“A smile and a tear” – Dutch cabaret as a satirical vessel for social critique

Robrecht Herfkens
University of Western Australia

Dutch cabaret is a theatrical genre that originated from France in the year 1881. Initially established to create a new performance genre between art and entertainment, it found its way to the Dutch theatres at the start of the 20th century. However, this geographical relocation had little influence on the core elements of an original French cabaret performance, that was now adapted into the Dutch national culture. Dutch cabaret is, aside from entertainment, a way of confronting the audience with a certain aspect of reality or humanity that is usually avoided in public. Thus, contemporary Dutch cabaret, as generally a one-man, stand-up performance, expresses opinions or ideas that touch on topical issues, taboos, or other ‘sacred cows’. One could subsequently summarize Dutch cabaret as a performance art focusing on societal, political, or cultural critique. To do so, satire is essential to any cabaret performance, as it is an effective means for critique to be delivered to a corresponding audience. In what follows, I will provide a definition and a short history explaining what Dutch cabaret in essence entails. Next, I will discuss why satire and social critique is essential in Dutch cabaret, and I will explain how it uses these concepts. Through examples of a selection of Dutch cabaret performance excerpts, it will be shown in what way social critique is delivered, how it is done, and what their according purposes and effects are. Because Dutch cabaret performances are always performed in the Dutch language, I have taken the liberty of freely translating some performance excerpts from Dutch to English. I take no academic credit for these translations, as they are merely done to the best of my knowledge, and the result is what I believe to be best in terms of form, function, and effect. On the other hand, citing excerpts on paper runs the risk of losing some effect – the few songs and poems cited here do not rhyme in English, and other citations or quotes are not as effective on paper as they are on stage. Lastly, in some cited excerpts, there is strong language present – this language comes from the performances, and are in no way edited in by myself as author of this paper.

When it comes to this theatrical form, considered both art and entertainment, there are many different yet unofficial definitions of contemporary Dutch cabaret. Primarily given by cabaret artists or ‘cabaretiers’ themselves, personal definitions all differ from one another, as individuals define the term by their personal repertoire characteristics. However, common characteristics can be traced throughout these various definitions and respective performances. Wim Ibo, an ex-cabaretier himself, defined the genre as ‘professional literary-musical theatre in intimate surroundings for an intelligent

What this means is that Dutch cabaret as a stage performance is not necessarily provided to simply please the audience with entertainment, like for example, stand-up comedy. A cabaretier has a story to tell: through personal observations he or she expresses critique against issues that reside in any respective society or culture. This critique can be expressed directly or indirectly, through a series of jokes or head-on assault. As is tradition, the cabaretier also uses poetry or music as a vessel, aside from spoken word.

However, it is the element of satire that claims priority in any Dutch cabaret performance. In this context, satire can be defined with a quote from Lord Byron’s *Don Juan*: ‘And if I may laugh at any mortal thing, ‘tis that I may not weep’. I would argue this phrase sums up satire quite accurately. Satire is ridicule, it mocks through a feeling of despair, or a profound dissatisfaction. A satirist uses humor, insult, and parody to attack perceived problems, and almost paradoxically, applies comedy to address issues of tragedy. Because of this, I would argue that any spectator may come such a performance to be entertained, but it is never the purpose of the artist to satisfy the audience – instead, the Dutch cabaret artist is the town crier making others aware of present problems and taboos. Spectators can only be lucky to hear what the artist has to say. From this point onwards, I will refer to this attitude against one’s own audience, as the ‘spectator, I despise thee’ attitude.

To fully comprehend this phrase, ‘spectator, I despise thee’, we must go back to the origins of cabaret itself. As I have written above, cabaret originated in France in the year 1881. Officially established by Rodolphe Salis (1851-1897), the genre was created in a local café, *Le Chat Noir* in Montmartre, Paris, for artists to distance themselves against the then-prevalent theatrical arts that mainly focused on spectacle and mainstream commercialization. Performance artists, like Salis, resented this direction and desired to go back to the basics of what they felt performance art really entailed – performances not created to appease people, but to convey a message. From this belief, an original French cabaret performance was a series of independent writers, poets, and musicians performing their own work. Due to its early status as “underground” (because of its distancing from mainstream theatre), cabaret was free to address topical issues that were not allowed in the grand theatres. This included insulting spectators as part of any societal critique. Moreover, because cabaret initially also resented the idea of performance art being used for commercialization or making profit, spectators by definition were a common target for the cabaret artist to attack. The phrase ‘spectator, I despise thee’ originates from this context, coined by Rodolphe Salis himself.

---

2 Ibo, *Cabaret...*, p. 12.
4 Ibo, *En nu de Moraal*, p. 10
During the start of the twentieth century, as cabaret spread north across the Dutch border via travelling artists and developing mass communication, cabaret evolved from a series of independent acts to a single, one-man performance with a dominant tone in spoken word. However, though the performance form may have changed (as it is now an accepted and common form of performance art in the Netherlands), its content – variety of monologue, music, poetry, and the prevalent satire – remained the same. This includes the ‘spectator, I despise thee’ attitude, as an essential part of the satirical form in any Dutch cabaret performance. Conclusively, since the birth of cabaret, it has been an explicit motif that a spectator comes to a show of cabaret to be insulted. Any spectator, by visiting the artist’s performance, immediately becomes part of the artist’s direct social environment, however small or big this may be. The cabaretier is never humble, and through satire addresses the observed environment, and therefore also the spectator.

Hence I would argue that Ibo’s definition of Dutch cabaret (‘professional literary-musical theatre in intimate surroundings for an intelligent audience’) is accurate, but not complete. Ibo’s definition would seem rather limited, considering that some other cabaretiers might not rely on music, or perform outside intimate surroundings, or more importantly, treat the audience as unintelligent – considering the ‘spectator, I despise thee’ attitude, which has been part of any cabaret performance since the very beginning. This article thus adds to Ibo’s definition by including satire as an essential part of Dutch cabaret. An artist can insult the audience as part of a bigger critique regarding society, or it can be merely for the sake of shock and entertainment. This rant below shows that even insulting the audience can still be received as entertainment. The performer, Hans Teeuwen, goes on a verbal rampage, as he performs as a man angry and frustrated with his audience. He then implores them to immediately leave, after which he tears off his microphone and storms away in a fit himself:

Ok, now what. Oh shit, goddammit – oh yeah, wonderful! Final applause! Final applause, amazing! You know, I’m going to stand over there, yeah? I’m gonna bow! I’m bowing, and you’re clapping. So I bow, and you clap, and I bow, and you clap, and I bow, and you clap, and then I leave, and you clap, and then I come back on, and I bow again...! And three of you will think, “well I guess I should stand up now”, and then the rest of you will think “Oh fuck! So we will have to stand up too”…

And I don’t feel like it, okay? I really don’t want it. If you want to do me a fav- and we’re not doing it, by the way! No! We are not doing it! There will be no clapping, if you want to do me a favour, you want to show me your appreciation: get the fuck out of here already! Just fuck off, get out of here! Good, fuck off already! Go! Yeah whatever, just fuck off! Final applause, what is final applause

---

7 Ibo, En nu de Moraal, p. 36.
worth (…) Really, turn on the house lights already, and everybody just fucking go away! And there will be no goddamn applause, just go! Go! Show’s over, go! Oh everybody just fuck off already!8

Throughout this verbal rampage, the audience is both confused and entertained, responding to Teeuwen’s insults with laughter and communicating with one another. This sense of being wrong-footed is strengthened when the house lights go on about half way through the rant. What Teeuwen was trying to achieve with this excerpt is debatable: on one side, it is possible that this bit is only included for entertainment purposes, but on the other side it can also mean that Teeuwen is wilfully wrong-footing the audience to confront them with something they are not used to – the rant shown above was preceded by Teeuwen explaining how his audience’s reactions hold no meaning to him whatsoever. The resulting effect is that spectators witnessing this part are confronted with something that is unpredictable, or uncomfortable to behold. This example affirms the “spectator, I despise thee” attitude, as it shows that the cabaret artist is not performing to satisfy the audience. Instead, the spectators are fortunate enough to witness what the artist has to say.

In the introductory paragraph I argued that satire is in fact a cornerstone of the cabaret tradition; now I will continue to elaborate how and why satire is used, and to what purpose and effect. The primary purpose of the Dutch cabaret artist will in the end always be entertainment: through satire and humour the artist will evidently try to keep the audience close to him or her and consequently maintain commercial success; but as opposed to a large percentage of stand-up comedy performances, a Dutch cabaret performance delivers more than just humor. It is the satire that binds a Dutch cabaret performance together. Satire is the weapon that the cabaretier uses to convey the message of social critique. In the analysis of the following examples, where I will argue how and why satire is essential in Dutch cabaret, it will be explained that satire can be used to either soften, or sharpen the confrontation between the audience and the cabaret artist.

Satire focuses on negative aspects, as is its purpose; through mockery and parody it addresses problems, taboos, and issues that have a negative impact on any respective society. The consequence is that the satirist ridicules those aspects with the hope of changing them, or at least raising awareness in those who are willing to listen.9 Edmund Knox provides an illustrating metaphor as he describes satirists as ‘angry men [with] fierce rolling eyes and are well aware how many of them have suffered for satire’s sake; have starved in garrets, or been exiled from palaces in satire’s cause’.10 In terms of classical satire, there are two different types of satirical expression to consider: Horatian

8 Freely translated from Trui, by Hans Teeuwen. De Kleine Komedie, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2000, live recorded performance, [CD].
and Juvenalian satire. These two can be considered opposites, though they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Horatian satire is primarily light hearted. It ridicules with humor, and a Horatian satirist attacks their targets with hope for the future.¹¹ In the field of researching classical satire, this attitude has also become known as the ‘Horatian Smile’ – William Anderson uses this label to describe satire that provides constructive criticism as it ridicules people or society, together with the use of light-heartedness and humour.¹² This is commonly, though not always, a subtle form of satire, because it does not directly attack. In the genre of Horatian satire, J. Wight Duff argues: ‘The good man’s hatred of sin is due to love of virtue’.¹³ For a Horatian satirist, ethics rise above self-regarding morality – thus the satirist changes from Knox’s bitter and angry man to a teacher, or a doctor, trying to change the wicked observed world for the better. The following example shows that even the toughest subjects, in this case the loss of love, can be treated with such a Horatian Smile – that is, addressing a serious or tragic issue with light-heartedness and comedy. Observe the following poem, which has been performed with light-heartedness and nonchalance:

The divorce from Linda took a great toll on me. I had grown so attached to her that I had to be surgically removed. The only advantage from such a divorce is that you start writing a lot:

Now that you have left after all,
My pen will be restless
And cry on paper
My tears will be heard
And beauty grows from pain

Suddenly my pen stops
Because I see you are standing before me once again
Alas, another incomplete poem that has been lost

But yeah, on the other hand,
A blow-up doll isn’t everything
She doesn’t make coffee, she doesn’t clean
Okay, sex is a bit nicer, but it’s nothing more that that.¹⁴

¹² Ibid.
This poem, written by Herman Finkers, was delivered optimistically, and received by spectators with laughter. By analysing the poem one notices that each stanza undercuts the previous one: the first is about the loss of love, the second about the loss of his poem, and in the last stanza, Finkers talks about how it is better to have his wife back at the cost of this lost poem, rather than having a sex doll – amongst other perks. By playing around with these changes of topic and rhythm, the expectancies of the audience are undermined as well. This emphasizes the comic nonchalance of the poem, and thus the poem itself is satirical for its content as well as its delivery and reception.

Juvenalian satire is significantly different. It holds no hope whatsoever, and thus it attacks its victims directly, with scorn and hatred. Humor in Juvenalian satire, if used at all, can be far more insulting and serious, rather than ridiculing. Hence I would argue that the example provided by Knox, regarding satirists being ‘angry men’, holds a core of truth. While Knox was not entirely accurate in implying his example would apply to satire in general, it is a very illustrating example of what Juvenalian satire is about. A term that is common to describe Juvenalian satire is ‘indignatio’, a Latin label that is defined as an ‘overmastering force of wrath’. Duff argues that this term labels anger or hate influencing what is written down or performed, and it thus automatically becomes satirical. Indignatio refers to the satirist’s realization that their world is out of joint, and thus takes a position of invective against a certain aspect, and is willing to fight against it. What follows is a poem from Hans Teeuwen’s performance Industry of Love. Precedent to this poem was a rather absurdist story about Teeuwen’s first experience with love. After he finishes his story “… and that was my first experience with love.” He jumps straight to the poem below:

Love!
Seduce me, strangle me,
Take away my freedom
Adore me, limit me,
Go ahead, I’m a coward
You want to melt together
A foolish idea
But I am romantic
And I go along

Mold me, enslave me
Be kind and mean
Allow me the position
To be your burden
If you are my woman

---

16 Duff, ibid., p. 118.
17 Ibid., p. 160.
Then I am your man!
And together we shall fight
For that which cannot be

We shall pour more water in our wine
Until there is only water left
Clear, but tasteless
No colour, no glow
Thus we will live together
Towards our death

Away with the loneliness!
Long live the drag, jealousy,
Irritation, blame, whining!
Love gives hope,
Love gives meaning
Love is a trap
And I want to fall for it so badly

Always the same mistakes
Always the same pain
It’s almost as horrible
As being all alone
But maybe this time is different
Maybe this time it’s true
Maybe the truth is a fable
And I want to believe it because I love her so much

The game has started again
I’m right in the middle
Addicted like an addict
And resistance is futile
I can only lose
My heart and my sanity
Love only lets go
When it’s burnt out

Only then you are yourself
Alone, and unloved
But mature, and sane
Until it starts again\footnote{Freely translated from \textit{Industry of Love} by Hans Teeuwen. Schouwburg Amstelveen, Netherlands, 2004, live recorded performance, [DVD].}
With this poem, Teeuwen unfolds the concept of love from an unorthodox angle. Where love is commonly considered a topic to romanticize about in poetry, in this case it is considered a curse, rather than a blessing. By reflecting upon love in a negative light, Teeuwen shows the audience that even a ‘beautiful’ thing like love can be out of joint. In short, Teeuwen confronts the audience with perhaps a familiar, but not an overly discussed because unpleasant, aspect of love. The satire within this poem lies therefore not with ridicule or parody – Teeuwen shows with his delivery he did not intend this poem to be comic in any way – but to confront the spectator with a distressed reality.

Anderson writes about a certain polarization in the genre of satire – he argues that satirists can be either playful or aggressive, but never both. He thus argues for a clear distinction between Horatian and Juvenalian satire. However, as I argued above, these two kinds of satire are not mutually exclusive, and it can be that a Dutch cabaret performer uses a mix of both, depending on the particular artist and his or her preferences. As these two examples above have shown, the same topic – love – can be addressed in either a Horatian or Juvenalian way – but one can still find traces of light-heartedness in the Juvenalian example, as one can also find elements of aggression in the Horatian one. I would conclusively argue these two categories within satire cannot be considered black and white – they lie on a spectrum, with each example showing different shades of grey.

Thus, the above shows the different uses of satire. On stage, the cabaretier can approach any topic through whichever means he or she deems necessary to achieve the desired effect. Depending on the relevant purpose, the artist can either cover an aspect with comic relief on one hand, or with confrontational sharpness on the other. This basic understanding of how satire works and why, will allow us to explore the concept of social critique in depth. As mentioned, a cabaretier would still have to maintain a certain standard of entertainment to remain a commercial success. Thus, satire is implemented in cabaret performances as a means to dress up their respective social critique in a more digestible way. The Dutch cabaretier Herman Finkers, when quoted during one of his performances, says, ‘a cabaretier is someone who addresses taboos that are present in current society’. Through satire, the cabaretier aims to address taboos, ‘sacred cows’, or other issues that he or she believes are relevant to today’s society. Through observational narrative the artist expresses this towards his or her audience. Due to the highly satirical nature of Dutch cabaret, this message is performed in such a way that it attacks, ridicules, or insults its target. This can be a situation, a concept, a person, or a social

---

19 Anderson, ibid., p. 172.
20 Freely translated from EHBO is mijn lust en mijn leven, by Herman Finkers. Leidse Schouwburg, Leiden, Netherlands, 1987, live recorded performance, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jk0pnqevxL0&list=PL5a5k5c-JrYQPRqP85TvxZ7QxZ7gWFzZ8, (accessed 16 July 2015).
group. Thus, it also happens that an artist chooses to leave humor behind for a moment, and expresses or performs deliberately confronting, abrasive, and uncomfortable material to the audience.

Such a Juvenalian example can be shown below, a small monologue from the duo Hans Sibbel and Dolf Jansen, or as they are known by their stage names, Lebbis & Jansen. The context behind this monologue is that every year, the Netherlands hosts ‘Queen’s day’, where the Queen addresses the nation with that year’s national political, economical, or otherwise topical events. This address is also known as the Throne Speech. This monologue, as part of their performance, is a critique on the Queen’s speech and behaviour during that year’s Queen’s day, which fell two weeks after the 9/11 attacks:

The only leader we have left is of course our Queen Beatrix. She has to do it, she has done it for years, she ought to know how to do it by now, she gets a lot of money for it, and she is still the mother of the fatherland. Our Queen Beatrix.

And sometimes she talks to us, she has her Christmas speech, and of course with Queen’s day – people really listen to it, they sit down for it and listen – and then she addresses us, the Dutch population. And that’s her job, okay? That’s what she’s there for. That’s why she is the Queen of the Netherlands.

And this year she had to address us again, and it dated coincidentally a week and a half, two weeks after the big disaster of 9/11. And she had to say something about it – of course she had to say something about it. It’s a magnificent disaster concerning the entire western world, the first official Dutch declaration of war, and, you know, she should have said something. And then she went and started her Throne Speech with five shit-sentences! Five ordinary sentences that I heard a thousand times before, of the nature that it was really bad what happened and that we were with them in spirit. Not one sentence from her heart, not one sentence she thought of herself, that had a little meaning and held something of genuine and honest intent. I’m thinking, you’re just a weak bitch. And what did she do? After that, she continued and talked about the ‘this’ and ‘that’ of the Dutch economy. No, she stood still for fifteen seconds at the embassy, the American embassy. A woman in a golden carriage stands still for fifteen seconds, and that is the end of that! She should’ve stood still for half an hour! And she should’ve said ‘hey, let’s forget about this whole Throne Speech, this is something that’s more important than the Dutch economy’, and she should’ve turned around, and go back home. For me, she is no longer the mother of the fatherland.  

This is one example where the artist does not rely on satirical humor; rather it is simply a direct opinion of critique against this performer’s chosen victim. The artist, Hans Sibbel, delivered this monologue at a very fast pace, and with a lot of performed

---

passion and anger. At the same time, his colleague Dolf Jansen would wander around the stage in the back, with crossed arms and staring at the audience. The overall atmosphere is no longer a light-hearted comedic one; it is brought back to a level where a serious man talks about a serious issue. Throughout this monologue the audience responded with only silence – after Sibbel’s last sentence, the two artists were rewarded with a responsive applause. It shows that intelligent and direct critique towards an issue is just as important as, if not more than, humor in a cabaret performance. A cabaretier always has something to say: ‘cabaret’ is ‘protest’ in the broadest sense of the word.\(^2\)

The above example reinforces the idea that the cabaretier is not performing to please the audience, instead choosing to share an idea, however sensitive or unorthodox it may be, with the audience in order to raise social, cultural or political awareness. It shows that satire is not always necessary – although, as I argued above, satire does make critique more digestible. It marks one of the main elements in any Dutch cabaret performance, since the cabaret performer plays directly to his or her audience; the relationship between the two is quite different from the majority of other performance genres. A cabaret artist is not performing to please the audience; rather it is the humble spectator who is expected to listen to what the cabaretier has to say. Sibbel’s monologue shows one of the main purposes of Dutch cabaret: to raise awareness of certain events or people, social or political, observe them and consequently critique them. Admittedly, this example shows little satire because it does not ridicule or mock Queen Beatrix. Instead it is a direct critique towards her and her behavior. Yet, this small excerpt does show that the cabaretier does not shun exploring every aspect of society and humanity – a characteristic inherited since the birth of cabaret.\(^3\) Anything or anyone can be a target.

Another example of this can be shown below. This time it will show a monologue, again from Hans Sibbel – in this case, one of his solo performances – that is laden with satire, as he insults as well as ridicules his chosen target:

Now I happened to travel to Australia, and I saw the Aboriginals there. Well, as you may know, they are slowly going extinct over there, because they’re ugly! They think that too, you can just tell them that, they think that too. When Aboriginals meet each other, they always go “aah!”, they always scare each other. And that makes copulating a little less easy.

(…)

Are you familiar with the Aboriginal art form? With those dots? Yeah, you know it? (Audience responds affirmatively) Right, so we all know the Aboriginal art, with the dots, and they are so very proud of it, that they achieved it. And at some point I got in a fight, an argument with an Australian, a white one, a guide, you know, a real Australian. And it happened because, we were in an art gallery with that art, all those dots, and I thought it sucked. It was nothing. Not developed or evolved at all. The Aboriginals have the longest lasting culture on earth, yeah? The Egyptians, the Romans, after four- or five thousand years it collapses; they

\(^2\) Ibo, *Cabaret…*, p. 10.

\(^3\) Ibo, *En nu de Moraal*, p. 42.
become decadent, and... you know. And the aboriginals have existed for forty thousand years! One continuous culture! So we can expect something from that, can’t we? That they do something else than only making those dots? You know, put some numbers with those dots, so we can draw lines between them, and see if something else comes up! You know, something! But they haven’t developed at all, so I told him that! “Well, I think it’s all a little primitive”. We have been here for only a few thousand years and we have Impressionism, Realism, Cubism, the Kobra Group, Rembrandt van Rijn, Bob Ross24, we have a lot! And they are always stuck with “Today, we’re going to make dots again! Oh yeah, great idea, we’ve done that yesterday as well!” And then the guide got angry with me! He says “you can’t say that!” He said it was racist. I say “racist? But it’s just a cultural question? Isn’t it weird that in forty thousand years, they haven’t changed at all?”25

This monologue does not end here, as Sibbel continues to talk about the current state of Aboriginal wellbeing (“They’re all drunk, which is very, very sad”), and explores the negative side effects of Western welfare (“When we Westerners feel guilty about something, we pay up. With the result that the Aboriginals don’t put any effort into anything anymore. (...) When we receive free money, something dies inside of us”). As Sibbel explores this issue, first the Aboriginal culture, and later drawing a more global picture, it is through satire that he directly critiques the current state of socio-economical welfare, and financial charity. With regards to insulting Aboriginal culture, when witnessing this part of the performance the audience can be heard as rewarding his jokes and insults with laughter. However, this laughter can be divided two-fold: it is a mixture of laughing because some spectators thought it was genuinely funny, and ‘uncomfortable’ laughter where spectators show that they do not agree, or even are shocked. Regardless, Lebbis uses satirizing Aboriginal culture as a stepping-stone to later critique a more encompassing issue, the negative results of global financial welfare and charity. Thus, this example shows that one hand, nothing is sacred in Dutch cabaret; what’s more, issues that are usually avoided in public are most likely issues that will be addressed in Dutch cabaret. On the other hand, Lebbis shows us that insult and shock does not always have to be used for shock value alone – he demonstrated that they can be very powerful tools to confront the audience with something that they are not used to, or comfortable with. However, one thing to consider here is that the Dutch population is not as familiar with the Australian-Aboriginal relationship, and that Lebbis’ remarks can be received as a rant ‘against yet another social group’. I would argue that if anyone

24 Bob Ross was the host of an art instructional television series, The Joy of Painting, broadcasted during the 80s and 90s in the United States, Canada, and Europe. By including this name in his list of various art movements, Sibbel undercuts his argument of cultural superiority, implying that Ross contributed to that superiority. Sibbel delivers his name with obvious comedic sarcasm, and is received by the audience with laughter.

were to perform the same monologue in Australia, the responses would be vastly different.

While Dutch cabaret relies heavily on the spoken word, as the above examples show, particularly through monologues, it is not at all the only medium through which the cabaretier can perform. As written above, the original French cabaret, when it was still a newborn genre hosted in the local cafés, consisted of a series of songs and poems. This tradition was carried over to the Netherlands, and then, as now, one cannot think of Dutch cabaret without thinking of music accompanying foregrounding issues that are usually not talked about in the open. Murder, abortion, prostitution, divorce, infidelity, and challenging authorities are a few of the common themes in Dutch cabaret’s programme.

In Dutch and more broadly, Western, society, these topics are now avidly covered and explored – not just in Dutch cabaret, but in other forms of comic or satirical entertainment as well. The quest for contemporary Dutch cabaret thus lies in finding new taboos to break. As society progresses through time, it develops new social, cultural, and political topicalities for the Dutch cabaret artist to address, but for certain timeless topics – such as the ones listed above – it runs the risk of becoming outdated. In other words, certain ‘taboos’ like for example the Christian religion, certain political authorities or Royalty have been satirized so often that it may still be considered satire by textbook definition, but it is no longer shocking or new. It is therefore imperative – especially for Dutch cabaret – to keep on searching for new taboos and other problematic issues to find – for example the growing prudence towards Islam, or the rapid advancement of the digital age. It is necessary for Dutch cabaret to evolve together with its respective society and the relevant norms and standards. More importantly, because of Dutch cabaret’s purpose as a confrontational mirror of reality, I would argue that humanity, represented by the material used in Dutch cabaret, is at least to some extent dependent on what the cabaretier has to say, in order to evolve. In other words, by exploring new taboos and other problematic issues, the cabaretier holds a small but significant power to direct its immediate social environment towards a future that the cabaretier deems best.

On the other hand, familiar areas can still be explored to find new angles and subsequently maintain the element of satire, shock, and discomfort. The following song was performed by the duo Hans Teeuwen and Roland Smeenk (“and together we are: Hans Teeuwen and Roland Smeenk!”). While Teeuwen introduces the song and sings, Smeenk supports with the electric guitar and background singing:

Daddy? Daddy? Hi, daddy. Are you finally home? I waited all night for you, daddy. Lately I have to think a lot about the past, daddy. You remember, daddy? Our little secret? Do you remember what you did when I was naughty, daddy?

27 Ibo, *En nu de Moraal*, p. 44.
You would pull down my pants, and then you would spank my bottom... I feel so naughty tonight, daddy. I feel so naughty... and I don’t want to hide it any longer, daddy! I want the whole world to hear! I will sing it for you, daddy! On television! At Kinderen voor kinderen28!

(guitar starts playing)
My father has a really big penis
My father has a really big dick
And when my mother leaves, and we’re alone
There’s only one thing he wants, and that’s me

And I say:
(both) Ow, ow, daddy, that hurts
Ow, ow, daddy, it’s too tight
Ow, ow, daddy, that hurts
Ow, ow, daddy,
But I do enjoy it a little, too

Ow, ow, daddy, that hurts (Come on!)
Ow, ow, daddy, it’s too tight (Wooo, it’s too tight!)
Ow, ow, daddy, that hurts
Ow, ow, daddy,
But I do enjoy it a little, too29

This song was well received: the introduction was rewarded with laughter, the upbeat melody from the guitar was supported by the audience clapping on the beat, and the first few lines of the song was received with applause. It is the unconventional angle from where Teeuwen and Smeenk approached this taboo (“consensual” incest paired with performed innocence and upbeat music) that may have been the primary cause of their success. The purpose of this song may not have been one for social critique: looking at the lyrics one can deduce that there is little to no idealistic message to be found. However, this song is a good example to show that taboos, old or new, can still be approached and breached. The song’s purpose is to entertain through discomfort – breaching taboos for the sake of breaching them – and its effect is as described above: the audience rewarded this song positively. I would argue that the satirical element in this song consequently lies with the according effect. Neither Teeuwen nor Smeenk get back to this song afterwards, but the satire can be found implicitly within the spectators themselves. Because who can otherwise proudly say that they enjoyed or supported a

28 Kinderen voor kinderen ('Kids for kids') was a TV show during the 90s where groups of children would perform a series of songs, themed for children around the age of 8-12 years.
song about incest? It is with this confrontational realization – the questioning of one’s personal moral compass – that the satire lays.

That is not to say that social critique does not exist within song or poetry. From personal experience it appears that artists rely more on spoken word to satirize topical events or persons, but songs have definitely been used as a means to convey a satirical and criticizing message. The performances of the duo Lebbis en Jansen, of which I used an excerpt at the beginning of this article, are heavily topical and their material always covers political and social events. As part of the Dutch cultural tradition, a cabaret artist can perform on New Year’s Eve to discuss important events – both global and national – that occurred in the past year. Lebbis and Jansen have done so for approximately two decades consecutively, in the 90s and early 2000s. As part of their New Year’s Eve performances, every time they incorporated a song as finale, called ‘Nooit meer terug’, or ‘Won’t come back again’. For this song, with piano as support, they summarize topical events in one phrase, where the audience has to respond with ‘won’t come back again’. To illustrate:

It’s December once more,
The year has passed
And it… (audience) won’t come back again

I’m not really happy
I’m not really sad
But it… (audience) won’t come back again

This is how the song starts every time, after which the phrases sung by Lebbis and Jansen become more relevant to that according year. For example:

You ticked your box
And voted Al Gore
But he… (audience) won’t come back again

Or:

Steve Irwin will no longer
Ride a crocodile
And he… (audience) won’t come back again

This recurring song shows two concepts: firstly, how social critique can be adapted into song that addresses serious or important matters, in addition to being rather light-hearted and mostly satirizing; yet having the audience to sing along adds to

---


31 Ibid.
the confrontation of the singing spectators with those events. Instead of incorporating an idealistic message in their song, Lebbis and Jansen chose to (re-) make the spectators aware of all the important events that happened in the past year. Again we encounter the Dutch cabaret artist – or in this case, artists – addressing the confrontational reality to the audience. Appignanesi, when writing about the historical context of traditional French cabaret, refers to the concept of a song as “the people’s version of the newspaper”. Indeed, the song in Dutch cabaret is not just a carrier for poetry alone, but also for human moods and movements, events, and even revolutionary ideas.

In fact, as I tried to prove with this article, Dutch cabaret in form and function is a theatrical genre which holds a purpose that does not primarily aim at entertainment, but at providing a reflective mirror to confront spectators, through the medium of satire, with aspects of society, humanity, and reality that are deemed problematic or taboo. Dutch cabaret is one significant example to show that the power of satire, within theatre especially, can be strong. Though it might not be the case that it may inspire immediate revolutions, the purpose of Dutch cabaret shows that theatrical satire, as it addresses social or political critique, can and does affect awareness to its audiences. Raising awareness of unorthodox opinions and unusual ideas, in addition to confronting people with hushed reality, is what makes Dutch cabaret unique. Through comedy, poetry, song, but also deliberately provocative forms of performance, the cabaretier is not only an entertainer, but involves him- or herself as someone who preaches to the masses. One Dutch cabaret artist, Hans Sibbel, puts it accurately as, during one of his performances he says, ‘the other day I read in the newspaper: “someone has to tell the people the truth”. (…) And then I thought “Yes! That’s me.”’

Dutch cabaret as a national cultural icon is an obscure topic to people outside the Dutch nation, or population. Through its use of satire, Dutch cabaret has been and continues to be used to significant effect as a means for social critique. Through this work I hoped to broaden the knowledge on the global field of theatre, and explain the power that any stage performance might have through the use of satire. It can be difficult sometimes to explain what makes Dutch cabaret, or any other genre of theatre for that matter, unique. Each theatrical genre is unique in its own regard, yet so similar to another, that parallels can be drawn at any time. However, for the future, I will continue to raise awareness of this national and cultural genre within the theatrical field, and work towards the creation of an opportunity for Dutch cabaret to grow to an international level.

34 Freely translated from Hoe laat begint het schieten, by Hans Sibbel, Schouwburg Amstelveen, Netherlands, 2008, live recorded performance, [DVD].