

# From Grotesque Caricature to Grotesque Satire

In an interview, he gave at the beginning of his career, Quentin Tarantino said that the only people in America who tend not to take violence seriously and laugh at it are 'black people. They don't let violence affect them at all' (qtd. in Willis, 212). What Tarantino had in mind was to make movies in which violence is represented as ridiculous as the violence in his beloved Sergio Leone spaghetti westerns, but aimed at a white (middle-class) public. And indeed, his films, which feature not only extreme violence, but also cheap jokes about shit and drugs and have a lot of talk about 'niggers,' became a tremendous success. The horrific scenes in his pictures provoke laughter,<sup>1</sup> as the infamous 'ear cut' scene from his debut feature *RESERVOIR DOGS* (1992) illustrates – a film about a well-prepared heist that fails miserably. In an attempt to find out the identity of the 'rat,' psychopath Vic Vega, whose codename is Mr. Blonde, threatens to cut off the ear of a police officer. Preceding this torture scene, he praises the radio station 'Supersound of the Seventies.' When he switches the radio on, we hear the middle-of-the-road track 'Stuck in the Middle with You' by Stealers Wheel. Then, Mr. Blonde takes a sharp razor to the officer's ear; while the camera turns away and shows the hangar's blank wall, we hear the officer screaming through the Stealers Wheel song. Conventionally, a viewer may be inclined to identify with a victim who meets a sorry fate, but here the combination of a horrific scene with the carefree music is so ludicrous that the viewer may not only react appalled, but cannot suppress a giggle or a smile. The deliberately chosen soundtrack, to which Mr. Blonde starts to make ultra-relaxed dance movements, is incompatible with his upcoming deed.<sup>2</sup>

According to Sharon Willis, an internal social censorship mechanism is activated, since we experience fun rather than shock. This produces a mismatch between our affective state (laughter) and our awareness that we are witnessing something horrific. The mixed emotion of shock and laughter

this scene unleashes serves to exacerbate the gruesomeness of the torture scene. Tormenting the officer was already bad enough, but the fact that the light-hearted song keeps playing, 'indifferent' to his suffering, possibly makes it even worse. In case the cheerful 'Stuck in the Middle with You' makes the spectator smile or creates only a slightly happy mood, the song starts to function as a sign of a lack of consideration for the police officer. The easy-going tune in *RESERVOIR DOGS* becomes 'complicit' with the malicious actions of Mr. Blonde.

The mismatch between the scene (relaxed music/horrific deed) and response (hovering between disgust and laughter) may produce a feeling of shame, since as socially disciplined beings the spectators know they should not have laughed. Those viewers who have a habit of watching gory movies and therefore already tend to laugh at violence in cinema, may not experience this mismatch, but those viewers who realize that it was fairly inappropriate to burst into laughter, precisely these spectators may feel as if, to borrow men's 'worst fear' in a Tarantino film, 'they are caught with their pants down' (Willis, 190).

This characterization of Tarantino's *nouvelle violence* cinema accords with the definition of what has come to be known as the 'grotesque,' whose effect, as Philip Thomson has it, is 'at least as strongly emotional as it is intellectual' (5). The incongruous co-presence of some laughable and disgusting things is the seminal building block of the grotesque. It derives its impact from the intrusion of comic elements in a 'spine-chillingly uncanny' setting (5). In trying to specify the conditions of the concept, Thomson mentions as an extra ingredient that a grotesque scene is preferably presented in a 'matter-of-fact fashion,' that is, within a relatively realistic framework. Moreover, some physical aspect is usually foregrounded, in this case the severe mutilation of someone's face. We abhor such cruel abnormal physical treatment, but add only some dose of humour to it, and the 'civilized and sane response' of disgust risks being mixed with 'unholy glee and barbaric delight' (9). And here is the astonishing paradoxical effect of the grotesque: one may expect that the comic makes it less harmful, for a laugh is presumed to release the tension, but it can also work the other way around, as I argued on the basis of the scene from *RESERVOIR DOGS*. When something repulsive is juxtaposed with something comic, it can generate a strong affect response, for the laughing spectator may feel ashamed for not having had a 'proper' reaction. In this chapter I will examine a number of films according to a sliding scale of variants of the 'grotesque,' from cartoonish versions to satires with a vengeance.<sup>3</sup>

## THE GROTESQUE AS A CONCEPT

As a concept, the grotesque dates back to the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when ancient Roman decorative art was rediscovered consisting of fantastic mixtures of humans and animals with plants. Over the centuries, the grotesque has often been linked to a monstrous exaggeration of physical idiosyncrasies, and as such it has been seen, often in a pejorative manner, as overstepping a classical ideal of symmetry. The grotesque tended to be treated as a 'vulgar species of the comic' (Thomson, 13). In his *De boekenpoeper*, Maarten van Buuren argues that, until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a grotesque breach of classical prescriptions was only appreciated in a few periods, like the era of Baroque style and the Romantic era. In those periods, some of Shakespeare's plays which mingled traditional stories about kings with down-to-earth elements like the pranks of jesters or matter-of-fact statements by grave diggers, were received more favourably than during other times. Van Buuren also mentions that *Madame Bovary* (1857) by Gustave Flaubert, written at the peak of the realist movement, was considered as a polemical novel, because Emma's tragic agony is brusquely interrupted by a banal melody, sung by a blind man in the street. According to him, this crude cross-cutting from the sublime to the vulgar was regarded as the true scandal of the novel at the time of its publication (60-62).

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In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of the grotesque has gained a fresh impetus, because it got elevated to an aesthetic category in itself. It does not only owe this raise in prestige to the enthusiasm among surrealists, but above all to two important studies, which, quite remarkably, happen to take totally divergent positions. In chapter 1, I referred to Mikhail Bakhtin, who dedicated a study to the 16<sup>th</sup>-century French writer Rabelais, for Bakhtin the uncontested master of what he called 'grotesque realism.' Rabelais had the guts to submit anything sublime and exalted to free and easy folk humour, time and again concerning bodily transgressions. According to Bakhtin, it had a positive and liberating force when something lofty and grandiose was converted into physical representations of a laughable nature, which, as I argued in chapter 1, was the case with FLODDER. Apart from being jolly, such a grotesque effect had a vitalizing function, since it worked to downplay pomposity.

Whereas Bakhtin proposed the grotesque as a sub-form of folk humour, the German art historian Wolfgang Kayser connected the concept to the idea of the 'metaphysically terrible' (15). The grotesque artist 'plays, half laughingly, half horrified, with the deep absurdities of existence' in an attempt to 'exorcise the demonic elements in the world' (Thomson, 18). According to Kayser, the grotesque arouses contradictory feelings; 'we smile at the deformations but are appalled by the horrible and monstrous elements as such' (31). He describes Kafka's works like the story *Die Verwandlung* [*The Metamorphosis*]

as 'cold grotesques' for we never know when we 'are supposed to smile ... and when we are supposed to shudder' (148-49). For Kayser, the grotesque 'instills fear of life,' since it confronts us with an 'estranged world': 'we are strongly affected and terrified because it is our world which ceases to be reliable' (185).

Kayser's position is indebted to the realm of the irrational and the mysterious rather than the comic, due to his 'somewhat melodramatic over-emphasis on the "demonic",' as Thomson claims (18). Studies on the grotesque have been versatile since Bakhtin and Kayser, because their opposing perspectives have inspired scholars to come towards a definition which usually walks the middle ground between the two spectrums. At the core of the grotesque is, as Thomson argues, an '*unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response*,' which is only a fairly abstract description of its formal pattern. Secondary to the definition is that the grotesque concerns the '*ambivalently abnormal*' (27). Abnormal is the outlandish juxtaposition of elements which do not logically fit together (like the solemnity of a royal court and the buffoonery of the jester). The adverb 'ambivalently' is applicable to the people's response: for the one the work (of art) will be nauseating, for another funny, and a third will consider it both horrifying and comic. Thomson presumes that the latter group will be the largest one, not really knowing whether to shiver or to laugh.<sup>4</sup> The grotesque has a 'harder message' than tragicomedy, according to him, for the latter points out that 'life is alternately comic and tragic, the world is now a vale of tears, now a circus.' In the case of the grotesque, 'the vale of tears and the circus are one,' implying that 'tragedy is in some ways comic and all comedy is in some way tragic and pathetic' (63).

Thomson has set himself the task to draw dividing lines between the grotesque and other modes and categories, like the absurd, the bizarre, the macabre, and so on, in order to come to a better understanding of the functions and the purposes of the grotesque. According to him, these functions vary from purely ornamental to showing off one's eccentricity to aggressive bewilderment, when 'the guffaw becomes a grimace' (59). My overview will not be as exhaustive as Thomson's, for I will restrict myself to three interconnections: the grotesque-caricature; the grotesque-irony; and the grotesque-satire.

## A WANNABE TARANTINO CAPER MOVIE: *BLACK OUT*

If, strictly speaking, *NEW KIDS TURBO* and *VET HARD* are too absurd and cartoonish to be considered under the umbrella term of the grotesque, then both *NAAR DE KLOTE!* [*WASTED!*] (Ian Kerkhof, 1996)<sup>5</sup> and *BLACK OUT* (Arne Toonen, 2012) are borderline cases. They are hyperbolic as well, but they revere the cinema of Tarantino in a way that *NEW KIDS TURBO* and *VET HARD*

do not or only to a lesser extent.<sup>6</sup> *BLACK OUT* not only looks like a Tarantino-style caper movie, but Toonen's film also has some explicit references to his work. To start with, the two 'power babes' Petra and Charity have to collect some money from people who owe the old gangster boss 'Granddad' a debt. At one point in the film, Petra mentions that gangster films do not offer female criminals the prospect of a true career. The guys watch *SCARFACE* (Brian de Palma, 1984) a thousand times, but Michelle Pfeiffer is a poor model for women, she claims. Charity then suggests *FOXY BROWN* (Jack Hill, 1974), a role played by Pam Grier who is briefly mentioned in a discussion among the gangsters in *RESERVOIR DOGS*, and who performed the role of the title heroine in Tarantino's *JACKIE BROWN* (1997). Petra disagrees, because Foxy Brown is not a professional by choice, but she is motivated by revenge. After the two women smash the window of a car with a cricket bat and an axe, Charity refers to Uma Thurman in Tarantino's double-feature *KILL BILL* (2003-4), but Petra briefly replies: 'That is revenge, too.'

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A more oblique reference to Tarantino's cinema concerns the controversial use of the term 'nigger.' In *BLACK OUT*, this word is only used during the scene when main protagonist Jos Vreeswijk is interrogated by the cynical police commissioner André; in Tarantino's films, the so-called N-word is uttered frequently. It is obvious from his pictures that Tarantino perceives black culture as the embodiment of cool. He considered it a compliment when someone told him that he had 'given white boys the kind of movies black kids get' (qtd. in Willis, 211). It is one thing, however, to be infatuated with black masculinity as a model for 'looking like a badass,' but the frequent mention of the so-called N-word is another thing. If Tarantino believes that African-Americans think that term is 'trendy or slick,' then he is mistaken, black filmmaker Spike Lee once criticized him.<sup>7</sup> Lee refuses to use the term because it is too much burdened by the dark history of slavery, but Tarantino's notion of history is entirely different. For him, history does not so much refer to actual events from the past, but it is basically a quotable text. Writes Willis: 'For the world of Tarantino's films is a world without history – a world where all culture is simultaneous, where movies only really watch other movies' (213). And thus, one can fantasize and stage any event, like Hitler dying in a fire in a French film theatre in *INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS* (2009), even when such an event clashes with historical data. Debunking official documents Tarantino builds a 'privatized public sphere' based upon the principle of recycling. He can appropriate anything from television, music, popular films and put it in the blender of a new, contemporaneous text. Expanding this logic, Tarantino's films offer a 'screen beyond history' (213), in which images and words can circulate without their usual connotations. The frequent use of the term 'nigger' may hint at Tarantino's (utopian) desire to sanitize the word and to lift it 'out of its web of social meanings' (Willis, 209).

Bearing this utopian goal in mind, the interrogation scene in *BLACK OUT* adds an additional layer to the use of the word 'nigger' (*neger* in Dutch). In the presence of his young assistant, Youssef, the experienced detective, André, tells an old anecdote about Jos, who is about to be interrogated for the first time since he has quit the criminal circuit ten years ago (which is one of the running gags every character says to Jos: 'Thought you had quit the business?'). The story is about some coke party when Jos was trying to seduce a girl, who happened to date a 'big nigger.' Youssef asks whether there is no different way of expressing this; André does not get the point. 'Well, nigger is a slave term.' André defends the use of the word: 'But it was a nigger all right. Niggers address each other like that all day. Nigger this, nigger that.' Youssef keeps silent, and André continues: 'You are the very first Arab who makes a fuss about this.' Youssef corrects him: 'I am a Berber' [an ethnic group indigenous to North Africa]. While there is a shift from the interrogation room to the flashback at the coke party, André's off-screen voice continues the story: 'So our Jos stands in front of a Harry Belafonte who is two heads taller.' 'Who's that?' Youssef informs. 'A nigger,' the black guard who had been silent so far, dryly replies.

This dialogue is to be seen as a comic wink at the criticism targeted at Tarantino. Initially, the conversation references the controversy surrounding the N-word, a 'slave term,' but the troublesome nature of the term is neutralized as soon as the black guard uses the word 'nigger' to clarify a euphemistic expression. One might consider this punchline – the black man using the term 'nigger' – as an attempt to give some backing to Tarantino against the charges of an immoral use of the N-word.

Whereas, as I said, Tarantino recycles images, sounds and texts from other cultural objects, *BLACK OUT* in turn replays the privatized universe of Tarantino's cinema. And thus it is only consistent that Toonen amply borrows from other sources as well, just like Tarantino. As regards the particular story element of a protagonist whose mind has gone blank just preceding an upcoming wedding, *BLACK OUT* resembles *THE HANGOVER*. There is, in a mob drama like *BLACK OUT*, the inevitable quote from *THE GODFATHER*. And a detective who prides himself on his 'intuition' like André does, is liable to become scapegoated: he got it entirely wrong and in the end he suffers the flop from degradation to a policeman carrying out alcohol checks.

The main reason for inclusion of *BLACK OUT* in this chapter on the grotesque is not due to the intertextual references to gangster movies, but because Toonen is overdoing the representations of its characters, in a fast-paced style, which reminds one of the Guy Ritchie films, even more than of Tarantino movies. Several of the directors, the British Ritchie among them, who followed in Tarantino's footsteps had the tendency to escape the label of 'copycat' by

accenting the oddities of its story and its characters, as well as to highlight sweeping cinematic devices, like fast zooms. Toonen's film is shot as edgy as the Ritchie's crime-thrillers *LOCK, STOCK AND TWO SMOKING BARRELS* (1998) and *SNATCH* (2000) with freeze frames, extreme low angles, frontal stagings, hectic camera movements, sound effects and smart-ass voice-overs, like the one about Inez who is nicknamed *Cocaïne*, because she can perfectly determine the degree of purity of this white powder. Hence, as in a Ritchie film, the frenetic style of Toonen's *BLACK OUT* underscores the slightly overdrawn plot with its innumerable situations and the slightly overdrawn representation of the characters. A gangster boss like Don Corleone arouses fear because he hides his cruelty and authority behind a veneer of calmness, giving him an aura of impenetrability, but the two gangster bosses in Toonen's film border on the caricaturesque. Like the ruthless mafia boss tied to a wheelchair in *THINGS TO DO IN DENVER WHEN YOU'RE DEAD* (Gary Fleder, 1995), 'Granddad' sits in a wheelchair and has a personal nurse who looks after his condition. He uses foul language and can burst into anger, but his fits can suddenly switch into serious coughs or make him run out of breath. The other gangster boss is at least as uncommon, named Vlad the Gay Basher, a former dancer in the Russian ballet, who realized that his agile body came in handy in violent settings which are reminiscent of *FIGHT CLUB* (David Fincher, 1999). That was the start of his career as a criminal. Vlad is a smooth-talking character, who can take it in his stride to blackmail a person on the phone and to correct one of the customers in his bowling centre: 'No walking on the lanes, please.' Or while he is suffocating his failing assistant with a pillow, he says to a bowler who orders a coke: 'I will be with you in a minute,' which happens to be a running line uttered by Cary Grant in *BRINGING UP BABY* (Howard Hawks, 1938).

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The representations of these gangster bosses are abnormal, and definitely based upon a clash of incompatible elements.<sup>8</sup> The terminally ill and incredibly avaricious 'Granddad' behaves in an authoritarian way, also towards his two sexy dames, whom he advises to adopt more creative – that is, ruthless – methods in collecting money. Vlad gracefully dances to the music of *Swan Lake* when he has planned to kill protagonist Jos on a bowling alley, to no avail by the way. But this clash of incompatibilities is not as unresolved as the concept of the grotesque requires, since the two bosses are ludicrous rather than threatening. They are downright criminals but of such an oddball nature that laughter at their exaggerated portrayal is more obvious than any uncanny feelings among spectators. The identities of both 'Granddad' and Vlad lack the mysteriousness to bring about a divided reaction from the viewer, and therefore they are not so much grotesque, but a sub-form: a grotesque caricature. And ultimately, the scales in this Dutch *nouvelle violence* film tip in favour of comedy, no matter how serious the setting seems to be, as some brief exam-

ples imply. 'Opium is the people's religion,' Inez says, and she uses a crucifix to snort her coke. At one point, Jos is fighting in a car, while the Tom Tom says: 'Turn around if possible.' Or what to think of the scene in which the gangster Gianni – who gets mad when someone calls him 'Jan' – has his two companions point a gun at two black guys. When Gianni describes their business as a service for walking dogs, the guys start to explain in detail during this tense moment that their speciality is to cut the dogs' hair.

### (NOT) A TARANTINO DANCE MOVIE: *NAAR DE KLOTE!*

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*BLACK OUT* is a grotesque caricature, in which the chill down the spine is drowned out by comic exaggeration. Ian Kerkhof's *NAAR DE KLOTE!* offers the other side of this coin. The film is not set up as a comedy nor as a mob thriller, but gradually evolves into a gangster film with caricatural undertones. The film focuses upon the young couple Jacqueline and Martijn who move from Tilburg to Amsterdam, and get involved in the house scene of the mid-1990s. Popular drugs like magic mushrooms and ecstasy are crucial ingredients of their lifestyle. The first ten minutes of the film are shot like a trip: fluorescent colours, bright lightning, unorthodox angles, out-of-focus and jerky camera movements, so that the opening has many moments of an abstract quality. Although *NAAR DE KLOTE!*, which is primarily aimed at a public of adolescents and young adults, is unlike Kerkhof's previous films, the abstract quality of many shots can be seen to close the gap to his earlier work. In the early 1990s, Kerkhof had earned a reputation as an avant-garde and experimental director in the tradition of Frans Zwartjes<sup>9</sup> with his *KYODAI MAKES THE BIG TIME*, winner of the Netherlands Film Festival's Golden Calf for Best Feature Film in 1992, a film with sex scenes shot in a minimal, long-take style.<sup>10</sup> A film on rapists and one inspired by monologues of serial killers had further gained him notoriety, but hardly an audience. *NAAR DE KLOTE!* offered him the opportunity for a functional embedding of experimental devices within the format of a popular film. The colours are at times very intense: sharp white, deep red, or a sex scene tinted in blue; some shots have black edgings as if to suggest that the sight of characters is constricted; jump cuts underline the idea of life in the fast lane; when characters eat in a Japanese restaurant the camera is as low as the tatami perspective in a Yasujiro Ozu film; superimpositions suggest that Jacqueline still longs for a time when her relationship with the unpretentious Martijn was stable. Martijn is a guy who just wants to hang around in a coffee shop and when Jacqueline takes him to a Japanese restaurant he says that he prefers McDonald's. His lack of ambition is best summed up by the ironic slogan, with which they arrive in Amsterdam: Let's get 'wasted.'



In their new home, Jacqueline outgrows Martijn and this process is accelerated after she meets the dealer JP, who has a red sports car, like the posh American producer in Jean-Luc Godard's *LE MÉPRIS* [CONTEMPT] (1963). Initially she only works for him, but JP soon gets more demanding. After a miserable threesome at his place, she gets home while Martijn is leaving. She throws away some pills out of frustration, which is the beginning of her financial problems. Later she takes 4,000 guilders from the cashbox of a shop to finance the record release of two girlfriends. Jacqueline promises to give the money back that very night to Winston, a black man who has a business conflict with JP. From the moment JP goes, accompanied by a buddy, to Winston's office to settle the dispute, events go quick and are cross-cut. The record release is successful, but Jacqueline is angry that her name is missing on the single and during a quarrel that ensues she is hit; Martijn has spotted JP's car and will start to demolish it with some friends; meanwhile JP is forcing Winston to call him, that is, JP. We get a quick series of shots of which the extreme close-up of the right side of JP's face, shot with a wide-angle lens for a distorting effect, is the most remarkable. Since not only the buddy, but also JP has pointed a gun at Winston's head, the latter wants to talk sense into his opponents by saying: *'This is the real world, man'* and while we look over the gun into Winston's left eye in a shaky, hand-held close-up, he continues: *'Not a Tarantino movie.'* Shot of JP with the gun he holds in the foreground: *'Tarantino?'* He turns around, and while the camera makes a 180-degree turn as well, JP repeats: *'Tarantino? I will give you Tarantino, motherfucker.'* And while we see JP aim, the shot is interrupted by the smashing of the windows from inside JP's car, then back to JP who strikes a pose as a shooter, and this goes back and forth in a fast cross-cut rhythm: a few frames of Mandela's portrait hanging in Winston's office, a high-angle shot of the demolition of the car, the bleeding face of Winston, JP's shocked buddy, JP's hysterical laughter in close-up. Immediately after JP and the buddy leave the office, Jacqueline enters to bring back the money in a high-angle shot. She starts to call the police, while we see Mandela's portrait, immediately followed by *'directed by Ian Kerkhof.'* Cross-cut with the end credits, JP becomes the target of some cartoonish violence, and Martijn and Jacqueline decide to go home, back to Tilburg.

NAAR DE KLOTE! is not a comedy, like *BLACK OUT* is, unequivocally, an action comedy. Kerkhof's film might even be said to show 'the real world,' at least the world according to those people who attend house parties and experience an occasional ecstasy trip. It is a scenery in which conceited and narcissistic types as JP or the blonde-haired DJ 'Cowboy' are as much drawn to life as they are silly caricatures. The way they consider themselves to be at the 'top of the world' makes them quite ridiculous, but the irony of *NAAR DE KLOTE!* is that if this particular youth culture is so hyperbolic, well, then Winston's

‘this is the real world, man’ is not an unfounded claim. The film shifts gear, however, the moment JP says, *‘I will give you a Tarantino movie, motherfucker,’* for this heralds a swiftly cut finale of over-the-top violence, during which the most excessive and self-assured characters are turned into pathetic victims. Winston is bleeding to death in his impeccably white suit; JP is humiliated by Martijn and his friends; and Cowboy is lying completely wrecked on the side of the road during the end credits after his ego has been very badly shaken when a female DJ has surpassed him in popularity. This finale is so excessive in terms of cartoonish events, fast (cross-)cutting and jerky camera movements that it is a Tarantino movie, but to a second, if not third degree. Or to put it in terms of this chapter: near the end, NAAR DE KLOTE! is turned into a grotesque caricatural version of a Tarantino movie. There are no particularly comic scenes or jokes in Kerkhof’s film, but, if you consider Kerkhof’s reputation as an experimental art-house director as well as the ironic title NAAR DE KLOTE!, one may be inclined to consider the film as a hilarious enterprise.

### COMIC STRIP MEETS TARANTINO AND TARKOVSKY: *DE WEDEROPSTANDING VAN EEN KLOOTZAK*

Guido van Driel described his *DE WEDEROPSTANDING VAN EEN KLOOTZAK* [THE RESURRECTION OF A BASTARD], which was the opening film of the International Film Festival in Rotterdam 2013, as a mix between ‘Tarantino and Tarkovsky.’ Such a characterization is already a hint at the grotesque, for if the American irony of Tarantino’s grindhouse meets the meditative long-take cinema of the Russian Andrei Tarkovsky, then we must be definitely dealing with a clash of incompatibilities. This clash is resolved, but only to a certain extent. Main protagonist Ronnie has had, as becomes clear later in the film, a near-death experience, when someone, with a tattoo of the Weapon of Dokkum on his wrists, shoots at him in the men’s toilet of a huge dance party. The camera makes wobbling movements, then ascends, without a cut, one floor up to the dancing crowd, and even higher and higher into an overhead shot with a circling camera, that ultimately dissolves into a white screen. In this bravura shot which recalls the visual style of films by Gaspar Noé, known for *IRRÉVERSIBLE* [IRREVERSIBLE] (2002) and *ENTER THE VOID* (2009) with cinematographer Benoit Debie, Ronnie seems to float high in the air over the dance audience. Ronnie survives the attack, but from that moment onwards, he has undergone a mental change. Or, as his faithful buddy Janus tells someone on the phone, ‘I’m telling you – he has completely changed. Like Bruce Willis in *THE SIXTH SENSE* is completely different from Bruce Willis in *DIE HARD*. Something inside him has snapped. He is no longer the old Ronnie.’

We then get, 18 minutes into the film, white letters on a black screen announcing the portrayal of the 'old Ronnie.' This old Ronnie is a ruthless criminal in the vein of the psychopath Mr. Blonde.<sup>11</sup> He did not shy away from mutilating a guy's eye with a vacuum cleaner. 'No more 3D movies for Stanley,' one of Ronnie's assistants will comment later with a smile. The scene is as morbid and as suggestive (for it takes place off-screen and we only hear the sound effect) as the torture scene from *RESERVOIR DOGS*. It is also very Tarantinesque that Ronnie and his buddies discuss films, like *THE BOSTON STRANGLER*, and television series. Watching *THE PERSUADERS* together, Janus observes that exciting events befall both Roger Moore and Tony Curtis: 'Car chases, fights, hot chicks. You'd think they have plenty to catch up on when they meet. But they never do. They are funny kind of friends.' 'They are no friends,' Ronnie corrects him, 'they are colleagues.' In addition to such a Tarantinesque dialogue, there is also the gangster boss whose moustache is as peculiar as his name, James Joyce. The visit Ronnie and his companion Jaap have to pay him, makes them nervous, so this James Joyce is acknowledged as an authoritarian figure before we have set eyes on him. He is absolutely calm on the surface and before he even looks at Ronnie, he is first finishing an anecdote about a bird that had burned its legs on a stove, recorded by a camera. Only then does he ask Ronnie to step forward and to smell his breath. '*What do you smell?*' '*Maagzuur,*' Ronnie says, which is translated by the cameraman into '*heartburn.*' James Joyce then calmly says: '*Ronnie, you give me heartburn.*' On the one hand, this gangster boss is terrifying because of his composure, on the other hand such a tranquil criminal has also been a stock image of the genre, and therefore the recycling of such a cliché risks becoming a bit ridiculous.

Hence, as regards the flashback episodes, *DE WEDEROPSTANDING VAN EEN KLOOTZAK* stands in the tradition of Tarantino's *nouvelle violence*, and in the near-death experience, it is influenced by Noé. In the scenes in Dokkum, which is the present in the film, Van Driel's picture is split. Janus is still his old self, blathering about practically anything and hence, as talkative as Vincent Vega from *PULP FICTION*. He has a series of outrageous theories, about food: 'Hogweed can bring you blisters on your dick,' or about female models in commercials. He regrets that these women do not have full hips and big breasts, but are always skinny daddy longlegs, because the gay men in the fashion world 'give us girls who look like boys.'

By contrast, the 'new' Ronnie, wearing a neck brace as a consequence of the attack, has become a more contemplative character with an extremely strong sensory perception. He takes ample time to smell the food that is being served. He asks Janus to stop the car, walks into a meadow and can save a man from burning alive, because he was already there before the fire actually caught him, suggesting that he has the gift of clairvoyance. To emphasize

Ronnie's inner change the rhythm in the scenes in Dokkum is less hectic, although the average shot length is still way too brief to be really compared to a Tarkovsky film. Tarkovsky regarded film as 'sculpting in time,' meaning that its editing should conform to a consistent and precise rhythm, but Van Driel's debut feature feels, as one reviewer at IMDb put it, 'a little arrhythmic,' meaning that its storytelling is uneven: sometimes disclosing too much information, sometimes too less. Instead of considering this as a flaw, the charm of this arrhythmia is that it betrays that the film is an adaptation of a graphic novel, one written by Van Driel himself, *Om mekaar in Dokkum* (2004). Bearing in mind that this graphic novel was praised for its painterly style, the background of the film shots originated from a meticulous framing. In his review for cinema.nl, Gerhard Busch even refers to the Dutch 17<sup>th</sup>-century painter Vermeer in the high-angle shot of the picturesque streets of Dokkum on the left while on the right we see protagonist Ronnie through a window enjoying his meal of trout and pomegranates.

A too painterly style can be at the expense of a narrative logic: why does the 'new' Ronnie decide to go cycling in the empty Frisian landscape at night? Why does he go into the water and remove his brace (for, given his exceptional sensory perception, we can presume that he knows his avengers are following him in the dark)? The logical answer to these questions is that narrative logic seems suspended, just as in a Tarkovsky film conventional causality is short-circuited. The film seems to work towards its remarkable final shot, for it is only then that the story about Ronnie is merged with another one, about Eduardo, an asylum seeker from Angola in Dokkum who has had such traumatic experiences that we only have been offered some snapshots from his past, but not an actual account. Someone tells Eduardo that Frisians used to believe in holy trees, but that Saint Boniface had come to convert them by chopping down trees. Seeing the empty landscape, Eduardo on the one hand remarks that the Frisians have become very orthodox these days, but on the other hand he mentions that he believes that the ghosts of the dead are hiding in the trees. At the moment, the trigger is pulled for the final shot at Ronnie, Eduardo suddenly falls from a tree, interrupting the execution of the gangster. At the end of the film, both Eduardo and Ronnie are sitting next to each other in the top of the tree, the wind through its branches. The status of the last shot offers food for thought: has the attempt to execute Ronnie been called off and resulted in the shots fired at him during his escape into another near-death experience, with him once again high above the ground? Or has he perhaps become a ghost of the dead, hiding in the branches according to Eduardo's belief in black magic? This latter option would give body to Van Driel's reference to Tarkovsky. In the metaphysical science-fiction film *SOLARIS* (1972), the main protagonist Kris Kelvin is on an expedition in a space station, where he

learns that people can materialize as memory remnants due to the bio-energy coming from the ocean of the planet Solaris. Since he still thinks of his wife, Hari, who had committed suicide, he encounters her once again, and despite her lifelike appearance, she is no more than a ghost.

In order to characterize *DE WEDEROPSTANDING VAN EEN KLOOTZAK* as a film inspired by both Tarantino and Tarkovsky, it has to be understood that there is no true meeting of influences. That would have made Van Driel's work an extraordinary grotesque. Now the adaptation of his own graphic novel foremost shows a dual face: on the one hand, it is a sketch of the grotesque gangster scene, slightly caricatural, and on the other hand, it has the allure of metaphysical cinema which closes with the suggestion of some magical realistic bond between Eduardo and a hypersensitive Ronnie.

## IRONY OF FATE: *PLAN C*

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The type of irony which is most likely to become grotesque, Thomson observes, is the cosmic irony (49). Although I discussed *OBER* in chapter 7 as a variant of cosmic irony, I would not consider Van Warmerdam's film here, for the imagery of his strikingly 'unsentimental' cinema is not particularly grotesque: bodies are hardly ever depicted as disfigured. We see Edgar floating in an aquarium after he has insulted the three macho guests, or we see, in *BORGMAN*, three bodies head-down in a bucket with concrete at the bottom of a lake, but the shots are represented from such a 'markedly detached perspective' that they are closer to black humour – that 'mortal enemy of sentimentality' (Breton, 25) – than to the grotesque, which elicits a more 'emotionally charged' reaction from its audience, as Vanessa M. Merhi concluded. Both black humour and irony achieve their greatest effect by tinkering with codes and traditions that are being inverted in a work, Phil Wagner claims, whereas the grotesque relies more on the 'audience's gut-instincts and the strange, invigorating appeal of the monstrous and the vulgar' (n.p.).

In her textbook on irony, Claire Colebrook classifies cosmic irony, together with irony of fate, and the more literary concept of dramatic or tragic irony, in the category of situational irony.<sup>12</sup> This latter category refers to, in the words of Hutcheon, a 'state of affairs in which events or circumstances, desirable in themselves, are either perversely ill-timed or turn out in a contradictory manner to what might be expected' ('Introduction,' 34). The Dutch boxer André van den Oetelaar used to be a talented fighter, but he never became national champion. Then he had a serious accident after which he had to have surgery. Due to the pins placed in his body he had gained so many kilos that he had to compete in another division, of the heav-

yweight class: this time, in 1981, he became champion after all – ironically, thanks to the misfortune. In such a case, the outcome is so contrary to logic that our ‘understanding of the world is undercut by some other meaning or design beyond our powers’ (Colebrook, 14).<sup>13</sup> With cosmic irony this ‘design beyond our powers’ is represented by some godlike instance manipulating events – the more Edgar starts to interfere with the scenario, demanding adjustments, the more the scriptwriter in *OBER* starts to act as a deity punishing his protagonist. Irony of fate can be called its plain and down-to-earth version: it simply concerns ‘the contrast between the individual’s conscious aspirations and what fate ... eventually makes of him’ (Hutcheon ‘Introduction,’ 34). Such an irony of fate is already implied in the title of *PLAN C* (Max Porcelijn, 2012). It is usually a bad omen when the original plan does not work, and even worse when the backup plan fails as well. Porcelijn’s film shows its viewers what happens when even another plan has to be improvised ‘as a bit of jazz,’ as one of the character says. Everything goes downhill for protagonist Ronald, but as a brief recapture of the plot of *PLAN C* will illustrate, thanks to a bizarre and miraculous twist near the end he gets away with the ‘bad things’ he was about to confess.

The divorced policeman Ronald Plasmeyer has only one week to pay his debts to a Chinese crime boss. His habit to participate in poker matches in Amsterdam North does not offer him benefits, but makes his financial sorrows worse. He asks his friend, Gerrit, to rob the poorly guarded office. Ronald bets on it that the organizers will not alarm the police since their tournament is illegal. When Ronald wants to finalize the deal in the lobby of some roadside hotel, Gerrit has brought his ex-brother-in-law Bram with him, to Ronald’s dissatisfaction. While the couple is on the way to rob the place, Ronald phones them from the toilet to abort the mission, because this very evening he is winning practically every game, but Bram insists they see the original plan through: ‘The machine is already set in motion. It’s not a school trip. Easy peasy.’ Despite Ronald’s command not to use any violence, not even as a last resort, Bram turns out to be trigger-happy and kills two people in a grotesquely violent scene. When they meet again in a diner, Ronald is mad because of the dead, but Bram reacts laconically. Moreover, Bram refuses to split three ways fair and square, for Ronald was no more than ‘Prince Charming,’ acting all high and mighty, while he and Gerrit had been sweating like work horses. From here onwards, the action develops in quick succession: Bram runs off with the money in the company with Gerrit; they check in at a small hotel; the money gets blood-stained; Bram shoots Gerrit when the latter tries to phone Ronald; Ronald tracks down Bram’s hiding place; he almost stumbles over a rip in the carpet; Bram catches him by surprise but his gun malfunctions; Bram runs away, but he really stum-

bles over the rip in the carpet; Ronald shoots him and makes it look like an accident; he pays off his debt to the crime boss who accepts the bag with money without deigning a look at it. For the police, it is case closed: the two dead guys are the perpetrators.

Ronald's fate is the opposite of the misadventures of Jerry Lundegaard, the protagonist of *FARGO* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1996), with whom he shares quite some parallels. Both Jerry and Ronald concoct some minor crime in order to solve their financial sorrows, and in both cases, they are saddled with not so very adequate associates: the one a bit clumsy, the other – and that will turn out to be worse – unfathomable. In *FARGO* as well as *PLAN C* the protagonist does not really have confidence in the unfathomable type, but the ball has been set rolling and there is no way of stopping the plan, which leads to a number of disfigured bodies on the way. In *PLAN C*, as in a film by the Coen brothers, the violence edges into slapstick, the horror into comic-strip farce and vice versa (Bergan, 27). *FARGO* will confirm the scenario of what came to be called Murphy's Law: Anything that can possibly go wrong, does. Hence, the outcome for Jerry will be a total disaster; in *PLAN C* it is the same, except for the miraculous twist.

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The ending of *PLAN C* is counterintuitive, for film conventions have it that sly characters do not get away with their wicked deeds. Woody Allen's *CRIMES AND MISDEMEANORS* (1989) can be considered as a metaphysical reflection upon this convention. The widely respected Judah Rosenthal is raised according to the dictum that the 'righteous will be rewarded and the wicked will be punished for eternity.' When he kills his mistress, who had said she would reveal their affair, he expects that a morally just God will make sure he gets caught. Since he is not punished at all, he starts to believe that our lives are not determined by some heavenly force, but by the arbitrary moral choices we impose upon ourselves in an indifferent universe.<sup>14</sup> When Judah tells his own experience in the form of a pitch for a murder mystery to a filmmaker, the latter says that the character will be so much burdened by his moral conscience that he will eventually give himself in. 'That's fiction,' Judah replies. Whereas the filmmaker in *CRIMES AND MISDEMEANORS* presumes that according to dramatic conventions characters have to suffer for their immoral decisions, no matter how hard they try to escape their fate, Judah knows better. *PLAN C* gives credence to Judah's position, for Porcelijn's film is an example of an 'irony of fate' which privileges the instigator of a crime.<sup>15</sup>

A main reason why the wheel of fortune is on Ronald's side, is because his chief, Peter, who is about to retire, does not have the ambition to get to the bottom of the situation.<sup>16</sup> He has his intuitions about Ronald's share: Peter has found Ronald's lighter at the scene of the crime; he guesses that

Ronald is in deep trouble, but only tells him that he himself knows ‘the darker side of life’; Peter does not contradict the colleague inspector who says that it would unnecessarily complicate the case if they were to take seriously that an eye-witness has reported a third person, a ‘bald’ one; and when Ronald is about to confess, Peter interrupts him and ultimately tells his minion a story, whose short version goes like this: A guy is stuck in a hole, and asks passers-by for help. The doctor gives him a prescription, the priest sends him a prayer, but the friend who comes along, jumps into the hole, so that they are stuck together. Since Peter has forgotten the punchline, he sums up the moral of this clueless anecdote with a brief ‘you need friends, Ronald.’ This story, devoid of an object, brings the opening voice-over by Peter into memory:

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In India I once spoke a wise ... well ... man who told me that a plan can change you and if you are strong, you might also change the plan. The rest is sheer luck. That’s how he saw it. I never really understood what it means. My father always said that if you let it come down to luck there’s only one certainty: Whichever way it goes, it will always swing back the other way in the end. But these are just theories, but in practice, it is ... [And here the sentence is cut short, because Peter’s extradiegetic voice-over is overwhelmed by the interdiegetic curses by Ronald who, in the background of the shot, is complaining about his bad luck at the poker game.]

As the voice-over illustrates, Peter’s ruminations are amusingly shallow throughout; his thoughts remain stuck in trivial phrases. The first part of the quote is mystic, because he himself admits that he does not understand it. The second part is superficial, kind of proverbial rather than philosophical: this time one is unfortunate, next time one may have luck, but actually he doubts whether this theory is right. On account of his seniority, Peter functions like a counsellor to his employees, lending them an ear to problems of whatever nature. He is a ‘good listener,’ at least he claims so himself in a conversation with Ronald, but despite his work experience his advice is never very sound. It is particularly ironic that Peter debunks his father’s theory about the fluctuation of luck and bad luck as too flimsy, whereas the film *PLAN C* – which can be called the ‘practice’ – proves the opposite: all the odds seemed against the typical *schlimazel*, or buffoon, Ronald, but it is more by hit than by wit that suddenly luck turns his way.

*PLAN C* is unmistakably inspired by the bleakly comic tone of the films by the Coen brothers, like *FARGO* in terms of plot, and as is also confirmed by the oblique visual quotation of having a Chinese man put out a cigarette



on the protagonist's rug versus a Chinese man peeing on 'The Dude's' rug in *THE BIG LEBOWSKI* (1998). In a study, in which he regards the Coen brothers as 'masters of the grotesque,' Schuy R. Weishaar argues that their films depict characters in 'moments of extremis': they are caught in moments of catastrophic rifts which demand actions and decisions. They either engage in short-sighted actions 'without much reflection, or alternatively, they get lost in their ruminations – or both' (115). Once they set the wheel turning by a first decision, a trajectory is set out before them, with the tragic and comic result that the crisis expands. In *L'Étranger* [*The Stranger*] (1942) by the French writer Albert Camus, Weishaar asserts, 'moments of extremis' finally lead to some self-discovery on the part of protagonist, but in the films of the Coen brothers the characters' leap to 'know thyself' is at best partial: 'they finally glimpse who they are, and they fail to recognize the image, or the weight of the knowledge is more than they can bear' (116). Moments of enlightenment, Weishaar continues, are 'more likely to be signalled with a bout of nausea or a vacant stare than they are with a look of intellectual satisfaction' (118). Either the films fall short of offering a satisfactory explanation to the characters or if there is some kind of closure or 'answer,' it is usually 'obviously false, overly simple, or utterly ludicrous' (118). At the end of PLAN C, after Ronald has promised Peter to make a report on a simple snack-bar case, the protagonist is sitting in a café. He sees there is some blood spilt on the sleeve of his jacket, and at that very moment, someone hails at him to play a game of poker. We see him hesitate, but before we get his answer, the end credits start, as if the 'overly simple' lesson is, following the superficial dictum of Peter's father, that one should not try one's luck again after such a narrow escape.<sup>17</sup>

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If PLAN C does not offer a more profound lesson to its protagonist (or its audience) than a commonplace, one can add to this that with a mentor like Peter it is no surprise that Ronald will not make a true leap into self-discovery. This disability to 'know oneself' is humorously expressed by one of the running gags about a going-away present for Peter. Agent Henk repeatedly reminds Ronald that he is the last one to pay his share of 25 euro, excluding a colleague suffering from a nervous breakdown. At the end of PLAN C, Peter thanks Ronald in a private conversation for the present. We see a bronze sculpture, and Peter explains: 'It is abstract, they told me.' By saying 'it is abstract' Peter clarifies to Ronald it is a vain attempt to search for meaning, since it is a non-figurative artwork. This can be called a humorous mise-en-abyme for the whole film, in which the logic of a plan or dramatic conventions do not really make sense. Further, Peter's addition 'they told me' disqualifies his status as an expert on art. He apparently did not understand what it represents, so someone explained to him that it does not represent

anything. As such, his words 'it is abstract, they told me' indicate that art, like so many other things, are beyond his understanding. At this time, the sculpture is a very appropriate present, for by labelling it 'abstract' it is no longer required to comprehend it. Thus, the present can also be taken as a very ironic gesture by his minions.

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In his fine analysis of the cinema of the Coen brothers, Weishaar argues that all the confusion and disorientation on the part of characters 'has to be represented physically – through the body, by or in actions or inaction, by or in expressions or moments when characters look expressionless' (126). In order to exorcize their internal tensions, they 'fall into physically performed rituals' (126). In the case of Ronald, his internal tensions find an outlet in weirdly funny tantrums, at his ex-wife and her new boyfriend, when he loses a game of poker, as usual, or, the most memorable one, when his friend Gerrit has arrived later than promised: 'You see that piece of paper? First I walked all the way over there, then I went in and ordered a sandwich. I ate it walking back here. Then I arrived and you still were not here. Then I leaned against the car and threw that piece of paper away out of anger.' He then continues to give an account of a cup of coffee he drank. Such a fit of anger is comical, because of the elaborate descriptions of his actions. Ronald gives the impression that his fits are not a character flaw as such, but are simply born from the feeling that the world has come to conspire against him. He shows his frustration every time a character refers to his baldness, which leads to a particularly humorous scene when he is being registered for the poker tournament as 'Ron (bald).' Why bald? Ronald informs. The man at the table drily answers: 'Handsome Ron is playing, too. I have to know who's who ...' Ronald: 'Why not moustache?'

In PLAN C, the gimmick about a physical 'flaw' like baldness works to signify the inner turmoil of the character, and that makes it so quirky. Similarly, Ronald has nervous tics, like skittishly looking around and putting his hands in his coat during conversations. His gaze is agitated and tired, and frequently a character asks him whether he has had a long night. Upon his 'No, why?' they either say 'Never mind' or they explicitly mention his 'eye bags.' At one point he is reading an article in a magazine titled '10 Tips to Cure Eye Bags.' Most important, however, is that his inward restlessness is at the root of a comic-strip like display of dead bodies. He is not directly responsible for the corpses, except for the last one, but others – like the inspector and his chief – deny him his responsibility, so that fate intervenes ironically in his favour. In addition to that, Porcelijn's film has a number of remarks concerning bodily waste, almost obligatory in a post-PULP FICTION film which treats violence in such a slapstick manner. As in VET HARD (chapter 1), characters either spend some time in the toilets or announce they

have to go to the bathroom. Ronald frequents the toilet regularly in order to find moments of relaxation, as if it is his safe haven. Just preceding the robbery, Bram addresses in a deadpan tone the filthiness of toilets, in much the same vein as the contract killers in *PULP FICTION* talk about foot massage: 'Never piss in a urinal. Your piss spatters back at you, you know, back at your penis. ... Your piss mixes with the piss of thousands of other dudes.' This quote is as nasty as hilarious, and as such it captures in a nutshell the ironic grotesquery of *PLAN C*.

## METAFILM AS A VENGEFUL SATIRE: *DE MANTEL DER LIEFDE*

According to Hutcheon, satire is 'the art of diminishing a subject by ridiculing (with intent to discourage) its vice or folly by the use of irony, sarcasm, humour,' or, as Thomson would add, by the calculating employment of the grotesque. *DE MANTEL DER LIEFDE* [*THE CLOAK OF CHARITY*] (Adriaan Ditvoorst, 1978) has a 'definite purpose' (Thomson, 4) to ridicule and discourage, as befits a satire. To appreciate this absolutely outrageous film with its star-studded cast as a grotesque satire, the curious career of its director Adriaan Ditvoorst has to be taken into account. He was one of the students at the Film Academy in the early 1960s, and his fellow peers regarded him as very talented. His first film, the 22-minute *IK KOM WAT LATER NAAR MADRA* [*THAT WAY TO MADRA*] (1965) was an experimental short, inspired by the French *nouvelle vague*. It was shot in black and white with brusque transitions, violations of conventional principles like the 180-degree rule and match on action, and a remarkable soundtrack, including scenes in total silence. The short got a favourable reception at film festivals, and directors like Bernardo Bertolucci and Jean-Luc Godard expressed their enthusiasm. Two years later, Ditvoorst made the feature *PARANOIA*, an adaptation of a novel by W.F. Hermans. The story of this beautifully shot, black-and-white film is bleak. After seeing a photograph in a newspaper, the main protagonist starts to believe, erroneously, that he is a wanted war criminal, and his paranoia makes him increasingly aggressive. His suicide only comes as a logical conclusion. The film consolidated Ditvoorst's reputation as a promising filmmaker, and after a few shorts,<sup>18</sup> a film of medium length was released in 1973, *DE BLINDE FOTOGRAAF* [*THE BLIND PHOTOGRAPHER*], based upon a short story of, once again, Hermans.

*DE BLINDE FOTOGRAAF*, albeit in black and white, could be qualified as a Van Warmerdam picture *avant la lettre*. The film announces itself as 'a day in the life of a reporter,' as if the day is selected at random. The starting point is very simple: the journalist of a local newspaper has the assignment to write an item on a blind photographer. The journalist is met with suspicion by the

parents who live in a small alley, in-between two houses. This isn't fair, the father tells the 'parasite from the press': you can see him, but he cannot see you. Upon the reporter's suggestion that he will conduct the interview wearing a blindfold, the mother answers that monetary compensation is a better idea. The father only allows the journalist in on the condition that he use a black light lantern only. When he returns with a lantern, the photographer's mother says, while the father is out of earshot, that her son wore special glasses and always had a pair of binoculars hanging around his neck, even though it caused welts in his skin. Later she bought a lot of Sunlight soap for the saving stamps, which she used to get him a camera.<sup>19</sup> When the journalist finally meets the photographer, he says that all his mother's stories are nonsense. The journalist replies that he enjoyed her accounts, adding that a mother is a holy figure: 'I only write what my public wants to read,' he says. The photographer then explains that his father always pretended to take out his roll of film once it was used up and put in a new roll, but he always put the very same roll of film back into the camera, time and again, out of cheapness. When the son became known as a 'blind photographer,' his father had the film with the many superimposed images developed. But he was afraid that his son would ask for another roll of film, so he kept his son in the dark room. How did you know that your parents lied to you?, the reporter asks. 'The point is not that I cannot see. You think I do not know that you are a fraud and an asshole? You have a lantern with real light, so that you can see me. How did you get it?' the photographer says, while he shines it into the reporter's face. For some time the screen is totally white, and then we see and hear the journalist laugh hysterically. The reverse shot shows that the photographer has his eyes wide open and they are without pupils, 'as white as ping-pong balls,' as Hermans' story has it.

Whereas the story progresses like a Van Warmerdam film, *DE BLINDE FOTOGRAAF* is shot in the vein of Orson Welles' *THE TRIAL* (1962), an adaptation of Franz Kafka's *Der Prozess*. Ditvoorst's film is shot in highly contrasting black and white, the more contrasting near the end because of the use of the lantern's sharp flashlight in a dark setting. Like Welles' film, which in an opening voice-over says that the logic of Kafka's story is 'the logic of a dream, or ... a nightmare,' *DE BLINDE FOTOGRAAF* explores a visual style that is quite like surrealist cinema. In the case of a surrealist film, Linda Williams argues, the representation of 'reality' is distorted but not via 'camera or laboratory effects such as slow-motion or superimpositions' (*Figures*, 215).<sup>20</sup> If the world is perceived as bizarre, this is usually the result of a play with the composition and the framing of the shots. In fact, the camera records the scene without distortions but from such an angle that it might take some time to get the picture. In *DE BLINDE FOTOGRAAF*, there are many uncommon angles,

either high or low, and at some point the reporter seems dwarfed in a dark alley. In short, at times the shots are wilfully unbalanced.

Strictly speaking, one might have expected that *DE BLINDE FOTOGRAAF* consolidated Ditvoorst's reputation as a filmmaker with a signature style. Unfortunately this film, though praised by critics, had only a very limited release in film theatres in a double bill with *DE ANTIKRIST* [*THE ANTI-CHRIST*] (Roeland Kerbosch) and thus it can be said that Ditvoorst missed the moment. It was a film that recalled the art-house fare from the mid-1960s like his critically acclaimed *PARANOIA*, like *DE MINDER GELUKKIGE TERUGKEER ...*, like *HET GANGSTERMEISJE*, but 1973 was the year that brought *TURKS FRUIT* to the screen. To emphasize the turn to more sensational amusement in this period, one can point at the films by Frans Weisz, *DE INBREKER* (1972) and *NAAKT OVER DE SCHUTTING* (1973), which were quite unlike his earlier *HET GANGSTERMEISJE*. In interviews, Ditvoorst said that he detested those colleagues of his generation who had sacrificed their artistic standards for commercial success (Verdaasdonk 'Marginality,' 47). Upon the suggestion of the producer Matthijs van Heijningen, who then was at the very beginning of his career, Ditvoorst agreed to shoot the crime revenge thriller *FLANAGAN* (1975), based upon a book by Tim Krabbé. There was conflict between the producer and the director about the script and the cast, and though Ditvoorst made concessions to please a more popular taste, this film was box-office poison again, to his deep frustration (Verdaasdonk, 47). After this flop, the only person who was willing to finance another one of his films, was the quite shadowy café owner Luc Bijkerk, about whom it was rumoured that he had earned his money by distributing soft pornographic films (Verdaasdonk, 48). *DE MANTEL DER LIEFDE* would remain Bijkerk's only attempt to make a name in the film business.

The first shot of *DE MANTEL DER LIEFDE* shows two bare feet walking in sand. Then an extreme close-up of a mouth, moustache and a beard. The mouth produces an enormous yell: 'Moses.' Then a close-up of eyes and nose; then a close-up of wild, black hair. We see some smoke in the distance and hear a voice, asking: 'Who are you?' 'Who do you think?' We get a close-up of a right hand with a wound in its palm. The camera swiftly pans to the other hand, also shown in close-up with a similar wound. Jesus passes a woman, but completely neglects her; she goes after him on all fours. While Moses is about to slaughter a little goat, Jesus announces that he has come to get Moses' soul, for the laws are not being obeyed by the people: 'It is a total mess everywhere.' Jesus explains that his father has sent him because Moses has failed. Moses is about to protest, but Jesus lifts his hand, which we see in close-up, and Moses falls silent immediately. 'You are finished; you have had your chance,' Jesus says, and when Moses indicates that he has a problem

with an itchy foot, Jesus advises him to cut it off. Instead of slaughtering the goat, Moses raises the axe and does just that. No attempt is made to disguise the fact that the remaining part of the leg and the streaming blood are fake; this special effect is deliberately poor. Moses is screaming like a pig, just like the woman. She wants to seduce Jesus, but he throws her into the sand. She lifts up her dress, but Jesus says disdainfully: 'You stink,' and walks away, while Moses' cries are mixed with relatively cheerful classical music on the soundtrack, 'Grand Potpourri for Cello and Orchestra,' composed by Carl Maria von Weber.

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This 3-minute-long scene is a prelude to a number of sketches, which, as the starting credits announce, are inspired by the Ten Commandments. At best, these sketches can be called a travesty of these commandments. In one of them, which is cut up and interwoven as a red thread through the film, a boy on a bicycle is halted by two men on a motorbike who, for no reason, slowly start demolishing his two-wheeler, and then ride on calmly. When the boy complains about the incident to two policemen, they tell him that it is not allowed to cycle on this dike, whereupon the boy throws the remainder of the bike into the water. In another sketch, a woman, Lies, is irritated by the impassivity of her husband, Cor, but he is so annoyed by her irritation that he picks up the television set and throws it through the window. The apparatus falls down several floors and produces a great ball of fire when it hits the ground. A neighbour, Toos, tries to console Lies, and then picks up an axe. Cor, who has just been singing 'The Internationale,' does not see her coming and a few seconds later she has imbedded the axe into his skull. In a subsequent scene we see a blood-spattered kitchen, while Toos is frying an enormous amount of meat. Lies is perplexed and, glassy-eyed, she just mumbles, 'Cor, Cor, Cornelisje, what are they doing to you?'

Not all of the sketches are this morbid, but they practically all are this absurd. Since no one attends church any more, a bishop advises a priest to go where the people are and so he ends up in a local café where his presence causes an uproar. In another sketch, a secretary insinuates to the chief tax inspector that the high supplementary income of Miss Split is perhaps related to her beauty. Maybe he should check on her, she suggests. When he pays this Miss Split a visit, she tries to soften him up by a striptease. Then he wakes up from his daydream and he leers at his secretary: 'Now I grab you, monster.' At that very moment, all people at the office start to indulge in degenerate behaviour: touching each other in their intimate places, and one woman even starts to photocopy her breasts before making love. Another sketch is centred around the hypocrisy of a cardinal, who has invited two former youth friends – a minister and a doctor – for a copious dinner. The cardinal is vehemently opposed to abortion, while the doctor wants to recommend this as a viable

option to the minister. When the cardinal goes to the toilet, he can eavesdrop on them via a bug. As he thereupon confronts the minister with bribery, the latter asks him how he knows. 'God hears and sees everything,' is his hypocritical answer before he forces the minister to resign his job. Another sketch concerns a quarrel among siblings about the cost of the upcoming funeral of their dying father who had been strongly advised to quit smoking. When they all go outside because an attempt is made to steal the car of one of the daughters, grandson Henkie is the only one to enter the room of the deadly sick old man who asks him for one last cigarette. Henkie gives in to the request, and while smoking, his granddad dies.

The most absurdist sketch is, however, the one with a corpulent baker and his equally corpulent wife. We see them sell bread and pastry, among other things, to the minister from a previous sketch who is dead drunk and busted by now. As soon as it is six o'clock, they immediately close the shop and remove all the furniture and put a black, plastic canvas on the floor. They both undress and while they are whinnying like a horse and shout ecstatically – 'Jetje Kadetje,' the baker cries out repeatedly – they throw cream pies and other baked goods at one another. This sketch is interrupted with shots from an impeccably dressed secretary sitting next to a film projector, watching the film. We also see a shot of a producer with a big cigar, before we return to the baker and his wife, who now throws a box of eggs against her husband's naked body. The producer, who is played by the very same actor who played Moses in the opening scene, is rubbing the goat's head. When the baker throws a pan of chocolate sauce over his wife's head, 'Moses' exclaims: 'Jesus Christ, what is this? Did I ask for this? Schlemiel, what kind of a director are you? Here, you were supposed to make this; that was the deal,' and he shows a script with the working title 'The Ten Commandments.' 'What the fuck did you do with my money? You stole from me. By the way, where is the commandment "Thou shalt not steal"?' The director, who was 'Jesus' from the opening scene, calmly answers: 'We are showing it to you now, Mr. Meyer [Rudolf Meyer was a producer, responsible for *FANFARE*]. You do not understand.' 'As producer, I gave you the assignment to make a classical film. What do I care for this shitty baker? Turn the projector off!' 'But the credits are still due. Your name,' but the producer's mind cannot be set at rest. When he then reaches towards the projector to switch it off, we get a close-up of an adjusted shoe, which brings into the memory the shot that Moses chopped off his itchy foot. He then stumbles over some cans with film and because his shawl gets attached to the projector, the producer is being strangled. Aghast, the secretary runs away and pushes a button. We then return to the baker's wife, who places a cream pie on her husband's erect penis, before the film burns itself, and the projector sinks into the ground, together with the producer. The film closes with the

cyclist without his bike on the Afsluitdijk. He tries to hitchhike, but since no one stops, he cries out 'god dammit' twice, and starts rolling on the cycling path hysterically.

DE MANTEL DER LIEFDE has its grotesque, if not gross moments: the cutting of Moses' foot, the axe in Cor's skull, the debaucheries of the baker and his wife. More significant than these vulgar effects is the explicit polemical tone of the film, mocking the legacy of Christianity. The meeting between Moses and Jesus during the opening of the film functions as a frame for all the subsequent sketches which have a contemporary setting. According to Jesus, speaking on behalf of his Father, humanity has drifted from the Commandments. He accuses Moses of having been too passive to resist the corruption of mankind and having excused many objectionable things. Or, to refer to the film's title, Moses is to blame for covering all vulgarity under the 'cloak of charity.' The film we are about to see after the starting credits, shows the perversity of people: needless aggression, egotism, disrespect of one's parents, illicit sexual pleasure. Hence, the fact that the world of today embraces ethical principles that are the inverse of those found in the Bible seems to be the irrefutable purport of the film. There is a double twist, however. First, just like Jonathan Swift's argument in his landmark satirical piece 'A Modest Proposal' (1729) that eating the children of the poor would be a clever solution to the problems of widespread hunger and poverty was too outrageous to be taken in earnest, all sketches are simply too outrageous to consider DE MANTEL DER LIEFDE as a morally serious wake-up call. Ditvoorst's film is anything but a plea to return to the firm ethical principles of the Old Testament, for it is too ironic. At times he combines vulgar scenes with solemn classical music; religious characters are represented as caricatures, such as the bishop who gets a manicure from his assistant and splashes his bare feet in the water of his footbath, enjoying the fact that the naive priest takes his silly advice seriously; and most ironic perhaps is the sudden intertitle after Henkie's granddad has died of cancer, for it not only reads 'intermission,' but it also contains the text: 'You now have time to smoke a cigarette.' The fact that this intertitle lasts for about three minutes, halfway DE MANTEL DER LIEFDE, can only be taken as a darkly humorous 'service' to the viewer to have a smoke indeed.

Second, all the sketches we have seen turn out to be the work of 'Jesus' in his role as director-in-the-film. This revelation recalls the opening scene in which Jesus holds Moses responsible for the fact that the world has become corrupted. The film-within-the-film holds up a mirror to the producer/Moses, but the latter can no longer bear to watch it. Apparently expecting to see a morally just world living according to the principles of the Ten Commandments, Moses is only confronted with the world's ugliness. DE MANTEL DER LIEFDE can be called a grotesque satire, because this Moses figure is positioned as the



true target. As for Moses, he is blind to reality; in the role of producer-of-the-film he is trying to rewrite reality according to his own wishes and commands. Moses the producer is a meddler who demands that the director compromise his artistic vision, and the analogy to Ditvoorst's own situation is not to be missed. Those times he had given in to the wishes of a producer, as in his then latest project *FLANAGAN*, had not gained him any success at all. It is only a small step to consider the penultimate scene from *DE MANTEL DER LIEFDE* as his revenge upon cigar-smoking producers who behave like dictators. Ironically, Jesus tries to play the card of the producer's vanity – 'your name' on the credits – but Moses is beyond reason. It is a streak of sarcasm that he has his comeuppance when he is killed because his shawl, another sign of vanity, is winded into the apparatus. And thus irony and sarcasm are called upon to articulate the grotesque death of this miserable figure who was an ignorant and vain busybody. When his corpse has sunk into the ground, we get a 'mortal' point-of-view shot, from a very low angle, looking up to Jesus who stands at his 'grave,' making the cross sign as a mock salute. The secretary pulls at his arm, but he only says, recalling the opening scene: 'You still stink,' and walks away, whilst she crawls after him. Thus, *DE MANTEL DER LIEFDE* which Ditvoorst made with a first-time producer, seems meant to settle old scores with meddlesome producers. The most influential critics remained favourable to his work, but the general public did not get enthusiastic. Alas, for it would have been a perfect joke and a great example of an irony of fate if precisely this film – a vengeful satire on commercialization – would have marked a first commercial success for Ditvoorst.<sup>21</sup>

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There is nonetheless an irony to be noted, which came true after all. If Ditvoorst was 'the golden boy of art-house cinema' in the late 1960s, Verhoeven superseded him in the early 1970s as the 'golden boy of the box office.' Just as *DE MANTEL DER LIEFDE* was a grotesque satire, made out of deep frustration, Verhoeven was to make *DE VIERDE MAN* [*THE FOURTH MAN*] (1983), because he felt deeply dissatisfied with the Dutch film climate. As a 'text' *DE VIERDE MAN* is an ironic film with grotesque elements, but when put in context, this last film Verhoeven made before he left the Netherlands can be regarded as a satire.<sup>22</sup>

## FANTASTIC IRONY: *DE VIERDE MAN*

After an opening shot of a spider building a web, Verhoeven's film adaptation continues with a scene in which Gerard's boyfriend is playing the violin, while Gerard creeps up on him and strangles him. After the strangling, we see Gerard walk through a corridor, while we still hear the violin play. He enters

a room and there is his boyfriend, still playing. Gerard just tells him he will be on his way to Vlissingen by train. The sequence of strangling, which obviously only proved to be a morbid fantasy, sets the tone for the film: a seemingly daily situation slips into a surreal scene and suddenly it goes back to 'normal.' Gerard will be seeing things throughout the film, and although the status of his observations is sometimes easy to determine, often it is not. Travelling by train, initially his perceptions are not extraordinary: he sees a drawing of Samson and Delilah; he sees a poster with the text 'Jesus is everywhere,' the apple peels around the head of a toddler are like a halo. When he focuses on another portrait in the train, however, he has a vision of the Hotel Bellevue, room number 4, and of blood dripping from a mutilated eye, a grotesque shot which obliquely references Buñuel's surrealist film *UN CHIEN ANDALOU*, already mentioned in chapter 8. The crying toddler marks his return from this unpleasant daydream to 'reality,' whereupon a blonde female passenger in a blue coat realizes with a shock that tomato juice is oozing from a bag above her head. The scene in the hotel is unmistakably a nightmarish vision, but it is uncertain whether this vision has been triggered by the juice or has anticipated it: cause and effect are unclear. This scene also indicates that Gerard seems to be a character whose imagination can run wild. This is emphasized in a subsequent scene when on the platform at the station he sees a coffin and thinks that the ribbon has his name written on it, for he distinguishes the letters G-E-R-A. When the ribbon is unfolded it reads 'Guido Hermans.'

These scenes basically suggest Gerard's inclination to sinister hallucinations, but the film owes its deeply ironic effect, I will argue below, to the overall framing of his perception of a blurred distinction between fantasy and reality. This framing is determined by the representation of the main protagonist as someone who excels at comments which are as sardonic as amusing. His fondness of such comments becomes clear during Gerard's lecture, of which a few excerpts, absent in the book, are included in the film. He tells the story of a gigantic coffin at the station, carried by 30 dwarfs. He then admits that he invented the story on the spot, but that if he were to continue it at length, it could start to sound like a true story. He then summarizes the essence of his authorship in the paradoxical claim: 'I lie the truth ... just as long as I start to believe it myself.' He presents his idea in a serious manner, but as equally optional, if not more so, is that he makes this assertion in jest. Similarly, all the other answers he gives during the Q & A are playful without ruling out that they can also be interpreted as serious, such as: 'Being Catholic means opening up to the domain of the fantastic' or 'The only time I suffer from madness is when reading the newspaper, for I read *lamp* as *ramp* [*lamp* as *disaster*], *gloed* as *bloed* [*glow* as *blood*], and *rood* as *dood* [*red* as *dead*]. Is that crazy? No, not really, just some trouble with my eyes.'

There are two other essential scenes in which Gerard defines himself as an ironic jester, while preserving a serious stance. These scenes take place after Gerard has spent the night in the bed of the seductive Christine, who is the treasurer of the association which had invited the writer. Christine also runs a beauty parlour named 'sphinx,' although when Gerard arrives at her place the neon letters only show the word 'spin,' meaning spider. When the next morning a female customer in the beauty parlour – hardly recognizable as the blonde woman in the train – recounts a spooky dream, she considers this as a sign of impending danger and adds to it: 'When you are being warned, you have to listen.' Gerard retorts sarcastically: 'Well, the people who listen, are they still around?' The second scene concerns his attempt to fool Christine by play-acting that he has occult gifts. On his way to Vlissingen, he saw an incredibly handsome boy, taking the train to Köln. At Christine's place, he sees a love letter, which conceals the photograph of this very same boy, named Herman, only dressed in swimming trunks. As the back reveals, the photo was taken in Köln. Without telling Christine of his discovery, Gerard starts to boast that he can read signs with the ultimate hope of meeting Herman. He takes Christine's hand and tells her that there is another lover, besides himself, that he sees the letters K and an O with two dots. Yes, he is from Köln, she confirms, in a tone of mock impression, for it seemed in an earlier scene that Christine had left the letter deliberately on her desk for Gerard to find. Gerard will only continue on condition that she takes a personal object of this man. Returning with the love letter, Gerard guesses correctly, obviously, that there is a photo hidden between the pages, that the lover is hardly wearing any clothes, and that the name starts with an H and an E. Before mentioning these letters, however, Gerard has a vision which shocks him: Herman walks out of the sea, and his eye is severely mutilated, like in his earlier dream.

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The three examples are structured in a similar way. Whilst keeping up an earnest appearance, Gerard seems to delight in ironic remarks and playful acts. It befits a character like him who boasts about his high intelligence, to consider all visual clues from daydreams as unfounded and superstitious. However, after pretending that he possesses occult gifts, for erotic purposes, the sudden visions, just as the one of a bleeding Herman, will come to grow on him as if he really did have occult gifts. He gradually realizes that he had better lend credence to his bizarre observations and his seemingly surreal visions. The turning point of *DE VIERDE MAN* is that Gerard himself, this ironic jester, has to take all signs as deadly serious warning signals: the light at Christine's place which accidentally spells the word 'spin' (spider); the seagull which drops dead at Gerard's feet; the frequent appearances of the blonde woman; the number four in his dream – Gerard begins to arrange all these signs into a causally logical pattern. His mind, which has become frenetic by now, turns

Christine into a femme fatale who like a spider has webbed her three husbands till death did them part.

Now convinced of her deceptive identity, Gerard becomes afraid that a terrible accident is awaiting him. He himself, however, is not the fourth man to die, but Herman is. At the very same spot where Christine was driving excessively fast earlier in the film, Herman ignores the speed limit and hits the iron tubes on a truck, which pierce his eye. After the fatal crash leading to Herman's death, Gerard is hospitalized, in a state of shock. He is nursed by the blonde woman who already crossed his path several times. Gerard becomes convinced that this woman is his guardian angel and he calls her 'Maria.' Excitedly, he tells the doctor that 'Maria' has protected him against the evil witch Christine. As further proof of his belief in her cunning tricks, Gerard mentions that she has an insensitive spot at her back. The doctor contradicts Gerard's words and diagnoses that the writer is suffering from delusions. To him, Christine is the epitome of a tragic woman, marred by ill fate and who one can only pity. While Gerard is shivering in his hospital bed, through a window we see Christine outside, meeting a wind surfer. Then we see the close-up of a spider in its web, with which the film also began.

There are two ways to read the ending, but neither one gets the upper hand. The first option is the doctor's analysis that Gerard suffers from hallucinations as a consequence of having witnessed Herman's atrocious death. For the doctor, Gerard is, partly due to his fondness of alcohol, a pathological liar and it is a token of disrespect to speak ill of the poor widow. Whereas the doctor believes that Gerard is suffering from delusions, the writer himself has to think that he is truly gifted with second sight. For him, the frequent appearances of the blonde woman in a blue coat are no longer coincidental, but meaningful and life-saving. The film's strength is that not only both options make sense, but that the two conflicting interpretations of delusions versus conspiracy are framed by Gerard's stance, which can be explained as both serious and ironic. As the doctor tells him, the option that Gerard might have (erroneously) made up Christine's guilty role is strengthened by his confession during the Q & A that 'I lie the truth ... just as long as I start to believe it myself.' The doctor takes this potentially ironic credo seriously and puts the emphasis on the lies as well as the vivid imagination. The other option presumes that Gerard has made this remark tongue-in-cheek, implying that he knows how to separate truth from lies. In that case, the irony is that Gerard dearly believes that his scepticism has led him to see the true state of affairs.

The main reason why this ambiguity cannot be resolved is a consequence of the cinematic devices employed by Verhoeven. A filmmaker conventionally uses dissolves, superimpositions or soft focus in order to mark the transition from 'reality' to a character's mental world. By contrast, Verhoeven uses hard

cuts practically all the time, with the result that, formally, a daydream or hallucinatory sequence is cinematically presented in the same way as any scene from the 'normal' world. However, the spectator can still distinguish a dream or hallucination from an everyday practice because of the bizarre content of many sequences: obviously Gerard did not strangle his boyfriend nor did Christine castrate him with a pair of scissors; it is obvious that the sequence in the hotel with the injured eye is a weird fantasy, and when he sees Herman, hanging at the cross in the church and only wearing swimming trunks, everyone will interpret this as a hallucination. The irony is that the viewer has the illusion throughout the film that he understands the status of each and every shot – this is a dream and this is not – and that he knows how to separate lies from truth but due to the final episode, the status of the visions becomes undetermined after all. What seemed to be too strange to be true, may not be that strange after all. In the eyes of the doctor Gerard's scenario that Christine is a cunning woman is too bizarre for words, but since the viewer has been confronted with the very same signs as Gerard, the story of a dark conspiracy is not that outlandish any more.

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Remember that Gerard defined a Catholic as someone who has opened up to the fantastic. This could be regarded as an ironic and playful remark, but the irony of the film is that Gerard owes his life – or, at least, he thinks so – to the fact that he becomes one of those people whose very existence he had ironically doubted: he is one of those rare types who happens to listen when he is being warned. To turn Gerard's train of thought into a legitimate option, scriptwriter Soeteman decided to introduce 'Maria,' a new character not in the novel, for without her the scales might have tipped in the favour of the down-to-earth vision of the doctor. In Soeteman's words, the blonde woman is the *femme céleste*, the mirror image of the *femme fatale*. The presence of the woman in the blue coat is required to bring about a shift in Gerard's attitude. As soon as he interprets her frequent appearances as warning signs of impending danger, he starts to act in congruence with those remarks he initially made in jest.

Since the film does not resolve the status of the fantastic visions as either outrageous or as meaningful flash-forwards, the spectator gets caught in the deadlock of how to interpret the protagonist: either Gerard is paranoid, as the doctor believes, or he is a visionary who is truly open to the fantastic – which was his ironic definition of the essence of Catholicism. On these grounds, one might claim that with *DE VIERDE MAN*, Verhoeven has performed a particularly unstable kind of irony. Seminal for this effect is that Verhoeven's film consistently problematized the status of the dreams and hallucinations. As I indicated earlier, Verhoeven refrained from employing formal means to help the viewer by using hard cuts throughout. In an attempt to explain that the film

becomes a balancing act between the conventions of realism and surrealism, Verhoeven, as he told Van Scheers, decided to shoot in deep focus. According to the director, the foreground and background should be equally sharp; a shallow focus may 'exclude reality.' At the same time, Verhoeven adopted the idea to use special filters in order to obtain extremely bright colours one sees when watching surrealist paintings: blue should be deep blue and red deep red. And of course, these hyper-real colours were not only used during hallucinatory scenes but throughout the whole film. Verhoeven's choice to represent the dreams and visions via deep focus and bright colours was an eminently functional one to underscore the effect of the incessant oscillation between irony and seriousness.

322 | Throughout my interpretation I have emphasized the ironic potential of Verhoeven's *DE VIERDE MAN*, in the sense that it is frankly impossible to draw a line between seriousness and irony, which recalls the undecidability of Van Warmerdam's cinema. At the same time, the film owes its grotesquery to a combination of surreal humour and horror: because of the dark hallucinations (or 'warnings'), it contains aspects of 'eeriness, of the spine-chillingly uncanny,' which Thomson considers as seminal to the grotesque (5). In addition to these textual features, the film can be seen as satiric if we consider *DE VIERDE MAN* against the background of Verhoeven's career. Remember that Verhoeven felt really sore about the hostile reception of his *SPETTERS*, which had raised an unprecedented level of sharp protest (see chapter 6). It may read like kitchen sink psychology but according to his biographer Rob van Scheers, it amused Verhoeven that after all the accusations of banality he turned to a novella by Gerard Reve, a highly respected writer who belonged to intellectual circles: 'All right then, let's make an art film!' Verhoeven is supposed to have said (qtd. in Van Scheers, 234-35). Associating himself with Reve could offer Verhoeven 'collateral advantage,' but not only because of the writer's renown. Reve had also built himself a reputation as a provocateur because of racist statements in his work, but he got away with it because there was a tendency among readers to consider Reve's quotes and performances as an act of ironic provocation. In a letter to 'fellow artist' Simon C. in his *De taal der liefde* [*The Language of Love*] (1972), Reve advocated, in apparently disdainful terms, the return of black people on a 'tjoeki tjoeki' steamboat to the 'Takki Takki' Jungle. At a poetry festival in Kortrijk in 1975, he recited, dressed in a dark shirt with a silver cross, the poem 'Voor eigen erf' ['For One's Own Backyard'] about black scum and white power. Text and performance do not give guidance on how to interpret them. A critic like colleague-writer Harry Mulisch presumed that Reve had betrayed the two-faced nature of irony. Racist opinions are disguised as tongue-in-cheek phrases, but one should not be fooled, Mulisch warns: Reve may really hold these opinions (Mulisch, 52). Hence, he misuses

the trope of irony as a playground for abject ideas. According to this position, irony functions as a poor excuse for a serious support of racist ideas. A reverse stance could be defended with equal gusto. Reve uses irony to expose and condemn the silly logic of racist thinking, and in such a case irony functions as a critical gesture. Both Reve and Verhoeven had caused quite a stir with controversial work, but whereas Verhoeven had been offended by all the negativity surrounding his SPETTERS, Reve had been given the benefit of the doubt and thus the racist slur had not deteriorated his success. So, the choice to adapt one of Reve's books into a film was to be seen as an implicit strategy: if you, critics, misread my films as banal, let me then make an 'art film' on the basis of a writer who despite controversial statements can have his cake and eat it, too. And thus his DE VIERDE MAN is to be interpreted as a satirical comment, aimed at those critics, including the people from the Netherlands Film Fund, who took him for a director who prefers to work 'below the belt.'

One final irony in all this is not to be missed: Ditvoorst's 'revenge' film elaborated upon a kind of vulgarity that had been introduced by Verhoeven with his WAT ZIEN IK!?, discussed in chapter 1, albeit it did not have the success of the latter. Verhoeven's 'revenge' film, by contrast, was a surrealist grotesque and as such it had much closer affinities with Ditvoorst's black-and-white DE BLINDE FOTOGRAAF than to his previous work, albeit that the very colourful DE VIERDE MAN was quite successful, perhaps thanks to the insertion of erotically charged elements. Ditvoorst was only to make one more film, released a year after DE VIERDE MAN. His DE WITTE WAAN [WHITE MADNESS] (1984) was a slightly surreal and pessimistic picture about the drug-addicted visual artist Lazlo who comes to live with his mother, a former theatre actress, after she has returned from the hospital. Initially, her half-sister acts as a nurse. This half-sister suggests that Lazlo should arrange a television set to offer his mother some distraction, but the latter prefers to stick to Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. The half-sister replies: 'All that sorrow, why don't you want some comedy?', a remark which only raises eyebrows from both mother and son. Eventually she leaves, after she has come to realize that she is out of place, an obstacle to the strong bond between mother and son. The film is intercut with shots from animals like snakes and eagles, both living, made of marble, or drawn by Lazlo, but also with close-ups from a lemon cut in half or blossoming trees, and the general pompous style is the overture to a theatrical finale. In a beautiful bed, surrounded by red and pink flowers as well as many candles Lazlo gives her champagne and a pill to commit suicide, while Mozart is playing, just as she had requested in a letter, as we can see in the final shot. This bleak film was, in spite of the main role for Thom Hoffman who had played the handsome boy in DE VIERDE MAN, way too idiosyncratic and it attracted no more than 1,700 viewers. In 1987

Ditvoorst committed suicide; that very same year Verhoeven made *ROBOCOP*, which was his ticket to fame in America.

## ALMOST FULL CIRCLE

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In the case of the grotesque, gruesome elements can be presented in such a comic manner that the grimace can become a guffaw, and vice versa. In this chapter three variants of the grotesque have been addressed. First, the caricature, which was clearly inspired by the cinema of Tarantino (*BLACK OUT*, *NAAR DE KLOTE!*) as well as by the odd combination of Tarantino and Tarkovsky (*DE WEDEROPSTANDING VAN EEN KLOOTZAK*). Second, the grotesque irony of fate of *PLAN C* in which a happy ending is handed to the clumsy protagonist on a silver platter. Third, both Ditvoorst and Verhoeven produced grotesque satires either to ridicule the Dutch film climate (*DE MANTEL DER LIEFDE*) or as a farewell project out of acerbity with this climate (*DE VIERDE MAN*). Ditvoorst's film seemed modelled after the vulgarity of *WAT ZIEN IK!?*, replacing the latter's erotic humour for hilarious violent scenes. Verhoeven's film resembled in its eerie surrealism a Ditvoorst picture, with colourful eroticism and perverse desires as extra ingredients.

With this discussion of the grotesque, this study has almost come full circle, for some of the films discussed contain the vulgar aspects that were central in chapter 1. Nonetheless, the vulgarity in the films from chapter 1, like *FLODDER*, *NEW KIDS TURBO*, *VET HARD* were too clearly played for laughs, whereas the vulgarity in films like *BLACK OUT*, *NAAR DE KLOTE!*, *DE MANTEL DER LIEFDE* had the effect to (slightly) confuse the spectator, and to create shifting moods, from shocked reactions to giggles. As such, the grotesque has to be distinguished from the deadpan (black) humour by Van Warmerdam. In his films dreadful scenes are hardly ever visualized, but only suggested. In *BORGMAN*, there is only one horror scene in which human flesh is cut with a knife for about a second only, because then the female character wakes up from her nightmare. In the cinema of Van Warmerdam, the performance of the characters is relatively blank so that the emotional register of the viewer is not pushed in a certain direction. The characters in his film do not gesticulate wildly and their facial expression is often demure, so that we do not get a clue as to their mood and state of mind. They do not laugh, no matter how hilarious the situation. And if they start laughing, as some characters do in *GRIMM*, it is fairly inappropriate. When gazpacho is being served by the butler, Luis, the Spanish host, Diego, wittily remarks, in Spanish: 'In Holland, the weather is cold and the soup is hot. In Spain, the weather is hot and the soup is cold.' Diego starts laughing at his own cleverness, whereupon the utterly obedient



Luis follows Diego's example, but in an exaggerated manner as if to please his master. The two Dutch guests, Jacob and Marie, then decide to participate in this social game, although their laughter is much less heartily. In fact, laughter in a Van Warmerdam film has to be met with suspicion, for Diego and Luis are later revealed to have a diabolical nature.

If the characters in his cinema have an emotional outburst, the effect upon the viewers is usually the opposite: when they laugh, we do not laugh; when they have an angry fit or use a snappy timbre, it comes across as laughable. When Marie and Jacob are on a deserted spaghetti western set in GRIMM, Marie wants to cure her brother's belly wound with alcohol. She then returns with a bottle of eggnog, because the label says it contains 14 per cent alcohol, and pours the yellow substance over the enormous scar. Jacob then starts to scream, telling her that the terrible pain is probably caused by the fact that the use-by date of the eggnog had expired many years earlier. Similarly, it is laughable the way Emma Blank is giving ridiculous commands with a stiff voice all the time, which allows no contradiction. At the same time, dark impulses can be unleashed, precisely by those characters who have behaved benevolently throughout, or seem innocent by appearance, like Jacob and Marie, who start as a kind of Hansel and Gretel, but are responsible for many deaths, while she also robs a Spanish woman, who is on her way to a funeral, of her clothes. Van Warmerdam tends to suggest these impulses in dry-comic fashion, whilst the grotesque displays them – either as caricature, as irony, or as satire.

