

From Ludic Humour to Cosmic Irony

In his groundbreaking study *Homo Ludens* (1938), the famous Dutch historian Johan Huizinga gives a ‘notoriously elusive’ (Rodriguez) reflection on the play element of culture. On the one hand, he asserts that in play, we move below the level of the serious. There are (primitive) forms of play, like children pretending to be someone else, a game of cards or a sporting contest, which are ‘largely devoid of purpose’ (49). Despite the fact that children or grown-ups can play ‘in the most perfect seriousness’ (18), such (primitive) play, ‘senseless and irrational’ (17) as it is, has ‘that irreducible quality of pure playfulness’ (7). Huizinga uses the Dutch term ‘aardigheid’ to describe this quality, but admits that no word better sums up the essence of this kind of play than the English word ‘fun,’ adding to this that the ‘*fun* of playing, resists all analysis, all logical interpretation’ (3). Hence, play has a strictly ludic function that goes beyond full comprehension.

| 229

On the other hand, and this is a main thrust of Huizinga’s study, play has a ‘*significant* function – that is to say that there is some sense to it’ (1). In play, people can also move above the level of the serious, ‘in the realm of the beautiful and the sacred’ (19). Play, Huizinga points out, is innate in aesthetic categories like music and poetry, which in classical antiquity had an ethical and educational value (162). Even more important, every ritual of either a political, legal or religious nature, which is ‘seriousness at its highest and holiest,’ grafts itself upon play (18-19). A ritual event and play both take place at a so-called ‘consecrated spot’; they step out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere and the acts can be performed ‘with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture’ (8). Since such examples illustrate that play can ‘very well include seriousness’ (45), the concept of play oscillates between the ‘highest regions of the spirit’ and futility. According to Huizinga, there is a ‘substantial similarity’ between the ritu-

al forms of play, often performed in a social and cultural context, and the ludic forms (19).

I refer to the work of Huizinga, because this canonical study, written by a Dutch scholar of international fame, seems to have left quite an imprint on Dutch culture, albeit its precise marks are difficult to detect. Perhaps this imprint shows itself best in the Netherlands in the particularly vivid tradition of cabaret performers, from Toon Hermans and Wim Sonneveld to Freek de Jonge and Youp van 't Hek, to Hans Teeuwen and Brigitte Kaandorp, to Claudia de Breij and Ronald Goedemondt. They take a ludic approach to their subjects, but such an approach can, to quote Huizinga, 'very well include seriousness.'¹ This option of earnestness is clear in the politically engaged shows of Freek de Jonge, but it is also applicable to the more absurdist performances of Hans Teeuwen, like the silly song about the 16th-century French seer Nostradamus in his tight green pants. The surplus value of the ludic can reside in a disordering potential, catching the viewer by surprise. The number one requirement for a successful cabaret performance seems to be that the comedian acts against conventions: he might sing the praise of something totally idiotic, be annoyed about something absolutely trivial or advocate a nonsensical opinion. This can offer the spectator pleasure and fun as much as have an alienating effect upon him. In this chapter I will focus upon films made by, among others, Jos Stelling, Orlow Seunke, Robert Jan Westdijk, Lodewijk Crijns, Eddy Terstall and Alex van Warmerdam, which are all rooted in the ludic, but nonetheless can slightly estrange the viewer because of an uncommon angle presented.

230 |

A STILLED FORM OF CATHOLIC SLAPSTICK: *DE ILLUSIONIST* AND *DE WISSELWACHTER*

One usually visits a camping site to enjoy a holiday. The theatrical company Het Werkteater, already discussed in chapter 3, went to such a camping site and improvised some characters as well as a couple of scenes on the spot, according to the company's aim to perform in the midst of 'real life.' Normally, the films of Het Werkteater were based upon theatrical plays, but *CAMPING* (Thijs Chanowski, 1978) was the exception. In one of the first scenes of the film, Guus tries to park his caravan while driving backwards. First, he gets annoyed because he cannot see his wife, Trix, who is supposed to give him directions. She is standing behind the caravan, not next to it. Second, he gets irritated because a child kicks a ball towards his car. When he wants to spank the kid, a man intervenes by saying: 'Quiet, quiet, this is a camping site not a housing estate.' 'Neither is it a football field,' Guus retorts. Third, it gets on

his nerves that as soon as the caravan is in the right spot, his wife immediately starts offering him a plethora of ‘cosy’ options – Shall we have a drink on the terrace? Shall I unpack the chairs? Would you like to refresh yourself? He can only respond by gradually raising his voice: ‘Quiet, quiet, holiday, holiday ... holidayyyyyy!!’ In short, Guus takes offence at his wife’s forced attempts to create a free and easy atmosphere that will guarantee a good time at the camping site. This scene is exemplary of the general tendency of *CAMPING* to poke fun at the apparent paradox that holidays impose a ‘duty’ to enjoy one’s leisure time. Instead of moments of relaxation, the film comically illustrates that one’s holiday can go with the stress to perform this ‘duty,’ which is best expressed in Guus’ peevisish ‘holidayyyyyy.’ Another fine moment of Guus’ nuisance is the scene when he can judge by the shoes under the door that there is a man occupying the ladies’ toilet. He puts a girl on guard so that he can get the camping steward, but the man has vanished upon his return. He makes a scene, frustrated by the man’s escape, but, once again, it is much ado about nothing. Only during the evening of the hilarious ‘Miss’ and the slightly more hilarious ‘Mister’ election, one of the film’s final scenes, is Guus able to set his mind at rest, to sing along with other guests about ‘fine lads who always show up everywhere.’

| 231

Though *CAMPING* was to become quite popular when it was later broadcast on Dutch television, film critics were less enthusiast this time than with other projects by Het Werkteater. Perhaps the fact that this film was not an adaptation of one of their own socially engaged theatrical pieces worked to its disadvantage. *CAMPING* was considered as no more than a loose array of sketches, and Margot van Schayk suggests that Het Werkteater required a well-trying theatre performance as a necessary ‘foreplay’ for a film. *CAMPING* more or less proved that their projects were to remain stuck in a ludic atmosphere and that the direct and critical testing for a live audience helped the company to combine their work with social engagement (Van Schayk, 131). Thus, the exception of *CAMPING* underscores the hypothesis that for Het Werkteater the transition from theatre to film can result into a favourable cross-fertilization. Likewise, the Swedish director Ingmar Bergman once remarked that even in cases that it proved to be incompatible, the crossover from theatre to film felt like a small step. *DE ILLUSIONIST* [*THE ILLUSIONIST*] (Jos Stelling, 1984) is an example of such a small step which has an incompatibility at its core: a talkative theatre show was adapted into a film without spoken text.² The film consists of a series of sketches, which are framed as remembrances by the protagonist – or perhaps figments of his imagination – when he peeps his head around the door of his drawing room to look at the auditorium preceding his performance.

One of these remembrances concerns a memorable 3-minute sequence

from the beginning of *DE ILLUSIONIST*. A father, a mother and two children, played by grown-ups, are seated around the dinner table, their hands folded and eyes closed in prayer. Only the table is lit thanks to the one lamp hanging above it; the rest is in darkness. The camera then shows the mother in profile, and we see a weak light bulb at a small distance behind her. When she turns her face to the left, the focus shifts to the grandfather in a chair near the bulb in the corner, playing cards all by himself. When he notices that the mother is looking at him, the old man quickly folds his hands and closes his eyes. He then stops, but when he observes that the mother is still looking at him, he quickly pretends to be praying. The only sound we hear in the scene is some murmur that accompanies the prayers, but soon the sound of a buzzing bluebottle is heard as well and attracts everyone's attention, as we can gather from their eyes. When the kids perceive that their mother sees they are distracted, they continue their prayers, eyes closed. A bluebottle is seated at a spoon, and one son moves his hand slowly in its direction, but he quickly withdraws when he notices he is being watched. The father thereupon increases the volume of his murmur. We then get a long shot of the dinner table, the camera positioned so that we see the grandfather in the background, in the middle of the shot. We see him playing cards, but he is also constantly peering in the direction of the dinner table. After a few seconds, the son cannot resist hitting the bluebottle on the spoon – we see his hand in close-up – but some porridge flies through the air, landing on grandfather's right cheek. We then get a shot in which the mother and son are out of focus, continuing their prayers, while the grandfather is in sharp focus, cleaning his face.

A shot then of the other son who takes the dead bluebottle from the dinner table. In a close-up we see that he has the insect between thumb and finger and starts cleaning it carefully, removing some porridge. His mother looks at it, but he is too focused upon his work to be disturbed by her glance. He then puts the bluebottle in a drawer of the table and starts counting the 20-something number of them, in a whispered voice. The mother has closed her eyes, apparently pensive. A bluebottle lands on her cheek, and she wants to get rid of it by slightly moving her facial muscles, but while the one son is still counting, the other son hits her on the cheek. The latter quickly closes his eyes, but his brother looks up and moves his hand to his mother's face, to which the bluebottle is still glued. When he takes the insect from her cheek to make it part of his collection, his mother hits him on his cheek, apparently thinking that she is paying him back. While the sneaky brother starts suppressing his laughter, his pair of thick spectacles falls into his porridge. Since he cannot see anything without them, he starts groping with his hands. Thereby his head gets affixed to one of the many sticky fly strips

hanging over the dinner table. His brother comes to his assistance, but since he is clumsy, he only makes things worse, which is, as we see in a medium close-up, secretly enjoyed by the father. End of sequence.

In this sequence, the only sounds we hear are the murmurs of prayer, the buzzing of bluebottles, the silent counting of insects, some furtive laughter and two blows. There is no dialogue, and actually there is none in the entire movie. This absence of spoken text is in notable contrast to the fact that De Jonge's theatrical performances are known for verbal fireworks. Initially, De Jonge's monologue was meant to be part of the film, but during shooting, it was decided that the combination of his lines and the scenes in the open air was awkward. Thus, in the case of *DE ILLUSIONIST*, theatre and film could only be spliced insofar as Stelling and De Jonge realized that the verbal performance had better be made as a wordless tragedy with slapstick effects.

Shooting a film without dialogue offered a considerable advantage for Stelling, for it perfectly suited his vision of cinema. Since Dutch culture is, as he claims, essentially Calvinist Protestant, cinema is relatively poorly appreciated in the Netherlands. For the Calvinist tradition regards literacy and erudition highly and favours text definitely over images. This preference is based upon the idea that the meaning of texts is, or at least can be made, quite straightforward. With words one can be pretty clear about one's intentions, and it is the task of clergymen associated with a rigorous doctrine like Calvinism to reduce biblical texts to only one unambiguous message. In contrast to the (enforced) clarity and unequivocalness of texts, Stelling believes that images are not to be limited to just one meaning. Because of their essential indeterminacy they open up space for ambiguity and leave room for interpretation by the viewer. A good image always represents more than meets the eye, inviting the viewer to add extra meaning to it. Unlike Calvinist Protestants, Stelling puts forward, Catholics do not have a problem with ambiguity; on the contrary, they have no quibbles with simulation and lies. In an interview with Theodoor Steen for *Salon Indien*, Stelling quotes a statement by Wim Verstappen: 'Film is a Catholic medium, because only Catholics know what heaven looks like,' meaning that Catholics even dare to represent the un-representable. Because a vivid imagination is more challenging than (some contestable version of) the 'truth,' austere textual accuracy is for them inferior to the indeterminacy of visual representations. In the spirit of his self-chosen dictum that film is basically a Catholic medium, Stelling asserts that dialogue in film is only of interest on condition that it reinforces lies and leads the spectator astray. Too often it has an explanatory function, which for Stelling is un-cinematic, for dialogue risks being an obstacle to one's visual attention.

Believing that his films are much better tailored to Catholic than to Cal-

vinist cultures, it does not surprise Stelling that his films are usually more successful in countries like Portugal, Italy and Russia than in his home country. A film like his ambitious project *DE VLIEGENDE HOLLANDER* [*THE FLYING DUTCHMAN*] (1995) – and the more modest *NO TRAINS, NO PLANES* (1999) – received only a cold to lukewarm response in the Netherlands, but were much better appreciated abroad. *DE VLIEGENDE HOLLANDER* even made it to the top 100 of the best pictures of European cinematography in the 20th century according to IMAGO, which is a considerable contrast to Jos van der Burg's review in *De Filmkrant* that this fantasy of the legend is 'without wings,' an opinion shared by many Dutch. The fact that *DE ILLUSIONIST* had fared much better in the Netherlands and even was voted as best film of the year by the readers of the (leftist) newspaper *de Volkskrant* was, Stelling hypothesizes, due to a misreading. Dutch viewers tended to see the film as humorous, mediated by the aforementioned slapstick scene, but above all by the participation of main actor De Jonge, a comedian especially popular among (leftist) intellectuals. For many, *DE ILLUSIONIST* was De Jonge's film and this was decisive for seeing the film as a ludic comedy with absurdist incidents.³ In fact, Stelling says, *DE ILLUSIONIST* is a bitter and bleak picture about a boy paying a visit to his brother in a mental institution, and the humour is added to make the film bearable.⁴ For viewers from Eastern Europe, the director had noticed, *DE ILLUSIONIST* is indeed a 'tragedy,' which corresponds to the title of the original theatrical show, and De Jonge, unbeknownst to them, was interpreted as a melancholic character, whereas in the Netherlands the label of comedy prevailed.

Leaving his films set in historical periods out of consideration, like his medieval debut feature *MARIKEN VAN NIEUMEGHEN* (1974), the aforementioned *DE VLIEGENDE HOLLANDER*, and *HET MEISJE EN DE DOOD* [*THE GIRL AND THE DEATH*] (2012), Stelling's signature is a tragic starting point supplemented with comic interludes. This comes best to the fore in his perhaps finest achievement, *DE WISSELWACHTER* [*THE POINTSMAN*] (1986).⁵ The plot is only ancillary: a French lady, dressed in a fancy red winter coat, gets off a train by mistake and is stuck in the middle of nowhere, because it is no longer a regular station. She can take shelter at the little place of the pointsman, a most peculiar hermit who does not really know how to approach her. The film depicts how they gradually grow closer together, among others by the fact that he shoots the intrusive postman. After having shared an intimate sexual moment together, a train stops to take them away, but he stays behind in his place which he has filled with moss. He will be fully covered by cobwebs at the end.

DE WISSELWACHTER is very sparse with text. The lady says a few words, but the pointsman does not understand French, nor do the three guests who

come along. Hence, she never has an actual dialogue with anyone. The only time the pointsman gives in to a request by her is when she yells 'tire' (shoot), but probably he would have shot the postman anyway. About the only word the pointsman himself speaks in the movie is a funny example of miscommunication. When the machinist asks him for her name, he answers after some moments of silence: 'Dégoûtant,' a term he has heard her utter, thinking she had introduced herself, while she was actually describing his living conditions with the French word for 'disgusting.' The machinist tells the pointsman a story but the latter only listens and does not give a verbal reply. When the postman comes along, the pointsman just stands by, the lady does not understand him, the assistant machinist is still recovering from being frozen and the machinist only answers by way of petulant gestures, which express his antipathy to the postman. Hence, the few spoken texts in Stelling's film take the form of monologues, even though – and that makes it humorous – the speaker is waiting or hoping for a verbal response.

| 235

Because there are so few incidents, so little words and no music except for a few diegetic fragments, *DE WISSELWACHTER* stands out for its attention to details: the sound of a dripping tap or of a rattling chain; the visual presence of insects. Most remarkable, however, is that while the film itself never uses slow motion as an effect, all the movements of the main characters, and the pointsman in particular, are very slow paced and sometimes also repetitive: if he takes a look at something, he then takes another look, and then perhaps once again. Any simple action, such as eating a meal by the pointsman, watched by the lady upon her arrival, is protracted. If in much slapstick, the actions can be very energetic, and even seem speeded up, *DE WISSELWACHTER* offers its spectators a stilled form of slapstick. As a consequence, it is already slightly absurdist when the pointsman does something quite normal like a little dance, or when the woman caresses his face amidst red currants which either are already bottled or still have to be pickled. A scene in which the pointsman hides himself behind some bush and moves closer at intervals to spy on the postman is even more absurd, all the more so when he puts the bush on the railroad, as if it was growing there. Not to mention the bizarre scene in which the pointsman puts the dead postman on his motorcycle and starts the machine so that the deceased drives away into the wide open.⁶ So, the humour in *DE WISSELWACHTER* resides in the actor's performance at slowed-down actions without ever becoming slow motion.

A BUSTER KEATON LOOKALIKE ON AND OFF THE SET: *OH BOY!*

236 |

The world of the classic slapstick comedian ‘defies common logic and physical laws’ (Desser, 34). No matter how extreme the pratfall, the slapstick character is never seriously hurt. He seems impervious to bodily pain and in that regard he is not quite human. Noël Carroll describes clowns as ‘creatures who can take a hit on the head with a sledgehammer and who then, after a brief swoon, are back in the game almost immediately’ (30). The clownish protagonist in slapstick inhabits a universe in which he does not fit in, but thanks to his ‘indomitable will’ (Desser, 56) he can bend all the forces that seem to conspire against him to his advantage. He is constantly put to the test, but his imagination is so vivid that when things go wrong, as they invariably do, he transforms the regular use of objects to surprisingly new ways; ‘necessity is the mother of invention’ (Desser, 62) and because of his clever mind, the outsider can prevail. In situations where slapstick comedians like Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton end up with their beloved girl besides them, ‘it is a matter of their proving themselves through physical challenges and not of their innate romantic qualities’ (Desser, 57).

In Orlow Seunke’s *OH BOY!* (1991), Pim (Seunke himself) is a young and inexperienced actor who plays the role of Boy, a Buster Keaton lookalike. As befits a Keaton character, he is interested in ‘mechanical and electrical engineering’ (Desser, 42). When the alarm goes off or when he pulls a rope, all kinds of objects are set in motion: tea is made, a shirt comes down from the ceiling, an electric train throws the dirty dishes into water, and so on. In this movie-within-a-movie, Boy owns a gas station in the middle of nowhere in a studio-made desert. According to the director within the film, the more desolate the setting the purer the drama. Business is far from thriving, and in the beginning of the film, a man pays him a visit who is tied to a wheelchair with a little bit of modern propulsion. He needs to have some petrol in his small tank and also one drop in his lighter. One of the gags is that the man – played by Jim van der Woude from *DE WISSELWACHTER* – utters sounds, but his speech is unintelligible, except for the one time he speaks a line as an actor on the set.

The story of the movie-within-the-movie is set in motion when Boy all of a sudden gets a neighbour who also runs a gas station, albeit slightly more modern. The two start competing for the few customers, trying to outbid each other.⁷ Moreover, this neighbour, Bozz, has in addition to a brutal little son a handsome daughter, Gal, with whom Boy falls in love. He tries to win her heart in his own clumsy manner, but the father is fiercely against their meetings. Bozz’ attempts to scare off Boy result in a series of him pulling break-neck stunts – although, to be honest, not as skilful as the actual Buster Keaton. Boy turns a lengthy ladder in some sort of air bridge but while walking over

the steps, Bozz uses a gun. The ladder turns over, but miraculously Boy succeeds in clinging to the underside of the stairs. To cap it all, it starts raining at that very moment. In another scene Bozz lights a fire that makes Boy run so hard that he bumps into the front of his own house. The wall comes tumbling down, but he is not hurt at all, because the open window falls over him, just as happens to the Buster Keaton character in *STEAMBOAT BILL, JR.* (Charles Reisner and Buster Keaton, 1928).

Actually, this is one of the very few scenes that is met with great enthusiasm on the set, because this difficult shot required precise timing. During the viewing of the daily rushes, director Otto Waaïjer is still delighted until it is remarked that the man in the wheelchair is seen in the background taking a shower, which is impossible because he is an invalid in the movie. They are moving the scene forward and backward, but since it is shot in one long take they cannot re-edit it: the only option is to shoot it once more. Actually, this is one of the minor problems of the production. To mention others: no one speaks highly of the acting skills of Pim, who plays Boy. With a guy like him, it becomes 'HELLZAPOPPIN', the producer remarks, a reference to an anarchic comedy full of sight gags and slapstick by H.C. Potter from 1941. Another one: Pim is in love with Chloe, who plays Gal in the film, but is too shy to approach her. He spies on her by looking through the peephole in a toilet which is no more than a prop for the film. He is so nervous he has to defecate, but he has apparently forgotten that a toilet on a set is not real and accidentally ruins the rinsing tub. When Boy runs away in great hurry, the whole toilet falls apart. The director sighs: 'I guess I have to omit the entire toilet scene.' Another one: Since the shooting of Otto's picture is a few days behind schedule, the crew of a subsequent production is already preparing for their own film. As a consequence, there is snow in the desert.

| 237

Worst of all, and a main reason for the delay, is the pedantic attitude of the self-declared big star of the movie-in-the-movie, Gert Schouwen, who plays the neighbour, Bozz. It is beneath his dignity to have Pim as his opposite number, someone whom he considers to be a 'prick, with capital P.' He has invited the society press for a tour and introduces Chloe, the actress playing Gal, as the 'new Sylvia Kristel.' He contradicts director Otto whenever he can, to everyone's annoyance. He is mad that he has to wear a cap all the time, to which Otto responds that he is fed up with the vanity of actors. Gert is displeased with his line 'Is the grass greener over there?' because he thinks it silly to use proverbs in the desert and he refuses to throw two ice creams in the direction of Boy, since it does not 'feel' right to do so. He speaks in disdainful terms about the director, even in a news report on the making of the film. According to him, the director is great at collecting beautiful shots and visual gags, but the script lacks consistent motivation. 'Give an actor a motive and he does everything

for you,' he tells Otto, who retorts: 'You read the script? It is all motive.' Gert: 'But you are not directing, you are just editing, accumulating shots.' Whereas Hitchcock, Gert tells to a journalist, considered his actors as cattle, for Otto an actor seems no more than a prop. Moreover, the 'star' shouts that he wants to have his name removed from the credits when a video compilation of scenes from Buster Keaton 'prove' to him that Otto has committed plagiarism. He does not follow through with his threat, but he decides to deviate from the script single-handedly when a surreal romantic encounter between Boy and Gal is about to take place: 'I am not acting in a Tiroler sex movie,' he says to justify his outburst.

OH BOY! was Seunke's third feature and can be considered as a humorous reworking of some frustrating experiences with both DE SMAAK VAN WATER [THE TASTE OF WATER] (1982) and PERVOLA, SPOREN IN DE SNEEUW [PERVOLA, TRACKS IN THE SNOW] (1985). DE SMAAK VAN WATER seemed to launch a promising career, and won among others the prize for Best First Work at the Venice Film Festival, but the success was slightly overshadowed by a controversy. The film was inspired by György Konrád's novel *A látogató* [*The Case Worker*] (1969), but Seunke claimed he simply had forgotten to mention Konrád's name on the credits. In OH BOY!, the most despicable character in the film is blathering about a theft of ideas. Since Bozz is the one who gets on his high horse regarding presumed plagiarism, the accusations are uttered so hysterically that they become 'all spin and no delivery.' Bozz' inability to distinguish homage from unoriginal mimicry can be taken as a belated riposte by Seunke: the whole controversy at the time was much ado about nothing. Moreover, the portrayal of the obnoxious actor Gert functions as a satiric revenge upon the actor Gerard Thoolen, who played main parts in Seunke's two previous films. In PERVOLA, Thoolen had especially shown himself to be a busybody who got on Seunke's nerves quite regularly. As a clear sign of Thoolen's highhandedness it can be mentioned that he, schooled in theatre, had protested against the choice for Bram van der Vlugt in the role of his brother, because the latter was mainly known for his television work. If Seunke's OH BOY! consists of a chain of brief anecdotes and is short of a true curve in development, as Gerdin Linthorst claims, this is due to Seunke's split aim (568). He not only wanted to pay homage to Buster Keaton, but he wanted to use the form of a comedy to settle a score with his meddlesome leading actor from a previous film.

The critics' response to Seunke's OH BOY! was only lukewarm, for which probably the complexity of the double aim is to blame. SHERLOCK JR. (Buster Keaton, 1924) is such a wonderful comedy, because the two layers are perfectly intermingled. Accused of a theft in 'real life,' a film projectionist dreams himself as a detective onto the big screen and solves the mystery. When he wakes up from his reverie, he is absolved from blame to the joy of the girl with whom

he is in love. Inept at kissing her, he peeps at the film that is still being projected and copies the romanticism on screen. In *OH BOY!* a similar situation ensues, but this time the cumbersome Boy glances at the crew and sees that the producer is play-acting a kiss. When Boy is still hesitant, the producer kisses the director directly on the mouth. Boy does likewise with Gal, but such a mimicry of Buster Keaton is less well integrated than in the case of *SHERLOCK JR.* The homage seems too much embedded in paying Gerard Thoolen his due via highlighting the tense relations between the director and his overbearing 'star.' Ironically, this also proves Gert right, for he said at one point: 'I am irritated at the two layers in this production.' *OH BOY!* tried so hard to be a vicious satire, ridiculing Gert, that it failed to be the apt and light-hearted comedy it also wanted to be.

I bring this critical note into the debate, precisely because I am sympathetic to Seunke's work in general, which regrettably seems to have fallen by the wayside.⁸ But *OH BOY!* also deserves this sympathy, because its ending is exemplary of postmodern irony 'light,' something that will be brought to greater perfection in a film such as Alex van Warmerdam's *OBER*, discussed later in this chapter. At the very end of *OH BOY!* Boy's gas station is totally ruined, and he takes a scooter from under the debris. With Gal at the back he takes a gun, loaded with real bullets, and shoots the lock of the studio door to pieces. The scooter drives into the wide open, while the producer encourages the camera man to do a crane shot. Otto says this is really great for the end credits, but Gert disagrees: 'Stop, is the camera still rolling? What a waste of material.' Gert steps into the shot, facing the director: 'What a nonsense. We will do another take, don't we? Those two will return, right?' But the end credits are already visible over the perplexed Gert.

This final scene shows in a nutshell some aspects of the working of representations. The shot that shows Boy and Gal driving away is an integral part of the film; the reverse shot in which the camera is moving higher and higher is part of the making of the movie. When we then see the scooter ride towards the horizon, it is once again, the movie-within-the-movie, whereas the directions by Otto to the cameraman we hear over the shot is one diegetic level up: the sound belongs to the shooting itself. At the same time, when Gert enters the frame, his status is unclear. He is supposed to react as Bozz, the character he is playing, but he reacts as Gert, flabbergasted because this narrative turn was apparently not included in the script – for Otto still was thinking how to end the movie. Now the finale has been handed him on a silver platter, director Otto wants the camera to stop running, for the intervention of Gert spoils the shot since he is not playing Bozz. For director Seunke, however, the perplexity of Gert finishes off his pique at Thoolen, for whom Gert is more or less a stand-in.

THE BROTHER WITH A MOVIE CAMERA: ZUSJE

240 | In OH BOY!, the camera itself was used as a prop, but this was done to even greater effect in the successful low-budget film ZUSJE [LITTLE SISTER] (Robert Jan Westdijk, 1995). Its reputation as a true landmark film was strengthened after the publication of the study *De broertjes van Zusje* [*The Brothers of Little Sister*]. The beginning of the film says that it is a film by 'Martijn Zuidewind.' This Martijn takes his camera upon his shoulder and we see what he films while he is about to visit his little sister, Daantje. At her place he is clear about his aim from the start: 'I want to record the way you react to me.' Something has happened in the past which has affected Martijn seriously, and though we have some hints, we only get a picture of the events near the end. 'I have to know what I did,' but Daantje is not willing to be of any assistance: 'Why? We're happy like this.' But Martijn is not, and Daantje is the only one who can help him to put an 'end to his misery' which he briefly sums up as: 'loneliness, boarding schools.' Filming her day and night is his way to put her under pressure. The hints we get in the course of Westdijk's film consist of some home-movie-style inserts: the 8mm scenes suggest a close bond between brother and sister, as when they play a mock wedding couple. Most crucial, however, is the fragment that their mother opens the bedroom door with a candle-lit cake for Daantje's ninth birthday and a naked Martijn sneaks out of the bed. As this home movie footage from the past might suggest, Martijn acts contrite, and apparently his mother draws the conclusion that he, as the older one, is to blame. At the end of the film, at the moment of the ultimate revelation, they are re-enacting their childhood. Daantje puts the camera in the corner and in a static shot we see that she was inquisitive about sexual knowledge, asking her older brother about his then girlfriend, Claudia. She takes the initiative, for she wants to know whether they kiss, how they kiss, how he lies on top of her. He is hesitant, but she is persistent: 'I'm the boss. I want to know. It is my birthday.' Though no penetration took place, the intimacy has marred Martijn's existence, for their mother caught them by surprise. Apparently, the re-enactment has been healing for Martijn, for at the end credits we see that all his 'Zusje' tapes are for sale at a flea market.

The innovative gimmick of Westdijk's ZUSJE is that Martijn is filming Daantje relentlessly in order to force her to an exposition of past events. She wants to get him off her back, but he simply will not let go. So the footage we get of Daantje's daily occupations is what Martijn has been shooting with his handheld camera. The sloppy cinematography, including out-of-focus shots and abrupt transitions, therefore is not a nuisance, but makes sense, just as it makes sense that we hardly ever see Martijn, but hear his voice often. The film which in essence is a drama comes across as a comedy because of the broth-

er's cynicism. He can afford to piss off her friends, like Ingeborg or Daantje's lover Ramon, because he is only interested in his sister. A few examples to prove ZUSJE's comic nature: Martijn challenges Ramon to show that he is a cute kisser. In a direct address to the camera, Ramon explains in a boastful manner that kissing is not a technical thing, but it is all a matter of feeling. 'I have big lips, that helps, too.' Upon Martijn's request to show him, Ramon says, in extreme close-up: 'You wet your lips, open your mouth, like this ... and stick out your tongue.' He then wets the camera with his tongue. In another, early scene, we get some random impressions from a party Daantje has organized at her place. At one point, Ingeborg asks Martijn: 'Why don't you rewind your tape?' While he does rewind the tape, we see that Martijn has passed out for some time, and that Ingeborg tells the occasional camera man to 'zoom in on that drunk's head.'

Most crucial, and most funny as well, is how Martijn uses his camera as a tool to drive a wedge between Daantje and Ramon. Secretly he goes up the stairs and sees the lovers doggy-style, with a copy of the *Kama Sutra* in Ramon's hands. As they change positions, Daantje looks straight at the camera, but instead of yelling, she says: 'Ramon, don't stop.' A few moments hereafter, Ramon notices the presence of Martijn and he is frightened out of his wits: 'Jesus Christ. Your brother is a real nutcase.' Martijn makes the situation even worse when he says: 'Do you want to see how she looked at the camera, saying "Ramon, don't stop?"' Ramon is so mad he sends them out of the house, throwing the *Kama Sutra* after them. The pause in the relationship enables Martijn to spy on Ramon. He then proudly presents his 'masterpiece' to Daantje. We see a woman ring at the door, we see Ramon close the curtains. When the woman leaves, there is a shot of Ramon at the balcony, waving. Though Ramon plays presumed innocence, Daantje cannot forgive him for cheating on her. Later, as she watches the raw footage, she sees that the woman was one of the prostitutes, ordered by the neighbour living above Ramon, and that the idea that Daantje's boyfriend was having an affair was merely a result of Martijn's manipulative editing.

Ramon, not knowing about Martijn's role, asks him to record a video message. When Ramon starts to express his emotions, Martijn interrupts him sardonically by saying: 'This is bullshit. Maybe you have to write it down?' Ramon acts according to this advice, but as soon as they start recording, it sounds way too formal, with a line that starts with 'Under the circumstances ...' Ramon crumbles his piece of paper and then gives an improvised speech, full of passion: 'I love you, baby, I am not seeing someone else, you wretched little thing. Please call me, Daan.' He begs Martijn to show the material to her, but we hear the brother only murmur: 'You bet, sucker.' A true bully, Martijn does not show his sister the tape, for that might convince her of Ramon's sincerity, but

gives her the crumbled piece of paper. Her response is: 'What a load of crap is this? "What did I do, Daan, to deserve this cruel fate?"' All Martijn's comic abuses are a result of his manipulative use of the camera – editing, withholding footage, shooting at inappropriate moments – and they are all aimed at one specific goal: to give an unfavourable picture of her friends so that she will confide in him and re-enact the event from 11 years ago. The mission to be accomplished is highly dramatic, for sure, but the means to Martijn's goal are comic, for he knows how to use the film camera itself to both sly and humorous purposes.⁹

PLAY WITH ONTOLOGICAL LEVELS: *HET ECHTE LEVEN* AND *MOCKUMENTARIES*

242 |

The riddle in *ZUSJE* is a matter of psychological motivation: Why is this 'young man with a movie camera' stalking his sister? The answer is suggested near the end in a re-enacted scene. In his fourth feature film, *HET ECHTE LEVEN* [REAL LIFE RE-EDITED], Westdijk offers the viewer a riddle of a different nature: is it possible to determine the status of all the shots?¹⁰ It seems so simple from the start. After the starting credits, which read that it is a 'Martin Zomer' film, we watch a young man, Milan, fall off his bicycle, and see him follow after Simone, who was responsible for the accident. He enters her house and climbs up the stairs. Suddenly, they are kissing and then end up in bed. When she leaves the next morning, she kisses him while he is still asleep, saying, 'Goodbye, stranger.' Upon her return, she is surprised to find him still at her place. From the subsequent conversation, the viewer realizes that they had play-acted the seduction scene. They pretended to be strangers, but Simone and Milan are actually lovers. Milan seems to be an overly sensitive type when he says in an angry tone: 'You cheated on me before my very own eyes. You gave yourself so easily to him. As if it didn't cost you any effort.' Simone replies: 'That's because I knew it was you.' Milan: 'That's not true. I was a complete stranger.' Since Milan concludes that 'everything could be fake' with Simone despite her claim that he is her 'one and only true love,' he starts an experiment: he will be away for a while and leaves her a letter with the assignment for her to 'find someone and fall in love.' He has the idea that only a relationship with another guy can help her to determine what they both mean to each other.

Some 13 minutes into the film, 'Milan' suddenly enters the scene, and says 'beautiful, thanks' and 'cut.' Milan is now Martin, the director of the film. From that moment onwards, the spectator knows he has to be on his guard all the time, for a scene can turn out to be a rehearsal for a scene, an actual film scene, or a slice from 'real life,' e.g., when Simone and Martin spend some time together in-between takes.¹¹ To complicate matters, a scene can also be

a bad take that has to be redone: either because a crew member is visible in a mirror, or when a hired actor has troubles reciting the scripted lines and in the next take is permitted to improvise. The failed takes contribute to the comic charm of *HET ECHTE LEVEN*. The inexperienced actor, Dirk, originally a crew member, is cast to play Simone's love interest as a substitute for the guy who kissed her too passionately during rehearsals, according to Martin ('It is not a porn movie'). Dirk has difficulty in distinguishing the acting performances from 'real life and real emotions.' He is really startled when he wakes up and finds a naked Simone besides him. He starts to excuse himself, thus spoiling the scene. Dirk thereupon reproaches Martin that he is sick to treat his own girlfriend like this, as if she is a prostitute.

When Milan returns in a subsequent scene, Simone tells him that she is fed up with playing games. She chooses 'the honest and authentic' Dirk, who starts behaving like a jealous boyfriend. Then Dirk's wife catches the two lovers by surprise in the bar, but Dirk does not recognize her, for she is only an actress, pretending to be his wife. Because Dirk has started to mix up fiction and 'real life,' Martin takes a more drastic measure: he secretly has Dirk's real children come over. We now get a clapboard which does not mention the title *HET ECHTE LEVEN*, but *SLECHTE LEVER* [bad liver], as if to announce some transition. The actress who played Dirk's wife says, while Dirk is kissing Simone: 'Dirkie boy, do you recognize these two?' His children ask: 'Were you really kissing her?' to which Dirk replies: 'That was just for the film.' After he has taken his children outside, Dirk is mad at Martin for not asking permission to bring the kids to this scene. According to the script, Simone is to break up with Dirk the next day in the bar in the presence of Milan, but Dirk comes over to her work and declares his love to her. This conversation is intercut with (lines from) rehearsal scenes by the actor who was originally cast as her love interest. She abruptly breaks the spell for Dirk, by yelling at him to stop, for it was only a job to act as if she loved him: 'I did it for the film.... We're not a good fit. Don't you see that?' Devastated, Dirk leaves the workplace.

Up till now, it has seemed that Dirk was not very bright to confuse fiction and real life, but from this point onwards, with a few scenes remaining, it becomes increasingly difficult for the viewer to distinguish the primary from the secondary diegesis. We now get an exact repetition from one of the earliest scenes in *HET ECHTE LEVEN* (or perhaps *SLECHTE LEVER* by now), the one in which Milan tells Simone: 'You cheated on me before my very own eyes. You gave yourself so easily to him. As if it didn't cost you any effort,' except that there are a few additional lines. When Simone says, as in the earlier scene 'That's because I knew it was you,' Milan says in dismay: 'Oh, yes, Dirk and I really resemble each other.' At the same time, while the scene runs, Milan switches to Martin, when he gives some directions to his cameraman. When

Milan – or has he become Martin by now? – accuses her, once again, that she is a great faker, she tries to convince him by saying she loves him and kisses him. Then there is a sudden transition to the scene where Dirk leaves Simone's workplace, after she has chucked him. Initially, it seemed as if this was part of the film-in-the-film, because the scene was intercut with rehearsal scenes with the original actor from the past. Apparently, the scene was always already scripted. This time, however, it seems as if Dirk is not leaving the workplace, but the actual set. Simone starts crying and asks Martin to come to her, but the director is too flabbergasted: 'What did you do? I still had some scenes with him.' Simone's facial expression is one of disbelief; she regards Martin's reaction as heartless. Then the preceding scene which had abruptly been interrupted is taken up again.¹² Milan and Simone have been kissing, and then she asks: 'You've got all you need now?' Milan – or is she addressing Martin right now? – does not respond, and she gives the answer herself: 'I think so.' She gives him one more kiss, stands up and walks away from the set, leaving Milan/Martin behind in total confusion.

The ending suggests that Simone is not only done with Milan's weird games (on the secondary diegetic level), but she also accuses filmmaker Martin of being too fond of playing games. It is quite ironic that this very same reproach launched by Simone can also be applied to Westdijk as the actual director of *HET ECHTE LEVEN*. The entire film is set up as a game and invites its viewer to attempt to solve the puzzle, for each and every scene: is it part of the film-within-the-film, the rehearsal, or of 'real life'? Near the end, it gets more difficult to distinguish 'Milan' from Martin. The drawback of this emphasis upon a play with ontological levels is that it, inevitably perhaps, goes at the expense of the (romantic) drama of the film. As a consequence, this film lacks the poignancy of *ZUSJE*, which was a balanced blend of comedy and drama.

HET ECHTE LEVEN also lacks the acuity of the early video shorts made by Lodewijk Crijns, *KUTZOOI [FUCKING SHIT]* (1995) and his graduation project at the Film Academy, *LAP ROUGE* (1997). *KUTZOOI* is a grainy black-and-white video about three young adolescents who meet each morning and then decide on the spot whether they will go to school or not. Frequently, they play truant, and the camera follows them closely, e.g., when they find the porn magazine *Big Mamas* in the bushes or when they are invited into the canalside house of a middle-aged woman and suddenly close the door on the crew, until the moment the woman has had a mysterious fit. In a later scene, the boys ride on a bike with their eyes closed, but one of them, Leto, falls into the dirt among broken glass. The director himself comes to the boy's assistance and asks Hans to stop, but the camera keeps on rolling. Despite the sincere impression of the video, the documentary turned out to be a mockumentary, since all incidents were staged. The spectator of Westdijk's *HET ECHTE LEVEN* knows he

is watching an enigmatic puzzle and has to concentrate to discern the status of the shots. In the case of KUTZOOI, however, the viewer himself might be puzzled: Is this supposed to be real, or is it perhaps fake after all? Since Crijns plays by all the codes of a documentary, the viewer has no clues to decide whether the depiction is fictional. He may be suspicious, the more because Leto loses both arms at a really weird game, but he cannot know, unless extra-textual information is provided. Whereas the effect of HET ECHTE LEVEN is predominantly ludic and playful, the ludic strategy of a mockumentary can sharpen the viewer's critical attitude: do not take for granted what you see.

Crijns' like-minded LAP ROUGE is about two bearded, middle-aged, native Dutch brothers who live with their elderly and dominant mother in a deserted village in France. Like KUTZOOI, it is a bit strange perhaps, but it could have been a real documentary, for as the saying goes, sometimes the truth is stranger than fiction. The title of his first video, KUTZOOI, has a deliberate ick factor. The term is used by the boys themselves to characterize their school, and it explains their reason for playing truant. Hence, the rancid title is a quote by the teenagers without the use of quotation marks. This is known as free indirect discourse, when a narrator's text is cross-cut with the specific wording of a character. This device increases an impression of 'authenticity,' for the film's title suggests that the makers have conformed themselves to the vision of the three boys. The title KUTZOOI helps to set a trap for the spectator. Similarly, the title LAP ROUGE is another instance of free indirect discourse, for it is a corruption of a saying expressed by one of the brothers. Talking about his mother, he wants to say that 'she is like a red rag to a bull,' but he erroneously mixes the Dutch word *lap* [rag] and the French word *rouge* [red]. Moreover, his slip of the tongue gives the illusion of spontaneity, as if their depicted lives are for real. Hence, the titles of his video shorts are deceptive signposts, leading the viewer astray.

| 245

Several other films by Crijns have titles that are replete with irony. He made a film about male teenagers who suffer from cancer, but the Dutch title of this picture KANKERLIJERS [SICKOS] (2014) not only literally means 'cancer sufferers,' but also connotes a strong insult, comparable to 'motherfuckers.' For the boys, the term 'kankerlijers' is embraced as a streak of black humour, for they like to cause uproar in the hospital and behave like pains in the ass. At least as ironic is the title of his first TV movie MET GROTE BLIJDSCHAP [WITH GREAT JOY] (2001), an expression one uses, among others, to announce the news of a childbirth. In Crijns' film, it turns out that a man and wife have hidden their severely mentally disabled son in a dark, isolated room adjacent to their remote house. Instead of making news about the birth public, they have withheld all information about the kid, even to their family. Considering that Crijns had started his career with two mockumentaries, it almost goes without

saying that he had wanted to work with an actual mentally challenged boy in the role of the hidden son. Since one usually works with actors in such parts – Dustin Hoffman in *RAIN MAN* (Barry Levinson, 1988), Leonardo DiCaprio in *WHAT'S EATING GILBERT GRAPE* (Lasse Hallstrom, 1993) – it would have been another option for Crijns to go against the grain. For the sole reason that practical obstacles could not be overcome, he cast a 'normal' boy for the part after all, but the performance is so utterly convincing that many a viewer kept believing that the (totally unknown) actor must be severely disabled, indeed.¹³

BAUDELAIRE'S IRONIC DOUBLING: *RENT A FRIEND*

246 |

In Terstall's underrated and dryly comic *RENT A FRIEND* (2000), there is no overstepping of ontological boundaries in the strict sense, but the world of fiction is used to mirror the relationship between protagonist Alfred and Moniek. Alfred is a failed painter who hardly sells any work, while Moniek provides the income ever since she started as a copywriter at the soap factory of Wiert Fokker. With this background information, the opening scene makes sense. We see an episode from the soap *Het kan vriezen, het kan dooien* [*Rain or Shine*], and when the character Roy says 'Damn it,' Alfred, who is watching television, asks 'Damn it?' Moniek responds: 'That is "soap speak." "Damn it" is one of the recommended expletives.' Then Alfred asks: 'And why am I played by a black actor?' Moniek: 'Every soap needs a racial mix. And we felt that this character's colour was not so important so we gave him a colour.' Or when the soap character Roy says: 'I hate people who flash their wallet around,' Alfred comments that he has never said that, to which Moniek replies in turn: 'Soap characters are always direct.'

When in another episode Roy says that he suspects his girlfriend, Myrthe, of having an affair with her boss, and we actually see her kiss this man who prides himself on his 'sea legs,' Alfred becomes convinced of Moniek's adultery in real life. Thus, Alfred packs his suitcase and starts living at his sister's place.¹⁴ Despite Moniek's claim during her first encounter with Alfred that 'money is unimportant,' he thinks that she has fallen for her boss because the latter likes to show off his great wealth. According to Alfred, anyone with a brain can get rich, so he starts his own business – 'Rent a Friend.'¹⁵ This business turns out to fill a gap in the market and becomes hugely profitable. He is hired by a great variety of people, and many of the visits he has to pay to them are very amusing. He sits next to a lonely man on a bench in public, who tells he is often made fun of because he is too fat. 'But when you're with a friend, people don't laugh. And even if they do, it doesn't matter, because you're not alone.' He is also rented by a Dutchman to watch the German soccer team play

a match. Since the man knows no one with whom he can celebrate a German victory, the only assignment Alfred has to fulfil is to shout ‘*Tor, Tor, Tor!*’ out loud when the team scores a goal. A husband and wife pay him to visit them, for they quarrel all the time, except when they have a guest. His presence, they tell him, saves them a lot of broken china.

Because of the success, ‘Rent a Friend’ has to hire new employees and he has to screen them during job interviews. A girl named Françoise who describes herself as opportunistic and ruthless becomes his business manager and introduces new categories like ‘vague acquaintances,’ ‘good friends’ and ‘close friends.’ So, while his business is booming, Alfred sees on the television that Myrthe, who is modelled after Moniek, is celebrating the holidays with her new lover, but she also catches him in the act while he is cheating on her. Alfred knows about this affair, because since he is living at his sister’s place, his sister shows him a taped episode from *Het kan vriezen, het kan dooien*. He then is rented by Moniek, but he sticks to the house rule of his own firm that sex with clients is not permitted. We then get a transition to the soap, in which Myrthe has an encounter with Roy, Alfred’s stand-in: ‘I want to come back to you. Shall we go to Mexico and give it another try?’ Alfred’s sister switches off the television, saying, ‘I already know the answer.’ In the final scene we see Alfred having good times with Françoise, who is fascinated by Japanese culture.

| 247

The hugely enjoyable RENT A FRIEND presents the world of soap as almost a one-to-one pattern card for real-life characters; almost, because so-called ‘soap talk’ slightly differs from everyday expressions and a soap, as Alfred says at one point to the actress who plays Myrthe, offers ‘emotions in bite-sized chunks.’ In creating some parallel between the soap and real life, RENT A FRIEND comically suggests that modern-day life lacks psychological depth and ‘authentic’ emotions. No wonder then that people are in need of ‘friendship,’ and are so desperate to rent a friend: the married couple which is having a fight all the time, except when a guest is around, is the caricatural epitome of this despair. This does not yet mean that Terstall’s film is desperate, on the contrary, for the film’s tone is mild overall, thanks to Alfred’s detached attitude and his deadpan comments. To add irony to this mildness, Alfred’s dry comic remarks are so flatly spoken that they come to resemble the non-expressive manner of speaking of the soap character Roy, who functions as his stand-in. In the case of Roy, this flatness is due to both tight shooting schedules and a lack of talent that soap characters tend to suffer from. By contrast, in the case of Alfred, his deadpan tone seems to result from a desire to keep aloof. It looks as if his position coincides with the characters in what Jeffrey Sconce called the tendency of the ‘new American “smart” cinema,’ like *SAFE* (Todd Haynes, 1995), *ELECTION* (Alexander Payne, 1999), *HAPPINESS* (Todd Solondz, 1999), *BEING JOHN MALKOVICH* (Spike Jonze, 1999) or *THE ROYAL TENENBAUMS*

(Wes Anderson, 2001). Characters in these films adopt an attitude of ironic detachment, not out of disinterest or general apathy, but because they simply do not know what (political) position to take. These films (the ones by Haynes and Solondz are the clearest examples) are marked by a 'blank style,' for they frequently use 'long-shots, static composition and sparse cutting' (Sconce 'Irony,' 359). In smart cinema, the spectator clinically observes a phenomenon and there are no *a priori* moral judgements. To politically engaged critics, this is sometimes taken as a form of nihilism, but Sconce claims that it is a refusal to identify with prefabricated positions; it is a 'strategic disengagement from a certain terrain of belief, politics and commitment' (369).

RENT A FRIEND can be said to endorse the 'blank style' of this smart cinema, marked by seemingly dispassionate framing and static tableaux. In fact, Alfred's current painting style, his 'Mexican period,' is symptomatic of this film mode of 'clinical observation.' He usually paints Mexicans from high above so that we only see the top of their sombreros.¹⁶ No one buys these paintings, but he will sell the picture half price to the person who can guess what the image represents. He adds in voice-over that so far no one has come close.¹⁷ One of the canvases depicts four sombreros against a colourful background and an object between them. To his sister, Alfred explains that they are Mexicans playing poker and the object is a bottle of tequila. 'Where are the cards?' his sister asks. Pointing at one sombrero, Alfred explains: 'He's shuffling them,' and therefore the cards are invisible, hidden underneath the sombrero. Usually, a poker game is based upon psychology, since reading the faces of one's opponents can help one to make an educated guess as to what cards they hold in their hands. Alfred's painting, however, is an absurd representation of a poker game, devoid of all psychology. This painting can be seen as a synecdoche of the film's refusal to psychologize: we never get a clear notion of what goes on in Alfred's mind. He packs his suitcases and leaves, without making a scene. The emotional range of his soap alter ego seems greater, for Roy at least asks Myrthe: 'What does that show-off have that I do not have, Myrthe?' When Alfred sets up his business, it is not because of a burning ambition to be successful. He just wants to test his claim that making money is easy. In fact, Alfred is fit for the job as a 'friend,' because his work requires him to set aside all emotions. In one scene, he is even hired to play the third man, the fall guy. Says the man who ordered both Alfred and one of his colleagues: 'When I go out with my two best friends, one always is the fall guy, two always pick on the third. And the third is always me. I want to be one of the other two for a change.' So while the other two 'friends' are fishing, third man Alfred is bombarded with denigrating commands: 'Hey four eyes! Hurry up with those worms. We've almost run out. How are we supposed to catch fish?' Or: 'The worms were scared stiff when they saw your ugly face.'

Alfred is the better fit for a job as a 'friend' as he is a psychologically 'blank' character. The required malleability shows in the scene when someone who has hired him, asks Alfred: 'Can I even call you Bram?' Alfred: 'Sure, whatever you like.' Man: 'That's a good name for a friend – Bram. Got a friendly ring to it.' Alfred: 'Yes, my name is Abraham. But Bram for friends.' And thus, Alfred comes across as an emotionally 'empty' character who talks (almost) as flat as the soap characters. Because he is a character, lacking any personality and ambition (in the opinion of scriptwriter Moniek), he might as well be played by a black actor. Nonetheless, Alfred differs from his soap stand-in Roy in a crucial respect. He is capable of taking an ironic distance from situations and of making deadpan comments, even when they are at his own cost. Commenting upon the choice for a black guy as his stand-in, Alfred says: 'Well, idiots come in all colours.' Similarly, when Françoise asks him why he broke up with Moniek, he refers to what he has seen on television: 'She met someone with sea legs.' The implication of this answer is: Like me, Roy is such a loser that he apparently has no compensation to offer for the fact that another man has the trivial quality of sailing on a boat.

| 249

Alfred is all too aware that by poking fun at the pathetic Roy, represented as his double, he is actually committing self-mockery. By watching his alter ego in the soap series, he observes himself, to paraphrase Charles Baudelaire in his essay 'De l'essence du rire' ['On the Essence of Laughter'], 'with the detachment of a disinterested spectator' (qtd. in Lang, 51). In this essay, Baudelaire complicates the so-called superiority theory, discussed in the Introduction. According to this theory, laughter is an expression of one's feeling of preponderance over another person – 'a satanic idea if ever there was one!' according to Baudelaire (145-46). When I see someone fall in a clumsy way, the standard example goes, I start laughing, because he is the bungler, not me. This kind of laughter, Baudelaire claims, refers to a pure and childlike joy, and is unaware of itself, resembling the 'happy tail-wagging of a dog' (Hannoosh, 39). It signals a weakness, for as he asks himself: 'Is there anything more deplorable than weakness delighting in weakness?'¹⁸ (qtd. in Hannoosh, 29). As a supplement to the superiority stance, Baudelaire introduces the ability to laugh at oneself. The reflexive type, which I use as a more common denominator for Baudelaire's specific mentions of the poet-philosopher and the comic artist, understands that it is not someone else who is falling, but that he himself is susceptible to falling as well. The misfortune of another is coupled with knowledge of one's own vulnerability, or rather, one's potential inferiority. This self-consciousness can be considered as an ironic doubling, or *dédoublement*: he who falls could be me.¹⁹ It is crucial for Baudelaire that one does not flaunt this knowledge, but that one pretends ignorance, for one's silliness makes others laugh: the essence of the comic, Michele Hannoosh surmises,

resides in 'the power to step back from oneself and survey the phenomena of the self, the power to be at once oneself and another' (Hannoosh, 70), for only on that condition laughter as a sign of pride, out of superiority over others, is matched by laughter as a sign of one's own imperfection and/or misery.

In the case of Alfred, his confrontation with Roy as his screen persona enables him to 'step back' from himself, which may explain why many of Alfred's remarks have a self-deprecatory ring to them. One remark is particularly self-ironic, and even though it does not directly concern Roy, its irony is a consequence of the mirroring function the soap has on Alfred. On one occasion, Alfred walks out on a client because he is uttering ethnic insults, which in fact is the one and only moment where he is more than just a blank character. Françoise justifies his act, because as she says: 'Ethical business principles are important.' Alfred: 'There goes my unblemished record. And for an idiot like that.' Françoise: 'You can't be everyone's friend.' Alfred: 'But I'm a perfectionist. May be we should have a new range of "dodgy friends."' Alfred's claim that he is a perfectionist is ironic for two reasons. First, the whole business was for him only a side issue. His true passion is making paintings, even when no one wants to buy them. 'Making stupid paintings, that's difficult!' Moniek at one point complains ironically, to which Alfred dryly responds: 'Not for me. I make lots of them.' Second, businesswise it is smart to be everyone's friend if your business happens to be 'Rent a Friend,' but in general, it is considered as an indication of a strong personality to be selective in choosing one's friends. Alfred's claim at perfectionism is here ironically converted into an admission of weakness: I have the talent of being everyone's friend (almost), precisely because I am a spineless figure.

250 |

A METAFICTIONAL JOKE PLAYED ON A SERIOUS MAN: *OBER*

RENT A FRIEND is the most 'Alex van Warmerdam' film Terstall has made to date. This picture, his sixth feature, was the first film Terstall shot on Super 35 CinemaScope instead of Super 16mm thanks to a bigger budget. This enabled him among others to practice a 'blank style' with carefully framed compositions, also a trademark of Van Warmerdam. Moreover, the excessively down to earth attitude of Alfred recalls the sobriety of several Van Warmerdam characters. Further, many of them are 'split' into a different person as well, albeit differently than Alfred. The protagonist in RENT A FRIEND sees himself 'split' because of his (ex-)girlfriend's script, but in the case of Van Warmerdam, characters either choose to play another role – the farmer and his wife in *KLEINE TEUN* [*LITTLE TONY*] (1998) decide to introduce themselves as brother and sister out of strategic reasons – or they are themselves condemned to role-play-

ing, puppets in the hands of a screenwriter, as happens to the waiters Edgar and Walter in OBER [WAITER] (2006).

The two men in OBER are working in a restaurant, which is not very successful. In the beginning of the film, Walter is not feeling well, but since most seats are vacant, Edgar can serve the customers all by himself. One of them is his mistress, Victoria, who is hoping for some nice conversation, but Edgar treats her coldly, pretending he has no time for cheerfulness. When she whispers in his ear that she is very horny, he looks up and asks with a blank expression on his face: 'Salad?' In a later scene we understand why Edgar has a mistress, for he has an ill and bedridden wife at home, whom he treats brutally: he deliberately turns up the volume of the music so loud that her bed starts shaking. When we see in a subsequent scene that Edgar is having sex with Victoria, trying different positions, we suddenly get a scene with the scriptwriter Herman, complaining to his girlfriend Suzie about the unoriginality of the scene we have just witnessed: 'Always the sex. No need to show that,' until he has the brainwave to turn it into role-playing. The scene then continues with Edgar, dressed as a hunter, followed by four bare-chested blacks with spears, chasing after Victoria. When Edgar finds her in the shower, Herman is satisfied with the scene, but Suzie is not, for she wants to see what comes after. Herman does not give it, explaining it will become a cheap effect, if he were to turn this into an 'orgy with four Negroes.'

| 251

With the introduction of Herman, the status of scenes has shifted. Edgar is not a character in the primary diegesis, but in an embedded one, for he is written by Herman. At the same time, the scene in which we saw him perform sexually with Victoria is apparently deleted in favour of the scene with Edgar dressed as a hunter. Things take another turn, when Suzie sits behind the computer, while Herman is taking a bath. She writes that Edgar drags his wife out of bed and makes her confess that she is having an affair with her doctor. When Herman returns, he is mad and we actually see him delete the text Suzie has written: 'It is bullshit, for Edgar cannot know his wife is having an affair.' Hence, the scenes with Edgar are either fragments from a script or instantly deleted scenes.

So far, so good, but this scheme is further complicated after Edgar has been bullied by three male guests in the restaurant. His taking of their order was not enthusiastic enough according to them, and while using violence, they make him say that he sincerely recommends the deliciously soft German sausage. It is a true stroke of genius that this scene is followed by Edgar entering Herman's apartment, complaining that he has not been given a proper retort. Herman is flabbergasted with the entrance of the 'fictive' Edgar who also wants to know what the function of his 'chronically ill' wife is, for 'she ruins my life.' Herman: 'That is exactly the idea.' Edgar: 'But she also ruins

your story. A sick wife is boring.’ Suzie’s revelation that Edgar’s wife has had an affair with the doctor, elicits from Edgar such negativity – ‘that filthy bitch’ – that Herman immediately says that the secret affair will be deleted. It turns out that the writer has no clue where his story is heading towards, except that Edgar has to suffer: ‘You have to be exasperated.’ Edgar continues negotiations by asking whether in exchange for all the punishment that will befall him he wants to get rid of his present mistress and start an affair with a new girlfriend, ‘a brief moment of happiness.’ Herman is prepared to give him one, temporarily, on the condition that he will no longer bother him. Edgar will violate this condition, for he madly bangs at the writer’s bedroom door after the brutal guests have returned and the only reply he was given was a ‘lousy term of abuse’ – namely, asshole. Thereupon he was beaten up and thrown into an aquarium. Herman, woken up in the middle of the night, then explains to him that he is a modern character without purpose, to which the distressed Edgar replies: ‘A modern character, that is totally outdated.’

OBER explores the overstepping of diegetic boundaries by on the one hand having Edgar say scripted lines in his role as waiter. The things Herman writes on his computer are immediately visualized for us. When Edgar says ‘eeeeeeee’ for some time, this is a consequence of the fact that the writer had fallen asleep on the keyboard. Keeping in mind that Edgar has no text of his own, it is ironic that his former mistress tells him she wanted a friend who says something original now and then. On the other hand, there is the ‘independent’ Edgar engaged in a dispute with his spiritual father about the (lack of) ambitions of the main protagonist, the waiter Edgar. Humour resides in the writer’s helplessness in the presence of Edgar and of other characters who also come to visit him. As soon as they leave his place, he can regain control, although to a limited extent. Since he lacks the creativity to offer Edgar an escape route, Suzie prompts solutions. When he then blames her for the out-of-control screenplay, she decides to leave him, but not after she has inserted some terrible events as a sort of revenge upon Herman.

The major achievement of Van Warmerdam’s cinema – and he shares this quality with someone like the Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki – is that the more deplorable the fate of the character, the more hilarious it gets. Near the end of OBER, after another of Edgar’s complaints, Herman promises him salvation and a happy ending back in the arms of his girlfriend Stella. And indeed, she shows up in the restaurant, but when he runs after her, Edgar is suddenly run over by a truck. This accident is cruel, but also hilarious, since it is an actualization of one of the writer’s earlier threats: ‘If you come to my place once more, I will have you run over by a truck.’ Hence, the writer’s promise of salvation was only a pretext to get Edgar out of his apartment, but he was already keen on revenge. Moreover, during his last visit, Edgar accused Her-

man of flaccid, sloppy script writing. Having his protagonist killed all of a sudden in fact proves Edgar's point. Indeed, Herman is a third-rate screenwriter, but also, it is an instance of irony that Edgar becomes the victim of his own accusation about the screenwriter's poor talent: you think I am a lousy writer, well, I will show you by having you killed. When thereupon minor characters like a Japanese gangster and Stella also pay Herman a visit, the bloody limit has been reached for the writer. He quickly types 'The End,' so that the last of the visitors dissolves into thin air. The final image is a long shot of the writer, all alone, staring at his computer screen.

In an article on cosmic irony in the cinema of the Coen brothers, Svetlana Rukhman argues that several of its protagonists 'arrogantly attempt to "play god," scheming against the other characters' but because the scheme 'invariably goes awry,' we can take delight in 'wickedly laughing at the schemer's ironic downfall' (103). She uses *A SERIOUS MAN* (2009) as an example of the wicked game played by the Coen brothers. Larry Gopnik regards himself as a righteous man, who starts to wonder why he is suddenly beset by a string of terrible events. According to Ethan Coen, the 'fun of the story for us was inventing new ways to torture Larry. His life just progressively gets worse' (qtd. in Rukhman, 106). Despite Larry's belief that he will be given an explanation, thinking that he is entitled to one, because he is 'a serious man,' he receives no response at all. Rukhman argues that the Coen brothers are enacting in *A SERIOUS MAN*, the ultimate malicious cosmic joke by masterminding Larry's downfall, purely for their own aesthetic sport and 'plainly announcing this fact to their audience' (110). While Larry presupposes that he is being toyed with by the Jewish God and 'seeks a genuine theological explanation for his suffering' (Gallagher 'Introduction,' 8), the film explores the metafictional role of the filmmakers as deity, for it is they, who are toying with Larry with sadistic glee.

In *OBER*, screenwriter Herman is the spiritual father of Edgar, and of Walter, Stella, and several others. He is in a godlike position, but at the same time he is bombarded with questions, not only by his own characters, also by his girlfriend, Suzie: What are you up to with the script? Edgar, in particular, wants to know what is the purpose of the story, that is, what is the meaning of his life? Herman is unable to come up with answers, except that he tells Edgar: You have to suffer first, redemption will be later. Like in *A SERIOUS MAN*, the promise will not be fulfilled. In the film by the Coen brothers this is due to the fact that they themselves play the protagonist a cruel joke; in Van Warmerdam's film, the writer punishes the protagonists for his accusatory interventions by not giving him redemption, but an instant death. This punishment also backfires, for in using his power as a 'deity' to kill his annoying 'darlings' at will, Herman is bereft of all his characters, while no proper solution has

been reached. At ‘the end,’ everyone has gone, including his own girlfriend Suzie. Initially, Herman plays a cosmic joke on his characters: ‘You want to know about the purpose of your life? First you will be subjected to misfortunes before anything can come of it.’ In the end, however, by getting rid of everyone who starts complaining at his door, he is left with a script that seems to lack coherence and meaning. Zooming out, as we see Herman all alone in the apartment in a long shot, the viewer can now wickedly laugh at the scriptwriter’s own ironic downfall. Like Edgar and the others are toyed with by Herman, the scriptwriter in turn is toyed with by the external narrator of OBER.²⁰

A ROM-COM WITH PETER PAN: AANMODDERFAKKER

254 |

As a reverence to Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*, this chapter on the ludic was meant to suggest on the basis of various examples that playful humour can also have a serious edge: the enjoyment of one’s holiday is not without stress and minor nuisances (CAMPING); the visual nature of the humour in the films by Stelling has to be taken as a most welcome antidote to a Calvinist tradition in the Netherlands; via the figure of the annoying smart aleck Gert, Seunke tried to settle the score with an actor he himself had worked with on two previous films (OH BOY!); and all the other films indicated that images can be deceptive and therefore require scrutinizing attention.

Another concern, perhaps even an overriding one, was to examine a number of films which court confusion between primary and secondary worlds. Remember that in the vulgar comedy FILMPJE!, discussed in chapter 1, there was a scene in which the rude character Bob interrupted the progress of the story to comment upon the incoherence of the plot. In a rare moment of self-awareness, he called it a ‘really weird movie,’ but this moment might also be qualified as an admission of weakness: the script of this film is such a mess that it is better not to wait for the critics to say so. The films under scrutiny here are arguably more subtle than this and the order in which they are presented in this chapter lays bare an ever-tightening loop between levels. Seunke’s OH BOY! is a ludic film about the shooting of a film, in which primary and secondary diegetic levels are to be distinguished, except for the last shot: Pim’s departure with Chloe from the set is also turned into the ending of the film-within-the-film. ZUSJE was about the use of a camera to intrude upon someone else’s life in an unscrupulous attempt to clarify muddled affairs from the cameraman’s past. The re-enactment scene at the end, in which the brother no longer holds the camera but is in front of the apparatus, belies the 8mm home-movie footage that has been inserted throughout ZUSJE and which has clouded the brother’s life. In retrospect, the fragmented footage is revealed

to lead to a biased interpretation of events. *HET ECHTE LEVEN* employed the postmodernist device of misleading its spectator in presenting an embedded, secondary world as the primary, diegetic world. In postmodernist texts, as McHale claims, such deliberate ‘mystification’ is frequently followed by ‘demystification,’ in which the true ontological status of the supposed ‘reality’ is revealed (116), but at the end of *HET ECHTE LEVEN*, which is constructed like a puzzle, the viewer is left to doubt the exact status of shots which are a near repetition of earlier shots in the film. In the case of Crijns’ early films, the status of the ‘documentaries’ as such is unclear: *KUTZOOI* and *LAP ROUGE* trigger the viewer to search for clues whether the images are truthful or staged.

In *RENT A FRIEND* it is very clear how to distinguish the world of the soap from the ‘real’ world, although Alfred speaks almost as blandly as the soap character Roy, but this film owes its subtlety to the protagonist’s self-mockery. Alfred is a character who stands at a distance from situations and his Mexican ‘landscape’ paintings are the ultimate proof of this: the perspective is so distant that we only see the huge sombreros from above. Since he watches the soap featuring his stand-in Roy, he himself also becomes the object of his deadpan irony, recalling Baudelaire’s complication of the superiority theory: in laughing I also become the one who is being laughed at. The uncrowned master of this deadpan irony in Dutch cinema is Van Warmerdam, whom I will also discuss in the next chapter.

| 255

His *OBER* abounds in supreme ironies thanks to the ongoing breaching of ontological boundaries. At the primary level, there is a scriptwriter who has no clue where his screenplay is heading towards. His excuse for the lack of structure and direction is that Edgar is a ‘modern character without purpose.’ In the embedded world, Edgar can only perform poor lines, and he gives vent to this frustration when he visits the scriptwriter, not in the guise of an actor playing Edgar, but as the character Edgar. Since he has to depend upon the whims of the scriptwriter, he requests better lines, suggests deletions as well as more creative twists, and offers meta-commentary. As a result of his efforts, Edgar is, in the secondary world, overrun by a truck, since the scriptwriter was fed up with his interventions. To add irony to this malicious joke, the screenplay lacks all that the characters were begging for (substance, coherence, meaning). This lack is visualized in the final shot of the solitary Herman, a shot which ironically summarizes that he is inept as a scriptwriter.

The irony in the cinema of Van Warmerdam – but also in *RENT A FRIEND* and *DE WISSELWACHTER* – works so well, because of a deadpan approach, which is totally at odds with many films from earlier chapters: in the majority of comedies the neurotic behaviour of characters is underscored by frenetic camera movements, hectic music on the soundtrack, exuberant colours and/or emotional outbursts, from laughter to sobbing. By contrast, the films by

Stelling, Terstall and Van Warmerdam refrain from using any comic markers, and since the characters themselves do not laugh, it is really up to the spectator whether he finds the situation hilarious or not. There is no better example in the oeuvre of Van Warmerdam than the scene in which Edgar – suggested by Suzie to Herman – walks into an obscure alley and passes a shop window, which displays a bow and arrow. Upon his entrance an old woman with a head scarf and a bent back very slowly descends the stairs. The buying of the bow and arrow will last five and a half minutes of screen time, during which the woman – a magnificent role by the male actor René van 't Hof – does not utter a word. It takes that long, because her movements are very protracted. The woman takes the objects out of the shop window and starts to pack the arrow. She has to search for a pair of scissors, she cannot find the beginning of the adhesive tape, she accidentally tears a part of the wrapping paper, and the pair of scissors remains stuck between her fingers. When she is about to wrap the bow, Edgar decides he had better not wait any longer and takes it unpacked, out into the street, for everyone to see. Packing the arrow, which has the air of slapstick, was so slow-paced that it could cause irritation among viewers if not for the perfect timing by the actor. As such, the scene is not funny, but it can elicit laughter from the audience, precisely because the woman patiently continues her 'duty' in such an incredibly slow pace. The duration of the action turns it into a comic scene, at least for the viewer who has affinity with such deadpan humour.

Released in early November 2014, Michiel ten Horn's second feature AANMODDERFAKKER [HOW TO AVOID EVERYTHING] proves to be a perfect elaboration of the deadpan style of the last couple of films discussed in this chapter.²¹ Its title even goes beyond a Crijns' title, 'Aanmodderfakker' being a pun that is as cheesy as smart. 'Modderfakker' can be taken as a literal transcription of a Dutchman pronouncing 'motherfucker' poorly. 'Modder' sounds like 'mother' (which is 'moeder' in Dutch), but actually means 'mud.' More crucial is the additional prefix 'aan,' for 'aanmodderen' is a verb one uses to say that someone is just muddling through. In the end that is just what the main protagonist Thijs, a 32-year-old slacker, is doing, although an active verb like 'doing' is probably too big a term, for Thijs is, in the vein of Alfred from RENT A FRIEND, an emblem of passivity, time and again avoiding doing something substantial. At one point in the film, he is reading a bedtime story to a child, and the few lines about Wendy and Peter suffice to make us realize that it is from J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. This can be taken as a clue to associate Thijs with the so-called 'Peter Pan syndrome,' a pop-psychology term to refer to a (male) adult who has remained an eternal boy and is socially immature.²² Thijs spends some occasional shifts at the information stand in an electronics store, but at no point do we see him helping a costumer, whereas the smoke breaks with col-

league Tommy are frequent.²³ To a young employee who passes by, he says, in the company of both Tommy and Dirk, the latter a hippie-styled guy who is reading a novel all the time: 'I understand you are new here, but could you please move a bit less? It gets on our nerves.' He eats some vitamin-rich food because his meddlesome mother has given him some leftovers in Tupperware containers.²⁴ Time and again, she requests, apparently hoping to keep the contact going, whether he will bring them back. He never does, of course, until the moment that he is so fed up with his mother that he throws his entire collection of containers on the floor in the living of the parental home. One of the running gags is that he spills beverage on the keyboard of his computer. After cleaning the keyboard he hangs it on a clothesline. For his regular laundry, however, he visits his sister's place, where he meets one evening the 16-year-old babysitter Lisa, the half-sister of his brother-in-law.

Since Thijs has made laziness into an 'art' and refuses to take any initiative, he cannot change, as Mariska Graveland wrote in her review of Ten Horn's film, thanks to an inner urge, but only because someone else makes him act – much like Alfred came up with the idea to rent himself as a friend as a reaction to his girlfriend's adultery (and also much like the two friends in *SHAUN OF THE DEAD* (Edgar Wright, 2004), who turn their moribund lives around with the arrival of the zombies). In *AANMODDERFAKKER*, it is Lisa, precocious for her age, who pulls Thijs out of his purposeless existence. She wants to have high grades at her secondary school in the hope of being accepted to Oxford University and she is also concerned about environmental issues. From the moment of the encounter between these two opposites, Ten Horn's film is clearly modelled after a typical romantic comedy – of the kind of *NOTTING HILL* (Roger Michell, 1999) – except that Thijs is too 'fearful' (Lisa's reproach) to really engage himself. Thus, he has the very same excuse for being late every time – a problem with his bicycle chain – and when she really says that she loves him, he insults her by saying that she is too childish. When he is about to walk out on her, he meets Lisa's much older half-brother, who gives him a good punch on the eye. The one time Thijs is on time, to his mother's performance in a church choir, he realizes he has to run for love after all, but Lisa is already about to take the plane for a stay abroad. Since she is on her way to the gate, they only have a brief form of communication, separated by a glass wall, with Lisa writing some text, and drawing a picture of a sea turtle to indicate that she is going to help this species.

Even though *AANMODDERFAKKER* takes the guise of a romantic comedy qua structure, including the ups and downs in the encounters between prospective lovers, the film never really becomes one because Thijs is too cynical to believe in love. A passion for Lisa only awakens when it is already too late, but while he rushes after her, he also remarks: 'What a fucking cliché,' as if

he is fully aware that, because he runs for his love, he is trapped, as a fictional character, in a romantic comedy, much like many characters in this chapter have been struggling with ontological boundaries. The curious case of AANMODDERFAKKER is that all the ingredients of a romantic comedy are there, but the inactivity of the protagonist works against it. On the one hand, Thijs' passivity is underscored by carefully composed long-take shot compositions, a stylistic characteristic AANMODDERFAKKER shares with RENT A FRIEND and the work of Van Warmerdam (as well as with the 'quirky' films of Wes Anderson and Todd Solondz). The art direction in Ten Horn's film is excellent and often we can detect striking and funny details in the background: Dirk moving on a Segway through the store, still reading his book; during a film party, one character is disguised as Chewbacca from STAR WARS, but because he is reading a book, we know that it must be Dirk; adults jumping in an idiosyncratic style on a trampoline during a party in a garden; an employee replacing the sign 'comedy and romance' in the DVD section for 'drama,' just when Thijs' brother-in-law comes to tell about his marital problems; often such details are conspicuously absent as well, for Thijs, who occasionally says he is 'too busy' and has 'things on his mind,' is regularly shown in the right part of the frame, with the left part significantly blank, no more than just an empty wall.

On the other hand, the camera is hardly very static, as if its role is like Lisa's attempt to change Thijs' sleepwalking existence. The camera is particularly mobile when Thijs is most passive: lying in bed the camera slowly circles in overhead shots around him; when Thijs' roommate has announced his departure, Thijs is passive, while the camera tracks backwards in the direction of the living room, where his mother is already waiting, as if to encourage him to face her. When the camera pans to the left with Thijs, he suddenly goes to the right when he sees Uncle Dick, and the camera then follows this uncle who catches up with Thijs to tell him a cheap pun about his nephew who had gone to India to visit the 'Touch my Hole' (Taj Mahal). On a few occasions, the camera has already moved a bit advance of Thijs, who then enters the frame from an off-screen position, e.g., in the scene when the camera tries to locate the mice on the basis of the sounds they make. Moreover, AANMODDERFAKKER has some quirky sequences, when the stop-motion technique is used to make characters, including Thijs, to move fast, and there is a quick succession of overhead shots in which Thijs gets angry at losing games against children (chess, draughts), while a number of significant objects fly across the screen, like toy dinosaurs, Lego bricks, Jew's harps, mousetraps. In addition to the fact that Thijs realizes being caught in a clichéd romantic comedy, such ludic sequences emphasize the fictional nature of AANMODDERFAKKER.²⁵

Thijs, like Alfred, can be considered, in the words of Herman, the script-writer in OBER, as a 'modern character' without a clear aim. Nonetheless, he

– and Alfred as well – awaits a relatively good fate: Thijs’ new roommate keeps the place tidy; Thijs is listening to an audio version of Allen Carr’s *Easy Way to Stop Smoking*; and he has his own washing machine. In the very final shot, the camera zooms in on the rotating machine, while Thijs’ face becomes gradually visible in its glass door. This visibility may still be a token of his narcissism, for people do not change overnight, but at least there are clues that Thijs has made a start to break out of his cyclical life pattern.²⁶ At the same time, there is reason to doubt the optimism of the ending, for the tracking zoom shot on the washing machine, which seems to rotate every second faster and faster, suggests that impending doom is at hand, but before anything bad can happen, the end credits set in. Therefore, in AANMODDERFAKKER, the comic tone can still be said to preside over the tragic part. By contrast, Edgar in OBER, who constantly rebelled against the aimlessness imposed on him by Herman, meets a tragic death as if to emphasize that the struggle between scriptwriter and character is unequal by definition because they belong to different ontological levels. Accusing Herman of flaccid screenwriting, a malicious joke is played upon Edgar as a sheer instance of cosmic irony.

