

Acting a fool

Evading knowledge in an analysis of
stupidity and re-meaning in post-
screwball comedy films

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Abstract

This thesis examines the representation of stupidity within film. Stupidity is treated in relation to theories about moral perfectionism and remarriage as set out by Stanley Cavell. Matthijs van Boxsel's optimistic theory about stupidity is used to lay a groundwork for the analysis. The films examined are *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994) (Joel and Ethan Coen), *Burn After Reading* (2008) (Joel and Ethan Coen), *Toni Erdmann* (2016) (Maren Ade) and *Alle Anderen* (2009) (Maren Ade). The analysis reveals that in the first two films follow a logic wherein stupidity functions to improve society's control on civilians. This obstructs the moral perfectionist perspective and reinforces a society's ideology with values such as cynicism and skepticism. The latter two films follow a logic wherein civilians employ stupidity as a method to undermine society's control, by rebelling against conform communities. This way, stupidity has the ability to make one set of values seem ridiculous, in order to let another set of values emerge, which is a moral perfectionist perspective in this work. The films are gathered around the idea of 'following a same set of values' - although they do so in different ways - under the denominator 'post-screwball comedies'. To explain this, my aim is to explicate the function of stupidity in the construction of 're-meaning'. Re-meaning echoes the influence Cavell's work has on this research, and how it impacts the way meaning in these films is interpreted. I conclude that a focus on knowledge is unhelpful in trying to pursue happiness and a Cavellian emphasis on 'neighbouring ourselves and others' is valuable, but made possible only by the function of stupidity.

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Introduction

Films mostly work on behalf of the ‘suspension of disbelief’. When watching a film, the viewer ignores his knowledge about what is and what is not possible, for the sake of the film’s argument. Without this fact, it would be impossible to make a film work. Film’s illusion lies in omitting certain ways the world works in reality and thereby creating another reality.

Within each genre and each film in its own, this mechanism works differently. Some rules about what is possible and what not count within the action genre, for example, but not in the genre of the romantic comedy. The viewer thus ‘plays dumb’ for the sake of a film’s narrative. Since a viewer needs the ability of playing stupid in order to actively watch a film, film genres are bound to the notion of stupidity. This example shows how stupidity works throughout the notion of film in relation to its audience. However, stupidity also seems to work *within* films, that is to say, films’ stories.

The history of narrative in film is littered with examples of stupidity, sometimes yielding personal profit to the protagonist and sometimes ridiculing ideas or concepts. The “dumb-blond” is an example of a character that reoccurs in several films (*Platinum Blonde* (1931), *Bombshell* (1933), *All About Eve* (1950), *Niagara* (1953), *Legally Blonde* (2001)). The dumb-blond is mostly a woman (at least, in all films I just mentioned) who pretends being dumb in order to get things done her way (Van Boxxel 2016, p. 36). A classic example of non-blond characters that use stupidity as ground on which to act is of course that of Laurel and Hardy. Their slapstick style only works on the condition of acting as-if not to understand normal physical boundaries.

Misunderstandings, false pretences and miscommunications: all are conditions from which film’s can initiate action. By limiting knowledge of a specific character, a group of characters or the audience, film can create curiosity and surprise (Bordwell & Thompson 2010, p. 93). Stupidity is never knowable since it works unseen and so all we do is blindly trust on knowledge (Van Boxxel 2016, pp. 85-86). Likewise, systems societies and ideologies rely on a blind trust on knowledge. This results in interesting situations, since blindly trusting on knowledge is never the solution for escaping stupidity, which leads to failures, collapses or loss, but also to success, gain or dumb luck. Our blind trust in knowledge gives all our actions something comical, something unreal and something indestructible (2016, p. 86). I think a fictional medium like film amply makes use of these situations. This is what makes film amusing to watch. At the same time, film gives us the opportunity to watch a phenomenon

like stupidity unwind in fictional worlds sometimes very similar to our own. Consequently, I think this topic offers enough interesting material to serve as subject of a thorough analysis.

Despite its apparent importance to film, the topic of stupidity is insufficiently examined within film studies. One of the rare works specifically devoted to stupidity is *De draagbare encyclopedie van de domheid (The portable encyclopaedia of stupidity)* (2016) by Matthijs van Boxsel. Throughout his career Van Boxsel wrote several other works around stupidity and continues to do research on the subject. This book in specific contains a self-assembled composition of the most essential parts of his books and readings. It provides clearness to what should be classified as 'stupid' and what stupidity entails. His book is full of examples of how stupidity is everywhere and how it makes the world go round (amongst which the role of the dumb blonde, which I mentioned before). Even though Van Boxsel's work about stupidity is by far the most extensive, there have been others who examined stupidity. Avital Ronell, for example, wrote a philosophical examination about the concept in her book *Stupidity* (2002). Like Van Boxsel, she is interested in structures of thinking that are inseparable from stupidity, in the rule and not in the exception (Ronell 2002, p. 21; Van Boxsel 2016, p. 50). She even devotes much attention to work of Robert Musil -who wrote that stupidity is not a lack of intelligence, as we usually think, but an independent character trait - of which Van Boxsel stated it triggered his fascination for stupidity (Van Boxsel). Surprisingly though, neither of both once mention each other's names in their indexes or work. Van Boxsel seems more invested in collecting as many examples as possible about stupidity, while Ronell seems more inclined to make philosophical explorations concerning the subject stupidity. Ronell does have an impressive assembly of sources, from both literature and philosophical traditions. By reading her book one comes to know a lot of writers and philosophers have in fact written, although not always so extensive (sometimes only a short sentence) or literally (sometimes only touching upon facets of the concept, like idiocy or foolishness) about stupidity. Notably, Van Boxsel states that he owes a lot of his ideas to philosophers Peter Sloterdijk and Slavoj Žižek (whom he honourably calls a "morosoof" ("morosopher")), but those two are never mentioned in Ronell's book (2016, p. 187). Van Boxsel is not so detailed in setting out philosophical traditions and reacting on ongoing philosophical debates like Ronell is. It seems the two complement each other in research, although a lot of their conclusions about stupidity as a phenomenon are overlapping. Since Ronell elaborates on philosophical traditions and Van Boxsel's work is more influenced by philosophers who have their roots in cultural sciences (the field of research where film

occurs), I prefer Van Boxsel's work as primary source for examining stupidity in film. I think Sloterdijk and especially Žižek offer theory that may provide interesting insights for researching film. Both influenced Van Boxsel, which is another reason to build upon Van Boxsel's work. That does not necessarily have as a consequence I mean to ban Ronell's work from this research, since I think her work is still remarkably different from that of Van Boxsel's. Rather, I mean to use her work as additional next to Van Boxsel's as part of influence on every remark about stupidity I will mention.

Other sources specifically about stupidity are for example 'Flaubert and the Rhetoric of Stupidity' (Leslie Hill, 1976), 'The Epistemic Efficacy of Stupidity' (Catherin Elgin, 1988), 'The Lesson of Balzac's Stupidity' (Herbert Gold, 1954), 'On the Politics and Sociology of Stupidity in Our Society' (Lewis Dexter, 1962), 'Stupidity of Deities' (*The Journal of American Folklore*, 1902), 'Stupidity is Anything at All' (Malcom Quinn, 2013) and 'Henry James and Stupidity' (Matthew Sussman, 2015). These sources are useful, but often very dated and rather short articles about specific manifestations of stupidity instead of bundles dedicated to stupidity *in general*, like Van Boxsel's or Ronell's. That does not necessarily mean they are useless, since every bit of knowledge about stupidity brings me closer to its core, but it does mean I merely used them as side roads in coming to think of stupidity and not as primary or secondary literature. Furthermore, all sources about stupidity treat it in an epistemological or ontological way, trying to get a general grip on it in society, philosophy or literature. No single source I have found expatiates on stupidity in film specifically, which is the reason for this research. Especially because stupidity works on behalf of fiction: fiction as the ability to put everything that seems self-evident to the proof. Stupidity works where everything seems self-evident (Van Boxsel 2016, p. 143). Self-evidence, in turn, only works due to fiction: we have learned to take some things for granted, while this is of course never the case (2016, p. 152). Film as fiction has the powerful competence of being a "mongrel medium" (as a mixture of linguistic, pictorial, dramatic, narrative, and aural forms) that fictionally 'tricks' its viewer on several levels (qtd. in MacDowell 2016, p. 8). Therefore, searching for stupidity, which likewise tricks self-evidence, and the way it is represented in film seems an almost fool proof assignment.

For this thesis, my choice of films is based on trying to elaborate on different kinds of stupidity in different kinds of film. Therefor I choose four films from different settings, using different styles. Two of the films, *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994) and *Burn After Reading*

(2008) are directed by American brothers Joel and Ethan Coen. The other two, *Alle Anderen* (2009) and *Toni Erdmann* (2016), are directed by German director Maren Ade. Ade's style is more realistic, while the Coen brothers choose to create an absurd like play that seems to have little to do with reality. I think each film can illustrate a different element of stupidity, showing some of the various ways it manifests itself. Since all the films, for their differences, lend themselves as better explained through different aspects of stupidity than others and these various aspects are better elaborated with different theories, I will use each film as an occasion to treat stupidity in relation to different content and theory. Eventually, in this way an overall picture of how stupidity is represented and functions in film can be formed. Each film thus is a separate element in trying to elaborate this question. As will become clear, for example *The Hudsucker Proxy* is more suitable than the other films to be explained through Žižek's ideas about the symbolic order of things and 'as-if' attitude, whereas *Alle Anderen* is where a greater emphasis on the importance of not-knowing and moral perfectionism by Stanley Cavell helps to illustrate its meaning and the function stupidity plays in this.

Stupidity seems to be a tool used in trying to achieve something, create something meaningful. It simultaneously is the cause for developing structures like knowledge or culture. I think the key in explaining stupidity in film would be to explain its relation to the construction of *meaning* in film. Meaning is the way a film is experienced by its viewer, based on the way sets of (social) values are portrayed (Bordwell and Thompson 2010, p.p. 62-65). Examining meaning will help to illustrate how stupidity is a cause for action and a motivation for development. Cavell writes about the possibility to build up things and the importance of interdependence in building up romance, a shared identity and the identity of a democratic nation. To stay with his line of thought and his emphasis on the 're-happening' of things I looked for films that construct meaning *again*. An important aspect of the constructivism of stupidity is namely the ability to 'fake' optimism and be a little gullible about the future without being too skeptic; to have a hard head in an altogether cynical situation. In situations where failure casts doubt, say because of a divorce, it is necessary to overcome this doubt gained by this failure that prevents people from trying again. Therefore I will talk about stupidity in film in relation to a so called 're-meaning'. This term echoes Cavell's legacy and I think his faith in constructivism is key to understand stupidity in relation to meaning. Because it is a word in Cavell's tradition, as I will come to explain in the first chapter, meaning and re-meaning account for cynicism and skepticism and is always a

reply to these notions, whether a film's meaning is found criticizing them or acknowledging them.

The "re-" before meaning supposes a change in meaning has occurred. "Re-" promises second chances that can mutilate circumstances around the experience of meaning. Whether this is a mere adjustment or an entire transformation is film-dependant. Like comedies of remarriage, a subgenre of screwball comedy films discussed by Cavell that I explain in the first chapter, the films I chose all feature characters that express the need for interdependence. They try to overcome obstacles that prevent them from coming together again, or in one case, at all. That is why I will refer to those films as 'post-screwball comedies'. I base this title on the idea Cavell proposed for his collection of films as comedies of remarriage, not as being a genre, but as films following a same kind of 'logic'. Since remarriage is not the focus of this research, but re-meaning, I will not refer to the film assemblage as 'post-comedies of remarriage', but as referring to a very similar kind of logic, thus of screwball comedies. I will, with this thesis, settle to formulate an answer to the following question: 'In which ways does stupidity function to construct re-meaning in the post-screwball comedy?' For each film I will elaborate stupidity in functioning in the construction of re-meaning individually and in my conclusion I will come to answer its function in the construction of re-meaning for the 'post-screwball comedy' as a whole (that is to say, for the four films I will analyse and interpret).

Searching for stupidity in film is searching for the way it is represented. When does stupidity manifests itself in the story? When does this welcome or unwelcome guest arrive and shakes things up? These questions require attention to cause and effect of film's narrative. Therefore, I will only devote sporadic attention to specific analyses of film as 'moving image'. Of course, when considering narrative I regard all filmic aspects (including elements like sound, mise-en-scene, cinematography and editing) that together form this, though I do not think it is relevant to specifically describe them continuously. To get a grip on film form's numerous aspects I will rely on David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's way of analysing film. This method is set out in their manual *Film Art: An Introduction* (2010). In regarding stupidity as constructing re-meaning in film, I will look at how a film consists of systems of relationships, that all together is form (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010 p. 55). Looking for the 'function' of stupidity in the construction of re-meaning means to treat it as an element that fulfils a role within the whole system (2010, p. 67). Bordwell and Thompson pay specific attention to film as a form and integrate 'content' as a part of form specifically, while others often separate

these components (2010, p. 58). A film itself contains no meaning, unless the viewer addresses meaning to it. It would then make no sense to treat content apart from form.

So, if stupidity is something that causes action and, eventually, re-meaning in film, this can for example be an element that *functions* in the story in a certain way. We can ask ourselves what it is doing there, assume that it has some kind of motivation for being there, but this is always regarded as part of the whole form (and thus content) of the film (Bordwell & Thompson 2010, pp. 67-68). Stupidity in this way is regarded as having a filmic form that can consist of linguistic, pictorial, dramatic, narrative, and aural elements altogether (MacDowell 2016, p. 8). Since this form is never neutral, by the style in which it is portrayed, I will elaborate for each film on how its form is characterized or sets a certain tone, since this is crucial for determining meaning and re-meaning and stupidity's function in the construction of this. So to take Bordwell and Thompson's way of looking at film as a method, means that I agree with their ideas about film as a form, the way how this is analysed and their explanation of 'function' and 'meaning' present in my research question. Since there is always a meaning before "re-" I will first take time in each chapter to divide attention to its symptomatic meaning and in the end I will conclude how this constructs a re-meaning: as meaning has now undergone a change.

Finally, the setup of this thesis is organized in five chapters. In the **first chapter** I will elaborate on Van Boxsel's examination of stupidity and Cavell's problem with the focus on knowledge, skepticism and the moral perfectionist perspective. I will elaborate on Emerson and Thoreau's influences in Cavell's theory and explain why I will combine theory of Cavell to stupidity.

Similar to the design of Van Boxsel's latest work, *Domheid als methode* (2017) ("*Stupidity as a method*"), the second and third chapter are about the ways an ideology or society use stupidity to keep its civilians under control. Chapter four and five are about how civilians can use stupidity as a strength to free themselves from the positions society, keeping them under control, has put them in. These chapters stress the way figures like tricksters, wise fools and foolish wisemen (and women) undermine stupidity by imitating it and in this way overturn it in itself (Van Boxsel 2017, pp. 109-110). Stupidity as method for ideology is echoed through both Coen's films, while Ade's films reflect the undermining of stupidity by characters who try to 'outstupid' ideology's grip on them and the situation they are in. The Coen's films focus on a society and this leads to another perspective on stupidity than stupidity in Ade's

films, which focuses on interpersonal, small communities. I will come to elaborate that the first two films I examine have an ironic or cynical tone to, or view on the story, whereas the last two films examined have a more Cavellian-romantic tone.

The **second chapter** treats stupidity's function in constructing re-meaning in *The Hudsucker Proxy* and is placed in relation to Žižek's ideas about the symbolic order, fantasy, desire and ideology and how this illustrates how ideas and actions can be regarded as stupid for one group but smart for another. Stupidity is represented in dumb luck and blindly trusting in knowledge. Notions of Cavell about naivety and childishness play part. Skepticism and cynical reasoning (as I will come to introduce) are no causes for bemoaning, though they are both treated as methods of stupidity by the social values of its central ideology. Re-meaning comes from an interpersonal perspective mainly, since ideology closes off a transformation of a wider kind.

Treating stupidity's function in constructing re-meaning in *Burn After Reading* is the subject of the **third chapter**. Cavell's notion about self-reliance (which he borrows from Emerson) is treated as a problem because of the film's prevailing classical stupidity. Ideology here totally shapes the desires and fantasies of society's civilians and so I will use Žižek's theory about these notions. Skepticism and cynicism triumph as the main issues of the film, since classical stupidity prevents the protagonist from gaining anything from these notions. Re-meaning is established in illustrating devastation and a closed future.

In the **fourth chapter** *Toni Erdmann* is analysed. The protagonist used stupidity as a deliberate tool for gaining some interpersonal contact. It is about the 'acknowledgement' of skepticism, as Cavell would describe it. Notions about foolishness and the position of the trickster in a realistic world are treated due to theory about the grotesque performance. It stresses more attention to Van Boxxel's latest work, *Domheid als methode*. It is about how meaning is regained by the fool by a tactic Van Boxxel would refer to as 'subversive affirmation', in the form of excessive over-identification. A stupidity called 'feigned stupidity' plays a minor role. Since ideology is less controlling or triumphing in this film, Žižek is less applied than in chapter two and three.

The last and **fifth chapter** resembles the function of stupidity of the fourth chapter, though with an emphasis on identity. In this chapter's film, *Alle Anderen*, characters use stupidity in order to rebel against prevailing conformity of a neighbourly couple. This form of stupidity is referred to as 'performed naiveté'. Since it is used as a method in order to reach a more moral perfectionist perspective, I consider it an act of civic disobedience in this film. Skepticism and cynicism are acknowledged and gained as legacy. Cavell's notion about the importance of

education is treated, combination with his focus on 'the importance of not-knowing'. Desire is regarded as a small item of relevance and re-meaning is created on an interpersonal level. In the conclusion I will echo everything I already stated about the film in a summary, including an answer to the main question of research. For this I will read stupidity and re-meaning as a structure throughout the logic of these films, regarding them as post-screwball comedies. For now, let me start with the first chapter and examine stupidity, the problem with knowledge, skepticism and the moral perfectionist perspective.

Theoretical framework

Stupidity

Several characteristics seem decisive for the exceptional way stupidity functions and causes effect. First, Van Boxxel claims that stupidity is conspicuous in being an independent property with its own logic. Those who search for stupidity in the realm of their intelligence at best just grow a little wiser about the limits of their own intelligence, but learn nothing about stupidity, since stupidity is not opposed to intelligence. Second, he even states that all failed attempts to get a hold on stupidity all together form our intelligence, our civilization and culture (Van Boxxel 2016, p. 51, 56). This is because stupidity can have such fatal effects that it is a threat to our existence (2016, p. 55). Therefore, we *had* to develop intelligence, in order to survive (2016, p. 56). Consequently, he concludes stupidity is the ability to act against your own interest (2016, p. 56). Stupidity is especially toxic when combined with intelligence, because this combination has the potential to enforce stupidity's destructive effects: the intelligent ignoramus is the one who succeeds in its project. I would now like to emphasise that stupidity is never graspable. It is always discovered *afterwards*. It has an invisible characteristic that causes stupidity only to be found where a fiasco occurs; it is hidden in the *action of doing* (2016, p. 72). We always seem to act on behalf of what we think is right, which is based on what we know. What we know, in turn, is culture dependent, meaning this culture is the result of the times we *did* succeed in trying something and it did not end up in a failure.

Understandably, our actions always open up the possibility that we suddenly bump into the exception to the rule. To illustrate Van Boxxel's ideas I will take a simple example from his encyclopaedia: a lumberjack who wants to cut off a branch of a tree but was sitting on the wrong side of the branch. He chooses the right goal (separating the branch from the tree) and the right tool (a sharp saw) and likewise he succeeds in reaching his goal. The problem, then, is that he sat on the wrong side of the branch, which causes him to fall and break his neck (2016, p. 51-52). Van Boxxel gives some further examples of how intelligence in combination with stupidity results in an explosive mixture: motorists with airbags and seat belts in their car drive approximately 20 per cent faster than those without and filters to purify tap water appear to be perfect breeding grounds for bacteria. An example that perfectly illustrates that stupidity can mean development as well as disaster for civilization is the story about the inhabitants of Easter Island: for five hundred years they chopped down trees on their island in order to construct enormous stone statues of their ancestors who should protect their civilization from doom from outside. Around the year 1600 A.D. the island was completely deforested.

Without canoes and firewood, tuna and sea turtle disappeared from the menu (the main sources of animal protein), with cannibalism as its final result (2016, p. 58-59).

These, sort of ‘basics’ of stupidity give an idea of what it is and how it operates. Stupidity operates in so many ways it also manifests itself in many ways. Van Boxsel’s idea about making an encyclopaedia about the phenomenon can be regarded an effect of trying to get a grip of the numerous ways in which it manifests itself. Examining these manifestations makes one’s knowledge about stupidity presumably wider and better. Van Boxsel has said to examine the subject from 1983 onwards and has written several books about stupidity, including seven encyclopaedias (Van Boxsel). His most recent work is *Domheid als methode* (‘*Stupidity as a method*’) (2017), which offers interesting perspectives on stupidity as deliberate tool. In film, for instance, this reminds of *The Truman Show* (1998), where a worldwide audience of a reality TV-show tries to keep the show’s protagonist Truman (Jim Carrey) ignorant about the fact he is born in a TV show and is still broadcasted. In a way, they use stupidity as a method in order to keep Truman numb.

Cavell, skepticism and moral perfectionism

Like stated above, the discussion of stupidity problematizes our trust on knowledge. This is something Stanley Cavell addresses throughout his work, specifically to a film series about ‘remarriage’. The problem with knowledge is something Cavell defends, although he highly recommends not to be disappointed by it. Cavell extensively discusses skepticism, as the result of an excessive focus on knowledge, and fears for its domination in philosophical debates and our general thinking. He proposes we should not focus knowledge so fiercely as skepticism does and, in turn, as we have come to do. Cavell introduces concepts as “not-knowing” in order to *experience* things instead of always trying to *know* things (Macarthur 2014, p. 4, 20). Cavell also attaches great value to lines of thought by Henry Thoreau and Ralph Emerson and his work repeatedly echoes their legacy. In relation to film he examines self-named ‘comedies of remarriage’, as a subgenre of the ‘screwball comedy’ that flourished between roughly 1934 and 1941, on how instead of trust on knowledge, trust on experience of the self and the other is a driving force for the protagonists in these films (Cavell 1981, p. 2). In his book *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981) he discusses seven screwball comedies (e.g. *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *The Philadelphia Story* (1940)) in the light of his idea about ‘remarriage’. ‘Remarriage’ constitutes something different than an actual law-bound marriage. It is about the *will* to live together again - whatever that may mean for each specific couple (1981, p. 2). It is an idealized image of an attainable perfect

community (Rodowick 2015, p. 251). Comedies of remarriage are about the “metaphysical discussion of the concept that underlines both the classical problem of comedy and that of marriage, namely, the problem and the concept of identity” (1981, p. 54, 55). The films emphasize the reuniting of the central couple after (emotional) separation and treat themes such as feminism, liberty and interdependence. *Pursuits of Happiness* is a medium specific book that treats these film’s stories all as a “continued search for a new intimacy in the self’s relation to its world” (1981, p. 15). Characters seek for this just outside the city, where divorce and confusion govern (1981, p. 19). The films falling under the genre (although Cavell does not literally call it a genre, mere films following a same kind of “logic” (1981, p. 24) depict a kind of romanticism that in “showing our fantasies, they express the inner agenda of a nation [or community] that conceives Utopian longings and commitments for itself.” (1981, p. 18).

Akin to Van Boxsel, Cavell is in fact very optimistic about trying not to trust knowledge so profoundly. First he problematizes the focus of it, after which he provides an alternative for it in the form of ethics. Cavell claims we can focus on experience and ethics more and Van Boxsel finds salvation in stupidity. For them, knowledge is overrated, either because stupidity is inevitable and more knowledge will not prevent this or because a high focus on it caused skepticism, which causes human isolation (on which I will elaborate soon). Meanwhile, we can conclude that stupidity is underrated; in fact it contributes highly to (or is even the factor that produces) science, civilization and our existence (Van Boxsel). It is the *constructive* side of stupidity that Van Boxsel tries to emphasize: the inevitable aspect of stupidity is no cause for hopelessness. He even proposes to make stupidity our best side (Van Boxsel 2016, p. 91). Making stupidity our best side is a turning away from the banal hoariness and stiffness stupidity can cause. It is a movement toward becoming colourfully, versatile stupid (2016, p. 91). The inevitable aspect of stupidity is not something we should become cynical about or disappointed by. It is an advice against hopelessness about that stupidity is inevitable and our knowledge so is not equal to certainty or even safety. This hopelessness for Cavell also originates in our focus on knowledge, which became skepticism when we concluded some things are never knowable. He also gives advice to become hopeful again. The reason van Boxsel gives for why stupidity should become our best side I think is where he meets Cavell and is where they complement each other in theory. They both propose society should “move on” from a passive point of resigning ourselves. In order to further explain their similarities and additional aspects, let me elaborate on how Cavell came to view the self and its relation to

the world, of which he stated the comedies of remarriage are about. This starts with the problem he has with skepticism and evolves in a hopeful perspective he has thereupon formed, of “moral perfectionism”, which I will come to explain. In doing so I will use the work *Philosophy’s Artful Conversation* by D.N. Rodowick (2015), that has an extended consideration of Cavell’s legacy. I will later engage Van Boxsel’s view on stupidity and his solution for making it our best characteristic (set out in *Domheid als methode*) within this argument.

A lot of Cavell’s work is a reaction on our focus on knowledge, specifically in the form of skepticism and its presence in our society, thinking and behaving. Skepticism is “an epistemological disappointment in that we are disconnected by the world by our own subjectivity.”(Rodowick 2015, p. 235) Skepticism penetrates our minds with the idea that “what is unknown in the natural world could not become known through the powers of causal reasoning” (2015, p. 236). Thus, there is always a barrier between us and the world and us and what we know of the world. This leads to moral disappointment in the world, others and ourselves and this enforces an inhuman isolation (from ourselves, others and the world) that prevents human sociability or community (2015, p. 233). In this light, remarriage, as the will to live together again is something at least Cavell finds very appreciating and explains his interest in the comedies of remarriage. The couples reunited in these films, as stated before, all got to this point in searching for a new intimacy in the self and their relation to the world. In researching how these couples come to reinvent and reunite, Cavell is convinced a perspective of “moral perfectionism” caused liberation from the deadening and alienating forces of skepticism. In this moral perfectionism Cavell echoes ideas of mainly Wittgenstein (which I will not elaborate on because I think this is of little significance to my point), Emerson and Thoreau. Emerson and Thoreau were both involved in a project that may be called “self-culture”, which involves internalization of all forms of education and the effacement of all dependent external influences (Dove 1989, p. 1183). By recalling their ideas about self-culture, Cavell provides a romantic, almost utopian vision on society and humans in relation to society and each other. Nevertheless he sounds hopeful this vision can again become a realistic, instead of a romantic vision. To make this become realistic would require openness about the future and a reduction of skepticism and cynicism. Then again, that is what moral perfectionism should preferably achieve anyway: the possibility for a good society, or at least a better one (2015, p. 250).

In this way, ethics is Cavell's therapeutic response to skepticism. Ethics (and ideas about ethics from Emerson and Thoreau in specific) formed this moral perfectionism, which is "a perspective on the potentiality for, and necessity of, entering into moral conversation and ethical self-examination in moments of crisis, confusion and dissatisfaction with others and oneself" (2015, p. 234, 247). These crises are often found in what Emerson calls "conformity": the commonness of unrelieved daily routine (and is also explained as Emerson's distaste of moral cynicism). It is important to know that skepticism is originally a defiant reaction on this conformity and skepticism altogether is not necessarily a bad thing, though the effects of an excess of skepticism are regarded as inhuman (2015, pp. 234-237, 281). So, in trying to take on the moral perfectionist perspective it is important to *acknowledge* skepticism *each day* (since it is constantly forgotten), and not to deny it. The moral perfectionist perspective includes about everything Cavell proposes is needed for the couples in films about remarriage to become motivated for remarriage, and later to actually remarry. It is his solution for the abandonment of the focus on knowledge that causes skepticism and is his "commitment to go on in a certain way" (1989, p. 1183). Since this perspective relies so clearly on Emerson's and Thoreau's specific ideas about self-culture, I will take a small paragraph to elaborate on what these ideas are. In this paragraph I will come to mention several key concepts that are crucial to understand the moral perfectionist perspective and will become important for this thesis. Moral perfectionism will found to be the perspective to be pursued, for which stupidity can be a practical method, as I will explain after this paragraph.

In comedies of remarriage, characters must first be motivated in order to take on this perfectionist perspective. For this motivation, Cavell states you need to experience a mode of existence that *limits* your life and be appealed to "a community and a certain rationality to the self in its potential (if often failed) intimacy with others." (Rodowick 2015, p. 233, 243). One thus needs the *desire* for change or becoming. However, this desire alone is not enough, one needs to enact one's existence and that of other persons and things as participating in a shared form of life (2015, pp. 233-234, 240). For this, one needs to have knowledge of the self ("self-knowledge") in order to transform it ("self-transformation") (2015, p. 236). Cavell reminds us that this path is rarely taken, since it always results in the betrayal of the self as it reaches for a yet unattained mode of existence. This betrayal (which is also perceived as a less negative "freeing" the self) is called "self-disobedience" (2015, p. 239). This transformation

is only possible if a constant “self-education” takes place, both before and during the transformation. According to Emerson, this education never happens in solitude:

it requires an intercessor, friend or interlocutor, real or imagined. It requires a community (actual or virtual) of at least two to exemplify a process whereby a future self and future form of community can be discovered and aspired to. (2015, p. 243)

In the comedies of remarriage this friend always is the man from the couple, whereas the woman is the one being educated. For Cavell, Emerson and Thoreau, this community always is a very democratic one (whereas Plato proposed subordination to a sage or master). In the democratic community, there is room for recognition and opinions of its participants. Also, the community is devoted to friendship, play, surprise and mutual education. This friend in education always needs to return one’s own thoughts, which mirror his “true” desires. In this way this friend learns you that you are awakening your *own* desires that were already there, but just were rejected. Since education for Cavell always happens through conversation, one needs to be able to express oneself through language (and to share the same language of the community). To share the same language here means something like understanding each other; speaking merely the same language like “English” is not enough for Cavell. In becoming educated one becomes “self-reliant”, as was of course put forward in Emerson’s essay “self-reliance” (2015, pp. 243-244). Since moral perfectionism is also a “revolt against a standing community of conformity, suffocating and resistant to change, self-disobedience” - and this is where Thoreau’s important idea completes perfectionism’s perspective - “becomes civic disobedience” (2015, p. 269).

In this summary the moral perfectionist perspective may sound as a sort of blueprint, while it is not, because Cavell does not seem to have any specific outcome in mind and finality is in fact excluded from this project (2015, p. 236). It is a guiding perspective, in the sense that education is important especially in a society where everybody is highly skeptic and cynical: Cavell is the “other” that is needed to transfer this education. Cavell mentions that moral perfectionism is enacted in the acknowledgement of the self and others in this world; to no longer be skeptic about their existence. In the “neighbouring ourselves and others” (an idea he lends from Thoreau) community can become point of attention again instead of something we choose to be closed off of (Cavell 1981 p. 79; Rodowick 2015, p. 285).

If moral perfectionism is a perspective, then stupidity can be its method to assist perfectionist practices of becoming, overcoming and projection (of projecting the mind into new contexts) (Rodowick 2015, p. 241). Van Boxsel proposes stupidity is the solution for the misery it caused in the first place: it can act against all knowledge – of what society has become and the pessimistic realization that stupidity is inevitable. Just as inevitable are “the daily confusions, conflict, and misunderstandings that separate us, and in which we deal or are dealt little deaths every day” for Cavell (and of which I think stupidity is an important instigator) (2015, p. 247). Ironically, acting against all knowledge is precisely how stupidity is defined (Van Boxsel 2016, p. 55). Forms of stupidity that enact this method are similar appearances such as “grotesque performance”, “subversive affirmation” and childlike “performed naivety”. Stupidity can become a method for a society in order to control its civilians, though it can also become a method for liberation for these same civilians, Van Boxsel claims (2017, p. 109). For these civilians, these forms of stupidity offer a solution and enable them to pursue a moral perfectionist perspective. As I will come to elaborate throughout this thesis, in some films stupidity is mainly presented as a sham of society and the ideology it maintains, from an ironic perspective. This causes the moral perfectionist perspective to be kept at distance. For the other films it is the other way around and stupidity is used to escape this societal control. In order to explain how precisely stupidity works in maintaining ideology and society’s grip on civilians I will use Van Boxsel’s *Domheid als methode* and theory by Slavoj Žižek. However, since I will relate them to the major theory by Van Boxsel and Cavell I will not go into further detail about these ideas until they are applicable for a film in a chapter. The same applies to the forms of stupidity mentioned in this paragraph. Important to know for now is that Van Boxsel, Cavell and Žižek all seem to agree that too much skepticism and relying on knowledge and intelligence causes a cynical way of thinking that makes us isolated, nihilistic, ironic, passive, falsely enlightened and a prey for ideology. The first two films I will elaborate on in this thesis work from an ironic perspective (as the style mechanism of skepticism and cynism) and therefore lack a romantic Cavellian persuasion (since by irony everything we say about things becomes false) (2015, pp. 276-277, 285). These films merely highlight problems and falseness instead of trying out possible solutions. The last two films do engage in this, trying to transform community. The subject of these two films is already of interpersonal matter and echo the moral perfectionist perspective. Stupidity is constructively used in forms of grotesque performance, subversive affirmation and childlike naivety. I will now start with the analyses and interpretation of stupidity in the first film, *The Hudsucker Proxy*.

The Hudsucker Proxy's circle of stupidity

In this chapter, the construction of re-meaning occurs within the realm of a prevailing ideology based on profit. As a consequence, ideology leaves no room for real transformations, only for small adjustments. This way, no openness towards a future results. An open future is only faintly *suggested*, since skepticism firmly shapes the values concerned by this future. Žižek's theory on symbolic order and its use of fantasy will be applied to explain how this ideology is formed and functions. As I will come to elaborate, the symbolic order steers us to apply an 'as if'-mentality, a form of stupidity employed by an ideology. Cavell helps to explain how characters, in their fantasies and spoken texts, need to find the right "language" in order to form a community. The ability for giving second chances is an important theme in this film and echoes a moral perfectionist perspective. This perspective, however, is ridiculed by a continuous ironic tone that causes distance to any meaningful content in the film. Fantasy and ideology are, with help of Van Boxsel's theory, noted as forms of stupidity as a method. Also, how ideas can be regarded as stupid by one group, but as smart by another, is a central theme clarified by theory on stupidity. I will now first discuss the film's plot.

Plot and tone

The Hudsucker Proxy (Ethan and Joel Coen, 1994) (*THP*) is a film that involves most closely, even intertextually, the stylistic elements of the genre of all the films in this thesis (Conard 2008, p. 195). The Coen brothers themselves stated that Frank Capra's and Preston Sturges' films, two directors that both made films greatly influencing the screwball comedy genre, were the foundations where *THP* is based on. Joel Coen stated that "there is Capra in the film, [...] but there is more Sturges" (Adams 2015, p. 91). *THP* is set in New York City's 1958. Norville Barnes (Tim Robbins) starts to work as a mailroom clerk at Hudsucker Industries. By dumb luck he is almost instantly promoted to president of Hudsucker Industries, for Sidney J. Mussberger (Paul Newman) and the company's other executives regard him as an imbecile who will cause the company's stocks to fall. This is desirable, since the company's founder and president just committed suicide and the company's stocks are on the verge of being sold to the public. Lowering the stock price would enable Sidney and colleagues to buy the stocks themselves, being the only ones knowing it is a scam. This way, they will gain ownership of the company. Meanwhile, journalist Amy Archer (Jennifer Jason Leigh) is sent out to write a story about Norville, of whom she already realizes he is an idiot. Her task is to find out who he "really" is. She gains access to his inner circle, without him realizing that her

real motivation is to to unmask him as an idiot. Amy unexpectedly develops affectionate feelings for Norville and starts to regret her betrayal. When Norville later adopts the role of a cold and pragmatic businessman, Amy leaves him. Following events show Norville being fired with the start of the new year, him discovering Amy's true intentions and him being enlisted for psychiatric hospitalisation, after which he desperately attempts jumping from the 44th floor, but, instead, accidentally trips down. He then is magically saved by an angel in the shape of old Waring Hudsucker (Charles Durning), after which he inherits all Hudsucker's shares, declares his love to Amy and – as the voice-over tells us – “went on and ruled with wisdom and compassion” (2015, p. 97).

Ironic tone and lack of critique

The stylistic plenitude of ‘screwball antics’ (criticized for being *too* plenitude by the film's critics, blaming the Coens for choosing form over content) is used “to lighten its treatment of weightier themes”, Jeffrey P. Adams writes (2015, p. 88). He describes the film's moral as “men who value career and material success above all else, even above personal relationships, are fated to live empty lives and ultimately to suffer despair” (2015, p. 86). He addresses a more moral theme in the film called “Capra-style karma” (2015, pp. 88, 92), which I will later in this chapter elaborate upon. For a film that may lack positive critiques, a moral is uncovered, nevertheless, by relating it to themes that concern my interpretation of the story. *THP* relies on an excess of cynical irony, something Adams ascribes to Sturges' influence on the film. Where Capra is considered much more sentimental and much less sympathetic to business and society, Sturges is not necessarily opposed to these entities and “prefers the comic fool whose redemption is granted not for his altruistic motives but in spite of his character weaknesses” (2015, p. 91). Indeed, although Norville almost dies due to bitter Wall Street mentality, instead of wishing the corporate world goodbye, he ends up joyfully running the company, introducing a new product (the Frisbee) that will keep Hudsucker Industries flourishing. The narrator, a voice-over by character Moses (Bill Cobbs), proclaims Norville went on and ruled with wisdom and compassion, but ends the film saying “You know there was a man who jumped from the 45th floor? But that's another story.”, and then laughs exuberantly. This way, the film does not allow itself to be interpreted as the romantic story it proclaims to be. Moses' laugh indicates the narrator thought of his story as a joke, distancing himself from the content, and betrays an ironic view on the story. Even if we would choose to believe that Norville went on and ruled with wisdom, we know the film's historical setting contradicts this belief, since, for example, the corporate neoliberal 1980s were still to come.

Therefore, the film can be deemed a farce, where extremely fast “anti-realism dialogues” aim to discourage identification with its characters (similar to ironic mechanisms cause to do (2015, p. 93). Its highly anti-sincere postmodernist tone would set Capra aside as a “sentimentalist dreaming nostalgically of the return of an America based on cultural myths that likely never existed” (2015, p. 93). I think that the happy ending of the film’s focus, the love story, does not engage the audience to critique the neoliberal ideology addressed in the film. Norville never questions this ideology and never tries to transform, for example, Hudsucker Industries’ main goal of making profit. The cynical tone that causes distance to any non-cynical or non-ironic content is important for how to interpret the film. It shows us how to regard all possible meaning created in the content.

Stupidity of help for transition

THP’s lack of ideological critique might be a reason no romantic Cavellian community emerges, while this is a function of stupidity. Stupidity, Van Boxsel writes in *Domheid als methode* (2017), is pre-eminently fitted for preceding a period of transition where one culture resigns and another emerges. It has the ability to unmask one culture as a mere game of power and enables the other culture to be taken so seriously it becomes the new order (2017, p. 92). In *THP*, this does not really happen, although dumb luck does put Norville, who ruled with wisdom and compassion, in charge of the company. For reasons mentioned above, this does not necessarily imply that a moral perfectionist perspective is pursued, although some adjustments prosper, despite the film’s ironic tone. Norville and Amy live through a transition of self-knowledge, education and revision, and a slight adjustment in the community’s culture at Hudsucker’s can be observed as well. Love does prosper by the remarriage of Amy and Norville. In the end, mutual shared values come to form a new policy at Hudsucker’s, one that is seemingly more democratic than the previous one, when the staff was corrupt and remorseless. They attempted to swindle stock holders, assigned their president for psychiatric hospitalisation, did not permit second chances and upheld “time is money” as their prevailing slogan. Stupidity’s share in this shift, however, stays limited to dumb luck. There are no individuals in *THP* that use stupidity as a method to undermine the system. Norville is dumb, but not deliberately so, and only has the ambition of promoting at Hudsucker’s. The real change simply arrives post-mortem thanks to Waring Hudsucker. In the epilogue, he returns as an angel and reminds Norville that he had to deliver a blue letter, which apparently contains Waring’s last will. This last will recommends that second chances are to be given at the company from that moment on. We however have no assumption that the high work

pressure at the bottom of the company, where the mail clerks and other lower employees work under constant threat of being fired due to a small mistake and where Norville himself started, is fairly reduced.



Figure 1. Norville's circle-drawing.

Knowledge becomes fantasy

There is, however, one aspect in the film wherein stupidity plays an important part: the blind trust on knowledge by Sidney and his colleagues. This stupidity facilitates the dumb luck of Norville's promotion. Let me explain this by first mentioning that something can be smart for one group, but stupid for another simultaneously. When Norville first starts to work at Hudsucker, he tells his colleague at the mailroom that he has an idea about how to make his way "up". He shows his colleague a folded paper with a drawn circle on it, without giving any context on how this is supposed to be a good idea - he only substantiates his argument by saying "You know, for kids!". His colleague represents the viewer's reaction with his disbelief in the man through his reaction: sarcastically answering "Terrific!", and disapprovingly looking the other way. Here, Norville seems too naïve to be taken serious, as he believes that he can make himself clear with nothing else but a plain drawing and relies on this as his "ticket upstairs". This makes him resemble the classic fool that is ignorant of any relativity. His stupidity is further emphasized by his ideas that are so innovative that no one until then would have thought of it as a success. Therefore, everyone regards these ideas as stupid. The only possible exception is Moses, who has a position as all-knowing narrator and hence knows what will happen, and later tells Amy he regards Norville as a "A smart one". Sidney and his staff seem to have accidentally chosen someone who is stupid, but intelligent

in making inventions nevertheless. At the place where he is – a manufacturing company – he has the ability to bring his idea into production. The staff is ignorant about the fact that something very simple still has the possibility of becoming a success, and thus expects that Norville's stupidity will cause his idea to become a failure. As a result, the employees at Hudsucker's think of Norville's idea as stupid, while it actually is about to become a huge success. Sidney and his staff seem overconfident about their plan to make the stocks of Hudsucker's drop by Norville's idiotic idea.

In addition, Sidney and his staff blindly trust on knowledge about stocks and shares and are even willing to put all their influence on the company at risk by placing an imbecile at the highest position. Actually, the financial market is highly unpredictable, and not based on rationality at all. This makes their plan risky to such a level that one might call it stupid. Afterwards (stupidities, as stated in the introduction, are only discovered afterwards when it is too late) promoting Norville to the function of president is regarded a stupid idea – at least when it comes to Sidney, the brain behind the scheme, since his chance of ruling the company vanishes because of his idea to put Norville in charge. It is the plan's failure that makes it a stupidity; otherwise it would only contribute to certainty and confirm existing knowledge about doing business with stocks and shares. Stupid as it may seem, for Sidney and colleagues it is entirely logic to believe in their rational idea. It would be too absurd for them to be executives of a company that is founded on dumb luck and irrationality, just as it would be too absurd to be millionaires only because of the functioning of such a system. This would imply that their entire careers and capital are based on irrationality, something that is impossible to believe in a community wherein irrationalities and idiots are taboo. Thus, they choose to believe the fantasy that their careers are based on logic and rationality, which causes them to put everything they worked for at risk and turns them into the very fools they believed they were not. Symbolically, at the end of the film, when Waring Hudsucker's last will suddenly appears in a (by Norville) forgotten letter and states that all shares belong to the new president of the company (which is Norville), Sidney indeed loses his mind and ends up in the mental hospital.

The executives' knowledge at Hudsucker's seems to maintain a fantasy that keeps the corporate system at Hudsucker Industries going. Van Boxsel states that people create little fantasies in order to generate systems, such as the educational system (2016, p. 79). Education functions by pretending that individuals teach their memories to remember facts. In fact, the opposite is true: one learns facts and knowledge only in order to develop a good functioning memory, as in ten years a third of all this knowledge is lost, another third is never used and

the last third has become irrelevant. Realizing this would be disastrous for students' moral, and would have as a consequence that they would probably not (be encouraged to) learn facts, which in fact is a very useful training for their memory (2016, p. 79). So, in order not to become demoralized, we create "little fantasies". Van Boxsel concludes that our world is in fact about these little fantasies and "blockheads" who believe in them (2016, p. 79). The characters of Sidney and his staff illustrate such fantasies and those who are willing to believe them.

Fantasy as desire of ideology

Van Boxsel's ideas about little fantasies are interesting to relate to theory by Slavoj Žižek. Those fantasies not only help to conceal society's absurd sides, they also seem to serve ideology in together forming a "symbolic order". The article "As If: Traversing the Fantasy in Žižek" by Bran Nicol (2001) discusses why one would pursue "enjoyment", and to be able to live a meaningful life within the realm of the "symbolic". The symbolic is explained as "[...] in short, our 'everyday reality', or culture" (Nicol 2001, p. 143). This symbolic is shaped by ideology until it feels natural and like our everyday reality, as something common (which could be what Emerson calls conformity) (2001, p. 145). We are bound to live in the symbolic, cannot escape it, but yet it obstructs "real" things, which are always underneath the fantasies of the symbolic. The real is regarded as existing 'behind' the symbolic. Meanwhile, the symbolic regulates our desires, our history and our very sense of reality (2001, p. 143). Žižek, as Nicol states, claims that our fantasy is a mechanism that supports and sustains the symbolic. He fittingly refers to the symbolic, which is divided in signs of language, as the opposition of the real (2001, p. 144). These ideas seem to stress a similar problem as skepticism: there is something in the world and in knowledge that is always out of reach for us.

Nicol describes fantasy as realizing desire, "not in the sense of satisfying it, but by bringing it out in the open, giving it a shape" (2001, p. 147). Our "quest for enjoyment", connected to this fantasy of desire, "means that we refuse to see some things - and what these are varies from subject to subject - as equal to others" (what, concerning the symbolic, is the case) (2001, p. 147). So, the lack of the symbolic, as it is the opposite of the real, makes one long for things that cause enjoyment. These things are shaped by one's desire, which in turn uses fantasy to shape it. Nicol explains how all this relates to the creation of a meaningful life in the symbolic order:

We sense the symbolic order is a purely bureaucratic mechanism designed to keep us in our subject positions. We also intuitively apprehend the real is beneath it all the while. Fantasy is what enables us to cover up this knowledge and continue to function as normal subjects, to continue to make life 'meaningful' in the symbolic. (2001, p. 147)

Combining Cavell's vision on a meaningful life with Žižek's ideas, the importance of fantasy is crucial to the creation of a meaningful life in a symbolic order, where nothing is meaningful unless one sees enjoyment in it. This failure to perceive enjoyment is something Cavell attributes to skepticism and Sloterdijk, mentioned in Nicol's article, to cynical reasoning. Žižek states this is a problem caused by ideology, which serves only itself. Enjoyment is caused by fantasy, fantasy is caused by desire, and both are shaped by ideology. However, this only functions under the condition of stupidity: pretending not to know the symbolic is in fact absurd. One knows some facts to be untrue, such as the president of a country representing the will of the people, but chooses to believe it anyway, maintaining the symbolic realm. Being gullible about the symbolic is what Žižek refers to with "as if" (2001, p. 155). It responds with Van Boxsel's idea of our world working on behalf of little fantasies and blockheads who are willing to believe in them. Capra, as we understand by reading Cavell, proposes that American democracy, with values such as equality and second chances, relies on fantasy as well. If two lovers come to share the fantasy of what is maintaining the separation between them, it enables the separation to disappear and let them unite (Cavell 1981, p. 81). For Žižek, this fantasy would still be in ideology, whether it is a different one than another or not.

A language community

Within ideologies, adjusted or not yet, Cavellian thoughts can be discovered about neighboring ourselves and others via the quest for a same "language" and being educated in order to remarry. Employees at Hudsucker's partly think of Norville as stupid because he talks a different language than they do. Again, with language here I do not refer to "English", but Cavell's notion of "language": to have interest for and understand each other in intentions and meaning, as a condition that must be met in order to form a community. A community Norville does seem to understand, from the beginning on, is the community of children. Children generally have a smaller vocabulary and assumedly have more fantasy than adults. Norville apparently (maybe coincidentally) takes this into account when explaining his idea and so, from a following perspective, this idea is not so stupid. At first, Norville's "hula

hoop” indeed seems to be a flop, laying in the toy stores unsold, but when it finally accidentally reaches a child (rolling out of an alley where a fed-up toy storeowner throws them in, making its way to the child directly instead of via adults), he immediately understands it. Norville’s idea about the hoop relies on a fantasy that he needs other people to share in order to make it reality, although he does not operate in a community with the proper language. To succeed, Norville’s fantasy about the hoop needs to be shared by a child.

The idea that fantasies have to be shared in order for an ideology to change, closely relates to Cavell’s notions on protagonists coming together. For example, Cavell writes in *Pursuits of Happiness* how the falling down of a “wall” is essential for the coming together (again) of the male and female protagonist in *It Happened One Night* (1934). In this particular case, it is a physical ‘wall’ in the form of a hung up blanket that separates them. For the wall to tumble, the pair needs to “come to share a fantasy of what is holding it up” (Cavell 1981, p. 81). They need to come together by being able to understand each other and so enjoy the same conversation. “Conversation” here implies more than just talk: “a mode of association, a form of life” (1981, p. 87). Following this line of reasoning, a couple needs to be able to “speak”: to follow the same language (1981, p. 88).

Norville and Amy come to share the same fantasy during a scene at a balcony. In this scene, their fantasies meet when Norville tells an improvised story about Amy being a gazelle in a previous life and him being an antelope or an ibex and the two meeting - “a chance encounter in a forest glade” – and imagining what a “good time” they must have had. This fantasy is pictured elsewhere by the two: Norville and Amy both look into the distance from their position on a high set balcony as if being in that fantasy with their minds. In reaching this fantasy, they reach beyond the self in order to acknowledge the other. In this same scene, Norville and Amy kiss for the first time. They come to share their mutual fantasy through spoken language, but the power of imagination is of great importance as well. It is through imagination that Norville’s words reach Amy and they get to picture a same sort of fantasy. When Norville, after reaching success, loses his contact with Amy due to his changed, rude behaviour, their ability to share the same language is temporarily lost and their fantasies no longer pursue the same desire: Norville seems only concerned with money and power. In addition, Norville loses part of his initial fantasy of “the circle”, which caused him to imagine the hoop and make it a success. When Buzz (Jim True-Frost), the elevator operator, proposes an idea to him, Buzz shows Norville the exact same plain circle that we saw Norville use to exemplify his idea, but supports this with the sentence “You know, for drinks!”. Buzz refers

to another object than Norville's hula hoop though he uses the circle sign to refer to a bend straw (in order to drink your drink easier).



Figure 2. Buzz' circle-drawing.

Instead of acting as one thinks he would act (understanding Buzz's idea) Norville calls it "worthless" and fires Buzz. There is a chasm in Norville's previous understanding of children fantasies and he no longer speaks the appropriate language of plain circles, which now alienates him from both Buzz and Amy. Amy describes this circle language, which embedded a specific kind of fantasy, in the scene where she resigns after Norville's rude behaviour:

Don't you remember how you used to feel about the hoop? You told me you were gonna bring a smile to the hips of everyone in America, regardless of race, creed, or color. Finally there'd be a thingamajig that would bring everyone together – even if it kept them apart, spacially – you know, for kids? [...] I used to love Norville Barnes [...] when he was just a swell kid with hot ideas who was in over his head, but now your head is too big to be in over.

Sharing fantasies is not only important for Amy and Norville to come together again, but to make life comprehensively meaningful as well. Their 'remarriage' could be read allegorical in the rise of a new policy at Hudsucker, one that focusses on Norville's initial intention with the hula hoop: a forming of unity in America (values that would have appealed Capra with his mythologization of American democracy (Adams 2015, p. 89). Combined with Waring Hudsucker's last wish of 'everyone deserving a second chance', eventually brought into

practice by Norville as head of the company, an American dream-like image remains (which is not based on merely profit and single-handed benefit, such as Sidney would have pursued).¹ Later in the film, Norville realizes that love and happiness in his personal life is what he desires, since angel Hudsucker recalls that the absence of these notions in Hudsucker's life was what caused him to commit suicide. Cavell describes that revealing one's desires, through self-knowledge and acknowledgement of other members in a community (of course, with the help of education of significant others in a community, in this case angel Hudsucker and Amy), is the focal theme of comedies of remarriage (1981, pp. 95-96).



Figure 3. Norville speaking the corporate 'language'.

After his realization, Norville reengages with Amy through a performative act. He makes the 'Go Eagles' sign (crossing hands faced inwards and waving them like bird wings) - which was a reoccurring, mutual act between the two - to communicate to Amy that he is willing to give her his love. Amy answers by forming the Go Eagles sign too. Here, their fantasies meet again, in the mutual act of performing something that has become their shared ritual. Interestingly, they do not use any spoken language to communicate in this scene: the act alone suffices. This signifies that they are at the same level again, not relying on spoken language (note that Norville has never been capable of explaining his drawn circle as a hula hoop through spoken language) in order to share the same language. Instead of relying on spoken language, they immediately move to the imaginative fantasy part, like children believing in the hula hoop, knowing there is much more to such an act than words can tell. Again, Norville

¹ Waring Hudsucker's last will is found in the appendix.

is capable of understanding a form of communication and shares a moral perfectionist type of language that will eventually cause him to rule with wisdom and compassion.



Figure 4. Norville and Amy making the Go-Eagles sign.

Of course, Norville still governs the company, indicating that love and personal life are not all he desires as profit should, as president of a company, be high in respect for him. Again, though, we see him present his magical plain circle to the board, this time referring to a Frisbee, after which he throws the thing out of the window, into ‘elsewhere’, in an unknown place the camera does not show and is only accessible through the audience’s fantasy. His regained trust and understanding in the plain circle confirms that he managed to combine a corporate management with a Cavellian language. This is how fantasy helps to arise an adjusted (though not entirely transformed) culture to Hudsucker Industries and the protagonist’s life, one that is more similar to moral perfectionism than the previous one. However, this culture still serves consumerist ideology and is maybe what encourages Moses to make his ironic remark at the end.

Consumerist circles and educational friends

To conclude this chapter, I would like to emphasize how second chances and educational friends are a focal theme in *THP*, in the allegorical reoccurring form of a circle. Despite the Cavellian potential, consumerist ideology seems to have the final say. The circle, namely, also stands for karma and the Hindu religious thought of a circle (‘mandala’ in Sanskrit) representing cosmic order and unity (Adams 2015, p. 96). Karma and its corresponding reincarnation could in this way be seen as the Hinduistic predecessor of the American ‘second

chance' democracy that Cavell would probably applaud. When Amy and Norville's fantasies unite in the balcony-scene, Norville is proposing their 'previous lives' as animals, in the tradition of Karma. It is the shape of the clockwork at the top of Hudsucker Industries' building that represents time, the circle of life and the shape of Norville's ideas and circular office (2015, pp. 96-97).



Figure 5. The circle-shape of Norville's newest invention: the Frisbee.



Figure 6. The circle-shape of the clock of Hudsucker Industries' building.

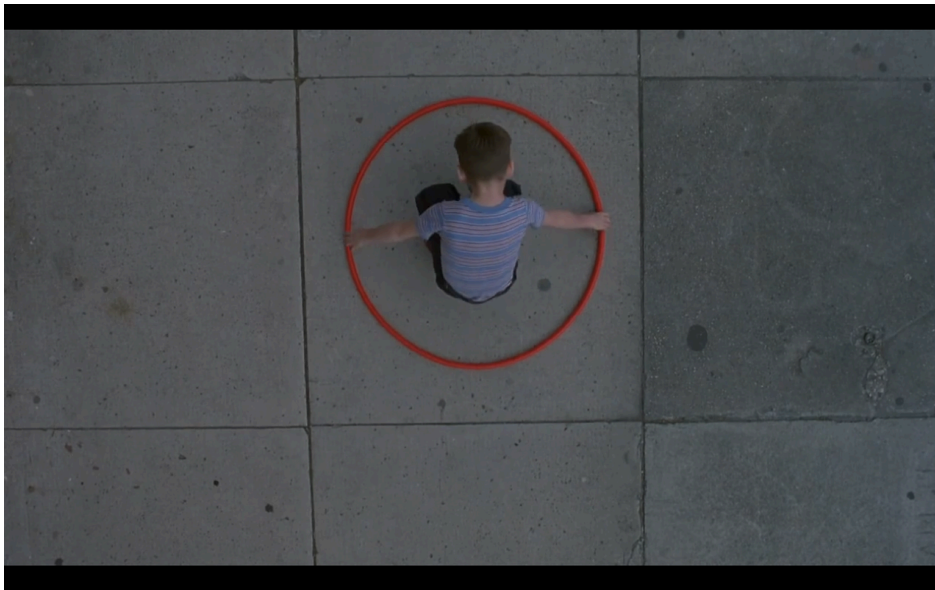


Figure 7. The circle-shape of the hula hoop and the first child using it.

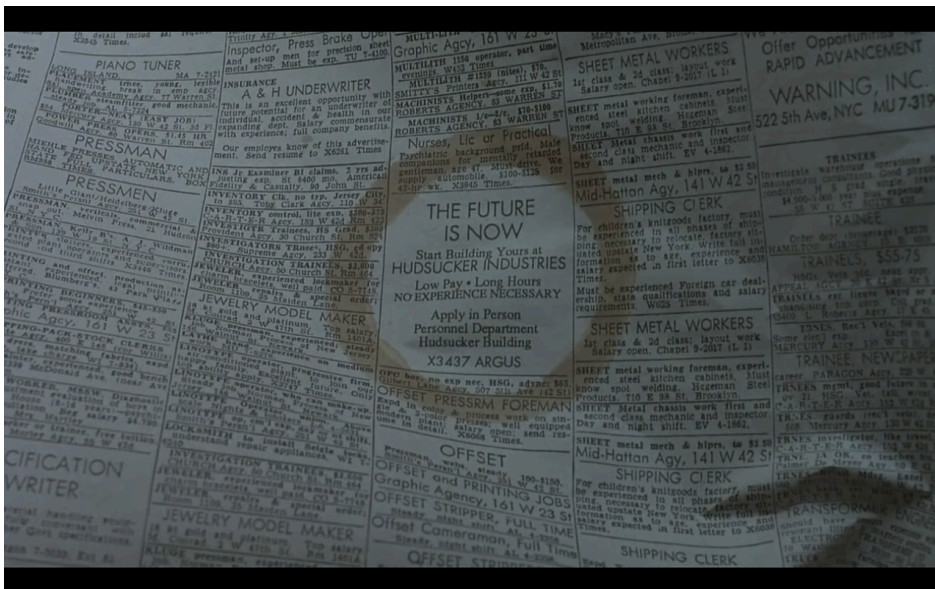


Figure 8. The circle-shape of Norville's coffee mug showing the vacancy for Hudson Industries.



Figure 9. The square aesthetics of Sidney's office.



Figure 10. The organic aesthetics of Norville's office.

To share Norville's fantasy is to share the symbolic realm of the circle and its second chances: a stylistic emblem of Capraesque mythologized American democracy. In opposition of these round aesthetics, capitalism is portrayed as having square aesthetics, "conveyed by the grand urban monoliths of corporate power" as Adams phrases it (2015, p. 95). A 2013 review of *THP* by Sam Adams accurately noted that it is a film about circles and the circle of life in general:

Circles are everywhere: Hudsucker's clock face, the coffee-mug ring that brings the company's classified ad to Norville's attention, the hula hoop and its descendants, the halo above Waring Hudsucker's angelic head (Sam Adams).

The circle gains a mythological meaning in *THP*, and reminds of Cavell's rediscovery and reinvention of the self and society, which is only possible when second "chances" for acknowledging yourself, others and the world are a possibility. In 'The Hudsucker Proxy: A Comedy of Reinvention', Capra's 'what goes around, comes around' principle is also mentioned and the title of the chapter itself refers to the film's moral of second chances (2015, p. 88). Jeffrey Adams later refers to an important note regarding the attaching of mythologized meaning to circles too easily:

[...] Empty-minded materialism of a consumer society for which the Hula Hoop is emblematic and precisely the opposite of the wisdom of Eastern religious thought which stipulates detachment from worldly desires as the path to true enlightenment and escape from the circle of *samsara*, the great circle of life, death and rebirth (2015, p. 96).

The consumerist emphasis on the circle eventually reminds us that *THP* is not a film providing possibilities of showing transformations of community. Rather, it is an observational film of what goes wrong in a community that is too much focused on ideological values like profit instead of human happiness. The way *THP* mixes consumerism with hints to ancient mythologies such as the latter is characteristic to the way the film both criticizes and retains corporate culture and capitalism: the mixture of Capra's unclouded division between good and evil and, eventually having the final say, Sturges' preference of ambivalence and critical distance (2015, p. 93).

Lastly, I like to add that the circle sometimes does hint to an educational friend who helps characters in the film to obtain what they really desire. The circle above Waring's head hints that he helps Norville to find his true desires and to pursue happiness. Moses, who obstructs the clock to prevent Norville's suicide, is the one operating the (round) clock at the top of Hudsucker's building. The educational friend is found in the form of a divine-like intervention, sometimes personalized in the character of Moses, who learns the characters to abandon themselves or parts of themselves. This way, Moses promotes a minor interest for a different ideology that is more engaged with moral perfectionism, while he is never able to overcome the ideology's main goal of profit and eventually laughs at the film's story.

Final remarks and re-meaning

THP represents a coming together of stupidity, Žižekian and Cavellian fantasy and desire for forming a love story that resembles a remarriage and an adjustment to a reigning community.

This mixture allows the characters to form a shared fantasy and to go “beyond” themselves, linking their minds and actions to a sort of “oneness with the universe” that Cavell discovers in Capra’s exteriors (Cavell 1981, p. 99). The circumstances in *THP*’s story are tuned just right to lead to a pursuing of happiness in the solving of a problem of the existence of other (separate) minds. In this way, re-meaning is eventually the combinational meaning of one corporate, capitalistic ideology with hints of Cavell’s moral perfectionist perspective. The opportunity of a second chance, nothing more than a mere, one might say, myth at Hudsucker Industries before the plot twist, turned out right for ‘the right people’ (in the eyes of Moses and the perspectives the audience gets to see: that of the two protagonists Amy and Norville) due to divine timing, or what may be called ‘dumb luck’. Stupidity had a huge influence on this, since if Norville was not regarded so stupid and if Sidney would not have, stupidly, blindly trusted on knowledge for his plan, this would not have turned out the way it did. When this is finally constructed, fantasies met, love and profit prospered. Along with the flourishing of Norville’s ideas, the idea’s intentions – that link so closely to Emerson and Thoreau’s idea’s about unlimited potential of everyone and the haunting of the essential facts of life – for what constitutes America’s (re)marriage also flourished: “[bringing] a smile to the bring a smile to the hips of everyone in America, regardless of race, creed, or color.” For this, however, it is necessary to buy a hula hoop at Hudsucker’s.

The big Other's clever scheme in *Burn After Reading*

In this chapter I will conclude that construction of re-meaning happens through consumerism of plastic surgeries and advocating values that only concern those in power. Ideology is so all-encompassing and controlling that it prevents even the smallest communities to be adjusted, since there is no self-knowledge possible. This is because all desires are shaped by this ideology, so again Žižek's theory is used. Cynicism is the film's main tone and closes off all openness about a brighter future. That is why Cavell is crucial for understanding what is wrong in this film, illustrating this problem with notions such as education and finding self-culture. In this film, these notions are all found in their negative, since they all seem to lack. How stupidity functions for this re-meaning is elaborated by looking at how it enables a dangerous outcome, because it is combined with blind knowledge. Also, in the automatic functioning of stupidity is where it gains a dual function in the form of a symbolic order and the order of the big Other. Firstly, I will now explain its plot.

Plot and tone

Burn After Reading (Ethan and Joel Coen, 2008) (*BAR*) is perhaps Joel and Ethan Coen's most disturbing film, in terms of violence and desperation. The film includes several main characters of which Osborne Cox (John Malkovic) is introduced first. He quits his job at the CIA due to an upcoming demotion, after which he is planning on writing his *memoirs*. His wife Katie (Tilda Swinton) does not like this at all and plans to divorce him - for she was having an affair with a guy named Harry Pfaffer (George Clooney). She first plans to get grip of his financials, in order to get the most out of the divorce. Simultaneously with this narrative, another narrative, which soon becomes intertwined with the former, evolves around Linda Litzke (Frances McDormand) and her colleague Chad (Brad Pitt). A disk containing mysterious information gets left behind at Hardbodies, the gym where they both work. Chad, being sure it contains "sensitive shit", wants to make the most of it. Meanwhile, Linda is intent on getting expansive plastic surgery and is busy dating through an online dating platform. Things start to get complicated when Chad discovers the CD - of which he is sure it contains important CIA information- belongs to Osborne Cox. The two try then attempt to blackmail Osborne, not knowing the CD contains nothing further besides Osborne's memoirs. An accumulation of events happen, making things worse and more complicated for practically everyone involved and since more parties tend to get involved, including the CIA and the Russian embassy, the impact of the misunderstandings grows. Chad and Ted (Richard

Jenkins), Hardbodies' manager who secretly fancies Linda and who seems to truly care for her, die. Osborne gets left in a coma and Harry turns paranoid and flees off to Venezuela. Eventually nobody wins anything, except for maybe Linda, who finally gets her long-wanted plastic surgery, although this does not result in her foremost goal of finding a loving life partner. In the end we witness the baffled CIA officer Palmer (David Rasche) and his superior (J.K. Simmons), wondering what caused all this confusion and the dead bodies. "Jesus Fucking Christ. What did we learn, Palmer?" the CIA Superior asks his colleague. "I don't know sir", Palmer replies, after which his supervisor concludes: "I don't fucking know either. I guess we learned not to do it again. But I'm fucked if I know what we did."

This last scene is characteristic for all the confusion the story causes for both its characters and its audience. After seeing the film, the audience gets left behind asking itself how all this could unwind so extensively due to so little. In the film, a great amount of conspiracy and stupidity plays its part. *BAR* shows us how oversights and accidental circumstances are able to cause life forming events. The CIA is portrayed as an organization that does little to nothing to protect its citizens, even causing the death of one of them (Osborne gets shot by an CIA agent because he was chopping into the head of Ted in the middle of the street, "at broad day light" as Palmer phrases it). The CIA is portrayed as a bunch of idiots, however calm and seemingly rational, acting only to save their appearances as a sensible and righteous institute that cares for its civilians. Keeping up appearances seems to be the main motivation for pretty much everyone in the film, resulting in shallow characters who fail at giving purpose to their lives, portraying contemporary America as highly superficial and lacking real meaning (Orr 2014). These notions assign a highly cynical tone to the unwinding events in *BAR*, from which I will now come to analyse the film further.

In search of reinvention

In reading Cavell's ideas about the moral perfectionist perspective, there is one condition from where to start and engage this perspective, which I think is displeasure about your current life. In *BAR*, this is not the problem, since just about everyone is displeased with his or her current situation. What they forget in this process however is to pay attention to their own and other people's experiences and to look at what they *truly* hunger for. Problematic for these characters is that skepticism and cynicism are too demanding and prevailing and before any acknowledgement about others can be successful, almost everybody dies or flees. Not only does the government and its representing organ, the CIA, lack interest in its civilians, the characters, except for maybe Ted, seem to lack interest in themselves, others and the world at

large. This is remarkable, since all characters do seem to search for meaning in their lives, showing a will to reinvent themselves. They just do not search for this in the right places. All characters just seem to overcome a midlife crisis and seek for meaning in their unsatisfying lives, a conclusion that Christopher Orr's *The Atlantic* review (2014) of the film makes. Orr declares the reason for the characters' lust for innovation partly due to their absence of having children and therefore having plenty of time. "[...] Almost every character is turning away from adulthood, regressing or "reinventing" themselves." Orr writes (2014). An obvious comparison with Cavell's reading of the comedy of remarriage is to be found here, since the protagonists of the comedies of remarriage have plenty of time and wealth so that their most basic needs are fulfilled. Therefore, they have the option to "talk about human happiness" (Cavell 1981, p. 5). Also, the protagonists are never shown with children that can drain their attention. As a result of this, they firstly need for self-knowledge, self-disobedience, self-transformation or self-reliance. Reinventing is precisely what Cavell claims what is needed to start and have interest in yourself and your true desires, others and the world. It is a demand for acknowledgement of yourself, others, the world and as well: skepticism. Only then an open, possibly better future with more Cavellian 'neighbouring of others and ourselves' is possible. Unfortunately, in *BAR* almost no one reaches out for another.

Katie's reaction to Osborne's *memoirs* are a good example of the character's lack of interest. Osborne had lived a life that is maybe a little out of the ordinary, but not worth mentioning in history. Hence his wife Katie's reaction on his anger about his stolen pieces of *memoir*: "Why in God's name would they [the thieves] think that's worth anything?" The problem for the characters in the film is that she is right. Nobody's experience or life seems to be worth anything to almost anyone, especially not to the CIA. Nobody, except for maybe Ted, seems to listen to anyone and nobody really cares about that either. Chad does have small talk with Linda about the dates she has, but their conversation never reach beyond this. They are all far too occupied with themselves and their conspiracies.

Cavell's reading of *It Happened One Night* claims that it is a film about imagining a better way to live and of the protagonist fleeing her old unsatisfying life in order to find true love (1981, p. 6). Likewise, Linda's rebirth or remarriage with herself is to be found in her plastic surgery, purporting a promise that after the surgery her life will get better and her search for love will succeed. This even goes as far as Linda neglecting a remark of her surgeon that some fat areas on her body can be reduced by exercise instead of surgery, even though she works at a gym. If surgery would help her find a better life, the film could have claimed a perspective of moral perfectionism, but this does not happen since we do not have the feeling

at all that these surgeries will help Linda live a happier life. She just lost her seemingly only friend Chad and the man who seemed to really, but secretly, care for her: Ted. To think that these surgeries will directly bring her happiness in love is to think that a happy love life arises from an appropriated look only, which is definitively no moral perfectionist perspective.



Figure 11. Linda getting measured for plastic surgery.

Keeping ourselves ‘stupid’

It seems the characters in *BAR* are all uninterested in themselves, each other, or both. Characters are of interest to the CIA, but only if they form a potential threat. And even though Chad and Linda are no targeted threat, one of them still ends up dead. The characters are interested in each other, but only to gain specific things like money, information, sex or excitement.

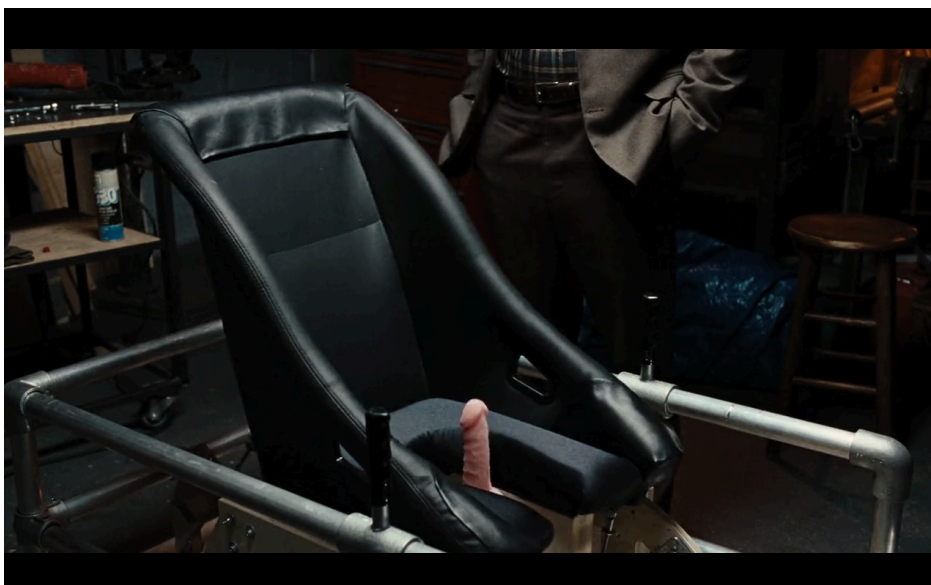


Figure 12. The sex chair Harry built himself.

Cavell raises a similar problem about the experience of ‘the common and the low’ in the comedies of remarriage. Because these films are segments of public events that together form a common life, the difficulty of assessing them lays in the same realm as the difficulty of assessing everyday experience. This in its turn contributes to the difficulty of expressing oneself satisfactorily and “to find words for what one is specifically interested to say”, which Cavell evens up to finding the right to be interested in one’s experience (Cavell 1981, p. 42). After this passage he notably writes: “It is as if we and the world had a joint stake in keeping our selves stupid, that is dumb, inarticulate.” (1981, p. 42). In *BAR* I think this idea can be read as a community being in need of attention for a ‘right of interest’, acknowledging each other and themselves. “Keeping ourselves stupid” would so entail that the characters do not pay attention to these experiences, or other people at all for that matter. In their conversations, characters constantly misunderstand each other due to a lack of paying attention to what the other is saying. Especially Katie and Osborne constantly talk at cross-purpose.

Cavell’s interest in experience, the common life and education (which he claims is an important part in his concept of ‘remarriage’) is also a plea for thought and articulation. *BAR* never gets to a remarriage (literally even, Katie never gets divorced and never gets to marry Harry), only to a divorce – to stay in the metaphor. Were the characters to become a community at all, say to bind to something more interpersonal than their nationality, Cavell would probably prescribe them attention of experience and the will to ‘thought’. For if he is right, the characters and even the CIA are all too “stupid” (in Cavell’s sense: not interested and inarticulate) to see what it is they truly hunger for. This skeptical, cynical stupidity in *BAR* seems to be merely a bad thing. Cavell writes that the heroes in the comedies of remarriage all seem to be “willing to suffer a certain indignity, as if what stands in the way of change, psychologically speaking, is a false dignity” (1981, p. 8). Nobody in *BAR* seems to have enough dignity to fulfil their happiness, or even to imagine what it is that stands in the way of them achieving any. Were the characters to get caught having dignity, like Osborne, they certainly are not looking to put it at risk, since there is way too much value attached to it in a story where everybody stands on their own and failure is a risk too high. If the comedies of remarriage were to show us our fantasies, as Cavell writes (1981, p. 18) *BAR* shows us our inability to shape our desires and fantasies. The characters are too stupid to find what it is they truly hunger for and the reason for this I think lies in ideology’s totalitarian grip.

Shallow desire

What stands in the way of the characters being able to shape their own desires and fantasies seems to be, very roughly said, the lack of interest, a heartless bureaucracy as the nation's representing organ (the CIA) and the ideology of capitalist consumerism (Linda thinking that she can buy love through plastic surgery). Linda's personal horizon lies in the period after her surgery, after which she thinks she will reach something similar to happiness. However, this ideology offers no escape and takes everything in its reach to adjust to its *own* horizon, which is one of consumerism and not perspective on happiness. The ideology of neoliberal capitalism prevents the adjusting of desires and fantasies to something other than consumerist eagerness, because that would reject the very core of the ideology. So, this ideology lingers on in promoting sugar coated as-if horizons to support its existence. Therefore, the ideology serves only itself (Fiennes & Žižek 2012). For this reason, 'the common' of the experience of an ordinary US-citizen is filtered out and discarded as unimportant for retaining capitalism and a/the neoliberal government. This is what we see in *BAR*: to get out of their miserable situations, the characters all feel they need to buy their way out like Linda who think she needs surgeries, or Katie who tries to get the most money as possible from her divorce. Harry later in the film figures what he needs is the love of his wife, when it is already too late and she has found someone else. Before that short moment however, he searches for an escape in complete hedonism in the form of a sex addiction, picking up women on dating sites and building a sex machine (of which Harry proudly mentions it had only cost him a hundred dollars, expressing even this desire in terms of money). All the characters, again except from Ted, get it wrong when it comes to knowing what it is they desire. For a moral perfectionist perspective this is maybe not fulfilling, but for a horizon where consumerism causes enjoyment and buying things guarantees meaning, it beholds a promise. We have no specific reasons to believe the characters would have gathered happiness easier in another ideology. However, the film clearly proposes that in any case it is not found in neoliberal capitalist USA either. This unfulfilled promise is what Žižek calls the promise of "the big Other in ideology" in *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (Fiennes & Žižek 2012). This big Other is something like a God, on which people rely for numerous reasons; it promises us a better life or gives purpose to our lives. The big Other is "the agency for which one has to maintain the appearance [in a symbolic order]." (Žižek)

Linda, as the one person getting what she wants, to us viewers has no clue of what she *really* wants. She tries to create her own second chance by planning plastic surgery. Still, we do not buy it; we are too well informed because of our position as all-knowing viewer (we see Ted

admiring her just the way she is and her inability to see this) but also because the film makes us too aware of the reigning ideology's false intentions. Why and how does the film do this? We could blame the filmmakers for being cruel and just wanting to tell a bitter story. It seems however that making a *comedy* where ideology's control is all-encompassing and not criticized leaves the filmmakers no choice but to make Linda think she can buy happiness, otherwise the film would become a drama. The reason for this, I think, lies in the same reason for thinking of Linda specifically as stupid.

Linda is fully integrated in the ideology, thoroughly relies on the big Other, and so is rather good in unwillingly keeping up appearances (of which she thinks that is what she wants). She acts like she knows what she wants and partly she does know what she wants: a plastic surgery. She is smart in the way the big Other *wants* her to be, desiring that what she is supposed to desire in order to keep the ideology intact. We see her planning an appointment with a plastic surgeon that advises her to change her looks entirely and we think this cannot be what she really wants but she does not see this. This desiring 'other' or secret part of someone is also embedded in ideology, Žižek argues. The big Other is purely fictional, it does not exist in real life, but we need this fiction as the agency which registers our predicament where the "truth" of ourselves is prescribed (Fiennes & Žižek 2012). This serves a mutual purpose of saving the ideology, since it presumes desire and fantasy and saving our wish of there being something more, as ourselves as being individuals with original ideas and tastes and the like. Osborne, for example, seems to write his *memoirs*, for the last mentioned reason. The big Other enables ideology to make it look as if it's not his fault things eventually did not work out. Another example of destiny superseding choice is given by Žižek, in the form of Rose and Jack's unreachable love in the *Titanic* (1997).

Rose, a wealthy woman from the upper classes and Jack, a working man from the lower classes fall in love, but of course the boat sinks and Jack dies. Žižek proposes that this unfortunate aspect of their love story is essential, because it helps us save the illusion of eternal love, while in actuality such a romance has little chance of success due to cultural difficulties and the suddenness in which it came to being. The truth of their love not succeeding and not being as romantic as it potentially seemed to be is too severe for us to observe. So their love as harshly interrupted by sudden death and unfortunate circumstances is a more enjoyable setup, because it does not bring an end to the idea of their romance. This 'lie' enables us to think: 'well if the boat had not sunken, they would have lived happily ever after'. In the same way, the mechanisms of the big Other in *BAR* incline us to think that the protagonists are unable to fulfil their true desires, only because they are just too stupid to see

what is going on or to articulate themselves properly. The dumbness of their characters is extravagantly pictured; they all act within the extreme. Partly they are really quite stupid, but the Coens rightly point out the role of the big Other in this scheme: the big Other prevents them from using their stupidity in a constructive way, such as to reshape their desires in the quest to happiness and fulfilment in life. The characters actually are only stupid about *certain* things, which in this story are especially the wrong things that make them end up dead, fled or alone. The audience is inclined to look at them as total idiots because of the exaggeration in which they are portrayed and the view they have as an all-knowing narrator. As such, the stupidity in *BAR* is akin to the boat sinking in the *Titanic*: we can solely blame the idiotic stupidity for preventing them from pursuing a better life, or even a better community and this would keep ideology spared as responsible. The problem for our *BAR* characters is that they are themselves to blame in this system of individuality. No ideology is promising “it all” and neither is capitalism (Fiennes & Žižek 2012). The issue here is that to overcome this misery this system relies on the self-reliance of its citizens, but in *BAR* they are all kept too stupid to save themselves and thus the problem becomes overarching. There is no bigger structure such as a government to help them, everybody depends on themselves. Ideology, via desire and fantasy, is caught here as abusing stupidity against its civilians. I will now describe this process in detail.

Trapped in stupidity

During the film, both the CIA and Chad and Linda try to use stupidity in their advantage. The stupidity used by the CIA is something Van Boxsel would call “rational stupidity”. This is a stupidity that denies being stupid (Van Boxsel 2017, p. 47). Rational stupidity is what Van Boxsel describes as the most dangerous stupidity of all, since it claims to understand things and in this way prevents doubt about the knowledge implied, blindly trusting it. It is also very effective in establishing order when used properly (2017, p. 51). It does so by not allowing a stable viewing point from where to overlook the situation and sort things out. In this way it sabotages every interpretation of the situation. Due to this stupidity’s form, it remains unclear what the intentions of its instigator are, every interpretation of it is sabotaged. In this way, the spectator is left to itself on how to judge it (2017, p. 62). Relating this to *BAR*, the CIA fails to make sense of Linda’s inexplicable wish for plastic surgery, but is willing to pay for it as long as she plays ball about what happened. The CIA also fails to get a grip on past events, but remain in control by distancing themselves from the situation and not taking it too seriously. A rational explanation is missing, so they prefer to stay stupid and just accept past events and

pay some money for Linda's surgery. In this way they effectively come out of this situation with a clean sheet. It is as Van Boxxel writes: failures are always left out in the telling of a nation's narrative and this is of course desirable for those in power (2017, p. 33). The confusion this stupidity sows also works on a level outside the story, involving the viewer. Possibly, the audience is also longing for an explanation for the film's bitter plot, but does not get it from the film itself, since no character or authority seems to care enough to examine what happened and just 'burns after reading'. The spectator is dependent on its own intelligence on how to make sense of the case. Although the all-knowing perspective is granted to us eventually, there is no simple explanation of the film's meaning because events just developed too intertwined and weird. Our perspective is linked to the CIA's - no matter how far reaching and all-knowing its sight is, making sense of it and adding moral is difficult. The characters, especially Chad and Linda, try to use a similar tactic as rational stupidity. The problem for them however is that the CIA is faster in fooling them first. So, for them this does not have the effect of establishing order, like it does for the CIA, but, like said before, becomes dangerous because this rational aspect of stupidity claims to understand things and in this way prevents doubt about the knowledge implied. Chad and Linda act on base of conspiracy and presumptions that they do not bother to gauge for plausibility, as long as it seems to fulfil an opening to a goal they attempt to reach (for Linda this is her surgery, which, in its turn, must help her find a right man and for Chad this seems to be mere excitement). However, in the creation of their myth – that the disk they found contains “sensitive shit” and relates to governmental conspiracies – they eventually do reach the CIA, with a bit of dumb luck (Osborne coincidentally was a former CIA employee who was still under their watch since he was just fired and so this caught their attention). Linda and Chad in this way succeed in making their myth of being part of something grand a reality: they become the heroes in their own story. They act as if they know exactly what is going on and what is on the disk, while in fact they attach all kinds of conspiracies to occurring events. Chad and Linda really are ignorant about what is happening and why. In the end, the only one getting a more thorough view of the entire story, is the viewer.

Righteously thought, although far too late in history when the Cold War is long stopped, Linda tries to speed up things in their bribery by bringing the CD's 'information' to the Russians. Indeed, a hostile superpower is where the eyes of a governmental institution like the CIA is normally focussed on, rather than the concerns of the “common and the low”, as Cavell would name it: the everyday business of the ordinary civilian. Strikingly, the CIA in *BAR* actually really appeared to have a spy at the Russian embassy. The effects of the former

Cold War is not only that it gave the CIA, as protection service, importance, but also gave the ordinary citizen a clear sense of an enemy and a nation's narrative: it is an example of how a system controls its civilian's fears and focuses. All the more problematic (for her pursuing happiness) is that Linda thereby is what Van Boxsel calls an 'enlightened ignoramus': she is a danger for herself because she succeeds in her undertaking (2017, p. 52). The stupidity in *BAR* would not have such disastrous effects if the characters were not so 'enlightened', meaning here that they *think* they know what they are doing. But to "withhold, disable or refuse knowledge in a strategic rather than haphazard way, one needs to have an inkling of what the knowledge concerns", Kelly Cresap writes in her book about performing naiveté in the person of Andy Warhol (Cresap 1993, p. 31). Characters such as Linda and Chad are all blocked off from this knowledge, partly because of their stupidity but partly because of a *secret* institution such as the CIA refusing them access to such knowledge. As such, they are doomed to guess what is happening and rely on conspiracies and known 'enemies' such as the Russians. They are classic dangerous fools as how Van Boxsel describes them: they possess the ability to act against their own self-interest, with death as the most extreme result (2017, p. 55).



Figure 13. Chad and Linda visiting the Russian embassy.

Stupidity of automatism against self-reliance

Acting against self-interest only makes sense for *BAR*, I propose, when this theory is combined with Žižek's theory about ideology that is able to function due to automatisms. The film creates a society where the role of the big Other is obvious, but mocks the ordinary people in that society to remind us that this big Other is no excuse, it is even fictional and

these ordinary people are the ones who keep the system working (Fiennes & Žižek 2012). Blaming the leaders in an ideology is not enough, Žižek says, since the leaders are often portrayed as ordinary people as well (Lenin was promoted to adore cats and children) (Fiennes & Žižek 2012). The CIA in *BAR* has no clue of what they are doing or why; they are no super humans with special brains, they are ordinary people. Rules within a system do not possess expediency naturally; this happens through herd behaviour only. Stupidity thus is not a matter of wrong insights or a lack of knowledge, but a matter of automation (which of course can be helped by stupidity in not knowing why you are doing something automatically), Van Boxxel emphasizes (Van Boxxel 2017, p. 77).

To realize so much misery can take place without an essential bad core leaves us puzzled. That is why we focus on the lie of, in this case, the characters inability to oversee events and their portrait of them as a few knuckleheads (while, as said, in fact nobody is smart enough to comprehend their own stupidity) to maintain order in what otherwise would unwind in total chaos (Van Boxxel; Fiennes & Žižek 2012). Because exposing this lie, which is hidden in stupidity, is fatal for society's moral. That we were to be as stupid as the characters in the film in not overseeing what we are doing and follow a system that we feel is reasonable, while in fact it is based on madness comparable to that of the film, is rather laughed away (2017, p. 72). Hence, *BAR* is a black comedy, not a tragedy. We need the big Other for keeping up the fantasy that it all makes sense what we do and make things feel natural. Like we need the boat in *The Titanic* to sink, we need Linda to be extraordinary stupid and to think she can adjust reality instead of her desires – which is what would maybe have a better chance of making her fulfilled in happiness – to make her happy, or the madness in the film would be too real and it would become a tragic. It is as Cavell wrote: we all have mutual interests in keeping ourselves stupid. Van Boxxel and Žižek would propose this is our interest because it prevents us from going mad. Cavell would argue a focus on knowledge unwinds in skepticism, which prevents us from forming another community. That would block us in trying to find what we truly hunger for, in disobedience of an unruly state.

Misery in knowledge

Despite the fact that more knowledge about certain situations would maybe have prevented some misery -like if Harry had known it was not the CIA following him he would not have fled to Venezuela - I still think the focus on knowledge is what caused the most misery. The characters are often very certain about themselves and what it is that they are doing and why, while they often are wrong. If they do not focus on what they know, they focus on trying to

get to know what they do not know, by hiring agents to spy on others for example. It is this focus on knowledge that caused skepticism and both the characters and the movie as a whole are highly skeptical: some characters having conspiracy-issues and Katie seems almost too skeptical to have emotions. The realisation of skepticism creates awareness about what we do not know and makes us likely to distrust everything and everyone. It prevents the coming together of people, which results in isolation.



Figure 14. The car of which Harry thinks it is following him.



Figure 15. Harry looking at a car of which he thinks it is following him.

A fool proof balance of skepticism and stupidity seems to be necessary for two things. Firstly, skepticism is needed in order to acknowledge that there is no escape to ideology and we are actually not individuals but a submissive group. Secondly, we must not to be *too* blind for the effects ideology has on us, to think we know what we are doing (to forget our stupidities) and end up like Linda. A character like Linda is naïve about precisely the wrong things. She is

convinced that surgeries will help her find the right partner, but is highly suspicious about the institutions like the government. In *BAR* the problem with governments and isolation in society is adequately highlighted. I think the film's meaning is found in how to move *away* from this situation. The transformation in meaning, the “re-“ in meaning, is found when we hear Linda gets her plastic surgeries, but still ends up alone. We then come to realize this ideology in *BAR* really only serves itself and only offers the possibility to provide ‘help’ in terms of consumerism. Re-meaning is only found through consuming plastic surgery in order to, I would almost say fake, a reinvention of the self. Also, a re-meaning is found for the CIA: they learned not to do “it” again, although they fail to make sense about what it is they had done. They are purposing cynicism and trying not the care too much is a meaning of life (I would say that in this personification, ideology pronounces its meaning: preferring its own functioning over its civilians). This again makes us aware civilians are not the ones gaining meaning from this system.

Where there is too much enlightenment, and by this I mean – based on the articles of several theorists I have used for this thesis thus far – the turn in thinking that brought skepticism widespread, we remain to question things endlessly. Cavell proposes that where there is too much enlightenment, we should dim the light a little. His answer to skepticism ironically lays in the same darkness ideology uses to retain order: the ordinary. Cavell does mean something slightly different by this; he sees the ordinary as a “countervailing force against skepticism” or “the recovery of the voice” (Dove 1989, p. 1181). He means skepticism has to “settle”, be accepted and find a place. If we know everything is possible to question, there can be no conclusions of where to move on from and this, Cavell writes, prevents an “openness” (1989, p. 1182). Based on ideas of Emerson and Thoreau, we need to ‘internalize’ education, and have “the commitment to go on in a certain way” (1989, p. 1183). The remarkability of ‘the ordinary’ is that it is closest to us, it is the everyday, but because of this, we forget that it is also special (Stricker 2016, p. 21). Throughout daily life the everyday experience becomes unremarkable, and this is how ideology, we could say ‘misuses’ the ordinary and forms the reasons for the Coens to mock precisely this automatic force that is established thanks to automatisms used by ordinary people. We need to rediscover our experiences in these automatisms and so come to question them, Cavell says, with the emphasis on ‘re-discovery’ (Stricker 2016, p. 4). “[The] experience [of the ordinary] has to be missed in order to gain significance in its deferred retrieval”, Stricker writes in his article about Cavell’s ordinary (2016, p. 25). It is precisely this paradox that is at the core of how stupidity works: stupidity only shows itself through an error. This is also what causes Osborne and Linda’s

dissatisfaction. Since stupidity has shown itself too late for them, after a fatal failure, they are unable to see what they were missing out on while it was still there. Linda is doomed to miss the things around her: her close ones who are now dead and her looks are fading Osborne is already sucked into utter bitterness and spends his days drinking and contemplating the past. He has neglected himself and others; his wife constantly misunderstands him or ignores him and he knows what he is missing: the way his job used to be when it was still of importance, so he tells his father. A Cavellian stupidity of isolation caused by skepticism in *BAR* thus seems to be a big reason for despair. When combined with ‘enlightenment’, this toxic result of everybody believing in their own righteousness, but no one getting what they really want, is the only thing that remains. The ideology, in the form of the CIA, is the one having control over its civilians by using stupidity. Eventually, *BAR* is an utter cynical film about observing problems in a cynical society and ironically, it is portrayed as a comedy.

Final remarks and re-meaning

In *BAR*, the bigger meanings of a person’s life are questioned. The characters do not feel purposeful and have no overarching community such as a nation with an evident quest (such as fighting the red menace) or religion or other social structure to turn to. They are ‘inhumanly’ isolated, such as Cavell describes the effects of too much belief in skepticism. The questions of the CIA at the end of the film about what they had done and what had happened, are not only questions about what they had literally done, but this also shows the filmmakers questioning the purpose and role of the nation and its organ the CIA. Like I said before, *BAR* offers no horizon and this is also how neoliberal capitalist ideology also keeps its civilians stupid: in not searching for explanations and offering no alternative. There is no way out of the oppressive ideology that reigns in *BAR* and this feels uncomfortable. The feeling that the ideology is totalitarian is strengthened by the beginning and ending shots of the film, where we zoom in and out of Washington D.C., as if watched by a satellite that is set up by an even more overarching power to control this – a pun is used here - satellite state. No wonder *BAR*’s characters suffer from a belief in conspiracy theories; fear of being followed and self-invented exciting plots, which they expect to be true.



Figure 16. Zooming in at the CIA headquarters.



Figure 17. Zooming in at the CIA headquarters.



Figure 18. Zooming in at the CIA headquarters.

The CIA seems about the only player that does not lose its mind and is able to retain its rationality. In all tranquillity Palmer keeps his boss up to date about the mind blowing events that had just occurred and coolly adds that he and his colleagues neither know what is happening and why. Linda maybe also meets this image of acting rational and cool, since she has no clue of what is going on, but towards the Russian embassy and the CIA acts as if she has everything under control almost the entire time. In the end, she is the only protagonist who at least partially gets what she *thinks* she wants: her plastic surgery.

Opposing the USA to the Russians in the film, capitalism seems to be the ruling ideology that had 'won' in the Cold War even more. Consumerism, bureaucracy and far-reaching individuality, based on a self-reliance this neo-liberalistic capitalist society pushes towards, are shown as the prominent features that shape this ideology. In line of Cavell's thought, we learn that this ideology will not bring happiness to any character in the film, because it does not promote any interest in others in a community and even promotes profit over well-being. Re-meaning is found post-mortem: afterwards we see Linda should have paid attention to her chance of pursuing happiness in the person of Ted, who is now dead. In the next chapter, as I will argue, stupidity can also work a less fatal, more constructive form.

Toni Erdmann's fool of an unfunny world

This chapter discusses *Toni Erdmann* (Maren Ade, 2016) (*TE*), one of the two films wherein civilians use stupidity as a method to undermine ideology. It constructs re-meaning by promoting romantic values that try to undermine both the corporate community and reality as a whole. In *Toni Erdmann*, skepticism seems to be kept to a limit and, instead, the possibility of openness to the future is formulated. The form of stupidity of interest in this chapter is excessive over-identification, with the foolish variant grotesque performance as its subform. This chapter puts self-culture into practice: via the use of stupidity, characters gain the courage to “go on in a certain way” - as Cavell advises. Thereby it is the first film in this thesis that has a moral perfectionist tone. In portraying a father-daughter, the film appropriately introduces an educational friend (in the form of the father) who helps his daughter to pursue happiness.

Plot and tone

Let me now explain the film's plot. *Toni Erdmann* is described as a drama-comedy ‘unlike any other’ (Sims, 2017), remarkable for its ‘anti-Hollywood ending’ (Gerke, 2017). The German film is portrayed realistically, filmed with a slightly shaky camera, offering no non-diegetic music or fantastic fictional elements. The plot revolves around a father fond of practical jokes and clowning, Winfried (Peter Simonischek), who tries to reconnect with his daughter, Ines (Sandra Hüller). Ines works as a consultant at an oil company in Bucharest. After Winfried's old dog dies and his (perhaps only) piano student quits lessons, he decides to spontaneously visit his daughter Ines in Bucharest. This is where the story starts to unwind. At the beginning of the film, we already see how Winfried uses fake teeth to set up a character, fooling an ordinary mailman delivering a package with this seemingly random act. As he puts his teeth in and out, he turns from ‘normal’ Winfried to a caricature and back. The blunt reactions of others around him show that this act is an old habit they are accustomed to. Whereas Ines claims to be in good shape in front of her family, this façade proves to be false when the film shifts to Buchares. Ines works over-hours and visibly suffers under the circumstances of her job at the oil firm. Her father notices this and when he ostensibly leaves, he secretly stays but in the form of his weird businessman alter ego, with shaggy wig and false teeth: Toni Erdmann.



Figure 19. Toni's introducing himself to Ines and her friends.

In performing his act, Winfried tries to pervade in Ines' life and, so it seems, looks out over her. Surprisingly, he succeeds in staying in her presence. Ines, when in public, plays along with Winfried's performance as if she does not recognize him, partly due to embarrassment for people discovering Toni in fact is her father and partly because he leaves her no choice, as he ignores her as his daughter. Tension builds as Toni keeps appearing in Ines' life, shaking up things while he does so. His actions come to a climax on Ines' birthday party, which simultaneously serves as a teambuilding event (which was necessary according to Ines' chef Gerald (Thomas Loibl). Ines has a mental breakdown when she fails to change dresses and the doorbell keeps ringing. She eventually pulls out her dress and receives her guests, who arrive one by one, naked, claiming this improves the team spirit and that it was an idea of her chef. Finally, Winfried makes his entrance in a bizarre traditional Bulgarian 'babugeri'-outfit (traditionally used to scare off evil spirits and make women fertile (Stinson, 2013). When he leaves, Ines follows him and emotionally falls into his arms, after which the two hug intensely. The film ends in Germany, at the old house of Winfried's mother, whose funeral has just finished. There, the film's most profound conversation evolves. Winfried recalls a question he asked Ines back in Bucharest: whether she was happy or not. Back then, she only criticized his question for being vague and avoids answering, after which she returns the question to him. Now, in his late mother's garden, he says that the problem is that, in life, one mostly toils and only afterwards sees what was really valuable. During those specific moments, it is not possible to see their true value, making it hard to hold on to those moments. Ines takes Winfried's fake teeth out of his breast pocket and puts a straw basket found beside her on her head, on which Winfried laughs and leaves to get his camera to capture her look.

We see Ines uncomfortably, maybe even humbled, waiting for him, not really sad but not happy either - her emotional state does not become clear. Then the credits roll and The Cure's 'Plainsong' plays.



Figure 20. Ines put in Winfried's fake teeth and put a straw basket on her head.



Figure 21. Ines awkwardly waits for Winfried to return.



Figure 22. Ines' expression just before the film ends. She is still waiting for her father.

In *TE*, several things remain opaque. For example, it is unclear whether Ines has found more potential for happiness at her new job in Shanghai she by then acquired. She does seem more appreciating towards her father's jokes, as is shown when Ines makes a joke in a serious conversation herself. Still, the final scene presents an Ines that is recognizable from previous scenes: impatient, uncomfortable and unsettling. Another question that remains pending is why Winfried seems desperate and sometimes even cynical. Is that because people decline to take his jokes seriously or as amusing, even? Or is the opposite true: Winfried being desperate because of circumstances in his life that make him aware of situations coming to a closure? Does he therefore try to lighten up things by mocking every suitable situation with (practical) jokes? The unanswered questions about fulfilment and desperation give the film a melancholic awareness and generic dramatic tone. They also make the film suitable for several interpretations considering stupidity and its function in the creation of meaning, especially in relation to a struggle for Cavellian moral perfectionism and fulfilment in the potential for happiness. *TE* lacks the ironic or cynical tones of the previous films and desists from mocking its plot. As will become clear during this chapter, *TE* emphasizes that stupidity is less employed by an overlapping ideology, but rather by civilians to acknowledge themselves and each other. By focussing on some scenes of *TE*, as I will do now, I will eventually explain why and how the use of an alter ego is a form of stupidity referred to as 'grotesque performance', and how this can aid the characters in ending an interpersonal stalemate.

Distinctive role-play

In order to understand the function of the role-play of Winfried and Ines, let me describe it more specific. Already before Winfried's alter ego takes over, he regularly performs jokes with his fake teeth. These sporadic performances, however, are still enacted within his real personality, Winfried, and he does not linger on to them. This changes when he acts as Toni Erdmann. Firstly, Winfried then seems to act out of Toni's character, totally engaged with his alter ego. This is directly notable in the scene where he first introduces himself in the story, as Ines and two friends meet in a restaurant. The next time he appears again, at Ines' company the next day, he emerges in the background. He acts as if he is solely Toni and not Ines' father Winfried. In this scene, Winfried grabs attention when he starts a loud phone conversation with his mother and subsequently sits on a fart cushion in the middle of a discussion between Ines and her chef Gerald. After that, Winfried addresses Ines directly as if they know each other work-related, in the presence of Gerald. When her chef is out of sight, Ines angrily asks her father what he is doing, ignoring his role as Toni, but gets no reply from her father, only from Toni - as if he has no idea what she is talking about and wants to keep it business related. In the following scene, when she has had an awkward 'sex' moment (except for there is no actual intercourse – an element that emphasizes the monastic relationship Ines has with her job: she is shielded from any further personal interests) with colleague and friend Tim (Trystan Pütter), she decides to phone her friend Steph (Lucy Russell). Steph was also present at the restaurant, when Toni made his first appearance. Ines tells Steph she had met Toni again, who had then claimed to be a coach of an important businessman, Ion Tiriac (who is, ironically, a real Romanian businessman), and got his phone number. We do not hear her say the exact words, but it seems Ines proposes to meet with Toni at an upcoming party that evening, since this is what happens in the next scene. At the party, Ines sees Toni, approached him solely and appeals to him: "Gutenabend Herr Erdmann" ("Good evening mister Erdmann"). He replies with "Oh hi" and then asks "Bist du ein bisschen beruhigt?" ("Have you calmed down a little?"). He now for the first time since Toni's introduction tries to speak to Ines as his daughter, in a worried way (referring to her angry outburst the last time she spoke to him). Considering how she related to Toni before, she surprisingly ignores this and keeps up the appearance that the man she is speaking to is not her father, but business coach Toni. She replies: "Kommt Tiriac nog?" ("Is Tiriac still coming?"). Her father smiles surprised and replies back in Toni's role: "Ja, hat er gesagt ja." ("Yes, he said so."). From this moment on, both Ines and Winfried repeatedly switch from roles as each other's business connections – this role is performed mostly when they meet in public, probably to keep up

appearances - to the father-daughter role. In this role-play, they have the chance to spend time together. It is remarkable that the two apparently need this role-play to come closer to each other, since it is a quite extreme form of distancing yourself from the actual situation and interpersonal controversy.

Grotesque performance as mediator

Winfried and Ines choice for using a specific form of stupidity in order to spend time together makes more sense when elaborating on something called 'grotesque performance'. In gaining information about their performance that switches between public and private, I distinguish two 'cultures' that I will term, for the sake of argument, as 'corporate community' and 'interpersonal community'. Interpersonal community is proposed here as the community where personal relationships are enacted that serve purposes besides or apart from the corporate community, in which personal relationships purely serve the work sphere. Of course, things are never so strictly separated. Ambiguities are possible, such as the scene where Ines has 'sex' with Tim - we do not know whether this has a purely functional motive, or whether it also has a personal affectionate motivation. However, by arguing there is a difference between the two cultures this argument is sustained. Interestingly, the characters move between the two cultures. This is a facet where feigned stupidity plays part, which is here explained with theory about grotesque performance, regarded as a form of stupidity represented in this film.

In an article on the grotesque in Fellini's *I Clowns* (1970), William J. Free (1973) explains that the grotesque work of art has a specific role when it comes to coherence and order:

The grotesque work of art evokes an estranged world which defies our powers to explain its coherence and order, one which disobeys the common sense laws of cause and effect which we have come to expect of reality. (Free 1973, p. 216)

Winfried's performance as Toni, followed by Ines' reaction on Toni's presence, plays with this same expectation pattern in the film's reality. This has a similar effect on the viewer, who does not expect - like Ines - Winfried to appear as a fake business coach and to grate cheese over his head in the club. Winfried's behaviour surprises the viewer because it breaks with conventions of the normal behaviour in general, but of the corporate community in particular. Within both corporate culture and interpersonal culture, Winfried's behaviour has rebellious features because of its high level of inappropriateness. The reputational damage this could

potentially inflict on Ines remains limited, as almost nobody realizes that Toni is in fact her father and because she decides to participate in the roleplay of business associates.

Interestingly, as the plot develops we come to perceive Winfried as perhaps more normal than Ines' colleagues. Encouraged by adopting Winfried's and Ines' perspective through shots where we are alone with them, we understand that they are not insane or inhuman but have emotions and sense of humour. In contrast, of Ines' colleagues nothing is shown besides their work drive (with the exception of an Easter visit that I will come to mention). As a result, our connection with them never reaches beyond superficiality and they almost come to appear inhumane.

Free writes: "The grotesque romanticizes the common life by finding in it traces of the most extreme demonisms or manifestations of the disorder which contradicts the elaborate sense of orderliness" (1973, pp. 216-217). Sophistication carries elements regarding the ordinary and common, such as the naked body or defecation, to a background where they need to remain out of sight. In the corporate community in *TE*, this is very obvious and highlighted by Toni's lack of keeping up appearances. Toni continuously emphasizes elements neglected by sophistication, such as inappropriate farts or weird remarks about humid hands to someone unknown. In doing so, he embraces the grotesque, romanticizing common facets that are usually deliberately hidden. His style recalcitrantly brings these things back into sight. Instead of alienating these elements, Toni alienates elements that are normal to the corporate community such as the importance they assign to themselves and their fancy parties. Winfried's behaviour is 'grotesque' as a performance, because it is not expected of any member of a community. Just like any system it relies on unwritten rules in order to function. In other words, Winfried uses the grotesque as a way to overcome isolation, the gap that prevents personal closeness between him and Ines. How does this tension between unwritten rules in culture depict stupidity and how, especially, does Winfried employ this tension in order to reach out for his daughter? Cavell offers an interesting perspective here, since in the comedies of remarriage change is encouraged in order to overcome certain obstacles a protagonist finds himself cornered in. Also, stupidity in the form of "subversive affirmation via excessive identification" remains a crucial outcome. Firstly, though, I will discuss the grotesque performance a little further in the light of this question.



Figure 23. Toni sits on a fart cushion...



Figure 24. ...and then puts down two ice creams on the bench, probably for Ines and himself.

A fool's attempt

Grotesque performance is particularly suitable for breaking out of isolation in *TE* since Winfried faces the limits of his father/daughter-relationship with Ines. His father role entails certain social rules that prevent him from entering Ines' workspace and sharing more time with her. Also, when she does have time to meet him, she acts superficial, seemingly trying not to show too much character and not to look overworked in front of others such as her father. During his first visit as 'Winfried', he fails to overcome this superficiality. Winfried is trapped in social conventions such as not being welcome at her workplace because he is no

employee at her firm. He is also confined to his role as a father who enjoys making practical jokes, which easily annoys Ines, who is accustomed to that role. In addition, Ines suggests he should say he had a cultural day in Bucharest when he meets some work-related people, since he is dressed in his ordinary clothes and otherwise might leave a wrong impression. Winfried obviously dislikes the attitude and behaviour of the businesspeople he meets. His answer to all these complications is to abandon his role as Winfried and to invent a new role as Toni Erdmann. Similar to the clowns in *I Clowns* (1970) as treated in Free's article, he "rebels against the limitations of his reality" by trying to reach beyond the problems of his situation (Free 1973, p. 219). Fellini's clowns, however, do not rebel against limitations of a personal kind but against practical limitations, such as not being able to catch a violin bow. In addition, Toni's style is subtler than the grotesque exaggerations Free ascribes to Fellini's clowns. How this relates to stupidity, I will elaborate upon by looking to stupidity as a method additionally. Van Boxsel describes culture as a series of more or less failed attempts to get a grip on stupidity. This battle against one's limitations is exemplary for human's struggle with stupidity. If our culture is a struggle against stupidity, we are all rebellious in trying and pretending to overcome it. Winfried's rebellion (and Ines's, when she is committed to his performance as well) originates from the urge of relational limitations. He desires to take care of his daughter, but is unable to do so. Thus, he rebels by setting up a performance. This grotesque performance can be perceived as a fight against stupidity, since Ines might react negatively to his act, causing the opposite effect. Free acknowledges this possibility of the grotesque as well, as he writes: "we forget that the grotesque and the absurd can be joy as well as a terror." (1973, p. 227). Additionally, it is both sad and joy; it can easily verge on the edge of sentimentality (1973, 226). *TE* is both a comedy and a drama, maybe even with emphasis on the latter, indeed very much on the edge of sentimentality. Free describes this combination in Fellini's film as the clowns find a faded reality where no one cares anymore, where people have forgotten how to laugh (1973, p. 224). It seems as though skepticism and cynicism prevail in the clown's world. Winfried's mission would be less sentimental if he would not constantly make jokes that fail to make people laugh. In this sense, he is the ultimate clown. In *TE*, people indeed have forgotten how to laugh; a situation Winfried seems desperate to change. When encountering some Romanian villagers at a future oil field, he advises a man: "Don't lose the humour." This characteristic makes his character extra mournful. Not only have people forgotten how to laugh while he desperately keeps on making jokes, the truth is that, for Winfried, there is little reason for laughter. His dog dies, his mother is old, he is divorced, his piano student quits and his daughter is overworked, living abroad

and not allowing much contact. It is not only *through* his performance that he fights reality, it is also *in* this performance that his goal is attained, since he spends time with Ines during his act and this is what brings them together (although not directly). It is his tool and destination at the same time. The film's ending emphasizes this notion, as Ines increasingly appreciates her father's jokes and has indeed spent 'true' time with Winfried, whereas she now lives in Shanghai. Additionally, Winfried's mother just died and the final shot shows an undefined Ines that is on the brink of sentimentality herself. His attempt for a joyful relationship with Ines was his success at the same time. It is how Winfried himself describes happiness in life: in the moments themselves it is hard to grasp what is important, but later on you get to realize what was valuable. This, in *TE*, is the farce of life and makes it a melancholic odyssey. Simultaneously, it is a source for rebellion against this inevitable part of life, what makes it all the more a fool's attempt.

What makes Winfried's grotesque performance even more interesting is that Ines starts to play along with his role. Ines later brings her performance to a next level of rebellion against reality, when she fails to take off her dress before the arrival of the first guest. She then sets up an act to overcome this limitation; she proposes that the party is in fact a naked party and that her first guests are not welcome if they do not adjust to this theme. The double vision at work here is that we find both Winfried and Ines grotesque, while simultaneously they succeed to deconstruct a culture with a deeply rooted politeness protocol within corporate and interpersonal community. Their performance brings to light the grotesqueness and absurdity of the community members, not only in general, but also when they try to overcome their desperation with the unexpected situations first Toni and later Ines create. It creates an effect similar to the villagers in Fellini's film, who in one sense "provide the norm of human conduct which the clowns parody", while in another sense "the clowns are a norm by which we recognize the grotesqueness of the villagers." (1973, p. 222). Let me explain how this relates to Cavell to give this interpretation more depth.



Figure 25. Ines' refusing Tim for to come in, since he does not want to get undressed.



Figure 26. Winfried (in babugeri-outfit) and Ines finally, sincerely embrace.

Remarriage against isolation

If used stupidity can result to Winfried's failure and rejection by his daughter, how does one come to act in such a way? Why put yourself at risk of being hurt and suffer pain or embarrassment when, in its most successful scenario, your operation will only add on to the list of cultural attempts to get a grip on stupidity? How does one come to act towards this possibly unpromising horizon? Again, I think, the answer lies in the omnipresence and self-sufficiency of stupidity, in the form of feigned stupidity and in this way neglect knowledge about the possibility of failure. In combination with his isolated life, this I think gives him enough courage for his undertaking.

Because there is not much left in Winfried's life he visits Ines and continues his struggle with reality. Reality tells him there is not much to find in Bucharest, as people have forgotten how to laugh and Ines aspires a job abroad far from his life. Against these odds, Winfried goes in search of his only hope, Ines, and this search itself appears to be his salvation. Since realizing this would be demoralizing, he goes to Bucharest with the intention of restoring his relationship with her. Reality also shows that, as a father, he will never be the most important person in her life again. Skeptic and cynical as one may become due to this knowledge, Winfried rebels against this: he tries anyway and keeps himself stupid about this matter in order to do so. In this way, he becomes stupid about the *real* meaning of his undertaking. With his enterprise, he signs up for a remarriage as displayed by Cavell in the comedies of remarriage. In an article about Cavell's work about the comedies of remarriage, Nikolas Kompridis writes:

The change the characters undergo is a change they pleasurably let happen, knowing full well that they are thereby making themselves vulnerable to both pain and embarrassment, if not shame and regret as well [...]. (Kompridis 2014 p. 27)

Earlier in the text he states:

[...] people can, and, improbably, do change, and, indeed, under conditions that would seem to be the most adverse conditions under which to change – such as when they lost their way, when their connection to others, to what most matters to them, breaks down, when they become unintelligible to themselves, rendering them incapable of going on as before, not knowing how to go on, either as whom, or with whom. (2014 p. 27)

In short, personal change is not necessarily pleasurable and can plausibly offer a variety of pain, but offers pleasure nonetheless. A turn of the tides is likely to happen in comedies of remarriage when the protagonist has lost his 'self-intelligibility' due to (relational) conditions in his life. Important to note here is that these changes, at least in the comedies of remarriage, are always interpersonal *in the first place* - although this does not imply that changes in community and culture are unlikely to happen. Kompridis claims that "moral perfectionism", which he describes as (re-)gaining self-intelligibility, can develop into "romantic perfectionism" when it regards "fostering the conditions for the transformation of culture." (2014, p. 30) He gives a hint, although not in so many words, why Winfried's performance is an act of foolishness: we think of it as unrealistic – too demanding, too risky, too threatening - and so it is romantic. This complies to the notions raised before, of our culture being drained

with cynicism. Even if *not* making a U-turn in life for the sake of “perfectionism” requires violence (for the resistance of this turn is demanding, risky and threatening as well), we remain cynical about ‘romanticists’ like Winfried (2014, p. 28). Meanwhile, the U-turn also offers potential for pleasure and happiness.

Kompridis himself addresses this problem to “the less than hospitable intellectual atmosphere of our late modern, irony-infected time” that is “incapable of responding to the world as possibly redeemable” because it is “deadened to the world (through disappointment with it)” (2014, p. 32). This is contrary to the way romantics like Thoreau, Emerson and Cavell “[require] every effort to keep the future open, to prevent it from being foreclosed” (2014, p. 32). Fortunately, irony can be assisted by stupidity and in this way construct a romantic quest again. For Cavell, again inspired by Thoreau and Emerson, this quest is not to be achieved alone, because the other, the “Emersonian or Cavellian friend”, manifests *both* the lostness of a protagonist to himself *and* “another way” through which to recover self-intelligibility” (2014, p. 28). As stated above, these changes always occur interpersonal in the first place. Thus, although Ines is right about the reason for Winfried’s visit when proposing this is because he is in crisis, this is not his only reason. Winfried is also visiting because he *wants* to find “another way” through human contact and interest in Ines. Not surprisingly, he does so via an opportunity: her birthday. When this seems to fail, he becomes rebellious and uses his grotesque performance through an alter ego. This rebellion grows to a bigger scale when Ines participates in the rebellion, growing towards a romantic perfectionist quest of a transformation of culture. In the last part of this chapter, I will describe how this rebellion and stupidity coincide in *TE*, as I will come to view “subversive affirmation” as a form of stupidity of which grotesque performance can be perceived as a subform.

Subversive affirmation in excessive identification as stupidity

The corporate culture Ines works in seems to have a social structure where she is so adapted to, it makes it hard for Winfried to reach out for her and make her notice other values outside this culture. Subversive affirmation has the excellent characteristic of using what is available in a given social structure and turning it around in order to highlight other aspects of a structured situation that remained previously out of sight, such as these unwritten rules that we come to regard as normal. As opposed to irony, so Arns and Sasse write, this method has the ability to criticize or even change a structure or discourse - such as the interpersonal or corporate community - from the *inside* (Arns & Sasse 2006, p. 448). Irony is not suited for this purpose because it is already embedded in these ruling structures, discourses, cultures, or,

to align with Arns' and Sasse's words, ideology. They write the following about 'excessive identification', a specific form of subversive affirmation:

According to Peter Sloterdijk and Slavoj Žižek, overtly criticising the ideology of a system misses the point because today every ideological discourse is marked by cynicism. This means that the ideological discourse has become internalised, and thus anticipates its own critique. Consequently, *vis-à-vis* a cynical ideology, according to Žižek, irony becomes something that 'plays into the hands of power'. In such a situation what is most feared by the ruling ideology is 'excessive identification ...: the enemy is the "fanatic" who "over-identifies" instead of keeping an adequate distance. (2006, p. 448)

Toni over-identifies with the corporate community by taking over their style and attitude, playing cool about his important position, having a business card and buying Ines and her friends champagne for no reason. For outsiders who do not know he is performing an act, this is quite convincing, as to them he keeps no adequate distance from what is being affirmed. Importantly, he only copies the *style* of a businessman, not the *content*. He talks about absurd subjects such as a turtle or wanting bigger teeth, which enables the other to identify him as a trickster (although they only find him to be an idiot). The viewer, of course, knows it is a joke, because we saw the transformation happening and see he is deliberately exaggerating and adding weird character traits to his role in order to ridicule it. This causes an absurd play that emphasises the constructed aspects, the unnaturalness of what is being subverted.

Arns and Sasse further write that over-identification (or excessive identification) highlights the obscene underside of a system and thereby suspends its efficiency. This method explicates the implications of a system (2006, p. 448). In a clever way, this thus employs the unavoidable aspect of stupidity.

Toni plays the part of identification with the corporate world partly very convincing and this is why people keep in doubt whether he really is a fake or maybe just a crazy businessman. A similar process evolves in Ines' naked birthday party. Everybody thinks it is absurd that she is proposing to have a naked party, but because she brings it seriously, nobody dares to mention these excesses, as they might be offending the myths of corporate culture in general. That is why Anca and Gerald do show up naked. It is like the joke of the naked king in reverse: everybody knows he is naked, but nobody dares to reveal this out of fear to be called stupid, and so they praise the naked king. Because there are adepts to Ines' fake concept of a naked party, it actually becomes a teambuilding exercise instead of an absurd proposal that ends up being a total flop. It now is necessary for the other guests to be naked in order to be part of the group. The absurdness of the grotesque performance makes it look like Cavell's utopian

future is still a possibility, one where Ines and Winfried are closer to each other and where the people living next to the Romanian oil field have a brighter future, because with its absurdity it undermines the cynicism that has made these (perhaps also absurd) fictional futures look ridiculous.

The trickster

Winfried seems to use a clever kind of stupidity. Stupidity is used in this grotesque performance in order to fake the idea, or stay open to the idea, that this future is still a possibility. The choice for this performance and the performance itself is dependent on stupidity, because the denial of cynicism is needed in order to strengthen the courage needed for this ideal future to pursue and, possibly ever, to flourish. Van Boxsel describes such a system in the cleverness of the trickster:

Het gaat niet om de tegenstelling tussen dom en slim. [De trickster] zijn slimheid is een gerationaliseerde domheid, een domheid die zichzelf ontkent; en omgekeerd, zijn domheid getuigt van een hogere wijsheid. (Van Boxsel 2017, p. 47) [It is not about the opposition between stupid and clever. [The trickster]'s cleverness is a rationalized stupidity, a stupidity that denies itself; and the other way around, his stupidity proves of a higher wisdom.]

Thus, because knowing the unavoidable aspect of stupidity would be fatal for our moral, we deny our stupidity. This denial, then, is of a higher wisdom as it chooses long (and better) profit over short secureness of staying put. We are stuck with this ever-lasting cynicism and irony, but there always remains the option to deliberately deny these characteristics in order to keep high moral and retain the possibility of Cavell's, Emerson's and Thoreau's re-marriage and second chances. Along this route, we do not simply deny cynicism and irony and forget them, we are *partly* naïve about them - which Cresap terms performed naiveté and Van Boxsel describes as 'feigned stupidity' - or else we would become like Norville (Norville's form of stupidity, 'congenital stupidity', needs to be distinguished from Winfried's 'feigned stupidity' (2017, p. 53). If cynicism and skepticism alone prevail, there will only be divorce. Such new meaning with new solutions, here a transformed meaning or a re-meaning, is only established when the laws and norms of the former are perceived as ridiculous. Grotesque performance, in addition with stupidity, has the possibility of doing just that. This is a characteristic that Van Boxsel addresses to tricksters as well (akin to the practical joking Winfried and his 'student' Ines):

[De trickster] zoekt voortdurend de grenzen van de cultuur, stelt wetten en normen in de waagschaal, en dwingt tot nieuwe oplossingen. Hij beproeft de identiteit van alles en iedereen in zichzelf. Hij zet de wereld op zijn kop en dwingt ons nieuwe coördinaten te ontwikkelen waarbinnen we ons moeten oriënteren. (2017, p. 47) [[The trickster] is in constant search of the borders of culture, puts laws and norms at risk and forces new solutions. He tests the identity of everything and everyone in himself. He puts the world upside down and forces us to develop new coordinates wherein we have to orientate.]

These new coordinates that in *TE* are set by Toni are found through remarriage in Cavell's reading of the comedies of remarriage. When these coordinates are considered useless or not better than the previous ones, for example because of skepticism and cynicism, this re-discovery can be made useful or powerful with the help of stupidity. In this case, a stupidity in the form of a grotesque, even trickster-like performance. This performance of stupidity raises attention to entities of which the order says "not to take it so seriously" (2017, p. 51). Van Boxsel demonstrates how irony is intertwined with stupidity in quoting J.P. Guépin, who says that not-recognized irony is seen as stupidity, whereas every stupidity can secretly be ironic as well (2017, p. 81). Thus, in stupidity the danger of irony is always imminent (2017, p. 85). Toni in *TE* especially embodies this edge of something being an ironic performance or earnestness and this is the power of his performance. Van Boxsel quotes Johan Huizinga in saying that all new order arises from a play that became serious, which is exactly what happens in *TE* (2017, p. 92).

Final remarks and re-meaning

The meanings of Winfried's intentions are no longer suspended when he and Ines perform a song at the house where they have come to celebrate Easter. The song is not performed mockingly, but very seriously, after which Ines, for reasons unknown, abruptly leaves the house. Winfried then admits to his host that he is not actually the ambassador of Germany, who he claimed to be. She then says she already knows this because she has met the real ambassador of Germany. In this scene, Winfried and Ines are finally both sincere at the same time, in their mutual performance of Whitney Houston's "Greatest Love of All". The song's lyrics emphasize that learning how to love yourself is the greatest love of all, which remarkably echoes Emerson's message of self-reliance.² Winfried then notices a weirdly looking suit at the host's house in the next scene, which later appears to be the suit he wears when visiting Ines naked birthday party. Although the suit itself looks completely ridiculous

² Lyrics to Whitney Houston's 'The Greatest Love of All' are found in the appendix.

in this setting, it has a genuine meaning in the tradition of Bulgaria. Thus, what looks like a joke is in fact a candid act to show his love to Ines. Remarkably, it works, because in this suit he and Ines truly connect in their emotional and long hug – outside in a park, after he already left the party without in fact ever showing he is inside the suit. His jokes now appear a to-be-taken-serious-seriousness, or they were with serious intentions of solidarity, of trying to connect to people and show interest in them, all the while.



Figure 27. Ines emotionally singing ‘The Greatest Love of All’ at the house they went to visit during Easter.

The film closes with The Cure’s *Plainsong*, which contains lyrics about the end of the world and about death, and how this simultaneously has the effect of feeling like living on the edge of the world.³ Perhaps it is this edge of seriousness and a humorous performance that gives the film meaning. The stupid thing is that hopeful horizons only work on behalf of invisibility, of what is there but needs to remain out of sight in order to provide moral to this horizon. When you grasp this, it loses its function. In this way, director Maren Ade conserves our fantasy by balancing the end of the film on the brink of satisfaction and longing, to “smile for a second”, as the lyrics of the song describe. In this ending, a romantic re-meaning is concluded. In order to give acknowledgement to cynicism this smile cannot endure too long, or we will not believe it and it would have become a typical sweet but cheesy Hollywood ending. Still, it needs to be there in order to provide the fulfilment in the *potential* for happiness and hope of Cavell’s solidarity. In order to maintain our hope for this, she keeps us stupid and provides an open ending, where an open future is a possibility due to the space stupidity created therefor.

³ Lyrics to The Cure’s ‘Plainsong’ are found in the appendix.

Rebelling against conformity in *Alle Anderen*

In this last chapter I will mention a final remark about stupidity as functioning for the construction of re-meaning. Just like in the previous chapter, again a feeling about openness in the future is presented. It portrays civilians that use stupidity as a method to undermine conformity in adulthood and form their own community. Re-meaning in this film exists of the values that this community encompasses. The form I address to this stupidity is ‘performed naiveté’, in this film formed by a play of childishness in becoming adults through Cavellian education. Stupidity here is specifically an ‘act of defiance’, a form of civic disobedience even, that declares a defence for identity. Identity is the final part of moral perfectionism that I like to address, since it forms a core element of self-culture. Civic disobedience is characteristic for this rebellious side of stupidity I have, until now, not yet addressed specifically. In order to introduce a solution for the problem Cavell has with ‘knowing’ and he produces a theory of ‘not-knowing’ that I will illustrate via this film. This film will explain how this theory is crucial to undermine skepticism and cynicism, which is something stupidity creates space for. The film’s tone is romantic in trying to bridge things that are, influenced by cynicism and skepticism, regarded unrealistic. The film’s plot is explained first.

Plot and tone

Alle Anderen (Maren Ade, 2009) (AA) contains remarkable overlaps with *Toni Erdmann*, such as the focus on relational issues between two characters and the realistic form it is portrayed. It is about the young love couple Chris (Lars Eidinger) and Gitti (Birgit Minichmayr), who are on a holiday in Italy where they encounter several relational issues, regarding topics like adulthood, children and finality. Especially the sudden presence of the brutal and unsympathetic Hans (Hans-Jochen Wagner), an old acquaintance, and his wife Sana (Nicole Marischka) raises issues on how the couple should relate to them, as well as to each other. During the holiday, Chris, being an architect, is simultaneously working on the redesign of an old nearby villa. Stress about his work, his career, his identity and his future haunt him, and therefore Gitti as well, during their break. Their future as a shared future is questioned through the fights and discussions they have. A visit to Hans and Sana, after bumping into them at the supermarket, rushes the underlying problems. After this visit Chris meets Hans again privately in the city centre, not wanting Gitti to come because he feels ashamed of her. The friction between Chris and Gitti reaches a climax when Hans and Sana visit them in Chris’ parents house. During this scene Gitti, out of sight of Hans and Chris, orders Sana,

faintly threatening her with a kitchen knife, to tell Hans she would want to leave. After they leave, Gitti throws herself out of the window. In doing so, she naively and clumsily embodying a fantasy Chris had outspoken to her, of that he would picture himself flying out of the window as Batman to impress her. Chris however does not notice this and she never brings it up herself afterwards.

In the following and final scene Gitti abruptly wants to take a plane back home because she does not love him anymore, as she tells him. Chris is surprised by this sudden declaration and tells her he does not believe her. When she is getting her stuff, she all of a sudden decides to fall down on the floor, where she continues to lay down as if dropped dead. Chris tells her to quit this nonsense, but when he approaches her he gets scared for a while, thinking there really is something wrong. When he then opens her eyelashes he gets angry because he then sees she is still awake and playing the part. She keeps lying like this for what seems like quite a while; leaving Chris tumbled up in his emotions. When he is sobbing in a nearby chair and her phone rings for the umpteenth time, he answers calmly saying Gitti will return the call. He then lifts her and lays her on the table, on which she still does not respond. He then produces a loud farting-sound by blowing air on her belly, after which she starts to chuckle. He repeats this several times, after which she starts to laugh. He tells her to look him in the eyes, which she does and strokes his hair and the film ends.

Evidently, as the film's title ("*Everyone Else*") suggests, the film is about how to act according to and towards others and how to remain close to your identity in public spheres with others who seem to prefer other appearances. Relating to Cavell, it is also about how to form a mutual future together that obeys two individual needs as well as responsibilities. Cavell's work on the comedies of remarriage offers interesting insights to how stupidity, in the form of performed naiveté, functions. Relating this form of stupidity to Cavell's theory, it seems to be an act of civic disobedience against the conformity people around them personify. Stupidity is deliberately used as an optimistic 'not wanting to be otherwise', as I will come to explain. The film's tone so is rather romantic. All the more, stupidity is a method that suits to make way for a moral perfectionist perspective in the creation for re-meaning.

Adulthood as conformity

Conform social expectation patterns seem to be the biggest subject of the film. At the beginning of this thesis, I wrote: "Since moral perfectionism is also a "revolt against a standing community of conformity, suffocating and resistant to change, self-disobedience" - and this is where Thoreau's important idea completes perfectionism's perspective - "becomes

civic disobedience” (Rodowick 2015, p. 269).” For Chris and Gitti, conformity is aligned with adulthood and a “publicness” of their relationship they come to endure during their holiday. The standing community where they revolt against is personified in the characters Hans and Sana. In their own relationship, what stands in the way of moving in with each other and having sex without a condom (which of course opens up the possibility for them having children) is Chris’ skepticism about these notions. These relational steps are what I, based on Cavell’s ideas, call the forming of a community. Later, when Chris starts to move towards the standing community of Chris and Sana, Gitti rebels against with stupidity in order to protect the identity of their relationship.

The story’s social expectation patterns are emphasized in the form of, for example, Hans and Sana, or by Chris’ sister mentioning a baby looks good on him when he holds his niece. The title of course very much hints at this already. There are social expectation patterns at work that show to be very fixed and conform ‘middle-class’, attaching value to regards as career, small talk and compromises. These patterns do not leave much space for deviations from this standard, for example when Hans tells the others that Chris’ did not want his design mixed, he tells them he thinks this is very stupid and romantic. This has a big impact on the way Chris and Gitti behave towards each other and towards choices in life. Hans and Sana since recently know, as they tell Chris and Gitti, they are to become parents. They are both successful career-wise and Hans operates in the architectural sphere, like Chris (a root for an increased feeling of failure for Chris). Very grown-up, they are invited over for dinner and make very civilized conversations without the jokingly, childlike play Chris and Gitti enact when they are just together. When during dinner Chris tells Hans and Sana a game Gitti played with his niece, it is made clear their behaviour is not accepted in this conform community. Chris proudly tells them about the play Gitti had with his niece, learning to tell the child to say she hates her and playfully shooting her with her fingers as a gun. However, Hans and Sana only condescendingly call the game “quite unconventional” and look away skeptically.

Throughout their dealing with Hans and Sana, Chris and Gitti seem to be tested for conformity, practicing with cooking and making civilized jokes not too curious (as they do privately), dressing up neatly (as Gitti buys a new dress in town that is said to be apparently entirely not her style). When they are together they seem to become children again, playfully enjoying each other’s company. In order to escape conform expectations and preserve the horizon of another prospective than ending up like Hans and Sana, Chris and Gitti enact their childlike play, reacting to these expectations and future as they do. They perform role-plays where they fool each other, dress one another up and Gitti initiates a role-play with Chris’

niece. Gitti even jumps out of the window in order to live up to a Batman fantasy and plays dead in order to rebel against the situation she and Chris are in at that time. Chris makes a small puppet out of a piece of Ginger, of which he acts as if it were a small person: talking for him and rolling his 'head' in bandage because he ostensibly hit his head. This play of deliberate naivety and childishness as forms of stupidity is a solution because it helps them focus on other things besides the frustrations in their relationship.



Figure 28. Gitti puts make-up on Chris' face.



Figure 29. The ginger puppet Chris made.

Chris and Gitti seems to take the adulthood that is personified in Hans and Sana as exemplary, while in fact, it is only an example of a civic form. It seems as though by taking this adulthood as an example, the future for their community seems very closed. If this is the only way of becoming adult, than they are limiting themselves from the possibility to themselves

form an adult community that can differ from this perspective. They need to turn away from the idea that this knowledge is the only possible knowledge and reengage with their own qualities of anti-conformity, which are already there. It is in the acknowledging of this part of themselves and their relationship that they will find an alternative community, which they have for now seem to have forgotten. In order not to get stuck in the focus on this particular example as the only possibility for a community, stupidity in the form of performed naiveté lends itself accurately. First however, let me explain *where* it is they need to return to, by referring to the ‘privateness’ of their community.

Profit of the private

To know the importance of using stupidity as a method is to see what is so important to gain from it. This is what I will now explain with the help of Cavell’s theory about remarriage and the importance of the ‘private’ in this. Regaining this ‘privateness’ via stupidity is even to using stupidity as a method to undermine a conform, stable community’s (or ‘societies’ as Van Boxsel would write) that try to control and adapt your self-culture. The creation of (re-)meaning is in way at stake, since, following Cavell’s arguments, moral perfectionism strives for a better community, which I think is to say a meaningful community that fits your personal self-culture.

Cavell addresses that what counts as public is the law and what is private as desire (Rodowick 2015, p. 248). While it is the side of desire where experience is found and what helps put on a moral perfectionist perspective. What is needed to (re)discover their desire, is the ability to choose, to be free what to desire (2015, p. 249). At the dubious point in Chris and Gitti’s relationship, this is problematized due to their lack to spend time together. In being constantly exposed to the presence of Hans and Sana, they are inclined to solely see their relationship as it is when they are with them, while it is in their private sphere when they seem to enjoy each other instead of being ashamed of each other. If Cavell proposes the road to moral perfectionism needs an educational other, Hans and Sana together would be the ‘uneducational’ other that gives the wrong example. This steers the desire of Chris and Gitti in a way of conformity that will not lead them to pursue happiness, but rather to adapt to the expectation of ‘everyone else’.

That they finally reengage when they are together again is illustrated in a scene where Hans and Sana are temporarily out of the frame. In this scene, Chris, Gitti, Hans and Sana are all standing in Chris’ mother’s room in the house he and Gitti are staying. They press play on the CD-player that is in the room and a sensitive and cheesy love ballad of the popular German

singer Grönemeyer starts to play. They listen to the song for quite a while and the shots in the scene make a division between the couples. Grönemeyer sings to his lover in the song, explaining that he wanted to start a family with him or her, but that this actually was way too early and that he now just takes it as it goes. Chris and Gitti meaningful look at each other several times and when they start to realize the lyrics of the song apply to them and their situation they smile to each other.⁴ Gitti, fed up with Hans mocking Chris' mother's room before, now comes to relax. Then all of a sudden Hans from out of the shot stops the music and we hear his voice saying "Es tut mir Leid, aber das is echt Folter für mich." ("I'm sorry, but that really is torture for me"). Chris and Gitti, and the film's audience, following their perspective, with them, are suddenly reminded that the reality of Hans is still in the room and their expressions turn sour.



Figure 30. Chris looks at Gitti as they come to have a private moment during the Grönemeyer song.

⁴ Lyrics to Herbert Grönemeyer's 'Ich hab dich lieb' are found in the appendix.



Figure 31. Hans and Sana in the meantime in the same room, but separated by the camera shot.



Figure 32. Chris and Gitti after Hans put off the CD and walks through ‘their shot’. After Which Gitti walks out of the room, irritated.

“Privacy is also a happiness and publicness also a loss”, Cavell writes in a passage about marriage as relating to individuality and togetherness (Cavell 1981, p. 102). Due to their regained awareness of Hans, their private moment, where they seem to reengage with each other again, is lost. The desire they have for each other has no chance of succeeding when they are with Hans and Sana, which is what this scene illustrates. Even skepticism returns, claiming the Grönemeyer song to be cheesy, while for a moment it was a romantic love song. The joy they endure during the private moment in the song seems to be a demand for divorce from Hans and Sana and can be seen as a will for freedom for desire, or freedom for the

identity of their relationship. A pursuit of happiness in a community is “fraught with difficulty, inspiring conflict between the couple and with the worlds they inhabit.” (Rodowick 2015, p. 251) So, Chris and Gitti have to face the difficulty of conflicting the community of Hans and Sana, which Gitti does by threatening Sana with a knife. Also, the possibility of humiliation in this process, which Cavell considers, is suffered by Chris, is ashamed of Gitti (2015, p. 251). That it is important not to dwell in passivism and focus on a bad example as a community, Cavell writes:

The picture is that the existence of others is something of which we are unconscious, a piece of knowledge we repress, about which we draw a blank. [...] The release from this circle of vengeance is something I call acknowledgement. [...] You have to act in order to make things happen, night and day; and to act from within the world, within your connection with others, forgoing the wish for a place outside from which to view and to direct your fate. These are at best merely further fates. There is no place to go in order to acquire the authority of connection. [...] You cannot wait for the perfect community to be presented. And yet, in matters of the heart, to make things happen, you must let them happen. (1981, p. 109)

In order not to wait for this community to happen and for Chris and Gitti to become a community of conformity like Hans and Sana, Gitti takes matters in her own hands. She uses a form of stupidity to create space for this and become regain ‘freedom’ of their relationship’s identity, on which I will now elaborate.

Performed naiveté as civic disobedience

Let me explain how the play of Chris and Gitti that helps them return to their own desires is a form of stupidity in the form of ‘performed naiveté’. Simultaneously it is an ‘act of defiance’ and able to save their community in being insubordinate against Hans and Sana’s conformity. In her book about Andy Warhol as a ‘pop-trickster and fool’, Kelly Cresap writes about stupidity, quoting Peter Sloterdijk about the subject:

In modernity, he writes, “Stupidity loses its apparent simplicity; in it one no longer recognizes a primary state of unenlightened minds but a complicated phenomenon that in itself is many-sided, indeed downright exciting... Stupidity is an act of defiance, a refusal, a not-wanting-to-be-otherwise that advances parallel to enlightenment.” (Cresap 2004, p. 33)

Stupidity here is acknowledged to be rebellious, in fact it is described (although not literally) as a form of perfectionism as suggested by Cavell via Kompridis. In this light it becomes a

romantic quest of not-wanting-to-be otherwise, as a deliberate choice in a sphere of options. Stupidity now seems to be used to keep open this possibility of the future as (now coming back to Kompridis for a moment) “object of a special concern and praxis”, assuming an ‘openness’ towards it (Kompridis 2014, p. 32). Cresap describes Warhol of doing something familiar:

[...] Andy continues his performance [...] as a naïf, thwarting our efforts to render him knowable within a familiar intellectual framework. (2004, p. 23)

The re-discovery of oneself, the self-intelligibility and self-reliance seems to aim at the same goal of avoiding a familiar intellectual framework that is so solidified and prevailing in philosophy. Only by dodging this intellectual framework, this option of ‘transforming culture’, of which moral perfectionism is a perspective for, stays a possibility.

In doing so, Chris and Gitti rebel against Hans and Sana’s conformity in order to save their relationship’s identity. Performed naiveté “requires courage in face of the ridicule”, as Cresap writes, trying “not to be intimidated by the seeming completeness or permanence of any existing body of knowledge.” (2004, p. 29). When Chris and Gitti first visit Hans and Sana, I think he is intimidated by the ‘knowledge’ of Hans. ‘Knowledge’ here means something like the realization of his presence and the culture in his community, which is that of conformity. During their visit, Gitti objects to something Hans says, calling him patronizing. Afterwards, Chris calls her remarks towards Hans embarrassing. The next time he wants to visit Hans (which in itself is remarkable, since he, until they ran into them, was desperately trying to avoid him), he does not want Gitti to come because he does not want to be embarrassed again. He then seems to conform more to Hans and Sana’s community and thereby outcasts Gitti. He failed to have courage for this performed naiveté and felt ridiculed. This is why I think Gitti, when she says she does not love him anymore, calls him a loser.

From the moment on Chris meets Hans on his own, Gitti starts to rebel even more: she jumps out of the window, threatens Sana with a knife, says she wants to break up with Chris and plays dead. Only when Chris is finally faced with the potential of losing Gitti when she says she wants to break up with him, he reinvents his playfulness and makes farting sounds on Gitti’s belly. Seeming like a sign Chris acknowledges the unconformity of their relationship, Gitti answers this act with laughter and caresses his face.



Figure 33. Gitti playing dead.



Figure 34. Chris making farting sounds on Gitti's belly.



Figure 35. Gitti caressing Chris' face as the film's final shot.

Performed naiveté is an act of civic disobedience because it rebels against a ruling community. When Chris starts to act more conform, Gitti starts to use this tactic in trying to undermine is. It is as how Van Boxsel describes stupidity can be used as a method by civilians to undermine society's control on them: this kind of stupidity sabotages the acknowledgement of a reigning force (Van Boxsel 2017, pp. 104-105).

Not knowing, final remarks and re-meaning

Cavell provides an interesting dimension to stupidity as performed naiveté with his theory about not-knowing, which is described as:

a condition [...] that registers not a gap in our knowledge that must be filled up, not a failure of the human condition as such, but only a failure of epistemology in its pretension to once and for all put this perplexity to rest. The stance of not-knowing is internal to Cavell's attempt to keep the question open. (Macarthur 2014, p. 20)

Entirely within the framework of Emerson and Thoreau, this 'acknowledgement' and 'acceptance' are matters of personal responsibility (2014, p. 23). Eventually not-knowing brings us to our relation to others. In the words of Macarthur it:

opens up into the need to reawaken one's sense of the deeply personal nature of one's attachments (to the world, or others, or oneself) and one's own responsibility for maintaining or disowning them. (2014, p. 23)

Again, an emphasis is laid on our self-reliance, for the sake of skepticism, others and ourselves. The return of the human subject to itself in philosophy, so Macarthur writes, leads

to a power to reawaken one's sense of "oneself, one's attachments to others and one's world" (2014, p. 23). Eventually, not-knowing even has the ability to "reconceive one's world", because it has a hand in liberating one's creative and destructive powers to "remake oneself, recommit or renounce one's attachments to others" (2014, p. 23). In this way, performed naiveté is not only an act of being subordinate, but also a will to see and experience things differently. This opens up the possibility a community can be different from a community of conformity and have an open future. When performed naiveté is described as "the strategic withholding, disabling, or refusal of knowledge; an apparent ignorance that nonetheless wields a critical edge." I think this is not only a refusal of a *certain kind* of knowledge, but of a *focus* on knowledge all together (Cresap 2004, p. 27). When regarding Cavell's idea about not-knowing, it is a shift of focus that enables the possibility of something else to emerge: another meaning. For Chris and Gitti, I think the meaning of their relationship is regained via the acts of first only Gitti and afterwards also Chris. Thanks to their act of stupidity, in refusing to become conform, they are educated for something they may already have known, but seemed to be forgotten: the importance of their relationship. In this way, they got remarried. In this way, re-meaning is constructed as a set of values that promote a refusal to be otherwise and the reinvention of identity and saved from becoming Hans and Sana's set of values.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have analysed how stupidity is represented in film. In doing so, my main influences were theories about stupidity by Matthijs van Boxsel and theories about striving for moral perfectionism in remarriage by Stanley Cavell. It is a given fact that stupidity is always revealed too late, only after a failure has occurred. My aim was to discover which meaning is revealed by stupidity, and how stupidity itself contributes to this uncovering. Therefore, I went in search for meaning, regarded as a set of values incorporated within the film's plot, determinative of how to understand a specific film. When stupidity emerges, it not only exposes something that was previously hidden, it also assists in the construction of this appearance. If this 'something' would be knowledge, for example, stupidity would present it as inadequate or limited. Often, stupidity is a cause for action and a motivation for development of some kind. In other cases, it has the ability to address proportions between characters in a society or community. Either way, stupidity should be focused on, rather than knowledge. Van Boxsel and Cavell both are concerned that the focus on knowledge is overrated. According to Van Boxsel, stupidity is underrated, while Cavell argues the same for not-knowing, a similar concept though more concerned with human's experience. Cavell claims our over-focus on knowledge maintains an abundance of skepticism and cynicism, which causes people to become isolated. Based on his ideas, I studied how stupidity functions in trying to overcome this focus on knowledge and sought for other foci that could be of importance. In doing so, I examined stupidity as a method in order to gain a perspective of moral perfectionism. Since Cavell is convinced neighbouring ourselves and others, via a culture of "self" formed by Emerson and Thoreau, is key for this, I decided to search for "re-meaning" as a meaning that echoes Cavell's legacy and undergoes a transformation or adjustment.

The post-screwball comedy is a term I constructed to determine the films I analysed, as following a same kind of logic as the logic Cavell found in the comedies of remarriage (regarded as subgenre -although Cavell himself avoids the term 'genre'- of the screwball comedy-genre). With this term, I based myself on Cavell and on his work about the comedies of remarriage in particular. Akin to Cavell, I found these post-screwball comedy films to follow a certain kind of logic that is determinable via the representation of stupidity in them. Two of these films, *The Hudsucker Proxy* and *Burn After Reading*, both by Joel and Ethan Coen, follow a logic that maintains these film's main ideologies. The re-meaning, which stupidity helped to construct, served these ideologies and even functioned in controlling

civilians within these ideologies. The other two films, *Toni Erdmann* and *Alle Anderen*, were both by director Maren Ade and follow another kind of logic, wherein stupidity functions as an instrument that civilians in a community employ to undermine conformity and stableness of these communities. The question I meant to answer hereby was as follows: ‘In which ways does stupidity function to construct re-meaning in the post-screwball comedy?’ To answer this question in this conclusion, let me first shortly elaborate on the function of stupidity in creating re-meaning in each film separately.

The Hudsucker Proxy illustrated notions of the symbolic order in regarding desire, fantasy and ideology. Dumb luck and a blind trust on knowledge functioned as instigators for action and eventually for a triumph of remarriage of the main couple, via finding a right language. The film is cynical about believing its own love story, however, and ideology never is truly transformed, since a main goal of making profit is still put before civilians’ well-being. However, the film’s set of values first emphasizes consumerist capitalist values, which later changes into a setting for second chances. This change happens as a result of stupidity: via dumb luck and a blind trust on knowledge. The re-meaning therefore does hint towards Cavell’s moral perfectionism, though still embedded in ideology’s profit-making goal.

Burn After Reading is problematic for finding re-meaning. The film never reaches a point where re-meaning is established, since it never truly escapes ideology. Stupidity is deployed by the film’s overarching ideology of neoliberal capitalism in order to control civilians, which leads the re-meaning of the film to be found at a place where it feels undeserved, namely the CIA. The CIA-agents learn “not to do again” what they did, but remain ignorant about which action is referred to and do not care about it either. The characters do all search for meaning in their lives, but fail to grasp what it is they truly desire, since most of them die, flee or end up alone. This way, the only character that gets what she wants, Linda, is fooled: she gets to consume a new look, of which we feel it does not help her pursue happiness. The film therefore remains cynical and never achieves Cavellian romanticism – it only hints at it briefly, when Ted admires Linda. This does not last for long, however, since Ted dies as well. Re-meaning is found in its negative: neoliberal capitalism will never bring moral perfectionism.

In *Toni Erdmann* is the first example wherein one gets to see stupidity in the hands of civilians. Stupidity actively helps to strive for a moral perfectionist perspective in being used as a method. The form of stupidity represented in this film is that of ‘grotesque performance’ and ‘subversive affirmation via excessive identification’. This way, it opens up space for a new community to emerge; one that is built on Cavellian values. It is precisely how Van

Boxsel claims stupidity has the potential to function by constructing something, in this case values that appeal to Cavell in the reunion of two people. A feigned stupidity is what gives the characters courage for their undertaking and helps not to become overly cynical or skeptical. Re-meaning is found in the re-appreciation of lost values such as family, but the film does not hesitate to illustrate these are volatile. This makes its meaning romantic, or even melancholic. The last film that I analysed and interpreted, *Alle Anderen*, again laid stupidity in the hands of civilians in order to undermine, or rather rebel against, conformity. This conformity is found in the community of a, I would nearly say, rival love couple. The form of stupidity functioning here is that of ‘performed naiveté’ as an act of ‘civic disobedience’. Its disobedience here lies within the abandonment of impending conformity. Stupidity eventually serves as a method to save a community, in opening a ground for childishness and the authentic identity of a community. It assisted in shifting from focusing on knowledge about a stable community that was seen as exemplary to focusing on the interest of the private community. The ‘privateness’ in this rebelling community was necessary in order to liberate one’s true desire again and to not adapt to public-reigning conformity. Re-meaning here functions as a rediscovery: values that were already there were put into focus again by stupidity in the form of performed naiveté. Emphasising not-knowledge as item of relevance paved the way for the acknowledgement of experience in a moral perfectionist, romantic perspective.

The function of stupidity in the construction of re-meaning in these post-screwball comedies thus seems to work in two separable levels. On the one hand, it contributes to strengthening a society’s or an ideology’s grip on civilians. Due to stupidity of dumb luck or a blind trust on knowledge, moral perfectionism is able to change meaning *within* its ideology, but it is never able to abandon it for the sake of a pursue of happiness. Stupidity combined with intelligence even has the ability to make situations worse. The first two films treated in this thesis only seem to address what is problematic for pursuing happiness. On the other hand, stupidity functions as making way for establishing moral perfectionism. If we are to take lessons from the first two films I examined, the meaning was that at least neoliberal capitalism does not help characters pursue happiness. These last two films seem to search for what *does* help characters pursue happiness and how they try to do so. In these films, stupidity achieved what Van Boxsel calls ‘making stupidity our best side’: civilians used it as a method in order to undermine communities with sets of values that blocked their communities to flourish. With this research, I contributed to the underrated research field on stupidity. This topic has, to the best of my knowledge, not yet been specifically scrutinized in film, while film as a

mongrel medium lends itself nicely to discover stupidity's numerous sides and forms. When combined with Cavell's assemblage of theories, I come to the conclusion that our focus on knowledge is preventing other values to emerge, such as experience or failure. Stupidity, however, has the unique ability to make way for other values, for it has the power to ridicule one set of values as being foolish.

For this research I searched for the moral perfectionist perspective as some sort of goal for which stupidity could be employed as a method. It might be very interesting to study what other perspectives it can make way for. In *Burn After Reading*, for example, the moral perfectionist perspective did not lend itself very appropriately to discover what new meaning had arisen. Perhaps this is because this is an utterly bitter film, or perhaps another perspective might be more suitable to explain its meaning. I am convinced that Van Boxsel will continue his work on stupidity, though it might be interesting to combine more of his work with Cavell's, who adopts the same optimistic view when it concerns knowledge. Furthermore, Ade's films have previously largely been ignored as source for film studies, while I think they offer very original, interesting perspectives that should not be left aside. Indeed, especially when looking at the Coen's films, we live in a highly skeptical, 'irony-infected' time, where the other is continuously mistrusted. This is not necessarily a bad thing, since a lot of values can arise from this skepticism and it functions as a good antidote for, amongst others, exaggeration or melodrama. Acknowledgement for scepticism, though, in order to move on from there and not remain passive due to it, offers values that are at least equally important and interesting. Stupidity, I think, first requires encouragement before it needs to become set back like skepticism. Ade's films seem to have the ability to move beyond this stable spectrum and are able to "change perspective". Would students at universities be inclined to pursue this, I would applaud to abandon a focus on knowledge and to take a further look at stupidity and its function in film, for that is where new meaning can be found.

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Appendix

“Norville reading out Waring Hudsucker’s last will” from *The Hudsucker Proxy*

“From the desk of Waring
Hudsucker. To. Sidney J.
Mussburger. Regarding. My
demise. Dear Sid. By the time
you read this, I will have joined
the organization upstairs -- an
exciting new beginning. I will
retain fond memories of the many
years you and I – “[...]”
[...]“Many years, uh... I know that
you will be wondering why I have
decided to move on, ending my
tenure at Hudsucker, and here on
Earth. You will be thinking, Why
now, when things are going so
well? Granted, from the standpoint
of our balance sheet and
financials, sure, sure, we're
doing fine. However, Sid. These
things have long since ceased to
give me pleasure. I look at
myself now and no longer see the
idealistic young man who started
this company. Now I see only an
empty shell whom others call a
'success.' How has this come to
pass? When and why did I trade
all of my hopes, dreams and
aspirations, for the emptiness
of power and wealth? What the
heck have I done?” [...]

[...]“... Looking back now, Sid, I see that I allowed time and age to corrupt my dreams. instead of fiercely guarding what was timeless inside of myself, I let the hubbub of earthly commerce erode my character, and dissolve my better self. How is it that some manage to preserve themselves where I have failed? Sidney, I do not know. Perhaps if others love you, you may more securely love yourself -- but I am alone. I loved a woman once, Sid, as you well know -- a beautiful, vibrant lady, an angel who in her wisdom saw fit to choose you instead of I...”[...]

[...]“... And so, Sid, the future does not belong to such as I -- nor even you. We have made our compromises with time. The future belongs to the young, who may more energetically wage the battle against corruption. Accordingly, in the spirit of hope, and the ringing in of the new, I hereby bequeath my entire interest in the company, and my seat on the board, to whomever is Hudsucker's most recent employee at the time of my demise.”[...]

[...]“I know this will disappoint you -- you, Sid, who have served

so diligently and for so long.
But –“[...]
[...]” ... But Sid, let me urge you to
work closely with the new
president, and to keep giving
Hudsucker Industries all your
energies -- but not your soul.
For while we must strive for
success, we must not worship it.
Long live the Hud. Waring
Hudsucker...”.

Dailyscript.com, September 1992.

Lyrics to “Greatest Love of All” by Whitney Houston

I believe the children are our future
Teach them well and let them lead the way
Show them all the beauty they possess inside
Give them a sense of pride
To make it easier
Let the children's laughter remind us how we used to be

Everybody's searching for a hero
People need someone to look up to
I never found anyone who fulfilled my needs
A lonely place to be
And so I learned to depend on me

I decided long ago never to walk in anyone's shadows
If I fail, if I succeed
At least I'll live as I believe
No matter what they take from me
They can't take away my dignity

Because the greatest love of all is happening to me
I found the greatest love of all inside of me

The greatest love of all is easy to achieve
Learning to love yourself
It is the greatest love of all

I believe the children are our future
Teach them well and let them lead the way
Show them all the beauty they possess inside
Give them a sense of pride
To make it easier
Let the children's laughter remind us how we used to be

I decided long ago never to walk in anyone's shadows
If I fail, if I succeed
At least I'll live as I believe
No matter what they take from me
They can't take away my dignity

Because the greatest love of all is happening to me
I found the greatest love of all inside of me

The greatest love of all is easy to achieve
Learning to love yourself
It is the greatest love of all

And if, by chance, that special place
That you've been dreaming of
Leads you to a lonely place
Find your strength in love.

AZLyrics (2018).

Lyrics to “Plainsong” by The Cure

I think it's dark and it looks like it's rain, you said
And the wind is blowing like it's the end of the world, you said
And it's so cold, it's like the cold if you were dead
And then you smiled for a second

I think I'm old and I'm feeling pain, you said
And it's all running out like it's the end of the world, you said
And it's so cold, it's like the cold if you were dead
And then you smiled for a second

Sometimes you make me feel
Like I'm living at the edge of the world
Like I'm living at the edge of the world
It's just the way I smile, you said.

Genius, 2018.

Lyrics to “Ich hab dich lieb” by Herbert Grönemeyer

Ich hab grad zärtlich
An dich gedacht
Wie du behutsam und ganz sacht
Mich total verrückt gemacht

Du kamst, wann du wolltest
Gingst morgens um acht
Tausend und eine nacht

Ich hab dich lieb, so lieb
Lieber als je zuvor
Ich hab dich lieb, so lieb
Ich nehm's halt mit Humor

Du wolltest dich nicht an mich binden
Bin ich so'n oller Baum?
Eine Familie mit dir, das war mein Traum
Doch dir war's viel zu früh
Es gibt bestimmt auch noch bessere
Andere als mich
Du willst dich erst umsehen
Man weiß ja nie

Ich hab dich lieb, so lieb
Lieber als du denkst
Ich hab dich lieb, so lieb
Auch wenn du nicht an mir hängst

Ruf doch mal wieder an und
Erzähl mir, was du treibst
Ist ganz egal wann und überrasch mich
Komm her und sag, daß du bleibst
Für immer jetzt für ewig oder mehr, doch halt

Ich muß wohl schon träumen
Jeder hat so seinen Tick
Für deine Suche wünsch ich dir
Viel glück

Ich hab dich lieb, so lieb
Ich hoffe, du verzeihst
Ich hab dich lieb, so lieb
Ich will nur, daß du's weißt

Ich hab dich lieb, so lieb
Lieber als du denkst
Ich hab dich lieb, so lieb

Auch wenn du nicht an mir hängst.

Letzte-version.de, 2018.