

Conclusion

In Dutch there is the saying ‘wie zijn hoofd boven het maaiveld uitsteekt, die wordt zijn kop afgehakt.’ This saying is equivalent to what the Anglo-Saxon world knows as the ‘tall poppy syndrome,’ which is defined as the ‘tendency to disparage any person who has achieved great prominence or wealth.’ Humour is often used as an instrument to belittle people, or to say it in slightly more friendly terms, to save the other from unseemly feelings of superiority.¹ It is often considered very effective to confront the other with physical aberrations, like a plump body – Ma Flodder, Bennie in *VET HARD*, Dik Trom – or a comically injured body, as in the grotesqueries from chapter 9. In case we laugh at remarkable facial expressions – Jim van der Woude in the films by Jos Stelling, André van Duin – or at an extremely agile body, however, the person is often lacking in another regard, e.g., because he is a naive underdog as is Pim in *OH BOY!*, who is visibly surprised at his own elasticity.²

Laughter, as Bergson has postulated, is a social phenomenon, and we tend to laugh collectively, as a group, at another group. Poking fun at people, even with the cruel aim to humiliate them, has a useful social function, according to Bergson, for the effect may be to correct the rigid and inelastic behaviour of others. Even though Freud hardly referred to Bergson, this idea can be made congruent with his theory of jokes. In his *Jokes* from 1905, Freud claimed that jokes are predominantly tendentious, often with the intention to discredit someone. Most jokes are not without hostile and/or obscene subtexts in an attempt to aggrandize one’s ego at the expense of others. Since the comic is hardly ever innocent, a comedy always has some message as an effect, *pace* Maas’ pun on the term ‘boodschappen.’ We do not so much appreciate a joke or a comedy because of its clever technique, but ‘we laugh at the tendentious thought behind the joke’ or the comedy (Billig, 159). To give *FLODDER* as an example: the butt of many a joke is Sjakie who is portrayed as a leftist ideal-

ist who believes in the possibility of a classless society. His utopian aim is to elevate the lower class to the level of the upper class, which seems a noble gesture, but the tendentious thought of FLODDER is that the lower class would be foolish to sacrifice its 'uninhibited instincts' to the strict conventions the upper class live by. Sjakie's assumption is that the Flodders will be delighted with this opportunity, but the comic incongruity is that the low-class family kindly refuses the offer: we prefer being rude oddballs to becoming posh people, for we are at least still 'authentic' in our rudeness.

In her attempt to bring out the specificity of the comical, Zupancic has pointed out that comedy 'involves a strange coincidence of realism ... and utter unrealism' (217). Sjakie tries to boost the boorish family out of idealistic motives: their concrete habits of drinking, eating and cursing have to be transformed into more abstract – that is to say, 'decent' – behaviour. Comedy, Zupancic observes, is supposed to be 'more realistic and down-to-earth than, say, tragedy' (217). A tragedy progresses from a concrete 'individual' to an abstract lesson about the hero's 'infinite passion,' but in a comedy, the abstract and the concrete change places. A comedy is about a relatively abstract type – the Happy Slacker, the Cigar-Smoking Woman, the Busty Babe, the Well-Meaning Social Worker – which, as the film progresses, becomes a concrete character. Moreover, it is characteristic of a tragedy that there is nothing behind the veil, to paraphrase Zupancic. In Alfred Hitchcock's VERTIGO (1958), Scottie is obsessed by the ravishing Madeleine, but there never was a Madeleine in the first place: she was just a masquerade, impersonated by the quite ordinary Judy. In a comedy, Zupancic claims, there is always something behind the veil, but this something is of a trivial nature³: Ma Flodder brewing alcohol, Kees selling her body, Johnnie transgressing the speed limit. In addition to this down-to-earth concreteness, a comedy is at the same time utterly unrealistic, because the characters are always kind of 'undead': as a rule, comic characters inhabit the 'universe of the indestructible' (Zupancic, 28). Whatever accident befalls the unfortunate Sjakie, or the 'new kids' or the characters from VET HARD, they 'rise from the chaos perfectly intact, and relentlessly go on pursuing their goals, chasing their dreams, or simply being themselves' (28).

In practically all films from the first half of this study, some 'constructive' tendentious thought is to be detected: the lower class does not give up its 'authenticity'; in the multicultural comedies stereotypes are exaggerated in the hope of undermining them from within; in the romantic comedies characters separate knowledge from belief in order not to give up the hope of finding Prince Charming; in the case of deliberate camp the option of double-coded reading is activated to entertain a gay audience with the advantage of an emancipatory potential, for camp, says Richard Dyer, is 'just about the only style, language and culture which is distinctively and unambiguously gay male' ('It's Being,' 49).

Whilst such variants of humour often seem rebellious in content, they nonetheless all too often fulfil conservative functions, as Anton Zijderveld already suggested in his *Reality in a Looking-Glass* (qtd. in Billig, 213). The attitude of the Flodders and the New Kids is too outrageous and vulgar to provide a viable alternative to the conventions. In trying to expose the sheer silliness and the absurd logic of stereotypes, as in SHOUF SHOUF HABIBI!, one also risks reiterating the clichéd images and hackneyed phrases which unduly disadvantage the minority groups. At worst, the multicultural comedies throw a plethora of commonplaces into the air, as in ALLEEN MAAR NETTE MENSEN, with the result that many viewers are being served: those who yearn for a political reading will find what they are looking for, but at the same time political themes are trivialized to such an extent that one can neglect them at will – a rhetoric which I qualified, following Bordwell, as strategic ambiguity.

The comedies in the first chapters can be taken as such an ambiguous comment upon the proverbial Dutch tolerance. On the one hand, the films seem to teach us to be tolerant towards ‘our neighbours.’ The protagonists may be rude, foul-mouthed, lazy or stubborn, but do not be too harsh on them, for they are good-hearted after all. On the other hand, the comedies play upon the effects of an overtly tolerant attitude. Sjakie’s naive belief is that one should avoid pigeonholing entirely: ‘living apart together’ should become ‘living together.’ His utopian project illustrates that when the practice of polarization is actually put under fire, the presumed Dutch tolerance easily converts into envy and gossiping. Dick Maas told he only had in mind to offer entertainment, but in passing, this lesson was the meaningful effect of his canonical comedy. Paul Scheffer’s scenario of a ‘multicultural tragedy’ in the year 2000 showed that tolerance can be a disguise for indifference. Those new fellow-citizens who are grounded in non-Western traditions are tolerated as long as they do not interfere with ‘us.’ They are left to their own devices, while they are estranged because living in a tolerant country means for them that they are thrown into an environment that lacks morals. This estrangement was exploited in the multicultural comedies in chapter 2, mainly by pitting hackneyed images against each other.

The irony in the romantic or neurotic comedies is ‘risky business,’ because the effect can be counterproductive. Irony can be misused to legitimize one’s actions: ‘I know that wearing Prada is a silly obsession, but nonetheless I do not like to wear anything else,’ or ‘Look at me, I like to show myself off as an unruly girl, but deep down my wishes are quite bourgeois.’ Such a gap between knowledge or posture and doing is ‘ideology at its purest’ according to Žižek, and I have labelled this, at the end of chapter 3, as free-floating irony. The plus of camp that it creates a ‘tight togetherness’ among gays also has a drawback, for not all gay men have an affinity with camp and its hilariously overblown ver-

sions of either femininity or masculinity. Moreover, camp can come to equal the apolitical tendency to turn everything into a witticism or a joke, which in the long run can be quite wearying (Dyer, 'It's Being,' 50).

In the case of camp, viewers are in the position to decide about the status of the film: 'Does the subtext give rise to recognizing double-entendres?' Likewise, (self-declared) cinephiles are, led by a relatively capricious taste, in a position to enjoy a film as a cult movie, despite or rather thanks to the poor quality. This study is structured as to make such relatively 'user-friendly' versions of viewer address slowly slide into more uncanny variants. Films which play with (postmodern) ontology, like OH BOY!, HET ECHTE LEVEN, RENT A FRIEND and OBER, are textually constructed as going from one diegetic level to another level, to-and-fro, and they thus require the spectator to be attentive. The cinema of Jos Stelling is still predominantly ludic, but his protracted form of visual humour, close to slapstick, is aimed at opening up a plurality of meanings as an antidote to the textual urgency of Calvinists for unequivocality. With his DE ILLUSIONIST and DE WISSELWACHTER, Stelling prepared the way for the middle-of-the-road absurdism of Van Warmerdam. Thanks to a consistent deadpan approach, it is difficult to decide whether his films are to be taken as serious or as ironic. When his films toy with the charged representations of 'negroes,' such indecidability can create discomfort on the part of viewers.

Freud has argued that a joke requires three subjects: the joker, who is the 'first person' in the role of perpetrator, a victim, who functions as the doormat of the joke, and an accomplice, the third person laughing.⁴ According to Freud, a joke is a 'double-dealing rascal who serves two masters at once': since the first person is unable to laugh at it himself, he is 'compelled to tell [the] joke to someone else' (Freud *Jokes*, 155). And Freud adds to this that when 'I make the other person laugh by telling him my joke, I am actually making use of him to arouse my own laughter' (156).⁵ A third person is thus required, because the first person is unsure whether or not his joke is funny and therefore he seeks confirmation from an external party. When the third person then starts retelling the joke, as Naomi Beeman has argued in an illuminating essay on 'uncanny laughter,' he is trading places and he himself becomes a first person and is likewise 'contaminated by its uncertain status.' In a regular comedy, such uncertainty is overcome by incorporating signs – such as canned laughter in a television sitcom or the contagious laughter of the characters in the French box-office hit INTOUCHABLES [THE INTOUCHABLES] (Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano, 2011). The cinema of Van Warmerdam can be taken as the inverse of this principle: this time the viewer in the role of the 'third person' is unsure whether it is funny, because the reactions of the characters are usually so demure. Rather, the viewer is provoked to laugh involuntarily, at seemingly

inappropriate moments, e.g., when the characters act cruelly or when they get angry.⁶

In laughter, as Bergson has famously asserted, ‘we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity’ (4). According to him, the comic ‘demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart’ (5). If there is, following Bergson, a ‘cold cruelty at the core of the comic,’ then a dividing line can be said to run through this study, which corresponds with the difference between Freud’s joke book and his short paper on humour, 22 years later, in 1927. As Freud’s position was in 1905, in acting as if a joke is harmless, we repress the idea that we like a joke because it makes us believe the best of ourselves, often at the expense of others (see Billig, 159–60). The New Kids are a case in point, for they ridicule others all the time, out of their conviction that they themselves are not to blame for their problems, but always someone else. Often this someone holds an official function and deserves to be turned into a comic object of derision. Jokes usually yield pleasure ‘in the service of aggression’ (Freud *Jokes*, 163), meant to inflate the subject’s ego: the idea that one is not as stupid as one’s neighbour can be ‘stuff of mirth’ (Polizzotti, 11).

In Freud’s much later essay ‘Humour,’ however, he suggests that a humourist does not just take up the role of the superior adult who treats the object of his gag like a child, but he also puts himself into the position of a child. This much more ‘dynamic explanation of the humorous attitude’ holds that the ‘ego can appear tiny and all its interests trivial’ (164). The deliberate role-playing in the cinema of Van Warmerdam is a good example of this kind of humour, for it requires the characters to adopt a distance from their selves: Edgar has discussions with his spiritual father in an attempt to improve the script, but after each encounter he cannot but return to the role of the unfortunate waiter, delivering poor scripted lines. In a reversal of the superiority thesis, this kind of Freudian humour is ‘essentially self-mocking ridicule’ (Critchley, 94) whereby the comedian/character looks at his own ‘childlike, diminutive ego’ (95). As soon as the ego is subordinated, Mark Polizzotti mentions in his Introduction to Breton’s *Anthology of Black Humour*, everything that seemed all-important is reduced ‘to a pretty scale’ (12).

Writes Polizzotti: ‘... black humour is the opposite of joviality, wit, or sarcasm. Rather, it is a partly macabre, partly ironic, often absurd turn of spirit that constitutes the “mortal enemy of sentimentality” and beyond that a “superior revolt of the mind”’ (10). In the anti-jovial cinema of Van Warmerdam, characters display a discrepancy between an unsentimental decorum – like Haneveld playing the role as butler – and their perverse impulses. When they perform their dark compulsions, however, they usually stay ‘in character,’ calmly keeping up appearances. Thus, in black humour, as Critchley men-

tions in reference to *FARGO*, there is often a ‘disjunction of action and affect’ (88). Evil deeds are executed so clinically that they become ‘partly macabre, partly ironic, often absurd,’ as when the obedient family members of Emma Blank abandon their submissiveness and nail the Madame to the floor in her very best clothes.

Macabre events are presented in a deadpan style, whereas the grotesque exploits the tension between the comic and the gruesome. Whereas the grotesque-caricature can be said to be close to the effect of the joke, the grotesque-irony of *PLAN C* and the grotesque-satire of both *DE MANTEL DER LIEFDE* and *DE VIERDE MAN* are closer to the effect of (Freudian) humour. Ditvoorst’s *DE MANTEL DER LIEFDE* in particular can be said to be ‘sublime’ in its ‘ambition’ to adapt the Ten Commandments while none other than ‘Jesus’ in the role of film director produces a banal version of the biblical instructions and prohibitions. At the same time, Ditvoorst performs a ‘self-mocking ridicule,’ as if he, known as an ‘art’ filmmaker, had in mind to outdo the vulgarity of a film like Verhoeven’s *WAT ZIEN IK?* (chapter 1), which is to be regarded as a gesture of humour par excellence. In turn, Verhoeven, accused of ushering in banality after the release of *SPETTERS*, started making an ‘art film,’ a gesture which can be understood as a ‘sublime satire.’



Plate 1. FANFARE



Plate 2. DE WISSELWACHTER



Plate 3. DE WISSELWACHTER

Jos Stelling

Z W R O T N I C Z Y.

NA ROZSTAJACH UCZUĆ

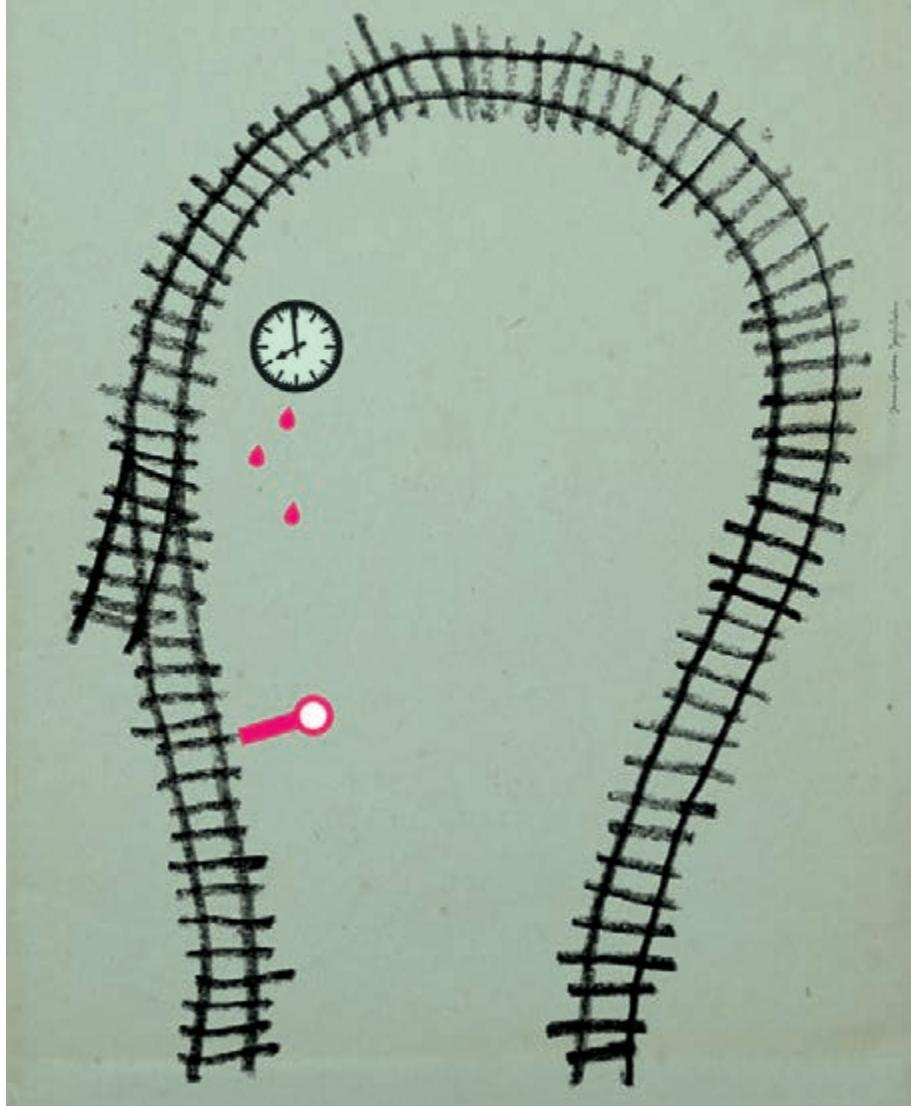


Plate 4. DE WISSELWACHTER



Plate 5. DE NOORDERLINGEN



Plate 6. DE NOORDERLINGEN

Laurens Geels en Dick Maas
presenteren



DE NOORDERLINGEN

een film van Alex van Warmerdam

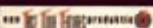


Plate 7. DE NOORDERLINGEN



Plate 8. FLODDER IN AMERIKA!



Plate 9. NEW KIDS TURBO



Plate 10. HET SCHNITZELPARADIJS



Plate 11. EEN ZWOELE ZOMERAVOND



Plate 12. JA ZUSTER, NEE ZUSTER



Plate 13. CHA CHA



Plate 14. DE MARATHON



Plate 15. OBER



Plate 16. BORGMAN



Plate 17. DE WEDEROPSTANDING VAN EEN KLOOTZAK



Plate 18. GRIMM



Plate 19. DE LAATSTE DAGEN VAN EMMA BLANK



Plate 20. AANMODDERFAKKER



Plate 21. AANMODDERFAKKER



Plate 22. AANMODDERFAKKER



Plate 23. DE JURK



Plate 24. BLACK OUT



Plate 25. DE MANTEL DER LIEFDE



Plate 26. JA ZUSTER, NEE ZUSTER



Plate 27. JA ZUSTER, NEE ZUSTER



Plate 28. SPETTERS



Plates 29. SPETTERS