

# EUR Research Information Portal

## Holland on the slide

**Published in:**  
Ethnologia Europaea

**Publication status and date:**  
Published: 01/01/2006

**DOI (link to publisher):**  
[10.16995/ee.1002](https://doi.org/10.16995/ee.1002)

**Citation for the published version (APA):**  
Reijnders, S. (2006). Holland on the slide: Celebrating the nation on television. *Ethnologia Europaea*, 36(1), 45-57.  
<https://doi.org/10.16995/ee.1002>

[Link to publication on the EUR Research Information Portal](#)

### Terms and Conditions of Use

Except as permitted by the applicable copyright law, you may not reproduce or make this material available to any third party without the prior written permission from the copyright holder(s). Copyright law allows the following uses of this material without prior permission:

- you may download, save and print a copy of this material for your personal use only;
- you may share the EUR portal link to this material.

In case the material is published with an open access license (e.g. a Creative Commons (CC) license), other uses may be allowed. Please check the terms and conditions of the specific license.

### Take-down policy

If you believe that this material infringes your copyright and/or any other intellectual property rights, you may request its removal by contacting us at the following email address: [openaccess.library@eur.nl](mailto:openaccess.library@eur.nl). Please provide us with all the relevant information, including the reasons why you believe any of your rights have been infringed. In case of a legitimate complaint, we will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website.

# HOLLAND ON THE SLIDE

## Celebrating the Nation on Television

by *Stijn Reijnders*

E-article  
from

Ethnologia  
Europaea  
*Journal of European Ethnology*

Volume 36:1  
2006

[E-book]

Museum Tusculanum Press  
University of Copenhagen  
2007

*HOLLAND ON THE SLIDE*

*Celebrating the Nation on Television*

Stijn Reijnders

E-article

© 2007 Museum Tusculanum Press

ISBN 978 87 635 0746 2

ISSN 1604-3030

From

Ethnologia Europaea

Journal of European Ethnology

Volume 36:1, 2006

E-book

© 2007 Museum Tusculanum Press

ISBN 978 87 635 0739 4

ISSN 1604-3030

Unaltered version in pdf-format of:

Ethnologia Europaea

Journal of European Ethnology

Volume 36:1, 2006

Copyright © 2007 Ethnologia Europaea, Copenhagen

Printed in Sweden by Grahns Tryckeri AB, Lund 2007

Cover and layout Pernille Sys Hansen

Cover photo [www.taptrappers.nl](http://www.taptrappers.nl), Woerden

ISBN 978 87 635 0691 5

ISSN 0425 4597

This journal is published with the support of the Nordic board  
for periodicals in the humanities and social sciences.

Museum Tusculanum Press

University of Copenhagen

Njalsgade 126

DK-2300 Copenhagen S

[www.mtp.dk](http://www.mtp.dk)

# HOLLAND ON THE SLIDE

## Celebrating the Nation on Television

Stijn Reijnders

Based upon field research, interviews with participants and audience surveys, this paper shows how the Dutch game show *Te Land ter Zee en in de Lucht* is intertwined with other, non-mediated forms of entertainment. For its participants, this programme is part of a wider festive repertoire which celebrates and expresses a group identity. For the audience, the ritualized media use surrounding the programme provides an opportunity to create and experience an imagined, national community.

*Keywords:* television, nation, audience, participation, media ritual

My husband [aged 33] and I [31] both enjoyed watching as children. They really were cosy evenings ... Now the same thing happens with our children. They particularly like the ‘jeans-hanging’. When the programme is over, Dad takes off his jeans and they take turns hanging from them. And when Mum puts the washing out they also want to hang from the jeans.<sup>1</sup>

Some television programmes seem to be anchored in the culture of a society: they have been around for so long that their presence has become a part of everyday life. One example of such a programme is *Te Land ter Zee en in de Lucht* (‘On Land, at Sea and in the Air’), a game show that has been aired on Dutch television every year since 1971. In *Te Land ter Zee*, contestants are required to slide down a slippery slope in home-made carnival-style carts and ring a bell suspended over the water as quickly as possible, or they have to hang from a pair of jeans for as long as they can.

*Te Land ter Zee* is not unlike the pan-European *Jeux sans frontières* – a famous television quiz from the 1970s, in which teams from different towns within the EU had to compete by playing games such as running steeplechases or building human pyramids. But whereas *Jeux sans frontières* was focused on a pan-European community (it was initiated by none other than Charles de Gaulle), the format of *Te Land ter Zee* is based on the representation of national stereotypes: the programme is filmed in nostalgic little harbour towns and the Dutch tricolour waves merrily from the stage on which the game is held. On top of this, the programme’s title contains a clear reference to the nation’s three guardians: the army, the navy and the air force. Within this ‘ideological landscape’ (Short 1991), viewers are treated to games of a highly folkloric nature, with soft soap, water and handicrafts forming the basic ingredients. Common props such as bales of hay and milk churns should be seen in the same light. In this way, the programme makers try to create a ‘traditional Dutch’ ambience,

a kind of national 'soapbox nostalgia' on television. This image is regularly mirrored in press reviews: the programme is highlighted as 'a mass party', 'a traditional Dutch game', 'a mini-carnival' or 'a pillar of Dutch social handicraft culture'. *Te Land ter Zee* is 'more innocent than cat-bludgeoning, eel-pulling or dwarf-throwing [all once practised in the Netherlands], but just as much a popular entertainment and folk tradition'.<sup>2</sup>

While most traditional game shows such as *Jeux sans frontières* have disappeared from television, *Te Land ter Zee* has retained its popularity for more than thirty years. Hundreds of candidates apply to take part in the show each year. They devote all their free time and creativity to building carts, only to see them crash within seconds in front of the camera. Both the audiences that flock to the recordings and the viewers at home clearly love this mixture of creativity and destruction; in terms of ratings, *Te Land ter Zee* has long been one of the peak performers in the Dutch summer television season.

How can we explain the continuing popularity of this nostalgic, seemingly old-fashioned game show? In this paper, the significance of *Te Land ter Zee* is not explained by elaborating further on the precise format of the show or, in the words of anthropologist Don Handelman (1998), by analysing this 'event' from the 'internal logic' of its design. Instead, focus is on the role of the participants and of the audience, which makes the show 'alive'. Why do candidates apply to take part in such a programme and how do they experience their own participation? Why does the viewing public enjoy watching their experiences? How do themes such as nostalgia and national identity fit in from the perspective of participants and viewers? In an effort to answer these questions, 43 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with randomly selected participants in the 2003 series of *Te Land ter Zee*. In addition, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted during the recording days and existing audience research from the period 1988–2002 was used. Finally, a notice was placed in the TV listings magazine *TrosKompas* asking viewers for their opinion of the programme. This generated 39 letters.<sup>3</sup>

## The Annual Ritual

Most participants in the show come from outside the big cities; provincial villages are a fertile recruiting ground for *Te Land ter Zee*. At least 300–400 applications are received from these areas each year. And they tend to come from people with a remarkable homogeneous social background. The vast majority of participants in the programmes are whites, aged between 18 and 35, who have a vocational qualification or are still studying. Just over three-quarters are men. Most participants are groups of students, friends or work colleagues.<sup>4</sup>

The participants usually build their machines on weekday evenings or at weekends. All in all, completing the average cart takes some 200–300 hours of work, 100–200 euros spent on materials – in other words a substantial investment in time and money. While it is true that there are prizes to be won, the chances of doing so are relatively small. What do the contestants get out of taking part, then? What is the added value of being a contestant on *Te Land ter Zee*? From the interviews, it seems that most participants regard the show first and foremost as an ideal opportunity to come together and to present their own group to the outside world. Roughly speaking, the participation process can be divided into four phases: group bonding, competition, display and remembrance.

In the weeks leading up to the day of the recording, the members of the team meet repeatedly in garages, old warehouses or workshops. These meetings are of a highly festive nature. Ruminations about the ideal distribution of loads across axles are lubricated with music and drinks. One of the interviewees puts it this way:

The building's what it's all about isn't it? ... That's the fun of it. And we really do test [the cart]. He lives next to the [river] Maas. We've even built our own launching site there. [It is] a lot of fun and a little bit of work.

Another participant explains:

It's not work all the time, you know. It's social ... With a cup of coffee, with a beer ... Yeah, that's fun ... It's just ... the looking forward to it. That's what's fun about it ... It's guiding, helping and supporting one another.

Building the carts encourages group bonding. Some people are invited, others are not. During the building process people take on fixed roles: the women often work on the painting and decking-out, for instance, whereas the men are generally more concerned with the technical side. It may also be that roles are allocated based upon the individual group members' jobs, with notions of professional pride coming into play. Participants openly acknowledge that working together has a bonding effect. Student associations and debating societies, for example, regard taking part in *Te Land ter Zee* as a good way of strengthening the 'club' feeling. Contestants who work together in normal life even describe taking part as a staff outing aimed at team-building.

After three or four weeks of preparation, along comes the day of the recording. The contestants have to report to the location early in the morning, where the carts are then lined up. The rest of the morning is spent with organizational preparations. In fact, the participants are simply left waiting by their creations from half past seven in the morning until at least one o'clock. To kill the time, they wander around, look at the other carts or chat with their opponents. Others ward off boredom with beer and barbecues.

In the midst of these spontaneous festivities backstage the group process goes through another stage: the participants are no longer isolated in their separate groups, they come in contact with the other teams. Although these contacts are amiable, there is certainly differentiation and rivalry between the various teams. Contestants uphold the honour of their own teams by laughing at the others or boasting about their own carts. This competition is particularly strong between groups with something in common. One participant from a local group of friends says that there was another group 'from the neighbourhood' taking part:

But they all had yellow shirts on. So we decided, OK, we'll put on pink shirts. Then we could shout at them: 'Yellow's a gay colour!' With those pink shirts on, just to compete a bit ...

A member of a student association describes a similar experience:

There was also a [student] team from Nijmegen, rowers. They were stuck-up, arrogant snobs. They had all plenty of talk, but in the end they sank straight away ... They said about [our club] shirts: 'Ha ha, what a feeble slogan.' It wasn't really serious or that, but just having a bit of a laugh at each other. Healthy competition, that's what I'd call it. But you always get that with students, between towns and that. Every student town has a bit of its own character ...

By wearing special clothes, and by ridiculing the clothing or performance of others, these groups embark upon a game of honour and shame in which their own pride is the key. In other words, there is a competitive battle to stand out: participation defines groups, but also binds them. Once recording actually starts, this competition reaches its high point. By performing when it matters and reaching the bell in one piece, a group can successfully defend its honour.

Once the cameras are rolling, though, the competitive element is already overshadowed by another interest: as soon as the contestants start sliding down the slope they are displaying themselves on stage to an audience of hundreds of spectators and hundreds of thousands of television viewers, as they are well aware. In the interviews many teams openly express how important that is to them: *Te Land ter Zee* provides them with a national stage on which to display their group identity.

The precise effect of this varies from one group to another. Students, for instance, often roll up at the starting line with a cart based on their debating society logo. Groups of friends, on the other hand, frequently display their group identity using local symbols. A group of friends from the province of Friesland, for instance, appeared in a cart drawn by



Ill. 1: A performance of group identity: four farmers' sons in overalls hit the water with a papier-mâché cow. (Photo by the author, Alkmaar 2004.)

Friesian horses. By promoting their own villages or regions contestants not only boost their group identity vis-à-vis the other contestants but can also raise their local status substantially (cf. Syvertsen 2001: 331f).

It was very important [to win]. It was a big thing in Culemborg. We were on the regional radio. And on cable television, and in the newspaper. Yes, it really was big ... In the first year, even the mayor came down [to our house] to have a look. She was so proud of us that she came here to watch.

Another respondent tells the following story:

I now know a whole load of people from *Te Land ter Zee*. And yeah, when you meet them it's always enjoyable ... I find that great. I just had the idea

one day and it is grown into something pretty big at the village level.

The fact that there are promotional aspects to taking part in *Te Land ter Zee* is seen perhaps most clearly amongst the colleagues and small companies taking part. For these groups, much of the creativity lies in circumventing the show's ban on advertising. So the staff of a greengrocer's dress up as bananas, local authority officials appear at the start of the competition in a model of a council service counter and employees of a company called *Te Strake* build an ingenious 'test rocket' – 'testrake(t)' in Dutch. The manager of a children's farm – dressed as a donkey – explains it as follows: 'Of course I'm looking for publicity as well, for the farm, because we survive on sponsorships and gifts and, yes, you just need it.'

## Remembrance

Even as one group of participants is still standing, dripping wet, at the water's edge, the cameras are already panning away to the next contestants. For some of those who take part, that is the end of the party. They lick their wounds and, chastened, head for home. Most groups, however, end the day with a meal together at their local pub to look back over the past few weeks and – for the lucky ones – to celebrate their prize. Over the weeks that follow, their participation in *Te Land ter Zee* fades into the background. Yet the programme never disappears completely, and is remembered in various ways.

A few weeks after the recording, the programme is broadcast, providing a good opportunity to look back. Most teams meet that evening to watch television together. Students organize a *Te Land ter Zee* drinks party in the clubroom to show the members of the debating society or association how they performed. Work colleagues video the programme so that they can show it in the canteen the next day. Groups of friends also meet on the evening of the broadcast. Sometimes they meet in somebody's home, but there are also those who get together on a really large scale.

We hired a pub, De Mulderije. And we all went down to watch it there. We had a big screen. It was actually the Saturday of the Assendelft fair, so it was particularly enjoyable ... We called everyone and invited them: 'First we're going to watch *Te Land ter Zee* – all be there at eight – and then we're going to the fair.'

For many groups, the broadcast of *Te Land ter Zee* is a great opportunity to revive the festive mood and to show their performance to friends and family. Another way of doing that is through photographs: many participants have shots of the day on the wall at home. And pictures of *Te Land ter Zee* also grace many a pub, staff canteen and student yearbook. Finally, there is the phenomenon of the *Te Land ter Zee* fan sites: a considerable number of internet home pages have been set up by participants to describe their experiences and show their photographs. These

have a twin purpose. On the one hand they act as a digital photograph album for members of the group, but on the other they are one more way to present that group to the rest of the world.<sup>5</sup>

Another, less common, phenomenon is flaunting the cart created for the show. But some participants do take the trouble to repair and display it – in a front garden or clubhouse, for example. In a few cases it even gains a more elaborate use.

We always begin half-term with a lantern procession for the children. So I said, 'Let's take part' ... So we had to completely do up [the cart] ... And then, at the end, we burnt it. Ha ha! Yes, we [burnt] it with a glass of beer in our hands. Yes, a sort of tradition or something, I don't know. An official farewell to the thing, actually it was more that.

This example shows how memories of *Te Land ter Zee* can be shaped by showing off the cart, or even by its ritual destruction. The above quote also hints at another, more widespread, pattern. Many contestants do not get together specially for *Te Land ter Zee*, indeed they have known one another for some time as a group and regard taking part in the programme merely as part of a series of group activities. The example cited above is of a group of friends who take part in local festivities, but staff outings or debating society activities are similar in nature. In other words, the programme is part of a broader festive repertoire for many contestants.

Most staff associations, student associations and groups of friends take part in certain events on an annual basis, for example national walks or cycling days. From this perspective of group culture, *Te Land ter Zee* also has the potential to develop into a regular event. Once a team decides to take part more often and the group process is repeated, the programme embeds itself in that team's festive calendar.

One illustration of how *Te Land ter Zee* has been incorporated into an established group-related festive calendar is the sharp increase in the number of carnival associations taking part. During the first decades of the programme, few – if any – such as-



sociations entered it. But that has definitely changed in recent years. Interviews with members of these organizations show that they are groups of people who are used to coming together each year to build a carnival float. Roughly speaking, the carnival season begins some time in September, intensifies from mid November, reaches its height during Lent and ends on Ash Wednesday. But the period between then and next September has to be filled somehow. So, just as festivities can be mutually exclusive, they can also reinforce one another (cf. Rooijakkers 2000: 213–217).

You've spent five months building a carnival float, but during the summer you have nothing... And then along comes [*Te Land ter Zee*] as an alternative. That's just great, it gives you an outlet for your creativity, after all ... You already have enthusiastic people, who know how you go about building such a thing ... And there are ideas that don't make it to the carnival float. So we say, 'Then we'll use that for *Te Land ter Zee*.'<sup>6</sup>

For many carnival associations, student associations, groups of friends and colleagues, taking part in *Te Land ter Zee* has evolved into an annual group ritual.

In some cases, though, participation is explicitly a one-off group experience. This phenomenon is typified by the stag parties appearing on *Te Land ter Zee*. You see one in almost every series: an unsuspecting bride and groom-to-be being manhandled by friends into a 'wedding boat' and raucously encouraged to ring the bell. This, in fact, is an example of a classic *rite de passage*, a formalized pattern of behaviour intended to symbolize a transition in social status. Quite apart from displaying a group identity, this is first and foremost about marking and expressing somebody's position – particularly a changing position – within that group (cf. Gennep 1960[1909]).

### A Festivity within a Festivity

It is clear that group bonding and the display of group identity play an important role in the participant experience. Yet that is not so in all cases. First,

not all the participants emphasize their own group identity in decorating their cart. Some use illustrations of more general national stereotypes like windmills, clogs, blocks of cheese or barrel organs. Other carts are based upon characters or themes taken from television culture. For example, TV heroes like the A-Team, the Flintstones, Bert and Ernie from *Sesame Street* or James Bond.

A second point is the composition of the entries. Not all those who participate in *Te Land ter Zee* enter as groups; a considerable proportion are individuals. These solo participants are rather aloof from the party. For them, the competitive aspect often seems to be more important than the fun part: technical performance and winning are valued more highly than conviviality and the party mood. And some of these individual entrants are real die-hards. They have their own *Te Land ter Zee* workshop at home, take part every year and appear regularly in their local media. Typically, these active individuals are a favourite subject of scorn for the group participants.

Look, you have some who are total fanatics. I know one who has been entering the same game for 15 years, and always with the same boat. And yes, he really is foaming at the mouth.

Precisely because it lacks irony and playfulness, the serious approach taken by the individuals breaks with the prevailing code of behaviour amongst the groups: "Some people are so serious. I do it for a laugh. It should be fun."

Another striking difference between the solo and the group participants is their attitude towards the organizers. *Te Land ter Zee* is aired by a public broadcasting association, the Televisie Radio Omroep Stichting (TROS). As a rule, the individual entrants have noticeably more affinity with that organization than the groups, a distinction which becomes stronger the more often the individual takes part. This phenomenon is exemplified by the fates of the two best-known solo contestants on *Te Land ter Zee*. Marco Barink, 39 years old, has now been on the programme forty times and, as a result, has become one of its most familiar faces. At first he felt

no affinity with the TROS, but that changed as he gradually became one of the programme's regular participants.

Yes, I'm a member of the TROS ... After a couple of years you think, 'Well, you're entering every time, it's on the TROS and I think it's great.' So then, in fact, you can't reconcile that with not being a member.

Perhaps even more remarkable is the career of Johan Vlemmix, 44 years old. He first entered *Te Land ter Zee* in 1978, but after a hundred appearances decided to call it a day.

I left in '99, a real farewell party. Then, after having been away for a year, they asked me to come

back as a judge and starter. I seized the opportunity with both hands. I said, 'That's what I want!' And now I actually work for the programme.

As a regular participant, Johan Vlemmix became so closely involved with the organization that he eventually had no difficulty joining it.

The teams have no particularly close ties with the organization; in fact many of them are frankly critical of the practical organization of *Te Land ter Zee*. They complain about lack of toilets or showers in the contestants' area and question whether tea and coffee could not be provided. The TROS' only concern, it seems, is to create a 'pretty picture'. According to many teams the festive atmosphere comes about not thanks to the organization but in spite of it:

**This illustration has been omitted for copyright reasons.**

Ill. 2: Backstage, participants kill time with beer and a barbecue. For this group of friends from Bakkeveen, competing in *Te Land ter Zee* en in *de Lucht* is part of a wider repertoire of festive activities. (Photo: [www.bikkelsite.com](http://www.bikkelsite.com), Coevoerden 2002.)

They don't really create the atmosphere. The organization really takes the attitude, OK, we just have to organize things properly. They are actually making a programme. [...] We're the ones who make it into a party.

For the teams, *Te Land ter Zee* is thus not so much a TROS party as a group party: it is all about group togetherness and displaying the group to the outside world. For many entrants, the fact that the programme is organized by the TROS is irrelevant. In some cases, the meaning with which a group imbues the 'party' can even clash with the image of the TROS. There have even been high-spirited attempts to defy the organizers.

We went against it by trying to shock the TROS as much as possible. That was our real aim. The TROS is just such a cosy family channel, we wanted to give them a fright. It's fun, being a bit provocative. [...] The one at the front who was going to jump, was just wearing a G-string. [...] He actually wanted to thumb his nose at Nance [one of the presenters]: it was a G-string with a face on it. Ha ha! When it came to the crunch, the 'nose' didn't stand out much, as the water was a bit cold, of course. Ha ha! [...] It's fun when you see Lexie's backside in shot.

As far as the contestants are concerned *Te Land ter Zee* is definitely their party, and the teams know how to leave a clear mark on the programme. But when push comes to shove, the organization has the last word (cf. Giles 2001). The TROS can decide not to allow particular contestants to take part, to mark down their performances or simply not to broadcast particular sequences. In the occasional, exceptional case they will even abolish a whole game for this purpose. 'Reversing', for instance, was for many years one of the most popular games in the programme: contestants had to complete a circuit in second-hand cars driving backwards. Within a few years, though, the programme developed in a direction that the organization had not envisaged. As the producer put it:

'Reversing' degenerated into one huge ugly mess. I used to have six bodyguards around me, as the contestants were not exactly the most sensitive of individuals. On one occasion about 20 people wanted to sort me out because their cars were found to be defective. The police had to rescue me.<sup>7</sup>

'Reversing' had turned into a party event that was no longer under the organization's control. In other words the festive atmosphere had been appropriated by a group of participants that was not compatible with the cosy image of the TROS and the organization saw no alternative but to abolish it.

### The Audience

In the case of game shows such as *Te Land ter Zee*, one can identify two different audiences: spectators and viewers. The spectators, usually no more than a few thousand of them, are physically present at the recording of the programme. Some of them are there as 'supporters' of the contestants. They have come in the same buses and are there to cheer on their own relatives, friends, colleagues or club mates from the sidelines. It is not unusual for them to wear the same clothes, sing club songs or wave banners bearing the emblem of their association. In that respect, these spectators support the group-based rivalry and competition between the participants.

Other spectators are local 'neutrals'. They have read about the recording of the programme in a local newspaper or even just happened upon the event by chance. It is also not uncommon for a recording of *Te Land ter Zee* to form part of a local festival. Many Dutch villages organize a period of several days during the summer when the community comes together to be entertained with drink, music and games. It is easy to incorporate *Te Land ter Zee* into a busy programme of barbecues, processions, musical performances and dances. Within the context of such a local festival, the recording of a game show does not disrupt other, more traditional activities. In fact, the festival-goers move smoothly from playing field to television location and to dance hall.

Finally, there are also spectators who are neither supporters nor locals. They travel specially to the recording locations to watch *Te Land ter Zee* ‘in the flesh’. These day-trippers come mainly for the entertainment and spectacle surrounding the recording of the show. They have no special ties with any of the participating groups, but cheer everybody who reaches the bell. It is telling that these spectators often have the strongest affinity with the organizers. They are often TROS members, and may have formed a fan club for the smiling blonde presenter Nance or brought along banners with messages for her male colleague, Bert Kuizinga: ‘Bert, there’s a banana in your ear!’ When there is no affinity with any specific subgroup, a generally festive mood – largely directed by the organizers – seems to dominate.

Supporters, locals and day-trippers all appear

prominently in the broadcasts of *Te Land ter Zee*. In that sense they are not merely spectators but also form part of the programme itself. And they in turn regularly address the viewers explicitly, using banners and t-shirts. That audience comes into play when *Te Land ter Zee* is aired as a television programme.

Who watches *Te Land ter Zee* on television? Existing audience research shows that it is particularly popular with two age groups: children and the elderly.<sup>8</sup> Yet it cannot be said that it is a typical programme for either group and, in any case, viewers aged between 12 and 65 still make up more than half of the total audience. On the other hand, there is one age group which is clearly not interested: amongst 20–24 year olds, *Te Land ter Zee* had a market share of only 6 per cent in 2002. As well as age, there is also clear differentiation in terms of educational back-



Ill. 3: Spectators wait for the recordings to begin. The banner hanging from the bridge reads ‘Twente class from Vasse’ in the dialect of the Twente region. (Photo by the author, Alkmaar 2004.)

ground. In general, the programme's market share declines the higher the educational level of the audience: from 19 per cent of those with a secondary education, to only 9 per cent of graduates. Breakdowns of its ratings by sex, region and political preference produce no significant results. It can be concluded, then, that the television audience for *Te Land ter Zee* contains relatively large proportions of children and the elderly, and that educational background plays some part in its composition. Yet the most striking thing, in fact, is the absence of any pronounced deviation from the television audience as a whole.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the question of why people watch would reveal more. To this end a notice was placed in the TV listings magazine *TrosKompas*: 'What do you think of the programme *Te Land ter Zee*? Tell us what you love or hate about the show, and why.' In total, 39 responses were received. These ranged from brief postcards to letters and e-mails several pages long. The vast majority were signed by senior citizens, children or families – a viewer profile which broadly corresponds with the one revealed through the audience research. Despite the huge variety in the responses, there seems to be one overriding reason for watching *Te Land ter Zee*: fun. Viewers described the programme as 'lots of fun', 'a good laugh', and found themselves 'roaring with laughter' or 'in stitches when [the contestants] fell in the water'.

The question which then arises is what the significance of that 'fun' and 'laughter' is. Upon closer examination, it seems that the fun of *Te Land ter Zee* for many viewers comes from the ambiguous combination of admiration for the participants' creativity and the malicious delight experienced when their creative work fails. Viewers said they 'sometimes felt sorry for them when they fell straight into the water [but] also had to laugh'. It was 'funny when they fell [in] the water [but] I [also] like seeing all the home-made converted bicycles'. 'But the fact that they sometimes make it so complicated and then don't make it very far is fun to watch.' Another respondent wrote the following:

We really enjoy the programme and double up laughing. But sometimes we do also empathize

with those who fail. How it must hurt them. It's a shame, all those good designs getting broken. I find the participants really creative. And I do ask myself whether the water they fall into is clean and free of bacteria.

The above selection shows how admiration and malicious delight are inseparable responses for many viewers. The more they admire 'the wonderful designs', the more intense their enjoyment when it all goes wrong. This paradoxical combination of admiration and malicious enjoyment requires a certain degree of identification with the participants. Viewers need to be able to imagine how much work went into building the carts. The fact that all that work is finally sacrificed in a carnival-like atmosphere is what makes them laugh. Identifying with the work, the tension and the cheerful destruction builds a bridge to the contestants: viewers feel involved with the revelry on television and for a moment there is a feeling of solidarity, perhaps even *communitas*. Laughing at them turns into laughing with them. In this way viewing and laughing becomes a kind of harmonic adaptation for the viewers, a way of joining in (cf. Huizinga 1949: 16–18).

### Ritualized Media Use

This participation on the part of television viewers can be intensified through ritualized media use, i.e. fixed actions and customs aimed at symbolic participation (Rothenbuhler 1998: 78f). Many of the respondents said they were 'loyal viewers', were 'keen not to miss the programme' and watched 'whenever it was on'. Saturday evening is deliberately set aside for *Te Land ter Zee*. While viewing, people carry out fixed actions: in practice this often boils down to creating a 'festive atmosphere'. They get together as a family or serve drinks: 'we make the programme even more of a happy social event by having tea and biscuits or sweets, so we really enjoy watching it together.' For many viewers, *Te Land ter Zee* makes for a 'really sociable evening: coffee with tasty biscuits [and] then crisps and a drink'.

An important aspect of ritualized media use is repetition. Watching on a regular basis gives rise to

fixed patterns of action, which can extend over a period of several years or even decades, finally becoming embedded in the viewer's daily routine. The way this happens varies. For some viewers, for instance, *Te Land ter Zee* is inseparably linked with the annual camping holiday: 'when we're at the camp site every summer [...] it's really enjoyable watching it together'. For another respondent the programme is rooted in memories of childhood and the rituals that were important then: 'when I think of [*Te Land ter Zee*] it reminds me of the old days when I was little. I'd just had my bath and would sit on the sofa in my dressing gown on a Friday evening, as I was allowed to stay up to watch it on television.' In some cases the ritualized media use of the programme even takes on a generational dimension:

My husband and I have two children, who both like to watch the programme. Indeed, it's a party for them every time [...] and we are still fans too! I'm curious to see whether our children will still enjoy it so much later on, when they're grown up (perhaps with their children?).

In these examples the ritualized media use of *Te Land ter Zee* has developed into a practice passed on from generation to generation. For these viewers the programme's significance lies in the fact that it is part of a shared past, a past that their children need to be 'initiated' into as well. Sharing the ritual 'socializes' the children, as it were, and makes them part of the group culture.

That leaves us with the question of how the audience regards this group culture, or in other words, what social, geographical or temporal boundaries are drawn in this imaginary community. In the audience responses, it is primarily the folk and national stereotypes that recur regularly. The 'national' image of the programme is praised and celebrated. A large proportion of the audience regard the group culture of *Te Land ter Zee* above all as a form of national kinship: 'I find it such a pure, innocent, truly Dutch programme'.

What is this need for national kinship based on? This is not clear from the viewer's responses, though

we could point to a fairly general fixation with national identity since the 1970s. Macro political developments such as globalization and large influxes of immigrants are seen by many people as a threat to the national identity (e.g. Hall 1992; Barker 1999). Heated discussions about what 'Dutch values' should be and what immigrants should learn about 'our' culture rage in the press, television and other media. Very probably *Te Land ter Zee* owes part of its popularity to this. This popular entertainment programme offers viewers a simple and powerful picture of what 'Dutch' means. As the nation becomes less strong as a political entity people feel a growing need to strengthen it culturally, e.g. with an uncomplicated celebration of 'Holland Waterland'. And they succeed in doing so: the programmes attract a large, loyal audience who have come to regard *Te Land ter Zee* as a tradition, an intrinsic part of their shared past (cf. Corner 2001):

What I find so special is that the whole world around us has changed (and how!!), but the general idea of the programme has remained more or less the same.

The type of media use just described applies only to a certain part of the audience, though. Other viewers may see *Te Land ter Zee* in a similar way, but to a lesser extent. Yet there is another group which has a totally different view. According to some of the audience responses received, *Te Land ter Zee* is 'an incredibly stupid programme', an 'eternal repeat' which 'can go straight in the bin'. For some viewers, it evokes 'the taste of brine, of polluted air, that most people hate'. As far as they are concerned, the TROS should not 'milk [the programme] to the last drop', but instead 'put on a good film'.

Clearly, the need for a festivity that binds is not universal. Rather, there is differentiation in public needs. Not all viewers appreciate the humour of *Te Land ter Zee*. And in some viewers' responses that differentiation is outspoken.

I know that this stuff is supposed to be funny, but [I can't] enjoy what must be humorous to very small children [...] Humour means something

completely different [...] Fortunately, as well as interesting programmes there is also enough humour to be seen on TV. Each to his own. For example, we prefer British humour.

This viewer is unable to laugh at *Te Land ter Zee*. In fact, she finds it an inferior humour. Her preference is 'British humour'. This distinction between 'childish humour' and 'British humour' is striking, yet anything but unique. According to a recent sociological survey, Dutch public preferences in this area show a clear distinction between 'popular humour' on the one hand and 'intellectual humour' on the other. And this divide coincides neatly with a social division in educational background (Kuipers 2001: 110–132). Although *Te Land ter Zee* was not covered by that research, the programme displays many of the characteristics which are ascribed to 'popular humour': spontaneity, conviviality, a non-threatening approach and simplicity. In some of the audience responses to it, a similar system of classification is discernible. By dismissing the humour of *Te Land ter Zee* as 'childish', the critical viewer quoted above is refusing to be drawn into the group culture we have described. Just as laughing along with others can serve as one person's form of harmonic adaptation, so can not laughing be somebody else's way of distinction.

### Celebrating the Nation

One important factor in the continuity of any game show is the enthusiasm of its participants. Without an active group of contestants, a good production would not only be impossible but also lack the essential festive character, making it a spectacle rather than anything else (MacAloon 1984). The participants in *Te Land ter Zee*, after all, invest a considerable amount of time and money in the show and at first glance appear to gain nothing in return. Yet the interviews reveal that taking part clearly does provide something: a welcome platform for the celebration and display of a group identity within a competitive context. The question is whether *Te Land ter Zee* can continue to fulfil that role. It is quite conceivable that a comparable entertainment show with higher

viewing figures might take over that function in the future. The participants in *Te Land ter Zee* seem to attach little value to the background of its producing organization, the TROS, or to its significance for the viewing audience. For them the programme is an attractive, but essentially interchangeable, forum.

For the audience, things are different. Many viewers have made *Te Land ter Zee* an important and recognizable part of their everyday lives. By watching it year in, year out, a ritualized media use centring on participation in the festive atmosphere has evolved. By watching and laughing, one section of the audience feels at home in the group culture being portrayed. As the responses show, that sense of solidarity is strongly 'national' in nature. The public does not identify with the particular group identities they see so much as with the representation of a national identity. Those group identities are important only insofar as they symbolize the national 'unit' *pars pro toto*. Ultimately, for its audience *Te Land ter Zee* serves as an uncomplicated celebration of 'Holland Waterland'.

For the time being, *Te Land ter Zee* has proven its durability. Over a period of more than thirty years, it has continued to serve a set of differing – and sometimes clashing – interests. The programme has become a recurring festive event with a highly ritualized character and an established group of participants. Programmes like it seem to have become an integral part of today's culture, in which the boundaries between the media and everyday life have all but disappeared in practice. For many of its participants, *Te Land ter Zee* is a regular date on their festive calendar, alongside the annual carnival, fair and skiing holiday. Or it forms part of a *rite de passage* like a stag party. For local spectators, the recordings of the programme often form part of a local festival and attending them fits seamlessly into the round of barbecues and performances. Finally, for many television viewers the show forms part of a common national past. Through ritualized media use, at home or on holiday, the festivity on television becomes a festivity in front of the television. In conclusion, then, it can be stated that over the years *Te Land ter Zee* has won itself a permanent place in

Dutch culture. Television entertainment shows like this have become part of wider festive traditions.

## Notes

- 1 The material to this article is based on 43 interviews with participants, 39 viewers' response letters or emails, and one interview with producer Rene Stokvis. All is available for inspection on application to the author.
- 2 Citations from Dutch newspapers, respectively *De Stem van Dordrecht*, 08.07.1992; *De Gooi- en Eemlander*, 14.06.86; *Elsevier*, 27.07.96 (2x); and *Algemeen Dagblad* 11.09.98.
- 3 This study forms part of a doctoral research project about the relationship between television entertainment and popular culture, supervised by Professor Liesbeth van Zoonen and Professor Gerard Rooijackers. At the intersection of media studies and ethnology, I am seeking an answer to the following question: What is the position of contemporary television entertainment within the cultural and historical context of Dutch popular entertainment? This research has been made possible by a scholarship from the Televisie Radio Omroep Stichting (TROS) for research into popular television culture. It is being carried out at the Centre for Popular Culture, part of the Amsterdam School for Communication Research at the Universiteit van Amsterdam (UvA). Thanks are also due to Rene Stokvis, to the students on the 2004 research course in Television Entertainment at the UvA and to all the interviewees and respondents.
- 4 This profile is based upon content analysis and the interviews.
- 5 See e.g. <http://www.degraaf.nu/>; <http://www.bikkelsite.com/tltz.htm>; <http://www.mislukkelingen.nl/te%20land%20ter%20zee%20fotos.htm>; <http://home.hccnet.nl/jos.van.oijen/druipneuzen/druip-tltz.html>; <http://home.hetnet.nl/~bpcvanoort/Te%20land%20ter%20zee.htm>.
- 6 Cf. <http://home.hetnet.nl/~bpcvanoort/Te%20land%20ter%20zee.htm>.
- 7 Excerpt from an interview in Dutch newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad*, 17.07.1996. See also my interview with Rene Stokvis, producer of *Te Land ter Zee*.
- 8 The market shares in the age groups 6–8 and 65+ were, respectively, 52 per cent and 17 per cent in 2002, and 50 per cent and 21 per cent in 2001.
- 9 The figures presented here are taken from audience research conducted by the Stichting KijkOnderzoek (Viewing Research Foundation). Report available for inspection on application to the author.

## References

- Barker, C. 1999: *Television. Globalization and Cultural Identities*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Corner, J. 2001: Television and Culture. Duties and Pleasure. In: D. Morley & K. Robins (eds.), *British Cultural Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 261–272.
- Gennep, A. van 1960[1909]: *The Rites of Passage. A Classic Study of Cultural Celebrations*. Chicago: University Press.
- Giles, D.C. 2001: Keeping the Public in their Place: Audience Participation in Lifestyle Television Programming. *Discourse & Society* 13, 603–628.
- Gouw, J. ter 1871: *De volksvermaken*. Haarlem: Bohn.
- Hall, S. 1992: The Question of Cultural Identity. In: S. Hall, D. Held & T. McGrew (eds.), *Modernity and its Futures*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 273–317.
- Handelman, D. 1990/1998: *Models and Mirrors. Towards an Anthropology of Public Events*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Huizinga, J. 1949: *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner.
- Kuipers, G. 2001: *Goede humor, slechte smaak. Nederlanders over moppen*. Amsterdam: Boom.
- MacAloon, J. (ed.) 1984: *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues.
- Rooijackers, G. 2000: Vieren en markeren. Feest en ritueel. In: T. Dekker, H. Roodenburg & G. Rooijackers (eds.), *Volkscultuur. Een inleiding in de Nederlandse etnologie*. Nijmegen: SUN, pp. 173–230.
- Rothenbuhler, E.W. 1998: *Ritual Communication. From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Short, J.R. 1991: *Imagined Country. Environment, Culture and Society*. London: Routledge.
- Syvertsen, T. 2001: Ordinary People in Extraordinary Circumstances: a Study of Participants in Television Dating Games. *Media, Culture & Society* 23, 319–337.
- Stijn Reijnders is Assistant Professor at the University of Amsterdam. His study focuses on the relationship between television entertainment and folklore. What is the position of contemporary television entertainment within the cultural and historical context of (Dutch) popular entertainment? His research project is broken down into three thematic areas: true crime, singing culture and festivity. He has recently published on the former two themes in *Media, Culture & Society* and *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. (S.L.Reijnders@uva.nl)