

## **Comedy taste: Highbrow/lowbrow comedy and cultural capital**

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### **Abstract**

Drawing on Bourdieu's theories about taste and class, this paper investigates how viewers with different levels of education evaluate different forms of comedy. Following up on the research by Giselinde Kuipers, who connected Dutch taste cultures in television comedy to levels of cultural capital, we interviewed Flemish viewers about their appreciation of an exemplary lowbrow, middlebrow and highbrow comedy TV series. We found clear patterns in the knowledge and evaluation of these series, related to the interviewee's level of education. Quite predictably, the lower educated respondents have a better knowledge of and prefer relaxing lowbrow comedy while the higher educated better know and appreciate complex middle- and highbrow comedy. These divergent readings can be related to cultural knowledge, as the lower educated do not notice many of the layers and social references in highbrow comedy, only commenting on the easier (often visual) elements of humour.

**Keywords:** TV comedy; taste; highbrow/lowbrow; level of education; Flanders.

### **Introduction**

Television comedy may have evolved from an 'unworthy' form of culture (Attalah, 1984) to an academically (more) respectable object of research, nevertheless it does remain quite low on the 'moral hierarchy' of television programmes (Alasuutari, 1992). As a genre, it still suffers from a low cultural status particularly in its more popular forms (Mills, 2001: 61; Seiter, 1999: 1-6). Scholarly writing has tended to focus on its socio-political meaning, criticising its conservative ideology or commenting on its subversive potential (e.g. Marc, 1997; Mills, 2001). Television comedy is indeed, essentially, social comedy, dealing with (the breaching of) social norms and conventions, which explains why class is such a central theme in its humour (Woollacott, 1982; Attalah, 1984; Bazalgette et al., 1982; Wagg, 1998). In this paper, we want to investigate how 'class' (to be further defined) also plays a role in the appreciation

of comedy. Based on Bourdieu (1979), the connections between class and taste have been firmly established. Whether one likes a cultural product or not is not simply a matter of (individual) taste, it is also connected to class and particularly to cultural capital. We will explore this connection theoretically but also empirically, drawing on audience research on different forms of TV comedy in Flanders, in an attempt to get a clearer view on the actual working of class-related readings. Do people of different classes and levels of education indeed know and watch different programmes (as is suggested by official ratings)? Do they interpret and evaluate them differently, and if so, how?

### **Class, taste and media**

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theorization (1979) of the connection between class and taste has been highly influential. He distinguished between economic (wealth), social (connections) and cultural forms of capital, the latter including both formal educational capital (degrees) and cultural knowledge acquired through family socialisation. Discussing French society of the time, he analysed the different structures of capital in different classes, which in some cases was symmetrical (e.g. the working class being poor in all respects), in others asymmetrical (e.g. the intellectual upper class having a large cultural but a restricted economic capital). This division of capital leads to the concept of a class habitus, a scheme of behaviour, perception and appreciation (or taste), which in turn determines lifestyle. Connecting empirical data on levels of income and education with surveys on taste, Bourdieu made a strong case for his theory (see Laermans, 1984).

To Bourdieu (1992: 123-131), habitus is thus connected to cultural capital, which exists in different forms. Most relevant to this research is incorporated cultural capital, or knowledge acquired through education or autodidacticism. A habitus can be defined as the product of (formal or informal) education, which provides people with the means to understand the codes of cultural products (Athique, 2008: 35). This explains why cultural appreciations and tastes are so strongly linked to levels of education: a cultural object is only meaningful when one has the cultural capital to read and understand it. People of higher education have generally acquired more socially recognized, 'legitimate', cultural capital, which in turn defines their cultural tastes (Bourdieu, 1979: 12-14).

Bourdieu (1979: 14-16) distinguished three taste zones corresponding to different levels of education. The legitimate (highbrow) taste is mostly that of the highly educated, who display an aesthetic disposition prioritising form over content. The popular (lowbrow) taste is mostly that of people with a low level of education, who prioritise the practical over the aesthetic. An intermediate (middlebrow) taste is mostly attributed to the *petite bourgeoisie* with an intermediate level of education (Laermans, 1984: 30-33). Popular taste is defined as a preference for logical, chronological plots with a happy ending, for simple characters and

situations rather than ambiguous, symbolical figures, enigmatic problems, formal experiments or innovations – all characteristics of legitimate taste (Bourdieu, 1979: 14-16). It is important to note that Bourdieu discussed the potential for class mobility through variations in both economic and cultural capital (see Holt, 1998). Moreover, as opposed to Bourdieu's 1960s France, in most contemporary Western countries class divisions have lost much of their rigidity and predictive value. For these reasons, in what follows we will focus on level of education instead of the more loosely defined and variable notion of class.

If we want to study the connection between level of education and media tastes, Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model is an indispensable step. Hall draws attention to the importance of familiarity with codes at the moment of decoding. In this model, the reading of a text is structured by a complex process in which the social position of readers, partly based on their level of education, defines their knowledge of cultural codes (Morley, 1992: 88). Using the encoding/decoding model, one can study the role of social structures (such as education and social class) in the division of cultural competencies among audiences (Morley, 1991: 18).

Morley took a first important step in translating this model into empirical research in his seminal study on the audience for the UK TV program, *Nationwide* (Morley, 1980). Using focus groups, he investigated how readings of this current affairs programme varied according to social and class position. He found that different groups of readers had recourse to different codes and cultural repertoires when discussing the programme, confirming the general connection between class and media use. However, in a critical postscript, Morley (1981: 9) stressed that the relation between class and readings is probabilistic, rather than deterministic. Indeed, we have to avoid an essentialist view on social variables like class, which are not fixed and stable and thus do not straightforwardly determine media use. Such determinism is one of the main criticisms on Bourdieu's overly-strong connection between social position and cultural tastes (Frow, 1996). There are also historical changes in class relations. For instance, Holt (1998) and Lawler (2005) agree that class still functions as one of the axes around which tastes are formed. However, they note that class differences have gone underground and that distinction is increasingly becoming a matter of practice rather than identification with consumed goods. Incorporated cultural capital is thus growing more important according to these authors. Nevertheless, the basic process of 'distinction' does remain valid: 'the stratification of tastes in such a way as to construct and reinforce differentiations of social status which correspond, in historically variable and often highly mediated ways, to achieved or aspired-to class position' (Frow, 1996: 85).

Further reflecting on his own research, Morley (1981: 8) also admitted that his focus on class precluded the necessary attention to other variables such as age, sex and race (see also

Morley & Brunsdon, 1999). Indeed, other variables beside class define the preference for and reading of certain media products (e.g. Skeggs, Thumim & Wood, 2008). Much subsequent audience research has focussed on gender and race, gradually moving on to address intersections of diverse variables and identities. However, since the literature points out that class remains a key variable in reception processes, this paper will focus on the level of education as a strong predictor of cultural knowledge, in full awareness of the importance of other social variables.

Another reservation concerning the straightforward connection between classes and tastes is related to evolutions in cultural hierarchies. Bourdieu (1979: 422-424) himself already discussed the shift from a duty ethic ('*morale du devoir*') to a fun ethic ('*morale du devoir de plaisir*'). While the notion of pleasure was formerly irreconcilable with legitimate cultural objects, new intellectuals have tried to avoid the notion of hierarchy by devising a new morality in which pleasure is considered as a duty (Bourdieu, 1979). Discussing this evolution, Peterson and Kern (1996) claim that the formerly snobbish attitude of the higher class towards middle- and lowbrow culture has faded and that they now consume all kinds of culture, having become 'cultural omnivores'. Indeed, the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture has become less rigid and stable, high culture has ceased being the self-evident centre of the cultural spectrum and it cannot be connected so simply to a single class anymore (Frow, 1996; Goodall, 1995). Costera Meijer (2008: 18-20) also observes this evolution among television audiences, viewers with a higher education consuming both high- and lowbrow programmes. In what follows, we will try to study this taste pattern in relation to television comedy, a cultural form with a generally low cultural status (Mills, 2001: 61) but which nevertheless contains higher and lower forms.

### **Comedy tastes and forms**

In studying the connection between class and taste in comedy, the research done by Giselinde Kuipers (2006a; 2006b) is of crucial importance. She investigated the impact of social class on taste cultures in the appreciation of Dutch humour and, more specifically, television comedy. Drawing on Radway (1984), Kuipers (2006b: 360) defines a taste culture as an 'interpretive community with shared preferences, dislikes and criteria for good and bad taste'. In line with Bourdieu, she defines taste not only as a pattern of preferences and aversions, but also as a form of cultural knowledge, linked to social status. Taste is both a preference for certain cultural objects, and a framework – or *habitus* – for the interpretation and evaluation of cultural products. According to Kuipers, taste cultures are relational, as they are mostly defined in contrast with other taste cultures. These relations are often entangled with differences in status and power, particularly in the classic highbrow/lowbrow model, which defines highbrow culture as difficult, exclusive and legitimate, in contrast to the more simple and accessible lowbrow culture.

Kuipers used a combination of surveys and in depth interviews to determine 'taste cultures' in the appreciation of Dutch TV comedy. Based on a non-linear principal component analysis of surveys in which respondents were asked about their appreciation of humorists and TV shows, she distinguished four taste cultures, two related to age (older viewers preferring established comedians and younger viewers celebrities) and two related to education. In her research, respondents with a lower education tended to prefer 'lowbrow' comedy, which Kuipers (2006b: 365) describes as based on stereotypes and exaggeration, explicitly framed as humorous through the use of canned laughter, funny costumes etc. Respondents with a higher education preferred 'highbrow' comedy, defined here as satirical, ironic, less exuberant and more avant-garde. In line with the theories mentioned earlier, highbrow comedy turned out to be exclusive: educated people know but dismiss lowbrow comedy, while the less-educated mostly do not know highbrow comedy. Based on her follow-up interviews, Kuipers concluded that the educated have more knowledge, both of highbrow and of lowbrow culture, and accordingly feel well placed to discuss and evaluate both – mostly dismissing the latter. The less-educated, on the contrary, do not know highbrow comedy well and they lack the skills to decode it in a gratifying way. Rather than a resistant reading (in Hall and Morley's terms), their attitude bespeaks nonresponsiveness. To Kuipers, this is because highbrow comedy is more difficult, faster and more ambivalent, with more and less well signalled allusions necessitating cultural knowledge. Moreover, highbrow comedy often verges on the absurd or the disagreeable, its appreciation necessitating an 'aesthetic disposition' which prioritises a cerebral and distanced perspective on beauty over the search for direct enjoyment and immediate entertainment.

In our research, we will build upon Kuipers' invaluable insights to investigate audience responses to Flemish comedy. Before we do this, however, it is useful to further develop distinctions within the comedy genre. In her research, Kuipers does not define highbrow and lowbrow comedy extensively, instead clustering programmes based on a component analysis of her survey data, showing which people appreciate which humorists and programmes. As she does not start from a preliminary analysis of programmes, it remains somewhat unclear what exactly characterises lowbrow and highbrow comedy from a textual point of view. Therefore, in our own research we start from a preliminary analysis of the comedy offerings. Defining film and television comedy generally, Neale and Krutnik (1990: 2-4) refer to its orientation to evoking laughter, its focus on a happy ending, on everyday life and on lower-class characters. However, comedy is a very broad category which can take on many different shapes. Like Neale and Krutnik, we will focus on narrative comedy, excluding other forms like sketch shows and stand-up comedy.

The form of narrative television comedy that is most discussed by academics is the situation comedy or sitcom, formally one of the most strictly defined comedy genres. It usually has self-contained episodes of about thirty minutes, with a limited cast of regular characters caught in oppositional relations, commonly set in a domestic or work-based environment, and displaying a circular narrative of equilibrium, disequilibrium and a resolution returning all to their original states (Bazalgette et al., 1982: 4-5; Baker, 2003: 22-6). It is mostly in relation to the sitcom that discussion about the conservative or subversive nature of comedy has taken place (e.g. Woollacott, 1982; Neale & Krutnik, 1990; Tulloch, 1990). Within the sitcom, there are further variations, such as the generally more conservative family or domestic sitcom, and the more sexually oriented workplace sitcom (Hartley, 2001: 65-7). According to Feuer (2001), the persistent popularity of the sitcom genre can be attributed to its simplicity, its familiar nature and its ideological flexibility. In her earlier work on the sitcom, Feuer (1992: 144) stressed the importance of audiences as interpretive communities decoding genres in similar ways, and although she does connect evolutions in the sitcom genre to changes in the composition of the audience, she does not provide any audience research to back up those claims. Indeed, as also mentioned by Mills (2001: 61), there is a general lack of research on the audience and reception of comedy, which this paper hopes to help remedy.

Turning to the sitcom in Flanders, literature is scarce. Dhoest (2006), sketching the history of Flemish TV comedy, describes a move to the sitcom format from 1989. Whereas before, few and disparate comedies were scheduled on the monopolistic public channel, from 1989 competition with commercial broadcasters led to a surge of standardised sitcoms, both on commercial and on public television. The most typical example, still running twenty years later on public channel Eén, is *FC De Kampioenen* ('FC The Champions', VRT, 1990-present), a sitcom about an amateur soccer team and their families. It is a textbook example of the sitcom genre, with a fixed ensemble of actors in tense and barely changing relations, each week a conspiracy or misunderstanding leading to comical situations which are resolved in the end, re-establishing the status quo. The humour is straightforward: strongly typed characters, verbal bickering and innuendo, even some visual slapstick, which explains the strong appeal to children and family audiences.<sup>1</sup> In this research, we use *FC De Kampioenen* as an example of 'lowbrow' comedy: the plot is simple and predictable, concluded with a happy ending, while the humour is straightforward, using (stereo-)types, funny costumes and voices, exaggerations and canned laughter (see Kuipers, 2006a; 2006b). It is a clear example of the simplicity, recognisability and recurring storylines which to Feuer (2001) are typical of the sitcom.

As mentioned by Mills (2001: 61-2), most research on television comedy has focused on the sitcom, but there are many other forms of comedy. Instead of the binary highbrow/lowbrow opposition used by Kuipers, we prefer to think of television comedy as a continuum. At one extreme, we have the classical sitcom, which itself contains variations in terms of complexity,

subversiveness, etc. At the other extreme, we can situate 'highbrow' or alternative comedy, introducing 'formal innovation and more daring subject matter' (Baker, 2003: 19). Highbrow comedy such as *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (BBC, 1969-1974) offers a 'surreal and intellectually challenging viewing experience, whose absurdity helped to deconstruct the established conventions of sketch comedy' (Baker, 2003: 19). Wagg (1992: 268-272) states that satiric programmes such as *Monty Python* mostly appeal to male, highly educated, liberal middle class and young viewers. The clash of highbrow and lowbrow cultures is in fact crucial comic material for *Monty Python*, which according to Wagg leads to divergent readings among audiences with different levels of education. He states that the less-educated with limited knowledge of highbrow culture only comprehend its mockery of popular television, while the highly educated also understand and appreciate its references to highbrow culture, but he does not support this with audience research. In this project, we use the Flemish satiric comedy series *Neveneffecten* ('Side-effects', Woestijnvis, 2005-2008) as an exemplar of highbrow comedy. It is a series of fictional documentaries, a sort of hybrid 'docufiction' or 'docu-comedy', broadcast on Canvas, the second public broadcasting channel focusing on information, culture and more experimental comedy (VRT, 2007). Each episode contains a single narrative about a particular (often societal) topic. The humour in *Neveneffecten* is highbrow because of its complex, layered and intertextual nature, a mix of clear visual humour and more subtle social critical elements. These fictional documentaries are drenched in absurdity, satire and irony, and they are not explicitly framed as humorous, all elements characteristic of highbrow comedy (Baker, 2003: 19; Wagg, 1992; Kuipers, 2000a). Moreover, the sharp, complicated humour is often mixed with repulsion, sadness or anger, another characteristic of highbrow comedy (Kuipers, 2000a: 87-89; 2006b: 371).

In between these two extremes, there are some intermediate forms which we will categorise as 'middlebrow'. They are less experimental and absurd than highbrow comedies but more hybrid and intertextual than classical sitcoms. According to Mills (2004: 65), in the past decade or so there have been developments and mutations of the sitcom format, which take over elements from other genres such as the documentary and the docusoap. His primary example is *The Office* (BBC, 2001-2003), a comedy about office life which combines a docusoap form with comedy elements, leading to a novel form of 'comedy vérité' (Mills, 2004: 65-75). It does away with some of the basic characteristics of the sitcom, such as the laughter track and theatrical acting, instead using 'faux-improvizational' acting and a documentary style connoting authenticity and thus contributing to the atmosphere of comical embarrassment. This hybrid form is not just funny but it is also a comment on the impression of veracity created by the documentary format. Like highbrow comedy, but less so, its humour is based on references to other television genres (Mills, 2004: 70-71). In order to pick up on these references, viewers need what we could define as 'popular cultural capital' (Fiske, 1987: 18-19). In Flanders, from 2000 there was also an evolution towards more innovative

styles of comedy, beside the still dominant sitcom. Like *The Office*, these programmes are often hybrid forms of comedy and other formats such as the docusoap, leading to a category of 'reality comedy' (Dhoest, 2006: 159-61). They are very intertextual, referring to both Flemish and international reality programmes such as *The Osbournes*. In this research, we use *Het Eiland* ('The Island', Woestijnvis, 2004-2005) as an exemplar of such middlebrow comedy. It was broadcast on the main public channel Eén and contains elements of both low- and highbrow comedy. On the one hand, it is very much like a sitcom in that it features a fixed ensemble of colleagues sharing desks in a work environment. The characters are strongly typed and antagonistic, which leads to weekly comical complications. However, contrary to the classical sitcom, *Het Eiland* has some continuing storylines and a slightly dramatic undertone, making it more of a 'dramedy' as defined by Taflinger (1996). The absence of a laughter track, too, frames the programme less explicitly as comedy. Moreover, there are strong references to reality conventions, such as the more naturalistic acting by secondary characters, whose reactions to the eccentric main characters add to the 'cringe' so familiar from *The Office*.

#### **Researching education and comedy tastes in Flanders**

Like Frow (1996: 39), who criticises the rigid opposition between two autonomous aesthetic universes in Bourdieu's thinking, we question the limits of Kuipers' model of two clearly demarcated comedy spheres. We prefer to think of the comedy landscape as a continuum of forms, some of which are more lowbrow, some more highbrow and others taking a middle position. However, since it is impractical to research this continuum in its entirety, we use three programmes occupying different positions on this continuum, in order to better grasp the actual diversity of comedy forms and to at least include an intermediate stage between the high and the low. Similarly, although we question the rigidity of the binary division between 'higher' and 'lower' education that is mostly used in sociological research, we use this division as a hermeneutic tool to explore class-based media tastes. We do not believe that viewers are determined by a higher or lower level of education, but we do believe that formal education provides cultural repertoires which tend to lead to similar ways of viewing and appreciating comedy. To sum up: we will study how viewers with higher and lower education appreciate these three forms of television comedy. In particular, we are interested to see if the more highly educated are, indeed, 'cultural omnivores': do they watch both high- and lowbrow comedy and have they become less snobbish in their appreciation of lowbrow comedy?

Drawing on the literature summarised above, we could expect people to use particular discourses or cultural repertoires when thinking about and discussing cultural forms such as comedy. In this context, we can also refer to Bernstein's (1974) observation that higher educated people master an 'elaborate' linguistic code, while the lower educated tend to use a 'restricted' code, which makes it more difficult for them to express their opinions. Therefore,

we will remain attentive to recurring cultural discourses or codes throughout this paper. In our account of viewer responses we have to use terminology which has evaluative connotations which we do not necessarily share. However, it is hard to avoid these terms since they are so firmly part of the cultural discourse used to discuss comedy.

To research viewer interpretations of comedy, we use a qualitative research design which allows us to focus on the 'how' and 'why' questions rather than quantitative statements. In this reception research, twenty respondents were interviewed using semi-structured, individual interviews (Bryman, 2004: 324-334). After a broad discussion on comedy tastes, the interviews were structured around the three prototypical comedies mentioned above. In case a comedy was not known to a respondent, the beginning of the first episode was shown. Our sample consists of ten higher educated and ten lower educated people. The lower educated group is composed of four women and six men, five under thirty and five thirty or older. The group of higher educated interviewees contains six women and four men, three respondents under thirty and seven thirty or older. To distinguish high and low levels of education we adopted the categories used by the official ratings company *Centrum voor Informatie over de Media* (CIM, 2008), considering all people with a higher education degree (i.e. university or polytechnic) as higher educated and the others as lower educated. In our discussion of the findings, we first look at broader taste patterns. Then, we investigate the connections between levels of education and comedy tastes, enquiring about their knowledge of comedies, discussing their preferences for high, middle or lowbrow comedy, and finally checking whether they evaluate the same series differently.

Before we give an overview of our findings, a note on method. Our small sample does not allow for generalisation to the broader population, so our findings should be read with caution, as an exploration of the field. However, there is a limited quantitative dimension to our discussion, as we are more interested in the broad patterns within our two groups than in individual responses. We will focus on recurrent tropes and arguments, arguing that these are witnesses of broader taste cultures, discourses and interpretive repertoires shared by members of one or the other 'class' (as defined here through level of education). These claims are supported by the systematic process of coding, i.e. the allocation of keywords to fragments, using a programme for qualitative data analysis (NVivo) to chart patterns and recurrent themes in the elaborate interview transcripts. This allows us to give reliable information on the prevalence of certain responses, which in turn will be used as indications – however limited – of the existence of a shared taste. For this reason, we will often specify (in 'pseudo' or 'quasi' quantitative terms, Schrøder, 1999: 44; Bryman, 2004: 444) if a response is shared by some, many, most or all, adding the actual numbers where appropriate. This should not be read as a claim about the distribution of these responses in the wider population but as a (provisional) claim about the existence of class-related tastes and

discourses. In this respect, we are not as interested in the quantity of responses as in their similarities, which indeed are striking. To counterbalance the ensuing rather fragmented point-by-point analysis of recurrent tropes and opinions, we will conclude our empirical findings with two illustrative 'cases', which demonstrate the interrelation of these discursive patterns in two actual responses.

Looking at the broader taste patterns of the interviewees, it is clear that the lower educated more often prefer commercial television channels than the higher educated. The first public channel Eén is only mentioned by half of the lower educated interviewees but by all the higher educated ones. The latter also all claim to watch the second public channel Canvas, which is branded as the channel for the 'added value seeker', while no lower education respondents do. This is telling, as most low- and middlebrow comedy is broadcast on Eén and most highbrow comedy on Canvas. Besides a lesson on channel branding, this also gives us a first indication of comedy tastes. As to print media, the higher educated interviewees all read newspapers and they prefer quality papers with a lot of background information, while some (3) of the lower educated do not read newspapers and when they do, they prefer regional newspapers. Finally, the higher educated mostly read information magazines while the lower educated prefer gossip and women's magazines.

Moving on to the core of our research, we first enquired whether the interviewees know particular comedies – a familiarity which will later turn out to be important for their appreciation. All lower educated respondents know *FC De Kampioenen*, the prototypical *lowbrow* sitcom, and when asked if they can give other examples of similar comedies, most (8) do. The highly educated equally know *FC De Kampioenen* but many claim it has been a long time since they last watched it and they cannot come up with other examples. *Het Eiland*, the typical middlebrow comedy, is only known to some (4) lower educated respondents and often this knowledge is superficial and limited to some broad storylines and the most striking characters. The higher educated, however, all know this series well. Finally *Neveneffecten*, the typical highbrow comedy, is unknown to all lower educated interviewees, who cannot name any other highbrow comedies either. Some (4) higher educated respondents do know this highbrow comedy and most can come up with other (often British) examples of this type. They often express a clear preference for this kind of humour, describing it as dry, unpredictable, difficult and absurd.

This division of knowledge in our sample is confirmed by the industry ratings for the three programmes. Using the distinction between high and low education mentioned above, the ratings for the three comedies clearly differ according to level of education (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Viewer profiles: Adhesion**

	<i>Lowbrow</i> FC De Kampioenen	<i>Middlebrow</i> Het Eiland	<i>Highbrow</i> Neveneffecten
Lower education	74.5%	64.4%	60.3%
Higher education	16.5%	30.1%	36.2%

Source: VRT Research Departement

This table shows that the adhesion (i.e. the proportion of a particular group within the total audience of a program) of higher educated viewers increases from low- to highbrow comedy, while the proportion of lower educated viewers decreases. This fits the different patterns of familiarity mentioned above, although one could note that the lower educated still constitute some 60% of the viewers for the highbrow comedy. However, this is mostly related to the larger absolute size of this group, for an overview of the market shares within each educational group (see Table 2) shows that the highbrow comedy only has a very limited market share in the lower educated group.

**Table 2: Viewer profiles: Market share**

	<i>Lowbrow</i> FC De Kampioenen	<i>Middlebrow</i> Het Eiland	<i>Highbrow</i> Neveneffecten
Lower education	50.7%	28.6%	4.5%
Higher education	48.2%	52.3%	10.5%

Source: VRT Research Department.<sup>2</sup>

While the market share for the lower educated fits the pattern of the first table, among the higher educated one can note that the middlebrow comedy has a larger market share than the highbrow comedy and that the lowbrow comedy also has a large market share, two tendencies which will be commented on below.

Beside their actual knowing and watching these three programmes, we also enquired how the interviewees appreciate them and what they think makes these comedies good or bad. The interviewees were also asked to rank the three series and to comment on that ordering. Unsurprisingly, all but one of the lower educated interviewees highly appreciate lowbrow comedy. They praise the actors and storylines, the recurring types and the general sense of recognition. Most of the lower educated respondents state that lowbrow comedy is not difficult, a characteristic which they appreciate as much as its high entertainment value. This

echoes Feuer's (2001) comments on the simplicity and recognisability of the sitcom. As a 25-year old male respondent puts it: 'You can switch your brain to zero'. This lower educated man openly admits preferring TV shows which do not require a lot of thought. While such statements were rather common for lower educated respondents, they were not once expressed by higher educated respondents. The middlebrow comedy is not appreciated very much by three of the lower educated respondents (particularly those over thirty), who describe the humour as boring, serious, lame and 'different'. The other seven, mostly those under thirty, appreciate the clear, visual jokes and the stereotypical characters, so age seems to be an important variable in this respect. This can be linked to Feuer's (2001) observation that the workplace sitcom (to which *Het Eiland* is closely related) appeals to a younger audience than the (quasi-)family sitcom (to which category *FC De Kampioenen* belongs). Because of the small scale of our research sample, we cannot make any further claims about age, but this is certainly a factor in media tastes which needs to be further explored.<sup>3</sup>

The lower educated interviewees state that they barely enjoyed the highbrow comedy, in part because of its unknown actors and the low degree of recognition it evokes. They describe the concept as 'ridiculous' and 'not funny', echoing the process also observed by Kuipers (2006a; 2006b), in which a lack of understanding leads to aversion. These respondents experience the difficult highbrow humour as a letdown, because 'one has to think harder' and thus 'cannot relax as much'. The lower appreciation of *Neveneffecten* among the lower educated is not a surprise, as it fits Wagg's (1992) observation that satire mostly appeals to the higher educated.

When subsequently asked to rank these comedies, the lower educated almost unanimously put the lowbrow comedy first. This is partly explained by their greater familiarity with this programme, but they also clearly prefer it because of the simple humour which leads to a relaxing viewing experience. To quote but two: 'To me, it does not have to be heavy stuff, it is a comedy' (49-year old woman) and 'I think it does not have to be too complicated, then you have to think too long' (21-year old woman). The recognisable nature of lowbrow comedy is also essential to their appreciation. They all like the stereotypical characters and they do not mind the lack of social criticism and layered humour, which they mostly do not comment on in middle- and highbrow comedy either. They all put the middlebrow comedy in second place, commenting positively on its typical characters and its entertainment value. To them, this middlebrow comedy is slightly more daring but still good-natured, which they appreciate. However, they barely appreciate the highbrow series, often commenting on its difficulty which makes it less relaxing. For instance, a 30-year old woman comments: 'If they consider this as comedy, I prefer something you have to think about less'. The older respondents in particular dislike *Neveneffecten*, while some younger respondents can deal with a degree of absurdity. Thus, a 49-year old man comments after watching the series for the first time: 'I think this is

ridiculous, it is not comical'; while a 21-year old woman states: 'No, it does not bother me, I think it should be done, it should not always be reality'.

A different picture arises in the interviews with higher educated viewers, most of whom (7) do not appreciate lowbrow comedy very much. They think it is too predictable: the storylines always follow the same pattern, in which misunderstandings arise and are finally solved. They also miss multilayered humour and social criticism, believing lowbrow humour to be too easy and too clearly signalled as funny. The good-natured humour and the exaggerated acting style bother them, although many do watch lowbrow comedy for 'pure entertainment', which is confirmed by the market shares in Table 2. A 49-year old man describes lowbrow comedy as 'good to some extent, to relax in your couch on a Saturday night. But, of course, nothing further.' This illustrates the cultural discourse of the higher educated for which it seems unacceptable to enjoy lowbrow comedy. In contrast, they all like middlebrow comedy, praising its actors and storylines. They enjoy its original mix of absurd and recognisable humour, as well as the many layers in the humour and its social criticism. The higher degree of difficulty and subtlety are not a drawback but a rather challenge for them, which is also the reason why they appreciate the highbrow comedy. They praise its subtle humour and its complex plots, its originality, absurdity and complexity, echoing Baker's (2003: 19) statement that highbrow comedies are appreciated because of the intellectual challenge they present and the absurdity of its humour which questions established norms.

However, in ranking the comedies, most (8) of the higher educated respondents put the middlebrow comedy *Het Eiland* first. This is in line with the high market share for this show (see Table 2) and it is largely due to its greater familiarity, since many respondents indicate that they would possibly put the highbrow comedy first if they would know it better. As mentioned above, knowledge of and familiarity with a comedy are determining in its appreciation. However, this response is also telling as it indicates the will and perceived desirability to like highbrow comedy: highbrow viewers know they are supposed to appreciate this kind of programme. *Het Eiland* is mostly praised for its novel mix of clear and simple humour and for more subtle and difficult humour with recognisable and absurd elements. The humour is judged not as daring as in the highbrow comedy, but more so than in the lowbrow comedy, and this quality is something the higher educated respondents like. Most (7) put highbrow comedy second, because of its surprising and absurd nature. In the words of a 60-year old male respondent: 'Humour has to be unpredictable for me.' On the contrary, they dislike the straightforward nature of the lowbrow comedy: 'I do not think a comedy can depend on just one layer. [...] I think that is the art of a good comedy' (same respondent). Most dislike (and some are even annoyed by) its simplicity, superficial and stereotypical characters, lame jokes, predictability and recurring storylines, although some accept this as characteristic of lowbrow comedy which prioritises entertainment.

In this research, we can observe the ‘omnivorous’ taste of the higher educated as described by Peterson and Kern (1996) and Costera Meijer (2008). All but one of the highly educated do watch the typical lowbrow comedy, albeit with another purpose than for watching middle- or highbrow comedy – they watch purely for entertainment. Although they thus know and sometimes watch lowbrow comedy, they still prefer middle- and highbrow comedy, so their viewing may have broadened but they nevertheless display a degree of ‘snobbishness’, looking down upon simple viewing fare. At least for comedy, it seems that ‘omnivorous’ implies consuming all kinds of cultural goods, not necessarily liking them equally and indiscriminately. There is still a clear hierarchy of tastes with ‘legitimate’ taste on top, as (also) observed by Kuipers (2006a; 2006b) in the Netherlands. In Flanders, too, the highbrow taste is less accessible, necessitating a degree of cultural knowledge which only part of the population possesses. However, the Flemish higher educated respondents are less dismissive about lowbrow comedy than their Dutch counterparts, which may be partly due to the ‘evergreen’ status of the lowbrow comedy they discuss. Another slight difference with Kuipers’ research is that some of the Flemish lower educated respondents do feel entitled to discuss and to dismiss highbrow comedy, while the Dutch ones were more reticent about this. For instance, this is what a 49-year old lower educated man says about *Neveneffecten*: ‘This is simply ridiculous, I do not think it is comical, it is ridiculous.’

To summarise, the comedy preferences of lower and higher educated interviewees are clearly different. There is quite a high level of agreement within these groups, with some clear differences only arising between younger and older lower educated respondents. Working schematically, we could present these differences as follows:

**Table 2. Preferences of lower and higher educated respondents**

Lower education	Higher education
Easy	Difficult
Recognisable (older viewers) or absurd (younger)	Mix of absurd and recognisable
Good-natured	Daring
Predictable	Surprising
One-layered	Multilayered
Simple, stereotypical characters	Subtle, complex characters

It is telling that the terms on the left side are generally quite negatively opposed to those on the right, which are associated with ‘legitimate’ culture and which are often used as indications of ‘quality’. Again, we want to stress that we do not necessarily share these

evaluations, but that this is indeed how they operate in discourses about cultural value. Also, as mentioned above, these findings should be treated with caution, as they are only based on twenty interviews, but they do confirm the points made in literature and they do clearly illustrate the different approaches and expectations of comedy.

To better understand how and why these respondents differ in their evaluation of comedy, they were asked how they would describe the humour of these different comedies: difficult or easy; predictable or surprising; absurd or recognisable; daring or good-natured; simple or layered? Analysing their responses, it became clear that their evaluation mostly differs for the highbrow comedy, *Neveneffecten*. A majority (6) of the lower educated respondents consider the humour of this comedy to be straightforward while many (6) of the higher educated describe it as difficult. For example, a 21-year old lower educated female respondent says: 'I think it was easy [...] they were just making jokes all the time.' At first sight this seems illogical because one would expect the lower educated to describe the complex humour as (too) difficult. However, taking a closer look at their responses, it transpires that they mostly remember the clear, visual jokes while they do not pick up on the more subtle references and critical undertones. Because of their lack of (high) cultural knowledge, they evaluate the highbrow comedy in a more superficial way. This confirms Kuipers' (2006a; 2006b) observation that only with the right knowledge can one understand and appreciate all aspects of highbrow humour. Highbrow humour is often consciously based on intertextuality and plays with media or formal conventions (with which not everyone is familiar), whereas lowbrow humour tends to rely mostly on social conventions (which most people know and recognize). Among the higher educated, there are also different responses. Some (4) equally consider the highbrow series to be simpler than the middlebrow one, because of the visual humour: 'It was easy [...] They were punching each other and saying weird words... that is what infants do.' (37-year old woman) Others describe it as complex because of the vocabulary, the syntax and the subtle social references etc. Only the latter in fact really pick up on (or decode) the (encoded) complexity of the humour. This is not to say that this intertextual and socially critical reading is the 'right' reading, but it definitely is intended by the producers.

A similar distinction arises in relation to the predictability of the highbrow series. Half of the lower educated respondents consider the highbrow humour to be predictable, again focusing on simple humorous elements such as the stereotypical characters and the clear visual humour. Almost all higher educated describe the highbrow humour as a mix of predictable and surprising elements, also commenting on its original concepts and complex, intertextual and ambiguous jokes. Similarly, both groups use different conceptions of 'daring' humour. For the lower educated, this mostly refers to sexual elements such as nudity, porn etc.: 'There are daring elements: the bed scenes [...], the sexy clothing.' (49-year old woman) The higher educated rather think of controversial social issues and politically incorrect jokes about

minorities and the like. For instance, a 37-year old woman says: 'It is about bullying, so it can be sensitive to some people.' This explains why the middlebrow comedy is considered to be quite daring by the higher educated, while the lower educated consider it to be good-natured. A similar distinction arises in the appreciation of the highbrow series: the higher educated think it is daring because it touches upon controversial social issues, the lower educated either think it is innocuous or they think it is daring because it shows porn magazines.

Both groups also use a different concept of 'layered' humour. For the lower educated this concerns the straightforward morality of the story, while the higher educated associate it with (often implicit) references to social issues. Moreover, the lower educated often do not pick up on different comedy layers. For instance, when asked if the middlebrow comedy *Het Eiland* contains social criticism, a 49-year old woman of lower education answers: 'I do not think so... Does that happen often, that comedy series contain a message?' The higher educated, on the contrary, all explicitly refer to the multiple layers, the irony or intertextuality and to the social issues in the middlebrow comedy and they elaborate on their opinions. Similarly, the different layers, ironic and intertextual elements of the highbrow comedy are not picked up by most of the lower educated respondents. For instance, answering whether he thought there are multiple layers in the highbrow comedy *Neveneffecten*, a 49-year old lower educated man says: 'No, nothing! I think there is no message in that series, it is an empty bag.' Similarly, a 22-year old woman sees no social criticism in it: 'No, not really. Mostly because it is so stupid. You do see different types, but the story is so silly that there is no underlying message.'

The higher educated do pick up on the different layers in the highbrow comedy and often develop elaborate hypotheses on it. Interestingly, some (4) ponder whether everyone picks up on those references. For instance, a 25-year old higher educated woman says: 'If you think about it, you can say that it contains some criticism and that they touch upon certain themes, but I wonder: does the average viewer pick up on that?' Along the same lines, another 30-year old woman states: 'I think that some people really think "Is this supposed to be funny? They haven't made a joke." [...] I think that different layers of the population laugh about different things.' Some also ponder on the reasons for divergent evaluations: 'I think the humour in *Neveneffecten* is too layered to burst out laughing. [...] I think that is why some people do not understand it.' (20-year old woman) So, interestingly, some respondents talk about divergent readings connected to 'social layers' and levels of understanding. Intuitively, they verbalise the exact connection made by Bourdieu and applied by Kuipers to comedy: that between the level of education and knowledge and the ability to decode the multiple layers in middle- and highbrow comedy.

To counterbalance the somewhat fragmented analysis above, we add two 'case-examples' which illustrate the interrelation of tastes and discursive patterns in actual responses. For this,

we choose two 30-year old female respondents, the first higher educated, the second lower educated, both quite typical of the overall responses within each educational group. The higher educated woman is a high school teacher who received a more theoretical training. When asked about her favourite television comedy, she names several British comedy series, such as *Little Britain* (BBC, 2003-present), *The Young Ones* (BBC, 1982-1984) and *Blackadder* (BBC, 1983-1989). She excitedly describes the 'superdry', unpredictable, absurd humour and the presence of anti-climaxes in British comedy. She thinks the difficulty of this middle- to highbrow humour is due to the absurdity of the humour and the lack of an explicitly humorous frame. For her, this explains why people with different educational levels have distinct comedy preferences. She provides an example from her classroom, in which she showed an episode of *Friends*: '[...] the things that I laugh at, they do not. But as soon as a character drops a pie on the floor, each year each class is filled with laughter while I think: "he drops a pie, big deal".'

When asked to arrange low, middle and highbrow comedy into a top three, she ranks middlebrow comedy first, followed by highbrow and, lastly, lowbrow comedy. She notes that she may have put the highbrow comedy first, but because she does not know it as well as the middlebrow series she decides to put it second. Familiarity thus is an important factor of this woman's comedy preferences. She prefers middlebrow comedy for their surprising plot twists, the combination of recognizable and absurd characters, and the presence of critical or even satirical elements, because 'a person needs a way to express his or her critique and opinions and this is best done through humour, getting some perspective on things'. When she was watching the highbrow comedy *Neveneffecten* for the first time, it was clear that she enjoyed the humour and afterwards she confirms this in the interview. She lauds the absurd humour and the high level of difficulty, due to the vocabulary and syntax, which she believes is not understandable to everyone. The elements she enjoys in middlebrow humour recur here: the unpredictability, the daring humour, the combination of absurd and recognizable humour and the presence of critical elements. The reasons for her dislike of lowbrow humour concern the easy humour which is too predictable. For instance, she ironically describes the constantly recurring plot as 'Misunderstandings, oh, misunderstandings, and then in the end, hurray, solved!' She also dislikes the lack of critical elements, which reduce the comedy to pure entertainment, while she clearly expects more from comedy. Overall, in this interview we can detect a wish to distinguish oneself by referring to 'respectable' cultural forms and by dismissing 'lower' forms of comedy.

The lower educated woman works as a nurse in a retirement home, so she received a less theoretical and a more practice oriented training. When asked about her favourite television comedy, she mentions several lowbrow comedy series. She explains this preference for lowbrow comedy by telling how she loves to 'just sit in my chair and think about nothing at all,

just watch and relax'. She likes the recognisability, the simplicity, the predictability and good-nature of the story lines, because 'the news and *Telefacts* [other informative programme] and the like, that is all sad and full of misery and a programme like this, of a lower level really, I think it can come in between, just because it is a relief to be able watch something like that.' According to her, humorous programmes should not be too severe or serious. When talking about the presence of critique in lowbrow comedy, she does not describe the latent discussion of societal issues, but she refers to the explicit 'lesson' of the story: 'They have these situations that occur everywhere and they mostly also have a solution for it. I like that, you can learn something from it I think.'

In her rankings, she puts lowbrow comedy first, then middlebrow and lastly highbrow comedy. She did not know the middlebrow comedy *Het Eiland* before the research and she did not seem to enjoy the extract shown very much. When evaluating it, she is rather concise and careful in expressing her opinions: 'I think ... but I do not know...' or 'I am not sure'. She also finds it hard to label the middlebrow comedy as easy or difficult, daring or good-natured, predictable or surprising, etcetera. This reticence is reminiscent of the Dutch 'nonresponsiveness' of lower class interviewees observed by Kuipers (2006b). Finally, this respondent thinks the middlebrow comedy is more difficult than the lowbrow comedy, which she regards as a disadvantage: 'When you miss a couple of episodes, you do not know what happened [...] then you have to stay at home or record it, because the episodes build on each other'. Nevertheless, she does not fully dismiss the middlebrow comedy because she enjoys the fact that it is rather predictable, recognizable and still entertaining. When watching the highbrow comedy clip (for the first time), she did not laugh once and afterwards she immediately dismisses it: 'If they consider this to be comical... I think it appeals far less than something which does not require that much reflection'. She explains that she does not understand the punch line and when asked about the presence of critical elements, she answers: 'I do not know, I do not know the series, so I really cannot tell'. Overall, in this interview we can witness a clear and unapologetic preference for popular comedy combined with a mixture of dismissal and lack of understanding of more highbrow forms.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to fill an important gap in the literature on both international and (particularly) Flemish comedy, focussing on its reception and evaluation. Drawing on Bourdieu and Kuipers, comedy tastes were connected to broader media tastes which, predictably, vary according to 'class' and cultural capital as indicated by levels of education. The lower educated surveyed prefer relaxing and clear apparently transparent media, while the higher educated prefer in-depth and complex media. As to comedy, the lower educated have a good knowledge of and clearly prefer lowbrow comedy, while their knowledge of middle- and highbrow comedy is more restricted and their appreciation more negative. They

prefer the simple humour, the recognisable nature and the stereotypical characters of lowbrow comedy, focussing on its relaxing qualities. The higher educated, on the contrary, have less knowledge of lowbrow comedy, which they also appreciate less. They do mostly know and appreciate the middle- and highbrow comedies discussed in this paper, also referring to other (often British) examples of such humour. The higher educated praise the difficult and subtle humour of middle and highbrow humour as well as its absurd, daring and surprising nature. They prefer complex characters and storylines, in line with their broader preference for complexity. They present themselves as omnivores, as they also know and watch lowbrow comedy, but they distance themselves from the latter, dismissing it as 'pure entertainment' – leaving intact the high/low distinction which it has been suggested is no longer relevant. At least for television comedy, being omnivorous may imply having a mixed 'diet', but not necessarily consuming everything with equal taste.

Exploring the reasons for these divergent interpretations, we note that our findings confirm Bourdieu's and Hall's statements about the importance of 'cultural capital', defined as knowledge of cultural codes. Particularly when discussing highbrow comedy, the opinions of the higher and lower educated diverge as to the difficulty, the daring nature and the complexity of such humour. Perhaps most striking is the fact that the lower educated describe highbrow humour as 'easy', which clearly illustrates how they may not be aware of the (intended) humour and the (often implicit) layers of social criticism. Through formal education, which is still – despite attempts to democratise it – strongly linked to social class, the higher educated have acquired the knowledge and codes necessary to fully appreciate highbrow comedy. Moreover, as the arguments developed above illustrate, they have acquired the necessary 'elaborate' (verbal) code (Bernstein, 1974) to discuss and analyse different kinds of comedy, while the more 'restricted' code of the lower educated makes it harder for them to verbalise and reflect on their opinions, a tendency often observed in interview research (Höijer, 1990).

To conclude, some caution is justified. Firstly, as mentioned before, the small scale of this study militates against too swift a generalisation from our responses to 'the' higher and 'the' lower educated in general. This binary opposition was used for practical reasons and it turned out to be productive as the variation in the responses indeed mostly diverged along the lines of education. But it is important not to reify both groups since they were very diverse, particularly in terms of gender and age-related tastes and preferences. More extensive research would be useful to explore further such differences and more specific 'taste cultures' (to use Kuipers' term). Another caveat concerns the examples used in this research, in which the lowbrow comedy was an evergreen known to all while the highbrow comedy was quite an obscure one with which even many higher educated respondents were not familiar. The decision to work with typical examples was productive because it enabled the discussions to

be focused and concrete, but other examples might have given slightly different responses, as knowledge of and familiarity with a series greatly determine the responses.

Finally, one thorny issue remains: the responses within each group were quite similar, suspiciously so. This is partly due to our own binary division of the two groups, which draws attention to the similarities rather than the differences within each group. However, the patterns are overly clear and there is a large degree of social – or cultural – desirability to be detected in the responses, particularly those of the higher educated. It is more than just a taste in common for certain cultural objects: they have acquired a set of cultural values integrated into a cultural discourse which they readily repeat. The similarity of their responses, then, may speak more to the (persistent) strength of this discourse and its hierarchies than to actual viewing processes and pleasures. While the lower educated may well not like and even miss the point of highbrow comedy (which they probably do not even *want* to like or understand), the higher educated probably do like and appreciate lowbrow comedy more than they dare to admit in interview, while they want or feel they *have to* appreciate highbrow comedy more strongly. Indeed, the ratings mentioned in Table 2 show nearly half (48.2%) of the higher educated Flemings watching the lowbrow comedy *FC De Kampioenen*, while only 10.5% actually watch the highbrow comedy they rank higher, leading to the inevitable conclusion that what people say about their tastes in comedy may have more to do with the way in which they wish to be perceived than in what they really like to watch.

### **Biographical Note**

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<sup>1</sup> In the 2008-2009 season, *FC De Kampioenen* had an overall market share of 42%, with a peak in the 4-14 age group of 56.9% (figures provided by the VRT Research Department).

<sup>2</sup> Many thanks to Lotte Vermeir of the VRT Research Department for providing us with these data.

<sup>3</sup> To give just one example: van Rees and van Eijck (2003), using multiple regression analysis, found eight media repertoires structured by status as well as gender, age, labor market position situation, religion and political interest.