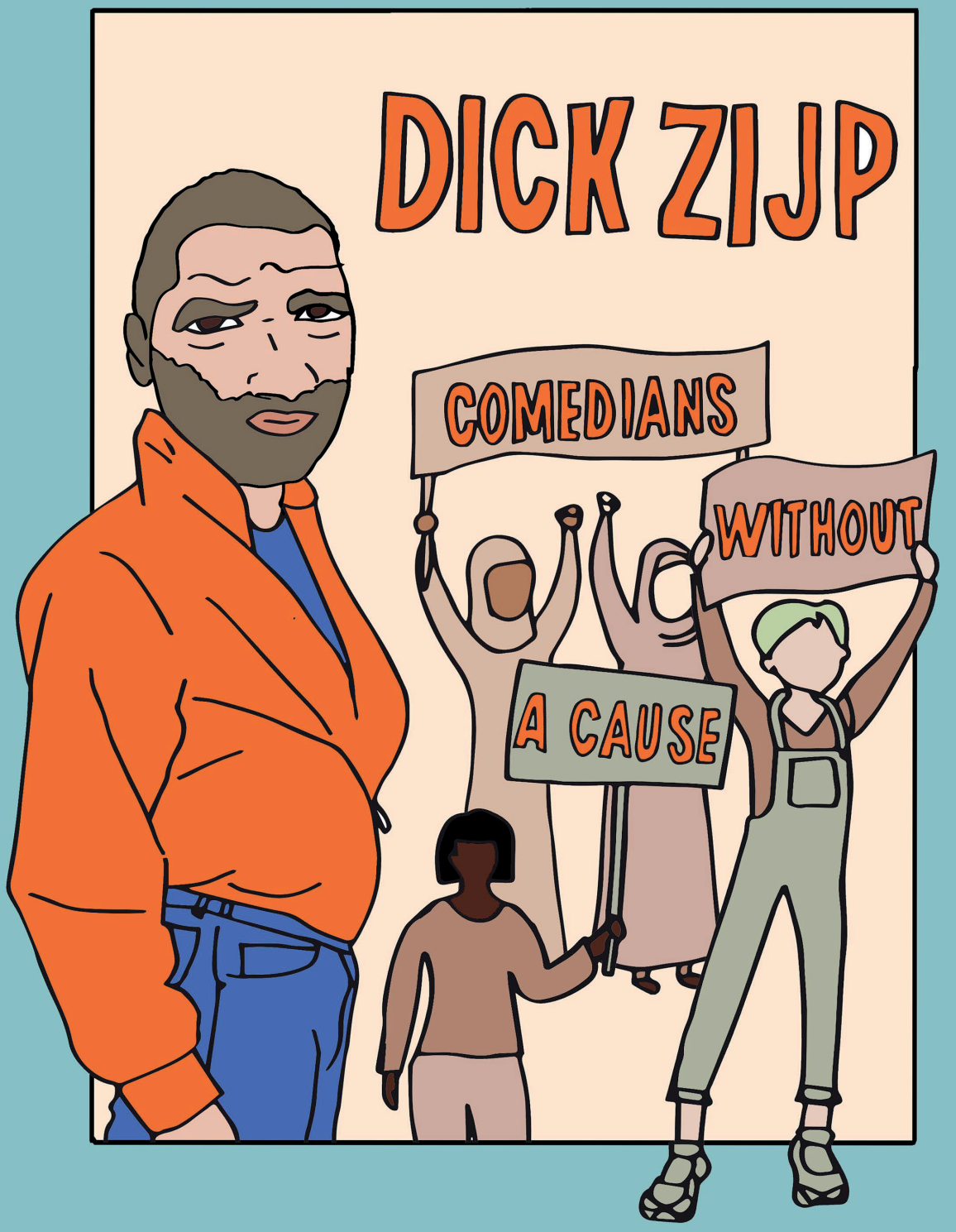
DICK ZIJP
COMEDIANS
WITHOUT
A CAUSE

Comedians without a Cause

The Politics and Aesthetics of Humour in Dutch Cabaret (1966-2020)

Dick Zijp

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Comedians without a Cause

The Politics and Aesthetics of Humour in Dutch Cabaret (1966-2020)

Comedians without a Cause: De politieke en esthetische werking van humor in het Nederlandse cabaret (1966-2020)

(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

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Acknowledgements

If you live for your dissertation, you do not have a life. If you do not live for it, you do not have a dissertation.

(Freely adapted from: Wim Kan, 1989: 10)

In the past five years, when writing this dissertation, I was often reminded of a statement made by the legendary Dutch comedian, Wim Kan, in his diaries: 'If you live for the performance, you do not have a life. If you do not live for it, you do not have a performance.'[1] I have long hesitated to open my Acknowledgements section with an adaptation of these words, because I do not want to romanticise academic labour. However, under the current conditions of precarious labour at a neoliberal university, living for one's work sometimes seems to be the only possible option, an option that not everyone can afford. Hence, I feel very privileged to have been able to write this dissertation, almost completely without funding, next to my work as a teacher, writer, and critic. I have included the adapted quote from Kan's work here as a critical note, and as a reminder to myself to keep protecting the boundaries between work and life against my inner workaholic.

Writing this dissertation in my free time was a tough and sometimes frustrating experience, and I could not have completed it without the endless love and support from family, friends, and colleagues. A big thanks to you all, also to those whom I do not mention here.

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1 'Als je leeft voor de voorstelling heb je geen leven. Als je er niet voor leeft, heb je geen voorstelling.'

for sharing her expertise on humour and Dutch cabaret with me. It is quite unique to be able to have in-depth conversations about Dutch cabaret with an academic scholar. I also thank Giselinde for introducing me to the International Society for Humor Studies (ISHS). Thanks to both of you for your trust and support, and for believing in this project, even when it turned out to be very difficult to get it funded.

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mentors in particular: Bram van Oostveldt, Kati Röttger, Rob van der Zalm, and Veronika Zangl. Veronika, I am looking forward to having many more coffees and hot chocolates with you, and to continuing our collaborations in the field of humour and comedy research.

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Unfortunately, I was never able to meet my grandfather on my mother's side, Cor Dokter (1914–1976), who was a well-known writer, illustrator, and entertainment journalist, and wrote multiple books and articles on Dutch cabaret, revue, and variety theatre. I am proud to follow in his footsteps.

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Introduction

In 2017, former cabaret critic Ruud Gortzak published an opinion piece in the Dutch national newspaper, *NRC Handelsblad,* in which he argued that Dutch cabaret had degenerated into a cheap form of entertainment (Gortzak, 2017). Cabaret, he contended, is increasingly becoming superficial: comedians nowadays have no higher aim than to make their audiences laugh, and they deal with personal issues rather than presenting social and political critique. Gortzak contrasted the present downfall of critical cabaret with a glorious past, in which comedians were presumably still rebellious and politically engaged. Gortzak, who started to work as an interviewer and cabaret critic for the national newspaper, *De Volkskrant,* in 1970, located that glorious past in the 1960s and 1970s. Although Gortzak did not explicitly mention the work of comedians from the 1960s and 1970s, he implicitly referred to the most critically acclaimed cabaret performers of that period.[2] Gortzak also approvingly cited an interview with celebrated comedian Freek de Jonge (b. 1944) (Gelder, 2017b). In this interview, de Jonge proclaimed cabaret and satire to be dead, and recalled the heyday of critical cabaret in the 1970s, a period in which he himself was part of the legendary cabaret duo Neerlands Hoop (1968–1979), well-known for their progressive stance and political engagement.

Not surprisingly, Gortzak's piece was not well received in the cabaret world. It sparked an opinion piece by comedian Micha Wertheim in the same newspaper (Wertheim, 2017), and led to angry Twitter responses from other comedians. In their responses, comedians mocked the nostalgic tone of Gortzak's

2 Gortzak expressed a nostalgic longing for performances 'not meant for the easily offended' ('niet voor lange tenen,' literally: 'not for people with long toes') and performances which 'chafe like sand in your bathing suit,' ('schuren als zand in je badpak'), referring, respectively, to the names of the controversial performances Niet voor lange tenen (1957) by Cabaret Tingel Tangel of Sieto and Marijke Hoving, and Zand in je badpak (Sand in your bathing suit, 1973) by cabaret group Don Quishocking. He also quoted the artistic director of Cabaret Lurelei (1958–1968), Eric Herfst, who famously claimed that 'cabaret's duty is to spot everything that is going on in a society,' ('Cabaret […] heeft tot taak alles te signaleren wat in een samenleving aan de gang is'), something Gortzak reproached comedians for not doing anymore.

article: Johan Goossens called it '1970s bullshit'[3] (Goossens, 2017), and Katinka Polderman joked that: 'To save cabaret, I will talk about den Uyl a little bit more in my next show'[4] (Polderman, 2017). Nevertheless, most comedians used similar terms as Gortzak. For instance, Wertheim suggested that present-day comedians are still 'engaged,'[5] although maybe in a way that Gortzak did not recognise.

Both Gortzak and his critics made reference to a popular image of the Dutch comedian. According to this image, comedians are rebellious, politically left-leaning, and socially or politically engaged. In this dissertation, I will use the notion of 'progressive rebel' to refer to this idea. The debate between Gortzak and his critics highlights the historical roots of the idea of the comedian as progressive rebel in the 1960s and 1970s. It also highlights the fact that, even though some consider it old-fashioned and passé, this idea still haunts comedians and their critics in the present day.

But how up-to-date is this image? Are comedians still 'progressive rebels'? Have they ever been? A complicating factor in thinking about these questions is that comedians typically resist political categorisations and descriptions of their work. While comedians have, on the one hand, often presented themselves as progressive cultural critics, they have also, on the other hand, often denied having a clear political agenda, or being politically engaged. The title of this dissertation, 'Comedians Without a Cause,' plays with this ambiguity, while also acknowledging the roots of this figure of the 'progressive rebel' in the counterculture of the 1960s. The title is, of course, a reference to the famous coming-of-age film *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), starring James Dean. This film anticipates the counterculture of the 1960s by giving expression to a rising youth culture and a generational conflict that would reach its climax with the clashes between young protesters and political authorities in the following decade.

So, are Dutch comedians truly 'comedians without a cause'? To find out, we should not only listen to what comedians say about their own work, but also look at what they *do* in their work. Hence, this dissertation presents an analysis of the *humour strategies* that comedians use to perform social critique and the *political resonances* of that humour. In so doing, this dissertation aims to present a deconstruction of the popular image of the comedian as a progressive rebel. The dissertation is predicated on the following two research questions. First, how do

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3 'jaren 70 gelul.' All translations are my own.

4 'Om het cabaret te redden zal ik het in mijn volgende voorstelling wat vaker over Den Uyl hebben.' The joke refers to Joop den Uyl (1919–1987), social democratic politician and Dutch prime minister from 1973 to 1977, who is remembered for leading the most progressive government of the post-war period.

5 'geëngageerd.'

comedians use humour[6] to perform social critique? And second, how does their humour resonate with political ideologies[7]?

I propose 'political resonance' as a helpful concept to analyse a genre of comedy that often plays with the boundaries between humour and serious criticism, but cannot so easily be reduced to a specific political preference or to the binary categories of 'left' and 'right.' Nevertheless, adopting such a concept makes it possible to recognise that comedians present more-or-less consistent comic personae (Double, 2005), and adopt particular modes of thinking and reasoning to project those personae to an audience, in other words, to recognise that there *are* particular resonances between comedy and serious worldviews.[8]

In the following sections, I will explain the what, the why, and the how of this dissertation. First, I will further elaborate on the central aim of this dissertation,

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6 While philosophers and humour scholars have long attempted to come up with an all-encompassing definition of humour, it is notoriously hard to provide such a definition without leaving important aspects out. In this dissertation, I follow Giselinde Kuipers' suggestion that it is more productive to distinguish between some 'ingredients' of humour (Kuipers, 2009: 220), which are part of most (but not all) humour. Kuipers mentions six of such ingredients: incongruity, non-seriousness, pleasure, sociability, transgression, and aggression (Kuipers, 2009: 221-223). Additionally, for the purposes of this dissertation, I follow Nicholas Holm's distinction between 'humour' and 'funniness' (Holm, 2017: 19). Holm defines humour as 'a textual quality whose presence can, in most instances, be agreed upon within the context of shared cultural conventions' (Ibidem). By defining humour in terms of formal and aesthetic qualities that are culturally and historically specific, it becomes possible to make the definition of humour less dependent on the normative question if particular instances of humour are 'funny' enough to be qualified as humour. That is, Holm productively distinguishes between humour 'as an aesthetic quality operative at a cultural level' and funniness as 'a particular subjective reaction to those texts' (Idem). In the following sections, I will further address the importance of attending to the formal and aesthetic operations of humour for an understanding of the politics of humour.

7 While the notion of ideology often carries negative connotations, both in political debate and in critical (Marxist) theory (cf., Williams, 1983: 156-159), I use it in a more descriptive sense, to refer to 'a complex system of related ideas that combines an explanation of the world with normative prescriptions for behavior' (Baumann, 2007: 57).

8 In this dissertation, I follow the pragmatist and processual definition of 'resonance' proposed by Terence McDonnell, Christopher Bail, and Iddo Tavory (McDonnell et al., 2017). The authors argue that resonance is not an inherent quality of a cultural object, but denotes an effect that is produced within the interaction between objects, audiences, and situations. This definition of resonance, as they indicate, helps us to explain how and why particular cultural or political resonances may change over time. Moreover, such a definition fits in with the cultural studies approach to humour proposed by this dissertation (see the section 'A cultural studies approach to humour'). This approach combines the close-reading of cultural texts, including the way these texts address historically and culturally specific audiences, with a more sociological, historical-contextual approach. Finally, McDonnell et al. argue that 'rather than having an already congruent or familiar solution ready at hand' (Mc Donnell et al., 2017: 3), resonance is 'the act of making a cultural object congruent as a person works through a situation or problem they face' (idem). Such an approach seems helpful for a dissertation that deals with humour and comedy, as humour often plays with meaning and ambiguity, and involves the solution of cognitive puzzles (as has been theorised by linguistic theories of humour in particular, see, for instance: Attardo, 1994).

and flesh-out the figure of the progressive rebel (the what). Next, I will point to the relevance of this research for gaining a better understanding of Dutch cabaret as a genre, as well as of the role of humour in contemporary society (the why). Subsequently, I will discuss questions of methodology (the how). I will outline a method for analysing the politics and aesthetics of humour, and I will explain how I compiled my corpus. I will close this introduction with a note on genre, and my chapter outline.

The comedian as progressive rebel

Building on recent work in theatre and performance studies that considers theatre as a form of thinking through artistic practice (Bleeker, 2019a; de Langen, 2017), I use the notion of the 'progressive rebel' to refer both to a rhetorical trope used by comedians and their critics when talking and writing about cabaret, and to a set of artistic strategies, a form of thought embodied in the artistic practice of comedians.

I will distinguish between three main characteristics of the figure of the progressive rebel. First, the progressive rebel is *engaged.* For many, the notion of engagement raises associations with the cabaret of the 1960s and 1970s. While comedians have, throughout the history of cabaret, often been criticised for lacking engagement (mostly by older generations), engagement remains an important category in which to think about and make sense of cabaret (e.g., Brink, 2020; Span, 1997; Wertheim, 2017). It refers, in the broadest sense, to the idea that comedians are concerned with the world around them, and speak out about those concerns by presenting social and/or political critique. The importance of this idea is demonstrated by the fact that some comedians have used it to draw a boundary between cabaret and entertainment. For instance, Jochem Myjer has argued that he feels more like a 'comic'[9] or an entertainer than a 'cabaret performer'[10] because he is not engaged with society ('Jochem Myjer,' 2016).

Second, the progressive rebel is *politically left-leaning.* Comedians, according to this idea, are not just engaged with society, but have a specific political orientation, and carry a left-wing political agenda. The idea that comedians are left-leaning goes far back, and can already be found in pre-war Dutch cabaret. For instance, when the director of De Nederlandse Omroep (the Dutch Broadcast Organisation), Willem Herweijer, initiated the notorious, anti-Semitic *Zondagmiddagcabaret met Paulus de Ruiter* (Sunday Afternoon Cabaret with Paulus de Ruiter, 1941–1943), he considered it an interesting opportunity to experiment with cabaret of a different political flavour, because he believed the

9 'komiek.'
10 'cabaretier.'

genre to be usually practiced by the left (Herwijer, cited by van Gelder, 2001: 64).[11] More than half a century later, Diederik Smit called himself 'the first right-wing comedian' (Hordijk, 2013), implying there had never been any right-wing comedians in the Netherlands before.[12]

Third, the progressive rebel opposes power and attacks the status-quo. He is, in one word, *rebellious.* According to this idea, the comedian is an anti-establishment rebel, who walks in front of the troops and initiates progressive social change. It is this third idea that most forcefully binds the comedian to a particular aesthetic, which is an aesthetic of transgression. The comedian is commonly pictured as someone who transgresses boundaries and breaks taboos, thereby fighting against oppression and subverting the authorities. This image of the comedian as being anti-establishment is closely bound up with the 1960s, a period in which a new generation of comedians began to rebel against the 'civilised' humour of an older generation, and cultivated an aesthetic of shock and provocation (Kuipers, 2015). This aesthetic of transgression is still commonly associated with the 1960s, and authors often refer back to that period as one in which comedians fought against religious and political authorities (Scholten, 1995), sometimes leading to cases of censorship and public controversies (as further explored in the next chapter). The image of the comedian as an anti-establishment rebel, so firmly established in the 1960s, is still present in many writings about cabaret, and is reflected in the way many comedians fashion themselves and address their audiences.

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11 Herweijer remarked: 'I assumed that one should not leave cabaret to the left, which had always been the case, but that it should also be possible to do cabaret in our political camp.' ('Ik ging ervan uit dat men het cabaret niet moest overlaten aan links, wat altijd gebruikelijk was geweest, maar dat het ook in ons politieke kamp mogelijk moest zijn om cabaret te bedrijven.') Interestingly, in retrospect, the exceptional circumstances under which the Zondagmiddagcabaret was produced (the German occupation of the Netherlands from 1940 to 1945) have been used to uphold the image of Dutch cabaret as left-wing. It has been argued, for instance, that the Zondagmiddagcabaret was not cabaret, but propaganda (van den Berg, 1977: 115-116). For a more convincing analysis of the ideological implications of the Zondagmiddagcabaret, see: Zangl, 2022.

12 Hordijk writes: 'Smit calls himself a "conservative comedian." Earlier, he voiced the ambition to become "the first right-wing comedian." And that is actually "everything which is not left-wing." According to him, there are already so many left-wing comedians who get worked up about the same things. That style comes from a certain angle. Theo Maassen, Lebbis and Jansen, whoever. But I don't share their astonishment. Capitalism is bad, advertising is meant to swindle us ... I don't agree.' ('Smit noemt zichzelf "conservatief cabaretier". Eerder sprak hij de ambitie uit om "de eerste rechtse cabaretier" te worden. En dat is eigenlijk "alles wat niet links is". Er zijn volgens hem al zo veel linkse cabaretiers die zich opwinden over dezelfde zaken. "Die stijl komt uit een bepaalde hoek. Theo Maassen, Lebbis en Jansen, wie dan ook. Maar ik heb die verbazing niet. Kapitalisme is slecht, reclame is bedoeld om ons op te lichten... Ik vind dat niet."')

In this dissertation, I aim to challenge this rather one-sided image of the comedian as progressive rebel. I do not deny that comedians have been socially and politically engaged, left-leaning and/or rebellious from time to time. Rather, by presenting a deconstruction of the dominant image of the comedian as progressive rebel, I aim to demonstrate that Dutch cabaret cannot be reduced to this image, and is far richer and more complex than dominant historical narratives suggest. Moreover, I argue that the image of the comedian as a progressive rebel may impede an understanding of how cabaret *does* contribute to progressive change. While we tend to look for progressive political messages in the work of comedians who present themselves as anti-establishment rebels, transgressive humour may also, paradoxically, strengthen social hierarchies, while other forms of humour may be more progressive and future-oriented than they seem to be at first inspection.

Dutch cabaret

This dissertation presents a long-overdue examination of a popular and critically acclaimed form of comedy. In the Dutch context, the term 'cabaret' does not refer to nightclub entertainment or striptease, but to a popular form of theatre comedy, which is highly valued for its critical reflections on society, and is, as such, closer to stand-up than to the nightclub. Dutch cabaret originates in the French and German artistic cafés (or 'cabarets') of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Ibo, 1970), but developed into a theatre genre with mass appeal in the 1960s (Klöters, 1997). Cabaret is one of the most important forms of comedy in the Netherlands, a national tradition that is seen as being 'typically Dutch' (van den Hanenberg and Verhallen, 1996: 10).

While comedians cater to broad audiences, Dutch cabaret is not considered 'mere' entertainment. Rather, it has the status of a middlebrow art. On the one hand, Dutch cabaret has been celebrated within intellectual and literary circles for its artistic quality, criticality, and political engagement. For instance, in an essay on humour, writer and literary critic, Kees Fens, mentioned comedians Wim Kan (1911–1983), Freek de Jonge (b. 1944), and cabaret duo Van Kooten en De Bie as examples of great artists who set a new norm and taught him a sense of humour, while juxtaposing their work with that of great Dutch writers (Fens, 2007: 10-11).[13] On the other hand, comedians do not receive government subsidy, and their work is hardly studied in cultural and theatre studies departments at Dutch universities, which traditionally focus on the 'high' arts. The small departments of Theatre

13 Fens published the essay on the occasion of the Boekenweek 2007 (Book Week 2007). The theme of that year's Book Week was: 'Praise of Folly: Jest, Satire and Irony' ('Lof der Zotheid: Scherts, satire en ironie').

Studies at the universities of Amsterdam, Utrecht, and Groningen, for instance, have mainly focused on subsidised and avant-gardist theatre, and have hardly looked into more popular forms of theatre such as cabaret and musical theatre.[14]

Hence, most publications on Dutch cabaret are geared towards broad audiences, including (auto)biographies, anthologies, songbooks, and collections of interviews. Academic research on Dutch cabaret is limited to one sociological dissertation from the mid-1970s (van den Berg, 1977), and a few short articles (Herfkens, 2016; van Heuven, 2005; Voets, 1985).

Serious attempts to study Dutch cabaret in a systematic way have been made by Wim Ibo[15] (Ibo, 1970; 1981; 1982), Jacques Klöters[16] (Klöters, 1987) and Patrick van den Hanenberg[17] and Frank Verhallen[18] (van den Hanenberg and Verhallen, 1996). Their historical overview works are valuable for their presentation of large amounts of primary source material based on archival work (especially in the case of Ibo and Klöters). Moreover, these works are informed by the long and rich experience these authors have as professional theatregoers with insider-knowledge of the Dutch cabaret field.

However, from an academic perspective, these works have clear limitations – even though Ibo clearly had academic aspirations and has presented a carefully

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14 In recent years, some room has been made for popular forms of theatre in the university curriculum, e.g., through the appointment of Millie Taylor as Professor by special appointment in musical theatre at the University of Amsterdam, and through my own teaching at Utrecht University.

15 Wim Ibo (1918–2000) was a comedian, writer, and producer. He was an authority in the cabaret field, not only for his production work (e.g., Ibo made the successful radio comedy series De Familie Doorsnee together with acclaimed writer Annie M.G. Schmidt, and negotiated with the broadcast organisation VARA, about Wim Kan's first New Year's Eve Performance), but also because he wrote a famous history of cabaret, often referred to as the 'Cabaret Bible' ('cabaretbijbel').

16 Jacques Klöters (b. 1946) is a comedian, writer, theatre scholar, and programme maker. He studied Dutch Language and Literature and Theatre Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Between 1970 and 1990, Klöters taught at the Kleinkunstacademie in Amsterdam and worked as a curator and researcher at the Dutch Theatre Institute (Theater Instituut Nederland). He has published widely on the history of cabaret and popular theatre. Klöters was one of the members of the famous cabaret ensemble Don Quishocking (1967–1980; see Chapter 3), and wrote texts for many comedians. He is also a well-known television and radio maker: he was one of the main faces of the cabaret television programme Andermans Veren and is long-time maker and presenter of radio show De Sandwich.

17 Patrick van den Hanenberg (b. 1953) is a history teacher, writer, and critic. He worked as a cabaret and musical theatre critic for the national newspaper, De Volkskrant, (1988–2017), and currently writes cabaret and musical theatre reviews for Theaterkrant. He has also published multiple books on Dutch comedians, theatres, and the history of Dutch cabaret.

18 Frank Verhallen (b. 1956) is a writer, critic, and artistic director. He worked as a cabaret critic for the national newspaper, Trouw, (1990–2000), and has published multiple books on the history of Dutch cabaret. He was also the founder and director of the former Koningstheater in Den Bosch (1999), and co-founder of the Koningstheateracademie (1999), a university of applied sciences for comedians in the same city. He is also the director of cabaret production company Cabaretfirma (2012), and a long-time cabaret collector.

crafted definition of cabaret (Ibo, 1970; 1981). First, these works tend to focus on historical reconstruction, which gives them an encyclopaedic character. They mostly present lemmata on the work of comedians and cabaret groups, and contextualise their work within the cabaret tradition. A theoretical discussion of the working or political implications of humour, or an in-depth analysis of the work of individual comedians, falls outside the scope of these works. Second, these histories are infused with judgments of the artistic quality of cabaret performances. In the work of van den Hanenberg and Verhallen, in particular, the authors' background as cabaret critics is clearly visible. This dissertation will take existing scholarship to a next level by presenting in-depth analyses of the work of a selection of comedians, as well as by challenging some of the historical narratives about Dutch cabaret that these works have (re)produced.

The repoliticisation of humour

We live in a day and age in which humour saturates almost all social and cultural interactions – Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai haven spoken of a 'permanent carnival' (Berlant and Ngai, 2017: 233) – and in which comedians are held in high esteem. Comedians function as cultural critics: they not only play for large theatre audiences, but are also regular guests in talk shows, write newspaper columns, and post their opinions on social media, thus switching between different media, and mixing jokes with serious opinions.

While comedians have been considered important cultural critics for quite some time, comedy has acquired a new social and political significance in recent years, with humour taking centre stage in political and social debates around issues of identity, social justice, and freedom of speech. Within this context, an understanding of the rhetorical and political operations of humour is increasingly urgent.

Ivo Nieuwenhuis and I have argued that the reappearance of humour as an important topic of social and political debate can be fruitfully understood in terms of a 'repoliticisation of humour' (Niewenhuis and Zijp, 2022). With this term, we do not aim to suggest that there has been a time when humour was *not* political. In this dissertation as well as in the article cited above, the term politics is used in a broad sense, in line with its common usage in the field of cultural studies.[19] That is, I do not use the term to refer to state politics only (politics in the small sense of the word), but to 'all those processes whereby power relationships are implemented, maintained, challenged, or altered in any sphere of activity whatsoever' (Jeremy Gilbert, cited by Holm, 2017: 12). Hence, I contend that humour is political by definition.

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19 In the following sections, I will further elaborate on what I call a 'cultural studies approach to humour.'

However, the extent to which this political nature of humour is acknowledged and debated depends on its historical and cultural context. In the past decennia, the political context of humour's production and reception in liberal democracies has changed considerably. The 'post-political' consensus of the 1990s and early 2000s (Mouffe, 2005) has been followed by an era of 'hyper-politics' (Jäger, 2021), which marks the re-entry of politics into the public sphere, but on different terms to those familiar to us from 20th-century mass politics. According to Anton Jäger, in the era of hyper-politics, political conflict increasingly plays out in the form of public controversies on social media, leading to a state of constant political upheaval but without real political change.

What we have called the 'repoliticisation of humour' needs to be understood against the backdrop of this shift from post-politics to hyper-politics. As Giselinde Kuipers has demonstrated, in recent times, we witness the rise of increasingly transnational 'humour scandals' (Kuipers, 2011), from the Muhammad cartoon crisis in 2006 (idem), to the recent controversy surrounding transphobic remarks made by Dave Chappelle in his Netflix comedy specials (Romano, 2021). This marks an important shift in social attitudes towards humour. While humour scandals are not a new phenomenon, in the post-political world of the 1990s and early 2000s, the idea that humour would not have serious political effects was more widespread in both humour scholarship and public debate. This attitude characterises the 'positive humour movement' (for excellent critiques of this trend, see Billig, 2005b and Lewis, 2006). It can also be recognised in the work of the much-cited folklorist and humour scholar, Christie Davies, who famously argued that: 'Jokes are a thermometer, not a thermostat; they provide an indication of what is happening in a society, but they do not feed back into and change or reinforce the social processes that generated them in any important way' (Davies, 2011: 248). In recent years, such blatant denial of the political and social effects of humour, for which humour scholars have provided strong empirical evidence (e.g., Boukes, 2019; Ford and Ferguson, 2004), has been replaced by the acknowledgement that humour can be used as a political weapon.

This repoliticisation of humour can be observed throughout the Global North, in countries as varied as the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Australia (Dahl, 2021; Ervine, 2019; Goltz, 2017; Ödmark, 2021; Rolfe, 2021). A recurring theme in the ideological battles surrounding humour is the supposed loss of freedom of the white, heterosexual, male comedian, and the construction of two common enemies: Islam and social justice movements. In the current 'woke wars' (Zijp, 2022) – the wars waged against so-called 'woke' activists who are accused of 'cancelling' comedians and artists on moral and political grounds – social justice movements, such as Black Lives Matter, the feminist movement, and trans rights activists, as well as a

supposed left-wing elite, are believed to pose the most serious threat to humour and the freedom of speech (Rolfe, 2021).[20] British comedy icon John Cleese, for example, has repeatedly claimed that 'woke cancel culture is killing comedy' (Zindulka, 2020), and he is currently working on a television series around this subject ('Cancel me,' 2021). In his view and that of others, holding comedians accountable for negative (e.g., racist or sexist) stereotypes is a slippery slope. It would lead to 'self-censorship' and it would punish those who refuse to hold back by 'cancelling' them.[21] However, the myths of self-censorship and 'cancel culture' are in contradiction to a comedy industry that thrives on transgressive jokes that fuel rather than destroy careers (Aroesti, 2021). Hence, these are straw man arguments, used to silence critique and debate on humour that potentially reinforces negative stereotypes.

It is important to stress, however, that the aim of this dissertation is not to participate in what Paul Lewis has dubbed the 'edgy-jokes-lead-to-angry-criticism-and-countering-defensive-moves dance' (Lewis, 2006: 6) or to 'declar[e] [...] allegiances in some sort of winner-takes-all conflict or pretend [...] to be some form of all-knowing adjudicator sent from the academy' (Holm, 2016: 111). Rather, this dissertation starts from the idea that the recent 'repoliticisation of humour' requires a deeper historical and theoretical understanding of the way comedians use humour to perform critique, and of the political resonances of their humour. The Dutch cabaret tradition presents an excellent case for studying the humour strategies that comedians use to perform social critique.

A cultural turn

Two strands of research have informed this dissertation in particular: humour studies, most notably the sociology of humour, and critical comedy studies.

While dispersed thoughts and speculations on humour can be found in the western philosophical canon, from Aristotle to Bergson (and beyond), the multidisciplinary study of humour in a more rigorous and empirical vein only began in the 1970s, and was formalised in 1989 with the organisation of annual humour conferences under the umbrella of the International Society for Humor Studies (ISHS; see: Carrell, 2008). Traditionally, humour research has been the domain of philosophers, psychologists, and (socio-)linguists, and – although to a lesser extent – of sociologists and anthropologists (Raskin, 2008). For the purposes of this dissertation, the sociology of humour is most helpful, because it emphasises that

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20 For a more detailed discussion of how comedians have constructed Islam and Muslims as the enemies of humour, see: Nieuwenhuis and Zijp, 2022. See also my discussion of Hans Teeuwen in Chapter 1.

21 The criticism of 'woke cancel culture' is a new incarnation of the much older debate on humour and 'political correctness', which dates back to the 1980s (cf., Lewis, 2006).

humour is always embedded in social relationships, and plays a role in the negotiation of those social relations and hierarchies (Kuipers, 2008, 2015; Mulkay, 1988).

In recent years, a 'cultural turn' in humour studies can be observed. Humour has not only been taken up as an object of study in media and cultural studies, but researchers from outside those disciplines (e.g., philosophers, linguists and sociologists) have also increasingly paid attention to the cultural aspects of humour (e.g., Chiaro, 2017; Deen, 2019; Kuipers, 2011). In media and cultural studies in particular, the focus has been placed, not on the reproduction of humour in experimental settings or on the role of humour in everyday social interactions, but on mediated humour or comedy, for example, cartoons, films, and stand-up comedy (Lockyer, 2016). The surge of interest in comedy among media and cultural scholars was marked by the establishment of *Comedy Studies* in 2010, an academic journal dedicated to the study of comedy.

The second strand of research that has shaped this dissertation is a particular branch of comedy studies that has been termed 'critical humour studies' (Weaver, 2011: 8), or 'critical comedy studies.' Both in traditional humour studies and in comedy studies, a strong emphasis has been placed on the beneficial psychological and social effects of humour: humour has been celebrated for reducing stress, fostering mental and physical health, releasing social tensions, expressing our shared humanity, challenging the status quo, and speaking truth to power (Critchley, 2004; Eagleton, 2019; Gray et al., 2009; Jones, 2010; Raskin, 2008; Warner, 2007). Here, scholarly accounts of humour echo many commonsensical ideas about humour as a positive social and political force, and have been slow to develop more critical approaches.

Critical comedy studies seeks to redress this imbalance. The term 'critical comedy studies,' or 'critical humour studies,' was first used by Sharon Lockyer, founding director of the Centre for Comedy Studies Research (CCSR) at Brunel University London, and her colleague Simon Weaver, but it is a helpful term to refer to a broader strand of comedy research that has emerged in the past fifteen years, and which reflects a growing interest in the 'dark side of humour' (Kuipers, 2008: 382; cf., Holm, 2018). In particular, scholars have paid attention to the way comedy is bound up with social hierarchies and the formation of cultural identities, for example, in studies of (anti-)racist humour (Billig, 2005a; Pérez, 2022; Weaver, 2011), comedy and disability (Lockyer, 2019), gender and (anti-) feminist humour (Chiaro and Baccolini, 2014; Han and Kuipers, 2021; Kypker, 2021; Proulx, 2018), and humour and class (Friedman, 2015; Friedman and Kuipers, 2013; Kuipers, 2015; Weaver, 2022). Additionally, the popular idea of political satire as being necessarily anti-establishment has been questioned (Higgie, 2017; Nieuwenhuis, 2018).

A cultural studies approach to humour

To analyse the aesthetic and political operations of humour in Dutch cabaret, I propose a 'cultural studies approach to humour' (cf., Nieuwenhuis and Zijp, 2022). Before addressing the implications of such an approach for the study of humour and comedy, it is important to mention that the approach taken here has also been influenced by cultural analysis, the research programme developed by Mieke Bal and institutionalised in the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA) and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Analysis (NICA). There is a long-standing debate on the differences between cultural studies and cultural analysis (e.g., Bal, 1999; Bloois, 2009), which I will not reproduce here. Rather, I will briefly outline how both traditions have shaped the research presented in this dissertation. What cultural analysis has brought me is a particular mode of reading: the careful close-reading of cultural texts, grounded in the poststructuralist paradigm of deconstruction. Hence, I read cultural texts in terms of their inner tensions and contradictions, and the way these texts may (inadvertently) create reductive binary oppositions. I combine this deconstructive reading of cultural texts with a mode of contextual reading as developed within cultural studies (see below for a further elaboration on the contextual reading of humorous texts). Moreover, in line with British cultural studies, I understand culture as the site of political struggle (Hall, 1990).

Both cultural studies and cultural analysis are interdisciplinary research practices, which integrate concepts and approaches from different academic disciplines (Bal, 2002; Culler, 1999). In this dissertation, I borrow concepts and insights from humour and comedy studies (itself an interdisciplinary research field), cultural sociology, and theatre and performance studies (an interdisciplinary field as well). The cultural studies approach to humour as proposed here starts from four methodological observations, which help to position humour as: (1) contextual; (2) political; (3) aesthetic; and (4) less polysemous than is often believed.

First, to account for the contextual nature of humour, I propose not to reduce humour to one cultural style or genre, but to study humour in the plural, as a set of cultural and aesthetic conventions, styles, and genres, which vary with cultural and historical context. Adopting such an approach means moving away from sweeping statements about the politics of humour. In humour research, there has been a tendency to make general claims about the politics of humour without taking into account the specific cultural and historical context in which humour is performed. In particular, many scholars have made crude distinctions between 'progressive' and 'conservative' humour, often normatively framed in terms of 'true' (progressive) versus 'false' (conservative) humour (e.g., Critchley, 2004; Zupančič, 2008).

That this line of thinking is widely embraced across humour studies is demonstrated by two much-cited studies, which adopt otherwise different perspectives and come to opposite conclusions, but share a tendency to abstract

from humour's concrete cultural and historical manifestations. In his *On humour,* philosopher Simon Critchley argues that 'true' humour offers 'a form of liberation or elevation,' but that 'most of the best jokes are fairly reactionary or, at best, simply serve to reinforce social consensus' (Critchley, 2004: 9, 11). In an awkward move, Critchley both acknowledges and denies the existence of reactionary humour by claiming that most humour is reactionary, but that this is not 'true' humour. In so doing, he performs what Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, in their critical reading of Critchley, have called an 'illogical conflation of taste with ontology' (Berlant and Ngai, 2017: 241-242). This conflation of taste with ontology is made most explicit when Critchley, at the end of his book, opposes reactionary humour to what he calls 'my sense of humour,' which is a form of humour that throws doubt upon 'the dominant common sense' (Critchley, 2004: 90).

Michael Billig's *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* seeks to criticise this type of humour research, which reproduces the personal aesthetic and ideological preferences of the researcher. Although Billig's argument is based on empirical evidence from socio-psychological research, his counter-thesis that humour is cruel by nature, and mostly functions as a social corrective, similarly abstracts from culturally and historically specific manifestations of humour. Like Critchley, Billig draws a crude distinction between what he calls 'disciplinary' and 'rebellious' humour (Billig, 2005b: 202, 207). In a next step, he complicates the distinction by arguing that while humour may feel liberating, it often reproduces the social order, thereby implying that 'true' humour is conservative. Thus, both authors promote a one-sided understanding of humour and abstract it from the concrete social and cultural contexts in which humour is performed.[22]

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22 Nicholas Holm has presented a similar critique of abstract theories of humour (Holm, 2017; 2018). Despite his criticism of reductive distinctions between 'good' (progressive) and 'bad' (conservative) forms of humour, (Holm, 2018), Holm's own work tends to reproduce such distinctions. For instance, in his analysis of the comedy of Jon Stewart, Holm argues that: '[…]although Stewart's ridicule could be considered politically critical – particularly from a Left perspective – because it takes a prominent right-wing politician as its butt, the actual form and content of the humour assumes, expresses and works to reinforce conventional social norms in a fundamentally conservative manner. Such apolitical mockery is by no means a rare or intermittent occurrence…' (Holm, 2017: 66, emphasis added). The distinction between political humour and apolitical mockery runs parallel to distinctions between progressive and conservative humour in the work of many other humour and comedy scholars. While Holm calls 'Left' and 'critical' humour 'political,' he considers 'conservative' humour 'apolitical.' Hence, while Holm's political aesthetic approach to humour is based on a definition of politics that promises to include 'all those processes whereby power relationships are implemented, maintained, challenged, or altered in any sphere of activity whatsoever' (Jeremy Gilbert, cited by Holm, 2017: 12), Holm's actual use of the term is more limited. He tends to reduce politics to the contestation and challenging of power, and considers 'conservative' humour 'apolitical'. This is a tendency shared by some of the theories upon which Holm relies in his work, most notably the work of Jacques Rancière (cf., Holm, 2017).

Second, this dissertation seeks to understand how humour is embedded in relationships of power, and contributes to the negotiation, contestation, and maintenance of social hierarchies. Such an approach is in line with British cultural studies, which has challenged the elitist project of humanities scholarship and its definition of culture as 'the best that has been thought and said' (Hall, 1980: 59). The Birmingham school has redefined culture as a site of political struggle and contestation, and has broadened the scope of cultural scholarship to include popular culture and everyday social practices (Williams, 1961). Given the popularity of comedians and the recent repoliticisation of humour, comedy can be considered an important example of such a cultural practice where power relations are negotiated, contested, and reaffirmed.

By taking humour seriously as a set of cultural practices embedded in social hierarchies and power relationships, I depart from the tendency, both in humour scholarship and public debate, to think of humour as a necessarily subversive cultural practice, which speaks truth to power. While humour can certainly function that way, it does not necessarily do so. The popular image of the comedian as a truth-teller, who opposes the powers that be, is based on a traditional notion of power as being concentrated with the state. In cultural studies, alternative conceptions of power have been put forward, drawing from Marxist, feminist, and poststructuralist theories, among others (e.g., Butler, 1990; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; McRobbie, 2009). An approach to humour informed by this critical tradition helps to analyse how hegemonic cultural practices and social hierarchies are maintained and contested through comedy. This is especially urgent since, as Sophie Quirk has argued, the idea that comedians necessarily oppose power, but do not exercise power themselves, is still widespread in both the comedy industry and society at large (Quirk, 2018).[23]

Third, to understand how power is negotiated, contested, and reinforced through humour, it helps to pay attention not only to the content or targets of that humour, but also to its form and aesthetics. In the often-explosive public debates on humour, little attention has been paid to form and style. As Dustin Bradley Goltz argues:

> In the current cultural climate where comedy is so often at the center of controversy, too often we engage comedic work as if it were parallel to political speech. Rather, from an aesthetic communication and performance approach, the political workings of comedy involve much more complicated processes than merely 'what was said' (Goltz, 2017: 6).

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23 Quirk argues for a Foucaultian notion of power, according to which power is not concentrated with the state or emanates from a symbolic centre, but is disseminated throughout society as a network of relationships.

In political communication research as well, humour has often been reduced to its explicit messages or targets (e.g., Baym and Jones, 2012; Boukes, 2019).

In the past decades, humour has been of growing interest for media and cultural studies, and in line with this, scholars have increasingly paid attention to questions of comic form and style (e.g., Davis, 2003; Kuipers, 2015; Lewis, 2006; Shifman, 2013). This dissertation builds on recent work, in which authors have more explicitly attempted to theorise comic form and style in relation to wider social and cultural relations, analysing what they have called the 'rhetoric' (Weaver, 2011, 2022), 'political aesthetics' (Holm, 2017), or 'dramaturgies' (Bala and Zangl, 2015) of humour. This often interdisciplinary research combines close-reading methods from traditional humanities with a cultural studies approach in which comic form and style are analysed in historically and locally specific cases, and in relation to broader political concerns. As Nicholas Holm puts it: 'Such a political aesthetic approach involves wedding a wider sociological perspective to an aesthetic reading that attends to the formal qualities of texts and the political opportunities afforded in their production and interpretation' (Holm, 2017: 14-15). By focusing on issues of comic form and style, this dissertation complements existing work in comedy studies, which places a stronger emphasis on production and reception (Lockyer, 2016).

Finally, an approach that is concerned with the politics of style helps to move away from placing too strong an emphasis on the polysemy or ambiguity of humorous texts. In media and cultural studies, there is a tendency to treat cultural texts as slippery, elusive, and open-ended. The rise of audience and reception studies in the 1970s and 1980s has contributed to this trend. As Stuart Hall has famously argued, media messages are actively interpreted and 'decoded' by audiences in ways that do not necessarily align with the intentions of their producer (Hall, 2000). In humour and comedy studies, but even more so in public debate, the ambiguous and slippery nature of humour has often been emphasised as well, and some have indeed claimed that the meanings of humour depend entirely on audience interpretation (e.g., Tomsett, 2018). Given the fact that comedians often purposefully create confusion and ambiguity, it seems wise not to make bold claims about the final statement of any particular instance of humour.

However, there is a risk involved in placing a strong emphasis on the ambiguity of humour. As Giselinde Kuipers has demonstrated in a discussion on the controversial Danish Muhammad cartoons, the non-serious and ambiguous nature of humour makes it possible to escape accountability and to denounce inconvenient interpretations, as well as to read humour in ways that align with our own political and ideological beliefs (cf., Vidmar and Rokeach, 1973; Lamarre, Landreville, and Beam, 2009). She writes: 'Like all non-serious communication, cartoons always leave room to deny meaning and escape accountability. Ultimately, this leads to deadlock or victory for the viewpoint of the loudest or

strongest' (Kuipers, 2011: 71). Yet, humour is not merely subjective, and not all interpretations are equally valid (Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman, 2014). By analysing the rhetorical and aesthetic operations of humour, humour and comedy scholars are, of course, unable to settle debates on the meaning of humour once and for all, but what they can do, is demonstrate how humorous texts invite particular readings and interpretations. Doing so can help to distinguish between more and less ambiguous forms of humour: some forms of humour, that is, leave more room for ambiguity, while others are more straightforward.

Here, the field of theatre and performance studies proves helpful. Theatre scholars, dealing with a medium that is predicated on the live presence of performers and spectators in a shared space and time (Kattenbelt, 2006), have long-standing experience in thinking about the relationship between performer and spectator. In this dissertation, I draw from recent work in theatre and performance studies that focuses on 'audience address,' that is, the artistic strategies and theatrical means employed by theatre makers to position and address their audiences (Bleeker, 2008; Groot Nibbelink and Merx, 2021). In my analyses of Dutch cabaret performances, I look at the humour strategies (and other artistic means) used by comedians to address their audiences, and how, in so doing, comedians appeal to particular modes of looking (including the presuppositions, desires, and ideas of culturally and historically situated spectators), and invite certain interpretations.

Corpus

The history of cabaret is well-documented and a large volume of source material is available for academic study. To be able to navigate this largely uncultivated field and conduct archival research, I have used two main selection criteria in compiling my corpus.

First, this dissertation focuses on cabaret in the post-war period. Jacques Klöters has argued that Dutch cabaret in the pre-war period was "an aspiration rather than a genre"[24] (Klöters, 2017). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, some comedians – inspired by the flourishing French and German cabarets of the time – attempted to establish cabaret as a genre in the Netherlands, but were not entirely successful. In the pre-war period, cabaret was performed in theatres only during the summer season, and even popular performers, such as Louis Davids (1883–1939), had to tour with revue productions during the winter to make a living (Klöters, 1997). Accordingly, the Dutch term 'cabaret' did not initially refer to a genre, but to a group of performers or the place where they performed (a bar or small theatre). In the 1960s, Dutch cabaret was established as a theatre

24 "eerder een streven dan een genre."

genre with appeal to a mass audience.[25] The growing popularity of cabaret as an art form also led to its institutionalisation, and the rise of a 'cabaret field.' The establishment of the Kleinkunstacademie (Academy for Kleinkunst) in Amsterdam in 1960, and the organisation of the first (student) cabaret festival, Cameretten, in 1965, are historical landmarks. By focusing on Dutch cabaret in the post-war period, I depart from the tendency to emphasise the continuity between pre-war and post-war Dutch cabaret (e.g., Ibo, 1970). Rather, I consider the pre-war Dutch cabaret experiments to be the 'prehistory' of the genre.

The story contained within this dissertation does not start directly after the war, but in 1966, when the progressive revolution in the Netherlands – in which comedians are considered to have played a significant role – reached its climax with the clash between protest movements and authorities. The story ends in 2020, when Dutch theatres were closed because of the first corona pandemic lockdown. In the next chapter, I will explain in more detail why 1966 provides a fruitful starting point for an examination of post-war Dutch cabaret, and for a deconstruction of the image of the comedian as progressive rebel.

Second, because my aim in this dissertation is to present a deconstruction of mainstream Dutch cabaret, I focus on the oeuvres of some of the 'big names' in the scene, who have been celebrated for their social and political critique. The main comedians discussed (in order of appearance) are: Youp van 't Hek, Hans Teeuwen, Theo Maassen, Wim Kan, Claudia de Breij, Freek de Jonge, Micha Wertheim, Wim Sonneveld, and Alex Klaasen. Additionally, I discuss examples from the work of Cabaret Lurelei, Kabaret Ivo de Wijs, Neerlands Hoop, Don Quishocking, Jenny Arean, Brigitte Kaandorp, De Vliegende Panters, the cabaret duo Arjan Ederveen and Tosca Niterink, and De Partizanen. While the dissertation focuses on a small sample of comedians, these comedians have been selected because they represent broader trends. Each chapter refers, in footnotes, to other comedians whose work is related to the work of those discussed more extensively.

The consequence of this strategy of deconstructing the mainstream is that the selection of comedians made for this dissertation reflects a cabaret field that is still predominantly white and male. While three of the nine comedians discussed in the dissertation are queer, only one of them is female, and all

25 According to Klöters, the increasing popularity of cabaret in the post-war period was enabled by the construction of new theatres throughout the country (Klöters, 1997). This was an effect of the government policy of 'geographical and social distribution' ('geografische en sociale spreiding') (van Maanen, 2009: 79), intended to increase the participation of citizens in the arts. Klöters' tentative observations, however, have a peculiar circularity: Klöters argues that the popularisation of cabaret was largely an effect of the construction of new theatres, but goes on to argue that the programmers of commercial theatres were especially interested in comedians because of their popularity.

comedians are white. Claudia de Breij is one of the few female, queer comedians of the Netherlands, and she is almost the only female comedian who has been celebrated for her political engagement. Hence, she is burdened with much of the 'identity work' that comedians who do not comply with the norm of the white, heterosexual male, and aim to present progressive social critique, are forced to do. My deconstruction of mainstream cabaret helps to demonstrate how particular identities are symbolically excluded through the reproduction of stereotypes. In the first chapter in particular, I demonstrate how the humour of white, heterosexual male comedians is bound up with issues of gender, sexuality, race, and class.[26]

While this dissertation mainly presents an analysis of the humour strategies used by comedians to perform social critique, and thus takes cabaret performances as its main research object, I have also looked into related materials, such as media interviews and reviews. These materials have helped me to gain a better sense of how cabaret 'thinks about itself,' and to identify the common terms of the debate.

For this dissertation, I have worked with the library and archival materials from the former Dutch Theatre Institute (Theater Instituut Nederland)[27], which holds a large collection of books, audiovisual recordings, programme booklets, posters, costumes, and other materials related to the history of Dutch cabaret, including some personal archives of comedians and critics. I have also used LPs, CDs, and DVDs of many cabaret performances, both past and present, which are available on the market.

A note on genre

While cabaret is still the term most frequently used to refer to Dutch theatre comedy, two other, closely related terms appear in Dutch comedy discourse: kleinkunst, and stand-up comedy. As there has been quite some confusion about these terms, I will briefly address them, and explain how I will use them in this dissertation. While at first inspection, cabaret, kleinkunst, and stand-up comedy seem to refer to distinct genres, the borders between these genres are not at all evident. Nevertheless, critics have often tried to protect the boundaries between them. I will argue that such 'boundary work' is not productive.

In contrast to the word 'cabaret,' which was adopted from the French, kleinkunst is a Dutch neologism coined by comedian Jean-Louis Pisuisse (b. 1880).

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26 The main focus of the dissertation lies on issues of gender and sexuality, which emerged from my corpus as being most prominent. The significant role played by other axes of inequality in Dutch cabaret, most importantly race, class, and ability, offer fruitful possibilities for future research (see: Conclusion).

27 After the forced closure of the Dutch Theatre Institute in 2013 following major cutbacks, the collections have (for the most part) been relocated to the University of Amsterdam, where they can now be accessed.

Pisuisse attempted to find an adequate term for a genre-in-the-making, which was inspired by French and German cabaret, but at the same time considered distinctively Dutch (Klöters, 2001a). Kleinkunst literally means 'little art' and, as such, emphasises the middlebrow status of Dutch cabaret: not pure entertainment, but also not 'high' art. While cabaret historians, such as Ibo and Klöters, have not provided a clear definition of kleinkunst, the term was initially used to refer to different forms of popular musical theatre, e.g., variety theatre, revue, and cabaret. Wim Ibo has famously defined cabaret as 'professional, literary-musical theatre kleinkunst'[28] (Ibo, 1970: 16), and thus as a specific form of kleinkunst. He does not, however, specify what the term kleinkunst means.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the relationship between cabaret and kleinkunst reversed: while cabaret initially referred to a specific form of kleinkunst, kleinkunst increasingly came to denote a specific form of cabaret. While Ibo could still argue that '[a] cabaret performance without music is like a stage play without words'[29] (Ibo, 1981: 14), the importation of the Anglo-American stand-up comedy format in the 1990s (which I will discuss in more detail below) transformed Dutch cabaret: the comedy heroes of a new generation of Dutch comedians, such as Lenny Bruce (1925–1966) and Richard Pryor (1940–2005), did not sing at all, and many comedians in the Netherlands followed their example. Consequently, kleinkunst increasingly began to refer to a niche of musical cabaret, as practiced by comedians such as Kees Torn (b. 1967), Maarten van Roozendaal (1962–2013), and Jeroen van Merwijk (1955–2021).[30]

Moreover, while cabaret always held the appeal of a critical form of comedy, a part of a long tradition of anti-bourgeois rebellion (Ibo, 1970), kleinkunst – as a self-consciously little art – has increasingly become a symbol of the petit bourgeois mentality that comedians seek to oppose (e.g., Rovers, 2005).

In the Dutch context, the term 'stand-up comedy' has acquired pejorative connotations as well. The history of stand-up comedy in the Netherlands can be traced back to the early 1990s. In 1990, aspiring comedian Raoul Heertje

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28 'professionele literair-muzikale theaterkleinkunst.'

29 'Een cabaretprogramma zonder muziek is als een toneelstuk zonder woorden.'

30 This conceptual shift is reflected in the terminology used by the VSCD Cabaret Awards (VSCD Cabaretprijzen). The Association for Theatre and Concert Hall Directors (Vereniging voor Schouwburg- en Concertgebouwdirecties, VSCD) is the branch organisation for Dutch theatres and concert halls and has awarded annual prices for cabaret since 2002. While the juries initially stuck to the idea that 'cabaret is part of kleinkunst' ('cabaret een onderdeel van kleinkunst is') (van den Hanenberg, 2012), in 2018, the cabaret prize Poelifinario (the prize for the most impressive cabaret performance of the season) was subdivided into three categories: engagement, entertainment, and kleinkunst. This shows that the VSCD began to consider kleinkunst as a subgenre of cabaret (Wester, 2018). The decreased importance of genres such as revue and variété after the Second World War has contributed to the marginalisation of kleinkunst (see Chapter 5).

established Comedytrain, a comedy troupe and training school for comedians. Responding to the lack of opportunities for young comedians who were not yet famous enough to perform in theatres, Heertje's Comedytrain provided those comedians with a place to experiment and receive training from more experienced colleagues. While Heertje did not intend to introduce stand-up comedy as a genre (Scholten, 1997), the influence of Anglo-American stand-up comedy cannot be denied: in 1996, Comedytrain established a fixed space in the basement of the Amsterdam Hilton hotel. The space was equipped as a true comedyclub, with a bar, tables, and chairs, as well as a small stage in front of a brick wall. Toomler is still the most important comedyclub in the Netherlands, with a line-up of comedians playing small sets (almost) every night.

In the early years of Dutch stand-up comedy, but continuing up to the present day, critics have tried to protect the boundaries between cabaret and stand-up comedy. In this debate, cabaret is portrayed as a serious art performed in theatres, while stand-up comedy is seen as a commercial and superficial form of entertainment. As cabaret critic Frank Verhallen remarked: 'It's almost prostitution; giving the costumer what he wants'[31] (Verhallen, quoted in Klöters, 2004: 162). In the opinion piece quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Ruud Gortzak links the deterioration of Dutch cabaret to the rise of stand-up comedy. The heading of his piece is telling: 'Dutch cabaret is just comedy nowadays'[32] (Gortzak, 2017).

But those who were fond of stand-up comedy also tried to demarcate it from cabaret. As comedian Owen Schumacher wrote in response to Verhallen, stand-up comedy is more authentic and spontaneous and less preachy than cabaret (Schumacher, 1996). While cabaret is performed in theatres, stand-up comedy is performed in comedy clubs; while cabaret has an elaborate theatrical form (by integrating narrative, costumes, setting, and song), stand-up comedy is a naked art form that only requires a performer and a microphone; and while cabaret performers perform for a full evening (which contributes to its theatrical character), stand-up comedians play small sets.

The distinction between cabaret and stand-up comedy often has nationalist overtones: while cabaret is seen as being 'typically Dutch' (Hanenberg and Verhallen, 1996: 10), stand-up comedy is considered a (cheap) American import product. However, such 'boundary work' does not do justice to the fact that cabaret has always been shaped by foreign influences, from early French cabaret, and the German cabarets of immigrants in the 1930s, to the American 'one-man

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31 'Het is haast prostitutie; de klant bieden wat hij wenst.'

32 'Nederlands cabaret is tegenwoordig alleen nog maar comedy.' He also writes: 'The current generation of comedians, it seems, is mostly on the platform pushing for a seat on the comedy train' ('De huidige generatie cabaretiers staat, zo te zien, voornamelijk op het perron te dringen voor een plaatsje in de comedy train').

shows' in the 1950s and 1960s (Ibo, 1970). It also denies the productive cross-overs between cabaret and stand-up comedy in the Netherlands since the early 1990s. While cabaret and stand-up comedy are rooted in different cultural histories, in the present Dutch comedy field, they cannot so easily be distinguished.

Although stand-up comedy exists in the Netherlands as an autonomous artistic form, it is not so popular here as it is in the UK or the US. Nevertheless, stand-up comedy has a considerable influence on Dutch cabaret because of its training function. Many comedians, such as Micha Wertheim, Theo Maassen, and Claudia de Breij, have been trained in the comedy circuit, while now almost exclusively performing for large theatre audiences. The cross-pollination between cabaret and stand-up comedy has led to new hybrids. In particular, the 'theatrical' cabaret of the 1980s (with its central storyline and distinctive theatrical setting and costumes; see chapter 4) has been largely replaced by the more naked style of stand-up comedy, with loosely connected jokes and personal stories, as well as minimalist settings and costumes.

To acknowledge the richness and hybridity of contemporary Dutch cabaret, I will use the term 'cabaret' in a broad sense. I acknowledge that different forms of cabaret have different histories, and I sometimes use the terms 'kleinkunst' and 'stand-up comedy' to point to those historical sediments. However, I will not try to demarcate cabaret from either kleinkunst or stand-up comedy. I will translate the Dutch term 'cabaretier' – adapted from the French, and commonly used to refer to the performers in the genre of cabaret – with 'comedian.' This term reads more easily than the somewhat clumsy 'cabaret performer.' Moreover, in the Dutch cabaret field, the terms 'comedy' and 'comedian' are increasingly used by performers and critics. It could very well be that these terms will, in the future, replace the terms 'cabaret' and 'cabaretier' altogether, because the differences between cabaret and stand-up comedy matter less in an increasingly transnational comedy field.

Central concepts and chapter outline

This dissertation is structured around five key concepts that help us to understand cabaret as a mode of thinking through artistic practice, and which are used as lenses through which the rhetorical and aesthetic operations, and the political resonances of humour can be understood: transgression, nuance, protest, engagement, and nostalgia. While some of these terms appear frequently in popular discourses on cabaret (such as engagement), others are used to refer to a broader set of terms that we find in cabaret discourse (e.g., transgression, a theoretical concept that is related to more popular categories such as taboo, breaking taboos, crossing boundaries, shock, and provocation). Each chapter takes one of those concepts as its central theme.

Chapter 0 is a prelude to the main chapters of the dissertation, and is entitled "1966." In this short chapter, I will explain why 1966 is an important year in the history of post-war cabaret, and functions as a fertile starting point for this dissertation. I will also give a more extensive introduction to the five central concepts, through a discussion of the humour scandal surrounding 'Arme ouwe' (Poor old hag, 1966), a song by Cabaret Lurelei.

In Chapter 1, I will begin my deconstruction of mainstream cabaret by discussing the work of three comedians who have, more than many others, presented themselves as progressive rebels: Youp van 't Hek, Hans Teeuwen, and Theo Maassen. They have done so, I demonstrate, by adopting an aesthetic of shock and provocation, to which I refer using the concept of transgression. I argue that their work tends to reinforce rather than to challenge social hierarchies, and that in recent years, these comedians have become increasingly defensive because they feel that their privilege as white, heterosexual, male comedians is under threat. I also propose the categories of moral, nihilist, and ironic transgression to enable a closer analysis of the humorous aesthetic of transgression, and the different forms that transgressive humour can take.

Although Dutch cabaret is often defined in terms of transgression, Chapter 2 argues that there is another dominant aesthetic in the history of Dutch cabaret, which I refer to as an aesthetic of nuanced humour. This form of humour, I argue, is rooted in the work of Wim Kan. In the chapter, I compare the work of Kan to that of the female, queer comedian Claudia de Breij. I argue that neither Kan nor de Breij presents themself as an avant-gardist walking in front of the troops, but rather, they present themselves as politically engaged comedians who are reasonable and nuanced, and want to listen to a political vanguard. Rather than initiating social change, their work accommodates progressive changes that were already underway at the fringes. While they do not thus present themselves as 'progressive rebels,' their work turns out to be more progressive than that of the self-proclaimed radicals discussed in Chapter 1.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I question the belief that Dutch cabaret is necessarily politically engaged. In Chapter 3, I do so through a discussion of the so-called 'protest cabaret' from the 1970s. I argue that in spite of the belief that comedians need to be politically engaged, comedians and critics have opposed political cabaret as being insincere, ineffective, moralist, and biased, and have often been careful not to display any partisan views in their work. I point to the existence of a neglected genre that I call the 'anti-protest song,' which is rooted in the protest cabaret of the 1960s and 1970s. Through a close analysis of anti-protest songs from the early 1970s to the = 1990s, I cast further doubt on the idea that comedians are progressive rebels. I also point to the continuity between the 'protest cabaret' of the 1970s and the 'nonsense cabaret' of the 1980s and 1990s. In so doing, I

challenge dominant historical narratives according to which cabaret in the 1960s and 1970s was politically engaged, whilst cabaret in the 1980s and 1990s was marked by ironic nonsense and a turn away from politics.

In Chapter 4, I make an intervention in the debate on cabaret and political engagement by discussing the work of two comedians who have pointed to the supposed dangers of political comedy: Freek de Jonge and Micha Wertheim. I demonstrate that both consider political engagement in the arts to be a dangerous form of 'preaching to the converted,' and fear that political preaching will turn the audience into a proto-fascist mob. Both comedians, I show, have used a strategy of dividing the audience to emancipate the individual from the supposedly dangerous mass. I present a deconstruction of the opposition between critical individual and proto-fascist mass. I argue that, rather than turning away from politics, 'preaching to the converted' offers a model for a political comedy beyond critique, which acknowledges the audience's participation in shared networks of meaning and sense.

Chapter 5 presents the final step in my deconstruction of the progressive rebel. Here, I take Wim Sonneveld's nostalgic cabaret song 'Het dorp' as my starting point to argue that nostalgia is an important 'structure of feeling' in Dutch cabaret. While nostalgia (typically seen as past-oriented and conservative) may seem to be the opposite of transgression (typically seen as future-oriented and progressive), I show that nostalgia has been put to both progressive and conservative uses. I use the work of Alex Klaasen, especially his parody of 'Het dorp' and his recent 'identity revues,' to demonstrate how nostalgia can be used as a resource to imagine more progressive futures, especially through this comedian's strategy of 'queering' the canon.

In the Conclusion, I return to the idea of the comedian as a progressive rebel, and propose an alternative understanding of the politics of comedy. I also point to the tension between politics and morality, and evaluate the 'cultural studies approach to humour' proposed by this dissertation. I close the chapter with recommendations for future research on Dutch cabaret, and a personal note on my experiences as a humour scholar in the twenty-first century.

All in all, the chapters of this dissertation present a discussion of Dutch cabaret as a cultural tradition, demonstrating that both comedians and critics are aware of the fact that they are part of this tradition: they respond to, copy from, and often oppose, their predecessors as well as their contemporaries, and most of the categories and oppositions that I deconstruct in this dissertation, have been developed over the course of the past sixty years, hence requiring an approach that takes such historical developments into account. I will come back to the importance of such a mode of historical analysis in the Conclusion.

Chapter 0: 1966

There is one matter on which all historians of the 1960s seem to agree, and that is that the 1960s are not yet over. We still grapple with (and fight over) their legacy (e.g., Buelens, 2018; Righart, 2006; cf., Oudenampsen, 2020). In historical narratives on Dutch cabaret, the 1960s play an important role as well: the 1960s are remembered as the period in which comedians broke with oppressive taboos and protested against the authorities, and thus manifested themselves as 'progressive rebels.'

In the Netherlands, the 1960s have something of a mythical status, because, in a relatively short period of time, the Netherlands changed from a traditional, conservative, and religious society, into a modern, progressive, and secular nation (Kennedy, 1995). As in many other countries, young protesters clashed with the authorities, who often responded with violence to social protests. The most famous protest movement in the Netherlands was called Provo, a play on the word 'provocation.' Provo was an anarchist and anti-bourgeois protest movement, established in 1965 by Roel van Duijn (b. 1943), Rob Stolk (1946–2001), and Garmt Kroeze (1937–2017). The group adopted an aesthetic of transgression, and organised playful 'happenings' to provoke the authorities. Provo shared this aesthetic of transgression with a younger generation of comedians and artists, who also began to present themselves as anti-bourgeois rebels, and fought for artistic freedom in a social climate in which the authorities often responded to such acts of transgression with censorship.

According to Hans Righart, we need to understand the political and social upheavals in the Netherlands of the 1960s in terms of a generational conflict and a double identity crisis. On the one hand, the baby-boom generation began to rebel against the traditional values of their parents, and started to express themselves through the lifestyle choices offered by an upcoming consumerist society, which had made room for the rise of a distinct youth culture. On the other hand, an older, pre-war generation, tried to hold on to the traditional society in which they had grown up, while also believing that they had to 'keep up' with a new generation, and that processes of modernisation were, to some extent, inevitable (Righart, 2006).

The clash between progressive, protesting youngsters and conservative authorities reached its climax in 1966. On 10 March 1966, Princess Beatrix (b. 1938) married Claus von Amsberg (1926–2002). The marriage was controversial because of Princess Beatrix' choice to marry a German man only twenty years after the end of the Second World War. Moreover, in progressive circles, the monarchy was seen as a waste of money. On the day of the wedding, Amsterdam was the scene of protests and riots, with members of Provo throwing smoke bombs at the Gilded Coach in which members of the Royal Family typically travel during official public events, and in which the bride and groom were being transported through the city streets. The police responded with violence to the protests on the wedding day, which in turn inspired an exhibition in which pictures of the riots were shown. On Saturday 19 March 1966, the opening day of the exhibition, another violent confrontation between visitors and police occurred, and an innocent visitor who was simply trying to get to his bike was beaten up by the police. That evening, the Amsterdam mayor Gijs van Hall (1904–1977) – a reviled figure amongst young protesters – gave an emotional speech on the talk show *Miesenscène,* hosted by Mies Bouwman, in which he proposed a 'cooling off period,'[33] because he feared that more violent confrontations between protesters and police would lead to fatalities. The turbulent events during the winter of 1966 were a turning point in the history of the 1960s and resulted in concrete political and legal changes. They not only led to the forced retirement of van Hall as mayor of Amsterdam, but also to, among other things, better protection for the freedom to demonstrate, and greater accountability of the Amsterdam Mayor to the city council (Duivenoorden, 2015).

1966 is also an important year in the history of Dutch cabaret. Of course, post-war Dutch cabaret did not begin in 1966, and the popular image of the comedian as 'progressive rebel' was not fabricated in this year. The comedian as progressive rebel had already manifested itself in the student cabaret groups of the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1957, Cabaret Tingel Tangel, by Sieto and Marijke Hoving, debuted with a controversial production bearing the telling title *Niet voor lange tenen.* In the early 1960s, cabaret group Lurelei also elicited a number of scandals with songs and sketches about controversial topics such as sexuality and religion (Blom, 1995). However, in 1966, the tensions between rebelling comedians and authorities reached a climax, not unlike the social protests during the winter of 1966. These tensions were rooted in a progressive counterculture that had existed for a longer period of time, and could be traced back to the 1950s.

In 1966, many key events occurred. Cabaret Lurelei was threatened with legal action by the Amsterdam police because of a scandalous song about Queen Juliana (see below). The makers of the satirical news show *Zo is 't toevallig ook*

33 'afkoelingsperiode.'

nog 'ns een keer[34] (1963–1966), who had already created a scandal in 1964 with a sketch in which they mockingly suggested that television had become the new religion, stepped back because broadcast organisation VARA censored a sketch in which the television interview with Gijs van Hall was parodied. Cabaret Tingel Tangel got a ban from the mayor of Heemstede, A.G.A. Ridder van Rappard, who did not allow the group to perform in the local theatre because he feared they would offend the Royal Family. Wim Kan presented his New Year's Eve Show, in which he staged his own identity crisis as an older man who tried to adapt to a society that quickly changed, and expressed his sympathy for Provo (see Chapter 2). Additionally, Wim Sonneveld for the first time performed 'Het dorp,' a now famous, nostalgic cabaret song in which the narrator looks back on his childhood in a small village (see Chapter 5). Moreover, there were some other scandals regarding transgressive humour in 1966 that did not involve Dutch cabaret performers: most notably, Benhard Holtrop, a member of Provo, was sued for publishing provocative political cartoons, and writer and novelist Gerard Reve was famously sued for two written passages in which he pictured God as a donkey, and in one of which he suggested that he would take the Lord-as-donkey from behind.

In conclusion, 1966 marks a turning point in the history of the 1960s, in which many of the social and political transformations prepared in preceding years gained momentum and became entangled with the history of Dutch cabaret. Hence, taking this year as the starting point for this dissertation offers the opportunity to analyse the political resonances of humour at a time of progressive social and political change, and to examine if comedians indeed acted as 'progressive rebels.'

A history of Dutch cabaret in 5 concepts

I will begin my deconstruction of Dutch cabaret with a discussion of a canonical example of progressive rebellion: the controversy surrounding Cabaret Lurelei's song 'Arme ouwe' (1966). Throughout this discussion, I will also introduce the five central concepts of this dissertation in more detail.

On 27 October 1966, three members of Cabaret Lurelei (1958–1968) were summoned to report themselves to the police. That night, the group premiered the production *Reldereldere*l (Riotriotriot). The title of the show referred to the ongoing riots in Amsterdam, and the violent confrontations between Provo and the police. The Amsterdam police had been warned that Lurelei would perform 'Arme ouwe' (Poor old hag), a scandalous song about Queen Juliana, which had already sparked riots in the provincial town of Tiel on 18 October. The song, performed by Gerard Cox (b. 1940), and written by Guus Vleugel (1932–1998), called the

34 An adaptation of the British satirical news show That was the week that was (1962–1963).

Queen a 'friendly cow'[35] and a 'poor old hag'[36]. Two police officers attended the opening night in Lurelei's own Leidsepleintheater in Amsterdam and checked if Cox' performance of the song corresponded with the lyrics that had been passed to them by their colleagues from Tiel. After the performance, the police officers went to the dressing room and informed Cox, Vleugel, and the company's artistic director, Eric Herfst (1937–1985), that they would be expected to present themselves at the Leidseplein police station the following day. They were accused of lese majesty, and had to sign a statement declaring that it had not been their intention to offend the Queen.[37]

Although the case was eventually dropped, the song continued to spark riots for the rest of the season. Every night, at least some audience members loudly voiced their complaints and stormed out of the room. Moreover, ample attention was paid to the song in the media, and questions about it were asked in Parliament. Accordingly, the controversy surrounding 'Arme ouwe' has been canonised as an important moment in the history of Dutch cabaret, in which comedians rebelled against the authorities and fought for artistic freedom (Zijp, 2011a).[38] It also marks the high point in Lurelei's existence as a critical cabaret group. While Lurelei started out as an innocuous cabaret group in the late 1950s, presenting a mix of pantomime acts and songs, they developed into one of the most successful and critically acclaimed cabaret ensembles of the 1960s in a period of just a few years.[39]

The impact of Lurelei's 'Arme ouwe' can be understood through the concepts of *transgression* and *protest.* First, by using coarse language to degrade and mock the Queen, the song gives expression to an aesthetic of transgression. The cabaret landscape of the 1960s reflects the political fault lines of the progressive revolution. It was populated by two groups of comedians with opposing styles of humour. On the one hand, an older generation of comedians, most notably Wim Kan (1911–1983), Toon Hermans (1916–2000), and Wim Sonneveld (1917–1974) – commonly referred to as the 'big three'[40] of Dutch cabaret ('Cabaret,' n.d.) – presented 'civilized humour' (Kuipers, 2015: 96) in big theatres and playhouses. On

35 'vriendelijke koe.'
36 'arme ouwe.'
37 For a more detailed reconstruction of the event, see: Blom, 1995: 425-428.
38 The text of this entry was written for the Canon van het theater in Nederland (Canon of Dutch theatre). I have not been involved in the construction of the canon or the selection of the 50 lemmas.
39 This was due, for a large part, to the successful combination of writer Guus Vleugel, who was praised for his sharp song texts, and Jasperina de Jong (b. 1938), who proved especially skilful in performing Vleugel's lyrics.
40 'Cabaret,' Theaterencyclopedie, last accessed 29 January 2021, https://theaterencyclopedie.nl/wiki/Cabaret.

the other hand, the 1960s saw the rise of student cabarets, who performed in bars and smaller theatres and opposed the light entertainment of the older generation by choosing a more confrontational style. By adopting such a style, cabaret groups such as Lurelei set a new norm. That is, from the 1960s onwards, and in line with the hardening of Dutch humour in the post-war period (Kuipers, 2015: 96, 148), cabaret is commonly described in terms of the crossing of boundaries and the breaking of taboos. For instance, Hilde Scholten writes that:

> For a long time, cabaret and breaking taboos seemed to be synonymous. Particularly in the 1960s, comedians – amid great hubbub from bystanders – tore down all kinds of walls. By doing so, they made unmentionable subjects such as sex, religion and the Royal Family debatable.[41] (Scholten, 1995: 14)

Second, 'Arme ouwe' provoked the authorities and thus became a classic example of cabaret as a form of *protest*. In the 1960s, and 1970s in particular, the notion of protest was frequently employed in writings on cabaret. It plays a central role, for example, in Wim Ibo's reflections on the genre. 'Cabaret,' he wrote, 'is protest in the broadest sense of the word'[42] (Ibo, 1970: 21).

However, 'Arme ouwe' has a more ambiguous relationship to both protest and transgression than the dominant historical narratives suggest. Lurelei not only protested against the authorities through an aesthetic of transgression, but also presented a metareflection on protest culture and its aesthetic of shock. 'Arme ouwe' stages a Provo who decides to stay home on Little Prince Day (the State Opening of Parliament).[43] He refuses to join the other protesters and throw smoke bombs at the Gilded Coach, because the Queen reminds him of his poor old mother:

> Today is Little Prince Day
> And all other Provos have left for The Hague
> However not me
> I stayed at home, as I would be of no use
> Not that I support the House of Orange, I hate the monarchy
> I nearly throw up at the sight of Trix, Claus, or Bernhard
> And I'd readily admit, Juliana isn't much either
> She's absolutely abhorrent, but she just looks like my mom

41 'Cabaret en het doorbreken van taboes leken lange tijd synoniemen. Met name in de jaren zestig haalden cabaretiers – onder groot rumoer van omstanders – allerlei muren neer. Daarmee maakten zij onbespreekbare zaken bespreekbaar, op het gebied van seks, religie en koningshuis.'

42 'protest in de meest ruime zin van het woord.'

43 In the Netherlands, 'Prinsjesdag', traditionally the third Tuesday in September, 'is the day on which the reigning monarch of the Netherlands addresses a joint session of the States-General of the Netherlands [...] to give the speech from the throne (Dutch: Troonrede). This speech sets out the main features of government policy for the coming parliamentary session.' ('Prinsjesdag,' n.d.).

Who more or less has a similar type of figure
Who also has an insecure look in her eyes
Who also tends to fumble with the frame of her glasses
When she's afraid of not being liked
And in The Hague I would've never thrown
A smoke bomb at the Queen's coach
I wouldn't have been able to
I would just have thought:

Poor old hag...[44] (Blom, 1995: 468)

In spite of the coarse language and the song's mockery of the Queen as a 'poor old hag,' Lurelei does not necessarily side with Provo. By choosing the perspective of the hesitant protester, and creating a sympathetic image of a Provo member who is struck by the humanity of the Queen, the song can also be read as a critique of the violent means through which Provo sought to attack the Queen.

Moreover, in the third stanza, the Provo describes a cartoon that he is drawing. This cartoon depicts the Queen sitting on the toilet and wiping her bottom with a banknote. On the one hand, this stanza presents another example of transgressive humour as a means to deliver social critique. The association between the Queen and defecation is scandalous, and is used for a satirical attack on the monarchy as a waste of money. On the other hand, this stanza presents a metacommentary on the transgressive humour of Provo by alluding to a notorious cartoon produced by Bernhard Holtrop for the Provo magazine, *God, Nederland en Oranje* (God, the Netherlands, and [the house of] Orange) in that same year, which led to a lawsuit. This cartoon shows Queen Juliana as a window prostitute, with an added price tag stating that she is worth 5 billion. By parodying this cartoon in a song that itself paints a more sympathetic picture of Queen Juliana, 'Arme ouwe' cannot so easily be reduced to a mere attack on the Queen. Rather, it raises questions about the proper means to protest against the authorities and to transgress boundaries, and the manner in which this was done by Provo. At the same time, alluding to the work of a cartoonist who was sued for his transgressive humour in a song that itself adopts an aesthetic of transgression, this can be interpreted as another provocation of the authorities.

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44 "t Is Prinsjesdag vandaag / En alle andre Provo's zijn vertrokken naar Den Haag / Maar ik ben d'r niet bij / 'k Ben netjes thuisgebleven, want ze hebben niks aan mij / Niet dat ik pro Oranje ben, ik haat de monarchie / Ik kan wel kotsen als ik Trix of Claus of Bernhard zie / En Juliana is ook niet veel, dat geef ik dadelijk toe / Ze is volstrekt verwerpelijk, maar ze lijkt zo op me moe / Die heeft ongeveer hetzelfde soort figuur / Die heeft ook zoiets onzekers in haar ogen / Die kan ook zo prutsen aan d'r brilmontuur / Als ze bang is dat de mensen haar niet mogen... / En in Den Haag had ik dus nooit / Een rookbom naar d'r koets gegooid / Ik had het echt niet opgebracht / En enkel maar gedacht: / Arme ouwe...'

The ambiguity of the song is enhanced by the *nostalgic* mood that it creates. In his history of cabaret, Wim Ibo makes a distinction between two types of cabaret: 'realist'[45] cabaret that provides social criticism, and 'romantic'[46] cabaret that deals with 'the generally human,'[47] and is arguably more sentimental and nostalgic (Ibo, 1970: 167).[48] 'Arme ouwe' challenges any easy distinction between these categories by staging a Provo who is critical of the monarchy, but emotionally attached to the Queen. The song combines protest against the old order with nostalgia for that very same order, which is about to disappear. In the chorus, these two positions create a comic incongruity:

> Poor old hag, just stay on your throne
> Oh, why would we push you off…
> Just stay seated, like in the old days, plain and simple
> Poor old hag, poor old hag…[49] (Blom, 1995: 468)

In the final chorus, this nostalgia reaches its climax when the Provo looks back at the monarchy from an imagined point in the future:

> Poor old hag, why did we do it
> Why did we not just keep you
> As you were our good and honest Juliaan[50], were you not…
> Poor old hag, poor old hag[51] (Blom, 1995: 469)

On the one hand, 'Arme ouwe' mobilises nostalgia to mourn the loss of old structures at a time of rapid social and political change. On the other hand, nostalgia is used in an ironic, playful way, and becomes a means of protest in its own right: by portraying Queen Juliana (and, by extension, the monarchy) as old, weak, and about to die, the song turns a possible defence of the monarchy into

45 'realistisch.'
46 'romantisch.'
47 'het algemeen menselijke.'
48 As Ibo writes: 'The predominantly realist groups Tingel-Tangel and Cabaret Van de Merwe were followed in the course of the sixties by three more romantically inclined ensembles: PePijn and Shaffy Chantant in 1964 and Harlekijn in 1967. General human subjects were given priority and political or socially critical comments were hardly ever made.'('De overwegend realistisch ingestelde groepen Tingel-Tangel en Cabaret Van de Merwe werden in de loop van de jaren zestig gevolgd door drie meer romantisch ingestelde ensembles: PePijn en Shaffy Chantant in 1964 en Harlekijn in 1967. Algemene menselijke onderwerpen kregen de voorrang en politieke of maatschappij-kritische kanttekeningen werden niet of nauwelijks gemaakt.')
49 'Arme ouwe, blijf maar zitten op je troon / Ach, wat zouwen we jou daar nou af gaan douwen… / Blijf maar zitten, net als vroeger doodgewoon / Arme ouwe, arme ouwe…'
50 An abbreviation of 'Juliana.'
51 'Arme ouwe, waarom hebben we 't gedaan / Waarom hebben we je niet gewoon gehouwen / Want je was toch onze brave Juliaan… / Arme ouwe, arme ouwe.'

another attack. Nevertheless, the song does evoke nostalgic sentiments, which are enhanced by the performance of Gerard Cox and the musical composition by Rogier van Otterloo. Van Otterloo's music is not strident, but soft and emotional. Cox performs the song with a similar softness and innocence, thereby mitigating its shock effects.

Although 'Arme ouwe' sparked controversy, critics celebrated the song precisely because it combined the transgressive with the sentimental:

> And then there is his [Gerard Cox'] "Poor old hag," already notorious. But in a way, that song about the Provo who identifies Queen Juliana with his old mother, is *touching,* despite the coarse idiom that is simply appropriate in this context.[52] (Spierdijk, 1966, emphasis added)

> A *forbidding* song, but so permeated with *wry, good sentiment* that the audience gradually stopped laughing: long live cabaret that manages to achieve this.[53] (Boswinkel, 1966, emphasis added)

> Typically Amsterdam and also appreciated as such, a song in which a Provo recounts that the Queen reminds him so much of his own mother. He does this in rather *crude* terms but at the end he takes things back in an *endearing* way and then the stanza: "poor old hag, just stay on your throne" sounds a little different than it did at the beginning.[54] (Duister, 1966, emphasis added)

Perhaps surprisingly, critics praised 'Arme ouwe' not because of its political radicalism, but because the song, by moving between aggression and empathy, integrated different perspectives on the monarchy in a critical but *nuanced* way. As one critic wrote: 'Guus Vleugel's lyrics have exactly what almost all other lyrics we regularly hear lack: *nuance* and that in a satirical sense'[55] (Koopmans, 1967, emphasis added). This emphasis on nuance is surprising given the fact that critics have often celebrated comedians for their radicalism, for breaking taboos, and protesting against the authorities. Nevertheless, the idea that good humour is nuanced, that it puts things in perspective and casts doubt upon things, is at least

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52 'Dan is daar zijn [Gerard Cox'] "Arme ouwe", nu al berucht. Maar op een bepaalde manier is dat lied van de provo die koningin Juliana identificeert met z'n ouwe moeder, ontroerend, ondanks het grove idioom, dat er nu eenmaal bijhoort.'

53 'Een grimmig liedje, maar zó doortrokken van wrang, goed sentiment dat de zaal langzamerhand het lachen verging: leve het cabaret dat dit weet te bereiken.'

54 'Helemaal Amsterdam en als zodanig ook gewaardeerd, een liedje, waarin een provo vertelt dat de koningin hem zo doet denken aan zijn eigen moeder. Hij doet dat in nogal rauwe termen maar aan het eind neemt hij toch een en ander op een aandoenlijke wijze terug en klinkt de strofe: "arme ouwe, blijf maar zitten op je troon" ietsje anders dan in het begin.'

55 'De teksten van Guus Vleugel hebben precies wat vrijwel alle andere teksten die we regelmatig aanhoren, missen: nuance en dat in satirische zin.'

as dominant in Dutch cabaret as the idea that comedians break taboos and attack the status quo.[56]

This apparent contradiction can be explained with the help of the concept of *engagement,* a complicated term that is rooted in the cabaret field of the 1960s and is still commonly associated with the 'protest cabaret' of the 1960s and 1970s. As will be further explained in Chapter 3, the concept of engagement was not undisputed in the cabaret field of the 1960s and 1970s. For now, it suffices to know that it has been used in both a weaker (positive) and a stronger (negative) sense. In a weak sense, being engaged means being critical. Comedians have often been praised for being socially and politically engaged in this sense. But many comedians and critics, from the 1960s up to the present day, have also used the term in a stronger sense, to refer to the idea that comedians are committed to a particular political programme or party. In this stronger sense, political engagement has been denounced by comedians and critics alike, because a comedian who is committed to a political programme or ideology would forfeit his independence. Lurelei was praised by critics because they succeeded in walking the fine line between being socially and politically engaged and keeping their critical distance. As the critic, Hans van den Berg, put it: 'He [Vleugel] never tackles anything half-heartedly or cautiously but wields the butcher's knife with an uncompromising

56 In an interesting interview, Guus Vleugel explained that 'Arme ouwe' was not written with the intention of causing a scandal, but that his aim had been to put things in perspective. This reading is in line with the idea that good cabaret is nuanced. Vleugel commented: 'It has not been my intention to show that I am fundamentally anti-monarchist, but I do not understand why such matters always have to go hand in hand with conflict. Queen Juliana has something special... She is actually a mother figure to us all. The song is about a Provo who wants to throw smoke bombs, but doesn't do it because the Queen looks so much like his old mother. Do you understand what I mean? [...] There are people who claim that this song was written to provoke a protest [...] We don't make riots. The riots are in the air. The heart of the matter is the Provo-Queen conflict. That's just the symbol of what's going on [...] There is no solution to the matter of Provo-Queen. There are two different camps. This Provo is sorry that it has to happen. The way it is done is cramped.' ('Het heeft niet in mijn bedoeling gelegen te laten zien dat ik principieel anti-monarchistisch ben ingesteld. Ik begrijp alleen niet waarom zulke zaken altijd met een conflict gepaard moeten gaan. Koningin Juliana heeft bepaald iets... 't Is eigenlijk een moederfiguur van ons allemaal. Het liedje betreft de provo die eigenlijk wel rookbommen wil gooien, maar het niet doet, omdat de koningin zoveel op zijn oude moeder lijkt. Begrijpt u wat ik bedoel? [...] Er zijn mensen die beweren dat dit liedje geschreven is om een protest uit te lokken [...] Wij maken geen rellen. De rellen zitten in de lucht. De kern van de zaak is het conflict provo-koningin. Dat is gewoon het symbool van wat er aan de hand is [...] In de materie provo-koningin is geen oplossing. Er zijn twee verschillende kampen. Deze provo vindt het jammer dat het moet. De manier waarop het gebeurt is verkrampt') ('Guus Vleugel,' 1966). However, when Vleugel gave the interview, the charge of lese majesty had probably not yet been dismissed, and the police investigation was probably still ongoing (cf.,'Lurelei vrijuit,' 1966). Hence, Vleugel could perhaps not speak freely about his intentions.

openness, for which most writers evidently feel too socially bound'[57] (Hans van den Bergh, quoted in Blom, 1995: 338). In other words, Guus Vleugel – Lurelei's main text writer – was believed to be rebellious precisely because he was not engaged in the sense of being committed. He was an independent thinker, and this independence enabled him to be critical without being biased by any political or ideological affiliation. Van den Bergh's statement is representative of a broader line of thinking among comedians and their critics, who have often suggested that a truly critical comedian does not take sides, but adopts an outsider's perspective and mocks both sides of the debate, thereby combining the biting aspect of satire with a reasonable and nuanced position ('nuance and that in a satirical sense,' as Koopmans, cited above, put it).

This dissertation explores the tension between the idea of the comedian as progressive rebel who has a left-wing political orientation, and the comedian as independent critic, between the comedian as having and not having a cause. By pointing to the political resonances of humour in Dutch cabaret, I will show that comedians, even when they present themselves as independent critics, have often used humour in ways that resonate with particular political ideologies.

57 'Hij [Vleugel] pakt nooit iets half of voorzichtig aan maar hanteert het slachtersmes met een compromisloze onbevangenheid, waarvoor de meeste tekstschrijvers zich kennelijk te maatschappelijk gebonden voelen.'

Chapter 1: Transgression

In 2017, comedian Youp van 't Hek became the centre of a small media storm when he used the word 'pisnicht' (piss queer) in his weekly column in newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* (van 't Hek, 2017). Van 't Hek's insult was directed at Gijs van Dam, who had made the headlines a few weeks earlier because he had been accused of sexual harassment by writer and journalist Jelle Brandt Corstius ('Gijs van,' 2018). The famous entertainer and television host Paul de Leeuw, himself gay and well-known for his coarse humour, sent van 't Hek a message to ask why he had used this offensive word ('de Leeuw,' 2018). This was picked up by the media, and a debate ensued in which the potential harm of van 't Hek's choice of words was discussed (e.g., Duin, 2018). The incident even inspired (the title of) a television documentary by Nicolaas Veul about the enduring bias against homosexuality in the contemporary Netherlands (Veul, 2019). Van 't Hek himself responded in another newspaper column (van 't Hek, 2018), and in his performance *Met de kennis van nu* (With the benefit of hindsight, 2019), defended his right to make offensive jokes.

Van 't Hek, a white, heterosexual, male comedian from an upper middle class background, and one of the most popular comedians of the Netherlands since the mid-1980s, is not the only Dutch comedian who has been criticised for his transgressive humour. In the past couple of years, big names in Dutch cabaret have come under criticism for targeting minorities and displaying racism, sexism, and homophobia. Such passionate debates about humour are in line with a broader, international trend, to which I have referred in the Introduction as the 'repoliticisation of humour,' marked by a quick succession of humour scandals.

These humour scandals raise questions about the politics and aesthetics of transgressive humour, a term I use here to refer to an aesthetic of shock and provocation. Although 'transgression' is an important 'ingredient' of humour (Kuipers, 2009), not all humour is equally transgressive. In the Dutch context, it was only in the 1960s that a new wave of comedians began to embrace an aesthetic of shock, breaking with the civilised humour of established comedians such as

Wim Kan and Wim Sonneveld (see Chapter 0). Youp van 't Hek (b. 1954), who began his career in the 1970s, would adopt a similar style as a solo comedian from the early 1980s onwards. His style can be characterised as deliberately coarse and tasteless, combining social criticism with jokes about women, gay people, and people of colour.

While comedians such as Youp van 't Hek have long presented themselves as progressive rebels, and transgressive humour is often believed to free us from oppressive boundaries and taboos, recent humour scandals such as the 'pisnicht affair' demonstrate that not everybody agrees on that point, which raises questions about its aesthetic and political workings: which rhetorical moves are comedians able to perform through an aesthetic of shock? Are they indeed progressive rebels, or does their humour sometimes also reinforce social hierarchies and relationships of power? Is transgressive humour necessarily liberating? The central argument of this chapter is that it is not, and that the politics and aesthetics of transgressive humour largely depend on context. To demonstrate this, this chapter presents an analysis of the work of three prominent Dutch comedians who are well-known for their transgressive humour, and have, in recent years, been criticised for targeting minorities: Youp van 't Hek (b. 1954), Hans Teeuwen (b. 1967), and Theo Maassen (b. 1966). These comedians were selected not only because of their popularity and reputation as taboo-breakers, but also because their careers span several decades, which makes it possible to study their work in relation to a shifting social and political context. While this chapter focuses on a small sample of comedians, I claim their work to be representative of transgressive humour as a dominant aesthetic mode in Dutch cabaret.[58]

Let me unpack the two central claims of this chapter. The first is that transgressive humour is not necessarily liberating, and does not always act as a progressive social force. I will show that Youp van 't Hek, Hans Teeuwen, and Theo Maassen offer their audiences an affective release of tension through 'tendentious jokes' (Freud, 1963) targeting women, gay people, and people of colour. However, by doing so, their humour tends to reinforce social hierarchies. As such, their humour is potentially liberating at an *affective* level, but not at an *ideological* level.

58 The student cabarets of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Lurelei, Don Quishocking, and Neerlands Hoop, typically adopted an aesthetic of transgression. In the 1990s, Waardenberg en de Jong and De Vliegende Panters were two cabaret duo's that were well-known for their transgressive humour. In contemporary Dutch cabaret, this mode of transgressive humour can be recognised in the work of Daniël Arends (b. 1979), Peter Pannekoek (b. 1986), and André Manuel (b. 1966). While there are important differences between the comic styles of these comedians and cabaret groups, what their work shares is an aesthetic of shock and provocation. In this chapter, I will differentiate between different forms and styles of transgression in Dutch cabaret.

By demonstrating this, this chapter presents the first step in my deconstruction of the popular image of the comedian as progressive rebel.

The second argument of this chapter is that the politics and aesthetics of transgressive humour depend on context. To demonstrate this, I will compare work made by those comedians in the 1990s and early 2000s, with that of the late 2010s. The question of context, and the comparison made here between the 1990s and the present, is especially relevant given the fact that in the Netherlands, the 1990s are often celebrated as the heyday of transgressive humour (Beijen, 2018). While some lament the waning of transgressive humour since the 1990s (e.g., 'Remko Vrijdag,' 2018), others point out that once radical comedians have not been able to keep pace with changing times, and instead stick to outworn comic vocabularies. Such is the argument of critic Mike Peek, in a passionate review about Youp van 't Hek's show *Met de kennis van nu*:

> When Youp van 't Hek told his father he wanted to become a comedian, he was given remarkable advice: make sure a large number of people hate you. He succeeded, but van 't Hek does not seem to realise that this hate has become distorted. Once he antagonised people with truths they did not want to hear. Now because he himself is behind the times [...] those who as a teenager in the nineties listened at night to Youp's rants, now experience it with disappointment.[59] (Peek, 2020)

Such nostalgic comparisons between cabaret in the 1990s and the present are widespread and raise questions: were comedians such as Youp van 't Hek indeed more progressive in the 1990s? Did transgressive humour change, or has the social context changed? I will argue that both are true. I will demonstrate that, on the one hand, there is continuity within the transgressive humour of Youp van 't Hek, Hans Teeuwen, and Theo Maassen in terms of its engagement with negative stereotypes. On the other hand, the politics and aesthetics of their work have changed: in response to the repoliticisation of humour in the public sphere, and heated debates on humour and social justice, their comedy has become more defensive. They do not simply transgress boundaries, but increasingly defend their right to do so through comedy. Furthermore, with the rise of the radical right and a playful 'conservative counterculture' (Nagle, 2017; Oudenampsen, 2020) over the past two decades, the political resonances of transgressive humour have

59 'Toen Youp aan zijn vader vertelde dat hij cabaretier wilde worden, kreeg hij opmerkelijk advies: zorg dat een flink deel van de mensen een hekel aan je heeft. Dat is gelukt, maar Van 't Hek lijkt zich niet te realiseren dat die hekel door de jaren heen is vervormd. Ooit joeg hij mensen tegen zich in het harnas met waarheden die ze niet wilden horen. Nu omdat hij zelf achter de feiten aanloopt [...] wie in de jaren negentig als puber 's nachts naar Youps vlammende conferences luisterde, ziet het met lede ogen aan.'

changed, heightening the tendency in such humour to reinforce social hierarchies and relationships of power.

In the following sections, I will first address the academic debate on humour and transgression, arguing for an approach that foregrounds social and political context. Then, I will turn to the case studies. I propose the categories of *moral, nihilist,* and *ironic transgression* to differentiate between the ways in which the three comedians under discussion have used humour to transgress social and moral boundaries. Doing so enables me to present a more precise and fine-grained analysis of transgressive humour than existing approaches allow for.

Thinking transgression

A central question in humour research is that of the relationship between humour and the social order: does humour have the power to subvert and attack the social order, or does it work as a form of social consolidation? The concept of transgression helps us to think about this question, because it directs our attention to what it is that humour does when crossing a social or moral boundary. It raises the question if humour is a form of anarchic negation of the social order that works in the service of removing taboos, or if it merely accentuates the taboo-status of its subjects and thereby reaffirms the lines that it crosses.

There are three types of answer to this question. The first emphasises the subversive and rebellious nature of humour. The much-cited study of Mikhail Bakhtin on the carnivalesque is the most famous articulation of this argument (Bakthin, 1984). According to Bakhtin, medieval carnival was a feast of transgression: it toppled social hierarchies, and playfully opposed the official culture of the Church. Bakhtin argues that the carnivalesque mode of humour spilled over into the literature of the Renaissance, but retained its radical folk characteristics. Bakhtin does not believe that carnival humour is in any way compromised by the powers that sanction it, but belongs 'to an entirely different sphere' (Bakhtin, 1984: 18). He argues that: 'The basis of laughter which gives form to carnival rituals *frees them completely* from all religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety' (ibidem, emphasis added). Thus, carnival laughter does not reinforce social hierarchies, but is characterised by a total freedom. It unites the people into a collective, utopian body, and establishes a space that is freed from the rules and restrictions of everyday life. The utopian quality of carnival has made Bakhtin's work into an attractive model for contemporary humour and comedy studies.

The 'carnivalesque model of humour' (Holm, 2017: 49) has been assimilated by philosophy and cultural studies in particular.[60]

The second type of answer is the direct opposite of the first, and holds that humour fulfils disciplinary functions (Bergson, 2011; Billig, 2005b), 'cements the social order' (Fine and Wood, 2010: 299), or reflects social relationships without fundamentally challenging them (Davies, 2011). This line of thinking, which can be found in humour research across the humanities and social sciences, has been influenced by Freud's work on jokes (Freud, 1963). A classic example is Mary Douglas' account of humour and ritual (Douglas, 2001). Douglas is sympathetic to Freud's idea that jokes are 'an attack on control' (Douglas, 2001: 149) that do not challenge the social order in any decisive way, because they work mostly as a form of affective release. Douglas' argument that jokes are the expression of a 'joke in the social structure' (Douglas, 2001: 153) supports her conclusion that humour, while potentially having 'a subversive effect on the dominant structure of ideas' (Douglas, 2001: 150), in the end 'merely expresses consensus' (Douglas, 2001: 158).

The third type of answer is the most convincing, because it finds a way out of the opposition between challenging and reinforcing the social order, and acknowledges the ambiguity of humour. It holds that humour fulfils different social functions and can both cross and draw boundaries, and often does both at one and the same time (Holm, 2017; Kuipers, 2015; Quirk, 2016). This emphasis on the power of humour to cross and draw boundaries is supported by philosophical accounts of transgression, such as the long-term debate on the work of Georges Bataille. According to Bataille, transgression is both a crossing and drawing of boundaries: it is 'not the same as a back-to-nature-movement; it suspends a taboo without suppressing it' (Bataille, 1986: 36). Although Bataille's account seems to suggest that transgression does not liberate, his work is open to different interpretations. For instance, Michel Foucault's reading of Bataille (in line with the latter's reputation as a dangerous and radical thinker) has emphasised the playful and subversive nature of transgression as a movement that is indefinitely suspended between the line and its crossing. Foucault believes transgression to be 'liberating' (Foucault, 1998: 76), not because it frees us from all taboos, but

60 Bakhtin does not claim liberation to be a universal function of humour, but presents a contextual reading of humour through the analysis of a specific style (the carnivalesque), which he traces back to the folk culture of the Middle Ages and the literature of the Renaissance (the work of Rabelais in particular). Bakhtin also draws a distinction between carnivalesque humour and modern satire, which he sees as rather different in terms of politics and style. At the same time, Bakhtin's work is often read as presenting a covert commentary on the oppressive Soviet regime (Davies, 2007: 301), and his notion of the carnivalesque has been employed to study the liberating powers of humour in widely different contexts (e.g., Brillenburg Wurth, 2015; Elsayed, 2021; Shade 2010).

because it is an elusive force that cannot be reduced to either a crossing or an affirmation of the limit.[61]

This chapter builds on work that has acknowledged the ambiguous nature of humorous transgression, but it adds two caveats. First, as pointed out in the Introduction, there is a tendency in humour and comedy studies to overstate the ambiguous and slippery nature of humour, which it shares with philosophical work on transgression. For instance, Holm remarks that, 'it is difficult to read any final ethical or political statement from provocative humour, which both reinforces and transgresses ethical and political boundaries' (Holm, 2017: 144). However, not all humour is equally ambiguous or indecisive (Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman, 2014: 981). Rather, this chapter demonstrates that the working of transgressive humour depends on historical and cultural context.

Second, in studying the relationship between transgressive humour and its broader context, an important question to ask is whose boundaries are transgressed. In academic work on humour and transgression, there is a tendency to suppose the existence of a single or dominant norm that is either challenged or reinforced through humour, without the possibility of conflicting norms and values being taken into account. In line with this, it is often assumed that an aesthetic of transgression challenges and subverts the norms and sensibilities of its audience (Holm, 2017; Julius, 2002), however, as this chapter demonstrates, comedians have also used transgressive humour to mock out-groups (e.g., the 'politically correct') that are constructed in opposition to an in-group (i.e., the audience, which is 'in on the joke'). As such, transgressive humour does not necessarily confront spectators with their own norms and conventions, but can also be used to strengthen the bonds with an audience through an act of exclusion.

To understand how the political resonances of transgressive humour in Dutch cabaret have changed over the past decades, this chapter also builds on recent work in political science, which has challenged traditional understandings of 'progressive' and 'conservative' as respectively referring to a politics of change that seeks to liberate us from oppressive boundaries and taboos, and a politics of conservation that seeks to protect boundaries. As Corey Robin and Merijn Oudenampsen have argued, in their intellectual histories of American and Dutch conservatism, respectively, abstract definitions of conservatism in terms of a nostalgic politics of restoration or a defence of the status quo miss the contextual and innovative aspect of this political movement (Oudenampsen, 2020; Robin, 2011; 2015). Although the conservative tradition in both Europe and the US is characterised by an hierarchical vision of society and a defence of social and

61 In later work, Foucault increasingly questioned the idea that transgression is liberating, especially in his history of sexuality (Foucault, 1978).

economic inequality, the way conservative thinkers have articulated this political ideology is dependent on context. Hence, conservatism has often re-invented its political style and rhetoric in response to progressive opponents.

This has become especially clear with the rise of an online 'conservative counterculture' (Oudenampsen, 2020: 157) during the past decades, which has appropriated an aesthetic of transgression long associated with the political left (Nagle, 2017).[62] This online right-wing counterculture has challenged traditional expectations of conservatism as an ideology that protects rather than transgresses boundaries. Angela Nagle explains that:

> The Sadean transgressive element of the 60s, condemned by conservatives for decades as the very heart of the destruction of civilisation, the degenerate and the nihilistic, is not being challenged by the emergence of this new online right. Instead, the emergence of this new online right is the full coming to fruition of the transgressive anti-moral style, its final detachment from any egalitarian philosophy of the left or Christian morality of the right. (Nagle, 2017: n.pag.)

While Nagle focuses on the American context, the Dutch political sociologist, Merijn Oudenampsen, has documented the rise of a conservative counterculture in the Netherlands that has equally confused critics. In his genealogy of the right-wing Dutch weblog, *GeenStijl* (No Style), a Dutch precursor of the American alt-right, which was founded by Dominique Weesie in 2003 and advertises using the slogan 'tendentious, unfounded & needlessly offensive,'[63] Oudenampsen has demonstrated that the 'keyboard warriors' (Oudenampsen, 2020: 153) behind this boorish website have fashioned themselves as anti-establishment rebels, reappropriating and playfully referencing the style of the countercultural movements of the 1960s, such as Provo.

This drawing from, and mixing of, different styles and political vocabularies by an online right-wing counterculture helps us to understand why transgressive comedy is, in the present cultural conjecture, so difficult to understand, requiring an in-depth contextual analysis. Below, I will demonstrate that the transgressive humour of Youp van 't Hek, Hans Teeuwen, and Theo Maassen increasingly resonates with – and has sometimes been directly influenced by – this online conservative counterculture, *GeenStijl* in particular, thereby heightening the tendency of such humour to strengthen rather than challenge social hierarchies.

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62 Foucault himself was part of the progressive counterculture of the 1960s. Foucault's essay on the liberating potential of transgression, published in 1963, is in that sense both a product of and a contribution to the countercultural climate of the 1960s, and its aesthetic of transgression.

63 'tendentieus, ongefundeerd & nodeloos kwetsend.' English translation quoted from: Oudenampsen, 2020: 154.

Moral transgression

Youp van 't Hek (b. 1954) reached national fame in the early 1980s with his transgressive humour, and has been one of the most popular comedians of the Netherlands ever since. He was born in Naarden, a small town in 't Gooi, an affluent part of the country and a breeding ground of the economic elite. Van 't Hek's stage persona is built around this upper middle class background: through his style of clothing, vocabulary, and posh accent, he is immediately recognisable as a member of the economic elite. Van 't Hek's brother Tom van 't Hek was a coach for the national hockey team, a fact often mentioned by the comedian in his shows, especially while ridiculing the elitist character of this sport. Furthermore, van 't Hek has adopted a bohemian, studentesque style that equally reflects this upper class milieu. His performances mostly revolve around the story of a middle class man who has a strong desire to escape his unhappy marriage and boring office job. His shows present a romanticised picture of those whose lives represent a break with bourgeois conventions, such as the vagabond, the madman, and the student (van den Hanenberg and Verhallen, 1996: 208).

In asides to the romantic narratives at the heart of his performances, van 't Hek mocks the fashion choices and lifestyles of his middle-class audiences. In the course of the years, he has criticised non-alcoholic beer,[64] grand cafés,[65] mobile phones,[66] leggings,[67] Lada cars,[68] playing golf,[69] IKEA,[70] and reality TV,[71] among many other things. Although van 't Hek's critique of the bourgeois way of life carries strong moralist overtones, van 't Hek at the same time often plays with his reputation as an established – and increasingly rich – comedian, living a normal family life together with his wife and children, driving expensive cars, and doing all the other things he accuses his audience of doing. The persona created by van 't Hek on stage is therefore characterised not only by moralism, but also by playfulness and ambiguity: he effortlessly switches between the anti-bourgeois and the bourgeois position. By doing so, as I will demonstrate, van 't Hek offers his audiences the opportunity of a double identification. On the one hand, by signalling to the audience that he is 'one of them,' and has inside knowledge of the cultural tastes of the (upper) middle class, he crafts a persona that is relatable and easy to identify with. On the other hand, he embodies the freedom of the bohemian, and thereby appeals to the desire to break free from bourgeois conventions.

64 In his show Oudejaarsconference 1989.
65 In his show Spelen met je leven (1995).
66 Idem.
67 In his show Scherven (1997).
68 In his show Hond op het ijs (1987).
69 Idem.
70 In his show Spelen met je leven (1995).
71 In his show Oudejaarsconférence 1995.

Through his jokes, van 't Hek performs what I term *moral transgression*. His comedy style, developed in the early 1980s, was influenced by Freek de Jonge (see Chapter 4), and his performances typically present a central storyline and a clear moral message. His transgressive humour promises a liberation from a bourgeois way of life, which is presented as dull and inauthentic, but also decadent and corrupt. Van 't Hek's anti-bourgeois rebellion is embedded in a longer artistic tradition that can be traced back to the progressive counterculture of the 1960s. His transgressive humour can be fruitfully understood through the lens of Daniel Bell's critique of the (American) counterculture of the 1960s (Bell, 1979). In *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism,* Bell argues that the spirit of transgression popularised by the modernist avant-garde of the early and mid-twentieth century, created a counterculture that, through its anti-bourgeois rhetoric, undermined the protestant work ethic that traditionally offered a moral justification of American capitalism. While the protestant work ethic is characterised by asceticism and frugality, the counterculture of the 1960s promoted self-realisation and hedonism, leading, according to Bell, to a dangerous 'denial of any limits or boundaries to experience' (Bell, 1979: 13). Bell argues that the 'break-up of religious authority in the mid-nineteenth century' is to blame for this loss of morals and the shattering of traditional American community life (Bell, 1979: 19). Van 't Hek's work is indebted to the anti-bourgeois hedonism of the counterculture of the 1960s, and can be read as a critique of the ascetic lifestyle and protestant work ethic celebrated by Bell. Van 't Hek promotes a more hedonistic lifestyle (reflected in the comedian's famous credo 'Leef!' (Live!)), and, as we will see, has often linked bourgeois morality to religious dogmatism. His work is thus not only anti-bourgeois, but also anti-religious.

Through his transgressive, confrontational style, romantic bohemianism, and critique of the (super) rich, van 't Hek has achieved the reputation of being a progressive rebel. In doing so, I will argue, he has directed attention away from the fact that his comedy is not just a progressive liberation from bourgeois norms and conventions, but also protects and reinforces bourgeois norms, especially through disparaging jokes about women, gay people, and people of colour. In this section, I will demonstrate this by presenting an analysis of one of his most famous scenes: a critique of the non-alcoholic Buckler beer.

Van 't Hek presented his famous Buckler jokes during his New Year's Eve Performance of 1989. The New Year's Eve Performance is a cabaret show traditionally broadcast on public television (but recorded in a theatre) on New Year's Eve, in which the comedian satirically reflects on the past year. The annual tradition was 'invented' by the legendary comedian Wim Kan (see Chapter 2), and each comedian presenting a New Year's Eve Performance is still, to some extent, measured against the norms set by Kan (Voskuil, 2010). When the progressive broadcast organisation

VARA asked van 't Hek to present the New Year's Eve Performance on 31 December 1989, this provided him with the opportunity to reach a big television audience, and it marked an important moment in his career, which further contributed to his popularity (van den Hanenberg and Verhallen, 1996: 207).

Buckler is a non-alcoholic beer manufactured by the Dutch brewer Heineken, and first brought onto the market in 1988. It is commonly believed – although very difficult to prove – that van 't Hek's jokes about Buckler damaged the brand's reputation to such an extent that sales decreased dramatically in the months following the performance, eventually leading Heineken to take Buckler off the Dutch market ('Evenblij met,' 2011). Although van 't Hek's jokes were not meant as a form of political activism per se, the (presumed) consequences of these jokes have made this bit very famous in retrospect, thus contributing to van 't Hek's reputation as a progressive (and anti-bourgeois) rebel. The Buckler affair generated a lot of media attention and has even inspired neologisms such as 'Buckler prick'[72] and 'Buckler effect'[73] ('Het Buckler-effect,' 2014; Verdegaal, 2009; Wynia, 2005).

The influence ascribed to this bit is remarkable in relation to its actual length. Van 't Hek makes only a few jokes, almost as an aside:

> You know Buckler right, it's that Reformed beer, right? Buckler drinkers, I really hate them, Buckler drinkers. Those forty-year-old assholes standing next to you in the pub with their car keys…fuck off will you mate! I am standing here getting a bit drunk, beat it, nutcase! Go booze in church, you idiot! If you don't want to, just don't drink, you idiot! Buckler drinkers![74] (van 't Hek, 2003)

On the one hand, van 't Hek's jokes can be read as an act of progressive rebellion, especially against the backdrop of this comedian's frequent targeting of big brands and the capitalist logic of compulsively producing new commodities and cultural tastes. Moreover, van 't Hek's criticism of Buckler as a brand is framed as a critique of the Buckler drinker, who is portrayed as being both petit bourgeois and a Calvinist: Buckler is called a "Reformed beer" and the Buckler drinker is portrayed as a pathetic family man who cannot drink because he still has to drive home to wife and kids (emphasised by the detail of the car keys) and is therefore advised to "go booze in church." The Calvinist bourgeois is criticised here in the name of an

72 'Buckler-lul.'
73 'Buckler-effect.'
74 "Buckler, dat kent u wel, dat is dat gereformeerde bier hè, dat kent u wel hè? Buckler-drinkers, daar heb ik nou een hekel aan, Buckler-drinkers. Van die lullen van een jaar of veertig die naast je in het café staan met die autosleutels…rot 'ns op, jongen! Ik sta hier een beetje bezopen te worden, ga weg, gek! Ga in de kerk zuipen, idioot, hè! Ja, zuip dan niet, idioot! Buckler-drinkers!"

anti-bourgeois hedonism embodied by van 't Hek himself, who tries to live life to the fullest and get properly drunk, but is bothered by the Buckler drinker.

On the other hand, by framing this bit as a progressive criticism of bourgeois norms, van 't Hek directs attention away from the fact that he is, at the same time, reinforcing norms of masculinity. When the Buckler affair is recalled (e.g., in television items), what is often left out is the first part of this bit, in which van 't Hek forges an explicit link between non-alcoholic beer and women. While framed as a criticism of a particular type of woman, van 't Hek's critique is specifically directed at Ria Lubbers, the wife of then Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers, leader of the Christian Democrat Party (CDA). Van 't Hek's bit is a direct response to Ria Lubbers' plans – which received some media attention in the months before the New Year's Eve Performance aired – to open a café in Rotterdam ('Ria Lubbers wil,' 1989):

> Nothing worse than someone who thinks too much of himself. Example: erm, you are at this party with all those terrible women, and at some point this terrible woman says, after her third, lukewarm white wine: 'You know what, I am a really crazy girl!' [mimics woman's laughter, followed by an exclamation of disgust; big audience laughter] Nobody thinks she is, nobody [laughter], and such a just-out-of-my-pleated-skirt-woman knows that herself... [laughter] But still: 'You know what, I am a really crazy girl!' You know who's the perfect example? Ria Lubbers, ...oh, I'm so allergic to her, Ria Lubbers. I get a rash on my most intimate parts when she's on television [big laughter]. When I've seen her, I want to have my retina transplanted, really [laughter]. Ria Lubbers, she's always like: 'I'm not the Prime Minister's wife, I'm just a simple girl from Rotterdam.' The other day, she went: 'Oh my, I would just love to open a pub.' Well, if she would open a pub, in no time everyone would be drinking Buckler. [big laughter][75] (van 't Hek, 2003)

Although van 't Hek frames this scene as a criticism of bourgeois norms by mocking a particular type of (upper) middle class woman who tries to suggest that she breaks with conventions while actually supporting a conservative worldview (she has only just freed herself from the traditional, pleated skirt), this scene reinforces norms of masculinity in different ways. First, van 't Hek's mockery of Ria Lubbers

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75 "Niets is erger dan dat iemand vindt dat 'ie iets is terwijl die dat dus absoluut níet is. Een voorbeeld: eeuhm, je staat wel 'ns op zo'n feestje met van die verschrikkelijke vrouwen en dan roept er opeens zo'n vreselijke vrouw na drie te gauwe lauwe witte wijntjes: 'Eigenlijk ben ik een hele gekke meid!' [lach] Niemand vindt dat, niemand [lach], en dat weet zo'n ruiten, even uit de plooirok zelf ook... [lach] Maar dan toch: 'Eigenlijk ben ik een hele gekke meid!' Weet je wie daar een goed voorbeeld van is? Ria Lubbers, ...oh, daar ben ik dus allergisch voor, Ria Lubbers. Op de meest intieme plaatsen krijg ik pukkeltjes als die op de buis komt [hard gelach]. Ik wil openlijk m'n netvlies laten transplanteren als die geweest is, echt waar [lach]. Ria Lubbers, o, die wil ook altijd: 'O, ik ben helemaal niet de vrouw van de premier, ik ben gewoon een Rotterdams meisje.' Laatst ook weer: 'Ik zou het liefst een kroegje beginnen.' Als die een café begint, binnen een uur is de hele bar aan de Buckler, absoluut! [hard gelach].'

needs to be understood against the backdrop of this comedian's disparaging jokes about women, who are often portrayed in his work as stupid and lacking a sense of humour. Second, by mocking Ria Lubbers for being an independent woman, van 't Hek reinforces traditional norms of femininity, and thereby also contributes to broader critiques of Lubbers for leading an active life.[76] Lubbers gave many interviews, organised meetings for the minister's wives, and took up creative work, such as writing a (and performing in another) musical (Huygens, 1989a; 'Ria Lubbers droomt,' 1989), among other things. She did thus not conform to the traditional role of the obedient housewife. Third, by mockingly suggesting that Lubbers – who was known to be a beer lover ('Griezelig,' 1989; 'Ria Lubbers wil,' 1989) – would make men convert to Buckler, Buckler is, from the start, framed as a beer for men who are henpecked, and as such is understood as posing a threat to male independence. The implicit message is that 'real' men drink alcohol (and, specifically, beer), while women are not expected to do so. Van 't Hek's Buckler bit ends with the remark that Ria Lubbers is "much worse" than the Buckler drinker, thus prioritising the protection of patriarchal norms over this comedian's broader criticism of the bourgeoisie.

Affective liberation

I will now dive deeper into the workings of van 't Hek's comedy, and the mode of liberation it affords to its audience, through an analysis of a (lesser known) bit taken from *De waker, de slaper en de dromer* (The watcher, the sleeper and the dreamer, 1998). In this show, van 't Hek – who never went to university himself – tells the seemingly personal story of his former student house. The performance paints a romanticised picture of student life: van 't Hek introduces the audience to his former mates, and recounts how they ended up living the bourgeois life of their parents, and lost the freedom they had as students. Van 't Hek's jokes are embedded in a story about Rik Sulawesi, the only gay student in the house, nicknamed "Wanking Rik"[77] (van 't Hek, 2003). He constructs Rik not only as a gay person, but as a gay person of colour, resulting in yet another nickname: "Ruk de Nikker." This pun is hard to translate: 'Ruk' means 'to wank' while 'nikker' is the Dutch version of the n-word.[78] The jokes that follow are mostly built around stereotypes of gay sex, and refer to dark rooms, fist fucking, and wearing leather.

While it could be argued that these 'tendentious jokes' work as a form of affective liberation in itself (cf., Freud, 1963), van 't Hek does not offer the

76 For instance, journalist Stan Huygens asked Ria Lubbers in an interview if her husband was not annoyed by the fact that she was so often away from home (Huygens, 1989b).

77 "Rik de Rukker."

78 Rik, who has an Indo-European background, is also called an "Indonegiër," a combination of the word 'Indo' with the pejoratively connotated 'neger' ('Negro').

audience the opportunity to release tension straight away. Rather, by playing with stereotypes surrounding gay people, he creates tension among the audience, further strengthened through the comedian's rhetoric and performance. Van 't Hek first points to the difference between the time in which the story is set (the early 1970s), and his own time, in which it is more acceptable to be openly gay. Then, he lowers his voice to suggest that even now, there are still gay people who have not "come out." By adopting a conspiratorial tone, van 't Hek builds up tension, which is heightened when he suggests that there might be 'secret gays' in the room. By mockingly suggesting that some audience members might use strong aftershave to signal their queerness to others, leading to nervous giggles, he makes spectators uncomfortably aware of their own behaviour and that of other spectators, especially given the fact that van 't Hek is known to target specific audience members, usually on the first rows, during his shows. The built-up tension is released when van 't Hek ironically reveals to the audience that entertainer Paul de Leeuw (mentioned at the beginning of this chapter for objecting to van 't Hek's recent 'pisnicht' jokes) is one of these secret gays. The joke is predicated on the audience's prior knowledge that Paul de Leeuw is openly gay, while also playing with the idea that de Leeuw's manners are 'too gay.'

Thus, the affective liberation created by van 't Hek in this scene does not lead to a liberation from heterosexual norms. Rather, the affective release of tension is the effect of reinforcing and protecting those norms: the built-up tension around the possibility of being shamed by the comedian as a gay person is alleviated through a joke about an outsider (i.e., Paul de Leeuw), who is mocked for being too openly gay, and thereby deviating from the heterosexual norm. Van 't Hek, however, also mocks gay people for *not* deviating from this norm. Following his jokes about Paul de Leeuw, van 't Hek addresses that era's debate on same-sex marriage, and mocks gay people for their desire to marry and have children, arguing that same-sex marriage would destroy the presumed sexual freedom of gay people and make them as dull as heterosexual men stuck in their marriages.[79] Gay student Rik, a frequent visitor of dark rooms, embodies this sexual freedom of the gay community.[80] Through his jokes about gay people, van 't Hek thus builds up to a release of tension and offers his audience the opportunity of a double identification: he embodies both the bourgeois heterosexual norm (reinforced

79 In October 1997, an advisory committee recommended the legalisation of same-sex marriage to the Dutch government ('Adviescommissie,' 1997). From 1 January 1998, a civil partnership was possible for people of the same sex. Whilst, strictly speaking, not a same-sex marriage, the media referred to the first partnerships as 'gay marriage' ('homohuwelijk') ('Run van,' 1998). Same-sex marriage was legalised in 2001.

80 Van 't Hek's romanticizing about a secret gay culture that breaks with the norms of bourgeois heterosexuality is shared by some members of the gay community. The Dutch writer and poet, Gerrit Komrij (1944–2012), is a prominent example (Komrij, 2010).

through his many jokes about gay people), and the desire to break free and live a more authentic life (a desire projected onto the student and the homosexual).

At the end of this bit, van 't Hek repeats this mechanism of building up and releasing tension, this time not by mocking an outsider, but by targeting an audience member in the first row. Van 't Hek first creates an intimate moment by lowering his voice again and reflecting on the presumed danger of telling jokes about gay people and other marginalised groups, which may lead to offence and even aggression. Hence, he admits to having become more careful about making such jokes, out of fear for being beaten up by an offended spectator. Then, he turns this seemingly serious statement into another joke by addressing a woman in the first row who was the butt of one of his earlier jokes. He mockingly confesses to have consciously chosen her as a victim of his jokes because he smelled the "scent of aftershave"[81] of the boyfriend/husband sitting next to her. In so doing, van 't Hek not only suggests that this boyfriend/husband is gay, but also that, as such, he is too effeminate to present a true physical danger to him, so that even if he were offended by his joke about gay people, he would not be able to beat up a 'true,' i.e. heterosexual, man like van 't Hek. This joke, which leads to explosive laughter, enables the audience to release the built-up tension, as it (finally) meets the expectation set up by van 't Hek that he would target specific audience members, while also reinforcing the bourgeois, heterosexual norm, by reinforcing the stereotype of the effeminate gay person.

Defending transgression

Youp van 't Hek has often been criticised for repeating himself, both in terms of comic style, and the moral messages presented in his shows (e.g., Meijer, 1997; Peek, 2020). However, the politics and aesthetics of his transgressive humour have slightly changed in recent years, as I will demonstrate by comparing *De waker, de slaperen de dromer* (1998) with *Met de kennis van nu* (2019).

Whilst *De waker, de slaper en de dromer* presents a criticism of the student-turned-bourgeois, *Met de kennis van nu* can be read as a metacommentary on humour. This commentary is foregrounded by the two stories that make up the backbone of the show: the first one deals with Hidde, a young boy who wants to become a comedian and asks van 't Hek for advice. This story enables van 't Hek to make explicit what cabaret means to him. The second story deals with an old friend who is incurably ill. When he visits his friend in the hospital, the friend's wife disapproves of van 't Hek's sick jokes, which leads van 't Hek to denounce her as being humourless, and to defend offensive humour as a means to blow off steam among (male) friends. Van 't Hek often steps out of these central stories to

81 "geur van aftershave."

comment on what he believes to be an increased sensitivity surrounding humour in today's society. He also addresses the 'pisnicht affair.'

If we compare van 't Hek's defence of the word 'pisnicht' in *Met de kennis van nu* with the comedian's jokes on gay people in *De waker, de slaper en de dromer,* we are able to see that the rhetorical structure of his humour has changed, even though both scenes present transgressive jokes about gay people based on negative stereotypes about anal sex. First, unlike his previous work, in *Met de kennis van nu*, van 't Hek presents an explicit defence of transgressive humour. He opens his bit by addressing the "climate change"[82] going on "in this country,"[83] arguing that "more and more people don't want to be offended,"[84] pronouncing the word 'offended' in an exaggerated way, thereby signalling that people taking offence at humour are stupid and not to be taken seriously (van 't Hek, 2004). The jokes that follow are intended to support this point: to defend his right to make disparaging jokes about gay people and other disadvantaged groups (e.g., trans people), and to demonstrate that he will not stop making jokes about those groups. Some jokes underline this by appealing to a long and celebrated tradition of transgressive humour. For instance, van 't Hek refers to the offended gay community as "guild of the brown star,"[85] an expression popularised by the famous Dutch television cabaret Jiskefet (1990–2005).

Second, whilst Paul de Leeuw, in both scenes, is constructed as outsider, the mechanism of othering underlying the humour is different. In the first scene (1998), de Leeuw is mocked as a famous representative of the gay community for deviating from the heterosexual norm (even though this community also embodies a fantasy of sexual plenitude).[86] In the second one (2019), de Leeuw is mocked for lacking a sense of humour and being oversensitive. While he is still measured against a heterosexual norm, van 't Hek does not suggest that de Leeuw represents the gay community as a whole, but rather draws a distinction between "queers"[87] and "piss queers,"[88] suggesting that queers do not complain whilst "piss

82 "klimaatverandering."
83 "in dit land."
84 "Er zijn steeds meer mensen die niet gekwetst wensen te worden."
85 "gilde van de bruine ster."
86 It is important to recognise that Paul de Leeuw's humour was similarly crude and transgressive at the time. Van 't Hek's jokes were thus made in a context in which it could be considered 'fair game' to mock de Leeuw and be hard on him. In 2019, van 't Hek defended his use of the word 'pisnicht' by making this point explicit: he pointed to the hypocrisy of Paul de Leeuw objecting to his use of 'pisnicht,' given the fact that de Leeuw's language was equally crude. Van 't Hek, however, only referred to an incident from 2002 (in which Paul de Leeuw offended Dutch singer Anneke Grönloh), and did not acknowledge that de Leeuw's comedy style is no longer as transgressive as it once was.
87 "nichten."
88 "pisnichten."

queers keep nagging."[89] In so doing, van 't Hek constructs de Leeuw as part of a broader community of 'politically correct' people who are unable to take a joke, while at the same time defending himself against accusations of homophobia by suggesting that many gay people are 'in on the joke' and do not mind being called 'queers,' while others, like Paul de Leeuw, are oversensitive.

Van 't Hek has thus increasingly defended his right to make disparaging jokes about minorities, and has increasingly connoted his targets as being humourless and 'politically correct.'[90] Both the rhetoric and political resonances of his transgressive humour have thereby changed. I will demonstrate the changed political resonances of van 't Hek's work by giving one final example: I will (briefly) trace the changed meaning of a key word in his oeuvre: 'deugen.' The term 'deugen' is hard to translate, but refers to the quality of being a good person. It was later reappropriated and popularised by the Dutch right-wing weblog, *GeenStijl,* in the pejorative sense of being 'politically correct,' and used in neologisms such as 'deugmens' (do-gooder). In the 1990s, van 't Hek used the word 'deugen' in its original meaning. In *De waker, de slaper en de dromer*, for instance, he did so to condemn the broker when he was about to sell his old student house: "But one day there was a guy walking around here [in the student house], and it was immediately clear: he's no good [deugt niet]. Nice suit, but no good [deugt niet]."[91] In recent years, van 't Hek has used the term in the meaning popularised by *GeenStijl* to condemn a supposed left-wing culture of 'political correctness.' In 2020, van 't Hek criticised Christian television presenter and celebrity, Arie Boomsma, and film director, Norbert ter Hall, in a newspaper column, for urging advertisers to boycott the talk-show *Veronica Inside*. This commercial television show had caused outrage for its racist and sexist jokes (Smeets, 2018; 'Veronica Inside,' 2020). Van 't Hek responded by calling Ter Hall 'a first-class and dead scary do-gooder,'[92] and wrote about Boomsma: 'And Arie is so good [deugt]. He is good [deugt] on all sides. Jesus Christ, how virtuous is [deugt] our Arie. He is the supreme commander of the ever-expanding battalion of do-gooders' (van 't Hek, 2020).[93] Hence, while van 't Hek had often criticised commercial television during

89 "pisnichten zeiken tegen je aan." This is a pun that is hard to translate. The Dutch word 'pis' means 'piss' and 'zeiken' can both mean 'to nag' and 'to piss.'

90 In van 't Hek's work from the 1980s and 1990, it was mainly women who were portrayed as being humourless.

91 "Maar op een dag liep hier een gozer rond, waarvan je meteen ziet: dat deugt niet. Wel een mooi pak, maar het deugt niet."

92 'een doodenge deugneus eerste klas.'

93 'En Arie deugt. Aan alle kanten deugt 'ie. Jezus Christus wat deugt onze Arie. Hij is de opperbevelhebber van het almaar uitdijende gutmenschenbataljon.'

his shows for its lack of good taste, he was now defending a commercial television show against its critics, whom he denounced as being politically correct.[94]

Nihilist transgression

Hans Teeuwen (b. 1967) began his career in the early 1990s as part of a new generation of comedians that opposed the moralism of traditional Dutch cabaret (Klöters, 2004: 154). Youp van 't Hek, at that time an established and very popular comedian, and one of the most important representatives of this moralistic style, was one of their main targets. While van 't Hek performed 'as himself,' and helped to popularise a form of comedy with a coherent storyline and a clear moral message, Hans Teeuwen presented a series of songs, sketches and impersonations that seemed to lack any logical connection, except for their scandalous content. Teeuwen impersonated lonely and desperate characters engaging in random acts of sex and violence, and his comedy did not seem to provide a moral lesson at all. He crossed moral boundaries without reassuring his audience that he himself was 'on the good side' (Nieuwenhuis, 2012). Teeuwen, born and raised in North Brabant, spoke on stage with a thick Brabant accent, but could easily switch to a presumably authentic, 'neutral' voice.[95] Teeuwen's cruel fantasies, and his switching between different accents and emotional registers, kept the audience guessing who this performer actually was and what he stood for.

I propose to call Teeuwen's style of transgression *nihilist transgression.* I use this term to refer to a type of transgression that rejects any metaphysical or moral truth. The term 'nihilism,' originally a swear word, dates back to the early nineteenth century, and was most thoroughly and passionately theorised by Friedrich Nietzsche. All contemporary uses of the term are, in some way or another, indebted to Nietzsche's use of it (Goudsblom, 2003; cf., Oudenampsen, 2020). In his cultural history of nihilism, sociologist Johan Goudsblom argues that nihilism is not a mere denial of truth, but is paradoxically rooted in a strong

94 While van 't Hek's criticism of Arie Boomsma is cited here to illustrate how this comedian's political rhetoric has changed, it is also in line with older strands in his work, especially with his anti-religious attitude. The fact that Boomsma was a Christian television presenter, who worked for the Dutch Evangelical broadcast organisation (EO), is important here. Boomsma's political correctness also signifies a moral rectitude, which is associated with his Christian background ('Jesus Christ, how virtuous is our Arie').

95 North Brabant is a Dutch province. Even though Eindhoven, the fifth largest city of the country, is located there, it is peripheral in relation to the urban centre of the Netherlands: de 'Randstad,' the urban agglomeration of West Holland, including the capital, Amsterdam. North Brabant is often looked down on by people in the Randstad as being rural and backwards. By playing with this lower status of the 'Brabander,' especially in his early shows, Teeuwen was able to claim an underdog position (in much the same way as Theo Maassen did; his work is discussed below).

commitment to truth, to which he refers as a 'truth commandment'[96] (Goudsblom, 2003: 123). According to this commandment, which Goudsblom traces in the work of western philosophers from Socrates to Nietzsche (and beyond), human beings need to aspire to the truth and base their moral values on it. The nihilist comes to the conclusion that none of the established truths hold, and, because of their commitment to truth, does not want to accept living a life according to false beliefs. Here, the nihilist paradoxically turns into an ardent critic of truth, and seeks to cultivate a way of life that breaks with all orthodox truths. Teeuwen's work reflects the attitude of the nihilist: he presents a comedy 'jenseits von Gut und Böse' (Nietzsche, 1984), a comedy that unmasks established truths, based on religious or other ideological beliefs, as being false.

To understand the relationship between nihilism and transgression in Teeuwen's work, it is helpful to situate this work within the context of postmodern art. According to Goudsblom, while the roots of nihilism lie in a western philosophical tradition that has a strong commitment to truth, it was only after Nietzsche's popularisation of nihilism that it became available as a style of thinking with a broader cultural resonance, ready to be picked up and re-articulated in different contexts. While postmodern art is not necessarily nihilistic, some artists have drawn from nihilistic vocabularies, and have re-articulated nihilism in the context of postmodernism.

Teeuwen's work represents a particular type of postmodern, transgressive nihilism. It fits in with Philip Auslander's description of the postmodern comedian (Auslander, 2004: 107-108). Referring to American comedians, such as Steve Martin and Andy Kaufman, Auslander points to the rise of a new type of comedian under postmodernism. He argues that:

> [...] the very notion of comedy itself had become problematic under postmodernism. Comedy by definition requires stable referents, norms against which behaviors may be deemed humorous. In the absence of such norms, it is impossible to define comedy. Some comics responded by becoming metacomedians whose performance took the impossibility of being a comedian in the postmodern world as their subject [...] The other problematic confronted by both theatre and stand-up was that of character. Traditionally, stand-up comedians present a consistent persona to represent the perspective from which they make their comic observations. But just as some postmodernist playwrights created dramatic characters as collections of fragmentary texts rather than psychologically consistent beings, some stand-ups also eschewed the presentation of clearly defined comic personae. (Auslander, 2004: 107-108)

96 'waarheidsgebod.'

Auslander's description of postmodern comedy resonates with the definition of nihilism proposed above. According to Auslander, postmodern comedy does not recognise the existence of stable norms, or any final, moral truth that we can rely on. In the absence of stable referents, Auslander argues, comedians begin to pose as 'metacomedians,' and to present fragmentary comic personae. Both elements are present in Teeuwen's work as well.

While some have argued that the disappearance of stable norms under postmodernism made transgressive art impossible (Auslander, 1997; Foster, 1985), transgression as a cultural and aesthetic practice did not cease to exist in the 1980s and 1990s.[97] What did change, however, was that transgression became increasingly disconnected from traditional moral and political vocabularies. Teeuwen forged a break with the political engagement and moral transgression of older-generation comedians, such as Youp van 't Hek. In so doing, he presented a nihilist transgression: he crossed social and moral boundaries, but not in the name of any political project of emancipation or a moral truth. Here, Teeuwen's work resonates with postmodern art of the time, in particular the 'Nouvelle Violence' of film makers such as Quentin Tarantino.

Through a discussion of the opening sequence of Teeuwen's first solo show *Hard en zielig* (Harsh and pathetic, 1994), I will demonstrate that by breaking with the moralism of traditional Dutch cabaret, Teeuwen offered his audience an affective liberation.[98] Teeuwen's first show received positive reviews, and was at the time already being hailed as an important moment in the history of Dutch cabaret, at least by some critics (e.g., Meijer, 1994).[99] Teeuwen opens his show

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97 For an interesting criticism of the end-of-transgression narrative of postmodern critics, see: Schneider, 2002: 3-4.

98 His work was, however, not experienced as such by everyone. While Teeuwen became extremely popular among young audiences in particular, with high school pupils being able to quote entire sketches and songs (Buurman, 2004), his work was deemed coarse and offensive by many people from older generations. An interesting newspaper article (published in 1996) demonstrates this. For this article, René van der Velden interviewed comedians and critics from older generations, such as Freek de Jonge, Wim Ibo, and Jacques Klöters about what he referred to as the new 'rudeness' ('grofheid'), a new wave of comedians who were deliberately coarse and tasteless, but whose comedy did not support a political project of emancipation, as traditional cabaret did. Resonating with the end-of-transgression narrative promoted by postmodern cultural theorists, the conclusion of the article reads: 'Everything has been said, everything has been done, and the last taboos have been broken' ('Alles is al gezegd, alles is al gedaan en de laatste taboes zijn geslecht') (Van der Velden, 1996). In addition to Hans Teeuwen, van der Velden mentioned Paul de Leeuw, Youp van 't Hek, and Lebbis en Jansen as examples of this new rudeness. The article's title, 'Een zieke non in de bek schijten' ('Shitting a sick nun in the gob'), is a reference to a famous scene from Teeuwen's first solo show.

99 Before he began a solo career, Teeuwen formed a cabaret duo with Roland Smeenk (1957–1992). In 1991, they were the winner of cabaret festival Cameretten. Teeuwen and Smeenk were considered promising comedians, so expectations were high when Teeuwen debuted as a solo performer in 1994, two years after Smeenk's untimely death in a car accident.

by performing a virtuoso piece of piano music. He seems completely and almost maniacally absorbed in the music, and while starting out softly, he plays more and more aggressively towards the end. Then, he suddenly stops. The tension built up by the aggressive but virtuoso performance is somewhat released through the applause, but then, Teeuwen walks to the front of the stage, and pretends to be so nervous that he is hardly able to speak. His underdog performance is strengthened by his Brabant accent and his big suit, too big even for his lanky body, which makes him look like a clown. He makes a somewhat deranged impression. His hair hangs down to his shoulders and is combed to the back of his head.

The atmosphere of the opening sequence is tense, not only because Teeuwen plays a nervous comedian, but also because he remains in his role for too long. He is clearly performing, but does not step out of his comic character, and keeps stammering. We cannot be sure what to expect. What follows is a scene in which Teeuwen poses as Auslander's metacomedian, thereby reflecting on the impossibility of being a comedian in a postmodern world. While still stammering, Teeuwen parodies a traditional, politically engaged comedian: "Well, well, people, it's ... it's quite something with politics nowadays, isn't it? Erm, if ... if I read the newspapers sometimes ...erm, then I think: well, well!"[100] (Teeuwen, 1995). Then, he starts crying and, in another unexpected turn, admits that he is crying not because he is nervous, but because his dog died that day. The punchline reveals that it is Teeuwen himself who killed his dog by throwing him out of the window, followed by another joke in which Teeuwen confesses that killing his dog was not easy: "I have double glazing at home, so... I really had to throw it at least five times."[101] Then, Teeuwen switches to a set of weird impersonations, from a coffee machine to a peacock.

While creating a tense atmosphere at first, Teeuwen increasingly makes room for the release of built-up tensions, first by making cruel, immoral jokes in which he finally offers the audience some punchlines, and then by switching to an absurd series of impersonations that offer the audience pure pleasure. The affective liberation offered by Teeuwen here is a liberation from traditional, political cabaret, replaced by a pleasurable crossing of boundaries in the absence of deeper moral meaning. This sets the tone for the evening: instead of engaging with politics in any serious manner, or teaching the audience a moral lesson, Teeuwen presents a nihilist transgression that breaks with traditional moral and political vocabularies, and undermines any coherent system of meaning and belief. This is reflected in the structure of Teeuwen's show as a whole, which does

100 "Sjongejonge, mensen, het is... het is toch allemaal wat met die politiek vandaag de dag? Goh... als... als dat je dat toch soms in de krant leest, nou zeg... dan, dan denk je toch ook wel: nou, nou!"

101 "Ik heb van die dubbele glazen thuis, dus... ik heb echt zeker vijf keer moeten gooien."

not present a coherent story, but consists of a quick succession of comic characters and crude jokes which, together with the comedian's energetic performance, create an intense experience in which tension is built up and released at high speed.

A cruel carnival

Besides an affective release of tension, does Teeuwen's work also afford the audience an ideological liberation? While Teeuwen has always played aggressive, maniacal characters, and has, from the very beginning, insulted and attacked his audience, e.g., by entering the auditorium, physically approaching and touching audience members, and asking them impertinent questions, in the late 1990s, his performance style became more manipulative and aggressive. His performances thereby created a sense of captivity, and sometimes denied the audience the possibility to release the built-up tension through laughter.[102] Moreover, Teeuwen increasingly performed 'as himself.' From his third show *Trui (Sweater,* 1999) onwards, Teeuwen more frequently 'stepped out' of his comic characters and performed in a seemingly 'neutral' and personal voice, even though he often kept the audience guessing about the sincerity of his comedy, especially because the 'authentic' Teeuwen was no less cruel and aggressive than the comic characters he performed on stage.

At the same time, Teeuwen's transgressive humour was gradually embraced by a mass audience, and in the early 2000s, he was increasingly criticised for having become a popular entertainer, whose work had lost its shock value and innovative character (e.g., Henfling, 2003; van Gelder, 2003; Wels, 2003). Teeuwen, however, retained something of a cult status, and in response to his mass appeal, began to pose as a metacomedian. He often ironically commented on his own popularity, e.g., in a series of catchy sing-a-long songs in *Industry of Love* (2003), in which he crowned himself "the king of laughter"[103] (Teeuwen, 2004).

Teeuwen's status as a popular entertainer contributed to the affective release of tension offered by his work. The affordances and limitations of Teeuwen's comedy can be fruitfully understood through Bakhtin's model of the carnivalesque,

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102 There is one show in which Teeuwen almost completely denies the audience the release of tension, Trui (1999), a show that contains an oft-cited scene about Fons, an ugly boy who is bullied at high school, particularly by Teeuwen himself. Teeuwen tells the story in a personal voice, thereby leaving the audience in doubt about its sincerity. The story ends with Fons committing suicide. Although Teeuwen presents himself as a psychopath without any regrets about his behaviour, he is able to manipulate the audience to express awe when he recites a seemingly sincere (but quite badly written) poem at the boy's funeral. In response, he insults the audience for accepting this trite poem at face value, and famously refuses to receive applause at the end of the performance, thereby denying the audience the opportunity to release the built-up tension.

103 "de koning van de lach."

as I will now demonstrate in a discussion of a famous, or rather infamous scene from *Industry of Love,* in which the comedian describes in (too much) detail his presumed sexual encounters with Queen Beatrix.[104] This is one of Teeuwen's most well-known and most transgressive scenes, which is deliberately coarse and tasteless: Teeuwen recounts how he had "fucked the Queen in the arse"[105] until she started to bleed, and demonstrates how he had performed cunnilingus on her. Teeuwen sits at the front of the stage, very close to the audience, thereby creating intimacy and making this very graphic scene even more 'in your face.' Moreover, he does not perform the scene in character (e.g., by adopting a comic accent), but 'as himself,' thereby heightening the shock effect.

On the one hand, this scene enacts a reversal of roles typical of the carnivalesque: Teeuwen creates a topsy-turvy world in which the Queen is degraded, and the common man can imagine himself to be king (bringing to mind the song in which Teeuwen crowns himself "the king of laughter"). Furthermore, Teeuwen's scene is not quite a satirical attack. Bakhtin argues that the carnivalesque is not to be confused with modern satire: carnival laughter is a festive laughter, a celebration of the people who free themselves from the social order but do not place themselves above the objects of ridicule (Bakhtin, 1984: 12). Teeuwen breaks with a long and established tradition of comedians attacking the monarchy. In contrast to Lurelei's 'Arme ouwe', our Ur-example, which launches a satirical attack on Queen Juliana by portraying her as a poor old hag, Teeuwen presents an extreme sexual fantasy about Queen Beatrix that borders on the absurd. The affective liberation offered by Teeuwen's carnivalesque aesthetic is confirmed by the explosive laughter of the audience that can be heard on the DVD recording of the show (Teeuwen, 2004).

On the other hand, the scene does not afford the ideological liberation promised by Bakhtin's carnival. The scene emphasises the cruel and aggressive dimensions of carnival laughter, but without mobilising ridicule for the opening up of a utopian space in which social divisions are bridged. Rather, Teeuwen enacts a nihilist transgression. He thus breaks with moral truths in a more fundamental way by positioning himself 'jenseits von Gut und Böse.' He does not attack the Queen in the name of any higher moral principle, but has made the shattering of moral truths his ultimate goal. The comic persona crafted by Teeuwen – cruel,

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104 On the one hand, this scene has been used as a shorthand for describing Teeuwen's 'shock comedy' (van de Perre, 2016) and has been denounced as tasteless, e.g., by older generation comedian Freek de Jonge (Rovers, 2005: 184). On the other hand, the scene did not lead to immediate outrage, in contrast to other comic attacks on the Queen and the monarchy at the time. For instance, in 2003, Dutch prime minister Jan Peter Balkenende and Minister of Justice Jan Piet Hein Donner, both from the Christian Democrat Party (CDA), called upon satirists to stop mocking the Queen and the House of Orange (Kamerman and Valk, 2003).

105 "keihard in d'r reet geneukt."

emotionally detached, and radically transgressive – is thereby reminiscent of Nietzsche's 'Übermensch,' who shatters moral truths and creates his own values. This Nietzschean 'master morality' (cf.,Oudenampsen, 2020: 164), according to which the strong dominate the weak, is expressed in Teeuwen's work more broadly.[106] In the next section, I will further explore the political resonances of this world view.

Conservative counterculture

While Teeuwen's early work was a revolt against political engagement and moral values, in recent years, Teeuwen's work has acquired stronger political resonances. After a long sabbatical (starting in 2005), Teeuwen made his comeback on the Dutch cabaret stage in 2011. Teeuwen's recent work is both an expression of, and a response to, the repoliticisation of humour in the public sphere, and the debate about humour and political correctness (or 'wokeness'), and was especially influenced by the murder of a close friend, the writer and film maker, Theo van Gogh. In 2004, van Gogh was murdered by a Muslim fundamentalist in response to a movie in which he had fiercely attacked Islam. In the years that followed, Teeuwen became increasingly frustrated with progressive critics who did not want to acknowledge his view that Islam presented a threat to western civilisation. Teeuwen began to appear more often in public debate, and became well-known for his defence of radical freedom of speech and his critique of Islam (e.g., Terstall et al., 2006; 'Hans Teeuwen,' 2013). In 2008, Teeuwen made a famous appearance in the one-off talk-show *Bimbo's en Boerka's* (Bimbo's and Burqa's) by De Meiden van Halal (The Halal Girls), in which he defended radical freedom of speech and the right to make disparaging jokes about Muslims.[107] While some critics have continued to praise Teeuwen's work, others have argued that his comedy used to be elusive, ambiguous, and innovative, but that the comedian has not been able to keep pace with changing times (cf., Heesakkers, 2021).

I will demonstrate that Teeuwen's nihilist transgression increasingly resonates with a conservative populism and an online conservative counterculture. While such resonances have remained implicit in van 't Hek's work, Teeuwen has, in recent years, more openly fashioned himself as a conservative rebel attacking the left through an aesthetic of transgression. He increasingly collaborates with the right-wing weblog, *GeenStijl:* Teeuwen's occasional home-made videos have

106 While Nietzsche's work is not free from misogyny, the world projected through Teeuwen's comedy is even more strongly gendered. In Teeuwen's work, male (sexual) dominance is asserted through shocking and extreme sexual fantasies in which women figure as the objects of sexual desire and humiliation.

107 This interview was awarded the prize for 'Television moment of the year' ('Teeuwen wint,' 2008).

been enthusiastically adopted and shared on the platform, and while Teeuwen's early shows were broadcast on television by the progressive broadcaster VARA, his latest show *Smerige spelletjes* (Dirty games, 2020) was broadcast by PowNed, the broadcast organisation founded by *GeenStijl.* Teeuwen has also expressed sympathy for Jordan Peterson, the Canadian psychologist who has grown into an influential figure in alt-right circles (Teeuwen, 2018).

In 2016, Teeuwen's show, *Echte rancune,* premiered. Originally a Dutch language show, Teeuwen also performed the show in the UK the following season, where it received positive reviews. While Teeuwen presents a familiar set of songs, parodies, and weird stories, infused with pop-culture references, he combines his cruel humour with a more straightforward criticism of a presumed left-wing 'political correctness.' This frame is already activated in the opening scene, in which Teeuwen mockingly praises Dolf Jansen, a left-wing comedian attached to the VARA who is known for his moralistic stance and social critique.

In a later part of the show, Teeuwen presents a series of jokes about French, German, Christian, and Jewish people to build up to a rhetorical question that the audience may ask him as a comedian: "Do you also have the courage to joke about Islam?"[108] (Teeuwen, 2018a). He mockingly denies that there is any reason to do so, because Islam has contributed to the emancipation of oppressed groups ("Why do you think an increasing number of homosexuals decide to emigrate to Mecca every year?"[109]) and because western civilisation and the US are to blame for everything that is wrong with the world. He goes on to present a critique of the presumed obsession with race among the politically correct.

By hastily and anxiously denying the need to make jokes about Islam, Teeuwen parodies his left-wing opponents by suggesting that they are afraid to tell the truth about this religion and are suffering from both a lack of courage and strong feelings of guilt about the role of the West on the global stage. Furthermore, Teeuwen not only transgresses boundaries, as in earlier shows, but also presents a defence of transgressive humour in the face of supposed attacks from the left as well as from Muslim fundamentalists (the latter will be discussed below). By ironically denying the need to make jokes about Islam, Teeuwen suggests the opposite: he frames Islam as a taboo topic, and suggests that it is up to the (brave) comedian to break this taboo.

In a later sketch, Teeuwen performs such an act of taboo-breaking. This sketch begins with Teeuwen going into the audience, supposedly to check if there are terrorists among them. Teeuwen intimidates the audience, offending and

108 "Heb je ook het lef om grappen te maken over Islam?"
109 "Waarom denk je dat het zo is dat er elk jaar weer meer homoseksuelen besluiten om te emigreren naar Mekka?"

physically approaching audience members, supposedly (and mockingly) because he wants to make sure that everyone feels 'safe.' In doing so, Teeuwen creates a tense atmosphere. Back on stage, he tries to imagine what it must be like to be a Muslim suicide bomber performing his radical deed. He goes on to imagine that the suicide bomber ends up in heaven and is fucked in the arse by Allah. He imitates this sexual act on stage, while singing the tune of the television series *The Love Boat*, thereby shifting attention from the audience to a mocked outsider, and offering the audience the opportunity to release the built-up tension through laughter.

By initially creating a sense of fear among the audience, Teeuwen plays into broader social anxieties about Muslim terrorism. The fantasy of a comedy show being bombed by a Muslim fundamentalist immediately calls to mind the attack on the headquarters of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015, which, at the time, was still recent. In so doing, Teeuwen frames the sketch as a dangerous crossing of boundaries, which is, however, necessary to protect western society from a religious 'Other.' The set-up of the show, furthermore, suggests that the Muslim suicide bomber is not an exception, but is representative of Islam as a backwards and conservative religion invading the West. Teeuwen's jokes thereby create an opposition between an 'in-group' (white, western, enlightened, and free, but falling victim to a backwards religion) and an 'out-group', the religious 'Other' (Muslim, fundamentalist, and lacking a sense of humour), an opposition that is at the heart of the political discourse of the 'New Right,' which has been on the rise in the Netherlands since the early 2000s (Oudenampsen, 2020).

On the one hand, this sketch is reminiscent of that other anal sex fantasy performed by Teeuwen, involving not Allah, but Queen Beatrix. Both sketches are similar in terms of their transgressive nihilism: Teeuwen performs an act of transgression, and does so in an emotionally detached way. He portrays Allah as a nihilist God: not a God rewarding religious sacrifice or showing mercy, but one who brutally rapes the naïve believer who tries to do his bidding. On the other hand, the political resonances of Teeuwen's nihilism have changed: while Teeuwen's mocked Queen Beatrix through a carnivalesque aesthetic, and without presenting a direct satirical attack, the scene in which a Muslim believer is raped by Allah serves as an explicit commentary on the supposed threat of Islam and the political left, and as a defence of transgressive humour and radical freedom of speech.

Teeuwen's work thereby not only resonates with conservative populist discourses, according to which Islam presents a threat to western civilisation, but also increasingly participates in an online, conservative counterculture, epitomised by the infamous, right-wing weblog, *GeenStijl,* with which Teeuwen has sympathised and collaborated in recent years. In his analysis of *GeenStijl,* Merijn Oudenampsen argues that the website is 'characterized by a nihilist orientation that is Nietschean in inspiration,' while also drawing from 'the provocative use

of irony in the Romantic literary tradition' (Oudenampsen, 2020: 163). According to Oudenampsen, *GeenStijl* has integrated Nietzschean nihilism and Romantic irony to present a critique of social egalitarianism and left-wing politics. In recent years, Teeuwen's style – which I have analysed in terms of nihilist transgression – operates in a similar way: Teeuwen has repurposed his transgressive nihilism for a criticism of minorities and left-wing political correctness.[110]

Ironic transgression

Theo Maassen (b. 1966), the third and final comedian I will discuss in this chapter, has often been compared to Hans Teeuwen, especially in the early phase of his career (e.g., Verhallen, 1994). They both have their roots in Brabant, attended the same theatre school, were part of the first wave of Dutch stand-up comedians, and rose to fame in the same period: the early 1990s. However, the carnivalesque aesthetic of Teeuwen's work stands in contrast to the more sober and personal style of Maassen, which is in line with the aesthetics of stand-up comedy: Maassen typically presents a loosely connected set of jokes and personal anecdotes, often performs on a bare stage without the use of lavish costumes or settings, and was the first Dutch comedian who hardly ever sang. Most importantly, Maassen's transgressive humour cannot be understood through the categories of moral or nihilist transgression: Maassen performs what I call an *ironic transgression*. It is precisely because of its consistent irony that Maassen's work presents one of the most difficult case studies for this dissertation.

Following Linda Hutcheon, I define irony 'not as a limited rhetorical trope or as an extended attitude to life, but as a discursive strategy operating at the level of language (verbal) or form (musical, visual, textual)' (Hutcheon, 1995: 10). By arguing against the idea of irony as a 'limited rhetorical trope,' Hutcheon criticises approaches that reduce the meaning of irony to the opposite of what is said, or to another meaning that can be firmly located in the text itself. Instead, she takes a more communicative approach, which allows for the active construction and attribution of irony by readers/spectators dependent on the specific discursive communities in which they are embedded, and according to which irony is triggered by 'conflictual textual or contextual evidence or markers which are socially agreed upon' (Hutcheon, 1995: 11). While Hutcheon and others have rightly emphasised that irony needs to be distinguished from humour (Hutcheon, 1995: 4), I use the concept of irony to point to a particular manifestation of it in the context of

110 Although Nietzschean in inspiration, nihilism is not necessarily conservative. As Oudenampsen remarks about GeenStijl: 'This negative or radical nihilism of GeenStijl is of course far from consistent and a very selective phenomenon, as it ultimately serves to reinstitute a petit-bourgeois conservative morale' (Oudenampsen, 2020: 166).

humour and comedy: a humour aesthetic that is characterised by a high degree of ambiguity about the intended meaning or message of the comedian.[111]

Maassen typically activates an ironic frame by creating a conflict between his jokes and his comic persona. Maassen has crafted a persona that is soft and tender, which makes him immediately likeable, and thereby invites the audience to interpret his blunt jokes, which would in other contexts be outright sexist or racist, as being ironic. Because of his Brabant accent, his physique (tall, shaved head, sharp-featured face), and performance style, as well as his adopting of a rhetoric that prefers common sense to intellectualism, Maassen emphasises his working class background. In so doing, he presents himself as authentic and 'of the people,' a tough guy who is actually soft-hearted. Moreover, Maassen has presented himself (both on and off stage) as someone who grapples with his social and political engagement, and searches for morality in an immoral and cynical world (van der Beek, 1998).[112] In line with this, and unlike Teeuwen and van 't Hek, Maassen has presented himself (and is perceived as being) a comedian who is not only provocative and shocking, but also nuanced, trying to bring people together and to bridge social and ideological differences (Broers, 2005; van den Hanenberg, 2002; Verbraak, 2012).[113] Finally, Maassen is unusually good-looking for a Dutch

111 There is an extensive literature on irony, which for the most part does not deal with irony as a mode of humour. Irony is a multifaceted and difficult concept that has been approached from many different angles. While linguists and psychologists have typically treated irony as a textual feature (e.g., Burgers and van Mulken, 2013; Clark and Gerrig, 1984), philosophers have written about irony as an attitude to life. The philosophical debate on irony can be traced back to Socratic irony, and has, via Romantic irony (Kierkegaard, 2011), been taken up again in debates about postmodernism (Rorty, 2006; for an overview of philosophical debates on irony, see Colebrook, 2004). Within this context, irony has often been criticised for signalling a lack of political commitment (Foster Wallace, 1993). In the Dutch literary field, irony is also a much-discussed topic, in which critiques of a lack of political commitment have resurfaced (e.g., de Vries, 2014; Pfeijffer, 2019). Whilst humour and comedy studies have often touched upon irony (e.g., Gournelos and Greene, 2011; Weaver, 2022), a conceptualisation of irony as a particular humour aesthetic has not been provided.

112 In an interview on his show Ruwe pit, Maassen explains: 'Ruwe pit is a search for morality. My generation understands that a beautiful song will not end the hunger in the world. We see the ruthlessness of our times better. We don't believe in God and we are all preoccupied with ourselves. That lack of morality is quite honest. After all, you can't change anything. I don't have the strength to fight on the barricades [...] Still, it would be bad to make a show without a moral. I'm just trying to find a meaning, a moral, but I fail' ('Ruwe pit is een zoektocht naar moraal. Mijn generatie snapt wel dat je met een mooi liedje niets aan de honger in de wereld verandert. Wij zien beter de meedogenloosheid van deze tijd. Wij geloven niet in God en zijn allemaal voor onszelf bezig. Dat moraalloze heeft wel zijn eerlijkheid. Want je verandert er toch niets aan. Ik heb ook niet de kracht om op de barricaden te gaan [...] Toch zou het kwalijk zijn als je een show maakt die geen moraal heeft. Ik probeer juist een zin, een moraal te zoeken, alleen: het lukt me niet') (van der Beek, 1998).

113 See Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of the aesthetic of 'nuanced humour.'

comedian, which helps him to play the role of the amiable and sensitive guy.[114] For many millennials, Maassen's softness and amiability is enhanced by his appearance in the popular children's film *Minoes* (Bal, 2001), in which he played the role of the timid Tibbe, the ultimate good guy and (eventually) the romantic hero.[115]

The concept of irony helps to point to the ambiguity of Maassen's transgressive humour.[116] In contrast to a 'verbal and local irony, [...] clearly contrary and delimited' (Colebrook, 2004: 17; the 'limited rhetorical trope' referred to by Hutcheon), Maassen's use of irony is more complex and less stable. He has pushed the boundaries of irony and has caused outrage on several occasions, with media discussions focusing on the presumed irony of his jokes, e.g., when the comedian made a controversial statement about radical right-wing politician Geert Wilders in one of his shows (Fretz, 2013; Marbe, 2013; Pauw en Witteman, 2013; Verdonschot, 2013). Although Maassen has long been considered a left-wing comedian with progressive views on topics such as social inequality, global warming, and right-wing populism (Donkers, 2012), in recent years critics have increasingly questioned the irony of Maassen's transgressive humour, and have criticised him for his racist and sexist jokes, as will be further discussed below. Furthermore, Maassen has, throughout his career, been involved in some serious incidents related to aggressive behaviour and sexual assault, which compromise his reputation as the 'good guy' ('Cabaretier Theo,' 1999; Wels, 2008).

While Maassen has joked about many different social groups, I will focus here on his jokes targeting women, because these are one of the strongest threads running through this comedian's oeuvre.[117] I will discuss a scene from Maassen's third show, *Ruwe pit* (Rough stone, 1998), to demonstrate what kind of liberation Maassen affords his audience through the enactment of ironic transgression. In *Ruwe pit,* Maassen presents a series of transgressive jokes on a wide range of topics: from refugees, racism, and religion to babies, his girlfriend, and porn movies. These jokes are embedded in personal anecdotes, which are combined with a severe criticism of capitalism. Maassen presents himself as a restless thirty-

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114 Youp van 't Hek, for instance, has often mocked himself for not conforming to beauty standards.

115 A few years later, Maassen played the lead in the movie TBS (Kuijpers, 2008). This movie represents the other side of Maassen's persona. In the movie, Maassen played the role of a man who escapes from a forensic psychiatric treatment clinic.

116 Although humour is often seen as elusive and ambiguous as well, this is even more central to the definition of irony. As Hutcheon states: irony 'undermines stated meaning by removing the semantic security of "one signifier: one signified" and by revealing the complex inclusive, relational and differential nature of ironic meaning-making' (Hutcheon, 1995: 12-13).

117 Another interesting strand within this comedian's work, resonating with Teeuwen's cabaret, is his criticism of Islam, in two shows in particular: Tegen beter weten in (2006) and Vankwaadtoterger (2016). For a more detailed discussion, see: Nieuwenhuis and Zijp, 2022; Zijp, 2019a.

something guy, who thinks about settling down with his girlfriend and having kids. His persona is tough but tender, which is emphasised by the title of the show: *Ruwe pit* is a pun on the Dutch expression 'ruwe bolster blanke pit', meaning that someone is rough on the outside but has a gentle nature ('blank' means white or pure).

This scene starts with Maassen sharing personal frustrations about his relationship in a (seemingly) serious way, followed by a set of jokes targeting his girlfriend. Through this joke set, Maassen portrays his girlfriend as always complaining, over-emotional, and defined by her sexuality. Maassen initially performs with restrained aggression and makes innocuous jokes ("I have a very sweet girlfriend, lovely girl, a lottery share. But not exactly the lucky number"[118]), but builds up to an explosion of anger. In response to his girlfriend's complaint that he is not able to express his feelings, Maassen jokingly replies that he is very well able to do so: "Just shut up for once, you filthy whore!"[119] (Maassen, 2005). In so doing, Maassen appeals to stereotypical differences between the dominant and physically strong, but emotionally weak male, and the physically weak, but (over)emotional and caring female. In the next step, Maassen more explicitly comments on, and naturalises, the presumed biological differences between 'men' and 'women' and presents a critique of feminism, e.g., by joking that the clitoris is an "undeveloped penis,"[120] that women are physically weak, and therefore especially fit for doing domestic work, and that he understands that women are so preoccupied with feminism, because: "You can't vacuum the whole day."[121]

By crafting a persona that is both vulnerable and aggressive, Maassen creates ambiguity and thereby sets up an ironic frame that keeps the audience guessing about his intentions. On the one hand, by portraying himself as tough but tender, someone who is not able to express his feelings but ultimately wants to do good, as well as by sharing his personal doubts and insecurities, Maassen plays with the conflicting sides of his comic persona, switching back and forth between aggression and kindness. Moreover, he activates an ironic frame by openly appealing to a conservative and anti-feminist worldview, according to which men are superior, which is in contradiction with his otherwise progressive persona.

On the other hand, Maassen's jokes are firmly rooted in the frustrations of his comic persona, and work in the service of the release of tension through the expression of aggression towards women. Maassen presents himself as being

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118 "Ik heb een hele lieve vriendin, een schat van een meid, een lot uit de loterij. Maar nou niet bepaald het winnende lot." Maassen plays on the ambiguity of the Dutch expression 'een lot uit de loterij,' which literally translates as 'a lottery ticket', but can be used figuratively to express that one feels blessed with a loved one.

119 "Hou nou toch eindelijk eens je bek, vuile kuthoer!"

120 "onvolgroeide penis."

121 "Je kunt niet de hele dag stofzuigen."

hot-tempered and unable to fully control himself, someone who does not feel comfortable in his body, building up energy that cannot be released. The tension built up throughout Maassen's performance is released through tendentious jokes about women, which thereby offer the audience an affective but not an ideological liberation. That is, while Maassen attempts to create an ironic distance between his persona and his jokes, he does not quite manage to do so. This 'but-not-quite-ness' is an important characteristic of Maassen's ironic transgression, which thereby tends to reinforce social hierarchies.

Defending white male privilege (but not quite)

The but-not-quite-ness of Maassen's ironic transgression became the focal point of a discussion about this comedian's recent, and most controversial, show, *Situatie gewijzigd* (Situation altered, 2019). The show was announced as 'an uncomfortable but hilarious monologue about the rise and fall of the white male'[122] ('Theo Maassen eindigt,' 2018), and was a response to a book by intersectional feminist activist and former comedian Anousha Nzumé (Nzumé, 2017; see: Berkeljon, 2019).[123] On the poster for the show, we see a close-up of Maassen's face, displaying a monkey-like expression. In the show, Maassen plays with his status as a white, middle-aged, heterosexual male and defends himself against feminist and anti-racist critiques of white male privilege, which he describes in terms of "identity politics."[124] Responses to the show were mixed, but remarkably negative compared with Maassen's previous work: many critics questioned the irony of Maassen's show and criticised him for his racist and sexist jokes (Henquet, 2019b; Janssens, 2019; Nieuwenhuis, 2019; Rijghard, 2019). Maassen publicised these mixed responses on his website, putting two quotes on top of his home page, one from a five-star and one from a two-star review, both from major newspapers (cf., Janssens, 2019). The show also provoked some media discussions, most notably a joint interview with Theo Maassen and intersectional feminist activist, Sunny Bergman (Berkeljon, 2019), and a polemic between the critic, Ivo Nieuwenhuis (the writer of the two-star review featured on Maassen's website), and the comedian, Micha Wertheim, who argued in favour of the irony of Maassen's jokes (Nieuwenhuis and Wertheim, 2020).

When the curtain rises at the start of *Situatie gewijzigd*, we see Maassen sitting on top of what looks like a rock formation. He is stripped to the waist,

122 'een ongemakkelijke maar hilarische monoloog over opkomst en ondergang van de witte man.'

123 With her book Hallo, witte mensen (Hello, white people), Nzumé seeks to educate white people about basic concepts to think critically about gender and race, such as white privilege, white fragility and intersectionality.

124 "identiteitspolitiek."

on his hands and knees, and emitting monkey sounds. Maassen thereby stages himself as an alpha male, a monkey on the rocks. After this first appearance, there is a black-out, and then, Maassen returns fully dressed, wearing a red garment that resembles a prisoner's uniform, or a football outfit. This costume can be interpreted as a serious comment on a presumably oppressive 'identity politics' that, as Maassen argues later in the show, reduces people to only one aspect of their identity (and would thereby make Maassen a prisoner of his identity as a white, heterosexual male). Both Maassen's performance as an alpha male, and his costume have, however, also been interpreted as ironic gestures, with Maassen consciously posing as a victim (Nieuwenhuis and Wertheim, 2020). This reading was repeated by the comedian himself in media interviews (Berkeljon, 2019).

While Maassen enacts an ironic transgression that is in line with his earlier work, the aesthetics and political resonances of his comedy have changed. First, *Situatie gewijzigd* not only presents transgressive jokes, but also offers a defence of transgressive humour. Maassen frames the show as a defence of transgressive humour through an ironic disclaimer at the beginning of the show:

> Erm, ladies and gentlemen, erm, before we start, if, erm, any jokes come up tonight that make you think: 'Hey, that's a really racist joke, isn't it?' With me you can be sure that if I make racist jokes, there's something really wrong with that race. [laughter, Maassen laughs too] And if there are any jokes tonight that make you think: 'That's actually a very sexist joke, isn't it?' It's good to know: I see women as completely equal, um, among themselves. [laughter] Maybe it's also good to know: I have absolutely nothing against gays. In fact, one of my very, very, very best friends regularly orders non-alcoholic beer... [laughter] No, so as far as that's concerned, I'm looking forward to the show![125] (Maassen, 2020)

In the build-up to the first joke, Maassen makes it seem like he is going to reassure the audience that he is 'on the good side,' but instead remains within the ironic frame through a punchline that reaffirms the racism. By comically breaking the expectation that he will make a serious disclaimer, Maassen creates an ironic distance, and thereby defends ironic transgression as an acceptable aesthetic mode. By showing awareness of the presumed racism and sexism of his jokes (and the broader sensibilities around jokes targeting minorities in the present cultural

125 "Eehm, dames en heren, eehm, voordat we beginnen, mochten er vanavond, eehm, grappen voorbijkomen waarbij je denkt: 'Hé maar da's toch eigenlijk een heel racistische grap?' Je kunt er bij mij op vertrouwen dat als ik racistische grappen maak er ook echt wel iets mis is met dat ras. [lach, Maassen lacht ook] En mochten er vanavond grappen voorbijkomen waarbij je denkt: 'Da's toch eigenlijk een heel seksistische grap?' Het is goed om te weten: ik zie vrouwen als volledig gelijkwaardig, eehm, onderling dan. [lach] Misschien ook goed om te weten: ik heb absoluut niks tegen homo's. Sterker nog, één van mijn aller-, aller-, allerbeste vrienden die bestelt regelmatig alcoholvrij bier... [lach] Nee, dus wat dat betreft: ik heb er zin in, mensen!"

climate), and then comically breaking the audience's expectation, Maassen also anticipates and tackles his critics. Maassen's laughter at the first joke is an ambiguous gesture: on the one hand, it can be read as an ironic marker through which Maassen distances himself from its racism, but on the other hand, it works to build up a rapport with the audience, and invites spectators to be 'in on the joke,' while rhetorically marking those who do not want to accept the irony of those jokes as outsiders. Thereby, the opening sequence serves as a prelude to a show in which feminists and anti-racist critics are often the butt of the joke. Moreover, by making a joke that links non-alcoholic beer to gay people, Maassen references Youp van 't Hek's famous Buckler jokes, and thereby places himself within a long and celebrated tradition of transgressive humour.

Second, by embedding his jokes about women, gay and lesbian people, and people of colour in a monologue about the 'rise and fall of the white male,' which attacks left-wing 'identity politics,' the ironic distance created by Maassen between his persona and his jokes becomes less pronounced. Let me demonstrate this through the analysis of a scene that closely resembles Maassen's relationship jokes in *Ruwe pit* in terms of its engagement with negative stereotypes, but presents a different rhetoric. The scene opens with a personal confession by Maassen, in which he points to his own hypocritical behaviour as a man who has high moral principles that he does not always live up to. Then, he makes a seemingly serious statement about 'identity politics,' followed by a set of jokes about women (only the first joke is quoted below):

> I am not a hypocrite *because* I am a white, heterosexual, middle aged male, it has nothing to do with that, you know. Black women are also hypocrites. Women are for sure. [hesitant laughter] No, no, I don't mean they're worse than men, I don't want to go there. I just mean that with our negative characteristics, men and women are well matched, we are equal in that respect as well. Of course, we're different. Men are of course, erm, well, physically superior. [hesitant laughter] Erm, well, if the Olympic Committee would today decide to organise a gender-neutral Olympics next time, women would win zero medals, zero. Emotional blackmail is not an Olympic discipline. [laughter][126] (Maassen, 2020)

126 "Ik ben niet hypocriet omdat ik een witte, heteroseksuele man van middelbare leeftijd ben, dat heeft daar niks mee te maken, weet je wel. Zwarte vrouwen zijn ook hypocriet. Vrouwen sowieso, hè [aarzelende lach] Nee, nee, ik bedoel niet erger dan mannen, dat straatje wil ik niet in. Ik bedoel alleen dat ook met onze negatieve eigenschappen mannen en vrouwen volledig aan elkaar gewaagd zijn, we zijn ook wat dat betreft gelijkwaardig. Tuurlijk hè, we zijn verschillend. Mannen zijn natuurlijk, eehm, hè fysiek eehm superieur, hè. [aarzelende lach] Eehm nou ja, als het Olympisch Comité vandaag zou besluiten om de komende Spelen genderneutraal te houden, winnen de vrouwen nul medailles, nul. Emotionele chantage is geen Olympische discipline. [lach]"

Following this first joke, Maassen continues to push the boundaries of irony in a monologue that attacks feminist accounts of social inequality. For instance, Maassen claims that he does not believe that men are more powerful than women, because men are obsessed with sex and thus dependent on women's power to offer or withhold (heterosexual) men sexual pleasure. Paradoxically, then, while Maassen initially criticises 'identity politics' for overstating the importance of social difference by pointing to our shared humanness ("we are all hypocrites"), he continues to present a series of anti-feminist jokes that confirm and naturalise social differences between men and women. On the one hand, this paradox helps to set up an ironic frame that creates uncertainty about the performer's intentions. On the other hand, by combining jokes about women with a seemingly serious criticism of 'identity politics,' Maassen does not quite distance himself from his on stage persona. Hence, his jokes can be read as a defence of white male privilege, in which social inequalities are naturalised with an appeal to the presumed biological differences between men and women, resulting in different social behaviour.

Maassen pushes the ironic ambiguity of his jokes to an extreme in the closing sequence. He first reiterates his criticism of 'identity politics' by arguing that it divides people, while the most pressing social issues, such as climate change, concern humanity as whole. He goes on to suggest that we are all "homo sapiens" and launches the provocative slogan "Proud to be a homo sapiens," which reads as a criticism of notions of 'Black Power.' He also celebrates human progress, arguing that we are the only animal that has defeated his natural enemies. By emphasising that we are all human, Maassen presents himself as being nuanced and committed to a higher moral good, and as a reasonable alternative to 'radical' social justice movements. Moreover, by opposing a particularist 'identity politics' with a presumably more universalist humanism, Maassen articulates a moral view of history in terms of human progress.

But then, Maassen provocatively suggests that we have to thank the white male for human prosperity, arguing that all important inventors and great minds were white males. By presenting a far-from-nuanced, openly conservative defence of white male superiority that contrasts with his earlier celebration of shared humanness, all performed within an exaggeratedly angry tone of voice, Maassen activates an ironic frame. Maassen does not, however, reassure his audience that he is on 'the good side,' and his words can therefore also be read as a serious defence of white male superiority, under the guise of a universalist humanism. Maassen ends the show by reading out loud a list of inventions made by white males. While Maassen does not explicitly distance himself from his persona, the fact that the list not only includes canonical examples of important inventions (such as the microscope and the radio), but also quite insignificant ones (such as the rhyming dictionary and the Pritt Stick), makes Maassen's persona look

somewhat pathetic. At the curtain call (following his exclamation that "this world has been brought to you by the white male!"[127]), Maassen reappears on stage with bared torso, emitting monkey sounds, thereby strengthening the parodic character of the preceding monologue.[128]

Maassen's ironic transgression, which increasingly blurs the boundaries between performer and persona, stands in a longer Dutch tradition that can be traced back to the work of the critically acclaimed Dutch writer, Gerard Reve (1923–2006). Reve is considered as one of the 'big three' of post-war Dutch literature, together with Willem Frederik Hermans (1921–1995) and Harry Mulisch (1927–2010). The recent discussion about the irony of Maassen's jokes is reminiscent of the polemic between Reve and Mulisch, in which the latter criticised the former for his controversial statements about immigrants. In a public letter, Reve notoriously argued that these immigrants should be sent 'with a big bag of little beads and mirrors on the TjoekieTjoekie steamer, one way to the TakkiTakki jungle, Sir!'[129] (Reve, cited by Mulisch, 1976: 5). In his response, Mulisch pointed to the but-not-quite-ness of Revean irony:

> That is the irony of irony: that it suddenly stops being ironic. He has, so to speak, fallen through the double bottom of irony. He who speaks ironically, says the opposite of what he thinks, but in such a way that the other sees through it. Van het Reve says what he thinks, but in such a way that the other does not see through it and still thinks he is dealing with irony[130] (Mulisch, 1976: 52).

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127 "Deze wereld is mede mogelijk gemaakt door de witte man!"

128 The ironic ambiguity of Maassen's cabaret also results from the fact that his shows do not present a consistent worldview, but are riddled with contradictions (Rovers, 2011) and oscillate between a progressive moralism and an anti-moral appeal to nature and power as primary drives of human behaviour. This appeal to nature is a recurring trope in Maassen's work, in which images of nature and evolutionary metaphors are mobilised to express a hierarchical vision of humanity. While Maassen often does so in ironical fashion, most notably through his many jokes about male superiority, he has sometimes adopted a more serious tone. For instance, Maassen closes his show, Zonder pardon (Without mercy, 2008), with the statement that there is no difference other than that between the strong and weak: "Strong conquers, weak drops out. Without mercy." ("Sterk overwint, zwak valt af. Zonder pardon.") In an interesting and extensive article, journalist Sander Donkers has compared the work of Theo Maassen and Hans Teeuwen, arguing that the moral of Maassen's show, Zonder pardon, is not far removed from that of Teeuwen (Donkers, 2012). In Situatie gewijzigd, Maassen plays with and comically exaggerates this hierarchical vision of humanity, e.g., by posing as a monkey at the beginning and end of the show. Not coincidentally, Charles Darwin is one of the first 'great minds' that Maassen mentions in his defence of the white male towards the end.

129 'met een zak vol spiegeltjes en kralen op de tjoekitjoeki stoomboot [kunnen] zetten, enkele reis TakkiTakki Oerwoud, meneer!'

130 'Dat is het ironische van de ironie: dat zij het plotseling niet meer is. Hij is als het ware door de dubbele bodem van de ironie gezakt. Wie ironisch spreekt, zegt het tegendeel van wat hij meent, maar zodanig, dat een ander dat doorziet. Van het Reve zegt wat hij meent, maar zodanig dat de ander dat niet doorziet en denkt nog steeds met ironie te doen te hebben.'

As Merijn Oudenampsen has argued, while both W.F. Hermans and Gerard Reve are still often considered progressive because of the important role they played in the fight for artistic freedom during the progressive revolution of the 1960s, their work is better understood as representing a 'right-wing undercurrent' (Oudenampsen, 2020: 189) of that progressive revolution. According to Oudenampsen, their ironic and anti-moral style prefigured the playful, conservative counterculture of the new millennium, epitomised by figures such as Theo van Gogh and the right-wing weblog, *GeenStijl*. In the present cultural conjecture, Maassen's ironic defence of white male superiority, which complicates any easy distinction between performer and persona, runs the risk of reinforcing this type of anti-establishment conservatism.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented an analysis of the politics and aesthetics of transgressive humour in the work of three popular Dutch comedians: Youp van 't Hek, Hans Teeuwen, and Theo Maassen. In doing so, my aim has been to deconstruct the popular image of the comedian as a 'progressive rebel.' By adopting an aesthetic of shock and provocation, all three have fashioned themselves as anti-establishment rebels, who shatter oppressive taboos and oppose the status-quo. However, this pose of progressive rebel directs attention away from the fact that these comedians tend to reinforce social hierarchies and relationships of power. While they typically build up tension by teasing their audiences and making them feel uncomfortable, the release of tension afforded by their humour is often based on the expression of aggression towards disadvantaged and minority groups, who are constructed as dangerous outsiders (e.g., women, gay people, Muslims, and people of colour). Hence, their comedy offers an *affective,* but not an *ideological* liberation. By demonstrating that their transgressive humour is often based on the scapegoating of outsiders, this chapter has questioned the idea that an aesthetic of transgression necessarily challenges and subverts the norms and sensibilities of its audience.

As transgression is considered an important and defining characteristic of humour, humour and transgression have often been conflated, both in public debate and in humour and comedy research. This has made it hard to reconstruct the academic debate on humour and transgression: one would typically find humour and comedy scholars writing about transgression (if that term is explicitly mentioned at all) as part of their broader humour theories, instead of dealing with transgressive humour as a separate form and style of humour (but see: Holm, 2017). In this chapter, I have proposed transgressive humour as a particular style of humour, while also acknowledging that most humour is transgressive, if not to the same extent. Treating transgression as a separate style has enabled me to

disentangle the relationship between humour and transgression, and to not treat transgression as if it were a single thing or a straightforward rhetorical move.

To analyse the different manifestations of transgressive humour in comedy, I have proposed three categories: moral, nihilist, and ironic transgression. These categories have helped me to differentiate between the transgressive vocabularies of van 't Hek, Teeuwen, and Maassen, and to analyse their work in more detail than traditional humour theories allow for.

Youp van 't Hek has performed what I have called a *moral transgression*. Whilst van 't Hek has often transgressed social and moral boundaries, he has typically presented a clear moral message in his shows, and has used transgressive and offensive humour to present a critique of the bourgeois lifestyles of his middle-class audiences, as well as of capitalism and big business (an element of van 't Hek's work only touched upon in this chapter). The place of disadvantaged and minority groups in van 't Hek's universe is malleable and somewhat ambiguous: for instance, while gay people initially embodied the anti-bourgeois dream of (sexual) freedom, in recent years they have increasingly come to represent a petit bourgeois political correctness.

Hans Teeuwen forged a break with the moralism and political engagement of Youp van 't Hek's more traditional style, and has performed a *nihilist transgression*. His work combines a postmodern aesthetic with a Nietzschean-inspired nihilism: Teeuwen presents inconsistent personae and aggressive sexual fantasies, often bordering on the absurd, without reassuring his audience that he is 'on the good side.'

Finally, Theo Maassen has performed what I have called an *ironic transgression*, characterised by a high degree of ambiguity about the intended meaning or messages of the comedian. Maassen often seems to mobilise transgressive humour as part of his search for truth. This makes Maassen into an ambiguous figure. On the one hand, he has presented himself as a political comedian committed to moral truth, which brings his work close to the moral transgression of Youp van 't Hek. But on the other hand, Maassen's attitude is somewhat nihilistic in the sense that it is characterised by what Johan Goudsblom has called the 'nihilist problematic'[131] (Goudsblom, 2003: 40), by the struggle (and the inability) to find a stable, moral truth, which brings his work closer to the nihilist transgression of Hans Teeuwen.

While the categories of moral, nihilist, and ironic transgression have helped me to differentiate between the work of van 't Hek, Teeuwen, and Maassen, I have also pointed to similarities between their work. By comparing their work from the 1990s and early 2000s to that of the late 2010s, I have demonstrated that

131 'nihilistische problematiek.'

their work has become more defensive, and has become part of the recent 'culture wars' surrounding humour. While their humour was once hailed as rebellious and progressive, in recent years their transgressive humour increasingly resonates with a playful, conservative counterculture, and a (radical) right-wing politics that has become more mainstream since the swing to the right in Dutch politics in the early 2000s (Oudenampsen, 2020). Their recent work thus shares particular political resonances. Interestingly, while van 't Hek and Maassen have long posed as moralists, both have in recent years adopted a more anti-moral style, epitomised by van 't Hek's criticism of politically correct 'do-gooders,' and Maassen's (somewhat) ironic defence of male superiority taken to the extreme, which has brought their work closer to Teeuwen's nihilism.

As has been pointed out already, Maassen's transgressive humour is particularly hard to categorise: although he has presented himself as shocking, provocative, and anti-establishment, he has also – and in contrast with van 't Hek and Teeuwen – positioned himself as reasonable and nuanced. His work thereby shares some characteristics with that of the comedians discussed in the following chapter. In this chapter, I will analyse the work of two comedians who have more fully embraced the position of the reasonable and nuanced critic. Although comedy is more often associated with breaking taboos than offering reasonable arguments, I will argue that 'nuanced humour' forms the second dominant aesthetic principle in the Dutch cabaret tradition.

Chapter 2: Nuance

In her performance, *Hete vrede* (Hot Peace, 2009), Claudia de Breij wonders how she should respond to increasing political polarisation and the rise of right-wing populists, such as Geert Wilders.[132] She observes:

> Everything has been turned around. Comedians used to say: 'In The Hague, they are all dirty, lying bastards!' Now they are saying that themselves in The Hague all the time. They are taking the bread out of our mouths, aren't they? [laughter] Comedians used to say: 'People wearing checked trousers should have to pay extra taxes, because it's so ugly!' And then politicians would say: 'Well, well, well, that's an interesting thought, but the reality is a bit more nuanced, isn't it?' Now politicians are saying: 'People wearing headscarves should have to pay extra taxes, because it's so ugly!' Everything has been turned around. Politicians have started to make cabaret, so should I start playing the nuanced politician?[133] (de Breij, 2012)

De Breij refers here, on the one hand, to the self-consciously shocking proposal of Geert Wilders, the leader of the radical-right PVV party, to introduce a 'tax on head rags'[134] (a tax on headscarfs) and, on the other hand, to comedian Youp van 't Hek's famous mockery of people wearing checked trousers.[135] By comparing those two

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132 Geert Wilders used to be a Member of Parliament for the liberal-conservative Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (Folk Party for Freedom and Democracy, VVD) from 1998 to 2004, but launched the radical-right Partij voor de Vrijheid (Freedom Party, PVV) after his break with the VVD, which he considered to be too liberal. The PVVwas elected to Parliament for the first time in 2006. Between 2006 and 2010, the PVV experienced a steep rise in popularity, and in 2010 their number of seats in Parliament almost tripled, from 9 to 24 seats (out of 150).

133 "Alles is omgedraaid. Vroeger zeiden cabaretiers: 'In Den Haag zijn het allemaal vuile, leugenachtige zakkenvullers!' Nu roepen ze dat in Den Haag de hele tijd zelf. Dat is toch broodroof? [lach] Vroeger riep een cabaretier: 'Mensen met ruiten broeken aan moeten extra belasting betalen, omdat het zo lelijk is!' En dan zeiden politici: 'Nou, nou, nou, da's een interessante gedachte, maar de werkelijkheid ligt iets genuanceerder hè.' Nu zeggen politici: 'Mensen met een hoofddoek om moeten extra belasting betalen, omdat het zo lelijk is.' Alles is omgedraaid. Politici zijn cabaret gaan maken, moet ik dan de genuanceerde politicus gaan uithangen?"

134 'kopvoddentaks.' This choice of words is meaningful: shocking, but playful.

135 In his show, Verlopen en verlaten (Shabby and abandoned, 1986).

– seemingly unrelated – examples, de Breij points to a shared aesthetic of shock and provocation underlying both, as well as to an important change in social and political context: while comedians such as Youp van 't Hek used to be deliberately shocking, rebellious, and anti-establishment, and the tone of politicians used to be reasonable and nuanced, politicians have, according to de Breij, increasingly adopted the role of comedians and fashioned themselves as anti-establishment rebels, thereby raising the paradoxical question if it is not more radical for a comedian nowadays to be reasonable and nuanced than to be shocking and provocative.

My aim here is not to assess the truth of these claims, but rather to suggest that we should read Claudia de Breij's meta-commentary on cabaret as the articulation of a comedy style that defines itself in opposition to the shocking, transgressive humour discussed in Chapter 1. While already a popular comedian at the time of performing her fifth, and award-winning show, *Hete vrede,* this show established her as a political comedian to be taken seriously. In the following years, she would increasingly embrace – and be praised for taking up – the position of 'nuanced politician' as proposed in this bit, and she became one of the most celebrated female comedians of the Netherlands.

In this chapter, I propose to analyse this style in terms of an aesthetic of 'nuanced humour.'[136] While using 'nuance' as a shorthand for this mode of humour, this term is part of a broader network of terms commonly attributed to such humour, e.g., doubt, mildness, putting things in perspective[137], and bridging/bonding[138]. By presenting an analysis of this aesthetic in the work of two popular and critically acclaimed comedians from different generations – Wim Kan (1911–1983) and Claudia de Breij (b. 1975) – whose work is often described in those terms, the aim of this chapter is two-fold.

First, this chapter shows that nuanced humour has a longer history in Dutch cabaret than is usually acknowledged. While transgression and provocation are often claimed as the essence of humour and cabaret, nuance has received less attention as an aesthetic quality of humour, and if it is recognised as such in the Dutch context, it is frequently claimed to be something new. Through the example

136 By seeking to analyse 'nuance' as a political aesthetic, my aim is not to qualify the opinions or statements of comedians as nuanced in terms of their content. Rather, my aim is to demonstrate how comedians rhetorically position themselves as such by adopting a particular mode of humour.

137 In Dutch: 'relativering.'

138 In Dutch: 'verbinding' (noun) and 'verbindend' (adjective). While hard to translate, these are religiously connoted terms that emphasise that a comedian does not split or divide people but brings them together and establishes a sense of community. The religious connotations of nuanced humour in Dutch cabaret require a more in-depth exploration, which falls outside the scope of this dissertation.

of Youp van 't Hek, de Breij frames transgressive humour as something of the past, as hopelessly out of fashion, while presenting her own, nuanced position as new and radical. In recent years, cabaret critics have followed this rhetorical move. They have mentioned de Breij as part of a new wave of comedians who are forging a break with an aesthetic of shock and provocation (Peek, 2018; Rijghard, 2016). Although these critics do not agree about the exact form this allegedly new type of cabaret takes, they argue, like de Breij, that it goes against the grain of a traditional style, which is shocking, vulgar, and divisive. By comparing the work of Claudia de Breij to that of Wim Kan, I will argue that nuanced humour is, next to transgressive humour, the second dominant aesthetic in the history of Dutch cabaret, and that neither fits into the binary of traditional versus new.[139]

Second, this chapter will further challenge the popular image of the Dutch comedian as a 'progressive rebel.' While de Breij presents nuance as being more radical and rebellious than the provocative humour of comedians such as Youp van 't Hek, at least in the bit analysed above, she has increasingly articulated her own position, not as that of an avant-gardist walking in front of the troops, but rather as that of a politically engaged comedian who responds to, and accommodates, progressive social change. I will argue that both Wim Kan and Claudia de Breij take up this moderate position of the politically engaged comedian who accommodates, rather than initiates, progressive social changes that were already in motion at the

139 An early publication in which the importance of nuanced humour for Dutch cabaret is acknowledged is a little-known sociological dissertation by Willem van den Berg, the first and only dissertation on Dutch cabaret to date (van den Berg, 1977). Van den Berg's dissertation deals with the sociological questions of why and when particular social groups are drawn to cabaret as a genre. In van den Berg's words: when is an audience 'ripe for' ('rijp voor') cabaret? (Chapter 3) The author's main thesis is that the typical cabaret audience is a 'collectivity on the move' ('collectiviteit in beweging,' as summarised by Klöters, 2017), i.e., a social group with a strong sense of solidarity, such as a religious community, which goes through a process of cultural change, accompanied by increasing doubts about their own way of life. The comedian, according to van den Berg, voices those concerns of his audience through humour. Hence, van den Berg believes that doubt and 'relativering' are important ingredients of cabaret. He distinguishes between four dominant flavours of cabaret, with 'the cabaret of doubt' ('het cabaret van de twijfel') (van den Berg, 1977: 61) as the most prominent category: 'In my opinion, doubt is the emotion pur sang for cabaret because the essence of humour, the painful contradictions, can be approached most fundamentally in this state of mind' ('Twijfel is naar mijn indruk trouwens de emotie pur sang voor het cabaret omdat het wezen van de humor, de pijnlijke tegenstrijdigheden, in die gemoedstoestand het meest fundamenteel kan worden benaderd') (Ibidem). Van den Berg deems the work of Catholic comedian Fons Jansen the perfect example of this type of cabaret. Jansen performed at a time of rapid secularisation and the hesitant embracing of progressive changes, such as birth control, by Dutch religious authorities and, according to van den Berg, was able to respond to and accommodate those social changes by casting doubt upon old religious truths that were increasingly left behind. In the English summary of his dissertation, van den Berg writes that: 'I think the core of cabaret is very near to the doubt and introspection found in Fons Jansen's first cabarets, when during their emancipation the Dutch Roman Catholics did no longer accept the fixed line of conduct very easily' (van den Berg, 1977: 220).

fringes. They do so by using similar tactics: by presenting satirical commentary on politicians and social movements that is only mildly transgressive, and does not seek to shock or insult; by expressing doubt and emphasising the need to listen to a political vanguard; by seeking to establish consensus and build a national political community; and, in doing all this, by articulating a centre-left position in between the radical left and the Orthodox Protestant right. I will argue, however, that their respective comic styles were affected by, and shaped in response to, different social and political contexts: whilst Wim Kan grew up in a strongly 'pillarised'[140] society, and was seen by many as being representative of the Social Democrats, Claudia de Breij was nurtured in the liberal and post-ideological society of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. By arguing against political polarisation and emphasising the value of rational argument, de Breij's work is demonstrated to be part of our (neo) liberal moment by articulating humour as a form of 'reasonable dissent' (Holm, 2017).

Not coincidentally, Wim Kan was the founder of the New Year's Eve Performance[141] (Voskuil, 2010). This subgenre of cabaret, which brings the nation together (if only in the imagination),on the last evening of the year, lends itself particularly well to the type of humour discussed in this chapter. Most of the works analysed here are New Year's Eve Performances. The comic mode that I call 'nuanced humour' is, however, not limited to this subgenre, nor to the work of Kan or de Breij. While presenting close-readings of the work of these two comedians in particular, this chapter claims that work to be representative of a larger body of performances by comedians as varied as Seth Gaaikema[142], Fons Jansen[143], Herman

140 'verzuild.' For an explanation of this term, see the next section.

141 In Dutch: 'oudejaarsconference.'

142 Seth Gaaikema (1939–2014) was a comedian and writer of musicals. He was the son of two Church ministers. His religious background was reflected in his work, not only in its themes but also in its contemplative tone. He was a contemporary of Wim Kan, and wrote songs for some of Kan's New Year's Eve Performances (see also my discussion of Kan's work later in this chapter). Gaaikema was also the first to present a New Year's Eve Performance on television in 1969 (Voskuil, 2010). Tellingly, the show was entitled, Heer, ik kom hier om te twijfelen (Lord, I come here to doubt).

143 Fons Jansen (1925–1991) was a Catholic comedian who presented mild criticism of the Catholic Church. He made his debut in 1962 with De lachende kerk (The laughing church), and performed for largely Catholic audiences (van den Berg, 1977). In his dissertation, van den Berg presents Jansen as example of what he calls the 'cabaret of doubt' (van den Berg, 1977:61).

Finkers[144], Pieter Derks[145], and Tim Fransen[146]. Although this list presents a broad range of comedians who have adopted different comic personae, and perform in various registers, what they share is a mode of humour that does not seek to shock or to divide, but to offer nuance and, in doing so, bring people together.

144 Herman Finkers (b. 1954) is a comedian from Twente, a region in the eastern Netherlands. He is well-known for his typical 'Twents' accent and dry sense of humour. He launched his career in the late 1970s and was part of a new wave of comedians whose style has been described as 'nonsense humour' (Van den Hanenberg and Verhallen, 1996). In later years, Finkers turned into a more politically engaged comedian, marked by his New Year's Eve Performance of 2015. Finkers is a practicing Catholic, and has regularly talked about his faith in television programs. He has also set up a chapel in his own house ('Herman Finkers'). Finkers is praised for his mild humour and is often called a 'verbinder,' or someone who put things in perspective (Zijp, 2017). Further proof of this is provided by an opinion piece on a supposedly 'silent majority' identifying with the political centre, in which Finkers is mentioned a couple of times. The authors, Marjon Bolwijn and Sander van Walsum, characterise this silent majority as 'people who experienced the mild mockery of Herman Finkers as a relief after years of being exposed to the hatred of politically engaged comedians. The silent middle is a pale shadow of the firmness that seems to be the norm' ('Mensen die de milde spot van Herman Finkers als een verademing ervoeren nadat zij jaren aan de hatelijkheden van geëngageerde cabaretiers waren blootgesteld. Het stille midden steekt immers wat bleekjes af bij de stelligheid die de norm lijkt te zijn') (Bolwijn and van Walsum, 2017). In line with cabaret critics, the authors think of shock and provocation as the norm, and nuance and moderation as the exception. Interestingly, they also interview Rolf Mol, an ordinary man who has spoken out as part of this silent majority. He expresses his appreciation of Herman Finkers, and also refers to a Facebook post in which he quoted a song text from another cabaret performer identifying with the political centre: Stef Bos (the song was called: 'Het midden' (The centre)).

145 Pieter Derks (b. 1984) is a politically engaged comedian and columnist who launched his career in the early 2000s. Derks has presented himself as being reasonable and nuanced. He does so most explicitly in his show Spot (2016; the word 'spot' means both 'spotlight' and 'mockery'). In this show, Derks tells about his attempts to connect to a Turkish cafeteria owner, and uses a white flag as a symbol of peace and the bridging of social and political differences (cf., Gelder, 2017a: 'He opts for nuance' (Hij kiest de nuance)). In a typical song from another production, entitled 'Half the world' (De halve wereld), Derks pays tribute to the reasonable majority. The first stanza and the chorus are worth quoting at length: "For those who do not shout, for those who do not fight / For he who does not say everything out loud/ For those who chew things over for a while / Who don't see their own opinion / As an absolute truth / And in a queue decide to just wait / We may seem like a minority / But take comfort in one indisputable fact / [Chorus] Half the world, half the world, half the world is ours / The other half is for the cheeky ones / So there's nothing to be gained there / But the other half is ours" ("Voor wie niet schreeuwt, wie niet vecht / Voor wie niet alles hardop zegt / Voor wie een tijdje kauwt op zijn gedachten / Voor wie zijn eigen mening niet /Als absolute waarheid ziet / En in een rij besluit gewoon te wachten / We lijken dan misschien een minderheid / Maar troost je met een onbetwistbaar feit / [Refrein] De halve wereld, de halve wereld, de halve wereld is van ons / De helft van de brutalen / Dus daar valt niks te halen / Maar de andere halve wereld is van ons.") The song was originally part of the show, Van nature (By nature, 2012), and was made into a videoclip by Derks in 2021 (Derks, 2021). Both the videoclip and the lyrics carry religious connotations: the lyrics refer to the idea of 'turning the other cheek' and the videoclip shows Derks wearing a white jacket while playing his song on a white piano, alternating with glorifying images of nature and his musicians.

146 Tim Fransen (b. 1988) is a comedian and philosopher, known for integrating philosophical reflection and contemplation into his performances (see also: Fleuren, 2021, who describes him as a 'nuanced comedian' ('genuanceerde cabaretier')).

A liminal space

Wim Kan was one of the most critically acclaimed comedians of the post-war period, and considered to be one of 'the big three' of Dutch cabaret. Kan began his career well before the war, with the ABC Cabaret (1936–1970), a successful cabaret ensemble that has been said to have marked the revival of cabaret in the Netherlands, not only through the consistent quality of their work, but also by offering many aspiring (and progressive) comedians a place to perform and develop their skills (Ibo, 1982).[147] Nevertheless, today, Kan is primarily remembered as the founder of the 'oudejaarsconference' (New Year's Eve Performance). For many years, Kan addressed the nation through his satirical commentary on the previous year, first on the radio, and later on television. Whilst not every Dutch citizen listened to or watched Kan's shows on New Year's Eve, the symbolic value of the New Year's Eve Performance, as well as the high ratings of his shows, have contributed to Kan's reputation as a comedian who brought people together through laughter.[148] This is perhaps surprising given the context of Dutch 'pillarisation', the division of Dutch society into four pillars (Catholics, Protestants, Social Democrats and Liberals), the members of which led relatively separate lives and had their own schools, sport clubs, newspapers, and broadcast organisations (Lijphart, 1990). However, as I will argue in this section before turning to specific examples from Kan's work, both Kan's social background, and the aesthetics of the New Year's Eve Performance as a genre, helped him to negotiate existing socio-political divisions and build a national community through laughter.

In 1954, when Kan proposed to perform a comedy show on New Year's Eve for the Dutch socialist broadcast organisation, VARA, he was already an established comedian.[149] That the New Year's Eve Performance was an immediate success, and would soon become a national tradition, had something to do with the peculiar role played by the political elites in the Dutch system of pillarisation. According to political scientist Arend Lijphart's famous thesis of 'pacification politics,' the risk of political instability posed by a divided society, such as the Netherlands, was averted through the strategic cooperation of political elites across the pillars, who

147 The ABC Cabaret was inspired by the German cabarets-in-exile that toured the Netherlands in the 1930s. Kan founded the ensemble together with Corry Vonk (1901–1988). Whilst Kan was still at an early stage of his career at that time, Vonk was already an established actress and revue star. In this ensemble, Kan established himself as a popular comedian. In later years, Kan performed solo after the interval (inspired by the one-man shows of his colleagues, Toon Hermans and Wim Sonneveld). With a long interruption due to a tour through the Dutch Indies shortly before the Second World War – which resulted in the internment of the ensemble members under Japanese occupation – the ABC Cabaret performed until 1970 (Ibo, 1982).

148 Voskuil (2010) presents an overview of the ratings.

149 For a reconstruction of this event, in which cabaret producer and chronicler Wim Ibo played a pivotal role, see: Voskuil, 2010.

tried to achieve consensus while defending the interests of their own people. This system was supported by a high degree of political passivity among the masses, as well as a fair amount of loyalty and respect for the ruling elites (Lijphart, 1990: 11).

Although not a politician himself, Kan's background enabled him to play such a role.[150] He was born in Scheveningen – close to The Hague, the political centre of the country and seat of the government – in a middle-class family. Kan's father and brother were both part of the political elite: his father, Johannes Benedictus Kan (1873–1947), was a high-ranking official and Minister of the Interior and Agriculture in the first De Geer cabinet (1926–1929), and his older brother, Johannes Marinus Kan (1905–2002), was Secretary General of the Department of the Interior ('Jan Kan: politicus,' n.d.; 'Jan M. Kan,' n.d.). While Wim Kan was known to be a Social Democrat, as confirmed by his attachment to the socialist broadcast organisation, VARA, he was praised for joking about all political leaders irrespective of their affiliation, and did not make his own political preferences too explicit in his work (Van Tijn, 1974).[151] Moreover, Kan often emphasised his own position as part of the political establishment. For instance, in his New Year's Eve Performance of 1973, he referred to the supposed arrangements he made with the new Prime Minister, Joop den Uyl, thereby both admitting to, and playing with, his closeness to political power:

> I arranged with Den Uyl: he will be on television for the first thirty days of December, and I the last. [laughter and applause] All agreed in advance, all agreed: he will tell no jokes, I will take no measures. [laughter][152] (Kan, 1973)

Additionally, Kan often mocked the climate of hostility between the different pillars, e.g., through jokes in which he speculated about which groups would switch

150 This point was made explicitly by politician Willem Drees, Jr. in a response to Kan's New Year's Eve Performance of 1973. In a short interview, he mentions Kan's father and brother, explaining that: 'I think Wim Kan is an extraordinary person. He comes from a political-administrative background, as you know [...] His background also enables Wim Kan to penetrate the political sphere better than anybody else' ('Ik vind Wim Kan een buitengewone figuur. Hij komt uit het politiek-bestuurlijke milieu, zoals u weet [...] Ook op grond van zijn afkomst is Wim Kan beter dan iemand anders in staat door te dringen in de politieke sfeer') (Hofhuizen, 1974).

151 Van Tijn (1974) raises the question if Kan is 'left-wing' or 'right-wing,' answering that his work cannot be reduced to those categories, because it is 'undogmatic' and 'nuanced': 'Indeed, doubting and raising doubts in others cannot be fitted into the left-right-scheme. That is why we have developed the categories "undogmatic" and "nuanced"' ('Zelf twijfelen en bij anderen twijfel wekken en aanwakkeren, dat kan inderdaad niet in het links-rechts-begrip worden ingepast. Daarvoor hebben we de begrippen "ondogmatisch" en "genuanceerd" ontwikkeld').

152 "Ik ben helemaal overeengekomen met Den Uyl: hij de eerste dertig dagen van december op televisie, en ik de laatste. [lach en applaus] Allemaal afgesproken van tevoren, allemaal afgesproken: hij zal geen grappen vertellen, ik zal geen maatregelen nemen" [lach].

off the radio when he made fun of them, and he sometimes explicitly addressed pillarisation as a phenomenon.[153]

The aesthetics of the New Year's Eve Performance also helped Kan to negotiate the boundaries of polite speech, and to make sure his comedy would not become too divisive. At a time when politicians were still addressed in very formal terms as 'Her/His Excellency,' mocking politicians, and even calling them by their first name, as Kan did, was a risky business. Kan's shows followed a fixed structure that emphasised the transition from the old to the new year, and thereby bestowed the performance with a ritual character that helped to make his comedy more acceptable.

The New Year's Eve Performance typically started with the voice of a woman, Mien or Mientje (played by Corry Vonk) who was crying because – as the male voice (Kan) explained – she found it very hard to go "over the threshold"[154] to the new year. This short opening scene, taking place off stage, ended with a punch line, usually a witty remark about the old year, which at the same time mocked Mien for dwelling on the past in an exaggerated and over-emotional way. This punch line was followed by Kan entering the stage and singing a more positive song, which further commented on – and, in so doing, performed – the act of 'going over the threshold.' This opening song had a set formula, including the words "over the threshold," to which an adjective was added that was inspired by the social and political context of the past year. For instance, in 1973, the oil crisis inspired Kan to use the line, "Frugally over the threshold."[155] The opening song thus had a strong affective quality: it summarised the past year by specifying an emotional state or an attitude towards that year and thereby also offered the audience an opportunity for identification, a perspective on the past that was at the same time a plea to move on.

In the middle part of the performance, Kan commented on the past year in a loosely structured set of jokes and songs, dealing with social and political affairs. The final song "Where do we go in the new year?"[156] also followed a set formula, which could be adapted to the present. This final song did not focus on the past year, but comically explored possible scenarios for the future, without giving any definite answers.

By means of this structure, Kan was able to establish the New Year's Eve Performance as a liminal space, a space in between the old and the new year, in which normal rules of social behaviour were temporarily suspended. 'Liminality'

153 Lijphart himself mentions one of Kan's jokes about the small broadcast organisation, VPRO, which did not fit into the pillarised structure of the media landscape. Kan joked that the VPRO was 'more of a stick than a pillar' ('meer een stokje dan een zuil') (Lijphart, 1990: 57).
154 "over de drempel."
155 "Zuinig over de drempel."
156 "Waar gaan we in het nieuwe jaar naartoe?"

is a concept coined by Arnold van Gennep's in his work on rites of passage (van Gennep, 1961), and further developed by Victor Turner (Turner, 1974). The term is derived from the word 'limen,' which means threshold. In theatre and performance studies, the concept of liminality has been widely used to theorise the in-between quality of both social rituals and theatrical performances, emphasising their critical potential and transformational power (Bleeker, 2019b: 44; McKenzie, 2001).

Kan has framed his New Year's Eve Performances as liminal rites of passage by structuring his shows as social rituals with fixed elements (in terms of structure, setting, costume, and props), and emphasising their transformational character. Kan, together with the audience, made a transition from the old to the new year, which required leaving behind strong emotions and making a new beginning (as symbolised by crying Mientje). Both in his opening song, and in the jokes in the middle part, Kan emphasised the temporality of the New Year's Eve Performance as a moment in-between. Kan accentuated the festive and ritual character of the performance by referring to the 'togetherness' of performer and audience on "the last evening of the year,"[157] but also, and most explicitly, by referring to the limen or threshold that needed to be trespassed collectively. The rituality of the performance was further highlighted by costume, setting, and props, which followed a predictable pattern: Kan was dressed in a suit and performed on an almost empty stage, with Ru van Veen (1912–1988) playing the piano centre left. Kan alternatively stood behind the microphone, or sat on a chair, while directly addressing the audience and peeking every now and then at his famous 'cheat sheets,'[158] and sipping from a glass of champagne.[159] Both Kan's social background, and the liminal structure of his New Year's Eve Performances, enabled him to make sometimes daring jokes about the people in power, while at the same time differentiating his civilised humour from the shock tactics of student cabarets, such as Lurelei.

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157 "de laatste avond van het jaar."

158 'spiekbrieven.' The 'cheat sheets,' big sheets of paper on which the structure of the performance was delineated, were a fixed element of the scenography, and Kan sometimes playfully referred to the fact that he could not otherwise remember the order of his jokes.

159 The reception of Kan's New Year's Eve Performances also followed ritualised patterns. Instead of reviewing the performance, newspapers typically published Kan's most memorable jokes (unlike regular cabaret performances, which reviewers write about after the opening night, but about which they do not want to give away spoilers, the radio or television broadcasts of Kan's New Year's Eve Performances were national events, and the newspapers thus addressed a reader expected to be familiar with their content). Moreover, newspapers telephoned the politicians and celebrities who had been mocked in Kan's performance to ask for their responses. This media ritual helped to negotiate social and political boundaries: interviewees were explicitly asked if they thought that Kan went 'too far' (the answer was typically 'no'), and if they were amused by the show (typically 'yes'). Cf., 'Wim Kan,' 1967; 'Commentaar op,' 1967; 'Toon Hermans,' 1967; Hofhuizen, 1974; Hydra, 1974.

Hesitant authorities

I will now turn to two examples in which we can see Kan's style at work. My first example is his New Year's Eve Performance of 1966, entitled *Lachend over de loongrens* (Smilingly over the income limit).[160] As we have seen, 1966 was a year of polarisation and riots, with the rise of Provo, and the marriage of Princess Beatrix and Claus von Amsberg sparking debate and social unrest (see Chapter 0). I will demonstrate how Kan negotiated these social and political tensions in his New Year's Eve Performance. I will discuss an extended segment from the second part of the show, which starts with two songs – one about the authorities, one about Provo – and ends with a seemingly personal anecdote about a father and his daughter.

While the show received overall positive responses, and Kan was praised for being 'critical'[161] ('Uit andere,' 1967), but 'never offensive'[162] (H.P., 1967), some complained that he did not make his own position clear enough, and was hardly in touch with the younger generation (Ouwerkerk, 1967). For instance, Rinus Ferdinandusse (1931–2022), writer, comedian, and journalist (and later editor-in-chief) of the influential weekly, *Vrij Nederland*, the 'voice' of the new generation, stated that Kan, 'lagged five years behind on Provo'[163] ('Toon Hermans,' 1967). I will argue against such a statement by demonstrating that Kan sympathised more with Provo than with the authorities, but adopted a different political aesthetic than a younger generation of comedians, to which Ferdinandusse belonged. As an ex-member of the notorious satirical television program, *Zo is 't toevallig ook nog 'ns een keer* (1963–1966), Ferdinandusse represented the transgressive comedy style of a younger generation. Kan's style, on the other hand, was not one of shock and provocation, but of nuance and mild criticism. The differences between the two are, however, smaller than have sometimes been assumed. While student cabarets such as Lurelei staged hesitant Provos (less radical than one would expect a Provo to be), Kan staged hesitant authorities (more willing to listen to the political vanguard than one would expect them to be).

In the first song, written by Seth Gaaikema, the authorities are mocked in a mild way. By way of an introduction, Kan expresses his emotional attachment to the authorities and a sense of nostalgia for all those places of power that he would miss if they were no longer there (the House of Orange, the ministries, the provincial governments, and the townhalls), thereby distancing himself from a direct attack on social and political hierarchies. The song that follows presents a

160 The title refers to the maximum wage level for entitlement to national health insurance, which was raised from 1 January 1967 onwards. In Dutch, the word 'grens' can mean barrier, boundary, border, or limit.
161 'kritisch.'
162 'nimmer kwetsend.'
163 'Bij de provo's liep hij vijf jaar achter.'

fantasy of how people in power, although moving solemnly when we watch them, transform into happily frolicking children as soon as night falls. This picture of frolicking and dancing authorities at night is emphasised by the frivolous music.

Although this song indeed mocks the authorities and relieves them somewhat of their solemnity, it also makes them more human. While Provo embraced an aesthetic of play, the authorities – often responding with violence to Provo – were seen as the opposite of light-hearted and playful. By suggesting that political and religious authorities are, deep down, human beings with a desire to play, the song reverses the traditional image of the authority figure and thereby mitigates the strong opposition between authorities and Provo. Kan gestures towards the similarity between the two by juxtaposing the frolicking authorities ("Authorities at full moon / Frolick, frolick"[164]) with the equally playful Provos ("Frolicking through the city centre"[165]) (Kan, 1966).

At the same time, the song also presents a criticism of the authorities' responses to the protests. The first chorus states: "Authorities when the moon is full / Frolick after the facts."[166] In the final chorus, this joke is given another twist: "Policemen, at night when the moon is full / Club after the facts."[167] By mocking the authorities for being overtaken by current developments (literally: 'walking behind on/after the facts'), the song suggests that political authorities have not adequately anticipated the new social and political climate.

While Kan initially distances himself from the authorities he mocks, in the following song and the bit thereafter, ridicule turns into self-mockery as Kan increasingly positions himself as part of the establishment. The second song, immediately following the first, deals with the "spectre"[168] of Provo haunting the authorities, and strikes a more serious tone. This shift in tone is meaningful, because it conveys that while the authorities are at least a little bit ridiculous, Provo is a serious force to be reckoned with:

> A spectre is haunting Amsterdam
> It's not a woman, it's not a man
> Sometimes it rides a white bike
> It's probably nothing at all
> Just a sign on the wall

164 "Autoriteiten bij volle maan / Huppelen, huppelen."
165 "Huppelend door de binnenstad."
166 "Autoriteiten bij volle maan / huppelen achter de feiten aan." The line 'huppelen achter de feiten aan' is hard to translate. Literally, the Dutch expression 'achter de feiten aanlopen' means 'walking after/behind on the facts,' or in better English, not being abreast of things/being behind the times.
167 "Agenten 's nachts bij volle maan / Knuppelen achter de feiten aan." The humour is strengthened by the morphological similarity between 'huppelen' (frolicking) and 'knuppelen' (beating with a club).
168 "spook."

A spectre is haunting the Netherlands
Sometimes it just sits on the streets
And nobody knows what it's about
Vague restlessness, strange longing
Everyone want to catch a spectre
Sometimes an old querulant shouts
The *Elsevier* still in his hand:
They should bloody well have...
And then he breaks his neck over the spectre[169] (Kan, 1966)

While 'Spectres in Amsterdam' was read by many critics as a critique of Provo, this interpretation misses the point ('Hofnar' Kan, 1967; Ouwerkerk, 1967). Although the solemn tone indeed highlights the seriousness of the threat presented by Provo and the song appeals to anxieties surrounding the Communist spectre haunting Europe in the 1960s, the song also suggests that Provo is not an enemy to be fought, but primarily a herald of changing times ("Just a sign on the wall"), even though we cannot clearly see where this spectre is heading. The song does not mock Provo, but rather the quixotic battle of a conservative-minded elite, represented by an "old querulant" carrying the right-wing political magazine *Elsevier* and breaking his neck over the spectre. In so doing, the song also suggests that Provo is more than a spectre: it is not just a vague threat, but a real political force.

In the final part of the song, the emphasis shifts from ridiculing the ignorant conservative to a confession of Kan's own inability to understand what is truly going on. However, in contrast to the "old querulant" fighting Provo, Kan expresses sympathy for two Provos (Leo and Lien) who are arrested by the police, stating that: "Something is haunting them from the inside / That we can't see very well anymore,"[170] followed by the confession that "I rather like them, Leo and Lien."[171] By making this shift from 'them' to 'we' to 'I', Kan stages himself as part of the establishment, but emphasises his progressive mindset.

In the bit following this song, Kan continues to play with his establishment position by telling a seemingly personal anecdote about the new boyfriend of his daughter, whom she brings to a family diner. Kan plays the role of the traditional father who is protective of his daughter and represents old ideas about sexual

169 "Er waart een spook door Amsterdam / Het is geen vrouw, het is geen man / Soms rijdt het op een witte fiets / Het is vermoedelijk helemaal niets / Alleen een teken aan de wand / Er waart een spook door Nederland / Soms zit het zomaar op de straat / En niemand weet waarom het gaat / Vage onrust, vreemd verlangen / Iedereen wil spoken vangen / Soms roept een oude querulant / De Elsevier nog in de hand / Ze mosten potverdikkie ook... / En dan breekt hij z'n nek over het spook."
170 "Er spookt bij hun van binnen iets / Dat wij niet goed meer kunnen zien."
171 "[Maar] ik mag ze wel, Leo en Lien."

prudence, whilst the boyfriend is staged as a Provo, with long hair and loose sexual morals. The humour of the scene lies in the tension between Kan as an authority figure (the traditional father, representing the establishment) and the Provo boyfriend (representing the 'protest generation'). For instance, playing on a well-known joke format, Kan has the boyfriend complain when he finds a hair in his soup during the family diner. Kan's response ("Then you have to sit up straight, boy"[172]) makes a mockery of the boy's lack of decorum and the sloppy Provo look (the typically long hair). But Kan also mocks himself as old-fashioned father who is stiff and uncomfortable in his responses to the boy. This self-mockery is made very explicit at the end of the scene, when Kan steps out of the story and comments upon his own behaviour, confessing that he is a "father with problems in adapting."[173]

Kan did not have children himself (and the audience probably knew this), which makes his choice to play the role of a father and frame this bit as a personal confession rather surprising, especially in a genre that is predicated on the authenticity of the performer.[174] However, by adopting the perspective of the father, Kan is able to frame the conflict between Provo's and authorities as a generational conflict and translate broader social and political tensions to the level of the everyday. Moreover, by mocking himself for having a hard time adapting to the progressive orientations of the new generation, Kan appeals to the ambivalent feelings about the progressive revolution of the 1960s among an older, pre-war generation: while Kan seems to feel alienated from the young generation and their lifestyles, he also takes the concerns of Provo seriously and expresses his sympathy towards them, thereby accommodating progressive change (cf., Righart, 2006).

At the end of this sequence, Kan returns to his earlier point about the loss of traditional hierarchies by emphasising his emotional attachment to the powers that be. However, he gives a comic twist to this seemingly serious expression of nostalgic sentiment by arguing that one is never sure who seizes power after the revolution. Then, Kan mockingly suggests that Cor van Dis may rise to power. Van Dis (1893–1973) was a politician for the Orthodox Protestant SGP, and famously sued writer Gerard Reve for blasphemy in 1966 (see Chapter 0). While expressing

172 "Dan moet je rechtop gaan zitten, jongen."
173 "vader met aanpassingsmoeilijkheden."
174 This was not the first time, however, that Kan staged a father and his daughter. He had already done so in 1957 with the ABC Cabaret, in the song, 'Vaders en dochters' (Fathers and daughters), written by Annie M.G. Schmidt. This was a dialogue between a concerned father and his adolescent daughter who was going out with several boys. Kan performed a slightly different version of this song in his New Year's Eve Performance of 1979, Wankelend over de drempel (Staggering over the threshold).

some nostalgia for the old order, Kan also emphasises his progressive sympathies and firmly distances himself from the Orthodox Protestant right.[175]

Building a national community

In 1973, Wim Kan presented his first New Year's Eve Performance on television.[176] I will present an analysis of Kan's successful television debut to point to another important characteristic of his aesthetic of nuanced humour: the building of a national community through laughter. While regular cabaret is performed for specific (niche) audiences, in the New Year's Eve Performance, the comedian addresses the nation, even though not every citizen may listen or watch. In that sense, the New Year's Eve Performance is an important event for the building of national, 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 2016). Rather than dividing the audience, the New Year's Eve comedian is expected to create a sense of togetherness and national belonging.[177]

While politics can be a matter of dispute, in mediatised societies, the television spectacle of politics also provides a shared frame of reference, and commenting upon significant political events, such as the fall of a government or the Queen's Speech on Little Prince Day (the State Opening of Parliament), can be a strategy to highlight our belonging to a national community. In his first televised New Year's Eve Performance, Kan did just that, commenting upon the new centre-left Cabinet Den Uyl (installed in May 1973), and the Queen. In particular, that year's oil crisis presented Kan with a great opportunity to appeal to collective

175 Both the Catholics and the Protestants have often been the butt of Kan's jokes. One of his most famous one-liners (a variation on a rather old joke) was directed at the Dutch bishops, Adrianus Simonis (1931–2020) and Joannes Gijsen (1932–2013), who spoke out against abortion and the use of the contraceptive pill, in opposition to more progressive Catholic leaders. In his New Year's Eve Performance of 1976, Kan famously replied that: "If you don't play the game, you should not interfere with the rules." ("Als je de sport niet beoefent, moet je je ook niet met de spelregels bemoeien.")

176 Wim Kan and Corry Vonk had long been hesitant to appear on television; after an early television appearance that both considered a total flop, Kan refused to perform for television audiences for many years. Hence, Kan's New Year's Eve Performances continued to be broadcast on national radio, even at a time when television had long occupied radio's status as the mass medium par excellence. In 1973, Kan had not presented a New Year's Eve Performance for seven years. In the years between 1966 and 1973, Kan continued performing with his ABC Cabaret, and after the group split up in 1970, he continued as a solo comedian (Ibo, 1976).

177 Not all New Year's Eve comedians have adopted such an approach. From the 1980s onwards, both Freek de Jonge and Youp van 't Hek have regularly made New Year's Eve Performances, bringing their style of provocative humour to the genre. Critics have observed that in recent years, the aspect of community-building has (again) been foregrounded by comedians performing on New Year's Eve (Peek, 2018).

emotions of fear, and to mobilise them against a shared enemy.[178] The oil crisis was indeed Kan's central topic, reflected by the show's title and eponymous opening song 'Frugally over the threshold.'[179] The crisis was an emotionally charged topic, which was reflected in direct audience responses: all jokes about the oil crisis were met with explosive laughter, often followed by applause.

Kan opens his show by addressing the collective nature of the crisis. He brings the crisis back to everyday proportions and deals with the matter in a light-hearted manner. For instance, he jokes that the most important problems of the recent past ("How do I lose weight and where shall I leave my car?"[180]) (Kan, 1973) have been solved, and discusses some government measures and how they affect our lives (such as auto-free Sunday). By doing so, Kan appeals to everyday and shared experiences of living through a crisis, bringing a message of hope and consolation. By emphasising the need for frugality in times of crisis, Kan also appeals to a national self-image of sobriety and economic reason.

Against this positive self-image, Kan posits a shared enemy: the 'Arabs.' While he constructs the 'Arabs' as an enemy through the use of negative and ethnic stereotypes, he does so without changing his tone, and making seemingly innocuous jokes based on wordplay. In so doing, he frames his critique of the Arab countries as an extension of his light-hearted approach to the crisis. For instance, Kan mocks the news coverage of a group of sheikhs who seem to be in a hurry by suggesting that they came straight out of the "harem," "the sheets still over their heads"[181], thereby sexualising the religious other by using familiar stereotypes. Next, Kan mocks the countries that were still receiving oil from the Arab world, e.g., Belgium. Kan describes the Belgians as "miserable little children"[182] and jokes that they have renamed their national monument "Manneke Pis" (literally: Little Pissing Man) into "Manneke Sjeik" (Little Pissing Sheik, where 'sjeik' sounds similar to the Dutch word 'zeik', which means 'piss'), thereby drawing a contrast between the submissive Belgians and the brave Dutch, who do not bend for the enemy. Thus, Kan's mocking of a shared enemy works to construct a positive self-image, which in turn helps to create a sense of belonging and to build a national community around a shared cause.

In one of the final songs, Kan brings together the audience as a community one more time. This singalong song, called "Just say 'yes' to Joop"[183], starts as an

178 In 1973, a coalition of Arab states declared an oil embargo against the United States for their support of Israel in the Yom Kippur War, and this embargo was extended to the Netherlands (among other countries) in October of that year, causing the first oil crisis.
179 "Zuinig over de drempel."
180 "Hoe vermager ik en waar laat ik m'n auto?"
181 "de lakens nog over de koppen."
182 "misselijke kleine kinderen."
183 "Zeg maar 'ja' tegen Joop."

ode to Prime Minister Joop den Uyl, but along the way, Kan introduces a slightly twisted version of the chorus, "Just say 'no' to Joop"[184], and invites the audience to sing the version that best matches their own political preferences. He reassures the audience not to look at him, as he will not display any preferences. Doing so, Kan gives space to different political opinions, but in a playful format while acting as independent arbiter, thereby neutralising potentially divisive political differences. He underlines this by stating, at the end of the song, that the only conclusion he is able to draw after having watched and listened to the audience, is that the country will be "ungovernable"[185] again for the next couple of years. Thereby, Kan playfully compares the anarchic situation of an audience singing different lyrics at the same time to a coalition politics in which it is equally hard to find common ground, while also referring to the fall of the second cabinet Biesheuvel in that same year. Nevertheless, the emphasis is not so much on conflict or anarchy, but on the political game that we are all part of, independently of our personal political affiliations.

The voice of reason

While Wim Kan reached the peak of his career during the progressive revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, Claudia de Breij witnessed the turn to the right in Dutch and international politics in the early twenty-first century, with radical right-wing parties attacking the liberal and post-ideological consensus of the 1990s and early 2000s. De Breij's aesthetic of nuanced humour was shaped in response to this context. As I will demonstrate in this section, de Breij has presented herself as the voice of reason, seeking to defend a liberal public sphere and democratic political institutions against attacks from the radical right (and, to a lesser extent, the radical left).

De Breij's work is fruitfully understood here through the lens of Nicholas Holm's concept of 'reasonable dissent' (Holm, 2017). Holm points out that the popular view of humour as a form of critical reason resonates with our current (neo) liberal moment, in which liberalism cannot be reduced to one political ideology, but is better understood as a dominant 'structure of feeling' (Holm, 2017: 28) and a 'meta-political framework' (Holm, 2017: 29) adopted by most (if not all) parties across the political spectrum. The liberal subject is seen as tolerant and reasonable, and expected to speak out against violence and oppression in all forms. While Holm is primarily concerned here with meta-perspectives on humour (the shared belief in humour as a form of critical reason) and not with a particular

184 "Zeg maar 'nee' tegen Joop."
185 "onregeerbaar."

aesthetic of humour, the category of 'reasonable dissent' is helpful to analyse the aesthetics of de Breij's work in relation to a broader political context.[186]

I will demonstrate this through two examples from de Breij's performance *Teerling* (Dice). When *Teerling* premiered in 2014, de Breij was already an established comedian. She launched her career in the late 1990s and rose to fame in the early 2000s, combining comedy with her work as a radio presenter. She is considered a left-wing, politically engaged comedian with a traditional style, integrating jokes, songs, and political opinions, and presenting her audience with clear moral lessons (Wels, 2014). She has always spoken from a queer feminist standpoint, and is one of the most successful female comedians of her generation, and one of the few female comedians who presents explicit political criticism. She voices her opinions not only on stage, but also in newspaper columns and talk shows. In 2010, de Breij was the first female comedian to receive the Poelifinario, the award for best cabaret show of the season.[187] Because of her left-wing profile, traditional comedy style, and participation in public debate, de Breij has drawn a lot of critique. Although cabaret critics tend to be quite positive about her work, others have called her old-fashioned, politically correct, moralist, and preachy (cf., Oomen, 2020). Her reputation of a left-wing preacher was strengthened by her hit song 'Mag ik dan bij jou?' (May I then with you?). Initially performed as a love song,[188] in later years de Breij has highlighted the political connotations of the song and performed it as a call to offer the political other a place of shelter in times of crisis and war.[189]

My first example is a scene that deals with the controversy surrounding Black Pete. In 2013, the Dutch blackface tradition of St. Nicholas (Sinterklaas) and Black Pete (Zwarte Piet) became the centre of media attention due to the work of artist Quincy Gario, who launched the artistic project 'Black Pete is racism.'[190] While building on decades of activism on the topic, it was due to Gario's critical questioning of Black Pete in the late-night talk show, *Pauw en Witteman,* on 7 October 2013, that a national debate was sparked ('Quincy Gario,' 2013). Activists and critics have pointed out that Black Pete is a racist caricature that needs to be abolished. The debate has continued for years and receives ample media attention, especially in the months leading up to the St. Nicholas celebrations, during November and December. Within a few years, the consensus around

186 Holm gestures towards the idea of reasonable dissent as a particular style or aesthetic by briefly pointing to Jon Stewart's 'Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear' (Holm, 2017: 23-26).
187 She received the award for her show Hete vrede (2009), quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Typically, she would remain the only female winner of the award until 2019.
188 In her show, Hete vrede (2009).
189 In her show,Teerling (2014), and on many other occasions.
190 'Zwarte Piet is racisme.'

Black Pete had changed considerably, especially in progressive circles, with an increasing number of people acknowledging that Black Pete needs to be adapted and undone from its blackface character. During November, the festive entry into cities around the Netherlands of St. Nicholas and his Petes is increasingly being organised without blackface performances (Nolles and Rosman, 2021).[191]

This debate has been a popular topic for comedians as well. In the context of a shifting consensus, comedians have been careful not to offend their audiences. They have often claimed a middle position and/or presented a meta-reflection on the debate itself and its emotional tone (Nieuwenhuis, 2022; Zijp, 2016). De Breij does this as well: while being clearly sympathetic to the critics of Black Pete, the main point of her bit is not to argue for or against this figure, but rather to criticise the tone of the debate. De Breij starts by appealing to feelings of exasperation that had been expressed at the time on many occasions.[192] She does so by applauding the debate in exaggerated terms as a "feast of opinions"[193] and a "tombola of arguments"[194] (de Breij, 2016), emphasising the irony of those words with her tone of voice. Next, she claims the debate to be finished, because everyone knows the other's position and different solutions to the problem have been proposed. The only question left, de Breij continues, is who of the participants in the debate was "most annoying"[195]. De Breij proposes some candidates: she ridicules Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who notoriously remarked that his friends in Suriname were rather lucky because they never had to paint their faces black for the St. Nicholas celebrations; Quincy Gario, who is portrayed as being impatient and unwilling to listen to his opponents; those who proposed solving the problem by replacing the total blackface appearance of Black Pete with soot marks on his face[196]; and herself, for not knowing enough about the history of slavery.

In this scene, de Breij employs humour to articulate a liberal ethos and present herself as reasonable and nuanced. She presents herself as a liberal subject who opposes strong emotions and reflects on the matter calmly and wittily, while deploring the lack of rational argument in an important political

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191 For reconstructions (in English) of the debate around Black Pete, see: Chauvin, Coenders, and Koren, 2018; Rodenberg and Wagenaar, 2016; Wekker, 2016.

192 The critics of Black Pete have received (and continue to receive) a lot of pushback, and an oft-heard argument has been that the debate itself is unnecessary, redundant, or badly timed.

193 "meningenfeest."

194 "argumententombola."

195 "de allerstomste."

196 According to the St. Nicholas mythology, Black Pete enters children's houses at night through the chimney to leave presents. Hence, many have proposed to replace the total blackface appearance of Pete with soot marks on his face. In 2014, consensus had not yet been reached, but nowadays, this has been widely acknowledged as the solution most in line with tradition, and increasingly 'soot mark Petes' ('roetveegpieten') are turning up during the St. Nicholas celebrations.

debate. She speaks out against radicalism on both sides of the political spectrum, mocking both the racist remarks of the right-wing Prime Minister and the lack of patience on the side of anti-racist activist Quincy Gario, thereby excluding both from her ideal of a rational debate. In so doing, de Breij also directs attention away from the fact that she expresses strong sentiments herself as well, ranging from fatigue at the debate, to anger at the blatant racism of the Prime Minister. By structuring the scene as a series of questions ('Who was the most annoying? Was it... or...?'), de Breij further articulates doubt and self-criticism. She admits that she does not know much about the history of slavery, and that this makes her less capable of taking a stand in the debate. Finally, by declaring the debate over and reiterating – and then ridiculing – the different positions, she suggests that some level of consensus has been reached, and potentially explosive political differences have been bridged through humour, even though she does not propose a concrete solution.

This bridging of opposites is the subject of my second example. In this scene, de Breij relates a meeting with Kees van der Staaij, the leader of the Orthodox Protestant SGP. De Breij tells how she once came across a tweet by van der Staaij, in which he spoke out against the recognition of same-sex couples with children. De Breij, being in a relationship with a woman with two children, tweeted in response: "Foul and filthy Kees van der Staaij, burn in hell."[197] Contrary to her expectations, van der Staaij did not respond with anger, but invited her for a coffee. De Breij accepted the invitation and they spent a great afternoon together. They had a friendly conversation in which both 'agreed to disagree.'

This bit not only reads as a critique of explosive Twitter culture, but also as an argument for a strong public sphere, in which the exchange of reasoned argument among equals prevails over emotional attacks and *ad hominems.* De Breij mocks her initial emotional response, confessing that she had "drunk a beer"[198] and was "premenstrual"[199] when posting her tweet. Next, she contrasts her own emotion to the calmness and reason of van der Staaij. In doing so, she also expresses self-criticism and shame for her initial response. By accepting the invitation, and 'agreeing to disagree' with van der Staaij, de Breij performs a liberal ethos, showing herself able to get over her emotional behaviour and enter a rational debate. Moreover, de Breij shows that she and van der Staaij came closer together, in spite of their strong ideological differences. The finale image called up in this bit emphasises this symbolic bridging of opposites: when they leave the

197 "Vuile vieze Kees van der Staaij, brand toch in de hel."
198 "een biertje op."
199 "premenstrueel."

café, van der Staaij buys her an umbrella to protect her from the rain, and they walk through the rain arm in arm.

In a final step, de Breij gives this image even more symbolic weight by using it as part of her act one finale, a song of praise for the Netherlands. In this song, she playfully appeals to the well-known trope of a small country which plays a big role on the international stage (the chorus line reads: "It [the Netherlands] was small but it could be so big"[200]) and portrays the Netherlands as a liberal and tolerant nation, referring to Dutch tolerance of drugs ("a coffeeshop in every small town"[201]), euthanasia, and gay rights, while providing mild criticism of a country where "big words"[202] are not always matched by "big deeds"[203]. This image of the Netherlands as a liberal and tolerant nation is further emphasised when, at the end of the song, small dice start falling from the sky[204], and de Breij picks up the umbrella she received from van der Staaij. The image of de Breij and van der Staaij walking through the rain under an umbrella is recalled here as a symbol of Dutch unity, thus contributing to a sense of belonging, and the building of a national community around a shared liberal ethos.

Activists lead, comedians follow

While de Breij initially mocked activist Quincy Gario for his emotional tone and lack of patience, and praised the moderate reasoning of political opponent Kees van der Staaij, in recent years, and within the context of the global rise of protest movements such as #metoo and Black Lives Matter, she has adopted a more activist tone. In December 2019, during the preparations for her New Year's Performance, de Breij even confessed that she considered this show 'a form of protesting'[205] (Heesakkers, 2019). In the same interview, de Breij also claimed that: 'For particular people, it might seem like I'm someone running in front, but that's because I listen to a vanguard and am able to say afterwards: hey guys, watch this, I believe it's actually like that.'[206] Hence, while embracing activism, de Breij does not claim for herself a position of the anti-establishment rebel walking in front of the troops. While certainly thinking in such military terms, she rather pictures herself as someone who is open to rational argument, someone who listens to the 'true'

200 "'t Was klein maar het kon zo groot zijn."
201 "een coffeeshop in ieder gat."
202 "grote woorden."
203 "grote daden."
204 This is a visual joke and a play upon the title of the show. It is also in line with the setting of the show, which consists of big dice spread out on the stage and hanging down from the sky.
205 "een vorm van protesteren."
206 "Voor bepaalde mensen lijk ik misschien iemand die voorop loopt, maar dat is omdat ik een voorhoedegroep beluister en daarna kan zeggen: jongens, kijk eens, volgens mij zit het eigenlijk zo."

activists and follows their lead. As such, de Breij has integrated this new activist sentiment within a political aesthetic of nuanced humour and reasonable dissent, while also pointing to the limits of liberalism. I will demonstrate this by comparing *Teerling* (2014) with de Breij's more recent New Year's Eve Performance (2019). This comparison is especially enlightening, because in the latter show, de Breij returns to both Quincy Gario and Kees van der Staaij. The roles are now, however, reversed: while she praises Gario for his activism, she sharply criticises van der Staaij for signing the Christian-conservative Nashville Statement (2017). I will discuss both scenes below.

De Breij made her debut as a New Year's Eve performer in 2016. While an increasing number of comedians have produced such shows since the early 1990s, de Breij was asked by the VARA to provide the 'official' New Year's Eve Performance, which is broadcast primetime on New Year's Eve. This is considered an honour for comedians, and de Breij was asked for a second time in 2019. Both shows were praised by the press and wider audiences alike, and critics have compared her style to that of Wim Kan (Possel and Rijghard, 2019).

In many respects, the political aesthetic of de Breij's New Year's Eve Performance of 2019 is comparable to that of earlier work. First, right at the beginning of the show, de Breij mentions "nuance" as the main ingredient of the show to come. She enters the stage wearing a panda suit, explaining that she has chosen to do so to make a statement against polarisation and "thinking in black and white."[207] (de Breij, 2019) Although de Breij mentions "nuance" in a somewhat self-mocking fashion here – she solemnly declares that, "finally the time has come to reflect on the past year with nuance,"[208] which contrasts sharply with her ridiculous panda look – she playfully establishes a sense of community through an image that unites rather than divides.[209]

Second, de Breij takes up a theme that she also dealt with in 2014: the need for institutions and procedures to enable a democratic politics, including a strong public sphere in which rational and open dialogue takes place. The premise of her 2019 show is the urgent need to defend liberal democracy in the face of growing right-wing extremism, and the rise of anti-liberal politics in the Netherlands. De Breij makes this point through a story that forms the backbone of the show and that tells about her father, a local politician who explained to her the basics of liberal democracy. He did so when the young Claudia tried to help her father by tearing down the election posters of Gerrit, an opposing candidate and neighbour, in the

207 "zwart-wit-denken."
208 "eindelijk tijd om met nuance te reflecteren op het voorbije jaar."
209 At another point in the show, when she discusses the political career of her father, she also speaks of "nuance" in such a mocking tone, pronouncing the word as if it were very old-fashioned.

lead-up to the municipal elections. The moral of the story is that in liberal politics, one does not treat the other as an enemy to be destroyed by any means, but as an opponent in a political competition. This is symbolised by the friendly handshake between Claudia's father and Gerrit on New Year's Eve. By taking us along with her childhood experiences (including her strong emotions towards Gerrit) and emphasising how she still looks up to her father, de Breij invites the spectator to imaginatively take up the position of the child who is about to learn an important moral and political lesson.

However, while her father is indeed held up as an example of political reason and nuance, de Breij juxtaposes the male figure of the moderate politician with black and female activists whom she equally admires. During the show, de Breij repeatedly dons the garments of historical figures who have inspired her, such as the medical doctor and first-wave feminist activist Aletta Jacobs (1854–1929), the first woman to pursue an academic doctorate at a Dutch university, and an important advocate of female suffrage. The garment representing Jacobs is a modern, theatrical impression of a traditional garment, with tones of grey and white, and a typical pleated skirt. Putting on this dress enables de Breij to make several critical points: first, it is a visual reminder of the centenary of Dutch female suffrage in 2019 which, as de Breij comments, has not been celebrated widely. Second, it directs attention to the historical lineage in which de Breij stands, a history of feminist activism that she embodies, but also represents the oppression that feminists still suffer today. By wearing a traditional garment while discussing current affairs, including the rise of a strong anti-abortion movement in a country well-known for its progressive abortion legislation (Kennedy, 1995), de Breij points to the fact that the boundaries between traditional and modern have become blurred again, that she is being forced, against her will, into a traditional female role, and has to fight for political rights that she thought were no longer up for discussion in the modern Netherlands.

De Breij's show is thus both a passionate plea for activism and a defence of reason and nuance. She seeks to integrate both most explicitly in her discussion of black activist Quincy Gario, whom she praises for speaking out against Black Pete. Through her repeated phrase "to change things, we need people who dare to walk in front,"[210] she explains that she has carefully listened to Gario's arguments, and that he taught her that something can be racist, even without the speaker having racist intentions. By demonstrating that her opinion on the matter has changed

210 "Om dingen te veranderen, hebben we mensen nodig die voorop durven lopen."

through careful listening to rational argument, de Breij suggests that activism and nuanced reasoning are not mutually exclusive.[211]

However, de Breij also points to the limitations of empathy and dialogue. In January 2019, Kees van der Staaij signed the Nashville Statement, an evangelical Christian statement opposing same-sex marriage and the rights of LGBTQIA+ people (ANP, 2019). In her weekly column in the programme guide, *VARAgids,* de Breij responded by publicly distancing herself from van der Staaij, and breaking all personal bonds with him (de Breij, 2019). While emphasising the importance of entering into dialogue with one's opponents to find common ground, she argued that van der Staaij had crossed a boundary by denying her identity and that of other LGBTQIA+ people, such as trans persons. Van der Staaij responded by publishing an open letter on the SGP's website (van der Staaij, 2019).

In her New Year's Eve Performance, de Breij presents a sharp criticism of van der Staaij's politics. While wearing a traditional garment – a type of garment still worn by the orthodox Christians that the SGP represents – she mocks the SGP's leader for posing as a victim of a supposedly dominant progressive culture, and points to the difference between voicing one's opinions (which is acceptable) and denying the existence of particular social groups and identities (which is not). She jokes that, while van der Staaij is allowed to *have* those opinions, he is not allowed to *express* them, thereby reversing and critically reappropriating the language of the Nashville Statement that she introduced earlier in the performance, in which a similar distinction is made between having and expressing particular sexual identities. In doing so, she employs humorous tactics to reiterate her earlier argument that van der Staaij has overstepped a clear boundary by denying the existence and the rights of people within the LGBTQIA+ community.

To conclude, then, although de Breij in her latest New Year's Eve Performance still expresses a firm belief in empathy and political reason, she also draws a line, and does so more explicitly than before: she refuses to accept an anti-liberal and conservative politics that threatens the rights of women, queer, and trans people.

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211 Still, she also reiterates her earlier argument that activists like Gario are too emotionally involved and not sufficiently patient. She uses the metaphor of "waking up" so familiar through the (often pejoratively used) notion of 'wokeness': Gario's activism had been a wake-up call for her, but when one has woken up, one needs some time to adjust to the world. This is something that activists like Gario, according to de Breij, do not accept. On the contrary, they blame you for not having woken up earlier. She concludes that: "Maybe, the vanguard needs to have a little bit of empathy for the rear and vice versa" ("Misschien moet de voorhoede een beetje empathie hebben voor de achterhoede, en andersom").

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that in spite of the dominant image of the comedian as a progressive rebel who transgresses boundaries and protests against the status quo, there is another dominant aesthetic in the history of Dutch cabaret: an aesthetic of nuanced humour, demonstrated through the work of two comedians from different generations. Whilst it may seem counterintuitive to discuss the work of Claudia de Breij, a female comedian who has always spoken from a queer, feminist standpoint, under the same banner as that of Wim Kan, a heterosexual, male comedian, their work displays strong similarities, in spite of the different social and political contexts in which these comedians developed their style.

Both Kan and de Breij prefer mild criticism over shock and provocation. Both have presented themselves as politically engaged comedians and moderate critics, who build consensus, and bridge ideological differences, while appealing to a sense of togetherness and national belonging. Both have also emphasised their closeness to the centre of political power. Kan and de Breij have maintained close ties with politicians and the Royal Family, and have exploited that position in their work, as demonstrated by the familiar tone adopted by Kan when speaking about politicians, and de Breij's reflections on her friendly encounters and final break with Kees van der Staaij.[212] However, while both have presented themselves as part of the establishment (and have staged the father as a figure of authority), they have also pointed to the need to listen to a political vanguard (with Provo and Quincy Gario as respective reference points). In doing so, while tending more towards the left than the right, they have not presented themselves as avant-gardists walking in front of the troops, but as part of the 'reasonable centre'[213] that follows rather than initiates social change. This sets them apart from the self-proclaimed anti-establishment rebels discussed in Chapter 1.

That nuanced humour has long been established as a distinctive style in Dutch cabaret, is demonstrated by the fact that it has been taken up by both critics and comedians as a topic for reflection and debate. I would like to demonstrate this

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212 After the Second World War, Wim Kan received a royal honour for taking care of his companions in the Japanese internment camps. When it was announced that Japanese emperor Hirohito would pay an unofficial visit to the Queen in 1971, Kan corresponded with Her Majesty to oppose this visit. When the royal meeting was not cancelled, he publicly declared that he and Corry Vonk had thrown their royal honours into a lake ('Wim Kan,' 1983). In 2021, de Breij was commissioned to write a book on princess Amalia, the Dutch heir to the throne, on the occasion of her eighteenth birthday, for which she interviewed Amalia extensively. It is a Dutch tradition that the heir to the throne is portrayed on his/her eighteenth birthday by an established writer. Hella Haasse was the first to write such a book, in 1955, about princess Beatrix. Thirty years later, Renate Rubinstein wrote a similar book on prince Willem Alexander. This is the first time that a comedian has been commissioned for this task.

213 The term 'reasonable centre' ('het redelijke midden') is a common term in Dutch politics, referring to those who identify with a position in the middle of the political spectrum.

by ending this chapter with a discussion of a sketch by De Partizanen (literally: The Partisans), the former cabaret duo of Merijn Scholten (b. 1983) and Thomas Gast (b. 1983), that presents a metacommentary on nuanced humour, and reflects on its limitations. The sketch was part of the Dutch satirical television show, *Cojones* (De Partizanen, 2016), and opens with Gast expressing unease with a social climate of polarisation. He refers, on the one hand, to Geert Wilders' proposal to lock up male Muslim refugees in refugee centres ('Wilders,' 2016), which he firmly rejects. On the other hand, he thinks it's too easy to claim that people voting for the PVV are all stupid. Gast illustrates this point through an anecdote of himself witnessing a woman jumping the queue when boarding a train. Gast speculates that this woman, who wore a headscarf, might have been a "refugee"[214] (De Partizanen, 2016), and that it is perhaps important to say that out loud. In the discussion between Gast and Scholten that follows, it turns out that this woman was not the only one jumping the queue, but just the only one wearing a headscarf. Scholten responds that Gast is clearly afraid of being "politically correct,"[215] and that what he needs is a little bit of nuance. The sketch ends with a comical song that is an ode to nuance.

This sketch not only reads as a parody of the notion of political correctness,[216] but also as a critique of nuanced humour. In their initial discussion, Scholten connects political correctness with what he calls "VARA engagement."[217] This is a reference to VARA's left-wing reputation, and helps to set up this sketch as a commentary of a particular type of politically left-leaning comedian associated with this broadcaster.[218] The song that follows adopts a similar, ironic tone. First, it is a parody of a well-known children's song by the popular Dutch clown and acrobat duo, Bassie & Adriaan. The original version is an innocuous ditty educating children about the alphabet. It is accompanied by a video clip, and was originally part of a television series (Bassie & Adriaan Channel, 2015). De Partizanen use both the melody of the song and the overall tone and style of the video clip, including particular facial expressions, gestures, and the use of props for demonstration. By dealing with a politicised and serious topic, such as immigration, in the style of a children's song, while at the same time adopting the edifying tone of the politically engaged comedian, De Partizanen suggest that

214 "vluchteling."
215 "politiek correct."
216 The sketch ironically mentions some oft-used terms within this debate, such as "benoemen" (literally: naming, in this context: daring to be honest about the problems surrounding immigration and Islam), and "wegkijken" (literally: looking away, a frequently used description of the behaviour of people who supposedly do not dare to face these problems).
217 "VARA-engagement."
218 This is also a form of self-mockery, since Cojones was broadcast by BNNVARA as well (the official name since the two broadcasters BNN and VARA merged in 2014).

this type of comedy risks simplifying complicated political debates. This point is emphasised further by the adapted lyrics, in which disturbing examples of radical right-wing extremism (e.g., hanging a dead pig's head in front of a mosque) are contrasted with more peaceful examples, such as a woman offering a refugee a place in her home, from which Scholten dryly concludes that "everyone is different."[219]

The serious point being made here is that within a context of right-wing extremism, trying to find consensus by bridging ideological differences is a risky strategy, because one might end up legitimising the radical right, or saying nothing at all. The latter option is demonstrated when, towards the end of the song, more and more objects are brought to the table. These objects all symbolise the coming together of opposites, e.g., a jar of Duo Penotti[220], 'Dutch' versus 'oriental' food (fries versus couscous), and a mixture of meat and fish. While doing this, De Partizanen not only create a total mess, which is in contradiction to the idea of nuance as a solution for political confusion, but also refer to the Dutch expression 'vlees noch vis' (literally: a red herring), thus suggesting that accepting all sides to a debate as equally valid is similar to saying nothing at all. Finally, the performers' slick look and tone of voice – both wear a suit and tie – suggest that the discourse of nuance resembles the talk of managers or salespeople, and does not pose a real challenge to the status quo.

While nuanced humour does not spark as much debate as the anti-establishment comedy discussed in Chapter 1, this sketch by De Partizanen shows that some debate and reflection are being elicited, which has in the past years resulted in a more critical evaluation of this style in the context of political polarisation and the rise of the radical and far right. Claudia de Breij's most recent work, which has adopted a more activist tone, is in line with this. In the next chapter, I will engage with the notion of protest to further demonstrate that comedians have, for a long time, struggled with the question of how to relate to activist sentiments and political extremes.

219 "iedereen is anders."

220 Duo Penotti is a two-coloured hazelnut spread (white and black). In many commercials, going back to the 1990s, the spread is presented by two children, one black and one white. Duo Penotti has thereby become a somewhat clichéd symbol for the celebration of racial difference.

Chapter 3: Protest

In 1978, the cabaret duo, Neerlands Hoop, launched a famous protest action against the participation of the Dutch national football team in that year's FIFA World Cup in Argentina. They called for a boycott because of the massive violations of human rights by Argentina's military regime, under Jorge Rafael Videla. Neerlands Hoop (1968–1979), or Neerlands Hoop in Bange Dagen (literally: Dutch Hope in Anxious Days), was the famous cabaret duo of Freek de Jonge (b. 1944) and Bram Vermeulen (1946–2004). They were, at the time, at the peak of their popularity. Hence, their protest manifestation received a great deal of attention and support (as well as opposition) from the media and politics: they participated in protest marches, spoke to members of Parliament, and presented a now famous activist cabaret performance, entitled, *Bloed aan de Paal* (Blood on the Post, 1978).

While Vermeulen and de Jonge were not able to stop the Dutch national football team from participating in the FIFA World Cup, their performance-cum-protest manifestation, *Bloed aan de Paal,* helped to establish and perpetuate their reputation as 'progressive rebels.' Up to the present day, *Bloed aan de Paal* is one of the best remembered performances in the history of post-war Dutch cabaret[221], and has often been presented as example, *par excellence,* of the politically engaged cabaret that is typically associated with the 1960s and 1970s (Zijp, 2011b). Indeed, *Bloed aan de Paal* is a good example of a cabaret performance that presents a form of progressive rebellion, especially given the public consensus at the time that politics and sport should be kept separate, as far as possible ('Bloed aan de Paal,' Andere Tijden, 2018).

However, the question is: how representative of Dutch cabaret in the 1960s and 1970s is this action of Neerlands Hoop? That is, the action represented an exceptional case of cabaret combined with political activism, and both the aim and structure of *Bloed aan de Paal* deviated from Neerlands Hoop's regular

221 For instance, the long-running Dutch television documentary series on national history, Andere Tijden (Other Times), has recently devoted an entire episode to Bloed aan de Paal ('Bloed aan de Paal,' Andere Tijden, 2018).

performances; it was meant to demand attention for a political cause, and was part of a broader protest manifestation that took place not only in the theatre, but also on the streets and in Parliament. The show, which was typically followed by a discussion with the audience about the political situation in Argentina, was not particularly funny either, and presented an anthology of protest songs from earlier shows. The only humorous part was a slapstick act in which de Jonge tried (and failed) to hold seven footballs in his hands ('Bloed aan de Paal,' DVD, 2018). This act not only represented a remarkable break with the serious tone of the show, but can also be read as a metacommentary on the protest manifestation itself, especially in the light of its ultimate failure to stop the Dutch national football team from participating in the FIFA World Cup. Moreover, both before and after their protest, de Jonge and Vermeulen opposed political engagement, both in their work and in media interviews (see also Chapter 4). Was *Bloed aan de Paal,* then, not the exception rather than the rule?

In this chapter, I will question the received notion that Dutch comedians are necessarily politically engaged, by focusing on the relationship between cabaret and protest, and more specifically on the role of the protest song in post-war Dutch cabaret. The 1960s and 1970s are, in particular, remembered as a period in which Dutch comedians were politically engaged and protested against the authorities through the singing of protest songs (Ibo, 1970; Klöters, 1997; 1999). Boudewijn de Groot's unequivocal statement against President Nixon and the Vietnam War ('Welterusten Mijnheer de President' or Goodnight Mr President, 1966), and Neerlands Hoop's protest song against Argentina, 'Het is weer tijd om te bepalen waar het allemaal op staat' (It's time to take stock, 1978), present the most iconic examples from the 1960s and the 1970s, respectively.

I will question this reputation of cabaret as a form of protest by highlighting a group of neglected songs in post-war Dutch cabaret, to which I refer, somewhat provocatively, as 'anti-protest songs.' Anti-protest songs are songs that mock protest movements, and/or parody the genre of the protest song, thereby complicating the reputation of cabaret as a form of protest in the 1960s and 1970s. That is, in this period, we witness the rise of a type of cabaret song that is more ambiguous about its commitment to social and political protest than the traditional historical narratives suggest. Lurelei's 'Arme ouwe,' discussed in Chapter 0, and performed in the same year that Boudewijn de Groot's anti-Vietnam song was released, is an early example.

In the following sections, I will present an analysis of a sample of anti-protest songs from the early 1970s to the 1990s.[222] My aim here is three-fold. First, doing so helps me to further challenge the popular image of the comedian as a 'progressive rebel,' in particular, by questioning the role of political engagement in post-war Dutch cabaret. While Dutch cabaret from the 1960s and 1970s is commonly remembered as being strongly politically engaged, I will highlight the existence of a long-standing debate on cabaret and political engagement between Dutch comedians and their critics. In this debate, as I will show, the term 'engagement' was often used in a quite negative way, and became associated with insincerity, moralism, and political bias. I consider the anti-protest songs discussed in this chapter as artistic interventions in this debate on cabaret and engagement. I will demonstrate that comedians have often been careful not to take sides or to display partisan commitments, but have tried to keep a certain distance from social protest, and have preferred to comment on it from a meta-position.[223] The anti-protest song helped them to do this.

Second, by tracing the roots of the anti-protest song in what we could call the 'protest cabaret' of the 1960s and 1970s, this chapter contests cherished historical narratives of Dutch cabaret. While the 1960s and 1970s are typically seen as the heyday of protest, many authors have observed a shift away from politics in Dutch cabaret during the 1980s and 1990s. They have argued that protest cabaret was followed by 'nonsense cabaret' in the subsequent period, characterised by cultivated stupidity, parody, and the substitution of personal narratives for political commentary. By demonstrating that the aesthetics of anti-protest humour can be traced back to the heyday of 'protest cabaret,' this chapter deconstructs the opposition between protest and anti-protest implicated in dominant historical narratives of Dutch cabaret. In so doing, this chapter also shows that the dividing line in post-war Dutch cabaret is not so much between two historical periods (the 1960s and 1970s versus the 1980s and 1990s), but between two generations. I will demonstrate that the history of cabaret has largely been written from the perspective of a baby boom generation that tends to view comedians from their own generation as being more engaged than comedians from Gen X, who began their careers in the 1980s and 1990s, and were often criticised at the time for being anti-political, shallow, and narcissist (e.g., Klöters, 1999).

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222 This chapter only presents a selection of anti-protest songs from a larger corpus. Other examples include Neerlands Hoop's 'Ik doe aan kabaret' (I'm doing cabaret, 1972), Freek de Jonge's untitled mock protest song from De Komiek (de Jonge, 1980: 62-64), Annie M.G. Schmidt's 'Hun hebben de macht' (Them [sic] have the power) from the musical Madam (1981) (for an interesting discussion of this musical and 'Hun hebben de macht,' see: Thierens, 2018) and NUHR's 'Vrouwenstrijdlied' (Women's Battle Song, see: 'Vrouwenstrijdlied,' 1996).

223 In this respect, comedians resemble writers, who have also often claimed the role of public intellectuals without giving up their artistic autonomy. See: Ham, 2015; Heynders, 2016.

Finally, this chapter contributes to a better understanding of the relationship between humour and protest. Academic scholarship on humour and protest tends to focus on the role of humour in social protests, or, conversely, on comedy as a form of protest. In both cases, authors have emphasised the positive functions of humour. In the context of social protest, humour has been claimed to function as a weapon of the weak, a means to foster collective identities and to create feelings of empowerment (e.g., Görkem, 2015; 't Hart, 2017). Although authors have indicated their awareness that protest humour is not always effective, or may reinforce social hierarchies (e.g., Graefer et al., 2019; 't Hart, 2017), their research may unwittingly promote the idea that humour and protest are natural allies (for an interesting critique of this idea, see: Davies, 2007). By demonstrating that comedians have not always identified with, or supported social protest, this chapter complicates the received ideas about the relationship between protest and humour.

A few caveats: since this chapter seeks to complement and complicate dominant historical narratives on Dutch cabaret as a form of protest, I will not present discussions of canonical protest songs from Dutch comedians and singers (some of which have been mentioned above). While I do engage with the work of the most critically acclaimed 'protest' comedians of the time, I focus on lesser-known examples that help to demonstrate the tension between protest and anti-protest in their work. Because this dissertation focuses on mainstream Dutch cabaret, this chapter also does not discuss the work of socialist comedians, such as Jaap van de Merwe (1924–1989) and Frits Lambrechts (b. 1937), who took an openly activist approach, and largely operated on the fringes of Dutch cabaret at the time.

Moreover, this chapter limits itself to the period from the early 1970s to the 1990s. Although in recent years, and against the backdrop of new activist sentiments, some comedians have shown a renewed interest in protest and in cabaret as a form of protest (see Chapters 2 and 5), the connection between cabaret and protest music has weakened, not only because song and music play a less significant role in Dutch cabaret nowadays than they used to (see Introduction), but also because Dutch protest music did, perhaps, not disappear, but became less easy to identify within the post-political climate of the 1990s and 2000s, not only in cabaret, but also in other musical genres (Ham, 2020). Since protest songs are largely believed to have disappeared, the anti-protest song as a genre also ceased to exist.[224]

224 This does not mean, of course, that Dutch comedians do not display anti-activist sentiments any longer.

In the following section, I will first situate the work of the comedians discussed in this chapter within the context of the long-standing debate on the role of political engagement in Dutch cabaret. Then, I will turn to the 'protest cabaret' of the 1970s. I will discuss examples of anti-protest songs from Drs. P (1919–2015)/ Kabaret Ivo de Wijs (1965–1979), Neerlands Hoop (1968–1979), Don Quishocking (1967–1980), and Robert Long (1943–2006)/Jenny Arean (b. 1942). This choice reflects the reputation of their makers, who are (with the exception of Drs. P and Jenny Arean) remembered as the most prominent examples of politically engaged comedians and cabaret groups of their generation.[225] In the second part of the chapter, I will compare these examples of protest cabaret with the 'nonsense cabaret' of the 1980s and 1990s, discussing examples from Brigitte Kaandorp (b. 1962), De Vliegende Panters (1995–2008), and the cabaret duo, Arjan Ederveen (b. 1956) and Tosca Niterink (b. 1960).

Political engagement

To understand the tensions surrounding the idea of cabaret as protest, we need to consider the long-standing debate on political engagement in the field of Dutch cabaret. Up to the present day, the notion of 'engagement' (in Dutch, the same term is used, though pronounced in the French way) carries strong associations with didactic theatre (see Chapter 4), and raises associations with the Dutch and Flemish political theatre of the 1970s (Nooren, 2006: 218). In the cabaret field as well, the term evokes memories of the political cabaret of the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Klöters, 1999). This may suggest that cabaret was, at the time, narrowly defined in terms of social and political engagement. However, this is not the case. On the contrary, engagement was a hotly debated topic in the emerging cabaret field of the 1960s and 1970s. On the one hand, it was formulated as a demand by gatekeepers and other professionals in the field (e.g., critics, festival juries), and both aspiring and established comedians were criticised for their presumed lack of engagement.[226] On the other hand, both critics and comedians expressed concerns about what they believed to be the reduction of cabaret to the level of political engagement.

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225 Kabaret Ivo de Wijs, Don Quishocking, and Neerlands Hoop are often considered the 'big three' of Dutch cabaret of the 1970s (e.g., 'Don Quishocking,' 2007). Wim Ibo considered Don Quishocking, Neerlands Hoop, and Robert Long to be the most important comedians/ cabaret groups of the 1970s (Ibo, 1982).

226 For instance, in 1967, the jury of festival Cameretten was 'most of all surprised [...] by the complete lack of engagement among the thirteen groups performing here' ('vooral gefrappeerd [...] door het volstrekt ontbreken van ieder engagement bij de hier optredende dertien gezelschappen') (P.J., 1967). Arguably, such criticisms reflect the status of cabaret as a middlebrow art that, as a popular theatre form aspiring to artistic status, always ran the risk of becoming 'mere' entertainment.

The paradoxical status of political engagement as a criterion of evaluation is reflected in the work of Wim Ibo (1918–2000). As a television programme maker, cabaret producer, and writer of a popular history of cabaret, Ibo was an authority on the field. In 1968, Ibo was jury member at festival Cameretten, and presented (and probably wrote) the jury's report. While Ibo celebrated that year's winner, Don Quishocking, for their 'engagement with the present time,'[227] he also opposed the 'fashion trend among some journalists who dissect a cabaret performance socially, politically, and religiously before adopting an artistic approach.'[228] He added that: 'Those who have the arrogant presumption to denounce solo acts and groups in a demagogical way because they would not be engaged, display an intolerance that hits cabaret at its core, because this art presupposes the individual freedom of the independent artist.'[229] (Wim Ibo, cited by Verhallen, 2018a: 10; Ibo repeats this statement in his history of cabaret, first published two years later: Ibo, 1970: 20). Ibo's statements point to a tension around the notion of political engagement, which is employed by the author as a criterion of evaluation, but also denounced as illegitimate, because the genre should be evaluated in artistic and not in political or ideological terms (a contradiction that was already pointed out by critic Peter van Bueren in his coverage of the festival's finals; see van Bueren, 1968b).[230]

A second, and more surprising, example of the opposition to political engagement as a criterion of evaluation is presented by Annie M.G. Schmidt's

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227 'engagement met deze tijd.'

228 'modestroming van sommige journalisten die een cabaret-programma sociaal, politiek of religieus ontleden alvorens zij tot een artistieke beoordeling overgaan.'

229 'Wie de arrogante pretentie heeft solisten en groepen te veroordelen omdat ze niet geëngageerd zouden zijn, geeft blijk van een intolerantie die het wezen van het cabaret raakt, omdat het de persoonlijke vrijheid van de ongebonden kunstenaar impliceert.'

230 While Ibo did not call any critics by name in his jury's report, his words seemed primarily directed at critic Peter van Bueren (1942–2020). In the revised version of his cabaret history, published in two volumes in 1981 and 1982, Ibo looks back on the debate around political engagement in the late 1960s and mentions van Bueren as an example of an 'extreme left' critic who judges cabaret on political grounds. Ibo refers to one publication in particular: the mock school report that van Bueren published in the Catholic daily newspaper, De Tijd, on Christmas Eve, 24 December 1968, and in which he scored the work of comedians on different criteria, including their 'mentaliteit,' or political attitude (van Bueren, 1968a). Ibo comments: 'In extreme left circles, people began to claim the art of cabaret for themselves, and everyone who did not wish to accept this monopoly was accused of a "reprehensible" mentality [...] The confusion in the cabaret world reached a peak when journalist Peter van Bueren published a seriously intended Christmas Report 1968 in the Catholic daily newspaper De Tijd, in which a six was given to Wim Kan's mentality' ('In extreem linkse kringen begon men de cabaretkunst voor zichzelf op te eisen en iedereen die dit monopolie niet wenste te erkennen, werd beschuldigd van een verwerpelijke instelling: een "slechte" mentaliteit [...] De verwarring in de cabaretwereld bereikte een hoogtepunt toen de journalist Peter van Bueren in het katholieke dagblad De Tijd een serieus bedoeld Kerstrapport 1968 publiceerde, waarbij aan Wim Kan een zes voor mentaliteit werd toebedeeld') (Ibo, 1982: 167-168).

opening speech at the protest manifestation, *Cabaretiers voor Vietnam* (Comedians for Vietnam, 1971), a benefit event for the victims of the Vietnam War, organised by comedian Jaap van de Merwe (van Gelder, 1994: 125-126). In her speech, Annie M.G. Schmidt (1911–1995), a prolific and celebrated writer of Dutch musicals, radio and television comedy, and cabaret songs, warned the audience that not all comedians would perform political songs that night.[231] She added that:

> There is still a sad misunderstanding that one type [of art, i.e., politically engaged art] is better than the other [i.e., art that deals with the everyday]. That cabaret and all music and all film and literature and so on should only be a vehicle for political testimony and protest.[232] ('Cabaretiers voor,' 2015)

Schmidt ended her speech by stating that when only politically engaged art would be considered acceptable, this would lead to a "mental air pollution"[233] of a sort even worse than air pollution proper.

That Schmidt used the opportunity of a protest manifestation – the kind of place where one would expect politicised art – to defend the freedom of the artist against the presumed demand of engagement, is telling, and points to the contested nature of engagement as a criterion of evaluation in the cabaret field of the 1970s. Whilst the examples of Ibo and Schmidt seem to suggest that the freedom of the artist was under siege at the time, this does not stand up to scrutiny. Most comedians and critics in the 1970s (including the most successful comedians and cabaret groups of their generation) not only resisted what they considered to be narrow definitions of cabaret in terms of engagement, but believed that engagement was not at all a good thing.

Three common arguments against engagement were presented by both comedians and critics of the time. First, engagement was seen as gratuitous and insincere, an easy trick played by comedians to please their audience. For instance, in an interview with the revealing title, 'Actueel zijn is een trucje' (Being topical is a trick), Bram Vermeulen argued that Neerlands Hoop (the cabaret duo of himself and Freek de Jonge, briefly discussed in the introduction of this chapter) was not engaged. He contrasted their own approach with that of Don Quishocking, whose engaged cabaret he believed failed miserably: 'Don Quishocking knows which

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231 Annie M.G. Schmidt was a writer of musicals, television and radio comedy, cabaret songs, poems, and children's books, and has remained a Dutch household name up to the present day. She closely collaborated with Wim Ibo on the radio show De Familie Doorsnee (Family Average) in the 1950s, a show that Schmidt wrote and Ibo produced.

232 "Er heerst nog altijd een bedroevend misverstand dat het ene soort beter zou zijn dan het andere. Dat het cabaret en alle toneel en alle muziek en alle film en literatuur en ga zo maar door enkel alleen maar een voertuig zou mogen zijn om politieke getuigenis af te leggen en om te protesteren."

233 "geestelijke luchtvervuiling."

topics are marketable and turns them into a show. But it does not come across, because nobody believes they are sincere'[234] ('Actueel zijn,' 1972). Likewise, comedian Ivo de Wijs (Kabaret Ivo de Wijs) argued against engagement because of its insincerity: 'Talking big on stage is easy enough. South Africa, Chile, it's easily said. But if you don't mean it, if you're not consistent off stage, it means nothing'[235] (Haagmans, 1976).

Second, socially and politically engaged cabaret was denounced as being moralist, preachy, and dogmatic. This indictment of moralism and its religious connotations (politically engaged comedians were often called preachers) worked to draw a line between cabaret as an autonomous art on the one hand, and the sphere of politics on the other. For instance, in the above-quoted interview, Ivo de Wijs argued against the politically engaged cabaret of Neerlands Hoop (among others) for being 'preachy'[236] and, citing comedian Sieto Hoving (1924–2016), called this type of cabaret 'a fire-and-brimstone sermon for which the congregation pays the pastor's fee.'[237] He added that cabaret should not be a 'political meeting'[238] but 'theatre'[239] (Haagmans, 1976). In the first and only dissertation on Dutch cabaret to date, Willem van den Berg makes a similar point by arguing that comedians who advocate for changes in society stop being comedians, and that: 'Dealing in a comedic way with social issues that are serious in themselves means one should not work in the territory of the pastor, politician, professor or educator'[240] (van den Berg, 1977: 25).

Third, and in line with the second argument, politically engaged cabaret was criticised for being extremist, partisan, and politically compromised. Thereby, the makers were accused of being attached to a political party or agenda, and hence not free and independent thinkers. Wim Ibo associated engagement with the 'extreme left' (Ibo, 1982: 168), and argued that the comedian is an 'ongebonden kunstenaar' (literally: an unattached or independent artist). Likewise, activist comedians, such as Jaap van de Merwe, were criticised for being biased. As Guus

234 'Don Quishocking weet welke onderwerpen goed in de markt liggen en maken daar een programma van. Maar het komt absoluut niet aan, want niemand gelooft dat ze het menen.'
235 'Grote woorden zijn gemakkelijk genoeg te zeggen vanaf dat podium. Zuid-Afrika, Chili, dat is zó gezegd. Maar als dat niet gemeend is, als je buiten dat podium niet consequent bent, staat het voor niets.'
236 'Dat prekerige.'
237 'een donderpreek waarvoor de gemeente het honorarium aan de dominee betaalt.'
238 'politieke meeting.'
239 'theater.'
240 'Cabaretesk omgaan met op zich serieuze maatschappelijke aangelegenheden betekent derhalve, dat er niet op het territoir van de pastor, politikus, professor of pedagoog wordt gewerkt.'

Vleugel put it, van de Merwe was 'not independent enough,'[241] and 'too dependent on what he thinks he has to believe'[242] (Vleugel, cited by Blom, 1995: 417).

The debate about political engagement helps us to understand the tensions surrounding the notion of cabaret as protest. While a comedian such as Ivo de Wijs argued against political engagement, he also claimed – in the same interview – that 'cabaret must stand for something though'[243] (Haagmans, 1976). While Ibo opposed definitions of cabaret in terms of political engagement, he also suggested that cabaret is a form of 'protest' (Ibo, 1970: 21). There is a tension here between being critical and being (too openly) political or ideological: while comedians were expected to be (and aspired to be) critical, there was an equally strong belief that comedians who committed themselves to a particular political cause, lost their independence and thereby their criticality. The way in which Ibo qualifies his statement that cabaret is a form of 'protest' demonstrates that he does not associate cabaret with political activism, but rather with a form of artistic critique that emphasises 'relativity'[244] over strong political attachments.[245] He writes that cabaret is 'protest in the broadest sense of the word, it contrasts art with kitsch, simplicity with glamour, sincerity with hypocrisy, depth with increasing shallowness, relativity with conventions, traditions and dogmas'[246] (Ibo, 1970: 21). The anti-protest songs analysed below can be considered as artistic interventions in this debate on cabaret and political engagement, through which comedians distanced themselves from a direct attachment to political and social protest, often by presenting parodies of protest songs.

The anti-protest song

I will now present an analysis of four anti-protest songs by comedians from the 'protest generation' to demonstrate how these comedians have intervened in the debate on cabaret and political engagement. While the first three songs are from the 1970s, the fourth song is from the mid-1980s, thereby highlighting that the dividing line between 'protest' and 'nonsense cabaret' runs between generations

241 'te weinig onafhankelijk.'
242 'dat hij te afhankelijk is van wat hij denkt dat hij moet vinden.'
243 'Cabaret moet wel ergens voor staan.'
244 'relativiteit.'
245 This expression resonates with the notion of the comedian as a nuanced social critic, as discussed in Chapter 2.
246 'Cabaret is protest in de meest ruime zin van het woord, het stelt kunst tegenover kitsch, eenvoud tegenover glamour, oprechtheid tegenover hypocrisie, verdieping tegenover vervlakking, betrekkelijkheid tegenover conventies, tradities en dogma's.'

and does not follow a clear-cut historical periodisation.[247] What these songs have in common is that they do not adopt an aesthetic of shock and provocation, nor do they launch direct political attacks. Rather, they present a form of absurd or nonsensical humour, characterised by parody, deadpan delivery, and comical escalation. Whilst it has been claimed that 'absurd humour' is a tautological expression because 'absurdity, of one type or another, is resident in all humour' (Oring, 2003: x), not all humour is equally absurd. Moreover, while absurdity is, in a theatrical context, commonly associated with Martin Esslin's notion of the 'theatre of the absurd' (Esslin, 1961), and hence with a set of dramatic texts that supposedly deal with the meaninglessness of life (for an excellent critique of this line of interpretation, see: Bennett, 2015), this is not the way in which I use the term here.

I use the term 'absurd humour' to point to a separate aesthetic mode that is not tied to a particular message about the meaninglessness of life, but, as Nicholas Holm has argued, 'is premised in the abandonment of everyday regimes of sense and meaning' (Holm, 2017: 149). I depart, however, from Holm's contention that absurd humour plays with sense and nonsense rather than with 'decorum and behaviour' (idem), that is, that absurd humour plays with logic and language rather than with social norms. I argue that absurd humour does sometimes present social criticism, but in a more indirect way than satirical modes of humour. In that sense, absurd humour is a style of humour that is difficult to categorise, and can be enjoyed for many different reasons (Kuipers, 2015: 99). I will demonstrate that absurd humour often works through a strategy of comical escalation, starting from a premise (which may also be a social rule or a political principle) that is undermined by being blown up to absurd proportions.

My first example is taken from the work of Drs. P (1919–2015) and Kabaret Ivo de Wijs (1965–1979). Kabaret Ivo de Wijs began as a student cabaret group in 1965, and was the winner of festival Cameretten in 1967. The core of the group, which had different combinations of typically three to five performers, was formed by the eponymous writer and comedian, Ivo de Wijs (b. 1945), and comedian, writer, and composer, Pieter Nieuwint (b. 1945). Of the cabaret groups and comedians discussed in the first part of this chapter, Kabaret Ivo de Wijs was seen as being the least politically engaged. De Wijs believed that cabaret was primarily a form of literary and musical entertainment, as emphasised by the title of the second show by the group, *Beschaafd amusement* (Refined entertainment, 1974). However, the

247 While generation is a sociologically questionable category (van den Broek, 1996), there is a common association between (comedians from) the baby boom generation and social protest. However, this chapter aims to deconstruct the opposition between protest and nonsense, and hence the idea that the baby boom generation was more inclined to social protest than following or preceding generations.

group was influenced and inspired by Lurelei (cf., van den Hanenberg and Verhallen, 1996: 46), and although it was sometimes suggested that the group's work bordered on light entertainment, many critics observed that the group still presented social criticism and contributed to the breaking of taboos (e.g., Bromet, 1972; Alkema, 1976; van der Molen, 1976). The group has also been compared to other critical (student) cabaret groups, such as Don Quishocking and Neerlands Hoop (e.g., van Bueren, 1973), and had garnered a reputation for being politically engaged because of songs such as 'De wortels van het kwaad' (The roots of evil, 1972).[248]

In 1972, Kabaret Ivo de Wijs contributed a song to a special television programme dedicated to the work to of Drs. P.[249] Drs. P was the pseudonym of Heinz Polzer (1919–2015), who was a critically acclaimed writer of absurdist cabaret songs that were decidedly uncritical. He was a close colleague of Ivo de Wijs, as well as a like-minded thinker, with similar ideas about cabaret as a form of literary and musical entertainment (van den Hanenberg and Verhallen, 1996). In the programme booklet of *Beschaafd amusement,* he praised the group's lack of political bias by approvingly remarking that they did not subscribe to any 'nagging ideology'[250] (Drs. P, cited by van der Molen, 1972). Drs. P performed his own work, but was first and foremost an acclaimed writer of cabaret songs. He was praised for his virtuoso use of rhyme and metre, as well as for his absurd humour. While his songs usually do not touch upon social or political matters, the song 'Demonstreren' (Protesting, 1972) does. Kabaret Ivo de Wijs performed this anti-protest song on the occasion of the special television programme mentioned above.

In the song, a series of failed political protests are described. These protests have to be cancelled time and again because of unforeseen circumstances. The comic strategy used here, which is typical of Drs. P's work, is one of escalation through repetition: while the form of the song is tight, the actions described escalate quickly. Initially, the reasons for the failure of these protests are quite normal: "Attendance was somewhat disappointing, people were not informed."[251] However, the reasons become increasingly absurd: "They hadn't learned all the

248 A parody of this song, entitled 'Dat is de schimmel' (That's the mould), was performed in the Dutch satirical sketch show, Hadimassa, in 1972 ('Het is de schimmel,' 1972). This is another example of an anti-protest song that mocked Dutch cabaret for being politically engaged (but in a cheap, boring, and ineffective way). 'De wortels van het kwaad' is also the title of a television documentary on the history of Dutch cabaret, edited and directed by cabaret expert Han Peekel (b. 1947) and produced by broadcast organisation TELEAC/NOT for Dutch public television in 1997–1998.

249 Zingt allen mee met Drs. P (All Sing along with Drs. P) (NCRV, 1973). I have made use of the Best of Kabaret Ivo de Wijs DVD ('Demonstreren,' 2009).

250 'drammerige ideologie.'

251 "De opkomst viel wat tegen, men was niet geïnformeerd."

slogans by heart"[252] and "The banner was urinated on by a police horse."[253] In each stanza, the reason for cancelling the protest is followed by a call to organise a new demonstration: "And that's why there will be another demonstration tomorrow / Protest, protest, protest!"[254] In the accompanying videoclip, the members of the group (Ivo de Wijs, Pieter Nieuwint, Aggie Terlingen, and Richard Fritschy) play with their appearance as long-haired youngsters who are part of the protest generation: the clip shows them as activist students carrying banners. These shots are alternated with footage of actual protest marches.

By using a strategy of escalation through repetition, the song parodies and destabilises the language and logic of the protest song. While protest songs cannot be reduced to any particular genre or style (Dillane et al., 2018: 6; Ham, 2020), the setting of the protest march called up by this song promises a commitment to a clear political cause and the chanting of catchy slogans. However, stable meaning is hollowed out. While a reason for the protest is specified in the first lines ("Pre-school education is over-simplified"[255]), this seems quite a superficial reason for protest, and reads as a parody of Marxist and radical-left calls for the democratisation of education and other institutions, while also referencing the rise of the so-called 'vormingstheater' in the Netherlands and Flanders during the early 1970s, a form of (Marxist-inspired) theatre aimed at raising political consciousness, and often directed at young audiences (van Berlaer-Hellemans et al., 1980; van Maanen, 1997). Rather than presenting political slogans related to this political cause, however, the song only repeats the empty slogan "Protest, protest, protest!"[256]. The song dryly but mockingly describes the failed attempts of the protesters to organise a proper demonstration, thereby picturing them as being disorganised and clumsy. Moreover, because the call to action is related to a series of coincidences and not to any political cause, the song suggests that protest can become a fetish, protest for protest's sake, as well as that protesters always blame others for their own failure. Hence, by parodying the protest song through a repetition of political slogans that are emptied of political content, the song plays with and destabilises the sense and coherence of the protest song, and invites a reading of protest as itself a form of nonsense.

252 "Ze hadden nog niet alle leuzen uit het hoofd geleerd."
253 "Het spandoek is door een politiepaard beürineerd."
254 "En daarom wordt er morgen opnieuw gedemonstreerd / Protesteert, protesteert, protesteert!" Note Drs. P's mocking use of the imperative of the Dutch word 'protesteren,' at that time already archaic.
255 "Het kleuteronderwijs is veel te ongenuanceerd."
256 "Protesteert, protesteert, protesteert!"

Mocking protest cabaret

While 'Demonstreren' parodies the type of song typically chanted during protest marches, many anti-protest songs mock protest cabaret itself. I will give two examples, beginning with a song by Neerlands Hoop (1968–1979), the cabaret duo of Freek de Jonge and Bram Vermeulen, briefly discussed in the introduction to this chapter. The group rose to fame in the early 1970s after a failed attempt to win festival Cameretten in 1968.[257] While Bram Vermeulen was responsible for the compositions and musical accompaniment, Freek de Jonge acted as the frontman and comedian of the group.

Although Neerlands Hoop joked about social and political topics, the politics of their work played out mostly at the level of form (Zijp, 2018). Neerlands Hoop rebelled against the student cabarets of their time, such as Lurelei and Don Quishocking. The latter were seen as transgressive because of the content of their work, but aspiring to high levels of professionalism with regards to acting, singing and *mise-en-scène* and, with their neat diction and carefully rehearsed movements and dance steps, they began to be seen by some as old-fashioned.[258] Neerlands Hoop, on the other hand, cultivated a provocatively amateurish style, which they shared with the satirical television comedy of the late 1960s and early 1970s, but which was, up to that point, considered taboo in the more highly esteemed cabaret tradition.[259]

Freek de Jonge was not a trained actor or singer. In fact, he could hardly sing at all, but did so anyway; and his performance style was chaotic and unrestrained. He told jokes at high speed, and did not seem to care if some of his jokes failed. It was sometimes difficult to follow his stories and associations, but for many critics, this contributed to his appeal and cleverness, while an older generation (including influential comedians and critics, such as Wim Ibo and Wim Kan; see: Kan, 1989: 34)

257 Neerlands Hoop ended in the fifth (and last) place. The jury, led by Wim Ibo, awarded Don Quishocking the first prize. This did, however, not stop Neerlands Hoop from continuing their career and, with a steadily growing audience base (Verhallen, 2018a: 58), becoming a true sensation in the early 1970s.

258 For instance, Jacques Klöters writes that: 'Neerlands Hoop came at the right time. Regular cabaret had become a fossilised formula: steps, dances, neat suits and a predictable show structure' ('Neerlands Hoop kwam op het juiste moment. Het reguliere cabaret was verstard tot een formule: pasjes, dansjes, nette pakken en een voorspelbare programma-opbouw') (Klöters, 1987: 336). Here, Klöters' position as both cabaret historian and comedian is remarkable: he was himself a member of Don Quishocking, a cabaret group that embodied the type of cabaret that Neerlands Hoop opposed.

259 For instance, Wim Ibo criticised the amateurish style of the satirical television show Zo is 't toevallig ook nog 'ns een keer (VARA, 1963–1966). He called the makers 'astute individuals who read out their critical comments from a piece of paper in front of a television camera' ('scherpzinnige particulieren die hun kritische commentaar voor een TV-camera van een papiertje aflazen'), and contrasted them with 'professional' cabaret artists, such as Wim Kan (Ibo, 1970: 20).

criticised his amateurism. In contrast to the transgressive humour of cabaret groups such as Lurelei, Neerlands Hoop presented puns, sick jokes, and absurd humour, combined with rock music. Moreover, with their physical appearance – most notably their long hair – de Jonge and Vermeulen were immediately recognisable as members of a rebellious and progressive youth culture. Their performances often had the character of political happenings or rock concerts, with loud, long-haired youngsters in the audience. Moreover, 'Bram and Freek' (as they were soon to be called) broke with codes of collegiality by making belittling remarks about colleagues in interviews and arrogantly presenting themselves as top of the bill, even at the beginning of their career (e.g., Pâques, 1969). This oppositional attitude is reflected in their work, and helps us to understand its politics and aesthetics.

While Neerlands Hoop is, up to the present day, remembered for their protest songs and political activism, the equally important part played by nonsense humour, metacommentary, and parodies of protest cabaret has been largely forgotten (Zijp, 2018). In their third show, *Plankenkoorts* (Stage Fright, 1972), Neerlands Hoop took their metacommentary on cabaret to the next level. The show was written for, and performed at, the Holland Festival, an international theatre festival launched in 1947 and based in Amsterdam. In the context of this experimental theatre festival, Neerlands Hoop presented a metareflection on the arts of theatre and comedy, a show announced as 'parody parade'[260] (Neerlands Hoop in Bange Dagen, 1972; van Bueren, 1972). For instance, de Jonge parodied a blasé comedian who wore a straw hat and presented awful jokes (a reference to pre-war comedian and lyrical singer, Lou Bandy, 1890–1959).

The show also contained a mock protest song about the Wadden Islands. With this song, Neerlands Hoop responded to the rising awareness of environmental damage in general, and that of the Wadden Islands in particular. In 1972, environmental awareness was increased through the publication of *The Limits of Growth* by The Club of Rome, which predicted that economic growth would lead to environmental collapse (Buelens, 2022). In the Dutch context, the Wadden Islands were of particular concern. In the 1960s and 1970s, land reclamation projects put the Wadden Sea under 'heavy environmental pressure' (Enemark et al., 2018), which led to ever stronger calls to protect the islands in the early 1970s ('Actie voor,' 1972).[261]

260 'Parodieën Parade [sic].'

261 The Wadden area was threatened by both oil drilling and mass tourism, among other things (ANP, 1972; 'Wel sterfte,' 1972).

In 'Het Waddenlied' (The Wadden Song), Neerlands Hoop, like Drs. P/Kabaret Ivo de Wijs, employs strategies of absurd humour to destabilise the language and logic of the protest song. For instance, a seemingly serious call to action ("However we are gathered here / From moderate left to radical / We must fight for the Wadden / For the sake of all"[262]) (Neerlands Hoop in Bange Dagen, 1972) is followed by increasingly weird descriptions of different groups ("From clubfoot to limp / From raving mad to schizophrenic"[263]), which mock the language of protest through a strategy of absurdist escalation. But 'Het Waddenlied' differs from 'Demonstreren' in that it presents a more explicit metacommentary on protest cabaret, in line with the meta-theatrical tone adopted by the show as a whole. De Jonge and Vermeulen do not so much ridicule the environmental protection of the Wadden Islands, but the way in which a fictional cabaret group called Dubbel en Dwars (a name that itself reads as a parody of the silly names of student cabaret groups of the time[264]) performs a seemingly sincere, but scarcely convincing protest song.[265]

By choosing a political cause that almost everybody is supposed to be in favour of, and making a scarcely convincing song about this serious issue, Neerlands Hoop ridicules the cabaretesque protest song as a gratuitous form of political engagement. The song does not make a serious case for the Wadden Islands, but diverts attention by playing with, and destabilising, the language of the protest song, e.g., by presenting a form of verbal slapstick in the middle part through a story about the dangers of wading through the mud flats, which may lead to an emergency situation in which one gets stuck in a sandbank. Then, this effect is made explicit through a warning that the song may divert attention from a solemn political cause: "I could go on like this for hours / Until you think, 'he is such a bore' / Your attention would wane / That would be to the detriment of the Wadden."[266] By playing the role of a comedian who makes it seem like he is

262 "Hoe wij hier dan ook bijeen zijn / Van gematigd links tot radicaal / We moeten strijden voor de Wadden / In het belang van allemaal."

263 "Van horrelvoet tot slecht ter been / Van knettergek tot schizofreen." Such ableist jokes are typical of Neerlands Hoop's transgressive humour.

264 The Dutch expression 'dubbel en dwars' means 'more than his share,' e.g., 'hij heeft het dubbel en dwars verdiend' (he deserves more than his share). In this context, however, it also refers to the double nature of cabaret as both a form of entertainment (as in the expression 'dubbel van het lachen' or 'doubling up with laughter'), and social criticism (with 'dwars' meaning contrary). The name reads as a parody of the fashion among student cabaret groups to adopt silly names that play on words, e.g., Don Quishocking.

265 This parodic, citational play was continued when, eight years later, an actual cabaret group with the name 'Dubbel en Dwars' was established by Jack Spijkerman (b. 1948), Arie van der Wulp (b. 1954), and Joop van Dijk (b. 1957). The name pays homage to Neerlands Hoop and Freek de Jonge, of whom the group's leader Jack Spijkerman was a great admirer (critics have also called him an epigone). See van den Hanenberg and Verhallen, 1996: 127-128.

266 "Zo kan ik nog wel uren doorgaan / Totdat u denkt: 'Wat een O.H. [ouwehoer] is dat' / Uw aandacht zou daardoor verslappen / Dat zou ten koste gaan van 't wad."

committed to a political cause, while actually diverting attention away from it and clowning around, Freek de Jonge/Neerlands Hoop suggest that protest cabaret is not just ridiculous and nonsensical, a mere play on form, but also hypocritical, a form of make-believe that is not seriously committed to social change but just pretends to be, and may even work against its cause.[267]

While Neerlands Hoop – in line with their oppositional attitude and their status as a young and upcoming cabaret duo in the early 1970s – framed their parodies of protest cabaret as an attack on the work of others, Don Quishocking's anti-protest song, 'Dankzij het cabaret' (Thanks to cabaret, 1976), ridicules the pretensions of protest cabaret through self-mockery. Don Quishocking (1967–1980) was the cabaret ensemble of Fred Florusse (b. 1938), George Groot (b. 1942), Anke Groot (1941–2010), Jacques Klöters (b. 1946), and Pieter van Empelen (1943–2017).[268] In terms of style, their work was closer to Kabaret Ivo de Wijs than to Neerlands Hoop: they combined a somewhat old-fashioned style, characterised by close-harmony singing and a carefully thought out *mise-en-scène*, with more shocking content, e.g., through a song in which they broke the taboo about mentioning the word 'cancer.' Don Quishocking is one of the best remembered protest cabaret groups of the 1970s, and has often been parodied as such by later comedians, in particular because of their combination of traditional style and transgressive content, which offers ample opportunities for creating comic incongruities (see the second part of this chapter).

However, Don Quishocking was not simply the socially and politically engaged cabaret group that so many people remember them to have been. Rather, they began to parody themselves before others had the chance to do so. The name of the group, a pun on the words 'Don Quixote' and 'shocking,' already plays with, and raises questions about, the extent to which comedians are able to change the world through an aesthetic of shock. In 1976, these questions became the subject of an anti-protest song in which Don Quishocking mocked their status as a cabaret ensemble that was, at that time, already well-established and known for their social and political engagement. 'Dankzij het cabaret,' performed at the

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267 The playful absurdity of this song differs from the more cynical tone adopted by another anti-protest song of Neerlands Hoop: 'Ik doe aan cabaret' (I'm doing cabaret), which was part of the show, Neerlands Hoop in Panama (1971). In this song, different reasons for making cabaret are summed up, through which politically engaged comedians are unmasked as hypocrites who are just in it for the money and care more about form than political content ('Because it's far from here / And I don't miss a single Brazilian [...] Because I still have something to do / And far too little money [...] Because it's such a nice form / And the interest is enormous [...] I'm doing cabaret') ('Omdat het hier ver vandaan is / En ik geen ene Braziliaan mis [...] Omdat ik nog iets te doen heb / En nog veel te weinig poen heb [...] Omdat het zo'n fijne vorm is / En de belangstelling enorm is [...] Doe ik aan cabaret') (Verhallen, 2018b: 36-37).

268 Van Empelen was temporarily replaced by Willem-Jan Gevers (b. 1950).

end of their production, *Afscheidstournee I* (Farewell Tour I, 1976), is framed as a response to critics who believed political engagement to be gratuitous and without real-world consequences:

> Many people believe that cabaret
> Nowadays is just about being funny
> Yes, we often hear the sharp reproach
> That we all suffer from a non-committal attitude
> That a comedian does talk about everything
> But leaves the rest to someone else
> That a lot of misery is touched upon
> But that that misery is not stopped[269] (Don Quishocking, 1977)

What follows is an ironic defence of their own achievements as a politically engaged cabaret group:

> Oh, how we scalded the Vietnam War
> We mocked America
> And, yes, peace came
> We gave Nixon a piece of our minds
> Until he deposed himself
> Well then I don't have to tell you anything
> That's because of cabaret, that's because of cabaret[270] (Don Quishocking, 1977)

Don Quishocking's 'Dankzij het cabaret' is playful and ambiguous in its reflection on protest cabaret. On the one hand, the song points to the quixotic nature of protest humour, and thus questions humour as an effective means of protest. By claiming that they had been able to put an end to the Vietnam War, the group mocked their own pretensions as a socially and politically engaged cabaret group with the power to effect social change through humour, while also framing their song as a broader criticism of humour-as-protest. The song closes by mocking the unsuccessful attempts of fellow comedians to protest against the authorities, and in particular mentions Wim Kan's failed efforts to oppose the unofficial visit of Japanese emperor Hirohito to Queen Juliana in 1971. This visit inspired the otherwise moderate and not-so-protest-minded Kan to write a bitter protest song about the atrocities for which Hirohito was responsible, and of which Kan himself had been a victim, in

269 "Vele mensen denken dat het cabaret / Enkel nog maar oog heeft voor de dolle pret / Ja, wij horen dikwijls het scherpe verwijt /Dat wij allen lijden aan vrijblijvendheid / Dat een cabaretier wel over alles praat / Maar het voor de rest aan een ander overlaat / Dat aan veel ellende wel even wordt geraakt / Maar dat aan die ellende geen einde wordt gemaakt."

270 "Wat hebben we niet gescholden op die oorlog in Vietnam / We hebben gespot met Amerika / Nou mooi dat er vrede kwam / We gaven Nixon op zijn vet / Tot 'ie zichzelf heeft afgezet / Dan hoef ik u toch niets meer te vertellen / Dat komt door het cabaret, dat komt door het cabaret."

World War Two (Ibo, 1976: 63). Despite the fact that Kan's protest was not well received, Don Quishocking's ironic remark that Kan's attempt had in fact been very successful because Hirohito never came back again, was greeted with applause.

On the other hand, the song can be read as mocking critics who believe that political engagement is only meaningful when it brings about direct political change, thereby pointing out that those critics have pitched their expectations too high. The ambiguity of the song was further enhanced through a television performance. When Don Quishocking was invited by cabaret producer Wim Ibo to perform the song in a television show, the Protestant broadcaster NCRV took offence at a line in which Dries van Agt – then Minister of Justice and leader of the Catholic Party KVP – was referred to as a "sycophant,"[271] demanding that the line be deleted. Jacques Klöters, one of Don Quishocking's members, mockingly suggested to bleep the line out instead, which was the final solution chosen (van den Hanenberg, 2008: 99–100).[272] By making this act of censorship audible for the television audience, another layer was added to the song, representing both the power of cabaret to provoke the authorities, and the possible failure of those protests to be heard and acted upon.

Protest as fashion trend

My fourth and final example, is a song from the mid-1980s, written by Robert Long and performed by Jenny Arean. Although Robert Long (1943–2006) was a member of the religious pop band, Unit Gloria (until 1971), in his early career, he would become famous for his anti-bourgeois and anti-religious cabaret songs in the mid-1970s. He experienced his breakthrough with the release of his Dutch solo album, *Vroeger of later* (Sooner or later) in 1974.[273] Between 400,000 and 500,000 copies were sold, despite boycotts by (mostly religious) broadcasters ('Vroeger of later'). Long was the first Dutch comedian and singer who openly spoke and sung about being gay, in contrast with earlier comedians, such as Wim Sonneveld and André van Duin, who felt forced to hide their sexual orientation from the public (see Chapter 5). *Vroeger of later* presented both lyrical and satirical songs, which voiced Long's experiences as a gay person from a Dutch Reformed background, a topic that Long expanded upon in later albums and in his cabaret shows. With famous protest songs such as 'Jezus redt' (Jesus saves, 1974), Long came to be seen as an important representative of the protest cabaret of the 1970s (Ibo, 1982: 216).

While initially praised for his protest songs, in the early 1980s, Long became increasingly criticised in left-wing circles for appearing on commercial

271 "slijmbal."

272 Don Quishocking performed the song in the television show, De tijd stond even stil (Time stopped for a moment), in December 1977 (van den Hanenberg, 2008: 99).

273 The title of the album is an Anglicism, a nod towards Long's previous career as a (quite successful) pop singer of English songs ('Vroeger of later').

television as a presenter of game shows, for writing a column for the centrist newspaper, *Algemeen Dagblad,* and for sympathising with the Church (van den Hanenberg and Verhallen, 1996: 107). It was around the same time that Long wrote an anti-protest song for Jenny Arean's first solo cabaret show, *Gescheiden vrouw op oorlogspad* (Divorced woman on the warpath, 1985). In the early 1980s, Jenny Arean (b. 1942) was already an established actress and performer, having played roles in different theatre and musical productions. Like many female comedians of the time, Arean did not write herself, but commissioned other (mostly male) writers and comedians to write songs and sketches for her.

The song 'Bevrijden' (Liberating, 1985) stages a woman who wants to "liberate" herself, but does not yet know from what, because she does not feel oppressed in any way. The lyrics, in combination with Arean's over-the-top performance, help to portray the female narrator as pathetic, and to ridicule social protest and its promise of liberation as being a stupid fashion trend ("But I have to find something quickly / To take a stand against / Because you don't count in our society / Without a problem"[274]) ('Bevrijden,' 2009). The portrayal of a particular social phenomenon as a mere fashion trend is an oft-used comic strategy in Dutch cabaret (see Chapter 4). 'Bevrijden' is, in particular, reminiscent of the opening song of Lurelei's *Reldereldere*l (1966), in which rioting is mocked as the latest fashion trend (Blom, 1995). While Lurelei responded to Provo and the protest climate of the mid-1960s, 'Bevrijden' reads as a response to the mass protests against nuclear weapons in the early 1980s (the song references, for instance, the peace activist and initiator of mass demonstrations against nuclear weapons, Mient Jan Faber), as well as to the feminist movement.

In line with the anti-protest songs discussed above, 'Bevrijden' turns increasingly absurd. In the second part, the female narrator proposes suicide as the best solution to the suffering of the oppressed, and decides to start a business to help minorities end their lives. By adopting this mode of absurd humour, the song remains ambiguous about its serious engagement with protest and emancipation, especially in relation to feminism.

On the one hand, by ridiculing protest as a mere fashion trend and provocatively advising feminists (and others who fight against their oppression) to kill themselves ("Anyone who has a problem / Just cuts their wrists [...] Penis envy? Castration anxiety? / Don't worry any longer, grab a knife!"[275]), the song ridicules feminists for posing as victims and reinforces the trope of the feminist

274 "Maar ik moet wel snel iets vinden / Waar ik stelling tegen neem / Want je telt in onze samenleving / Niet zonder probleem."

275 "Iedereen die een probleem heeft / Snijdt gewoon de polsen door [...] Penisnijd? Castratieangst? / Tob niet langer, pak een mes!"

killjoy (Ahmed, 2012). On the other hand, the solution proposed is downright absurd, and the final result of this unorthodox method ("The mess remains / But you are gone!"[276]) reveals this to be not a true solution at all. Moreover, the song is presented in the context of a show that, as a whole, is not at all anti-feminist. Significantly entitled *Gescheiden vrouw op oorlogspad* (Divorced woman on the warpath), Arean's solo show portrays different female characters who struggle with, and try to liberate themselves from, their male partners. The show deals with the tension between being caught in unequal relationships in a patriarchal society, and the feelings of loneliness and despair that may be the result of abandoning those relationships altogether (Knirrep, 1985), which resonates with feminist sensibilities of the 1970s and 1980s.[277] Against this backdrop, 'Bevrijden' may be read as giving expression to such feelings of loneliness and despair, and as a reflection on the mechanism by which women may turn the violence that they have to endure in a patriarchal society against themselves. Hence, rather than presenting a straightforward critique of feminism or any other social movement, 'Bevrijden' plays with and destabilises the language and rhetoric of protest from a meta-position through a mode of absurd humour: the song both ridicules protest as a mere fashion trend, and also gives expression to feelings of alienation and isolation experienced by women in a patriarchal society. Interestingly, in interviews, Arean tended to deny that the show was politically engaged, stating that:

> No, it has not become a politically engaged show, but I also wouldn't know what to take a stand against. The bomb, cruise missiles – yes, I'm opposed to them – and against flats and against obscurity and bargaining, but it's childish to shout that from the rooftops.[278] (Löwenhardt, 1985)

Furthermore, the ambiguity of Arean's humour enabled critics to interpret the show according to their own tastes and preoccupations. This is demonstrated by the reviews by (mostly male) critics who expressed relief that the show was not openly feminist. For instance, critic Henk van der Meulen, adopting quite a conservative tone, argued that:

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276 "De rotzooi blijft / Maar jij bent weg!"

277 See, for instance, the Dutch feminist classic, De schaamte voorbij (Beyond Shame), by Anja Meulenbelt (Meulenbelt, 1976), in which she describes both her professional and personal struggles as (intersectional) feminist activist, including her attempts to maintain relationships with men and women.

278 'Nee, het is geen politiek-geëngageerd programma geworden, maar ik zou ook niet weten waar ik stelling tegen zou willen nemen. Tegen de bom, tegen kruisraketten, dat ben ik, en tegen flats en tegen onduidelijkheid en marchanderen, maar het is toch kinderachtig om dat van de daken te schreeuwen.'

> A show with the ominous title 'Divorced woman on the warpath' and quite a few women in the audience without male accompaniment – no wonder that on entering, one fears an evening of male-unfriendly feminism of the most militant kind. But fortunately, these misgivings were not confirmed this time. (van der Meulen, 1985)[279]

Likewise, Jacques d'Ancona praised Arean for her lack of political engagement. WHe remarked:

> Jenny Arean develops a kind of militancy in her own way, without associating herself with a minority or an action group. The gruesome, perfunctory pseudo-engagement of many cabaret groups is fortunately alien to her.[280] (d'Ancona, 1985)

In his next paragraph, d'Ancona cited 'Bevrijden' as an example of a song that has 'a kind of militancy,' but does not 'associate itself with a minority or action group.' The song's ambiguity thus allowed critics to foreground the anti-protest sentiments expressed by it, whilst ignoring the more complex and layered feminist critique offered by the song (and the show as a whole).

Nonsense cabaret

Although political engagement was a charged and debated topic in the cabaret field of the 1960s and 1970s, in retrospect, and in response to the rise of a new generation of comedians in whose work an older generation did not recognise themselves, the 1960s and 1970s were increasingly romanticised as the heyday of political cabaret. Many critics, often belonging to the protest generation themselves, began to criticise cabaret in the 1980s and 1990s for its presumed turn away from politics. For example, comedian and theatre scholar, Jacques Klöters, a former member of cabaret group Don Quishocking, argued that irony and nonsense had become dominant modes of humour in the early 1980s (Klöters, 1987: 342-344), as opposed to the political engagement of the preceding decades. Looking back on post-war cabaret, at the turn of the millennium, Klöters summarised his observations thus:

> People today do not go to cabaret to hear what someone thinks of something, but to experience what someone is like. The questions that today's comedian seems to ask himself in his shows are: "who am I, what do I want, what is holding me back, what do I think, how do I feel and what should I do?" The engagement with society that was so

279 'Een programma met als dreigende titel "Gescheiden vrouw op oorlogspad" en in de zaal nogal wat vrouwen zonder mannelijke begeleiding – geen wonder dat je bij binnenkomst vreest een avondje vol manonvriendelijk feminisme van het strijdbaarste soort te zullen moeten ondergaan. Maar de bange voorgevoelens kregen ditmaal gelukkig geen bevestiging.'

280 'Op haar wijze ontwikkelt Jenny Arean een soort strijdbaarheid, zonder dat ze zich associeert met een minderheid of een actiegroep. Het griezelige, plichtmatige schijn-engagement van veel cabaretgroepjes is haar gelukkig vreemd.'

> striking in the 1960s and 1970s has been succeeded by playful nonsense, irony, and therapeutic-seeming self-centeredness.[281] (Klöters, 1999: 36)

Likewise, in their history of cabaret, covering the period from 1970 to 1995, Patrick van den Hanenberg and Frank Verhallen pointed to the rise of 'nonsense cabaret' in the early 1980s, a type of comedy that they associated with the work of Brigitte Kaandorp (b. 1962), Herman Finkers (b. 1954), and Bert Visscher (b. 1960) (among others), who challenged expectations of cabaret as a critical form of comedy by presenting 'mere' entertainment (van den Hanenberg and Verhallen, 1996).[282] The rise of this so-called 'nonsense cabaret' has generally been portrayed negatively. Both Klöters and van den Hanenberg and Verhallen couch their analysis in negative terms, as illustrated by Klöters' pejoratively connoted description of cabaret as 'therapeutic-seeming self-centeredness.'[283]

The refusal of comedians such as Brigitte Kaandorp and Herman Finkers to present social and political criticism indeed sets them apart from protest cabaret. However, the nonsense humour of the 1980s was not entirely new. While Klöters, to some extent, acknowledges this by tracing its roots in the absurdist television comedy of Wim T. Schippers in the 1970s, I will argue that nonsense cabaret is also indebted to protest cabaret, with which it shares a mode of absurdist humour, and

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281 'Men gaat tegenwoordig niet meer naar het cabaret om te horen wat iemand van iets vindt, maar om mee te maken hoe iemand is. De vragen die de huidige cabaretier zich in zijn programma's lijkt te stellen, zijn: "wie ben ik, wat wil ik, wat houdt me tegen, wat vind ik, hoe voel ik me en wat moet ik doen." Het engagement met de samenleving dat in de jaren zestig en zeventig zo opvallend was, is in het cabaret in de periode daarna opgevolgd door speelse nonsens, ironie, en therapeutisch aandoende ik-gerichtheid.'

282 While van den Hanenberg and Verhallen use the term 'nonsense cabaret' to refer to a particular form of cabaret that became popular in the early 1980s without suggesting that all cabaret of the time turned into apolitical nonsense, the authors still tend to see cabaret of the 1980s and early 1990s as less politically engaged, as emphasised by the title of a chapter on political cabaret of the 1980s/1990s: 'Critical… but we keep it casual' ('Kritisch… maar we houden het luchtig').

283 Some critics took a more nuanced approach, and pointed to the rise of new forms of engagement, often referred to as 'personal' engagement. For instance, Hilde Scholten observes: 'From the 1980s, themes in cabaret underwent a significant change. Protest, social criticism and political engagement, testified to in cabaret for years, largely disappeared. In their place came a more autobiographical content and a more personal engagement' ('Vanaf de jaren tachtig ondergingen de thema's in het cabaret een aanzienlijke verandering. Protest, maatschappijkritiek en politieke betrokkenheid, waar men in het cabaret jarenlang van had getuigd, verdwenen grotendeels. Er kwam een meer autobiografische inhoud en een persoonlijker engagement voor in de plaats') (Scholten, 1995: 12). The term 'personal engagement,' which seems to have been introduced and popularised by cabaret critic Frank Verhallen in the early 1990s (I did not find earlier occurrences of the term in the context of cabaret), was meant to suggest that personal cabaret is not necessarily apolitical, because personal storytelling can be a way to engage with the world as well. However, this term works to set up an opposition between 'political' and 'personal' engagement, which, especially in a cabaret field where personal approaches have often been discredited as shallow and narcissistic, easily comes to signify a lesser or immature form of engagement.

an inclination to mock social protest and to parody protest songs. Hence, 'nonsense cabaret,' which is considered typical of the 1980s and 1990s, should not be understood as forging a radical break with the past, but rather as a more radical manifestation of the anti-protest sentiments of a previous generation. I will demonstrate this by presenting an analysis of three anti-protest songs from the 1980s and 1990s, and comparing them with the songs analysed in the first part of this chapter.

My first example is Brigitte Kaandorp's 'Protestlied' (Protest song) from this comedian's debut performance, *Waar gaat zij helemaal alleen heen?* (Where is she going all by herself?, 1984). Brigitte Kaandorp (b. 1962) is a female comedian who won festival Cameretten in 1983 with a combination of nonsensical songs and personal anecdotes. She cultivated an amateurish and clumsy style, somewhat reminiscent of the early Freek de Jonge. However, the comic persona crafted by Kaandorp differs from the cleverer and more politically informed personae created by comedians and cabaret groups of the 1970s. Kaandorp opposed a cabaret tradition in which one was supposed to break taboos and be anti-bourgeois by staging herself as a housewife who hardly ever left her bourgeois home. She dressed up as an ugly duckling, wearing floral dresses and with a short haircut, played silly songs on the ukulele, and made mostly self-deprecating jokes. She confessed, both on and off stage, to know nothing about politics and to have a hard time understanding a comedian such as Freek de Jonge (van den Hanenberg and Verhallen, 1996: 174-175).

In line with her self-deprecating jokes and self-fashioning as a dumb girl, Kaandorp's early work has often been evaluated in belittling (and gendered) terms. For instance, van den Hanenberg and Verhallen wrote:

> Talking nonsense and singing pleasantly stupid songs, that's the simple assignment Kaandorp gave herself. She turns out to be an irresistible babbler, for whom the world seems to stop at the end of the street…[284] (van den Hanenberg and Verhallen, 1996: 175)

Kaandorp's 'Protestlied' is often cited as an explicit statement against political cabaret, which would set her work apart from that of previous generations (van den Hanenberg and Verhallen, 1996: 175). Yet, the 'Protestlied' resembles the anti-protest songs of the 1970s. Kaandorp introduces the song by explaining that as a comedian, one is supposed to sing protest songs, but that she does not like protest that much. She continues that, as a solution, she has made a protest song that deals with all pressing social issues at once. Thereby, she frames her song as a parody of protest cabaret, and as a response to critics who complained that

284 'Onzin uitkramen en aangenaam stomme liedjes zingen, zo luidt de simpele opdracht die Kaandorp zichzelf heeft meegegeven. Ze ontpopt zich tot een onweerstaanbare kwebbelaarster, voor wie de wereld aan het eind van de straat lijkt op te houden…'

cabaret had become 'mere entertainment' (a line of critique playfully cited in Don Quishocking's 'Dankzij het cabaret' as well).

The tone and style of the song itself are also reminiscent of earlier examples of anti-protest songs, with which Kaandorp's 'Protestlied' shares a mode of absurdist humour. The song describes, in random fashion, everyday situations that can be related to bigger social problems. At the end of each line, Kaandorp attaches a label to the situation just described, which links it to a social issue, for instance:

> My brother finally left home
> Out of poverty he squatted (house shortage)
> By battering rams, tear gas and hammers
> He became disabled (increasing brutality of police actions).[285] ('Protestlied,' 2008)

Kaandorp delivers the song in deadpan style: she dryly sums up the most horrible situations and attaches social labels to them in asides (the text in parentheses in the stanza quoted above), thereby making this seemingly autobiographical story feel implausible and strange. The all-but-dramatic tone and mood of the song (which contrast with its content) is further strengthened by the fact that Kaandorp plays the song on a ukulele (an anything but solemn instrument) while wearing a floral dress. The stanzas are accompanied by somewhat dramatic music (in a minor key), comically contrasting with the cheerful music of the chorus (in a major key), which presents a rather pessimistic message ("I am ill and you are dying / Of mercury poisoning or lead"[286]). By setting up a comic contrast between deadpan delivery and pessimistic content, Kaandorp not only performs her disinterest in politics and lack of political engagement, but also mocks the cabaretesque protest song for being contrived and insincere, a formulaic way of dealing with social and political problems while pretending to be personally involved. By mocking protest cabaret for randomly summing up social and political problems, for touching upon them without truly caring about them, Kaandorp continues a line of critique that was initiated by the anti-protest songs in the 1970s. With these songs, Kaandorp's song also shares a comic strategy of absurdist escalation: while the labels attached to the personal experiences of the narrator refer to serious social and political issues at first, they become increasingly absurd ("Little by little I'm balding (cancer) / Also I miss an ear on one side (van Gogh)").[287]

While Kaandorp's anti-protest humour has often been discredited as apolitical nonsense, contextualising her work within a longer history of anti-

285 "Mijn broer moest nu eindelijk op kamers / Uit armoede heeft hij gekraakt (woningnood) / Door stormrammen, traangas en hamers / Is hij invalide geraakt (verharding van het politie-optreden)."
286 "Ik ben ziek en jij gaat dood / Aan kwikvergifting of lood."
287 "Zo zoet aan begin ik te kalen (kanker) / Ook mis ik aan één kant een oor (Van Gogh)."

protest humour leads to a different conclusion. In line with anti-protest songs from older-generation comedians, Kaandorp's 'Protestlied' does not present a direct, satirical attack on authority figures (e.g., a politician or the Church), but rather plays with and destabilises the language of the protest song, thereby expressing social critique through the more indirect and seemingly apolitical mode of absurdist humour. Kaandorp's song not only parodies protest cabaret, but also mocks the no-future pessimism of the early 1980s, in which nuclear war loomed ahead and the overall mood was grim. Kaandorp comically exaggerates this no-future pessimism in the first stanza of the song:

> It's all so much worse than it was
> It's all over quickly
> It's no longer here and not yonder
> We are as good as dead I think.[288] ('Protestlied, 2008)

In the course of the song, the labels referring to social problems, such as the housing shortage, environmental pollution, and loneliness among the elderly, are replaced by labels that comment on the bleak mood of both the song itself and the social climate of the times: "it's all getting worse,"[289] "general pessimism,"[290] and "doom-mongering"[291]. Thereby, Kaandorp suggests that the problem is not (only) reality itself, but (also) the pessimistic way in which reality is framed, both by the often pessimistic protest cabaret of the late 1970s and early 1980s,[292] and within society at large.

Postmodern pastiche

My second example is taken from *Sex* (1996), the debut performance of De Vliegende Panters or 'The Flying Panters' (1995–2007), the former cabaret group of Diederik Ebbinge (b. 1969), Remko Vrijdag (b. 1972), and Rutger de Bekker (b. 1972). Ebbinge, Vrijdag, and de Bekker met at the Kleinkunstacademie in Amsterdam, and quickly rose to fame after winning the Amsterdams Kleinkunst Festival in 1995. Their shows presented a quick succession of songs and sketches, which offered a mix of absurd and transgressive humour, and were thereby reminiscent of the work of Hans Teeuwen (see Chapter 1). Cabaret critic, Henk van Gelder, coined

288 "Het is allemaal zoveel minder / Het is allemaal zo voorbij / Het is niet meer hier en niet ginder / We zijn praktisch dood volgens mij."
289 "het wordt allemaal minder."
290 "algemeen pessimisme."
291 "doemdenken."
292 The worrisome tone of protest cabaret of the late 1970s is reflected in the work of both Neerlands Hoop and Don Quishocking (see also Don Quishocking's television special from the late 1970s, discussed in the next section). A song that represents the somber tone of protest cabaret in the early 1980s is Jan Boerstoel's 'Van de gekken' (1982), made famous through Adèle Bloemendaal's version from the early 1990s ('Adèle Bloemendaal,' 1998).

the term 'zap-cabaret' (van Gelder, 1996) to typify their work. This term refers to the fragmented character of their shows, which created an experience of 'zapping' between television channels. The way in which De Vliegende Panters mixed up styles and genres contributed to this experience. Their shows abounded with playful citations of media and pop culture, including many references to socially and politically engaged Dutch comedians. In *Sex,* De Vliegende Panters presented pastiches of comedians and *chansonniers,* Herman van Veen (b. 1945) and Stef Bos (b. 1961), and a hard-rock version of the title song of Annie M.G. Schmidt's comic television series for children, *Ja zuster, nee zuster* (Yes nurse, no nurse, 1966–1968). In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the anti-protest song 'Sarajewo' [*sic*] (Sarajevo, 1996), the title of which refers to the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, at that time the epicentre of the bloody Bosnian War. In this song, De Vliegende Panters stage a fictitious cabaret group that sings a protest song about the atrocities of war.

This anti-protest song is typical of the postmodern aesthetic of their work. First, 'Sarajewo' does not so much present a parody of protest cabaret, but rather a postmodern pastiche. While cabaret groups such as Neerlands Hoop and Don Quishocking made their work in a period that knew a lively protest culture, in which these comedians themselves (to some extent) participated, De Vliegende Panters operated in the post-political climate of the 1990s, in which protest was generally considered to be something of the past. Hence, De Vliegende Panters approached protest cabaret as one among many styles and genres they could cite from. 'Sarajewo' thereby qualifies as a pastiche, described by Frederic Jameson as a postmodern play with the dead styles of the past, which conveys a general image of 'pastness' without presenting direct social or political criticism (Jameson, 1997: 18-19).

Second, the song gives expression to the experience of living in a mediatised society in which images lead a life of their own and seem to function as 'simulacra' (Baudrillard, 1994). The song stages the failed attempt of a cabaret group to perform a serious protest song. While Ebbinge desperately tries to share his concerns about the horrific images of war that he has seen on the news, the others constantly interrupt him with unimportant details. The song starts thus:

Ebbinge: Nineteen... ninety-eight
Images burn on my retina
Vrijdag: No, that's your cornea
De Bekker: No, the retina
Vrijdag: Oh right, the retina indeed.[293] ('Sarajewo,' 2003)

293 'Ebbinge: Negentien...achtennegentig / Beelden branden op m'n netvlies / Vrijdag: Nee, dat is je hoornvlies / De Bekker: Nee, je netvlies / Vrijdag: O ja, toch je netvlies.'

Rather than engaging with the bloody wars these images refer to, this cabaret group ends up having a discussion about the way these images are processed by the human eye. This sets the tone for the rest of the song, in which the performers squabble about the names of news anchors, and the correct way to pronounce the names of conflict zones (e.g., "Chechnya"[294]). The song thereby calls up a world of simulacra, in which images do not seem to refer to anything other than themselves and the experience of watching. In so doing, De Vliegende Panters also capture the experience of living in what Guy Debord has called the 'society of the spectacle,' in which we consume the world as a series of images from which we are alienated (Debord, 1984). This staging of the alienated (television) viewer is in line with (and adds another layer to) van Gelder's description of the experience afforded by the work of De Vliegende Panters as 'zap cabaret.'

But 'Sarajewo' also stands within a longer tradition of anti-protest humour. First, it shares with this tradition a mode of absurdist humour, in which situations quickly escalate and thereby divert attention from the serious causes of the protest. Second, the song not only comments on a mediatised society in which watching horrible news images has become a daily routine, which makes it hard to be affected by the reality these images refer to, but also mocks protest cabaret and political engagement as being gratuitous and insincere. This point is made explicit at the end of the song, when the fictional cabaret group mockingly states that they are "so engaged"[295] and "so honest,"[296] which is immediately undercut by their refusal to even try to remember the names of conflict zones ("In Sarajevo, oh wait Rwanda and Chechnya / Well I don't know"[297]).

Finally, 'Sarajewo' reads as a pastiche of cabaret group Don Quishocking. Through their acting and *mise-en-scène*, De Vliegende Panters imitate Don Quishocking's style. They specifically (and tellingly) cite a television special of this group's work, originally broadcast on 3 November 1980 ('Zolang het,' 2007). Because most of Don Quishocking's shows were not recorded for television, and this special represents one of the few television recordings of their work, excerpts from this special have been broadcast many times.[298] De Vliegende Panters parody the *mise-en-scène* of Don Quishocking's television performance, with the group members sitting around the piano, while they switch between carefully rehearsed theatrical poses. Moreover, De Vliegende Panters playfully allude to the overall

294 "Tsjetsjenië."
295 "zo betrokken."
296 "zo integer."
297 "In Sarajevo, o nee Rwanda, en Tsjetsjenië / En weet ik veel."
298 This special was, however, not a recorded theatre show. Rather, it presented a selection of songs and sketches from Don Quishocking's work, performed in a television studio, and alternated with fragments from interviews with the group's members.

mood of the television special, which is rather pessimistic because of different songs and sketches about death. De Vliegende Panters mockingly refer to this bleak and melancholic tone in the closing line of their song ("And... everyone will die"[299]), performed in typical close-harmony style while adopting a solemn tone that does not fit in with the rest of the song. This existential remark can also, and in line with the logic of the pastiche, be read as the burial of an old-fashioned style of protest cabaret, which had at that time long passed its due date.

Protest or nonsense?

The comparison between 'protest' and 'nonsense' cabaret has so far demonstrated that the latter does not forge a radical break with the past, but draws from and continues its mode of absurd humour and playful anti-protest. I will close this chapter with an example of anti-protest humour that explicitly comments on the shared aesthetic logic of protest and nonsense cabaret, a television sketch that presents a pastiche of cabaret as a genre: 'Cabaret Brevet' (Cabaret Diploma, 1994). The sketch is taken from the mockumentary series *Kreatief met Kurk* (Creative with Cork, 1993–1994), written by Arjan Ederveen (b. 1956) and Tosca Niterink (b. 1960), and directed by Pieter Kramer (b. 1951). The series was produced for the VPRO, a broadcaster with a long history of experimental and absurdist humour. The sketch is part of an episode that playfully cites from the work of different comedians, and mocks them through absurdist comedy, e.g., in a sketch in which two employees of a fictional cabaret museum complain about comedian Jenny Arean, who supposedly keeps sending them personal items for their archives ('Cabaret,' 2007). Through such sketches, Ederveen and Niterink present a commentary on the cabaret boom of the 1980s and early 1990s, a time when cabaret experienced a steep rise in popularity and was at the same time increasingly criticised for having become 'mere' entertainment for a mass audience. Around the same time, the broadcast company, VARA, began to make cabaret more central to their programming strategy and, as a consequence, upcoming comedians gained more exposure on television than ever before. The VARA's broadcasting of several editions of the *Cabarestafette,* touring cabaret shows with a line-up of promising young comedians, contributed to the popularity of cabaret as a genre (Krans, 2005: 134-136).

Ederveen and Niterink were both educated at the Kleinkunstacademie in Amsterdam, where they were taught by theatre scholar and former member of Don Quishocking, Jacques Klöters. They were thus intimately familiar with the post-war cabaret tradition, which is reflected in their careful impersonations of past and present comedians throughout the episode. 'Cabaret Brevet' mocks the cabaret boom of the 1980s and 1990s through a format that is reminiscent of both a

299 "En... iedereen gaat dood."

cabaret festival (steadily growing in number at the time[300]) – and hence of a contest between comedians, with the winners being awarded a prize at the end – and the *Cabarestafette.* Ederveen and Niterink play with the conventions of televised cabaret by presenting short excerpts from cabaret performances, in which shots from the performers on stage are alternated with close-ups of laughing audience members (a convention that was already old-fashioned at the time, but had been quite common in television broadcasts of cabaret performances in the 1960s and 1970s; cf.,Voskuil, 2010). By using a strategy of fragmentation, Ederveen and Niterink create an experience of zapping between different television channels, as De Vliegende Panters would do a few years later. The postmodern aesthetic shared by De Vliegende Panters and Ederveen/Niterink plays out on another level as well: by showing only short fragments from cabaret performances *in medias res,* which, out of context, do not make much sense and are not particularly funny either, Ederveen and Niterink make familiar humour styles and vocabularies seem strange and artificial. The close-ups of laughing audience members in response to these rather unfunny performances contributes to the feelings of alienation that the sketch evokes.

It may seem as if Ederveen and Niterink's commentary on cabaret is in line with that of critics who criticised the new wave of 'nonsense cabaret' in the 1980s, as well as with much older critiques of a lack of professionalism among comedians of the new generations. Indeed, Ederveen and Niterink present pastiches of the nonsense cabaret of Brigitte Kaandorp and Bert Visscher. Moreover, the title of the sketch reads as an ironic commentary on the supposed level of skill of those incredibly popular comedians, in particular through the choice of the word 'brevet,' which literally means 'diploma': however, in Dutch, this word sounds old-fashioned and non-serious, and is mostly used in the expression 'een brevet van onvermogen krijgen/geven' (which translates as 'showing one's incompetence').

However, 'Cabaret Brevet' mocks not only the 'nonsense cabaret' of the 1980s and 1990s, but also the pretensions of protest cabaret. The final cabaret group shown to us during the sketch is a protest cabaret group called Paal en Perk[301], which closely

300 Cameretten had long been the only major Dutch cabaret festival. The other three leading festivals were established much later, in 1978 (Leids Cabaret Festival), 1987 (Groninger Studenten Cabaret Festival), and 1988 (Amsterdams Kleinkunst Festival).

301 The title of this fictional cabaret group reads as another mocking reference to the convention among protest cabaret groups of the 1970s to adopt silly names, which was already parodied by Neerlands Hoop (see the preceding discussion of their fictional cabaret group 'Dubbel en Dwars'). The name 'Paal en Perk' is derived from the Dutch expression 'paal en perk stellen aan,' which means 'putting a check on something,' an appropriate name for a protest cabaret group because it sounds critical and oppositional.

resembles groups such as Kabaret Ivo de Wijs, Don Quishocking, and Purper.[302] The spirit of these groups is evoked through a combination of supposedly provocative social critique and an old-fashioned professionalism. At the start of the scene, we witness two performers standing behind a microphone (a third one is sitting behind a piano), with their backs turned to the audience. Then, they turn around simultaneously, their white-gloved hands stylishly under their chins, and start singing a protest song. The first line of the song ("Hey there, soldier Jan / What are you doing there on the streets?"[303]) references an early and not very well-known song by Don Quishocking[304] and a song by Jaap Fischer from 1963 ('Jan Soldaat,' 1997), as well as a longer tradition of protest songs that glorify the figure of the soldier (e.g., 'Universal Soldier' by the Canadian singer-songwriter, Buffy Sainte-Marie, 1964).

By randomly naming conflict zones (Serbia, Bosnia, South-Africa) and even random words that sound serious and potentially critical, but do not really mean anything in the context of the song, Ederveen and Niterink mock protest cabaret for being a mere play on form, a form of nonsense packaged as social critique:

> Hey there, soldier Jan
> What are you doing there on the streets?
> In Serbia, in Bosnia,
> South-Africa, South-Africa
>
> No sir, thank you very much
> Apartheid is not in fashion anymore
> As of today, a new start
> From today on, everyone is apart
>
> Giro, bank card, eurocheque
> Pin code, cash machine
> Who is apart here?[305] ('Cabaret,' 2007)

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302 Purper (1980–present) is a cabaret ensemble in different constellations of typically four or five performers, with Frans Mulder (b. 1953) and Eric Brey (b. 1956) as key figures, which shares its traditional style (close-harmony singing, carefully thought-out mise-en-scène, and mild social criticism) with former cabaret groups, such as Kabaret Ivo de Wijs and Don Quishocking. They typically perform in dress suits, a convention playfully cited by Ederveen and Niterink in their sketch.

303 "Hé Jan Soldaat / Wat doe jij daar op straat?"

304 The song references the first lines of 'Heilsoldaat' (Salvation Army Soldier, 1969): 'Oh Salvation Army soldier, oh Salvation Army soldier / What are you doing out on the streets this late?' ('Oh heilsoldaat, oh heilsoldaat / Wat doe je nog zo laat op straat?') (Don Quishocking, cited by van den Hanenberg, 2008: 25).

305 "Hé Jan Soldaat / Wat doe je daar op straat / In Servië, in Bosnië / Zuid-Afrika, Zuid-Afrika / Nee meneer, ik dank u zeer / Apartheid is geen mode meer / Vanaf vandaag een nieuwe start / Vanaf vandaag is iedereen apart / Giro, bankpasje, eurocheque / Pincode, betaalautomaat / Wie is hier apart?"

The pastiche character of this anti-protest song is strengthened by the mixing-up of different genres, including that of the children's song ("No sir, thank you very much / The polka is not in fashion anymore," in which the word 'polka' is replaced by 'apartheid'). In doing so, Ederveen and Niterink mock politically engaged cabaret for being childish, gratuitous, and insincere, a mere summing up of social issues, while also mocking critics who prefer this type of cabaret over the 'mere' entertainment of nonsense cabaret (that is, we learn that Paal en Perk has been awarded the first prize and is thus preferred by the presumed festival jury over the nonsense cabaret of the other comedians).

By revealing the protest cabaret of Paal en Perk to be utter nonsense, and juxtaposing this protest cabaret group with impersonations of 'nonsense' comedians, such as Brigitte Kaandorp and Bert Visscher, whose comedy does not make a lot of sense either, Ederveen and Niterink deconstruct the opposition between political protest and ironic nonsense implied in histories of Dutch cabaret. Through a postmodern pastiche, both are revealed as being conventional and inauthentic, and as having more in common than is often believed. At the same time, while ridiculing cabaret from a meta-position, Ederveen and Niterink are not fully able to place themselves outside of the cabaret tradition that they parody. Their work neatly fits in with the so-called 'nonsense cabaret' of the time. Ederveen and Niterink's metacommentary on cabaret is not so much the exception, but rather the rule in a genre in which anti-protest often takes the form of a parody or pastiche of cabaret itself.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented a deconstruction of the image of the comedian as a 'progressive rebel' by questioning the idea that comedians – and in particular comedians from the protest generation, who began their careers in the 1960s and 1970s – are necessarily socially and politically engaged. To highlight the importance of this point for an understanding of Dutch cabaret up to the present day, I would like to briefly return to the opinion piece by Ruud Gortzak, discussed at the very beginning of this dissertation (Gortzak, 2017). In this article, the former cabaret critic – belonging to the protest generation himself – argued that Dutch cabaret had become increasingly superficial, and lacked the social and political engagement that it had been renowned for in previous decades. Gortzak's piece was a response to the announcement of a small-scale production by cabaret theatre, De Kleine Komedie, in Amsterdam, devoted to the genre of the protest song. The production played with the aesthetics of protest by referencing the 1960s and 1970s: the title of the production, *Want er komen andere tijden* (The Times They Are A-Changin'), made reference to Bob Dylan's canonical song and Boudewijn de Groot's Dutch adaptation of it, and many comedians of the 'protest generation' collaborated on

the production, e.g., Jacques Klöters (Don Quishocking) and Jenny Arean (cf., Zijp, 2017). According to Gortzak, the production made it seem like protest and political cabaret were still alive, which he believed was not the case.

Both Gortzak (in his opinion piece) and many comedians (in their critical responses) made reference to the 1960s and 1970s, which demonstrates that the impression of the 1960s and 1970s as a time of political cabaret is still alive. For some,this period was a source of inspiration, and for others, a period that they would not want to return to, but what everybody seemed to agree on, was that those were times of protest and political engagement. As this chapter has demonstrated, however, political engagement has never been an unproblematic category in Dutch cabaret. Hence, there is a certain irony to this discussion: while the twittering comedians cited in the introduction to this dissertation opposed (a particular version of) political engagement as being outdated and belonging to the 1970s, the discussion itself reads as a re-enactment of a debate on cabaret and political engagement that dates back to those times.[306]

By reconstructing the way in which comedians have intervened in this long-standing debate, both in their media performances and through anti-protest songs, this chapter has challenged the image of the comedian as a 'progressive rebel' who is necessarily politically engaged. Despite some dissident voices (of which Gortzak is himself an example[307]), there was a consensus among comedians and many critics that cabaret should indeed not be 'mere' entertainment, but also not too strongly politically engaged. This was a slippery slope, a tension that comedians had to negotiate in their work, leading to sometimes farcical situations in which comedians accused each other of 'engagement' while presenting themselves as being critical, but independent artists. The 'anti-protest song' helped comedians to negotiate this tension. The introduction of this term has enabled me to point to the tendency among comedians to playfully distance themselves from social protests and to parody protest songs. I have demonstrated that comedians whose performances are now canonical examples of protest cabaret, were less unequivocally devoted to protest than is often believed, and have also ridiculed social protests and poked fun at the pretensions of protest cabaret. This chapter

306 An attempt to historicise the debate was made by comedian Micha Wertheim. In a written response to Gortzak's opinion piece, published in the same newspaper (Wertheim, 2017), Wertheim pointed to the tendency among older-generation comedians to disqualify the humour of younger colleagues. While Freek de Jonge (cited by Gortzak) now declared satire dead, when de Jonge began his career as member of Neerlands Hoop, it was older-generation humorist Max Tailleur (1909-1990) who opposed their comedy in similar terms.

307 Looking back on his career in a special issue of the journal Sketch, Wim Ibo recounted his life-long opposition to the critics, Peter van Bueren and Ruud Gortzak, for whom political engagement had always been an important criterion of evaluation (Klöters, 1997).

has thereby also complicated any easy identification of humour with protest, a tendency in existing academic literature on the topic.

Additionally, this chapter has deconstructed the opposition between protest and nonsense cabaret implied in histories of the genre. I have argued that anti-protest did not come out of thin air in the early 1980s, but rather, that so-called 'nonsense cabaret' was presaged by the 'protest' comedians of previous generations. This is not to say that the cabaret of the 1980s and 1990s was in no way different from what went before (even though the term 'nonsense cabaret' has often been overstretched and has thereby become a somewhat useless category, lumping together many different comedy styles). The playful anti-protest of the 1980s and 1990s, I have claimed, can be understood as a radicalisation of already existing anti-protest sentiments. This is reflected in the altering form of the anti-protest songs from the early 1980s onwards. While the comedians and cabaret groups of the protest generation still stuck to the formal conventions of the protest song, either in the style of the traditional cabaret song (Don Quishocking, Kabaret Ivo de Wijs), the pop/rock song (Neerlands Hoop), or a combination of the two (Robert Long), comedians from subsequent generations took the strategy of comical escalation a step further, and staged protest songs that burst out of their traditional form, e.g., through asides (Brigitte Kaandorp), or discussions between group members about the content of the song (De Vliegende Panters).

The question may arise of why comedians who often distanced themselves from the label 'engagement' in their own work, in retrospect began to identify the 1960s and 1970s as the heyday of politically engaged cabaret. As this chapter has demonstrated, this was largely a response to the 'nonsense cabaret' of the 1980s and 1990s, a type of cabaret that took the anti-protest sentiments of previous generations a step further. Comedians and critics of the protest generation generally did not recognise themselves in this new type of cabaret (even though, to some extent at least, it presented them with a mirror image). In response, they created a romanticised and comforting image of the 1960s and 1970s as a time in which everyone still agreed on what counted as good cabaret, thereby ignoring the heated debates on political engagement as an (in)appropriate criterion of evaluation in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, the distinction between protest and nonsense cabaret corresponded to a broader social sentiment, according to which Dutch society and its citizens became more self-absorbed and less politically engaged from the early 1980s onwards. The popular term 'ik-tijdperk,' or '"Me" Decade,'[308] was introduced by journalist John Jansen van Galen in the eponymous

308 This is the original, English term. Jansen van Galen borrowed the term from Tom Wolfe's essay 'The "Me" Decade,' published in 1976 in New York Magazine (Turpijn and van Galen, 2022: 28).

Christmas special of the Dutch weekly magazine *Haagse Post* in 1979 (of which more than 70.000 copies were sold), gave expression to this sentiment (Turpijn and van Galen, 2022). The term has often been used by cabaret critics, such as Jacques Klöters, to make sense of the transition from protest to nonsense cabaret (e.g., Klöters, cited by Stokkink, 1990: 53).

A problem pertaining to the notion of political engagement is that it seems to suggest that the politics of comedy (and of art in general) are expressed through the explicit messages of their makers. As this chapter highlights, to understand the politics of comedy, we should not reduce humour to any explicit message or content, but should also pay attention to the form and style of such humour. A good example of how the politics of humour play out at the level of form is presented by the work of Neerlands Hoop: while not all their work deals with topical social and political issues, by fashioning themselves as long-haired rock stars who rebelled against prevailing standards of professionalism, they were able to present themselves as 'progressive rebels,' a reputation they were able to exploit when they launched their campaign against the FIFA World Cup in Argentina. To give another example, while Brigitte Kaandorp's work has been read as being apolitical because it does not present explicit social or political messages, by parodying political cabaret and fashioning herself as a member of the petit bourgeois, despised by older-generation comedians such as Youp van 't Hek, her work opens up political interpretations that may be easily missed if we pay attention to its explicit messages alone.

This chapter has presented a reconstruction of the long-standing debate on political engagement in Dutch cabaret to arrive at a better understanding of the tensions surrounding the idea of cabaret as protest. As we have seen, both comedians and critics have claimed that political engagement is gratuitous, moralist, and biased. In the next chapter, I will question this line of thought, and will articulate an alternative. Not shying away from political engagement all together, the next chapter will seek an answer by challenging the notion of the comedian as a superior critic. To do so, we will first have to explore a further danger that is often ascribed to politically engaged cabaret: its power to address and organise the audience as a collective body.

Chapter 4: Engagement

> Those who laugh as a body today, will march as a body tomorrow.
> (Howard Jacobson, 2009)

> 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!
> (Bruno Latour, 2004: 238-239)

In his performance *Micha Wertheim voor de zoveelste keer* (Micha Wertheim for the umpteenth time, 2010), Micha Wertheim makes a somewhat cynical joke about Bertolt Brecht. Initially, Wertheim pretends to be a great admirer of Brecht's work:

> The ultimate proof that theatre is the place where people come to be activated and undeceived is still Bertolt Brecht, isn't it? Right? German playwright who wrote plays in the 1930s that are still performed today, in which he opens people's eyes socially, eh? When you go to see a play by Brecht, there is always a moment in which he says to his audience: 'It's nice here in the theatre, we're all sitting comfortably in our seats, but soon we have to go outside. Because the world outside is on fire. And it is our task to put an end to that injustice.'[309] (Het Micha Wertheim Genootschap, 2019)

Pointing to the similarities between 1930s Germany and the present, Wertheim continues:

309 "Hét bewijs dat theater de plek is waar mensen heen komen om wakker te worden geschud is nog altijd Bertolt Brecht hè. Toch? Duitse toneelschrijver die in de jaren '30 toneelstukken schreef die nog steeds worden uitgevoerd, waarin 'ie z'n publiek maatschappelijk wakker schudt hè. Als je naar een toneelstuk van Brecht gaat, zit er altijd een moment in waarin hij tegen z'n publiek zegt: "t Is gezellig hier in het theater, we zitten allemaal comfortabel op het pluche, maar straks moeten we naar buiten. Want de wereld hierbuiten staat in de brand. En het is onze taak om aan dat onrecht een einde te maken."

> And Bertolt Brecht wrote those plays in Berlin in the 30s. It was a period of great economic recession, rising populism – hey! [as if recognising something] – and increasing xenophobia.[310] (idem)

But then, Wertheim breaks away from his initial praise by dryly concluding:

> Oh my, just imagine what would have happened to Germany if Brecht had not written those plays![311] (idem)

Micha Wertheim, a comedian praised for his self-reflective commentary on comedy, and art in general, makes this joke in the context of a broader discussion on the value of art. This was a topical issue in the Netherlands at the time: Wertheim was touring with his show when, in 2011, the centre right government announced major budget cuts affecting theatre and the arts, which were thought out and executed by minister Halbe Zijlstra. In this context, Wertheim wonders on what grounds art can be defended.

Wertheim's joke resonates with the objections to political engagement discussed in the previous chapter. As we have seen, comedians and critics alike have criticised political engagement as being insincere, ineffective, moralist, and extremist. Wertheim seems to make a similar point here: he criticises Brecht's political theatre for not living up to its promise of radical social change, and suggests that it may even have worked against its objective. Wertheim also confesses, somewhat later, that political engagement (which he summarises as 'being angry on stage') often feels insincere to him.

But Wertheim also makes another point, not touched upon in the previous chapter: he suggests that political engagement is a form of 'preaching to the converted,' and that presenting audiences with predictable opinions is dangerous, because it transforms the audience into an uncritical, proto-totalitarian mass that is easily manipulated. Wertheim ends his contemplations on art and politics with the following question: "That is the eternal moral dilemma: when is it immoral to keep quiet on stage about what is going on in the world and when is it gratuitous to voice opinions that you actually know everyone in the audience agrees with anyway?"[312] (Het Micha Wertheim Genootschap, 2019) While Wertheim admits to not having a final answer to this question, in recent years he has increasingly

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310 "En Bertolt Brecht schreef die stukken in de jaren '30. Dat was een periode van grote economische recessie, opkomend populisme – hey! – en toenemende xenofobie."

311 "Je moet er niet aan denken wat er met Duitsland was gebeurd als Bertolt Brecht die toneelstukken niet had geschreven!"

312 "Dat is het eeuwige morele dilemma: wanneer is het immoreel om op het podium je mond te houden over wat er in de wereld aan de hand is en wanneer is het gratuit om meningen te verkondigen waarvan je eigenlijk weet dat iedereen in het publiek het toch wel met je eens is?"

defended the position that political engagement tends to be a dangerous form of 'preaching to the converted.'[313]

In this chapter, I suggest that Wertheim's scepticism about political engagement is representative of a deeper-rooted opposition to political community-building and 'preaching to the converted' in Dutch cabaret. I will demonstrate this by juxtaposing the work of Micha Wertheim (b. 1972) with that of another critically acclaimed comedian, from a previous generation: Freek de Jonge (b. 1944). I will show that both have used humour to unmask their audience as a proto-fascist mass, thereby making political community-building seem suspect. By analysing how these objections to political engagement have been articulated in the work of two prominent comedians, one of whom (Freek de Jonge) is often believed to be strongly committed to social change, this chapter aims to further question the popular image of the comedian as a progressive rebel.

This chapter is somewhat different in style and approach from the other chapters of this dissertation. I do not only present an analysis of cabaret performances, but also take a closer look at and enter into dialogue with some of the ideas articulated within these performances and in other, written work. In Wertheim's case in particular, I combine performance analysis with a close-reading of some of this comedian's essays on art and politics. Both de Jonge and Wertheim are well-known for their self-reflective and intellectual style and their meta-commentary on comedy and the arts. Hence, their work invites an interpretation and evaluation of these ideas about the making of comedy, and of the moral and political dilemmas that these comedians have encountered and explored in their work.

This chapter presents two central claims. First, I argue that both Freek de Jonge and Micha Wertheim tend to think of the community in terms of a proto-fascist mass, and to 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. Drawing from the work of philosopher Bruno Latour (Latour, 2004) and comedy scholar Sophie Quirk (Quirk, 2016), I deconstruct this opposition between (critical) individual and (stupid, proto-fascist) mass.

Second, I make a case for 'preaching to the converted' as a positive approach to political community-building in comedy. While being sympathetic to the idea that comedy carries the danger of excluding minorities or individuals and mobilising audiences against them, I argue that the solution to this problem is not to oppose community-building altogether, but rather to break away from

313 If we take this argument seriously, Brecht's theatre may indeed have created the opposite effect to that intended: it may not have worked against, but have created the preconditions for national-socialism.

the hierarchical relationship between 'enlightened critic' and 'stupid mass.' I argue here that the work of de Jonge and Wertheim can be fruitfully understood against the backdrop of recent academic debates on the limits of social critique.

By proposing an alternative to the idea of the political comedian as dangerous rabble-rouser, this chapter also seeks to contribute to broader debates on the merits of social critique and politically engaged art. The association between political engagement and 'preaching to the converted' was not conceived by Freek de Jonge or Micha Wertheim, but has been debated by writers, philosophers, and cultural theorists for decades. A classic example is Theodor Adorno's essay on politically engaged art, in which he presents a critique of the 'didactic drama' of Brecht which, he writes, 'invite[s] the American phrase "preaching to the converted"' (Adorno, 1974: 81, 82). In the field of humour, the idea that the comedian's manipulation of the audience to respond as a mass is dangerous, has been around for a long time as well (cf., Quirk, 2015; 2016). The idea is summarised in the one-liner by writer and journalist Howard Jacobson, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, and repeatedly cited by Wertheim in essays and interviews: 'Those who laugh as a body today, will march as a body tomorrow' (Jacobson, 2009).

The work of Freek de Jonge and Micha Wertheim is claimed in this chapter as representative for a broader resistance to 'preaching to the converted' in Dutch cabaret. Their style is, however, different from that of other Dutch comedians. Although de Jonge and Wertheim are not often compared to each other, both are praised for their intellectual, highbrow humour and their meta-reflections on comedy, which sets them apart from their peers.[314] At the same time, their work presents an interesting contrast: while Freek de Jonge has long been (and, to some extent, continues to be) considered a politically engaged comedian, Wertheim has always and consistently resisted that perception. Furthermore, their work is affected by different social and historical contexts: while Freek de Jonge reached the peak of his career at a time when the role of the cultural critic was largely taken for granted, Micha Wertheim began his career at a time when the role of the cultural critic was increasingly contested, resulting in a more deconstructionist approach.

Enlightened critic, stupid mass

Both Freek de Jonge and Micha Wertheim have been praised for their critical and progressive humour. Freek de Jonge, in particular, has a long-standing reputation as left-wing comedian (Hartmans, 2014b). However, the tendency in their work

314 While metareflection and deconstruction form an integral part of the Dutch cabaret tradition (see Chapter 3 and 5), not all cabaret is equally self-reflective. In this chapter, I deal with the work of two comedians who have made this style of humour into their trademark.

to belittle and mock the spectator for being stupid and conservative (as will be further demonstrated below) also raises questions about the progressive nature of their comedy.

This tension between critique and emancipation is best understood against the backdrop of the broader academic debate on the limits of critique. In the past decennia, an upsurge of publications within the fields of cultural studies, philosophy, and critical sociology has pointed to the limits of the modern project of critique (Boltanski, 2011; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Felski, 2015; Holm, 2018; 2020; Latour, 2004; Rancière, 2007). The main point of these authors is that critique does not always live up to its promise of emancipation, and maybe never has done.

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, emphasis in original). However, many critical theories have paradoxically reinforced the hierarchical relationship between enlightened critic and stupid mass. The critic imaginatively places himself 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. In 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, emphasis in original)

As will be further demonstrated below, comedians often claim a similar position. They adopt the role of the 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). Moreover, an important point of connection between comedy and critique is that both comedians and critics tend to mask this position of superiority by presenting themselves as anti-establishment rebels. As Rita Felski points out: 'we think of critique as emanating from below, as a blow against authority rather than the exercise of authority'

(Felski, 2015: 140). Replace the word 'critique' with 'humour' and this claim holds true for many writings on comedy.

The work of Bruno Latour (2004) can help us 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 modern project of critique has largely collapsed. He relates this to the strategic adoption of a form of postmodern relativism by radical right-wing 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 being 'mere ideology' in order to push their own conservative agendas. Latour's solution for this crisis of critique is not a return to the modern paradigm of objectivity, with its problematic subject-object-distinction, but rather a move from what he calls '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 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 (cf., Felski, 2015).

Seen this way, comedians who want to stand up against racism, sexism, and other forms of 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 the enlightened critic and stupid mass, they would have to build political communities around shared 'matters of concern.' This involves, 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

Political community-building is easier said than done, because there is a strong taboo surrounding it in Dutch cabaret. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the oft-heard complaint that comedy is merely 'preaching to the converted.'[315] The assumption here is that comedians would only say things their audiences already agree with, and that in turn audiences would only laugh at jokes that confirm their opinions. This insult is used by both comedians and critics. It has, for instance, been mobilised by Freek de Jonge in his criticism of the satirical late-night show of his

315 The complaint that cabaret is merely 'preaching to the converted' has been made by many Dutch comedians. For instance, in an episode of the television documentary series Allemaal Theater (All Theatre), a series that deals with the history of post-war Dutch theatre, former member of Lurelei Jasperina de Jong (b. 1938) remarked that their political cabaret was merely 'preaching to the converted,' and hence, pretentious and ineffective ('Heilige huisjes,' 2004).

younger colleague Arjen Lubach (Gelder, 2017b). Although the idea that comedy is merely 'preaching to the converted' is not exclusively Dutch, and can also be found in, for instance, British stand-up comedy discourse (cf., Quirk, 2016a), it has arguably stronger overtones in the Dutch cabaret tradition, where political engagement raises associations with moralism and dogmatism, and which has often been claimed to be influenced by Calvinist Dutch culture (e.g., Koolhaas, 1981). The link between Dutch cabaret and Protestantism is not just a theoretical speculation: many Dutch comedians (e.g., Freek de Jonge and Seth Gaaikema) are sons of church ministers, and reflect upon this in their work.

However, as the comedy scholar Sophie Quirk has argued, preaching to the converted does not equal a lack of impact, and it is not necessarily dangerous or reactionary either (Quirk, 2016a). Quirk argues that preaching to the converted can also be empowering: it can be a way of strengthening political community, articulating as-yet unarticulated ideas of audiences and inspiring people to political action (Quirk, 2015: 178-180; Quirk, 2016a; Quirk, 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, e.g., 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 re-evaluation of preaching to the converted in comedy by juxtaposing the work of Mark Thomas with that of Stewart Lee. According to Quirk, both present examples of successful critical comedy, but do so 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 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 Lee's comedy. 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 an explicit theme of their work.

Dividing the audience

Freek de Jonge (b. 1944) garnered the reputation of being a progressive rebel in the 1970s as a member of the highly successful cabaret duo Neerlands Hoop (see Chapter 3). After he broke up with his comedy partner Bram Vermeulen in 1979, he kickstarted an equally successful solo career. Between 1980 and 1985, de Jonge produced nine solo routines and a movie (in addition to his occasional radio and television work; see: Verhallen, 2011). With his solo comedy of the early 1980s, de Jonge set a new standard for Dutch cabaret. He not only introduced the narrative device of the central storyline (highly uncommon in Dutch cabaret at the time), but also broke with codes of minimalism by performing in exuberant costumes and against large settings, both designed by his wife, the artist Hella de Jonge (b. 1949).

A leitmotif in de Jonge's early solo work is his criticism of political activism (most notably feminism) and his deconstruction of the opposition between left and right. His first solo performance *De Komiek* (The Comic, 1980) set the tone in terms of style and central themes (de Jonge, 2004a). Here, de Jonge mixes explicit social criticism with political parables, clowning around, and role-playing to comment upon the tension between the individual and the collective. He alternates between 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 any longer, 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'[316] (de Jonge, 1980: 6, 71) is one of the comedian's running jokes. While performing his monologue, de Jonge is dressed as a clown: he wears an exuberant blue costume, a red wig, and has a table tennis ball as a nose. In so doing, he accentuates his role of the wise fool, who is not himself part of society, and is therefore better able to see its wrongs.

In a bitter monologue at the end of the show, de Jonge points out that the progressive revolution of the 1960s and 1970s has largely failed: although its promise was to liberate the individual from the ties of community, it has only created new, oppressive political identities. His pessimistic conclusion is that the individual always tends to hide in the group, finding expression in the comic aphorism: 'Why are so many people stupid? Because it's safe to be with many' (de Jonge, 1980: 72).

316 'Het valt niet altijd mee de leukste te zijn.'

Although de Jonge thus began to distance himself from the political activism of Neerlands Hoop in the early 1980s, the image of long-haired youngsters fighting against political oppression turned out to be persistent (see Chapter 3). Even though de Jonge somewhat distanced himself from left-wing politics in the early 1980s, and began to deconstruct the opposition between left and right, most notably in *De mars* (The march, 1982), he continued to be seen as a left-wing preacher, in particular by his opponents (Hartmans, 2014b).[317] The well-known fact that de Jonge is the son of a church minister has contributed to that reputation.[318] De Jonge's religious background is reflected in the form of his early solo performances, which were structured like sermons, with a central theme and storyline, and asides that offered ample opportunity for joke-telling.

Freek de Jonge responded in his early solo work to the dominant Cold War politics of the 1970s and 1980s, with its strong oppositions between left and right, east and west, which offered 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, which is a central theme in his work. De Jonge responded to this tension by critically confronting and taunting his audiences. In the following paragraphs, I will analyse the politics of humour in two scenes from de Jonge's early solo work, demonstrating that the comedian consciously tried to divide the audience so as to emancipate spectators from the dangerous mass.

The first scene is one in which Freek de Jonge plays a follower of Bhagwan. This scene is taken from the comedian's second solo show *De Tragiek* (The Tragic, 1981) (de Jonge, 2004c). Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (also known as Osho) was an Indian guru and spiritual leader, with followers from both India and the rest of the world. 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).[319]

317 The book that journalist Rob Hartmans wrote about the cultural criticism of Freek de Jonge (Hartmans, 2014b) is interesting in this respect. Hartmans has argued that de Jonge is perhaps better understood as a 'conservative rebel' (Hartmans, 2014a: n.pag.).

318 In recent years, though, some minor scandals around de Jonge's work have shifted public attention to the comedian's seniority, with some people claiming that the comedian is now passé and no longer to be taken seriously (e.g., 'Freek de Jonge,' 2019).

319 A conflict around Bhagwan was the reason that Cabaret Don Quishocking broke up in 1981 (at least temporarily): Jacques Klöters and Fred Florusse strongly opposed the decision of George and Anke Groot to become followers of Bhagwan. The ensemble made a final show before their break-up in which they dramatised this conflict: Wij zijn volstrekt in de war (We are completely confused, 1981).

The context for this scene is provided by Freek de Jonge's appearance as host 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,' 1980). In the Bhagwan scene, de Jonge plays with his public persona by confessing to the audience that he has converted to Bhagwan's ideology 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, and also provokes a presumably left-wing audience that would be opposed to such expressions of religiosity.

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 (cf., van Kooten, 1981).

In the scene, de Jonge breaks with the formal convention of providing the comedy audience with laughter. By creating awkward moments of silence and non-laughter, he 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 punchline, supposedly because Bhagwan has taught him that those who have reached spiritual enlightenment do not need to make 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 them onto 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., by 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 by 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 meditation or writing down spiritual questions), de Jonge divides the audience, making spectators feel uncomfortable and emphasising 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 contributes to its impact. When de Jonge disappears from the stage, and the music begins that signals the end of the scene, he immediately returns on stage, interrupts the music, and confronts the audience with its desire to find relief: "Wow, wow, wow, wow, wow, no relief! Wait a minute. Do not act like: 'Well, that's over, okay, damned curious what's next!'" [imitates a clapping audience][320] (de Jonge, 2004c) De Jonge repeats this another time, thus making it impossible for the audience to release the built-up tension. The impossibility of comic relief is emphasised by the lyrics of the Jimi Hendrix track, 'All Along the Watchtower,' which the audience hears as de Jonge disappears from the stage: 'There's too much confusion / I can't get no relief.'

My second example exemplifies de Jonge's tendency to associate the mob behaviour of the audience with totalitarianism, and is taken from *De Mythe* (The Myth, 1983) (de Jonge, 2004b). In this scene, de Jonge exploits the well-known fact that he is married to a Jewish woman, Hella de Jonge. He pretends that his wife is standing in the wings (together with their children) and talks to them in asides. In one of these, 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 has won it a little."[321] When the audience responds with laughter, de Jonge corrects them for laughing at a tasteless joke. A while 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 three pages with Cohen, they can be taken out too.' [small laughter] And see: when all those foreigners get the hell out of here, my phone book fits in the bookcase again! [harder laughter; 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

320 "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho, geen opluchting! Wacht even. Niet van: 'Zo, dit hebben we gehad, nou, ben ik deksels benieuwd wat we nu gaan krijgen'" [doet applaudisserend publiek na].
321 "Als jij nu nog met de oorlog zit, dan heeft Hitler 'm toch een beetje gewonnen."

> think: 'That must be the one!' [mimics applause, followed by hard laughter and actual applause][322] (de Jonge, 2004b)

By confronting the audience with its 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 Willem Frederik Hermans, two of the most critically acclaimed Dutch novelists of their time (see Chapter 1), 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 themselves being '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. An audience that may think of itself as progressive 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 at anti-Semitic jokes or to entertain the idea of book burning.

It would be ridiculous, of course, to suggest that de Jonge truly believes his audience to be (potential) book burners. Rather, de Jonge repeatedly manipulates audience response to force spectators into a position that can, in the next step, be unmasked as morally wrong (cf., Kuipers, 1997). De Jonge performs the role of the innocent clown, acting surprised when the audience responds with laughter to a joke that he believed the audience would dislike, and he refuses to offer the

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322 "Ik sta laatst voor mijn boekenkast, ik wil m'n telefoonboek erbij stoppen – past niet! Te veel boeken. Of: telefoonboek te dik. Dus ik begin eens te bladeren, ik denk: 'Nou, die bladzij Aron die kan er wel uit.' [kleine lach] 'Die bladzij Bouterse kan er ook wel uit.' [kleine lach] 'Die drie bladzijden Cohen die kunnen er ook wel uit. [kleine lach] Wat bleek? Als al die vreemdelingen oprotten, paste mijn telefoonboek weer in de boekenkast! [hardere lach; De Jonge kijkt naar het publiek, verbaasd, het lachen zwelt aan, De Jonge draait zich naar kinderen in de coulissen] Er zitten onherroepelijk racisten in de zaal vanavond! [harde lach, de Jonge keert zich weer naar het publiek] Nee, nee, nee, wat ik had moeten doen, is naar die boekenkast lopen en eens kijken: die boeken van W.F. Hermans, de boeken van Gerard Reve, die kunnen eruit, past m'n telefoonboek er ook tussen! [Het lachen zwelt aan, applaus, De Jonge kijkt verbaasd het publiek in en draait zich weer naar kinderen in de coulissen] Oh jee, d'r zitten zelfs potentiële boekverbranders tussen vanavond! [harde lach] [...] Die willen zo graag een mening hebben dat als ze d'r een horen, dat ze denken: 'Dat zal 'm wel zijn!' [De Jonge doet klappend publiek na, gevolgd door harde lach en daadwerkelijk applaus]."

audience a 'safer' opinion instead. Nevertheless, de Jonge claims the position of the cultural critic by unmasking the moral convictions and semi-automatic responses of the audience as being dangerous and reactionary.

The limits of critique

While Freek de Jonge reached the peak of his fame at a time when the role of the critic was largely taken for granted (the early 1980s), Micha Wertheim (b. 1972) started his career at the turn of the twenty-first century, a time when critique was becoming increasingly questioned. Wertheim received his degree in Cultural Studies from the University of Maastricht, in the 1990s. The postmodern aesthetic of the time is reflected in Wertheim's work, which 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.

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, 2010; from here on: *Voor de zoveelste keer*), Wertheim engages 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, the minimalist setting, and an emphasis upon the here-and-now character of the event and spontaneous interactions with the audience (Henquet 2019a: 24).[323] 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 silenced 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. Moreover, the target should be

323 Like many Dutch comedians from his generation, Wertheim received his training as a comedian in the stand-up comedy club Toomler, and moved to the cabaret circuit after winning a major cabaret festival, the Leids Cabaret Festival, in 2004. In contrast to Freek de Jonge, who makes ample use of props, settings, and costumes, Wertheim has a more minimalist style, in line with the aesthetics of stand-up comedy.

something that one-third of the audience is already using, while two-thirds of the audience does not, because the greater part of the audience does not like 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 being 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 reactionary. 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 comic strategies used by Wertheim resemble those of Freek de Jonge, at least to some extent. By explaining the mechanisms behind his own jokes, Wertheim kills the comedy and creates moments of silence and uncomfortable, isolated laughter. Moreover, Wertheim reveals the clever strategies used by the comedian to manufacture consensus around a topic: this comedian, in Wertheim's reading, convinces the majority who have not yet formed an opinion about the stupidity of the new, and makes the minority shamefully self-aware of their engagement with a stupid trend. In so doing, 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 does not, 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 (see Chapter 1) and Toon Hermans.[324] Wertheim mocks van 't Hek for being the type of comedian who makes fun of the latest trends, and thereby presents himself as being critical and rebellious while actually confirming the status-quo. Wertheim gives the example of a routine in which van 't Hek mocked

324 Toon Hermans (1916–2000), counted among the 'big three' of post-war Dutch cabaret, was a folk comic, coming from the tradition of variety theatre and well-known for his clownesque humour and frivolous songs.

the first users of the mobile phone in the 1990s.[325] Next, Wertheim points to the apolitical comedy of Toon Hermans as an alternative to 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 lavishly for continuing with his shows during the Second World War. By imagining being present at one of these shows, only to realise that this would not have been possible because access to the theatre was denied to Jewish people, Wertheim exploits his Jewish background to create a painful moment that undercuts his initial praise of Hermans, and frames it retroactively as being ironic.

In his deconstruction of the comedy 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. Neither critical humour nor apolitical humour thus provides 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.

Against engagement

While Wertheim's discussion of the limits of critique in *Voor de zoveelste keer* resonates with long-standing debates on political engagement, both in the cabaret field and beyond, Wertheim does not mention the notion of engagement explicitly. In his more recent show *Micha Wertheim voor alle duidelijkheid* (2019, from here on: *Voor alle duidelijkheid)*, Wertheim presents a more explicit discussion of political engagement, but – again – without shying away from the contradictions of critique. The title of Wertheim's show plays on the ambiguity of the expression 'voor alle duidelijkheid.' The common meaning of this expression is 'to be perfectly clear,' but it can also be read literally as 'before all perfect clarity.' Wertheim plays with the double meaning of the expression in his show: while he presents a meta-reflection on comedy and an extensive explanation of his own artistic intentions (as he does in many other shows as well), he does so in a way that raises more questions, and creates confusion and ambiguity. Hence, Wertheim's promise to be 'perfectly clear' turns out to te be a false promise, to some extent at least.

325 Wertheim seems to refer to a scene from van 't Hek's performance Spelen met je leven (Playing with your life, 1995).

Wertheim initially comments on politics and society in a surprisingly straightforward manner in this show, sharing his concerns about a world that is threatened by climate change and the rise of fascism. Hence, he creates confusion when, in the middle of the performance, he sits down on a chair at the front of the stage (a gesture often used by Wertheim to create a distance from and reflect upon his own work) and confesses that his performance "is just a lot of nonsense"[326] (Het Micha Wertheim Genootschap, 2020) and does not have a serious message, thereby distancing himself from any claim to social or political engagement.

Wertheim continues by making a broader point about comedy and art, which he believes should not be judged in terms of any serious message or political engagement. He does so by provocatively defending a controversial statement made by the right-wing Dutch Minister, Eric Wiebes, who argued that art is a "hobby" and should thus not receive financial support from the government.[327] By making this statement, Wiebes drew from right-wing discourses according to which art is an expensive 'hobby' of a left-wing elite. Not surprisingly, his statement created a scandal in the art world. Wertheim turns Wiebes' argument around by claiming that art is indeed a hobby, but that the only reason to have a government in the first place is to provide for our hobbies. Wertheim supports his argument by making a comic comparison between the prosperous Netherlands and Darfur's war economy, in which there is no place for hobbies at all.

Although Wertheim's defence of the arts is provocative because he partly adopts a right-wing political language, which seems to be in opposition to the high status of art bestowed upon it by contemporary art discourse, Wertheim seems to make a serious point. By defending Wiebes' claim that art is "just a hobby," but challenging the political agenda behind that claim, Wertheim paradoxically suggests that art cannot be defended in utilitarian terms, but that this is precisely why it has to be defended. The value of art is that it cannot be defined in terms of social or political engagement, a point that resonates with many of Wertheim's earlier statements on artistic autonomy, within both his comedy shows and his essays.[328]

At the same time, however, Wertheim creates an ironic distance from his defence of the arts. He does so at the end of this scene when he suggests that Wiebes was right, but should have consulted him for the proper arguments to defend his claim that art is a "hobby." When the audience responds with applause, Wertheim takes a pencil out of his pocket and throws it in the air. This small

326 "gaat helemaal nergens over."

327 Eric Wiebes (1963) is member of the Dutch liberal-conservative party VVD, and was Minister of Climate and Economic Affairs in the centre-right government Rutte III (2017–2021). He made his statement on art in the intellectual television programme Zomergasten (Summer Guests, VPRO, broadcast on 26 August 2018).

328 I will present a close-reading of some of Wertheim's essays in the following section.

gesture, easy to miss, refers back to an earlier part of the show, in which Wertheim presented a critique of the satirical television comedy of Arjen Lubach.

With his Dutch adaptation of an American satirical late-nightshow called *Zondag met Lubach* (Sunday with Lubach, 2014–2021), Arjen Lubach (b. 1979) became incredibly popular. Lubach is exceptional in the Dutch cabaret field for his activist style, often calling his audience to action, e.g., when he asked his viewers to boycott Facebook by deleting their accounts *en masse* (Nieuwenhuis, 2022). In the first part of his show, Wertheim mocks Lubach for his angry comedy, which he suggests is inauthentic, because Lubach often expresses anger and surprise at social injustices that are already well-known, thereby suggesting his comedy to be an example of 'preaching to the converted.' Wertheim also mocks Lubach for copying the format of the American satirical late-nightshow (making his show even more inauthentic), pointing out that Lubach not only adopted its general format – sitting behind a desk and presenting explicit political commentary supported by news footage (cf., Nieuwenhuis, 2022) – but even the smallest gestures of American talkshow hosts, e.g., by playing with a pencil in a seemingly casual way. It is this particular gesture that Wertheim imitates at the end of his reflections on Wiebes and the arts: he takes a pencil from his breast pocket, throws it in the air and triumphantly catches it.

By doing this, Wertheim retroactively frames this scene as a parody of Lubach's style and rhetoric. Indeed, Wertheim's exaggeratedly argumentative style, fuelled by rage and building up to applause at the climax of the story, closely resembles the style of Lubach. Through his parody of Lubach, Wertheim also confronts the audience with the dangers of mass response. He reveals that the audience collectively applauded his ironic suggestion that it is the comedian's task to provide arguments for political debate, even though the point of the whole scene was that art should not be reduced to a political message. In so doing, he thus confronts the audience with the fact that they were manipulated by the comedian to stop thinking for themselves and become part of an uncritical mass.

In the scene that follows, Wertheim presents a more explicit discussion of political engagement in the arts, in which he undercuts his earlier complaint that politically engaged art is a form of 'preaching to the converted.' Wertheim suggests now that political engagement is "disgusting"[329] because it is "immoral"[330] to "conceal"[331] important political and social messages in a work of art. He supports this point by making a comical comparison between the artist and the doctor. Wouldn't it be immoral, Wertheim wonders, if an oncologist refused to tell their

329 "walgelijk."
330 "immoreel."
331 "verstoppen."

patient about her tumour, instead inviting her to a musical performance in which her diagnosis is concealed through artistic means?

While the idea that political engagement would equal the concealment of important and life-saving messages in art works seems ridiculous and misguided, thereby undercutting any serious statement about the dangers of politically engaged art, by refusing to make an un-ironic statement against political engagement, Wertheim's scene paradoxically seems to be in line with his earlier expressed idea that art should not present a serious message. However, as Wertheim is well aware, it is, in the end, impossible to escape (political) meaning, and create an artwork that is pure form. He demonstrates this by reflecting upon the many five-star reviews of his show. Wertheim playfully suggests that theatre critics only give five stars to a show when they believe that that show is "engaged."[332] But how, he continues, is it possible that critics thought his show to be politically engaged? Did he not explain on stage that the show did not have any serious message? Wertheim's answer is that critics must have thought that by claiming the performance to be meaningless, Wertheim meant to defend the theatre as the last resort for people to think freely, and that this protection of the freedom of art against a "utilitarian society"[333] where everything is judged in terms of its usefulness is actually very urgent and, hence, politically engaged. He ironically concludes, then, that "I cannot get rid of those five stars, even if I wanted to."[334]

Wertheim here not only presents a criticism of political engagement as an important criterion of evaluation in the Dutch cabaret field (a complaint that has a long history, as we have seen in the previous chapter), but also makes explicit that he is not fully able to escape political engagement. That is, the opposition between artistic autonomy and political engagement is hard to maintain, because defending the autonomy of art is also making a political statement, especially at a time of budget cuts fuelled by a right-wing, anti-art discourse, which makes artistic autonomy and the value of art intensely politicised issues.

The politicisation of art

By grappling with the contradictions of critique, both of Wertheim's shows discussed in this chapter give expression to what has been called 'post-critical critique' (Rancière, 2009: 40) or a 'critique of critique' (Felski, 2015: 9). According to Rancière, while traditional critique at least promised people the possibility of emancipation, the post-critical critique of the late twentieth century unmasks critique itself as being complicit in the systems it seeks to oppose. Nevertheless,

332 "geëngageerd."
333 "utilitistische samenleving."
334 "Die vijf sterren: ik kom er niet vanaf, al zou ik het willen."

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 critic to guide them. Wertheim's work demonstrates the complexities of post-critical critique: while trying to escape from the position of the politically engaged comedian who lectures his audience about the state of the world, it turns out to be hard to escape from political engagement (as well as from moralism) altogether.

While Wertheim has explored the contradictions of critique within his comedy shows, resulting in an ironic and deconstructionist form of humour, in his essays, Wertheim has presented a more straightforward criticism of politically engaged art. I will close this chapter with a close-reading of two of these essays to further demonstrate how and why Wertheim tries to draw a clear boundary between art and politics.

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; 2019). Nevertheless, Wertheim continues to emphasise that art becomes dangerous when it builds political communities.

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, 2011). The link to totalitarianism is already alluded to in the title of the essay, a playful reference to Walter Benjamin's famous essay on the artwork in the age of mechanical reproduction, and the dangers of the aestheticisation of politics in Nazi-Germany (Benjamin, 2008: 38). Wertheim's opposition to unified laughter is underscored by the essay's motto, taken from writer Howard Jacobson, and quoted in one of the epigraphs of this chapter: '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'[335] (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'[336] (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

335 'Goede satire zaait twijfel en provoceert.'

336 'Ik stel voor om kunst die als doel heeft ons te laten vergeten dat we alleen zijn, voortaan amusement te noemen.'

side effect that people eliminate their capacities to think critically'[337] (Wertheim, 2011: 45). It is thus easily susceptible to becoming politicised. For Wertheim, it's 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.[338] (Wertheim, 2011: 45-46)

Wertheim continues to warn us for 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.[339] (Wertheim, 2011: 46)

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

In recent years, Wertheim has increasingly participated in public debate through the publishing of articles on art and politics, e.g., in a series of essays on satire for *De Correspondent* (The Correspondent), a popular, left-liberal platform for opinion pieces and investigative journalism. In his recent essay, 'De politiek heeft geen parodie meer nodig' (Politics no longer needs parody, 2019), Wertheim re-articulates 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

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337 'De makers van amusement mogen dan niet het doel hebben de wereld over te nemen, amusement heeft wel als bijwerking dat mensen hun kritisch denkvermogen uitschakelen.'

338 '[...] het onderscheid tussen wat ik amusement en kunst noem, wordt het beste duidelijk in een totalitaire samenleving. Een totalitaire samenleving is een maatschappij waarin het belang van het individu volledig ondergeschikt wordt gemaakt aan dat van de staat. Geen wonder dus dat er in de communistische en fascistische heilstaten geen plaats was voor echte en dus subversieve kunst.'

339 'Maar het liefst zijn we natuurlijk niet alleen. Fascisten konden daarom rekenen op grote steun. Het is de weg van de minste weerstand. De meeste mensen willen graag geloven dat er duidelijke antwoorden zijn.'

able to arm themselves against it are those who suggest that they are a parody of themselves?'[340] (Wertheim, 2019).

Again, Wertheim does not present a critique of satire per se, but makes a distinction between a 'true,' non-political satire, and a dangerous, political satire.[341] For Wertheim, the best example of the latter are satirical late-nightshows, 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'[342] (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?[343] (Wertheim, 2019)

In the 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'[344] (Wertheim, 2019). Wertheim thus makes a sharp distinction between art and politics.

To complicate and question Wertheim's policing of the boundaries between art and politics – which are, in a sense, always permeable (Rancière, 2007: 2019) – I would like to turn to one of Wertheim's sources of inspiration (van Welij, 2019): Walter Benjamin's essay on art in the age of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin, 2008). What Wertheim shares with Benjamin is a belief in the critical potential of art, as well as a belief in the possibility to use 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 that defines fascism; for Wertheim, it is the way in which proto-fascist political leaders have adopted the aesthetics of comedy. There is a fundamental difference, however, in the way both think

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340 'Zou het bijvoorbeeld zo kunnen zijn dat het persifleren van politici zo vervolmaakt is dat de enige politici die zich daar nog tegen kunnen wapenen, politici zijn die uitdragen dat ze een parodie op zichzelf zijn?'

341 While many would claim that satire is, by definition, political in the sense that it presents a critique of political power, 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).

342 'schakelen heen en weer tussen politiek en satire zonder duidelijk te maken waar hun grens ligt.'

343 'En als grappenmakers zich over politiek gaan uitspreken, waarom zouden we ons dan nog opwinden over politici die rare dingen roepen? Mogen die niet ook gewoon zo nu en dan een uitstapje naar de humor maken? Als satirici politiek gaan bedrijven, wanneer houdt satire dan op satire te zijn, en gaat het over in propaganda?'

344 'dat wij mensen betekenis zoeken die inherent chaotisch, onrechtvaardig en wreed is.'

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, has famously stated that the aestheticisation of politics calls for the politicisation of art (Benjamin, 2008: 38). 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 crowd. 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. Benjamin does not oppose mass response per se, but the specific way in which the masses were mobilised by the Nazis. Moreover, he argues that the individual is always already embedded in political communities ('imminent massing'). Benjamin's work thereby provides a fruitful starting point for thinking about the relationship between individual and mass, and opens the possibility to think about political community-building in the arts (including comedy) in different and more positive terms.[345]

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have traced the opposition to political engagement in the work of two comedians from different generations: Freek de Jonge (b. 1944) and Micha Wertheim (b. 1972). In so doing, this chapter has sought to further deconstruct the

345 My aim here is not to turn the opposition between critical individual and stupid mass around and claim the political community as an unproblematic locus of critical political agency. Although a more extensive discussion of the tension between individual and political community falls outside the scope of this dissertation, a fruitful starting point for such a discussion within the context of theatre and performance is presented by the work of theatre scholar Nicholas Ridout. Building on the work of philosophers, such as Jean-Luc Nany and Jacques Rancière, and resisting myths surrounding theatre's supposed historical roots as a community-based art, Ridout argues that 'theatre is about community to the extent that it contains a "presupposition" of community' (Ridout, 2015: 19). Emphasising the affective appeal of this presupposition of community in theatre under late capitalism, he concludes that: 'It is precisely because there can in fact be no community here in the place where it is always presupposed that the experience of listening among others acquires a peculiar condition, in which the intensities of both solitude and relation are amplified, so that inside a theatre auditorium one feels oneself both more alone and more related than one does on the outside in so-called real life.' (Ridout, 2015: 162).

image of the comedian as a progressive rebel. Both de Jonge and Wertheim have, at different moments in their career, tried to distance themselves from political engagement, as well as from the association between cabaret and left-wing political critique. While Freek de Jonge continues to be criticised by adversaries as a left-wing preacher, he has deconstructed the opposition between left and right already in his early solo shows, culminating in *De mars* (The march, 1982). In this show, de Jonge gets caught up in the wire mesh curtain that divides the stage in a left and a right half. The moment that the curtain is taken down marks the symbolic moment when the narrator has found a way out of the opposition between the radical left and the radical right (Verhallen, 2011: 151).

While de Jonge has often provided explicit political criticism within his work – and has even presented special cabaret shows on the occasion of the general elections in 2002, 2017 and 2021 – Wertheim has consistently and carefully rejected the position of the politically engaged comedian, arguing that cabaret needs to be more than 'a progressive opinion larded with jokes'[346] (Wertheim, 2017). When articulating social or political criticism himself, Wertheim often does so through the comic modes of irony, deconstruction, and self-reflection.

This chapter complements the previous one by presenting a more in-depth analysis of the idea that political engagement is extremist and, therefore, dangerous. I have demonstrated that politically engaged comedy is seen as a dangerous form of border-crossing between art and politics. The danger here is not only that critics who expect comedians to be politically engaged and use political engagement as a criterion of evaluation run the risk of reducing comedy (and art in general) to a political tool (a concern expressed mostly by Wertheim), but also that political comedy would be 'preaching to the converted.' Preaching to the converted is not only ineffectual, because the comedian tells the audience what it already knows and agrees with, but also dangerous, because it robs the individual of their critical agency and transforms spectators into an uncritical, proto-fascist mass.

I have argued that the work of de Jonge and Wertheim is fruitfully understood here through the lens of recent academic debates on the limits of social critique. There are important structural similarities between the role of the comedian and the role of the cultural critic: both comedian and critic typically present themselves as radical and anti-establishment, and thereby tend to claim a positon superior to their audience. Moreover, the critical comedian uses humour as a powerful rhetorical tool, which can (and has been) employed to scapegoat minorities or to single out and mock individuals from the group (see also Chapter 1). Both de Jonge and Wertheim are aware of this dark side of humour, and have

346 'een met grapjes gelardeerde progressieve mening.'

explored and counter-acted this tendency in their work. They have especially done so, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, by confronting their audiences with their inclination to let themselves be manipulated by the comedian as well as with the conservative implications of their own laughter.

In this chapter, I have deconstructed the opposition between critical individual and proto-fascist mass implied within the work of these comedians. As I have demonstrated, by creating somewhat arrogant comic personae, and manipulating audience response so as to unmask their audiences as stupid, both de Jonge and Wertheim have created a binary opposition between (stupid, dangerous and conservative) mass and (critical, detached, and progressive) individual. In so doing, they have cultivated the romantic ideal of the critical and independent artist, as opposed to a spectator who has not yet achieved that level of critical agency and needs to be emancipated by the comedian-critic.

It is important to emphasise here that the opposition to political engagement and community-building in the work of de Jonge and Wertheim does not come from nowhere. In their shows, both de Jonge and Wertheim have playfully referred 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 that is still haunting the present.

Nevertheless, as emphasised by one of the sharpest witnesses of upcoming fascism, the 'imminent massing' (Benjamin 2008: 26) of the individual also opens up critical possibilities, and demonstrates that the opposition between critical individual and stupid mass is not tenable, because the individual is always already part of the community. While it is, probably, not possible to completely escape from the hierarchical relationship between the critic and their audience, I have argued that an embrace of political community may provide a way out, because it is not (or at least less solidly) rooted in such oppositional thinking. A comedy beyond critique acknowledges the audiences' participation in shared networks of meaning and sense. Doing so also requires a re-thinking 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' (Jacobson, 2009).

A concrete example of what a comedy beyond critique could look like has been articulated through the work of comedy scholar Sophie Quirk. While de Jonge and Wertheim have pointed to the potential of community-building to exclude outsiders and to cause a loss of critical agency, Quirk has argued, through the example of Mark Thomas, that preaching to the converted can also be a way to inspire like-minded audiences, especially because comedians have the talent, the

space, and the rhetorical tools to articulate ideas in appealing and powerful ways, even when those ideas are already present – in one form or another – within the community that comedians are preaching to.

The complexities of critique, as explored in Wertheim's work most extensively, are reflected in the argumentation of this chapter. That is, one may wonder: am I, as a researcher, not complicit in the critical endeavour of 'unmasking' comedians and their audiences, by seeking to uproot the myths of autonomous art and progressive comedy? As Rita Felski has pointed out, it is indeed hard to escape from the position of the critic: 'To object or to disagree with critique is to be caught in the jaws of a performative contradiction: in the act of disagreeing with certain ways of thinking, we cannot help being drawn into the negative or oppositional attitude we are trying to avoid' (Felski, 2015: 192). This is the fate that I share with both Felski and Wertheim, who attempt to escape from but also find themselves trapped in the critical paradigm. Yet, although my aim in this chapter has not been to present a 'postcritical reading' (Felski 2015: 173) of those comedians' work, I have tried to avoid the destructive tendencies of critique, and to acknowledge the complexity of their comedy, while also engaging with some of its contradictions.

Chapter 5: Nostalgia

On 10 October 2018, the Dutch singer, Maan, performed a cover version of the song 'Het dorp' (The village, 1966) on the daily talk show *De wereld draait door* ('Gesprek,' 2018).[347] 'Het dorp' is a Dutch cabaret classic, originally a French song by Jean Ferrat (entitled 'La montagne'), which was translated and adapted in 1966 by Friso Wiegersma for his partner, the popular Dutch comedian Wim Sonneveld. Whilst the meaning of the lyrics had been changed quite a bit, the nostalgic feel of the song had been preserved, effected through a combination of Ferrat's composition and the narrator's melancholic portrayal of his childhood, located in a preindustrial, rural past. 'Het dorp' is Sonneveld's most famous song (van Dyck, 2019: 122-123), and one of the most performed, adapted, and parodied songs in the history of Dutch cabaret[348],

347 Maan is the stage name of the Dutch singer and actress, Maan de Steenwinkel (b. 1997). The title of the talk show is a play on the double meaning of the Dutch word 'doordraaien': 'de wereld draait door' both means 'the world keeps on turning' and 'the world freaks out.'

348 There are too many parodies and adaptations of 'Het dorp' to mention here. An overview of adaptations and parodies (far from complete) can be found on the Wikipedia page dedicated to this song ('Het dorp'). Interestingly, this overview shows that the song has been adapted and translated into many different local and national languages, including Frisian, Zeelandic, and German. There have been famous performances of 'Het dorp' by Karin Bloemen and André van Duin, and a well-known version that is somewhere in-between adaptation and parody is the R&B version by De Vliegende Panters (all mentioned on the Wikipedia page). Other parodies/adaptations have been made by Daniël Samkalden (Samkalden, 2007), Kasper van Kooten (van Kooten, 2021), and Max van den Burg (van den Burg, 2011), among others. Next to Alex Klaasen's parody of 'Het dorp' in the television programme *Kopspijkers* in 2002, analysed in this chapter, Klaasen made another adaptation for his recent revue production *Snowponies* (Klaasen, 2021). When reviewing the many adaptations of 'Het dorp,' it becomes clear that the song has been used for both progressive and conservative political agendas. For instance, an African adaptation of 'Het dorp' was made by Kyle Seconna and Elisha Zeeman for a theatre production for the Koningstheateracademie in Den Bosch (Club Cabaret, 2017; for a detailed analysis see: Zijp, 2019b). This adaptation presents a progressive criticism of nostalgia from a decolonial perspective. In contrast, a radical right-wing version of the song has been produced by the (amateur) singer Harry Pater (Pater, 2015). Finally, that it has become something of a cliché to listen to, sing, or adapt 'Het dorp' has been the object of ridicule in a song by Jan Beuving (Beuving, 2018): "That corny nostalgia [...] Or yet another damn parody / I can't hear it anymore" ("Die suikerzoete nostalgie [...] Of weer zo'n kloteparodie / Ik kan het niet meer horen"). The enduring popularity of 'Het dorp' and its first performer are demonstrated by a recent book on the topic, in which journalist Jan Vriend seeks for the 'origins' of the song in Sonneveld's life and work (Vriend, 2021).

which made it a perfect candidate for the special series of which Maan's performance was a part: 'Songs in the Key of Life,'[349] presenting 13 songs about the course of life ('from birth to death'[350]) selected by 13 well-known singers, and performed on prime-time television for a broad audience.

Unfortunately, Maan's performance was not positively received by all viewers. On the evening of the broadcast, Maan was criticised on social media for her presumably poor performance (to which others responded by defending her) and the following day, the tabloids reported on the angry Twitter responses in detail (Segers, 2018; 'Steun voor,' 2018). Maan's performance was not only judged in artistic, but also in moral terms: many critics thought that she was 'too young' to sing a classic like 'Het dorp' (Segers, 2018).

The strong emotions evoked by Maan's rendition of this nostalgic cabaret song point to the important role of nostalgia in the Dutch cabaret tradition. In this chapter, I will take 'Het dorp' as my starting point to present an analysis of nostalgia as both an underlying 'structure of feeling' (Tannock, 1995: 454[351]) in Dutch cabaret and an important rhetorical device used by Dutch comedians. Nostalgia has often remained implicit in Dutch cabaret performances, where it has been mostly present as a mood or an undertone. Hence, this chapter focuses on two comedians – Wim Sonneveld and Alex Klaasen – who engage with nostalgia in a more explicit way (and, in Klaasen's case, in a more reflective way as well). In so doing, this chapter presents the final step in my deconstruction of the popular understanding of the comedian as a progressive rebel. Nostalgia, I argue, seems to be the opposite of transgression: while nostalgia has long been considered past-oriented and conservative, transgression is often seen as future-oriented and progressive. In a genre that is often still defined in terms of transgression and taboo-breaking, nostalgia does thus not seem to play a significant role. I deconstruct this opposition between transgression and nostalgia by pointing to the important role of nostalgia in the Dutch cabaret tradition, as well as by demonstrating that nostalgia is not necessarily conservative, but has also been put to more progressive uses.

The media storm surrounding Maan's performance of 'Het dorp' highlights two important aspects of nostalgia, which are representative of nostalgia as an underlying mood in Dutch cabaret. First, it highlights the power of nostalgia to present social criticism by opposing a corrupt present in favour of a presumably better (pre-industrial, rural) past, while also making an emotional appeal for the times of our childhood and feelings of national belonging and homecoming.

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349 A reference to the album of the same name by Stevie Wonder.
350 'van geboorte tot dood.'
351 Tannock borrows this term from Raymond Williams (Williams, 1961).

Although 'Het dorp' responded to a specific social and historical context, in particular to the feelings of alienation experienced by a pre-war generation that witnessed the transformation of the Netherlands from a traditional, religious, and conservative society, to a modern, secularised, and progressive nation in only a few decades (Kennedy, 1995; Righart, 2006), 'Het dorp' simultaneously appealed to (and continues to appeal to) a more general sense of nostalgia for a lost childhood, and as such continues to inspire new generations of comedians and audiences. 'Het dorp' is thus representative of a larger body of work by Dutch comedians, in which the combined nostalgia for a lost childhood and a lost society finds expression in story-telling and jokes, as well as in lyrical song. In the interview with talk show host Matthijs van Nieuwkerk, Maan highlighted this particular aspect by explaining that the song made her nostalgic for the village of her own childhood, Bergen. Even though she had left Bergen only a few years earlier, she often felt nostalgic for the place where she had grown up, and sometimes when she returned to her parents' home "to truly feel like a child again,"[352] she noticed that the village had changed quite a lot.

Second, Maan's own explanations for selecting this song as well as the many angry responses to her performance, highlight the fact that cabaret as a cultural tradition is itself often approached in a nostalgic manner, and is for many people bound up with their childhood memories. In the interview, Maan emphasised her own affective relationship to the song, and the role it played in her childhood. She explained that it was the favourite song of her mother, who used to play it at breakfast, and it therefore conjured up sweet memories. As if she had foreseen the upcoming media storm, she also confessed that she had felt anxious about performing a song that is "almost national heritage."[353] It was precisely the song's status as 'almost national heritage' that fuelled the negative responses on social media. Maan was believed to be too young, making her performance inauthentic. Even Maan's defenders resorted to such nostalgic arguments. For instance, one of Sonneveld's biographers, Jan Uriot (Uriot, 2009), suggested in a television interview that it would perhaps have been better if Maan had performed 'Het dorp' together with André van Duin (b. 1947), Matthijs van Nieuwkerk's sidekick in that day's episode of the show. In doing so, Uriot suggested that Maan's performance was too far removed from the original, and that a more traditional performance by an older generation and well-respected comedian such as André van Duin (also a great admirer and frequent performer of Sonneveld's work, including 'Het dorp')

352 "echt weer kind te zijn."
353 "bijna nationaal erfgoed."

would have been a more appropriate choice.[354] As will be demonstrated in this chapter, the nostalgic appeal of cabaret as a tradition has also been exploited by other comedians, who have put it to more progressive use than Maan's critics did.

This chapter presents an analysis of the rhetoric and the political resonances of nostalgia in the work of two comedians from different generations: Wim Sonneveld (1917–1974) and Alex Klaasen (b. 1976). There are interesting points of connection between them: they are both queer, male comedians; their work is traditional in form and style, in line with early definitions of cabaret as a literary-musical art; the tone of their work is light-hearted, mildly satirical, and has an overall nostalgic mood; and finally, as will be further explained below, both have played, in their work, with the boundaries between cabaret and entertainment. However, the political resonances of nostalgia in their work differ: while Sonneveld's nostalgia is more past-oriented, using the past as a source of comfort, Klaasen has borrowed elements from the past to imagine a more progressive future. Here, another point of contrast between Sonneveld and Klaasen emerges: while Sonneveld lived in a time when same-sex intercourse was still considered a crime, and felt forced to hide his sexual orientation from the public, making sure that his onstage persona would not seem 'too gay' (Pekelder, 2017), Klaasen began his career in a place and time where non-heterosexuality was more widely accepted, and he has increasingly made his sexual orientation and identity the explicit theme of his work. I will demonstrate in this chapter how Klaasen has mobilised the affective powers of nostalgia for progressive purposes by critically re-appropriating and 'queering' a cabaret and revue tradition (including some of Sonneveld's work) in which queerness has often been present only as a subtext.

A final note on genre: both Sonneveld and Klaasen have often trespassed on and challenged the boundaries between cabaret and entertainment. However, in line with the recent reception of their work, and the broad definition of cabaret proposed in the introduction of this dissertation, I will consider their work as part of the cabaret tradition. Sonneveld began his career as the frontman of a popular cabaret ensemble (Cabaret Wim Sonneveld, 1943–1960), but switched in 1964 to the genre of the 'one-man show.' Although the 'one-man shows' of legendary comedians such as Toon Hermans and Wim Sonneveld are long since considered part of the Dutch cabaret tradition (Klöters, 1999), at the time they were not: forging a break with the tradition of critical cabaret ensembles, 'one-man shows' (and, somewhat later, 'one-woman shows') were considered too

354 There is another meaningful point of connection between Sonneveld and van Duin, not mentioned by Urion, but strongly present as a subtext: both are queer comedians, who, however, never made their sexuality explicit in their work.

showy, not critical enough, and too centred around a single comedian to be qualified as such.[355] In turn, although starting his career as a cabaret performer, Alex Klaasen's most recent work has been an explicit attempt to revive the genre of the 'revue,' a light-hearted entertainment show in which topical social and political issues are playfully commented upon through sketches, song, and dance ('Revue').[356] However, the cross-overs between cabaret and revue have long been acknowledged, as encapsulated by the term 'cabaret-revue' (Klöters, 1987: 205).

In the following section, I will first present a brief discussion of cultural studies approaches to nostalgia, arguing in favour of a contextual approach that helps to move beyond reductive, binary typologies. Then, I will present a close-reading of Sonneveld's Ur-version of 'Het dorp' as well as Klaasen's parody of this song from 2002. Finally, I will turn to Klaasen's recent engagement with the politics of queerness in his 'identity revue' *Showponies* (Show ponies, 2019).

Theorising nostalgia

If we think about its modern uses, nostalgia can be read as the opposite of transgression, the concept with which I began this dissertation. While transgression has, at least in modern and contemporary art discourse, been considered future-oriented and progressive, nostalgia has long been considered past-oriented and conservative. As comedians are often considered progressive rebels, it may not come as a surprise that we do not find many references to nostalgia in comedy discourse (but see: Weaver, 2020). However, as has been demonstrated in Chapter 1, transgression is not necessarily progressive, and may also work to reinforce social hierarchies. Hence, comedians using transgressive humour are not necessarily progressive rebels.

Conversely, as this chapter will demonstrate, nostalgia is not necessarily conservative, and nostalgia in comedy does not always work in the service of a politics of restoration. In this section, I will present a brief discussion of approaches to nostalgia in the field of cultural studies, in which both the conservative and progressive uses of nostalgia have been acknowledged. I propose, however, to move beyond the typologies of nostalgia that cultural studies research on the topic

355 For instance, in a chapter on Wim Sonneveld, Wim Ibo distinguishes between Sonneveld's 'cabaret period' ('cabaretperiode') and 'showbizz period' ('showbiz-tijd'), using the latter term to refer to Sonneveld's one-man shows from 1964 onwards (Ibo, 1982: 63). This does not mean, however, that Sonneveld's one-man shows were received negatively. Critics have often been careful to distance themselves from the negative connotations of the one-man show when reviewing Sonneveld's shows, considering his work as one of a kind (e.g., Doolaard, 1967; Duister, 1967).

356 While the early, turn-of-the-century Dutch revues of August Reyding were satirical in tone, the early twentieth-century revues of Henri ter Hall and Louis Bouwmeester jr. had a less satirical and more spectacular character (Krijn, 1980; 'Revue').

tends to construct, arguing for a more contextual approach that seeks to analyse the political resonances of nostalgia in concrete cultural and historical cases.

The pseudo-Greek term 'nostalgia' (from *nostos,* homecoming and *algia,* longing) was coined by the Swiss doctor, Johannes Hofer, to name a disease that plagued Swiss soldiers fighting abroad, and retained its pejorative associations when it came to be seen as typical of the modern condition. In the so-called 'heritage debate' of the 1980s and 1990s (Pickering and Keightley, 2006: 927; Smith and Campbell, 2017: 614), nostalgia became defined as the opposite of history, as being sentimental, a form of poor memory, and a way of misrepresenting the past (Lowenthal, 1985). Under postmodernism, nostalgia became linked to inauthenticity and processes of commodification. According to Frederic Jameson (1997), the postmodern artist would approach the past as a collection of dead styles from which he or she could cite randomly to convey a general impression of 'pastness,' thus turning history into a spectacle (see also Chapter 3 of this dissertation).

In the past decades, nostalgia has been re-appropriated as a more positive concept within cultural studies, with authors distancing themselves from the idea that nostalgia is, by definition, inauthentic, sentimental, and conservative. The nostalgia debate tends to be somewhat repetitive, however, because authors continue to respond to earlier work in which nostalgia has been read as conservative. Moreover, to distance themselves from those early, negative uses of the term, authors have constructed typologies and categorisations that are indeed more nuanced, but also tend to reduce nostalgia to a binary opposition between 'good' and 'bad' forms: authors have made distinctions between 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia (Boym, 2001), 'reactionary' and 'progressive' nostalgia (Smith and Campbell, 2017), and nostalgia as a form of 'retreat' and 'retrieval' (Tannock, 1995). There is a danger of reification in making such categorisations and reducing nostalgia to only two (ideal) types, while also suggesting that progressive and conservative uses of nostalgia are always easy to separate.[357]

To demonstrate this, I will limit myself here to a brief discussion of Svetlana Boym's (2001) oft-cited distinction between 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia. I will take Boym's typology as my example because it operates in a similar way to many typologies that have been constructed in later work.[358] Moreover, Boym's

357 Although some authors have rightfully warned against the dangers of 'obsessive classification' (Smith and Campbell, 2017: 613; cf., Pickering and Keightley, 2006), it turns out to be very difficult to resist such obsessive classification.

358 For instance, in a reference article on nostalgia, Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley distinguish between approaches to nostalgia that desire a return to the past, and more progressive/reflective approaches, in which aspects from the past are taken as inspiration for the future (Pickering and Keightley, 2006).

distinction will provide a fruitful point of reference in my discussion of Sonneveld's song in the next section.

In her book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Boym explains the distinction between 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia in the following terms:

> Restorative nostalgia stresses *nóstos* (home) and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *álgos*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately [...] Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgic, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. (Boym, 2001: xviii)

The restorative nostalgic, according to Boym, tries to repair 'longing' with 'belonging' (Boym, 2001: xv). Restorative nostalgia is a conservative form of nostalgia that desires a return to the past, defined in terms of a lost (local or national) community. For Boym, restorative nostalgia is linked to the revival of a right-wing, nationalist politics, because it defines the community in rather exclusive terms (Boym, 2001: 41). Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, allows for a more progressive politics. It is characterised by ironic distance and a self-reflective awareness that the past can never be brought back. Boym encounters it in the work of poets and thinkers, such as Baudelaire, Benjamin, and Nabokov, but also in the rhetoric of post-Soviet immigrants who long for a past that they know no longer exists, or never existed in the romanticised version that they constructed of it.

Although Boym has argued that the distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia should not be read as absolute (Boym, 2005: 41), her typology has been rightfully criticised for creating a reductive, hierarchical opposition between a simple, conservative nostalgia and a complicated, progressive nostalgia.[359] First, a conservative politics of nostalgia does not necessarily promote a simple return to the past or a 'transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home.'[360] Moreover, Boym's notion of reflective nostalgia seems rooted in the broadly shared

359 For instance, Alastair Bonnett (2010) and David Sigler (2004) have both problematised the category of restorative nostalgia by pointing out that nostalgia always presupposes a reflective awareness that the past is out of reach, and never aims for a restoration of the past. 'To be nostalgic,' Bonnett writes, 'is to be dislocated, alienated, homeless and, hence, removed from one's object of desire. As this implies, nostalgia is inherently reflective: it presupposes a self-conscious relationship with history' (Bonnett, 2010: 44). In a similar vein, Sigler argues that Boym 'raise[s] the lost object of nostalgia to the level of the Thing, fundamentally misconstruing the mechanics of the drive' (Sigler, 2004: 44). However, Bonnett and Sigler themselves reduce nostalgia to only its reflective uses, without acknowledging the possibility that it may be used in unreflective ways.

360 An example, in which nostalgia is used as a form of retreat rather than restoration, will be discussed in the next section.

idea that the playful and the ironic necessarily work in the service of a progressive politics, while in fact, humour and irony may also be used by conservative critics of modernity.[361] This does not mean that we cannot distinguish between more progressive and more conservative uses of nostalgia, but rather that we need to analyse the rhetoric and political resonances of nostalgia in concrete cultural and historical cases, without falling back on binary oppositions.

A lost childhood

Wim Sonneveld (1917–1974) was considered to be one of the 'big three' of post-war Dutch cabaret, together with Toon Hermans (1916–2000) and Wim Kan (1911–1983; see Chapter 2). Although Sonneveld achieved early successes with his own cabaret ensemble (Cabaret Wim Sonneveld, 1943–1960), he is now principally remembered for his 'one-man shows.' Sonneveld created three such shows, between 1964 and 1971, and all were recorded and broadcast on television. Although he acted as the central star, Sonneveld never performed completely alone, but always worked with sidekicks – actors, and singers, such as Marijke Merckens (in 1964), Ina van Faassen (in 1966), and Willem Nijholt and Corry van Gorp (in 1971). The shows, supported by a musical combo on stage, presented a combination of sketches, songs, and comic impersonations, which were mostly written by others, such as Annie M.G. Schmidt (1911–1995), Simon Carmiggelt (1913–1987), and Sonneveld's partner, Friso Wiegersma (1925–2006). In contrast to Kan's political comedy and Hermans' clownesque entertainment, Sonneveld's work is difficult to categorise, and his place in the history of cabaret (including his legacy) is therefore difficult to determine. Sonneveld is mostly remembered for his craftsmanship, and for individual sketches and songs from his one-man shows, but few comedians have regarded themselves as his heir.[362]

The song, 'Het dorp' (AVROTROS, 2017) was part of Sonneveld's second one-man show, together with Ina van Faassen, *Wim en Ina* (Wim and Ina, 1966). While praised by critics as being 'emotional' (de L., 1967), 'beautiful' (Klare, 1972) and 'melancholic' (Duister, 1967), it was only after the performer's death in 1974 that the song entered the hit parade and became a classic. The song, as the comedian's own favourite, was even played at Sonneveld's funeral, which was attended by a large crowd ('Vele duizenden,' 1974). Friso Wiegersma based the

361 In recent years, we have witnessed the rise of a type of politician that resorts to humour and irony to perform a nostalgic, nationalist populism, and uses humour to disguise a radical politics of change as the return to a magnificent past that has been lost (cf., Weaver, 2021).

362 'Het dorp' represents a good example: it is Sonneveld's most famous song, which has been performed, adapted, and parodied multiple times, but without performers claiming themselves to be an heir to this performer's style (perhaps with the exception of André van Duin).

song text on his own childhood memories. The song's status as 'national heritage,' to use Maan's phrase once again, is demonstrated by the memorial constructed in Wiegersma's birth place of Deurne. In 2008, the garden path next to Wiegersma's parental home (today a municipal museum) was officially re-named 'The garden path of my father,'[363] referring to the famous line from the song's chorus ('Het Dorp,' n.d.).

'Het dorp' is representative of the general mood of Sonneveld's work, which can be characterised as entertaining, mildly satirical, and nostalgic. Sonneveld's work activates a nostalgic mood on different levels. First, Sonneveld's songs often play on the nostalgia for a lost childhood (e.g., 'Scheveningse tram'[364]), or appeal to more general feelings of national belonging and the domestic home.[365] Second, Sonneveld has often tapped into the nostalgic trope of a mythologised, 'authentic' Amsterdam of the past, e.g. through his famous creation of the organgrinder, Willem Parel (in 1955), or through his sketch about the supposed loss of a traditional, Amsterdam sense of humour ('De gulle lach'[366] in 1971). I will come back to this nostalgia for a supposedly authentic, traditional Amsterdam in the next section. Finally, there is something inherently nostalgic about the genre of the 'one-man show' in the sense that this genre, even though it did not exist in that form before Toon Hermans introduced it in 1955 (van der Zalm, 'Toon Hermans'), plays with the form and style of pre-war Dutch variety theatre. For example, Sonneveld has played with the legacy of the revue, a genre that flourished in the Netherlands before the Second World War in particular[367], through his well-known song 'Moeder, ik wil bij de revue' (Mother, I want to become a revue artist, 1971). This song tells about a young boy who longs to join the revue, but is not allowed to by his mother. The song's nostalgic feel is not only effected through the appeal of a bygone era of Dutch revue and variety theatre, but also through the nostalgic trope of the adolescent boy who wants to become an artist, but meets with opposition from his traditional family.

363 'Het tuinpad van mijn vader.'

364 The lyrics of all of Sonneveld's songs referred to in this chapter, including 'Het dorp', have been collected in: Scholten, 2006.

365 A good example is 'Margootje,' a fanciful song about a miniature creature visiting Sonneveld and becoming an intimate part of his daily routine. Importantly, this creature lives in Madurodam, a well-known entertainment park in Scheveningen which shows Holland (and especially its many famous buildings and architectural styles) in miniature. Thus, the song forges a connection between the domestic world of the everyday and feelings of national belonging. The song's lyrics were written by Annie M.G. Schmidt.

366 'The hearty laugh.'

367 In the postwar period, the Dutch revue survived through the successful productions of René Sleeswijk/Snip & Snap (until 1977), followed by the André van Duin revues, but its central place in Dutch popular theatre had at that time already been taken over by cabaret (Krijn, 1980).

'Het dorp' recounts the childhood memories of a middle-aged man who grew up in a small, rural village. The song combines the appeal of a general sense of nostalgia for a lost childhood with the trope of the traditional, rural society that has been destroyed by the forces of modernity. To be able to understand the rhetoric and political resonances of nostalgia in the original song as well as in the adaptation discussed in the next section, I will quote (a translation of) the song in its entirety.

In the first stanza, the narrator paints an idyllic picture of the village of his childhood:

> I have a postcard at home
> Depicting a church, a horse and cart
> A butcher's shop, J. van der Ven
> A bar, a lady on a bike
> It probably means nothing to you
> But it's where I was born
>
> This village, I remember what it was like
> The farm kids in the classroom
> A cart rattling on the cobble-stones
> The town hall with a pump in front of it
> A sand road through the corn
> The cattle, the farms.[368] (Scholten, 2006: 237-238)

Then follows the famous chorus:

> And along the garden path of my father
> I saw the tall trees
> I was a child and for all I knew
> It would never pass away.[369] (Scholten, 2006: 238)

The second stanza gives expression to the spatial displacement experienced by the narrator. The rural village of the narrator's childhood is compared here with the modernised village (is it even still a village?) of the present:

> Oh, such a simple life people led back then
> In simple houses in the green
> With cottage garden plants and a hedge

368 'Thuis heb ik nog een ansichtkaart / Waarop een kerk, een kar met paard / Een slagerij, J. van der Ven / Een kroeg, een juffrouw op de fiets / 't Zegt u hoogstwaarschijnlijk niets / Maar het is waar ik geboren ben / Dit dorp, ik weet nog hoe het was / De boerenkinderen in de klas / Een kar die ratelt op de keien / Het raadhuis met een pomp ervoor / Een zandweg tussen koren door / Het vee, de boerderijen.'

369 'En langs het tuinpad van m'n vader / Zag ik de hoge bomen staan / Ik was een kind en wist niet beter / Dan dat het nooit voorbij zou gaan.'

But apparently their way of life was wrong
The village has been modernised
And now they're on the right track

Look at all that life's got to offer
They watch the quiz on television
And they live in boxes made of concrete
With lots of glass, so that you can see
How the living room suite looks at Mien's place
And her sideboard with plastic roses.[370] (Ibidem)

The third and final stanza gives expression to the temporal displacement of the narrator when he witnesses a new generation growing up in 'his' village, the modern 'beat generation':

The youth from the village sticks together
In miniskirts and Beatle hair
And roars along with beat music
I know: they have every right to do so
The new age, like you say
But it makes me a bit melancholic

I knew their fathers
They bought liquorice for a cent
I watched their rope-skipping mothers
This village of the past, it's over
This is everything that remains to me
A picture postcard and memories.[371] (Scholten, 238-239)

Although the nostalgic trope of the premodern, rural past that has been destroyed by the forces of modernisation can be found in both left-wing and right-wing political discourses (Bonnett, 2010), and although 'Het dorp' was written with the purpose of enabling listeners to project their own childhood memories onto the song (Wiegersma, 2000: 50), the song reads as a mostly conservative defence of order and tradition. Although the songs identifies modernisation with

370 'Wat leefden ze eenvoudig toen / In simp'le huizen tussen groen / Met boerenbloem en een heg / Maar blijkbaar leefden ze verkeerd / Het dorp is gemoderniseerd / En nou zijn ze op de goeie weg / Want ziet hoe rijk het leven is / Ze zien de televisiequiz / En wonen in betonnen dozen / Met flink veel glas, dan kun je zien / Hoe of het bankstelstaat bij Mien / En d'r dressoir met plastic rozen.'

371 'De dorpsjeugd klit wat bij elkaar / In minirok en beatlehaar / En joelt wat mee met beatmuziek / Ik weet wel: 't is hun goeie recht / De nieuwe tijd, net wat u zegt / Maar 't maakt me wat melancholiek / Ik heb hun vaders nog gekend / Ze kochten zoethout voor een cent / Ik zag hun moeders touwtje springen / Dat dorp van toen, het is voorbij / Dit is al wat er bleef voor mij / Een ansicht en herinneringen.'

industrialisation and denaturalisation, symbolised by the 'plastic roses,' the song does not (or only implicitly) present a critique of environmental destruction. The song mostly opposes the fashions and lifestyles of a new age and a new generation, characterised by modernist architecture (houses of glass and concrete), television, and the 'beat music' listened to by young people.

By defending the past as more beautiful and authentic than the present, it may seem like 'Het dorp' employs a 'restorative' mode of nostalgia. Indeed, the song treats history as the source of 'truth and tradition' (Boym, 2001: xviii). In the first stanza, the postcard picture works to authenticate the image of the past constructed by the narrator as historical truth: it presents empirical proof of how it used to be. In so doing, it also invites the reader to follow the narrator and step into the past (as if this was reality itself, and not a representation). However, the song also suggests that the past is irretrievably lost, that we cannot return to it: 'This village of the past, it's over.' This is not just a factual observation, but also a moral judgment: the narrator believes that the new generation has 'every right' to do things differently than their parents, even if it makes him 'a bit melancholic.'

To understand what is at stake here, we need to read 'Het dorp' against the backdrop of the specific social and historical moment in which it was created. Produced in the mid-1960s by a writer in his early forties for his ten-year-older partner, the song appeals to the ambivalent feelings, vis-à-vis social change, experienced by a pre-war generation to which both Sonneveld and Wiegersma belonged (see Chapter 0). On the one hand, the pre-war generation experienced a sense of alienation from the rapid social changes in the first decades after the Second World War, culminating in the clash between two generations with different value systems in the mid-1960s (Righart, 2006). The 'beat generation' referred to by Wiegersma/Sonneveld began to express itself through the fashion choices offered by a new consumerism, resulting in the rise of a youth culture (called-up here through 'miniskirts and Beatle hair'). The pre-war generation experienced this youth culture as a radical break with the past, and especially with the ethos of frugality that they themselves had cultivated in response to economic crisis and the Second World War (which had both been formative experiences for this generation). On the other hand, this pre-war generation partly embraced the fruits of post-war prosperity, and considered modernisation as being, to some extent, inevitable and even desirable. For example, Hans Righart points to the ambivalent feelings that the pre-war generation held towards the television, only introduced in the Netherlands in the early 1950s, and still figuring as a source of corruption in 'Het dorp,' but in the end, largely embraced by this generation (Righart, 2006: 91–94, and passim). The ambivalent feelings of this pre-war generation toward modernisation find expression in 'Het dorp,' with a narrator who both presents a nostalgic longing for the past, and hesitantly embraces

the 'new age' by acknowledging the moral right of a new generation to do things their own way.

Read against the backdrop of the progressive revolution of the 1960s, another meaningful element of 'Het dorp' needs to be mentioned. Although falling outside of the song's narration, the fact that Sonneveld was secretly gay contributes to the overall meaning of the song, and the way the song appeals to a traditional, natural order. Sonneveld's on-stage persona was emphatically heterosexual: female lovers figure in many of Sonneveld's songs (e.g., 'Deze vrouw,' 'Lieveling,' and 'Dat wij verschillen van elkaar'), and Sonneveld was careful to reject songs that he considered to be 'too gay.'[372] By painting a romanticised picture of an idyllic past, with a natural order that was presumably better than the corrupt present, Sonneveld paradoxically performs nostalgia for a traditional society in which there is no place for gay people and hence, tragically, for that part of his identity that he was forced to hide, even at the dawn of the sexual revolution in the mid-1960s.[373]

Mocking nostalgia

In response to a cabaret tradition in which nostalgia has often been used as a serious mood, comedians have also played with and mocked nostalgia, often through adaptations and parodies of 'Het dorp' as the nostalgic cabaret song *par excellence.* In this section, I will discuss one example to demonstrate this playful, anti-nostaligic tendency in Dutch cabaret: Alex Klaasen's parody of 'Het dorp' from the satirical television show *Kopspijkers* in 2002, written by Jurrian van Dongen and Erik van Muiswinkel ('Het dorp,' 2004). In the tenth season of this highly successful television programme, which was broadcast on Saturday evenings at prime time, parodies of famous pop and cabaret songs were used to comment upon news events, in this case one in a series of revenge killings in Amsterdam.[374] In Klaasen's parody, the setting of the original song is changed to Amsterdam: Klaasen mourns the good old days in which Amsterdam was supposedly still an innocent village and did not suffer from organised crime.

Alex Klaasen (b. 1976) studied at the Kleinkunstacademie in Amsterdam in the late 1990s. His early cabaret gave expression to the postmodern sensibility

372 For instance, Sonneveld initially rejected the now famous song 'Lieveling' (Sweetheart, 1971), also written by Friso Wiegersma, for this reason (Wiegersma, 2000: 60, 86-87).

373 The work of Robert Long (1943–2006) presents an interesting point of contrast here: Long was the first comedian and singer in the Dutch cabaret tradition who was openly gay and reflected upon prejudices against gay people in his work (see Chapter 3). In many of his songs, Long presented an anti-nostalgic approach to his childhood, marked by religious conservatism and the suppression of his sexuality.

374 The song was in response to the liquidation of Willem Endstra in Amsterdam on 17 May 2004. Endstra was a Dutch real estate trader accused of money laundering, and a well-known figure in the Amsterdam underground world.

of the time, and was in line with the playful and absurdist comedy of earlier graduates of the Kleinkunstacademie in the 1990s, such as Arjan Ederveen, Tosca Niterink, and De Vliegende Panters (see Chapter 3). Klaasen's work abounds with pop-cultural references and pastiches of different musical styles and genres. His parody of 'Het dorp' shares this postmodern aesthetic.

Although postmodern uses of nostalgia have been criticised as being conservative, ahistorical, and superficial, most famously by Frederic Jameson (Jameson, 1997), Klaasen's parody is not ahistorical, but rather plays with the different historical layers of nostalgia in the Dutch cabaret tradition. Moreover, it cannot be so easily categorised as either progressive or conservative. Rather, it reads as ambiguous and playful, a postmodern and ironic deferral of meaning. It does so by both calling-up and mocking nostalgia. Here, Linda Hutcheon's work on the politics of nostalgia in postmodern art offers a fruitful point of reference. In her article 'Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern' (Hutcheon, 2000), Hutcheon highlights the uneasy relationship between postmodern irony and nostalgia. According to Hutcheon, postmodern nostalgia differs from modern nostalgia, because it treats the past ironically, but without shying away from nostalgia's affective appeal. Using postmodern architecture as her main example, she points to:

> [...] the difference between contemporary postmodern architecture and contemporary revivalist (nostalgic) architecture; the postmodern architecture does (indeed) recall the past, but always with the kind of ironic double vision that acknowledges the final impossibility of indulging in nostalgia, even as it consciously evokes nostalgia's affective power. In the postmodern, in other words, (and here is the source of tension) nostalgia itself gets both called up, exploited and ironized. (Hutcheon, 2000: 205)

Klaasen's parody presents a similar combination of nostalgic sentiment and ironic distancing from nostalgia.

The song plays with nostalgia on two levels: first, on the level of the performance and the music, where a nostalgic mood is created; and second, on the level of the lyrics, where nostalgia is mocked through adaptation, humorous incongruity, and playful quotations from the original.

A nostalgic mood is created through a close imitation of the original music and performance: the original music and arrangement of the song are closely followed (including the romantic strings) and Klaasen imitates Sonneveld's voice and gestures in a precise manner. The 'original' imitated here is the song as performed by Sonneveld in his one-man show with Ina van Faassen, and especially the version that was recorded for television and VHS (which is now available on YouTube). Klaasen, dressed like Sonneveld, begins singing the song while sitting on a typical, old-fashioned chair that we recognise from the well-known television

broadcast, and he stands up at the start of the second stanza, just as Sonneveld did. Since Klaasen's imitation is so lifelike, and no (or perhaps just a slight) attempt is made to make his incarnation of Sonneveld appear grotesque or exaggerated, the parody imitates the original in creating a nostalgic mood. However, the source of nostalgia here is not so much the portrayal of an idyllic childhood (which is ridiculed through the lyrics, as will be further argued below), but rather the figure of Wim Sonneveld himself, the comedian and entertainer whom we may have watched in our childhood, or whom we only know from black-and-white videos.

The song thereby highlights the way in which the figure of Wim Sonneveld, and especially 'Het dorp,' has become a symbol of better times, and can be endlessly repackaged to evoke nostalgia. This point is made explicit by the show's host Jack Spijkerman, who introduces the song by stating that recent examples of organised crime call-up a desire for past times, for 'the time of Wim Sonneveld.'[375]

Although the song activates a nostalgic mood through its music and performance, the audience is not allowed to indulge in those nostalgic sentiments, as those feelings of nostalgia are mocked through the song's lyrics. While the narrative construction of the original song is emulated – with an idyllic picture of the narrator's childhood in the first stanza, followed in the second and third stanzas by a comparison between the corrupt present and utopian past – the setting is changed from a small village to the city of Amsterdam. By doing this, and by calling up the image of a more innocent and authentic Amsterdam located in the past, Klaasen playfully refers to Sonneveld's own nostalgic treatment of Amsterdam in many of his songs and sketches, as well as to a broader tradition of songs and stories that have painted a nostalgic picture of traditional Amsterdam.[376] According to this tradition, there was a time when Amsterdam was innocent and 'gezellig,' a city with the feeling of a small village. In the first stanza, this trope is ironically cited by appealing to characteristic elements of it, such as the figure of the 'authentic prostitute':

> At home, I have an old print
> Depicting a square, a striptease club
> A kebab shop, and nothing else

375 'de tijd van Wim Sonneveld.'

376 In the mid-1950s, a cult was created around the white working class neighbourhood 'De Jordaan.' A song contest connected to the annual Jordaan festival helped to popularise artists with telling stage names such as Johnny Jordaan (1924–1989) and Tante Leen (1912–1992), who exploited nostalgia for a supposedly ideal past that no longer existed at the time they were performing (Klöters, 2001b). Wim Sonneveld picked up on this sentiment with his creation of the fictional organgrinder Willem Parel in 1955, as well as in later work. As Jacques Klöters explains, this nostalgic tradition still exists and is hence available as a trope to mock and ironicise, as was done by, among others, Robert Long and Leen Jongewaard in the early 1980s.

This is what the village of Amsterdam was like
A man took the tram for free
A poor junky sold his bike

Someone throwing small stones at a window
Or stealing apples, was a rascal
And Appie Baantjer was patient
The oldest whore had something stylish
Oh, villains used to be so innocent

(Chorus)

And the culprit walked along the garden path
Masked, wearing a burlap sack
You pointed to him and asked your father:
'Daddy, am I allowed to catch him?'[377]

The first stanza mocks this nostalgic account of traditional Amsterdam by suggesting that Amsterdam was a small village only a few decades ago, as well as by creating a comic incongruity by suggesting that past crime was innocent, culminating in the first chorus, in which the innocence of past crime is related to the nostalgic longing for the times of our childhood. Moreover, the song playfully references different pop-cultural variations on this nostalgia for old Amsterdam, e.g. the detective novels of Appie Baantjer. In this crime series, famously adapted for television, Amsterdam is the scene of various crimes, which are always solved by Appie Baantjer and his partner at the end of the episode in an authentic Amsterdam café in 'de Wallen' (Amsterdam's famous red-light district). By referring to a time when 'Appie Baantjer was patient,' the song mockingly appeals to a sense of nostalgia for a romantic Amsterdam of the past, in which crime did not pose a real threat because order was always restored. Finally, the song mockingly challenges any stable boundaries between past and present by including more contemporary elements in this picture of traditional Amsterdam, such as the kebab shop.

In the second and third stanzas, the romantic Amsterdam of the past is compared with the corrupt present, in which chaos reigns because of organised crime. This comparison is blown-up to absurd proportions in the third and final stanza, in which it is suggested that there are 'corpses on the pavement'[378]

377 'Thuis heb ik nog een oude prent / Waarop een plein, een stripteasetent / Een shoarmazaak en verder niets / Zo was het dorpje Amsterdam / Een man reed gratis met de tram / Een arme junk verkocht z'n fiets / Wie steentjes gooide naar een ruit / Of appels stal, was een schavuit / En Appie Baantjer was geduldig / De misdaad was iets sympathieks / De oudste hoer had nog wat chics / Wat waren schurken toen onschuldig / (Refrein) En langs het tuinpad liep de dader / Gemaskerd met een juten zak / Je wees 'm na en vroeg je vader: "Pap, is het goed als ik 'm pak?"'

378 'lijken op de stoep.'

everywhere nowadays where there used to be only 'dog shit.'[379] The absurdity of this comparison is further emphasised by quoting the moderate, moral judgment of the narrator from the original song, thereby suggesting that criminals have 'every right' to kill people, but that it just makes the narrator 'a bit melancholic' when they do so.

In the final chorus, Klaasen makes explicit reference to Sonneveld's own nostalgic portrayal of Amsterdam. Through a citation from Sonneveld's 'Aan de Amsterdamse grachten' (Along the canals of Amsterdam), Sonneveld's famous declaration of love for the canals of Amsterdam, Klaasen both appeals to feelings of nostalgia evoked by Sonneveld's song (so much a part of cultural memory that it can be called up by just reciting one line), while at the same time creating an ironic distance from this nostalgic portrayal of the past through the set-up of the song as a whole.[380]

In conclusion, while playing with and mocking a sense of nostalgia for the past (in particular, a romanticised, authentic Amsterdam), Klaasen's parody cannot so easily be categorised as either progressive or conservative. Rather, it presents a postmodern play with nostalgia as a sentiment that is both very powerful, and easy to be unmasked as sentimental and ridiculous.

Reviving the revue

While Klaasen did not present explicit social or political commentary in his early work, in recent years, he has taken a more activist approach, and has used nostalgia in a more straightforward, and (openly) progressive manner. In 2018, Klaasen made the successful revue production *Showponies,* followed by *Showponies 2* in 2019, and the Christmas revue *Snowponies* in 2021. Klaasen played the lead in these productions, and was supported by actors and singers Freek Bartels, Daniël Cornelissen, and Jip Smit, plus a large ensemble.

In the Netherlands, the revue is seen as a genre that belongs to the past (Klöters, 1987; Krijn, 1980). By describing his musical theatre productions as 'revues,' Klaasen thus gave these productions an immediate nostalgic feel. In interviews, Klaasen has explained that the shows were inspired by the revues of André van Duin and Frans van Dusschoten, which he used to watch as a child, together with his father (Quaegebeur, 2018). By mentioning this, Klaasen

379 'hondenpoep.'

380 The final chorus reads: 'To Amsterdam's canals / I have pledged my heart, well great / But even a child would know by now / This village has truly become a big city.' ('´k Heb aan de Amsterdamse grachten / Mijn hart verpand, ja mooi is dat / Maar zelfs een kind zal nu wel weten / Dit dorp werd echt een grote stad.' The first lines of the chorus of 'Aan de Amsterdamse grachten,' from which van Dongen and van Muiswinkel cite here, reads: 'To the canals of Amsterdam / I have pledged my heart forever' ('Aan de Amsterdamse grachten / Heb ik heel mijn hart voor altijd verpand').

emphasised the nostalgic quality of the revues, and appealed to a sense of nostalgia for a bygone area of Dutch theatre entertainment, as well as for the times of our childhood.

However, Klaasen's revues were not 'restorative' in the sense that they propagated a return to the past, nor did they evoke the past to offer spectators an escape from the present. Rather, Klaasen, who has called his productions 'identity revues'[381] (Gelder, 2018) and 'revue 2.0' (Quaegebeur, 2018), has re-appropriated the nostalgic mood of the revue and put it to progressive use. Klaasen's 'identity revues' deal with the prejudices and stereotypes regarding queer and non-heterosexual people, and use the conventions of the revue to explore the ways that identity is constructed and performed.

In interviews, Klaasen has confessed that he was surprised by his own political engagement, something he distanced himself from in the past (Kragtwijk, 2018). Klaasen was born and raised at a time and in a society where same-sex relations and non-heterosexuality were more widely accepted than in the time of Sonneveld. While Klaasen has often played characters who were stereotypically gay, such as the stylist Yari in the drama series *Gooische Vrouwen,* sexual identity was, for a long time, not an explicit theme in his work. However, with increasing violence against queer people, Klaasen has expressed the need to raise his voice, but to do so not in a cynical or angry way (which he believes to be typical of Dutch cabaret), but in a light-hearted manner, through song, dance, and comedy sketches, for which he believed the revue would provide a suitable vehicle (Kleuver, 2018; Kragtwijk, 2018; Quaegebeur, 2018).[382]

Taking Klaasen's first revue production *Showponies* (2018) as my main example here, I will present an analysis of how Klaasen has used the conventions of the revue to unmask prejudices against queer people (Klaasen, 2020). The conventions of the revue are different from those of cabaret: while cabaret

381 'identiteitsrevues.'

382 In this sense, Klaasen's work both resembles and differs from the revues of André van Duin and Frans van Dusschoten by which they were inspired. Like the André van Duin Revue, Klaasen's productions are light-hearted and entertaining, and make ample use of theatrical disguises and comic impersonations. However, although van Duin has often mocked authority figures (typically played by Frans van Dusschoten), his revues were not politically engaged or satirical in the way Klaasen's recent work is. Moreover, while Klaasen makes his personal struggles with his sexual identity and being a single forty-something guy into the subject of his work, van Duin – like Sonneveld, of whom he was a great admirer – never made his sexual identity into the theme of his work. In that sense, Klaasen's work reflects the quest for authenticity both in contemporary cabaret (Klöters, 2017) and society at large (Smelik, 2011), as well as the growing attention paid to gender and sexual identity in the mainstream. Nevertheless, van Duin's work seems to carry a queer undertone, as demonstrated by the fact that different gay comedians and performers have recently reported that they were inspired by van Duin's revue productions, including Richard Groenendijk in his performance Voor iedereen beter (Better for everyone, 2022).

has often been defined as minimalist with regard to costume, setting, and performance, revue is seen as more 'showy' because of its integration of song, dance, and sketch comedy. Klaasen uses these conventions to highlight the fact that often, to call someone's behaviour 'gay' is to suggest that that behaviour is 'showy', 'extra,' or 'theatrical,' and hence unnatural. The negative connotations of this type of behaviour are already hinted at by the word 'show pony' from the title. The term 'show pony' is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'a person who takes excessive care over his or her appearance; an ostentatious or showy person (in early use esp. a man).' From the beginning of the show, it is clear that Klaasen himself is framed by the other cast members as a show pony. The performance starts with Bartels, Cornelissen, and Smit doing a comical impersonation of Klaasen in front of the closed curtain. When Klaasen enters the stage to ask for an explanation, clearly annoyed, the other cast members confess that they think Klaasen is always hiding behind exaggerated comic characters, thereby both showing off and not showing his 'true' self.

In the first act, Klaasen's supposed lack of authenticity and his showiness are linked to him being gay. That is, the audience is presented with a series of sketches and songs in which Klaasen uses the theatrical disguises and comic characters typical of the revue to play with the fact that gay people are both seen as too much (excessive, effeminate, and showy) and too little (hideous and inauthentic). For example, in a scene at the police station, Klaasen plays an officer who makes a stubborn criminal convert by threatening the suspect with all manner of sexual acts. The sketch creates a comic incongruity between the overly masculine, homophobic criminal, and the stereotypical, effeminate gay. In another scene, Klaasen plays an Inspector Morse type of detective who needs to find out which member of a British aristocratic family is gay, but turns out to be that gay person himself. The sketch thereby mocks the idea that to be gay is to be hideous and hence in need of being unmasked.

The second act, following the intermission, stands in sharp contrast to the first. Here, Klaasen presents a solo concert in drag. In the movie-like setting of a roof terrace, looking out over the skyline of New York, Klaasen performs a combination of Dutch and English songs, both classics and new work. Throughout the concert, Klaasen directly addresses the audience, not in Dutch but in English, speaking with a strong American accent. He explains that he is in drag because he is a big fan of Barbara Streisand and wants to perform her work and that of other female performers, as he believes the best songs have been written for women.

Through his drag performance and his strong American accent, Klaasen may at first seem to create a distance between performer and 'true' self. However, Klaasen's performance has the opposite effect. In contrast to the first act, which presented a quick succession of sketches, songs, and dance routines, in which

Klaasen dressed up as different comic personae, the second act feels less spectacular, more intimate, and somewhat private, almost like a peek behind the scenes. Klaasen performs mostly alone, directly addresses the audience, and shares his emotions, e.g., through a song about his deceased father. Towards the end of the second act, the idea that being gay means to be excessive, false, and inauthentic is criticised by Klaasen explicitly within a conversation with Smit, who enters the stage and gets angry at Klaasen for playing all the female roles, and for making the whole show about himself without ever showing his 'true' self to the audience, but instead dressing up all the time. Klaasen's reply is that when performing in drag, he can be most truly himself.

Through the set-up of the first and second acts, culminating in this discussion between Klaasen and Smit, Klaasen's revue presents an argument about the construction of identity. The revue resists any essentialist understanding of gender and sexual identity, and instead seems to articulate an understanding of identity as constructed and performed through what Judith Butler famously called a 'stylized repetition of acts' (Butler, 1988: 519). By emphasising that performing in drag enables him to express his 'true' self, Klaasen takes a more playful approach to identity, while also highlighting the fact that such playful ways of 'doing' our gender and sexuality are often considered unnatural and false according to a patriarchal and heteronormative logic (cf., Butler, 1988). Klaasen's intimate drag concert, leading up to his final statement about drag, also invites the audience to reflect upon their own modes of distinguishing between true and false, authentic and 'theatrical,' being your true self and being 'showy,' complicating any easy distinction between the two (Bleeker, 2007). By exploiting the presumed 'showiness' and 'theatricality' of the revue, Klaasen thereby also disconnects theatre and theatricality from their old associations with all that is inauthentic, false, excessive and showy, and invites the audience to understand reality as itself constructed or, as Barbara Friedman has put it, to consider theatre and reality as 'parallel constructions' of the real (cited by Bleeker, 2008: 9).[383]

Queering the canon

In *Showponies*, Klaasen not only deconstructs a genre that tends to be associated with showiness and dressing up, but also makes room for more inclusive and queer interpretations of past work. I will demonstrate this strategy of 'queering' the canon

383 A more detailed discussion of the academic literature on queer and drag performance, as well as its relationship to time and nostalgia, falls outside the scope of this dissertation. For good introductions to this field of research, see: Campbell and Farrier, 2016; Muñoz, 2019. For the relationship between queer performance and time/nostalgia, see: McCallum and Tuhkanen, 2011; Pallister, 2019, especially the chapters contributed by Heather Freeman and Keshia Mcclantoc.

through a discussion of two examples. The first is taken from the drag concert discussed above, in which Klaasen performs "t Is over' (It's over, 1965), a Dutch musical classic by Annie M.G. Schmidt (lyrics) and Harry Bannink (music).[384] The original musical *Heerlijk duurt het langst* (1965)[385] tells the story of a heterosexual couple, Ido and Marian, who go through a break-up because Ido has cheated on his wife by having an affair with his secretary. In the bitter-ironic song "t Is over', originally performed by Conny Stuart, and in later productions by Jenny Arean and Jasperina de Jong, Marian pretends not to care about her husband any longer, even though she is still emotionally attached to him. Klaasen's performance of this song appeals to feelings of nostalgia by an audience who are largely familiar with this musical classic, in particular because Klaasen's performance is not a parody (unlike his version of 'Het dorp'), but strikes a serious tone, and is faithful to the original: the lyrics are not changed, and Klaasen's intonation and interpretation are in line with earlier performances. However, one decisive change has been made: Klaasen performs the song in drag, thereby 'queering' the original and opening up new interpretative possibilities. Rather than playing the role of a female character and trying to make the audience forget about the difference between performer and role, Klaasen does not hide the fact that he is performing in drag. Thereby, Klaasen creates an extra layer, allowing the audience to interpret the song as a story of a woman and her unfaithful husband, or as a story about a same-sex relationship.

The second example is an adaptation of Sonneveld's classic children's song, 'Katootje,' or 'Ik ben met Katootje naar de botermarkt gegaan' (I have been to the butter market with Katootje, 1962), presented by Klaasen in his second revue production *Showponies 2* (2019) (Klaasen, 2022). Like 'Het dorp,' 'Katootje' has been adapted and parodied multiple times, by, among others, André van Duin and Paul de Leeuw ('Katootje'). Klaasen's adaptation is entitled 'Nieuw alfabet' (New alphabet), and refers to the letters representing the different members of the LGBTQIA+-community. While not creating an immediate sense of nostalgia (such as Klaasen's faithful performance of "t Is over'), Klaasen's 'Katootje' nevertheless plays with nostalgia on different levels.

First, a sense of nostalgia is created by using the format and the music of Sonneveld's original. Not only has Sonneveld as a performer become the signifier of an idyllic past himself[386], the original song also creates a nostalgic mood by

384 The lyrics of the song can be found in: Schmidt, 2007. An audio recording of Conny Stuart's original performance can be found on CD: "t, Is over,' 2002.

385 The title is hard to translate: it is a play on the Dutch expression 'eerlijk duurt het langst' (honesty is the best policy). The word 'eerlijk' (honest) has been changed into heerlijk (delightful/wonderful).

386 Although the song was, in the original TV show from 1962, not performed by Sonneveld himself, but by the cast of the musical My Fair Lady, in which Sonneveld played the lead, the song has always been considered 'his' song.

appealing to the times of our childhood as well as to feelings of national belonging. The original tells about the young girl Katootje, who is able to make figures out of butter. Each stanza tells about one of these figures: a minister, a witch, and a baroness, among others. The song not only evokes a sense of simplicity and playfulness connected to our childhood by staging fairy-tale figures like the witch, but also is situated in a nostalgic, Dutch past, and stages old Dutch figures, such as the "waffle lady,"[387] performed by the members of Sonneveld's ensemble in traditional Dutch attire (Vroegerennu, 2010). Moreover, the setting of the 'butter market'[388] is significant, as the Netherlands used to be one of the most important producers of butter during the Dutch 'Golden Age' (van Bavel, 2009), a historical period that is still a symbol of national pride.

Second, while not indulging in nostalgia for a Dutch Golden Age, Klaasen's adaptation does appeal to the history of the Dutch revue, and in particular to the attractions and technical devices for which early Dutch revues were well known (Krijn, 1980), by placing the performers on revolving plateaus which are positioned on top of each other. Because the performers often stand still while being transported by the revolving plateaus, an association is created with a music box, with the actors resembling puppets or toy figures.

In Klaasen's adaptation, the narrative structure of the original is followed: each stanza tells about one individual, this time not fairy-tale creatures or traditional Dutch characters, but members of the LGBTQIA+-community. The song thus reserves one stanza for each letter. Doing so, Klaasen on the one hand educates the audience about different sexual identities that are not yet widely known or understood, thereby 'queering' a cabaret classic of which the original version is more past- than future-oriented. On the other hand, Klaasen uses the format of the children's song and the association with toy figures in a music box to mock the risk of over-simplification involved in reducing complex sexual identities to an 'alphabet,' in which these identities may seem to be fixed categories. The first lines of the song read: "I have made a new alphabet with Katootje / For those who like to pigeonhole people,"[389] thereby addressing an audience who may also think in such fixed categories. For the remainder of the song, Klaasen plays with existing stereotypes about the sexual identities discussed. For instance, the 'queer' is staged as someone who is confused about the meaning of this category, and the

387 "wafelvrouw."
388 'botermarkt.'
389 "Ik heb met Katootje een nieuw alfabet gemaakt / Voor wie graag in hokjes denkt." The Dutch lyrics use the term 'hokjesdenken', which carries an association with parochialism and closed-mindedness.

'homosexual'[390] is stereotyped as someone going to the sauna: "To the sauna, to the sauna / Said the homosexual."[391]

By doing this, however, the song not only resorts to old stereotypes, but also complicates the normative logic underlying the original: the famous and recurring line "And my sister, she is named Kee"[392] from the original is here mockingly replaced by lines such as: "And my sister, she is named Sven"[393] and "My aunt, she is named Michiel"[394] (both typically boy's names), thereby challenging traditional gender binaries. Even though the song runs the risk of reinforcing some of the stereotypes that it uses, in the end it does not promise a return to a supposedly less complicated world, but rather presents a mild criticism of a proliferation of categories and mocks the unwillingness of a mainstream audience to seriously engage with those categories. At the same time, it makes room for and educates the audience in a light-hearted way about these different sexual orientations and identities. The risk of stereotyping the non-heterosexual as 'other' is tackled most explicitly at the end of the song, when the ensemble concludes that "the rest is heterosexual,"[395] thereby suggesting that the current situation is one in which heterosexuality is only one among many possible sexual orientations.

In conclusion, nostalgia is used in the examples discussed here not as a means to restore the past or temporarily escape the present, but rather as a means to imagine more progressive futures by 'queering' a revue and cabaret tradition in which queerness has previously been present only as a subtext.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed the work of two prominent Dutch comedians from different generations – Wim Sonneveld and Alex Klaasen – to argue for nostalgia as an important, underlying mood in Dutch cabaret. My aim in doing so has been to further deconstruct the popular image of the comedian as a progressive rebel, which seems to be at odds with an understanding of cabaret in terms of nostalgia for the past. While transgression is typically understood as being future-oriented and progressive, nostalgia has long been understood as being past-oriented and conservative. This chapter has sought to challenge that opposition. On the one hand, through an analysis of Wim Sonneveld's classic song 'Het dorp' (1966), which presents a defence of order and tradition at a time of rapid social change, I have demonstrated that Dutch cabaret is not necessarily future-oriented

390 Klaasen uses the pejorative and outdated Dutch term 'homofiel.'
391 "Naar de sauna, naar de sauna / Zei de homofiel."
392 "En mijn zuster, die heet Kee."
393 "En mijn zuster, die heet Sven."
394 "En mijn tante heet Michiel."
395 "de rest is hetero.'

and progressive. On the other hand, through a reading of Alex Klaasen's revue productions, I have demonstrated that nostalgia is not necessarily conservative either: I have argued that Klaasen has used nostalgia in a progressive way, by both reviving the old revue, but also deconstructing its conventions to demonstrate that being 'showy' – a charge that has been levelled both against the revue performer and the queer person – does not mean being shallow, deceptive, or unnatural. Moreover, through playful adaptations of cabaret and musical classics, Klaasen has 'queered' the canon. Surprisingly, then, while transgressive comedy holds the promise of a radical break with the past that supports a progressive political agenda, the nostalgic cabaret-revues of Klaasen turn out to be more progressive than the transgressive comedy discussed in Chapter 1.

While this chapter has concentrated on two comedians, in whose work nostalgia is present as a dominant mood, a sense of nostalgia is present in the work of many comedians discussed throughout this dissertation. It looms large, for example, in the work of Claudia de Breij, who has appealed to feelings of national belonging (e.g., by calling-up the nostalgic image of the Netherlands as a small nation with an heroic past) as well as an idyllic childhood (e.g., through the figure of the father representing a democratic politics that has been put under pressure in the present). In the seemingly future-oriented, transgressive comedy of Youp van 't Hek and Theo Maassen, nostalgia is present as well: van 't Hek's work abounds with references to the more innocent times of our childhood and adolescent days (e.g.,the old student house) as well as to a romantic, pre-capitalist society; and while Maasen's early work is based almost completely on nostalgia for the times of our childhood, in later work, he expresses a nostalgic longing for a traditional society in which white male privilege had not yet been put under pressure.

Nostalgia is thus often present as a mood or an undertone in the work of Dutch comedians, but it has not always been recognised as such, or reflected upon by comedians or their critics. Hence, nostalgia is not, as some scholars have argued, necessarily reflective in the sense that it emphasises and invites a 'self-conscious relationship with history' (Bonnett, 2010: 44). It is often rather unreflective, which makes it into a powerful rhetorical device. It has been used to perform critique in an affective rather than an argumentative way, by appealing to childhood memories, as well as to feelings of national belonging and homecoming. This chapter has sought to highlight this important role of nostalgia in Dutch cabaret as both a mood and a rhetorical device, and to demonstrate how comedians have used its affective appeal to perform social criticism.

Nostalgia, as a central yet often implicit mood in Dutch cabaret, has also invited more critical responses. This playful anti-nostalgia has been demonstrated through a reading of Klaasen's parody of 'Het dorp,' but it is also present in some of the anti-protest songs that I have discussed in Chapter 3 and in Micha Wertheim's

metacommentary on the work of Youp van 't Hek and Toon Hermans discussed in Chapter 4. It seems to have reached its climax in the postmodern cabaret of the 1990s and early 2000s. In the work of Arjan Ederveen and Tosca Niterink, and De Vliegende Panters, as we have seen, the legacy of protest cabaret is not approached in a nostalgic manner, but rather is unmasked as pretentious and pathetic. These adaptations and parodies of past cabaret also play with the fact that cabaret as a cultural tradition is itself often approached in a nostalgic way, as highlighted by Klaasen's parody of Wim Sonneveld. In his most recent work, Klaasen has exploited this nostalgic potential of past cabaret and revue to envision a more queer future.

An interesting connection has emerged in this chapter between nostalgia and queerness. This is perhaps not surprising, given the fact that Dutch cabaret (even more so since the rise of Dutch stand-up comedy in the early 1990s) is still a heterosexual, male-dominated field. Moreover, the performance of compulsive heterosexuality plays an important role in the tradition of transgressive comedy, discussed in Chapter 1. Hence, queer comedians, such as Wim Sonneveld, André van Duin, Richard Groenendijk, and Alex Klaasen have typically not developed an aesthetic of transgressive humour (with the exception, perhaps, of Paul de Leeuw), but have cultivated a more nostalgic approach, while also creating cross-overs with other popular musical theatre genres that are less male-oriented and less heteronormative.

This chapter has, however, only touched upon this connection between nostalgia and queerness. An analysis of the different dramaturgical layers of the performance of queer in Dutch cabaret (including the role of travesty, parody, and camp)[396] as well as a systematic review of the many academic studies on queerness and queer performance, falls outside the scope of this dissertation. That is, this dissertation presents a deconstruction of the image of the comedian as progressive rebel, and the work of Sonneveld and Klaasen has been presented in this chapter as a counterexample to a male-dominated, and heteronormative mainstream, in which cabaret is often still understood in terms of an aesthetic of transgression.

396 In the work of Alex Klaasen, the role of travesty and cross-dressing differs from the rather mysoginist ways in which these have been used as comic devices in the comedy of the twentieth century, e.g., in the popular Dutch Snip & Snap revues, and in the work of Monty Python.

Conclusion: rethinking the politics of comedy

We were so good at follow ing that we came to walk in front.[397]
(Bram Vermeulen on Neerlands Hoop, cited by 'Heilige huisjes,' 2004)

Comedians typically know their work better than critics and analysts do. Through the above-quoted statement, Bram Vermeulen (1946–2004), former member of the legendary Dutch cabaret duo, Neerlands Hoop, presented a sharp analysis of Neerlands Hoop's role in society, long before I began to doubt the popular image of the comedian as a 'progressive rebel.' According to Vermeulen, he and his artistic partner Freek de Jonge were sensitive to the social and political trends and opinions of their time (especially those associated with a progressive and rebellious youth culture), and were able to give expression to them in their work. They were even so skilled at following these social and political trends and developments, that they ended up walking in front. They started out as *followers,* but became *leaders,* somewhat to their own surprise. Their protest action against the participation of the Dutch football team in the 1978 FIFA World Cup in Argentina (discussed in Chapter 3) marks the moment when Vermeulen and de Jonge most convincingly performed this role of progressive leader.

The image of the comedian as a follower who ends up as a leader does not just apply to the work of Neerlands Hoop, but to the work of many Dutch comedians. It resonates, for example, with the description that Claudia de Breij gave of herself as a comedian who tries to accommodate, rather than initiate, progressive social change (cited in Chapter 2). The picture of the comedian as a follower-becoming-leader presents a powerful – and somewhat tragically funny – counterimage to that of the comedian as a 'progressive rebel,' which I have sought to deconstruct in this dissertation.

397 "We waren zo goed in meelopen dat we voorop kwamen te lopen."

While Vermeulen's statement reads as being self-deprecating, it also highlights the talent and craftsmanship that is needed to respond to the progressive social and political changes already underway at the fringes, and to translate them into comedy. It also highlights the power of the comedian to use humour as a rhetorical device to convince and inspire audiences, and to build political communities out of a disparate group of relatively random people.

In the concluding chapter of this dissertation, I will address both points raised by Vermeulen's statement. I will first return to the popular image of the Dutch comedian as a 'progressive rebel,' and explain why this image is in need of correction. Then, I will argue for an alternative understanding of the politics of comedy, which acknowledges the rhetorical power of humour and comedy to build political communities around shared matters of concern, followed by a brief consideration of the tension between politics and morality in Dutch cabaret. Next, I will evaluate the 'cultural studies approach to humour' proposed in this dissertation, and present some suggestions for future research on Dutch cabaret. I will end on a personal note, sharing my experiences of being a humour scholar in the twenty-first century. Doing so will help me to explain why humour (and its academic study) matters.

The comedian as progressive rebel (revisited)

To what extent (if at all) are Dutch comedians 'progressive rebels?' In this dissertation, I have distinguished between three characteristics of the progressive rebel to enable a deconstruction of this popular idea. I have done so through an analysis of the work of Dutch comedians and popular discourses on Dutch cabaret articulated through media interviews, reviews, and histories of the genre. I will briefly return to these three criteria now to argue that the traditional image of the comedian as a progressive rebel is too limited, and in need of correction.

First, Dutch comedians are generally believed to be socially and politically *engaged.* While the notion of engagement is rooted in the 'protest' cabaret of the 1960s and 1970s – and some believe that it died with the passing of those decades – it remains an important category to 'think about' Dutch cabaret. However, engagement is an historically and emotionally charged term, which does not help us to understand how comedians use humour to perform critique. The long-standing debate on cabaret and engagement is rather repetitive, and centres around the question of if comedians are politically engaged or not, without telling us much about the exact ways in which comedians use humour to articulate particular social or political messages.

What a closer examination of the debate on cabaret and political engagement *has* enabled me to do, is to demonstrate that both comedians and critics have objected to notions of social and political engagement. This resistance

to engagement goes back to the supposed heyday of political cabaret in the 1960s and 1970s. While, on the one hand, engagement has been used as a criterion of evaluation by festival juries and critics, and is considered by many comedians as an ideal that they somehow have to live up to, it has also been opposed, by comedians and critics alike, who have denounced it as insincere, moralist, and politically biased. The many parodies of political cabaret, sometimes presented by the very same comedians and cabaret groups who were otherwise praised for their political engagement, demonstrate this. Moreover, engagement has been criticised as a dangerous form of 'preaching to the converted': the politically engaged comedian could abuse his rhetorical powers by tricking spectators into believing that he, as a superior critic, knows the truth, thereby transforming the audience into a proto-fascist mass, swallowing the individual and their capacities to think critically in the process.

This does not mean that engagement is a label that is rejected by all comedians: it is an ambiguous and contested term, which has been opposed by some, and positively (re-)claimed by others. I have pointed to the work of some comedians who have, in recent years, increasingly embraced political engagement in their work, e.g., Claudia de Breij and Alex Klaasen, both of whom refer to and draw from feminist, anti-racist, and queer forms of activism. There are other comedians, not discussed in this dissertation, whose work is also recognised as being socially and politically engaged, e.g., Jaap van de Merwe (1924–1989), Frits Lambrechts (b. 1937), Hans Sibbel (a.k.a. Lebbis, b. 1958), Dolf Jansen (b. 1963), Erik van Muiswinkel (b. 1961), and Pieter Derks (b. 1984).

By opposing the notion of social and political engagement, many comedians have presented themselves as 'rebels without a cause.' Both comedians and critics have argued that the task of the comedian is to oppose 'conventions, traditions, and dogmas,' as Wim Ibo phrased it (Ibo, 1970: 21), but without subscribing too openly to a particular political ideology. Comedians see themselves as (and are generally considered as being) independent and autonomous artists, who are critical *because* they are free and independent. This does not mean, however, that the work of Dutch comedians does not resonate with particular political ideologies.

This can be demonstrated in relation to the second characteristic of the comedian as a progressive rebel, that is, the idea that comedians are *politically left-leaning.* In this dissertation, I have shown how particular modes of thinking and reasoning adopted by comedians resonate with broader political ideologies. In so doing, I have demonstrated that Dutch comedians do not necessarily speak from a left-wing, political standpoint. Dutch cabaret offers more political flavours, from the left-liberal politics of Claudia de Breij, to the conservative rebellion of Hans Teeuwen, and from the queer political engagement of Alex Klaasen, to the more ambiguous (anti-)protest of Lurelei, Don Quishocking, and Kabaret Ivo de Wijs.

An interesting finding of this dissertation is that particular comic styles tend to be associated with particular political resonances. This dissertation has, roughly speaking, distinguished between three comic styles. The first is *transgressive humour,* a term that I have used to refer to an aesthetic of shock and provocation, as adopted by Youp van 't Hek, Theo Maassen, and Hans Teeuwen. While these comedians present themselves as anti-establishment rebels, I have demonstrated that in the present cultural moment, transgressive humour tends to reinforce rather than challenge social hierarchies, and thereby resonates with an (online) conservative counterculture, and a nationalist, conservative populism.

The second comic style is *nuanced humour.* I have used this term to refer to a comic style that breaks with the transgressive humour of the anti-establishment rebel, and rather seeks to offer moderate and reasonable social and political criticism by expressing doubt, seeking consensus, and bridging ideological differences. I have located this humour aesthetic in the work of Wim Kan and Claudia de Breij. Both comedians have, through their work, articulated a centre-left position, in-between the radical left and the Orthodox Protestant right. While this humour aesthetic, compared with the other two, is most strongly associated with a left-wing politics, Kan and de Breij have sympathised with, but also distanced themselves from, activist sentiments. They have presented themselves as being part of the so-called 'reasonable centre,' thereby complicating any easy identification of Dutch cabaret with social protest or the radical left.

The third comic style is *absurdist humour.* While some have argued that the term 'absurdism' lacks precision (Oring, 2003; Wertheim, 2017), it is a helpful term to refer to a comic style that is predicated on parody, deadpan delivery, and comical escalation. This style is also closely associated with the *meta-* or *deconstructionist humour* of comedians such as Freek de Jonge and Micha Wertheim, discussed in Chapter 4. Compared with the 'transgressive' and 'nuanced' comedians discussed above, what the absurdists and deconstructionists have in common, is that they, while often being considered left-wing cultural critics, tend to disassociate themselves from a strong political engagement, and instead, to reflect upon social and political issues from a meta-perspective. As such, this type of comedy challenges any easy identification of Dutch cabaret with a left-wing political agenda. Micha Wertheim is perhaps the best example of a comedian who has consistently rejected making political statements in his work.

Third, Dutch comedians are generally considered *rebellious.* Here, we hit the core of the popular image of the comedian as a 'progressive rebel,' because rebellion is commonly associated with a progressive politics. To be rebellious is to be progressive, or so it seems. The understanding of the comedian as a 'progressive rebel' is firmly rooted in common-sensical definitions of 'progressive' versus 'conservative.' Whilst 'progressive' is commonly used as a term to refer to a politics

of change, 'conservative' is commonly used to refer to a politics of conservation or restoration (Robin, 2015). This dissertation has sought to challenge the opposition between 'progressive change' and 'conservative restoration,' building on the work of political scientists, Corey Robin and Merijn Oudenampsen (see Chapter 1), and their definitions of progressive and conservative political thought. As Robin has argued: 'No conservative opposes change as such or defends order as such. The conservative defends particular orders – hierarchical, often private regimes of rule – on the assumption, in part, that hierarchy is order' (Robin, 2011: 24). Hence, the distinction between progressive and conservative political thought cannot be reduced to an opposition between change and conservation, but is more fruitfully understood in terms of a distinction between a politics of emancipation, and a politics of hierarchy and order.

However, the rhetorical strategies used to defend hierarchy and order, or to strive towards a politics of emancipation, are contingent on historical context. Here, I follow Robin and Oudenampsen in their contextual approach to political ideas, which does not consider progressive and conservative political thought as fossilised ideological systems, but rather as political traditions that have changed their tactics in response to new cultural and historical contexts.

Such a change of tactics is apparent in the recent trend among conservatives to adopt transgressive forms of humour, thereby exploiting the association between transgression and a progressive politics, which can be traced back to the 1960s (Bell, 1979; Oudenampsen, 2020). In the 1960s, comedians, artists, and activists began to adopt an aesthetic of shock and provocation to fight for social change and oppose political and religious authorities. What we have inherited from the 1960s is both the typical conflation of humour and transgression, and the idea that transgressive humour is progressively liberating. I have questioned both ideas, first, by proposing transgressive humour as a separate aesthetic mode, and, second, by demonstrating that transgressive humour in Dutch cabaret increasingly resonates with conservative political ideologies, because comedians adopting such a style tend to reinforce social hierarchies. Subsequently, I have demonstrated that seemingly less-radical forms of humour are more radical and more progressive than they may appear to be at first inspection: both the moderate, nuanced humour of Wim Kan and Claudia de Breij, and the queer nostalgia of Alex Klaasen, enact a politics of emancipation, thereby challenging old oppositions between left-wing radicalism and right-wing moderation, and between progressive transgression and conservative nostalgia.

The politics of comedy

If Dutch comedians are not (or at least not necessarily) 'progressive rebels,' what role do they play in society, and how (if at all) is their work political? In

the Dutch cabaret field, the politics of comedy have often been downplayed by comedians and critics alike, who have tended to reduce politics to a limited (and often negatively connotated) notion of 'political engagement.' A Dutch cabaret performance is generally believed to be 'political' if the comedian has a clear political agenda (typically left-wing) and presents explicit political critique (typically anti-authority). This dissertation, however, invites another reading of the politics of comedy. I argue that the politics of comedy are not to be located at the level of explicit political critique, but rather at the level of humorous form and style. Humour is employed by comedians as a rhetorical device, and is used both to present rational argument and to appeal to the sensibilities and emotions of an audience. In so doing, I propose, comedians build political communities through *passionate argument,* and as such, play an important role in public debate.

Let me unpack this notion of comedy as 'passionate argument.' First, comedians, or at least the type of comedians dealt with in this dissertation (i.e., cabaret performers and stand-up comedians), tend to be *argumentative.* Whether they fashion themselves as anti-establishment rebels or moderate critics, whether they present themselves as politically engaged or use strategies of disengagement and offer social commentary from a meta-position, what they all share is that they present forms of argument: they employ humour as a rhetorical tool to advance positions in a debate, or to oppose the arguments of others, even when they discuss seemingly banal and everyday matters. Moreover, comedians often present themselves as being *rational,* and tend to use humour to mock opponents as being unreasonable and stupid (Nieuwenhuis, 2022). This rationalism is most clearly present in the work of the 'nuanced' comedians discussed in Chapter 2, who oppose all forms of radicalism for its supposed lack of reason. But this claim to rationality is equally present in the work of comedians who perform anti-protest songs, or who defend white, male privilege against its supposedly irrational opponents.

Second, when comedians mock opponents as being stupid or irrational, they not only engage in a form of rational argument, but also appeal to the emotions and sensibilities of their audiences. To put it simply: comedy tends to be *affective.* This dissertation has demonstrated these affective qualities of comedy, and has pointed to the different ways in which comedians have made use of them. While some comedians have employed transgressive humour to offer their audiences an affective release of tension and build communities around the supposed threat of 'political correctness,' others have appealed to feelings of nostalgia, e.g., to come to terms with social tensions in the present (e.g., in Wim Sonneveld's 'Het dorp'), or to 'queer' the canon and propose more progressive futures. Even 'nuanced' comedians, such as Wim Kan and Claudia de Breij, make use of the affective power of humour. Although they present themselves as rational consensus-seekers,

who are opposed to strong emotion, I have demonstrated that both, in their work, appeal to feelings of nostalgia and national belonging, thereby constructing political communities, e.g., by picturing the nation as a home, with a wise father as the protector of liberal democracy.

What kind of political model does such an understanding of comedy have to offer? First, a political model that does not reduce politics to a form of opposition to the status-quo or to power. An understanding of comedy as passionate argument and a form of community-building helps us to see that comedians do not just oppose power, but also exercise power themselves (Nieuwenhuis and Zijp, 2022; Quirk, 2018). Comedians employ humour as a rhetorical strategy, both to appeal to our reason and to our emotions, and this gives them the power to build political communities around shared 'matters of concern' (Latour, 2004).

Second, such an understanding of comedy invites a reconsideration of political theories that reduce politics to the exchange of rational argument between equals, and as such, to traditional understandings of the 'public sphere,' which do not leave much room for humour or other forms of non-serious speech (Habermas, 1962; cf., Gardiner, 2004: 35). While a full engagement with public sphere theory falls outside the scope of this dissertation, when we acknowledge that comedians participate in public debate by integrating reasoned argument with an appeal to affect, this seems to pose a problem for ideal-typical understandings of the public sphere as a form of rational debate. While some humour and comedy scholars (and Habermas himself in later revisions of his argument) have attempted to include humour and satire in their notions of the public sphere (e.g., Basu, 1999; Kuipers, 2011), the idea of comedy as passionate argument proposed here has stronger resonances with the 'agonistic pluralism' of Chantal Mouffe (Mouffe, 2005; 2013). Mouffe is critical of liberal political philosophy, including the work of Habermas, and argues for a more affective and conflict-oriented understanding of politics. That is, the antagonistic nature of the political, which implies a conflict between irreconcilable world views that a democratic politics can only seek to manage but not resolve, requires a model that understands politics as the building of affective communities around shared ideologies or world views. Politics, in that sense, is not merely rational and argumentative, but also affective. In this dissertation, I have proposed to reappropriate the negatively connotated notion of 'preaching to the converted' (inspired by the work of Sophie Quirk) to argue for a more affective understanding of the politics of comedy.

The tension between politics and morality

Dutch comedians have often been accused of moralism. While some comedians, such as Youp van 't Hek, have embraced moralism, others, such as Hans Teeuwen, have cultivated an anti-moral style. The tension between moralism and anti-moralism is inherent to humour as an aesthetic category. Humour is a parasite of morality: it is predicated on the transgression of moral and social boundaries (Kuipers, 2009), but does not necessarily commit to a moral truth. However, humour can also be used as a rhetorical tool to advocate particular moral messages.

There is another tension here: that between morality and politics. The charge of moralism has often been used by comedians and critics to accuse comedians of employing political indoctrination. While moralism and political engagement are thus closely related categories in the Dutch cabaret field, they should not be conflated. As the case studies discussed in this dissertation help to demonstrate, comedians have long struggled with the tension between politics and morality, and have often tried to separate politics from morality. Despite their passionate attempts, however, politics and morality cannot be wholly separated. I will demonstrate this by giving two examples of comedians who have followed opposite trajectories: the first has attempted to purge humour of politics, the second to purge humour of morality.

The first comedian is Micha Wertheim. While Wertheim explores moral dilemmas in his work, he has been hesitant to make political statements, and has argued for the importance of drawing a clear boundary between art and politics (Wertheim, 2019). However, in engaging with moral dilemmas, such as the question of if comedians should continue performing under a totalitarian regime, Wertheim has touched upon political issues, related to the dangers of political community-building on stage. His struggle to purge humour of politics (or, to abstain from "opinions" about "the state of the world," see below) is expressed through the moral question posed by Wertheim in his show *Voor de zoveelste keer,* cited in Chapter 4: "When is it *immoral* to keep quiet on stage about *what is going on in the world* and when is it gratuitous to *voice opinions* that you actually know everyone in the audience agrees with anyway?" (Het Micha Wertheim Genootschap, 2019, emphasis added). In other words, when is it immoral to be apolitical?

In contrast to Wertheim, Hans Teeuwen has opposed the moralism of traditional Dutch cabaret, and has presented a comedy beyond good and evil. While Teeuwen did, in his early career, oppose the political engagement of Freek de Jonge and Youp van 't Hek, thereby combining anti-moralism with an aversion to political engagement, in recent years, Teeuwen's anti-moral style has come to support this comedian's passionate protest against left-wing moralism. In line with his recent political activism, Teeuwen has increasingly participated in public debate as well. However, the anti-moralism advocated by Teeuwen in his critique

of left-wing 'political correctness' bites itself in the tail, because it resonates with a conservative political ideology that is predicated on particular moral beliefs, e.g., a belief in the moral goodness of order and hierarchy, and the moral praise of the strong and the talented in favour of the weak and the 'woke' (Zijp, 2022). In other words, as soon as Teeuwen's anti-moralism comes to support a political ideology – defined by Shyon Baumman as 'a complex system of related ideas that combines an explanation of the world *with normative prescriptions for behavior*' (Baumann, 2007: 57, emphasis added) – morality is smuggled in through the backdoor. This is the paradox of nihilism, as pointed out by Johan Goudsblom: 'When one attempts, no matter how, to convert the sense of meaninglessness into action, nihilism loses its problematic tenor and turns into a programme'[398] (Goudsblom, 2003: 237).

Both Wertheim and Teeuwen have thus struggled with the tension between politics and morality in their work, without finding a final answer. This seems to be part of what fuels their work and keeps them searching. In this dissertation, I have proposed a moral understanding of politics, by suggesting an approach to comedy as the building of political communities around shared matters of concern, thereby breaking with the opposition between politics and morality. While some political philosophers have argued against such a moralisation of politics (Mouffe, 2005), politics and morality cannot be wholly separated.

Humour and cultural studies

How can cultural studies contribute to a better understanding of humour? In this section, I will evaluate the 'cultural studies approach to humour' proposed by this dissertation, and will recapitulate the four most important lessons on humour that this approach has enabled me to draw, starting with the latter.

Humour is not homogeneous. Humour is '[not] one thing'[399] (Kuipers, 2019). While our language may seem to suggest that it is, humour as a modern category is an umbrella term covering many different genres and styles (Condren, 2021), from the satirical to the absurdist, from the carnivalesque to the clownesque, and from the moralist to the ironic. This dissertation has demonstrated the variety of styles and forms in one particular, historically and locally specific genre of humour: Dutch cabaret. I have distinguished between transgressive, nuanced, absurdist, and deconstructionist humour, but these distinctions were the starting point for more precise analyses of the comic styles of comedians: for instance, the anti-bourgeois moralism of Youp van 't Hek differs from the nihilist transgression

398 'Op het moment dat men tracht, hoe dan ook, het besef van zinloosheid in handelen om te zetten, verliest het nihilisme zijn problematische strekking en gaat het over in een programma.'

399 '[niet] één ding.' Literally: 'The second fallacy: we think that humour is one thing' ('De tweede denkfout: we denken dat humor één ding is') (Kuipers, 2019).

of Hans Teeuwen (which borders on the carnivalesque), while both styles are, in turn, different from the ironic and ambiguous humour of Theo Maassen.

Humour does not have a single politics. Humour is 'transideological,' to borrow the term used by Linda Hutcheon's for the politics of irony (Hutcheon, 1995: 10). While scholars, comedians, and pundits tend to assume that humour is rebellious, marginal, and opposed to power, and as such, left-wing and progressive, I have demonstrated that comedians are cautious to commit themselves to a radical or revolutionary politics, and typically feel more comfortable when reflecting on social and political debates from a meta-position, or when positioning themselves in the so-called 'reasonable centre,' mocking opponents on both sides of the political spectrum. Moreover, when comedians *do* present themselves as anti-establishment rebels, they do not necessarily commit to a progressive politics of emancipation, but may also defend order and hierarchy. Hence, I agree with Markus Rolfe that 'the notions of rebel satirist and powerful elite are contested relational concepts, as are the terms dominant and margins in this battle of rhetorical positioning' (Rolfe, 2021: 95).

The politics of humour lie in its form and aesthetics. We should not reduce the politics of humour to its contents or targets (Holm, 2017). If we do so, we miss the way in which humour does political work on a formal level. By attending to the form and style of humour in Dutch cabaret, as well as engaging with the messages and ideas implied by the use of humour as an aesthetic, this dissertation demonstrates that the politics of humour are the result of an interplay between form and content. In the Dutch cabaret field, this relationship between form and content has been a topic of reflection, but often, the formal operations of humour are not sufficiently taken into account. For instance, it has been argued that Wim Kan is not a true, political comedian, because his work is more focused on the outward appearances and personal idiosyncrasies of politicians than on their actual policies (de Jong, 2007: 3; Klöters, 1987: 263). However, what such interpretations miss is that it was Kan's style, more than the contents of his jokes, that enacted a particular politics: by adopting a mode of nuanced humour, Kan represented the style and approach of political elites in a pillarised society, who sought to build bridges across social and political groups (Lijphart, 1990).

Humour is less polysemous than we tend to assume. While humour is, even more than other cultural expressions, considered elusive and ambiguous, this dissertation has demonstrated that in most cases, and through a careful reading of both the text and context of humour, it is possible to give the most plausible interpretation of a particular humorous utterance. Moreover, this dissertation has demonstrated that some forms of humour are more ambiguous than others, as such, enabling a better and more fine-grained understanding of the politics and aesthetics of humour in particular cases. The various degrees of ambiguity in the

work of comedians is reflected in the writings of Dutch cabaret critics: for instance, critics have had a hard time making sense of the ironic and ambiguous humour of Theo Maassen (does he *really* mean it?), while they have been more determined in their interpretations of the anti-bourgeois moralism of Youp van 't Hek.

I will end this section by addressing and evaluating the two most important characteristics of the 'cultural studies approach to humour' proposed in this dissertation: first, the combination of deconstructive close-reading and contextual analysis, and, second, a mode of historical analysis that does not aim for a mere reconstruction of the past, but aims to understand the historical traces of the past *in* the present (cf., Bal, 1999). This approach has helped me to make sense of Dutch cabaret in at least three ways.

First, by integrating close-reading with a contextual approach and with what we could call a 'history of the present,' I have been able to make sense of Dutch cabaret as both a cultural tradition and a mode of thinking through artistic practice. Since the 1960s at least, Dutch comedians have self-identified as part of a Dutch cultural tradition, and have adopted particular modes of thinking and making. Particular concepts (e.g., political engagement), ideas (e.g., comedians are left-wing preachers), and styles (e.g., transgressive humour), have been passed on from one comedian to the next, hence requiring a historical approach. For instance, it is difficult to understand what is at stake in current debates on cabaret and 'political engagement' when one does not know the history of this debate, and the way this history is (selectively) remembered.

Second, this approach has enabled me to analyse the interplay between invention and tradition in Dutch cabaret. Dutch cabaret is characterised by a logic of opposition and distinction, related to its reputation as a critical form of comedy. Comedians have often mocked and distanced themselves from both their predecessors and their contemporaries, responding to transgressive humour with nuanced humour (and *vice versa*), to nostalgia with anti-nostalgia, and to protest with anti-protest and seemingly apolitical nonsense. While there has been thus both continuity and change in Dutch cabaret of the past sixty years, a deconstruction of this oppositional logic has helped me to argue against bold claims about the history of Dutch cabaret, and the tendency to presume that every new generation forges a radical break with the past. This can be seen reflected in complaints about the 'nonsense' cabaret of Gen X, believed to be the opposite of the 'protest' cabaret of a previous generation (see Chapter 3), and in the celebration, during the past fifteen years, of nuanced humour as a supposedly new form of humour, and a revolt against a dominant aesthetic of transgression (see Chapter 2).

Third, while close-reading as a method of analysis runs the risk of overemphasising the ambiguity of cultural texts[400], combining close-reading with a more sociological, historical-contextual approach has helped me to demonstrate how the meanings of comedy shift over time. The concept of 'resonance' has done important political work here. For instance, a close-reading of the work of Theo Maassen may lead to the conclusion that this comedian's ironic and ambiguous humour is elusive and open-ended. However, reading this work against a shifting social and political context has made it possible to see why and how interpretations of Maassen's work have changed in recent years. Although earlier shows of Maassen allow for racist and anti-feminist readings as well, many critics have voiced the concern that Maassen's recent work – in contrast to his earlier shows – resonates with right-wing populist discourses (e.g., Rijghard, 2019). This dissertation thereby points to the dynamic observed by Terence McDonnell, Christopher Bail, and Iddo Tavory, in their paper 'A Theory of Resonance,' where they write that 'a cultural object may begin as incongruent or discordant – conflicting with the worldviews of an audience – only to resonate given the right situation' (McDonnell et al., 2017: 2; see also the embrace of Teeuwen's recent work by *GeenStijl*). At the same time, close-reading helps here to attend to the interpretative nuances of Maassen's work and the readings it invites, without reducing that work to the mere expression of the social context in which it is produced.

Future research

This dissertation presents one of the first academic studies on Dutch cabaret, a genre that has scarcely received scholarly attention, despite its long and established tradition as a form of theatre comedy. Hence, this dissertation only represents the first step in an understanding of this theatre genre. I will highlight three possible directions for future research on Dutch cabaret.

First, this dissertation has dealt with a relatively small sample of comedians. Based on this sample, I have found that particular comic styles tend to be associated with particular political resonances. This finding needs further empirical testing, based on a wider sample of comedians. Additionally, the analysis

400 There has, for instance, been an interesting debate about the possibilities and limitations of cultural analysis, the research programme developed by Mieke Bal, and institutionalised in the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Analysis (NICA). In a thorough discussion of Bal's work, Joost de Bloois has expressed sympathy towards Bal's project, which has foregrounded the agency of cultural objects, while also pointing to the possible fetishisation of the cultural text, which may result in an abstract, semiotic notion of 'conflict,' a conflict that would take place at the level of the text, in favour of a more contextualised understanding of cultural texts as the site of political 'struggle,' as proposed by British cultural studies (de Bloois, 2009: 123).

of a wider sample of comedians may lead to the identification of comic styles not discussed in this dissertation.

Second, this dissertation has focused on the work of white, male comedians. In future research, the work of both female and non-white comedians should be included to gain a better understanding of the politics and aesthetics of humour in the Dutch cabaret tradition. How have female and non-white comedians negotiated a genre that is predominantly white and male? Have they resorted to forms of humour often associated with minorities and disadvantaged groups, such as self-deprecating humour (Auslander, 1993: 326), or have they opposed mainstream (white, male) comedy? And why are there still relatively few female comedians? As this dissertation has demonstrated, women have often been the subject of jokes in Dutch cabaret, and have been portrayed as humourless, e.g., in the work of popular comedian Youp van 't Hek. Such a climate of sexist jokes (as well as other types of jokes targeting minorities) may spill over into the institutional realities of theatre schools, festivals, theatres, and comedy clubs, as a recent discussion about comedyclub Toomler, criticised by comedian Janneke de Bijl as a hostile environment for women (Bijl, 2022), has demonstrated.

Third, while this dissertation has addressed the politics of gender and sexuality in the work of different comedians, the politics of class and race have received less attention. The relationship between humour and class, and humour and race, present important, but complicated, topics of research. As Giselinde Kuipers has demonstrated, while people in the Netherlands are generally aware of gender differences in the production and appreciation of humour, people are generally unaware of how class-specific their humour tastes are (Kuipers, 2015). This is reflected in Dutch cabaret, in which the politics of class play an important, but tacit role. I have touched upon the politics of class in the first chapter, where I juxtaposed the upperclass, comic persona of Youp van 't Hek, with the working class, comic persona of Theo Maassen. There are other interesting potential case studies, e.g., the work of Waardenberg en De Jong, the cabaret duo of Martin van Waardenberg (b. 1956) and Wilfried de Jong (b. 1957), who became popular in the 1990s with their absurdist and physically transgressive humour bordering on slapstick, and who cultivated working class personae mocking everything elitist.

The relationship between humour and race is complex as well. In humour research, racist jokes have often been discussed as part of the broader category of 'ethnic humour,' e.g., in the work of Christie Davies and Elliott Oring (for a critical discussion of this label of ethnic humour in their work, see: Pérez, 2022). Moreover, in a supposedly colour-blind and post-racial society, humour plays an important role in spreading racist messages, but is often 'hidden in plain sight' (Pérez, 2013; 2022). The humour of Dutch comedians, such as Theo Maassen and Hans Teeuwen, resonates with racist political ideologies in complex ways.

They sometimes seem to resort to a form of 'cultural racism' (Weaver, 2011), such as when Hans Teeuwen and Theo Maassen present Muslim minorities in the Netherlands as being dangerous and antithetical to western cultural beliefs, or keep audiences guessing about their intentions by using comic modes of irony and absurdism. A more systematic review of the role of racism in Dutch cabaret, beyond the work of individual comedians, is much needed.

Epilogue: being a humour scholar in the twenty-first century

While humour has often been considered frivolous, insignificant, and 'just joking,' this dissertation claims that humour is a serious matter. Humour does important political work, and so do comedians, in the role of professional humourists with the power to appeal to our reason and to our emotions in a light-hearted manner. In the final section of this dissertation, I will use my personal experiences as a humour scholar to demonstrate how the study of humour and comedy – and the cultural studies approach to humour proposed in this dissertation in particular – is related to serious social and political issues and debates.

It has become somewhat of a cliché to state that we should 'take humour seriously,' or that humour 'matters,' as demonstrated by the many titles of books and academic papers that use such terms (e.g., Dufort, 2018; Lockyer, 2016; Palmer, 2004; Quirk, 2015). Nevertheless, this remains an important point to make. Both in the academic world and in society at large, humour is often not taken very seriously.

First, humour is often not taken seriously as an object of academic study. It is notoriously difficult to find academic funding for humour and comedy research (including this, mostly self-funded, dissertation), although that has changed somewhat of late. Hence, to be able to pursue an academic career as a 'humour scholar,' one needs to be somewhat tenacious. In my 'home' discipline of theatre and performance studies, humour and comedy are usually not part of the curriculum. Traditionally, theatre scholars pay more attention to the serious, the tragic, and the avant-gardist, than to the humorous, the comic, and the popular (with notable exceptions).

However, when I started to write my Master's Thesis, and later, this dissertation, I soon discovered that humour and comedy are more powerful, and thus more serious, than I had realised. I discovered that humour is a powerful rhetorical tool, precisely because it enables us to frame social and political messages as 'just a joke.' As Michael Mulkay summarises: '[I]t is precisely the symbolic separation of humour from the realm of serious action that enables social actors to use humour for serious purposes' (Mulkay, 1988: 1). But even if humour is not (consciously) used for serious purposes and experienced by social actors as mere 'play,' such humour may have real-world consequences. I discovered, however, that we do

not often acknowledge these serious consequences of humour, or at least tend to think that humour is an overall positive social and political force: we think of humour as a means to bring people together and to stay healthy, as being merely playful, pleasurable, and innocent, or otherwise as revolutionary and rebellious, a way to break taboos and to oppose power (Billig, 2005).

This is the second way in which we do not take humour seriously (enough): we tend to downplay its serious consequences and its 'dark side' (Kuipers, 2008: 382). However, as this dissertation has demonstrated, the power of humour to touch upon taboo topics and to foster communities has a downside: while humour unites some, it necessarily excludes others, and some comedians have made such acts of exclusion – often directed at disadvantaged and minority groups – central to their strategy of building political communities.

Thus, the notion of 'progressive rebel,' proposed in this dissertation in the context of Dutch cabaret, has a wider applicability, and refers to a popular way of thinking about humour and comedy. For instance, in a recent book on satirical late-night television and opinion talk radio in the US, Dannagal Goldthwaite Young wonders why satire tends to be the domain of Democrats, while so-called 'outrage programming' tends to be the domain of Republicans, both in terms of their producers and their audiences (Young, 2020). She explains the supposedly 'liberal bias' of satire by arguing that the ambiguous and playful character of humour matches the psychological make-up of people with left-wing sympathies, while the moral certainty offered by outrage programming matches the psychological make-up of those sympathising with the political right. In so doing, Young draws a schematic distinction between left-wing humour and right-wing outrage, which does not allow for a more detailed analysis of the political resonances of supposedly liberal humour, and also ignores the use of humour by the (radical) right, e.g., as a means to spread racist messages (Pérez, 2022).

In recent years, I have experienced how deep-seated such positive notions of humour and comedy are, not only in (particular branches of) humour research, but also in society at large. In the past couple of years, I have participated in public debate through expert comments and opinion pieces related to my research. In 2021, I wrote an opinion piece for the national newspaper, *De Volkskrant,* in which I responded to a media interview with comedian and actress Ilse Warringa (Huigsloot, 2021). In that interview, Warringa claimed humour to be inclusive by definition, to which I responded by arguing that humour may also reinforce social hierarchies and relationships of power (Zijp, 2021). This opinion piece sparked intense debate on social media, in the said newspaper (e.g., Jadib, 2021), and on the radio, culminating in a slanderous video in which comedian Hans Teeuwen

mocked me for having a "genderneutral shitface"[401] (Teeuwen, 2021; cf., Zijp, 2022). In these debates, the serious consequences of humour were often downplayed, and I was accused of 'wokeness' and, as such, was believed to present a danger to freedom of expression. It turned out that many people only wanted to accept the academic study of humour – if at all – if that study confirmed their positive bias towards humour and comedy.

This dissertation helps us to understand the significant role played by humour in our personal lives and in society at large, and thereby to make sense of the sometimes explosive responses to academic studies pointing to the dark side of humour, while also helping us to counteract the 'moral panic'[402] (Zijp, 2021) surrounding the current repoliticisation of humour (Nieuwenhuis and Zijp, 2022).

First, in recent years, social attitudes towards humour have changed, and we have seen a global trend in which humour has become part of the culture wars. This dissertation has argued that humour has always been political in the sense that it is predicated on the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, and is bound up with social hierarchies. This broad definition of politics, which is in line with the common usages of the term in the field of cultural studies, helps to demonstrate that the current repoliticisation of humour is no reason for moral panic (unless one sees one's own privileges being threatened), because humour has always been the site of political struggle, even though in some periods the political nature of humour is acknowledged and debated more than in others. Moreover, such a definition helps us to complicate reductive, linear-progressive historical understandings of humour, according to which humour contributes to the gradual removal of oppressive taboos, leading us towards total freedom as opposed to a totalitarian society that would be the result of a discussion about the moral boundaries or political effects of humour (e.g., Umbgrove, 2020; 2021).

Second, when read through the lens of this dissertation, it turns out that the most explosive debates about humour and comedy are debates about one particular type of comedy: transgressive comedy. This is in line with the tendency to reduce humour to transgression, and to ignore the existence of other styles and types of humour. This dissertation pays attention to a range of comic styles, demonstrating that humour is more than merely transgression. But this dissertation also contributes to a better understanding of transgression at a moment when the existence of transgressive comedy as a dominant cultural mode is increasingly being challenged. I have demonstrated that transgressive humour has, in recent years, become more defensive and more politicised in its tone and style, and has thereby become more conservative in its political resonances as well. This invites

401 "genderneutrale kutkop."
402 'morele paniek.'

comparisons with the work of prominent transgressive comedians from the US and the UK, such as Dave Chappelle, Jimmy Carr (cf., Quirk, 2018), and the makers of South Park, and helps us to challenge cultural narratives according to which we are 'not allowed to joke about anything anymore,' without taking into account the shifting aesthetics and political resonances of such humour.[403]

Third, this dissertation has demonstrated that humour is affective: it is not only pleasurable, but also bound up with feelings of nostalgia, and with our childhood memories. Humour is connected to very strong feelings, and is something we hold dear, so when academic scholars claim that humour is not only pleasurable or progressively liberating, this can be experienced as a personal attack (e.g., van Amerongen, 2021).

Humour is, in all its pleasurable playfulness, a serious matter, and humour and comedy scholars can help to disentangle the complex rhetorical and aesthetic operations of humour, and trace its political resonances. While humour is often believed to be polysemous and ambiguous, this dissertation has shown that some forms of humour are more ambiguous than others, and that a close-reading of humour in its specific cultural and historical contexts can help to demonstrate which messages humour conveys and which readings it invites, thereby providing an antidote to people who take advantage of humour's ambiguity to read humorous messages in line with their own ideological and political preferences. Perhaps, then, we may conclude that not only does humour matter, but that humour scholars matter as well.

403 That such cross-national comparisons between transgressive comedy may be fruitful, is demonstrated by a recent article, in which Nicholas Holm draws similar conclusions about the shifting politics and aesthetics of transgressive humour in the past twenty years. Holm compares the rise of the somewhat anarchic humour of the Cartoon Network programme block, Adult Swim, in the early 2000s, to recent manifestations of this humour. He concludes: 'In the newly ascendant centres of comic-cultural production and distribution, places like 4chan, 8chan and reddit, an intentionally amateurish and discordant humour style has become the basic for an increasingly influential comic style [...] However, as it shifts away from its marginal origins, the sense of anarchic disruption attendant to such humour becomes less clearly liberating and more potentially oppressive' (Holm, 2022: 369). Holm, however, is more cautious in determining the political resonances of Adult Swim's humour in the present, and focuses on the difference between Adult Swim as an 'emerging' cultural formation in the early 2000s, and the cultural 'dominance' of this mode of humour in present-day meme culture.

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Introduction

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Chapter 1

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Chapter 4

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Chapter 5

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Summary

This dissertation deals with the politics and aesthetics of humour in Dutch cabaret (1966–2020). It present an analysis of the humour strategies that comedians use to perform social critique, as well as the political resonances of their humour, that is, the way that their humour resonates with political ideologies. I propose 'political resonance' as a helpful term to analyse a genre of comedy that often plays with the boundaries between humour and serious criticism, but cannot so easily be reduced to a specific political preference, or to the binary categories of 'left' and 'right,' while recognising that comedians present more-or-less consistent comic personae, and adopt particular modes of thinking and reasoning to project those personae to an audience. The title of this dissertation, 'Comedians without a Cause,' plays with this ambiguity, acknowledging that comedians, on the one hand, have often presented themselves as progressive cultural critics who speak truth to power and oppose the status-quo, and, on the other hand, have fashioned themselves as independent cultural critics without a particular political agenda.

While comedians have been considered important cultural critics for quite some time, comedy has acquired a new social and political significance in recent years, with humour taking centre stage in political and social debates around issues of identity, social justice, and freedom of speech. Within this context, to which this dissertation refers as the 'repoliticisation of humour,' an understanding of the aesthetic and political operations of humour is increasingly urgent. This dissertation seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the cultural politics of humour by examining its uses within a single historically and locally specific genre of humour: Dutch cabaret. In the Netherlands, the term cabaret refers to a popular form of theatre comedy, originating in the French and German artistic cafés (or 'cabarets') of the late nineteenth century, but established as a theatre genre with mass appeal in the 1960s, highly valued for its critical reflections on society. As such, Dutch cabaret offers an excellent case for studying the humour strategies that comedians use to perform social critique, as well as the political resonances of their humour. Moreover, by taking Dutch cabaret as its object, this dissertation presents a long-overdue examination of a popular and critically acclaimed form of comedy.

The dissertation presents a deconstruction of the popular image of the Dutch comedian as a 'progressive rebel.' According to this image, which can be traced back to the 1960s, Dutch comedians are typically considered to be politically engaged, left-wing, and rebellious. To be able to analyse and question this image, the dissertation proposes what I call a 'cultural studies approach to humour,' which combines the deconstructive close-reading of humorous texts with a historical-contextual approach that seeks to situate these texts within a broader cultural and historical context. Additionally, this dissertation follows the recent, 'cultural turn' in humour studies, and integrates insights and ideas from critical comedy studies, cultural sociology, and theatre and performance studies.

The cultural studies approach to humour, as proposed here, starts from four methodological observations, which help to position humour as: (1) contextual; (2) political; (3) aesthetic; and (4) less polysemous than is often believed. I argue that humour is not homogeneous, but covers a range of comic styles and genres, as expressed in the rich tradition of Dutch cabaret; that humour is necessarily political, in the sense that it is embedded in relationships of power, and contributes to the negotiation, contestation, and maintenance of social hierarchies; that the politics of humour cannot be reduced to its explicit content, but are also expressed through its form and style; and, finally, that the tendency, both in academic debates and society at large, to place a strong emphasis on the polysemy and ambiguity of humorous texts, makes it possible to denounce inconvenient interpretations, and to read humour in ways that align with our own political and ideological beliefs. Instead, this dissertation demonstrates that some forms of humour are more ambiguous than others, and that in most cases, and through a careful reading of both the text and context of humour, it is possible to give the most plausible interpretation of a particular humorous utterance.

The cultural studies approach to humour makes it possible to examine Dutch cabaret as both a cultural tradition and a mode of thinking in and through artistic practice. This dissertation is structured around five key concepts that are used as lenses through which the aesthetic operations and political resonances

of humour can be understood: transgression, nuance, protest, engagement, and nostalgia. These concepts provide the starting point for a close reading of cabaret performances and related materials, such as media interviews and reviews. A sample of popular and critically acclaimed Dutch comedians is analysed, most importantly: Youp van 't Hek, Hans Teeuwen, Theo Maassen, Wim Kan, Claudia de Breij, Freek de Jonge, Micha Wertheim, Wim Sonneveld, and Alex Klaasen. Additionally, I discuss examples from the work of cabaret groups and solo artists, such as Cabaret Lurelei, Kabaret Ivo de Wijs, Neerlands Hoop, Don Quishocking, Jenny Arean, Brigitte Kaandorp, De Vliegende Panters, the cabaret duo Arjan Ederveen and Tosca Niterink, and De Partizanen. Because this dissertation presents a deconstruction of mainstream Dutch cabaret, the selection made here reflects a cabaret field that is still predominantly white and male.

Chapter 0 is a prelude to the main chapters of the dissertation. In this short chapter, I argue that the year 1966 presents a fertile starting point for this dissertation. I point to the cross-overs between Dutch cabaret and protest culture in the 1960s, in which comedians, artists, and activists adopted an aesthetic of transgression, and clashed with the authorities, culminating in a series of humour scandals in 1966 that both commented on and mirrored the clashes between young protesters and authorities outside of the cabaret field. I present an analysis of the humour scandal surrounding the song 'Arme ouwe' (Poor old hag), by Cabaret Lurelei, to introduce the central concepts of this dissertation.

In Chapter 1, I begin my deconstruction of the comedian as a progressive rebel by presenting an analysis of the work of three comedians who have, more than many others, presented themselves as progressive rebels: Youp van 't Hek (b. 1954), Hans Teeuwen (b. 1967), and Theo Maassen (b. 1966). They have done so by adopting an aesthetic of shock and provocation, to which I refer using the concept of transgression. I argue that their work tends to reinforce rather than to challenge social hierarchies, and that in recent years, these comedians have become increasingly defensive because they feel that their privilege as white, heterosexual, male comedians is under threat. This chapter disentangles the complex relationship between humour and transgression, which have often been conflated, and proposes the categories of moral, nihilist, and ironic transgression to enable a closer analysis of the humorous aesthetic of transgression, and the different forms that transgressive humour can take.

Although Dutch cabaret is often defined in terms of transgression, Chapter 2 argues that there is another dominant aesthetic in the history of Dutch cabaret, to which I refer as an aesthetic of nuanced humour. This form of humour can be traced back to the work of Wim Kan (b. 1911). I compare the work of Kan to that of the female, queer comedian, Claudia de Breij (b. 1975). I argue that neither Kan nor de Breij presents themself as an avant-gardist walking in front of the troops,

but rather, they present themselves as politically engaged comedians who are reasonable and nuanced, and want to listen to the political vanguard. Rather than initiating social change, their work accommodates progressive changes that were already underway at the fringes. While they do not thus present themselves as 'progressive rebels,' their work turns out to be more progressive than that of the self-proclaimed radicals discussed in Chapter 1.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I question the belief that Dutch cabaret is necessarily politically engaged. In Chapter 3, I do so through a discussion of the so-called 'protest cabaret' from the 1970s. I argue that in spite of the belief that comedians need to be politically engaged, comedians and critics have opposed political cabaret as being insincere, moralist, and dogmatic, and have often been careful not to display any partisan views in their work. I point to the existence of a neglected genre that I call the 'anti-protest song,' which is rooted in the cabaret of the 1960s and 1970s. Through a close analysis of anti-protest songs from the early 1970s to the 1990s, I cast further doubt on the idea that comedians are progressive rebels. I also point to the continuity between the 'protest cabaret' of the 1960s and 1970s and the 'nonsense cabaret' of the 1980s and 1990s. In so doing, I challenge the dominant historical narratives according to which cabaret in the 1960s and 1970s was politically engaged, whilst cabaret in the 1980s and 1990s was marked by ironic nonsense and a turn away from politics.

In Chapter 4, I make an intervention in the debate on cabaret and political engagement by discussing the work of two comedians who have pointed to the supposed dangers of political comedy: Freek de Jonge (b. 1944) and Micha Wertheim (b. 1972). I demonstrate that both consider political engagement in the arts to be a dangerous form of 'preaching to the converted,' and fear that political preaching will turn the audience into a proto-fascist mob. Both comedians are shown to have used a strategy of dividing the audience to emancipate the individual from the supposedly dangerous mass. I present a deconstruction of the opposition between critical individual and proto-fascist mass. Building on the work of philosopher Bruno Latour and comedy scholar Sophie Quirk, I argue that, rather than turning away from politics, 'preaching to the converted' offers a model for a political comedy beyond critique, which acknowledges the audience's participation in shared networks of meaning and sense.

Chapter 5 presents the final step in my deconstruction of the comedian as a 'progressive rebel.' Here, I compare the work of Wim Sonneveld (b. 1917) with that of Alex Klaasen (b. 1976). I take Wim Sonneveld's nostalgic cabaret song 'Het dorp,' one of the most performed, adapted, and parodied songs in the history of Dutch cabaret, as my starting point to argue for nostalgia an important and often implicit 'structure of feeling' (Raymond Williams) in Dutch cabaret. While nostalgia (typically seen as past-oriented and conservative) may seem to be the opposite of transgression

(typically seen as future-oriented and progressive), I argue that nostalgia has been put to both progressive and conservative uses. While Sonneveld's classic presents a mostly conservative defence of order and tradition, Klaasen's work, especially in his parody of 'Het dorp' and his recent 'identity revues,' demonstrates how nostalgia can be used as a resource to imagine more progressive futures, especially through this comedian's strategy of 'queering' the canon.

I conclude that the image of the Dutch comedian as a 'progressive rebel' is in need of correction, because Dutch cabaret is far richer and more complex than dominant historical narratives suggest. Comedians have not only presented themselves as being politically engaged, but have also struggled with and opposed political engagement; comedians are not necessarily left-wing, but have also claimed centrist or right-wing positions; and while we tend to look for progressive political messages in the work of comedians who present themselves as being anti-establishment rebels, this dissertation demonstrates that transgressive humour often protects boundaries. Moreover, it shows that both the moderate humour of Wim Kan and Claudia de Breij, and the seemingly past-oriented nostalgia of Alex Klaasen, are more radical and progressive than the transgressive humour of Youp van 't Hek, Hans Teeuwen, and Theo Maassen.

By presenting a deconstruction of the dominant image of the Dutch comedian as a 'progressive rebel,' this dissertation contributes to a better understanding of humour in the present cultural moment, in which humour is still – both within and outside academia – often not taken seriously, and one-sidedly celebrated as being merely pleasurable, innocent, or progressively liberating.

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Nederlandse samenvatting

In dit proefschrift onderzoek ik de politieke en esthetische werking van humor in het Nederlandse cabaret (1966-2020). Ik analyseer de humorstrategieën die cabaretiers gebruiken om maatschappijkritiek te leveren en de politieke resonanties van deze humor, dat wil zeggen, de manier waarop de humor van cabaretiers resoneert met politieke ideologieën. Ik introduceer het begrip 'politieke resonantie' omdat dit me helpt om een komisch genre te analyseren dat regelmatig speelt met de grenzen tussen humor en serieuze kritiek, maar niet zo eenvoudig herleid kan worden tot een specifieke politieke voorkeur of de harde tegenstelling tussen 'links' en 'rechts.' Tegelijkertijd houdt dit begrip rekening met het feit dat cabaretiers bepaalde vormen van denken en redeneren aannemen om vorm te geven aan min of meer consistente personages (of beter: personae). De titel van dit proefschrift, 'Comedians without a Cause,' speelt met die ambiguïteit, en met het feit dat cabaretiers zichzelf aan de ene kant vaak presenteren als progressieve criticasters, die de machthebbers tot de orde roepen en zich verzetten tegen de status-quo, terwijl zij zich aan de andere kant laten voorstaan op het feit dat zij onafhankelijke critici zijn, zonder vastomlijnde, politieke agenda.

Hoewel cabaretiers en comedians al lange tijd beschouwd worden als kritische stemmen in het publieke debat, hebben humor en comedy in de afgelopen jaren aan belangstelling en betekenis gewonnen, vooral omdat humor een centrale plaats is gaan innemen in debatten over identiteitskwesties, sociale rechtvaardigheid en de vrijheid van meningsuiting. Deze ontwikkeling, waar ik naar verwijs als de 'repolitisering van humor,' vraagt om een diepgaander begrip van de esthetische en politieke werking van humor. Dit proefschrift levert daar een bijdrage aan door zich te richten op de rol van humor in een historisch en cultureel specifiek humoristisch genre: Nederlands cabaret. In Nederland verwijst de term 'cabaret' naar een populaire vorm van humoristisch theater, die zijn oorsprong heeft in de Franse en Duitse kunstenaarscafés (of 'cabarets') uit de late negentiende eeuw, maar pas in de jaren '60 is uitgegroeid tot een theatergenre voor een massapubliek, dat gewaardeerd wordt om zijn maatschappijkritiek. Daarmee is het Nederlandse cabaret een zeer geschikte casus voor het bestuderen

van de strategieën die humoristen gebruiken om maatschappijkritiek te leveren en de politieke resonanties van die humor. Behalve een onderzoek naar de werking en politieke rol van humor, biedt dit proefschrift ook één van de eerste wetenschappelijke analyses van cabaret in Nederland, een genre dat, ondanks zijn populariteit en kritische naam, nauwelijks wetenschappelijk onderzocht is.

Dit proefschrift presenteert een deconstructie van het populaire beeld van de cabaretier als een 'progressieve rebel.' Volgens dit beeld, dat wortelt in de jaren '60 van de vorige eeuw, zijn Nederlandse cabaretiers politiek geëngageerd, links en rebels. Om deze reputatie van Nederlandse cabaretiers te analyseren en te bevragen, introduceer ik een cultuurwetenschappelijke benadering van humor, die beïnvloed is door zowel het Britse 'cultural studies' als door 'cultural analysis,' en die de deconstructivistische close-reading van cabaretvoorstellingen combineert met een meer historisch-contextuele benadering. Daarnaast volgt dit proefschrift de recente *cultural turn* in het onderzoek naar humor, en ontleent het ideeën en inzichten aan *critical comedy studies,* de culturele sociologie, de theaterwetenschap en de *performance studies.*

De cultuurwetenschappelijke benadering van humor die ik in dit proefschrift voorstel, gaat uit van vier methodologische observaties, waarmee humor begrepen wordt als: (1) contextgebonden; (2) politiek; (3) esthetisch; en (4) minder ambigu dan vaak wordt aangenomen. Ik betoog, ten eerste, dat humor niet homogeen is, maar een breed palet aan stijlen en genres beslaat, dat tot uitdrukking komt in de rijke traditie van het Nederlandse cabaret. In de tweede plaats laat ik zien dat humor per definitie politiek is: humor is altijd verbonden met machtsverhoudingen in de samenleving, waar ze zich tegen verzet of die ze bevestigt. Ten derde kan de politieke werking van humor niet gereduceerd worden tot een expliciete boodschap of 'inhoud,' maar komt deze juist ook tot uitdrukking in de vorm en stijl van humor. Ten slotte betoog ik dat de tendens, zowel in het wetenschappelijke als het publieke debat, om humor als ongrijpbaar en (eindeloos) meerduidig te zien het mogelijk maakt om onwelgevallige interpretaties van humor te ontkennen en humor te interpreteren op manieren die in lijn liggen met

onze persoonlijke politieke en ideologische voorkeuren. Dit proefschrift laat zien dat sommige vormen van humor minder eenduidig zijn dan andere en dat we in de meeste gevallen, en met behulp van nauwkeurige analyse, kunnen vaststellen wat de meest plausibele interpretatie is van een humoristische uiting.

De gekozen cultuurwetenschappelijke benadering van humor maakt het mogelijk om Nederlands cabaret te onderzoeken als een culturele traditie en een manier van denken in en door de theaterpraktijk. Dit proefschrift is georganiseerd rondom vijf kernbegrippen, die gebruikt worden als 'bril' of 'perspectief' waarmee we zicht kunnen krijgen op de esthetische en politieke werking van humor: transgressie, nuance, protest, engagement en nostalgie. Deze begrippen vormen het vertrekpunt voor een *close reading* van cabaretvoorstellingen en daaraan gerelateerde materialen, zoals media-interviews en recensies. Ik analyseer het werk van een selectie van populaire en als kritisch bekend staande Nederlandse cabaretiers. De meest belangrijke namen zijn: Youp van 't Hek, Hans Teeuwen, Theo Maassen, Wim Kan, Claudia de Breij, Freek de Jonge, Micha Wertheim, Wim Sonneveld en Alex Klaasen. Daarnaast gebruik ik voorbeelden uit het werk van Cabaret Lurelei, Kabaret Ivo de Wijs, Neerlands Hoop, Don Quishocking, Jenny Arean, Brigitte Kaandorp, De Vliegende Panters, het satirische televisieduo Arjan Ederveen en Tosca Niterink en De Partizanen. Omdat dit proefschrift zich richt op een deconstructie van de mainstream van het Nederlandse cabaret, is dit corpus een afspiegeling van een cabaretsector die nog altijd overwegend wit en mannelijk is.

Hoofdstuk 0 biedt een prelude op de centrale hoofdstukken van dit proefschrift. In dit korte hoofdstuk betoog ik dat 1966 een vruchtbaar beginpunt vormt voor het verhaal dat verteld wordt in dit proefschrift. Ik wijs op de cross-overs tussen het Nederlandse cabaret en de protestcultuur van de jaren '60, een tijd waarin cabaretiers, kunstenaars en activisten zich een provocatieve en transgressieve stijl aanmaten en begonnen te botsen met de autoriteiten. Dit culmineerde in 1966 in een reeks humorschandalen, die commentaar leverden op maar ook een afspiegeling vormden van de conflicten tussen jonge demonstranten en de autoriteiten. Ik demonstreer dit verder met behulp van een analyse van het humorschandaal rondom het lied 'Arme ouwe' van Cabaret Lurelei, aan de hand waarvan ik ook de kernbegrippen van het proefschrift introduceer.

In hoofdstuk 1 begin ik mijn deconstructie van het beeld van de cabaretier als 'progressieve rebel' met een analyse van het werk van drie cabaretiers die zich, meer dan vele anderen, als progressieve rebellen hebben gepresenteerd: Youp van 't Hek, Hans Teeuwen en Theo Maassen. Zij hebben dat gedaan door het cultiveren van een vorm van grensoverschrijdende humor die inzet op shock en provocatie en waar ik naar verwijs met het begrip 'transgressie.' Ik betoog dat het werk van deze cabaretiers bestaande machtsverhoudingen eerder bevestigt dan ondermijnt. Ook laat ik zien dat hun werk in recente jaren steeds defensiever is geworden, omdat

zij aanvoelen dat hun privilege als witte, heteroseksuele, mannelijke cabaretiers onder druk staat. Omdat humor en het overschrijden van grenzen of doorbreken van taboes vaak aan elkaar gelijkgesteld worden, introduceer ik drie categorieën die het mogelijk maken om meer onderscheid te maken tussen de verschillende vormen van grensoverschrijdende humor die we terugzien in het werk van deze cabaretiers: morele, nihilistische en ironische transgressie.

Hoewel Nederlands cabaret dus vaak gedefinieerd wordt in termen van shock, provocatie en het overschrijden van grenzen, laat hoofdstuk 2 zien dat er een andere humorstijl is die minstens zo overheersend is geweest in de geschiedenis van het Nederlandse cabaret. Ik noem deze vorm van humor 'genuanceerde' of 'relativerende' humor. Deze vorm van humor vinden we al in het werk van Wim Kan. Ik vergelijk het cabaret van Kan met dat van de vrouwelijke, queer cabaretier Claudia de Breij. Ik laat zien dat Kan noch De Breij zichzelf beschouwen als avant-gardisten die op te troepen vooruitlopen, maar dat zij zich afficheren als politiek geëngageerde cabaretiers die rationeel en genuanceerd zijn en bereid om te luisteren naar een politieke voorhoede. Zij pretenderen niet dat zij sociale veranderingen in gang zetten, maar beschouwen het eerder als hun taak om mee te bewegen met en ruimte te maken voor progressieve veranderingen die geëntameerd zijn in de marges. Hoewel zij zich dus niet presenteren als 'progressieve rebellen,' blijkt hun werk progressiever dan dat van de zelfbenoemde rebellen uit hoofdstuk 1.

In hoofdstuk 3 en 4 stel ik het idee ter discussie dat Nederlandse cabaretiers per definitie politiek geëngageerd zijn. In hoofdstuk 3 bespreek ik het zogenaamde protestcabaret uit de jaren '70. Ik laat zien dat cabaretiers en critici uit deze jaren zich vaak juist verzet hebben tegen politiek engagement. Zij hebben erop gewezen dat politiek cabaret onoprecht, ineffectief, moralistisch en dogmatisch is en ze zijn doorgaans voorzichtig geweest om al te nadrukkelijk partijstandpunten of ideologische voorkeuren uit te dragen in hun werk. Ik wijs hier op een nog niet eerder geïdentificeerd genre: het 'anti-protestlied,' geworteld in het cabaret van de jaren '60 en '70. Door het analyseren van een selectie van anti-protestliederen uit de vroege jaren '70 tot aan de jaren '90, stel ik het idee van de cabaretier als 'progressieve rebel' verder ter discussie. Bovendien wijs ik op de continuïteit tussen het zogenaamde 'protestcabaret' van de jaren '60 en '70 en het 'nonsenscabaret' uit de jaren '80 en '90. Daarmee stel ik het dominante historische narratief ter discussie, waarin een breuk verondersteld wordt tussen het politiek geëngageerde cabaret uit de jaren '60 en '70 en het cabaret uit de daaropvolgende periode, vooral de jaren '80 en '90, waarin politiek cabaret plaats zou hebben gemaakt voor ironische nonsens en een afkeer van het politieke.

In hoofdstuk 4 pleeg ik een interventie in het debat over cabaret en politiek engagement door me te richten op het werk van twee cabaretiers die gewezen hebben op het veronderstelde gevaar van politiek cabaret: Freek de

Jonge en Micha Wertheim. Ik laat zien dat zij politiek engagement in de kunsten beschouwen als een gevaarlijke vorm van 'preken voor eigen parochie' en vrezen dat het publiek hierdoor getransformeerd zal worden tot een proto-fascistische massa. Beide cabaretiers hebben dit gevaar gethematiseerd in hun werk door hun publiek te ontregelen en uit elkaar te spelen, om op die manier het individu te emanciperen en los te maken van de kudde. Ik deconstrueer deze tegenstelling tussen kritisch individu en proto-fascistische massa. Voortbouwend op het werk van de filosoof Bruno Latour en comedy-onderzoeker Sophie Quirk betoog ik dat 'preken voor eigen parochie' ook positieve inspiratie kan bieden en ons kan helpen om te breken met de beperkingen van kritiek als een genre, juist omdat 'preken voor eigen parochie' ervan uitgaat dat cabaretier en publiek bepaalde waarden en overtuigingen delen.

In hoofdstuk 5 zet ik de laatste stap in mijn deconstructie van het beeld van de cabaretier als 'progressieve rebel.' Ik neem hier Wim Sonnevelds cabaretklassieker 'Het dorp' – één van de meest gezongen, bewerkte en geparodieerde liedjes uit de Nederlandse cabaretgeschiedenis – als mijn vertrekpunt om te wijzen op het belang van nostalgie als een onderliggende 'structure of feeling' (Raymond Williams) in het Nederlandse cabaret. Hoewel nostalgie vaak gezien wordt als conservatief en gericht op het verleden, en daarmee het tegenovergestelde kan lijken van grensoverschrijdende humor, die vaak gezien wordt als progressief en gericht op de toekomst, betoog ik dat nostalgie in het Nederlandse cabaret zowel op progressieve als conservatieve manieren is gebruikt. Ik plaats Sonnevelds cabaretklassieker hier tegenover Alex Klaasens parodie op 'Het dorp' en zijn recente 'identiteitsrevues.' Ik laat zien dat Sonnevelds oerversie van 'Het dorp' een overwegend conservatief wereldbeeld presenteert, waarin nostalgisch wordt terugverlangd naar een tijd van orde en regelmaat en traditionele waarden. In Klaasens parodie, en nog sterker in zijn identiteitsrevues, wordt nostalgie op een meer ontregelende manier ingezet, en gebruikt als inspiratiebron voor het verbeelden van een progressievere toekomst. Hij doet dit vooral door in zijn cabaret-revues ruimte te maken voor queer perspectieven.

Ik concludeer dat het eenzijdige beeld van de Nederlandse cabaretier als 'progressieve rebel' correctie behoeft, omdat het Nederlandse cabaret veel rijker en complexer is dan vaak vertelde verhalen over de cabaretgeschiedenis suggereren. Ten eerste tonen cabaretiers zich niet altijd politiek geëngageerd, maar hebben zij ook geworsteld met en zich verzet tegen dit label, vaak door als humoristen een positie buiten en boven de partijen in een maatschappelijk debat te kiezen. Ten tweede zijn cabaretiers niet noodzakelijk links, maar hebben zij ook posities in het midden of aan de rechterkant van het politieke spectrum gekozen. Ten derde is Nederlands cabaret niet noodzakelijk rebels en radicaal: hoewel we deze radicaliteit vooral verwachten van cabaretiers die zichzelf als rebellen

presenteren, toont dit proefschrift aan dat trangressieve humor vaak juist grenzen beschermt en bevestigt, terwijl de relativerende humor van Wim Kan en Claudia de Breij enerzijds, en de nostalgie van Alex Klaasen anderzijds, radicaler en progressiever zijn dan we op het eerste gezicht zouden verwachten.

Door het gezaghebbende beeld van de Nederlandse cabaretier als een 'progressieve rebel' te deconstrueren, draagt dit proefschrift bij aan een beter begrip van humor in de huidige tijd, waarin humor nog steeds –zowel binnen als buiten de universiteit – niet altijd serieus wordt genomen, en vaak wordt beschouwd als simpelweg aangenaam, onschuldig of politiek bevrijdend, zonder dat men oog heeft voor de donkere of meer conservatieve kanten van humor.

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According to popular belief, Dutch comedians are 'progressive rebels': politically engaged, left-wing, and rebellious. But is this image correct? Are comedians truly 'progressive rebels'? Have they ever been? In this dissertation, Zijp deconstructs popular historical narratives about Dutch cabaret, and presents a new perspective on the politics and aesthetics of humour.

'In this highly relevant and original dissertation, Dick Zijp challenges common conceptions on political humour based on a deconstruction of mainstream Dutch cabaret. Like a comedian, Zijp writes with bravura and flair, making this study not only accessible and informative, but also entertaining to academic and normal audiences alike.'
Dr. Linda Duits, rogue media scholar

'Een van de weinige cis-het kerels die we kunnen verdragen.'
Nydia van Voorthuizen & Marie Lotte Hagen, feministisch platform DAMN, HONEY

´Keihard maar virtuoos hamert Dick zijn punt naar binnen.´
Michiel Eijsbouts, auteur van *Dat Zei Mijn Vrouw Vannacht Ook Al*

Dick Zijp (b. 1988) is a humour and comedy scholar, working as a lecturer in Theatre and Performance Studies at Utrecht University. He wrote this dissertation as an external PhD candidate, combining research and teaching with a job as a comedy critic for newspapers and magazines (*Theaterkrant, NRC,* currently *De Groene Amsterdammer*). He also likes to participate in public debate. In the past, Zijp has been a teacher and guest scholar at the University of Amsterdam, KU Leuven, and the Koningstheateracademie.

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