CHAPTER 8

From Insubordinate Playfulness to Subversive Irony

The so-called '1,2,3 Group' was a ludic group, if there ever was one in Dutch cinema. The group united five young filmmakers, described on René Daalder's webpage as 'future architect Rem Koolhaas, director Jan de Bont, TV personality Frans Bromet, software tycoon Samuel Meyering and multimedia pioneer Rene Daalder.'[1] In 1965, they made the 15-minute-long short De 1,2,3 rhapsodie [1, 2, 3 Rhapsody], consisting of five brief segments, which have a totally unpretentious appeal. In the segment 'Hoe stoer Jan kan zijn' [How Tough Jan Can Be], De Bont poses in front of the camera as an aviator and a fisherman among others and he is prancing around in a meadow, wearing only white underwear. In another segment, Koolhaas plays a lackey who crawls under the skirts of the English queen. Further, Daalder is portrayed as a maternity nurse who is extensively being praised in voice-over by a young mother: 'She's one in a million,' but 'My husband was constantly hanging around her. I have no idea why.... She's not that pretty, is she? But she didn't encourage him at all.' Because it was a sloppily shot short, the black-and-white De 1,2,3 rhapsodie had an improvised feel.

The seemingly playful short was a follow-up to a manifesto the five had written to distance themselves from François Truffaut's famous dictum that the director should be attributed the honorary label of *auteur* when he has full responsibility for the film, from the first words written in the script to the final cut. The Group explicitly resisted this requirement: for its five members a film was the result of a cooperative effort of cast and crew, in which no one, not even the director, had pride of place. To underscore their criticism of the concept of the *auteur*, which had created such a buzz in circles among French cinephiles, the five constantly switched roles. In the one segment De Bont (or Daalder or Bromet, etc.) was the director, in a second the actor, in a third the scriptwriter, in a fourth the cameraman, in a fifth the sound record-

er. Since De 1,2,3 rhapsodie was made to downplay the snobbish attitude of film lovers, the short had to avoid any suggestion of pomposity. In order to live up to their pretence, they paradoxically had to make a film which necessarily gave a ludic and matter-of-fact impression. Because the aim to subvert a dominant vision on the practice of filmmaking lurks behind the unpretentious stance, De 1,2,3 rhapsodie belongs to this chapter, which differs from the previous one in displaying a (slightly) stronger inclination to subversive forces.

This short illustrates the fact that Dutch films in the 1960s had the advantage of being made amidst a whirlwind of tendencies, which could be termed 'rebellious' because the cinematic tradition in the Netherlands was still young and above all quite tame (see chapter 3 on Staudte's Ciske de Rat and Haanstra's Fanfare). There was much to explore for the new film school generation, and they did so either by resisting international trends (as the 1,2,3 Group) or by adopting influences: Adriaan Ditvoorst and the *nouvelle vague*, Frans Weisz and the baroque cinema of Fellini. In his *Van Fanfare tot Spetters*, Hans Schoots gauges the claim that the rebellious stance of the filmmakers is in fact a belated aping of the mentality of an artistic avant-garde from the 1950s, represented by the writer-poets Simon Vinkenoog, Gerrit Kouwenaar, and Remco Campert, painters like Karel Appel and Corneille, as well as the painter-poet Lucebert. The influence of these artists came literally to the fore in several short documentaries dedicated to their work (Jan Vrijman on Karel Appel; Johan van der Keuken on Lucebert) and Campert wrote several scripts for the screen, directed by either Van der Keuken or Weisz.[2] Hence, Dutch films in the 1950s had been overall complacent, but in the 1960s some filmmakers incorporated the insubordinate undercurrent of the 1950s, then voiced by a scene of writers and visual artists. In this chapter I will examine how such an insurgence is laced with humour and wit.

LUDIC PARANOIA: *DE MINDER GELUKKIGE TERUGKEER VAN JOSZEF KATÚS NAAR HET LAND VAN REMBRANDT*

De minder gelukkige terugkeer van Joszef Katús naar het land van Rembrandt [The Not so Fortunate Return of Joszef Katús to the Country of Rembrandt] (Wim Verstappen, 1966) was made with limited means: Verstappen had some unused film stock available totally by accident; his former fellow student Wim van der Linden had an Éclair camera; Rudolf Lucieer offered himself to play the main role.[3] So they simply decided to make a film. The film was made according to the idea of contiguity as it was prac-

ticed by neo-realists such as Roberto Rossellini. The French critic André Bazin praised Rossellini's ROMA CITTÀ APERTA [ROME, OPEN CITY] (1945) and PAISÀ [PAISAN] (1946) among others because of their 'adherence to actuality' and their strong concern for day-to-day events. He described these films as 'reconstituted reportages,' without ever becoming pamphlets for specific ideological positions. Rossellini's 'revolutionary humanism' is particularly notable in ROMA CITTÀ APERTA in which a Catholic priest comes to the assistance of a communist resistance fighter. They could have been used as paeans for or against Catholicism, or for or against Communism, but, Bazin claims, Rossellini walks the tightrope between these two positions. The neo-realists, he argued, focused upon the 'concrete social realities' such as the black market, poverty, prostitution, unemployment and thus they downplayed 'the *a priori* values of politics' (Bazin 'Cinematic Realism,' 34).

Verstappen's film about Joszef Katús has an even stronger concern for day-to-day events than Rossellini's films and covers the days from 29 April to 5 May 1966. The main actor was present during an actual procession near Palace Soestdijk to celebrate the queen's birthday and improvised on the spot. He also spontaneously joined in with an actual demonstration, shouting for the release of a Provo member,[4] although the character later says he has no clue who this Hans Tuynman was.[5] At the same time, politics is trivialized to an extent that the neo-realists would never do. In Italian cinema, politics is perhaps only temporarily side-tracked, Bazin suggested. Because of an emphasis upon urgent social problems, political discord does not come to the fore in their cinema, but, as Bazin states, it 'could happen that tomorrow [the priest and the Communist] might not get on so well' ('Cinematic Realism,' 34). Verstappen's film constitutes an ironic contrast to Bazin's characterization of neo-realism. DE MINDER GELUKKIGE TERUGKEER is set amidst an atmosphere of explicitly political and anti-bourgeois provocations, but its main protagonist keeps aloof. Interviewed by a documentary maker who wants to capture the revolutionary spirit of the so-called Provos, Joszef explains that he is just a hanger-on, an opportunist who is neither in favour nor against ideals. Since Joszef refuses to side with the Provos, the documentary maker calls him a fiasco and a commonplace type. Joszef, however, does not want to assert ideas, he just wants to 'be.'

Instead of advocating political engagement, Verstappen's film ties in with the cinematic avant-garde, although its makers once again opt for a light-hearted variant, up to the point of irony. Michel, protagonist of Godard's breathtaking debut feature À BOUT DE SOUFFLE [BREATHLESS] (1960), was a model for the character of Joszef, but the latter was only a small-time crook. Whereas Michel had shot a policeman, Joszef only sold sugar cubes with eye drops as if it were LSD. Moreover, Michel is shot by the

police in the streets after his girlfriend has betrayed him. In an imitation of the staggering walk of a character from the western MAN OF THE WEST (Anthony Mann, 1958), Michel dies. In DE MINDER GELUKKIGE TERUGKEER Joszef is severely hit in the stomach by someone, perhaps a secret agent, on the street in Amsterdam. We see this scene at the very beginning of the film, but it is repeated at its very end, where it fits chronologically, for this incident takes place on 5 May. We know by now that this figure has been stalking him since his arrival in the Netherlands. Joszef is suffering from serious stomach pain so probably the blow is deadly. The other clue that he does not survive the assault, is derived from an ambiguous voice-over, spoken by actress Shireen Strooker, in the beginning of the film: 'Joszef Katús came back to Amsterdam (in order) to die.' Since the film also starts with the end scene, it is tempting to consider this text as a comment upon the beginning couched in terms of a foretelling.

Despite the aggression in this repeated scene, the overall tone of Verstappen's film is droll and whimsical. There are frequent references in voice-over to cola: 'When he came back from Paris, the cola was not as good as when he had left.' Or: 'In East Germany, Coca-Cola was synonymous with capitalism, murder and rape.' Or: 'In Morocco, they had the best cola.' None of these voice-over texts have anything to do with the images we see or with the actual story; they are spoken in isolation. Another indication of the droll tone: cheesy music is being played when Joszef is about to be examined for his stomach pain. Or Joszef has the strange habit to make duplicate keys to open station lockers. He does not do so in order to get rich, but to mull over the odd objects he finds in them, as the voice-over explains: 'Old clothes, mouldy bread, orange peels, a rickety umbrella, hardly anything of value.' To top all drollness, we get a comical close-up of this 'secret agent' at one point, who addresses the camera and utters this paradoxical line: 'Such a pity that I am not permitted to say anything in this movie.'

DE MINDER GELUKKIGE TERUGKEER never fulfils its suggestion that this might be a politically engaged film, because of its focus upon banal details, its isolated references to cola which become no more than a gimmick, and its alienating devices (like the frontal staging of the 'secret agent'). Or rather, Verstappen's film so provocatively refuses to be a political film that it becomes humorous and comic in rebound – a mere ludic film. At the same time, there is an edge to this apparent playfulness when we consider the extra-textual information that director Verstappen had the idea he himself was being watched by Dutch secret agents, since his visit to East Germany with Pim de la Parra. From this perspective his ludic film, with the ludic title, is an ironic lure. Because Verstappen presumed he was prosecuted himself for political reasons, he made a film about a guy who may seem politically

active, but is no more than an idler. And thus Verstappen's paranoia translates itself into a mild satire of Dutch security services, for the stalker, taken for an agent, keeps on following the 'wrong man,' who has nothing on his sleeve. In the guise of a ludic film, Verstappen seems to plead the case that he is absolutely an innocent man and that the security services are overcautious, for if they are really watching him, they are wasting their time on him – and, worse, wasting their aggressive energy on the film's protagonist, who is senselessly beaten up in the street.

A TONGUE-IN-CHEEK SHORT: *BODY AND SOUL*

Verstappen's tongue-in-cheek tone is perhaps only matched by a short film, also from 1966, made by the aforementioned Daalder. The 12-minute BODY AND SOUL, has, as the title may suggest, all the ingredients to become of iconic value for the upcoming 'soul-searching' hippies. Instead of becoming a 'sign of its times,' BODY AND SOUL is best to be seen as a parody of hippies even before the Flower Power era has really taken off, which makes it an historically odd picture, but also, in retrospect, an amazing achievement.

BODY AND SOUL is beautifully photographed, by Jan de Bont, in black and white and in widescreen, and it consists of a few daily episodes out of a strong man's life. This bodybuilder, named John, does not speak in the film, but a voice-over, in English, speaks for him all the time in a fairly flat tone. John is trying on new clothes in a men's shop, but he actually is fearing '*that he is nearly too big for ready-made clothing*.' After the opening credits, we see him working out at the gym by lifting weights. The voice-over mentions that his muscles had pumped up so much that he was thinking that '*his body might grow over his head if he didn't take care*.' At that point John gets distracted, and after hanging around a bit, goes home. Meanwhile, the voice-over mentions that he supposes that '*the mind is superior to the body*,' but in his case the mind apparently does not keep up pace with his body, for thinking always puts him '*in a bad mood*.' He is trying on a white shirt for a party that night, but '*his clothes had conspired to make him conscious that his body had outgrown him*.' He does not succeed in fastening the top button, and when he expands his chest in front of a mirror, a button pops off the shirt. He then reads an article in the magazine *Mr. America* which states that one has to tell oneself, a thousand times: '*I will become a real man like the Creator has intended me to be*,' but his mother tells him she wanted him to be the way he was.

When John then passes a mirror, he '*couldn't resist the temptation*' to look into it and starts admiring himself. The voice-over and the music

remain silent for about one minute while we see him doing some bodybuilder's poses either from a frontally staged low angle or from behind his back displaying his torso via the mirror. '*The feeling grew stronger and stronger that his body didn't belong to him anymore and would live its own life one day*.' He then continues the poses once again, until we see his mother who has been climbing the stairs appear via the mirror under his right armpit. John stops immediately, disenchanted by her arrival, because, as the voice-over says, she gives him the impression that his posturing is indecent.

At the party, John is alone, not knowing anybody and he is not sure whether he wants to know anybody. Once again, the voice-over is expressing John's concerns with his appearance: '*He didn't like eyes on his back. Funny, he thought, nobody knows how one looks from behind. He should have taken some pictures from behind*.' Another rumination by the narrator: '*His presence didn't change the party a bit. Everyone was too much occupied with themselves to think about him*.' We then see some partygoers throw wood into the open hearth, commented upon in a deadpan voice-over: '*When the mood goes down everyone tries some acts of despair*.' After someone challenges him to a game of arm wrestling, we see John from behind, blocking our view of his opponent, until the moment when the latter loses the contest. This piques the curiosity of the guests, who suddenly realize '*that there was a bodybuilder in their midst*.' The girls present want to know what a bodybuilder looks like. '*John didn't know what happened to him; they began to undress him, that he noticed…. Most people would be embarrassed if their body was exposed like this, but what kind of bodybuilder does not want to show his body?*' Standing there, '*lifeless as a statue*,' suddenly a student with knowledge of classical mythology has a great idea of how to make a spectacle of John: '*Let's make him an Atlas, he suggested*.' The student puts a globe on John's shoulder. '*For once, John was allowed to bear the whole world*.' When the globe falls from his shoulder, the camera tilts down slowly and follows the globe between the legs of the partygoers, who use it like a football.

> *Oh God, John realized, the globe will be destroyed. Why is everything always to be destroyed? The party was now quite degenerated. For the first time that day, he knew exactly what he was going to do. He took the globe away to put it back where it belonged – in the holder. There are still some things around you didn't play with, and John was the only one around here who was conscious of it. He was certainly annoyed by the destructive inclination. And what a waste of money, John thought. Such an expensive globe.*

Daalder's short can be seen as a particularly tongue-in-cheek film, once we start considering its title in combination with the period in which it was made. Around 1966, soul-searching hippies were en vogue, but this film was about a huge and strong man who is all body. He seems out of step with his times, for he is not pursuing mind-blowing experiences. On the contrary, John is as blank a character as imaginable, without facial expressions throughout the 12 minutes the short lasts. He has several thoughts, but they are quite pathetic: he has the silly anxiety that his body growth will affect his mind negatively, as if the bigger the body, the less well his brain will function. Nonetheless, his own body fascinates him tremendously, for he cannot resist the narcissistic desire to show it off, and the camera cannot resist registering John's admiration of his own body. Moreover, the fact that the narrator speaks on behalf of the protagonist has an ironic effect, because of a striking contrast: he paraphrases the thoughts of the bodybuilder in a very reflexive and precisely verbalized manner without ever commenting upon John's naive ideas. Because the bodybuilder himself does not speak a single line, the protagonist is really made into a spectacle. This reaches a climax at the party, where he is not offered a drink or a sandwich and does not speak to anyone, but he is undressed for the enjoyment of all the guests, who are anxious to see what a bodybuilder looks like. He swallows this treatment, which makes him a very passive character throughout. The voice-over describes him as '*lifeless as a statue*' for good reason. The one action he undertakes, except for the exercises at the gym and the expanding of his chest, is to put the globe in the holder as he sees the guests playing with the object as if it is a football. The voice-over is, on behalf of John, talking about his awareness of their '*destructive inclination*.' The narrator uses pathetic phrasing to describe the emotional turmoil of the character in the final shots ('*Oh God … why is everything always to be destroyed*?'), whilst still speaking in the very same detached tone. The flat tone is visually underscored by the meticulous mise-en-scène and the relatively lengthy widescreen shots. The narrator's description becomes the more ironic since hippies, unlike John, consider the mind superior to the sanity of the body. For them, a body is a mere vehicle to mind-blowing experiences, and one of the ways such an experience can manifest itself is in getting in touch with 'mother Nature,' figuratively speaking. The final words of the narrator are an ultimate ironic twist, because he takes his task to '*save Mother Earth*' in the most literal sense possible: if in the eyes of John, the world might be coming to an end, this has nothing to do with political matters as hippies would claim, but with the way the guests treat an expensive globe. This strong man, who is all body, is only concerned about Mother Earth in the form of a precious object, which can be taken as ultimate ironic proof of the fact that a gigantic physical appearance perhaps affects one's mind, indeed.

ANTI-BOURGEOIS SATIRE: *DE VERLOEDERING VAN DE SWIEPS*

If both De minder gelukkige terugkeer and the short Body and Soul tended to comically trivialize the typical 1960s engagement of the Provo movement and the soul-searching hippies, then De verloedering van de Swieps [The Whipping Cream Hero] (Erik Terpstra, 1967) portrays a bohemian about whom can be said that 'he's the man for his time and place. He fits right in there.'[6] This bohemian is Manuel, played by Ramses Shaffy, who by that time had already become known as a maverick and larger-than-life artist/singer. He is introduced as a hitchhiker on the road, and when he is picked up by the civil servant, Jan-Hein Swiep, he says: 'You are going in the right direction.' 'Where do you have to go then?' 'Your way.' From that point onwards, Manuel will suggest proposals which are increasingly more impertinent. And Jan-Hein simply is too compliant and polite to say 'no' to any one of them: his natural attitude is the obedient mode. In the very first scene we have already seen that he lets everyone pass ahead of him into the elevator so that he ultimately has to take the escalator. Once Jan-Hein has introduced Manuel as his 'guest' to his wife, Ans, and his little son, Heere – 'a name chosen for sentimental reasons of a familial nature,' Jan-Hein says – the intruder starts to adopt a strategy of interchangeably pleasing and stupefying the couple. Initially, Jan-Hein is inclined to defend Manuel, if perhaps only out of hospitality. When Ans asks Manuel, who calls himself a poet by profession, after his surname, Jan-Hein answers that their guest has become an orphan at a very young age. Thus, Manuel is kept from revealing his surname.

After Manuel has been allowed to sleep over, he starts to charm Ans, while Jan-Hein is at work. They go shopping together, they buy records and clothes. Jan-Hein starts complaining about Manuel's presence to a colleague at the office, for the guest drinks all the booze and the television has been moved to his bedroom. When Manuel unexpectedly visits Jan-Hein at work, he pokes fun at him in the presence of his colleague. Jan-Hein is fed up with the intruder, but Ans tells her husband: 'You invited him into the house, and wanted to show off your hospitality. Now you want to throw him out.' Ans points out a presumed inconsistency in her husband's behaviour because it is in her own interest to keep Manuel around: she is involved in a romantic liaison with the guest, or at least, so she thinks.[7] Jan-Hein is fighting a losing battle, and the more the guest is taking liberties of luxury – demanding an egg for breakfast, inviting guests for a dance party – the more Jan-Hein collapses. He has become so deranged by the end that he joins the guests in their acts of destruction. They tie him on a chair, and the next day, after Jan-Hein has freed himself, he finds himself amidst a total mess. The film ends with a freeze frame of his contorted face.

One might postulate that De verloedering van de Swieps is, in terms of content, a tragedy, since it shows how an honest citizen is driven to despair for being too well-disposed. Nonetheless, it makes more sense to call Terpstra's film a comedy insofar one highlights Manuel's jovial behaviour: he is the proverbial bon vivant who really knows how to charm a woman and he watches Jan-Hein's decline with malicious delight. A main reason to consider the film as a comedy rather than a tragedy resides in the way the film is shot. De verloedering van de Swieps uses fairly unorthodox devices, like near frontal close-ups in some moments; a relatively fast forward tracking shot now and then; a few unconventionally framed shots that cut off a head half or in its entirety; a few freeze frames. One might argue that these formal devices underscore Manuel's position, since the brusque close-ups, the zoom shots, the raw editing are sufficiently unconventional to favour the perspective of the maladjusted debauchee instead of the proper employee. Thus, in pitting Manuel against Jan-Hein, De verloedering van de Swieps formally sides with the former.

A main reason why Terpstra's film has always remained beneath the radar, I would surmise, is that Jan-Hein's downfall is presented in an easy-going fashion: let us watch how a citizen goes to the dogs.[8] And Manuel is too eagerly presented as the embodiment of the hippie fantasy that one can live as a cheerful rake, unhampered by any conventions. Hutcheon defines satire as 'the art of diminishing a subject by ridiculing (with intent to discourage) its vice or folly by the use of irony, sarcasm, humour' ('Introduction,' 36). According to this standard, De verloedering van de Swieps can be called an anti-bourgeois satire, indeed, but one which uses unholy glee as its main instrument. Thus, it lacks the ambivalence and the complex subtlety – and hence, the poignancy – of those quintessential anti-bourgeois satires by Luis Buñuel, like Belle de Jour (1967) and Le charme discret de la bourgeoisie [The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie] (1972).[9] In De verloedering van de Swieps, the independent drifter was represented in opposition to the compliant citizen,[10] but the surreal satires of Buñuel expose how such positions are inextricably entangled: the bourgeoisie itself is already perverted (Trevitte, 218). Whereas the degeneration of Jan-Hein Swiep has a clear cause and is therefore not shown as innate to people as such, no work in Dutch film history comes closer to suggesting a Buñuelian imbrication between bourgeois decorum and perversity than the cinema of Alex van Warmerdam.[11]

BUÑUELIAN DESIRES: *DE NOORDERLINGEN*

Of his 32 films, only Buñuel's first two can be called 'die hard' surrealist films, since they were made under the direct influence of the surrealist movement and outside the commercial film industry (Williams *Figures*, 151). Buñuel's short UN CHIEN ANDALOU [AN ANDALUSIAN DOG] (1928) and his L'AGE D'OR [AGE OF GOLD] (1930) are no exceptions to the convention that surrealist artists always tended to respect the grammar of a medium. If the viewer of a surrealist photograph has difficulty in deciphering the depicted object, it is because the photographer has chosen an uncommon angle or taken the picture of a small object at very close range, not because they have manipulated the image. The meticulous framing has defamiliarized the object, made it surreal, often by adding overtones of eroticism to the picture (Van Alphen, 'Geschreven realiteit,' 167). Likewise, Buñuel's first two radically formal films are enigmatic in terms of plot, but he did not violate conventional principles of editing. If a character looks outside a window onto the street in UN CHIEN ANDALOU, the next shot is a high-angle shot from that position, thus attributing the focalization to that character. If the scenery is bizarre, this is due to the surrealist adage that characters see with 'eyes of imagination': their observation is criss-crossed with desires and phobias, which explains why we see a deformed object. If a woman's dress dissolves into a torn piece and we get to see her naked buttocks, it is unmistakably the man's wishful thinking, as we can gather from his dreamy facial expression. If a man stares at his hand and we then see, in close-up, how insects crawl out of a gaping wound in this hand, this is the consequence of his slumbering disgust. In UN CHIEN ANDALOU, the desires and fears of the gazing characters distort the perception of a scene to such an extent that the armpit hair of a woman can suddenly appear as the goat on a man's chin. In short, a shot shows a character looking at something off-screen, a subsequent shot shows the 'obscure object' of the character's desire or anxiety.

According to Linda Williams, subsequent films by Buñuel tended toward coherent narratives, but from EL ÁNGEL EXTERMINADOR [THE EXTERMINATING ANGEL] (1962) onwards he returned to surrealism proper (*Figures*, 151). The films of his late period, however, are no longer the works of an anarchistic iconoclast, but of a 'mellowing surrealist master' (152). These films have a 'slick prettiness, a sunny glamour' but the 'slicker and sunnier the films appear on the surface, the more complex and troubling they can often be underneath' (153). Like in the old days, Buñuel persistently explored the analogy between the structure of film and the discourse of the unconscious, which has, as Williams argues, 'the paradoxical effect of making the spectator more conscious of the processes that produce desire' (217). One of the concerns of

psychoanalysis, to which the surrealist movement felt affiliated, is to suggest that desire cannot be fulfilled, and its object will be a mirage, permanently out of reach. Buñuel's films are structured according to postponements: two couples want to dine together in LE CHARME DISCRET DE LA BOURGEOISIE, but time and again something intervenes that prevents fulfilment of this simple wish. Thus, his films shift away from a conventional narrative to an 'elusive elsewhere, an *other scene* constructed out of mechanisms analogous to those in dream work' (Williams *Figures*, 214).

While exploring the structures of desire, his late period films show that, as Roger Ebert says, bourgeoisie manners are 'the flimsiest façade for our animalistic natures.' Citizens perform social rituals to hide the dark desires that lurk beneath their appearances. Freedom is only a 'phantom of liberty,' a false illusion that one is liberated from rituals, while civil compliance is an attitude to cover up repressed wishes. Specifically talking about BELLE DE JOUR (1967), Matt Lau claims that Buñuel's scathing satirical critique is 'subversive in its orthodox realism': camera work is usually done without flourishes or special effects; there are long takes with stilted dialogue; no musical score.

This characterization of late Buñuel almost reads like a formal description of a Van Warmerdam film. He tends to shoot relatively straightforward and prefers the use of hard cuts, deep focus and elliptical editing. The majority of shots in his films are static, and when the camera does move it is to follow a character or observe a situation, hardly ever to accentuate a mood. There is some musical accompaniment to scenes, but it is never intrusive, for that might affect the general mood too much. The main reason for this sober approach is to acknowledge, as already mentioned in the Introduction of this study, that Dutch culture is rooted in a Calvinist tradition of austerity. Van Warmerdam does not revere this tradition, but uses Calvinism – that is to say, his notion of Calvinism – as a background for a story in which bourgeois characters are either obstructed in their impulses or seem to rebel against the strict coding of their environment.[12]

Symptomatic of the Calvinist sobriety is the setting of DE NOORDERLINGEN [THE NORTHERNERS] (1992), his second feature. After an opening in which a man and his wife with a toddler on her arm are instructed in a photo studio to look 'with hope … to the future,' the subsequent scene shows that the photograph of the happily smiling family is used on a billboard accompanying the text '2,000 houses will be finished by 1958.' While a text over the shot mentions that it is 'summer 1960' already, we see that only one street happens to be built so far, surrounded by barren land and deteriorating building materials, which are covered by weeds.[13] The uniform and austere houses in this one street are adjacent to the sidewalk and have huge, almost square windows, so that passers-by can easily look inside, a 'typically Dutch habit,' according

to Van Warmerdam. Not only the man-made settings excel in uniformity, but also the natural environment. Frequently we get a shot of a deserted landscape on the left side and a forested area on the right, with the trees positioned in a straight line as if a ruler has been used to demarcate an absolute distinction between emptiness and density.[14]

Events in De Noorderlingen are set in motion because Jacob and Martha have marital problems. We know from a letter, read by the postman, Plagge, who secretly opens the mail he has to deliver, that Martha has asked one of her girlfriends for advice about how to cope with a sex-crazed husband. The answer: do not dress attractively, do not use make-up. And thus the corpulent butcher Jacob seeks his pleasure elsewhere. While he is preparing sausages, he observes the cleavage of his shop assistant. Sight leads to touch, but once she has freed herself from his embrace, she runs into the street of this microcosm. In a long shot we see his female neighbours standing at their door, all lined up, watching in the direction of Jacob, as if they all know what a 'brute' he is.

It is not only that (sexual) desires are restricted in the small (Calvinist) community, but De Noorderlingen suggests above all that such scrutinizing looks contribute to a repressive climate. In this bourgeois environment, one cannot escape being observed. This is consistently underscored in Van Warmerdam's film by the way windows repeatedly function as a frame within the frame of the film. Plagge stands right in front of the huge window of Martha's house, gesticulating at her not to wear any lipstick. One of the quarrels Martha has with her husband is played out in the street, for everyone to see behind their windows, and she does this deliberately to prevent him from acting too aggressively. When the camera is on the street we see the neighbours in the background, peeping through their windows; or the camera is positioned inside a house, making the quarrel look like an odd and hardly audible spectacle. The analogy between the huge window and the frame of the film is emphasized once again, when Martha's self-imposed abstinence from sex turns her into some sort of a holy Madonna.[15] Lying in her bed near the huge, square window, her female neighbours come to kneel at the pavement, taking a look at her, with their hands folded. Jacob chases the onlookers away, but in a subsequent shot the small group has become a crowd, and still more people are arriving by bus. At one point their son, Thomas, closes the curtains for he and his father are about to eat, but the noise of tapping fingers makes him pull the curtains away, revealing the window as a screen, even though the spectacle on display is no more than a woman lying in bed.

It is perhaps no coincidence that of all the thirty-eight videos uploaded by Alex van Warmerdam on YouTube – accessed on 12 October 2015 – there is only one from a (foreign) feature film. He has selected two wordless excerpts

from Du levande [You the Living] (Roy Andersson, 2007), and one is about a window. We see a cleaning man on his back before the window of an art gallery in a static long shot. Inside the building there is a man and later also a woman, who are carefully scrutinizing the pane. Now and then they point their finger at what apparently seems a dirty spot, which the cleaner then goes to wipe with a cloth. The scene shows a quite common situation, registered by an immobile camera at some distance from the scenery, but its display is nonetheless slightly peculiar. Of course, the people of the art gallery have every right to a perfectly clean window, and of course, the cleaner has to polish the glass as brightly as possible, but the impression arises that the man and woman in the gallery want to have any tiny, practically imperceptible, stain removed. Seen from a distance, which is a result of the choice of a long shot, we as film spectators are not able to discern any dirty spot and hence, the scenery suggests that the couple carps at every minor detail. The cleaner follows their instructions, but it is impossible to guess whether he really cleans a stain which he happens to have overlooked or whether he just sheepishly gives in to their commands in order to satisfy his clients. Because of this ambiguity, the scene might add silliness to their possible hair-splitting attitude. I write 'might add,' since the scene is (fairly) normal, but thanks to the particular framing, one is invited to interpret the scene in an ironic way. The specificity of a Roy Andersson film resides in the option that both readings can be activated simultaneously: there is an everyday – or middle-of-the-road – situation, but it can be looked upon from a slightly awry perspective, and if one does so, it turns into an absurd scene.

One of the characteristics of this type of what I will call 'middle-of-the-road absurdism' is its deadpan quality, accentuated by the immobile camera at quite some distance from the scene.[16] Every character acts as if it is a perfectly normal situation, and in fact it is. Nonetheless, in the midst of this normality, there are always some details in excess, which give the scene its specific acumen, for a principle conditional of the absurd is to confuse logic and the order of sense. Zupancic makes the important point that the absurd can only have an (intense) comic effect when the apparent 'nonsense' nevertheless 'makes sense' (58). In order to 'make sense,' the scenery should not be distorted by cinematic techniques and hence, as the example of the window pane suggests, the function of the camera preferably restricts itself to registering a situation. Thanks to the strategy of offering a seemingly neutral stance, the camera guarantees the endurance of the double option. Odd details are displayed in everyday situations, but these details are not overemphasized and are only shown as part of the overall picture.[17]

Likewise, Van Warmerdam's cinema restricts itself to presenting weird details. The conflict between Jacob and Martha may suggest otherwise, since

their marital problems are conventional, almost too schematic, but the roles of other characters are murky ones. There is Silent Willie, a fat boy in short pants (played by the then 34-year-old Theo van Gogh) who is all eyes, but does not say a single word. His only pleasure is driving on his moped to scare off other people. If one were to cut the scenes with Silent Willie from the film, it would not hamper the story at all, which in turn is an argument for appreciating his odd presence. The most enigmatic character is Plagge, who is played by Van Warmerdam himself: why does the postman secretly open the mail near a small lake in the woods at the risk of being caught in the act by the bespectacled forest ranger? Thanks to his spying activities, he knows about the latter's infertility and teases him repeatedly. When the forest ranger asks Plagge what he was doing in the forest, the postman calmly responds he had a letter for William the rabbit. His dirty finger nails, he explains, are a result of helping William to dig his burrow. When the forest ranger wonders whether this rabbit has a lot of offspring, Plagge dryly replies: 'No, William is infertile.' One of Plagge's other nasty jokes is to hide himself in the woods and to call to the forest ranger, with a high-pitched voice: 'Sweet little hunter, make me a child.' We can only guess whether Plagge has been bullying the forest ranger for quite some time now, since Van Warmerdam's cinema is shorn of explanatory flashbacks. Conventionally, a flashback is inserted to offer psychological motivation: by digging into the past the logic behind a character's acts can become clear. None of that, in De noorderlingen, or in any of Van Warmerdam's other films.[18] We have no clue whether the animosity is due to some past incident. Or is Plagge simply taunting him as some sort of resistance to his own obliging role as a postman? In that case, being confined to a civic function has made him into a 'pervert.'

PERVADED WITH ROLE-PLAYING: *KLEINE TEUN* AND *DE LAATSTE DAGEN VAN EMMA BLANK*

The impossibility to understand Plagge's motivations for his behaviour is to be related to Van Warmerdam's 'confession' on the extras on the DVD of Allemaal film,[19] that he has a 'fear of meaning': he shies back from imposing a meaning upon the viewer. He will waive the use of a crow in his films, because this animal too easily connotes death. As soon as a character, an animal or an object evokes too obvious an association, Van Warmerdam will avoid his or its inclusion. He prefers an animal without a fixed connotation, like a goat, to encourage the spectator to unsuspected interpretations. This reluctance is totally at odds with the tradition of Calvinism, which takes hermeneutics as its core practice. In his account of 'iconophobia,' Christopher Collins explains

that a hermeneutic profession tends to display a distrust of images and a suspicion of the visual potential of verbal texts, for they can unleash an 'uncontrollable imagination' (1). In a similar vein, it is the purpose of Calvinism to suppress the possible ambiguity of images/texts to only one, preferably very rational meaning, or, in the words of Collins, to an 'abstract-propositional function' (1). In contrast to the strict Dutch Calvinist tradition of unilateral meanings, Van Warmerdam's films should evoke 'accidental' meanings which he himself never has had in mind.

These 'accidental' meanings are far removed from the principle of the 'chance encounter' embraced by surrealists. They were interested in chance in every possible manner – like found objects, discovered at flea markets, for instance – because for them, chance is a structuring device for the unconscious; chance is antithetical to rational deliberations. For surrealists, significance is a by-product of coincidences. Buñuel had the tendency to emphasize the element of chance by interspersing his story of 'interruptions' with shots which have the status, often in retrospect, of fantasies, of dreams, of dreams-within-dreams. By contrast, the 'accidental' meanings by Van Warmerdam are meticulously staged: information is provided, but never the obvious and never too much. At the end of Kleine Teun [Little Tony] (1998), his fourth feature, which was screened in the Un Certain Regard section at the Cannes Film Festival, the husband murders his wife, but the act of killing is only shown obliquely. From inside the house through the window we see him raise an axe, but the woman is slain off-screen. An establishing shot had been made, showing her in a flower field with a wound in her back, but no matter how great the shot, Van Warmerdam cut it, because upon reflection he considered it excessive.[20]

Typical of his long-take style are an almost complete neglect of optical effects, such as superimpositions, and a minimal use of close-ups, which in conventional cinema is often used for emphasizing a crucial detail. If an optical effect is used, it is done so conventionally that it seems inserted as a joke. To underscore that the father of the title protagonist in Van Warmerdam's debut feature Abel [Voyeur] (1986) is at a loss, all the ashtrays start to move in the café he uses to frequent in a shot focalized by him. Since such a shot is an obvious exception to the rule, it comes to border on irony.[21] In general, the viewer is manipulated only to a minor extent and is encouraged to actively distil his own interpretation from the shot or to attribute qualities to characters or objects. Deep focus can be considered a form of 'montage within the frame': the viewer can divide the space however he deems fit. He can decide to focus upon something in the upper-left corner of the shot, because the length of the take enables him to scrutinize the image carefully. Since for directors like Van Warmerdam – or Andersson, or Aki Kaurismäki, or Bent Hamer – the manner in which characters are positioned in space is seminal, the décor has

a determining function. For his De laatste dagen van Emma Blank [The Last Days of Emma Blank] (2009) as well as for his subsequent film Borgman (2013), Van Warmerdam had a whole house built, simply because he could not find what he was looking for. The house for De laatste dagen van Emma Blank was constructed with an eye to the Cinemascope frame, which enabled him to show a room in the background in each and every shot. On the one hand, this choice is an invitation to the viewer to discover details within the shot, on the other hand, a tragicomic effect can ensue because the framing of characters can anticipate the oppressing situation they are about to meet.

To downplay the importance of (too much) information, a scene from Kleine Teun is striking. A countrywoman is fed up with the daily habit of reading aloud the subtitles on television for her illiterate husband. She hires a female teacher who at one point is invited for dinner. When the guest starts crying, she walks to the toilet, whereupon the host tells his wife that as a city girl, she tends to weep easily. Upon her return in the living room, the wife asks what is up, but the man answers that as his teacher he is not supposed to know anything about her background, one can only speak small talk. And thus her feelings remain undisclosed.

The humour of this type of middle-of-the-road absurdism – to stick to that label – is based upon subtle incongruities. Everything seems perfectly normal, almost, but not quite. There usually is some detail out of joint – not very awry, but slightly awry, as I already mentioned above.[22] Let us take the very first shot in Abel, the film about a 31-year-old guy who, still living with his parents, has not been outside for years. He spends his time trying to cut bluebottles in half with a pair of scissors and keeping watch on the neighbourhood with a pair of binoculars. In the opening shot, we see him play Peeping Tom at his neighbour, a fairly old man exercising on a home trainer. Since his right leg is in a cast, he only uses one pedal. The shot is displayed without any further emphasis. The second shot, once again seen through Abel's pair of binoculars, shows us the image of a living room with a black-and-white television, playing a western. A cowboy is on the verge of dying, since his body has been riddled with arrows. Later, about half an hour into Abel, the genre of the western is referenced in a dialogue between Abel's father, Victor, and his mother, Duifje, which is the diminutive of 'dove.' The mother suggests they buy a television set so that their reclusive son can at least see some of the outside world. The father is fiercely opposed to television and argues that it only broadcasts a load of rubbish, like cowboy films: 'This cowboy, hasn't he got any parents to visit from time to time? Or have those parents died? Is this cowboy a foundling? Has he got brothers and sisters? Has he had an education? Not a word about that, no.'

The father condemns westerns for being totally unrealistic, since the cow-

boy is a character without any personal background. The brief fragment of the dying cowboy on television which we witnessed through Abel's pair of binoculars, underscores this opinion to a superlative degree. We only see an image of a cowboy apparently breathing his last, nothing else. The screen shot shows only a stock image, even lacking any narrative context: Was he the 'good guy'? Did he 'deserve' to die? Who shot him? Strictly speaking, these questions are more fundamental than the questions raised by the father about siblings, parents and education, in fact, reducing his words to drivel. Although this might be a possible way of reading the silliness of the father's criticism of westerns, the actual object of derision of a (or perhaps of any) Van Warmerdam film lies somewhere else. If the father faults westerns for a lack of psychological consistency, ABEL as well as other films by Van Warmerdam work contrariwise to this criticism. His cinema reveals an affinity with cowboys and seems to distance itself from 'deeply felt' psychological scenarios with so-called 'round' characters.[23]

If psychology is alluded to in the cinema of Van Warmerdam, it is usually done so by negation or in a too obvious fashion, as in ABEL. The son does not seem to have a particular ambition at all; he is unmotivated in every regard. If his parents propose to go for a walk in the dunes, he has a range of arguments to stay at home: gin traps, stray bullets, raving mad poachers, the risk of getting lost. In fact, his goals are twofold. First, he wants to be cuddled by his mother. He even stages an accident so that his body is fully covered by a pile of boxes to attract his mother's attention. Second, his main purpose seems to annoy his father, who works as an administrator, a profession deliberately mispronounced by Abel. Perhaps his reason for staying inside is that his father wants him to go outside. When the father wishes the family a Merry Christmas and adds to this: 'And let us for once try to have a dinner without any arguments,' the son calmly replies that by accentuating it, there will be an argument. And indeed, a quarrel ensues. When a psychiatrist visits Abel's home, on the request of the father, the son acts like a mentally challenged person. The psychiatrist quickly makes a diagnosis, an indication of the too obvious nature of the Oedipal conflict: the boy is trapped by his overprotective mother. The psychiatrist further suggests that another part of the problem is that the father is ashamed of his son, to which the father retorts: 'Wouldn't you be ashamed of a son like that?' Apparently the son rebels against the father by giving him all the more reason to be embarrassed by him. This leads to a series of scenes which are as straitened as they are hilarious. When the father invites a girl at their place for Abel to meet, the father prepares Abel for the visit, for he himself is an expert on how to treat a lady. The son ignores all instructions or he explicitly recalls one of its lessons, thus embarrassing his father once again. Hence, Abel ruins the date on purpose, sometimes by keeping lengthy

silences, sometimes by blathering about his favourite subject, the Iron Curtain and the poor working conditions in Russia. Or he asks the amateur actress a silly question like: 'Could you also climb into the skin of … a potato?' After her puzzled reaction, he says: 'I think you'd make a very good potato.'

In the second half of the film, Abel is thrown outside the house by the father, but he happens to be offered a home by the woman Zus – or Sis, an abbreviation of sister – who, as only the spectator knows, is his father's mistress. Zus, who works at a peep show, breaks off the affair with the father, while the mother finds her son's hiding place thanks to Abel's unique fish pullover, worn by the female model. From now onwards, ABEL turns into an inter-male competition over a young woman who for both father and son has taken the mother's place. The tone has changed, but the film still seems to be overdoing its Oedipal scenario. Due to the overtly clear outline of the positions of father, mother, son and the girl both father and son vie for, the viewer is not invited to really identify with the characters. Since ABEL so obviously alludes to an Oedipal scenario, the film is to be taken as a caricature of a psychological drama. And although the father is called Victor, the son is the actual 'victor,' which is proven by the fact that while Zus is sweeping up the splinters of a broken wine bottle at the very end of the film, Abel cuts a bluebottle in half with his pair of scissors.[24] Hence, Abel's 'victory' lacks any grand gestures whatsoever, no wedding, no kiss, but is condensed in the most trivial of triumphs. For once Abel is successful in a habit which constantly functioned as an indication of his dysfunctionality. Though his final success at cutting a fly is a sign of his development into maturity – he is no longer a virgin, he has surpassed his father – this preoccupation remains an empty gesture, because of its utter silliness. The ending of ABEL, which is his only film not to end on a wry note, is like a timpani stroke without any resonance.

It is a recurring feature that Van Warmerdam's films start as apparently uncluttered psychological dramas. Opening scenes frequently show a fairly ordinary scenery, or so it seems. A family having Christmas dinner in ABEL; a waiter is serving the guests in a restaurant in OBER while one of the guests is his mistress; the household is watching while a woman is eating her meal, as in DE LAATSTE DAGEN VAN EMMA BLANK. Soon the identifiable setting takes a slightly bizarre turn, and as the story progresses, slightly bizarre twists start to accumulate. In several of his films, such a twist concerns an element of deliberate role-playing, as in OBER, discussed in chapter 7, already illustrated. The starting premise of KLEINE TEUN is that Keet hires a woman who can teach her husband, Brand, how to read. After a few lessons, this relatively familiar overture takes a slightly bizarre turn. When some affection arises between Brand and the female instructor, Lena (the familiar element), Keet does not get angry, but encourages them to have a sexual relationship (the slightly

bizarre element). She provokes her husband by telling him he is not bold enough to sleep with her: every other man would have done already by now. She also suggests they tell Lena that they only play-acted being married, but that they really are brother and sister. This charade leads to a complicated love triangle, which is a springboard to another bizarre twist. Keet instructs Brand that she wants him to act in a dominating way towards her, so that Lena will be overwhelmed by his power and will desire to be fertilized by him: infertile herself, Keet plans to take the baby. Her plan fails finally, because Brand in the end no longer sides with his 'sister,' who wants to reclaim her position as his wife, and therefore he kills her.

De laatste dagen van Emma Blank is pervaded with role-playing from the very start, although the viewer realizes this only in retrospect. Bella is the cook, Gonnie is the maid, Haneveld is the butler, Meier is the handyman and Theo is the dog. Initially, it seems peculiar that Theo is not an animal, but a human, wearing clothes and, when outside, sunglasses. Despite his human appearance, he behaves like a dog, e.g., by enthusiastically jumping towards the Madame while she is eating, and he is treated like one: he is punished like a dog for misbehaviour and he is taken outside when he has to use the bathroom. An hour into the movie, it turns out that everyone is just playing a role – the butler is in fact Emma's husband; Gonnie her daughter – in order to please the 'Madame,' who claims she is on the verge of dying. 'Madame' behaves like a true dominatrix, and everyone seems prepared to swallow her vagaries. Their willingness evaporates the moment Emma explains that there is no wealth to be inherited. Lacking the care of her former household, Emma will soon die; it were her last days, indeed.

On the basis of the opening scenes of films like Abel, Kleine Teun and De laatste dagen van Emma Blank spectators may suppose that these films with their bourgeois settings can be interpreted according to the conventions of psychological realism, a favourite mode of reading. In fact, every bizarre turn in a Van Warmerdam film is a more or less polite request to give up this mode. If viewers get frustrated with his pictures this is due to their continued adherence to the principles of psychological realism: for them, the film no longer makes sense; its logic is thwarted. Since films like Kleine Teun and De laatste dagen van Emma Blank are best seen as a mimicry of a psychological drama, tending towards absurdism, a more fruitful mode of reading is to adopt an ironic distance towards the narrative, which is facilitated by the deadpan tone of his cinema. Expanding upon Van Warmerdam's aforementioned 'fear of meaning,' it makes sense that viewers (should) have difficulty in making sense of his pictures. His films problematize the spectator's desire to attribute meaning to the film, and this 'quality,' I will claim, makes them so 'ironic.'

MIDDLE-OF-THE-ROAD ABSURDISM: *DE JURK* AND *GRIMM*

Van Warmerdam's third feature, De jurk [The Dress] (1995), is a delightful exercise which because of its deceptively simple structure sets a trap for the viewer. To start with, the film does not have a character as a main protagonist, but an object. This object, a dress, has a strange genesis, for a designer has been asked to propose a particular motif for a summer frock. All the designs have been declared unfit for use, for in the eyes of the advising committee, they are too 'avant-garde' and not 'sunny' enough. When Van Tilt continues to doubt the willingness of the designer to think commercially, director Loohman is so annoyed that he quite randomly picks a 'timeless leaf motif.' This motif, as the viewers know, is no more than a copycat from a dress worn by one of the designer's neighbours, an Indian woman. Van Tilt and Loohman get embroiled in a physical fight, whereupon the latter not only fires his employee, but also yells at him that he hopes that Van Tilt will become very unhappy.

As soon as the dress is taken in production, the film follows one particular item, bought by a woman in her early sixties. While wearing it, she gets ill and spoils coffee on the frock. Her husband washes the dress, but at the very moment of her death, the heavy wind takes the dress from the clothesline. This is the beginning of the journey of the dress, with one constant factor: each and every woman who wears the item, experiences something dreadful, like being harassed by a horny train ticket inspector, and gets rid of it thereupon, by giving the item away for charity, for example. At the end, the dress is stolen by a female vagabond, who starts wearing it in combination with other clothes. Bearing in mind that the piece of cloth was officially made as a summer dress, it is a streak of black comedy that she will only some time later freeze to death. As darkly comic is the fate of Van Tilt who pops up at intervals in De jurk, but time and again in a different guise. After his discharge, we see him selling coffee and snacks in a train, and as an ultimate sign of his downfall, we see him as a tramp befriended to the female vagabond. After her death, he tears a part of the dress and uses it as a shawl. With some of his very last money, he pays a woman to French kiss him in the park and after that he throws away the improvised shawl which is immediately torn to pieces by an electric lawnmower.

De jurk invites the spectator to draw an analogy between the sorry fate of Van Tilt and the diminishment of value of the dress, for this object starts as an attractive window shop item but in the end, it is partly being buried and partly torn to pieces. The editing of De jurk suggests causality, for Van Tilt is made to cross paths with this particular frock regularly. Therefore, it seems as if director Loohman's angry discharge of Van Tilt has, in retrospect, the status of a godlike prophecy when he bade him farewell by wishing him bad

luck. If there is anything godlike about Loohman, however, it is his authority to take arbitrary decisions. No matter how obvious the analogy between the whereabouts of both Van Tilt and the dress, drawing such a parallel seems a trap set for the viewer. It is tempting to suggest that Van Tilt is punished for trying to prevent the manufacture of the dress and that the dress can cast a bad spell on practically anyone, since most characters appear to be affected by it somehow. Van Warmerdam's film seems to satisfy the viewer's desire for meaningful connections, but this is so deceptively logical that it, in case of a Van Warmerdam film, had better be distrusted. Is the striking discrepancy between the utter simplicity of the item and the severe impact it seems to have on several characters, not played primarily for laughs? Originally, the dress was produced as an object designed to radiate joy, but it has become a token of despair for the majority of characters. And at the same time, there is no clue at all that it is anything more than a strictly random item, and all the events that befall the characters are purely happenstance. The simple frock is to be interpreted as much as a highly significant garment and as a banal object, and as such it is a sign of unstable irony.

Irony requires that the reader/viewer can take the text/film literally, but a figurative interpretation is at least as plausible. In most cases, a line can be drawn between seriousness and irony, for the balance seems to tip into the favour of one of two poles, but in the case of Van Warmerdam, it is fairly difficult to decide how to read his films. Can De Noorderlingen be read as a reflection upon the impact of religion, or is it too absurd for that? Can De laatste dagen van Emma Blank be read as a reflection upon the greed of bourgeois citizens, or is it too absurd for a serious analysis? The final scene of De jurk can be taken as a lead, for the dress is depicted on a painting in a museum, made by the partner of one of the women who wore the garment. A teacher points out to a group of pupils that the cheerful colours contrast with the dark mood of the painting, but he also mentions that the characters have no eye for this antidote to gloominess: 'For them, the dress does not exist.' At that very moment, his interpretation is interrupted when the train conductor who has had some unfortunate experiences with women wearing such a dress, mutilates the painting with a Stanley knife. On the one hand, this aggressive act makes the teacher's explanation instantly insignificant, for without the dress, the effect of the contrast is lost. On the other hand, while the teacher said that the characters ignore the cheerful print, they now, ironically, have reason to neglect it, for the dress is cut out. This final scene oscillates between two moods – a serious one and a trivializing one – allowing the film spectator to choose either one. The violent act by the train conductor has strokes of absurdism, no doubt, but the act is also committed out of frustration, and thus can be said to have some serious purport. It is a recurrent feature in his

films that the tone keeps oscillating between seriousness and absurdism, and the resulting undecidability can be called 'ironic.'

If GRIMM is considered as his least successful film, then this is due to the impression that Van Warmerdam is overdoing attempts to escape any categorization. In terms of genre, the film constantly shifts gears. GRIMM starts as a fairy tale about children left behind in the freezing cold woods out of poverty, but unlike characters in a tale by the Brothers Grimm, they have to perform sexual acts – Jacob is forced to satisfy a farmer's wife, that 'witch,' and Marie prostitutes herself for money. After the clumsily executed death of her client, the film becomes a road movie. They travel on a moped and all of a sudden, when going through a tunnel, they find themselves in warm Spain. Their trip seems to come to an end when a Spanish surgeon lodges them in his affluent residence, and marries Marie. It will soon turn out to be horror in bright sunlight, for the surgeon removes one of Jacob's kidneys.[25] More dead than alive, Jacob finally arrives on a deserted film set used to make spaghetti westerns, together with his sister. There is the conventional shoot-out amidst a sand storm, but the victor, Jacob, uses a bow and arrow instead of a gun, before the film concludes with a biblical reference when he takes off in the company of both Marie and a donkey. Even more indistinct than genre classifications in GRIMM is the nature of the relationship between Jacob and Marie. Significantly, the script opens with a kind of instruction leaflet that the brother and sister may come across as 12-year-old children, but that their age is 'abstract.' The actors playing them are over 20, but they radiate a 'visual youth,' according to the script. The close intimacy between the two is striking: when Marie complains that she is cold in the opening scene, her mother tells her to sleep in her brother's bed; they take a bath together in a Spanish hostel, caressing each other; Jacob is jealous of Marie's status as the surgeon's wife. Though GRIMM is about the tight bond between a brother and sister, Van Warmerdam told that the term 'incest' should not cross the viewer's mind, 'for that is a social term, and I do not want any social or so-called contemporary message.' A social reading risks restricting the preferred plurality of meanings, and such plurality is better served by indistinct genre classifications, abstract ages and an enigmatic relationship between brother and sister.

To guarantee such plurality, main characters often have common, even archaic names, such as Jacob, Anton, Marie, particularly popular in the 1950s. Such names, as Van Warmerdam has said, refer to a period of class differences and paternal authority, implying a hierarchically ordered neighbourhood where one still lived according to strict social roles. Though the option that this bygone era still can exert some nostalgic fascination is not crossed out, this period is presented in a laughable manner, thanks to its relatively detached depiction.[26] This duality between fascination and absurdism is

never truly solved in his films, which is most evident in the representation of blacks. About halfway through De Noorderlingen, two white priests arrive to showcase an African man, labelled as a 'negro,' as an educational exhibition. In its portrayal of the black man as a caged animal, this image reproduces the worst of stereotypes, but it can also be regarded as a parodic mimicry of a cringing, patronizing attitude on the part of white people. To underscore this latter option, we see that the priests are busy hanging a wooden board, announcing the exhibition, but it breaks in two halves. The function of the 'negro' becomes even more complex when we consider the preoccupation the young teenager Thomas, the butcher's son, has with news flashes about the figure of Patrice Lumumba, a resistance fighter in Congo who contributed to the country's independence from Belgium. Thomas even paints his face black and dresses like Lumumba, identifying with a man totally foreign to his own petit bourgeois environment. Seeing how the priests do not permit the 'negro' to smoke, Thomas aids him in escaping from his cage. He also helps him to take shelter by sitting on his shoulders in the guise of Lumumba, while wearing a long coat. Thomas gets away with the trick, because the forest ranger Anton presumes that the postman Plagge, who is pestering him all the time, is hidden underneath. Strictly speaking, Thomas' attitude is marked by exoticism, but since the teenager is presented as a down-to-earth boy, shorn of any pathetic gesture, it is at the same time a particularly dry-comic variant of exoticism. Later the black man is once again shown as stereotypically wild. Thomas has brought him to a subterranean place of refuge in the woods. He then witnesses an accidental killing of a young girl by the forest ranger, who submerges her body in a small pond. The negro takes revenge in a primitive fashion: only dressed in a skirt, he jumps from a tree upon the forest ranger and lances the latter's eyes with a handmade spear. After the hunter has been blinded, the black man hides in the postman's house, dressed in his uniform. Thus, the black man's role in De Noorderlingen constantly oscillates. On the one hand, he is depicted according to old-fashioned notions about black men, still current in the 1950s: he is either a primitive brute or a token of exoticism. On the other hand, the blank and deadpan presentation is so wilfully odd that the option of ridicule keeps resonating throughout. As said, the impression that his films remain caught between seriousness and ludicrousness makes his work so thoroughly ironic.

A BLACK HORROR-PASTICHE: *BORGMAN*

In comparison to its immediate successors Ober and De laatste dagen van Emma Blank, Borgman is a bit more macabre, without losing its comic tone entirely. After its premiere at the main competition of Cannes, reviewers made connections to films like Pier Paolo Pasolini's Teorema [Theorem] (1968), Kim Ki-duk's Bin-jip [3 Iron] (2004), Dominik Moll's Lemming (2005), and Ben Wheatley's Kill List (2011) as well as to the cinema of Buñuel and David Lynch. Foremost among the comparisons, however, was Michael Haneke's Funny Games (1997), except that Van Warmerdam's home invasion film was called 'actually funny' by critic Robbie Collin in the *Daily Telegraph*. In Haneke's film, two decently dressed and seemingly polite boys have a small request – one of them only asks for eggs to bake a pie – but the pair develops into manipulating intruders. The couple starts tormenting the three residents – father, mother and boy-child – but as they tell in frontally staged shots, they merely commit their violent acts to entertain the audience, presuming that film spectators are delighted by watching torture scenes on the screen. In suggesting that they have some contract with the public, on whose behalf they perform their evil, the two boys perversely make the viewers complicit to their atrocious deeds. After a series of brutalities, most of them committed off-screen or at some distance from the camera, the woman succeeds in killing one of the boys with a gun, shown in plain view of us. This scene which sometimes is greeted with a sense of relief by the audience, is 'neutralized' by a notoriously cruel joke, played upon the film spectator. The other guy takes the remote control and rewinds the film, until the moment when the woman got hold of the gun and then grabs the weapon himself, hence reducing the chance for catharsis. In the end, the woman, the last of the family surviving, is casually thrown overboard of a boat, as if the guys have become bored by their 'funny games,' which in fact have proven not to be funny at all.

Like the boy in Haneke's film who asks for eggs, Borgman also has a small request at the beginning: the vagrant Camiel Borgman, who introduces himself as Anton Breskens, just wants to take a bath, because 'I am dirty.' This request is refused him by the middle-class businessman Richard who even beats up the stranger after the latter insinuates that he has been on intimate terms with Richard's wife, Marina. Apparently, the woman feels guilty about the violent treatment and she offers the bearded stranger a shed with a bed on the condition that he does not show himself in the house. Time and again, Borgman asks for little favours – one more night, a breakfast, another bath – and the woman gives in to each request. He sneaks into the house at will, but he is for some reason never perceived by her husband, Richard, only by the three children and the Danish au pair who are all immediately under the spell

of Borgman. They behave compliant and obedient and never betray his presence to Richard. The hobo exercises a hypnotic power upon Marina as well, and this is affirmed in the scenes in which he sits, naked and squatting, over her. These shots can be taken as a clear reference to Henry Fuseli's 1781 oil painting *The Nightmare*, which depicts a sleeping woman with her head hanging down, surmounted by an incubus.[27] Just as in the painting, it seems as if the demon is capable of injecting her with nightmares. In BORGMAN, the content of her dreadful dreams is time and again a revelation of her husband's aggressive nature, which Borgman himself had experienced physically. The one true, albeit very brief, horror and blood-spilling moment of the film is also one of Marina's nightmares: her husband sexually assaults her and as soon as he cuts her flesh with a Stanley knife, she wakes up. As a consequence of the nightmares, Marina develops a growing suspicion towards Richard up to the point that she tells Borgman that her husband has to die. But not only he will be poisoned, Marina herself will also die after drinking a glass of wine offered to her by Borgman. The corpses are buried into the garden, which is being strewn with artificial fertilizer. Meanwhile, their children as well as their nanny have been drugged and have each undergone a small operation. The resulting scar on their backs is a sign that they have definitely joined the gang of conspirators.

The purport of Haneke's FUNNY GAMES was unashamedly didactic. The film was made as a provocative reflection upon the too alluring depiction of violence in much contemporary cinema. By way of its coolly detached and minimalist style, FUNNY GAMES was deliberately made as a nauseating antidote to films like NATURAL BORN KILLERS (Oliver Stone, 1994) and PULP FICTION (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), which (too) eagerly show graphic violence for the viewer's entertainment. As said, BORGMAN refrains from graphic violence, except for a very brief shot, only a few frames, and as such it recalls FUNNY GAMES, but it lacks the didacticism that Haneke's film is pervaded with. Since Van Warmerdam usually shies away from offering social criticism, it is only consistent that the motivations of his villains are 'blurry,' and that his horror pastiche is without a true 'killer punch' (Shoard).[28] In the first half of the film, BORGMAN creates the expectation of being a spellbound horror thriller. At one point, Marina tells her husband that something surrounds them, 'an agreeable warmth that both intoxicates and confuses one; a sheath of something that wants to do evil.' All the ingredients for a vicious criticism of middle-class values in the form of an occult horror film are there, including a no-nonsense husband who downplays Marina's intuition as a hallucination. Instead, BORGMAN starts to shift gear from here, as if Van Warmerdam wants to 'eschew standard genre trappings,' just as he did in his other films. One might have expected that Borgman would take revenge upon the bigoted and decadent

lifestyle of Richard, but that would have been at odds with Van Warmerdam's reluctance to inject his films with social messages. In fact Borgman, as he tells Marina, who halts him as he is about to depart, has no bigger ambition than to 'play': 'I am bored. I want to play. I do not feel like hiding. I want to eat at the big dinner table.' If he is so bent on playing, could he then not, Marina proposes, return in a different guise?

By foregrounding the element of play, the promise of an occult horror film is twisted to scenes of absurdist and black comedy. Black humour, as it is characterized by André Breton who coined the term in his *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, is the opposite of joviality, for it is the 'mortal enemy of sentimentality' (25). We witness something horrific, but because of a too detached representation of the scenery, we are not encouraged to sympathize with the misfortune of the victims. Their fate is depicted in such a trivializing manner that a laugh is closer at hand than a shocked response. This is the case in BORGMAN, when Borgman's eagerness for play becomes the preamble to a series of calmly executed and elaborate plans, devoid of any emotion or passion. Aided by his offbeat accomplices, Borgman disposes of the gardener and his wife by encasing their heads in buckets of concrete and then sinking the bodies, upside down, to the bottom of a greenish lake 'like a submarine sculpture' (Calhoun). Since the job of gardener has become vacant by now, Richard will select a new employee from among five applicants. Unbeknownst to him, Borgman and his co-conspirators have selected a number of prospectless candidates whom they pay to ring at the doorbell: non-Western foreigners without diplomas, 'even a Negro,' Richard exclaims in despair. When Borgman then offers his services, Richard immediately takes the bait. The fact that he does not recognize the shorn and scrubbed applicant as the bedraggled tramp he has mistreated before is a token of his self-absorption. By contrast, Marina sees immediately through his appearance. Having Borgman around the house gives her the idea that she might become close with the gardener, but he discourages any advance as 'too early.' He insists that he plays the gardener, and that as such Richard is his superior, and one is not supposed to mess with the boss' wife. Only after Richard's demise does he get intimate with her, but it is a kiss of death.

Upon the question why Van Warmerdam made BORGMAN, he responded in an interview with cinema.nl: 'I felt like making a horror film. Or rather something along that line.' BORGMAN is a typical Van Warmerdam film in the sense that as soon as you believe you are watching a genre film with social purport, it frustrates that expectation. Out of his 'fear of meaning,' he bends generic conventions to such an extent that it either becomes a pastiche (as in BORGMAN) or a different genre (as in GRIMM, going from fairy tale to road movie to horror to western). Moreover, in each and every film, the scales tip in favour of playful elements over social and/or ideological aspects. On the

one hand, this playfulness expresses itself in dry-comic scenes, ranging from the son's attempt at cutting flies with a pair of scissors in Abel to the sinking of bodies with their heads in buckets of concrete in Borgman. On the other hand, deliberate role-playing is used to humorous effect in especially his last films. The husband and wife in Kleine Teun pretending to be brother and sister; the waiter aiming to obtain redress from his very own scriptwriter in Ober; Emma's family members, who play an utterly servile household in De laatste dagen van Emma Blank; and the idler Borgman, playing the role of gardener in such a serious manner that it becomes slightly absurd.

Moreover, Van Warmerdam's ninth feature, Schneider vs. Bax (2015), as such can be regarded as a form of 'play.' In this film, the family man Schneider is given the assignment to kill the writer Bax. Schneider is reluctant to do so, because it is his birthday, but the job cannot be postponed, the contractor Mertens tells him. He is not impressed by Mertens' arguments, such as 'Tuesday is a perfect day for a good kill, because that is the lucky day of the week.' Schneider will only start preparations after Mertens has told him that Bax is a 'child killer.' When Schneider is on his way, the very same contractor instructs Bax how to await the arrival of the assassin. Thus, the whole scheme is an intricate trap set for Schneider who is, Mertens assures Bax, a 'child killer.' Schneider vs. Bax is set in the present; we do not get background information about any of the two titular heroes, except for the questionable statement that they both are child killers. Nor do we get to know anything substantial about the minor characters. Thus, the film is structured like an extended shoot-out of a cowboy movie, set in the midst of the polder. Unlike a classical western, however, it lacks the conventional distinction between 'good' and 'bad.' Should we sympathize with Schneider, father of two young daughters? But he behaves mercilessly to a woman 'from Culemborg' who crosses his path, and lies to his wife each time she phones him to inquire after his job. Initially, he has set the strict condition that he will only kill Bax when there are no visitors, but later he is adamant to kill Bax's daughter as well. Should we then rather identify with Bax, who uses drugs and alcohol and detests the presumed healthy food his depressed daughter consumes ('muesli is meant for goats'). He is unfriendly to her even though she pays him a visit after they have not seen each other for a year. He grumpily tells her: 'I want a daughter who is well off, not a sad one.' And he has apparently good reasons to behave extremely rudely towards his father, 'that bastard.' Since the protagonists are not endowed with a clear history, we are not manipulated in regard to with whom to identify, and this lack of guidance can be taken as a form of 'play.' As Van Warmerdam suggested, perhaps one should not identify with characters here but with props, landscape and actions: guns, water, sky, horizon, people shooting and wading through swamps (qtd. in Beekman, V4).[29]

Van Warmerdam's ludic approach to cinema can be taken as a response to the strict Calvinist-Catholic tradition that Dutch culture still was steeped in during his childhood and adolescence. His films allude to this tradition of firm hierarchies and unilateral meanings, but also drift away from these conventions up to a point where meanings cannot be fixed at all. Averse to explicit (social) messages and conventional psychological motivations, his films are, despite their common starting points, difficult to read, since they are not easy to categorize, neither in terms of genre nor in tone. They oscillate between tragedy and humour, between horror and hilarity, between irony and seriousness. If the tone tends to incline towards one pole, one can be sure that it will soon be tilted to the other pole. The more this might confuse spectators, the better.

DEADPAN IRONY

The way irony has been discussed in this study has made it into a curiously indefinable trope. Traditionally, as I already mentioned in chapter 3, irony is taken in terms of an antiphrasis, meaning that one thing is said, but the opposite implied. Or irony was associated with a notion of 'excess,' as in the examples of deliberate camp in chapter 4: conventions are blown up to such an extent that viewers no longer take them seriously. Gerrit Komrij once wrote a review of *Een romance* [*A Romance*] (1973) by Dutch novelist Dirk Ayelt Kooiman in which he praised the book in the most exuberant manner, as the Ultimate Masterpiece. It is such a rave review that Kooiman's friends suspected that the article was meant to be ironic. Komrij was capable of making such a joke and the article itself contained quite a number of stock phrases of the sort used by publishing houses to advertise their novels.[30] Komrij's review shows that an ironic text – let us assume that it is, for the moment – can be read perfectly non-ironic, which provokes the question: If readers regard an ironic text as non-ironic, does it thereby become non-ironic (and vice versa)?

For those who are attached to irony as inherently textual, the answer is 'no.' The reader/viewer is supposed to reconstruct the 'intended' meaning of the text/film, and not pursue anachronistic readings. In his *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Wayne Booth goes to great pains to 'stabilize' irony: what clues can help a reader/viewer to decide whether a text/film is ironic or not? Booth is not satisfied until he can narrow down a text to a specific meaning. If he comes across a truly impenetrable text, like a work by Samuel Beckett, e.g., he uses an escape route and terms it a form of 'infinitely unstable irony.' Booth would have great problems with irony as a mode of reading, i.e., with those who answer the question above with a 'yes.' In the words of Linda Hutcheon, how-

ever, irony has to 'happen'; whether a text 'is' ironic or not is an interpretive act. The crucial condition is that readers/viewers decide to attribute irony to a text. Blue Movie and Spetters were such curious cases, because there is little reason to regard the films themselves as ironic, but as soon as spectators make the controversial production history of both films part of their reading of the film, irony can be attributed after all. I side here with the astute remarks made by Sontag in her essay on camp, in note 30: Time 'contracts the sphere of banality,' because time 'liberates the work of art from moral relevance.' Over the years, Sontag postulates, we have become less involved in the work, and 'can enjoy, instead of be frustrated by, the failure of the attempt.' Since we are no longer as shocked by the brutality of Spetters as viewers in 1980 and no longer tend to see the film according to a yardstick of realism, there is room to appreciate the film as an ironic comment upon the 'immoral' behaviour of the male youngsters.

The irony in a Van Warmerdam film is even of a slightly more complicated nature, and would definitely be too subtle for one of Booth's 'stable' categories. As regards the cosmic irony, discussed in chapter 7, a God-like entity, embodied by scriptwriter Herman in Ober, is, in the formula of M.H. Abrams, 'deliberately manipulating events so as to lead to false hopes, but then to frustrate and mock the protagonist' (92). Despite promises for a more fortunate course of events, Edgar becomes the victim of his reproach to Herman that he has no creative solutions on offer, for the scriptwriter promptly misuses his powerful position.

The overall, unstable, irony of Van Warmerdam is one of unreadability, thwarting (generic) expectations in order to confuse the viewer. Moreover, the presentation of 'negroes' in his films leaves the viewer in doubt whether they reproduce hackneyed imagery or satirize Western paternalistic attitudes towards blacks. For, if the purport 'risks' becoming too critical, playful elements are inserted to counterbalance the seriousness. On the one hand, this playfulness expresses itself in drily comic scenes, like the one with the old woman slowly packing an arrow in Ober. On the other hand, deliberate role-playing is used to humorous effect in especially his last films. Keet in Kleine Teun, takes up the role of 'sister' to her husband; Haneveld behaves like the proverbial obedient butler to his wife; Borgman is very serious in his role as gardener. All three look like everyday types of characters, but they become comically absurd since they develop into or have already developed into villainous schemers. The more polite and obliging their appearance, the darker the energies which ultimately are unleashed as soon as play time is over.

Initially, every family member in De laatste dagen van Emma Blank seems to feel compassion for Emma and gives in to her capricious wishes. One of her most hilarious demands is that she orders the 'butler' Haneveld –

who is her husband, actually – to wear a moustache, so that he will gain a certain allure. Haneveld tells her he is hardly able to grow a beard, so she makes him buy a fake moustache. When he has one under his nose, she starts, in the presence of everyone else, criticizing its size: it is too big. It seemed a bit childish to have a small moustache, Haneveld replies. 'There is quite a gap between this moustache and a small one,' Emma snaps, 'I had asked for a moustache that suits you.' Since he had bought several items, he is asked to try them on in an adjacent room and to enter as if he has been wearing a moustache all his life. And when another day Haneveld is wearing a different fake item than the one Emma had chosen originally, he obediently starts changing the moustache.

When it turns out that there is nothing of any value to be inherited, however, the charade is immediately over. From that moment onwards, they all let Emma waste away, only offering her a wet sponge for her face to prevent her from dying of dehydration. Gonnie wants to give her mother a glass of water, but Haneveld takes it away after she has had a few sips, saying: 'She did not have milk to breastfeed you. Is that a mother?' And when Emma dies thereupon, Haneveld mentions that they did give her water, and while bending over the corpse, says: 'It was out of goodness, you hear? Out of goodness.' The most benevolent of characters turns out to have repressed the darkest of impulses. Owing to such darkness in Van Warmerdam's cinema, the more ludic approach of Het echte leven or Rent a Friend, both discussed in chapter 7, is supplemented with the perverse impulses from Buñuel, which comes close to grotesque effects, as is the subject of the next chapter.[31]