

Humour as an Aftermath Effect

In her study *Screening Sex*, which traces the historical development from the very first film kiss in *THE KISS* (Thomas Edison, 1896) to the online possibilities offered by cam.whore experiences and Virtual Sex Simulators, Linda Williams introduces the concept of 'on/scenity.' According to her, the obscenity of the public display loses its scandalous impact the more that display becomes familiar (*Screening*, 260). At the time, *THE KISS* caused quite a stir when the short film, initially made for the small format of the Kinetoscope with its peephole device, was projected on the much bigger film screen. Williams suggests that it probably gave offence that the intimacy of a kiss was 'monstrously enlarged' (*Screening*, 30), but for a present-day audience *THE KISS* is no more than an innocent 'attraction.' Over the decades, the (adolescent) kiss has shifted to presumably more adult displays of what happens between the sheets in mainstream movies, as in the controlled interlude of the spectacle of sex in *THE GRADUATE* (Mike Nichols, 1967) (*Screening*, 21, 84), leading up to the 'erotic modern art' of *LAST TANGO IN PARIS* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972) and the 'crass hard-core pornography' of *DEEP THROAT* (Gerard Damiano, 1972), in which the ejaculation of the male performer functions as visual evidence of 'the orgasmic bliss of the female' (Williams *Hard Core*, 101).¹ Whereas the latter film, as befits conventional pornography, had the overt intention to arouse viewers, Williams uses the term 'hard-core art' for those films which merge visibility of genitals with the (narrative) conditions of art cinema, considering the Japanese film *AI NO KORIDA* [IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES] (1976) as one of the early 'benchmark' films. Though a great number of hard-core art pictures foreground that sex can have humiliating and alienating effects or even induce boredom, like *INTIMACY* (Patrice Chéreau, 2001), *SHAME* (Steve McQueen, 2011), or the second part of *NYMPH()MANIAC* (Lars von Trier, 2014), hard-core scenes in some other art films with explicit sexual content, can

be loving, playful or joyous – as in *9 SONGS* (Michael Winterbottom, 2004), *SHORTBUS* (John Cameron Mitchell, 2006), *LA VIE D'ADÈLE [BLUE IS THE WARMEST COLOR]* (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013), *L'INCONNU DU LAC [STRANGER BY THE LAKE]* (Alain Guiraudie, 2013), and in several episodes from part one of *NYMPHOMANIAC* (Lars von Trier, 2013).

No matter whether these hard-core art titles emphasize the bleakness or the euphoria of sexual experiences, film audiences have grown acquainted over the years with a certain explicitness of sexual imagery, ‘through repeated and magnified anatomization’ (Williams *Screening*, 30). The two lengthy lesbian sex scenes in *LA VIE D'ADÈLE* might have raised some scandal in previous decades because of the explicit display, but in 2013 it was only controversial because it was reported that the male director had subjected his two leading actresses to fatiguing shooting sessions and not because of the display as such.² An even better indication that the ‘scandalous’ impact of explicit eroticism on the white screen seems to have gradually faded away is the release of the art-house suspense thriller *L'INCONNU DU LAC*, which hardly stirred a debate, despite its frontal nudity and ‘gay male sex on/near the beach’ scenes. Many an older film with a graphic display of sex was greeted as too provocative by a contemporary audience, but is in fact quite ‘innocent’ in comparison to Guiraudie’s thriller. This implies that the original provocative impact of a film can get lost as time progresses, which results in a remarkable paradox. It is often the fate of those daring films which try very hard to capture or even to anticipate the zeitgeist that as soon as the historical conditions change, they suddenly find themselves lagging behind – unlike movies with a more classic allure, like *LAWRENCE OF ARABIA* (David Lean, 1962) or *TYSTNAÐEN [THE SILENCE]* (Ingmar Bergman, 1963), which remain solid as a rock. In this chapter I will focus on films which have undergone a thorough shift in reception: at the time of production they held a vanguard position, but they have gained, willy-nilly, a comical effect in the aftermath. Originally, these expressions are token of a provocative, often anti-bourgeois mentality, not necessarily of a sexual nature, for the films at hand will also concern ‘drugs and/or rock ‘n’ roll’ and the horrification of a national symbol.

A DISCREPANCY BETWEEN STORY AND NUMBER: *BLUE MOVIE*

Let me give a brief synopsis of a Dutch movie from the early 1970s. Michael is free on parole after serving five years in prison. He was sent to the penitentiary for sleeping with the 15-year-old daughter of a notary, and while he was a jailbird he beat up a fellow-prisoner. Guided by the probation officer Eddie,

who advises him not to rush things, he will start living in an apartment on the eighth floor in the so-called Bijlmerflat, trying to build a new life. The film follows his reintegration process and portrays his attempts to get acquainted with other inhabitants. After becoming familiar with the locale, he starts a profitable business.

This may read like the synopsis of an art-house production or of a social document about readjustment, until it is revealed that the majority of encounters with the inhabitants are of a sexual nature. As soon as a commercially released film contains explicit eroticism, the story tends to become of minor importance. In his *The Plague of Fantasies*, Slavoj Žižek claims that a (film) story and graphic sexual numbers are mutually exclusive: '... if we choose one, we necessarily lose the other' (177). From the perspective of mainstream cinema this exclusivity can be illustrated via the hypothetical example of an extra inserted sequence in *OUT OF AFRICA* (Sydney Pollack, 1985). Since every spectator suspects that the main characters will sleep with one another, is it not realistic then to actually show how they make love, if only for a few minutes? Had Pollack opted for this, then the romantic bearing of the film would have been completely disjointed. *OUT OF AFRICA* would have become notorious as a scandal picture and would basically be remembered because of the steamy sex scene.

In fact, this is what befell *BLUE MOVIE* (Wim Verstappen, 1971), a Scorpio Films production whose synopsis was mentioned above.³ Because of the inclusion of erotic scenes the official film censorship board did not give permission for the release of *BLUE MOVIE* in regular theatres. Director Verstappen was dissatisfied with this decision and in a quite lengthy counter-plea he pointed out the scientific and religious purport of the film. *BLUE MOVIE*, he bluffed, should be seen as a loose adaptation of *De toekomst der religie* [*The Future of Religion*] (1947), a volume consisting of nine essays by the respectable writer Simon Vestdijk. Verstappen also attached an official American scientific research document, called *The Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography*, to his apology, for he claimed that this was crucial source material. By explaining in his apology that such extra-textual aspects had been influential, which of course was hard to deny, Verstappen provoked the Film Commission. Moreover, a psychologist was consulted who thought the film made sense from the perspective of his profession. One minor character, called Newman, is known for his stories about sexual debaucheries, but after he is exposed as an impotent man he commits suicide. Further, the presence of a zoologist in the film, played by the renowned actor Kees Brusse, also added some weight to *BLUE MOVIE*. This professor, Bernard Kohn, is among the inhabitants of the Bijlmerflat, but lives six months a year in Africa studying the behaviour of monkeys in order to better understand

the human biotope. The zoologist not only teaches Michael that the female monkeys yearn after the males with the highest (social) positions, but he also tells him that apes are not interested in sex, but once you put them in cages, they turn into sex maniacs, as happens to humans in huge apartment buildings. This hypothesis is then proven in the film by the conduct of practically all inhabitants who are in for a quickie time and again. The professor is so obsessed by apes that he neglects his young wife, who therefore has every reason to be adulterous. On top of that, *BLUE MOVIE* strategically capitalized on a shift in the 1960s mentality regarding sexual mores in Amsterdam, and as such it could be seen as a film with social value. Michael was sent to prison in a period preceding the so-called 'Summer of Love' in 1967, which led to less strict ideas on sexual behaviour. The inclusion of sex scenes was a not illogical consequence to illustrate this changed mentality. Finally, in his counter-plea Verstappen also argued that the visibility of the protagonist's erection proved Hugo Metsers' commitment to the whole project. To top it all, the visibility of Michael's erect penis earlier in the film was required, because in the final scene with Julia, who seems to become his love interest, a shot of a non-erect penis suggests he is unable to perform (Den Drijver, 131). Thus, the erection had the narrative function of suggesting the tragic irony of Michael's impotence. The Commission gave Verstappen the benefit of the doubt and approved of the film without demanding any cuts. From that moment onwards people, including moviegoers in Belgium and Germany, were anxious to see the much-discussed picture.

After the film censorship board had shot itself in the foot with the final approval, Verstappen claimed that it had been his goal to undermine the functionality of the board. A few years before, in 1967, he had co-signed a petition to protest that the Centrale Commissie voor de Filmkeuring had disapproved of Jef van der Heyden's *ONGEWIJDE AARDE* [UNCONSECRATED EARTH].⁴ According to the Commission, its makers disrespected dead bodies, for corpses were 'dragged around' in the film and it had been crude to shoot the funeral of a priest with a candid camera (Van Gelder, 107-8). Let us take Verstappen at his word, that his intention was to put the efficacy of the Commission into doubt. If so, then his *BLUE MOVIE* had lived up to its aim.⁵ In short, judged by its effect, the film was a success, for the Commission was reduced to paralysis and in 1977 film censorship for viewers aged over 16 years ceased to exist.

Given that the effect was of greater importance than its actual content, it does not really matter whether *BLUE MOVIE* was a 'good' film or not. In fact, it is not, and measured by present-day criteria, *BLUE MOVIE* is an uneven film. It can only be enjoyed as the sheer oddity it has turned into in the course of time. It can be said in defence of Verstappen's film that DEEP

THROAT (Gerald Damiano, 1972) still had to be released, so there was no key reference point for erotic or hard-core cinema yet. Despite its differences to this porn classic to be, *BLUE MOVIE* shares with *DEEP THROAT* the idea that having sex is wholesome. Analogous to the structure of American musicals like the ones by Vincente Minnelli (*MEET ME IN ST. LOUIS*, 1944; *AN AMERICAN IN PARIS*, 1951), in which any problem at the level of the story finds a (miraculous) solution as soon as characters start to sing and dance, the performance of sex is the utopian remedy for any ailment in an erotic/porn film. Whereas the one guy who talks only about sex, but is incapable of practising it, dies tragically in *BLUE MOVIE*, Michael's reintegration into society is so successful because he understands that screwing his female flatmates is beneficial. It helps him to develop his social skills and it gives him the much needed confidence to start his own sex-based business. *BLUE MOVIE* can be regarded as comic because Michael's probation officer Eddie – who is supposed to teach his client about social values – is utterly ignorant about the beneficial role of free love. Eddie wants to encourage him to enter into a steady relationship, but Michael retorts that he already knows two of the single women on the list: the first one is lesbian, and a second one is a member of a Maoist organization, cunningly adding to this that it is probably not a very good idea to engage with her. In response to Michael's bluff, Eddie has no other reply than some stumbling words. Ultimately, the probation officer is a nice chap with good intentions, but because of his naivety, he is the sitting target in Verstappen's film. As such, the portrayal of Michael and Eddie foreshadows the later representation of Johnnie Flodder and Sjakie.

A second reason why *BLUE MOVIE* can be read as a comic, if not hilarious picture, is because its main story, about an ex-convict's return into society, has the air of seriousness, but obviously should be taken with a grain of salt. In his brief essay 'How to Recognize a Porn Movie' Umberto Eco claims that some story is indispensable for the porn flick. A plot, no matter how rudimentary, is required to justify the staging of sexual acts. Eco's argument from his 1985 article is based upon a comparison between art cinema, like Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'AVVENTURA* (1960), and porn. In *L'AVVENTURA*, hardly anything happens for more than two hours, but boredom and the 'waste' of time are essential to the aesthetic experience of the film. A porn movie also consists of many wasted moments, but viewers regard them as annoying delay: characters drive cars, wait at elevators, sip various drinks, or a plumber comes by to fix the sink. Those apparently irrelevant scenes are advantageous nonetheless, because they create a 'background of normality.' The insertion of ordinary scenes may seem superfluous, but psychologically a porn flick would be unbearable for its viewers if there was only sex without any narrative framing, according to Eco. The viewer can only appreciate a

'healthy screw' on the condition that everyday scenes prevent the film from becoming an abnormal showcase of permanent saturation. Regardless of the ridiculous nature of those storylines, the regular porn movie depends upon a necessary interaction between narrative and number.

For Eco the difference between an art film and porn seems only gradual, a matter of a different emphasis. The art film can permit itself to ignore a story, whereas the porn movie has to offer a narrative, although the plot by definition lacks substance, for it merely functions as a stepping stone for the sexual number. Since present-day viewers have become much more familiar with what has grown over the years into a staple feature of regular porn, they will recognize the preludes to the sex scenes as the obligatory imposition to construct a frame of 'normality.' Living on the eighth floor, Michael has to take the elevator. The only other person in the elevator is a woman who challenges him – sign of the changed mentality – to make it stop and have a quickie. Michael takes up the challenge while downstairs a growing crowd is becoming more and more impatient. A mechanic is called in, but before he has been able to repair the breakdown, the two have reached ground level, fully dressed again. In another scene, Michael spies on the neighbours who have left their curtains open while love-making. Michael recognizes that the wife is horny, so he plucks up courage and approaches her the subsequent day by asking whether she can spare a cup of sugar. In both cases, there is a prelude, albeit minimal, not to say that it is hilariously minimal.

In the 4-minute-long persiflage by KREATIEF MET KURK, broadcast in 1993, the minimalism of the preludes is even further reduced. When the man rings the doorbell, the woman immediately asks, before he can even utter a word: 'You come to borrow a cup of sugar or you want to fuck?' The persiflage by KREATIEF MET KURK reveals the wonderful paradox of BLUE MOVIE. Once it was a daring project pervaded with an anti-bourgeois sensibility and a provocation at film censorship to great effect, but these days it can only make an obsolete impression as if the whole film was just a joke.

A BOHEMIAN DISPLAY OF SEX AND DECAY: *TURKS FRUIT*

TURKS FRUIT [TURKISH DELIGHT] is not so much a scandalous picture because of its depiction of sexual acts, but because it insistently links 'desire, death and decay,' Xavier Mendik claims in his analysis of Verhoeven's 1973 film (109). It is one of the key titles in the blossoming period of 'porn-chic' in this decade, but instead of equating sexuality with a joyful bliss, the film is quite macabre in tone, as seems to befit the tradition of European (art) cinema.⁶ Mendik underscores this claim by selecting some scenes that have an

'uncanny effect' (113). When the blonde bohemian artist Erik Vonk is about to have sexual intercourse with his beloved Olga Stapels in his studio, she falls asleep amid an elaborate array of candles. Since an overhead shot with reflective mirrors is used to show the naked Olga, she 'appears corpse-like, part of some bizarre funeral display' (113). In another scene, also described by Mendik, her inanimate body, covered with flowers by Erik, gives 'the appearance of death.' As soon as he removes the flowers, Olga's breasts and stomach are covered with maggots and insects, once again an image of decay. And due to the tragic ending, whereby Olga dies from a brain tumour, all these scenes can be interpreted as signs of a death foretold. Despite the morbid moments and sad ending, the film is above all appreciated for its overall vibrant atmosphere and the bohemian lifestyle of the main protagonist.

Most of the time Erik's acts seem prompted by an impulse to show himself off as wilfully contrarian. Sometimes his behaviour is only a boyish prank. At one point he takes an ice cream from the hands of a pedestrian when he passes him on a bike and he cycles right into a liquor store, with Olga on the bearer. At other times he just expresses his annoyance. The newly-weds Erik and Olga are about to have sex with one another, but time and again the bell rings which interrupts the consumption of sex. Fed up with all the ringing he throws the water in a flower vase to the man at the door, who happens to be Olga's father. Luckily for Erik, he is about the only person from an older generation who can appreciate a prank. Most of Erik's practical jokes are directed at characters for whom he feels a certain contempt. For an official assignment, he makes a sculpture of Jesus, but ornaments it with maggots and worms. He calmly explains that this is the awful truth, because Jesus was dead for a couple of days according to the Bible, but the representative of the tourist town Valkenburg is disgusted and demands removal of the nasty details. Immediately thereafter Erik turns a festive meal attended by this very same representative into a total mess when he starts spoiling and throwing food. Olga's mother is also a target of ridicule for him, because she undertakes efforts to keep Erik at a distance from her daughter. When he finds a balloon in the bathroom that is meant to cover-up for one of her removed breasts, he first says to Olga that her mother's charms are made of air and he then writes 'greetings, Erik' upon it with lipstick. In the scene when the queen arrives to inaugurate a sculpture he has made on commission, he encourages Olga to take off some clothes because it is so warm. The comic provocation falls flat, however, because a civil servant and his obsequious assistant make sure that the brass band passes in front of him and the scantily dressed Olga so that they are hidden from the queen's sight.

Erik behaves in a contrarian way, partly because he does not want to submit to rules of commonly accepted conduct, but above all to annoy figures

184 | who lay some claim to authority – the representative of Valkenburg, Olga's mother who thinks she can have a say in her daughter's love affairs, the store manager with whom he has a quarrel first and a physical fight second when he tries to prevent Erik from seeing Olga. The notable exception is Olga's father who does not disapprove of the relationship of his daughter with Erik, has the habit of telling jokes, albeit stale ones, and on top of it all, sings to the rhythm of the 'Radetzky March,' by repetitively adding the words 'tits 'n' ass' [tieten-kont]. Unlike Erik whose rebellion is overt, the father's is concealed so as not to irritate his own wife too much. When Olga's mother accidentally breaks the heel of her pump, he starts laughing, but stops immediately as she expresses her dismay at his fun. Erik's affinity for the father is most evident during a scene at the old man's funeral, when Erik dilates his eyes which works to emphasize his focalization. We then get a hallucinatory shot: the father rises from his coffin, singing 'tits 'n' ass' to the Radetzky March once more. This scene is on the one hand a friendly salute, imagined by Erik, and on the other hand, we can consider the scene, discussed in chapter 4, from *DE TRANEN VAN MARIA MACHITA* when Elbert finally has the right lyrics to his song as a homage to this hallucinatory resurrection from *TURKS FRUIT*.

All these comic scenes notwithstanding, *TURKS FRUIT* is of course best remembered for the frankness with which it displays scenes of sex, right from the start. The film opens in medias res, after Olga has left him for Henny. Lying on his bed in his untidy apartment Erik has some dark fantasies, strangling the new couple among others. After cleaning his place, he puts on a black leather jacket and says to himself in the mirror, 'Scoundrel,' which is the start of an extensive episodic sequence on 'making a pass at every woman.' The scenes are all brief: he goes into the city and starts to bother a girl in a phone booth. She reacts annoyed initially, but she starts to smile, however, when he draws a heart with his thumb on the glass. In a subsequent shot he is already on top of her in his bed. He frankly announces that he will fuck her, followed by a quick transition to Erik smoking a cigarette, while the girl is sobbing that he is sending her away and, moreover, without a 'souvenir.' With his back to her, he quickly draws a huge cock and signs it. Handing it to her, he says, 'Frame this.' The structure of this scene is repeated for his next 'conquest.' In town again, he jumps into the back seat of a cabriolet which has stopped at a traffic light. The woman yells at him to get out, but he kisses her. Cars start to honk, so she has to drive on. In the next shot she is already undressing in Erik's apartment, although he tells her she can leave her shirt on, since he will only use her bottom half. A next shot shows her bare buttocks, while his hand takes a pair of scissors, with which he then cuts some of her pubic hair. He puts it under his nose as if he

has a moustache and then glues the hair in a book, asking her name: Josje is his 'number 50.' The tempo of the episodic sequence accelerates from here onwards, for this is followed by a post-coital shot with another woman, who tells him that she missed God in their encounter, to which Erik responds: 'I fuck better than God.' Shocked, she turns away, and he then tries to smash a peeled banana into her mouth. Immediately there is a transition to a close-up of a crying baby in a pram, and then a high angle shot, showing Erik making love to another woman. In a closer shot we see that her right hand takes the pram and the rhythm of the sex comes to correspond to the movement of the baby carriage, which immediately silences the kid. The moment Erik and the woman stop, the child starts to cry again. A transition to another post-coital scene when a woman complains that she feels like a cow, for he considers her buttocks too soft and her tits too small. Then she takes up a black-and-white photograph of the ground, asking whether this is her. The melancholic theme music, played on a harmonica by Toots Thielemans, starts as Erik pensively touches the photograph. When the woman then remarks that she has left him for some shithead, he throws her out of his apartment while she is still naked. Then we see, as the last in the series of this episodic sequence, that Erik takes a girl with him on a bike to his house, shown in a long shot. Initially we might think it is Olga, the photographed woman, and that this is already a flashback. She also has the same, slightly hoarse laugh that Olga has. While Erik embraces her, he suddenly stares off-screen at something, accompanied by some sinister sounds. We see a sculpture, difficult to discern in the dark. Thanks to some light from outside, a closer shot reveals it is Olga. Erik seems paralyzed, then walks towards her. The girl, in the background, turns on the light, and it becomes evident that it is only a dark sculpture, representing Olga. The girl wraps her arms around Erik and asks: 'Fancy a fuck?' but Erik shakes his head. She looks over her shoulder towards the sculpture, and as if she considers herself an unworthy rival to the image, she leaves. The episodic sequence ends with Erik caressing the sculpture, before we go two years back in time when Erik is about to meet Olga.

I have described this sequence of about five and a half minutes at length, because of its fundamentally double-edged nature. On the one hand, the sequence is vulgar, presenting Erik as a lout who treats women disrespectfully. He seems uninterested in knowing their names or engaging them in conversation, and passed nasty comments about their body and even cuts a woman's pubic hair without asking permission. It is suggested he just wants to have sex with as many women as possible in a limited time span – as we can gather from his album in which he collects souvenirs from all his 'conquests.' On the other hand, as we can read from the last two encounters, his

rude behaviour is determined, to some extent at least, by his melancholia which apparently arose after he lost the love of his life to another guy. The last part of the sequence is so very efficient, since, covered in the darkness, she seems to bear some resemblance to Olga. At home, Olga really seems present, until the spell is broken when the lights are switched on. The hallucination confirms that, meeting other women for casual sex is perhaps a way for him to vent emotions, but none of them will meet the required standard.

Strictly speaking, one might say that *TURKS FRUIT* keeps us guessing what is pretext and what is goal or ‘message.’ Are the erotic scenes subsidiary to illustrate Erik’s deep affection for Olga? Yes, that is possible. One might also see this the other way around. The romantic aspects are basically a smart excuse to legitimize the insertion of the series of brief sexual encounters. In practice, however, the scales definitely tip in favour of the latter option, since ‘romance’ and ‘sex’ are not of equal weight. As soon as sex is involved in mainstream film, any balance gets disturbed. That happens with *TURKS FRUIT* also, but at the same time the film partly compensates for this imbalance in two ways. Sex scenes can bewilder a mainstream movie when its main effect is to evoke excitement and arousal; in short, when the scene is ‘hot.’ *TURKS FRUIT* tones down this effect by associating sex with death and decay on the one hand and with humour on the other hand. Only think of the scene when Erik is having sex for the very first time with Olga, in her car at a parking lot. Their quite uncomfortable, but apparently very needy lovemaking in a cramped space is suggested by the fact that his buttocks make the car horn blow and his boots put a lever that turns on the water spray and the windshield wipers. When Erik then quickly wants to zip up his pants, he catches his penis in the zipper. They have to go to the nearest house so Olga can borrow a pair of pliers, at the same time keeping the curious farmer and his wife at a distance. Such comic appeal worked to ensure that *TURKS FRUIT* was not received as a truly provocative film, but as only mildly so, leading to both an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Language Film and an unprecedented success in Dutch cinema with more than 3.6 million paying viewers at the box office.

A landmark film such as *TURKS FRUIT* has of course functioned as a source of inspiration for other filmmakers. The results belong to the poorest of what Dutch cinema has on offer – *BRANDENDE LIEFDE* [BURNING LOVE] (Ate de Jong, 1983), *IK OOK VAN JOU* [I LOVE YOU TOO] (Ruud van Hemert, 2001), *ZOMERHITTE* [SUMMER HEAT] (Monique van de Ven, 2008) – and, to put it in positive terms, each failure further accentuates the remarkable achievement *TURKS FRUIT* is, illustrating that it is an inimitable film. One of the lessons of the most ambitious of these failed imitations, *KOMT EEN VROUW BIJ DE DOKTER* [STRICKEN] (Reinout Oerlemans, 2009), is that this

specific kind of genre requires a male protagonist who deserves our sympathy. Erik was an artist with an anti-bourgeois mentality who preferred his love for Olga over money. By contrast, Stijn in Oerlemans' film is an egotistic yuppie working at an advertising agency, or in his own voice-over, 'I was a major-league hedonist and I lived like a God in Amsterdam,' until he moves to the suburban Amstelveen with his wife, Carmen. He thinks that she has to tolerate his 'cheating as a bad habit,' just like another guy picks his nose as a habit. No problem for him and her, for his heart belongs to Carmen – until he loses his heart to Roos. What is wrong with *KOMT EEN VROUW BIJ DE DOKTER* is, paradoxically, that the photography is too stunning, the editing too fluid, and the musical score too conventional. Since the film is too glossy and not a bit 'gritty,' there is neither a built-in option for the spectator to dis-identify with a spineless protagonist like Stijn nor to feel uncomfortable about his 'amoral' choices.

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ONCE PROVOCATIVE, NOW OBSOLETE: PIM & WIM MOVIES

In comparison to the bohemian Erik, the car salesman Frank van Eeden from Pim de la Parra's *FRANK & EVA: LIVING APART TOGETHER*, also from 1973, is a good-for-nothing. Whereas Erik's pranks are not disrespectful to Olga and can be regarded as an inverted expression of love, Frank's jokes are often at the cost of his wife, making her blood boil. At the very start of the film, Frank is lying in bed, a gun in his hand and his head covered with blood. Eva has to use a key to open the locked door, but whereas the sight of Frank terrifies the maid, Eva hits him in the groin, which makes him cower in pain: 'Drop dead, prick,' is her verdict. During the opening scenes we see Frank having fun by flirting and drinking alcohol while driving. When he hits another car, he runs away because the police will find 'too much blood in his alcohol.' Frank is a typical slacker and playboy, about whom one of his best friends, the elderly Max, will say that every time he hears Frank talk about 'freedom,' this has to be interpreted as 'making a pass at women.' Not surprisingly, then, the most serious crisis in their relationship occurs when he considers the news that she is pregnant a very bad joke, because this would require him to take up fatherly responsibilities, which would limit his freedom. Eva is so mad that she leaves the house, in which they are 'living apart together,' each on a different floor. When she returns after a while, she finds him looking through binoculars at a sexy woman who lives on the other side of the canal. She warns him she will leave him once he shows himself at that bombshell's place. Frank immediately challenges her by ringing the woman's doorbell. Once inside, he tells her he has a bet with the woman at the window, carrying binoculars. He requests

her to close the curtains for 15 minutes. We see her do so via Eva's binoculars. Upon his return, she has his back towards him, while we see a displeased look on her face, but she coolly asks: 'Back so soon?'

While this scene is staged for her eyes to annoy her, there is a structurally similar scene in which the roles are actually reversed. After Frank has gone out with two women, Eva picks up a stranger in a restaurant. Frank enters the house by smashing a window and then sneaks into the closet of her bedroom. He looks on when Eva and the stranger undress and as they are about to have sex, he mimics the sound of a cat. It does not bother the stranger, but Eva is puzzled since there is no cat around. Hearing 'meow' once again, Eva is convinced there is a cat in the closet. When the guy decides to size up the situation, Frank jumps out wearing a cloth over his head. The stranger is so aghast that he takes his clothes and runs downstairs as quickly as he can. Eva laughs out loud at Frank's practical joke. Whereas in the previous scene, the observer – Eva with binoculars – was the fooled party, in this scene, the observer – Frank in the closet – turns the situation to his benefit. Frank keeps on pretending, and the end scene shows him once again in bed, door locked, gun in his hand and blood on his face. Tired of the joke, Eva takes the gun and accidentally pulls the trigger. This time, the gun was loaded and the sudden shot startles them both. She starts hitting the 'idiot,' saying that she will leave him and while they both fall into the bathtub, her blows transform into caresses, suggesting that a definite goodbye will, once more, be postponed.

In terms of their identity as a *bon vivant*, Frank is more or less in the same league as Erik in *TURKS FRUIT*, but with a huge difference nonetheless. The latter really cared for his girlfriend Olga, and many of his pranks can be taken as either a sign of melancholia over losing her or as a salute to her. By contrast, Frank is a solipsistic guy who is lucky to get away with his incorrigible behaviour. The only one who gives him a note of warning is the old and deadly Max. He tells his young friend that 30 years ago he himself was making the same stupid mistakes as Frank is making right now. The senior calls him a juvenile, egotistic and stubborn idiot, but Frank takes the advice light-heartedly. Even Max' death has not really reformed him, as the final prank illustrates. In the beginning of *TURKS FRUIT*, Erik was using a series of women as sex toys, but this could at least be seen as a reaction to his grief. Even though Erik's behaviour can also be seen as a token of narcissism, since her departure had insulted his masculine pride, Olga was nonetheless one of a kind for him. For Frank, on the contrary, every woman, including Eva, is an object of his bohemian lifestyle.

Eva is a good-hearted woman who has to endure his boyish pranks as if he is constantly putting her loyalty to him to the test. At one point, when he has driven her mad again, he curls up next to her in a foetal position and

thumb in his mouth, and what else can a ‘mother’ do than forgive her foolish ‘baby’? Thus, he permits himself to act disrespectfully, which in *FRANK & EVA* is cause for comic amusement, or rather, it is meant to be comic, a deliberate attempt to transgress bourgeois norms. Some might consider Frank’s chutzpah funny, but others will regard his incessant rowdiness annoying, and thus very unfunny.

The title of De la Parra’s next feature film, *MIJN NACHTEN MET SUSAN, OLGA, ALBERT, JULIE, PIET & SANDRA* [*MY NIGHTS WITH SUSAN, OLGA, ALBERT, JULIE, PIET & SANDRA*] (1975) also provokes a male fantasy, since the ‘My’ refers to a man named Anton. The story is quite simple: this Anton wants Susan to go on a trip, but she is not sure whether she really feels like it, so he stays a couple of days. Via this newcomer we get to know the particularities of the residents. Susan came to live in the house amidst meadows near the seaside some three years ago. Albert joined her, but ever since the arrival of Olga and Sandra, he has hid himself in a dark sheltering place. Susan brings him food and Julie visits him secretly. Olga and Sandra have never set an eye upon him, but through a small peephole Albert spies on the two promiscuous women.

In the beginning of De la Parra’s picture, we see a couple of swans in a lake, which can be taken as an allusion to the ducks in Haanstra’s *FANFARE*. Shots in which the ducks submerge their heads under water function as a comment upon the ostracism of the inhabitants in *Lagerwiede*, but in *MIJN NACHTEN MET SUSAN, OLGA, ALBERT, JULIE, PIET & SANDRA*, the swans dive because Olga and Sandra throw little rocks into the lake. Scantly dressed, they walk into the open landscape and along a small road, where they block a car driven by an elderly American. He yells at them to get into the car, which they do. While Sandra whispers something in the man’s ear, she hands a whisky bottle to Olga in the back seat. Then we get a high-angle shot of the camera, panning the surroundings, until it captures the car from above. Sandra is having sex with the American in the car. In a close-up, Olga raises the bottle and hits the American on the head with it. In the next shot, the two women are driving the car, with the dead man’s body on board and the Stevie Wonder song ‘Don’t You Worry ‘bout a Thing’ playing on the soundtrack; in a close-up we see the man’s cigar still smouldering in the ashtray. The women hide the corpse in a ditch, but their action is witnessed by Piet, a woman living as a hermit in a shed nearby.

Advertised as a ‘sex-psychological suspense mystery thriller,’ De la Parra’s film represents the two girlfriends as blown-up versions of femme fatales, even more brutal than Catherine Trammell in Verhoeven’s *BASIC INSTINCT* (1992), some 17 years later, will turn out to be. When they see Piet, they start yelling at her: ‘Piet, Piet, crazy Piet, do you see my cunt, do you see my tit [*tit* is *tiet* and thus rhymes on Piet].’ The very first evening the handsome Anton is around,

Olga says to him: 'Sandra's nipples are hard, her cunt is all wet. She has never had a man, however. She has been waiting for you, Anton. Oh, you are a real man. I feel it. Oh, Sandra, I am so jealous of you.' Once again, Olga is about to hit the guy who is having sex with Sandra, but we get a cut to the next day: Anton is still alive and kicking. And at this point we are only a quarter into a film with a weird plot, weird characters, and an outrageous ending: Olga and Sandra are locked into a small shed, and Piet sets fire to it. Finally, the camera zooms in onto an extreme close-up of Piet's iridescent eyes.

In the previous chapter I paraphrased Sontag's argument that we can get irritated when an important theme is brought up in a commonplace work of art, but once we become less involved in it, a few years later, we can derive pleasure from it. According to her, 'time contracts the sphere of banality. ... What was banal can, with the passage of time, become fantastic' (285). In the case of the Pim & Wim films from the early 1970s, there is a reverse effect. They profiled themselves as vanguard filmmakers, who address the theme of sex in a time when its insertion in mainstream cinema could still be considered a bold move. This connotation of boldness evaporated, the moment sex lost its provocative appeal and became commodified. The soft-erotic film series of *EMMANUELLE*, which started in 1974 with Sylvia Kristel in the titular role, accelerated this process. And thus what was anti-bourgeois initially became, with the passage of time, quite banal and (slightly) humorous.

The label of cult and/or naïve camp is usually applied as soon as a serious work of failed art meets appreciation in its aftermath. The work is then cut loose from its original context. In the cases of the films in this chapter, it is contrariwise. If we enjoy the films by Pim & Wim nowadays it is in the full awareness that these sex-crazed pictures once were (meant to be as) vehicles of provocation. We understand all too well that they are signs of their uproarious times. The fact that these progressive texts have become so rapidly obsolete is cause for comic amusement. Their change in status from anti-bourgeois to banal is definitely a comic and ironic turn, worth a (big) smile at least. Likewise, a film centred around the best-known 'rock 'n' roll junkie' in the Netherlands, the singer Herman Brood, known for his consumption of drugs and his capricious behaviour, also became more quickly outdated than its makers probably had bet on. Posing as a rebel does not automatically stand the test of time.

BAND OF OUTSIDERS: CHA CHA

In its first ten minutes, *CHA CHA* (Herbert Curiël, 1979) promises to be a film with politically subversive undertones.⁷ Intercut with photographs, the film opens with a lengthy text in English by the German Intelligence Bureau warning the Dutch police about the arrival of Nina Hagen, Lene (misspelled as Lena) Lovich and Les Chappell (misspelled as Less Chapell), '*three suspects of anarcho provocations*' who have to be put '*under constant surveillance*.' After the opening credits, we see some archive material about both the inflammatory power of pop music performances and the social unrest in Amsterdam when a police force confronts young squatters. The sequence is concluded with a gig by Dutch pop singer Herman Brood in open air. Then suddenly the camera tracks the three 'suspects,' who take a stroll through Amsterdam. We hear a voice-over dialogue between Nina and Lene, and then we hear them sing together, on screen, a Russian song. Thereupon Lene suggests that they might rob a bank, but that, if caught, it will cost you four or five years in prison, unless it is discovered '*there are political motives*,' for then '*there is the chance that you might be locked up for a longer time*.' Nina responds in a thick German accent, while giggling: '*I do not want to go to prison, but I do like to make a bank robbery, haha*,' as if it is no more than an enjoyable pastime. We then get a close-up of handcuffs, and hear Nina's voice: '*Put your hands just in front of it, tchak, tchak*.' The camera zooms out and two employees are being handcuffed. Herman has a gun and Nina has her huge gun pointed at the employees. Lene walks outside with a bag, followed by Nina and Herman, and that is about it. We hear Lene's voice-over, which could have come from a Jean-Luc Godard movie like *BANDE À PART* [BAND OF OUTSIDERS] (1964): '*In this picture I play the part of a political activist. As you can see, we have just robbed a bank. And now that I have the documents, I have the power to make some certain changes*.' They step into a runaway car, and so the robbery takes less than 30 seconds of screen time. Nina adds to this, once again in voice-over: '*Future is now, 1968 is over, 1979 ist Wahnsinn, the future is mine*.'

While a police car is chasing them and Nina has taken some money for a washing machine and video recorder, we get the most important cross-cutting scene from the film. All of a sudden, we see a blue-tinted shot of a man and a young kid walking in the street. The kid says to his father that he wants to become a singer. The father acts surprised: 'What are you saying? You want to become a singer?' Brief insert from inside the car, where Herman suddenly says: '*I'm gonna go back in rock 'n' roll ladies*.' Immediately back to the blue-tinted scene, where the father gives the advice to his kid: 'You have to make a career in crime, because only crime pays.' Back to the car, where Herman repeats his statement: '*Leave me alone. I want to go back to rock 'n' roll*.'

The brusquely blue-tinted inserts might be Herman's reminiscence of his childhood. The cross-cutting is a case of comic incongruity, a father advising his boy to become a criminal instead of a singer, strictly out of financial gain. And to add some more humour to this incongruity: this father is played by Dolf Brouwers, a gesture of ironic casting, since Brouwers dearly had wanted to become a celebrated singer all his life, and only became famous after he was already 60 years old.⁸ In case it is a flashback indeed, the adult version of the kid remembers he has acted according to his father's advice, but he immediately has second thoughts. All of a sudden he is very sure he wants to be a (rock 'n' roll) singer, suggesting it is better to pursue one's vocation than to get rich. At this point, the film takes a different turn, centred around Herman's preoccupations, often told in mumbling voice-over reflections, and many low-key performances. *CHA CHA* still breathes an anti-bourgeois sensibility, for Herman is an unconventional and maladjusted musician as there ever was in the Netherlands, and both Nina and Lene add a dose of capriciousness to the overall wayward atmosphere, but the film no longer lives up to the promise of subversion. The first ten minutes mixed a number of incompatibles – people strolling the city, committing a crime, a political backdrop – as alienating as a Godard movie, but this potential is sacrificed, alas, to Herman's determination to become a singer after all.⁹

AGENT PROVOCATEUR: *06* AND *BLIND DATE*

If Herman Brood was to pursue a career as a 'rock 'n' roll junkie' and as visual artist, then Theo van Gogh more or less took over the role as 'agent provocateur' in the domain of cinema. This is not meant to suggest that Van Gogh is a successor to Brood, for the two are worlds apart in many regards, including their personalities. My reason for including Van Gogh is that the way this 'misguided missile' would build himself a reputation is marked by ironies.

A first irony, a tragic one. Until his untimely death on 2 November 2004, Theo van Gogh was a jack-of-all-trades: besides being a filmmaker, he also was a (script)writer, a television creator, a columnist, and a blogger on his website *De Gezonde Roker* [The Healthy Smoker]. He usually played the role of a 'pain in the ass.' In many of his public appearances he was notoriously rude and he not only had feuds with sworn enemies but also with former friends. As Ian Buruma argues, he considered Thom Hoffman an 'early comrade-in-arms against the commercial film industry,' but once Hoffman's acting career started to prosper, he was no longer a 'fellow outsider' in the eyes of Van Gogh and thus a coward who deserved contempt (94). Van Gogh 'placed himself squarely in the tradition of abusive criticism' (Buruma, 98) and voiced extreme

opinions on Jews, on Islam, on left-wing politics; he spoke favourably of the Muslim-bashing politician Pim Fortuyn, the 'Divine Baldy.' His 06/05 (2004) suggests that the killing of Fortuyn was not a one-man's action, as the official investigation has concluded, but the main protagonist uncovers a conspiracy behind the murder. During the post-production of this film, Van Gogh himself was murdered by a Muslim extremist who took revenge for him directing the anti-Islam short *SUBMISSION* (2004), scripted by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the actual target of Mohammed B. This film was supposed to reveal that many Koranic verses, which were written on semi-naked female bodies, are unfavourable to women. Like Hirsi Ali, Van Gogh had received death threats, but he had declined an offer of personal security. He himself suggested that he was no more than a 'village idiot,' for, he asked himself rhetorically, Who would really take his unorthodox opinions seriously? Making provocative statements was part of his DNA; his many edgy and pestering statements could perhaps better be seen as a form of playing ding dong ditch to keep policymakers alert. Well, Mohammed B. did not consider him just a joker.

A second irony, an amusing one. Some of Van Gogh's early films are wilfully provocative, as if he wanted to be noticed as a bad boy. In his debut feature, *LUGER* (1982), a gangster shoved his gun in a woman's vagina, and two kittens were spun in a washing machine. His third film, *CHARLEY* (1986), was about a female serial killer who seduces men and ultimately eats her victims. Albeit notorious as a troublemaker, Van Gogh only became acknowledged as a film director to be reckoned with when he started to make more reserved and sober films. His seventh feature, *06 [1-900]* (1994), was based upon a theatrical play and it was shot in no more than five days. The camera was either in the apartment of architect 'Thomas' or in the house of the bourgeois Sara, a former art history student in Leiden. He left his number on a telephone sex line, and she rings him every Thursday. They chit-chat on a variety of subjects: his work, the song 'Telkens Weer' by Willeke Alberti from *ROOIE SIEN* (see chapter 3), or a horny encounter she has had with another woman. During one of their conversations, he pretends to be a sociologist who has to do a questionnaire on masturbation. And, of course, they also practise masturbation. A line is crossed, however, when he finds out her last name, thanks to an accidental meeting with one of her former fellow-students: 'Keep out of my life,' she warns him. When she rings him next time, 'his father' takes up the phone, informing her that Wilbert, whom she knows as Thomas, is dead by suicide. She is quite taken aback by the father's story, and then commits the error by giving the 'father' her phone number. He then says 'just kidding.' She calls him back, telling him he is insane and sadistic, and the film ends with her staring off-screen. The reverse shot shows the phone huge in the foreground and a vague silhouette against a brightly lit window in the background.

The film 06 is extremely simple in structure: it is chronological, and the observing camera mainly punctuates the emotions: at moments of excitement it is relatively close, at other moments it is distant from the characters, with an occasional high-angle shot from behind, and fairly often it slowly circles around them. The camera work and the editing are strictly subservient to the dialogue which was, to some extent, improvised by the actors.¹⁰

Like 06, Van Gogh's *BLIND DATE* (1996) is theatrical, small-scale in design and dialogue-driven, and hence, another two-hander domestic drama, according to Kate Connolly in *The Guardian*, 'reminiscent in [its] intensity of Pinter, Ibsen or Mamet.' A man who performs magical tricks as clumsy as Tommy Cooper, and a wife, a former dancer, have regular meetings on the basis of contact advertisements. It will turn out that these dates are re-enacted in order to cope with the death of their three-year-old daughter, Annabel. We hear this girl in posthumous voice-overs, that persistently demand that her parents join her: 'They have to do what they promised each other. I have been on my own long enough.' After their suicide at the end, the voice-over says: 'Dear diary. It is now the three of us again.' It is an instance of wry sarcasm that *BLIND DATE* mentions at the end: 'This film was made possible with the support of the Elco Brinkman Foundation to promote the family as the cornerstone of society.' This acknowledgement is fictive, because there is no such a foundation. This word of thanks is a banter at Elco Brinkman who was the former leader of the Christian Democratic Party (CDA), focused upon a policy to discourage divorce and to make euthanasia impossible. In *BLIND DATE*, the child's voice-over suggests that the family is back together again, but the way this is solved is in total contrast to what CDA has in mind.

A third irony, a fateful one, is best summed up by quoting a few lines from Connolly's article in *The Guardian* on the release of Steve Buscemi's *INTERVIEW* (2007), a remake of Van Gogh's film of the same title from 2003¹¹: 'Theo van Gogh was no one in America – until his murder made the director a cause célèbre. Now Hollywood is queueing up to remake his films. ... [T]he irony is by no means lost on [his] friends and colleagues that it is only because of his death that his films are being remade in America.' Moreover, his *INTERVIEW*, almost entirely shot within one room, was remade according to his 'doctrine' of the three-camera set-up, born out of necessity. Since one camera focused on each actor and another provided a master shot, single takes could be recorded that lasted as long as 20 minutes.¹² To add irony to irony, his friends like Emile Fallaux and Doesjka van Hoogdalem guessed that even though Van Gogh had dearly wanted to make films in America, it probably would have been impossible for him to work in a country that is so staunchly politically correct, has very strict time schedules for crew imposed by the union, and, perhaps worst, 'has no sense of irony' (Fallaux, qtd. in Connolly). And thus the fateful irony

entails that his films could only be produced in a 'land without irony' because he himself was no longer around.¹³

THE HUMOUR OF HORROR: *SINT*

When *06* was released in 1994, two complainants asked for a ban on the 'pornographic' poster of the film, made by photographer Erwin Olaf. It showed a naked woman, straddle-legged on a toilet pot with one hand on her vagina and another hand on a telephone horn. The Advertisement Code Commission judged that the poster contravened common decency, the more since it was visible on billboards near the public highway. The controversy surrounding the placard for *06* paled in comparison to the brouhaha about the poster for the film *SINT* (Dick Maas, 2010). Hundreds of agitated parents, among them filmmaker Johan Nijenhuis, lodged a complaint addressed to the Advertisement Code Commission, even before the poster was hanging in the street. The advertisement would have attracted no attention at all, if not for the fact that, of all people, Saint Nicholas was depicted as the Grim Reaper. In dark silhouette and on a hollow horse, but nonetheless clearly recognizable because of his mitre and his staff. Being confronted with a zombie version of a figure known as a friend to children, disturbed the rose-tinted idyll of the festivities and could be traumatic for young kids, according to the accusers. Despite a lawsuit and an appeal process mounted by Nijenhuis, it was decided that the poster was not damaging to morals. To make matters even worse for him, the poster won the TV Krant Filmposter Award, an Audience Award for best poster of the year. Maas himself was delighted by all the discussion, betting that it would benefit the box-office sales favourably.

Whereas the film poster gave the impression of horror, *SINT* definitely is a mixture of horror and comedy. This should not surprise us, since humour seems part and parcel of Maas' signature. His best-known attempt at horror, *DE LIFT [GOIN' UP]* (1983), later remade less successfully in America as *DOWN* (2001), is suspenseful but at the same time it is not short of comic moments. Most of these moments are red herrings, attempts to fool the viewer via editing. In a restaurant named Icarus, pun intended,¹⁴ situated on the upper floor of a huge building, we get a close-up of a wide open mouth at the start of *DE LIFT*. It seems a terrifying scream at first, but when the camera zooms out it turns that one of the guests has burst out in roaring laughter. In a later scene when four guests have fainted in the elevator, we get a reverse shot in low-angle from some personnel in the building staring in a state of shock. The next shot is not an eyeline match, but shows an ambulance with sirens. Then suddenly the ambulance is halted by a shoe: it turns out it is only a child's toy

and when the camera tilts up, the main protagonist is introduced to whom the shoe belongs. At one point a hilarious visual analogy is created when a night guard is stuck with his head between the doors of the elevator. After the question by his not so bright colleague whether he should get some 'green soap,' the guard's head is cut off. We then get an immediate transition to a close-up of a cigar whose top part is being chopped off. When the camera zooms out the police inspector who will investigate the case is introduced.

For a number of viewers the scene with the guard's cut-off head is the most humorous fragment. Many aficionados of horror hold the rule that the more a film (scene) scares the shit out of people, the better and the funnier. For those spectators, the scene in Maas' subsequent horror (or rather slasher) film, *AMSTERDAMNED* (1988) which will be met with delight is perhaps the one with the dead woman hanging upside down from a bridge, whose body slides over the glass roof of a tourist boat on the canals. The scenery causes huge uproar among the unsuspecting passengers, the more since the body leaves a trail of blood on the glass and eventually ends as a dreadful spectacle inside the boat.¹⁵ From this stance, good horror is already humorous, albeit with a caveat. Good in this context does not concern the psychological suspenseful variant, for that too subtly uses sounds and off-screen space as sources for eerie events. Symptomatic of this is the user review on IMDb by Quentin Zwerenzino of *ZWART WATER [TWO EYES STARING]* (Elbert van Strien, 2010): the movie's 'biggest flaw' is that it starts really creepy, but then, halfway, the horror develops into 'some sort of drama.' In other words, *ZWART WATER* is in fact too sophisticated a film and it fails to explore its potential for grossness. More or less the same can be said about *DE POEL [THE POND]* (Chris W. Mitchell, 2014), which Jan Pieter Ekker on cinema.nl describes as, more of a classical, psychological drama with a fraternal discord and a 'neat portion of rancidity' than scary horror. Good horror is considered (comically) delightful when it has some gory special effects – spelled 'SFX' in the jargon of the film buff. The gritty *SL8N8 [SLAUGHTER NIGHT]* (Frank van Geloven and Edwin Visser, 2006) is not a great movie, a user on IMDb says, but he recommends the film nonetheless because 'gore hounds and horror freaks will have fun.' Some will prefer it when a film really becomes gross, although the risk is that if a movie is too obviously made to shock, it becomes interpreted as just a 'sick joke.' Significantly, one user on IMDb describes *THE HUMAN CENTIPEDE (FIRST SEQUENCE)* (Tom Six, 2009) not as a gruesome, mad scientist horror, but, how fitting, as a 'misguided comedy.'

Upon making *THE HUMAN CENTIPEDE II (FULL SEQUENCE)* (2011), which supersedes the 'first sequence' in grossness, the Alkmaar-born director Tom Six remarked that it is 'like I made a comedy and they take out all the good jokes.' On the one hand, the quote suggests the proximity between horror

and humour, as effect: creating SFX that make the viewer scream, shiver, or nauseate is ‘fun,’ like watching them can provide comic pleasure – especially because one knows that other viewers will be nauseated or shocked by them. On the other hand, the quote also implies that horror and comedy, as a genre, almost seem antithetical: good jokes and comic relief risk spoiling the terrifying effects. The matching of horror and comedy requires a delicate equilibrium to prevent being characterized as just ‘weird’: if the filmmaker is too heavy with the comedy, he might be too light with the horror, and vice versa.¹⁶ *ZOMBIBI* (Erwin van den Elshof and Martijn Smits) consists of a series of comic-strip violence, with giant guns and a lot of death-stabbing. One character cannot use guns, because his fingers are stuck in bowling balls, which also turn out to be very effective weapons against the zombies. Moreover, the scene with the Barachi brothers is shot like a video game, with terms like ‘final round,’ ‘rip-off,’ ‘jawbreaker’ in big letters over the screen. *ZOMBIBI* is too cartoonish to be a shocker, and opinion is divided whether it is funny at all.

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Maas’ *SINT* is not so much a horror-comedy, but a horror film within an overall comic frame, which is a consequence of using the legend of Saint Nicholas as a backbone. In telling about a ‘good holy man’ who delivers presents on his birthday, young children in the Netherlands are turned into naive believers, until the age of nine. By exploiting this tradition, *SINT* commits both a comic and an ironic reversal, I will claim. Instead of a light-hearted mock of a ritual which offers a backbone to several storylines, as in *MAKKERS STAAKT UW WILD GERAAS* and *ALLES IS LIEFDE* in chapter 3, Maas rewrites the legend of Saint Nicholas to create a shocker. In Maas’ horror film, the saint is a living dead creature who returns to Holland according to a specific schedule. Each and every year when there is a full moon on 5 December he and his Black Petes randomly wreak havoc among Dutch citizens, adults and children alike. He did so in 1492, as is shown in the prologue of the film. He also did in 1968 when Goert Hoekstra sees the dark shadow of the horse-riding saint on a rooftop before he discovers that his father, mother and siblings have been massacred. He later joined the police force because he considers it his duty to warn the citizens for the upcoming disaster in 2010 when it will be full moon again on 5 December.

Maas uses all the devices which have become a trademark for horror pictures: things or characters which suddenly pop up from off-screen, punctuated by heavy sounds; fast tracking shots; the juxtaposition of idyllic moments (such as kids singing Saint Nicholas songs) and gruesome suggestions (blood spatters on the television screen). At the heart of his film, however, is the discrepancy between the common convention of Saint Nicholas as the ‘good holy man’ and his actual nature as the ‘bad holy man.’ The discrepancy between the benevolent fantasy and the little known existence of a murderous bish-

op is used to comic ends, as when Goert calls himself one of the few people who really believe in Saint Nicholas, or 'Niklas' as his name is spelled in the policeman's report. Against this background, the comic reversal of *SINT* can be described as: whereas in real life those who believe are considered innocent and naive, in the film, those who do not believe, are likely to be duped. It is perhaps no coincidence that the very first victim of Niklas in the film is Sophie, a teenager who refuses to celebrate 5 December because she disdains the festivities as a commercial excess of the welfare society.¹⁷ The fact that she is a victim can be termed a streak of irony, because in Maas' film the tradition of Sinterklaas, as we know it in Holland, is put to ridicule and de-sanctified. Hence, the ironic reversal runs like this: since *SINT* is a travesty of the yearly celebration, the film presents itself from the vantage point of a viewer who is an unbeliever, but in the film, those characters become victims who are as incredulous as the average film spectator.

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Films which are made to provoke – and thus pretend to take a vanguard position – can become hopelessly obsolete in the course of time. This change in status from a bold enterprise to an outdated impression has been treated as a source for humour in this chapter. The films with an anti-bourgeois sensibility like the Pim and Wim productions or Curiël's *CHA CHA* have become marginal oddities, if not anachronistic relics that produce a smile once we realize their 'original' ambitions. *TURKS FRUIT* is the notable exception, for this film is still considered as a Dutch milestone, but this probably has to do with an unprecedented vivacity of Verhoeven's box-office hit. It is to the credit of director of photography Jan de Bont that he convinced Verhoeven to shoot with mobile and 'gritty' camerawork, in the vein of William Friedkin's *THE FRENCH CONNECTION* (1971).¹⁸

The career of Van Gogh is criss-crossed with a number of ironies, of which the most relevant here is that he tended to shout down himself when trying too hard to be provocative, whilst his simply structured films turned out to be much more effective in being acknowledged as the rebellious jester of Dutch cinema. The fundamental irony of Maas' horror-comedy *SINT*, on the contrary, was that there were huge protests against the poster by parents of believing children, whereas in the film itself, only non-believers become the victim of the saint's dreadful campaign. The only strategy for survival in the film is to take the existence of a horror saint seriously, which is ironic for the film is targeted at a 16+ audience of sceptics.

