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All Fun Aside

on the role of
fun and humour
in environmental activism

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Introduction

On a Saturday afternoon I found myself in bus packed with climate activists. Before and behind this bus were about five other busses filled with even more of us. The busses were not driving, instead we were standing still in front of a detention centre, waiting for the moment the police would call us out one by one to be arraigned. Five hours earlier we were arrested during a protest and ever since we were in those busses, waiting, and it did not seem like the situation was going to change anytime soon. Altogether we went through phases of fear, excitement, hope, boredom and fatigue. We killed time by exchanging conversations and snacks while we were putting superglue and glitters on our fingertips so that the police would not be able to get our fingerprints later on. But after five of those hours we started to get tired of the waiting and the uncertainty, our fingertips were already covered by abundant amounts of glitter and the energy started to fall. At that moment, one of my fellow detainees decided to play some salsa music from her phone. The barely audible but cheerful music got everyone to their feet in no time. Before we knew it, we started to dance around in the cramped space we had and a game of limbo was initiated not much later. People joined the game while others stayed seated and watched the spectacle, and everyone cracked up in laughter. Two hours later we were released.

This personal anecdote is one of the many examples of fun and laughter I have experienced in activist spaces. This ethnographic inquiry is an exploration into the role of fun and humour in the rather serious context of environmental activism. Environmental activism has received an increased amount of attention since the movement has proliferated in the end of 2018, especially with the emergence of the new groups Extinction Rebellion and Fridays For Future, which proved to be able to mobilize millions of protesters across various countries to participate in acts of civil disobedience (de Moor et al., 2020, pp. 623–624; Gunningham, 2020). However, unlike my personal experience, the attention that climate activism gets most often does not include notions of fun and humour. Bashir et al.'s study (2013, p. 615) shows that in general, people hold negative stereotypes of activists as they are often described as militant and unconventional eccentrics. Even activists themselves can sometimes get absorbed by the earnestness of their objectives that they lose sight of bringing fun in their activist practices (Fominaya, 2007, p. 256). Nevertheless, through my experiences and observations before and during this research, I found that portraying activists as militant and unconventional eccentrics does not by far reflect the complete reality of environmental activism.

In today's world we can no longer ignore the mounting evidence that we are in the midst of a climate crisis that currently already manifests in numerous destructions and injustices around the world and many more catastrophes are expected in the near future (Pierrehumbert, 2019, p. 215). To face this alarming reality and uncertain future, we need all hands on deck. Laughing together is an essential feature of the human experience and can be a powerful tool in the most severe circumstances. Getting a deeper understanding of the role of fun and humour in climate activism might create possibilities for harnessing humour in activism and through this strengthening the climate movement and providing hope for a better future.

This ethnography is based on three months of fieldwork from January to March and has resulted in this article and a 30 minute documentary, both standing independently but are mutually reinforcing. There are references in this article to the film when the described moment can be seen in the film, indicated with a footnote of what minute the scene can be found. Where in this article there is room for going in depth into the theoretical analysis, the film has the potential to generate experiential and embodied knowledge of what it is like to engage in a protest and how these situations can be humorous. In other words, the film can make you laugh, while this article can explain you what it means to laugh in this situation. Yet, both aim to convey the fun and humour in activism and at the same time provide insights on what role fun and humour can play in this context.

Research

Research Participants

It was a Tuesday evening in December and it was cold and dark when I got out of the train station of Amsterdam Sloterdijk. I found myself there on that evening because located on a ten minute walk from the station there was De Sering, a public space where community dinners were organized and supposedly on Tuesdays activists of Extinction Rebellion Amsterdam would gather to hang out. It was my first time visiting the place and while I was nearing the location the buildings looked increasingly industrial and uninviting. Finally arrived and no clue what to expect, I opened the doors and was startled by the warm atmosphere of the place. There were chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, there was funky art on the walls, music playing, food and beers were served and a bunch of people sitting on long tables chatting and laughing. This was the place where I hoped to find research participants.

I knew just one person there and I came to sit with her and some of her friends. I started chatting with the people next to me, got food, a beer, and another, and gradually started to become friends with the people seated next to me. A whole hour past when I realized I was actually there on a mission. I changed the topic of conversation to my research project and explained them that I was looking for a friendship based activist group that was active in the climate movement and kind of radical in their approach. "Would you know anyone like this, maybe?" I asked. "Well," one of them answered, "than you actually might be looking for us!".

This ethnography is a case study on various climate protests and the activists who were present there. I developed a close relationship with the friendship based activist group mentioned above, in particular three of them became important interlocutors for the research. It became a habit to go to De Sering on Tuesdays and hang out with them. The friend group is affiliated with Extinction Rebellion (XR) but their activism encompasses all kinds of leftist and human rights activism. They are all Dutch, their ages range between 18 and 25 and all of them are based in and around Amsterdam. Next to this group of friends, I met and talked about the research topic with many other activist. One of which is H el ene, an environmental activist who works in stand-up comedy and improv theatre and incorporates the climate crisis and activism in her work. She became one of my most important interlocutors after the insightful interview we had. All the participants and interlocutors gave their informed consent to be mentioned in this article and for the sake of confidentiality on the long term, their names are anonymized.

Environmental Activism and Lifestyle Politics

This ethnography is situated in the context of environmental activism and I will hereby specify what exactly this entails. Differentiating between the terms climate activism, the climate movement and environmental activism is beyond the point here, although I do think environmental activism does better encapsulate the wide range of problems the activists are addressing of which not all are directly linked to climate change, such as biodiversity losses and plastic pollution. Nevertheless, I use these terms interchangeably throughout the article since they all refer to the mobilization of people against environmental injustices (Schlosberg, 2007). When talking about injustice, the concept of environmental activism is inherently intersectional since it incorporates both ecological issues and social systemic issues such as racism and sexism (Malin & Ryder, 2018). Therefore, the issues that environmental activist engage with often go beyond issues that are directly linked to the environmental and regularly involve an acknowledgement of privilege and oppression.

The environmental activism this ethnography specifically focusses on is the mobilization of people in acts of non-violent civil disobedience and direct action with the intention to be disruptive (Gunningham, 2020, p. 16). Such actions are represented in this research by road blockades and occupations of university buildings. But the activism this ethnography aims to portray goes beyond just political actions

and additionally includes how the activists' political beliefs also manifest into certain behaviour in daily life. This is what Portwood-Stacer (2013, p. 2) calls lifestyle politics, meaning that people's political values are an impetus in their personal lives, which makes the personal highly political. Having a vegan diet, not buying fast fashion clothing and women not shaving their body hair are examples of engaging in lifestyle politics. What people consider as political acts themselves is what gives meaning to the concept of activism, which is therefore under continuous construction (Portwood-Stacer, 2013, p. 2). Incorporating lifestyle politics in this analysis creates space for how political values are translated into the everyday actions of activists, including the ways in which activists have fun and produce humour.

The people who participate in this ethnography self-identify as activists and their activism can be described as radical in the sense that their approach to activism is intersectional and holistic, which manifests in their engagement in lifestyle politics and their involvement in other movements which objectives are related to those of XR. Most of the protests I have been to and the interlocutors I engaged with are affiliated with XR, but I also include protests and activists outside of XR. Therefore this ethnography does not try to represent activists of XR nor the environmental movement as a whole, but rather aims to depict an impression of what fun and humour can look like in the context of environmental activism.

Fun and Humour

This ethnography explores to what extent fun and humour informs the social relations and the political action of environmental activists. Fun and humour here can be understood as two different phenomena, where fun is a the overarching concept of which humour is one of its manifestations. Fun can be characterized by feelings of pleasure, enjoyment and laughter. In Western culture where late stage capitalism is blooming, fun is arguably reduced to a feeling gained from entertainment which can only be acquired through consumption (Wettergren, 2009, pp. 3–4). In the context of intersectional activism that acknowledges that the intrinsic features of capitalism are the main underlying causes of injustices in the world, this conception of fun as consuming entertainment is rejected (Wettergren, 2009, pp. 5–7). Wettergren (2009, pp. 5–7) investigates fun in such activist contexts and he finds that these groups give an alternative meaning to fun that relays on enjoying freedom and autonomy. This is not only available for the privileged and should not go at the expense of the disadvantaged in society. They come to define this as 'real and authentic fun' opposed to the 'false fun' offered by the contemporary Western consumption culture (Wettergren, 2009, pp. 5–7). According to the activists Wettergren engaged with, the fun that comes from enjoying freedom and autonomy manifests in the propensity to create humorous moments of all sorts and sharing this with others (Wettergren, 2009, pp. 5, 12).

Producing humorous situations with one another is inherent to this meaning of fun. The value of exploring the concept of humour next to fun resides in the fact that humour has been the dominant expression of fun in this research. Next to that, humour describes more specific phenomena than fun and therefore it is interesting for the purpose of analysis. It is hard to offer a concrete definition of humour since the gist of the concept in fact lays in its contingency (Cardeña, 2003, p. 117). Humour is commonly associated with laughter, however both concepts are not entirely interchangeable since laughter can occur without humour and vice versa. Yet, in both academic research and the everyday sense, humour and laughter, as well as fun, pleasure and enjoyment, are often used to describe similar phenomena (Watson, 2014, p. 409). So for the purpose of this ethnography it is not necessary to make an explicit distinctions between these phenomena. What can be said about humour is that it is a ubiquitous and universally intrinsic feature of human life (Carty & Musharbash, 2008, p. 213). At the same time, humour is highly specific to time and place and can only be comprehended when the socio-cultural context is properly understood, which makes it a particularly appropriate phenomenon for ethnographic research (Cardeña, 2003; Carty & Musharbash, 2008, p. 213).

Engaged Anthropology

This research has not been my first experience with activism. Before the start of this research I had already engaged in several actions within the environmental movement and I also joined protests concerned with racism, sexism and other social injustices. I feel strongly about injustices in the world and because I hold many privileges - I am a white, highly educated woman from a middle-class family born and raised the Global North - I feel the responsibility to do something about it. It was through activism that I found a place to release these concerns, get public attention for the injustices and join a community of people who feel the same way about these issues. Getting into activism felt like a warm bath. Yet, I had the impression that the general public mainly perceived activists as frustrated and morally superior people – the prevalence of the Dutch word ‘klimaatdrammer’, loosely translated in English to nagging climate activists, is I think very telling for the social discourse. I wanted to also give wider public the opportunity to dip their toes in this warm bath. I thought, what better way to do this is through calling attention to the way climate activists laugh together and finding out what strength and importance this has within the movement.

These feelings have led me to this topic and guided me through the research process, from being in the field to the analysis, to this very moment of writing these very words. Yet, it is also these feelings that blurs the line between me as a researcher and me an activist. This dual role became apparent when I was doing participant observation during a road blockade and my body was on the streets too. When the people around me were chanting the slogans and songs, I had to keep myself from chanting with them. My participants would point out to me that I should also join actions even when it would not be interesting material for the research. I noticed their disappointed faces when I would set other priorities. We would joke about how I would never be at protests or community dinners again after the research project would be finished, and I wondered to what extent they actually felt these doubts to be true. To deal with this particular positionality, I aim pursue this ethnography in line with the aesthetics of engaged anthropology.

I understand engaged anthropology in the words of Seta M. Low (2011, p. 390) who defines it as *“those activities that grow out of a commitment to the informants and communities with whom anthropologists work and a values-based stance that anthropological research respect the dignity and rights of all people and have a beneficent effect on the promotion of social justice”*. With this in mind, this research aims to deal with and generate knowledge for societal issues that need more understanding in order to create a more just society. Essential to this is to prioritize accountability for the consequences of the research through embracing collaborative relationships with the people aimed to represent (Ginsburg, 2018). This ethnography can even be characterized as activist research, which according to Charles R. Hale (2006, p. 97) entails *“a method through which we affirm a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle and allow dialogue with them to shape each phase of the process, from conception of the research topic to data collection to verification and dissemination of the results.”*. These principles are very much in line with this ethnography since the topic of this research is dealing with activists, a rather politically engaged group, the research process has been informed by these activists and the outcomes endorse the practices and the values of environmental activism. This research is not only about activism, it is a form of activism in itself.

To work in line with the aesthetics of engaged anthropology and activist research means above all to be as explicit, transparent and reflexive about my positionality as possible. I do this by being open about my intentions and the emotions involved in this research in this article and towards my participants. Next to that, I aim to accurately represent the researched group and make a meaningful contribution to them and the wider public through a commitment to collaborate with my participants. This commitment is in line with what Ginsberg (2018, p. 39) beautifully described as the ‘aesthetics of

accountability', where the researcher takes the relationship with the participants in special consideration in order to avoid the risk of misrepresentation, Othering and negatively impacting the represented community. This implicates a collaborative relationship with the research participants, which for this research entails that I involved my participants in the research process and gave them the possibility to give input on what events I should attend, what to focus on and criticize me when they had doubts about my decisions. However, besides these idealistic intentions, my participants have their own lives and they did not necessarily always have the time, energy or motivation to get actively involved. Therefore, the collaboration in the end is comprised of my open and continuous communication towards my closest research participants, yet I remained responsible for all the data collection in the form of fieldnotes and audio-visual recordings. This ethnography is entirely written and constructed by me, but the generated ethnographic data is dialogically informed and therefore I owe many words to my participants.

Finally, this research project focusses on a social movement that includes decolonization as part of its intersectional resistance. Therefore I aspire to reflect the practice of decoloniality in this thesis. An important part of this is giving special attention to truthful representation. Besides this, I also put effort into generating an output that is accessible, understandable and relevant not only within academia but also to the wider public. I practiced this applied form of anthropology to contribute to the decolonial practice of challenging the oppressive systems that induce injustices. This is also why the audio-visual output in the form of a film is essential to this research. In this way I aim to give back to the research participants and the wider represented group in the hope that it contributes to their cause. I therefore aim to pursue this research in line with the aesthetics of engaged anthropology to deal with issues of representation and generating knowledge that integrates the theoretical and the practical in order to create something of interest for a public outside of the academia.

Privilege

What has to be noted in this ethnography is that the possibility to create humorous situations in the context of environmental activism is very much dependent on a privileged position. This goes for the act of making comedy on the climate crisis and on powerful actors, and for having fun in legal demonstrations as well as high risk civil disobedient actions. Turning these moments into a fun experience is only possible when you are secure that your human rights are respected. In many countries around the world, this is not the case. Also in the Netherlands, BIPOC (black, indigenous and people of colour) and LGBTQ+ people have higher risks of being treated roughly by the police than others (Feddes & Jonas, 2020; van der Leun & van der Woude, 2011). This is also what I have heard and observed when I did my fieldwork. H el ene made me especially aware of this when she said the following:

“The act of being arrested for many people is serious. We have the privilege to make it a funny moment to get floppy and be carried away by policemen. For a lot of the population, of the world population, being arrested is extremely serious. It's a life altering moment. So I also understand that the fun sometimes for high risk actions where people get arrested, that the fun has to stay a little bit hidden. It's something that keeps you going within the action, but it's not specifically something you want to showcase to the world because it is a double edged sword, no? To be like, look how funny it is to be arrested. Or look how fun I'm having blocking a road. Because A, the situation is not fun for... The climate crisis is really not fun and life altering for so many people. And the act of being arrested and the political action and the act of putting your body onto the street is so not fun for so many people. And we, because we are in a privileged situation, have the fucking luxury to make it a fun, exciting, enjoyable moment.”

H el ene here points out that in high risk actions where the police intervenes it is not a given that these moments can be turned into fun experiences. Especially disseminating images of this in the media can

be particularly problematic. Moreover, an action that is low risk in one place can be high risk in another, think of political cartoons that would be hardly controversial in the Netherlands but could lead to catastrophic consequences in a country with a totalitarian regime. The privilege that activists enjoy in the Netherlands to greater or lesser extent is an essential underlying factor for this entire ethnography.

The rest of this article is structured on the basis of three main ethnographic vignettes that describe a insightful moment during my fieldwork. Intertwined with these stories, I bring in theoretical analysis, comparable examples from my literature review and parts of interviews that relate to the vignette. The article comes to an end with a discussion and conclusion.

The Comedy Night

At the end of January XR organized a Community Weekend in Amsterdam for all its affiliated activists. From Friday to Sunday the days were filled with workshops, trainings and amusement for anyone who would be interested, with De Sering as its headquarters. When I arrived on a sunny Saturday afternoon I sat down to wait for the first workshop and soon started to talk to the guy next to me. I told him about the research project I was doing on the role of fun in activism. He laughed a little and said “Oh no, we as activists can’t have fun. How can we enjoy the sun outside when there are such atrocities happening in the world?”. We laughed about his ironic comment and chatted for a bit more while enjoying the subtle warmth of the winter sun on our skin.

Just in one joke he pointed exactly to the tension that is prevalent when it comes to fun in activism. The question of how fun is produced in the midst of the seriousness that comes with climate activism appeared to be central throughout the research. This Saturday was expected to provide interesting insights into this question because this evening an actual comedy night was organized. Comedy for Climate, to be exact. All kinds of comedians, from classic stand-up comedy to improv theatre, were going to perform and it promised to be a 90 minutes full of jokes and laughter.

Collective Identity Formation

There was an audience of about 200 people, all affiliated with XR and most of them were experienced activists. It might actually have been H  l  ne, the organizer and host of the event, who stole the show that evening with her improvised R&B love song with lines as “You make me forget about all of my exes, like oil companies forget about their about their taxes” and “You’re such a masterpiece, I would throw soup at you. By your side forever, I’ll use some superglue.”. The jokes referred to things and experiences you can only really know about when you are at least somewhat informed of or engaged in climate activism. Some jokes reach a wider audience, but for example the line “Let me show you how to form a finger” would probably remain unnoticed to the general public. Only for the ones who know that forming a finger is a direct action tactic in which you form a procession of people in a certain way to circumvent the police, the joke would strike a chord. H  l  ne herself is an experienced activists who works in improv theatre and comedy, and this enabled her to make jokes that would be specifically relatable to the activist audience.

Jokes that can only be shared and manifest within the climate activists community is an internal form of humour, which can contribute to the process of collective identity formation. Fominaya (2007) came to this conclusion in her ethnographic study on autonomous activist groups in Madrid, where she noticed that the process of creating a shared sense of humour brought the heterogenous group together which enabled them to sustain their activist practices. The dynamics I observed in the climate activist community did suggest this as well. Melucci (1995) described collective identity formation in social movements as the dynamic process of an ongoing construction of an identity that is shared among individuals within a group that creates a sense of unity. Just the organization of the XR Community Weekend in itself points to the fact that XR puts effort in creating a community. Quite literally, the Comedy for Climate event created fun and humour that can be shared within the community. A shared sense of humour, based on experiences that only activists share with one another, creates connection among the activists. In the interview I had with H  l  ne a few weeks after the event she told me something similar:

“And I also think, frankly, it's a bonding experience to laugh about something altogether. So I think in the context of building a community around a climate activism movement, I think just knowing that we just spent a whole evening laughing together, I think it's a very strong binder.”

Hélène describes something similar here to the dynamics observed in Fominaya's case study (2007), which is that having fun together strengthens the connection with one another and contributes to a sense of unity. Yet, inherent to the construction of a sense of "we-ness", it is inevitably also creating a sense of otherness (Fominaya, 2007, p. 244). Through this, collective identity formation comes with processes of not only social inclusion, but also exclusion. Since humour is always contextual and place-time specific, it means that that only people who understand the specific socio-cultural circumstances can comprehend the joke, with the result that certain people are included while others are excluded based on who understands and can appreciate the humorous situation (Carty & Musharbash, 2008, p. 214). In this sense, using humour is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, humour has the potential to transcend boundaries and create a sense of collective identity, for example among the heterogenous group represented in Fominaya's case study (2007). On the other hand, the use of humour runs the risk of creating a shared sense of identity that excludes others. Hélène talked about this as well:

"So I think about it all the time that you can have a laugh with someone who's so different than you. You can, of course, humour is divisive and people laugh at different things. But real funny situations, I think, transcend a lot of differences and transcend a lot of backgrounds and transcend a lot of social classes. And so I think when something is inherently funny, many people can echo and connect with it."

Hélène's perspective reflects the duality of inclusion and exclusion that humour can both bring about. Yet, she puts an emphasis on its ability to create connections among people despite their differences. It is a fine balance whether humour functions in a divisive or connecting manner and it all depends on subtle differences in the way the humour is used and in which particular context.

Comic Relief

The Comedy for Climate night did not only inspire connections among the activists, it also enabled the activists to, in the words of Hélène: "laugh about the things that normally make us cry". Hélène spoke of this some more during the interview:

"It's so fucking scary, the world we live in, the inevitable doom that we're heading towards, that I think comic relief and comedy can help us at the same time grasp how serious the situation is and on the other hand, have hope and energy and therefore being engaged. (...) We can laugh about it and therefore, I think it's the opposite of despair."

Here Hélène describes how humour enables activist to release their worries and through this sustain their activism, even in the harsh circumstances of the climate crisis and the activism that revolves around it. This potential of humour to function as a coping mechanism can be observed in all kinds of situations that involve stress, anxiety and other 'negative' emotions (Branagan, 2007, pp. 479–480). Environmental activism too is emotionally taxing for many people, given the threatening predictions of the future, the organization of and participation in direct actions, the sometimes rough police interventions and the feeling of powerlessness in the midst of it all (Branagan, 2007, pp. 479–480; Kleres & Wettergren, 2017). One of the ways to deal with these stresses is through using humour. When I asked Hélène about this, she told me:

"It's our survival mechanism. Because it's perspective giving. Because it's distancing. I mean, isn't it that when we feel shitty about ourselves, that's when we use self-deprecating humour all the time, right? If I make a joke about it, it's not going to impact me as much because now I've taken distance from it. And there's so much fucking humour in difficult contexts."

A particular telling example from my experience happened during one of the highway blockades I attended. The highway blockade was an action organized by XR where activists gathered on the A12

highway, located between the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy and the temporary Second Chamber. The action was specifically targeting fossil fuel subsidies, which is estimated to amount 17,5-30 billion euros, that the Dutch government facilitates for the fossil fuel industry, one of the most polluting industries worldwide (*Stop Fossiele Subsidies*, 2023). The action promised to attract 3000 people, which was more than ever before gathered for a climate action of civil disobedience in the Netherlands. Therefore, the police had come with some more serious measures than usual: watercannons. Days before the action, rumours had been going around that the watercannons were going to be brought from Germany and deployed for this action. People anticipated on this possibility, but still, the moment we set foot on the highway and saw the three large vehicles ready to start shoot water at us at any point, fear grew among the crowd. But after about an hour we realized that the watercannons were not going to be used – presumably because the crowd included children and elderly and using watercannons at that point would be disproportional – and soon the trucks were decorated with stickers, children’s drawings, garlands and even a cardboard sign saying: [ON SALE: watercannon – call: polizei.de]. It was about two months later that another A12 blockade was organized. This time people came more prepared: many activist brought their swimwear, inflatable swimming tubes and water pistols to ‘shoot back’ at the watercannons.

These funny acts created humorous sights and situations that made many people laugh during and after the action, activist or not. Yet, it has to be said that the presence of watercannons was certainly not all fun and games. Quite the opposite actually. The moment that the truck started shooting water to extrude peaceful protesters was not fun. People got cold and wet and some even got hurt or hypothermic. Nevertheless, what this situation shows is that even in the most grim moments of activism, people can still find the fun in it and use this as a method of relief. Despite the seriousness of the climate crisis and the activism revolving around it, humour is produced in order to cope with the circumstances. Therefore, the presence of the serious does not exclude humour, instead it rather invigorates the use of humour and fun.

Woke Culture and Political Correctness

The so-called ‘woke culture’ is highly associated with leftist activism and has become a prevalent term in the West over the last decade (Cammaerts, 2022, pp. 734–736). What exactly is meant by ‘woke’ remains contested and unclear, but it can be broadly and swiftly defined as being well informed about social justice issues, typically associated with the progressive groups on the political left (Cammaerts, 2022, p. 735). In line with the woke culture is the term of political correctness, another contested term with neither a consensus on its exact meaning. However, in this context it refers to language that is free from racist, sexist, LGBTQ-phobic and other discriminatory undertones and is ought to be used in order to not perpetuate social injustices. (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2003, p. 134). The proliferation of both terms in the recent years has also evoked a just as strong aversion to it in the form of an actual ‘anti-woke culture’. Opponents on the political right have come to demonize wokeness and political correctness as a threat to freedom of speech and perceive it as an overly sensitive reaction that is “lacking a sense of humour” (Cammaerts, 2022, p. 735). In the context of activism that is concerned with intersectional issues of environmental justice, activists are perceived and expected to be woke and politically correct. Making fun of marginalized communities is often disapproved of in climate activism because their movement is essentially about dismantling the unjust power structures that causes social and environmental injustice in the first place (Fairclough, 2003, p. 21). The question that arises accordingly is then how humour can be produced in this supposedly restricting language. I talked to one of the comedians of the Comedy for Climate event after his performance and it became clear that he sensed that the social discourse on wokeness is in the air. He said the following:

“A lot of comedians complain about wokeness, woke culture, but I think it is an easy scapegoat for like if somebody disagrees with you or you might actually be offensive, because that is also possible, or it is just a bad joke and you should go back to the drawing room. But it is also a good challenge for people to think a little bit longer before they make a joke like what is this joke about.”

The comedian made a rather critical remark and apparently did not feel restricted by the expectations of this woke culture. Instead, he perceives jokes that are condemned by the ‘woke culture’ as simply jokes that are actually not all that funny. In another interview I did with three activists of the friendship based activist group we also talked about this. I asked them what they thought of people who say that you cannot make jokes anymore because of the woke culture and they responded:

Ziggy: “I find that bullshit.”

Thyme: “No, but that’s the thing. Those are people who have a shit load of privilege and now can’t make jokes anymore about... Oh, I’m not allowed to make jokes about minorities anymore. You know, oh, I’m not allowed to make racist jokes anymore.”

Kim: “Yes, you know, oh I can’t say anymore that this group never works and that kind of things, because not all of a sudden it’s racist. Bitch, it was racist all along!”(...)

Ziggy: “It’s just that more people have realized this...”

Kim: “No, it’s that more people have stood up for their shit.”

I could definitely feel that my question released some frustration. While they expressed their thoughts, I sensed that there was a strong mutual agreement and that it was not the first time they had heard how the woke culture would supposedly restrict freedom of speech and making jokes. But according to them, this woke culture is contributing to creating a language that is more sensitive to discriminatory undertones, which would actually make language and the humour produced within it more inclusive.

Another part that the woke culture is associated with is the so-called cancel culture (Cammaerts, 2022, pp. 736–738). The cancel culture refers to the recurrent phenomenon of when someone, in particular a person who is publicly known and can reach a larger audience, spreads discriminatory opinions or other unaccepted behaviour and as a result is being boycotted and denied from certain platforms. The act of cancelling people has received similar criticism of being too sensitive and too restrictive. In my conversation with the three activists it became clear that they were aware of the cancel culture and the criticism that is being voiced, but instead of shying away from their principles they actually play with it:

Ziggy: “What does happen a lot though is that when someone says something that is not offensive at all and other people act as if it was offensive. Like in the sense of the white and black chocolate. That kind of things. Everyone knows that you’re making a joke. That does happen quite a lot I think.”

Thyme: “The ‘cancelled’ jokes.”

Ziggy: “Yes, really with the smallest things, oh, you’re cancelled now.”

Kim: “Yes, yes, I can’t be cancelled. I’m a person of colour, I’m queer, you know.”

Ziggy: “Neurodiverse.”

Kim: “Look, the only thing that you can cancel me on is that I’m not trans or so. I feel just like a cis woman. So you could cancel me for that. But that’s the only thing. But on the other hand, the other things compensate for it.”

Thyme: “And we’re gonna get you on that. You better watch out.”¹

The friends are laughing together while they are telling this. They are playing with the stereotypical expectation of activists being overly sensitive and looking for insignificant grounds for arguing. They take this expectation and bring it to an even more extreme level to make fun of it. Through this, they show that they are aware of but reject the criticism of the cancel culture and thereby are reclaiming the value that it has in creating a more equal language and culture.

Hélène too spoke about the woke culture and the influence it has on comedy. Before she shared her thoughts with me she made a disclaimer that the conversation is “fucking complicated” and her thoughts might change over time. At the moment of the interview she told me that she believes:

“(…) we've never been so free to make jokes, actually, because we have so many platforms to make jokes on. (...) And yeah, maybe something that was harmless is becoming harmful. Or something that was considered harmless by most people who owned the means of communication, people who could speak. Now that the voice is more widely spread, some people are like, no, that was harmful all along. And now we hear it. (...) So I think a lot of the things that I say to my students, for instance, in improv, they're like, oh, can I do accents? Or can I play with clichés? Or can I play with these kind of things? I'm like, you can, but you'll have to be 10 times smarter about it. Because the low-hanging fruits have been harvested already so many times.”

Her thoughts echo what the other comedian and the activists have said too. Hélène explains that she believes we are very free to make jokes, but now that minorities and marginalized groups have gotten more of a voice, it has become clear that certain jokes do more harm than good. This would mean that humour is not restricted by politically correct language, it rather challenges people to come up with better jokes that don’t risk to be discriminatory and offensive.

Ethnography and Comedy

Interestingly enough, the way that humour is being produced taps into similar techniques as that of doing ethnography.² This becomes clear in how Hélène described that during the Comedy for Climate event, certain jokes were very much appreciated while others did not really strike a chord with the audience. She explained how a joke relies on very sharp observations that are relatable to the listeners. Yet, while relatability is important, the elements of surprise, discrepancy and absurdity are also nearly always essential to a joke. In order to get the joke right, one has to spend a lot of time to get all the ins and outs of the particular context the joke is made in. Accordingly, no matter how strong the joke is, something only appears to be funny for a particular audience who can relate to the context in which the joke is being made. For people who do not hold the specific knowledge of this context, the elements of relatability or surprise might not be present and the joke is therefore not funny or not even understood.

Many of these aspects overlap in the ways in which ethnography is done. For gathering rich ethnographic knowledge, one has to make detailed and precise observations over a long period of time in order to get an in-depth understanding of what is happening in the field (Ingold, 2014, p. 384). The eventual data that is gathered over a certain period of time is directed to a specific audience, who needs

¹ This quote has been translated from Dutch to English.

² I was pointed to this by my supervisor Federico de Muso.

an explanation of the context in which the lives of the represented group of the research is situated in. In both producing humour and doing ethnography, the audience needs to have a detailed understanding of the situatedness of the story that is being told in order to fully comprehend the load that it comprises. One could argue that ethnography serves the purpose of putting unquestioned assumptions in perspective to shed light on distinctive features of different societal groups while at the same time showing what seems to be universal among the human population. While humour is not explicitly oriented towards this purpose, it does have the potential to have a similar outcome. Humour on the other hand often occurs without much premeditation apart from the sole purpose of creating light-heartedness and fun, yet it certainly can have intentions and consequences that go far beyond this innocent aim. In this regard, it is especially stand-up comedy that is very much kin to ethnography. Therefore, researching humour through ethnographic practices is somewhat meta in its approach.

FC Aardkloot

In the conversations and interviews I had with my participants, I often asked them if they could recall some of the funny experiences they had in doing environmental activism. One story that came back a few times was the one of FC Aardkloot. It is the story of a sunny day in April of 2021, when activists of XR had gathered in The Hague for a protest. In the middle of the crowd, amongst the XR flags, the people locked on laying on the ground and the police, there was a small football game set up. It was FC Aardkloot (Dutch for Earth) against FC Toxic System. It promised to be an exciting match. But the players, dressed in fancy suits, spend most of the time negotiating with each other instead of actually playing the game. Every time one of the teams was finally about to score, the 'climate goals' were moved just a little further away. The scene was ridiculously funny and painfully accurate at the same time.

Subversive Strategy

The example of the FC Aardkloot football game with the constantly shifting climate goals very well reflects how a serious situation – the act of putting your body on the street to address the miseries of the climate crisis and the feeling of impotence because the people in power seem unwilling to take appropriate action – is turned into a joke. In fact, the activist portray the serious situation in such a manner that shows how ridiculous the situation actually is. Giving attention to the powerful actors responsible for dealing with the climate crisis in this particular way, attempts to put them in their place. In the interview with H el ene we talked about the act of ridiculing as an act of protest and she told me the following:

“So on the one hand, it's really not laughable because actual lives are being destroyed and actual landscapes are being destroyed and our resources are being stretched to the maximum. So it's not laughable, but it's also so laughable if you think that we are engineering our own extinction. Like, we just are okay with having ten mostly white males entering a room, entering board meetings and deciding for the future of humanity and just shaking hands and be like, ah, good day for extracting more fossil fuel. And we think that's all right. And I think if you just think about it, it is laughable and it is ridiculous. It's like the definition of a ridiculous situation. It's over the top, it's too much and it doesn't make sense.”

What H el ene describes here echoes that there exist a duality of the seriousness of the situation and at the same time its inevitably ridiculous character. A humorous action, such as the one of FC Aardkloot, is not only there to create fun in the midst of the serious, the protest is ridiculing the powerful ones to undermine oppressive forces, which is essentially a subversive act. Humour is always situated in a context of power structures (Dağtaş, 2016, p. 13). On the one hand, this can manifest in humour based on the contempt of marginal groups in society, which reveal societal power dynamics and feelings of superiority. These jokes have an exclusionary character, which is considered as politically incorrect, as mentioned in the previous chapter. On the other hand, humour can be used as a subversive strategy to form emancipation and resistance to undermine dominant power structures (Dağtaş, 2016). The FC Aardkloot action is an example of this. Through making fun of the powerful actors who are responsible for taking measures on the climate crisis, it challenges their legitimacy and exposes the ridiculousness of the hegemonic power structures that are in place. The use of humour as a subversive strategy is not unique to environmental activism and can be observed in various spheres throughout time (Dağtaş, 2016, pp. 13, 24–25). The ubiquity of humour to challenge oppressive power structures was also expressed by H el ene:

“It's also in France, we have a saying that humour is the politeness of the poor, you know, in a sense. Like, that's when the buffoon or the fool of the king is someone who makes fun of the king. So humour has always been used to make fun of power and to make fun of the most

powerful one. And it maintains a certain sort of balance in society. Because if you can make fun of Total and you can make fun of Shell's CEO and you can make fun of this hyper powerful... if you can make fun of fucking Elon Musk, then you bring them back to our level (...)."

Throughout the fieldwork I came across various humorous moments in actions that I would interpret as subversive acts. Just to name a few examples: the decoration of the watercannons mentioned in the last chapter, a protester showing his magnificent dance moves in front of an abundant amount of riot police³ and activists playing the Star Wars tune of The Imperial March when the police is lining up for an eviction⁴. In all these examples, the authority of the powerful ones is being challenged. The powerful ones are in all these cases the police. By taking these examples, I do not mean to form a substantial critique to the police. Rather, I want to show that the police is an example of an oppressive force whose power is being attempted to be circumvented and subverted by the activists. There is one example that I found particularly interesting scene that I would like to elaborate more on.

It was during the A12 blockade in March around 19.00 o'clock and the action had been going on for seven hours already. By that point, most of the activists did already leave and the ones who were left were cold and wet because of the watercannons. Everyone seemed pretty worn out and the police was about to start the arrests. But the mood changed when one guy pulled out a little speaker and started playing music from Sophie Straat, a protest singer especially famous among leftist groups. He played the song "Wat is het kut om agent te zijn" (Dutch for "It must suck to be a cop"), a song that voices critique on police at peaceful protests.⁵ Almost instantly the protesters seemed to regain their energy. People sang and danced along and for a moment the fear, discomfort and fatigue that was present among most of the protesters temporarily faded away and was replaced by a spark of light-hearted joy. People were already making suggestions for a next song when the police came to take the guy and his speaker away. As they walked away from the protest towards the police vans, the activists loudly laughed and cheered for the guy. Days later when I was watching back the footage of the protest, this scene grabbed my attention. In retrospect, it seems like the police deliberately took this guy first to suppress the fun in the protest. The subversive act of the guy playing a protest song was overpowered by the police and they showed their dominance in the situation. Yet, by taking out this guy and thereby the fun at that moment, it reveals that the police recognizes the strength that fun has in an action. This scene is similar to the phenomenon David Graeber's (2005) analyses in the context of anti-globalization movements in the United States, where the police seemingly arbitrary yet consistently demolishes the giant papier-mâché puppets that the activists crafted. One of the interpretation of this ambiguous phenomenon is that the colourful and carnivalesque puppets are a symbol of fun and festivity, which does not coincide with the image of a disruptive protest that the police has to suppress (Graeber, 2005, pp. 22–24). Similarly, images of activists enjoying a protest song is inconsistent with this and therefore the buffoon with his speaker is taken away before anyone else is arrested.

Persuasion Strategy

Humour does not only have a subversive power, it can also be strategically inserted in activism for the sake of communicating, influencing and convincing those outside of the movement (Kaltenbacher & Drews, 2020). The use of humour in activism has the ability to appeal to a wider set of audience in order to achieve widespread and diverse support from the public (Branagan, 2007, pp. 476–477). Engaging an audience through humour can for example be done in the form of humorous actions (Fominaya, 2007, p. 257). The FC Aardkloot action was eminently a humorous action that was meant to make both activists as well as outsiders laugh, all the while conveying a rather serious message; the ones in power

³ Can be seen in the film at minute 13:48

⁴ Can be seen in the film at minute 18:11

⁵ Can be seen in the film at minute 30:07

are not taking the appropriate action to deal with the climate crisis. The whole theatrical performance was also livestreamed in order to disseminate the message. H  l  ne told me the following about using humour as a strategy for reaching the public:

“Well, I think humour works better in communication than most other tones that we use. So I think about it all the time that you can have a laugh with someone who's so different than you. You can, of course, humour is divisive and people laugh at different things. But real funny situations, I think, transcend a lot of differences and transcend a lot of backgrounds and transcend a lot of social classes. And so I think when something is inherently funny, many people can echo and connect with it.”

This was one of the first things H  l  ne told me during the interview and this really reflected the importance she sees in the use of humour in the climate movement. She mentions that humour can be divisive, which I elaborated on in the section on collective identity formation and how this inevitably goes hand in hand with a process of exclusion. Yet above all, H  l  ne tells that laughing together does not only strengthen the bond between people within the movement, as mentioned in the previous chapter, but it also has the potential to make people connect who do not have as much in common. Regardless of people’s differences, everyone shares the human experience of which humour is an intrinsic feature (Carde  a, 2003, p. 117; Carty & Musharbash, 2008, p. 213). What exactly it is in humour that it enables people to connect despite their differences is hard to define. It seems that using humour in some way disarms the messenger and makes the receiver more open for hearing the others viewpoints (Branagan, 2007, pp. 473–474). H  l  ne had thought about why humour works in this way and shared her thoughts:

“Comedy treats the person you're talking to as an equal and as an intelligent being. So I think using comedy, using sarcasm tells the other person, I think you're smart and I think you understand why we're making fun of this and why we're using comedy or sarcasm or irony. And I think an issue in climate activism or in the messaging has been either going towards we're scaring you, be scared, which I think works, but you know, be scared, this is terrible. Or thinking that other people are a bit stupid or they haven't really understood how bad it is or being a bit patronizing. And humour is the opposite of patronizing.”

Here H  l  ne gives an insightful explanation of why using humour in communication and persuasion works so well. Instead of positioning yourself as morally superior, you leave more room for the audience to interpret and draw their own conclusions. What H  l  ne specifically discusses here is how humour can be used to persuade the wider public to see the activists’ viewpoints. Yet, another factor of persuasion through humour is to engage more people to take part in activism. Here it is not so much about changing people’s opinions about environmental issues, but more so about the act of protesting itself. By showcasing the fun people have in actions, it can spark the interest to join to movement for people who might be initially put off by the idea of direct action (Branagan, 2007, pp. 476–477). However, as previously discussed, showing the fun people have in actions can be problematic because it might be an insensitive exposure of your privilege, as mentioned earlier.

The Risk of Trivializing

Humour can be an effective tool to engage the wider public in climate activism, however not everyone finds it appropriate to always approach this topic in a comic manner. The situation might be ridiculous and laughable at times, but in the end it is incredibly serious. Through making jokes about the climate crisis and the activism concerned with it, it runs the risk of trivializing it. This dilemma especially came to the fore in my conversation with Thyme, who put their doubts very honestly into words:

“Well, the first time you told me about your documentary idea, your project, in the beginning, even though I find it a cool idea, I got quite suspicious. That is because in the circles that I’m in outside of my activism, my parents, my family, radical activism is not very appreciated. It is okay if you fight for a good cause, but only if you give it a funny twist. So it should be done in a funny and nice way, because then you are “more approachable”. And already for a while I have found this to be bullshit. Because we are talking about humour and humour is really important and nice and good. But it shouldn’t be all about that. Because a lot of the things that we as activists are talking about are not funny. The climate crisis is not funny. Racism is not funny. Fascism is not funny. The housing crisis and homelessness, you’re also not going to make jokes about that. That’s not funny. So in the beginning I was afraid that the message of this documentary was going to be ‘you have to be funny to be a good activist’. I know you better now, don’t worry. (...) Because if you really need humour to take our cause seriously, then how serious do you actually take it?”⁶

I was very thankful for Thyme for bringing up his doubts because it was a dilemma that was already on my mind before the start of my fieldwork. I realized that through focussing this project on the fun in climate activism, it might downplay the serious struggles that the activism is essentially concerned with. This is why some activists might consciously or unconsciously refrain from using humour (Fominaya, 2007, p. 426). Moreover, it is not only activists who feel like humour might undermine the earnestness of the problems they are dealing with. Also when communicating the movement’s objectives through humour, even though it might help disseminate the message, it runs the risk of losing credibility and undermine to convey the gravity of the problems (Kaltenbacher & Drews, 2020, p. 726).

Using humour in this intricate context is a process of constantly striking a fine balance between acknowledging the earnestness of the situation while from time to time finding a way to approach it with a comic touch. Making jokes about it does not necessarily preclude taking the situation serious. Yet, when it is appropriate to use humour and in what manner is a nuanced and complicated discussion heavily dependent on the context. Hélène had put thought in this dilemma as well and put it into words as follows:

“And it shouldn't overtake how serious it is, right? But I think talking about it, talking about the climate crisis is acknowledging how serious it is. Even if it's through making jokes, saying, this is the world we live in. This is our reality now. This is the context in which we're producing humour. This is the context in which we're producing art. It gives it its importance, even if we're making jokes about it.”

The Protest That Was Not Fun Enough

This is a story about the protest that was not fun enough to include in this research, until I realized that the absence of humour is just as telling as its presence. On the suggestion of Thyme, I attended an anti-fascist and anti-racism protest in Rotterdam that was a response to white supremacist slogans that were projected on the Erasmus bridge in Rotterdam on New Year’s Eve. We gathered on a square on a grey rainy day in January and we marched to the bridge. There were a few hundred people, there were speeches, there were banners, there was chanting, all in all a typical protest. But laughs were scarce and the overall mood was serious and gloomy, yet fierce and righteous. I soon discovered this was not the place to look for the fun in activism, but that did not spoil the importance of the protest. I believe that at this specific moment and place, this was the right way to acknowledge the struggle and fight for the cause. At some moments you can dress in colourful clothes, dance around cheerfully and perform a theatrical piece to fight for your cause. At other moments, it is simply not what you do. Therefore, I

⁶ This quote has been translated from Dutch to English.

want to highlight that there is value in all different kinds of actions and the amount of fun and humour does not determine the quality of the protest, if that would be something that can be measured anyways. Humorous and cheerful protests is just one strategy of many, with its own strengths and weaknesses.

The Protestival

Once more, a story of the A12 blockade in March. It was once again a sunny day - you would almost think that the weather gods are on our side. By that point, we had entered the highway about an hour ago with approximately 3000 people. At first, the police immediately gave a warning that we had to leave the highway, otherwise the riot police would be mobilized and it was announced that this might involve violence. But after an hour or so, the initial tension of the action was over now that the police did not seem to be going to use the watercannons anytime soon and it felt like we had free reign to perform the protest. The speeches were going in full swing, the beat of the drums energized the crowd and people were talking in the sun that was surprisingly warm for early spring. A little while later, people were singing self-written protest songs, others performed rehearsed dances and somewhere else people pulled out their instruments and started a jam session. On the asphalt, groups of people gathered to play card games and read books and newspapers. Eventually, more and more people gathered around the drums, dancing and shouting the protest chants. For some reason, it is a reoccurring phenomenon that a great amount of enjoyment and energy emerges in these kind of moments. At one point, I heard someone in excitement saying to a fellow activist: "It is almost like a festival!"

Protestival

I bumped into an activists I had come across already several times in other actions and we started talking. Soon the conversation went to my research topic and we spoke about the almost ecstatic atmosphere that had emerged in the protest. He pointed me to the fact that this was nothing new. The protest we were at reminded him of the street raves he had read about in the UK in the '90s. My interest was sparked and I looked into it when I was home again many hours later. Indeed, the uplifting music, the cheerful dancing and the gathering of thousands of people to fight for a cause all the while having fun was nothing new. The so-called 'protestival' finds its historical roots back in the 1960's and encompass carnivalized protests of social movements mobilizing against capitalism, neo-liberalism and globalization, manifesting in the form of events that embody the freedom they wanted to see in the world (John, 2008, pp. 168–169). Later, in the '70s, '80s, and '90s the protestival was found throughout the Global North and some primary examples are the Stonehenge Summer Solstice festival, Reclaim the Streets and Carnivals Against Capitalism (John, 2008). These events enabled the counterculture to generate a locus in which their principles of 'diversity, creativity, decentralization, horizontality, and direct action' would manifest and be performed (John, 2008, p. 168). Hakim Bey (1991) has described such spaces as a 'temporary autonomous zone' (TAZ), where for a moment in time a sort of free enclave is created in which the imposed rules of society are dismissed and replaced by the ideals of the movement (John, 2008, p. 170). In this way, the imaginative future of the activists is being performed in the present moment and through this they are pursuing the cause of the movement. Therefore, the phenomenon of the protestival is not only an attractive and enjoyable way to fight for a cause, it is in fact a subversive act.

When I was reading into this I could not help to see the similarities between this and what happened on the A12 that day. The blockade lasted for hours in which we had free reign to temporarily establish a locus in which the principles and values of the movement took the upper hand. A reoccurring chant at XR protests is: "We are unstoppable, another world is possible". I got the feeling that this 'other world' is being resembled in the aesthetic of the protest, an aesthetic that allows a kind of fun to emerge that is based on enjoying freedom and autonomy. This also connects to what is described in Wettergren's study (2009, pp. 5–7) of how the activists experience 'real and authentic fun' when creating humorous moments in actions opposed to the 'false fun' that comes from consumption and accumulation. The euphoric dancing that happened at the A12 is another characteristic of the carnivalesque protest and

interestingly enough it has been a reoccurring phenomenon at the three A12 blockades I attended. The excitement I saw in the dancing and chanting of the protesters is something one would only emulate at their favourite concert. It felt like the dancing was a non-verbal release of the energy, excitement but also tension that people stored in their bodies that came with the intensity of the action. The complete energy and atmosphere is hard to describe in words to someone who was not there. There was something in the air that not only energized the crowd, but made it feel like we were a collective being rather than individuals. The cheerful dances, the collective chanting and the energizing drums gave a carnivalesque touch to the protest which strengthened the action because it resembled the 'other world' that the activist pursue.

Interaction Rituals and Collective Effervescence

At times, when I would take a distant look at the dancing crowd, the collective chanting, the speeches and the exulting cheers, all happening across the uniformed police officers, the protest would seem to me as if we were performing a ritual. Analysing a protest as a ritual has been done by Wettergren (2009) and this can provide interesting insights. Approaching secular activities as rituals is based on the work of Collins (2014), who came to describe interaction rituals as everyday situations that are performed in the co-presence of other people with a common mood and a common focus. When these rituals are performed in collective attunement, the participants experience feelings of awareness, confidence and connectedness, an experience that Collins (2014) calls emotional energy. Through sharing this with others, a feeling of collective effervescence is released. Collective effervescence is a concept coined by Durkheim which describes the mutual excitement that emerges in an interaction ritual that comes with a sense of unity and solidarity among the members of the group (Collins, 2014, p. 105). Understanding protests as interaction rituals with emotional energy and collective effervescence as the outcome, like Wettergren (2009, pp. 10–12) does, helps to understand the atmosphere that can unleash during actions and how fun and humour is generated in this context. What Wettergren (2009) found in his case study is that the pleasure, fun and laughter the activists felt was a form of emotional energy and was enabled and intensified through sharing this state of being with others.

Approaching the protest with the concepts of interaction rituals and collective effervescence gave me a deeper understanding of the energy that emerged during the A12 blockade and other protests I have attended. We shared a common mood that included feelings ranging from excitement to anxiety and together we had a common goal of fighting for climate justice. At the moment the protest was going as planned and the police did not seem to intervene yet, a great amount of emotional energy was generated and this was accompanied with a lot of fun, laughter and cheerful dances. According to Collin's (2014, p. 107) theory, the feelings of joy during such an action might just seem like a short-term expression, but in fact the emotional energy gained from this experience adds to the long-term deeper state of wellbeing. These joyful moments can thus translate into happiness on a deeper emotional level that stretches further than just the moment of the ritual. This explains why activist often do actually enjoy engaging in activism, something that came back often during interviews and conversations with my interlocuters. Similarly, Branagan (2007) suggests that humorous activism can go beyond just entertainment and instead create settings in which playfulness, freedom and a feeling of temporary abolishment of hegemonic norms take the upper hand, which can affect people holistically and leave memorable experiences for the ones involved. Branagan's observations shows the connection between the protestival and the theory on interaction rituals. The protestival is an interaction ritual and when executed successfully it can generate emotional energy that is often accompanied with fun and laughter and can generate long-term sense of happiness. This was also reflected in the interview with H el ene when she said the following:

“(…) of course it's tough, and of course it takes a toll on your body and your mind. And you do need to find spaces to let your stress out and stuff. But I genuinely think people wouldn't do it so often if they didn't get a little bit of fun out of it.”

She acknowledged once again that the activism she talks about has to be taken seriously, thereafter making a point that the fun is an essential aspect of the activism. Her non-verbal communication at this moment made clear she was making an understatement when she said “a little bit of fun”. What she conveyed was that the fun in activism is a significant impetus to engage in activism and continue to do so.

Violent Oppression and Righteous Anger

However, actions do not always go according to plan and the interaction ritual can be interrupted because of unforeseen aspects, interventions of the police and negative responses from passersby. The interruption of the police of humorous and protestal-like actions is not completely arbitrary. In fact, the protestal knows a history of violent suppression by the state. For example, in 1985 the Stonehenge Summer Solstice festival was brought to an end when the police violently disrupted the Peace Convoy, consisting of the 600 travellers who were on their way to the event. The police came with more than twice as many and made false claims about the travellers being armed with petrol bombs (Thompson, 2005). It might seem arbitrary that this group of so-called new age hippies organizing a festivity would be aggressively oppressed by the state. Yet, through its autonomous and anti-capitalist character, the protestal is an assault on the authority of the state and its neo-liberal agenda (John, 2008, p. 183). The fact that this is violently suppressed shows that the state does acknowledge the strength that resides in the carnivalesque actions. Suppressions of protests is a general phenomenon, whether they are intended to be fun or not (Travaglino & d’Aniello, 2023). However, in my fieldwork I have noticed police interventions that were specifically directed at the humorous aspects of protests. One example that has already been mentioned in the subchapter on subversive strategy, about the guy playing a protest song who was the very first to be arrested. Next to that, during the A12 protest that was characterized by its cheerful and playful atmosphere, the peaceful protesters were eventually sprayed by the watercannons until they were cold and wet, after which they were arrested. At another A12 protest in the end of May, the first thing the police took away were the speakers that were amplifying the speeches and blasting the music people were dancing to. This intervention took away a significant fun aspect of the protest and this is arguably a deliberate decision to undermine the allure of the action. Once again, this underscores the importance of fun in protests and how this is recognized by the police.

When the interaction ritual of the protest is disrupted, righteous anger can manifest. This is a phenomenon Collins (2014, pp. 127–128) describes that can emerge when the rules of the ritual are violated and the symbols are disrespected by either participants or outsiders of the group. What then comes up is a feeling of shock and outrage. In the case of a protest, one of the rules of the ritual could be the right to protest and an example of a symbol can be the amplifiers. When the police arrests the protesters or confiscates the speakers, this can be perceived as a violation of the interaction ritual and can result in strong reaction of righteous anger among the activists. I have noticed this during A12 protests that police interventions could bring up intense emotions and responses among the activists, including myself. I have seen arrests that were disproportionately violent and I have shouted together with other activists of the outrage we felt at those moments. Sometimes I was even surprised by the loudness of my own screams. This shows that on the flipside of the fun and cheerful atmosphere at certain protests, there is the violent oppression of the state and the righteous anger that emerges as a response.

End in itself

Besides all the functions, benefits, risks and limitations that can be ascribed to fun and humour that are discussed in this article, humour in itself does not need to have a premediated function for it to be used. In other words, humour is essentially an end in itself. Fun and humour are intrinsic and essential features of the human experience and it does not need to be functional for it to manifest. This might be one of the most straightforward arguments of the article, yet a crucial one. It is often not a deliberate decision to use fun and humour as a means to an end, instead we as humans have the propensity to create fun and humorous moments for the sake of itself. The strength of fun and humour might actually reside in this. Because in an era where neoliberalism prevails and everything is ought to be efficient and goaloriented, having purposeless fun goes against the grain (Wettergren, 2009, pp. 3–7). By not necessarily having a premediated function other than creating a joyful feeling in the present moment, we can break away from the in the economic system that sees humans as mere production and consumption machines. In this way, fun and humour reclaims the intrinsic value of quality of life and therefore it is by definition a form of resistance.

Conclusion & Discussion

This ethnography is an account of my personal experience immersing myself in environmental activism in the Netherlands for three months and looking for the fun in it. I have been to various protests, joined numerable community dinners and deeply engaged with the activists I met, all the while experiencing a whole range of emotions, from exuberant joy to intense stress. Yet, this research covered a relatively small amount of time in a highly localized area with deep engagement with only a few people. Therefore, it is plausible that there are activist in the environmental movement who cannot relate with everything that is discussed in this article. I want to stress that this ethnography is by no means a complete story of fun and humour in environmental activism. It is also not my intention to dismiss activism that does not include as much fun and humour. There is value in all kinds of strategies in activism and each has that own strengths and weaknesses. Nevertheless, fun and humour are ubiquitous aspects of the human experience and even in the gravest circumstances it seems to find its way in (Carty & Musharbash, 2008). This ethnography can function as an insight into the ways in which fun and humour can manifest in this rather serious context of environmental activism.

Fun and humour in environmental activism is embedded in the seriousness of it, and this is exactly what gives it its importance. The use of humour can function as comic relief and provides a way of coping with the intense emotions that come with the activism. Additionally, humour has the potential to bring people together and contribute to the process of collective identity formation. Laughing together can even connect people despite their differences and enables to transcend factors like social class and political values. Therefore, humour can also be deployed as a strategy in activism to persuade the general public. Conveying the cause with a comic touch seems to disarm the messenger and can make people more open to listen to an argument.

Yet, whether something is considered humorous is highly context dependent, and this can cause a process of inclusion as well as exclusion. Humour can be divisive when jokes are set in a context that the other does not relate to, which can lead to misunderstanding or can even come across as offensive. Among the activists I talked to in this research, making jokes about other societal groups is problematic once these other groups belong to a marginalized social group. Nevertheless, they believe that humour is not restricted by politically correct language, but jokes that are discriminatory or offensive are simply considered as less humorous. Next to that, using humour in such an earnest context of environmental activism, given the harsh reality of the climate crisis and the intensity that can come with activism, it can run the risk of trivializing this. Therefore, the appropriate use of fun and humour is a complex and nuanced discussion that has to be considered continuously.

Fun and humour is not only a tool that can be deployed, it is also a form of resistance in itself. Making fun of the powerful ones and ridiculing them is a subversive act. Having fun can be fully incorporated in an action in the form of a protestival, where carnivalesque elements are unified with the act of protesting and generate a form of fun that is based on freedom and autonomy. The way in which protests are performed does resemble a ritual and approaching actions in this manner can provide insights in the experiences of the activists, both into the feelings of exhilaration as well as righteous anger. Finally, having fun and producing humour can be a means to an end, but it is essentially an end in itself. It does not need to have a premediated function in order for it to manifest since we as humans have the propensity to create fun and humour. In the end, the cause of environmental activists revolves around creating a world that is more sustainable and equal to enhance the quality of life of all living beings. Humour and fun is ubiquitous, inherent, and essential to the quality of life and therefore cannot be missing from environmental activism.

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