

A PLAY ON SATIRE



A WRITERS' CONFERENCE

JANUARY 10TH & 11TH 2007 - THE HAGUE, THE NETHERLANDS

winternachten
the hague international literature festival

Participating authors: Alaa Al Aswany, Nukila Amal, Abdelkader Benali, Tsead Bruinja, Renate Dorrestein, Michiel van Kempen, Rustom Kozain, Laila Lalami, Fouad Laroui, Allard Schröder

Chairman: Bas Heijne

Guest lecturers: Gerrit van Dijk, Wim Tigges

Photography: Serge Ligtenberg

Report: Lonneke Kok

English advices: Susan Pond

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A PLAY ON SATIRE



Prologue

They come from Indonesia, Egypt, the Netherlands, Surinam, South Africa, Morocco, the United States or a mix of these countries. Ten international authors, working on the borderline between fiction and journalism, come together in a two-day conference in The Hague to meet and share their visions on writing. Time: the 10th and 11th of January, 2007. Place: the Royal Theatre in The Hague. Action: a seminar about the meanings and implications of 'satire', with as the starting point the book 'Gulliver's Travels' by Jonathan Swift. The conversations are led by Bas Heijne, columnist, essayist and writer.

Act I

Welcome to the Royal Theatre

The writers take their places on the 6th and 7th rows of the theatre, to listen to Oscar Wibaut, director of the Royal Theatre. He tells them about the magic of this theatre, which Napoleon used to visit after its opening in 1804. For more than three centuries, it was mainly French operas that were performed on the stage. Oscar Wibaut looks around proudly, pointing out the shape of the stage and the auditorium, constructed on the principle of the Golden Rule. The auditorium was built in Italian style and was renovated ten years ago. The space for the audience is horseshoe-shaped, a form that automatically focuses the eyes of all the spectators

on the stage. At the same time, people can see their neighbours, so that they are influenced by each other. There is no aisle down the centre, meaning that the whole audience forms a single body. The performer is almost automatically driven to one central spot on the stage: the spot where all the architectural lines and lights come together.

The writers come on stage and almost automatically find their way to the magical spot. They look at the auditorium, the huge stage, and the Art Deco painting on the ceiling; a painting made in the 20th century depicting tragedy and comedy, which unfortunately hides a Renaissance painting of heaven. A text above the stage says 'SPQH', which indicates the people and the government in The Hague. 'Is that meant to be satirical?' asks Fouad Laroui, relating to the topic of the conference that is about to start. But it is not. Oscar Wibaut: 'It's a Republican slogan, which was put there after King William IV sold the theatre in 1851.'

Intermezzo

As an introduction to the conversations about satire, chairman Bas Heijne wrote three statements to discuss:

- 1. Due to the process of globalisation and the rise of commercial mass-culture the controversial writer is no longer able to shock his audience into recognition. The maverick writer will no longer eventually be recognized as an important cultural critic or prophet; he will remain just a maverick.*
- 2. The age of Swift and Voltaire is over: satirical fiction has become ineffectual in the age of Internet and television. Columnists, comedians and cartoonists have become more influential than the writer of fiction in changing public opinion and attacking the pieties of the age.*
- 3. Swift and Voltaire used the popular genres of their ages to get their message across. Because present day literature seems to have become part of the entertainment industry in large parts of the world, writers have to find new ways of being subversive to get their message across.*

ACT II

Meeting each other

Bas Heijne:



Bas Heijne (Nijmegen, the Netherlands, 1960) studied English language and literature at the University of Amsterdam. In 1983 he made his debut with the novel *Laatste woorden* (Last words). This was followed by *Suez* (1992), *Vreemde reis* (Strange journey, 1987) and *Vlees en bloed* (Flesh and blood, 1994). Besides these publications he translated works from Evelyn Waugh, E.M. Forster and Joseph Conrad. Since 1992 he works as an essayist for the newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*. Two collections of these essays were published in *De wijde wereld* (The wide world, 2000) and in *Het verloren land, opmerkingen over Nederland* (The lost land, comments on the Netherlands, 2003). In 2004 a collection of his interviews was published, entitled *Tafelgesprekken* (Conversations at the table). Heijne's collection *De Werkelijkheid* (The reality, 2004), about the function of art in this society, inspired him to put together an exhibition of artists' work, that 'brings the soporific consciousness back in contact with reality'. In September 2006 his new novel *Grote Vragen* (Big Questions) was published, Heijne in discussion with well-known philosophers and scientist.

'Today and tomorrow we will talk about satirical fiction and its essence. Satire works in different ways, and the degree of influence it has differs from culture to culture. The organisation of *Winternachten* asked all of you to bring along your favourite satirical passage from a book, film or cartoon. Talking about this will be a good way of introducing yourselves to one another.'

Alaa Al Aswany:



Alaa Al Aswany (Cairo, Egypt, 1957) studied at the Cairo University and the University of Illinois in Chicago. He is a dentist-turned-writer who has written prolifically for Egyptian newspapers on literature, politics and social issues. He was made famous by *The Yacoubian Building* (Omarat Yacoubian), published in 2002, which for several years was reputedly the best-selling novel in Arabic. It depicts the ills of modern Egypt through the inhabitants of a once-fashionable apartment block in downtown Cairo. Though the characters are fictitious, the Yacoubian Building actually exists - it is where Aswany's first dental surgery was based. The novel was filmed.

'I have dreamed all my life of being a writer. My father was a writer of fiction in Egypt. In the Arab world, it's impossible to make a living out of fiction. You need to have another job; you need to be independent. So I am a dentist as well. I like being a dentist; it's a useful job for me. I have daily contact with other people. I do not only care about their teeth but also about their lives. One man visited my practice all the time, though he didn't have any problems with his teeth! He just wanted to talk.

As a writer, I am in trouble with the government. I support the opposition. I wrote a bestseller in 2002, which was translated into ten languages. A hundred thousand copies of it were printed. Many people love my writings. After a while, the book was adapted for screen. And what happened? I was not invited to the premiere! They don't trust me. The president's son was supposed to be coming to the premiere, so I was not welcome. Actually, in the end, he did not even come.

But this is not just my personal problem. It's a problem for the whole country. I have friends being tortured in jail for the things they wrote; they pay a huge price for their work. I recently presented my new novel, *Chicago*. I studied in Chicago. It was a successful presentation with lots of interest in the book, and I was signing for four hours.

The question raised today is that it is difficult to be satirical. Well, no – it is not difficult to be satirical in fiction. We have a tradition. Arab literature is strong, although it did not come to the

West. We've always had the best novelists. They are strongly influenced by history. Writing a novel in Egypt is like playing music in Austria: everyone writes. So you have to be good to get your work published.

We have a good sense of humour, and we can laugh about our president. He keeps oppressing people. We can't change that situation; that's not what literature is for. But we can imagine how we would want things to be. We can solve things temporarily through our sense of humour.

The best satirist for me is the Egyptian Naguib Mafouz (Cairo 1911-2006). He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. His most famous work is *The Cairo Trilogy*. Not much of his work was translated. But he is good!

Nukila Amal:

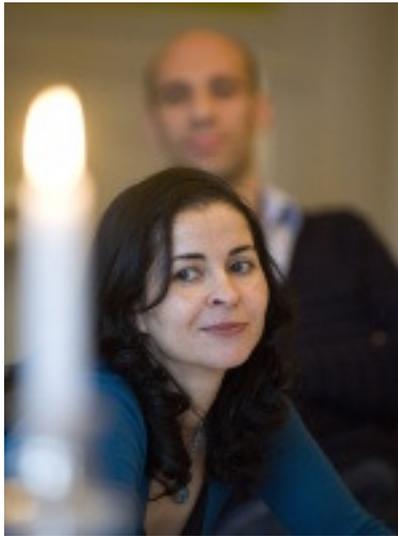


Nukila Amal (Ternate, Indonesia, 1971) had had her 2005 short story collection, *Laluba*, named Best Literary Work of the Year by Tempo magazine, and her novel *Cala Ibi* (2003) short-listed for the Khatulistiwa Literary Award. Both works have marked the latest phenomenon in Indonesian literature by their *détournement* from the tradition of story telling and conventional narrative forms. At present, she serves on the Committee of Literature at the Jakarta Arts Council.

'I wrote two books; one of which was a novel. I also wrote a lot of essays. At the moment, I am working on a satirical novel. It's about food and young people who like to eat. I write about issues such as lifestyle, youth, dreams and relationships, and sometimes about political issues. During Soeharto's regime, there was a growing tendency to attack the monarchy in writings. After his fall, the tendency subsided. A satirical tone was employed to attack political traditions we had to get rid of.

My favourite satirists are Ovid and, later, Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller. And cartoons! Cartoons are a great example of satire.'

Laila Lalami:



Laila Lalami was born and raised in Morocco and studied English in Rabat, London and California. She is the editor of the literary weblog www.moorishgirl.com, which was reviewed in *USA Today* and the *Washington Post*. In addition, articles by Lalami have been published in among others the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Nation*, *The Baltimore Review* and *The Independent*. *Hope and Other Dangerous Desires* is Laila Lalami's fiction debut and was published in October 2005 with Algonquin Books. She lives in Portland, Oregon (US).

'Both my parents were book lovers and I enjoyed writing. But a career as a writer was an impossible goal. So I started by studying medicine, and ended up studying linguistics.

As an example of a good satirist, I would like to mention Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian writer who wrote *A man of the people* in 1966. It's a novel about a man who starts a conflict with the corrupt Nigerian government because of his personal anger.'

Abdelkader Benali:



Abdelkader Benali (Ighazzazen, Morocco, 1975) has lived in the Netherlands since 1979. He made his debut in 1996 with the novel *Bruiloft aan zee* (Wedding by the sea), awarded with several prizes. He published the plays *De Ongelukkige* (The unfortunate, 1999) and *Jasser* (2001) and a collection of stories, articles and columns titled *Berichten uit Maanzaad Stad* (Messages from Moonseed city, 2001). For his novel *De langverwachte* (The long awaited) he received the Libris Literature Award. Abdelkader Benali writes articles and columns for different newspapers and magazines. He made his debut as a poet in 2003 with *Gedichten voor de zomer* (Poems for the Summer). In cooperation with historian Herman Obdeijn he worked on *Morocco through Dutch eyes; 400 years Dutch-Moroccan relationship*. In 2005 he published the novel *Laat het morgen mooi weer zijn* (Let it be Nice Weather Tomorrow) and in 2006 the novel in verses *Panacee* and the novel *Feldman en ik* (Feldman and I).

I owe my whole existence to satire. I owe my family more than I ever thought; I could only thank them by verbal aggression. That might sound rude. Let me explain it to you. I was born in 1979 and grew up as a second generation Moroccan in the Netherlands. My parents don't read. My father owns two books: the Koran and the telephone book. He was born in a very small village that does not exist anymore because the inhabitants have either died or left. But there was one thing I admired in my uneducated family. That was their great sense of literal verbalism; the way they can express themselves and formulate a judgement on the world without relying on written information. I grew up in a family that was really addicted to gossiping. My father is never happier than when talking about other people. A couple of days ago my family talked about two topics: the hanging of Saddam Hussein and – this became much more important – the fact that my father, who owns a little patch of land that his father gave him, heard that somebody was using it as a path. He got paranoid. I was so incredibly charmed by the fact that my father was not becoming paranoid about the hanging of Saddam

Hussein, the great Sunnite symbol, but about the fact that someone was walking across his land.

They have invented me as a writer, by their way of reflecting to the news, by their way of talking. I am the only one in the Berber-speaking tradition who writes. Everything in that tradition is oral. Nobody writes.

My novel *Bruiloft aan Zee* (Wedding by the Sea) is a satirical story. The reason that people read satire is that they see it is used as a means of expressing oneself. It's a necessary style. My favourite satirical writer is Richard Pryor, an Afro-American stand-up comedian. He turned the cliché of the angry black criminal into a stylistic form. As a child, I watched VPRO television. Once I saw Richard Pryor there, and was impressed by his energy. He talked about his life all the time. I also like Monty Python. I can't point out any punch lines in Monty Python, because there weren't any.'

Michiel van Kempen:



Michiel van Kempen (Oirschot, The Netherlands, 1957) worked from 1983 to 1987 in Surinam. Van Kempen is the compiler of two extensive anthologies: *Spiegel van de Surinaamse poëzie* (Mirror of the Surinamese Poetry, 1995) and *Mama Sranan. 200 jaar Surinaamse verhaalkunst* (Mama Sranan, 200 Years of Surinamese Storytelling, 1999). In 1997 his first novel, *Plantage Lankmoedigheid* (Plantation Patience) appeared. He also published: *Het Nirwana is een lege trein* (Nirvana is an Empty Train, 2000) and *Pakistaanse nacht* (Pakistani Night, 2002). In 2002 he obtained his doctorate with his thesis *Een geschiedenis van de Surinaamse literatuur* (A history of Surinamese literature). His anthology *Noordoostpassanten* (Northeast Transients), which he compiled together with Wim Rutgers, was presented at the Winternachten festival in 2005. In 2006 he published the novel *Escape Routes*.

'A good friend of mine holds the position that there is not one single subject in the world you might not laugh at. Everything is worth a good joke. Now, before you are going to ask me

questions like: was this before or after 9/11, the murder of Theo van Gogh and the Danish cartoons on Mohammed, I should add that this friend is a Muslim.

Thinking this position to its extremes, you might come up with a good joke on the pope – as practically everybody in Holland does, including all Catholics with the exception of diplomats and politicians – you might make funny remarks on young children suffering from Aids after their parents had unsafe sex, and the ultimate challenge for good humour is of course the pregnant mother killed in a car accident by a drunk driver.

Of course satire is not the same thing as a good joke, but the appreciation for both satire and good humour emerges from the same source: a certain mutual understanding. The very same friend I told you about, knows very well what this means. As an author of literary reviews in a Surinamese newspaper he had some fierce clashes with quite a few writers (in real life he seems to have hardly any friend at all in his native country). He once wrote that the poetry of one of his countrymen was so appallingly bad, this poet should be forbidden to publish for at least five years. For this statement he was accused of hindering the freedom of speech and threatened to be prosecuted. Still, to every intelligent reader it was crystal clear how much irony he laid in his words.

I myself had some similar experiences when I was still writing reviews in Surinamese newspapers in the eighties and nineties. But in my case there was another stick to beat the dog: I was a foreigner, even worse: I represented the former colonial power. When some years ago I dared to raise some questions on the quality of a widely appreciated historical novel, I was publicly demanded to apologize to the entire Surinamese people (as you understand, I am still working on my text...).

Perhaps these reactions are full of colonial suspicion, aggression, frustration and therefore understandable. But what explains that the two novels I wrote and which in my view were never meant to be satirical, were nevertheless several times read as satirical books? The basis of my first novel, *Plantage Lankmoedigheid* (Plantation Indulgence), is the true, sad story of the way a Dutch historian was murdered cruelly in Suriname in 1986. My second novel, entitled *Vluchtwegen* (Escape Routes), describes the way multicultural life in a ten-story-building in Amsterdam came into being and what went wrong when architects and sociologists developed fancy ideas on the most perfect way of living together and building-up a society. To the reader it might be strange to read in my novel how Muslims try to push in by the front door a living cow in their premises on the eight floor of their apartment building, but it once really happened in the building where I lived. Somebody with the name of *Strijdhaftig* (Belligerent) might sound awkward, but here is his nameplate (I unscrewed it from his door the day he was suddenly gone with the wind). Moroccan youngsters getting themselves upright on a metro at high speed and crashing to their death: sadly enough it happened. These things are not

invented by a satirical mind; on the contrary they are so realistic that they are too realistic to be true.

So this is what I'm saying: there is nothing so satirical as reality. The *operas bouffes* of Jacques Offenbach, like *La Vie Parisienne* and *Orphée aux enfers* are sometimes described as caricatures. In fact they are not; they are so densely realistic reproducing Parisian 19th-century salon-life that they became satirical.

Let me give you another example: I want to take you back to the year 1997, when McDonald's was opening its first restaurant in Paramaribo, the capital of Suriname. The opening party with music and speeches was planned for a Saturday, but a slight panic broke out the day before: the plastic and paper ware with the well-known McDonalds' logo hadn't arrived. So the manager hired a plane and flew to Trinidad late in the afternoon on Friday to get them from there. On his returning the airport was already closed and the authorities weren't willing to switch on the runway lights. The pilot nevertheless decided to land and the plane crashed. Surinamese television broadcasted pictures of the wrecked plane with the bodies of the pilot and the McDonalds's manager still in it, both corpses covered with cups, plates and serviettes with the logo of McDonalds's. The next morning the official opening of the restaurant took place as planned, and the people came flocking in with so many, that the police had to close the street to all traffic.

It's sensational to see these images on television – although perhaps a bit sad for the two deceased men and their families – but it would hardly be possible to include such an image in a novel. Real life is satirical. But if everything in reality is satirical, satire doesn't exist.

In a review of my novel *Vluchtwegen* a well-known critic commented upon nothing but the social perspective of the book. She thought the book to be unrealistic, meaning unreal, so too satirical. The critic judged from a pure 19th-century perspective, satirical characters could not be realistic, and realistic characters could not (and should not) carry an idea.

Satire is everywhere as long as satire is in the eye of the beholder. And perhaps reality doesn't even exist, if we carry enough sense of the satirical in us.

This makes writing so pleasant a job, albeit perhaps alienating from what happens around us. Therefore we are sometimes looked upon as fools, and we'd better smile for that. And be afraid if we weren't.'

Tsead Bruinja:



Tsead Bruinja (Rinsumageest, the Netherlands, 1974) is a poet living in Amsterdam. He made his debut in 2000 with the Frisian volume *De wizers yn it read/De wijzers in het rood* (The Pointers in Red). Tsead Bruinja's Dutch debut *Dat het zo hoorde* (That it was Proper) was published in 2003 and in the following year was nominated for the Jo Peters Poetry Prize. By the end of 2004 the anthology *Droom in blauwe regenjas* (Dream in a Blue Raincoat), compiled by Bruinja and Hein Jaap Hilarides, was published. With poet Daniël Dee he compiled the anthologies *Klotengedichten* (Bollocks Poems) and *Kutgedichten* (Cunt Poems). In 2007 will appear *Bang voor de bal* (Fear of the ball) (new Dutch volume) and *Geboorte van het zwarte paard* (Birth of the Black Horse) (a bilingual selection of his work in Frisian, with DVD). Tsead Bruinja has written reviews for *Trouw*, *Awater*, *Ietsmetboeken* and *Boeken.vpro.nl*. Bruinja alternates his poetry readings with music, with Jaap van Keulen (flamenco), Michiel Rasker (trance/hip hop/soundscapes) or Polo de Haas.

'As a sixteen-year old boy I was influenced by artists like Fish, the singer of Marillion, who wrote this beautiful satire on the desire of rock stars for fame and fortune:

Incommunicado

*I'd be really pleased to meet you if I could remember your name
But I got problems of the memory ever since I got a winner in the fame game
I'm a citizen of Legoland travellin' incommunicado
And I don't give a damn for the Fleet Street aficionados*

*But I don't want to be the back-page interview
I don't want launderette anonymity
I want my hand prints in the concrete on Sunset Boulevard
A dummy in Tussaud's you'll see*

Incommunicado, incommunicado

*I'm a Marquee veteran, a multimedia bona fide celebrity
I've got an allergy to Perrier, daylight and responsibility
I'm a rootin'-tootin' cowboy, the Peter Pan, the street credibility
Always taking the point with the dawn patrol fraternity*

*Sometimes it seems like I've been here before
When I hear opportunity kicking in my door
Call it synchronicity call it deja vu
I just put my faith in destiny - it's the way that I choose*

*But I don't want to be a tin can tied
To the bumper of a wedding limousine
Or currently residing in the where are they now file
A toupee on the cabaret scene
I want to do adverts for American Express cards
Talk shows on prime time TV
A villa in France, my own cocktail bar
And that's where you're gonna find me*

Incommunicado, incommunicado

*Sometimes it seems like I've been here before
When I hear opportunity kicking in my door
Call it synchronicity call it deja vu
I just put my faith in destiny - it's the way that I choose*

Incommunicado, incommunicado

It's the only way

© Marillion from the Album *Clutching at straws* (www.marillion.com)

Of course I was secretly longing for that same fame. The irony and pessimism that I recognized in the lyrics of Marillion, but which I also found in the words of Roger Waters of Pink Floyd, fuelled my own dark view on mankind, a not so uncommon view amongst young people in the eighties. A more recent example of musical satire can be found on Paul Simon's latest release *Surprise*:

Outrageous

It's outrageous to line your pockets off the misery of the poor.

Outrageous, the crimes some human beings must endure.

It's a blessing to wash your face in the summer solstice rain.

It's outrageous a man like me stand here and complain.

But I'm tired. Nine hundred sit-ups a day.

I'm painting my hair the color of mud, mud okay?

I'm tired, tired. Anybody care what I say?

No! I'm painting my hair the color of mud.

Who's gonna love you when your looks are gone?

Tell me, who's gonna love you when your looks are gone?

Aw, who's gonna love you when your looks are gone?

Who's gonna love you when your looks are gone?

It's outrageous the food they try to serve in a public school.

Outrageous, the way they talk to you like you're some kind of clinical fool.

It's a blessing to rest my head in the circle of your love.

It's outrageous I can't stop thinking 'bout the things I'm thinking of.

And I'm tired. Nine hundred sit-ups a day.

I'm painting my hair the color of mud, mud okay?

I'm tired, tired.

Anybody care what I say?

No! Painting my hair the color of mud.

Who's gonna love you when your looks are gone?

Tell me, who's gonna love you when your looks are gone?

Tell me, who's gonna love you when your looks are gone?

God will. Like he waters the flowers on your window sill.

Take me. I'm an ordinary player in the key of C.

And my will was broken by my pride and my vanity.

Who's gonna love you when you're looks are gone?

God will. Like he waters the flowers on your window sill.

Who's gonna love you when your looks are gone?

© Paul Simon from the album *Surprise* (www.paulsimon.com)

Both Fish and Paul Simon make fun of the people around them as well as of themselves. It is a way of dealing with humor and criticism, which I have adapted in my own poetry. In my seventh collection of poems *Bang voor de bal* (Afraid of the ball) I have used lyrics by these artists as mottos. I have also used the literary form of the ready-made in poems that were critical of society. In a poem about a get-together of dog-owners, for which I used large parts of a written account of a real meeting, I introduced a member of a right wing party to make a mockery of him and his party. I did the same with Henry Kissinger who I multiplied by four after which I made the four Kissingers swim through the air with their bellies on a chair, during which I had them utter several cruel remarks:

*...four tight-suited henry's lie with their bellies
on a chair swimming through the air*

the first kissinger babbles

*plaster a fence or blow up an island
I'd rather make a wrong decision than
wait for wisdom*

*there's a gnat buzzing around the head
of the second henry...*

© Translation Willem Groenewegen

Fouad Laroui:



Fouad Laroui (Oudja, Morocco, 1960) studied mathematics, physics and architecture in Paris. He specialized in econometrics. Since 1998 he lives in Amsterdam. In 1996 he made his debut with *Les dents du topographe*, which was given the Albert Camus Prize 1997 in France. In 1998 his second novel, *De quel amour blessé*, was given the Prix Méditerranéen. His novels, stories and poems are also published in Dutch. For his work Laroui received the E. du Perronprijs 2002. This year he published *L'islamisme*, a personal refutation of Islamism. Laroui gets more and more involved in the social-cultural debate in the Netherlands. He writes regularly for Dutch newspapers and magazines.

'I came here to praise Voltaire. His *Candide* is the most perfect book for me in French; it is impossible to change a single word in the whole book. It's the most perfect possible universe. Voltaire used the word 'optimist' to attack the theories of Leibniz. It's wonderful what is going on in this book.

When I wrote my first novel, I tried to make it very Voltairian. Voltaire thought he would be remembered for his tragedies, but instead he is remembered for his satires. The problem with satire is that if the reader does not get it, you're lost. For instance, if you use irony in subjects that concern religion or sensitive subjects, and people take it literally. Whenever I am in Morocco or France, people look at what I write and say: "That's not true!" Obviously it's not true; it's irony, or satire!

At the film festival in Marrakech a few weeks ago, the film *L'immeuble Yacoubian* (The Yacoubian Building) was shown, which is the screen version of a book by Alaa Al Aswani. In the book, a homosexual man, a very nice guy, is murdered. The audience of the film started applauding when that happened. It's horrible in the sense that the intention of the writer is completely lost. They see something totally differently to how the author meant it!

My mother always said: "Too much misery makes you laugh." You must make fun of it; otherwise you can't talk about it.'

Bas Heijne:

'This reminds me of *Jarhead* (2005). During the Gulf War, people got themselves into fight watching anti-war movies: "Shoot him, shoot him!"

Michiel van Kempen:

'The most popular movie in prison is *Scarface*. If you see that movie, it makes you think twice about becoming a criminal.'

Alaa Al Aswany:

'There's a stereotype about how the Arab culture accepts or rejects homosexuality. It's not true that homosexuals get killed there. Arab literature is very tolerant about this issue. We even have a homosexual poem that is very well-known.

Homosexuality is accepted even better in Arab culture than in the West. But there is a distinction between tolerance and acceptance. We don't officially recognise homosexuality in the Arab world, but I must say that we don't officially recognise anything at all! There are 22 countries with 22 dictators. This is not a special case.

So - what happened with the movie? The book you mentioned was very well accepted. But the screenwriter made a change. In the book, the man was killed by his own lover because they were desperate. The screenwriter said: "You write for literary readers and you know them very well. But I know the movie audience and they have to see things clearly. So this man must be the bad guy, and he is going to be killed. So he made a change. People applauded every time when the security state officer who tortured people got killed. Everybody applauded. That would be a kind of defence, a subconscious defence. I have seen how people reacted to the homosexual character. In the beginning, people made fun of him. But if he feels bad and keeps on drinking, they are very touched by him. I think it's a success because you get rid of stereotypes. And every time you get rid of a stereotype, you have a defence. Because it's a very deep stereotype. One of our ways of defending stereotypes is to laugh or to applaud when it's not really necessary. That's my explanation.'

Renate Dorrestein:



Renate Dorrestein (Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 1954) started her career as a journalist, but she preferred writing literature more and more. In 1983, her first novel *Buitenstaanders* (Outsiders) was published and was a big success. Dorrestein writes about social topics all the time, and does so in a light way. Absurdities are a huge part of her writings. Her novel *Een hart van steen* (A heart of stone, 1998) got a large international interest. In 2000 she gave with *Het geheim van de schrijver* (The secret of the writer) fans and starting writers a look in the kitchen of writership. In 1986 and 1987 she was writer-in-residence at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, US. She often gives masterclasses at universities in Europe and the US. In 1986 she contributed to the foundation of the Anna Bijns Stichting, which puts up a prize every two years for the 'female voice in literature'.

'In the past 24 years, I've published 19 books, most of them novels. I write about the atrocities of everyday family-life. At home, where they should be loved, cherished and at the very least safe, many women and children are in reality abused, battered and tortured, while the rest of the world looks away, because these are "private matters".'

Today I'd like to talk a little about Kurt Vonnegut Junior, the American novelist known for works blending satire, black comedy and social critique. He mocks religions, political doctrines and a large variety of isms. He is my idol.

As a prisoner of war during the Second World War, Vonnegut witnessed the firebombing of the German city of Dresden by the allied forces in 1945, in which more than 100.000 civilians perished. Vonnegut was one of just seven American POW's to survive, in an underground meatpacking-cellar known as Slaughterhouse 5. This experience formed the core of his most important – and most famous – novel, *Slaughterhouse 5*, which took him twenty years to write. It appeared in 1969. I was 15 at the time, and only read the book in my mid-twenties. It has, to this very day, remained one of the great discoveries of my life.

Slaughterhouse 5 is an arresting mixture of entertainment, science fiction and biting social criticism; it's also devastatingly funny. It tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, who as a 21 year old serves as a soldier in the WWII and who also survives the bombing of Dresden, one of the

many unnecessary massacres in the history of the world. The only way Billy can cope is by becoming an avid reader of science fiction books, because they help him to reinvent his shattered world, and in this way offer him consolation. Decades later, he is abducted by a race of aliens from outer space, the Tralfamadorians, who take him to their planet, put him in a zoo and mate him with a beautiful young porn-starlet, Montana Wildhack.

The Tralfamadorians are great time-travellers, and Billy also gets to get his share of time-travel, but he is not very good at it and becomes 'unstuck in time'. This means that he returns, uncontrollably, over and over again to the central episode in his life, the bombing of Dresden. If this all sounds a bit unreal to you, well, Dresden's fate was as unreal as the existence of the Tralfamadorians – and yet it happened. What Vonnegut does in this imaginative, hilarious and touching satire, is show how wars impact the lives of the soldiers who fight in them, and how the survivors deal with the guilt of being still alive. How does one go on living, how can one find meaning in life, after experiences like young Billy Pilgrim's?

In all his books, Vonnegut's recurrent theme is the importance of basic human decency in a world of madness, chaos and pain. On top of that, he has reformed the American novel by extending its range through his innovations of tone, style and form.

For decades now, Kurt Vonnegut has been one of my main sources of inspiration as a novelist. It's thanks to him that over the years one solid theme has emerged from my own work: how hard it is to be a decent human being to begin with and how impossible that can become when the circumstances are getting nastier and nastier. I also owe him the realisation that using absurdities, exaggerations and slapstick are wonderful means to convey the miseries of life.

What I admire and treasure most in his work though, is the fact that he is a satirist with a heart. Satire often lacks a sense of warmth and of humanism: it's intellectually rewarding, it bedazzles our brains with its cleverness, but it does not always touch our hearts. Kurt Vonnegut, however, manages to engage both – which to my mind is a rare feat. I hope we will be able to discuss this later.'

Rustum Kozain:



Rustum Kozain (Paarl, South Africa, 1966) studied in the Department of English at the University of Cape Town. As PhD candidate he focused his research on selected South African poetry in English from 1970 to 1990. His poetry has appeared in journals both locally and abroad and he has also published reviews, short fiction and journalism, and the occasional literary essay. His debut volume of poetry, *This Carting Life*, was published in 2005. A former lecturer in English literary studies, he now works as a freelance editor. He is currently working on an anthology of poetry for high schools.

'I am not a satirist, or rather I do not write satire. I do not write satire for the simple reason that I cannot imagine how I could make someone like George Bush more satirical than he already is.'

My favourite examples of satire are Rabelais and the South African writer Ivan Vladislavic. When I read their works, I found myself a target of satire, which was an eye-opener to me. Vladislavic's work is full of real life.

There is a relationship between irony and satire. Satire has also to do with education. I would like to talk about that. I wonder how others see satire.'

Bas Heijne:

'If people understand satire immediately, it's not good. They must first be misled; they must become angry before they see the satirical point. I like the satirist to have a poker face. He must not give his meanings away. And a satirist also has to cut into his own flesh. I don't like it if writers only offend others.'

Nukila Amal:

'The Chinese word for satire means literally "laughter with knives".'

Abdelkader Benali:

'By satirising yourself, you can be understood. The only way to get understanding for what you do is to mock yourself.'

Fouad Laroui:

'It's interesting to define the difference between satire and irony. If we can define that difference, we can go further in our conversation.'

Allard Schröder:



Allard Schröder (Haren, the Netherlands, 1946) made his debut in 1989 with the novel *De gave van Luxuria* (Luxuria's Gift). This was followed two years later by *De muziek van de zwarte toetsen* (The Music of the Black Keys). With *Raaf* (Raven) Schröder found a wider audience. The stories in *Het pak van Kleindienst* (Kleindienst's Suit) is situated along varying moments in history. The atmosphere is menacing and mysterious. In his novel *Grover* Schröder looks into a number of essential questions of life. *De Hydrograaf* (The Hydrographer) was awarded the AKO literature prize and is a curious novel in which the patterns of the sea reflect those of love. In 2005 the novel *Favonius* appeared and early 2006 the collection of essays *Nieuwe tijden* (Modern Times) was published.

'I do not like talking about myself as a writer. I wanted to write. I write novels, radio plays, translations from Greek and Latin texts, and reviews in a weekly. I would like to be a satirical writer, but I am not. I can write ironic pieces, but that's it.

The first satirist I admired, during my schooldays, was Petronius. He wrote a satire of upstarts and snobs in Italy during Nero's time. I also liked Palladas from Alexandria (355-430), an Egyptian-Greek, whose work I translated. Heinrich Heine is also a good example, from the time when Germany had a greater influence than nowadays. Today, there is a thin line between writing satire and not being understood. Ilya Leonard Pfeijffer wrote a very funny book

about writing a book and about critics, but they didn't see that they were mocked by the book and nobody liked it. It was brilliant though.

In my own writings, I don't write about social problems or reality as such. I want to know what makes the world tick. The only thing I want to know before I die is how to die, not how to live. I have been doing that for sixty years now and it all went very fast. To die is not a question. You live automatically.'

Fouad Laroui:

'As Montaigne said: "Le philosophy est apprendre de mourir."'

Intermezzo

Lunchtime in the Royal Theatre. Writers stick together in the foyer, where soup, fresh bread, fruit and juices are served. Some of the authors keep talking about the subject during their lunch while others manage to exchange experiences of life. There is much friendly gossip about the ins and outs of literature land, as well as some hilarious anecdotes from Bas Heijne. Michiel van Kempen stands staring out of the window at the American embassy on the opposite side of the road, where some bored gendarmes stand in front of the building, smoking cigarettes.

Act III

The Swiftian Irony in Gulliver's Travels

Wim Tigges, lecturer in English Literature



I would like to tell you about the satire in the work of Jonathan Swift, in the 18th century. After a brief introduction to Swift, his characters and his engagement, we will go through the book *Gulliver's Travels*. What makes *Gulliver's Travels* the greatest satire is that it is so versatile, complex, and contradictory – books and books have been written about it. I will try to indicate the targets of Swift's satire, and link these to some of his other famous satirical works. He wrote polemics throughout his career.

Jonathan Swift was born in Dublin of British parents, and grew up in Ireland. He went to university in Dublin and was a dean in the Church of England, the national church in those days in the British Isles. He was given a position in Ireland and of course he had to make a living by writing. He soon found out that having been in contact with political leaders in the late 17th and early 18th century was a good thing. He could help them with his sharp writings on all sorts of topical issues, and by way of a reward, Swift hoped to get preferment in the church for a higher position. For Swift, it was always a matter of 'what's in it for me?', as he found himself in a society that worked along the lines of 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours'. One of Swift's great frustrations was that finally, at the end of the century, he was made dean of the church of Saint Patrick in Dublin, whereas he had hoped for a bishopric. But if they had offered him a higher position, he might never have written *Gulliver's Travels*. He was a voluminous writer, producing many pamphlets; little booklets that would be sold individually and would mainly have found their way to people interested in political matters and religious controversies, through the coffee houses. This was the great period of the coffee houses, which subscribed to new papers and periodicals. In 1695, during the reign of the Protestant King William III, the licensing act which had subjected writing in the late 17th century to very

strong censorship was allowed to lapse. This meant that people could now speak more freely about political issues. It was also the time after the glorious revolution of 1688, when the modern two-party system in England began to develop. The Whigs, the town party, who were mainly supported by financiers, merchants and the higher aristocracy, were in power throughout most of the reign of William III up to the late 1760s, before which Swift died. They seemed to have an almost oligarchic monopoly, but Swift belonged to the other side, the Tories, who had more support from the lesser gentry and the country clergy. This party stood for traditions, isolationism, a strong monarchy and a strong parliament; issues which, of course, are seen in *Gulliver's Travels*.

What about Swift himself? Many critics consider him to be a great fighter for freedom, for human rights and for humanity; a radical if you like, whereas others have said he is very conservative. Swift is, in fact, what we would now call 'a grumpy old man'. He was against everything. One of the phrases used in the invitation to this topical lecture was Swift's engagement. Well, I doubt if there was actually any such engagement. Of course he had all kinds of opinions about things but they are mainly demonstrated in attacking in the most general terms. His target was 'that animal called man'. Swift would say "I don't hate individual people, but I hate humanity as a whole; some of my best friends are women, but I don't like women as a collective because they always pretend they're not physical, they always hide their physicality in dainty behaviour and fine clothes, cosmetics and what have you". And the same goes for all the other targets we will discuss. On the one hand, you could say Swift is an anti-satirist. On the other hand though, he does hold an idea typical of many writers from this age of reason, regardless of what faction, political party or religion they supported, i.e. that this early 18th century was a time of chaos and irrationality, where people tended to be carried away by their emotions. And they thought it was the task of the intelligentsia and writers to keep people aware of the fact that reason ('the inner sensor', according to Swift) and law ('the outer sensor') should rule these passions and emotions, and that we should find a kind of balance between the two. It's interesting to note this with a view to the most controversial part of *Gulliver's Travels*, book 4, about the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos. The question you could raise is: does Swift really expect humanity to be like the Houyhnhnms, i.e. almost purely rational beings? If you take into account the way he describes the Yahoos you could say that this was the case. But on the other hand, these Houyhnhnms are without compassion and without love. They do indeed have very rational ideas, but do we really want to be like that, and does even someone as grumpy as Swift feel that the world would be a better place if human beings were like these rational horses? Somehow, I doubt it.

As I was saying earlier on, Swift wrote an enormous number of polemics, pamphlets, and newspaper articles, which would have reached a very large audience of thousands of people.

Practically everyone with a higher education in those days would be aware of his existence as a writer. This is perhaps another point to talk about later: which audience are you writing for? Has a satirist ever managed to win over a single person to his beliefs, and how does that work? And how did that work in Swift's time?

And then of course there are his longer works as well. In the modern edition, his prose works amount to 14 volumes. There are 3 volumes of verse, which is also mainly satirical, and 5 volumes of correspondence – so we know a lot about the ideas he held. The problem with Swift's irony is that ultimately, almost anything can be ironic. In our post-modern days, we are familiar with the idea that we cannot really know how things are or what the absolute value of something is. But we must assume that in Swift's day most of his readers would somehow get the point. Alexander Pope, a great friend of Swift, and John Gay, another great friend on the same political side, famous for his *Beggar's Opera* which is almost contemporaneous with *Gulliver's Travels*, would know roughly where they all stood. But when we read all these letters over their shoulders, it's not always easy to ascertain that. From what seems to be a fairly serious introduction to one of his famous early satires, *A Tale of a Tub* (about the religious controversies of the times and the new scholarly way of writing), we can quote a tiny text surrounded by annotations and introductions and digressions and digressions on digressions: 'Satire is a sort of glass in which beholders discover everybody's face except for their own'. And that is still very much the case. It's almost about 'them'. Nobody says "He's attacking us". *Gulliver's Travels* is a rather late satire (1726), and Swift was almost 60 years old when he wrote it. Much of the turbulence of earlier times was gone by then, but there were certain things going on in Swift's own time that got his goat and which he clearly attacks in *Gulliver's Travels*. You could see the whole book as a spoof or fantasy; a kind of parody on the travel literature that was so popular at the time. People would be reading stories of the great travellers, the explorers in the 17th century. And some writers imitated those, without having travelled. It became a kind of literary fad. This was the framework he used for *Gulliver*, his narrator, who is a balanced man and no youngster. One of the issues is: where does Gulliver himself stand? Is he a reliable narrator, and can we always trust what he says? The more you re-read the book, the more you find out that you can't trust him. Some people would say that he is just a satirical mouthpiece. Others defend the opposite. One example is the man who tells us at the end that he sucks a wound on the inside of his left knee – can everyone here do that? But that's just a little detail and you don't even notice it. It seems very realistic but it's impossible. This is the finicky, pedantic precision of the travel writer who tells us things we don't really want to know. Or who says "I will write a whole book about it later on". And, of course, the main items on the menu in *Gulliver's Travels* are these satirical attacks.

It might be nice to have a brief look at chapter IV in book 1, the voice of Lilliput, where he tells us that the principal secretary of the government in Lilliput visits him and tells Gulliver all about the political system and the main issues in Lilliput.

“We labor under two mighty evils; a violent faction at home, and the danger of an invasion by a most potent enemy from abroad. As to the first, you are to understand, that for above seventy moons past there have been two struggling parties in this empire, under the names of Tramecksan and Slamecksan, from the high and low heels on their shoes, by which they distinguish themselves. It is alleged indeed, that the high heels are most agreeable to our ancient constitution: But however this be, his majesty has determined to make use of only low heels in the administration of the government, and all offices in the gift of the crown, as you cannot but observe.”

No reader in 1726 would have missed this reference to the friction between the Whigs and Tories. Nowadays we might say “this is just great stuff; democracy 300 years ago had a two-party system – hooray!” But that’s not quite how it worked. It was just the beginning of the two-party system. In the elections, there were a total of around 300,000 voters, which was just over 20 percent of the male population in those days. They really had to inveigle them to come to the election by giving them free beers, and then perhaps a third of the people would turn up. Some of the constituencies were actually controlled by important landowners. That is what you could call profiteering; a member of parliament could be appointed rather than being elected, so it was a very corrupt system. Then, of course, there was also the issue between the two parties of the emergence of a new, mercantile middle-class power group, threatening to overtake the Tories. If you could have looked into every Englishman’s heart in those days, the majority would have been Tory. They just wanted to keep to their own country, live happily and not have too many changes in their life. The Whigs were on the move, and were inventing and arranging things all the time. And they were the ones in power all the time. It was not so that Swift was against the Whigs (if the Tories had come to power he may even have become a spin-doctor of the Whigs), but he was against the way they exploited their power and he found that they were a great strain on the real liberty of the people. During the brief period they were in power, the Tories became the party that Swift associated with, maybe because they could give him the job he wanted. He also sympathised with the Tories’ ideas about having a national church, being isolationist, not having a standing army (which was very costly) and not mounting the costly campaigns in France which were taking place at the time. The Duke of Marlborough was appointed captain general of the army by Queen Anne. He was very successful and also became very rich. It was similar to the present situation in Iraq, with so many debates between parties and inside parties. How did the costs weigh up against the

benefits? Many of the Whigs, being financiers, lent money to the king and the government, so they had an interest in the war going on, whereas the Tories were much more in favour of a war with the French. But there were problems with the Jacobite Scare. The Jacobites were supporters of the old Stewart monarchy, which had been deposed in 1688 because James II was a Roman Catholic. These Jacobites, the followers of King James and afterwards of his son, the Pretender, formed a major issue in those days. The government were constantly arresting people for liability or sedition, if they attacked the government because it was a danger to the state. The Tories included some of these Jacobites, and if they gained power, there would be another Catholic king before you knew it, and they didn't want that, based on their bad experiences of the past. On the other hand, neither did they want the other extreme. Many of the Whigs were non-Anglicans or dissenting Protestants, or just nominal Christians. Very often, they only communicated once with the Anglican church, in order to get their positions, and the rest of the time they practiced their religions in their own churches and chapels. One of Swift's greatest bugbears was what could happen if one of these extremes came into power.

So the fact that there were parties had not so much to do with a new kind of democratic movement, but rather with the question of who was in power, what were the dangers, and how could the fundamentalists be kept out? In that same passage in book 1, Gulliver actually refers to the other kingdom, in particular the island of Blefuscu. Not only does Swift point out the dangers of those factions, but he also asks what the differences are about and why there should be factions at all. It's Lamecksan-Tramecksan, i.e. whether your heels are higher than others, or whether you break your bread with one hand or the other. That's what the difference between Catholics and Protestants comes down to. What is this all about? This is just such a very petty kind of politics. That is what he's talking about there. Book 1 of *Gulliver's Travels* is, to a large extent, England seen through the wrong end of a telescope. And then the pretences and the bombast of the politicians, and the importance attached to these factions, become very petty. This is demonstrated in the beginning of the document that gives Man-Mountain his freedom, which is in the name of the emperor of Lilliput. Lilliput is only twelve miles around, but it is called a great empire, headed by Golbaste Mamarem Evlame Gurdile Shefin Mullu Ullu Gue.

“Golbaste Mamarem Evlame Gurdile Shefin Mullu Ullu Gue, Most Mighty Emperor of Lilliput, delight and terror of the universe, whose dominions extend five thousand blustrugs (about twelve miles in circumference) to the extremities of the globe, monarch of all monarchs, taller than the sons of men, whose feet press down to the center, and whose head strikes against the sun...”

Indeed, we laugh at Swift and we laugh at the pygmies; at their pretence that they need an emperor who hits the sky with its head. But what goes on in book 2, where you have England and the ideals of the Tories in practice, is not really much different. I quote from chapter III in that book. The pygmies have an emperor, the giants only have a king and they have a strong monarch, which is exactly what Swift had favoured (the royal sovereign). He then talks about how this is done in England and, of course, the king literally looks down on him. Gulliver says:

“While my color came and went several times with indignation to hear our noble country, the mistress of arts and arms, the scourge of France, the arbitress of Europe, the seat of virtue, piety, honor and truth, the pride and envy of the world, so contemptuously treated.”

This is the same kind of rhetoric we just heard in that document. This is where the laughter turns against Gulliver and, to the extent that we may have identified too strongly with Gulliver at this stage, it's also against ourselves, as 18th-century Englishmen. And then there are these rational animals the Houymnmnhs (literally meaning 'perfection of nation'). What can we make of a rational being, whether it's a human being, a horse or whatever? Many critics say, and I agree, that this is the main target of Swift's satire. Not so much that some men are less reasonable than others or some more stupid, or that groups tend to come to stupid decisions even if the individuals are clever or the other way around, but that people, human beings, pretend to be so rational and proud. Pride is the great sin, the great bugbear of the 18th century, and this is what Swift's writing continually opposes. One of my favourite passages of these first two books is the passage from book 1 where he rather pedantically talks about people's handwriting as not being from right to left, or from left to right, or top down, but being a slant across the page, like the ladies in England. He always catches some small fish along with the bigger fish.

There's something similar in book 2, chapter III, when he has a box made that serves him as a chamber. A blacksmith makes a box and he wants a lock on his door to keep the rats and the mice out, which have the plague. He has a little lock made.

“I desired a lock for my door, to prevent rats and mice from coming in: The smith, after several attempts, made the smallest that ever was seen among them, for I have known a larger at the gate of a gentleman's house in England.”

Though he is pedantically admiring and patronising the smith for being able to make such a tiny lock, there are nevertheless larger locks in England where someone wants to keep the public out of their grounds. There is yet another scene in that book, in chapter IV of book 2, when he travels around. And Brobdingnag is enormous, a whole continent, so these people

are very lucky, they can stay at home and have no interest in gunpowder.

“I was very desirous to see the chief temple, and particularly the tower belonging to it, which is reckoned the highest in the kingdom. Accordingly, one day my nurse carried me thither, but I may truly say I came back disappointed; for, the height is not above three thousand foot, reckoning from the ground to the highest pinnacle top; which allowing for the difference between the size of those people, and us in Europe, is no great matter for admiration, nor at all equal in proportion (if I rightly remember) to Salisbury Steeple.”

It's only 900 metres tall, and he is disappointed. If you re-read it, you think “wait a minute, 3000 feet – how tall is that?” In the text about the third voyage, which he wrote last, he visits all the islands and floating islands and shows us a variety of hang-ups. The amateur scientists, or projectors, formed one of his main targets. Swift hated Ireland, but he hated the English rulers of Ireland even more so. His argument was that if you introduce so many new currencies in a country, the old coins lose their value. Swift remarked that people were always coming up with idealistic, highly theoretical ideas, rather than inventing things that improve people's homes and lives. In book 3, chapter VI, he describes the problems of the politicians:

“In the school of political projectors I was but ill entertained, the professors appearing in my judgment wholly out of their senses, which is a scene that never fails to make me melancholy. These unhappy people were proposing schemes for persuading monarchs to choose favorites upon the score of their wisdom, capacity, and virtue; of teaching ministers to consult the public good; of rewarding merit, great abilities, eminent services; of instructing princes to know their true interest by placing it on the same foundation with that of their people: of choosing for employments persons qualified to exercise them; with many other wild impossible chimaeras, that never entered before into the heart of man to conceive, and confirmed in me the old observation, that there is nothing so extravagant and irrational which some philosophers have not maintained for truth.”

Of course, it did enter into Swift's heart and this is where Swift turned the satire around. Tories as well as Whigs would have agreed. Ideally speaking, politicians should be wise and capable, should know what it's all about and should not be corrupt. But if you don't read carefully you think “oh yes, sunlight out of cucumber and recycling your own excrement and so on - it's all rubbish. This is what makes it so difficult to establish exactly where the irony is in Swift's text, creating a major problem when we get to book 4. How straightforward and how ironical is Swift in that book? Here he talks about the controversy of the nature of humanity, asking what we humans are really like. In the Latin books still used by students, a human being was an “animus

rationale” and the horse was always the “animo irrationale”, which Swift turns around. The human beings have no reason at all. What is left of a human being when you take away his reason? Then you have a Yahoo. It takes you a while before you recognize the Yahoos for what they are. At first you think they are maybe apes or monkeys, but no - they are very much like ourselves! By way of conclusion to my introduction, let’s look at what he does in book 4, chapter VIII. There is a discussion going on of how he goes out one day and meets a girl who falls in love with him. It’s not just the shock effect but how he creates it:

“Being one day abroad with my protector, the sorrel nag, and the weather exceeding hot, I entreated him to let me bathe in a river that was near. He consented, and I immediately stripped myself stark naked, and went down softly into the stream. It happened that a young female Yahoo standing behind a bank saw the whole proceeding, and enflamed by desire, as the nag and I conjectured, came running with all speed, and leaped into the water, within five yards of the place where I bathed.

I was never in my life so terribly frightened; the nag was grazing at some distance, not suspecting any harm. She embraced me after a most fulsome manner; I roared as loud as I could, and the nag came galloping towards me, whereupon she quitted her grasp, with the utmost reluctancy, and leaped upon the opposite bank, where she stood gazing and howling all the time I was putting on my clothes.

This was matter of diversion to my master and his family, as well as of mortification to myself. For now I could no longer deny, that I was a real Yahoo, in every limb and feature, since the females had a natural propensity to me as one of their own species. Neither was the hair of this brute of a red color (which might have been some excuse for an appetite a little irregular), but black as a sloe, and her countenance did not make an appearance altogether so hideous as the rest of the kind; for, I think, she could not be above eleven years old.”

This last sentence really clinches it. What is he saying? Is he implying that this is just a Yahoo thing, and that they mature much earlier, or is this really a dig at a type of woman in Swift’s own day?

Gulliver’s Travels is one of the best comic books, and one of the most humorous and witty books in the English language. Swift simply got carried away with an adolescent sense of humour. Sometimes, it’s more bitter and provoking. *The Modest Proposal*, where he proposes that the best solution for the famine in Ireland is to cook all the children and serve them up. This is pure irony. How does that work? It’s also a great fantasy. Then there is this plethora of targets, ranging through all mankind, and even himself. Some people might think “well, what about yourself, Mr. Swift - are you so perfect and rational yourself? But in his best poem, *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift*, he also makes fun of himself. And the story goes that his last

words, when he became insane at the end of his life, were "I am a fool". And of course, if you are a satirist that might be another question to think about. How humble are you allowed to be? What do you take pride in, if you tell other people that you are so much better than your readers, and what are they supposed to believe or how should they react?'

Renate Dorrestein:

'A good reader makes a good book. I must compliment you on your enthusiasm. But did Swift really mean all this?'

Wim Tigges:

'Thank God, no! Some writers don't care; others do. You can interpret this book in many different ways. In 2007, it is totally different to when Swift wrote it. But Swift doesn't know that. He's dead, so who cares?'

Allard Schröder:

'A good book belongs to the reader.'

Abdelkader Benali:

'When the book was published, who were its audience?'

Wim Tigges:

'We are not sure; it's not easy to research. We don't even know how many prints were made. It cost eight shillings and sixpence, which was quite expensive. But possibly the books were shared. It was almost immediately translated into French and Dutch. And it was serialised in two newspapers. People wanted to read the book for recognition. "Yes, he's right! That's exactly how it is!'

Rustum Kozain:

'Were the readers educated people?'

Wim Tigges:

'Except for the passages where he parodies, his style is pretty simple. Some say it's satire. This presupposes an agreement on what man ought to be. That agreement was very strong in the 18th century. There is only one truth, and order is better than chaos. These values are much diffuser now. This book is 'a glass in which the beholder recognises everything except himself'. Swift could be arrested for his writing, so on the Dutch version Gulliver was given as the author. We are all Yahoos.'

Bas Heijne:

'What did he mean himself? You talked about the subtlety of his humour. All these layers of humour and irony make the book great. But a critic would wonder where Swift stood himself.'

Wim Tigges:

'The question is whether he wanted to write a work about a certain point of view he opposed or whether he wanted to write a good work of fiction that was critical of everything in life. His sharpness is shown at its best in *A Modest Proposal*, which is a marvellous piece of rhetoric. Why don't we kill our children and export them as food? That would solve two problems at once!'

Allard Schröder:

'What kind of satire was that?'

Wim Tigges:

'It was based on morality. It is inhuman to abuse your power and to let the country that you are responsible for suffer all the time. There were a few bad harvests at the time and many people were poor. They did not have civil rights. One of Swift's points of view was to 'burn everything English except their coals' (as coals came from England).'

Bas Heijne:

'What were the reactions to *A Modest Proposal*?'

Wim Tigges:

'Some people were upset and some claimed it was 'not true at all'. Others thought he was right; they admitted they had to do something, but what? In the age of laissez-faire we can't take people's freedom away.'

Wim Tigges:

'Swift writes about things he finds immoral. He can write, but that's all he can do. He was not selfish, but he felt no mission to save or help the poor. The first reaction of the English state to the French Revolution was 'oh my God, we can't have that here!'

Rustum Kozain:

'You can write for your own pleasure. For laughs.'

Abdelkader Benali:

'He must have been a split personality. He was also religious.'

Wim Tigges:

'He was the dean of St. Patrick's Church and everyone knew him. He belonged to a small group of Tories that were not in the government, and they hardly could do anything to help the suffering of the Catholic poor. What kind of power do you have as a satirical fiction writer to change things?'

Bas Heijne:

'He was not a cynic.'

Wim Tigges:

'He had a sharp eye, and that moved people. He saw that something had to change, but he was smart enough to see that he could not do anything. A friend of his, Alexander Pope, also a Tory and a Catholic, wrote: 'We live in the best possible world'. Swift did not like Descartes at all. He was more anti-Enlightenment.'

Faoud Laroui:

'Another aspect of satire is that if a satirist tries to prove a point by the absurd, it's not satire anymore. This was said by Descartes.'

Alaa Al Aswany:

'It is not the task of fiction to change the world. If you want to change the world, it is better to become a politician. Good fiction does not change the situation, but it changes the people, the readers. It makes them more open and more aware. Swift's ideas forced him to write them down. I do not agree with the idea that he thought he could change something.'

Wim Tigges:

'In his time, people did think it could change something, he was also the spokesman of a pressure group.'

Alaa Al Aswany:

'Of course, writing can change a situation, if it is political writing. But fiction has other rules. The human factor makes the book readable after three centuries. Fiction is something different to journalism.'

Wim Tigges:

'It is satirical in its form of fiction. I think that Swift, whether he wrote like this or in a purely rhetorical way, wouldn't have achieved anything else. It was a different situation in those days.'

Bas Heijne:

'It's very anti-satirical that it became a children's book.'

Abdelkader Benali:

'He also mocks grown-up characters.'

Michiel van Kempen:

'Does the book contain a lot of things that we do not recognise any more?'

Wim Tigges:

'What is right and what is wrong? We lost the idea that the truth is the truth.'

Abdelkader Benali:

'At the moment we all listen to each other. When the Danish cartoons were published, I was in Beirut. I got an SMS that I had to look out for the cartoons. At the same moment, I saw a lot of people demonstrating in one of the main streets, Eventually I realised they were protesting about the cartoons, in front of the Danish Embassy. But those drawings had been published in the newspapers four months ago! If just one person had been killed during those demonstration, we would now have had a massacre here. The published word is alive and kicking.'

Rustum Kozain:

'Postmodernism is responsible for the fact that these cartoons could produce the effect they did. Everyone's point of view is equal. I can defend the things I do using my tradition and culture. We pay attention to the question of who is expressing an opinion. Postmodernism has made a mistake on that point.'

Alaa Al Aswany:

'The idea in the Arab world is that 'Western governance has huge double standards against us'. I saw these cartoons being shown by Jazeera. The same newspaper refused a couple of cartoons about Christians. A newspaper that is against Christianity and against Islam - okay. But it was only against Islam.'

Saddam Hussein is dead, but the other dictators might be worse. Saddam did not get fair treatment. At the beginning of the war, two soldiers were shown on TV drinking a cup of tea. Saddam was not shown drinking a cup of tea, but dying. It is inhuman to film someone while dying! And we see this double standard all the time.'

Laila Lalami:

'There is a mix-up concerning freedom of speech and a tasteful discourse. When you read the Western press, you see everybody screaming at the same time. But who is saying what?'

Bas Heijne:

'The question of the identity of the satirist is important. A joke about homosexuals is different if it is made by a homosexual or by a non-homosexual. A radical Muslim telling a joke about a Jew ...'

Alaa Al Aswany:

'I never tell jokes!'

Rustum Kozain:

'I have a problem with postmodernist relativism.'

Bas Heijne:

'He is evil, so I am allowed to kill him. Which makes me evil.'

Intermezzo

18:00. A dinner in restaurant Fab, next to Theater aan het Spui. Present are the international authors involved in the Winternachten programme, and the financiers and organisation and staff of Winternachten. There is a choice between a veggie meal and a kind of steak. A good example of traditional Dutch cooking, mixed with some exotic ingredients. One of the guest authors says, carefully: "I don't get the feeling the Dutch love their food very much..." Two Dutch writers, in defence: 'Uche, uche. You mean that satirically?' After dinner, the Winternachten Lecture is given by Pankaj Mishra in the Nieuwe Kerk. (The text of his lecture is available from the festival.) What follows is a long night in the streets and cafés, and the hotel bar of the Novotel in The Hague. The writers talk on and on, many of them drinking, some smoking, and all of them predominantly curious about each other. There's a lot of laughter, and just as many serious faces. Late at night, the room doors close. The hotel - full of international writers - sleeps. Some last notes are taken in pocket notebooks. Stories are dreamt. Ideas are born.

After a cup of coffee and a croissant the next morning, everybody is alive and kicking again, though some authors are reminded of their long night in the form of a headache.

Act IV

Satire in the animation films of Gerrit van Dijk



In 1978-1979, animation film maker Gerrit van Dijk (Uden, the Netherlands, 1938) did a twelve-month project, together with Luc van de Lagemaat, painter Pieter Zwaaanswijk and actor Wigbolt Kruijver, to give their artistic reflection on the news.

Every month, Pieter Zwaaanswijk made an object with plastic sculptures, Wigbolt Kruijver gave a half-hour lunch performance, and Luc van de Lagemaat and Gerrit van Dijk made a three-minute animation film. Van Dijk made the drawings and animations, while Van de Lagemaat did the sound. They called their art project *Jute*, and the goal of the artists was to give critical reflections on controversial subjects, such as apartheid in South Africa or the presence of Dutch UN soldiers in Lebanon.

The films were shown in the Toneelschuur in Haarlem, an alternative theatre and film house. The protagonists of the short films were also seen in Kruijver's performances. Zwaaanswijk's sculptures were exhibited in the Vishal.

1978, *Queen*. 'God always sees you.' A white pigeon flies in a blue sky. It enters the world, which has an enormous mouth. The world opens its mouth, the bird flies in and the teeth chew – the bird is eaten. Then, the world changes into the Queen of England, talking about 'our little conflict in Northern Ireland', as an example of a model war.

For the whole project - a year of hard work - the group of artists received only 200,000 guilders (comparable to about 91,000 euros). But many people found this too much. According to Van Dijk, it became 'the talk of the town'. The artists had problems with politicians, newspapers and pressure groups.

After a while, Aad van de Heuvel began to show Van Dijk's animations in his television programme (KRO). Van Dijk made satirical movies about Carter's visit to China (*Alle Menschen werden brüder*), about the UN soldiers fighting in Lebanon (*Lebanon Soldiers*, in which bishop Gijsen made his legendary remark: 'Every abortion is one soldier less in Lebanon').

“During that project, we noticed that as artists, instead of just following what happens in the world, we could also influence the world.’ At a certain point, many Dutch people thought the ‘Van Agt I’ cabinet (a right-wing coalition between the labour party CDA and the liberal party VVD from 1979 to 1981) would fall because of the tensions between Joop den Uyl (PvdA) and prime minister Dries Van Agt, a Christian Democrat (CDA). The cabinet had to deal with a major economic depression, but refused to cut government spending due to fierce left-wing opposition in parliament, which held nearly half of the seats. Many left-wing demonstrations were held on the street against the government. The harsh demonstrations in Amsterdam during the coronation of Queen Beatrix and the squatters’ riots were notorious. There was a sharp increase in unemployment and the government was seen to have created too much debt.

The group of artists around Gerrit van Dijk hoped to contribute to the fall of this cabinet. They made a project in which the fall was announced. In their film *Valsplat* (1979), they showed many problems that the Dutch government had to deal with in those days: abortion, the growth of Schiphol, the abortion clinic in Bloemenhove, the building of mosques, commercials at football matches, and so on. Van Agt was shown as a cyclist, Den Uyl as another cyclist mocking Van Agt who was falling off his bike.

But the cabinet did not fall.

The picture that Van Dijk used for the face of Den Uyl came from a magazine that claimed its rights. The KRO, the broadcasting company of Van Dijk’s movies, got into trouble with the photographer. They accused Van Dijk of using material for which he did not have the copyright.

After Van Dijk and Van de Lagemaat had made a film in which they satirised the plans of the TROS (another broadcasting company) to broadcast the television series *The Holocaust*, with Meryl Streep, the TROS asked the KRO to stop broadcasting their films. This was the end of the film project.

Another project initiated by Gerrit van Dijk was his impressive animation movie *Pas a Deux* (1988); ‘a film about women’s liberation’. This film shows a dancing couple drawn in pencil lines. A man and a woman start dancing. The man changes into Popeye, the woman becomes Betty Boop, Popeye becomes Mickey Mouse, and we watch the two people on the dance floor transform into many iconic figures; famous cartoon and movie figures, pop artists biblical figures. We recognise the snake from Disney’s *Jungle Book*, ‘tante Sidonia’ from the Belgian comic *Suske & Wiske*, Superman, the Statue of Liberty in New York, Jesus Christ, the Virgin and Child, Charlie Chaplin, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, the comic figure Tintin, Popeye’s wife Olive Oyl, Tarzan, Tina Turner, the dwarfs from Snow White, Santa Claus, the Pope,

Jeanne d'Arc, Vincent van Gogh, Bibendum (the Michelin Man) and many others. All of them were drawn in Van Dijk's own style.

The film was the Dutch entry for the Oscar Nominations of 1988. In the second round of nominations, *Pas a Deux* was in first place. But the Disney studios opposed the movie, asking all their employees to vote against the film. *Pas a Deux* came in fourth place in the final round of nominations, which meant it did not get nominated for an Oscar.

Bas Heijne:

'Was censorship something that bothered you a lot during your career?'

Gerrit van Dijk:

'It's part of my work. If you make films like I do, you know in advance that many people won't like it. Karel Appel made a painting for a church; the church did not like it, and hung a curtain in front of it. Even an artist does not have the right to claim his work is holy. If the pastor does not like Appel's painting, he has the right to hide it. If people do not like my work, I don't force them to watch it. My point of view is that they don't have to like it, they don't have to broadcast it, they don't have to show it or to see it, but if people do not like my work, they cannot censor it, and I don't censor it myself.'

Bas Heijne:

'The action taken by Disney that you talked about is a form of pressure. Do any of you recognise this from your own work?'

Abdelkader Benali:

'When my novel *Bruiloft aan Zee* was translated, the publisher wanted to change the title of the first chapter, and they wanted to get rid of the last chapter, the epilogue, which they found redundant. My German translator did not want a character to say 'if we had the Holocaust, we would now be the winners', saying that I could not publish that Hitler was good. He could hide himself behind the law.'

And for a book containing Ischa Meyer's letters to his mother, the publisher, Prometheus, asked me to write an introduction, which I did. But after a few weeks, they told me that they would not publish it in the book, because Meyer's widow, the writer Conny Palmen, was 'not at all amused.'

Allard Schröder:

'I wrote radio plays which were recorded on CD without asking my permission. They said that it was 'public domain'. I do not agree. What Gerrit van Dijk did with that photo of Joop Den Uyl? I wouldn't agree if I were the photographer.'

Gerrit van Dijk:

'But this picture of Den Uyl with his tongue out of his mouth was world famous. I did not claim to have made the picture myself; I used a well-known image that everybody knew was not mine. I always used to work that way.'

Alaa Al Aswany:

'If I satirised a piece of yours that everyone knew, would you protest?'

Allard Schröder:

'I wouldn't be at all happy.'

Abdelkader Benali:

'After Theo van Gogh was murdered in Amsterdam, people speculated about the identity of the murderer. Every Moroccan hoped it was a Turk and vice versa. I said that on TV and the director later used precisely that idea for a television play. I would rather have been informed about that beforehand.'

Bas Heijne:

'There is a danger of copyright being used more and more as a way to censor things.'

Fouad Laroui:

'That pastor hanging a curtain over a painting is an example of a good way to deal with this kind of matter. Something totally different happened with the Danish cartoons. It would have been better if the opponents could have hung a curtain in front of them! If you don't like satire, then don't watch.'

Laila Lalami:

'There were actually a lot of people who saw the cartoons and ignored them. It was the worldwide manipulation that made it into such a big deal.'

Alaa Al Aswany:

'There is a great distance between Egypt and Denmark, which makes Denmark an easy enemy. The government likes to reflect on 'fake issues'. Denmark is no Israel, no United States. Having Denmark as an enemy is wonderful for the Egyptian government. In the newspaper, we made a joke: 'One more cartoon, or we will declare war on Denmark'. The topic is exaggerated. But it is also a good example of what's going on. We don't feel that freedom of expression in the West is very consistent. There's that double standard again. Four weeks ago, my American translator refused to translate my last novel, and threw it in my face. He translated a short story of mine and insisted on changing two words, which I refused. He thought that these two words were against Egyptian Christians, which was not the case at all. I said to him "you can accept it all or refuse it, but you don't have the right to change anything in my work". That's a good example of what I mean, and another example is the Holocaust. It is a terrible event to imagine. I can't imagine any human being not being touched by the Holocaust. But you are using your freedom of expression to insult our religion. That's okay, but we cannot understand that talking about the Holocaust is prohibited. After all, the Holocaust is a historical event; it is not a religion. So we don't understand that there are laws that prohibit talking about the Holocaust. There is an English professor of history in jail, and we don't see this as a consistent value.'

Fouad Laroui:

'This is said again and again and I don't agree. I'll tell you why. You are right about these rights, and last year the French government adopted a law that you cannot even deny the Armenian genocide. But you cannot compare what should not be compared, i.e. religions. Let's look at how it works. In France, for many years there was a satirical paper you could buy at the kiosk. I remember a caricature of the Pope making love to Mother Teresa. Jesus was completely ridiculed on a daily basis. Why it worked is that when you went to the kiosk, you knew as a Christian that you might be offended if you bought it, so you did not buy it. The idea that only Islam is attacked by cartoonists is absolutely not true. Any religion is attacked every day - in France, in Europe, everywhere. It's a fact.

The Holocaust. I agree with you that it's very strange you cannot say anything about a historical fact that actually took place. But you should not put the Holocaust and Islam on the same level.'

Laila Lalami:

'There have been many situations in which the Prophet or Islam was caricatured, and nothing happened. In the television series *South Park*, they put the Prophet in satirical situations and nobody even raised an eyebrow. It really depends on the political situation. In October, the

cartoons had already been published in an Egyptian newspaper. Nothing happened. Five months later it became an issue!

Abdelkader Benali:

'A newspaper that would caricature Christians and Muslims every day would be very stupid. Why should you offend other religions all the time?'

Bas Heijne:

'If a Muslim had written Arnon Grunberg's novel *The Messiah*, he would have been in big trouble.'

Alaa Al Aswany:

'I am for total freedom of expression, but then it should be consistent. The problem with this kind of thing is that it is categorised, so you join either the A team or the B team. Take the Holocaust, for example. Every time I see this in presentations, people start talking about the traumatic aspects of the event, and I am automatically included in the B team. I am against the Holocaust, of course, but a historical event is a historical event. It is not our role to make a historical event into a crime, you see? As has been written in the press many times. And if you think that any crime against humanity, with the Holocaust as the biggest example, would be a crime to deny, then I could also give you a list of our victims.'

Allard Schröder:

'The problem with the Holocaust was that there were many survivors of the camps who were insulted because it was simply denied that they had been there. This was considered an insult to their suffering. And there was also the fear that anti-Semitism could return to society. Those were the only reasons - not because it was a crime as such.'

Rustum Kozain:

'Insulting the Prophet of Islam is also an insult for people, so it is not simply a matter of comparing apples and oranges. They *are* comparable.'

Alaa Al Aswany:

'The world is not perfect, but I am trying to explain to you why people really over-react to something like cartoons. It is the inconsistency!'

Fouad Laroui:

'They should not see satire and cartoons as an instrument against Islam. They think it's aggressive towards Islam. It's not. It's not even aggression; it's just freedom of satire against any religion. The Holocaust and the Armenian genocide are very interesting to talk about but we should not put them on a par.'

Rustum Kozain:

'Why not? The offence, is that an offence concerning racism?'

Fouad Laroui:

'There's a simple reason. It's only in France, Germany and Austria that you cannot deny Holocaust, but you can deny it in Portugal, and everywhere else. So it's not about 'Europe' or 'the West'.

Alaa Al Aswany:

'It's hypocrisy. The Algerian people had massacres; everybody knows that. This has been the colonial mentality for centuries. We had the British colonial history. This is the evidence.'

Allard Schröder:

'All these crimes mentioned here, as in colonialism, were matters of keeping the power and denying the power to other people. The Holocaust was a different thing altogether. It was the eradication on an industrial scale of part of the population. That's a great difference.'

Intermezzo

Lunch again. Fouad Laroui, Rustum Kozain and Alaa Al Aswany continue their discussions. Others rest a bit and have something to eat. Photographer Serge Ligtenberg had arrived and prepares his camera for photographing the international guests. After lunch, the discussion goes on in a quieter tone.

Act V

Final discussion

Bas Heijne:

'Now we've been talking about satire for a couple of days - is there a satirist among you?'

Renate Dorrestein:

'I am not really a satirist, but I am struggling. I am now working on a book about trafficking in under-age females. And I notice that being satirical makes it difficult to get close to people. People are used to showing something, they are no longer autonomous people. I'm afraid I'm going to miss my point because I've chosen a satirical form.'

Michiel van Kempen:

'Why did you choose for satire?'

Renate Dorrestein:

'The subject is so terrible and so bizarre, that I decided to put it in a satirical story.'

Abdelkader Benali:

'A protagonist can satirise himself. What is the problem?'

Renate Dorrestein:

'You can't satirise everything.'

Alaa Al Aswany:

'My Italian publisher says that there are good novels and bad novels, and that there are living novels and dead novels. By creating real characters, you have moments when you lose your control over the characters. They make their own decisions. Take, for example, a story by Chekhov about the death of an employee. A nineteenth-century Russian employee gets an invitation to a huge concert. The invitation was sent to him by mistake, but he decides to go to the concert anyway. In the auditorium, he finds himself sitting next to a governor. He can't concentrate on the show, and at a certain point, he sneezes. He says sorry, but the governor does not answer. Back home, he can't sleep, and his wife blames him for all their troubles. The little employee visits the governor and reminds him of his terrible mistake of sneezing next to him. The governor says "you are a crazy person!" And the employee dies. This could happen and this could not happen. Every good artist finds a living person in his imagination. I am a bit against literary analysis. Fiction is like life and fiction includes satire.'

Bas Heijne:

'Swift is an example of another form of satire. It has a satirical purpose as a story, apart from the fact that the characters live their own lives.'

Fouad Laroui:

'We can feel empathy for the character in Chekhov's story. But if you use your characters as puppets to convey satire, it doesn't work.'

Allard Schröder:

'A character is a construction. You put elements into your character that you expect to need later. So a character is not a living figure. You must change your characters or the form of your story. The characters in my own novels are not loveable at all, but in the end, I cannot kill them.'

Bas Heijne:

'Isn't that contradictory? You say that characters don't live anyway.'

Allard Schröder:

'You can't ask them questions, like do you collect stamps?'

Bas Heijne:

'Another question is: is fiction still a means of raising a topical discussion? When Salman Rushdie wrote his *Satanic Verses*, he said that literature had no function anymore... and not much later, he was imprisoned.'

Michiel van Kempen:

'The element of satire is in the eye of the beholder. You can't decide the sociological impact of your work yourself.'

Allard Schröder:

'Not the impact - but you can decide the purpose.'

Bas Heijne:

'Pankaj Mishra spoke yesterday night in his Winternachten lecture about more engagement in literature. Nobody is obliged to, but if I want to mean something in society, like Dostoyevsky or Konrad...'

Rustum Kozain:

'To entertain is the first impact.'

Allard Schröder:

'Art is the only place in society where we can be amoral.'

Bas Heijne:

'Back to Renate. You want to raise a social topic through satire.'

Renate Dorrestein:

'Maybe there are topics that you can't satirise.'

Fouad Laroui:

'We are mixing up making fun of something and satirising it. Can we define both? Satire is: taking a situation and make it completely different, the characters move in a constructed world and it is impossible to care for them. Who can you care for in *Gulliver's Travels*? For nobody!'

Bas Heijne:

'I agree with Fouad that in satire you use your characters to satirise something. The book *Gulliver's Travel* is still there because it has living characters.'

Rustum Kozain:

'If it is a good satire, we get general human things out of it, although we don't know the difference between Tories and Whigs any more. We do, however, recognise general patterns in human contacts.'

Bas Heijne:

'Satire in literature is almost always about general human topics.'

Rustum Kozain:

'Good satire is!'

Alaa Al Aswany:

'What makes fiction readable after a few centuries? These human elements! And art must be a pleasure; without pleasure it has a basic problem. I don't read boring fiction for any reason.'

Bas Heijne:

'We are talking about satire. The question is not 'how do I write something that will still be read in 300 years' time'. It is 'how do I write something that changes people's minds?'

Fouad Laroui:

'George Orwell has written a lot about the bad sides of militarism. Because of the entertaining aspect of his novel *Animal Farm*, it had more effect than any pamphlet. You never forget it after reading it.'

Tsead Bruinja:

'Can you still write an *Animal Farm* nowadays?'

Michiel van Kempen:

'Well-written non-fiction can have the same effect.'

Laila Lalami:

'A book like *Animal Farm* becomes more a part of you than a non-fictional book, which makes you understand the matter on an intellectual level. Fiction also speaks on an emotional level. You find out the mechanisms behind the subject.'

Alaa Al Aswany:

'Marquez said: a good novel will raise a good subject. But a good subject will not automatically make a good novel. If you have a good novel in your hands, even though it is just a love affair, the subject is always good.'

Rustum Kozain:

'What do you mean by 'just a love affair'?''

Bas Heijne:

'If you have a subject and you want to tell people something about it, how do you decide whether you write a novel or an opinion article for a newspaper?'

Iaa Al Aswany:

'That's a good question. I put every consistent idea into an article. When I have a subject clear in my mind, it's article matter. In fiction, there is something mysterious. You get stimulated, feel a kind of nostalgia, you find there are characters and dramas that must be w ritten... Isabel Allende said: The short story falls on my head like an apple. But to w rite a novel, I have to w rite every day to see it. It exists somew here around or inside you, and you have to w rite it to see it.

Writing an article is a form of conscious w riting. What w as positive and negative in this festival? Fiction is about the unconscious.

Bas Heijne:

'But your fictional w orks do have a social impact.'

Alaa Al Aswany:

'Yes. If w e had had this conversation thirty years earlier, everything w ould have been different. During your life, you get all kinds of new ideas.'

Allard Schröder:

'It takes time to w rite a book. You live together w ith the book. It's alw ays moving; it's a living organism. If you stop w riting for three months, you have to start all over, until it's your story again.'

Bas Heijne:

'Wim Tichers, Sw ift used his novel for a satirical purpose; he w as not a novelist.'

Wim Tigges:

'Yes, he w anted to attack things and he inspired other novelists by his w ay of doing that. Like Nabokov w ith his *Lolita*.'

Fouad Laroui:

'Do you have to be a bastard to be a satirist? If you really care about your characters, they live; you can't kill them - you love them...'

Wim Tigges:

'You care about the Chekhov-character, even though it is satire.'

Fouad Laroui:

'I don't think it's a satire; it only has satirical moments. You can relate to this guy.'

Alaa Al Aswany:

'I did not agree with Pankaj Mishra yesterday. He presented many of his assumptions as facts. He talked about the effects after globalisation, but for me globalisation is not a fact. Besides, I don't see any relation between globalisation and fiction. He kept talking about the relation between globalisation and fiction. The well-developed countries are powerful, which does not mean they don't need to be creative. The best novels of recent years came from the less developed countries. Globalisation versus industry; now there is a relation.'

Rustum Kozain:

'The fact that your own book has been translated into so many languages is an effect of globalisation.'

Alaa Al Aswany:

'Globalisation is a philosophy introduced after the fall of the Soviet Union.'

Rustum Kozain:

'The world has operated as a global economy since colonialism.'

Laila Lalami:

'Pankaj Mishra talked about the balance between writers from rich countries who can easily get their books translated and exported over the whole world, and writers from poor countries who don't have those possibilities.'

Alaa Al Aswany:

'If you write a good novel, you will get it translated anywhere.'

Others:

'That's not true at all.'

Allard Schröder:

'It's not only the poor countries that are the dupe. Countries like the United States or England do not translate from Dutch and Flemish. The Anglo-Saxon world has more power in literature.'

Rustum Kozain:

'A New York publishing house found my novel too worldly. It did not give their readers a good idea of South African life. They already have enough of that.

The term globalisation is just a new term for 'global economy'; the term we have had since colonialism.'

Allard Schröder:

'We all talk English here, and almost only English books are mentioned; hardly any French or Russian books. American and British publishing houses have a big advantage. There is no Englishman amongst us, but we talk about these English books as our own books.'

Alaa Al Aswany:

'Every good book belongs to me.'

Laila Lalami:

'But they have to be made available first! That's what Mishra meant with his speech yesterday.'

Epilogue

With these words, the conversation about satire has come to an end. The Winternachten Festival 2007 is about to start. The writers have got to know each other somewhat better. But they are not tired of discussing. Instead, they all long for further conversations. For further meetings. Further ideas. And, of course, for further inspiration to write more novels, short stories and articles. Satirical or not. If possible with a social impact. And in the best case scenario, translated all over the world and still read after 300 years, when the concept of 'satire' will again have a new role and meaning in life and literature.



Winternachten – international literature festival The Hague 2007

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Administration: Willem Hijdra and Service Buro René Penders

Programme advisors: Ais Aynan, Abdelkader Benali, Robert Dorsman, Bas Heijne, Michiel van Kempen, Fouad Laroui, Maya Sutedja-Liem, Margreet Ruardi, Jessica Teunissen

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