
Literatur


Theo Meder

“Welcome to Ollandistan”

PhotoShop-lore and the Growing Perception of Division between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ in the Netherlands

Introduction

On Sunday, June 25th 2006, the Dutch soccer team met the Portuguese team at the World Championship and lost the game by 1 : 0. The game turned into a fierce battle, which led to a festival of yellow and red cards by the referee. The Dutch tried to blame referee Ivanov for spoiling the game and making the Orange team lose. Just one day later, a picture of Ivanov and his deck of yellow cards travelled from one Dutch mailbox to the other, with subject lines like “Thanks a lot, moron.” To be honest, it wasn‘t the fault of the referee that we lost. We just lacked players who were able to shoot a ball into the goal. I think German jokers showed better judgement when they depicted the return of the Orange team on a cheap flight home, with a Dutch caravan behind the plane. The comment under the picture is: “The Dutch team flies like it plays: third rate.” By the way: the picture of the plane and the caravan is a German joke about the Dutch that has existed since April 2002.

However, football is not the division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ I would like to talk about. I showed the first two pictures to introduce the phenomenon I call ‘Photo-

1 NVB: THM 00332; NVB = Nederlandse Volksverhalenbank (Dutch Folktale Database): id-number; see www.verhalenbank.nl).
2 NVB: THM 00333; HUMOR 311.
Shop-lore: pictures are being manipulated digitally and sent around by e-mail as a visual joke. PhotoShop is the name of one of the most popular computer programs used to manipulate pictures. PhotoShop-lore is circulating particularly among adolescents (computer nerds, wizz kids, students) and as part of office culture. Actually, PhotoShop-lore is in many ways the successor to the well-known Xerox-Copy-lore: in the past, people copied funny pictures and cartoons and distributed them on paper. (See Dunne and Fager 1987; 1992)

The digital distribution of PhotoShop-lore and the oral transmission of traditional jokes have some features in common as well:

- the original maker of the joke remains anonymous most of the time,
- the joke is transmitted from person to person,
- the joke comments on subjects that – at least according to the narrator and his audience – really matter in present day society,
- the PhotoShop joke deals with the same taboos, frustrations, prejudices and fantasies as the traditional oral joke,
- as in traditional joking, PhotoShop jokes are recycled from time to time.

We have just seen a German-Dutch joke from 2002 being used in another context in 2006. Visual motifs are being repeated as well: lying politicians, for instance, have repeatedly been depicted as Pinocchio with a long nose. (See Kuipers 2002)

The phenomenon of PhotoShop-lore has existed in the Netherlands since the late 1990s, as soon as enough people were able to receive e-mails with attachments. Still, it became real hype after September 11, 2001: the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. (See Ellis 2003) Mailboxes in the western world immediately became infested with PhotoShop humour about the Twin Towers, Bush, Bin Laden, Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda and Muslim terrorism in general. The first pictures were of American origin, but soon Dutch PhotoShop-lore followed. (See Meder 2004) Many of the pictures focus on the new division created between ‘us’ and ‘them’: the world of the West and the world of the East, the victims and the terrorists, the Christians and the Muslims.

I must warn you in advance: whereas folklore is often considered to be a provider of innocent folkdances with clogs or sweet fairy tales, what you are about to see belongs more and more to the dark side of folklore. We are not dealing with safe stories here, but in some cases with shocking and intolerant stories, with provocative stories that could demonize minority groups in society. The kind of humour you are about to see, plays a (somewhat bizarre) role in coping with certain traumas and channelizing certain emotions. For ethnologists it is not necessary to agree with these jokes; it’s just necessary to acknowledge that these jokes exist and to understand why they are being made.

September 11

One of the first orally transmitted funny riddles after September 11 in the Netherlands was: “George Bush and Osama bin Laden are playing chess. Who loses?”

Answer: “Bush, because he has already lost two towers.” This joke can be made in Dutch because the two pieces of chess are not called ‘rook’ or ‘castle’ like in English but ‘toren’, meaning ‘tower’. Still, the joke can be made in English and any other language visually, just depicting a chess board and the white party missing two rooks: “Osama bin Laden: 1 – George W. Bush: 0.”

One of the questions asked in the beginning was: ‘What if the Taliban win?’ PhotoShop-lore provided us with some answers. Firstly a picture of New York City was circulated in the year 2006: between the ruins of apartment buildings and sky scrappers huge new mosques and minarets have been erected. Another picture shows what the president would look like. We see George Bush with a long grey beard and a turban on his head – the distinguishing marks of the orthodox Muslim. A third example is the picture of the veiled Statue of Liberty, signifying that western freedom will lose its face. All three pictures predict a feared scenario of destruction, anti-feminism, religious oppression and loss of identity.

Then came the pictures of a wished-for retaliation. In one picture a fighter jet fires (haram or unclean) pigs as anti-jihad rockets over Kabul. In a picture with the caption “Don’t get mad ... get even” a United States airliner is about to crash into a huge crowd of Muslim pilgrims rounding the Kaaba in Mecca during the Hajj. The wish dream of capturing Osama bin Laden is the central theme in the next picture, in which Osama attempts to escape on a flying carpet, like in an eastern fairy tale, but it is obvious that he can’t compete with the brute and superior technological force of the American fighter jet.

These PhotoShop jokes are clearly American, but typically Dutch is the one of
Osama bin Laden hiding, disguised as the Dutch Saint Nicolas or “Sinterklaas”, here called Sint Laden. The picture resembles a commercial poster for mobile phone provider Ben, while “Ben Undercover” means “I am undercover”. Part of the joke is that the evil Muslim terrorist is trying to dress up as a Christian saint.

The next picture is Dutch as well, and has been circulating for several years now. It is a map of the Netherlands in the future, when the Muslims have taken over. The map is called “Welcome in Ollandistan” and a Muslim half moon and star are added to the Dutch national red-white and blue flag. The suggestion is that after the Muslim take-over, names of cities and geographical names will be altered to Muslim standards. Some of the alterations are quite innocent, but others show how much Islam is being identified with extremism and terrorism in general. Innocent are, for instance, Limburg becoming Muslimburg, Hoofddorp being altered to “Hoofddoek” (meaning headscarf), Amsterdam changing into Imamsterdam, Abou coude becoming Kebabcoude and Coevorden changing into Couscousvorden. Furthermore, Muslims and Islam are identified with Allah, Mohammed, Palestine, circumcision, the Ramadhan, the mosque, the minaret and the turban. However, Islam is also being identified with violent phenomena like throwing stones (“Steen-smijt”), terrorist attacks (“Aanslagharen, Terror Apéel”), hijacks (“Kapingedam, Hijack en Boecop”), fascism (“Gripee Wolvega”), Holy War (“Jihadtem”), the PLO (“P.L. Oosterhout”), Hamas (“Hamastricht”), Osama bin Laden (“Bin Leiden, Ossama”), and the Taliban (“Talibannekom”). Whereas the vast majority of Muslims, especially in the Netherlands, has no violent intentions whatsoever, the identification between Islam and violent or terrorist behaviour is growing stronger.

Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh

Now I would like to turn to the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn who became famous for public statements like: “The Netherlands are full”, “Islam is a backward culture”, as well as “Make no mistake. I will be the next prime minister of the Netherlands”. First, he had become the party leader of the new political right-wing movement “Leefbaar Nederland” (The Netherlands Liveable), but he was dismissed for his discriminatory and anti-Islamic ideas. Then he founded a party named after him-
self, the LFP: List Pim Fortuyw. During his campaigns, Pim Fortuyw was often portrayed as a fascist in Photoshop-lore, posing as a Mussolini-like redeeemer ("verloos") or as leader of the fascist hordes giving us the middle finger.9 These were the pictures that circulated before his assassination.

On May 6, 2002, Pim Fortuyw was killed by militant animal rights activist Volkert van der Graaf, because he thought that Fortuyw posed a threat to the Netherlands. It was on the day that the political polls started to take the possibility into account that Fortuyw could really become prime minister. Immediately after the assassination, people deleted the Photoshop-lore from the internet – I could only recover them through Google cache. Instead, Photoshop-lore appeared in which Pim Fortuyw was portrayed as a folk hero and a protagonist for freedom of speech – for instance, in a picture where Fortuyw is represented along with influential political leaders like John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King.10

On March 11, 2004, Muslim terrorism reached Western-Europe with train bombings in Madrid, but no PhotoShop-lore reached me personally concerning these attacks.

Then there was the assassination of filmmaker Theo van Gogh on November 2, 2004, by Muslim terrorist Mohammed Bouyeri, a Moroccan boy born and raised in the Netherlands. The murder took place, not so long after the presentation of the short film Submission, made by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Theo van Gogh, on the subject of the oppression and maltreatment of women within Islamic culture, showing half naked women with texts of the Koran projected on their bodies. Van Gogh’s attitude towards Muslims and Islam can be at least called ambiguous: on the one hand he made films about the problems of young Muslims, on the other hand he provoked Muslims by calling them ‘goat fuckers’. He believed in the freedom of speech at any cost. According to many examples of PhotoShop-lore appearing after his death, freedom of speech had cost him his life. Now Van Gogh is portrayed as the hero of free speech in the Netherlands. The murder silenced him like other opinion leaders: Steve Biko, John Lennon, Pim Fortuyw, Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy.11 The PhotoShop picture shows them with tape over their mouths, and it looks like a poster from the government (Postbus 51). The Dutch text can be translated as follows: “Who has to get murdered before you raise your voice? Freedom of speech: it should be the most normal thing in the world.”

Meanwhile, making PhotoShop-lore had become so popular, that there is a contest on the internet every Friday called "Fotofuck Friday" organized by the website Retecool.12 Contestants are asked to make a PhotoShop joke on a given subject or a given picture. The winning picture of November 7, 2004, commenting on the murder of Theo van Gogh showed him as the revolutionary folk hero and freedom fighter Ché Guevara, simply stating: “Freedom of speech.”

9 NVB: HUMOR 287, 332.
10 NVB: HUMOR 344.
11 NVB: THM 00057.
12 See the website Retecool (www.retecool.com) where a link to Fotofuck Vrijdag can be found.
13 NVB: THM 00061.

Another picture just shows a packet of Gauloises cigarettes – Theo van Gogh was a highly addicted smoker – with the following warning: “Liberty of speech is bad for your health.”13 The next slogan is a variation on the original warning against fireworks: “You are an idiot if you organize stunts with fireworks.” The original poster showed some mutilations resulting from reckless use of fireworks. Now the Photoshop picture shows a beheaded person (the murderer of Theo van Gogh made an attempt to cut his throat the way one slaughters an animal) and now the text goes: “You are an idiot if you put on stunts using your opinions.”14

Not only in the realm of PhotoShop-lore, also among professional cartoonists discussions developed about what one could say and do and what not anymore. In a provocative cartoon about Fokke and Sukke two rude ducks are harassing a Muslim woman, attempting to lift her burqa, and saying: “Hey sweetie ... do you have any sisters?” The title of the cartoon is: “Fokke and Sukke are soliciting for a fatwa.”15 The general idea behind the cartoon is that one cannot say or do anything without enraging the Muslim community.

14 NVB: THM 00059.
15 NVB: THM 00058.
16 NVB: THM 00068.
One of the disturbing facts to emerge during the investigation of the Van Gogh murder, was that the killer Mohammed Bouyeri was by no means a lone terrorist: he belonged to a group called the 'Hofstadgroep', which consisted of young Muslims, born and raised in Western society, who where rapidly radicalized and developed a growing hate for Western civilization, and who were making plans for suicide bombings aimed at undermining the state and killing as many infidels as possible. One of the members of the Hofstadgroep is Samir A. or Samir Azzouz, who had to stand trial several times for planning terrorist attacks. In a PhotoShop picture, the cover of a popular Flemish-Dutch comic strip album with the adventures of Suske and Wiske, called Wattman (inspired by Batman), is altered into the adventures of Samir and Samira in De Ploffeende Plofkip (The Exploding Chicken). The Wattman or Batman symbol has been changed into the Muslim half moon and star (as can be found in the Turkish flag). Suske turned into Samir by making his face brown like a Moroccan; Samir has a lead of TNT around his waist. Wiske turned into Samira by means of a burqa.

The internet-cartoonist Nozzman was able to catch the Dutch fear for the islamisation of society in one simple drawing: he painted a Dutch windmill with the golden dome of a mosque as the roof. The two main ingredients of humour and jokes are present. Firstly, a joke needs to deal with some kind of taboo or pain and needs to cross a moral border in doing so. Secondly, the joke needs to result in the surprising combination of two elements that normally don’t go together. Both BORDERCROSSING and INCONGRUENCE can be found in the cartoon of the windmill-mosque. (Douglas 1978) Here the message is again: dominant Muslims will turn our country into an Islamic state against our will.

Death of a bag snatcher

In this psychological climate, even relatively 'trivial' events can turn into mayor media hypes and into PhotoShop jokes. On January 17, 2005, a young Moroccan bag snatcher stole a purse from the passenger seat of a woman driving a car. The thief tried to escape on a moped, but the victim put her car into reverse and squeezed the perpetrator at full speed between her bumper and a tree – the latter died on the spot. In fact, it was no more than a stupid theft leading to a stupid accident. However, the story was used as a typical example of the behaviour of criminal Moroccans (not orthodox Muslims, this time).

One PhotoShop joke depicts a commercial for a "reverse cruise control with target – seeking function and a free handbag module". As soon as the handbag is stolen, the car will automatically drive backwards to hit the thief. It is an easy-to-

---

17 NVB: THM 00307; This picture comes from another PhotoShop contest called ‘Feu- teauf*ck’, organised by website GeenStijl (www.geenstijl.nl).

18 NVB: THM 00076.

19 NVB: THM 00124.
install kit. On the LCD-screen, one can see the picture of a Moroccan boy, but in this case it’s Ali B., a popular Dutch-Moroccan rapper, who happened to be a friend of the killed victim. Another joke was a commercial for a so-called ‘Marocbar’: an extra large and heavy bumper for the back of the car to catch Moroccan bag snatchers. A last example is a Halfords commercial for a gear-lever, on which the R for reverse is substituted with a Muslim symbol – the half moon and star again.

A negative image

A survey by the renowned bureau TNS NIPO in June 2004 showed that only 14% of the indigenous Dutch people have a positive image of Muslims. No less than 36% fosters very negative feelings about Muslims, and 16% of this group feels intimidated by the presence of Muslims in Dutch society: these people are afraid of street gangs of immigrant youngsters, of terrorist attacks and of Muslim supremacy in the future. Moreover, 67% of the Dutch population has no personal contact with Muslims: they know them only from television or because they see them walking in the street. Furthermore, the survey made clear that a majority of Dutch people don’t distinguish between immigrants and Muslims – it is thought that all immigrants must be Muslims.

It is evident that, since September 11, one can see a growing distrust towards Muslims and immigrants. There is hardly any relevant contact between the indigenous Dutch and the immigrants. The news media tend to focus on extreme and bad news: suicide bombings, lack of integration. Good news about Muslims don’t seem to find their way into the papers or tv-programmes.

On July 7, 2005, there were the bombings in London, but I haven’t encountered any Photoshop-løre about it in the Netherlands. At the end of October and the beginning of November 2005, there were serious riots in the French suburbs. Not only in Paris, but in other French suburbs too; about a dozen cars went up in flames every night. A French Photoshop joke about the weather forecast reached the Netherlands as well, showing overturned, burning cars on the map of France. The riots were mainly caused by young immigrant, Muslim boys, and their anger can be explained from the fact that they are treated as second-rate citizens in France, unable to obtain good housing or find a proper job.

“We are being threatened by the Muslims”

How much fear of Muslims remained a hot item in the Netherlands, can be shown by the song that was recorded in 2005 by a group of Dutch comedians called De Vliegende Panters (The Flying Panthers). The song was meant to be a hit at carnival, the melody is cheerful and the videoclip shows the Netherlands in the supposedly good old days. In the song all the prejudices about Muslims are summed up; the most fearful thing about them is that they sometimes tend to explode in public places.

We worden bedreigd door de moslims, Ja wij zijn bang voor de islam. We worden bedreigd door de moslims, Een pastoor heeft een imam.

De mannen dragen witte jurken (Dat is daar heel gewoon); De jongens zwarte leren jassjes En een mobiele telefoon.

Een vrouw heeft een moslims, Lijkt een beetje op een non. Ze wonen in kleine flatjes Met een schotel op’t balkon.

Ze doen aan hongerstaking En dat heet dan ramadan En ze hebben weinig hobby’s En een vrouw is minder dan een man. We worden bedreigd door de moslims, Ja wij zijn bang voor de islam.

Ze worden bedreigd door de moslims, En ze slachten soms een lam.

Ze halen hele lage cijfers En werken doen ze niet. Ze drinken hele sterke koffie En roken hasj of weed.

Ze hebben maar drie namen: Achmed, Ali, Mohammed. Hun vrouwen zien we bijna nooit; Die zitten binnen in hun flat.

Ze hebben ook een eigen taalje Niet gespeend van hysterie; Het klinkt voor ons nogal boosaardig En zonder een greinje ironie.

We’re being threatened by the Muslims, Yes, we’re afraid of Islam.

The men wear long white gowns (That’s quite normal over there); The boys have black leather jackets And a mobile phone.

A Muslim woman is called a “Moslima”, Looks a bit like a nun. They live in very small apartments With a satellite dish on the balcony. They practise hunger-strike Which they call Ramadhan And they have very few hobbies And a woman is less than a man.

We’re being threatened by the Muslims, Yes, we’re afraid of Islam.

We’re being threatened by the Muslims, And they sometimes slaughter a lamb.

They get very low grades And they don’t work at all. They drink very strong coffee And smoke hash or weed. They only have three names: Ahmed, Ali, Mohammed.

We hardly ever see their women; They sit inside their apartment. They have their own language Which is not free of hysteria; To us it sounds quite malicious And without a bit of irony.

20 NVB: THM 00127.
21 NVB: THM 00128.
23 NVB: THM 00277.
We worden bedreigd door de moslims, 
Ja wij zijn bang voor de islam. 
We worden bedreigd door de moslims, 
Ze houden niet van spek en ham.

Tot zover niets bedreigends, 
Nog geen vuilte aan de lucht. 
Waar zijn we dan zo bang voor? 
Waarom zijn ze zo beruchtt? 
Niet omdat ze slecht zijn, wild of onbeschoft, 
Maar soms zit er eenheid tussen 
Die opeens spontaan ontploft.

Maar nooit als ze alleen zijn, 
Altijd op de markt en in de trein. 
En dat maakt ze zo gevaarlijk, 
Daarom nog één keer dit refrein.

We worden bedreigd door de moslims, 
Ja wij zijn bang voor de islam. 
We worden bedreigd door de moslims, 
Want ze doen vaak van klav [...] BOEM! 
Want ze doen vaak van klav [...] J BOUM!

In 2006, most of the carnivals committees in Limburg and North-Brabant asked participants of the parade not to make fun of Muslims in general or the prophet Mohammed in particular. This request had everything to do with the so-called Danish cartoon row.

Danish cartoon controversy

In September 2005, twelve cartoons about Mohammed were printed in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten, but at that moment nobody seemed to be bothered by them, and there were no reactions or protests worth mentioning. Apart from the taboo against depicting the prophet (and not all the cartoons portray the prophet), most of the cartoons can be seen as quite harmless and innocent. Not quite innocent, but still rather funny is the cartoon about the suicide bombers who go to heaven, while Mohammed urges them to stop because they are out of virgins. After all, it is said that he who dies for Allah in the war against the infidels, will receive 72 virgins in heaven.

Another cartoon shows Mohammed with a halo in the shape of a half moon, although some interpret the halo as diabolical horns. The next cartoon shows the cartoonist with a rough sketch of Mohammed in his hand. Both cartoons can hardly be called shocking, unless one takes great offence in the portrayal of the prophet.

More shocking are the cartoons in which the prophet is portrayed as an aggressive person. One cartoon displays him, supported by women in burqa, as an armed criminal with a little black bar before his eyes. Another cartoon suggests that the prophet is a suicide terrorist with a bomb in his turban. Indeed, these two cartoons suggest that there is a distinct connection between Islam and terrorism; no doubt, these two cartoons may have offended many peaceful Muslims.

Still, as I said, nobody made a fuss about the cartoons at first. The controversy started later, when the Danish Imam Ahmed Abu Laban took the twelve cartoons with him on a trip to the Middle East, and he added three cartoons to the collection that had never been printed by the newspaper Jyllands-Posten. Actually, it was these three additional cartoons that were profoundly offensive and provoked the Muslim protests. It is still not known where the three cartoons came from: were they made by right-wing Danish extremists, or have they been created by Muslim extremists themselves?

The first so-called cartoon is in fact a manipulated photo, showing a praying Muslim being sexually assaulted by a dog. The headline in Danish says "Derfor beder muslimer", which is translated into Arab at the bottom of the page—it means: "This is what Muslims pray for". The accusation that Muslims want to commit bestiality with an unclean (haram) animal like a dog is extremely insulting.

Equally insulting is the second cartoon—in fact no more than a clumsy drawing—showing Mohammed as a pedophile. In Danish it says: "Den paedofile 'prophet' Mohammed" which is again translated into Arab. The accusation must refer to the fact that Mohammed married his favorite wife Aisha when she was nine years old—


a fact that made the right-wing Dutch-Somalial politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali call the prophet a paedophile as well.\(^{28}\)

The third cartoon is a manipulated photograph once more, and in Danish it says: “Her er det rigtige billede af Muhammed”, meaning: “This is what Mohammed really looks like.” The black-and-white photo shows a pig’s face holding a microphone. In reality, we are dealing with a piece of PhotoShop-lore again: it’s a manipulated photo of the French comedian Jacques Barrot, who participated in the annual “Pig In Talestension”-contest in Trier-sur-Rhine on August 15, 2005. The photo was made fuzzy and provided with a false headline on purpose. The representation of the prophet as an unclean animal is extremely insulting once more.

It needs to be stressed that these three cartoons did not belong to the original twelve, and that they have been added by Imam Laban. Later he confessed he did so, but he claimed that he took along the three extra images to demonstrate how people in the West look down upon Muslims.

After the set of fifteen cartoons hit the news in the Middle East, Muslims started protesting, which led to the burning of Danish and other Western flags, to embassies being set on fire\(^{29}\) and to the boycott of Danish products.\(^{30}\) Not only do demonstrations take place in the Middle and Far East, like in Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Pakistan and Indonesia, but in the Netherlands as well, in the cities of Maastricht and Amsterdam.

In the Netherlands, we were able to see all the cartoons, because they were published on the website of the right-wing politician Geert Wilders (whose life needs to be guarded night and day because of the death threats he has received since the murder of Theo van Gogh).\(^{31}\) Many newspapers in the West printed (a selection of) the cartoons. Danish cartoonists received death-threats and had to go into hiding.

During a demonstration in Islamabad in Pakistan, a journalist carried held up a cartoon that showed the personification of the West urinating all over the Muslim world.\(^{32}\) Furthermore, Muslims tried to take revenge with cartoons about the Holocaust because this is a sensitive subject in the West.\(^{33}\) In one such cartoon two researchers are doing a recount, trying to reach the number of six million Jewish victims, but they don’t succeed.

Freedom of speech and sense of humour?

In the meantime, fierce debates started to take place in the West as well as in the Netherlands on the subject of freedom of speech, censorship and blasphemy.\(^{34}\) Should blasphemy be forbidden by law? Is it a kind of censorship if one takes the feelings of other religious groups into consideration? And above all: even if there is freedom of speech that gives someone the opportunity to insult other people, should they always exert their freedom to do so, no matter what?\(^{35}\)

Another matter of debate in the Netherlands is that Muslims seem to be easily offended: do they have a sense of humour at all?\(^{36}\)

Between 1998 and 2001 I conducted fieldwork in a multicultural neighbourhood in Utrecht and collected jokes along other narrative genres (Meder and van Dijk 2000; Meder 2001; 2004a) I soon found out that the sense of humour Muslims have is quite comparable to the Dutch sense of humour. There are just a few taboo themes, like religion, sexuality and – in some cases – politics. As far as religion is concerned:

---

28 When I presented a first version of this paper in Amsterdam, a Muslim woman in the audience claimed that the marriage to the nine-year-old Aisha is based on a misunderstanding: Mohammed only dreams that he marries Aisha when she is nine years old, but the real marriage takes place years later.


31 See www.geertwilders.nl.


cerned, neither jokes nor portrayals may be made of Allah or Mohammed (even a professional comedian like the Dutch-Moroccan Najib Amhali doesn't stray into this territory). It is allowed to make portrayals of mosques, religious leaders, the Kaaba et cetera. Jokes about the Muslim clergyman Nasreddin Hodja are very popular. Jokes about all kinds of heterosexuality are much appreciated, but the hard-boiled Western jokes about homosexuality, incest, paedophilia and bestiality are not. Political jokes require much caution in many cases. There are jokes about the Turkish Kurds or about the former king Hassan of Morocco, but they only get told among intimate friends, not in the public domain. (See Doreij 2001; Driessen 1999)

'Fotofuck Vrijdag'

Popular Dutch websites for young reactionaries like GeenStijl (No Style) and Retecool (Awesomely Cool) reacted to the Danish cartoon riots by adding some fuel to the fire. In March 2006, Retecool organized a Fotofuck Vrijdag contest, in which the prophet Mohammed was to be visually depicted. The website even provided for one of the few historical pictures of Mohammed. All in all, the visual jokes are much more aggressive than the Danish cartoons. Most of the time, the pictures have the explicit intention to offend, degrade and demonize Muslims and the prophet.

One of the contestants used the Danish bomb-in-turban-cartoon again, adding the text: "Too many Muslims have too short a fuse", indicating that Muslims are aggressive people, easily aggravated over nothing.37 Another PhotoShop joke used the historical picture of Mohammed in a commercial for the painting method of Bob Ross: "The joy of painting Mohammed with Bob Ross, America's favourite art instructor."38 The same Mohammed is teaching a young suicide terrorist a lesson in another PhotoShop joke. Mohammed says: "A virgin of 72. Not 72 virgins. You need to read my book more carefully."39 Another joke shows Mohammed with the Koran in his hand while the headline says: "Once upon a time..." Out of the Koran come Disney figures like Snow White, Mickey Mouse and Tinkerbell. This way, the Koran is reduced to a book of (untrue) fairy tales.40

In yet another picture, the Playstation game The Godfather is turned into The Godfucker, featuring Mohammed. Again there is the accusation that Muslims commit bestiality, one of the worst insults one can make.41

36 The Muslim woman who attended a previous presentation of this paper, denied that was a picture of Mohammed and declared that was a picture of his brother Ali. Nevertheless, the PhotoShop jokers all intended to depict Mohammed.
37 NVB: THM 00305.
38 NVB: THM 00306.
39 NVB: THM 00306.
40 NVB: THM 00306.
41 NVB: THM 00306.
for a box of Lego in English: “New, Play as if you are a prophet Mohammed. It contains 23 wives including 6 year old Aynah. Lego. 6+ Halal. 43) Not suitable for girls. Made in Denmark.” I think we should not underestimate the power of this kind of humour, which is part of the domain of 'dark folklore'.

Perceptions of reality

Shortly after the Danish cartoon riots, the Dutch newspaper Algemeen Dagblad gave Bureau R&M Matrix the assignment to research the attitude of the Dutch towards Islam by means of a survey. The results were published on February 18th, 2006: 44

52 % of the Dutch people consider Islam to be intolerant,
40 % of the Dutch people consider Islam to be violent,
70 % of the Dutch people consider Islam to be hostile towards women,
55 % of the Dutch people consider Islam to be humourless.

In the same article Peter Maris, who is a professor in clinical psychology at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, is quoted: “It’s good that this survey demonstrates that people are very much preoccupied with terrorism and Islam since the attacks in New York, Madrid and London. The fear is real. On television we see frenzied Muslims shouting anti-Western slogans, not only in the Middle East, but in Maastricht and Amsterdam as well. This arouses feelings of anxiety. One can pose the question as to whether these are whether receiving a balanced view of reality. The Muslims who don’t go out to demonstrate, can’t be seen on television. The media are playing an important role here. They are not interested in a neighbour helping his neighbour, only in a neighbour stabbing his neighbour. Of course that’s important, but it gives a false representation of reality. The survey says a lot about people’s feelings, not about reality.”

This last remark is crucial for the statement I would like to make here: to a large extent, PhotoShop-lore is a subjective representation of how people perceive reality, not an objective representation of reality itself.

Many Dutch men and women feel threatened by the ‘otherness’ of Muslims; deviant behaviour is interpreted as hostile. A lot of Dutch people still live in an ethnocentric state of mind: they think that their present culture represents an ideal and invariable world standard that should be aspired to by everyone. There is very little consciousness about how different our own culture was in the past, and even less belief that Muslims consider their culture to be equally valuable and visible.

On the other hand, one must not judge all people alike. To begin with, not all immigrants are Muslims, and fortunately not all Muslims are extremists and fundamentalists. Furthermore, not all indigenous Dutch people think badly of immigrants or Muslims.

However, PhotoShop humour may point out a dangerous development. Muslims are being labelled today with extremely negative features: they are seen as violent, cruel, criminal, religiously intolerant, hostile towards women, repressive, backward, humourless, inclined towards censorship, polygamy, paedophilia andlustiness. People speak about Muslims in the following ways: we can do without them, they should go back, or even, they should not be allowed to defeat us. In our own past we have seen the devastating results of labelling groups of people in order to demonize or dehumanize them, in a time when humour turned into serious government policy.

Literature


MEDER, Theo (Hg.): „Er waren een Marokkaan, een Turk en een Nederlander ...” Volkskundige en taalkundige opstellen over het vertellen van moppen in de multiculturele wijk Lombok. Amsterdam 2001.

MEDER, Theo: “There were a Turk, a Moroccan and a Dutchman ...” Narrative repertoires in the multi-ethnic neighbourhood of Lombok in the Dutch city of Utrecht. In: Sabine Wiener-Piepho, Klaus Roth (Hgg.): Erzählten zwischen den Kulturen. München 2004(a), S. 237-258.