CHAPTER 2

Multicultural Comedies

The more left, the more right-wing the jokes. It’s allowed. A must even. If you make a bad racist joke, you’re a racist. But a good joke is too clever to be racist.

– Jos Fransen, main protagonist in Vox populi

For Bakhtin, carnival laughter which marks the anti-establishment or folk humour that has been the subject of the first chapter, is ambivalent: it is not only reactionary and toothless, but its mock and derision also have some subversive impact, no matter how minimal. For one, the comedies contradict the utopian assumption that class distinctions are hardly relevant in the Netherlands. Moreover, the laughter could be aimed at some social mischief or situation, as was the case with Schatjes!, Flodder or New Kids Turbo. By contrast, the deliberate banality of Filmpje! and Vet hard seemed to be shown for the sake of banality as such. The primary function of the coarse humour in these films was to test the limits of ‘bad taste.’ It is perhaps no coincidence that Paul de Leeuw (lead actor in Filmpje!) and Tim Oliehoek (director of Vet hard) were to unite forces. According to the critical reactions, they went beyond these limits of grossness in the almost unanimously bombed Spion van Oranje [Spy of Orange] (2009).

Since 2004, the farcical comedy has also become a format for ethnic humour, precisely in a period when relations have become quite tense between ‘native’ Dutch and generations of ‘new Dutch’ people (because they or their parents or grandparents were born in a non-European country). Since the second half of 2001, Pim Fortuyn entered, after a number of failed attempts with established parties, the political arena, but this time he gained incredible appeal. His success exposed an ideological paradox: The more controversial his statements and the more exalted his public appearances, the more acclaim he received. Declaring the Islam a backward religion, as he did in February 2002, did not diminish his popularity, but only increased it. Fortuyn could become the centre of political debates, because in the years preceding his rise, some critical texts had been published that spoke about the bankruptcy of the so-called ‘multicultural society.’ In his 1997 study De
The Philosophy of Human Rights], the legal philosopher Paul Cliteur considered the Dutch tendency to be tolerant towards the customs of non-Western cultures as a regrettable acceptance of ‘their’ barbaric practices. Whereas Cliteur feared that his ‘own’ Western values might erode due to the arrival of ‘anachronistic’ immigrants, the sociologist Paul Scheffer in his essay ‘Het multiculturele drama’ [‘The Multicultural Tragedy’] addressed the subject from an opposite perspective. At the root of this ‘tragedy,’ Scheffer claimed, was a startling indifference of Dutch people towards the integration of non-Western newcomers. They turned their backs on contact with the new arrivals and moved to well-to-do, white neighbourhoods. They founded their own organizations and brought their children to elitist schools. Partly out of frustration with this ‘white flight,’ the newcomers cherished their own cultural specificity and continued to practice their own religions. They were too isolated to really participate in Dutch society, but it was their children who came to regard themselves and their parents as victims of this policy of ‘coexistence without interacting.’ Although the basic assumptions of this ‘multicultural tragedy’ were widely contested, it became a popular catchphrase to advocate the idea that an unbridgeable gap separates the Dutch from the newcomers.

As regards Dutch film comedies, the response to this ‘tragedy’ has taken two forms. First, there is the ‘political comedy,’ best represented by Vox Populi [Latin for public opinion] (Eddy Terstall, 2008) with its focus upon the opportunistic opinions of a member of parliament.1 Second, since the hilarious Shouf Shouf Habibi! [Hush Hush Baby] (Albert ter Heerdt, 2004) and the equally successful Het schnitzelparadijs [Schnitzel Paradise] (Martin Koolhoven, 2005), a number of ‘multi-culti’ comedies has been released. Their humour is based upon an exaggeration of this ‘tragic’ scenario. I will initiate a discussion of this second tendency with the most outrageous of the cycle, Alleen maar nette mensen [Only Decent People] (Lodewijk Crijns, 2012), which, by the way, can be seen as a ‘light’ adaptation of a most controversial novel by Robert Vuijsje. Starting with an ‘overcooked’ case I will work my way back to more subtle treatments of the topic of multiculturalism. Via Shouf Shouf Habibi! and Het schnitzelparadijs, the chapter will end with a discussion of the road movie Rabat (Jim Taihutti and Victor Ponten, 2010) that counterbalances its comic elements with a dramatic backbone.
THE JOIE DE VIVRE OF THE RIGHT-WING: Vox Populi

Vox Populi is a lower-class comedy, if there ever was one. At least, so it seems. Terstall's film pits its protagonist, the opportunistic but insincere politician Jos Fransen against its real 'star,' the big-mouthed but much more sincere plebeian Nico de Klerk. They get acquainted with one another, because Jos' daughter Zoë falls in love with Nico's son Sjef. The two fathers are worlds apart. To start with, Nico is the proverbial family guy for whom his relatives, including in-laws, mean everything, but Jos, suffering from a midlife crisis, is unfaithful to his wife. He has an extramarital affair with his naive intern Nina and he has had one with Mira Ornstein, one of his colleagues in parliament, who used to be one of his interns. Jos is the political leader of the Red-Green Party whose 'idealistic' programme is at odds with the ambitions of the rising populist newcomers in the 'Go Holland Go' Party. During one of the first meetings with Nico, Jos boasts that he talks to people from all echelons, but Nico retorts: 'Not to me,' implying that the lower class is unjustly overlooked. Nico is distrustful of Jos, for he holds the idea that the pockets of the elitist politicians in The Hague run deep and that the ordinary guy is always shitted upon. He tends to criticize everything that is not within his scope with remarks which are at times as funny as embarrassing. When he visits a theatrical play from Greek antiquity because Zoë is one of the actresses, he pokes fun at the experimental performance, in which the beautiful Helen is played by a naked guy. He gives comments such as 'A bit a lousy soccer match so far' or 'Is it the heat wave? Or is it Candid Camera?' Nico's son Sjef apologizes for the fact that his father cannot keep his mouth shut, but Jos, who is not a lover of 'high culture' himself, wants to play the diplomat by appeasing Nico. He applauds him for saying 'things we all would like to say, but do not dare to.'

This dialogue exposes their basic dichotomy. As a politician Jos preferably uses veiled language, like when he dictates his intern: 'Must we sacrifice our political morals at the murky altars of misanthropy?' By contrast, Nico does not wear his heart on his sleeve. Indifferent to social conventions, he tends to be pretty clear and unequivocal, as when he complains about official permits. One of the few times when Nico speaks obscurely, is when he discusses the nuisance caused by the 'new Dutch' people. When he mentions that his nephew Rodney is being bullied by brats every single day, he adds to this that 'we are not talking about Swiss here.' Since the naive intern is puzzled, Nico's daughter explains that he means 'the Moroccans,' but that it is more polite to say, 'they weren't Swiss.' This indirect expression functions here as a dig at politicians of Jos' Red-Green Party who claim that the right-wing 'Go Holland Go' Party sidelines many citizens with statements that Islam is a danger to society. Even though Jos had said some time ago to
Mira, when she was still his mistress, that the people are crazy and dangerous and that a politician should never listen to them, he starts to integrate words used by Nico into his speeches and interviews. When he discusses criminal ratings in a TV show, Jos imitates Nico’s euphemistic expression that there is no Swiss among them. Preceding this statement which aroused vehement responses from his fellow-politicians, he had given an interview, a controversial one to say the least. The editing of the interview in VOX POPULI perfectly captures the influence of Nico’s cynical opinion on the presence of Islamic people. While sitting on a terrace with Jos, a Muslim man passes in a djelabah – or an ‘alibaba’ in Nico’s words.

Nico: ‘Just be honest, such an imbecile who just walked by with his army pants and tent dress, isn’t he backward? Or am I crazy?’
Jos [shrugs his shoulders]: ‘What’s backward?’
Nico: ‘No, he’s forward. All right? He’s ahead of his times. Next year we’ll all wear one. In pastels.’
Jos: ‘In a sense someone like him is backward.’
Nico: ‘So the truth comes out. Say that in public. Then I might vote for you.’
Jos: ‘There is a certain backwardness …’ [While saying this, there is an immediate cut to an interview with a journalist, who reacts surprised]: ‘You used the word “backward”?’
Jos: ‘In a certain context.’

Mira reacts furiously by saying that a term like ‘backward’ proves that Jos is pissing on his principles. He defends himself, cowardly claiming that it is a ‘quooc,’ i.e., a quote out of context, which it is not. The net effect of his statements, however, is that the popularity of the Red-Green Party increases considerably, and this puts its members in the dilemma of standing firm on its political direction or give in to the wishes of the newly won voters. When Jos is accused of behaving like a flip-flopper, he replies: ‘No, that is called progressive insight.’ He becomes the target of scorn in the public domain, the ‘national alpha male,’ as comedian Freek de Jonge calls him. He is using Muslims as ‘political currency,’ a Dutchman from Moroccan descent sneers. Despite favourable polls, Jos’ fate is sealed when a hidden camera and microphone register him telling a racist joke about Muslims, which he originally heard from Nico’s son-in-law who eagerly feeds him with foul opinions, behaving like a modern-day Rasputin. According to the prime minister, he has gone beyond ‘flirting with the underbelly’ of society. Ultimately, he needs bodyguards for his safety, and the period of involuntary seclusion makes him conclude during a speech, broadcast on television: ‘If you can lead the national laments,
the people reward you with power. As long as you give them what they want. A good politician should say, however: “No, you do not get what you want. You’re spoiled.” Realizing that he has not been a very good politician, he steps down as leader of the Red-Green Party, and thus paves the way for Mira as the new prime minister.

While shooting VOX POPULI, Terstall told that he had not yet decided whether his film should become a left-wing or a right-wing pamphlet. On the basis of Jos’ edifying farewell speech, one might be inclined to presume that the film favours the political left, since moral principles are preferable to instant popularity. Since vanity is one of Jos’ weaker traits, he could not resist the short-term success. But while the serious bottom line may favour a left-wing position, the underlying current of the film privileges the characters with the right-wing opinions. Strictly speaking, Mira is the true ‘victor’ in this picture, sticking to her principles while taking advantage from Jos’ opportunism. She, however, is not as memorable a character as Nico and his lower-class family. On the extra features on the DVD, Ton Kas, who plays Nico, states that, in general, the lower-class fiddlers are more humorous than the righteous people: One cannot reproach them for a lack of joie de vivre. Hence, VOX POPULI is ‘left-wing’ in terms of content, its ‘message,’ but it would be forgettable without its ‘right-wing’ characters. Moreover, Terstall’s film is shot without much ado – VOX POPULI has pace, much handheld camerawork, copying the hectic of the work of political (television) journalists. Formally, this makes the (charm of the) film as pretty direct as its lower-class characters talk.

STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY: ALLEEN MAAR NETTE MENSEN

To start bluntly, ALLEEN MAAR NETTE MENSEN is pervaded with racial prejudices. Each and every character has the habit of talking in terms of ‘us vs. them,’ and, as the saying goes, never the twain shall meet. Usually, ‘they’ are met with suspicion, because ‘we’ presume that ‘they’ are not as good as ‘we.’ Evidences of this unshakable barrier are manifold in the film. Significantly, Moroccans are only talked about as a negative point of reference, but in no way are they visualized in the film, except in a strangely distorted fashion. In the beginning of the film, David tells in voice-over that Dutch people cannot tell the difference between a Jew and a Moroccan. This inability is ‘illustrated’ by a freeze frame in split screen: on the right we see David as a ‘Jew’ wearing a necklace with a Jew’s star; on the left we see David as a ‘Moroccan’ wearing the same necklace but a black leather jacket as well. For Dutch people, the differences are negligible, for they all are foreigners. Further, as a running gag, prac-
ically every black character asks main protagonist David Samuels whether he is a ‘Mocro,’ a disdainful term for Moroccan, because in their eyes he looks like one. No, I am Jewish, David responds calmly at each and every occasion. In the eyes of the Surinam community that David comes to attend, it is clear that being a Moroccan equals being at the lowest level of civilization. In a peculiar speech, one black character named Clifton, argues why David is a ‘Moroccan’ after all. Moroccans look down upon black people because they consider them monkeys from the jungle, but in the meantime they are the biggest monkeys themselves, for they wear black people’s clothes, listen to black music and imitate the movements of blacks. ‘If you want to be part of the community of blacks,’ Clifton argues, ‘that means you are a Moroccan.’ Hence, in ALLEEN MAAR NETTE MENSEN, Moroccans are only talked about and referred to in pejorative terms. They are used by the black characters as invisible objects of comparison to mark their superiority over them. The fact that they constantly mistake a Jew for a Moroccan indicates the invisibility of Moroccans. In Crijns’ film they are put in the position of an ‘unknown other’ for whom the blacks feel such a contempt that there is also no craving to know about Moroccans. Likewise, David also makes clear in voice-over that Surinamers like his girlfriend Rowanda hate the Surinam Hindus, the Surinam Javanese and above all the Antillians, abbreviated as ‘Antis.’

Nor do the blacks know about Jews, but at least there is some readiness to give David, strictly as an ‘individual,’ the benefit of the doubt. His Jewishness comes most explicit to the fore in a conversation with the mother of Rowanda, the girl he is infatuated with because he loves her ‘big bottom.’ As soon as he mentions the charged word ‘negro’ in the mother’s presence, she corrects him by describing herself as a Surinam black woman with African roots. She refers to the history of slavery which has caused such terrible psychic wounds that financial compensation would be most appropriate. It is unfair according to her that the Jewish people have received monetary reparation for the Holocaust, for that was less worse than slavery. Even though the comparison is doubtful, the remark of the mother hints at an angry political edge, at least. Unlike her mother, Rowanda herself is not concerned about David’s ethnic-cultural background at all. If he is really serious about dating her, the only thing that interests her is whether David is not a ‘lying man’ like all her former (black) boyfriends – a question which she asks repetitively. To David, by contrast, his background seems important for he reassures her that both committing adultery and lying are not ingrained in Jewish culture.

The question of ethnicity is for David closely imbricated with the issue of class. He tries to overstep the barrier separating the ‘Old South’ neighbourhood, where, as his mother says, ‘only decent people’ live, and the Bijlmer, predominantly populated by lower-class blacks. The film already reveals the
utopian purport of this endeavour in its opening scene when David walks barefoot and with a bruised face towards the home of his former girlfriend, Naomi. Three months ago, his voice-over tells, he was still happy, but the first shots suggest that he has become a wreck, and ALLEEN MAAR NETTE MENSEN will continue to show how he has gone astray. As for all the adolescents in his upper-class neighbourhood, there is a predictable trajectory ahead for him, but David is at unease with this plotted path. His parents expect him to register at a respectable university, but he does not feel like doing so. The change in behaviour he will undergo in the brief time span of only three months can be interpreted as a juvenal response to his parents' expectations. To underscore his revolt he breaks up with his girlfriend Naomi, whom his parents consider as a most convenient choice as daughter-in-law to be. Her utter decency is best signified by David’s description in voice-over of what she considers a nightmare: when she tries on a new dress she always asks him whether she has a big bottom. David’s outspoken preference for black women comes about as his imaginary reaction to this nightmare. According to him, they are proud to flaunt their big bottoms and, as his voice-over emphasizes, ‘black women would rather die than have a flat ass.’

It is worth emphasizing that the representation of black culture in ALLEEN MAAR NETTE MENSEN is consistently focalized and interpreted by David. As David is telling in a relaxed tone, accompanied by relaxed music on the soundtrack, how blissful he was with Naomi, a black woman passes by. The slow-motion shots of the woman wiggling her hips and of her sparkling golden tooth visibly attract David’s attention. These slow-motion shots which are repeated when he takes a bath, clarify from the start that the images will be filtered by his gaze. On top of that, he associates black women with animalistic primitivism, believing that the darker a woman is, the closer she is to nature. According to this logic, the white, upper-class Naomi is corrupted by civilization, and as a resultant, as an early scene shows, he is only able to make love to her in a slow and mechanical way. When he manages to turn on the television with his toes, he can secretly glance at a dark woman who is bending over, revealing her bottom. He accelerates his love-making considerably and even ends with a jungle yell, to the annoyance of Naomi. Talking over the option of a time out with her, he thereupon meets Rowanda at a dance, shaking her bosom and buttocks. This time the slow-motion shots are even more extreme, indicating that this is the one woman for him. Her voluptuous body is a total contrast to Naomi’s slim figure. Moreover, in comparison to the black woman from the beginning, Rowanda has not one but two golden teeth, with her name engraved on them.

David truly thinks that his outspoken preference for black culture is ‘sincere’ and that he can be a perfect match for Rowanda because he, as a Jew,
cannot be a ‘lying man’ and will not cheat on her. Soon he discovers that black boys consider it hilarious that David has only one ‘chick’ and no concubines. The womanizer Ryan takes him for a night out to a night club and encourages him to dance with an Antillian woman whose movements imitate the sexual act. Since this dance happens to be witnessed by Rowanda, she gets angry and now considers him to be just another liar. She calls him a ‘speculaas’ [a ginger cookie], meaning that he’s only pretending to be like a black man, which is ‘worse’ than actually being a black man. David tries to calm her down, but to no avail. If he likes black women for being ‘natural and primitive,’ he’s getting what he wants: Rowanda is led by ‘pure’ feelings of revenge and is not forgiving at all.

Rejected by Rowanda as well as by Naomi, David at the end fancies the young black woman Rita for whom he initially felt contempt. She is a student who works as an intern at his father’s office, and he despises her for speaking the very same ‘neoliberal social talk’ as middle-aged men of his father’s generation do, and for wearing neat clothes, so unlike his idea of the code for black women. In his eyes, she is the ‘typical bounty,’ meaning brown on the outside, white on the inside, who denies her own culture. At the end of the film, he meets her again, when she visits a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet with two nieces, while he works there as a cleaner, amidst only blacks. Initially, his eyes just fall upon a woman who hits a man in the face for touching her bottom and scolds at him without restraint, to David’s delight. Rita has undergone a metamorphosis, for from behind she just looks like Rowanda. David then sees her necklace with her original name Sherida; Rita was only a common Dutch name she had used for getting the internship at his father’s work. In some brief inserts we had seen in the film it was already suggested that ‘Rita’ appreciated the way he stood up against his father, and in the KFC she mentions her former boss in an ironic tone. She is not the ‘typical bounty,’ keen on integration, David had taken her for, and, in addition to that, it is implied that there is a mutual, mild scorn for his father. As David sees a tattoo on her back, he asks her whether she has children. She bursts out in a way which recalls Rowanda, but it turns out to be a mock answer. When she has left her phone number on the table for the ‘cleaner,’ he utters a yell with a big smile, exposing a golden tooth. During the end credits we see that both David and Sherida are accepted by his parents.

The film received a mixed response, varying from ‘morally questionable’ and ‘poor story’ to an ‘enjoyable take on politically correct thinking.’ The fact that the reactions are diverse is exemplary for the working of a comedy like Alleen maar nette mensen. The film has taken the liberty to put a series of prejudices in the mix, without taking a stance. The film is ‘strategically ambiguous in politics,’ to paraphrase David Bordwell in his
characterization of Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). Says Nolan:

> We throw a lot of things against the wall to see if it sticks. We put a lot of interesting questions in the air, but that’s simply a backdrop for the story. . . . We’re going to get wildly different interpretations of what the film is supporting and not supporting, but it’s not doing any of those things. (Qtd. in Bordwell)

In an explanation of this quote by Nolan, Bordwell argues among others that thematic murkiness and confusion have become the norm. Similarly, *Alleen maar nette mensen* brings up a wide range of stereotypes and hence it attempts to create a pick-and-mix with, the makers will hope, something for everyone. To give an example of this, while Rowanda’s mother refers to the history of slavery in a serious, almost embittered tone, her son Clifton immediately adds to this that the forced separations during the period of slavery still leave an impact on black men for it is impossible for them to limit themselves to one woman only. It is typical for the tone of the film that an attempt at seriousness is immediately downplayed by a far-fetched remark. Indeed, the filmmakers throw a lot of things against the wall, and the viewer has to figure out himself what sticks. As a consequence, the film had better not have a transparent vision or a particular political stance, but should be open for a variety of interpretations and opinions, at the expense of consistency. Is the violent beating by Rowanda and her two brothers sufficient to cure him of his fondness for the ‘purity’ of black women? Sherida gives an imitation of Rowanda in the KFC, but is she only a pale version of ‘purity’? Has David’s desire been compromised, perhaps motivated by his wish to reconcile with his father (not to say, the wish for a ‘happy ending’)? All these options can be activated, and that makes this film so deliberately ambiguous – viewer, take your pick.

The unevenness of the film can be considered as a wilful strategy, and as a justification for the many ethnic stereotypes of sexually obliging black women, lustful black men, and kids playing PlayStation all day, of upper-class whites who live according to suffocating strict etiquettes and flirt with a Jewish identity steeped in tragedy. The fact that these racially hackneyed representations are presented in the form of a hilarious comedy ideally functions as a disclaimer. As I argued in the previous chapter, a carnivalesque comedy always has the effect of both affirming and undermining stereotypes, but this comes with an important proviso. Comic exaggerations can also be misused as a carte blanche for stereotypes. Whether the subversive force really blots out the ‘damaging’ reproductions of clichés, depends upon the viewer’s willingness to regard them as excessive, but there is always
the risk that the spectators see the stock images as uncannily close to the assumptions they already hold. This risk is higher the more the represented group is unfamiliar to the viewer. And in such a case, when the evidently excessive nature is not recognized as such, the representations can be counterproductive. Since Crijns’ ALLEEN MAAR NETTE MENSEN refrains from offering a coherent guide on how to read the film, it is possible to regard the film as subversive: David becomes a victim of his own naive projections about black culture. But it is as easy, if not much easier, to read the film as an affirmation of ethnic stereotypes, for ALLEEN MAAR NETTE MENSEN does little more than put a comic frame around them.

Moreover, if one were to argue that Rowanda’s place is treated in a cliché-ridden fashion, then one might counter such a charge by pointing out that, analogously, the white upper-class culture of the ‘Old South’ is also portrayed in a stereotypical mode. Be that as it may, one seminal aside has to be made nonetheless, for if every group is represented according to more or less ethnic and/or class commonplaces, then groups that are missing in the film are favoured implicitly: these groups can ‘safely’ look at how all the others are shown as quite foolish. Since the white lower class is conspicuously absent from ALLEEN MAAR NETTE MENSEN, Crijns’ film can be read in tandem with FLOODER. Whereas the latter comedy is consistently presented from the perspective of the lower class, I would like to qualify ALLEEN MAAR NETTE MENSEN because of its strategic ambiguity as a lower-class comedy in disguise.

100% HALAL: HET SCHNITZELPARADIJS

Together with the equally successful HET SCHNITZELPARADIJS, which attracted more than 340,000 moviegoers, Albert ter Heerdt’s film SHOUF SHOUF HABIBI! (almost 320,000 viewers) can be seen as the eye-catcher among a cycle of multicultural comedies, like ‘N BEETJE VERLIEFD [HAPPY FAMILY] (Martin Koolhoven, 2006), ALIBI (Johan Nijenhuis, 2008), GANGSTERBOYS (Paul Ruven, 2010), the TV movie COACH (Joram Lürsen, 2010), PIZZA MAFFIA (Tim Oliehoek, 2011), DE PRESIDENT [THE PRESIDENT] (Erik de Bruyn, 2011), SNACKBAR (Meral Uslu, 2012) and DE MASTERS (Ruud Schuurman, 2015). They all to a lesser or greater extent play with prejudices surrounding Dutch-Moroccans and/or Dutch-Turks, but the tone in them is light-hearted, never truly scornful.

HET SCHNITZELPARADIJS comes close to a honey-sweet comedy, with some fairy-tale touches, of Romeo and Juliet and the ending of The Graduate (Mike Nichols, 1967). A voice-over by the 18-year-old Nordip in the beginning
announces that his Moroccan father has two sons which are incomparable. One is a wastrel called Nadir, but he feels himself blessed with the other, Nordip himself, the ‘good son.’ He has wonderful grades at secondary school, and his father expects him to do what he himself had never been able to do, that is, take up the study of medicine. Nordip does not want to live up to this expectation, and searches for a place where he will have ‘plenty of time to think.’ He tells his father that he starts working at the library, but actually he has a job as a dishwasher in the Blue Vulture Hotel. One of his colleagues tells him that here he is ‘absolutely nothing,’ he only has to do the dishes. To underscore his low status, his name is mispronounced time and again as Nordil. The blonde Agnes, whose entrance is shown in slow motion and with gay musical sounds, is the first who has his name right. She is the niece of the director, Mrs. Meerman, and has to work in the kitchen to prepare herself for her future position as big boss. She is also the one who calls him a ‘weakling’ because he stoically accepts the bullying practices of his colleagues, who have put a rat in his meal and pushed his head in a pan filled with dirty water. Since he fancies her, he changes his attitude and stands up to one of his bullies, a Dutch guy called Sander. This gains him the respect of Amimoen and his inseparable sidekick, Mo. They introduce themselves as the proverbial back-seat drivers who promise to help him to survive in the ‘snake pit.’ Their comic performances as Moroccans with a big mouth and big plans, but who never do anything, have received the film many accolades. They pride themselves on their psychological insights and tell Nordip that, since he is not a ‘real Mocro with balls,’ he will not stand a chance with Agnes. It is just like in nature, Amimoen asserts, ‘the biggest beast gets the most chicks.’

Of course, the boasting Amimoen will prove to be wrong and Agnes falls in love with Nordip. They have to keep their love secret, because Agnes’ family will not approve of the liaison. At home, however, Nordip gets in trouble, because his brother, Nadir, betrays him to their father by telling him that Nordip is working at the Blue Vulture. The pathetic response by the father goes like this: ‘God gave me two sons, a liar and a traitor.’ Meanwhile, at work, he is promoted to assistant chef by Mrs. Meerman personally, to the dismay of his ‘friends’ Amimoen and Mo, who consider him a wolf in sheep’s clothing. He got the news of his promotion in a private conversation at Mrs. Meerman’s office, whilst this female director tried to utter some Moroccan words she had been practicing: ‘You are a very attractive man.’ His promotion is replaced with a discharge, however, as soon as Mrs. Meerman finds out that Nordip is dating her niece. In her explanation she refers to Shakespeare’s well-known play about a doomed love affair, because the two families are not supposed to mingle: ‘Haven’t you read *Romeo and
Juliet? Don’t, it’s all tragedy.’ Thinking over the course of events, Nordip is reminded of the words by Goran, a Serbian guy who is cutting large slabs of meat. While Nordip was still a dishwasher, Goran had advised him to leave the workplace, because there is a ‘bullet for everyone,’ a wisdom that seems derived from a western like The Magnificent Seven (John Sturges, 1960). Lying on his bed we see an insert of the gesture Goran is making in the restaurant: he imitates the shooting of a gun. This mental focalization apparently motivates him to go back to the restaurant at the very day that the Meerman family have their annual meeting. When Mrs. Meerman sees him by accident, she runs after him, saying, in Moroccan, ‘You are such a beautiful man,’ but in a homage to the final scene of The Graduate, Nordip shuts the aunt/director behind a door with glass (just as Benjamin leaves a perplexed Mrs. Robinson behind a glass door) and merely by glancing intensely at her, Nordip persuades Agnes, who is amidst her family (like Elaine in The Graduate), to run away with him.

By using the setting of a kitchen in the Blue Vulture Hotel, Het schnitzelparadijs has created a small microcosm with its own rules and hierarchies. On the one hand, this microcosm with its many bizarre, colourful and sneaky characters from different backgrounds overlaps to a certain extent with irksome structures in society. On the other hand, the film drifts away from these structures. Just as Nordip considers the workplace as an escape from ‘real life’ with its pressing demands, the film itself constructs a fairy-tale solution to the story. This (too) utopian dimension is legitimized by its intertextual allusions, to Romeo and Juliet, to The Graduate, and to Goran’s oblique reference to a life lesson from the western genre. Moreover, the title sequence is an homage to spaghetti westerns in general, and the rotating words ‘the end’ to Once Upon a Time in the West in particular. In turn, the love scene in the hotel is, as Koolhoven told on the commentary track on the DVD, inspired by Revolver (1973), directed by Sergio Sollima, who is mentioned at the end credits.

In a cultural climate in which the debates about the multicultural society have become very heated, the more since the killing of filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a radical Muslim of Moroccan descent in November 2004, Het schnitzelparadijs could have easily become too much of a hot potato. The murder imparted a brutalized tone into the public debate in the Netherlands, opening the way for aggressive views about Islam to be voiced. Het schnitzelparadijs seems to overcompensate for the rising animosity towards Moroccans and their religion. The film was labelled as a ‘100% halal comedy’ to make absolutely clear that it did not want to perpetuate the negativity regarding Moroccans. Thus, Koolhoven’s film is cheerful in every regard, thanks to the likeable characters, the uplifting music by Junkie XL,
the sweeping camera movements, the swift editing. The tongue-in-cheek references in Koolhoven’s film also gave it a cautious tone, as if to ensure that it should not be misapprehended as a too serious or a too pessimistic intervention in the public discussion. One might accuse HET SCHNITZEL-PARADIJS, based upon a novel by Khalid Boudou from 2001, of being half-hearted, for it is too unpretentious to offer a substantial comment upon the ‘multicultural drama.’ At the same time, one might reverse the terms of debate here. In a year when the going had gotten tough following upon the death of Van Gogh, the best way to cool off the heated discussion on the role of Islam in Dutch society was to offer the audience unpretentious and delightful comedies as an antidote. Apparently viewers thought so, too, for by the tenth day of its run the movie had become a so-called Golden Film, meaning that it had been seen by more than 100,000 viewers.

PRIMAL DUTCH: SHOUF SHOUF HABIBI!

While the intertextual references contribute to the playful nature of Koolhoven’s ‘100% halal’ comedy, in SHOUF SHOUF HABIBI!, by contrast, intertextuality rather functions to slightly bend the hilarious tone in the direction of a tragicomic drama. Admitting that he perhaps does Ter Heerdt’s film a bit too much honour, NRC film critic Bas Blokker proposed that it somehow recalled Luchino Visconti’s masterful ROCCO E SUOI FRATELLI [ROCCO AND HIS BROTHERS] (1960), in the way all the (Moroccan) family members struggle with their position in society, like Rocco’s family did when they moved from the south of Italy to the north. The sister runs away because she is having an affair with a Dutch boy, the slacker brother suddenly becomes serious in defending the family’s name and he goes to Morocco to find himself an acceptable bride. So much for the seriousness of the film, because a comic tone predominates in a film which ironically advertised itself as an ‘oerholllandse komedie’ [primal Dutch comedy]. Indeed, released in January 2004, SHOUF SHOUF HABIBI! [HUSH, HUSH BABY] deserves credit for carrying out the pioneering work of being the first Dutch ‘ethnic comedy.’ At the time, its light-hearted approach was most welcome as a counterweight to the hardened tone in political debates about the multicultural society. Against this backdrop, SHOUF SHOUF HABIBI! is a priori a more sharp-edged film than ALLEEN MAAR NETTE MENSEN, even when the devices of the two films – presenting racist commonplaces as a cause for laughter – are perhaps not that different from one another. Unlike the deliberate ambiguity of Crijns’ film, the strategy in SHOUF SHOUF HABIBI! can be said to consistently put the sharp debate into perspective.
Ter Heerdt’s film pitches a Moroccan life style to an existence sandwiched between Morocco and the Netherlands. The best representative of the Moroccan way of life is Uncle Youssef, who has not migrated to Europe and still lives in the land of, as Abus’ voice-over mentions, ‘sand and stone.’ In this introductory text by the main protagonist, the people of Morocco are marked by a lack of ambition. And if someone has some aspirations, both the circumstances and the people’s simplicity are obstacles, as the anecdote of the ice cream man, also told in voice-over, illustrates. He is sufficiently ambitious to sell ice cream, but due to the bloody hot weather all the sticks are floating in his box: ‘He can’t even keep his ice creams frozen.’ In characterizing Morocco as a country of sun, sand and stone, it is put back in medieval times. No better way to express any disability of progress, then to mention that Uncle Youssef has never heard of E.T., and hence does not understand the joke about the five differences between this alien from a Spielberg movie and a Moroccan, living in Holland: ‘ET had his own bike... ET looked good... ET came alone... ET wanted to learn the language... and ET wanted to go back home.’

By contrast, Abus, whose parents have moved to the Netherlands, dreams of a bright future as an actor in Hollywood. He is quite sure he will get rich, but while he talks in voice-over about his plans, we see him lying in bed and after a cut – which evidently suggests the passing of considerable time – he is still in bed. This discrepancy between his voiced ambition and his shown attitude exposes that he misses the discipline to rise to fame. His eagerness for doing little to nothing is underscored when he has troubles in arriving at work at the – from his perspective – impossibly early hour of 8.30. At the very first day at a bank – a job offered to him thanks to the contacts of his older brother who works as a policeman – he is already too late, because he forgot about the ‘summer time.’ Abus was neatly dressed, all right, but we then get a sequence of jump cuts of him behind his desk, either doing nothing substantial – eating a banana, feet on the table – or employing frenetic, but senseless activities, like putting stamps in a very rapid tempo on one piece of paper or just typing in a totally arbitrary way. The uptempo music is interrupted when the telephone rings, and we see him, in jump cuts, stare at it. Then his boss walks by and says with an irritated voice: ‘That was me. On the phone! Should I send a carrier pigeon?’

The plot of the film is structured around some incidents in which a number of typical clichés about Moroccans are activated. Since Abus is too lazy to work, he joins three of his friends to rob a bank, but the plan is not smartly executed. Abus gets caught, but the bank clerk does not recognize him, for all the suspects ‘look the same’ to her. Another cliché concerns the generation gap, since Abus’ parents want a fixed marriage for their daughter Leila.
This wish is responsible for the introduction of tragic elements within the comedy. Leila runs away to her Dutch boyfriend whose friends make fun of her not consenting to have sex before marriage. When Abus hears of his sister’s disappearance, he traces her down and beats her up for violating the cultural custom. It is for Abus the moment to express his intention to his saddened parents to become a good and serious son. He starts working at an Islamic butchery, which again is cause for comic incidents; he goes to Morocco to arrange a grave for his father, and he chooses his bride out of one of the four daughters of Uncle Youssef. Of course, nothing turns out right, since it is a comedy after all. Although he tells his sister Leila that it was love at first sight, he anticipates that the marriage with his too young bride is a silly idea and escapes from his own wedding. Because his father dies immediately after the escape, no one knows about Abus’ run to the cafe to play a game of billiards. We then see the family standing at the pompously constructed grave of the father in a far-off spot in Morocco. A bit behind them, is the family of Uncle Youssef, who sums up the benefits of his late brother Ali’s decision to go to Holland: ‘What did Holland give him? His eldest son is more Dutch than Moroccan. His daughter doesn’t wear a headscarf any more. His other son embarrassed him by calling off his wedding. And his youngest son is no good either.’ And after a brief pause, another old Moroccan man adds to this: ‘But at least he now has the grandest grave.’

This comment by Uncle Youssef captures a general thrust of Shouf Shouf Habibi! Practically every scene starts from one cultural perspective – be it Moroccan or Dutch – and addresses the peculiar elements of the other culture. The peculiarity gains emphasis to such an extent that the two cultures are shown as totally incompatible. There is no way that the gap between them can be bridged. At the same time, the other culture is not entirely odd, but its strangeness also reveals an unexpected advantage, which is so unexpected that it can provoke laughter. To illustrate this by rephrasing Uncle Youssef’s train of thought: going to Holland brought my brother misery, but due to the silly ideas and grand illusions in that country, his son, estranged from our culture, selected an inappropriate grave, but it is very spectacular though. Similarly in structure is the scene in the café when Abus says to his friend ‘Mussi’ that he is a copycat of Mohammed Atta in appearance. In a climate when Muslims are looked upon with more suspicion than ever before, it is a sheer disadvantage to be identified with a man who was involved with the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. Abus, however, gives it a twist by seeing opportunities: Think big, for Hollywood will need lookalikes of Atta in films based upon the 9/11 catastrophe in upcoming productions like Saving Private Saddam.

Significantly, Shouf Shouf Habibi! is advertised as an ‘oerhollandse’ – meaning ‘primal Dutch’ – comedy, but its focus is upon people of Moroccan
descent living in Holland, who have not fully integrated into Dutch society. Or rather, they despise those Moroccans who have made Dutch customs their habits. When police officer Sam has to arrest his brother, Abus, for his part in the bank robbery, Sam tells him that he has set a bad example. Actions like these make it hard for other Moroccans, for it confirms the negative opinion of them. Abus replies: ‘Are you blind? They do not want us. They hate us! All racists! You have to stand above it. Laugh at them! They only want creeps like you! Cheese head! Tulips for brains!’ In a serious drama, Abus would come across as the angry young Moroccan kid, very hard to handle. In the context of a comedy – of a ‘primal Dutch’ comedy – he is depicted, however, as a character who uses the image of the angry young kid, sandwiched between two cultures, as a pretext for his misstep. If we take Abus’ remark literally, he suggests that Dutch people require ‘token Turks’ eager to assimilate into Dutch society as a continuation of their racist politics. In that case, all foreign elements become invisible so that Dutch culture becomes an all-encompassing standard. In fact, Abus here pleads to regard his criminal activity as a necessary resistance to the process of assimilation. Moroccans should be identified with ‘typically’ Moroccan features in order not to be robbed of their specificity, Abus suggests: better to be labelled as ‘bad Moroccans’ than becoming an indistinct ‘Cheese head.’ The comic incongruity here concerns that Abus uses this argument as a belated justification of his misdemeanours.

In highlighting the discrepancies between Dutch and Moroccan culture, both cultures are mocked. Some characters are represented as simply rude, such as the jealous girl joking about the sexual unavailability of Leila for her Dutch boyfriend and the bank director who, as a guest in Sam’s house, starts to paw Sam’s wife in an impertinent manner. Given the context of a comedy, these unfavourable portrayals are so downright embarrassing that they can be taken as ‘worse’ than the representation of the bank robber who motivates his wrongdoing with a laughable excuse. As such, Shouf Shouf Habibi! implies that the gap between cultures cannot be bridged, foreclosing any illusion about a ‘happy’ merging of them. Instead, by opting for the form of a hilarious comedy, the film turns the encounter of cultures into an enjoyable deadlock.

Entertaining as it is, such a comedy has, in its full display of ethnic stereotypes, some pitfalls. First, as I have put forward several times, even if this display contradicts these images as being in excess of the norm, stereotypes can never be fully exorcized, because by reproducing and/or recalling them, one also risks affirming them. Second, this type of comedy tends to privilege effect over aesthetics and laughter over critical reflection. The pace of the movies leaves no room for contemplation, since one is always keen on another joke or another gag. As such, the stock images are not problematized, but mainly used to exploit them as a basis for humour. In this regard, Maas’ pun on the
slippage from messages to shopping makes sense: the films discussed here predominantly aspire to raise laughter from the audience.

Nonetheless, comedies – even plain ones – always have the potential to address issues which can either be too complicated or too controversial. One can act as if the jokes are only innocent and make no sense, but in the meantime they have a social significance, as Bergson stresses in *Le rire*. In the previous chapter I discussed both *Flodder* and *New Kids Turbo* as two stages in the domain of ‘vulgar’ humour. *Shouf Shouf Habibi!* transcends them and can be identified with a third theoretical stage.

The humour in films like *Flodder* and *New Kids Turbo* is ambivalent, hovering between divergence and confirming a status quo. In the first chapter I argued that they were more successful than other comedies, because they somehow can be seen as a reaction to ‘genuine’ social issues. *Shouf Shouf Habibi!* complies to this condition as well, for it is a comic intervention to debates on the ‘multicultural tragedy,’ which were particularly heated at the time. Whereas the derision of the lower class is less harsh than the ridicule inflicted on high-class and/or formal behaviour in *Flodder* and *New Kids Turbo*, *Shouf Shouf Habibi!* has taken the form of self-mocking display of clichés about and by Moroccan characters.

Since the presumed ‘authenticity’ of Morocco is taken by Abus as (too) primitive, it is clear Abus has internalized a Western perspective on life. This is also illustrated by his dream of becoming a Hollywood actor and desiring the associated luxuries. For an immigrant acquainted with Dutch culture, *Shouf Shouf Habibi!* has basically two options on offer. First, one can attempt to assimilate into society, like Sam did by becoming a policeman. Abus describes his brother as a ‘Cheese head,’ a most contemptible category in his eyes. The ‘Cheese head’ has agreed to play by the dominant rules and has implicitly elevated Dutch identity to a golden standard, sacrificing his Moroccan background. His brother can only make ‘it’ on the condition that he becomes (partly) Dutch and he thereby enables the Dutch to hold a policy of ostracism: in principle, Abus says, all Dutch people are ‘racists,’ but by giving the assimilated Moroccan some opportunity, they can cover up their hostile attitude. Abus himself represents the second option. He himself is living proof of the worst of the stereotypes Dutch hold about Moroccans: he avoids work and he is involved in a bank robbery.

One may blame Abus for affirming these clichés, but the point of *Shouf Shouf Habibi!* is that Abus’ strategy is based upon an overidentification with these stereotypes. He is all too familiar with the hackneyed images about Moroccans by the dominant culture and starts to behave accordingly. Since Ter Heerdt’s film is a comedy, his role can be regarded as a humorous imitation of clichés. Thanks to the playful and self-reflexive voice-over by Abus, his imita-
tion of the ‘typical’ Moroccan is a token of a self-mocking distance towards this stereotype, precisely by radicalizing the hackneyed imagery. Because of the comic self-reflexivity, it is suggested that this is not how Moroccans are ‘by nature,’ but that they just perform this way to accord with the imagination the Dutch already have about them. In short, Abus shows himself off as a product of the multicultural drama by deliberately imitating stock images of Moroccans. The flipside of this strategy, however, is that Abus can put all the blame of his lack of success onto the ‘racist’ thinking of Dutch society. His self-mocking performance of ‘being’ a ‘typical’ Moroccan can function in anticipation as the perfect excuse for his failures, which is the ultimate joke of Shouf Shouf Habibi! The comic incongruity of the film is that Abus himself is already much more assimilated than he is willing to admit. Any claim that he is so much more ‘authentically’ Moroccan than his ‘Cheese head’ brother is opportunistic, meant to explain that his lack of success in society is to be pinned on others. As soon as he really goes traditional and travels to Morocco to get himself a bride, he becomes particularly laughable. He apparently realizes so himself and escapes his own wedding to play, very ‘oerhollands,’ a game of billiards in his favourite pub.

Strictly speaking, Shouf Shouf Habibi! does not provide a favourable image of its Dutch-Moroccan characters, despite the fact that the film is presented from the perspective of Abus. What saves the film, however, is that the characters humorously flaunt their flaws, but are not inherently bad. And though the film does not have the pretention to offer a clear-cut analysis, Shouf Shouf Habibi! suggests that people like Abus are caught in a deadlock. None of the options they have are very favourable, for indeed, Dutch society is organized so strictly that newcomers and the second generation have little to no space for integration. Instead of whining about this unfortunate situation, Shouf Shouf Habibi! has chosen to comically acknowledge the difficult position of the second generation, of those who are sandwiched in-between cultures. Abus rebels against this impossible situation by radically exposing himself as a comic stereotype so that he can keep on, to paraphrase Zupancic, ‘enjoying his symptoms’: avoid work, hang out with friends, being late.

My main reason for favouring Shouf Shouf Habibi! over Alleen maar nette mensen is that the film does not just ridicule Dutch culture, but that in the case of Ter Heerdt’s film, this ridicule is also built into the film’s formal structure as well. In Alleen maar nette mensen there is some critique of Dutch culture, but it is just part of the package: if anything can be ridiculed, then there is no yardstick for a truly critical perspective. By contrast, Shouf Shouf Habibi! has a particular red thread: the silly Dutch habit of being punctual. The strict attitude towards time shows itself among others in the running gag about summer time, which functions to distinguish a ‘seize the day’ men-
tality from the organized, not to say over-organized work ethic of the Dutch. Abus cannot adhere to this mentality, but when he is visiting Morocco he defends the logic of Western customs over the habits of his ‘primitive’ Uncle Youssef. Discussing the possible gain of putting the clock forward in March and then back in October, Abus says: ‘If you put the clock back, people work longer and it saves energy,’ and when his uncle does not understand what he is saying, he continues: ‘Look, back an hour, means less light in the morning. Then you have more light in the evening. So even at night you can…. ‘ Since Abus gets entangled in his own reasoning, the Dutch logic to manipulate the artificial invention of time in an attempt to conquer nature makes it appear like a senseless custom. When his uncle then inquires why the Dutch do not put the clock back two hours, Abus gives a preposterous reply: ‘The Queen won’t let them.’

The Dutch obsession with punctuality finds a counterpoint in the titles of the chapters of SHOUF SHOUF HABIBI! These chapters are named ‘First Quarter,’ ‘New Moon,’ ‘Full Moon’ and ‘Last Quarter,’ but these temporal indications refer to the ‘natural’ phenomena that Moroccans tend to live by. Hence, on a formal level, the film prioritizes an un-Dutch mentality. This is the more effective, since Ter Heerdt’s film was labelled as an ‘oerhollandse’ comedy, by which SHOUF SHOUF HABIBI! reveals comic exaggeration as its major satirical strategy.

**A DUTCH ROAD MOVIE: DUNYA & DESIE**

Ter Heerdt’s film triggered attention for Moroccans in the cinema, and in addition to the comic films mentioned above, there is another remarkable tendency since 2008: the Dutch road movie. This genre had been practically non-existent in the Netherlands until that year, except for a handful of films, but none of them particularly successful, like HEB MEDELIJ, JET! [HAPPY DAYS ARE HERE AGAIN] (Frans Weisz, 1975) about a couple of hustlers travelling around, and EEN STILLE LIEFDE [A QUITE LOVE] (René van Nie, 1977), about a divorced father who kidnaps his 12-year-old son for a trip through Holland and Belgium, and BOVEN DE BERGEN [ABOVE THE MOUNTAINS] (Digna Sinke, 1992), about a group of six friends on a walking tour from the north to the south of the Netherlands. One can speak of a mini-cycle in the late 1990s, with the very delightful DE NIEUWE MOEDER [THE NEW MOTHER] (Paula van der Oest, 1996), THE DELIVERY (Roel Reiné, 1999), as well as the TV movies ROOS EN RANA [ROOS AND RANA] (Meral Uslu, 1999) and MONTE CARLO (Norbert ter Hall, 2001), in which characters cross borders, physically and, as befits the genre, also mentally. The first concerns a trip from Letland to the Nether-
lands; in the second the protagonists have to fulfil an assignment for a paranoid gangster, making a first obligatory stop in Wageningen, but subsequent ones abroad; in the third two girls take the train to Turkey; and in the fourth an old widow is driven in a white Mercedes to Monaco by a black chauffeur. Some road movies made for TV which stay entirely within the Netherlands seem to be examples of an anti-variant within the genre. In EN ROUTE (Paul Ruven, 1994), the camera is in the back seat of the car (three in total) for the entire movie, focusing upon an escaped convict and his girlfriend, who seem stuck in Amsterdam and never really get ‘en route,’ although the open ending promises that they will be able to depart from the city. Significantly, in the mosaic TV movie POLONAISE (Nicole van Kilsdonk, 2002), the main characters are caught in the same lengthy traffic jam.

Distances in the Netherlands are small, and the poor reception of Het wapen van Geldrop [The Weapon of Geldrop] (Thijs Römer, 2008) may suggest that a road movie entirely set in Holland is not the best idea. Nonetheless, as said, since that year, the road movie has become more popular as a genre format, that is to say, according to Dutch standards. BLACKWATER FEVER (Cyprus Frisch, 2008) seems to be a road trip in America, but as soon as the car passes the sign with the names of Los Angeles and Las Vegas, the film takes a bent to Africa all of a sudden. TIRZA (2010) is about a man who tries to find his missing daughter in Namibia, repressing the idea that he has already killed her as well as her boyfriend, before the couple took the plane to Africa. In ALL STARS 2: OLD STARS (Jean van de Velde, 2011), the players of a football team travel to Barcelona for a wedding of one of their mates. JACKIE (Antoinette Beumer, 2012) portrays a trip through America of two sisters with their long-lost mother (at least, they assume it is their mother). The characters in the TV movie HITTE/HARARA [HEAT] (Lodewijk Crijns, 2008), as well as in DUNYA & DESIE (Dana Nechushtan, 2008) and RABAT (Victor Ponten and Jim Taihutti, 2010) either go to Morocco, via Belgium, France, Spain, and/or they travel within Morocco. The female protagonist in SILENT ONES (Ricky Rijneke, 2013) travels by cargo ship from Hungary to western Europe in search of a better life, whereas the female protagonist in both NOTHING PERSONAL (Urszula Antoniak, 2009) and ZURICH (Sacha Polak, 2015) wanders abroad, going nowhere in particular, as a reaction to a recent trauma. And in MEET ME IN VENICE (Eddy Terstall, 2015), an Italian musician takes his daughter, whom he has not seen since she was three, on a musical voyage with the Orient Express from Venice to Istanbul.7

In their ‘Introduction’ to The Road Movie Book, Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark claim that the attraction of road movies resides in their promise of an escape from (domestic) confinement. The genre ‘owes much to its obvious potential for romanticizing alienation as well as for problematizing the uni-
form identity of the nation’s culture’ (1). In other words, being on the road triggers fantasies of becoming an outsider to the existing culture. The trip to Mardi Gras in EASY RIDER (Dennis Hopper, 1969) emphasizes the male characters’ identity as non-conformist hippies; the two women in THELMA AND LOUISE (Ridley Scott, 1991) discover during their hyperkinetic ride that they are ‘deep down’ adventurers rather than subservient housewives. Not all road movies end in a rebellious stance, however. Having experienced the colourful world of Oz, Dorothy in THE WIZARD OF OZ (Victor Fleming, 1939) starts to re-appreciate her home which she initially had come to dislike. Similarly, the film director in SULLIVAN’S TRAVELS (Preston Sturges, 1940) gives up his ambition to make a serious film on poverty with a social realist ‘message,’ provisionally entitled OH, BROTHER WHERE ART THOU? and returns to the comedies he had become fed up with, after he has learned how pleased the lower class is with humorous pictures. Whether one distances oneself from the dominant conventions or whether the journey has made one reconcile oneself to them, the road movie rearticulates the identity of its main characters. Even when the destination looks the same as the point of departure, the trip has brought about a significant change. In a similar vein, DUNYA & DESIE, which was made after a successful TV series, shows how the two title protagonists undergo a change as a result of the journey they make together in Morocco, by bus, train, cab and hitchhiking in a truck.

Nechushtan’s film opens with a voice-over by Dunya El-Beneni, who is of Dutch-Moroccan descent. This device may seem to privilege her over Desie Koppenol, who is the object of her reflections. When summing up a list of what goes without saying in her life, Dunya says that the Dutch weather, breathing and getting older are as automatic as the fact that Desie has a new relationship time and again, which also passes by automatically. The two girls are best friends, but the voice-over and the annoyed look by Dunya when the blonde and flirtatious Desie is toying with her driving instructor clearly indicate that they are very different from one another. The impression that Dunya is a thoughtful character may be determined by her strict upbringing. Her brother Soufian watches her movements and does not flinch from informing their parents. By contrast, Desie acts on impulse. She is working at a barber shop, but when her boss refuses her permission for a day off she not only quits her job right away, but also breaks off the relationship.

Because of her 18th birthday, Dunya receives as a gift a jigsaw puzzle of 1,500 pieces, depicting a castle in the village that her ancestors originated from. Further, some family members have come over from Morocco to arrange a marriage with her nephew, Mounir. Dunya is reluctant to go, but she cannot resist her parents’ wish. Just before they go to Morocco, she receives news that Desie is pregnant by her driving instructor, who wants her to have an abor-
tion. It makes Desie inquire after her own conception – ‘You were a mistake,’ her mother confesses – and the circumstances of her birth: ‘Your father had already left.’ This information makes her postpone her decision about whether she will keep the baby or not. She desperately needs to speak to her father first and find out about her own family background: Does her biological father care about her existence at all?

The stakes for the two protagonists are contrasting, as they acknowledge themselves at some point: while Desie searches for her origin, Dunya considers her family background to be a burden. When Dunya is already in Morocco, living in a house that is not yet finished, Desie comes to visit her to get the latest address of her father, Hans, who apparently is somewhere in Casablanca. Dunya’s parents are unpleasantly surprised by her arrival, for they consider the ‘slut’ Desie to be a bad influence on their daughter. For them, Desie represents the lack of moral values in Holland. This lack is signified by the fact that Desie is scantily dressed and even sunbathing in a bikini. She is too naive to understand that a woman needs decent clothing in a predominantly Islamic country. Or she play-acts naivety, and in that case, it is a token of both cultural indifference and rudeness. On behalf of her family, Dunya has to ask her to leave, but at the last minute she takes the bus with Desie (because it is too dangerous for a foreign woman like Desie to travel alone). The trip gives Dunya some relief from the impossible choice she faces. She wants to remain loyal towards her family, but having seen the not too smart and not too handsome Mounir, she is certain she does not want to marry him.

After a few adventures, they meet on their way a reader of tarot cards, like in the opening of the nouvelle vague film CLÉO: DE 5 À 7 [CLÉO FROM 5 TO 7] (Agnès Varda, 1962). The fortune teller then produces a mirror card and on accidently coming across the castle in the jigsaw puzzle some time later, Dunya realizes that while Desie is searching for her self(-image), Dunya herself is fleeing from it. Desie’s search is successful insofar as she meets her father, who has a photograph of her as a baby with him. Her mother wanted to keep the child very much, he tells his daughter, and he always thinks of her. This will lead to a feel-good ending: since Desie’s mother has arrived in Morocco with her boyfriend there is a happy gathering at the house of Dunya’s parents. Not only can Desie wholeheartedly embrace her mother and inform her that she will deliver twins, but Dunya’s family is also glad to be reunited with their daughter. They have come to grasp that they have been too harsh on Dunya, for life in Morocco has taught them that they themselves have become ‘too Dutch’ in the eyes of their neighbours. To indicate the harmony, there is a shot of the finished jigsaw puzzle, hanging on the wall.

DUNYA & DESIE does not strike one as a comedy. Its humorous moments are in fact restricted to scenes with Desie who is pretty direct and can give
imprudent responses, to the visible annoyance of her environment. She is careless whether her behaviour is inappropriate or not. If sunbathing in a bikini is acceptable in the lower-class environment she has grown up in, then it should be acceptable anywhere. This leads to scenes in which her attitude is almost as embarrassing and out of context as the Flodders’ behaviour was in Zonnedael. From the perspective of Dunya’s Dutch-Moroccan family, her uninhibited nature is ‘typically Dutch,’ and that is the main reason why the mother regrets ever having come to Holland at all. What underlies DUNYA & DESIE is that Desie has, in the end, such a positive impact upon Dunya’s family. Initially, she is a pain in the ass, because she triggered Dunya to follow her own path, but through Desie the family members realize how they have drifted from their ‘Moroccan roots.’

Fundamental to the main argument is that Desie could have this impact, because she refused to adapt to her surroundings and never compromised her behaviour. Since she persists in her ‘typically Dutch lower-class’ directness, even in Morocco, the Dutch-Moroccan family of Dunya has some point of reference for their position vis-à-vis Holland. She is a nuisance to those who have a strict Moroccan perspective, but her family is no longer able to maintain such a strict perspective. For them, it predominates that she is ‘all mouth, no trousers,’ clear-cut and distinct, but also benevolent. This character painting of Desie is very similar to the descriptions of the Flodder family members, who remained ‘true’ to themselves, regardless of circumstances. By not adjusting themselves to their environment, they looked silly, but ultimately the well-to-do neighbours came across as much sillier. Flodder was an anti-establishment comedy to ridicule the upper-class bourgeoisie. Whereas in Flodder, the lower-class family is the pivot of the film, in DUNYA & DESIE, the lower class – Desie, but also her mother and stepfather – rather have a mediating role: they function as a projection screen for the Dutch-Moroccans. Since Dunya’s parents do not think her actions as unseemly as their neighbours do, the presence of Desie makes the latter appear quite obsolete and at the same time it helps to constitute the identity of Dunya’s family as ‘more Dutch,’ or ‘more modern,’ than they had expected. Thanks to their acquaintance with the Dutch lower class – who tend to behave crudely, but actually are ‘generous’ – Dunya’s family stands at a distance from a traditional culture with its presumed tight restrictions. And thus, (part of) the ‘message,’ to use this charged term, of the ‘multicultural’ road movie DUNYA & DESIE is that it is wholesome for the Moroccans to be tainted by lower-class influences, which can be considered as the ‘legacy’ of the Flodders in terms of Dutch cinema. The strength of the lower class, from this perspective, is that it tends to take a pragmatic approach over an adherence to strict principles.
KEBAB SUTRA: RABAT

In the surprise hit Rabat, the (lack of) taste of the lower class is in the end a most positive force. It helps the Dutch-Moroccan protagonist Nadir to buy himself out of trouble. He is expected to drive his father's old cab from Amsterdam to Rabat, and though his father has told Nadir not to take ‘that Tunisian and that clown’ with him, Zakaria and Abdel join him on his journey. They leave with high expectations, and at their departure the car radio plays for good reason: ‘The grass will always be greener / on the other side of the hills,’ a Dutch evergreen sung by Liesbeth List. Whereas Nadir is quite serious and has recently finished an economics degree, his two friends take life very easily. For Zakaria, only the present counts; his basic occupations are, in the accusatory terms of Nadir, ‘smoking, drinking, waking up from a hangover.’ Rumour has it that Zakaria made a girl pregnant in Tunisia, but he is ‘too yellow,’ says Nadir, to visit her. Abdel is not much different, although he is always talking about his ‘business plan.’ Currently, he is still working in what Abdel himself euphemistically calls the ‘restaurant’ of his uncle, selling kebab, but he claims he has a ‘unique concept.’ He presumes that his two friends have already agreed to be a part of the project, but it turns out that Nadir has had his doubts all the time. At the film’s crucial beach scene, when the three friends put their camaraderie to the test, Nadir reproaches Abdel that his business consists of ‘talking for two years’ and of designing logos which took about half an hour. ‘Your plan is an excuse for doing nothing. All the time we discuss it, we don’t have to do anything else. Admit, you’re a loser.’

In the first half, Nadir is positioned as the moral anchor of the film and his father’s recommendation to travel without friends makes sense. When they are at a beach in Barcelona, however, things take a different turn. So far, Nadir had kept silent to his friends about the true motive for his trip to Rabat, but Abdel guesses that the car is in fact a bridal gift. Since this guess is correct, his reply is a scathing critique of Nadir himself: ‘You lack the guts to tell your friends what you were really going to do in Morocco. You’re the one who betrayed the trust of his friends the last few days.’ There is a brief fight when Zakaria hits Nadir on the mouth, but as it goes with long-time friends, they make up with one another. The confrontation has brought about a change. When they have crossed the sea to Morocco, his two friends wish Nadir all the best with the girl, and encourage him to visit a barber. Nadir himself is not that certain of his ‘mission,’ set up by his father. His doubt is not just provoked by the reactions of his two fellow-travellers, but the meeting with the French shoplifting girl, Julie, who shows them Barcelona has increased his hesitation. He was thinking that she was bluffing when she said that she knows Nadir's favourite film THE GODFATHER (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972)
very well, but he is deeply impressed that she gave the right answer to his question who was Don Corleone’s hitman (‘That’s easy: Luca Brasi’). Later when he is walking around with Yasmine, the bride selected for him, he tells her that the scenery reminds him of a scene from THE GODFATHER, ‘when Michael Corleone meets that girl in Sicily. He takes her for a walk, just like we are walking.’ When Yasmine replies that she has not seen the movie, he is convinced that this is not meant to be. Like him, she is also doing this only to please her parents, for she prefers studying over a marriage. Back at her place, he tells the father and her brothers about his spectacular business plan. From his pocket he shows him a piece of paper with the logos designed by Abdel: Kebab Sutra. He tells them that all the Dutch are the same and that they want two things: sex and kebab. His plan is to hit two birds with one stone by serving the meals by topless women. The interior will be a combination of Arabian nights and modern design. The menu will consist of modern dishes with names like Kebab 69, Kebab on the Beach, Kebab Happy End.

So far, the film had avoided disclosing any details about Abdel’s business plan, but it turns out to be a sleazy plan which could also have been concocted by Johnnie Flodder or Desie Koppenol. Abdel can be seen as a character who has adopted their mentality, and hence, Nadir can pretend that all Dutch are alike. He pictures Holland as a shameless country where immoral values reign, and from the perspective of Yasmine’s family, this must really seem like a Sodom and Gomorrah. One might expect that Nadir’s suggestion of the Netherlands as a land of doom may offend Dutch people, but probably the effect is rather the opposite. Holland can only be presented as an undisciplined country in the eyes of foreigners who stick to traditional customs. They, the homebred Moroccans, cannot see ‘our’ achievements as tokens of a progressive liberalism. The fact that ‘our’ liberal principles come across as lawless is their shortcoming, and only proves that we are more advanced and broadminded than they are. At the same time, the joke on the various kebab dishes implies that Abdel and, by extension, Nadir, are perhaps more Dutch than they had realized. These assimilated Arabs have a touch of Johnnie Flodder, indeed.

From a cinematographic perspective, it is striking that during the trip, perhaps with the exception of the quarrel scene at the beach in Barcelona, the three friends are often shown together in the same shot. To put an emphasis on either Zakaria, Abdel or Nadir, the focus changes within the shot, representing one (or two) in sharp focus and the other or others a bit blurred. This is an effective strategy, for on the one hand, the changes in focus illustrate that they are not alike, characterologically. On the other hand, showing the three together in a great many shots already hints at the mutual influences upon each other. All three make a decisive step forward.
thanks to the fact that the adventures on the road require them to talk honestly with one another, and thus, Zakaria will go to Tunisia eventually, Abdel will start a restaurant finally, and Nadir will choose The Godfather aficionado Julie over the arranged bride.

**FLOUTING MORAL RULES**

Much ethnic humour is a case of the comic scapegoating of a minority group: I find you ridiculous because you do not comply with my norms and therefore I laugh at your expense. Such humour, as Critchley remarks, is ‘not laughter at power, but the powerful laughing at the powerless’ (12). The American TV sitcom *All in the Family* (1971-1979) became famous for reversing this effect. The racist slurs by the main character, Archie Bunker, were based upon such an absurd logic that we primarily laughed at his bigotry and thus the joker himself became the object of humour. Analyzing Al Bundy’s misogyny in the American sitcom *Married with Children*, which is structurally similar to the ‘humour’ of Archie Bunker, Noël Carroll remarks that Bundy’s badinage ‘provokes laughter by flouting moral rules, but also pokes fun at the character himself’ (101). Carroll adds to this that even when we ‘recognize something of Al Bundy in ourselves, our laughter may not be affirmative, since we are, in effect, knowingly laughing reflexively at ourselves as well, and in that sense hardly endorsing the hateful, potentially harmful attitudes in question’ (101). Carroll suggests that Al Bundy (and Archie Bunker) are so ridiculous that we will not go along with their thinking: such comedies work to deconstruct the silly logic that underlies (sexist or racial) prejudices.

The Dutch counterpart of Archie Bunker was the plebeian grumbler Fred Schuit, played by Rijk de Gooyer, in the comedy series *In voor- en tegenspoed* [For Better or For Worse], broadcast on public television for four seasons, starting in 1991 and ending in 1997. With the figure of Nico, Terstall’s *Vox Populi* offers us a diluted version of Archie Bunker and Fred Schuit. He has derogatory jokes about foreigners, but his logic is not as absurd as Bunker’s and Schuit’s was. Terstall’s comedy shows what happens when one does not completely disagree with his opinions and an opportunistic politician integrates them in his public appearances – in an even further diluted form. The initial success in the polls does not pay off in the end and thus *Vox Populi* seems to argue against the demagogic tactics of a politician who denounces his moral principles. Since the politician is portrayed as insincere, the plebeian Nico makes, in turn, a more ‘authentic’ impression. Moreover, unlike the politician who is sleeping around, Nico is more likeable because he is represented as a true family man. Archie Bunker
and Al Bundy were represented as the ‘worst’ of characters in their sitcoms to make them function as negative publicity for racist and patriarchal ideas. The portrayal of Nico, on the contrary, is not as ‘bad’ as the representation of the sly politician. And thus we may still feel (slightly) superior to Nico, as we felt towards Bunker and Bundy, but the more sympathetic Nico becomes, the more Terstall’s film hovers between left-wing and right-wing positions.

In the case of the multicultural comedies, the main protagonists are in a position of the ‘powerless’ themselves, with the exception of the well-to-do David in ALLEEN MAAR NETTE MENSEN. I identified Crijns’ film as strategically ambiguous due to its inconsistent tone. Ethnic stereotypes are exaggerated, but one could as easily read them as being affirmed. The film threw everything in the mix, so that groups which were spared from derision were implicitly advantaged. Hence, ALLEEN MAAR NETTE MENSEN is a white, lower-class comedy in disguise. In the other films under scrutiny, and in fact SHOUF SHOUF HABIBI! is the most interesting among them, the practice of ethnic scapegoating is often an example of self-mockery. The more Abus embraces his Moroccan roots, to rebel against the notion of a ‘Cheese head,’ the more he has to acknowledge that ‘going traditional’ is a dead end for him. At the same time, he blames a prejudiced Dutch society for his lack of success, an excuse which becomes increasingly pathetic as the movie progresses. SHOUF SHOUF HABIBI! shows that the second generation is caught in the difficult position of being in-between, but instead of whining about this, the film comically acknowledges this, quite mild-mannered. This has, I suppose, to do with the nature of Abus’ failures. The habit of being clock-wise is considered by Dutch people as part of their work ethic, but as Joke Hermsen argues in her study Stil de tijd at the same time many feel themselves victim of a (too) busy schedule. As a film like MODERN TIMES (Charles Chaplin, 1936) illustrates, ‘clock time’ can turn individuals into cogs in the machine. Hermsen makes a plea for the re-appreciation of spare time and boredom and in fact, Abus is already living the dream to the full, and he does so, I claim, in the tradition of the Flodder family. His notion of time has a natural component, and that is why the film is structured according to the tides of the moon: first quarter, new moon, and so on. He fails to conform to time as an artificial system: he is one hour late because he did not know about the Dutch practice of following summer time; if the civil servant at the work agency asks him whether he will call Spielberg for him, Abus gets excited, apparently not noticing that it is a question in jest, but then is told: ‘It is about nine hours earlier in America, so he might be having dinner’; when Abus finally has a job as a train conductor, he misses his very own train, for he was too late, once again.

By hopelessly failing in ‘being right on time,’ Abus can be seen as a
descendant of the Flodder family. Likewise, the presence of the frivolous lower-class Desie proved ‘beneficial’ for Dunya’s family who became less strict on traditional customs. Nadir in Rabat could save himself from an awkward situation by showing himself off as a heir of typically Dutch lower-class taste. Thus, it seems that the most successful multicultural comedies either testify to an affinity with the ‘bad taste’ of the Flodders or they come to discover that there is some ‘Flodder within’ them.