

# From ‘Kind-hearted’ Comedies to Neurotic Romances

In a classic essay from 1948, the influential French film theorist André Bazin claims that a theatre visitor comes away with a ‘better conscience’ than the film spectator. A theatrical play has a ‘more uplifting, a nobler ... effect than the satisfaction which follows a good film’ (‘Theater,’ 98). Whereas theatre calls for an ‘active individual consciousness,’ the film ‘requires only a passive adhesion’ (99). According to Bazin, a member of a film audience becomes part of a collective. The way the viewer is encouraged to identify with the hero has the effect of rendering ‘emotion uniform,... the result of which is to turn the audience into a “mass”’ (99). Instead of exciting the spectator, cinema calms its viewer.

This thumbnail sketch of the distinction Bazin makes between theatre and cinema may seem outdated today – after Ingmar Bergman, after Rainer Werner Fassbinder, after the Frans Weisz’ pictures LEEDVERMAAK [PERVERSE DELIGHT] (1987) and HOOGSTE TIJD [LAST CALL] (1995), or after a film like TOESTANDEN [CIRCUMSTANCES] (Thijs Chanowski, 1976) – but I bring the essay to memory to highlight that, unlike (serious) drama, most films have conventionally been distributed as amusement for the masses. Obviously, film has been used to artistic ends or political purposes, but if, as Bazin suggests, (a great majority of) film renders emotion uniform, this is mainly due to the entertainment and cheap thrills film has on offer. In a sense, the cinema has never shed its ‘birthmark,’ when it was hailed as a technological device capable of achieving the marvel of movement as its first special effect. The cinema was in its years of origin not seen on a par with literature, theatre or visual art, but it was considered comparable to vaudeville or fairground attractions.

It is no coincidence then that, with the exception of the avant-garde documentary *REGEN [RAIN]* (Joris Ivens, 1929), three out of four pre-war titles on the Canon of Dutch Cinema are geared towards a more popular taste. In addition to a comic short from 1905 and a love tragedy produced by 'film factory' Hollandia from 1919, *DE JANTJES [THE TARS]* (Jaap Speyer, 1934), in particular, tackles topics and sentiments which have a wide appeal among the common people. The relatively poor circumstances and the ensuing animosity among characters as a result of love intrigues are counterbalanced by gay sing-a-longs and popular tunes. These songs could be enjoyed as the special supplement to an earlier silent version of *DE JANTJES* (Maurits H. Binger and D.E. Doxat-Pratt, 1922). Speyer's sound film was to initiate a quite successful cycle in the 1930s of what I would like to term 'sentimental and social drama in a nonetheless happy mood.' Although such a cumbersome label is quite indistinct, the cycle was also known as the so-called 'Jordaan-film,' because the drama was often set in De Jordaan, a working-class neighbourhood in Amsterdam.

Sometimes, the not-so-fortunate conditions were supplemented, if not superseded by comic asides in order to create a general feel-good atmosphere, as in *BLEEKE BET [PALE BET]* (Alex Benno and Richard Oswald, 1934) and *ORANJE HEIN [ORANGE HEIN]* (Max Nosseck, 1936). At other times, the characters' attempts to fight both poverty and a sad fate gained emphasis, as in *OP HOOP VAN ZEGEN [ON GOOD HOPE]* (Alex Benno, 1934). In this type of sentimental and social drama, the scales could tip in favour of laughter, then again in favour of tears. An important sub-category consists of the films based upon youth novels about little rascals. These kids engage in mischief either out of despair or out of clumsiness, but they basically have a heart of gold, like in *MERIJNTJE GIJZEN'S JEUGD [MERIJNTJE GIJZEN'S CHILDHOOD]* (Kurt Gerron, 1936), *UIT HET LEVEN VAN DIK TROM [FROM THE LIFE OF DIK TROM]* (G.B.H. Niestadt, 1937, but released in 1941), and *BOEFJE [WILTON'S Zoo]* (Detlef Sierck, 1939). The way these chaps try to come to terms with their troublesome situations results into entertaining movies, fit for all ages.

This type of feel-good tragedy will some 15 years later result into one of the greatest box-office successes in the history of Dutch cinema, *CISKE DE RAT [A CHILD NEEDS LOVE]* (Wolfgang Staudte, 1955). I will read this film in tandem with that other big commercial achievement from the 1950s, *FANFARE* (Bert Haanstra, 1958), for, as I aim to claim, both films can be regarded as two sides of the same coin. My point is that if one removes the poverty from *CISKE DE RAT* – set in a lower-class urban environment – the film is not quite unlike *FANFARE*, located in a provincial town. Because of a few humorous asides and the optimistic mood at the end, Staudte's heart-rending drama is closely aligned with Haanstra's film, which can be called, for want of

a better term, a 'kind-hearted comedy of/for the common people.' Leading relatively prosperous lives in the countryside, the characters in *FANFARE* can permit themselves to get involved in petty conflicts which were caused when one of the protagonists laughs too loudly at a false note, blown by a horn player in a brass band. In this chapter I will discuss *CISKE DE RAT*, *FANFARE* and several of their unofficial predecessors and successors in an attempt to elucidate some of the ingredients of the combination of sentimental/social (family) drama and mild comedy. My main argument will be that this combination could survive because this type of cinema converted itself over the decades from 'worn out' to a range of three contemporary variants, provisionally called 'formalistic,' 'tongue-in-cheek,' and 'neurotic.'

## FEEL-GOOD TRAGEDIES: *KOMEDIE OM GELD* AND *CISKE DE RAT*

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In attracting more than 2.43 million and more than 2.63 million paying viewers, both *CISKE DE RAT* (Wolfgang Staudte, 1955) and *FANFARE* (Bert Haanstra, 1958) became unprecedented box-office successes in Dutch cinemas. These numbers are not to be underestimated, because they exceed the results of even the most popular blockbuster films of today in Dutch cinemas by far. There had been some occasional commercial success in Dutch post-war cinema preceding these two titles, like *STERREN STRALEN OVERAL* [STARS SHINE EVERYWHERE] (Gerard Rutten, 1953),<sup>1</sup> but it is hardly disputed that with *CISKE DE RAT* and, in particular, *FANFARE* the Dutch feature film finally grew to maturity. While the popular appeal of both films is more or less comparable, there is nonetheless a watershed that separates them. In the period between 1930 and 1958 the majority of the more than 50 films had been directed by foreign filmmakers. Until *FANFARE*, made by Haanstra, the majority of film directors working in the Netherlands had been foreigners. Like Staudte, who had directed *CISKE DE RAT*, most of them came from Germany.

Two of these directors became internationally acclaimed filmmakers. Detlef Sierck made *BOEFJE* but he never got to see the end result, because he was already on his way to America where he had, under his new name Douglas Sirk, a booming career as the king of colourful melodramas. The other one was Max Ophüls, who made with *KOMEDIE OM GELD* [THE TROUBLE WITH MONEY] (1936) perhaps the most refined film in the Netherlands of the decade, according to Kathinka Dittrich in her article 'De speelfilm in de jaren dertig,' although its commercial success pales in comparison to other comedies from the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> Due to a flaccid scenario, a popular film like *BLEEKE BET* is no more than a 'theatrical picture book' consisting of static tableaux, Dittrich claims (123), but *KOMEDIE OM GELD*, by contrast, displays

an inventive alternation of images full of ironic effects. The film opens with a ringmaster in an imaginary circus telling us that the game is about to begin and singing about money 'which covers up what is evil.' Ophüls uses some of the cinematographic devices which will turn into his trademark, like low- and high-angle shots, (slow) lap dissolves, rapidly cut dream sequences with superimpositions, and the camera circling around in the space of the bank office, even making 360-degree pans later in the film. These devices function to accentuate the situation of main protagonist Karel Brand, who is fired as a money runner at a bank after 25 years of loyal service. The reason for his discharge is the accidental loss of a huge amount of money. When he is cross-examined by the police inspector, the latter is shot from a low angle, making him (morally) superior, whereas Brand is shown from a high angle, which has the effect of miniaturizing him. Back at the office, the porter hands him a letter. Initially, the camera zooms in out of curiosity, but as soon as the camera tracks backward, it is already clear that this must be the fatal letter of resignation. The one job he gets is as an employee at a bowling alley and to suggest his humiliation one of the balls goes straight at the camera.

Then there is a remarkable sequence of parallel editing: the board of a huge building company discusses the sudden death of its director. When the word 'catastrophe' is uttered, the term resonates over shots of Brand. Another alternation between the board and Brand has the expression 'no possible way out' resonate a couple of time. Instead of an upcoming suicide, there is an unexpected turn of the tide: since the company claims to work in the service of the proverbial 'little man,' it wants a typical 'little man' as its director and they consider Brand fit for the function.<sup>3</sup> The ringmaster intervenes to tell about the importance of saying 'yes' at the right moment, for then the only way is 'up.' The next shot shows Brand from his nicely polished shoes up to his decent smoking. The camera tends to show him from a low angle rather than from a high angle, since he really has become somebody. Brand in fact is too conscientious for his job. He resists the plan to build houses with the cheapest of bricks, and he gets the feeling that he is exploited as a straw man. When he decides to resign, the company's cunning trick becomes apparent. While the camera zooms in on the face of the chairman of the board to an extreme close-up, it turns out that the company had hoped they could get a hold of the lost money, presuming that Brand had secretly hidden it somewhere. Brand is determined to withdraw from his job and he literally goes down, by elevator, and later, after heavy drinking with his brother-in-law, he ends up in a cellar after his mate has stumbled into it. This downfall introduces yet another twist, for here he finds the money he had lost before by accident. Brand is sentenced to a year of detention, but then the ringmaster shows up for a happy ending to this tale of the 'irony of

fate.' Thanks to a confession by a young boy, Brand's name can be cleared finally.

The irony of **KOMEDIE OM GELD** is partly created by the camera perspectives. Brand is looked down upon from a relatively high angle in those cases when he is just a modest money runner suspected of deceit, and hence an object of contempt, but Brand turns out to be morally upright. In turn, the camera emphasizes his high status as a neatly dressed director, but despite his favourable appearance, Brand himself comes to realize that he has become part of a cynical and money-hungry world.

The reference to the specifically filmic means of **KOMEDIE OM GELD**, which were so dearly appreciated by Dittrich, is meant to suggest that I will read both **CISKE DE RAT** and **FANFARE** in more or less the same vein, with a focus on formal devices. Even though the film opens with a kid near one of the canals in Amsterdam who starts running away as soon as a female voice shouts his name 'Ciske,' we hear after the opening credits the voice-over of schoolteacher Bruis, telling about his daily routine at school. Then he is addressed by the school principle and two of his colleagues who tell about a new rascal in Bruis' class. This creature – '*heerschap*' – has gotten into trouble with the police a couple of times, he has been fighting with all of his teachers, and on top of that, he had spilled red ink on a school mistress. The school principle says that the kid's nickname, 'The Rat' is supposed to remind Bruis he can only be taught manners by giving him a punch now and then. Since Bruis reacts laconically at the cautionary remarks, the three start talking over each other. This cacophony of voices has the contrary effect that it prepossesses the kid in Bruis' favour. While the camera zooms in on the teacher's face, we hear him say in voice-over: 'Whatever he may have done, he is only a kid after all,' implying that he cannot believe his new pupil to be that bad. While the principle and the two colleague teachers continue to convince Bruis, their voices die down as mere background noise the moment the camera captures a kid at the other end of the corridor in a long shot. Then we hear the principle say: 'There he is,' and he walks in a frontally staged reverse shot directly towards the camera, urging the boy to take off his cap as a token of decency. Obviously, this is a point-of-view shot from Ciske's perspective, but since the effect of such a direct address at the camera is generally experienced as quite aggressive by the viewer, it immediately suggests that the boy is unfairly treated, without any reason. When the kid does not give in to the command to take off his cap, the principle hits the cap from his head and orders him to pick it up. The principle threatens to slap his face if the boy does not do so, but the latter does not even blink. Just before the principle is about to strike, Bruis calmly puts the cap back on Ciske's head.

Bruis' act proves that his decision, uttered in voice-over, were no vain words and that he is inclined to adopt a benevolent attitude towards the new kid he had never set eyes upon before. The more one had tried to convince him of the evil nature of Ciske, the more he felt obliged not to condemn the kid on the basis of only hearsay. The impression that the boy is unfairly judged due to a bad reputation is confirmed in a subsequent point-of-view shot. The principle walks towards the kid in a frenetic way, but by shooting the shot as the kid's point of view, his demeanour comes across as an assault. Hence, the combination of Bruis' voice-over and the kid's point of view shot are the filmic means that provide ground for an immediate bond between the two as well as gaining the sympathy of the spectator. Bruis then takes Ciske along with him, but the boy suddenly turns around and tries to run away. The camera zooms in on Ciske's face and then we get a technically advanced reverse shot: in a point-of-view shot we see how the camera/Ciske is swiftly moving from left to right to left through the corridor in order to escape the stretched out arms of the teachers and the principle. This mobile shot, which could only be made by putting the heavy camera on a bike, once again emphasizes that the boy seems a hunted kid, no matter whether he has done any mischief or not.

In fact, the whole film will come to pivot around the bond between Ciske and Bruis who feels some responsibility for the kid after he gets to know that the boy has been raised in the most poor and unfortunate of circumstances. His father is about to divorce his mother, for they live in an atmosphere of assault and battery. The father has the habit of spoiling the kid, whereas Ciske's mother lacks any maternal feelings. Since the family guardian is not up to the task required of him, Bruis goes to great pains to become the kid's tutor. Nonetheless there are some moments which even supersede the close tie between Ciske and Bruis, and they involve detective Muysken for youth affairs. When one kid in Bruis' class, Jantje Verkerk, accuses Ciske of being cut with a knife, Muysken arrives at school to interview Jantje about this 'bloodbath.' He asks whether the kid needs a cushion, for he may probably feel a bit weak after all the loss of blood. Thereupon, the detective deliberately takes the wrong arm to inspect the wound and then only gives Jantje a tiny Band-Aid, which, as Bruis remarks in voice-over, makes that the boy has definitely fallen from the 'highest heaven of martyrdom.' After this sarcastic examination, Ciske is supposed to enter the room. We see Bruis and Muysken in a two-shot, but as soon as the detective greets the kid, Ciske is shown via a swift pan. This swiftness of the camera movement suggests that one has to be really on guard for this brat, but it is already clear that the camera here only play-acts that he is a truly dangerous kid, just as Muysken will only describe Ciske's deeds in terms of mockery: 'Why not use anything

heavier next time, a hand grenade maybe?' At the same time, the pan had the effect of putting Bruis off-screen, and this accords with the teacher's experience upon hearing the interview between Muysken and Ciske: he envies the tone of conviviality with which the detective treats the kid. This downplay of Ciske's presumed deeds by way of an ironic exaggeration is qualified by Bruis as the ultimate attitude.

This attitude frames Ciske's subsequent crime, which is brought to us in ellipsis. There is an outdoor shot of a barrel organ while in the background we see Ciske running and hear him scream. It turns out that he has killed his heartless mother. The precise circumstances are only clarified in court by the housekeeper, Marie. Ciske's mother is pestering him all the time according to Marie's account. She has locked him in the coal shed, she forces him to eat against his will, and on top of that, she threatens to tear the pages of a book Ciske has received from his closest friend, a handicapped boy. We see a close-up from the torn pages, then a close-up from a bread knife on the table, and Ciske throws the knife in a split second, whereupon we see his frightened face for a brief moment. Next shot is a repetition from the earlier shot with the barrel organ. The ellipsis is significant in the sense that it works to downplay the actual crime of matricide. All the formal means have prepared us for putting Ciske's situation into perspective. Bruis' voice-over created sympathy for the kid with the troublesome background; the point-of-view shots made us aware of the aggressive treatment that befell the boy; the swift pan was a visual example of the ironic detachment, play-acting that he was a dangerous kid, and the ellipsis was meant to repress the horror of the actual crime, because the shot of his frightened face, followed by his screams in the outdoor shot are evidence that the matricide is not only unrepresentable but also strictly accidental. Although he has committed the worst of possible crimes, it is fully acceptable that Ciske does not receive a more severe punishment than borstal. It gives him the opportunity to reform, and during his stay he gets interested in the pious lessons a parson teaches him. Robbed of the bad influence of his mother, the boy can change for the better and open up his good heart, as the convention of such a feel-good tragedy commands. My point in juxtaposing *CISKE DE RAT* with *FANFARE* is related to a similar emphasis on cinematographic devices. The charm of Haanstra's film, I will claim, resides in its ludic framing of shots as well as its playful parallel editing.

## PLAYFUL PARALLEL EDITING: *FANFARE*

120 | *FANFARE* is set in Lagerwiede, the fictional variant of Giethoorn, a village without streets so that one can only travel by boat. The composer, Mr. Altena, functions as an internal narrator. He is an outsider who introduces the viewers to this 'unusual village' whose peacefulness is only disrupted by its many noisy tourists. As an extra-local inhabitant from Lagerwiede, he will be the mediator who intervenes in the story a few times and act as someone who can take an unbiased view of the conflict that will arise in the small community. Two rival innkeepers are members of the same band, and as long as they can bury their differences, the brass band is entitled to receive a grant and also has a good chance to win an important upcoming competition. The moment the mayor utters to a representative of cultural affairs that all is well now, a new quarrel ensues, just because Geursen laughs out loud at a false note, blown by Krijns on his horn. Geursen excuses himself by saying he cannot help it, and he decides to offer apologies. The cow Clara that Geursen brings with him, happens to break loose, because it is frightened by Krijns' dog. Due to the consternation, all the 30 customers at Krijns' terrace are chased away, much to the latter's anger. The enmity has become so serious by now that they both attempt to create their own brass band, and Krijns has a new conductor come over from Amsterdam. The mayor tells the two rivals that the grant will be offered to the largest band. Since the one group has thirteen members and the other group twelve, it is just a matter of persuading only one person to go over to the other side. No one is more susceptible to taking a bribe than the grocer, Koendering, and both parties try to outbid each other. To illustrate the futility of the whole dispute, this spineless Koendering plays the triangle, the most insignificant of all instruments. In the meantime, one group has stolen all the instruments, including the banner of the band, and this deed results into a hilarious game of hide-and-seek. There is a whole mishmash of mutual cheating on each other, and finally each of the two groups has collected enough instruments by some cunning tricks to believe that they are entitled to perform at the contest. While one is on its way by boat, the other goes in a truck, meanwhile practicing their own musical numbers which are composed by the internal narrator, Altena. When it is Lagerwiede's turn to perform, the two groups both take their seats, but while they start playing their own melodies, they sound in perfect unison. To everybody's joy, it is worth the first prize.

In addition to the various moments of comic relief with the new director from Amsterdam falling into the water, stumbling from a stage, or being attacked by a flying chicken, the cinematography of *FANFARE* keeps up with the film's light-hearted tone. Exemplary is a pan to the right at the very beginning of the film. A cow seems to move magically amidst the grass. Another

pan, this time to the left, shows a cow moving backwards. A closer camera shot to the left and from a higher angle, however, reveals that the cow is being transported on a boat. Further, there is the shot in which Geursen's daughter tells her father that she thinks Krijns is not capable of any mischief, but the moment she utters these words, the images illustrate the contrary: we see Krijns and his son stealing the band's banner. One of the best examples of the charming cinematographic tricks is the scene when the police officer, Douwe, sees his girlfriend, Marije, with the conductor from the big city. A large white sheet is in front of the couple, so that Douwe sees only a shadow play. While the conductor makes wild gestures in order to illustrate to Marije how he tried to hold on to a pole before he fell into the water, it looks from Douwe's perspective as if the two are embracing each other. Another such moment of apparent misperception takes place in a cross-cutting scene. We see Krijns' group practicing in a barn and we see Geursen and Douwe search for the instrument. The two only have to proceed towards the sound of music, but when they enter the space of the presumed rehearsal, they only see an old man listening to a tape recorder.

Perhaps most significant as regards the playful tone of *FANFARE* are the many inserts with ducks which live in the canals of Lagerwiede. When someone announces that the whole village will be amazed, the ducks stretch their necks as if in surprise. When the policeman says that Krijns has hidden all the instruments, we see the ducks dive as if looking for the instruments under the water surface. When at one point the mayor of Lagerwiede has fallen into the water while waving his arms, we get a series of shots of ducks clapping their wings. When two people are in front of mirrors dressing up for their wedding, we see several ducks washing themselves. The several brief inserts from the ducks, unrelated to the story whatsoever, can be regarded as functioning as a light-hearted reference to the chorus in a Greek classical tragedy. This chorus intervenes at regular intervals and can either comment on the proceedings in the play, express a moral voice or garner sympathy for the protagonists. On the level of the plot, *FANFARE* showcases a dramatic conflict of full-blooded rivalry, but at the same time, the inserts of the ducks work to put the earnestness of the conflict into perspective. Hence, Haanstra's film invites the spectator to a double reading. One can enjoy the film as a serious drama, but one can also consider this quarrel as an example of 'much ado about nothing,' because of the suggested analogies with the behaviour of ducks, including their quacking. Indeed, the viewer is willing to accept to identify with the petit bourgeois affairs in Lagerwiede thanks to the in-built relativization of the gravity of the dramatic plot situations. To add humour to this relativization, there is the scene when Geursen and some of his men think that Krijns' group has hidden the instruments on boats in

the rushes. In an attempt to misguide Geursen, Krijns asks his assistants to imitate the sounds of ducks. The quacking creates some sort of a feedback loop: there are not only some parallels in the actions of the people in Lagerwiede and the behaviour of ducks, but these people are really like ducks.<sup>4</sup>

The great success *FANFARE* enjoyed needs a two-fold qualification. First, as screen writer Jan Blokker recalls in an interview from 2006, Haanstra's film had a cold reception abroad with the exception of Russia. When *FANFARE* was selected for the main competition at the film festival in Cannes, no one among the audience was laughing; only some sighs were heaved (Blokker, qtd. in Hendriks, 85).<sup>5</sup> One reason for this lack of enthusiasm among the foreign public could reside in the fact that *FANFARE* was unprecedented in Dutch history – and therefore had great appeal among the Dutch public – but that this type of comedy had already been practiced elsewhere, most evidently in Great Britain. *FANFARE* bore quite some resemblance, in its mild comical tone, to Ealing Studios productions, which should not be surprising, since prolific film director Alexander Mackendrick who was affiliated to this company, had been hired as advisor.<sup>6</sup> Second, *FANFARE* has a paradoxical status in Dutch film history, for it also happened to bring the combination of (social) drama and kind-hearted comedy to a temporary standstill. In the eye of the public, Haanstra's film may have brought this type, almost single-handedly, to high acclaim, but for a young generation of aspiring directors, *FANFARE* became the eye-catching example not to follow. The youngsters who attended the Film Academy which had opened its doors in 1958 regarded the film as way too jocular for a medium that deserved serious attention – of course, one did not attend an Academy to make 'stale entertainment' oneself. As a consequence, these youngsters cut the ties with both popular film comedy and sentimental social drama (as well as the combination thereof). This does not mean that these types died down, but they were eagerly adopted by the new medium of television in favourably rated series like *STIEFBEEN EN ZOON* (1963-1966), based upon the British sitcom *STEPTOE AND SON*, or *SWIEBERTJE* (1955-1975). The (combination of) heart-rending drama and kind-hearted comedy later got revived in cinema in, roughly speaking, three different fashions.

First, this type of cinema got 'spiced' up, because more (sexually) exciting material was inserted in it. The representation of Ciske's mother had been based upon the trope of the 'lady is a tramp,' but in films from the 1970s the tragic stories of prostitutes could be shown in a more favourable light, such as in *KEETJE TIPPEL* (Paul Verhoeven, 1975) and *ROOIE SIEN [RED SIEN]* (Frans Weisz, 1975) with the memorable song 'Telkens Weer' ['Again and Again'] by Willeke Alberti. Second, in the 1980s, a decade often associated with a mood of nostalgia, there was a remake of *CISKE DE RAT* (Guido

Pieters, 1984), with an important deviation from the original. Staudte's film shows how the schoolteacher gains sympathy for the rascal, whereas in Pieters' remake the kid is the focus of attention throughout. This time, the film opens with a song performed by the main actor in which he gives voice to his misery: 'Had ik maar iemand om van te houden' ['I Wish I Had Somebody to Love']. Since the song became a massive hit, the kid is the one the audience can identify with as soon as the music sets in during the opening credits. For his next picture, Pieters opted for another nostalgically tinted remake, *OP HOOP VAN ZEGEN* (1986), which was already the fourth adaptation of the play by Herman Heijermans.

Third, if *CISKE DE RAT* and particularly *FANFARE* can be seen as examples of Dutch folklore, some films can be seen to take a slightly ironic attitude towards typically national sentiments. The festivity of Saint Nicholas offers the best example of all, and in the upcoming paragraph I will discuss a film by Fons Rademakers featuring this saint with his long, white beard and his red mitre.

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### **BERGMAN 'LIGHT': DORP AAN DE RIVIER AND MAKKERS STAAKT UW WILD GERAAS**

Before Rademakers was to make *MAKKERS, STAAKT UW WILD GERAAS* [THAT JOYOUS EVE] (1960), he shot that other eye-catching film of 1958, next to *FANFARE*, which was *DORP AAN DE RIVIER* [VILLAGE ON THE RIVER]. The plot of his debut feature, based upon a so-called regional novel by popular writer Antoon Coolen, was steeped in folklore like *FANFARE*. The stubborn and unconventional Van Taeke from high up north works as a doctor in a rural community in the south of Holland. The internal narrator, the regular jailbird Deaf Cis, speaks in voice-over with reverence about the Frisian doctor, 'that peculiar and odd character.' For Van Taeke can give the impression that reading his newspaper and smoking a cigar are more important than the well-being of his patients, but if the tide is high, he always performs his duty and proves, as one villager says, to possess 'nerves of steel.' When the doctor undertakes a reckless journey during a dangerously icy night in order to save the life of a pregnant patient, many villagers are dumbfounded in their admiration for his bravery. Nevertheless, Van Taeke will be given a 'honourable discharge' by the mayor who has been offended by the doctor's frank refusal to play along with the highfalutin' upper class. The mayor is flabbergasted when the doctor says bluntly: 'I don't see how we could have any joint interests.' During the celebration of Van Taeke's 25 years as a practicing doctor, the mayor delivers a speech and hands over an envelope containing 1,000 guilders, which is no less than

a kiss of death. Without opening the envelop, Van Taeke burns the gift in the presence of all guests and then goes back to his native ground.

However, Rademakers did not opt for a light-hearted adaptation of this 'culture clash,' in the vein of *FANFARE*. He could have turned the adventures of a village doctor into a comedy, as Nikolai van der Heyde would do some 16 years later with *HELP! DE DOKTER VERZUIPT*. Although *DORP AAN DE RIVIER* is not without its humorous moments – as when Deaf Cis hides from the police underneath a toilet basin, but meets an unfortunate fate when one officer has to use the bathroom – the mood in Rademakers' film is quite dark, with superb black-and-white photography, especially in the candlelit scene in which four drinking men are gathered at the coffin of a man who has hanged himself. Other striking devices are the frequent use of almost frontally staged close-ups of distinct faces, a few well-timed extreme close-ups – e.g., when the doctor talks to one of his sons about his deceased wife – and the wonderful 180-degree pan to the left during the hypocritical speech, starting from the mayor alongside the guests and coming to a halt in a medium close-up of a coldly gazing doctor. Stylistically, the film can be seen as a companion piece to films by Ingmar Bergman. Before making his film, Rademakers had carefully studied two of the films by the Swedish director, *GYCKLARNAS AFTON* [*SAWDUST AND TINSEL*] (1953) and *SOMMARNATTENS LEENDE* [*SMILES OF A SUMMER NIGHT*] (1955) (Bernink, 15). Since Rademakers originally had a background in theatre – also as an actor – it was not illogical that he wanted to draw inspiration from a director like Bergman who had a close affinity with the theatre as well. Rademakers also asked Bergman to be a consultant on his picture, not because he needed help, but in order to reassure his financiers that although he was a novice filmmaker he would seek out the help of an experienced director. Though not supposed to get truly involved with the film, Bergman persuaded Rademakers to omit the scene in which the doctor shows himself from a particularly unsympathetic side. When a farmer has spread rumours about the doctor's crude behaviour towards his own wife, Van Taeke threatens the farmer with a gun three times, driving him crazy. To the dismay of scriptwriter Hugo Claus, a well-known Belgian novelist and playwright, who considered the moral complexity of the doctor fundamental, Rademakers followed Bergman's advice to kill this darling (Bernink, 18).

In the light of later Bergman films, like *DET SJUNDE INSEGLET* [*THE SEVENTH SEAL*] (1957), not to mention *NATTVARDGÄSTERNA* [*WINTER LIGHT*] (1963), *DORP AAN DE RIVIER*, the very first Dutch feature ever to be nominated for an Academy Award in the category of Best Foreign Language Film, can be qualified as 'Ingmar Bergman light.'<sup>7</sup> It is a slimmed-down version in the sense that the existential and/or religious themes that often pervade Bergman's film from *DET SJUNDE INSEGLET* onwards, are lacking in *DORP AAN DE RIVIER*. By

contrast, Rademakers' film pays tribute to its 'regional' source text by putting an emphasis upon the doctor's outright contempt for the upper class. As such, this seminal film, in which the dramatic supersedes over the comic, is symptomatic of a tradition of privileging the perspective of the 'common citizen,' which is continued in quite a number of comedies discussed so far.<sup>8</sup>

If DORP AAN DE RIVIER is Bergman 'light,' Rademakers' subsequent feature, MAKKERS STAAKT UW WILD GERAAS, seems an even 'lighter' picture, but what it lacks on the side of tragedy, it gains in irony. If this film walks the middle ground in tone between FANFARE and DORP AAN DE RIVIER, it is perhaps due to the fact that this time the script was not written by Hugo Claus, but by Jan Blokker, who had co-authored the screenplay of FANFARE.<sup>9</sup> The (untranslatable) title is revelatory in indicating the shift to mild irony. According to a traditional notion, irony is a rhetorical trope which exhibits a contradiction between the said and the non-said. Irony is then an antiphrasis and the message is to be decoded as the inversion of the literal meaning of the expression. If someone says 'splendid weather' when it is raining cats and dogs, he probably means to communicate that he thinks the weather is terrible and hence the opposite of splendid. In such a case, irony is a trope that reveals the hidden meaning of the message via a detour. Several critics have pointed at the narrowness of such a conception. Despite attempts by scholars such as Wayne Booth in his well-known study *A Rhetoric of Irony* in which he aimed to figure out which clues enable a reader to stabilize irony and to cross out ambiguities, irony is particularly difficult to pin down. According to Linda Hutcheon, irony is neither only the said nor only the unsaid, but it is both at the same time. Or in her phrasing, irony 'happens' in 'the space *between* (and including) the said and the unsaid' (*Irony's*, 12). Rademakers' title MAKKERS STAAKT UW WILD GERAAS offers this double-coded process in a nutshell. Every Dutchman will recognize the title as the second line in the song 'See the Moon Shines through the Treetops,' originally written in 1843. The widely known rhyme is sung by children in the hope of receiving presents from Saint Nicholas. For Dutch viewers the association with this nostalgic tradition, aimed at kids, will be particularly strong since 'Makkers, staakt uw wild geraas' is an uncommon expression, which no one will ever use outside the context of Saint Nicholas. In plain terms, it means something like 'friends, be quiet,' but in such a translation, the ring of the archaic terms is lost. 'Mates, Cease Your Wild Roaring' might be more appropriate, but still misses the true peculiarity of the expression.<sup>10</sup>

The reference to Saint Nicholas is visually confirmed in the first minutes of MAKKERS STAAKT UW WILD GERAAS which show the happy event of the yearly arrival of the 'Spanish bishop,' greeted by a huge crowd of young children and the inevitable brass band. If only the association with the tradition of Sinterklaas were relevant, the film might also have been named 'See the

Moon Shines ...,' or it might bear the title of any other famous line from any other famous Saint Nicholas rhyme. However, as soon as Mr. Leegher closes the curtains so that his young son, Eduard is cut off from the festivities, the screen turns completely dark for a moment and the film shifts gear. The idea of 'mates, cease your wild roaring' is from now onwards to be taken literally as well. As the narrative will make clear, the 'wild roaring' does not so much refer to the noise produced by young children, but to the behaviour of the adults portrayed in the film. At the heart of each of the three families portrayed is some internal dispute. Hence, one can read the archaic title also as a call for stopping the conflicts. At the same time, the title should also not be applied too literally to the events in the film. An odd and solemn expression like 'mates, cease your wild roaring' will only befit those formal people who tend to regard any minor disturbance of the peace as 'wild roaring.' In that sense, the title is a form of free indirect speech. In such a case, one quotes the manner of speaking of those formal people, without using quotation marks, but one does so in order to stand at a distance from them. In fact, the conflicts in the film are not that deeply rooted, but from the perspective of decent civilians who are used to an orderly lifestyle – like, e.g., the Keizer family – they can be quite alarming. The film itself however does not adopt their perspective, but rather adopts a perspective on them, in fact not only mocking the petit bourgeois, but all of its characters. Hence, by way of archaism, the title is a wilful exaggeration of the actual situation, and therefore a perfect example of how irony channels both the said and the unsaid. It is just a reference to a children's rhyme; it can function as a call to stop the quarrelsome atmosphere among the adults, but if one takes the archaic terms to their letter, they also become too heavy-handed and as a rebound effect, it works as an indication to take the conflicts not too seriously.

Since the stories of the loosely connected families are intercut with one another, *MAKKERS STAAKT UW WILD GERAAS* is an early example of the mosaic film: Mr. Leegher is a colleague of Mr. Keizer; Emma is a friend of Mrs. Keizer and also the babysitter for the Lomijn family; the young Eduard Leegher is playing with his schoolmate Rolf Lomijn, at the latter's home. The Leeghers are separated from bed and board, although Mr. Leegher hopes his wife will accept him returning to his former home. The Keizers have only one child, the troublesome teenager Henk, who rebels against his parents, to the sorrow of his mother. During the opening credits she is present at the arrival of Saint Nicholas and, seeing a child sitting on his father's shoulders, she nostalgically recalls the time when 'our Henk was that small.' In turn, Mrs. Lomijn has increasing suspicions that her husband is having affairs with other women (which he has, indeed, been doing).

Although the characters experience their respective problems as seri-

ous issues – a separation, the generation gap and adultery – the way they are handled is benevolent. Henk's father, Mr. Keizer, is everything but a strict patriarch. At the request of his wife, he asks his son, amidst all of the latter's friends, whether he wants to celebrate Sinterklaas at home, but the teenage Henk naturally refuses to participate. Mr. Keizer accepts his son's refusal, for he fully understands that young people like his son do not always accede to their parents' wishes. The scene when Mrs. Keizer, in the company of her friend Emma, wants to buy a record for Henk is both endearing and funny, but she only vaguely remembers the melody. She is humming the tune in music stores ('pom, pom, pom'), but to no avail. Then there is a shift to Henk who is enjoying himself in the café with some of his friends, while a record is playing diegetically. Back to Mrs. Keizer who now, as if she has been present in the previous scene in the café, all of a sudden has the melody right. At the end of the film, when Henk is brought back home totally drunk, his mother is worried sick, but his father puts on the record as both a surprise and as an attempt to comfort him. Henk, however, is too intoxicated to appreciate the gesture. Even Mr. Lomijn who is perhaps the least likeable character because he is cheating on his wife, is depicted relatively gently. He is represented as a *bon vivant*, flirting with women and stealing kisses, but in the end, when he is on his way to yet another meeting with a mistress, he all of a sudden returns home and makes up with his wife. He confesses his love to her and she says she believes him. It is not an 'all's well that ends well' for them, because whether Mr. Lomijn will behave like a *Don Juan* no more is doubtful.

Most interesting of the three narratives is the story concerning the Leeghers. When he comes to see her at her photo studio, she tells him she wants to be left alone: 'We're probably not the kind of people to be married.' She tries to keep aloof from him, but when she has invited many guests in her house to celebrate the joyous Saint Nicholas eve, Mr. Leegher arrives at her place dressed up as Saint Nicholas. Their son, Eduard, is still awake, so the father in disguise cannot be sent away, even though Mrs. Leegher is embarrassed, since she had asked a colleague to perform the role of Saint Nicholas. Disguised as the so-called friend of all children, Mr. Leegher sits in the best of chairs and says: 'It's great to be back here.' The effect of his trick is postponed, because the story is interrupted in order to show the developments at the Keizers (with the drunken son) and the Lomijns (the suggestion of a reaffirmation of love). We return to the Leeghers when, Eduard probably asleep, the booked Saint Nicholas has arrived as well and is dancing a tango with Mr. Leegher in his disguise.<sup>11</sup> Because there is also an exchange of a rose from mouth to mouth, the scene is a deliberate imitation of the dance act between 'Daphne' – a man dressed up as a woman – and an old millionaire from *SOME LIKE IT HOT* (Billy Wilder, 1959). Mrs. Leegher is clearly enjoying the spectacle and has a tender look on

her face. Then we get a sudden close-up of Mr. Leegher, contemplating. When she embraces him after all the guests have left, he says ultimately: 'Difficult, isn't it? ... Maybe we are not the kind of people to be married,' in a repetition of her earlier phrase. He announces his departure, still partly dressed as Saint Nicholas. Now there is a close-up of her face, contemplating. In an extreme long shot we see the sloppily disguised Saint Nicholas from behind, as he goes into the dark night, a jazz score on the soundtrack.

Joop Landré, the producer of the film, was not amused by the sour ending of the film, but Rademakers and the scenarist, Blokker, refused to comply to his wish for a happy outcome. Blokker explained that characters like the Leeghers suffer from a loneliness that cannot be 'remedied' by marriage. Their reconciliation would have been a stopgap, at odds with the actual disposition of the characters, he claimed (Bernink, 33). For Blokker, *MAKKERS STAAKT UW WILD GERAAS* should have a documentary appeal. In sticking to its original ending, the film preserves its status as a '*document humain*' (Bernink, 33). The film represents a conveniently arranged world in which upright people are suddenly confronted with (minor) dramas, Blokker said in an interview. 'If I were to show my grandchild what the Netherlands looked like around 1960, I would not take him to a documentary by Bert Haanstra, but to *MAKKERS STAAKT UW WILD GERAAS*' (qtd. in Hendriks, 87).

As a mildly comical moral drama, Rademakers' film has had some offspring in the history of Dutch cinema, which I will tentatively divide into three subcategories: a 'theatrical' and 'formalistic' approach to the pitfalls of modern relationships; a tongue-in-cheek recycling of the comedy of remarriage; and a neurotic and/or decadent comedy of manners.

### STICKS OF SATAY IN THE THEATRE: *EEN ZWOELE ZOMERAVOND* AND *TUSSENSTAND*

Rademakers had never shed his close ties with the domain of the theatre. For him, cinema is a performance art basically, with good acting at its core. As theatre was the ancillary medium to cinema for Rademakers, the films made by the theatrical company *Het Werkteater*, which existed between 1970 and 1985, can be seen as one of his heirs, despite some divergences. Rademakers was a classically schooled man of the theatre, whereas *Het Werkteater* bore fruit as a company to overturn theatrical conventions. It was fashionable in the days of the early 1970s to emphasize socialist ideals by deliberately misspelling words, and so the group's name was intentionally written without the letter 'h': *Werkteater* instead of *Werktheater*. In line with those ideals, there was no real leader of the company, there was much improvisation and roles were

played interchangeably: one evening someone played the mother, the next evening they were the father. Above all, the group owed its rebellious reputation to the fact that its members performed their shows in unorthodox places. In their eyes, a show about mortally ill patients had best be put on in a hospital. Moreover, such a setting had the advantage of enticing a discussion with the public, which could break the daily grind of the regular theatre where the audience always went home after the last round of applause. Preferably, the performances were aimed at actual and social wrongs, e.g., the treatment of psychiatric patients, and for that reason acting out one's emotions was more valued than a technically superb acting style. Of all the shows which were eventually adapted into films, *EEN ZWOELE ZOMERAVOND [A HOT SUMMER NIGHT]* (Shireen Strooker and Frans Weisz, 1982) based on a show that was presented in 1978, can be seen as the closest successor to Rademakers' *MAKKERS STAAKT UW WILD GERAAS*.

*EEN ZWOELE ZOMERAVOND* could as well have been titled, with a wink to Ingmar Bergman, 'scenes from a modern relationship.' The film is set amidst a group of entertainers who will give a show in some sort of circus tent which is full to overflowing. Foremost among the artists are the De Nellicos, which consists of the couple Nel and Koos, parents of two children, one of them still a baby. Amidst all the excitement, the pair are discussing their marital problems.<sup>12</sup> While they are doing their make-up in the caravan, Koos confesses that he is having an affair, just before they have to enter the ring. He adds: 'Nel, if you would like me to end it, you only have to tell me.' The situation is comic, because Nel remains calm on the surface ('Oh, you mean you want to continue it. Of course you do'), whereas there is chaos around them: her father walking in and out of the caravan; their children making noise; an old woman knocking at the window asking for the main entrance. Moreover, the scene is intercut with the audience going inside the tent, accompanied with the gay sounds of a fanfare. Before they enter the arena, Koos asks Nel for a kiss, since he reassures her that the affair does not mean anything, but she does not grant him his wish. The lyrics of the song they have to perform are blatantly at odds with their situation: 'I have never been so much in love. / I mentioned your name a thousand times. (Nel, Nel, Nel) / There has never been someone else. / You were my ideal.'<sup>13</sup>

The film is predominantly structured around such ironic contrasts. On the one hand, there is excitement and stress, because incidents prevent the show from running smoothly: the small orchestra is late; there is a power failure in the tent because someone uses the coffee machine; the baby, played by then 45-year-old actor Joop Admiraal, crawls into the ring. On the other hand, Koos and Nel continue their conversation during all this, with ever-changing moods. Initially, Nel reacts deceptively calm: 'Is she only 28? Oh, then she

still wants children one day,' or during an acrobatic act: 'What was her name again? Patricia? Oh no, it was Pamela. That's even worse.' During one of the unplanned breaks, however, she locks herself in the caravan, crying out loud, with Koos asking through the door whether there is anything wrong. At the same time, his young son and a friend are nagging him for money to buy chips, and he gives them a hundred guilders to get some. While sobbing, Nel wants to know what Koos' mistress looks like, her hair colour, her size. When he says that she is quite robust, Nel first is a bit puzzled 'Is she fat?' and then she repeats with a slight mock in her tone, 'Is she fat?' During a subsequent act, Koos is singing in front of the audience, while Nel is showing the leader of the orchestra, who happens to be his brother, Flip, that her black stockings have a ladder. From Koos' position it looks as if she is making advances to his brother, and from then onwards he reinforces his attempts to win her back, albeit in an ill-thought-out way. He tells Nel that Pamela fatigues him, because she is sexually insatiable and wants to do it everywhere – in the bedroom, in the kitchen, on the staircase. Later during an act, he carelessly makes a comparison that is supposed to favour Nel: 'I behave like a fool. When I go to her, I have to perform three times in a row, while with you I can have sex whenever I want,' with an emphasis on the last *I*. Nel pulls the toupee from Koos' head, which causes another interruption in the show, giving room to an intermezzo, which is perhaps the best known part of the film. A Surinamese woman, played by the white male actor Gerard Thoolen, who was erroneously called to bring 150 sticks of satay, uses the break to sing and dance, to the delight of the audience. Nel's father is in dismay, however, and he takes up the microphone to tell the public that their joy proves that 2,000 years of civilization has not amounted to anything substantial.

Made by an unorthodox theatre company, *EEN ZWOELE ZOMERAVOND* is a comedy about a man who expects to be able to get away with having an affair, since he believes his wife is so broad-minded as to accept this non-monogamous form of a 'modern relationship.' He hopes she will agree to his affair with a woman, based entirely, as can be gathered from bits of information, on sex. It is unclear whether he brings up the topic just before the show out of naivety or out of strategic reasons, perhaps counting on the chaos of the moment to increase the chance that she will accede to the arrangement. It turns out to be wishful thinking on his part, and Koos' bad timing only works to create commotion, which ironically contrasts with his attempts to win her back. He tells Nel that he has broken up the affair, because Pamela wanted him to come over more often, which he considered as 'too bourgeois.' Moreover, he warns Nel that she should not fancy his brother, for a relationship produces much fuss. In the final shot, with the camera at quite a distance, we see that Nel sits on the roof of the caravan, smoking a cigarette, whereas Koos is searching for her all around.

The humorous ingredients are easy to detect: a man thinks that his wife should be 'modern' enough so as to accept his mistress, but the bad timing of his confession creates an awkward situation. Seeing trouble ahead, he tries to avoid it in a clumsy way. Moreover, he (mistakenly) suspects his wife of flirting with his brother, and the fact that he cannot conceal his jealousy, makes him comically hypocritical.

On the surface, *EEN ZWOELE ZOMERAVOND* may seem to come remarkably close to the type of coarse humour (discussed in chapter 1) as it is delivered by André van Duin in *IK BEN JOEP MELOEN*. Indeed, it is set in the environment of revue artists, ushering in banality, but it stands out nonetheless from Van Duin movies. First, the films by Van Duin have not the value of actuality, whereas the film by Strooker and Weisz ties in with the contemporary subject of the 'supposed liberty of modern relationships.' Second, the main actors do not exaggerate their behaviour or their facial expressions, like Van Duin who is, among others, explicitly pulling madcap faces for the sake of laughter. Third, and perhaps most crucial, *EEN ZWOELE ZOMERAVOND* adds a reflexive dimension to the silly jokes, which is missing in any film discussed in chapter 1. As an intermezzo Koos tells jokes about the utter stupidity of the Belgians. One of the spectators rises from his seat to protest the insulting nature of the jokes. Thanks to the discussion, the jokes might still make one laugh, but mediated by the protest, it is made clear that jokes like these also, if not more so, can make one squirm. Because of this duality – making jokes and at the same time qualifying them as improper – *EEN ZWOELE ZOMERAVOND* is on the side of irony rather than straightforward comedy. One might say that *FLODDER* or *NEW KIDS TURBO* are too hilarious to be taken seriously, but they are comedies nonetheless, which in practice cater to lower-class audiences in particular. *EEN ZWOELE ZOMERAVOND* has a built-in irony to distinguish itself from this type of comedy, and perhaps for that very reason a company like *Het Werkteater* was relatively popular among (left-wing) intellectuals, just like the mildly ironic and theatrical *MAKKERS STAAKT UW WILD GERAAS* was.

Although *EEN ZWOELE ZOMERAVOND* is scripted, its acting nonetheless gives the impression as if it is being improvised on the spot, which is enhanced by all the backstage chaos.<sup>14</sup> Whereas this theatrical spontaneity accords with the guidelines of the company, there is a cinematic dimension as well, since the film creates its ironic contrasts via the principle of crosscutting between the gaiety of the audience and the repressed emotions of the couple. Taking a cue from this principle, *TUSSENSTAND [STAGES]* (Mijke de Jong, 2007) can be seen as a relatively recent companion piece to this type of theatrical cinema. On the one hand, the teenager Isaac is predominantly represented in lengthy and meticulously framed static shots, which usually show him isolated from his environment: he can be in sharp focus, but the background is not; the

shot shows his body, but not his head; we listen to music via his earphones. In apparent contrast to this sterility, the shots with Isaac are consistently juxtaposed with scenes in public spaces like restaurants, frequented by his parents who have divorced but meet to discuss their son's upbringing. There is background noise, music, and the frenetically moving camera depicts faces, very John Cassavetes-like, in (extreme) close-ups, so close that it at times disorients us. If we see the mother up close and the father bends forward, his head is out of focus. The two of them are having dinner together because the mother is worried since Isaac is so tight-lipped lately and even bought himself a samurai sword. The mother's sketch of a totally self-absorbed and socially dysfunctional teenager seems correct if we consider the scenes with Isaac, but the irony of *TUSSENSTAND* is that the manners in which the two adults cope with one another is hardly any better. They have conversations, but they either exchange small talk – about shared memories of a 'Mrs. Pussybeard' – or they tend to address their partner using reproachful terms. He seems to take positions which are wilfully contradictory to her ideas: if she says she distrusts their son's reclusive attitude, he replies that one has to let teenagers explore things at that age. A samurai sword is not a token of aggression, as the mother might presume, but of discipline and control, the father 'corrects' her. So, the adults are talking but as they do so the situation turns into one of 'psychological warfare.' Indeed, the father seems bent on belittling his ex, as when he says: 'If you have so little personality, it is a good thing if you can imitate people.' Fed up with his bantering remarks, she finally calls him a 'fat, gluttonous, selfish non-father.'

*TUSSENSTAND*, a collaborative effort by De Jong and with actors who have won their spurs in the field of theatre (Elsie de Brauw, Marcel Musters, Jeroen Willems), uses cinematic means – handheld, close-up shots versus cold, static ones – to articulate a huge gap between talkative adults and their quiet teenage son. Since the conversations do not lead up to any understanding, but to frustration, their result is in fact 'worse' than Isaac's taciturnity. Due to its ironic contrasts, which might elicit a smile or a grimace from the audience, De Jong's film can be seen as a disclosure of modern divorce. Its final shot, when mother and son are watching some programme on television on the same bench, is as good as it gets.<sup>15</sup>

### **PURSUITS OF HAPPINESS: *ALLES IS LIEFDE* AND *ALLES IS FAMILIE***

In addition to these 'theatrical' films which usually do not end on a very optimistic note, but are stuck in ambiguity, there is a particularly successful category of feel-good films, redefining modern relationships. Joram Lürsen's

ALLES IS LIEFDE [LOVE IS ALL] (2007) and ALLES IS FAMILIE [FAMILY WAY] (2012) both draw on the subgenre of the comedy of remarriage that was particularly popular in American film history in the years between 1934 and 1941. The central drive of the plot in a comedy of remarriage, as Stanley Cavell claimed in his seminal study *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981), is not to get the central pair together, but to get them *back* together, together *again* (2).<sup>16</sup> Of the six seminal titles in the Depression period, three of the films start with a divorce. In *THE AWFUL TRUTH* (Leo McCarey, 1937), *THE PHILADELPHIA STORY* (George Cukor, 1940) and *HIS GIRL FRIDAY* (Howard Hawks, 1941), Cary Grant plays the part of the overbearing male whom the woman has become fed up with during marriage. She has experienced too many disappointing foibles. In *THE AWFUL TRUTH*, Jerry is self-conceited, suspicious, foolish and boasts about his 'continental mind.' The quite independent and assertive woman Lucy (Irene Dunne) is a successful singer who becomes engaged to an impeccable man from Oklahoma, while Jerry has insubstantial affairs with an empty-headed nightclub dancer and a woman who appears in gossip magazines. They gradually come to realize the 'awful truth' that they cannot live without one another. The purport of this type of comedy is that one does not love a partner for all of their ideal and decent characteristics – honesty, wealth, upper-class appearance – but one loves the other because of his or her typical idiosyncrasies. As a woman one has to re-appreciate the oddities of the man, and vice versa. Love can only bloom after putting aside the prejudices against one's partner. The genre has to be understood within the context of the Freudian wisdom that an object is never discovered but it can only be valued upon its rediscovery. A second marriage is therefore never identical to the first, or as Jerry remarks at the end of *THE AWFUL TRUTH*: 'As long as I'm different, don't you think, maybe things could be the same again, only a little different.' In short, the comedy of remarriage suggests that a remarriage is an improved repetition of the first phase of matrimony.

In the other three seminal films in the subgenre – *IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT* (Frank Capra, 1934), *BRINGING UP BABY* (Howard Hawks, 1938), and *THE LADY EVE* (Preston Sturges, 1941) – man and woman have not been married to one another, but they position themselves in situations as if they are husband and wife, or are seen by others as a wedded couple. In *IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT*, the upper-class daughter Ellen Andrews tells her rich and influential father that she has married a pilot. This angers her father, because he feels utmost disdain for the man and he warns his daughter that he will see to it that 'you're never going to live under the same roof with him.' Ellen escapes from her father's ship and decides to travel on a night bus in order to prevent being spotted by the detectives hired by her father. She meets a poor journalist, Peter Warne, and because she has been robbed of her luggage and money, they can

only afford to stay at a boot camp on condition they share a room. In addition to the fact that they live under the same roof, they are strategically registered as 'Mr. and Mrs. Warne,' so as to avoid problems. When detectives arrive in the boot camp the next morning looking for Ellen, the two succeed in fooling them because the journalist play-acts such a serious quarrel with his wife, a 'plumber's daughter,' that the detectives truly believe they are a married couple. The running gag in comedies of remarriage is that the constant bickering of the man and the woman convinces suspicious observers that they are a seasoned couple, thereby suggesting that 'a willingness for marriage entails a certain willingness for bickering' (Cavell, 86). One of the effects of films like *IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT* and the hilarious *BRINGING UP BABY* is that the pair enjoys doing things together, no matter how trivial. They can have quarrels together, they can sing silly songs or waste time, but the point is that no one else can keep up with their pace of talking or bickering. Once the language they speak has become a private one, because they are the only people to fathom the inside jokes, they come to realize that they are meant to be together.

The mosaic film *ALLES IS LIEFDE* follows up on both of these variants of the comedy of remarriage. Lürsen's film has five major narrative trajectories, which not only have a happy ending during that joyous eve of Saint Nicholas, but also conform to some conventions of the classical comedy of remarriage. In one case, the marital problems of a family were based on a misunderstanding: when she finds out that he has kept silent about losing his job, she presumes that his pretence is a cover-up for a secret affair. The ensuing conflicts turn out to be a stepping stone for a reaffirmation of their love. In another case, a man runs away during his own wedding ceremony, possibly out of 'fear of commitment,' as one of the characters guesses. After he discovers his biological father who had abandoned him at a young age, he decides to marry his gay friend after all, so that the wedding party over the end credits is only the postponement of an earlier event: the repetition is an improved version of the original. In a third case, a woman has left her husband who has committed adultery, and starts an affair with a handsome, 16-year-old boy. His total adoration for her, however, encourages her to return to her fallible husband, choosing the latter's idiosyncrasies over the charming but overwhelming naivety of the adolescent. As befits the conventions of the comedy of remarriage, the brief encounter with the boy is here like the necessary detour to re-appreciate the man one has left behind.

The fourth case concerns a woman who is dressed up as a huge box with a bow on her head on the occasion of the arrival of Saint Nicholas. By accident, she ends up in the arms of the country's most popular bachelor, Prince Valen-tijn. Her replies to his teasing words are dismissive for three reasons. First, she feels embarrassed that he meets her in the ridiculous guise of a huge present.

Second, she thinks she is out of the league of the highborn celebrities he usually dates. Third, she is waiting for Mr. Right, the proverbial prince on a white horse, and does not want to be dumped after a 'night of wild pleasure.' In spite of, or rather thanks to her dismissive tone, the prince makes efforts to renew the contact and chooses the disguise of Black Pete. When she finally sleeps with him, it is telling that he still has all the grease paint on his face, as if one can only win someone's heart under a mask (as a life-size present, as Black Pete), not as oneself, which fully accords with films like *IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT* or *BRINGING UP BABY*. In the end, the prince shows up with a white horse in order to convince her that he seriously thinks that he can be her Mr. Right, which in her words means that he will continue to love her, even when milk is leaking from her breasts and when they are still laughing together at the age of eighty.

These stories are intermingled with one another, first because the characters of the separate stories have some relationship to each other (brother-sister; their kids are classmates; or they meet each other by fate, in a café or during a funeral). Second, the stories are woven together by way of constant cross-cuttings from one story to another. Third, the narrative lines are positioned against the background of the fifth one, about a middle-aged man who is a last-minute substitute to play the role of Saint Nicholas for the live television coverage of his arrival from Spain. Actually, this man has returned from Spain to Holland to look for both his ex-wife, who died a couple of years earlier, and the son he had left behind. When he tells his story on television in his role as Saint Nicholas, the gay man who had run away from his own wedding recognizes himself as the abandoned boy, and thus finds his father. Remarkably, they had met each other before, by pure coincidence, on a bench in a park. Without any disguises, they met as strangers, and the older man gave the younger one some advice, which with hindsight can be termed as a truly fatherly advice.

My point in comparing the two mosaic films *MAKKERS STAAKT UW WILD GERAAS* with *ALLES IS LIEFDE* is that the first uses the festivities of Saint Nicholas for a contemporary comedy of morals and the second for an updated variant of the comedy of remarriage. The difference in genre determines the possible outcome. As a comedy of morals, Rademakers' film acknowledges that any solution is no more than a veneer for each and every crisis at hand. A woman cannot continue to treat her adolescent son as 'mommy's dearest' or people who are really attached to their personal freedom have better not be married. The 'joyous eve' of Saint Nicholas may suggest an overall atmosphere of camaraderie, but that is only a matter of outward appearance. Any happy ending would undermine this conclusion. For that reason, it is appropriate that Rademakers opted for a 'theatrical' approach to his film: showing the

states of affair in long shots and only using a close-up for crucial shots, usually when a character is silently contemplating his situation. Mieke Bernink notes that Rademakers is often called a director of scenes rather than of films, meaning that he is more interested in what happens in front of the camera than in what one can do with a camera. At several times his scenes last longer than the screenplay had prescribed (Bernink, 29). Rademakers himself added to this: 'I love long shots. I want to see the whole situation. A long shot enables the viewer to look around himself' (qtd. in Bernink, 30).<sup>17</sup> It is small wonder then that most actors in a Rademakers' film were originally performers in the theatre, like Ellen Vogel, Guus Hermus, Guus Oster, Yoka Berretty, Ank van der Moer.

By contrast, the comedy of remarriage is known as a talkative genre, in which characters speak out what they expect of life or what frustrates them, at least the female characters in *ALLES IS LIEFDE* tend to do that. Their wordiness is underscored by a relatively rapid kind of editing and a more frequent use of close-ups. Instead of a theatrical approach, a film like *ALLES IS LIEFDE* is rather measured to the format of the television soap, albeit a perfectly executed one, with a script that is at least as solid as the screenplay of *LOVE ACTUALLY* (Richard Curtis, 2003), which had functioned as a source of inspiration. Except for the fact that a soap postpones closure, for that would mean the end of the story, both a comedy of remarriage and a soap have a cyclical pattern as a common denominator. Each and every attempt to achieve one's aim makes one wiser – not necessarily sadder – so that each new try can bring about a (slightly) improved repetition. Hence, to paraphrase Jerry in *THE AWFUL TRUTH*, things can be the same, only a little different, meaning a little better. Yes, the gay man can go to his own wedding ceremony for the second time, after he has found his father, the presumed missing link who had to be traced to overcome his 'fear of commitment.' Yes, the premature speculations during the television coverage about the prince and the 'surprise' woman in his arms, followed by her scepticism, can only be affirmed after she has defined her ideas about love and Mr. Right on a white horse. In fact, the happy ending of each narrative line is prepared by the external voice-over in the beginning. In telling about the tradition of Saint Nicholas, he draws a comparison between the children's belief in the Holy Man and the necessity to believe in love, despite all its trappings: 'What would happen if we all agreed that Saint Nicholas exists? We'd still have to buy the presents ourselves, but it's the idea that counts. The belief that we will prevail in the end, that love will prevail in the end. Because love is like Saint Nicholas. You have to believe in it or it doesn't work.' In a comedy of morals like *MAKKERS STAAKT UW WILD GERAAS* we know that love is based upon a void called marriage, but in a comedy of remarriage like *ALLES IS LIEFDE*, the well-known formula of fetishism is applicable: we know that love is unattain-

able, but we act as if it is possible after all. In such a case, knowledge is inferior to belief, which is the prerequisite for the happy endings in Lürsen's film.<sup>18</sup>

As an unofficial successor to *ALLES IS LIEFDE*, Lürsen's film *ALLES IS FAMILIE* is another mosaic film about new discoveries of reaffirmations of love. Although in familial terms, the most important one is the temporary separation, followed by their reunion, of the father and mother right before the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their marriage, the most intriguing one, plot-wise, is the developing relationship between their son, Charlie, and his wife's brother, Winnie. She has been married to Rutmer, but their wish for children is thwarted because he turns out to be infertile. Since he does not want her to be inseminated by some hunk, whose genes may carry on some character flaw, he wants his brother Charlie as a sperm donor. Since Winnie dislikes him for his phlegmatic approach to life and career, this has to be executed as a secret plan with the help of a doctor, to whom Rutmer is befriended. During Winnie's pregnancy there are two striking scenes. First, since no one else is around, Charlie has to bring her to the hospital because of some emergency, and, of course, he is addressed as the 'father' all the time, which he soon stops denying. Second, at one point, Charlie is the babysitter of two kids, while Winnie happens to come by to fetch some things, and is surprised to see him. Since one of the kids has started to cry, which he heard over the baby alarm, he goes to the child's bed, and as instructed by the father, he sings a children's song. We see Winnie in the room, while she listens to him singing the child asleep. Her facial expression communicates that this spineless fellow at least has one great talent: he would be a wonderful father, not knowing that he is the biological father of her yet unborn baby. This talent perplexes her so much that she starts to see him afresh, in a much more positive light. If in the comedy of remarriage the accidental pose as a married couple precedes the realization that the man and woman love each other, then *ALLES IS FAMILIE* has scenes in which the man and woman are seen as 'father and mother' before she even knows that she carries his child. The order that a man becomes a lover first and a father second, is here reversed.

In contrast to Rademakers' theatrical *document humain* with its stage actors, the two films by Lürsen, measured to the format of a soap opera, feature quite a number of actors who had built a reputation on Dutch television. Restricting myself to *ALLES IS LIEFDE*, one can mention Paul de Leeuw, Wendy van Dijk, Valerio Zeno, Chantal Janzen, Marc-Marie Huijbregts and one can also count Michiel Romeyn, Thomas Acdra and Viggo Waas among them. Most of these names are known as comedians and casting these familiar faces contributes to the tongue-in-cheek humour of the film. Even if De Leeuw plays a relatively serious part – far removed from his outrageous roles as Bob de Rooij in *FILMPJE!* (see chapter 1) or as terrorist/would-be-couturier in the spoof of

spy films, *SPION VAN ORANJE* [SPY OF ORANGE] (Tim Oliehoek, 2009) – his share in a film automatically tends to be taken with a grain of salt.

### FREE-FLOATING IRONY: *DE GELUKKIGE HUISVROUW* AND *GOOISCHE VROUWEN*

Some of the main characters in the *ALLES IS ...* films are fairly laid back, but others are quite affected, not to say neurotic. It is therefore but a small step to the third tendency of post-*MAKKERS STAAKT UW WILD GERAAS* films, in which the neurotic behaviour comes to take the upper-hand. For want of a better term and with a wink to the next chapter I will call this last category, ‘neurotic’ comedies about modern relationships from the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It has to be noted that this category is on a sliding scale from ‘slightly berserk’ – *GOOISCHE VROUWEN*, *JACKIE*, *DE GELUKKIGE HUISVROUW* – to over-the-top productions like *AMAZONES*, *MOORDWIJVEN*, *PHILEINE ZEGT SORRY*. In general, these films fared quite well at the box office, although *AMAZONES* is the negative exception (26,563) and *GOOISCHE VROUWEN* overshadows them by far with 1,919,982 viewers, and part 2, released in 2014, even surpassed this number, being the first Dutch film since 1986 to attract more than 2 million moviegoers, becoming the all-time number 7. A common link between the *ALLES IS ...* films and both *JACKIE* and *DE GELUKKIGE HUISVROUW* is that Carice van Houten is the scene-stealer in all four.

Hearing the plot summary of *DE GELUKKIGE HUISVROUW* people would not assume the film as a comedy, but this drama has its moments of comic relief. The stewardess Lea Meyer, about 30 years old, lives in a huge villa with her rich husband, Harry. She gets pregnant, but after the arduous delivery of a healthy boy, swapping ‘canapés for nappies,’<sup>19</sup> she starts to suffer from psychotic hallucinations. Recovering in a mental institution she is being told that she has to mourn the death of her father who drowned himself in a lake when she was nine years old. As a drama the film is schematic, as if derived from a book on psychoanalysis for dummies. Lea’s mother has incessantly taught her to despise her father, who was, in her opinion, unfit to raise children. As a child, Lea was therefore encouraged to repress all memories of her father, but now, 20 years later, she feels the urge to dig up the past, for, as she is told in the institution, a dead father is a father, too. (‘How profound,’ she utters, and judging from her tone she is serious about it.) Initially, she only had some dim memories of him, but after she has been given a picture so that she at least knows what he looked like, her notion of him becomes clearer. Moreover, she comes across a notebook with a rhyme dedicated to her, and this will be one of the set-ups for a belated encounter with the ghost of her father. Following a quarrel with her mother, she hallucinates that she sees him in the rear

seat of a car via her driving mirror. She even hears him speak, telling her she slept so peacefully while he stood by her bed for 15 minutes before he went to drown himself. Reassured that he really loved her after all, she imagines that he walked into the lake. At the end of the film, she faces the camera, with her baby in her arms, suggesting that now she has come to terms with the past, she is finally ready for her role as mother.

This overtly conventional drama – for a psychoanalytic scenario is at odds with such a feel-good ending – is mixed with comic scenes whose nature can be divided in two. First, there are the incongruous situations, like in the beginning of the film. One of the passengers follows the stewardess behind the curtain for some champagne, and then into the bathroom. A colleague stewardess, who has witnessed them, advises the passengers to fasten their seatbelts, for some ‘turbulence’ is to be expected. After the brief sexual encounter, the man tells the woman that ‘it was a real pleasure again, Mrs. Meyer,’ and only then it becomes clear that they are a married couple who only play-acted that they were ‘strangers’ for the sake of erotic titillation. This ‘joke’ repeats itself in a next scene when she pretends to be the cleaning woman who, when she turns around, exposes her naked buttocks. At the end of the film, when she has successfully come to terms with the history of her father, her husband, Harry, plays the role of cleaner, who asks ‘Mrs. Meyer’ to follow him upstairs, exposing his naked buttocks. Actually, Lea and Harry as a modern couple are equals, but for their sexual satisfaction, or ‘turbulence’ as the bawdy wordplay in the beginning has it, they apparently have to create deliberate hierarchies in class status, not unlike the situations between the prostitute Greet and her subservient male customers in *WAT ZIEN IK!?* (discussed in chapter 1).

Second, the film owes its humour above all to the way Carice van Houten performs her comic-angry lines in the most awkward of situations. Her husband has a compliant character and finds it difficult to handle any drawback. When he thinks his pregnant wife has an orgasm, she retorts: ‘No moron, it is a contraction.’ While he is eating Asian food with the midwife, Lea complains about the smell of the meal. Are you okay?, he asks, and she scolds at him: ‘My pelvic floor is being torn asunder and you’re chatting with a dyke about crackers!’ Suffering from post-natal depression, she puts the child, Harry Junior, into a box during the night. Harry is shocked by this behaviour and calls for a doctor, who asks her why she put the baby in a box. She yells at him: ‘No, not in a box. He came out of my box. I have to explain that to you? He calls himself a doctor!’

Her frustration about the fact that she had to carry all the burden, while ‘Harry did not do a thing,’ unleashes some angry energy on her part which translates itself into wisecracking replies. The film does not suggest that it is in her nature to be a ‘post-feminist bitch.’ Her job, for one, requires her

to behave as a friendly host to all the passengers aboard. And the end scene suggests that she can be happy in the role of mother. The slightly kinky sex, which is hinted at both in the beginning and at the end, may be one of her few dissipations left. So, her funny-aggressive retorts, aimed at her husband, her mother or medical personnel, only came about as a reaction to a situation that frustrated her. At the end of the film, having mourned her father's death, it is suggested that she can finally 'act her age,' as Harry has requested her several times during her depression. Hence, her hysterical-comic days seem to be over.

One of the charms of *GOOISCHE VROUWEN*, exploiting the huge success of the homonymous television series, for its target audience is that the four female protagonists do not give in to the demand to 'act their age.'<sup>20</sup> Their refusal is not hysterical, however, for they are hardly traumatized like Lea in *DE GELUKKIGE HUISVROUW*, but the main and painstaking thrust of their relatively luxurious lives is to remain 'forever young,' or as Cheryl asks herself, 'how to grow older with style.'<sup>21</sup> Each of the four girlfriends has her own problems, like Anouk, who is called a 'slut' by her daughter because of her series of (young) male lovers, but those of Cheryl are the most decadent. She thinks she has lost her sex appeal, so her gay male 'fashionista' friend Yari advises her to wear a push-up bra, but, oops, she has already got one on. When Yari thereupon meets Cheryl's husband, the popular torch song vocalist Martin Morero, the latter complains that he does not know what present to give his wife for her upcoming birthday. Yari suggests that he buy her 'new boobies,' not realizing that Martin will misunderstand the joke. So, when Cheryl has the laugh on her side when she guesses in the company of the party guests that it is a 'book gift certificate,' Martin says in all vapidly: 'You're close, it is a booby certificate. The thing does not even exist. I had to design it myself. There's a gap in the market.' Martin adds vulgarity to embarrassment when he says: 'A breast enlargement. Of course, I mean: breasts enlargement. Get them both done, otherwise you'll be off balance. And so will I.' Displeased with the cold reception of what he considered as a highly original gift, he mumbles a bit later: 'Next year, I am giving another watch again.'

The depiction of Cheryl and Martin is of interest, because it shows what happens when a type like Johnnie Flodder catapults himself, thanks to just one talent – his vocal qualities – to the level of the nouveau riche, with a mortgage of 2.9 million euro on his residence. Whereas in Maas' comedy, *FLODDER*, a social experiment put the lower class into a position to flaunt their 'true selves' in order to mock the upper class, in *GOOISCHE VROUWEN*, the upper class are shown to have a lower-class mentality.<sup>22</sup> Cheryl's joke on the 'book gift certificate' shows that they do not buy books. Martin has a poor taste in clothing and wants to appear in a 'flashy costume' because he thinks that

would make a ‘grand entrance.’ He not only speaks in a sophisticated manner, which reveals that he originates from a well-off neighbourhood, but he also uses curse words without being aware how inappropriate that is in public settings. Further, when the teacher at primary school tells him and his wife that their son has the habit of doing ‘deferred imitation’ – copying actions he has seen others perform – Martin says: ‘How is that possible? He does not even know what that is. Neither do we.’

In *FLODDER*, the presentation of the upper class as stiff was mediated for us from the perspective of the lower class. In *GOOISCHE VROUWEN*, this mediation is missing, since the lower class itself has become bourgeois, and it is up to the viewer to recognize the hilarious incongruity of their social rise to an upper-class position. The depiction of Cheryl and Martin equals the Flidders becoming decadent: they show off a luxurious lifestyle, but ‘deep down’ they are quite trite. This discrepancy has been turned into the source of mocking the upper class. Both Johnnie Flodder and Martin Morero have a huge libido, but whereas Johnnie gets away with anything, Cheryl, as an upper-class woman, cannot accept her husband getting a blow job from one of the neighbouring mothers, primarily because it might affect her social position. Problems arise because there is a position to be upheld, and, ironically, as an antidote to this pressure, Cheryl attends a workshop on ‘Becoming Who You Are’ in a castle in sunny France. Whereas the Flidders caused problems to others, because they never bothered about their social status (they were just ‘being themselves’), the upper-class women are in search of their inner selves. Since they are subjected to New Age jargon about exploring the vibrant shell of their bodies, they give up the workshop. After their failed attempt at self-actualization, they go shopping in Paris with their friend, Yari, the ultimate activity to show off one’s social class. Their ‘core business’ is aptly summed up by one of the lines of Cheryl in the extremely successful sequel, *GOOISCHE VROUWEN 2* (Will Koopman, 2014), who tells Claire after the latter’s return from a three years’ stay in Burkina Faso: ‘You can take the girl out of Het Gooi, but you cannot take Het Gooi out of the girl.’

Placing *GOOISCHE VROUWEN* under the banner of the ‘neurotic comedy’ perhaps does injustice to the film (and the TV series). I presented *KOMEDIE OM GELD*, *MAKKERS STAAKT UW WILD GERAAS* and *EEN ZWOELE ZOMERAVOND* quite favourably as mildly ironic films, so why then deny this honorary label to *GOOISCHE VROUWEN*? Well, Koopman’s film can be termed mildly ironic, like its predecessors, except that irony has come to mean something different since the 1990s. Perhaps the television programme *GLAMOURLAND* is a watershed in this. Presenter Gert-Jan Dröge went to visit parties attended by the rich and famous and poked fun at the affected behaviour of the guests. Instead of being embarrassed by their portrayal, a number of these guests – Jan des

Bouvier, Harry Mens – used their appearance in the programme to become (second-rate) national celebrities, which greatly benefited their career. They were being laughed at, but at the same time they themselves laughed with the people who watched the programme. The train of thought runs like this: 'You smirk at me because of my posh lifestyle and my attendance at shallow parties, but do not underestimate me. I know it is silly, but I happen to have a sense of self-mockery.' For that very reason, Christy Wampole has described irony as 'the ethos of our age' on *The Stone*, a commentary page of the *New York Times*. For the relatively well-educated and financially secure, as she puts it succinctly, 'irony functions as a kind of credit card you never have to pay back.' Irony has become the perfect excuse for not committing ourselves to any cause or lifestyle, but meanwhile we continue to support that very cause or lifestyle. People might consider the programmes of a commercial TV station stupid, and watch them out of a sense of perverse delight, but the station itself is only interested in statistics: for their business model the only thing they care about is how many people are watching and how much can they charge the advertisers. They do not really care whether the programme was enjoyed by the viewers or not. This discrepancy between ratings as such and the (lack of) appreciation on the part of viewers is at the very heart of the liberal-capitalist ideology. A TV station, or a social medium like Facebook, does not bother about ironic viewers/participants as long as they are watching or do not give up membership. Similarly, it leaves a torch song artist like Martin Morero indifferent whether he appears to be a laughing stock to people, as long as they buy his records or attend his concerts: 'Of course, his songs are kind of banal, but it is sheer fun to sing along with them.' This logic is the basis for kitsch: yes, I know that this is an unpretentious and sentimental song/object, but because I know I can enjoy it, or rather, enjoy it differently than those who simply consider this sentimental song/object beautiful. In such a case, the knowledge becomes the excuse for enjoying the song/object. In short, under the banner of kitsch, mediated by an ironic perspective, people derive pleasure of songs/objects which they 'officially' regard as beneath their taste.

Since this kind of free-floating irony has become the sign of the times, as was Wampole's point, it should not surprise us that *GOOISCHE VROUWEN* has struck a chord among audiences. Even though it hardly carries any subversive edge, the film has no more pretence than ridiculing the affected behaviour of the financially secure for commercial entertainment. To put it bluntly, the rich might be thinking: 'We think it is fine when you laugh at us, as long as you do not consider our decadent lifestyle as a reason to bring up the subject of a class struggle.' In that sense, *GOOISCHE VROUWEN* is in the context in which 'irony is the ethos of our age,' a harmless film, since this type of laughter will guarantee the status quo. Koopman's relatively unpretentious film is ultimately in

the same league as those films which display an eagerness to show themselves off as very hip, but which despite their bravado, remain stuck in the very same kind of free-floating irony.

## POST-FEMINISM: *PHILEINE ZEGT SORRY*

**PHILEINE ZEGT SORRY** [PHILEINE SAYS SORRY] (Robert Jan Westdijk, 2003) is shot as a fast-paced film with frenetic camera movements which accords with the energy of the main character, the 'powerbabe' Phileine. She can be called a typical representative of post-feminism. She has benefited from the emancipatory struggles of the feminist movements in the 1970s and 1980s, but instead of continuing these struggles, the post-feminist creates the image of the assertive and independent woman instead. Phileine is a true she-devil, at times parading like a female James Bond. The film owes its humour to the fact that Phileine is foul-mouthed – 'My aberration, dear Kitty, is that I love discussing sex with girlfriends, preferably vulgar'<sup>23</sup> – and excels in wisecracking, which is contrary to how an adolescent girl is supposed to behave.

On the one hand, Phileine suggests a state of independence, so far so good, but on the other hand she ultimately is dependent on the whims of her laconic lovers. Since her boyfriends cheat on her – like the 'cute and toe-curling' Max with the excuse that he has to rehearse an erotic scene for a modern Shakespeare interpretation – she vents air at randomly selected victims, like a 'hideously ugly' guy. She thinks it great when she has a 'poor boy's soul dashed.' Her intimidating behaviour is born out of frustration. Her incapacity to control her lovers throws her off balance. Granted, Phileine herself notes the inconsistency that she is, or rather pretends to be, a 'cynical, insensitive bitch' but who starts 'wagging her tail as soon as her boss comes in.' The problem of the film is that such reflexive remarks seem to legitimize her behaviour. She radiates toughness, but in the end she only wants to have a relationship with a boy she can call 'my everything.' The image of Phileine as a funny example of Girl Power with all her smart retorts is therefore embedded within a conservative and narcissistic desire of having a steady relationship with the one and only. Phileine hates making apologies, but in the end, she can only win Max back by saying 'sorry,' a couple of times. And as such, Phileine is a typically male fantasy, or 'every boy's wet dream.'<sup>24</sup> She is a cat on a hot tin roof on the outside, but at the core she is fairly tame. During the end credits Phileine can show up dressed as a female 007 and hit the 'sorry'-saying Phileine on the nose in an attempt to restore her 'girl power' image, but it is too little too late.

Because the tame Phileine wins over the wild post-feminist Phileine – which is more a posture than her actual identity – the humour of the film falls

flat. All the wisecracks are no more than window dressing. And as a consequence, all the filmic devices in *PHILEINE ZEGT SORRY* fall flat as well: Phileine gives comments either in voice-over or by talking directly into the camera; the dream sequences of Phileine floating in space on the Richard Strauss music from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY* (1968); the insertion of a pseudo-documentary on Phileine with talking heads (Max, her girlfriend Lala, her mother); the commercial break from the sponsor when writer Ronald Giphart says that the film adaptation is much better than his own book (oh, my God, really?); the play with shallow focus or with freeze frames, and above all the many frenetic camera movements. All these devices are meant to underscore the unconventional representation of Phileine, but they lose their function because, deep at heart, she is a romantic soul. In short, her post-feminist stance is a charade, and so are the filmic devices that go along with them.

144 | The spectator may laugh because he recognizes that her behaviour is the opposite of the convention of the average girl. At the surface the film may seem to turn conventions inside out, but on closer inspection the comedy is more conservative than one might have expected, since her tough posture is no more than a disguise for an average identity and concomitant desires. At the outset, the film seems to offer humorous pleasure because of Phileine's attitude, but on closer inspection the laughter risks, notwithstanding its apparent hipness, reaffirming mediocrity. In defence of Westdijk's post-feminist comedy, it could be said that my comments are too harsh and too serious. For the tone of the film is so mocking throughout that my critical point about the disappointingly conventional ending should be put into perspective. So, I reconsider my 'verdict': *PHILEINE ZEGT SORRY* has a tame ending, but because of its overall ironic mode, it can also be seen as a parodic mimicry of tame endings. May be, may be not, but that precisely is the point of this type of free-floating irony: in the vein of the idea of strategic ambiguity, discussed in chapter 2, the viewer is offered here a vision upon 'female power' which is strikingly directionless.

## WOMEN WHO KNOW TOO MUCH

So far I discussed the mixture of social drama and comedy 'light' according to a sliding scale: from the lower-class melodrama of *CISKE DE RAT* (Wolfgang Staudte, 1955) and the narrow-minded affairs in *FANFARE* (Bert Haanstra, 1958) to the theatrical irony of *MAKKERS STAAKT UW WILD GERAAS* and the screwball humour of *ALLES IS LIEFDE* (Joram Lürsen, 2006). Seen from another angle one could say that this chapter addressed typically Dutch phenomena with comical overtones: the boyish pranks of a little rascal, the 'much ado about nothing' conflicts in a brass band, the love perils triggered by the

upcoming celebration of Saint Nicholas. In both *MAKKERS STAAKT UW WILD GERAAS* and *ALLES IS LIEFDE*, the festivities were a backdrop for all kinds of family matters: adolescent rebellion, reunions, romantic encounters and marital conflicts. And though these conflicts were not always solved on that joyous eve, there was at least some form of reconciliation, if only the awareness that marriage is not apt for anyone. The films suggest that Saint Nicholas can bring about some advance among people, and often this advance is of a comic nature. In Rademakers' film, Mr. Leegher unexpectedly arrives in the disguise of Saint Nicholas in the hope of making up with his wife; in Lürsen's film, Prince Valentijn is dressed as Black Pete to seduce Kiki.

A film such as *ALLES IS LIEFDE* firmly stands in the tradition of the idea that disguises might work in winning someone's heart, which in cinema history was executed to perfection in the aforementioned *SOME LIKE IT HOT*.<sup>25</sup> First the saxophone player Joe disguises himself as Josephine to escape the Mafia. He then meets Sugar Cane, who confides in him, thinking he is a girl, that tenor sax players are unreliable, for the only things they leave behind are 'a pair of old socks and a tube of toothpaste, all squeezed out.' She tells him she prefers 'helpless' men with weak eyes as a result of reading 'all those long columns of tiny figures in the *Wall Street Journal*.' Joe/Josephine then takes on the guise of Shell Junior, a bespectacled and impotent millionaire with the voice of Cary Grant. Impersonating this immensely rich offspring she falls in love with him, unbothered by his eventual revelation that he is just a tenor saxophone player. Both *SOME LIKE IT HOT* and *ALLES IS LIEFDE* can only work on the condition that the film spectator is prepared to accept the naivety of characters who do not see through disguises. In *ALLES IS LIEFDE*, this naive position is not only represented by Kiki, but above all by the lone drifter, Eppie, with his childlike imagination. He cannot see through a disguise, which makes him such an endearing character: a bearded man with a red cloak and a mitre is for him Sinterklaas, or as he calls him 'Sniklaas.'

Films like *PHILEINE ZEGT SORRY* and *GOOISCHE VROUWEN* seem a bit more mature than the quite naive *ALLES IS LIEFDE*, but let me clarify the surplus value of the latter by making a brief detour via superhero comics/films like *BATMAN*, *SPIDERMAN* and *SUPERMAN*. The charm of these films resides in the split identity of the male character. The protagonist is 'divided into the weak everyday fellow with whom sexual relation is possible and the bearer of the symbolic mandate, the public hero' (Žižek *Enjoy*, 24). Clark Kent is in love with Lois Lane, but she has a crush on Superman, not knowing that he is Clark's alter ego. As soon as his identity would be exposed, Žižek argues, 'we are bound to lose him' (24). The makers of the television series *LOIS & CLARK: THE NEW ADVENTURES OF SUPERMAN*, originally broadcast between 1993 and 1997, nonetheless took the risk to make Superman's identity known to Lois

at the beginning of the third season.<sup>26</sup> They argued that Lois simply was too smart and intelligent a woman to remain ignorant of what seemed so obvious after all those episodes. The revelation made sense from a ‘realistic’ as well as a feminist perspective, but it spoiled the charm of the ‘original’ fantasy to such an extent that all kind of bizarre script interventions had to be made to keep the series going (Lois temporarily acquires Clark’s power; they get married, but then she turns out to be a clone; she suffers a bout of amnesia; Clark’s wife from the planet Krypton comes to Earth). A film like ALLES IS LIEFDE made its viewers accept the route of naivety by setting the film up as some kind of suspension of disbelief: you, viewer, you have to believe in love, in Saint Nicholas, or it simply does not work. The biggest joke of the film is that Kiki (acts as if she) does not recognize Prince Valentijn as Black Pete, which is comparable to Lois Lane in the first two seasons of LOIS & CLARK.

Phileine, the ‘happy housewife,’ the ‘desperate housewives’ from GOOI-SCHE VROUWEN and the ‘killer babes’ from MOORDWIJVEN are all women who ‘know too much.’ Just as the plot twists in LOIS & CLARK became increasingly bizarre after Lois had shed her naive stance, the humour in these films with assertive and wisecracking women became more and more ‘hysterical,’ which is a true title with pride seen from the angle of ‘deliberate camp,’ the subject of the next chapter.

## EPILOGUE: A NOTE ON TOLERANCE

I would like to pause here briefly for some ‘helicopter view’ of the chapters so far. It may be a caricature, but in the 20<sup>th</sup> century people in the Netherlands were usually described as phlegmatic and forbearing – by ‘lazy foreign journalists,’ as Ian Buruma is quick to add (10). The Dutch, however, were not naturally born to be tolerant, but their tolerance was rather a consequence of the peculiar phenomenon of *verzuiling*, i.e., pillarization. Specific religious groups (Catholics, Protestants) and secular groups (the Social Democrats being the most important one) had their own institutions: political parties, trade unions, schools, newspapers, broadcasting organizations. Life was relatively uncluttered: one knew how to vote, what magazines to read, what clubs to frequent, and so on. As Buruma observes, ‘all the real or potential conflicts between the pillars were negotiated by the gentlemen who stood at their pinacles’ (48). There was a mutual understanding among these ‘gentlemen’ not to intensify the debates but to settle for watery compromises. For the ordinary citizen, membership of a pillar worked as a wall of protection; in fact, one was pampered, as Marcel ten Hooven notes, from the cradle to the grave (11). According to the adage ‘good fences make good neighbours,’<sup>27</sup> the idea of ‘liv-

ing apart together' was a most pragmatic solution. The attitude of tolerance helped the Netherlands to develop into a prosperous country and even when the pillars started to totter in the 1960s, tolerance truly became a catch-all term for the upcoming decades: it was not illegal to use recreational drugs, free love was advocated, prostitution is pardonable, gay rights should be supported, euthanasia should be possible, albeit still under strict conditions, and so on. Buruma is right when he notes that this led to 'an air of satisfaction, even smugness, a self-congratulatory notion of living in the finest, freest, most progressive, most decent, most perfectly evolved playground of multicultural utopianism' (11).

What most of the comedies in these first three chapters have shown – and in that sense they can be regarded as 'typically' Dutch – is what happens when a pragmatic tolerance is challenged. *FANFARE* shows a mild version: the burst of laughter by Geursen is too much to bear for his fellow musician Krijns. A conflict ensues, but apparently insurmountable differences among sworn opponents dissolve in perfect unison as soon as the two groups enter the musical stage, illustrating how silly the dispute was in the first place. The films made after *FANFARE* are more outrageous, since they reply to the atmosphere of tolerance since the 1960s. These comedies exploit what the freedom regarding X leads to, and X is to be read as prostitution (*WAT ZIEN IK?!*), extramarital affairs (*EEN ZWOELE ZOMERAVOND*), disregard for authorities (*SCHATJES!*, *NEW KIDS TURBO*). Most of these films tend to highlight the berserk effects resulting from an 'excess' of tolerance. In some cases, the purport can be quite conservative. Emancipation in general may meet support as a good cause, but the struggle for equal rights for women has also produced the 'cold and selfish bitches' from *MOORDWIJVEN* and *PHILEINE ZEGT SORRY*.

Pace Dick Maas' reply that *FLODDER* has no 'message,' this lower-class comedy teaches its viewers that if we are to take 'typically Dutch' tolerance seriously, we have to accept the Flodder family for what they are. A lenient attitude, as promoted by types like Sjakie, gives them ample room to show off their rudeness. In the film, the Flidders are presented as the 'odd one in,' to paraphrase Zupancic, but the required tolerance of the well-to-do neighbours soon evaporates into thin air. On a closer look, Maas' comedy is a foretelling of the 'multicultural tragedy' Scheffer was talking about when one substitutes the lower-class white family for the new Dutch with a religious, often Islamic, background, albeit with a crucial difference. The Flidders are an anomaly who are distinguished by their coarse manners. Their arrival disturbs the quietness in Zonnedael, but their presence is mainly a practical nuisance. One may dislike the Flidders due to their rudeness, but one could trust them instinctively: the party is the definite proof they have nothing behind their sleeves. In a changed political environment since the new millennium, Mus-

lims, however, are regarded as invaders, in principal opposition to the liberal values of the West. The readiness to tolerate their presence has its limits, even for Dutch progressives like Scheffer, as Buruma has argued: It is easy to be tolerant of those who are quite like ourselves, but what if the other seems to denounce our values? (127-28). It is the fear that the newcomers aim to rob us of our hard-earned luxuries; tolerance being one of our main achievements. The fact that many women wear headscarves and that they endorse the practice of female circumcision are taken as visible tokens of their presumed intolerance. A typical reply by Dutch people to this discrepancy is the sour mood of *verongelijktheid*, 'to be wronged, not by an individual so much as by the world at large' (Buruma, 15-16). We start wondering: What did we do to deserve such intolerant people coming to join our little paradise of tolerance? From this perspective, the Muslims are, in the words of Buruma, regarded as 'the spoilsports, unwelcome crashers at the party' (127).

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The multicultural comedies from chapter 2 aim to belie the idea that being a Turk or a Moroccan equals taking a fundamental stance. Abus and his friends from SHOUF, SHOUF HABIBI! want to enjoy the privileges from the West, but the source of comedy is that they find it so hard to cope with this freedom. For one, Abus is never ever punctual. In DE MASTERS (Ruud Schuurman, 2015), Aziz, also played by Mimoun Oaïssa, succeeds in reuniting his former rap crew, and guess what? For their performance at a sweet sixteen party in a small village with, says Aziz, a 'rich tradition of hip-hop,' they arrive three hours late, but Aziz responds that if they want to go to bed in time, they had better ask Frans Bauer. Well, probably the kids should have done that, for the performance goes completely out of control.

The comedies so far have basically addressed the excesses that come with the lack of sexual mores and disrespect for authority. Thus, they present material which is quite hot to handle. This could have resulted into provocative films, but by couching these excesses in the form of 'plain' comedies, the 'transgressive' effects were minimized though not yet fully neutralized. In case of controversial content, it is a relatively safe bet to do this under the banner of humour, for the laughter might drown out reflection – almost, but not quite. In the analyses of films discussed in subsequent chapters, the balance will gradually shift towards the reflexive part.

To mark this transition, let me refer to Mike van Diem's DE SURPRISE [THE SURPRISE] (2015), which indeed was a surprise, coming from a filmmaker who had not directed a film, since the Oscar-winning KARAKTER (1997).<sup>28</sup> DE SURPRISE was advertised as a romantic comedy, featuring two actors who were television celebrities. The actual marketing of the film as if it were another ALLES IS LIEFDE or HARTENSTRAAT was a bit of decoy to attract a huge audience. The film is a romantic comedy, for sure, about a wealthy but impulsive

esquire whose attempts at suicide after his mother's demise are time and again interrupted. He then goes to the mysterious 'travel' agency, Elysium, which promises him, in the euphemistic terms of its manager, a '*once-in-a-lifetime journey to the ultimate destination*.' And, yes, then he finds the love of his life, who introduces herself as a fellow-traveller. Since, alas, the contract is irreversible, the question becomes: How to escape fate? A similar plot is also used in *I HIRED A CONTRACT KILLER* (1990) by the Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki, but Van Diem wanted to avoid being put in the category of deadpan absurdism. The 'surprise' of *DE SURPRISE* is that it walks the middle ground between the snappy style of the regular romantic comedy and the dry-comic surrealism of a Kaurismäki film, giving the film a classic allure. Van Diem's picture is littered with a great number of stylistic quotes, from *GIANT* (George Stevens, 1956), *CHARADE* (Stanley Donen, 1963), *MARNIE* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1964) and *LE SAMOURAI* (Jean-Pierre Melville, 1967), so that the film comes to border on 'theatrical abstraction' (Van Diem, qtd. in Van der Burg, 13). Thanks to this stylistic concern, *DE SURPRISE* becomes a rom-com, wrapped up as a thoughtful ode to classic cinema. It thus adds a reflexive extra to the entertaining love story it offers at the same time. In the upcoming chapters I will aim to trace variants of such reflexive extras in comedies which are to be categorized as camp, ludic, ironic, absurd or grotesque. Owing to a more unconventional approach of these films, the chances of subversive effects will increase accordingly.

