

'Those who laugh as a body today, will march as a body tomorrow': Critical comedy and the politics of community

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Dick Zijp** 

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Abstract

Comedians are often celebrated for critically confronting their audiences, thereby upsetting deep-held beliefs of spectators and contributing to progressive change. In this article, I will use Dutch comedy as my case study to demonstrate that comedians' playful opposition to the audience has serious political implications and reveals a deep suspicion towards political community. By analysing this fear of the community, this article contributes to a better understanding of the politics of comedy and challenges the dominant idea that critical comedy is inherently progressive and emancipatory. I point to the separate ways in which two Dutch comedians from different generations – Freek de Jonge and Micha Wertheim – use humour to unmask the audience as proto-fascist mass.

Keywords

Comedy, critical humour, Freek de Jonge, Micha Wertheim, political community

Do you now see why it feels so good to be a critical mind? Why critique, this most ambiguous *pharmakon*, has become such a potent euphoric drug? You are always right! (Latour, 2004: 238–239)

Introduction

'Why are many people stupid? Because it's safe to be with many' (de Jonge, 2004a). At the end of his show *De Komiek* (The Comic, 1980), comedian Freek de Jonge presents a

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bitter monologue about the current state of society. The main point of his monologue is that the progressive revolution of the 1960s and 1970s has collapsed. Although its promise was to liberate the individual from the ties of community, it has only created new, oppressive political identities. De Jonge criticises the women's movement, the gay movement and the disabled for engaging in one-issue identity politics, leaving no room for individual expression. While delivering his monologue, de Jonge is almost screaming and drags his fellow performer Orlow Seunke (who plays the disabled brother of the comedian) across the stage, expressing both anger and desperation:

That every individual is, can be, something special, is out of the question. So the special ones need to adapt. The special ones want to adapt. The special ones will adapt. Emancipation! The elderly have the right to be old. Women have the right to work. Faggots are entitled to a clean arse. The disabled to a towerless threshold block.¹ Toddlers to Sesame Street. (de Jonge, 1980: 73–74)

De Jonge's mockery of identity politics leads to the pessimistic conclusion that the individual always tends to hide in the group. This is summarised in the above-quoted comic aphorism, which is repeated a couple of times: 'Why are many people stupid? Because it's safe to be with many' (de Jonge, 1980: 72).

In *De Komiek*, Freek de Jonge mixes explicit social criticism with political parables, clowning and role-playing to comment upon the tension between individual and collective. He alternatively plays the role of the comedian and the comedian's father. The comedian's father is a union member and represents the old world, the world of unions and collective political action. The comedian does not believe in politics anymore, because he knows that the masses are conservative. They only want to be entertained and are not interested in the comedian's political engagement. 'It's not always easy to be the funniest person in the room' (de Jonge, 1980: 6, 71)² is one of the comedian's running gags. While performing his monologue, Freek de Jonge is dressed like a clown: he wears an exuberant blue costume, a red wig and a table tennis ball as a nose. Doing so, he emphasises his role of the wise fool, who is not itself part of society and is therefore even better able to see its wrongs.

Freek de Jonge is not the only comedian who unmask his audience as stupid in the name of emancipation. This is a staple of critical comedy. Comedians are often celebrated for critically confronting their audiences, thereby upsetting deep-held beliefs of spectators and contributing to progressive change. In this article, I will use Dutch comedy as my case study to demonstrate that comedians' playful opposition to the audience has serious political implications and reveals a deep suspicion towards political community. By analysing this fear of the community, this article contributes to a better understanding of the politics of comedy and challenges the dominant idea that critical comedy is inherently progressive and emancipatory (Critchley, 2002; Fox, 2018; Morreal, 1983).

Such an inquiry is especially relevant at a time that critique is widely believed to have 'run out of steam' (Latour, 2004). As philosophers and social scientists have observed, critical strategies traditionally belonging to left-wing critics have been accommodated by corporate capitalism and adopted by conservative voices such as climate-change deniers (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Latour, 2004; Rancière, 2007). Comedians have also increasingly questioned the critical potential and progressive nature of humour. For

instance, the creators of South Park argued that satire is not an effective weapon anymore in times of Trump (Garber, 2017), and Dutch comedian Claudia de Breij wondered on stage how comedians should respond to the aggressive humour of right-wing populists like Geert Wilders (de Breij, 2012).

In the first part of this article, I will address this broader debate about the limits of critique and argue that overcoming the limits of critical comedy requires a return to political community. This opens new possibilities, but also creates resistance, as demonstrated by the often-heard complaint that comedians embracing the community only 'preach to the converted' (Quirk, 2016a).

The main part of the article consists of detailed analyses of the work of two prominent Dutch comedians from different generations: Freek de Jonge (born in 1944) and Micha Wertheim (born in 1972). I will argue that both Freek de Jonge and Micha Wertheim tend to think of the community in terms of a proto-fascist mass and romanticise the individual as a necessarily critical and progressive thinker. They do so through explicit commentary, but also by opposing unified laughter and using a strategy of dividing the audience. By focusing not on the explicit messages of their humour, but rather on the political work carried out by humour on the level of form, this article is in line with recent scholarship on humour in the field of cultural studies (Holm, 2017; Marsh, 2015).

The tendency to distrust the audience as mass can be observed in the work of many other comedians as well. However, the work of Freek de Jonge and Micha Wertheim lends itself particularly well for an analysis of this trend. Both de Jonge and Wertheim are valued for their highbrow humour, which sets them apart from other Dutch comedians. They are not only critical of society, but also reflect on the limits of critique (both on and off stage). They thereby present a form of 'metacomedy', or comedy *about* comedy. This makes their work into an excellent case study for examining the workings and political implications of critical humour.

Enlightened critic, stupid mass

Freek de Jonge's *De Komiek* stands within the tradition of Dutch cabaret, a popular form of theatre comedy which might include jokes and personal stories, but also songs, sketches and slapstick (Ibo, 1970; Van den Hanenberg and Verhallen, 1996). Dutch comedians are often praised for their critical and progressive humour (Herfkens, 2016; van Heuven, 2005). Freek de Jonge in particular has a long-standing reputation as left-wing comedian (Hartmans, 2014), but his tendency to belittle and mock the spectator for being stupid and conservative also raises questions about the progressive nature of his comedy.

This tension between critique and emancipation is best understood against the backdrop of the broader academic debate about the limits of critique. In the past 15 years, an upsurge of publications within the fields of cultural studies, philosophy and critical sociology has pointed to the limits of the modernist project of critique (Boltanski, 2011; Felski, 2015; Latour, 2004; Rancière, 2007). The main point of these authors is that critique does not always live up to its promise of emancipation and has maybe never done so.

The aim of critical theories has always been to contribute to the emancipation of oppressed groups, along the lines of gender, race and class (among other axes). It does so through the formation of political collectives. As Luc Boltanski puts it, one of the main objectives of ‘the work of *liberation* proposed by critique’ is to enable ‘the dominated to make the transition from a *fragmentary condition* to a *collective condition*’ (Boltanski, 2011: 42). However, many critical theories have paradoxically reinforced the hierarchical relationship between enlightened critic and stupid mass. This is because of the totalising tendencies of critique. The critic imaginatively places himself³ outside of society, and thereby claims a position superior to that of ordinary people. Hence, the logic of critical theories is that of unmasking the illusions of the masses. Doing so, critical theories have often reinforced the superiority of the critic while keeping ordinary people in a position of powerlessness and naïveté:

To explain how and why actors are dominated without knowing it, the [critical] theory must accord great importance to the *illusions* that blind them and appeal to the notion of the *unconscious*. An initial consequence is that actors are often treated as deceived beings or as if they were ‘cultural dopes’, to use Harold Garfinkel’s phrase. Their critical capacities in particular are underestimated or ignored. (Boltanski, 2011: 20)

As will be further demonstrated below, comedians often claim a similar position. They adopt the role of the superior critic in the name of emancipation and liberation, but by doing so reinforce the hierarchical opposition between enlightened critic (the comedian) and stupid mass (the comedy audience).

The work of Bruno Latour (2004) can help to rethink the possibilities of a comedy beyond the paradigm of social critique. In an article with the polemical title ‘Why has critique run out of steam?’, Latour observes that the modernist project of critique has largely collapsed. He relates this to the strategic adoption of a form of postmodern relativism by right-wing, conservative groups. He points, for instance, to the rise of climate-change deniers, who exploit the sceptical position of the critic to unmask scientific facts as ‘mere ideology’ in order to push their own conservative agendas. Latour’s solution for this crisis of critique is not a return to the modernist paradigm of objectivity, with its problematic subject-object distinction, but rather a move from ‘matters of fact’ to ‘matters of concern’. This means acknowledging that facts are never ‘plain’ facts, but that we care for them, and that they are in that sense always embedded in social communities. The move from matters of fact to matters of concern thereby presents a solution for one of the most important problems of critique, which is that it is destructive and does not acknowledge its own entanglement in systems of meaning and belief.

Seen this way, comedians who want to stand up against racism, sexism and other forms of social inequality, and do not want to fall into the trap of destructive critique, should embrace the power of community-building. Rather than creating an opposition between enlightened critic and stupid mass, they would have to build political communities around shared ‘matters of concern’. This means, as Nicholas Holm puts it, acknowledging that humour is ‘never just anarchic negation, but rather also assumes a set of beliefs and structures against which incongruity can be perceived and ridicule mobilised’ (Holm, 2018: 41).

Preaching to the converted

This is easier said than done because there is a strong taboo on community-building in comedy. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the often-heard complaint that comedy is merely ‘preaching to the converted’ (Quirk, 2016a). The assumption here is that comedians would only say things their audiences already agree with, and that in turn audiences only laugh at jokes that confirm their opinions. The insult is used by both comedians and critics. It has, for instance, been used by Freek de Jonge, who complained about the satirical late-night show of his younger colleague Arjen Lubach (Gelder, 2017). The idea of ‘preaching to the converted’ has even stronger overtones in the Dutch cabaret tradition, because cabaret in the Netherlands has a reputation for being moralistic and preachy. It has often been suggested that cabaret is strongly influenced by Calvinist Dutch culture, further enhanced by the fact that many comedians are ministers’ sons (Koolhaas, 1981).

However, as comedy scholar Sophie Quirk (2016a) has argued, preaching to the converted does not equal a lack of impact, and it is not necessarily conservative either. Quirk argues that preaching to the converted can also be empowering: it can be a way of strengthening political community, articulating yet unarticulated ideas of audiences and inspiring people to political action (Quirk, 2015: 178–180; Quirk, 2016a, 2016b). She sees this reflected in the work of Mark Thomas, a British, activist comedian who consciously chooses to preach to the converted, and to empower and positively inspire like-minded audiences. She analyses the strategies used by Thomas to strengthen the collective and inspire it to political action, for example, by emphasising his personal struggles and insecurities as an activist, thereby making ‘the notion of activism more accessible to the audience’ (Quirk, 2016a: 254).

Quirk, however, also undermines this positive revaluation of preaching to the converted in comedy by juxtaposing the work of Mark Thomas to that of Stewart Lee. According to Quirk, both present examples of successful critical comedy, but do so by using different strategies. While Thomas embraces the audience, Lee divides it and ‘seeks discord rather than unified laughter’ (Quirk, 2016a: 252). He does so because he believes that uniting the audience would result in mob-like behaviour. Quirk provides the theoretical underpinning of this fear of the community when she writes,

The joker is bound by the consensus of the group; it logically follows, therefore, that political comedians can only hope to attract audiences who already agree with them, at least if they want that audience to laugh. Worse still, our knowledge of the social pressure to conform with group laughter could suggest that audiences can be coerced into mob-like behaviour, causing them to celebrate or conform with ideas that are not their own. (Quirk, 2016a: 249)

Despite Quirk’s positive approach to the comedian who preaches to the converted, she does not question the deep suspicion towards unified laughter and agreement that she encounters in the comedy of Lee. In the following, I will further theorise and question the idea that unified laughter is dangerous by analysing the work of Freek de Jonge and Micha Wertheim, who share with Lee a suspicion towards unified laughter and make it into the explicit theme of their work.

Dividing the audience

Freek de Jonge (born in 1944) is one of the most critically acclaimed comedians of the Netherlands and well-known for his intellectual humour. De Jonge started his career in the cabaret duo Neerlands Hoop in Bange Dagen (1968–1979), together with Bram Vermeulen. While Bram Vermeulen was responsible for the music, Freek de Jonge acted as the frontman and comedian of the group. Although Neerlands Hoop sometimes joked about social and political topics, the politics of their work was played out mostly at the level form. Neerlands Hoop rebelled against the student cabarets of their time, which were seen as transgressive because of the content of their work, but aspired to high levels of professionalism with regard to acting, singing and *mise-en-scènes*. Neerlands Hoop, on the other hand, cultivated a provocatively amateuristic style. De Jonge was not a trained actor or singer. In fact, he could not sing, but did so anyway; and his performance style was chaotic and unrestrained. He told jokes in high speed, and did not seem to care if some of his jokes bombed. It was sometimes hard to follow de Jonge's stories and associations, but for many critics this contributed to his appeal and cleverness. In contrast to the satirical humour and cabaret songs of the student cabarets, Neerlands Hoop presented puns, sick jokes and absurdist humour, combined with rock music. Furthermore, with their physique – most notably their long hair – Freek de Jonge and Bram Vermeulen were immediately recognisable as part of a rebellious and progressive youth culture. Their performances often had the character of political happenings or pop concerts, with loud, long-haired youngsters in the audience. In 1978, Bram and Freek (as they were soon called) famously protested against the football world championship (FIFA World Cup) in Argentina because of the country's military regime under Jorge Rafael Videla. Their political campaign (in which they called for a boycott) largely failed, but their activist performance *Bloed aan de Paal* (Blood at the Post, 1978) helped to further establish and perpetuate their reputation as left-wing comedians.

In the early 1980s, Freek de Jonge made a number of highly successful solo performances. Although de Jonge began to distance himself in these years from the political activism of Neerlands Hoop, he was still perceived by critics and audiences as moralistic and preachy (Hartmans, 2014). The well-known fact that de Jonge was the son of a minister has contributed to his reputation of left-wing preacher. De Jonge's moralism is reflected in the form of his early solo performances, which were structured like sermons, with a central theme and storyline, and asides which offered ample opportunity for joke-telling.

Freek de Jonge responded in his early solo work to the politicised culture of the 1970s and early 1980s and a dominant Cold War politics, with its strong oppositions between Left and Right, East and West, offering fertile ground for social critique. However, there was a tension between de Jonge's self-perception as a critical comedian catering to highbrow audiences, and his embrace by a mass audience. De Jonge responded to this by critically confronting and insulting his audience. In the following, I will analyse the politics of humour in two scenes from Freek de Jonge's early solo work, arguing that de Jonge consciously tries to divide the audience so as to emancipate spectators from the dangerous mass.

The first scene, taken from the show *De Tragiek* (The Tragedy, 1981), is one in which Freek de Jonge plays a follower of Bhagwan (de Jonge, 2004b). Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (also known as Osho) was an Indian guru and spiritual leader, with followers from India, Australia, the United States and Europe. Between 1980 and

1984, the Bhagwan movement reached the peak of its popularity in the Netherlands and also counted some Dutch celebrities among its followers, including comedians and singers Ramses Shaffy and George Groot (Cabaret Don Quishocking).

The context for this scene is provided by Freek de Jonge's appearance as presenter of the television programme *Denkbeeld* (1980), in which the comedian interviewed and expressed admiration for spiritual leaders, which led to critical responses among left-wing intellectuals and artists (*Denkbeeld: Freek over Freek*, 1980). In the Bhagwan scene, de Jonge plays with his public persona by confessing to the audience that he has converted to Bhagwan and does not want to make jokes anymore because he is now enlightened. By putting on the Bhagwan garment, de Jonge playfully embodies the preacher that some believed he had become.

In terms of content, this scene could be (and has been) interpreted as a parody of Bhagwan (Heijer, 1981; van Leeuwen, 1981). However, what these interpretations miss is that critique in this scene is played out first and foremost at the level of form. Read in this way, the scene is not primarily about Bhagwan, but about the dangers of the mass (van Kooten, 1981).

In the scene, Freek de Jonge breaks with the formal convention of providing the comedy audience with laughter. By creating awkward moments of silence and non-laughter, de Jonge breaks away from the comedy format and thereby confronts the audience with its desire to be entertained by the comedian. De Jonge starts the scene by telling (sick) jokes, but refuses to give the punch line, supposedly because the Bhagwan has taught him that those who have reached spiritual elevation do not need jokes at the expense of others. Next, de Jonge asks the spectators to write down their (spiritual) questions on a piece of paper and throw it to the stage. De Jonge announces right away that he will not provide answers to these questions, because, according to Bhagwan, the question is more important than the answer. De Jonge waits patiently until (some) spectators write down questions for him, thereby creating nervous giggling and long moments of silence.

Sometimes, de Jonge does make jokes at the expense of others (e.g. mocking someone in the first row), but only to confront the audience with their desire to be entertained at all costs, even when this means that the individual is scapegoated to the collective. To work against the dangers of the mass, de Jonge adopts a strategy of dividing the audience. By confronting spectators time and again with their desire to act as a mass and laugh at excluded outsiders, and by inviting spectators to participate in unconventional rituals (such as meditations or writing down spiritual questions), de Jonge divides the audience, makes spectators feel uncomfortable and emphasises their individual responsibility to make their own choices.

The long duration of the scene (almost 30 minutes) and de Jonge's refusal to grant the audience comic relief contribute to its impact. When de Jonge disappears from the stage and the music starts to signal the end of the scene, he immediately returns on stage, interrupts the music, and confronts the audience with its desire to find relief: 'No relief! Do not act like: well, that's over, now for something more cheerful!' De Jonge repeats this another time, thus making it impossible for the audience to relieve the built-up tension. The impossibility of comic relief is emphasised by the lines of Jimi Hendrix' 'All Along the Watchtower', which we hear as de Jonge disappears from stage: 'There's too much confusion / I can't get no relief'.

My second example, taken from the show *De Mythe* (The Myth, 1983), exemplifies de Jonge's tendency to link the mob behaviour of the audience to totalitarianism. In this routine, de Jonge exploits the well-known fact that he is married to a Jewish woman, Hella de Jonge. De Jonge pretends that his wife is standing in the wings (together with their children) and talks to them in asides. In one of them, he makes a cynical joke about the complexities of being a second-generation Holocaust survivor by telling his wife: 'If you are still bothered by the war, Hitler might have won after all'. When the audience responds with laughter, de Jonge corrects them for laughing at a tasteless joke. Somewhat later, he tests the morality of his audience by making another one:

I'm standing in front of my bookcase the other day, I want to add my phone book – does not fit! Too many books. Or: phone book too thick [small laughter]. So, I start thumbing through the book, I think: 'Well, that page with Aron can be taken out'. [small laughter] 'That page with Bouterse, that one can be taken out too'. [small laughter] 'Those pages with Cohen, they can be taken out too'. [small laughter] And see: when all those strangers get the hell out of here, my phone book fits in the bookcase again! [harder laughter; Freek de Jonge looks at the crowd, surprised, laughter swells, turns to children in the wings] There are irrevocably racists in the room tonight! [hard laughter, de Jonge turns to the audience again] No, no, no, what I should have done was walk to that bookcase and let's see: W.F. Hermans' books, Gerard Reve's books, they can be taken out, and my phone book fits as well! [laughter swells, applause, de Jonge looks into the crowd, surprised, turns to children again] Oh dear, there are even potential book burners in the room tonight! [hard laughter] [. . .] They [the audience] want to have an opinion so badly that if they hear one, they think: that must be the one [mimics applause, followed by hard laughter and actual applause]. (de Jonge, 2004c)

By confronting the audience with their willingness to laugh at a racist and anti-Semitic joke, de Jonge already hints at the connection between (unified) laughter and totalitarianism. While the first joke is openly racist, the second joke is less so. Gerard Reve and W.F. Hermans, two of the most critically acclaimed Dutch novelists of the time, were both accused of racism and anti-Semitism. That de Jonge's mocking proposal to burn these authors' books is met with more laughter than the previous joke, might be explained by the shared feeling that it is more acceptable to make fun of a racist than to make racist jokes. The audience can now imagine to be 'on the good side'. However, de Jonge's response that there are not only racists but also 'book burners' among the audience suggests that this joke is just as reactionary as the previous one. A seemingly 'progressive' joke about a racist writer is unmasked here as a populist and proto-fascist joke about book burning. The audience is thus not only willing to laugh at racist jokes, but – even worse – is not even aware of the political implications of their own laughter. Finally, by suggesting that the audience is just passively waiting for the comedian to give an opinion for them to agree with, de Jonge points to the dangerous power of the comedian to manipulate the audience and links it to totalitarianism: the audience can even be manipulated to laugh about anti-Semitic jokes or to entertain the idea of book burning.

Although de Jonge directly confronts his audience, this all seems to happen in the 'play mode'. It would be ridiculous to suggest that de Jonge truly believes his audience would seriously engage with the idea of book burning. Rather, de Jonge repeatedly manipulates audience response to force spectators into a position that can, in a next step,

be unmasked as morally wrong. Doing so, de Jonge primarily demonstrates his own powers as a critic, who keeps his audience in a position of inferiority, even if he does so in a playful, non-serious way.

The limits of critique

While Freek de Jonge reached the peak of his fame at a time that the role of the critic was largely taken for granted (the early 1980s), Micha Wertheim started his career at the turn of the century, at a time that critique became increasingly questioned. Wertheim, born in 1972, received his degree in cultural studies at the University of Maastricht in the 1990s, at a time of consensus politics and the heydays of postmodern art. The dominant, post-modern aesthetic of the time can be seen reflected in Wertheim's work. In contrast to Freek de Jonge's moralism, Wertheim's style is marked by irony and playful citation. In his work, Wertheim often presents a deconstruction of cabaret by playing with the conventions of the genre (Zijp, 2015). In line with his ironic, deconstructionist humour and in contrast to Freek de Jonge's meandering, associative logic, Wertheim's style is more argumentative, as if he was giving an academic lecture. His physical stiffness and uncomfortable way of talking contribute to this experience.

For Wertheim, then, critical comedy is not something to be taken for granted, but something to be deconstructed. In *Micha Wertheim voor de zoveelste keer* (Micha Wertheim for the umpteenth time, 2012), Wertheim engages most explicitly with the limits of critique by presenting a deconstruction of Dutch cabaret and its reputation as a critical form of comedy. The performance starts as conventional, observational comedy in which the comedian mixes anecdotes with jokes and critical opinions. Wertheim stands behind the microphone, thereby emphasising the roots of his work in the stand-up comedy tradition, which is often considered less 'theatrical' than cabaret because of the absence of song and narrative, its minimalistic setting and an emphasis upon the here-and-now character of the event and spontaneous interactions with the audience (Henquet, 2019: 24).⁴ But in the middle of the show, Wertheim breaks away from this stand-up comedy format. When he is ranting about Facebook, mocking its users for being lonely and unable to make friends in the real world, he is suddenly interrupted by a recording of his own voice, which continues the story he was telling live.

By doubling his voice, Wertheim is able to distance himself from his routine and critically reflect upon it. When he has disconnected the cord of the microphone, thereby silencing the voice-recording, he confesses that it is quite easy to become a critical comedian. He explains that the comedian should always pick something – a new technology or an upcoming trend – and use that as the butt of his jokes. Furthermore, the target should be something that one-third of the audience is already using, while two-thirds of the audience does not use it and might dislike it or has not yet formed an opinion about it. By doing so, the comedian is able to manufacture consensus, but strategically mask his comedy as critical and rebellious. This, Wertheim explains, is nothing new; it is an old comedy trick. Wertheim continues to explain that this trick makes comedy quite conservative. The comedian, in Wertheim's reading, does not mock the consensus of the group or the social norm, but rather opposes the not-yet-established norm and is thus necessarily opposed to social change.

Wertheim's routine could be interpreted in terms of the paradigm of critical comedy and the politics of emancipation. Indeed, the comedic strategies used by Wertheim resemble those of Freek de Jonge, at least up to a certain extent. By explaining the mechanisms behind his own jokes, Wertheim kills the comedy and creates moments of silence and uncomfortable, isolated laughter. Furthermore, by revealing the clever strategies used by the comedian to manufacture consensus around a topic, convincing the majority who have not yet formed an opinion about the stupidity of the new and making the minority shamefully self-aware of their engagement with a stupid trend, Wertheim confronts the audience with the dangers of the mass. By emphasising that the audience is made up of different segments, each with different relationships to the topics discussed, Wertheim also divides the audience and precludes any easy identification with the comedian or an experience of unified laughter. Thereby, it might be argued, Wertheim aims to emancipate the individual from the group by confronting spectators with their own desires, expectations and opinions and the way these are exploited by the comedian.

However, while Freek de Jonge's moralism still seems to offer the promise of emancipation, Wertheim's deconstructionist humour doesn't, because it finds itself entangled in the contradictions of critique. Wertheim engages with the contradictions of critical humour in a deconstruction of the Dutch cabaret tradition. Following his Facebook routine, Wertheim presents a comparison between two prominent Dutch comedians embodying critical humour and its antithesis: Youp van 't Hek and Toon Hermans.⁵ Wertheim mocks van 't Hek for being the type of comedian who makes fun of the latest trends, and thereby presents himself as critical and rebellious while actually confirming the status quo. Wertheim gives the example of a routine in which van 't Hek mocked the first users of the mobile phone in the 1990s.⁶ Next, Wertheim points to the apolitical comedy of Toon Hermans as an alternative for van 't Hek's supposedly critical humour. While Wertheim seems to be serious at first, emphasising how much he has been inspired by Hermans' comedy, he continues by praising Hermans all too extensively for continuing with his shows during the Second World War. By imagining that he had been present at one of these shows, only to realize that this would not have been possible because access to the theatre was denied to Jews, Wertheim exploits his Jewish background to create a painful moment that undercuts his initial praise of Hermans and frames it retroactively as ironic. In his deconstruction of Youp van 't Hek and Toon Hermans, Wertheim highlights the fact that both comedians offer their spectators a sense of belonging to a collective, but at the expense of tricking and misleading the audience, and reinforcing the status quo. While van 't Hek seemingly divides the audience, he actually manufactures consensus. Hermans, in Wertheim's reading, uses apolitical comedy to create unified laughter and offer spectators a sense of belonging, but at the expense of reinforcing an oppressive political system that produces its own outsiders. Both critical humour and apolitical humour thus do not provide a solution for the crisis of critique because they lead to dangerous forms of political community-building associated – especially in the example of Hermans – with totalitarianism.

The politicisation of art

At first inspection, it seems as if Wertheim is rather cynical about the critical potential of art. Wertheim's deconstruction of critical humour seems to fit with what Jacques Rancière

has called ‘post-critical critique’ (Rancière, 2009: 40). According to Rancière, while traditional critique at least promised people the possibility of emancipation, the post-critical critique of the late 20th century unmasks critique itself as complicit in the systems it seeks to oppose. Nevertheless, post-critical critique remains within the logics of the old critical paradigm: it still presupposes that people are not able to separate reality from illusion, and need the superior critic to guide them. In *Voor de zoveelste keer*, Wertheim claims the superior position of the critic who reveals to the audience that both critical humour and apolitical comedy are proto-totalitarian, but without offering spectators the possibility of escape from the deadlock of critique.

However, Wertheim actually has a strong belief in the critical powers of art. While Wertheim in his performance work usually does not provide answers and keeps an ironic distance from serious art discourse, in his essays Wertheim has commented on these matters in a more straightforward manner. In recent years, Wertheim has increasingly participated in public debate through the publishing of articles on art and politics, for example, a series of essays on satire for *De Correspondent*, a popular, left-liberal platform for opinion pieces and investigative journalism.

In his essays, Wertheim has emphasised that true art is ‘subversive’, and that satire – as an emphatically critical form of humour – is the paradigm of all arts (Wertheim, 2011; 2018). Nevertheless, Wertheim continues to stress that art becomes dangerous when it builds political communities. In the following, I will demonstrate this through an analysis of two of Wertheim’s essays, arguing that the distinction he draws between art and politics is reductive and overlooks the critical possibilities of political community-building.

An early version of this argument can be found in the essay ‘Satire in het tijdperk van manische reproduceerbaarheid’ (‘Satire in the age of manic reproduction’, 2008). The link to totalitarianism is already alluded to in the title of the essay, a playful reference to Walter Benjamin’s (2008 [1936]) famous essay on artwork in the age of mechanical reproduction, and the dangers of the aestheticisation of politics in Nazi-Germany (Benjamin, 2008: 242). Wertheim’s opposition to unified laughter is emphasised by the essay’s motto, taken from writer Howard Jacobson, and quoted in the title of this article: ‘Those who laugh as a body today will march as a body tomorrow’ (Jacobson, 2009).

Wertheim makes a distinction in his essay between art and entertainment. Good satire (which aspires to the status of art) addresses spectators as individuals and confronts them with their loneliness. This makes good satire subversive: ‘Good satire is provocative and sows doubt’. (Wertheim, 2011: 38). Bad satire, on the other hand, offers spectators membership in a shared, political collective by providing answers rather than posing questions. Wertheim calls this latter form of satire entertainment: ‘I propose to call art which aims to make us forget that we are lonely entertainment’ (Wertheim, 2011: 44). Hence, entertainment is not innocent, because it eases our critical faculties: ‘The creators of entertainment may not have the goal of taking over the world, but entertainment does have the side effect that people eliminate their capacities to think critically’. (Wertheim, 2011: 45) For Wertheim, it is only a small step from the loss of critical individuality to totalitarianism:

The distinction between art and entertainment is best understood in relation to a totalitarian society. A totalitarian society is one in which the interests of the individual are completely

subordinated to those of the state. No wonder, then, that in the communist and fascist states there was no place for real and hence subversive art. (Wertheim, 2011: 45–46)

Wertheim continues to warn us of the dangers of entertainment in the present: But of course we don't want to be alone. Fascists could therefore count on a great deal of support. It is the line of least resistance. Anybody who places his trust in a group, an ideology or a religion makes it easy for himself. Most people would like to believe that there are clear answers. (Wertheim, 2011: 46)

Good satire, according to Wertheim, promises to emancipate us from a shared (political, ideological, religious) community.

In his recent essay 'De politiek heeft geen parodie meer nodig' ('Politics no longer needs parody', 2019), Wertheim rearticulates his early argument in response to a changed social and political context. In the essay, Wertheim warns against the politicisation of art against the backdrop of the rise of a new generation of proto-fascist leaders posing as comedians or clowns, such as Donald Trump.

While satirists have frequently attacked the populist right, they have not been able to stop it. On the contrary, Wertheim argues that those satirists who have tried to subvert and criticise the populist right are co-responsible for the rise of these new political leaders: 'Could it be', he wonders, 'that caricaturing politicians is now perfected to such an extent that the only politicians left who are able to arm themselves against it are those who suggest that they are a parody of themselves?' (Wertheim, 2019).

Again, Wertheim does not present a critique of satire per se, but makes a distinction between a 'true', apolitical satire and a dangerous, political satire.⁷ For Wertheim, the best example of the latter are satirical late-night-shows such as *Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver and its Dutch adaptation *Zondag met Lubach* with Arjen Lubach. The problem with these talk shows is that they do not adequately protect the boundary between art and politics. They 'switch back and forth between politics and satire without making it clear where their boundary lies' (Wertheim, 2019). He continues,

And if comedians start to speak out about politics, why should we be bothered about politicians talking weird stuff? Aren't they also allowed to make an occasional foray into humour? If satirists start doing politics, when does satire stop being satire, and turn into propaganda? (Wertheim, 2019)

In a next step, Wertheim argues that 'true' satire does not present a direct political message, but is ambiguous and reminds us 'that we humans seek meaning in a world that is inherently chaotic, unjust and cruel' (Wertheim, 2019).

By thus opposing a dangerous, political satire to an idealised, apolitical satire, Wertheim creates a false distinction between art and politics. He not only makes a caricature of political art by portraying it as proto-totalitarian, but also overlooks the fact that art is always already political, even if it does not present an explicit political message (Rancière, 2007). At this point, we can find inspiration in Walter Benjamin's essay on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, which Wertheim himself claims has had a formative influence on his thinking about art (van Welij, 2019).

What Wertheim shares with Benjamin is a strong belief in the critical potential of art, as well as a belief in the possibility of using art as an antidote to fascism. Both also point to the fact that fascism aestheticises politics: for Benjamin, it is the aestheticisation of

war and mass spectacle which defines fascism; for Wertheim, it is the way in which proto-fascist political leaders have adopted the aesthetics of comedy. But there is a fundamental difference in the way both think about the relationship between art and politics, and about individual and mass. According to Wertheim, the best response to the aestheticised politics of fascism is a protection of the boundaries between politics and aesthetics. That is to say, true art creates critical individuals by emancipating them from the community. Benjamin, on the other hand, famously states that the aestheticisation of politics calls for *the politicisation of art*. By that, he does not aim to reduce art to a thinly veiled political message. Rather, he argues that the individual is always already part of the mass. For him, the film audience is the example par excellence of a critical mass:

In the cinema, the critical and pleasure-seeking stances of the audience coincide. And what crucially makes this happen is: nowhere more than in the cinema do the individual reactions that together make up the mass reaction of the audience prove from the outset to be caused by their immediately imminent massing. (Benjamin, 2008: 26)

Here, Benjamin complicates any easy distinction between art and entertainment, politics and aesthetics, individual and mass. Against Wertheim's anxiety of mass response, Benjamin posits the idea of an individual always already embedded in political communities ('imminent massing'). This, I would argue, provides a more fruitful starting point for thinking about the politics of community in comedy than the rather one-sided idea of the mass as always and necessarily proto-fascist.

Conclusion

In this article, I have pointed to the tendency among comedians to think of their audience as a dangerous, proto-fascist mass. I have done so through an analysis of the work of Freek de Jonge and Micha Wertheim. It is important to mention that their opposition to political community-building does not come from nowhere. In their work, Freek de Jonge and Micha Wertheim playfully refer to the way their thinking about political community is affected by their personal histories. Both evoke the cultural memory of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust: de Jonge by staging his Jewish wife, Wertheim by recalling his Jewish background. The idea of the proto-fascist mass is thus not a theoretical abstraction, but points to a past which is still haunting the present.

Nevertheless, as argued by one of the sharpest witnesses of upcoming fascism, the 'imminent massing' (Benjamin, 2008: 26) of the individual also opens critical possibilities.

I have argued that escaping from the hierarchical relationship between superior critic and stupid mass set up by traditional critique requires an embrace of the community. A comedy beyond critique acknowledges the audience's participation in shared networks of meaning and sense (Holm, 2018; Latour, 2004). Doing so also requires a rethinking of the politics of comedy, breaking away from the deep-seated suspicion of political community-building in the theatre and leaving the ominous idea that 'those who laugh as a body today will march as a body tomorrow'.

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Notes

1. A pun on ‘towerblock without a threshold’. In Dutch: *torenloze drempelflat*.
2. In Dutch: *Het valt niet altijd mee de leukste te zijn*.
3. The traditional critic is typically male.
4. Like many Dutch comedians from his generation, Wertheim received his training as a comedian in stand-up comedy club Toomler and moved to the cabaret circuit after winning a major cabaret festival (Leids Cabaret Festival, 2004). In contrast to Freek de Jonge, who makes ample use of props, setting and costume, Wertheim has a more minimalistic style in line with the aesthetics of stand-up comedy.
5. Youp van ‘t Hek (1954) is a popular Dutch comedian, well-known for his transgressive humour and anti-bourgeois mentality. Toon Hermans (1916–2000) is a folk comic, coming from the tradition of variety theatre and well-known for his clownesque humour and frivolous songs.
6. Wertheim seems to refer to part of van ‘t Hek’s performance *Spelen met je leven* (Playing with your life, 1995).
7. While many would claim that satire is, by definition, political, it is important to remember that Wertheim uses the notion of satire in a broader sense, and considers it the paradigm of all arts (Wertheim, 2019).

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