

Homosocial Jokes

In a memorable scene from *THE LAST PICTURE SHOW* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1971), set in a small Texan town in the early 1950s, the teenager, Duane Jackson, is about to have sex for the very first time with his girlfriend, Jacy Farrow, in a shady local motel. She encourages him to undress quickly, because she is excited about losing her virginity. Lying naked on the bed, she closes her eyes while he mounts her. The camera shows his face in close-up, but his look is puzzled. 'I don't know what's wrong,' he mutters. 'How can anything be wrong? Just go on and do it,' she says and once again closes her eyes. To his repetitive phrase 'I don't know what happened,' she has some denigrating retorts like: 'Put your clothes on. You think I want to look at you naked?' And Jacy ends on a dramatic note: 'I knew you couldn't do it. I'll always be a virgin! What do we tell everybody? The whole class knows.' When Duane is dressed and once again says: 'I don't know what happened,' she stops him from leaving: 'Don't go out there! We haven't had time to do it. I don't want anyone to know. You'd better not tell one soul. You just pretend it was wonderful!' As Duane leaves, the camera shows a car with two girls in it and pans to the right. A close-up of Duane with a happy smile on his face, looking in the direction of the car. A next shot is also a pan, and brings the car of his best friend, Sonny Crawford, in view, who opens the door. Then the two girls enter the motel room, and ask in an excited way what it was like. Jacy sits on the bed with a dreamy expression and talks slowly, with a faint smile: 'I just can't describe it. I just can't describe it in words.'

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In a scene from *SPETTERS* (Paul Verhoeven, 1980), reminiscent of this one from the American film *THE LAST PICTURE SHOW*, the two friends Hans and Eef have taken two girls whom they have just met to a construction site at night. They enter one of the partly built apartments, and each chooses a separate room. One girl, Truus, is undressing herself, but Eef does not get

aroused, because, as he says, he has been drinking too much. The camera pans to the right and while Hans is about to penetrate the other girl Annette, she finds out that she has started her period. He checks it out, and indeed, his two fingers are covered in blood. Back to Eef who is trying the missionary position, but fails. She attempts to excite him with her hand, but then sighs that her arm is getting tired, while his penis still looks like a shrimp. Then they hear moaning sounds from the adjacent room, and she says she will not embarrass herself in front of her girlfriend, who will know they did not have sex. Eef answers that they just have to pretend and advises her to wheeze, just like they do in *TURKS FRUIT*. And so they do, gradually increasing the volume. Then the camera pans to the right once again and shows Hans and his girlfriend almost fully dressed, imitating sounds that suggest sex. Hans commands her to make louder noise, and since she does not do so to his satisfaction, he bites her in her arm. She screams and slaps him in the face, which leads to a yell on his part. He immediately calls to his buddy, Eef, to check whether he is ready to leave: 'I only need to remove a spot.' The two guys walk away from the girls, and Eef says upon leaving, 'Not bad, right?' to which Hans retorts: 'Well, I got her hard.' Then the two girlfriends meet one another, and the scene concludes with one of them saying: 'Great, right?'

Both scenes comically undermine the idea that the goal of love-making is to experience private pleasure. They merely fake the enjoyment of sex in order to impress their (male and female) friends, albeit there is a difference in response qua gender and historical period. Set in the 1950s, Jacy in *THE LAST PICTURE SHOW* is yearning after sexual knowledge, and her two girlfriends want to hear about her experience in order to gain knowledge as well. Duane first walks past their car with an attitude which radiates that thanks to him she 'knows.' The fact that he is pretending to have achieved a successful performance seems more aimed at them than at his buddy, Sonny. There is no need for Duane to show himself off as a true hunk to Sonny, since he already dates Jacy, the most gorgeous girl in town. It would only hurt his pal, as is confirmed later when Sonny starts dating Jacy in Duane's absence.

By contrast, in *SPETTERS*, the two girls Truus and Annette are not interested in gaining knowledge. They are simply flirtatious – it is clear they have done this before and just want to have some fun. For Jacy, it was experienced as sheer drama that Duane could not perform, but Truus takes Eef's failed performance light-heartedly, illustrated by the joke about the shrimp-like shape of his penis. If there is something at stake for anyone, then it is for the boys. Both Eef and Hans encourage the girls to fake and to pump up the volume of their panting. The sighs and moans are clearly staged for the ears of the beholder, so that they can boast upon leaving the girls behind that they 'got them hard.' This scene humorously suggests that a (hetero)

sexual encounter is not just between a boy and a girl, but that a male friend is a required third, who can bear witness to his buddy's masculinity. It illustrates that male bonding is characterized by an oscillation between competition and friendship, rather than by the exclusion of the one by the other. Such inter-male relations can be cherished to such an extent that they are privileged over heterosexual love affairs, and as the scene from *SPETTERS* illustrates, this can lead to comic effects, showing that masculinity often stands on feet of clay.

IRONIC DISTANCE: *SPETTERS*

Like *BLUE MOVIE*, discussed in the previous chapter, *SPETTERS* can only be considered by taking its reception history into account. And once again, the reception history increases the pleasure of watching the film. Being a most versatile director in the 1970s and a guarantee for box office success, Verhoeven was both surprised and frustrated that he met only resistance with this project. To start with, the Productiefonds voor de Nederlandse Film refused to give him money for *SPETTERS*, because its members considered the screenplay shallow and commercial.¹ Ultimately, the Productiefonds gave a subsidy after the original screenplay had been rewritten into a bowdlerized version. During shooting, however, Verhoeven worked with the first draft, the rejected one, which, of course, angered the Productiefonds. When *SPETTERS* reached the screen, the film got a hostile reception from the press: after the suspenseful World War II film *SOLDAAT VAN ORANJE* (1977), the majority of the critics felt that a film about some adolescents on motorbikes was a waste of Verhoeven's talent. On top of that, the film raised an unprecedented degree of protest as shown by the founding of Nederlandse Anti Spetters Actie (NASA) to fight the 'disgusting' and stereotypical representations of women and homosexuals in the film.

Feminists were particularly angered with the portrayal of Fientje, a young woman who runs a travelling fish-and-chips stand with her brother, Jaap.² When a policeman tells them they need a permit for parking their stand in the built-up area, she asks him in for 'a cup of coffee,' which of course is a euphemism for sex, and which of course settles the problem. Because of her alacrity Fientje can turn on all the young men in town. She is after the one whom she thinks can offer her a better future than working herself to the bone making fish and chips. Or as she tells her brother: 'I do not know what love is. I am searching for a bit of security, then love will come itself.' Leaving in the middle whether her assessment skills are limited or whether, as she herself believes, she has bad luck all the time, each and every boyfriend

has a drawback. Since the boys follow one another in quick succession, one jealous girl, who has lost her own partner to Fientje, describes the snack-bar girl as a 'cashbox with a cunt.' Though Fientje has made some economic improvements (for in the end she exchanges the stand for a shop in a fixed location), she offered, as reviews emphasized, a pretty bleak prospect for young women, as if the only way to improve one's situation was to offer sex in exchange for the necessary help or resources.

Even more prominent as a target of critique were the outbursts of homophobic violence in *SPETTERS*. The three male friends, Eef, Hans and Rien, step out of their car in the company of three girls to chase after a man who is walking with his boyfriend. While they call him a 'dirty ass-fucker who has to keep his hands off little boys,' they stain lipstick on his face, to give him a 'great mouth for a blow job.' Later in the movie, Eef makes a habit of following men to underground places and after the sexual act, he either blackmails the client or robs the male prostitute. At one point he is being chased by a group of gay men, who pull down his trousers and rape him anally. Among them is Jaap, whom we have seen reading a bodybuilder's magazine in an earlier scene while Fientje was offering the policeman a 'cup of coffee.' The men leave Eef behind, but Jaap returns saying that they did it just for fun since they considered him a gorgeous guy. Since Eef is also seeing Fientje, he adds to this: 'Don't mess with my sister. She is too good for a queer. You have to be honest with yourself.' In a subsequent scene Eef goes to his pious father, and confesses to him he is a queer, a sissy, a faggot, but since these terms do not mean anything to his father, Eef cites Leviticus 20, verse 13: 'If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination.' The furious father thereupon tries to put into practice what is foretold in the Bible: their blood shall be upon them.

According to a NASA pamphlet which was distributed to paying viewers at the cinema, *SPETTERS* gave rise to the beating and mistreatment of homosexuals as a pastime. Verhoeven defended his pre-*FLODDER* film that it merely offered a portrayal of rural male teenagers, a seriously neglected group in Dutch cinema, which according to him, has the habit of privileging elitist social circles. He only had in mind to give a 'realistic' representation and in his eyes, this happens to include the homosexual panic that has stricken such rural fellows. In reply the pamphlet mentions that Verhoeven's reality is 'in all respects negative.' Moreover, the director is accused of being driven by 'pure egotism (only his own success is leading).'

The words of NASA's pamphlet left little to be desired in terms of clarity. *SPETTERS* was a deleterious product and had better be banned from screens. The press was also quite unanimous in its verdict, summed up in the judgement that the film offered no more than 'indecent amusement.'

Verhoeven's film was not an isolated case, however. In 1979, the year preceding the release of *SPETTERS*, vehement protests had already been charged at films with so-called emancipatory objectives. Both *EEN VROUW ALS EVA* [A WOMAN LIKE EVE] (Nouchka van Brakel, 1979) and *TWEE VROUWEN* [TWICE A WOMAN] (George Sluizer, 1979) were about a lesbian relationship, but they were criticized by feminists for not being radical enough. It had been unacceptable for them that Eva was played by Monique van de Ven, who was not a lesbian herself. No, Van de Ven riposted, that is right, but as she said with a streak of irony, in *TURKS FRUIT*, she had played a woman with cancer while she did not suffer from the illness herself. Further, the avant-garde filmmaker Frans Zwartjes was vilified for his low-budget *PENTIMENTO* (1979), because its violent images of humiliation were not interpreted as a reflection upon the repression of women, but simply as a misogynist encouragement to sustain the power structure.³ These protests, however, paled in comparison with the wave of revulsion *SPETTERS* met. The uproar is a clear token of the politicized climate in the late 1970s, which left hardly any space for nuanced positions, let alone for touches of irony.

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This sketch of the protests is not meant to argue that irony was non-existent in films in the 1970s and early 1980s, but my point is that it was hardly appreciated as such, as the poor fate of Adriaan Ditvoorst's *DE MANTEL DER LIEFDE* [THE CLOAK OF CHARITY] (1978), described in chapter 9, will also illustrate. If irony is not appreciated or acknowledged, it falls flat. Today, the reverse seems the case. Irony is attributed even when it is unlikely that it was intended. A film can be so poorly executed with technical failures and terrible performances that viewers may, as a rebound effect, start to enjoy it as a great work of alienation. Bad taste is then ironically converted into an unorthodox play on conventional devices. This happened with *INTENSIVE CARE*, discussed in chapter 4, as one of the 'highlights' in *DE NACHT VAN DE WANSMAAK*. *SPETTERS* belongs to a different category, because it became a cause for huge disputes due to its 'immoral' purport. Nowadays, Verhoeven's film has a different status, which is already proven by the mere fact that Film Institute EYE restored *SPETTERS* in 2012 as an acknowledgement of its film-historical value.

Today's reception of the film is marked by an ironic distance for two reasons. First, we have seen other representations of contemporary (youth) culture since 1980, which were at least as cynical and pessimistic, like *CRUISING* (William Friedkin, 1980), *NAKED* (Mike Leigh, 1993), *AMERICAN HISTORY X* (Tony Scott, 1998), *IRRÉVERSIBLE* (Gaspar Noé, 2002), or the Belgian *EX DRUMMER* (Koen Mortier, 2007). A film which originally is considered as too gross loses its sharp edges, once other films supersede it in brutal directness. Writing on occasion of the re-release of *SPETTERS* in 2012, critic Gawie

Keyser noted that the protests at the presumed vulgarity had hidden from his sight that the film is actually very bleak: the 'moral chaos' of the characters is embedded in a sour sense of unease, for the most talented guy on a motorbike ultimately commits suicide and the boy who comes out of the closet is abandoned by his father. Because of all the fuss back in 1980, Keyser was, more than 30 years later, not really prepared to be confronted with such gloomy and dark undertones. Against such a backdrop, the vehement protests against *SPETTERS* become, in retrospect, quite hysterical, which is an important reason to give Verhoeven's film a belated benefit of the doubt. This can be summed up in the stance of 'SPETTERS is not as morally bad as I thought it had been.' Such an attitude is a crucial condition under which to reconsider the film, including the whole brouhaha, from an ironic distance. A proviso has to be made, nonetheless. This distance can give rise to comic amusement: Ha, look at those sensitive souls in 1980; what was too hot to handle for 'them' is acceptable for 'us' right now. This amusement would tie in with the superiority theory and risks giving present-day viewers the faulty idea that they are more tolerant than the NASA protesters in 1980. At the same time, this historical gap can be a sign of regret about what has been lost: look at those people, they still knew what political engagement was about.

Second, *SPETTERS* partly owes its present-day ironic celebration to Verhoeven's successful period in America, which has affected, with hindsight, the reception of his Dutch films. After his first international film *FLESH + BLOOD* (1985) was recorded in Spain, he went on to direct in Hollywood, making *ROBOCOP* (1987), *TOTAL RECALL* (1990), *BASIC INSTINCT* (1992), *SHOWGIRLS* (1995), *STARSHIP TROOPERS* (1997), and *HOLLOW MAN* (2000). In an article, written as a 'fanboy,' the British film scholar I.Q. Hunter claims that a number of critics dislike Verhoeven's work, because he 'frolics among the clichés of Hollywood blockbusters.' It is easy to disqualify *SHOWGIRLS* (1995) for its cheap sensationalism and *STARSHIP TROOPERS* (1997) for its noisy militarism. Yes, Hunter contends, these critics are right for Verhoeven's cinema is 'flash-trash,' and no, they are not right, for his cinema is also a mimicry of 'flash-trash.' On closer look, Verhoeven's work excels in double coding, and because so many reviewers misread him as a bombastic filmmaker, it offers Hunter extra pleasure to recognize him as an ambivalent director who voices his critique in a style that seems a copycat of the type of cinema he criticizes. If *SHOWGIRLS* is a sarcastic comment upon the commodification of sex in Hollywood, then this is presented to us via 'quantities of choreographed flesh' and obscene dialogue (475). The key is that Hunter does not reproach Verhoeven for inconsistency, but that he considers his approach as hyperbolic, as over-the-top. In comparison to a 'bad' exploita-

tion movie, *SHOWGIRLS* is better at being 'bad.' In beating the 'bad' film on its own terms, Verhoeven's film is a vehicle for Hunter's 'own (European?) ambivalence towards disreputable material which I both love and am culturally obliged to rise above' (479).

In my own *Film Narratology*, I wrote that *STARSHIP TROOPERS* has been criticized for its featherweight protagonists. That argument was reason enough to discard the film in its entirety: empty characters means empty film. The fact that the characters appear to be nitwits is consistent, however, for their cartoonish representation legitimizes that we read *STARSHIP TROOPERS* as a satire of American foreign policy and its 'silly' propaganda. In short, if we take Verhoeven's film seriously, it is a nasty picture with hints of glorifying America. If we, however, read the adoption of fascist iconography as ironic, then we foreground the film's satiric impulses (Verstraten, 58-59).

If we consider Verhoeven's approach not as a repetition of clichéd codes but as an over-identification with them, then the spectator is inclined to read his previous work also from the angle of irony. And thus, the representation of the life of the youngsters in *SPETTERS* is deliberately exaggerated as to offer comic amusement. The over-the-top depiction of their preoccupations is then not seen as affirmative and conservative, but on the contrary, as 'too much' and slightly subversive.

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It could be argued that such a 'boys among boys' atmosphere is already a bit overdone, which has to do with the intricacies of so-called homosocial bonding. As the already quoted scene of the fake orgasm from *SPETTERS* suggests, real experiences count less than bragging about experiences towards one's best friends. In her study *Between Men*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued that male camaraderie oscillates between the twin poles of mutual affection and rivalry. It is constitutive of homosocial relations that there is a constant movement between the two. One way to treasure the friendship is to have a good laugh by making a girl or woman the butt of a joke. Eef is working as a motorcycle mechanic, and while his two best friends are around, a girl who seems big-breasted asks him to fix her moped. Eef thinks she makes a pass at him, and while he pretends to approach her he pulls tennis balls from under her shirt. Since he saw through her trick, all three guys can laugh at her. Eef tells his buddies that she is 'two peas on a shelf,' and he then yells after her to aggravate her humiliation: 'Take your big sister with you next time,' which implies that they are big boys themselves.

In the scene at the nightclub, however, one of the friends becomes the butt of a joke. Hans wants to pick up a black girl who is seated on a bar stool. After he has had eye contact with his friends to indicate that he has had suc-

cess and even yells that this girl is easy to get off with, he puts his right hand between her legs, despite her warning not to do that. He then withdraws his hand, and discovers to his astonishment that his fingers are covered with mustard, which she used to ward off intrusive guys. Hans' two buddies do not feel pity for him, but of course greet this scene with great hilarity. One of them jokes: 'Now you know where Abraham gets the mustard,' which is a proverb to indicate that someone knows all the answers – but Hans apparently does not.

Hans wants to be on an equal footing with his buddies Eef and Rien, which is a crucial condition for 'mutual affection,' but he is underperforming most of the time. He wants to date a girl like they do, but he produces a misfire. He wants to be as great a motorcyclist as Rien, but he is not as talented as his friend. Moreover, his material is not as good as Rien's, which is driven home by one of the girls who refuses to sit on Hans' motorcycle, for she guesses they will stand still in a minute. Hans' role as a klutz within the group of buddies is important, since he has similar aspirations as his friends, but his failures enable them to laugh at him. At the same time, this laughter is not meant to truly ridicule him, but to encourage him to try harder so that he might be as good as they are. In a group of friends, the theory of homosocial relations presumes, there is always some competition underneath: there is a leader of the pack, but his position is also potentially vacant. In principle, anyone among the buddies is entitled to this position, but foul play is not accepted, for that would ruin the friendship. So, a guy like Hans who plays by the rules, but to no avail, is seminal for determining the implicit hierarchy among friends.

Nonetheless, there is one crucial scene in which Hans is acknowledged as the winner, and once again it is a scene in which a girl is used as an object of exchange among the boys. All three fancy Fientje, and each of them believes that she will pick him. Since they cannot decide who can go after her, they agree to solve the matter by measuring the length of their penises: the one who has the largest prick is to 'have' Fien, which is 'fair' to her. This time, Hans deserves the admiration of his friends, but in practice, Fien chooses to date Rien first, because she thinks he has the most prosperous future ahead, Eef second, and Hans only last. Rien's accident ends his affair with Fien and it ruins his career as a professional motorcyclist, but, at least as important, it affects his implicit leadership within the group of buddies. Now, he suddenly finds himself in the position that seemed reserved for Hans, as the 'typical loser.' If people still treat him in a very friendly way, such as when a brass band celebrates his homecoming from hospital, they do so, he guesses, because they feel pity for him, a thought he cannot bear.

A certain dose of rivalry is wholesome to keep male camaraderie intact,

according to the theory of homosocial bonding. This competitive element often manifests itself in caustic remarks towards each other in an altogether playful and humorous tone, like in 'Now you know where Abraham gets the mustard,' directed at Hans. A supplementary advantage of competition is that it prevents the friendship from becoming 'too friendly.' As soon as affection comes to overrule the urge for rivalry, the 'spectre' of male homosexual desires erupts. The basic problem with same-sex desires is that they threaten to disrupt the required oscillation of affection and rivalry. In the case of a man-loving-man, the intimacy of friendship can become too strong as a result of which competition, the twin-opposite of camaraderie, fades away. As a consequence, not all friends play by the same rules any more. For that very reason, male homosexuality has always been such an encumbered subject for soldiers. The army is an institution which derives its strength from a fixed hierarchy: every man is given a specific role and has to discharge this role absolutely seriously. A gay soldier may withdraw from this competition, if only because using women as an object of exchange does not work for him. Bragging about female conquests, as soldiers yearning for popularity might do, is suddenly a game without cards.

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As Sedgwick has hypothesized, there is a sliding scale between social companionship and male homosexuality. This male continuum is far from continuous, however, for there is a slippage. Homosociality presupposes that men are prepared to serve each other's interests – at the expense of women usually – but on the condition that one is not 'interested in men' on an intimate or sexual level. There is a tendency among men to articulate a rupture within their friendly bonds in order to prevent them from becoming *too* friendly: you can be my best buddy, but there is no way that you can be my lover – a position Sedgwick labels as 'homosexual panic.' It seems to be mandatory within homosocial relations to mark a profound schism in order to ward off any suggestion of same-sex intimacies.

The guys in SPETTERS run after a gay man and when they catch up with him, they smear lipstick on his mouth against his will. Their response is a mixture of fascination ('great mouth for a blow job') and contempt ('this way we'll recognize you better, dirty faggot'). The latter statement gains extra weight within the context of 'homosexual panic.' The red lips function as a visible sign to distinguish him from them: the more he is recognizable as a gay man, the more they ensure their heterosexual identity. At the same time, as SPETTERS will spell out, the necessity to differentiate homosexuality from heterosexuality is usually stronger when a man is insecure about his identity, as if an aggressive act is required to convince oneself that one does not have homosexual affinities. The maltreatment of the gay man is completed by a blatant joke. In the presence of his friends and in a laughing atmos-

phere Eef tells them: 'I would have liked to fuck him.' Within this context, this remark is interpreted by his friends as an inverted message. By saying 'I would have liked to ...' Eef indicates the opposite within this context: it just articulates how much he does *not* want to fuck this guy, who they humiliated a minute ago. No one at this point, perhaps not even Eef, realizes that his statement should be taken more literally than anyone within the group does. In SPETTERS, it is thus suggested that gay-bashing can be a cover-up of a man's fascination with homosexuality; for Eef beating up homosexuals is a means to postpone that he has to come out of the closet.

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In addition to the aggression as a particularly nasty and concrete effect of 'homosexual panic,' a more light-hearted but no less effective strategy to avert the threat of homosexuality is by way of humour. Preceding the scene when the three friends start measuring the length of their penises, they discuss the possibility of a threesome with Fientje. Eef has an immediate objection to this proposal: 'Mine will not get erect when you are looking on.'⁴ We have seen Eef fail to perform sexually in an earlier scene, but nonetheless he boasted about his qualities as a lover afterwards. In case such an embarrassing situation might arise again, Eef already covers himself in advance: if I fail, it is not due to a lack in male potency, but because I get nervous when I am aware that you are watching (or directly involved as in a threesome). The remark can also be taken as a thorny remark that boys make to poke fun at each other, hinting at the 'ugliness' of Hans and Rien: you guys are so unattractive that your presence will deflate my penis; even a beautiful woman will not be able to compensate for your disenchanting impact. Such a remark is not meant to offend the tight companionship, on the contrary, it is an example of homophobic irony that strengthens male camaraderie, and can be paraphrased as: 'I like you as my friends, but I am so very non-homosexual that even the presence of my very best buddies will rob me of any sexual excitement.' It is symptomatic that Eef will start to realize and to explore his desires for other men, after the friendship with Hans and Rien has practically dissolved, so that it will not become a dodgy subject as it is in ALL STARS (Jean van de Velde, 1997).

HOMOSEXUAL PANIC AS BALONEY: *ALL STARS*

Each and every week Bram tries to make sure that his football teammates from Swift Boys show up for the weekly match on Sunday morning. In the beginning of *ALL STARS*, he calls them on his way back from China. Everyone asks him whether he knows at what time he is calling, whereupon Bram calmly replies: 'Almost half past two at night, but that is about the only moment that each of

you is at home and still awake.’ (As the film was shot in 1997, Bram is the only one who has a mobile phone.) This comic retort rightly suggests that the players do not have a professional mentality, to put it mildly. They are already a team since they were seven, except for Peter who joined them a year later, which matter-of-factly makes him the outsider within the group. In a voice-over Bram explains that the actual result is secondary to the experience of being part of a team: ‘Lying on the wet grass with an injury while your friends keep up the honour of the team, is the highest conceivable form of happiness.’⁵

This voice-over text rightly suggests that male bonding is at the heart of Van de Velde’s film, including a series of stereotypical notions about women. One running gag is that a woman is a creature who will never understand off-side, no matter how clear the explanation offered.⁶ At the same time, women can be an obstacle to the joyful gathering on the football field, demanding that the men spend time with them. Goalkeeper Willem has a strict wife who reminds him of his fatherly duties regularly so that he is not allowed to watch sport on television on Sunday evenings like all his friends do. When Hero tells Willem that he is lucky to have his own business, wife and kids – for the always hesitant Hero would be happy to have some stability in life – Willem responds: ‘You are lucky. You study, have leisure time, are single, have rich parents.’ Hero, a philosophy student, sums it up in an aphorism: ‘Wind behind you is wind in front of you if you want to go in the other direction.’

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Since everyone is getting busier and busier lately, they have to decide whether their upcoming match, which happens to be their 500th game together, will be their last one or not. For old time’s sake, they will organize – which in practice means that Bram will organize – a training’s camp like they used to have in the past. During the camp they meet three women from a speed ice skating team. Of all people, Mark ends up with one of the girls. He is about to get married to the pregnant Roos, but he had to win back her trust after he had cheated on her. This time he is making the same ‘mistake,’ and his teammates know about it very soon, because the woman is yelling ecstatically in the car where he is having sex with her. To prevent detection, Mark had to put his hand in her mouth to muffle the noise she was making, but to no avail – she bites in his hand. We then get a shot from inside the car: three laughing faces of his friends peep through a rainy window. On the one hand, they are smiling because they have caught Mark in the act, and this explains that we see a close-up of an annoyed Mark in reverse shot. On the other hand, their laughter turns Mark’s ‘mistake’ into a ‘triumph,’ suggesting they envy him for his conquest. Not everyone thinks so, however. Johnny gets mad because Mark apparently does not understand that at this phase in his life dating other women is a sign of immature behaviour: ‘Asshole, you are about to get married. You become a father. Do you know what that means?’

The consequences seem severe for Mark, for soon the news is out that the marriage is off. Mark tells Bram that she kicked him out, 'even though I said to her that she is absolutely the only one whom I make love to when sport is broadcast on television.' Since Bram has been a close friend of Roos since childhood, Mark requests him to talk the break-up over with her. During dinner, Roos immediately guesses that the invitation was Mark's idea, which Bram denies. 'It does not matter,' she says, 'for it is over for good. And the worst thing, he is becoming a father and he has ... what, are you nodding?' A close-up of Bram: 'Committed adultery.' While Bram is describing the atmosphere of booze, fun, and the presence of ladies during the training's camp, Roos asks who he is talking about. Bram mentions the girl's name, and while Roos is close to tears, he asks: 'Who are you talking about?' 'The midwife.' When Mark enters the bar, hoping that Bram has convinced Roos, she starts kissing Bram on the mouth to scare him off.

212 | This kiss is quite poignant, because we viewers already know by now why Bram is still single. It is not as Mark supposes, that is, that Bram is secretly in love with Roos, for during the training's camp one of the other girls wondered why Bram was not able to kiss her passionately. She tries to guess what might be wrong: Is he married? Am I too ugly? Until it suddenly dawns on her – he does not like girls. 'But your friends do they know ...?' And before she can mention the love that 'dare not speak its name,' Bram says: 'No, I could not tell them, for then I would have been lying to them all those years.' In one of the very few flashbacks in the film, in an overtly lit scene Bram discloses in voice-over a joyful memory. At a very young age, they were about to win a tournament but Bram missed a crucial penalty kick. All of the boys started consoling him, and then Bram reveals to us that he did not cry because of the missed penalty, but 'because they were so very kind to me, because all these various boys considered me worthy of their consolation. I cried because I was certain I would never be happier than that day in the dressing room.' A team sport like soccer is a homosocial event par excellence, because competition is at its core and it should be played in a manner that is sportsmanlike. Bram, however, is not so keen on winning the game, as a true sportsman is supposed to do, but, and this is an apt expression for his utter falsity, he experiences the mutual intimacies as more valuable. Physical contact in soccer is permitted for either the benefit of competition (such as touching someone to prevent him from scoring a goal) or to be a good sport (shaking hands after a foul play), but one is not supposed to derive pleasure from bodily contact. To make it clear that this thin line between touching someone as part of the game or for one's enjoyment, any term connoting 'homosexuality' is used as a pejorative or a curse word. If you are called a homosexual it means that you are unfit to be on the pitch, for then the rules of the game become secondary to one's fondness of

bodily intimacies. Against this background, it always offers such a great relief to call the referee a 'blind homo,' which Johnny describes as his particular Sunday morning pleasure. And no one ever denies him this pleasure.

After two matches have been cancelled for various reasons, Willem announces to his wife for the third time that the upcoming game is not to be missed because it is their 500th one. 'You look like a bunch of women who've turned 40,' Willem's wife sneers at him. This time they have to play an away game against a physically tough team, called the Poldervogels, that is to say, if enough players from the Swift Boys show up. Johnny has to bring his seriously ill father, who happened to be their former coach, to the hospital; Hero is not in the mood since the woman he is in love with will become his stepmother. And goalkeeper Willem has not arrived yet. During the warming-up Mark gets furious at Bram, and we then see a series of point-of-view shots, from either Mark's perspective or Bram's. Mark gives Bram a push, and the latter defends himself by saying: 'I have not slept with Roos.' Mark: 'So, you kiss, but do not fuck,' and he then pushes him onto the grass. Thereupon the captain of the Poldervogels gives him an elbow: 'But he is a homo. Take a good look. Don't you see. He is a homo.' At that moment Willem arrives, yelling from afar: 'Is it alright for me to get dressed?' The players from the Poldervogels shout in unison: 'But we don't play against homos.' Willem: 'Get lost, you're a bunch of homos.' In slow motion they start running towards Willem, while we hear threatening music on the soundtrack. In one of the subsequent scenes we see that Willem has a great number of bruises.

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Mark's response to Bram coming out of the closet is two-faced. On the one hand, he asks Bram why did he not tell them before, for 'We don't live in a backward country.' All the homophobic phrases in the cloakroom are no more than baloney, he reassures Bram. On the other hand, when Bram confesses to him that in fact Mark himself is his 'big love,' the latter is all of a sudden less obliging, and even threatens to hit him in the face. Bram is angry and in a later scene Mark visits him, in the company of Roos, to make up with him. The verbal confrontation between the two guys is completely couched in terms of a soccer match: I stick to your heels; you lose against an agile forward; your defence has a gap; I make a step forward and you are offside. When Roos then intervenes that she is puzzled by this talk, Bram and Mark then start explaining offside to her, but as the movie has made evident so far, that is to no avail. Ultimately, witnessed by Roos, Mark kisses Bram on the mouth and says: 'This is the way to solve it. Queers among one another.'

It would be too optimistic to consider this kiss as a sign that Mark's 'homosexual panic' is cured. First, the kiss is a gesture of opportunism, because he wants Bram to organize the 500th game, this time for real. Second, homosexuality will remain a vehicle of humorous disdain throughout, albeit differently,

as is clear from Willem's peculiar logic: 'Bram is not gay, not really I mean. Homosexuals always are feminine-like. And what is characteristic of females? They do not know what offside is, and moreover, it is pointless to explain it to them. Well, Bram knows what offside is.' This quote illustrates that a hackneyed idea of male homosexuality is activated so that their very own team mate can be exempted from it. This seems not so much meant to spare Bram, but to reassure their own state of mind: one of our mates is gay, well almost, but not quite, and therefore we keep on using homophobic irony as a structuring principle in our cloakroom.⁷ Eddy Terstall's *SIMON* (2004) goes one step beyond, for in this film homophobic irony becomes the paradoxical foundation of a dear companionship between two seemingly unlikely male characters.

BONDING BETWEEN A GAY YUPPIE AND A HE-MAN: *SIMON*

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In the beginning of *SIMON*, the picture with the highest IMDb score (8.0) of all Dutch films, Camiel is almost overrun by a SUV. Irritated by the wild manoeuvre, he is about to obtain redress. The driver who seems an obnoxious macho upon first impression, gets out of his car and says straight away: 'Just lost ten points. Queers count double.' Camiel can take the insult, because it is clear that the two are acquainted, but have not seen each other for quite a while. Simon informs: 'You're still with us?' Camiel: 'Yes, you too?' Simon's reply is blunt: 'Barely. I have cancer. That's life.' Camiel introduces Simon to Bram, his partner, 'in the private sense.' Simon: 'I am Camiel's ex-partner. In business. So don't get any ideas.'

Two minutes into the film we go back from October 2002 to June 3, 1988, the day Simon 'entered my life with a bang,' Camiel recounts in voice-over, but actually he is telling the story later that October day to Bram who has just met Simon for the very first time. What happened in the afternoon was almost a repetition of what had happened 14 years ago. This time an accident was only just prevented, but in 1988, Camiel was actually hit by a car, driven by Simon, who brings him as quickly as possible to hospital. Camiel can only think: 'Anyone who drives this fast must be crazy.' When they return from hospital, Simon tells him that he fancied the nurse, a 'straight-up horny blonde.' Camiel then reveals without any hesitation that he is not interested in her, because he is gay. 'Better you than me, buddy,' Simon replies.

The two will meet regularly, because Camiel will buy his supply of weed at Simon's place. They are worlds apart, but become close friends nonetheless. Camiel himself is a decent student in dentistry whereas Simon, of Jewish descent, is the proverbial 'rough diamond,' who fully believes that life is discovered through play. Though he is a dealer in soft drugs, he also claims

unemployment benefits, according to the peculiar logic that if 'I wasn't on the dole, they would question my income and I would be screwed.' At the same time, he also gives some of his average wage to animal organizations. Calling someone 'whacko' or 'nutjob,' Camiel explains in voice-over (but diegetically to Bram), means in Simon's vocabulary 'I like you.' When a policeman gives him a ticket, he asks him: 'Aren't you in the Village People? Where are the Indian and the Leather Boy?' Simon also has regular fights with 'that ugly albino' and 'that Bogus Brother,' whom he also calls 'Sjors and Sjimmi,' two characters from a Dutch comic strip.⁸ His reason for disliking this couple is his assumption that 'Sjors and Sjimmi' desire his girl, Sharon. Simon considers them rivals for he is paranoid that Sharon is sleeping around with other men. His main reason for accepting Camiel as a friend is that he can be quite sure that a 'guacamole fag' will not vie for Sharon. In turn, Camiel confesses that he had become 'addicted to Simon's weird world; I put up with his political incorrectness and comments about my gayness.' When Camiel asks whether Simon's parrot is a boy or a girl, Simon answers: 'Funny you ask, for he asked the same about you,' a remark that plays upon the stereotype of the male homosexual as feminized.⁹ Camiel has to take into the bargain that Simon makes a series of jokes but he understands that Simon does not do so to humiliate him. On the contrary, the jokes are a constant reminder that they are so utterly different. That is to say, they are so different that the option of an aggressive rivalry is irrelevant. This absent option is the basis of their seemingly uncommon friendship. The unexpected happens, however. At one moment, when both Camiel and Sharon are 'as drunk as a Mekong monkey,' Sharon 'started her "I can't control myself" act.' Afterwards, when Camiel gets a grip on himself again, he considers himself a worthless friend and a worthless fag. The incident will result into an abrupt ending of their friendship, until they meet again after 14 years.

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The scenario jumps back and forth in time, because several characters start telling what has happened over the years: Sharon recounts memories of Simon; Joy does so as well – she is Simon's daughter born in Thailand who came to Amsterdam with her younger brother after their mother died. Simon tells how Sharon became the girlfriend of 'Sjimmi,' of all people: 'At least she is politically correct: first a Jew, then gay, then a brother. Just a Turk and a dyke, and she will get the Nobel Prize.'

Let's first take this phrase literally: Simon calls Sharon politically correct because of her variety of lovers, in terms of ethnicity and sexuality. This is not meant as a recommendation, for Simon is very sore about this achievement, since his worst nightmare has come true. Hence, his prediction that she will get the Nobel Prize is to be taken ironically and meant to indicate how much she does not deserve such a prize. By sneering at her presumed politically cor-

rectness Simon makes a politically incorrect remark. He will consider himself excused to make such a blunt joke, first, because she has hurt him in his pride as a He-Man. As a self-acclaimed macho, it was his privilege to sleep with other girls, while she was only privileged to be his 'prima donna.' Second, Simon shows himself a representative, in the aftermath of the *Flodders*, of a position which has become dominant in Dutch (political) culture, the more since the short-lived rise of Pim Fortuyn: if we really take the freedom of speech seriously, then I am permitted to say anything. In principle, everyone can become the target of comic scorn – policemen, gays, (ex) girlfriends, or, as cited in the Introduction, Gordon poking fun at a Chinese candidate in *HOLLAND'S GOT TALENT* – so to treat others as equals, one precisely should not spare them. In short, being politically incorrect is from this perspective an emancipatory tool.

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Simon may be a nephew of happy slacker Johnnie Flodder, but Terstall's film is not a rip-off of Maas' comedy – far from it. In many a film from chapter 1, the humorous incidents are often quite cartoonish. In the world of the cartoon, characters always seem to have more than one life; the bodies of 'positive' heroes are practically indestructible. If they have a serious accident, they have only some minor bruises, like a black eye. After their house has exploded, the Flodder family cheerfully writes a postcard from their holiday address, as if nothing outrageous has happened. Simon, however, is confronted with an illness that devastates his body from within, and hence, his chutzpah is mixed with 'terms of endearment.' In between his chemo treatments, he still wants to keep up his spirit high by making jokes. When Camiel asks Simon to be best man – which in Dutch means 'witness' – at his wedding with Bram, he puns: 'Witness? Like "It was them, your honour, I saw them behind the bushes. Committing unnatural acts."' The joke covers up that he is 'touched' by the request (Sharon's interpretation), although he himself proposes to water down the term 'touched' to 'honoured.'

When Simon was still alive and kicking, his jokes on homosexuality were meant to articulate their mutual differences, as if to say: 'You are not like me, and therefore I do not have to fear you as a potential rival.' In the period of Simon's illness, his jokes function as a defence mechanism and are rather meant to keep his emotions at bay, for that may spoil his image of the He-Man he always was. The fact that this imago of machismo was not as solid as is the case with Johnnie Flodder probably contributed to the popularity of *SIMON*. When Simon receives his fatal injection, his friends are gathered at his bedside. It is followed by a close-up of Camiel, who then reminisces about the one moment that he had seen Simon scared. Working as a stuntman double on a Vietnam movie in 1988, he stood above a waterfall and had to jump into the water. Camiel had talked about this moment to Joy, Simon's daughter, but it

had not been visualized to us. Simon is standing there in an army uniform and looks over his shoulder to Camiel. ‘Kinda high, isn’t it?’ A transition to Camiel in the present, watching intensely off-screen, probably at Simon, at the verge of dying, and at the same time thinking back to this remarkable event. The final shot shows the object of Camiel’s memory: we see Simon’s jump in slow motion, but before he hits the water, the film has faded to black. How appropriate to end *SIMON* like this, for, first, it accentuates that the figure of Simon is consistently focalized by other characters, Camiel in particular, and as I have argued in *Film Narratology*, at the level of focalization interpretation takes place: someone never just ‘is’ a ‘real man’ objectively, but someone is seen by others as a hero, a macho, a weakling, etc. Second, rather than being a natural-born daredevil, the ambiguous ending suggests that the title hero was very good at playing he was one.¹⁰

DEAD MAN ‘WALKING’ AS A COMEDY: *DE MARATHON*

On the poster for *SIMON* we see eight characters walk on the beach on Simon’s very last day alive. Marco, one of his friends, is pushing an empty wheelchair, for Simon is still walking all by himself.¹¹ On the poster for *DE MARATHON* (Diederick Koopal, 2012), there is also a wheelchair, but this time a man in sportswear is seated in it, with his head on his chest, while two of the four people, in the same sportswear, behind him hold his arms in the air. One has to see the movie in order to understand the quite morbid context of this poster.

The five male characters all work at the car service station Groteboer, owned by Gerard. He often plays a game of cards with three of his colleagues. Kees is under the thumb of his devout wife, but every time he vehemently contradicts this assumption, the others laugh. Nico lives all by himself since the recent death of his mother, but his answering machine still starts with: ‘You’ve reached Mrs. Witteveld and Nico.’ While a date leaves the message that she cannot make the appointment and is not sure whether he had counted on her, the camera pans across a copious takeaway meal. The most boisterous of them all is Leo, who does not want to face the fact that his young girlfriend Anita is working as a prostitute.¹² Leo usually talks loudest, always having a wise-crack at his disposal. To his Egyptian colleague Youssoef he says while playing cards himself: ‘Keep working. At your pace, the pyramids wouldn’t have been finished yet,’ or he calls him ‘Tutankhamun.’ Such remarks to which Youssoef shakes his head with a smile, is symptomatic of the atmosphere at work. The jokes Leo makes usually contain cultural prejudices, both positive and negative: he refers to a pharaoh from the rich ancient history of Egypt, but to Youssoef’s presumed laziness as well. More important is the homosocial

dimension of the jokes: it affirms the hierarchical order in the work place, which already was clear from the fact that Youssoef is excluded from playing cards.

All Leo's wisecracks are meant to keep everyone else in their places, to ensure him a fixed world view. His surroundings are structured according to stereotypes. When an attractive woman drives her car to the service station, she asks: 'All of a sudden a red light came on. I have no idea what it means,' Leo answers: 'Time to go to work?,' which is a hint that a woman's most important function is to offer sexual pleasure to men. When Kees advises him that banana liquor will keep his partly Cape Verdean stepson satisfied – 'for all blacks love bananas' – Leo indeed puts the crybaby's soother into Pisang Ambon. For types like Leo, ignorance is considered bliss. He tells the Muslim neighbours during the barbecue that the hot satay is 'halal pork,' which is a contradiction in terms.

218 | Drinking beer is one favourite pastime for the workers and helps them to confirm their identity as regular guys without much ado, who, since they are Rotterdam-based adore Feyenoord and hate Ajax/Amsterdam, or in their phrasing '020,' so they do not have to pollute their mouths with 'dirty words.' When Gerard invites them for his birthday on Sunday, he says, coffee and cake at 11:00 am, beer at 11:30. At one point, when Leo is in the pit repairing a car, he looks intensely at the underside, while his right hand tries to grab something behind him: an aerosol, a screwdriver, a bolt perhaps, but when the camera pans slightly to the left, it reveals a bottle of beer. No need to add that any hint at homosexuality is taken as an insult. They collect 50 euros to send Nico to a prostitute, but he declines the offer until they suggest he might be gay. Judging from the sounds, the sex is intense, but in long shot we see that the prostitute is only massaging his calves.

The characters are shaken out of their habits after it has become known that Gerard is having financial problems. When Youssoef is reading *Runner's World* during a break, his colleagues think that the Muslim is coming out of the closet, for he apparently likes men's legs. Youssoef then tells them that he used to earn money running marathons, until an accident injured his foot. This sounds like a great way to cover the almost 40,000 euro deficit, but as Youssoef guesses, no one is prepared to sponsor 'four badly-wrapped mummies.' After some rejections, Youssoef might be able to arrange a meeting with his uncle, Hussein, who sells 'class vehicles.' Suddenly, Youssoef is treated like a prince: You want sugar in your coffee? You want a Twinkie? During the conversation they are surprised that Gerard puts his whole business at stake. He tells the uncle that they will receive 40,000 euro if all four of them reach the finish; if not, the service station is Hussein's.

During their first training we see them leave and in the very same take,

without any editing, we already see them return, exhausted and one of them puking. They guess it must be the 'thin air': 'How high up is Rotterdam?' Youssoef explains they have to train their 'metabolism' and to 'watch their nutrition.' The greatest part of the film is dedicated to showing how this 'mission impossible' requires that their mentality be changed. Youssoef is prepared to act as their coach, but when he is about to quit the ungrateful job, Gerard persuades him to return by confiding in him that he has oesophageal cancer and only has a few months to live. Youssoef gives in and thereafter they definitely make progress, despite a few occasional relapses. Near the end, it seems a failure when Kees might drop out, for his wife forbids him to run on a Sunday, but he shows up after all. They reach the start in the nick of time, dressed in canary shirts and pink pants, which was met with the predictable sarcasm by Leo: 'Do we want to finish as an egg yolk?'

They do finish together, except for Gerard, who was having severe difficulties. Youssoef, knowing about the cancer, says he had better quit, but Gerard refuses to give up. At one point, he is on the big screen as the very last participant in the marathon. Broadcast on television, both Uncle Hussein and Gerard's rebellious teenage son are fascinated by his struggle. We get shots in slow motion, but then Gerard falls down, close to the finish, and will be brought to hospital. He dies and when Youssoef tells that he had kept silent about his illness because he did not want anyone to worry, his fellow-workers realize that their boss was an 'incredible hotshot.' With a brief 'We can make it, guys,' they secretly sneak Gerard out of the hospital, in a wheelchair. While the streets of the race are being cleaned, they walk the last couple of hundred meters in slow motion and pass the finish line with his arms in the air until the image freezes. The poster, which more or less equals the freeze frame, has a suggestion of an ultimate triumph, but as soon as we know the narrative context, this triumph is overshadowed by tragedy. It is a heroic death, nonetheless, for service station Groteboer has been prevented from bankruptcy. Youssoef has been promoted to the fourth card player, though he still has some stuff to learn at the game of cards. Meanwhile Gerard's son, who seemed to go astray, has now taken Youssoef's position. And thus, even though it may seem quite morbid to have a dead man on the film poster, Gerard's passing away has a positive outcome, as befits a feel-good film.¹³

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A WANNABE TARANTINO BROMANCE: *BROS BEFORE HOS*

In *DE MARATHON*, homophobic irony and ethnic skits abound, but since they are not really malicious, they basically function to keep the world uncluttered for the working-class characters. It is inherent to friendship among men

that one accepts jokes about one's 'weak spot,' for camaraderie is never free from mutual rivalry, as I explained before. Youssoef can take the ribbing about pyramids, Tutankhamun and camels, because he understands that their possibly racist undertones are embedded in homosocial relations. The remarks are not intrinsically hostile, and he apparently acknowledges that they are made to affirm male bonding. Even when Youssoef has definitely won their respect, he will remain a Tutankhamun or a camel. Part of the relative benevolence of the jokes by Leo or Kees is that they include their own class and gender, albeit in a light-hearted manner. They make fun of their own unsportsmanlike nature, as when Leo says that the distance of a marathon is already far by car. They also make bantering remarks about each other's physical appearance – read: unattractiveness – like the running gag that 'your wife would not mind if you had a new V-belt,' for replacing a V-belt is a common repair in their line of business. Because of its mild-mannered tone, the rock solid comedy *DE MARATHON* is the 'diet version' of the unpolished and raunchy *BROS BEFORE HOS* (Steffen Haars and Flip van der Kuil, 2013), a homosocial title if there ever was one.¹⁴ In terms of purport, they are comparable: jokes work to channel friendship/brotherhood. The tone of the latter is much more comically violent, however.

The expression 'bros before hos' is an abbreviation of 'brothers before whores,' meaning that one's best friend is always to be privileged over one's girl – and 'ho' is a most pejorative term, suggesting that women tend to sleep around with other men. This lesson is already hammered home by the father of the 'white' kid Max and his adopted brother, the 'brown peanut' Jules, when they are both 5 years old. After their mother has left the house after a serious quarrel, their father advises them: 'Never ever, I mean never ever, have a relationship,' and the two guys swear to it.

After this prologue, Max introduces himself and his brother while they are about to turn 30. Jules is assistant branch manager of the Stipmarket, 'free snacking all day, phoning and slacking.' Max lives very close to the video store he is working at, 'hoping that I do not get any customers.' When they go out, they frequently pick up girls with an elaborate ruse. When they meet some girls they like, Max pretends to be upset that his girlfriend has just broken up with him, while Jules confides to the girls that it happened 'on our birthday, of all things.' The act of seduction practically always works, but Max has to admit that Jules ends up with the prettier girls, 'perhaps because of his colour.' They are shown in rapidly cut sequences coming on to different girls. One time Max says that Jules is from Turkey, another time from Botswana, or Djibouti, and once he even claims that his brother is an aboriginal. The two always have one-night stands, until they meet Anna.

BROS BEFORE HOS can be labelled as a 'bromance' (or a 'brom-com'), inspired by a cycle of American films in which boyish slackers postpone a

‘healthy’ relationship with a girl/woman and wallow in inter-male closeness. This cycle came to prominence with the release of such titles as Judd Apatow’s *THE 40-YEAR-OLD VIRGIN* (2005) and his *KNOCKED UP* (2007), *SUPERBAD* (Greg Mottola, 2007), *I LOVE YOU, MAN* (John Hamburg, 2009) and *HUMPDAY* (Lynn Shelton, 2009). The narrative conflict this cycle has to overcome is, as Jenna Weinman argues, between ‘funny boys “who don’t give a shit” and the serious women who “care,” and desperately want, albeit hardly need, men to “care more”’ (44). One of the historical roots of this cycle is, as Michael DeAngelis asserts, the ‘buddy film’ from the late 1960s and early 1970s – *MIDNIGHT COWBOY* (John Schlesingen, 1969), *EASY RIDER* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), *THUNDERBOLT AND LIGHTFOOT* (Michael Cimino, 1974) – in which female characters are marginalized, any identifiable ‘home’ is absent, and ‘the death of at least one of the protagonists is required in order to preclude any possibility that the relationship will be “consummated”’ (Robin Wood, qtd. in DeAngelis, 8). In a period of ‘a noticeable lessening of social stigmata attached to homosexuality,’ some distinctions manifest themselves. In addition to the fact that no one has to die anymore, the main difference between the ‘buddy film’ and the bromance is that the buddies are allowed to remain silent about the larger purpose of their intimacy, whereas the male characters in a bromance are ‘*required* to talk’ about it (DeAngelis, 13). Navigating the possibilities of the male-male relationships helps them to mature and fosters their manliness, which prepares them for the (heterosexual) marriage contract. Hence, the bromance is marked by a wonderful curiosity, as DeAngelis observes: something must happen – boys demonstrating their mutual friendship – on the condition that other things not happen – no consumption of sexual desire between straight males (1). If all the adventures lead up to a marital end, it should not amaze us, as Weinman remarks, that ‘despite their raunchy content,’ proponents of the conservative right have praised brom-coms ‘for their family values’ (44).

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Although steeped in a tradition of the countercultural buddy film, the bromance comes, at its core, close to the conventions of the usual stuff from romantic comedies, and (the plot of) *BROS BEFORE HOS* is no exception. Max saw Anna first at the video store, but Jules starts to date her and the ensuing relationship is the end of their pact, much to the chagrin of Max, since Anna is the first girl he knows who is hot without being annoying. Predictably, the film by Haars and Van der Kuil will bring the sympathetic ‘loser’ Max and dream girl Anna together, in three stages. First, when Anna goes steady with Jules, Max is so depressed that he goes to his father’s place, and after watching a game of Lingo on a lousy television set with his Dad, he locks himself up in his former room, with all kinds of 1980s paraphernalia, like a *RAMBO* poster and a *Playboy* magazine with Viola Holt as Playmate, its pages stuck

together. One day his father bangs at the door, bringing him a birthday cake which he finally throws on the ground. With a silly party hat on his head, the father explains that he had made a terrible mistake sending Max's mother, who really was 'the nicest woman in the world,' away. Max should not make the same error, and the fatherly advice is like a command, delivered in a comic deadpan vein: 'You turned 30 today, goddammit. Better go and fight for her. You won't get a second chance that easily. Look at me. Even better: talk to your brother first. No, even better: shave off that gnome beard first.'

The second one who, after his Dad, comes to Max' assistance is his brother, Jules. Due to a misunderstanding made by Max, Anna has lost her job as an attendant to mentally retarded patients, or in the belittling terms of Max, 'sexually frustrated authentic freaks.' The patients are duped as well, because without Anna they are no longer able to perform the fairy-tale play *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* at a festival. With René, Jules, and the institution guard Bart, Max secretly kidnaps them to teach them how to put FIRST BLOOD (Ted Kotcheff, 1982), aka the first RAMBO movie, on stage. Anna is present at the festival, but she is not amused. Bathing in backlight, she tells him in public that it is indecent to misuse those 'sexually frustrated authentic freaks.' Jules then gives a brief speech, admitting that he himself is not made for 'eternal faithfulness' and tries to persuade Anna that his brother is the perfect match for her. She is not convinced, and to make matters worse, Max and his companions end up in prison for kidnapping. When they are released after six weeks, Jordy who played Rambo, comes to greet them: 'Bros before hos.' In fact, Jordy turns out to be the third, and most important, mediator, for we then hear Anna's voice: 'Those dudes did nothing but talk about you,' a conclusion which is sealed with the obligatory kiss. Initially, his 'gift' to her in the form of the performance was not appreciated by Anna, until later when she finds out how much Jordy, a most intractable patient, has enjoyed his role as Rambo. So, the 'brotherly' pact between Max and Jordy makes her accept him as her love interest.

On the one hand, BROS BEFORE HOS is filled with the requirements of a romantic comedy to the brim. After Jules has confessed in public that he is not made for 'eternal faithfulness,' a woman he had earlier seen as a strip-tease dancer tells him: 'I love open relationships.' René's utterly decent girlfriend Suzanne who had left him because she thinks that he prefers porn actress Sasha Grey over her, comes to the prison and sitting on her horse Misty she starts singing Volumia's 'Hou me vast' [Hold Me Tight]. While her jangling version transforms into the original song on the soundtrack, we see René slowly ride away from his friends on horseback. On the other hand, BROS BEFORE HOS is a spoof of romantic comedies. We hear Volumia sing, but the song is interrupted brusquely for one of the question games

the brothers are playing regularly. They constantly invent 'difficult' dilemmas for each other, that are impossible to answer, for the choice is always between 'bad' and 'worse,' like: 'Who would you bang? Doutzen Kroes with full-blown AIDS, without a condom, or Viola Holt (*Playboy*, 1984), overrun by a truck dragged along for a mile, but down there she's still perfect?' Seeing René on horseback with Suzanne, Jules has another dilemma for Max: 'Suppose you have to choose. Either those mud flaps of Suzanne in your face, or ...' but before Jules can finish, Max already says: 'The horse, definitely,' and Jules joins him: 'Me, too,' to emphasize how much they do not want a girlfriend like Suzanne.

Suzanne is utterly disliked by the brothers because she is the typically controlling girlfriend who does not understand the fun of male bonding. She is very much like Melissa, the woman with whom the dentist Stu from *THE HANGOVER* (Todd Phillips, 2009) is about to get married. Stu lied to her about the stag party in Las Vegas he is having with his three friends and has told her he is on a wine tasting tour. One of the humorous lessons in a homosocial comedy like *THE HANGOVER* is that a man should never choose a woman who disapproves of her hubby hanging out with friends. Thus, Stu's girlfriend, Melissa, is represented here as a total misfit. By contrast, the bride, Tracy, has consented to the trip which the friends make on occasion of her wedding to Phil. Of course she was nervous about the fact that the four only arrived in the nick of time, but she did not make a scene. This response makes Tracy a woman in the same league of Anna, one worth fighting for.

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The main reason why Anna stands out, is because she understands boyish behaviour. She gives evidence of such understanding when she is playing the same video game which we saw Max play at the age of five. On top of that, she tells him, after she has belched loudly by the way, that *FIRST BLOOD* is the 'best movie ever, so fucking bad.' And imitating a heavy voice: '*He just wanted something to eat.*' Max continues, imitating Sylvester Stallone: '*They drew first blood, not me. Are you telling me that 200 of our men against your boy is a no-win situation for us? You send that many, don't forget one thing,*' and then Max and Anna together: '*A good supply of body bags.*' The shared preference for *FIRST BLOOD* not only makes Anna his object of desire, but it was also Max' reason for choosing this film to have it performed on stage by her (former) patients – his 'gift' to her.

Strictly speaking, the romantic ending of the film does not cross out the continuation of homosocial relations. Anna falls in love with Max, predominantly because one of her male patients starts considering him as a 'brother.' Moreover, she expresses his love with a 'boyish' prank. 'While you were in prison I fell in love. With Rick. Rick Brandsteder,' she tells a baffled Max, and after a few seconds, she adds: 'No, of course not.' Since a girl like

Anna proves herself more of a 'bro' than a 'ho,' the romantic plot does not really violate the reigning principle of male bonding.

Throughout the film, the two brothers and their housemate, René, address each other as 'niggaaaaah.' The nerdy René, whose acts provide hilarity time and again, mimics 'nigga' talk, in particular: '*Control your bitch is what I am saying.*' He is big-mouthed in the company of his friends, but his actual behaviour in the presence of his girlfriend is in flagrant contrast to his words. As soon as Suzanne requests something, he sits up like a puppy. This already clearly indicates that their conventionalized use of the N-word is no more than a fetishization of black culture. Their boyish desire to be associated with the position of an outsider is expressed without ever giving up the privileges of the Western slacker who lives in relatively luxury. The more they talk 'niggaaaaah' speech, the more it becomes manifest how shallow their words are and how much of an 'outsider' they are instead of a black insider (see Willis, 210-13).

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Just as the characters can be described as 'wannabe white Negros,' *BROS BEFORE HOS* can be described as a 'wannabe Tarantino movie.' This is not meant as a disqualification, for his films are themselves an amalgam of many other titles, 'wannabe' versions of a variety of films. A film like Tarantino's *PULP FICTION* (1994), as Sharon Willis observes, 'recycles them as a kind of nostalgia to the second degree' (197). It is not a nostalgia for the 1950s to the 1970s as such, she argues, but for the way the films from these decades have circulated in television, radio, and particularly relevant, on VHS. Tarantino was simply too young to know the spaghetti westerns by Sergio Leone or the blaxploitation films from their original theatre release, but his nostalgic longing for them is a belated appreciation as a consequence of watching them on television or video. By recycling them into his own homage to these films, Tarantino makes them contemporaneous. Diverse pictures such as *KISS ME DEADLY* (Robert Aldrich, 1955), *FOXY BROWN* (Jack Hill, 1974) and *THE DEER HUNTER* (Michael Cimino, 1978) thus become part of 'a kind of utopian eternal present' (Willis, 197).

The main points of reference in *BROS BEFORE HOS* are from later decades, and via these references the identity of the characters gains definition. The fact that Max works at a video store, where we see posters of *PLAN C*, *DE MARATHON*, *TUSSENSTAND*, *SNACKBAR*, *MATTERHORN*, is already a nostalgic reference. A 'nice job,' Max says in voice-over, but the job is no longer as nice as it used to be in the time when Tarantino himself was working at a video store. At one point, two boys ask whether Max can advise them some great pictures. He mentions *DJANGO* (Sergio Corbucci, 1966) – the film that inspired Tarantino's *DJANGO UNCHAINED* (2012) – some 'Will Ferrell shit,' and the 'awesome' *TED* (2012) by Seth McFarlane. The boys respond to his

list by saying: 'OK, thanks, then we will download them from the Internet. Loser. Who the fuck still rents movies at the video store?'¹⁵ Early in the film, a boy and a girl bring back the DVD of *THE BIG LEBOWSKI* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1998), which they considered a piece of crap. Max then throws *COSTA!* (Johan Nijenhuis, 2001) onto the counter for them. The girl asks whether that is the one in the snow with all the skiing. Max does not try to contradict her – for that is *SNOWFEVER* (Pim van Hove, 2004) – and coolly replies: 'Definitely. Best Dutch film ever made.' Whereas 'Will Ferrell shit' and *TED* are definitely liked by the people who make *BROS BEFORE HOS*, because they are more or less in the same league, Max' recommendation of *COSTA!* is to be interpreted as an ironic reversal: if you think *THE BIG LEBOWSKI* is a piece of crap, your taste is perhaps so rottenly bourgeois, that you will probably like *COSTA!* better.

BROS BEFORE HOS is a dustbin of references to popular cinema, above all in the category of *FIRST BLOOD* and *ESCAPE FROM ALCATRAZ* (Don Siegel, 1979). The latter is referenced to 'free' the patients from the institution where Anna used to work as an attendant. The guard who assists Max in the 'rescue operation' actually mentions Siegel's film as his favourite movie, the one with 'Whoopi Goldberg' (almost right, it is Clint Eastwood). Moreover, in the end credits, the patients copycat scenes from a variety of films. The director of the institution has permitted them to do so, since their enjoyment of the stage performance has proven to her that violent movies actually work therapeutically. Although the acting performances are wooden and the delivery of lines is blunt, they enthusiastically imitate scenes from such films as *JAWS*, *ROCKY*, *SCARFACE*, *PULP FICTION*, *BRAVEHEART*, *AMERICAN HISTORY X*, and *NEW KIDS TURBO*, which all are, significantly, highly popular among adolescents and young film aficionados.

But perhaps more than anything, *BROS BEFORE HOS* has affinity with the quirky comedy *CLERKS* (Kevin Smith, 1994), about two guys working at a video store.¹⁶ 'This job would be great if it wasn't for the fucking customers,' Randal says in *CLERKS*, which recalls a line from Max' voice-over. The most striking parallel, however, is with the scene when Randal is on the phone and wants to place an order with the distribution house. While a mother and her young child ask him where to find *HAPPY SCRAPPY HERO PUP*, Randal continues the phone conversation and mentions no less than 19 titles from porn movies. There is a slightly comparable scene in *BROS BEFORE HOS*, when the mentally retarded Jordy has been permitted to hire porn DVDs from Max' video store to keep his sexual lust under control. By coincidence, Max' boss is desperately searching for precisely these porn movies which have been reserved by a customer. He loudly names all the titles in the presence of a grandmother and her granddaughter who are at the counter

with a DVD. Max then has to call Anna straight away to request the return of the films. He also starts mentioning all the titles, while the grandmother and the granddaughter are still waiting patiently: *RAPING MIDGETS II*, *THIS WHORE SEES A DOCTOR*, *SCHINDLER'S FIST*. Thus, *BROS BEFORE HOS* can be said to be a romantic comedy which dearly wants to be a bad-ass bromance, portraying the intimate bonds between Max, Jules, and, to a lesser extent, the quite weird René. These bonds are channelled by picking up girls for one-night stands, as we saw in a series of episodic sequence shots, and by visiting striptease joints. These bonds are put at risk when the brothers vie for the same woman, but they become particularly strong again when Jules helps Max to conquer Anna. But above all, these bonds are secured by liking the very same movies which date back to their childhood and adolescent years, *FIRST BLOOD*, *PULP FICTION*, *CLERKS*, *THE BIG LEBOWSKI*.

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Max and Jules' enjoyment of films from the 1980s and 1990s is basically nostalgic, reminiscent of their juvenile tastes and years of unconditional brotherhood without the responsibilities and desires that come with age. Significantly, Jordy's enjoyment of (imitating) these movies is still 'authentic,' since as a mentally retarded person he is more or less still the young boy they once were. When Jordy greets them at the end with a '*bros before hos*,' he becomes a part of the brotherly pact. His inclusion of this pact, which, as I state at the risk of repetition, is mediated by popular films predominantly from the 1980s and 1990s, makes Anna realize that Max definitely is okay. At the same time, their kiss may result into a gradual dissolution of the homosocial bonding, for as Max says in voice-over: 'Shit, 30, this is the beginning of the end. Probably I will change into a yes-nodding, stay-at-home daddy. I'll have two kids, a minivan and a gay-looking Golden Retriever. But fuck it. With Anna, I don't give a shit.'

POETIC HOMOSOCIALITY: *WILDE MOSSELS*

Verhoeven's *SPETTERS* was neither a comedy nor an ironic work, but in retrospect, it can be regarded as such because of its remarkable reception history. And thus it makes sense to discuss, as I did in this chapter, the comic offspring of Verhoeven's controversial 1980 film. Strictly speaking, *BROS BEFORE HOS* is much more vulgar, but it did not get the vicious reception of its predecessor. Unlike the quite 'realistic' *SPETTERS*, the film by Haars and Van der Kuil did not claim to capture the zeitgeist. The homosocial pattern in *BROS BEFORE HOS* functioned as a skeleton for 'cool' jokes in an attempt to catch up with comedies like *CLERKS* or comically violent films like *PULP FICTION*.

To prove the impact of *SPETTERS*, Hans Schoots mentions in his 2004

study *Van FANFARE tot SPETTERS*, that Verhoeven's film influenced pictures like the gritty *VAN GOD LOS* [GODFORSAKEN!] (Pieter Kuijpers, 2003) and the 'poetic' *WILDE MOSSELS* [WILD MUSSELS] (Erik de Bruyn, 2000), about three rural fellows in Zeeland. To reinforce the kinship: Hans Veerman who was cast as Eef's father in *SPETTERS*, played the stepfather of male protagonist Leen, who happens to be a motorbike enthusiast. In addition to funny one-liners, *WILDE MOSSELS* has its comic moments, as when one of the friends clumsily shoots himself in his leg during the robbery of a small local bank where only one female employee is working. The three buddies in *WILDE MOSSELS* are as much descendants of the pals in *SPETTERS* as Max, Jules and René in *BROS BEFORE HOS* are. What separates De Bruyn's film from the one by Haars and Van der Kuil is the editing and cinematography. Stylistically, *BROS BEFORE HOS* uses many hip techniques we know from music videos, which were at the peak of their popularity in the 1980s and 1990s: use of split screen, swish pans, slow motion, fast motion, high-angle shots, time-lapse photography. Thus, the film by Haars and Van der Kuil is a homage to (the era of) the music video in terms of both style and efficient storytelling. By contrast, the overall tone in *WILDE MOSSELS* is melancholic. Even though De Bruyn's film has some quickly cut scenes and extreme slow motion as well, it frequently uses wide lenses for long, lengthy shots to convey that the characters are situated within bare acres and close to the seaside. The distant landscapes work to propel the teenager's vague desire to disappear behind the horizon for a more vivacious existence, in the vein of the poems by Slauerhoff, who made many sea voyages during his brief life. De Bruyn's film, which has a preference for the colours green and blue, also uses very slow dolly movements which contribute to the general poetic indeterminacy: while the viewer can barely perceive that the camera moves, the perspective slightly changes nonetheless.

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In terms of content, *WILDE MOSSELS*, aptly described by Jan Pieter Ekker as a 'potato western about a lost generation,' ties in with the homosocial pattern of the comedies in this chapter: boys hanging out with one another, making plans together, while the longing for a girl (or girls) may be an obstacle to the friendship. In *WILDE MOSSELS* the rivalry that ensues from this longing results into a deadly incident, and for that reason the melancholy, accentuated by the cinematography, definitely presides over the humour.¹⁷ In the comic descendants of *SPETTERS*, on the contrary, the friendship will be regained precisely when death has foretold its arrival, as in *SIMON*, or when, as in *DE MARATHON*, death incites the friends to an illicit ode.

