



## The Irony of Irony: On Paul Verhoeven's Adaptation of Gerard Reve's *De vierde man* [*The Fourth Man*]

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**Abstract:** Since the literary increasingly tends to refer to a mode 'between page and screen', the so-called adaptation studies are 'on the move' again. This article examines the not very recent, but nonetheless too sporadically examined case of 'Dutch novel into Dutch film' in order to consider whether there might be some leeway for film to position itself as a viable subject within Dutch studies. Against this background, a film inspired by a book by the renowned post-war writer Gerard Reve is analysed to argue that adaptation studies have the advantage of urging us to address the 'form/content dilemma': formal adjustments are required in case content is transferred from one medium to another. Paul Verhoeven's 1983 adaptation of *De vierde man* [*The Fourth Man*] shows that the only way for film makers to work in the spirit of Reve is to insist on 'the necessity of infidelity to its letter or form'. Opting for a 'functional likeness' rather than imitation, Verhoeven privileges the cinematic devices of deep focus and hyper-real colours in order to achieve the effect of an 'irony of the irony'.

**Keywords:** Irony, Adaptation, Dutch Cinema, Gothic, Femme Céleste

If the approach of (Anglo-Saxon) literary studies has been predominantly 'aesthetic', Thomas Leitch asserts in his *Film Adaptations & Its Discontents*, then the approach of cinema studies can be called 'analytical'.<sup>1</sup> When film entered academia as an object of study in the ideologically charged decades of the 1960s and 1970s, scholars were above all interested in 'mining film after film for political critique'.<sup>2</sup> Since adaptation critics, by contrast, were basically preoccupied with aesthetic concerns, they felt more at home within literary studies which had a tradition of regarding artistic value criteria as a touchstone. Nonetheless, despite this shared affinity, adaptation study was doomed to remain at the periphery of [28] literary studies. Kamilla Elliott argues that literary scholars have always tended to excoriate adaptation critics 'as outmoded and as lagging behind the critical times', because they too easily presumed that 'form is separable from content, after all'.<sup>3</sup> For adaptation critics, the transfer from linguistic signifiers to audiovisual images, to take the case of novel into film as an example, is mainly a challenge for the film maker to come as close as possible to a faithful reproduction of the book: a puzzle perhaps, but it should be feasible somehow. Many literary theorists, varying from New Critics in the 1960s to poststructuralists, however, doubt the possibility of such an enterprise, arguing that adaptation scholars ignore that every transfer brings about an irrevocable loss due to the unique singularity of signifiers.

No wonder then that adaptation studies, which came to rise, unofficially, with the writings of André Bazin and George Bluestone in the 1950s, have been 'stuck in the backwater of the academy' for decades, as Leitch notes in his article 'Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads'.<sup>4</sup> In view of this fact, the recent revival of this branch is all the more surprising. The considerable increase in books and volumes on 'literature and film' since 2000 proves that adaptation studies, in the words of Leitch, are 'on the move' again.<sup>5</sup> A main rationale behind this turn may reside in a paradigm shift. Bedevilled by the issue of fidelity, scholars of 'old school' adaptation studies were too often bent on the evaluative question whether the film was as good or beautiful as the book; usually, the answer was 'not'. This question has become obsolete in favour of a more reflexive approach, as represented, among others, by Leitch and Elliott. According to the latter, adaptation studies have the advantage of urging us to address the 'form/content dilemma'. Instead of just taking a text as principally paraphrasable, one should analyse the precise nature of the formal adjustments which might be required in case content is transferred from one medium (book) to another (film).<sup>6</sup> I will take this medium-specific recommendation into account when examining Paul Verhoeven's adaptation of Gerard Reve's novella *De vierde man* [*The Fourth Man*] (1981). One reason for choosing this case is because of a specific, additional challenge. Since the book happens to be written in an ironic style, can a film preserve this tone? If so, through which cinematic devices?

Another reason is of a more opportunistic nature, for the case of 'Dutch novel into Dutch film' has simply been too sporadically examined. Dutch cinema lacks a proper institutionalisation, since film is no consistent part of the curriculum of the Dutch Language and Culture departments in the Netherlands. If Dutch cinema is addressed at universities, it usually takes place incidentally in a lecture under the umbrella of literature, such as 'Book and Film' lectures.<sup>7</sup> The policy which underlies such a course seems obvious: Dutch film, which is often held in low esteem, can only fit in the curriculum provided that it is associated with the more venerable belles-lettres. And even if such a course were to give film (adaptations) pride of place over novels, it risks affording film the role of side-kick to [29] literature, the more since the reputation of the written-source texts predominantly determines the selection of films. This aside, however, is not meant to strike a sour tone, because courses like 'Book and Film' at least offer a leeway for Dutch film to position itself in academia. In that sense, this article will do little more than opt for a 'modest proposal'. I go along with this practice and as a strategic manoeuvre I juxtapose the work of a very famous Dutch author (Reve) with an adaptation, made by one of the best known directors the Netherlands has ever had (Verhoeven).

## A Mix of Banality and Solemnity

Although Reve published his first texts in the mid-1940s, the first film based upon his work only hit the screen in 1980. Paul de Lussanet's *Lieve Jongens* [*Dear Boys*] was inspired by a trilogy Reve wrote between 1972 and 1974: *De taal der liefde* [*The Language of Love*], *Lieve Jongens* and *Het lieve leven* [*Dear Life*], but it was hardly successful. Reve himself was rather harsh in his criticism of the adaptation, and disdainfully remarked that De Lussanet, who had a background as a painter, made 'a spoken picture book of a novel'.<sup>8</sup> It is worth lingering over De Lussanet's misfire for it shows why the work of Reve is fairly difficult to adapt.<sup>9</sup>

Reve's books are not particularly known for the plots, but for a style which abounds in irony. He has a penchant for using deliberately archaic and solemn terms, at times interspersed with biblical resonances, to describe ordinary, not to say banal situations. At the same time, he

mixes this explicitly literary style with commonly used truisms – often to humorous effect. He employs this device frequently in his novel *De taal der liefde*, in which a personal narrator tells stories to his male lover in order to get sexually excited. The I, however, is so talkative that his relentless narration overshoots its mark. The story-telling does not lead up to erotic adventures, but has the counterproductive result to test his partner's patience, constantly urging the I to move on with his stories so that the desired 'action' no longer has to be postponed. As Ernst van Alphen observes, the truisms used by Reve fall short of meaning, but have the phatic function of keeping a conversation going, like in the paragraphs which end with: 'It is a real challenge, being a creative artist', or 'Being rich can cause enormous concerns'.<sup>10</sup> The blunt insertion of such overtly general statements which evoke a different type of discourse makes the reader wonder whether the utterances have to be taken seriously or ironically. Because the truisms are mixed with high-sounding language, the scales seem to tip into the favour of an ironic reading.

Just as Van Alphen considers Reve's prose from the early 1970s, Maaïke Meijer makes a more or less similar claim as regards his poetry from the mid-1960s. In her analysis of a number of his poems, published as 'Geestelijke liederen' [Spiritual Songs] in the novel-in-letters *Nader tot U* [*Nearer to You*] (1966), she argues that his poetry is characterized by abrupt alterations in pitch. The 'Geestelijke [30] liederen' are polyphonic, Meijer notes, because he addresses in only a few sentences a hodgepodge of linguistic regimes: both clichés and evocations of prayer; both requests to the Supreme Being and vulgar terms; both archaic words and child language.<sup>11</sup>

My brief references to Van Alphen and Meijer's discussion of Reve are mainly meant to indicate how the style of writing is of paramount importance when considering his work. The particular clash of contrasting idioms in his work even earned him the honorary adjective 'reviaans', derived from his surname. This term *reviaans*, which is commonly used in combination with the nouns humour or irony, suggests that his style is somehow personal and private, if not unparalleled. His witty and polyphonic juggling with language is his hallmark, and therefore *reviaans*. When *Lieve Jongens* was published, the majority of literary critics observed that Reve had pushed the dominance of style over plot to the limit. As usual, he was praised for his stylistic exuberance, but in Gerrit Komrij's opinion, the book consists of no more than 'fragments of a confession', without any cohesion.<sup>12</sup> Since, as he asserted, the novel is 'all about nothing', the referential function – which works to characterize and describe situations, sceneries and/or mental states – in *Lieve Jongens* is seriously downplayed. Trivializing this function makes a film adaptation particularly difficult. Even though De Lussanet has preserved Reve's particular use of language in the dialogues of his adaptation, maintaining the novel's lack of dramatic structure was regarded by film reviewers as an admission of weakness. Whereas a literary critic such as Wam de Moor was willing to accept the absence of a clear beginning, middle and end in the book as a mockery of the Aristotelian notion of the unity of action,<sup>13</sup> film critics did not note irony and were therefore practically unanimously annoyed by the absence of plot in the adaptation. Reve joined their choir by stating that everything which had a double meaning or an ambiguous potential in his own text had become flat and unequivocal in the film.<sup>14</sup> Although De Lussanet had made an effort to be faithful to the book, the view was that Reve's irony had been lost along the way. Since a change of medium primarily requires formal adjustments, it was too hard a nut to crack for De Lussanet to choose effective devices.

The film director essentially restricted himself to imitating the 'content' by copying dialogues and (the lack of) narrative structure, a typical fallacy of the yearning for fidelity. In such a case, to put it bluntly, an adaptation is at risk of becoming a show-case of, to paraphrase

Seymour Chatman, what novels can do and films cannot.<sup>15</sup> Due to its focus on *content*, the adaptation fails to incorporate the ironic *effect* of the source-text. My point in analysing the adaptation of Reve's *De vierde man* is how director Verhoeven, aided by his scriptwriter Gerard Soeteman, managed to introduce cinematic devices which can be regarded as a worthy alternative to the literary style, permeated with irony. [31]

## 'Let's Make an Art Film!': *De Vierde Man*

*De vierde man* was Verhoeven's next film following the controversy surrounding the release of *Spetters* (1980). A most versatile director in the 1970s and a guarantee for box-office success, Verhoeven was both surprised and frustrated that he only met resistance with this project. To start with, the Productiefonds voor de Nederlandse Film would not give him any funding for *Spetters*, because its members considered the screenplay shallow and commercial. Eventually, the Productiefonds did fund him once the original screenplay had been rewritten into a bowdlerized version. During shooting, however, Verhoeven worked with the first, rejected, draft, which of course angered the Productiefonds. When *Spetters* reached the screen, the film received a hostile reception from the press: 'indecent amusement' is a qualification which summarizes the criticism of most journalists. In addition, the film raised an unprecedented level of sharp protest, when the temporary group NASA – Nederlandse Anti Spetters Actie – was set up to fight the 'disgusting' stereotypical representation of women and homosexuals.<sup>16</sup>

It may read like kitchen sink psychology but, according to his biographer Rob van Scheers, it amused Verhoeven that after all the accusations of banality he would turn to the work of a writer who belonged to intellectual circles: 'All right then, let's make an art film!' Verhoeven is supposed to have said.<sup>17</sup> The fact that Reve's novella from 1981 was one of his more plot-driven and suspenseful books with fewer pages than his usual work, had one practical advantage: it seemed to beg for an adaptation. Moreover, it can be seen as a more than happy coincidence that it was a book by, of all people, Reve, for Verhoeven could indirectly benefit from Reve's reputation as an ironic provocateur. Verhoeven had been offended by all the controversy surrounding *Spetters*, but when Reve himself caused quite a stir in the 1970s with some racist statements he was not branded as a black sheep within the literary community. In a letter to 'fellow artist' Simon C. in his *De taal der liefde* Reve advocated, in apparently disdainful terms, the return of black people on a 'tjoeki tjoeki' steamboat to the 'Takki Takki' Jungle. In 1975 he recited, dressed in a dark shirt with a silver cross, the poem 'Voor eigen erf' [For One's Own Backyard] about black scum and white power at a poetry festival in Kortrijk. Since there was a tendency among intellectuals to consider Reve's statements and performance as an act of ironic provocation, the author did not become a target of public outcry.

Annoyed by the fact that Reve got away with it, colleague-writer Harry Mulisch criticized him in the booklet-annex-pamphlet *Het ironische van de ironie* [*The Irony of Irony*] (1976) for misusing the trope of irony as a playground for abject ideas. According to Mulisch, Reve's readers will probably interpret his statements as meaning the opposite of what he writes which, for Mulisch, is the key to irony. Assuming that his readers will take his statements with a grain of salt, Reve can allow himself to write what he really means. By using this strategy, Reve has, in [32] Mulisch's words, betrayed the two-faced nature of irony. Racist opinions are disguised as tongue-in-cheek phrases, but one should not be fooled, Mulisch warns: Reve may really hold these opinions.<sup>18</sup> It is an unsolvable matter whether Mulisch is right or whether Reve is only pretending to support racist notions, merely playing the role of agitator. It bothered Mulisch

that his rival/colleague Reve could have his cake and eat it too: it was not possible to pin him down to a fixed position.

Such fixity, or a form of 'stable irony' which Wayne Booth tried to delineate in his *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974), is at odds with the spirit of irony as such. For irony is notoriously difficult to determine. Unlike what Mulisch made us believe, the trope exhibits a permanent oscillation between explicit statements and implicit ones. Just like the well-known drawing of the duck/rabbit-illusion represents both a duck and a rabbit, Linda Hutcheon states that irony is neither only the said nor only the unsaid, but both at the same time.<sup>19</sup> Irony requires that the reader/listener can take the statement literally, but a figurative interpretation is at least as plausible. In the case of Reve, it is frankly impossible to draw a line between seriousness and irony, for there seems to be an incessant oscillation between the two. Instead of calling this one of the specific charms of Reve, Mulisch was frustrated that one could not halt this oscillation, resulting in a second-degree irony, which gave the pamphlet its title: 'het ironische van de ironie'. In other words, Mulisch was unable – or at least refused to – to deal with the inherently double-edged nature of Reve's writings, for the irony could not be 'stabilized'. The point is that one really cannot fathom the status of Reve's fragments. Indeed, as Mulisch insists, he uses the option of irony as a pretext, for in fact he is truly serious about the racist prejudices he utters. And indeed, an argument *a contrario*, the statements are so excessively silly that they 'clearly' make fun of such abject ideas. The simultaneous validity of these contrasting options conforms to Hutcheon's notion that the appreciation of such irony is not a property of the text, but the result of an interpretative strategy. The text does not give a definite answer, therefore it is up to the reader to consider the irony as a poor excuse (for a serious support of racist ideas) and/or as a critical gesture (to expose and condemn their silly logic).

### 'Opening Up to the Domain of the Fantastic ...'

The moot question is how a film can achieve this characteristic effect of Reve's work, hovering between earnestness and irony. In the novella *De vierde man*, this 'whole mixture of play and seriousness'<sup>20</sup> is not only achieved stylistically but, as spelled out by Agnes Andeweg, some generic, thematic and dramatic ironies can be attributed to the text as well. In her view, the setting, the plot and the characters of the novella *De vierde man* can be called 'gothic', because of an atmosphere of impending doom, caused by ominous dreams.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, she claims [33] that gothic novels have a hybrid nature. They are usually a combination of horror and melodrama, and only a slight exaggeration of the melodramatic moments can be enough to create a comic turn. Reve fully explores this underlying comic potential of gothic fiction which, as Andeweg emphasizes, does not defame the status of gothic as a serious genre.<sup>22</sup> His strategy in *De vierde man* is not so much to overdo melodramatic moments, but the humour arises from a constant alternation between overwrought thoughts and down-to-earth inferences.<sup>23</sup> This alternation has an ironic effect, since the reader has no benchmark to decide to what extent the story, which, its narrator laments, has an empty centre, has to be taken seriously.<sup>24</sup> The fact that the narrator admits to a 'heated imagination' only reinforces this effect.<sup>25</sup> Thematically, the novella is ironic in its interplay between male homosexuality and heterosexuality. Set up as a frame story, an internal narrator Gerard tells his male lover about an affair he had many years ago with Christine, a wealthy woman he met at one of his lectures. He starts to fantasize about an existence as a decent, bourgeois citizen at her place, but the reader cannot be certain whether this fantasy is in earnest. Perhaps he experiences their fling merely as a comic mimicry

of a heterosexual romance. To underscore this argument, Andeweg points out that when he seduces Christine, he repeatedly imagines himself as playing a part in a film:<sup>26</sup> he kissed her, 'just like in a movie';<sup>27</sup> he wonders whether he has to 'create another film scene';<sup>28</sup> or, the 'camera did not have to run another take: this way the shooting costs were reduced.'<sup>29</sup> There is also dramatic irony at stake since, as Andeweg indicates, the present-day Gerard is a homosexual, telling about his posing as a heterosexual.<sup>30</sup> He plays this role so convincingly that Christine has no reason to believe that he is not one, but in fact the narrator tells us, she has bought a 'pig in a poke'.<sup>31</sup>

Noteworthy as these ironies may be, there is one type of irony which, for the sake of my argument, supersedes them in importance. After Gerard discovers that Christine's three husbands have all died tragically, he starts to believe that their deaths were not unfortunate accidents but planned by Christine. The novella is fantastic in the sense that we are never certain whether Christine truly is a black widow or whether the internal narrator only imagines her fatal role in their deaths. What induces irony is the way he presents his account which is, as he states, a little unlikely and implausible, 'like any true story'.<sup>32</sup> Since he is telling about his adventures many years after the event, his tone is comically detached and playfully melodramatic. As a consequence, paranoia and humour go hand in hand to the effect that even the scarier moments become slightly ludicrous without the gothic story turning into a farce.

The challenge for scriptwriter Soeteman and director Verhoeven was to add an ironic flavour to the gothic story so that it would come close to reproducing the effect of reading.<sup>33</sup> In the short novel the tone of the (inner) deliberations of the protagonist-narrator is chiefly responsible for this effect, for he recounts events from the past to his male lover. Since it is usually considered 'uncinematic' to [34] have a voice-over directly quote from the book, the 'irony of irony' had best be created at the level of focalization. The way Gerard perceives signs becomes paramount, for focalization, as Mieke Bal's definition has it, is the relation between the vision and that which is 'seen', perceived.<sup>34</sup>

After an opening shot of a spider building a web, the film continues with a scene in which Gerard's boyfriend is playing the violin, while Gerard creeps up on him and strangles him. After the strangling, we see Gerard walk through a corridor, while we still hear the violin play. He enters a room and there is his boyfriend, still playing. Gerard just tells him he will be on his way to Vlissingen by train. The sequence of strangling, which obviously only proved to be a morbid fantasy, sets the tone for the film: a seemingly daily situation slips into a surreal scene and suddenly it goes back to 'normal'. Gerard will be seeing things throughout the film, and although the status of his observations is sometimes easy to determine, often it is not. Travelling by train, initially his perceptions are not extraordinary: he sees a drawing of Samson and Delilah; he sees a poster with the text 'Jesus is everywhere', the apple peels around the head of a toddler are like a halo. When he focuses on another portrait in the train, however, he has a vision of the hotel Bellevue, room number four, and of blood dripping from a mutilated eye, a shot which obliquely references the surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Buñuel, 1928).<sup>35</sup> The crying toddler marks his return from this unpleasant daydream to 'reality', whereupon a blond female passenger in a blue coat realizes with a shock that tomato juice is oozing from a bag above her head. The scene in the hotel is unmistakably a nightmarish vision, but it is uncertain whether this vision has been triggered by the juice or has anticipated it: cause and effect are unclear. This scene also indicates that Gerard seems to be a character whose imagination can run wild. This is emphasized in a subsequent scene when on the platform at

the station he sees a coffin and thinks that the ribbon has his name written on it, for he distinguishes the letters G-E-R-A. When the ribbon is unfolded it reads 'Guido Hermans'.

These scenes basically suggest Gerard's inclination to sinister hallucinations, but the film owes its deeply ironic effect, I will argue below, to the overall framing of his perception of a blurred distinction between fantasy and reality. This framing is determined by the representation of the main protagonist as someone who excels at comments which are as sardonic as amusing. His fondness of such comments becomes clear during Gerard's lecture, of which a few excerpts, absent in the book, are included in the film. He tells the story of a gigantic coffin at the station, carried by thirty dwarfs. He then admits that he invented the story on the spot, but that if he were to continue it at length, it could start to sound like a true story. He then summarizes the essence of his authorship in the paradoxical claim: 'I lie the truth ... just as long as I start to believe it myself'.<sup>36</sup> He presents his idea in a serious manner, but as equally optional, if not more so, is that he makes this assertion in jest. Similarly, all the other answers he gives during the Q [35] & A are playful without ruling out that they can also be interpreted as serious, such as: 'Being catholic means opening up to the domain of the fantastic'<sup>37</sup> or 'The only time I suffer from madness is when reading the newspaper, for I read *lamp* as *ramp* [lamp as disaster], *gloed* as *bloed* [glow as blood], and *rood* as *dood* [red as dead]. Is that crazy? No, not really, just some trouble with my eyes'.

There are two other essential scenes in which Gerard defines himself as an ironic jester, while preserving a serious stance. These scenes take place after Gerard has spent the night in the bed of the seductive Christine who is the treasurer of the association which had invited the writer. Christine also runs a beauty parlour named 'sphinx', although when Gerard arrives at her place the neon letters only show the word 'spin', meaning spider. When the next morning a female customer in the beauty parlour – hardly recognisable as the blond woman in the train – recounts a spooky dream, she considers this as a sign of impending danger and adds to it: 'When you are being warned, you have to listen'. Gerard retorts sarcastically: 'Well, the people who listen, are they still around?'<sup>38</sup> The second scene concerns his attempt to fool Christine by play-acting that he has occult gifts. On his way to Vlissingen, he saw an incredibly handsome boy, taking the train to Köln. At Christine's place, he sees a love letter, which conceals the photograph of this very same boy, named Herman, only dressed in swimming trunks. As the back reveals, the photo was taken in Köln. Without telling Christine of his discovery, Gerard starts to boast that he can read signs with the ultimate hope of meeting Herman. He takes Christine's hand and tells her that there is another lover, besides himself, that he sees the letters K and an O with two dots. Yes, he is from Köln, she confirms, in a tone of mock impression, for it seemed in an earlier scene that Christine had left the letter deliberately on her desk for Gerard to find. Gerard will only continue on condition that she takes a personal object of this man. Returning with the love letter, Gerard guesses correctly, obviously, that there is a photo hidden between the pages, that the lover is hardly wearing any clothes, and that the name starts with an H and an E. Before mentioning these letters, however, Gerard has a vision which shocks him: Herman walks out of the sea, and his eye is severely mutilated, like in his earlier dream.

The three examples are structured in a similar way. Whilst keeping up an earnest appearance, Gerard seems to delight in ironic remarks and playful acts. It befits a character like him who boasts about his high intelligence, to consider all visual clues from day-dreams as unfounded and superstitious. However, after pretending that he possesses occult gifts, for erotic purposes, the sudden visions, just as the one of a bleeding Herman, will come to grow on

him as if he really did have occult gifts. He gradually realizes that he had better lend credence to his bizarre observations and his seemingly surreal visions. The turning point of *De vierde man* is that Gerard himself, this ironic jester, has to take all signs as deadly serious warning signals: the light at Christine's place which accidentally spells [36] the word 'spin' (spider); the seagull which drops dead at Gerard's feet; the frequent appearances of the blond woman; the number four in his dream – Gerard begins to arrange all these signs into a causally logic pattern. His mind, which has become frenetic by now, turns Christine into a femme fatale who like a spider has webbed her three husbands till death did them part.

Now convinced of her deceptive identity, Gerard becomes afraid that a terrible accident is awaiting him.<sup>39</sup> He himself, however, is not the fourth man to die, but Herman is. At the very same spot where Christine was driving excessively fast earlier in the film, Herman ignores the speed limit and hits the iron tubes on a truck, which pierce his eye. After the fatal crash leading to Herman's death, Gerard is hospitalized, in a state of shock. He is nursed by the blonde woman who already crossed his path several times. Gerard becomes convinced that this woman is his guardian angel and he calls her 'Maria.' Excitedly, he tells the doctor that 'Maria' has protected him against the evil witch Christine. As further proof of his belief in her cunning tricks, Gerard mentions that she has an insensitive spot at her back. The doctor contradicts Gerard's words and diagnoses that the writer is suffering from delusions. To him, Christine is the epitome of a tragic woman, marred by bad fate and who one can only pity. While Gerard is shivering in his hospital bed, through a window we see Christine outside, meeting a wind surfer. Then we see the close-up of a spider in its web, with which the film also began.

There are two ways to read the ending, but neither one gets the upper hand. The first option is the doctor's analysis that Gerard suffers from hallucinations as a consequence of having witnessed Herman's atrocious death. For the doctor, Gerard is, partly due to his fondness of alcohol, a pathological liar and it is a token of disrespect to speak foul of the poor widow. Whereas the doctor believes that Gerard is suffering from delusions, the writer himself has to think that he is truly gifted with second sight. For him, the frequent appearances of the blonde woman in a blue coat are no longer coincidental, but meaningful and life-saving. The film's strength is that not only both options make sense, but that the two conflicting interpretations of delusions versus conspiracy are framed by Gerard's stance, which can be explained as both serious and ironic. As the doctor tells him, the option that Gerard might have (erroneously) made up Christine's guilty role is strengthened by his confession during the Q & A that 'I lie the truth ... just as long as I start to believe it myself'. The doctor takes this potentially ironic credo seriously and puts the emphasis on the lies as well as the vivid imagination. The other option presumes that Gerard has made this remark tongue-in-cheek, implying that he knows how to separate truth from lies. In that case, the irony is that Gerard dearly believes that his scepticism has led him to see the true state of affairs. [37]

## Deep Red and Blue

The main reason why this ambiguity cannot be resolved is a consequence of the cinematic devices employed by Verhoeven. A filmmaker conventionally uses dissolves, superimpositions or soft focus in order to mark the transition from 'reality' to a character's mental world. By contrast, Verhoeven uses hard cuts practically all the time, with the result that, formally, a day-dream or hallucinatory sequence is cinematically presented in the same way as any scene from the 'normal' world. However, the viewer can still distinguish a dream or hallucination from an

everyday practice because of the bizarre content of many sequences: obviously Gerard did neither strangle his boyfriend nor did Christine castrate him with a pair of scissors; it is obvious that the sequence in the hotel with the injured eye is a weird fantasy, and when he sees Herman, hanging at the cross in the church and only wearing swimming trunks, everyone will interpret this as a hallucination. The irony is that the viewer has the illusion throughout the film that he understands the status of each and every shot – this is a dream and this is not – and that he knows how to separate lies from truth but due to the final episode, the status of the visions becomes undetermined after all. What seemed to be too strange to be true, may not be that strange after all. In the eyes of the doctor Gerard's scenario that Christine is a cunning woman is too bizarre for words, but since the viewer has been confronted with the very same signs as Gerard, the story of a dark conspiracy is not that outlandish any more.

Remember that Gerard defined a Catholic as someone who has opened up to the fantastic. This could be regarded as an ironic and playful remark, but the irony of the film is that Gerard owes his life – or, at least, he thinks so – to the fact that he becomes one of those people whose very existence he had ironically doubted: he is one of those rare types who happens to listen when he is being warned. To turn Gerard's train of thought into a legitimate option, scriptwriter Soeteman decided to introduce a new character, missing in the novel, for without 'Maria' the scales might have tipped in the favour of the down-to-earth vision of the doctor. In Soeteman's words, the blonde woman is the *femme céleste*, the mirror image of the *femme fatale*.<sup>40</sup> The presence of the woman in the blue coat is required to bring about a shift in Gerard's attitude. As soon as he interprets her frequent appearances as warning signs of impending danger, he starts to act in congruence with those remarks he initially made in jest.

Since the film does not resolve the status of the fantastic visions as either outrageous or as meaningful flash-forwards, the viewer gets caught in the deadlock of how to interpret the protagonist: either Gerard is paranoid, as the doctor believes, or he is a visionary who is truly open to the fantastic – which was his ironic definition of the essence of Catholicism. On these grounds, one might claim that with *De vierde man*, Verhoeven has performed a kind of 'irony of irony', in the spirit of Reve's work.<sup>41</sup> Seminal for this effect is that Verhoeven's film [38] consistently problematized the status of the dreams and hallucinations. As I indicated earlier, Verhoeven refrained from employing formal means to help the viewer by using hard cuts throughout. In an attempt to explain that the film becomes a balancing act between the conventions of realism and surrealism, Verhoeven, as he told Van Scheers, decided to shoot in deep focus.<sup>42</sup> According to the director, the foreground and background should be equally sharp; a shallow focus may 'exclude reality'.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, Verhoeven adopted the idea to hire special filters in order to obtain extremely bright colours one sees when watching surrealist paintings: blue should be deep blue and red deep red. And of course, these hyper-real colours were not only used during hallucinatory scenes but throughout the whole film. Verhoeven's choice to represent the dreams and visions via deep focus and bright colours was an eminently functional one to underscore the effect of the incessant oscillation between irony and seriousness.

## Conclusion

Adapting a text by Reve challenges film makers to introduce cinematic solutions to compensate for the impossibility to reproduce a literary style. The change in medium requires fundamental formal adjustments – this can be proposed as a golden rule in the 'form/content dilemma'. Or

to rephrase this, by partly quoting from Elliott: the only way for scriptwriter Soeteman and director Verhoeven to work in the spirit of Reve was to insist on 'the necessity of infidelity to its letter or form'.<sup>44</sup> Traditionally, notions of adaptations have been based upon a hierarchy: is the (content of the) source-text correctly replicated? Since the answer has all too often been couched in negative terms, the book is usually considered 'better' than the film. As Leitch argues, this 'will to evaluate' is one of the least interesting paths to pursue. If adaptation studies continue to be ruled by the 'dead hand of literature, taxonomy and evaluation', then it is on a road to nowhere.<sup>45</sup> One way to break this cycle is, as was the main thrust of this article, to take the stylistic idiosyncrasies of both literature and film at heart so that an adaptation is no longer judged in terms of imitation but of what one may call 'functional likeness'.<sup>46</sup>

In the case of the adaptation of Reve's *De vierde man*, the internal reflections of the narrator-protagonist in the book were relegated from the level of narration to that of focalization. The film pivots around the question: how does the main protagonist see things? The shift from narration (in the book) to focalization (in the film) is underscored by stylistic considerations, like the bright (surreal) colours and the deliberate choice for deep focus. According to Verhoeven, such cinematic principles problematize any attempt to draw a line between reality and fantasy. The impossibility to do so is more than a gimmick because, in this particular case, it turns Gerard's self-assured ironic wisecracks, presented in an apparently serious manner, inside out. His statements backfire when it appears that [39] the doctor considers them as serious messages, exculpating Christine and declaring Gerard sick. Conversely, should his statements be taken as ironic, their purport gains a serious undertone in retrospect, leading to the idea of an intricate conspiracy. When Gerard says sarcastically 'well, the people who listen, are they still around?' his ironic rhetorical question ('no, of course those people do not exist') also backfires for he himself has to become a person who listens to warning signs. Thus, the difficulty in *De vierde man* to discern between the writer's life-saving insight and his madness is framed by a series of remarks whose status remain unclear, incessantly hovering between earnestness and irony, postponing any decisive answer. Since the cinematic devices leave these remarks ambiguous, the film *De vierde man* becomes an instance of 'the irony of irony', in the vein of Reve's own provocatively playful writings.

## Notes

1. Thomas Leitch, *Film Adaptation & Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), p. 5.
2. *Ibidem*, p. 5.
3. Kamilla Elliott, 'Literary Film Adaptation and the Form/Content Dilemma', in *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, ed. by Marie-Laure Ryan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), p. 221.
4. Leitch, 'Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads', *Adaptation*, Vol. 1, no. 1, 2008, 63-77 (p. 63).
5. *Ibidem*, 63-77 (p. 63).
6. Kamilla Elliott, 'Literary Film Adaptation and the Form/Content Dilemma', pp. 220-1.
7. Dutch studies at Utrecht University have such a course since the year 2010.

8. 'Paul de Lussanet is een schilder, en Lieve Jongens is een gesproken plaatjesboek bij de roman.' Reve, quoted in Nop Maas, *Gerard Reve: Kroniek van een schuldig leven, deel 3: De late jaren (1975-2006)*. (Amsterdam: Van Oorschoot, 2012), p. 217. All translations are mine unless indicated otherwise.
9. Next to *De vierde man*, Reve's *De avonden* [The Evenings], his classic novel from 1947, was adapted by Rudolf van den Berg in 1989. The only reason for not discussing this honourable achievement is lack of space.
10. Ernst van Alphen, *Barokke vertellingen*. (Leiden: Universiteit van Leiden, 2001), pp. 16-7. The original quotes from Reve's *De taal der liefde* are: 'Scheppend kunstenaar, dat valt niet mede' (54) and 'Rijk zijn, dat brengt ook een hoop zorgen met zich mede' (69).
11. Maaïke Meijer, 'Reve's geestelijke liederen', *Bzzlletin* 19, nr. 170-171 (1989/1990), pp. 85-6.
12. Komrij's and De Moor's opinions are cited in Klaus Beekman, 'Omtrent Lieve Jongens en *De vierde man*: Twee boeken, twee films', *Bzzlletin* 138 (1986), p. 3.
13. *Ibidem*, 3.
14. 'Alles wat bij mij diepte of een dubbele bodem of een dubbelzinnige betekenis heeft, is in de film alleen maar in één duiding letterlijk neergezet. De "gein" is daardoor nooit schrijnend, en de figuren hebben niets tragies.' Reve, quoted in Maas, *Gerard Reve*, p. 216. [40]
15. This is a paraphrase of a title of an article by Seymour Chatman, 'What Novels Can Do that Films Can't (and Vice Versa)', *Critical Inquiry*, 7, 1 (1980), 121-40.
16. The Dutch television programme 'Andere Tijden' devoted half an hour to the history surrounding Spetters on 24 September 2002. A written account is available at: <http://www.geschiedenis24.nl/andere-tijden/afleveringen/2002-2003/Spetters-de-wording-van-een-cynisch-sprookje.html>.
17. 'Nou goed, dan maar een kunstfilm'. Verhoeven, quoted in Van Scheers, *Paul Verhoeven: De biografie* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 2008), pp. 234-5.
18. Harry Mulisch, *Het ironische van de ironie: Over het geval G.K. van het Reve* (Den Haag: Manteau, 1976), p. 52: Reve 'is als het ware door de dubbele bodem van de ironie gezakt. Wie ironisch spreekt, zegt het tegendeel van wat hij meent, maar zodanig, dat een ander dat doorziet. Van het Reve zegt wat hij meent, maar zodanig dat de ander dat niet doorziet en denkt nog steeds met ironie te doen te hebben.'
19. Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London / New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 60-4.
20. '(...) dat gehele mengsel van spel en ernst (...)' Gerard Reve, *De vierde man* (Amsterdam: Maarten Muntinga, 1987), p. 63.
21. Agnes Andeweg, *Griezelig gewoon: Gotieke verschijningen in Nederlandse romans, 1980-1995* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), p. 54.
22. Andeweg, *Griezelig gewoon*, p. 61. For her idea of the hybrid nature of gothic, Andeweg relied upon the study by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Gothic and the Comic Turn* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
23. Andeweg, *Griezelig gewoon*, p. 63.
24. 'Het is net of het [verhaal] in het midden leeg is (...)' Reve, *De vierde man*, p. 177.

25. '(...) mijn verhitte verbeelding.' Reve, *De vierde man*, p. 34.
26. Andeweg, *Griezelig gewoon*, p. 63.
27. '(...) kuste haar, precies als in een film (...).' Reve, *De vierde man*, p. 31.
28. 'En moest ik nu werkelijk opnieuw een filmscène creëren (...)?' Reve, *De vierde man*, p. 34.
29. 'De camera behoeft de scène niet over te doen: op deze manier werden de draaikosten gedrukt.' Reve, *De vierde man*, p. 87.
30. Andeweg, *Griezelig gewoon*, pp. 63-5.
31. '(...) een kat in de zak.' Reve, *De vierde man*, p. 42.
32. '(...) het is namelijk, als elk waar verhaal, een beetje onwaarschijnlijk en ongeloofwaardig.' Reve, *De vierde man*, p. 8.
33. In a contribution to the magazine *Bzzlletin* in 1986, Klaus Beekman argued that Verhoeven's adaptation has to be considered as deliberately infidel so that one should not commit the error, as many film reviewers did, to equate the actual novelist Reve with the film's protagonist. To underscore this point, Beekman focused on the obvious differences between book and film, e.g. the introduction of the woman in blue and the overarching theme of eyes in the screen version. Due to these changes, he claims, the irony of the source-text is lost, however. Andeweg quotes Beekman's observation that Verhoeven's film is short of humoristic devices (Andeweg, *Griezelig gewoon*, p. 55), [41] but my point is to suggest that irony manifests itself nonetheless as a subtle reading protocol, namely as an 'irony of the irony'. Klaus Beekman, 'Omtrent Lieve Jongens en *De vierde man*: Twee boeken, twee films', pp. 3-11.
34. Mieke Bal, *Narratology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 142.
35. This has also been noted by Van Scheers, Paul Verhoeven, p. 247.
36. 'Ik lieg de waarheid ... net zolang tot ik het zelf begin te geloven'.
37. 'Katholiek zijn betekent open staan voor het fantastische'.
38. 'Welja, waar vind je dat nog, mensen die luisteren?'
39. As such, *De vierde man* stands in the tradition of classic film noirs like *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *Gilda* (King Vidor, 1946), and *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947).
40. Soeteman, quoted in Van Scheers, Paul Verhoeven, p. 253.
41. If *Spetters* is nowadays considered in a much more favourable light than at the time of its original release, it predominantly owes this shift in reception to the lens of irony with which Verhoeven's films are seen in retrospect. An affinity with irony was not only apparent in *De vierde man*, but also in films he subsequently made in America, such as the over the top science-fiction *RoboCop* (1987) and his satire of a fascist iconography in *Starship Troopers* (1997).
42. Actually, Verhoeven's use of deep focus is not as consistent as he makes us believe. In the majority of scenes, the foreground is as sharp as the background, but not in all of them.
43. Van Scheers, Paul Verhoeven, p. 246.
44. Elliott, 'Literary Film Adaptation and the Form/Content Dilemma', p. 224, italics in original.
45. Leitch, 'Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads', p. 65.

46. The term 'functional likeness' is used by Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, in 'Introduction', *Between Page and Screen: Remaking Literature Through Cinema and Cyberspace*, ed. by Kiene Brillenburg Wurth (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), p. 18.

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