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THE FUN OF FEAR: PERFORMING HALLOWEEN IN THE NETHERLANDS

JOHN HELSLOOT

During the last five years—since the 9/11 attacks in particular—preventing the spread of fear may be said to have permeated the whole fabric of Western societies, if not of the globe at large. And when disaster does occur, one of the means of redressing the emotional balance in society is through ritual (Post et al. 2003; Stengs 2003; Santino 2006). It may come as a surprise, then, to find a ritual like Halloween being celebrated, given that to all intents and purposes it is designed to provoke fear, terror and horror. Of course, to this it might reasonably be objected that Halloween and terrorism are utterly unrelated and incomparable phenomena—see, however, Skal (2002, 184), who mentions a Halloween "Fright House" in Washington featuring "apocalyptic images of the destruction of the U.S. capitol, the Pentagon, and the White House"—and besides, that the history of Halloween clearly precedes 9/11. Such a swift dismissal, however, would in an untimely way preclude an exploration of the possible relationships between the fun of fear and wider social and cultural issues.

In undertaking such an analysis, I draw my perspective from a combination of historical and anthropological theories on understanding ritual—taking as a shorthand definition that ritual is "a sign language of the emotions" ("*eine Zeichensprache der Affekte*", Scharfe 1999, 162)—in contemporary Western society, focusing on the Netherlands as my case study. Catherine Bell and others (e.g. Burckhardt-Seebass 1989, 99-100; Eriksen 1994; Frykman and Löfgren 1996, 19) have argued, convincingly in my view, that in late 20th century society attitudes towards ritual have changed radically. As Bell (1997, 241) states:

> a new paradigm of ritual has gradually replaced a set of more long-standing assumptions. In the newer model, ritual is primarily a medium of expression, a special type of language suited to what it is there to express,

> namely, internal spiritual-emotional resources tied to our true identities but frequently unknown and underdeveloped.

In the style of public debate nowadays in the Netherlands this new approach is manifesting itself clearly. The emphasis is on "saying what you think", that is sidestepping former conventions of civilised intercourse, up to the point of claiming the legitimacy of publicly insulting one's opponents. In ritual and festival culture, inhibitions on expressing one's identity and emotions are equally giving way to performances of an ever more idiosyncratic nature. For that reason, some researchers are inclined to speak of a general "carnivalisation" of (festival) culture (Braun 2002; Knecht 2002, 13). The Gay Pride tour on Amsterdam's canals is a prime example. In the ritual practice of other people, the same tendency is visible in the personal touch of many a wedding and funeral. Underlying all this is a willingness to shift boundaries and to make a personal stand vis-a-vis "tradition". Tradition is no longer perceived as an obligation. Instead, it is regarded as a repository of optional forms of expression that is open to personal choice, variation, or the introduction of completely new elements—the latter favoured in particular by the blurring of geographical boundaries between cultures in the global communication process. In the 1990s, for instance, the Dutch tradition of giving one another presents on the festival of St Nicholas, on December 5th, was discarded by many in favour of bestowing these at Christmas—leading to a predictable uproar among traditionalists bemoaning the decline of "Dutch culture" (Helsloot 1996). Simultaneously infusing this readiness for experimentation is a felt need to gain a "true experience" while performing. Contemporary culture bears all the characteristics of a "society intent on living experiences" ("*Erlebnisgesellschaft*", Schulze 1993). In this climate, new festive forms offering new thrills are eagerly seized upon (Van Schoonhoven 1999; Wolf 2002) by those—a category in society hard to locate precisely—so predisposed or inclined. The introduction of Halloween in Holland, as elsewhere in Europe (cf. the contributions, including my own, to Korff 2001a; Stillger 2001, 6), is a case in point.

Appropriating Halloween as a "theme"

As American scholars have shown, it was only in the 1970s that Halloween in the United States was transformed into a festival for indulging in the sinister, the grim and the horrific (Skal 2002, 4-7, 89, 163; cf. Santino 1994a, 152; Oliver and Sanders 2005, 249). It was predominantly in this guise, both provoked and mediated by films of the slasher genre like *Halloween* (1978) and its many sequels and companion films (cf. Santino 1996, 119-127; Skal 2002, 163-184), that Dutchmen were exposed to Halloween in the late 1980s and in the 1990s. Those attracted to these kinds of films, praised as "an evening of gory fun" (*De Telegraaf*, October 21, 1998), watched them, with commercial channels having special horror nights. Halloween was also represented in American television series, many of which are broadcast in the Netherlands, and there were news items on television and in the press on Halloween as celebrated in the United States and by Americans in Holland. To her amazement, a journalist was greeted in an Amsterdam American bar with "Welcome, I'm a serial killer" (*Het Parool*, November 4, 2000). Children were familiarised with Halloween through the books of Harry Potter and specials of children's magazines, like *Donald Duck*.

At first, Halloween was appropriated as a "theme", or encouraged a corresponding dress code, for parties in discos and bars. Theoretically, this is not surprising, for, as Victor Turner (1982, 55, 85) suggested, such "'liminoid' settings and spaces" are "peculiarly conducive to ... the introduction of new forms of symbolic action, such as ... original masks". "I have no connection with that American tradition", said disco owner Dave Kramers. "I put on parties every month and am therefore in need of a theme for each of them. That's how I stumbled on to Halloween". Edwin van Kollenburg, staging one of the first Halloween parties in the Netherlands in 1989 in Amsterdam disco the "iT"—"a temple of hedonism in which almost anything was allowed" (Beunders 2002, 105)—maintained in a similar vein: "We down-to-earth Dutchmen have no emotional relationship with that feast in itself. Halloween, basically, is a jolly occasion for putting on something funny" (*Algemeen Dagblad*, October 29, 1998). This appreciation of Halloween as a welcome party "theme" (cf. Reijnders, Rooijakkers and van Zoonen 2006, 141-142) was soon shared in other spheres of adult sociability like sports clubs and music societies, even a swimming pool, and equally in schools (though mainly in the lower grades of secondary schools) and children's and youth clubs. The somewhat loose connection to a real "celebration" of Halloween is also evident from the dates on which these Halloween parties are held: rarely exactly on October 31st, but without any difficulty on a suitable evening or (Satur)day nearby, up until mid-November. Perhaps astonishingly, "Halloween" may even be the theme of a party on Christmas or New Year's Eve, or the last day of school. As is the case with "Americanization" in general, Halloween, as "an arena for playfulness which is not always reflexively scrutinized down to the smallest detail" (O'Dell 1997, 227), was adapted to local tastes and usage (Korff 2001b, 181-183; Elpers 2005/2006, 81). Less a "traditional calendar custom" in terms of the paradigm of old, Halloween was just another "event" or "experience" in night life (cf. Röckel 2001, 5; Dewald 2002, 43, 53).

Prompted by a slogan like "Dress to scare, if you dare", people happily dress up in what they perceive as a suitable Halloween outfit—although it must be stressed that, like elsewhere in Europe (Elpers 2005/2006, 83), certainly not all of those attending jump at the opportunity in this respect. The costumes range from simply putting on a witch's hat or the devil's horns to masks worn by serial killers in films or the uninhibited personification of death itself, of monsters and vampires, or the victims of bloody assaults, accidents or rough surgery. In dressing up and performing Halloween, one hopes to facilitate socialising and to gain prestige among one's peers (Skal 2002, 128; cf. Jankowiak and White 1999, 343-344). People also admit, as predicted by Bell's model, to relishing the dark and sinister sides of themselves and their intent to shock. Paradoxically, it is in this (more or less) elaborate and beautiful representation of ugliness and horror that the main attraction and fun of Halloween seems to reside—as the smiles on the blood-stained faces of the participants testify to. At the same time, an ambivalence may be read in these faces. I will come back to that in my conclusion.

Halloween as an emerging calendar ritual

Apart from being a new link in a burgeoning "event culture", however, there are also indications of Halloween lodging itself, American style, in the cycle of annual calendar rituals in Holland. From about the year 2000, one sees community or youth centres and informal groups, like small groups of mothers or street residents, organising "trick-or-treating" for their dressed-up children. These seem to have little difficulty in grasping the gist of Halloween, the funny expression of fearsome characters.

As yet there are no Halloween "parades" in the Netherlands, like in New York or in the extravagant manner of the Gay Pride parade in Amsterdam. Still, when parents dress up themselves, and for themselves, beyond merely accompanying their children trick-or-treating, as in a few new neighbourhoods—"liminoid" spaces *par excellence*—of southern towns, these processions bear a faint resemblance to American parades. This is particularly evident in the Brandevoort area of the town of Helmond, a newly built, expensive quarter for young and well-to-do residents. Their Halloween procession is an activity—one amongst several others, and as such also a "theme"—to visualise neighbourhood identity, as its organizers profess. True as that may be, there is clearly more to this. Among these, one may suppose, otherwise kind and civilised citizens, an uncanny creativity can be found for representing the macabre and the bloody on and near their homes, such as the remains of a murder victim, headstones or a baby (doll) strung up by a rope from a balcony (cf. Santino 1994a, 34-38; Skal 2002, 99), in their disguises, and in attractions alongside the procession like fake fingers severed by an axe to represent tasty sausages or the brutal extraction of entrails from a live patient. As Reynold Humphries (2002, 141-142) suggests: "The ideology of social upward mobility symbolised by chic suburbs is one based on the elimination of one's rivals, where 'keeping up with the Joneses' means digging their grave" (cf. Bannatyne 1990, 150).

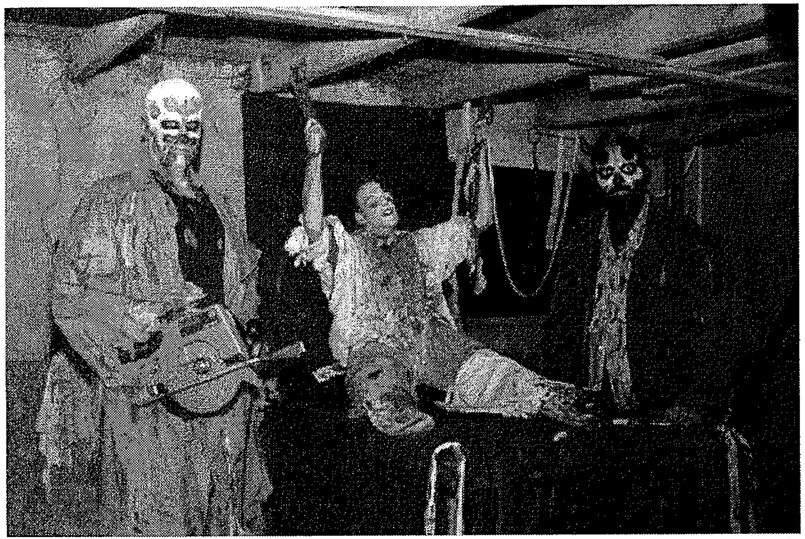

Fig. 1: Halloween hell house in Doetinchem (Dichteren) 2005.
Photo: Henk Vlasblom, Doetinchem.

A separate phenomenon in the American Halloween are so-called "fright" or "hell houses", showing various nasty scenes, executions and the like. In a milder variety, these can be seen in one or two Dutch commercial amusement parks. In America, making a "hell house" is also a favourite pursuit among private persons. In Holland I found only one specimen of such a private "hell house", in the new Dichteren neighbourhood of

Doetinchem in 2005. With their dedicated seriousness, these youngsters delighted in representing a particularly gruesome scene of cutting off the foot of one of their victimised mates with an electric saw. This alerts us to the fact that here, and in Halloween guising in general, there is a strong propensity for re-enacting scenes or characters from horror films, in this case from (an appropriation of) *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Skal 2002, 176; cf. Reijnders, Rooijakkers and van Zoonen 2006). As the confused and perplexed facial expressions of some visitors suggest, the dividing line between re-enactment and enactment appears to be a very thin one (cf. Dégh 1995, 254-257).

Making sense of Halloween

As Jack Santino (1994b, xxii-xxiii) wrote: "What one does on or around Halloween varies, depending on factors such as age, place of residence (rural, urban, or suburban), region of the country, ethnicity, and associational group. Halloween is used in a variety of ways by different groups of people as a vehicle for expressing identity" (cf. Winterberg 2006, 21-22; Elpers 2005/2006, 86). As a base line for understanding Halloween, this also applies to the Dutch case. Halloween is, quoting Canadian Tamar Bosschaart as she organised a "Disco of Death" in an Amsterdam pub, "just a jolly festival. To participate, you don't need to know what it's about" (*Spits*, October 31, 2003). Several partygoers indeed publicly expressed their ignorance of the meaning of the feast, being satisfied with its patent social rewards. For those looking for further elucidation, however, the popular press and the internet provide ready answers to the question "What are we celebrating?" (*Metro*, October 29, 2004). As a consequence of their rehashing of the worn-out story, now acknowledged to be an ethnological fiction (Rogers 2002, 19; Döring 2006, 331; Zeebroek 2006), of Halloween's Celtic origins, of Samhain and the invasion of the dead, these to be frightened off by dressing up, etc, etc, it comes as no surprise to find people actually believing that Halloween is not at all a recent phenomenon "because the Celts already celebrated Halloween in the Netherlands" (*Brabants Dagblad*, October 29, 2001; cf. for similar statements in Austria, Haid 2001, 176). To be true, the basic association of the "Celtic" with "Otherness" (Leersen 1996, 4), and thereby with something mysterious or weird, makes it attractive for people to identify with these stories, thereby providing a kind of additional motivation or legitimation to engage with Halloween (Dégh 1995, 254; Skal 2002, 18, 20). In their actual festive practice in Holland, however, performers of Halloween give other messages rather than "celebrating a Celtic ritual" (cf. Hörandner 2005, 30).

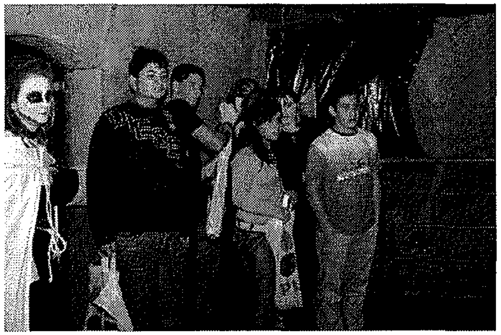

Fig. 2: Halloween hell house in Doetinchem (Dichteren) 2005.
Photo: Henk Vlasblom, Doetinchem.

Interpreting Halloween as a rite of inversion, as already done by Victor Turner (1974, 161-163; cf. Dégh 1995, 240-241; Santino 1998, 9; Rogers 2002, 137; see also Handelman 1990, 52-53, 138, 158), cannot possibly be said to offer a novel insight nowadays. Still, in my view, this elementary model—of confirming a society's cherished values by ritually and temporarily inverting them—helps to understand what's going on at Halloween. "The mockery increases the seriousness: for one thing, the mockery suggests what would occur if the serious were no longer taken seriously" (Caplow 2004, 107). Death and bloodiness, as, of course, prescribed by the American (film) model, predominate in the representations of many Halloween performers. In this way they offer, according to Belgian art historian Paul Vandenbroeck (1987, 141-148, especially 143), a "negative definition of themselves". By shockingly showing the inappropriate, at the same time, "as in a photo negative", the norm is articulated. In all the fun, there is an inverted seriousness, an ambiguous reflection of basic anxieties (cf. Santino 1994a, 163-164; Winterberg 2006, 25; see, however, Elpers 2005/2006, 87-88, for reservations about this). In participating in a Halloween event, there "emerges as participants bring together bits and pieces of knowledge in the performance" (Hughes-Freeland 1998, 15) something of a "performative reflexivity" (Turner 1987, 24) that will be experienced individually in different modes. As Edward Schieffelin (cited in Hughes-Freeland 1998, 15) stressed, "participants experience symbolic meanings as part of the process of what they are actually doing" (cf. Ohrvik 2001, 239; Schilling

2001, 279-280). Inevitably, this precludes making definitive statements, and allows only for suggesting hypothetical interpretations. As in horror films in general, "by dealing with the loss of the human, the doubts informing human identity may be for the moment exorcised, and the validity and arrangement of the established social categories may be affirmed" (Prince 2005, 129; cf. Verrips 2001). Particularly during the last ten-fifteen years, Dutch society has witnessed indeed a heightened sensibility towards (sudden) death (Beunders 2002). Security, safety and good health are primary values. So, in the background, there may be indeed a reference to 9/11 too.

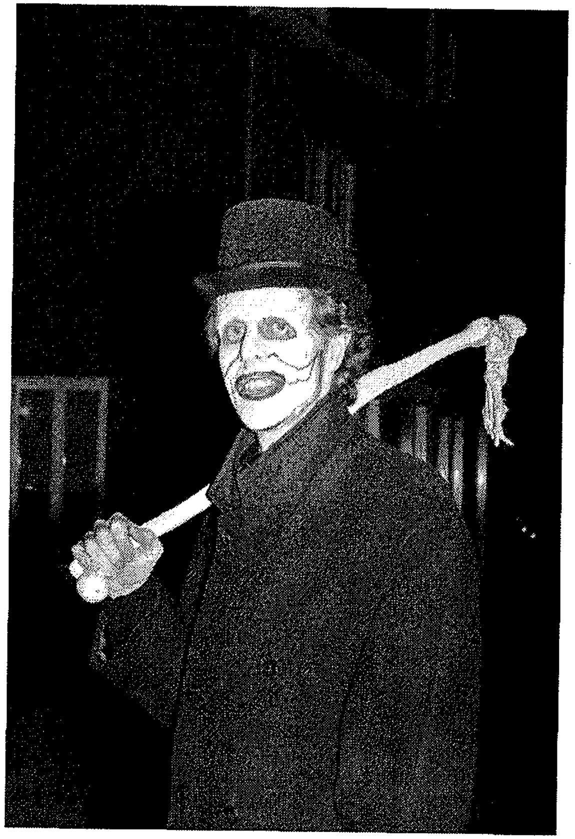

Fig. 3: Halloween in Helmond (Brandevoort) 2006.
Photo: Pascal van den Tillaart, Fotoclub Brandevoort, Helmond.

And yet, there is more to contemporary (Dutch) Halloween than merely a ritual inversion. As touched upon in my introductory remarks, the blurring of boundaries is an essential characteristic of postmodern culture. In this "culture of experience" this also pertains to what, in the old cultural paradigm, was called the boundary between "high culture" and "low culture", between "good taste" and "bad taste" (Verrips 2001, 193)—the world of horror films being a good example of perceptions of the latter (Paul 1994, 3-4, 6, 9, 43-44). Nowadays these distinctions have lost a good deal of their meaning, and people happily engage in both worlds, formerly clearly socio-culturally divided (Maase 1994, especially 34; Paul 1994, 33). But knowledge of these old boundary lines has not been completely lost, and there still exists a perceived tension between "good" and "bad" taste (cf. Skal 2002, 140-142).

Performers of Halloween are precisely exploiting this tension. With greater or fewer inhibitions, they deliberately display their ugliness and bad taste—according to former standards. At the same time, their smiles and the whole ludic atmosphere of the festival make it clear that they are aware of what they are doing, that their performance is not serious at all—of course not. Their mood can adequately be summarised in the word "camp". "The whole point of Camp", Susan Sontag wrote, "is to dethrone the serious" (cited in Kugelmass 1991, 458). That's what Halloween is about—and simultaneously, not about—in view of the sensibilities and anxieties mentioned earlier. In this more or less conscious and productive ambivalence (cf. Paul 1994, 370) resides, in my view, the success, the attraction and also the way to grasp the meaning of Halloween, in the Netherlands, and probably elsewhere as well.

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