



‘With a stretched arm. Like Superman, not like Hitler’. The Politics of Commemorative Irreverence in *Astronaut van Oranje* (2013) by Andy Fierens and Michaël Brijs

‘Met gestrekte arm. Zoals Superman, niet zoals Hitler’. De uitdagingen van het culturele geheugen in *Astronaut van Oranje* (2013) van Andy Fierens en Michaël Brijs

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Abstract. This essay offers an analysis of the aesthetical and political implications of the seemingly random use of names of figures from Belgian collaborationist history in the novel *Astronaut van Oranje* (2013) by Flemish authors Andy Fierens and Michaël Brijs. More specifically, it investigates the framing of the memory of World War II in Belgium by means of a satirical fantasy story that fuses elements from the dystopian imagination, science fiction, Gothic horror, and popular culture. Drenched in satire, hyperbole, absurdities, coarse humor, and blatant clichés, the novel eschews historiographical relevance and deliberately ignores the sensibilities that govern public and political discourses about this war past. By doing so, so I argue, it offers a provocative engagement with established practices in both Belgian and Flemish cultural memory, implementing what I will call a ‘politics of commemorative irreverence’.

Keywords: Second World War, collaborationism, cultural memory, Andy Fierens, dystopia, science fiction, satire / Tweede Wereldoorlog, collaboratie, cultureel geheugen, Andy Fierens, dystopie, science fiction, satire

Introduction

The use of the comic in cultural representations of suffering and perpetration seems governed by a stringent ethical imperative. While the comical presentation of affliction is considered the privilege of those subjected to it (the insiders and, by extension, their descendants), the permission to laugh at perpetrators is tied to the condition of not being one (the outsiders, although this category is obviously much more difficult to demarcate). The history of the Holocaust is a case in point. Here, texts using comical means to represent suffering in concentration camps have to stem from the pen of Jewish authors if they wish to be ‘accepted into high culture as an adequate representation of the Shoah’.¹ Edgar Hilsenrath’s *The Nazi and the Barber* (1973), Leslie Epstein’s *King of the Jews* (1979) or Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale I and II* (1986, 1991) exemplify this clearly. Although the humorous response to disasters is claimed to be a Jewish tradition,² the fact that all three authors have – both in context and paratext – evoked and stressed their Jewishness repeatedly, demonstrates their awareness that the public’s acknowledgement of their identity and life experience is a *sine qua non* for the acceptance of their comical approach.³

If laughing at suffering has strenuous limits, then Holocaust perpetrators must face a long and steady tradition of ridicule, certainly in film and theatre. Already during World War II National Socialism and its protagonists were beloved objects of comical representation, as, for example, in Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940), Ernst Lubitsch’s *To Be or Not to Be* (1942) or Bertolt Brecht’s theatrical parable *Der aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui* (1942). Later examples include Frank Beyer’s film *Jacob der Lügner* (1974), George Tabori’s dramatic farce *Mein Kampf* (1987), Roberto Begnini’s *La Vita è bella* (1998), and Dani Levy’s *Mein Führer: Die wirklich wahrste Wahrheit über Adolf Hitler* (2007). Here, the comic functions as what Terrence De Pres has called an ‘antimimetic mode’⁴ that mocks its subject in order to ‘overcome’ a collective enemy.⁵ Hence, these comical representations function first and foremost as ‘symbolic victories’⁶ over thoroughly de-auraticized and disempowered perpetrators.

¹ Sander L. Gilman, “‘Is Life Beautiful?’ Can the Shoah Be Funny? Some Thoughts on Recent and Older Films”, *Critical Inquiry*, 26.2 (2000): 279-308 (p. 284).

² See Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, ‘After Such Knowledge: What Laughter?’, *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14.1 (2001): 287-313 (p. 288).

³ For critical discussions of the ethical dimensions of the comic in representing the Holocaust, see e.g. Terrence Des Pres, ‘Holocaust Laughter?’, in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. by Berel Lang (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), pp. 217-233; Ezrahi, ‘After Such Knowledge’; Gilman, “‘Is Life Beautiful?’”; Ernst Van Alphen, ‘Playing the Holocaust’, in *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery / Recent Art*, ed. by Norman Kleeblatt (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002), pp. 65-83; Michael Richardson, “‘Heil Myself!’ Impersonation and Identity in Comic Representations of Hitler”, in *Visualising the Holocaust: Documents, Aesthetics, Memory*, ed. by David Bathrick et al. (Rochester: Camden House, 2008), pp. 277-97; and Kerstin Mueller, ‘Laughing at Hitler? The German Reception of George Tabori’s *Mein Kampf* (1987) and Dani Levy’s *Mein Führer* (2007)’, in *Strategies of Humor in Post-Unification German Literature, Film, and Other Media*, ed. by Jill E. Twark (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011), pp. 330-362.

⁴ Des Pres, ‘Holocaust Laughter?’, 217.

⁵ See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), pp. 102-103.

⁶ Richardson, “‘Heil Myself!’”, 278.

In recent years some cultural artifacts have emerged that maintain this strategy and continue to implement the comic as a challenge of dominant memory practices, thereby ardently testing the limits of ethical and political correctness in an often very provocative way. Quentin Tarantino’s black comedy *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) is the most famous exponent of this trend. In Germany, stand-up comedian Oliver Polak’s controversial performance (and ensuing book) ‘Ich darf das. Ich bin Jude’ (2008) sparked both fierce criticism and enthusiastic applause for its jokes about Jewish victimhood⁷ – a tactic also explored by Dutch author Arnon Grunberg in his satirical novel *De joodse Messias* (2004) or by various artists at the art exhibition ‘My Poland. On Recalling and Forgetting’ at the Tartu Art Museum in Estonia in February-March 2015.⁸

In this essay I want to take a closer look at a novel from Flemish prose fiction that, so I argue, fits in with this new approach, namely the ‘hilaric anarchosciencefictionhorrorsatire’ (as it is called on its dust jacket) *Astronaut van Oranje* [Astronaut of Orange] (2013) by performance poet Andy Fierens and musician Michaël Brijs.⁹ In a seemingly random manner its characters are given the names of figures from Belgian collaborationist history and situated in a satirical fantasy story that fuses elements from the dystopian and the utopian imagination, science fiction, Gothic horror, and popular culture. The narrative tone is marked by satire, hyperbole, absurdities, coarse humor, and blatant clichés. Historiographical relevance seems not at stake and the use of the comic in the novel seems to reflect defiance for the sensitive nature of the topic in Belgian and Flemish public and political discourse.¹⁰ A brief synopsis of

⁷ Polak’s use of the comic here explicitly confirms that, even today, joking about the Holocaust is strictly tied to being Jewish, even as it expresses an effort to construct a posttraumatic Jewish identity as part of what Georg Diez has called ‘The “New Jew” Movement’ (‘The Past as Prop. Young German Artists Define the “New Jew”’, *Der Spiegel*, 11 November 2011, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/the-past-as-prop-young-german-artists-boldly-define-the-new-jew-a-797008.html> [accessed 23 April 2015]). An important difference with previous forms of the comic in the representation of suffering, however, is that Polak explicitly aims at inciting laughter in his audience and readers. In previous works by Jewish authors, such as Hilsenrath’s, Epstein’s, and Spiegelman’s (and that of many others), so Gilman has indicated, ‘laughter is rarely the desired reaction’ (“‘Is Life Beautiful?’”, 282).

⁸ This exhibition presented a number of artworks by international artists dealing with the history of the Holocaust in Poland and with the tension between victimhood and anti-Semitic perpetration in Polish national memory and identity. Central to the works on display by, among others, Art Spiegelman, Zbigniew Libera, and Artur Zmijewski is the combination of re-enactment and humor in dealing with Holocaust memory, thereby provocatively addressing the question of how to remember today. For more information, see the online catalogue: <http://tartmus.ee/files/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Minu_Poola_A5_32lk_preview_final.pdf> [accessed 24 April 2015].

⁹ References to the text of this novel will be from Andy Fierens and Michaël Brijs, *Astronaut van Oranje* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2013), given in the body of the text as *AVO* followed by page numbers. All translations of quotations from the novel are my own.

¹⁰ Over the course of the postwar period, the memory of the Second World War in Belgium has been steadily dominated by the topics of collaborationism and its subsequent sanctioning during the liberation days. These topics have fuelled numerous political and public debates and even sixty-five years after the end of the war continue to cause controversies between the various memory communities that emerged after the war. The fiery political debates in the Belgian parliament over Minister of Interior Jan Jambon’s statement that Flemish Nationalist collaborationism was wrong, but that people during the war ‘had their reasons for collaborating with the German occupier’ in two Walloon newspapers in October 2014, or over Minister of Justice Stefaan De Clerck’s use of the verb ‘vergeten’ (to forget) instead of ‘vergeven’ (to forgive) with regard to Flemish collaborationism during a television show in May 2011, demonstrate this pertinently. Both remarks were met with strong political opposition from both Walloon and Flemish parties and denounced as efforts to exculpate collaborationists. A sociological and historical insight into the developments of war memory in Flanders and Belgium is, for example, offered by José Gotovitch and Chantal Kesteloot, *Het gewicht van het*

its contents already indicates that its approach towards this aspect of war memory is rather unusual.

Situated at the beginning of the twenty-second century, the story of *Astronaut van Oranje* tells of Borms, captain of a spaceship named REX, who is assigned by the Vatican to transport patients to an unknown destination in a far corner of the universe. The mission is highly secret and Borms has no clue what is wrong with the patients, to whom he has no access. A ubiquitous smell pervades his ship but when he inquires about it with the Vatican's delegate, a monk by the name of Father Degrelle, the latter refuses to answer. Borms is unaware that the mission is a set-up by the Cardinal, a sinister character bound to find Gunther, a boy whom he fathered with Borms's lieutenant Laplasse. The boy forms a threat to his ambitions of becoming Pope and the mission allows the Cardinal to shadow Laplasse, who is equally in search of her son, who was taken from her after childbirth by a priest called Damiaan in order to protect him from the Cardinal.

During a brief 'shore leave' at the biosphere Vulva located on the asteroid Böling, the Cardinal's men find and kidnap Gunther, whom Damiaan had hidden there nine years before. Borms and Laplasse, who resist the kidnapping, are arrested and transported as prisoners to the planet Molokai, the final destination of the mission. The Cardinal, at his arrival on Molokai, orders their execution, which is, however, thwarted by Damiaan. Remarkably, the latter has become a man of metal – a result of a slow and highly infectious mutation process after an exposure to a volcanic substance on Earth. He succeeds in liberating Borms and Laplasse, along with a group of captivated children, but they must leave Gunther behind with the Cardinal.

During their flight the Cardinal's men kill Damiaan, but Borms and Laplasse manage to lead the children through the wilderness to the cave of the *homines metallici*, the people that slowly transform into metallic beings and of whom Damiaan was the leader. Here, they hide from the Cardinal who is out for the silver and gold that their bodies contain. The novel's climax is an apocalyptic battle between the Cardinal's men and the metallic people, lead by Laplasse and Borms, who also start to show the symptoms of their transformation into metallic beings. With the help of some surreal creatures they manage to stop the ongoing genocide, destroy the concentration camp in which the metallic people are imprisoned and tortured, and unmask and kill the Cardinal. Gunther dies as well, but not without messianically proclaiming the coming of a utopian empire on Molokai. Peace is restored on the planet, which becomes a place of virtue and righteousness under Borms's rule and so constitutes an antipode to Earth, where corruption and evil continue to thrive.

For readers unfamiliar with the history of the Second World War in Belgium, the novel's relevance with regard to its memory construction is puzzling at best. The story is not situated in the past but in a fantastic future and it lacks any mimetic relation to war history. The war is almost exclusively evoked by means of its characters' proper names: Borms, Laplasse, Degrelle, and the ship's radio operator Vindevogel all refer to historical figures that are primarily known for their collaboration with the German occupier before and during World War II. The use of these and other historical signifiers in the novel, therefore, differs significantly from that of

oorlogsverleden (Gent: Academia Press, 2002); Bruno Benvindo and Evert Peeters, *Scherven van de oorlog. De strijd om de herinnering aan de Tweede Wereldoorlog, 1945-2010* (Antwerpen/Brussel: De Bezige Bij/SOMA, 2011); and Olivier Luminet et al., *The Interplay between Collective Memory and the Erosion of Nation States: The Paradigmatic Case of Belgium. A Special Issue of Memory Studies*, 5.1 (2012).

more conventional approaches in, for example, the traditional historical novel or previous cases of Flemish war literature that also stage some of these historical collaborationists.¹¹

In my analysis I will, first of all, focus on the novel’s evocation of a Flemish Nationalist dystopia and argue that it expresses an anxiety for a radical agenda hidden by contemporary Flemish Nationalist parties in Belgium today. Second, I will scrutinize *Astronaut van Oranje*’s use of fantasy as well as the aesthetical techniques that underlie its satirical presentation of these figures from collaborationist history. These techniques, so I argue, lead up to what Renate Lachmann has called an ‘*ars oblivionalis*’,¹² a playful and provocative assault on the mnemonic tradition, entailing ‘the obliteration of accumulated, transmitted knowledge and the creation of a counter-memory, in the “conception” of a tabula rasa’.¹³ In the case of *Astronaut van Oranje* this counter-memory does not entail the construction of an alternative version of cultural memory, but a radically different way of handling it, namely as a compendium from which one can freely pick out historical signifiers, rearrange, and re-semanticize them. Because of this, their customary signifieds become secondary to how these signifiers are used and redefined in their new aesthetic context. Historical referentiality is, in other words, subordinated to aesthetic creation. This approach, which I define as ‘a politics of commemorative irreverence’, since the novel defies more traditional, referential uses of the cultural memory of collaborationism and ignores established connotations that determine how it is used, is aimed at challenging memory practices from Flemish and Belgian cultural memory of the Second World War. In conclusion, I will gauge the political effectiveness of this memory politics as well as its ethical implications.

1. Dystopia and Flemish-Nationalist politics

While not referring to the history of World War II directly, the use of historical signifiers from war history in *Astronaut van Oranje* evokes it very directly. The protagonist’s name ‘Borms’

¹¹ The historical figure August Borms was, for example, subject of the controversial poem ‘Aan Borms’ [To Borms] (1949/1957) by the Flemish author Willem Elsschot. This poem is one of the most striking literary responses to war history by a canonical author in Flanders. First published against the author’s will in the Flemish Nationalist satirical journal *Rommelpot* and later, in its final version, in his *Verzameld werk* [Collected Works] (1957), the poem formulates an accusation against the judicial arbitrariness during the repression period and then, more specifically, against Borms’s execution at the end of the war. For an insight in the history surrounding Elsschot’s publication of ‘Aan Borms’, see Matthijs De Ridder, *Aan Borms. Willem Elsschot: een politiek schrijver* (Amsterdam/Antwerpen: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2007). The figure of Joris Van Severen has been evoked repeatedly in Flemish prose fiction about World War II. The most obvious example is the figure of Fons Kapjes in Jet Jorssen’s historical novel *Wat nu Sinjoor?* (1975). More fictionalized evocations, in which the reference to the historical Van Severen is far less evident, is the character Clemens Boodt in *De verraders* [The Traitors] (1962) by Piet van Aken and the mythical figure of Maurice De Keukeleire in Hugo Claus’s *De verwondering* [translated as *Wonder* in 2009]. For a general introduction into the construction of World War II-memory in Flemish prose fiction, see Jan Lensen, *De foute oorlog* (Antwerpen: Garant, 2014).

¹² Renate Lachmann, ‘Cultural Memory and the Role of Literature’, *European Review*, 12.2 (2004), 165-178 (p. 174, emphasis in original).

¹³ Lachmann, ‘Cultural Memory’, 174.

reminds of the Flemish Nationalist activist August Borms;¹⁴ that of his lieutenant, ‘Laplasse’, of Irma Laplasse¹⁵ – both of whom were executed for treason at the end of World War II. The spaceship’s doctor ‘Van Severen’ evokes the figure of Joris van Severen, founder and leader of the fascist-inspired Verdinaso,¹⁶ while ‘Vader Degrelle’ [Father Degrelle] is based on the figure of Léon Degrelle, who founded Rexism and joined the Waffen-SS. The spaceship in *Astronaut van Oranje* is, moreover, named after Degrelle’s political party, Rex.¹⁷ Other, more marginal characters are ‘Vindevogel’, the spaceship’s radio operator, who refers to Leo Vindevogel, a Flemish war mayor;¹⁸ a monk named ‘Moens’, whose name coincides with that of Wies Moens, a Flemish writer notorious for his Flemish Nationalism;¹⁹ and ‘Sultan Sergio’ alias ‘Eriksson’,

¹⁴ August Borms (1878-1946) was a controversial key figure in the development of the Flemish Movement during the interwar period in Belgium. Both in World War I and II he openly sided with the Germans in hope of gaining their support in establishing Flemish independence. He was executed on 12 April 1946 for collaboration, which made him a martyr and a mythical symbol for Flemish Nationalists. For more information on his historical and political relevance, see Herman Van Goethem, *Belgium and the Monarchy: From National Independence to National Disintegration* (Brussel: Asp/Vubpress/Upa, 2011) and Christine Van Everbroeck, *August Borms: Zijn leven, zijn oorlogen, zijn dood. De biografie* (Amsterdam/Antwerpen: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2005).

¹⁵ Irma Laplasse (born Irma Swertvaeger, 1904-1945) was executed in May 1945 for betraying a local resistance group that had arrested her son, a member the National Socialist Youth Flanders. The Germans liberated her son and several German soldiers, leaving seven resistance fighters dead. As with Borms, her execution was considered an unjust and anti-Flemish move, which made her, too, a hero in Flemish Nationalist propaganda. For more information about the case Laplasse, see Johan Anthierens, *Zonder vlagvertoon* (Leuven: Van Halewyck, 1998) and Frank Seberechts, ‘Swertvaeger, Irma’, in *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, ed. by Reginald De Schryver et al. (Tielt: Lannoo, 1998), pp. 2927-28.

¹⁶ Joris van Severen (1894-1940) founded and led the Verdinaso (Verbond van Dietsche Nationaal-Solidaristen – Union of Diets National Solidarists), an authoritarian and fascist-inspired political party in Belgium striving for a unification of the Benelux-countries. Although Van Severen detested Nazism, he was one of several far-right and far-left activists arrested at the eve of the Second World War. The arrested men were put under the care of the French Army and stationed near Abbeville. On 20 May 1940, as the advancing German Army cut off the area, a group of French soldiers carried out a massacre and killed a number of members of Verdinaso, Rex and the Belgian Communist Party, among them Van Severen. For more information about Van Severen, see Philip Rees, ‘Van Severen, Joris’, in Philip Rees, *Biographical Dictionary of the Extreme Right Since 1890* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), p. 401 and Roland Vanlandschoot, ‘Van Severen, Joris’, in *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, ed. by Reginald De Schryver et al. (Tielt: Lannoo, 1998), pp. 2739-45.

¹⁷ Léon Degrelle (1906-1994) was a Walloon Belgian politician, who founded Rexism and later joined the Waffen SS (becoming a leader of its Walloon contingent), which were front-line troops in the fight against the Soviet Union. After World War II, he fled to Spain, where he spent the rest of his life. He remained active in several fascist movements; frequently appearing in public and in private meetings in a white uniform featuring his German decorations, while expressing his pride over his close contacts with Adolf Hitler. For more information about Léon Degrelle and his political party Rex, see Martin Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium: Léon Degrelle and the Rexist Movement, 1940-1944* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1993).

¹⁸ Leo Vindevogel (1888-1945) was mayor of the East Flemish town Ronse between 1941 and 1944. He is the only Belgian elected representative effectively executed at the end of the war and he became a cult figure in the postwar war community of ex-collaborators. The repression novel *Dood met de kogel* [Death by Firing Squad] (1951) by Flemish author Valère Depauw (1912-1978) offers a hagiographic portrait of Vindevogel, along with a strong complaint against the juridical procedures leading up to his execution. For more information about Leo Vindevogel, see Petra Gunst, ‘Vindevogel, Leo’, in *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, ed. by Reginald De Schryver et al. (Tielt: Lannoo, 1998), pp. 3301-03.

¹⁹ Wies Moens (1898-1982) was a Flemish writer and activist for the Flemish Movement. During the interwar era, his predilection for a ‘Greater Netherlands’ (a fusion of Flanders and the Netherlands) evolved in the direction of right-

potentate of Vulva, whose name is a reference to the Flemish Nationalist neo-Nazi Bert Eriksson.²⁰

The novel's use of these historical signifiers functions similarly to the intertextual concept of the 'palimpsest', as theorized by Lachmann: 'die Zweitschrift, durch die hindurch die Erstschrift lesbar ist, [interpretiert] die Sinnkonstitution eines Textes, in dem Zeichen zweier Kontexte aufeinander treffen'.²¹ The signifieds of these historical names, as they are being negated in Belgian cultural memory, remain, in other words, latently present in the new text, regardless of how they are overwritten in this fictional narrative. Therefore, they function in *Astronaut van Oranje* as what Manfred Pfister has called a 'bewußte Markierung',²² inserting an explicit text-syntactical link between the text of the novel and the intertext of Belgian cultural memory. The novel, moreover, does not just refer to one particular aspect of war memory; it implements a 'Systemreferenz'²³ or a matrix of references that are related to each other in the intertext.

The relation between text and intertext is, however, very loose. Most names refer to Flemish Nationalist collaborationism during World War II (Borms, Laplasse, Moens, Vindevogel), some to radical Flemish Nationalism after the war (Eriksson, Annemans). Others have, however, little to do with Flemish Nationalist collaborationism, such as the figure of Degrelle, who was politically active in Wallonia, Van Severen, who fiercely opposed collaborationism, or the Cardinal, who seems to refer to Cardinal Jozef-Ernest Van Roey (1874-1961), a Belgian, Roman Catholic Cardinal, who was a significant figure in Catholic resistance to Nazism in Belgium.²⁴ What is to make of this loose relation between text and intertext?

wing nationalism and he was – together with Joris Van Severen – one of the founders of the fascist movement Verdinaso. During the war he was director of the Dutch broadcastings at the National Socialist 'Zender Brussel'. For his collaborationism he was sentenced to death *in absentia*. He fled to the Netherlands where he spent the rest of his life. For more information about Wies Moens, see Olaf Moens and Yves T'Sjoen, 'Moens, Wies', in *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, ed. by Reginald De Schryver et al. (Tielt: Lannoo, 1998), pp. 2067-68.

²⁰ Bert (Armand Albert) Eriksson (1931-2005) was a leading Flemish neo-Nazi and Flemish Nationalist who played an important role in postwar fascism in Flanders. In 1971 he took command of the Vlaamse Militanten Orde (Flemish Militant Order), leading the organisation on an extreme right wing path and was one of the founders of the Flemish Nationalist right wing political movement Vlaams Blok (Flemish Block). For more information about Bert Eriksson, see Jan Creve, 'Eriksson, Bert (eigenlijk A. Albert)', in *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, ed. by Reginald De Schryver et al. (Tielt: Lannoo, 1998), pp. 1080-81.

²¹ Lachmann, Renate, *Gedächtnis und Literatur: Intertextualität in der russischen Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990), p. 59.

²² Broich, Ulrich and Manfred Pfister, *Intertextualität: Formen, Funktionen, anglistische Fallstudien* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1985), p. 27.

²³ Broich and Pfister, *Intertextualität*, p. 53.

²⁴ Cardinal Jozef-Ernest Van Roey served as Archbishop of Mechelen from 1926 until his death and who was elevated to the cardinalate in 1927. In contrast to the other figures in the novel and to the role his name is assigned to, he was a significant figure in Catholic resistance to Nazism in Belgium. In that sense, the reference confirms not only the degree of randomness at work in the novel's referentiality; it also shows *Astronaut van Oranje*'s play with clichés (cf. *infra*), as it evokes one of the most blatant misconceptions about the role of the Church during the Second World War. As Aline Sax and others have clarified at length, the image of the Church as a decisive stimulant for Flemish soldiers to join the Germans at the Eastern Front is the product of apologetic efforts by collaborators to divert the attention from their ideological New-Order sympathies. See Aline Sax, *Voor Vlaanderen, volk en Führer. De motivatie en het wereldbeeld van Vlaamse collaborateurs tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog 1940-1945* (Antwerpen: Manteau, 2012), pp. 124-25, and

This art of historical referencing, so I argue, evokes four possible readings. **First**, the seemingly random referencing to cultural memory indicates the narrator's aesthetically motivated irreverence for historiographical relevance. The signifiers are picked at will, and the various nuances and complexities of collaborationist history are ignored. **Second**, the referential incongruence signals a historiographical critique of the blurry and often generalizing way by means of which collaborationist history is represented in public discourses. Here, the use of hyperbole and commonplaces serves as a provocation, meant to expose the mechanisms that underlie the often politically twisted construction of this memory. **Third**, the use of signifiers from these disparate political movements reflects a historico-political critique, as it hints at the fact that collaborationism was not just a Flemish-Nationalist matter, but one that pervaded Belgium as a whole during World War II. The character of 'Father Degrelle', for example, then invokes collaborationism in Wallonia and serves at confronting the rigid and somewhat repressive memory politics by means of which the French-speaking memory community continues to inform Belgium's official discourse on collaborationism.²⁵ **Fourth**, and a hypothesis I wish to work out here in more detail: the seemingly random transposition of historical signifiers serves the novel's evocation of a dystopian image of Flanders. To that end, the divergent intertextual elements from cultural memory are syncretized to produce an image of future Flanders as a place where a number of political ambitions from Flemish Nationalist and other collaborationist movements in Belgium during World War II have been accomplished. In what follows I will give an overview of the various elements of dystopian Flanders and their effect.

The image of future Flanders evoked in the novel resembles in many ways how it is imagined by a fundamentalist Flemish-Nationalism. Here, it has attained territorial, political, and economic autonomy, consolidated in the form of an independent 'Republiek van Vlaanderen' [Republic of Flanders] (*AVO*, p. 9). Its government is located in Dicksmuide, a real-existing provincial town in West-Flanders that is renowned for its 'IJzertoren' (Iser Tower), a *lieu de mémoire* for Flemish soldiers killed during both world wars and which served until the nineties as a pilgrimage place for the radical Flemish Nationalist memory community.²⁶ Borms's spaceship REX has the shape of this Iser Tower and functions, hence, as the face of the Republic.

This independence in itself is not dystopian, but the means that have served to establish the Republic and their repercussions clearly are. Flanders has reached independence through collaborationism with Nazi-Germany and its politics are, subsequently, deeply National-Socialist in nature. Reactionary, racist, and anti-Semitic, the Republic proclaims a pure Flemish bloodline and its political discourse – which Borms initially adheres to and voices in a speech to

Bruno De Wever, 'Catholicism and Fascism in Belgium', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 8.2 (2007), 343-52.

²⁵ Whenever Flemish Nationalist collaborationism and the question of amnesty are brought to the table in Belgian politics, responses from Flemish and Walloon political parties are distinctly dissimilar. While Flemish parties in general oppose amnesty but seem open to debate (cf. the discussion following the legislative proposal for amnesty by Vlaams Belang in May 2011, see footnote 10), Walloon parties have often reacted insulted, thereby resisting every notion of amnesty and foreclosing discussion.

²⁶ For a historical insight into the evolution of the Iser Tower's ideological meanings during the postwar period, see Benvindo and Peeters, *Scherven van de oorlog*, pp. 82-113 and 146-83.

his men – is strongly indebted to the Nazis’ Blood-and-Soil rhetoric that espouses racialism and national romanticism. Other elements that enforce the link with German National-Socialism are the Republic’s annexation of French-Flanders, which echoes the takeover of Austria by the Germans in March 1938, and the decreeing of an ‘Algeheel Cultureel Creatieverbod’ [General Cultural Creation Ban] (AVO, p. 12) in order to revive traditional folksong music. As Borms remarks, ‘Het Creatieverbod werd niet uitsluitend ingevoerd om de oude Vlaamse klassiekers in volle glorie te laten schitteren, maar ook om al die arrogante luilakken uit hun vals gestemde artistieke dromen te halen en hen te activeren op de arbeidsmarkt.’ [The Creation Ban was not only issued to revive and glorify the old Flemish classics, but also to get those arrogant lazy bums [artists in a general sense, jl.] out of their off-key artistic dreams and to put them on the labor market] (AVO, p. 13) This prohibition on creation unmistakably alludes to the National Socialist onslaught on the so-called ‘entartete Kunst’; art considered to be un-German, Jewish or Communist in nature.

Besides references to National Socialism, the novel also invokes the history of the Holocaust in a metaphorical form. The systematic torture, murder, medical experimentation, and the extraction and melting of silver and gold from the *homines metallici*’s bodies are unmistakable references to the persecution of Jewish people in the concentration camps. The description of the cruelties as well as the imagery of ovens and smoking chimneys in the Cardinal’s vineyard confirms this. While the Vatican here embodies the role of the Nazis, the metallic people of Molokai function as an allegory of the Jewish people, a comparison underscored by the fact that Damiaan, as their leader, contracted the metallic infection on a mountain in Spain after contact with volcanic substance – an obvious reference to the biblical story of Exodus.

Since the classic dystopia is, however, generally concerned with a situation in the present, *Astronaut van Oranje* must not primarily be read as a critique of collaborationism and its involvement in German war crimes. It reflects, rather, so I argue, a fearful suspicion of the fascist roots of Flemish Nationalist politics today and then, more specifically, of the center-right party Nieuwe Vlaamse Alliantie [New Flemish Alliance] and the radical rightwing party Vlaams Belang [Flemish Interest]. This is apparent from the established Republic in the novel, a state form these parties have been advocating more fervently than any collaborationist movement during World War II.²⁷ In line with this, the abovementioned ‘General Cultural Creation Ban’ equally targets, so I argue, the populist culture politics proclaimed by both parties.²⁸ A third –

²⁷ The idea of an independent Flanders was, during World War II, only advocated by the radical National Socialist DeVlag (Deutsch-Vlämische Arbeitsgemeinschaft), albeit as part of the Great-German Empire. The leading Flemish Nationalist collaboration movement in Flanders, Vlaams Nationaal Verbond (Flemish National Union), aimed to separate Flanders from Belgium and unite it with the Netherlands to form a Greater Netherlands, which they termed ‘Dietsland.’ Joris van Severen’s ‘Verdinaso’ strived for a union of the Benelux countries, while Degrelle’s Rex advocated Belgian Unitarianism and royalism. The politics of none of these movements is comparable to that of the Flemish Republic in *Astronaut van Oranje*.

²⁸ Both Vlaams Belang and N-VA have often pleaded for an art production that is less dependent on government funding and more on the dynamics of the free market. From an ideological point of view, they make a pledge for a form of art that is first and foremost community constructive and appealing to a large audience, as the N-VA stresses in its culture policy. Vlaams Belang goes further here, by expecting culture to honor Flemish identity in order to be eligible for funding. Subsequently, both parties have expressed concerns about autonomous art, considered them a-social, elitist, and money squandering. For an insight into the controversies and discussions, see De Pauw, Wim, *Absoluut Modern: Cultuur en Beleid in Vlaanderen* (Brussels: VUPRESS, 2007) and the special issue of the bi-monthly journal

and the most obvious – element that points the novel's critique towards today's politics is the name of the spaceship's computer, 'Annemans', referring to Gerolf Annemans, former chairman of Vlaams Belang. By intermingling protagonists from historical collaborationism with those from contemporary Flemish Nationalism, the novel subscribes to a line of attack often implemented in response to Flemish Nationalism's electoral success over the last decades. Here the Flemish Nationalist upsurge in Belgian politics is presented as a melancholic reenactment of a failed past that creeps in through the back door. By means of this hyperbolic dystopian construction of future Flanders, *Astronaut van Oranje*, thus, aims to act as what Baccolini and Moylan have called a 'prophetic vehicle',²⁹ warning its readers for the sociopolitical tendencies in Flanders that could, if continued, turn it into a nightmare.

2. Neutralizing the mythical past

The unease behind this dystopian imagination is not the only aesthetic means *Astronaut van Oranje* deploys to counter the radical phantasms it suspects in contemporary Flemish Nationalist politics. The historical signifiers are simultaneously subjected to a thorough process of 'inversion and re-semanticization'.³⁰ Here, in terms of the palimpsest, the fictional 'Zweitschrift' takes over from the 'Erstschrift'³¹ of history and it does so in a rather forceful way, stripping the historical signifiers from their mythical character and denying them any form of political credibility. By doing so, *Astronaut van Oranje* creates what Darko Suvin has called a 'fallible dystopia' in which 'no dystopian reality is nightmarishly perfect, and that its seams may be picked apart'.³² *Astronaut van Oranje* does this in three ways: via a story of successful revolt, by means of fantasy's subversive potential, and through satire. In the following, I will analyze these aesthetic techniques.

2.1. Superman's stretched arm

Dystopia is not only evoked by the novel's chronotope, but also by its plot structure. As Baccolini and Moylan have remarked, a typical feature of the dystopian novel is 'the construction of a narrative of the hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of resistance'.³³ It

De Witte Raaf dedicated to the link between Flemish Nationalism and culture policy (169 (2014), <http://www.dewitteraaf.be/edities/index/nl> [accessed 11 November 2014]).

²⁹ Baccolini, Raffaella and Thomas Moylan, 'Introduction. Dystopia and Histories', in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopic Imagination*, ed. by Raffaella Baccolini and Thomas Moylan (New York/London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1-12 (p. 2). Baccolini and Moylan use this term to define a distinctive branch of dystopian narratives in the margin of mainstream Western fiction, such as Evelyn Waugh's *Love among the Ruins* (1953) and Don De Lillo's *Underworld* (1997), where writers display 'an ethical and political concern [...] warning us of terrible sociopolitical tendencies that could, if continued, turn our contemporary world into the iron cages in the realm of Utopia's underside' (p. 1-2).

³⁰ Lachmann, 'Cultural Memory', 173.

³¹ Lachmann, *Gedächtnis und Literatur*, p. 59.

³² Suvin, Darko, *Defined by a Hollow: Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction and Political Epistemology* (Frankfurt am Main/Oxford/Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 395.

³³ Baccolini and Moylan, 'Introduction', p. 5.

generally opens *in medias res* in which one or more characters are fully immersed in the nightmarish society, but gradually develop insight and acknowledgment of their situation and enact a counter-discourse that is most manifest in the form of power over language and the ability for speech. The plot in *Astronaut van Oranje* follows this pattern quite faithfully. At the novel's start the totalitarian Flemish Republic is an established fact and Borms, the main protagonist, is quasi integrally immersed in its structure of feeling (cf. Williams). Although deeply annoyed by the Jesuit monks on his spaceship and skeptical about the Flemish Nationalist politicians' capabilities, he is an unwavering advocate of Flemish Nationalist rule and its ideology. He is part of the official, hegemonic order – at least that is what he believes.

Soon, however, inexplicable and uncanny things start to surface and his failure to understand them undermines his identity as part of this order. The porn movie sent to the REX, featuring lieutenant Laplasse having intercourse with the Flemish author Louis Paul Boon initiates this process of alienation.³⁴ Its blatant obscenity and historical incongruity leave Borms puzzled about the video's meaning and its origins. The video, moreover, contains an encoded message that Borms cannot decipher. The mystery deepens when a monk, who approaches Borms to speak to him in private, is moments later found impaled on a pole with the Flemish flag. When a voice of a boy who names himself Gunther emanates from the deceased monk's mouth, Borms's bewilderment is complete.

This general feeling of unease intensifies when his superiors at Terra demand the release of the monks that have kidnapped the children at Vulva, in order to avoid a diplomatic conflict with the Vatican. Borms senses political schemes that he cannot reconcile with his own ideological convictions: 'Het wereldbeeld waarmee Borms was opgevoed en waaraan hij zich altijd had vastgeklampt, vertoonde barsten. De republiek zoals hij die kende zou nooit de moord op een kind toestaan.' [Borms's worldview, with which he had been brought up and to which he clung, revealed cracks. The republic, as he knew it, would never allow the murdering of a child [i.e. Gunther, jr.] (*AVO*, p. 118). This process of alienation does, however, not only come from the outside; Borms himself turns out to be inherently dissimilar from the order he adheres to, as he learns from deciphering the porn video's coded message: '*Borms vermoedelijk niet raszuiver*' [Borms probably not a purebred] (*AVO*, p. 82, emphasis in original). To his utter bafflement, a DNA-test proves that he is partly Dutch. Considering this a personal disgrace as well as a political problem in a state that swears by an uncorrupted Flemish bloodline, he conceals this information anxiously.

³⁴ Louis Paul Boon (1912-1979) was one of Flanders's most influential post-war writers. His literary legacy ranges from poetry, novels, novellas, and short stories to art- and literary critique. He was also an artistic painter. He is most famous for the novelistic diptych *De Kapellekensbaan* [translated as *Chapel Road* in 1972] (1953) – *Zomer te Ter-Muren* [translated as *Summer in Termuren* in 2006] (1956), and *Menuet* [translated as *Minuet* in 1979] (1955). The innovative character of his work resides first and foremost in his highly modernist style. His work is, moreover, infused by a strong critique of modernity and its negative effects on the working population and the ordinary man. From that perspective his work is often marked by a socialist political posture, paralleled by an anticlerical attitude, but this aspect is not as tendentious as was alleged by Flemish catholic critics at the time his novels were published. One could, hence, say that Fierens and Brijs play with a cliché-image of Boon that was produced by these critics and that Borms, by reiterating them in his identification of Boon as 'die bekende antiklerikale schrijver van eertijds' [that famous anticlerical author of yonder times] (*AVO*, p. 16), exemplifies how this dystopian Flemish society is pervaded by an outdated and biased conservatism that has proven to be incorrect by academic criticism.

Borms cannot surmise that the Cardinal's political maneuvers are behind the video and the ensuing revelation of his hybrid identity. In order to thwart the captain's critical stance vis-à-vis his lackey-monks, he has set up a scheme to have Borms arrested. Here, the ideology Borms sided with radically turns against him, as Father Degrelle points out during the following interrogation:

[Borms:] 'Ik zeg geen woord meer voor ik een advocaat heb, en ik wil mijn oversten in Diksmuide spreken.' [Father Degrelle:] 'Maar kapitein, zonder een zuivere bloedlijn kan er van rechten geen sprake meer zijn. Wij hebben uw oversten er al van op de hoogte gebracht dat een van hun schepen onder het bevel van een Hollander stond. Neemt u maar van mij aan dat u momenteel een betere vriend aan mij hebt dan aan hen. De Vlaamse Republiek heeft u al uit het bevolkingsregister geschrapt. Er heeft nooit een kapitein Borms bestaan.'

[[Borms]: I will not say another word before I have an attorney, and I wish to speak to my superiors in Diksmuide.] [Father Degrelle:] 'But captain, without a pure bloodline you have no rights at all. We have informed your superiors that one of their ships was under a Dutchman's command. You can assume that, for the moment, I am a better friend to you than they are. The Flemish Republic has erased you from its civil register. For them, Captain Borms never existed.] (AVO, p. 122)

Confronted with this reality, Borms sees no alternative but to resist the order that expelled him, as he tells Laplasse: 'Ik besta niet meer voor Vlaanderen en Vlaanderen bestaat niet meer voor mij [...]. Voortaan ben ik een astronaut van Oranje.' ['I do no longer exist for Flanders and Flanders does no longer exist to me [...]. From now on, I am an astronaut of Orange.'] (AVO, p. 126). Here the oppositional structure typical of the dystopian genre is underscored by intertextual references. First, Laplasse, who is repeatedly described as attractive and sensual, is endowed with the role of Orwell's *Julia* in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or I-330 in Zamyatin's *We*, 'a sexually proactive woman whose affections serve to promote the male protagonist's resistance to the state'.³⁵ Additionally, this resistance is supported by the intertextual reference to Erik Hazelhoff Roelfzema's novel *Soldaat van Oranje* [Soldier of Orange] (1970), an autobiographical account about the author's role in the resistance during the Second World War.³⁶ By plainly assuming this identity, Borms models himself after this iconic figure in Dutch war memory.

³⁵ Andrew Milner, *Locating Science Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), p. 128.

³⁶ Erik Hazelhoff Roelfzema (1917-2007) is acclaimed in the Netherlands as one of the nation's greatest World War II heroes. He was involved in the Dutch section of MI6 (the British intelligence service), where he carried out plentiful of missions transferring resistance materials and spies to the Netherlands. In 1942 he was awarded with the Military Order of William, the highest recognition in the Dutch military. He also joined Britain's Royal Air Force, flying on 72 missions and received the RAF's Distinguished Flying Cross in 1945. *Soldier of Orange*, which contains an autobiographical report of his war experiences, was made into a film by Paul Verhoeven in 1977, and into a musical in 2010. For more info on Roelfzema, see Dennis Hevesi, 'Erik Hazelhoff Roelfzema, a "Soldier of Orange", is Dead at 90', www.nytimes.com, 8 Oktober 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/10/08/world/europe/08roelfzema.html?_r=0 [accessed 13 November 2014].

Borms’s staging as a resistance leader is not only relevant on the diegetic level, but also with regard to the novel’s memory politics. At the moment of attacking the Cardinal’s men, he is presented as flying forward ‘met gestrekte arm. Zoals Superman, niet zoals Hitler’ [with a stretched arm. Like Superman, not like Hitler] (AVO, p. 251). The link between the comic hero and the *Reichsführer* evokes not only the opposition between the morally ‘good’ Borms and the ‘evil’ Cardinal; it also embodies a counter-discourse on an extradiegetic level. By signaling that the stretched arm refers to the heroic gesture of a comic figure and not to the Nazi salute, the novel explicitly chooses to suspend the connotation of a difficult war past. Just as the novel deploys a transformative act of random referencing in the use of historical signifiers from cultural memory, it explicitly strips the symbolism of the stretched right arm off its Nazi-connotation, substituting it with the evocation of courage, resistance, and redemption inscribed in the iconography of Superman. This not only indicates a performative change in the political and moral semantics of the right arm’s symbolism, but also a provocative discursive act of replacing that what is a highly sensitive political matter with an element of popular culture that seems to defy that historical connotation. It is precisely this act of irreverence for political sensitivities as well as the use of clichés and outdated images of collaborationist history – which seem to reflect an indifference towards historical and contemporary political reality – that signal the ‘ars oblivionalis’ at work in *Astronaut van Oranje*. Established meanings are deconstructed and replaced by alternatives that randomly substitute the historical signified.

2.2. The Mangle of Satirical Fantasy

The novel’s use of fantasy under the form of science fiction as well as via incongruous plot changes and posthuman character transformations fits in with this playful confrontation with cultural memory. With regard to the idolization of these historical figures as martyrs within the Flemish Nationalist fundamentalist memory community, their radical displacement in time and space not only signals the narrator’s ability to treat these signifiers in any way he prefers, it also aims at disarming the mythical status they hold in this cultural memory. The use of the fantastic inverts their traditional signifieds, ‘re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* “new”, absolutely “other” and different’.³⁷ This process of alienation, however, is not a form of superfluous escapism; on the contrary, the inversion produced in the novel through fantasy, so I argue, entertains a ‘parasitical’³⁸ relation to the real. Linked to the dystopian chronotope, it forms a playful assault on the memory community of Flemish Nationalist fundamentalism and the mythological fallacy that pervades it.

The fantastic functions in *Astronaut van Oranje* also as a way of unearthing that what remains unspoken in Belgium’s officially legitimated view of the war past. As Jackson has argued, the fantastic allows us to trace ‘the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’.³⁹ In light of the many debates

³⁷ Jackson, Rosemary, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London / New York: Methuen, 1981), p. 8.

³⁸ Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 20.

³⁹ Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 4.

that have taken place in the political and public sphere in Belgium, collaborationism is no longer a taboo topic, however, the biased representations, the political sensitivities, the ambiguous positionings as well as the sustained controversies (see footnote 10) governing the Belgian cultural memory of the Second World War make it still somewhat of a commemorative minefield. By staging these historical signifiers outside of their common context and by submitting them to a process of fantastic re-semanticization, the novel aims at challenging the heaviness that still surrounds war memory on the political level, thereby offering a hybrid discursive mode that wants to make addressing this history a less stringent, even joyful matter. Interestingly the resistance against the hegemonic order on a diegetic level (Superman's stretched arm) gains extradiegetic significance since it seems to constitute the crucial precondition for developing this playful but parasitical literary counter-discourse.

With the dystopian trope demonstrating the political undesirability of a fundamentalist Flemish Republic and fantasy constituting a playful subversion of the mythical fallacy at work in its cultural memory, *Astronaut van Oranje* offers a thought-provoking exercise of gauging memory practice today in Flanders and Belgium. Suggesting, however, that the novel does little more than scratch the surface of the real would entail an ignoring of its overall anti-bourgeois politics. This attitude is most obvious from the fact that its worldview – and, thus, also its perspective on war history – is immersed in satire, which adds a ‘militant attitude’⁴⁰ to its subversive setup. At times mild, this satire mostly expresses a highly critical vision of the dystopian hegemonic order and its advocates. To that end, the novel implements a number of features that aim at relativizing the political and moral credibility of the Republic's leaders and at problematizing its overall workability. The most explicit one is the often-expressed skepsis about the governmental capabilities of the politicians in the Flemish Republic as, for example, by the ship's computer Annemans, who remarks: ‘En ik zou haar geen ongelijk geven, als je ziet hoe het land nu bestuurd wordt’ [And I would not disagree with her, in light of how the country is being run] (*AVO*, p. 20). With this, the novel expresses both a specific critique as well as a timeless skepsis with government, suggesting that the realized ambitions of radical Flemish Nationalism have not brought anything new. The Republic is, in other words, not any better than the Belgian state it has detached itself from, which reads like a critical questioning of the promises of contemporary Flemish Nationalist politics.

Besides skepsis, the novel inverts many elements that are crucial to Flemish Nationalist identity through a process of ‘*ironic redescription*’⁴¹ and allots the dystopian regime a high degree of obscenity, ridicule and – ultimately – fallibility. A good example is the depiction of the Flemish Republic as male chauvinist: men assume the higher-ranked positions, they are generally openly or covertly sex-obsessed, and their speech is riddled with sexual innuendo. The phallic shape of the REX is exemplary for this masculine imperial dominance, while the biosphere's name Vulva as well as its architectural construction – a gigantic woman lying on her back pushing her vagina upward – expresses the misogynistic attitude and the psychosexual degeneration that mark the radical Flemish Nationalist mentality in the novel. On the extradiegetic level this hyperbolic and somewhat disturbing portrayal of male sexual aggression is clearly meant at questioning the moral status of the Flemish Nationalist state. It hints at the

⁴⁰ Northrop Fry, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 224.

⁴¹ Jonathan Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 9, emphasis in original.

moral degradation at work in its members as well as at the intrinsic primacy of the bodily functions in spite of – or exactly because of – a perpetual indoctrination proclaiming moral, political, and racial purity. By evoking this discrepancy between body and mind the satire indicates the naiveté and twisted logics of National Socialist ideology and, hence, its unworkability.

This critique also resonates in the portrayal of those dominating Flanders. The Catholics on Borms’s spaceship are meek, hypocritical, and untrustworthy and their bodies metonymically reflect a state of degradation. This is, for example, apparent from the pervasive smell of the monks’ breath as well as from their constant sweating. In other instances, their depiction is marked by grotesque elements. This is manifest in Borms’s observation of Father Degrelle’s face, which in his perception suddenly features ‘een knoert van een wrat’ [a colossal wart] (*AVO*, p. 28). Borms considers it a ‘monstruositeit [monstrosity]’ (*AVO*, p. 29) and fears it to be

een strakgespannen, op springen staande zak vol spinneneieren. En wanneer dat gebeurde [...] dan zouden miljoenen exemplaren van de venijnige arachnida zich vliegensvlug verspreiden over het schip, de bemanning langs alle lichaamsopeningen binnendringen en het kwade van de hun meticuleus ingeprente leer als een kiemrijp zaadje in de Vlaamse hersenen komen planten.

[a taut sack of spider eggs, on the verge of bursting. And when that happened [...] millions of exemplars of this vicious arachnid would spread swiftly over the ship, penetrating the aircrew through all bodily openings and planting the evil of their meticulously inculcated doctrine as seeds ready to germinate in their Flemish brains.] (*AVO*, p. 30)

Borms’s obsession with the wart produces a grotesque depiction, marked by an occupation for that which ‘protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body’s confines’.⁴² The intended effect is double. As John Ruskin has remarked, the grotesque mode is ‘composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful’.⁴³ As one or the other of these elements prevails, the grotesque falls into two branches: sportive grotesque and terrible grotesque. We can, however, not legitimately consider it under these two aspects, because there are hardly any examples that do not in some degree combine both elements. The ‘ludicrous’ element of the grotesque, its comic, playful, or ‘sportive’ side, has obvious affinities with satire, irony, caricature, and cartoon, which stay on the surface of the object and exaggerate or deform their targets with the aim of ridicule. The ‘fearful’ element, so Ruskin, has a different set of generic affiliations (the Gothic, the fantastic, horror, and, most crucially, the uncanny) that hint at a troubled interiority and move from laughter to anxiety. Ruskin noted how these two elements do not disentangle easily. The laughter provoked by the grotesque is therefore ‘always uneasy,

⁴² Michael Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1984), p. 316.

⁴³ John Ruskin, quoted in Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire and the Novel*, p. 9.

nervous laughter, never wholly free from disquiet'.⁴⁴ On *Astronaut van Oranje's* diegetic level the threat is present in the risk for contamination and infection, physically as well as ideologically; on the extradiegetic level the strong exaggeration of the protrusion links the grotesque with caricature.⁴⁵ Here, the monk's body shape is ridiculed and, through its metonymical relationship to its subject, the character attached to it is presented as ludicrous and weak.

This negative image is representative of the evoked Flemish Republic and it becomes an allegory of what Flemish independence in its most fundamentalist shape, according to the novel, would look like. Through the use of hyperbole, it presents the radical Flemish Nationalists' imagined community (cf. Anderson) as the result of an opportunist will for power, marked by the relinquishing of all moral and political integrity and the demonstration of a wilful blindness for the grotesque face of evil it accedes to. Its weakness is confirmed at the end of the novel, when – due to some design flaws in the Cardinal's clone who has taken over power on Earth – Flanders is annexed by the Netherlands and sold to the United Arab Emirates that enforces Islamic religion and culture. Hence, coincidence rules its fate, not agency.

3. Laughing at anything?

Reading *Astronaut van Oranje* from this political angle raises questions about its relevance for discussions on Flemish Nationalist politics today and about its contribution to the continuing negotiations of collaborationist memory in Belgium. Does the novel offer insights that help us attain a better understanding of the dynamics behind today's political system in Belgium? And does its comical approach towards this war past embody a memory practice that is valuable for Belgian cultural memory today? In light of my analysis, both answers seem to beg for a negative answer, but here I also see the key to the novel's commemorative relevance.

When considering the political attack launched by the novel on today's Flemish Nationalism, several elements jeopardize its effectiveness. First, this attack is implicit, since it functions via dystopia and does not contain any direct references to today's political situation. Second, if the construction of this dystopian narrative is aimed at linking today's Flemish Nationalist politics to historical collaborationism and, hence, signals a heeding of some fascist core at its heart, the novel serves a political thinking that reduces Flemish Nationalist identity to that of a radical minority that collaborated during both world wars to achieve its political goals. This somewhat anachronistic and certainly biased ideological maneuver, which has often been implemented by anti-Flemish or belgicist political forces since World War I to curb the political credibility of the Flemish Movement, offers not only a serious misrepresentation of political reality, it also contradicts the various instances at which prominent figures from the Flemish Movement and Flemish Nationalist politics have distanced

⁴⁴ John Ruskin, quoted in Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire and the Novel*, p. 9-10.

⁴⁵ See Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, *Grotesque* (New York / London: Routledge, 2013), p. 97.

themselves openly from the past of collaborationism and its fascist roots.⁴⁶ No doubt, Flemish Nationalist politics in Belgium today is to a certain extent rooted in collaborationist history, however, there is a consensus that the importance of this history for its identity has diminished decisively. Still, this argument does not suffice to discard *Astronaut van Oranje's* political credibility completely. In light of various incidents at which Flemish Nationalist politicians have displayed a dubious relationship with the past of collaborationism,⁴⁷ the novel's critical heeding for the sincerity of this public distantiating seems not too far-fetched.

Third, the novel undercuts its own political performativity through its abundant use of clichés about Flemish Nationalism. The references to Dicksmuide as the Republic's capital, the spaceship shaped like the Iser Tower, and the description of Flemish Nationalist festivities featuring tambours and color guard stem from a repertoire of commonplaces whose critical potential has dwindled significantly. A quick look at the critical reception of the novel confirms this. The 'societal approach', so one critic remarked, 'is futile. The novel does not reach much further than a bunch of clichés about Flemish Nationalism and the Church'.⁴⁸ Another critic commented that the image of Flanders evoked in the novel 'is as monolithic and choking as the image National Socialist politicians have in mind of it'.⁴⁹ Other reviews were less negative or did not engage with the novel's political dimension at all, indicating that it was not even taken into consideration.

In light of these clichés, the novel's comical aesthetics and its anti-bourgeois politics, however, one could argue that the question about the novel's political performativity is somewhat misdirected. No doubt, *Astronaut van Oranje* may upset Flemish Nationalists, as

⁴⁶ The most recent example was the following claim by NVA-Chairman Bart De Wever at the commemoration of the Holocaust at a monument in Antwerp, erected in honor of deported Jewish citizens: 'Deze collaboratie was een vreselijke fout op alle vlakken. Het is een zwarte bladzijde in de geschiedenis die het Vlaams-nationalisme onder ogen moet zien en die het nooit mag vergeten' ['Collaborationism was a terrible mistake on all fronts. It forms a black page in history, which Flemish Nationalism must face and which it may never forget']. An insight into this process of denunciation is, for example, offered by Evert Peeters, 'Grote schoonmaak in Vlaanderen. Collaboratie en regionalisering aan de IJzertoren', in Benvindo & Peeters, *Scherven van de oorlog*, pp. 146-83.

⁴⁷ At various occasions, politicians from mainstream Flemish Nationalist parties have stirred controversy by openly attending events organized by ex-collaborationists. In 2001, Johan Sauwens, then Belgian minister of Internal Affairs, Civil Services and Sport had to resign after it became known that he had attended a celebration at the Sint-Maartensfonds, an organization of Flemish people who has fought at the Eastern Front. More recently, politician and Minister of the Interior Jan Jambon (NVA) – who was also present at the Sint-Maartensfonds-celebration in 2001 – openly claimed that collaborators 'had their reasons for collaborating' (see footnote 10). In October 2014, Secretary of State for Asylum, Migration and Administrative Simplification Theo Francken (NVA) and NVA-Vice President Ben Weyts attended the party of birthday of Bob Maes, a former member of the Vlaams Nationaal Verbond, a party who collaborated with the Nazis in the Second World War. Rather than suggesting that these political figures sympathize with these extreme-right movements and people, it is clear that these visits serve electoral purposes that evoke an unrelenting skepticism with regard to these National-Socialist politicians' intentions, regardless of their political program.

⁴⁸ 'de maatschappelijke insteek is futiel. Veel verder dan een rist clichés over het Vlaams-nationalisme en de kerk reikt het boek niet.' Wim Huyghebaert, 'Andy Fierens en Michaël Brijs, 'Astronaut van Oranje': Ongerijmde uitschuiver', in *Cutting Edge*, 6 October 2013, <<http://www.cuttingedge.be/boekenstrips/andy-fierens-en-michael-brijs-astronaut-van-oranje>> [accessed 1 September 2015] (para. 4 of 6).

⁴⁹ 'Het beeld dat de schrijvers Vlaanderen opdringen is even monolithisch en verstikkend als de beeltenis waarnaar nationalistische politici het proberen te scheppen.' PC in 'Andy Fierens en Michaël Brijs – Astronaut van Oranje', in *Humo*, 28 september 2013, <http://www.humo.be/boeken/256689/andy-fierens-en-michael-brijs-astronaut-van-oranje> [accessed 1 September 2015] (para. 3 of 4).

one critic argued,⁵⁰ but all of these features suggest that the novel's approach to politics should not be understood in terms of credibility and effectiveness. The anachronistic displacement of historical signifiers and their subsequent fictional transformation, so I argue, rather signal a complete undercutting of its own performativity through aesthetic excess. As a dystopian, satirical and picaresque fantasy, the novel ridicules its target, but rather than to urge for reform, it acts as an oblivious renegade in which subversion is enjoyed for itself and where the inflicted cruelty by playing with distortions and blatant clichés is first and foremost a savoring in the very powers of aesthetic freedom.

While impairing its political performativity, the choice for aesthetical indulgence in dealing with collaborationist history is intensely relevant for the negotiations of this history in Belgian cultural memory of World War II today. Although its use of satire and comedy in representing collaborationist history is far from new in Flemish literature,⁵¹ I claim that *Astronaut van Oranje* goes a whole step further than its predecessors. Rather than reflecting the 'anti-mimetic mode' (Des Pres) of the examples mentioned above, which still signal a degree of ethical engagement with history and with the politics of historiographical representation, *Astronaut van Oranje* – through the dislocation of historical signifiers and their subordination to the whims of fictional and ironical redescription – is thoroughly a-mimetic and a-historical. Gone is the idea of defending some political stance or finding out some historical truth about the war past – so typical for novels from first- and second-generation authors.⁵² Sociological or psychological working-through the past of collaborationism, as for example in Claus's *Het verdriet van België*, is equally not at stake, just like the critical empathy in the construction of collaborationist history as, for example, in the work by Flemish author Erwin Mortier – an approach also mocked in *Astronaut van Oranje*.⁵³ Driven by its 'politics of commemorative irreverence', *Astronaut van Oranje* embodies a self-conscious narrative positioning vis-à-vis

⁵⁰ 'Nee, Vlaams-nationalisten zullen niet om dit boek kunnen lachen.' Marc Cloostermans, 'Drie romans "over" het Vlaams-nationalisme: Dichter Andy Fierens en muzikant Michaël Brijs schreven vorig jaar een zeer on-Vlaamse roman', Mark Cloostermans, 'Book Reviews and More', http://markcloostermans.blogspot.de/2014/02/drie-romans-over-het-vlaams_26.html [accessed 1 September 2015] (par. 2 of 3).

⁵¹ In his magnum opus *Het verdriet van België* [translated as *The Sorrow of Belgium* in 1994] (1983) Hugo Claus infused his sociological and political critique of collaborationism with satire, albeit in far more nuanced way. For an insightful analysis of this critique, see Paul Claes, 'Hugo Claus. Het verdriet van België', in *Lexicon van literaire werken. Besprekingen van Nederlandstalige literaire werken 1900-heden*, ed. by A.G.H. Anbeek van der Meijden et al. (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1989), 1-8, I-II. Today, moreover, numerous novels such as Pjeroo Roobjee's *De zomer van de neusbloedingen* [The Summer of the Nose-Bleeds] (2013) and Thomas Blondeau's *Het West-Vlaamse Versierhandboek* [The West-Flemish Seduction Manual] (2013) address Flemish Nationalist politics from an ironically informed critical point of view.

⁵² For an insight into these tendencies by authors from the first and the second generation, see Lensen *De foute oorlog*, pp. 83-112 and pp. 149-78.

⁵³ Halfway through the story, Borms needs to locate a secret corridor in an antiquarian bookshop, which – according to inside information – is hidden behind 'de verzamelde in memoriam van Erwin Mortier' [Erwin Mortier's collected in memoriam] (AVO, p. 93). The phrase ironically points at Mortier's continuous preoccupation with memory, but the reference is more than just a literary-critical assessment. By referring to his oeuvre as a collection of 'in memoriam', *Astronaut van Oranje* openly ridicules Mortier's respectful handling of the past, e.g. in *Marcel* (1999) which is marked by empathy, understanding, and a nostalgic yearning for what is lost in the process of remembering. An analysis of these features is offered by Jan Lensen, 'Perpetrators and Victims: Third-generation Perspectives on the Second World War in Marcel Beyer's *Flughunde* (1995) and Erwin Mortier's *Marcel* (1999)', *Comparative Literature*, 65.4 (2013): 450-465 (p. 40).

war memory, marked by the claim to speak about the past on one's own terms without being subjected to the practices and sensibilities that govern discourses about collaborationism today. This does not imply revisionism or a disregard for the significance of memory, but a provocative fun-poking knock on the walls of cultural memory with Superman's 'stretched arm', inspired by the conviction that the time has come, as Michaël Brijs confidently claimed in an interview, to 'laugh about anything'.⁵⁴

As indicated before, the impact of this politics of irreverence is probably rather limited. The use of clichés and absurd humor not only jeopardizes every form of political credibility, the impudent handling of collaborationist memory also affects its commemorative relevance and evokes questions about what is ethically acceptable – even with regard to perpetrator memory. Are Fierens and Brijs allowed to laugh at a past that they did not experience directly? Is their temporal and genealogical remoteness from the historical events sufficient to identify them as outsiders to collaborationist history – an identity I defined in my introduction as a precondition for the ability to mock perpetrators? Or does their engagement in the discursive practice of war memory turn them into what Michael Rothberg has called 'implicated subjects',⁵⁵ evoking notions of responsibility and accountability? And if so, is their contribution then not an imposturous offense in view of the sufferings and traumas that continue to haunt Belgian cultural memory? No doubt, these questions are highly relevant but, strikingly, no reviewer asked them or seemed disturbed by the novel's commemorative irreverence, as critical attention was mostly devoted to its aesthetic features. This may signal the novel's limited commemorative impact, however, it can also hint at what has become possible and acceptable today, when speaking openly about this difficult page in Belgian cultural memory.

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⁵⁴ 'Je moet kunnen lachen met alles en iedereen.' Michaël Brijs, quoted in Michiel Leen, "'Er is toch meer in het leven dan bomen opzetten over de Vlaamse identiteit?" (Andy Fierens)', [www.knack.be](http://www.knack.be/nieuws/boeken/er-is-toch-meer-in-het-leven-dan-bomen-opzetten-over-de-vlaamse-identiteit-andy-fierens/article-interview-106593.html), 9 September 2013, <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/boeken/er-is-toch-meer-in-het-leven-dan-bomen-opzetten-over-de-vlaamse-identiteit-andy-fierens/article-interview-106593.html> [accessed 3 September 2015].

⁵⁵ See, Michael Rothberg, 'Multidirectional Memory and the Implicated Subject. On Sebald and Kentridge', in *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*, ed. by Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 39-58.

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