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Understanding the Zany and Awkward post-Fordist Manager

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Citation

Heijboer, V. (2025). *Understanding the Zany and Awkward post-Fordist Manager*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Understanding the Zany and Awkward post-Fordist Manager



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Prologue: Evil Bosses

When looking for academic accounts which deal with portrayals of corporate working life in tv shows or film, one quickly stumbles upon the contributions coming from the field of *organizational studies*. There is a considerable body of work which attempts to study these fictional portrayals in order to investigate how the “public” perceives corporate structures and

also how these fictions inform real life working conditions and “work identities”(e.g. Bell 2008; Clark 2008; Gagliardi and Czarniawska 2008; Holt and Zundel 2014). Several of these texts have occupied themselves with discussing the manager-figure in popular media. In “Fiction and the Identity of the Manager” by Learmonth and Griffin, different types of manager portrayals in a wide array of feature films and tv shows are identified (2020). The authors used the term manager as a “catch all” for a wide array of positions such as; “CEO’s, entrepreneurs, chairs of multinational companies, as well as junior managers employed in corporate bureaucracies”, are all portrayed in similar manners (Ibid., 458). What rather seems to count is their “superior” position within a company. The authors created a typography consisting out of three most returning portrayals of managers. (Ibid., 456-68).

The authors commence their discussion with James Carker, the cranky manager found in Charles Dickens’ 1848 novel *Dombey & Son* (2020, 460). The authors note how the Carky character is portrayed as somewhat of a “victim” of the then ruling corporate structures. (Ibid.). The authors also note how novels such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Robert Tressel’s *Ragged Trouser’s Philanthropist* portray “manager”-characters who are *transformed* into amoral characters by “giving into” the firms they work for, with these novels respectively highlighting the barbaric horrors of European imperialism and class treason (Ibid., 460). This motive can be traced throughout 20th century literature into that of the 21th, with the authors mentioning a whole array of novels in which such amoral manager characters appear: *Psmith in the City* (1912); *Babbitt* (1922); *Something Happened* (1974); *The Bonfire of Vanities* (1986); *American Psycho* (1990) and *A Week in December* (2007). All these books contain some sort of manager figure who, in differing degrees, displays selfish behaviour and use their power to “feed ruthless obsessions, personal status, greed and sexual allure ” (Ibid., 460).

Next to these negative portrayals, Learmonth and Griffin also introduce two categories of “positive” and “tragic” portrayals. Interestingly, these positive portrayals are only somewhat positive. The authors explain that in this part of their categorization the manager often takes the form of a handsome businessman who engage in a (promiscuous) sexual relationship around which the plot revolves (Ibid., 461). Learmonth and Griffin write that their daily jobs are often *not* or only little portrayed in the texts. These left-out-of-the-frame jobs often signify the suffering or self-sacrifice which make these manager-figures even more sexually desirable (Ibid., 460). However, the authors note that the professional lives of these characters often only function as a backdrop or alibi for the riches these characters often possess.

Lastly, Griffin and Learmonth identify “tragic” or “nihilistic” portrayals of the manager figure in fiction (Ibid., 462-63). They typify this category as manager characters who are portrayed as “caught” in their function. The “tragic” manager figure is so loyal to his profession or unable to leave it and live another kind of life. An example the authors mention is that of the butler James Stevens, the protagonist of *The Remains of the Day*, who struggles with his boss’ Nazi collaborating-past but is unable to say something about this because the sense of duty that is expected from a butler (Ibid., 462-63). The “nihilistic manager”-type can be found in figures such as Tony Soprano (*The Sopranos*) and John Draper (*Mad Men*) . These two cult heroes are described by the authors as: “ (...) deeply flawed individuals who (at times) do horrible things but who have enough goodness and kindness in them to persuade an audience they can be redeemed” (Ibid.). Despite this, these characters hold a troubled relationship to their job, being unable to escape it , but only finding a kind of hollow fulfillment in it which at the end of the day leaves these characters spiritually empty.

What strikes about the research by Griffin and Learmonth (with the exception “positive” manager-type) is that assuming the role of a manager, means adopting amoral, or adopting some sort of behaviour which is ethically at odds with the behaviour of someone who is *not* a manager. The high amount of negative portrayals of managers is further affirmed by a study coming from the field of organization studies called *Deconstructing the Manager*, written by Panayiotou (2012). For her research Panayiotou selected several movies on corporate life with a high IMBD rating in order to discuss the most prevailing discourses on manager characters (amongst them *Wall Street*; *The Firm* and *The Boiler Room*) (Ibid., 11). This research revealed a particular motive returned again and again in the analyzed movies: a trade off between the “authentic” self and that of a corporate, managerial identity (Ibid., 18). In most of the analyzed plots, the protagonist struggles to maintain their initial identity as they start to emulate their superior/boss while climbing the corporate ladder. Panayiotou describes this tension as “the conflict between the need to belong and the urge to be real” (Ibid., 18). It is worth mentioning one of the films analyzed to get further grasp of Panayiotou’s observation. In the movie *The Firm* (1993), the protagonist wants to fit in the structure of the company he works at but also realizes he has to *transgress* his moral principles and break the law; as the company is involved in money laundering (Ibid., 19). In the analyzed films, adhering to the rules of a big company seems to mean: giving oneself *away*. However, Panayiotou also notes the analyzed protagonist “come to their senses” and turn their back on corporate life in order to *get their life back* (Ibid., 20).

This tension between corporate and “normal” identity seems to be created by a perceived *amorality* which comes when adhering to the goals and values of a big corporation. A typification of big businesses as morally dubious or downright evil seem to prevail in culture. The 2003 documentary *The Corporation* (Achbar, Abbott and Bakan) argues that corporations in *themselves* are like pathological entities, sembling psychopathic personality disorders. This is because the drive for profit makes them neglect any legal or moral norms; disregard safety of others or their own; indifferent to the feelings of others and deceitful (2003). The thesis of this successful documentary seems to provide further explanation of the returning motive of “authentic” identity vs. corporate identity: the capitalist imperatives organizing the behaviour of companies breed immoral, “psychopathic” behaviour. In the book version of *The Corporation*, Bakan writes in the introductory chapter that public opinion is quick to assure “pundits, politicians and business leaders” are “greedy, corrupt, individuals” or simply “bad apples” who are to blame for “Wall Street’s woes” (2004, 1). Opposing this, Bakan states something is wrong with corporations *themselves*, which must be seen as structures which lead people to behave badly (Ibid., 1-2). This text assumes this assertion, arguing that many manager characters can be understood as individuals whose ways of behaviour are the outcome of varying degrees of identification with the company they work for. Assuming the role of the “manager”, one needs to act in the interest of “the corporation”, which is in conflict with a sense of “authenticity” or the “self”. In the case of much fiction on the workforce, the boss functions as a character which *overidentifies*, becoming a character who is totally defined by their professional role to grotesque extents. This overidentification often serves as a cautionary tale to not give into the “amoral” Big Other of the corporation.

The Boss as Devil

A much telling example of this can be found in *The Devil Wears Prada* (David Franker 2006). In this film, the aspiring journalist Andrea starts working as a junior assistant for the

“devilish” editor-in-chief of the fictional fashion magazine *Runway*, Miranda Priestly. Initially regarding her job as superficial and as a CV-filler, the awkward and nerdy Andrea transforms into a dedicated assistant to Priestly. During this process, her stance towards her boss also changes, as she grows more appreciative of the woman who she first only despised. One could say that, as the story evolves, Andrea starts to identify more and more with the role expected from her at *Runway*. However, following the motive of so many movies on corporate life, she “loses a bit of *herself*”: She starts to get estranged from her boyfriend Nate. In a discussion which ends up with them taking a break from their relationship, Nate tells Andrea:

“I wouldn’t care if you were out there pole dancing all night, as long as you did it with a little integrity. You used to say this was just a job; you used to make fun of all the runway girls! Now you’ve become one of them!”

Andrea: *“That’s absurd!”*

Nate: *“That’s okay, that’s fine. Just own up to it; and we can stop pretending that we have anything in common anymore.”*

This small dialogue illustrates how the process of identification with one’s job can become “too much” in the sense that it destabilizes the “authentic” identity one had before. Whereas Andrea first loathed the girls at *Runway*, she now *is one!* Note also how Nate uses the word “integrity”, saying that he does not mind about a job in fashion (or anything else) but *does* care about the ruthless, time-consuming, abject character of Andrea’s job: while she dedicates herself more and more to her job, the “original” Andrea who is kind, honest and aspires to become a serious journalist somewhat disappears, as she becomes a loyal assistant to the capricious Priestly. Although Andrea does get caught up in her job, she herself also fears she becomes too much like Miranda, who principles her job as the editor-in-chief of *Runway* over her loyalty to her friends; exemplified in the film when she grants someone else than her loyal friend and colleague Nigel the job of creative director at the magazine. Repulsed by this whole affair, Andrea confronts Miranda with her heartless behavior. However, Miranda then points out Andrea did something similar when she agreed to join her to Paris Fashion Week, knowing this was a great desire of her colleague Emily. Being shown this parallel, Andrea realizes she has adopted the ways of behaviour induced by a job at a corporation like *Runway* and quits. It has to be pointed out that the film does not portray Miranda, evidently modelled after Anna Wintour, as *just* a horrible boss. Rather, we also see her as a mother and (ex-) wife, showing that the outsider perspective of her is just not true. Instead, the film portrays Miranda has willingly gotten too caught up in her job as editor-in-chief, to the point that she backstabs one of her most loyal friends in order to maintain her own position. She is not literally “the devil”: A bearer of evil who *is* the corrupt, immoral and heartless cause of her own behaviour. Instead, she is playing the *part* of the devil caused by identifying too much with corporate imperatives which make her behave in that way. The likening of corporate life to devil is blown up to epic proportions in *The Devil’s Advocate* (1999), which follows a similar plot line: a young ambitious protagonist is lured into becoming a corrupt and immoral lawyer by his boss/mentor. The twist of this baroque drama is that the boss-figure actually *is* the devil and the protagonist the anti-Christ. Although differing in genre and tone, both movies like adhering to the expectations of corporate life itself as something *devilish*. How higher one climbs the corporate ladder, how more one needs to identify with the supposedly evil (or psychopathic) norms and values of a company, to the point of being likened to this ultimate form of evil (The Devil). Note how the poster of

the aforementioned *The Corporation*, the entity of the corporation itself is envisioned as suit-wearing devil-in-disguise.



Figures 0.1. and 0.2.: Visual representations of the boss and corporation as devil

Enter the Mockumentary Sitcom Boss

However, although this motive of the “corrupted” or even “evil” boss seems to be a red thread in much workplace fiction, this paper is interested in a *different kind of boss*. This boss first appeared in the classic *mockumentary* sitcom *The Office* in the form of David Brent, played by the show’s creator Ricky Gervais. Leading the Slough branch of the Wernham Hogg paper company, Brent is a self-aggrandizing manager who desperately wants to be perceived as a convincing *cool*, entrepreneurial boss; a natural leader who takes initiative and is admired by his colleagues. However, as we perhaps all know, Brent is the total opposite of this. While surely overidentifying with his profession, Gervais’ character fails to convincingly come across as *a boss*. Aided by the “realism” of the mockumentary style, we see a *man thinking he is a boss* (a formulation which will be very important in a later part of this text) instead of *being a boss*. Every plan to improve the company, be it his attempt to host a motivational seminar; his misguided efforts to boost morale through impromptu guitar performances; or his attempts to bond with staff through awkward social gatherings, turn into a flop. Brent and his schemes are *too grandiose* and fall out of place in the context of a dull local office of a paper company.

With Brent, an archetypical character in the modern workplace mockumentary genre was born. Brent’s closest cousin is Steve Carrell’s Michael Scott, the manager of the US version of *The Office*. However, beyond remakes of the famed show, this loser manager character is a returning staple in all the show’s offspring. *Parks and Recreation*’s Leslie Knope; *Community*’s dean Pelton; *Veep*’s vice president Meyer and *Abbot Elementary*’s principal Ava are all notable examples of boss/manager characters whose delusions of themselves make them hard to convincingly be a figure of authority. A character like *The Comeback*’s

Valerie Cherish, not a manager but a fallen comedy actress who aspires to return to success, also bears similarities with Brent; being so utterly convinced of her star appeal and attempting all sorts of schemes to get her fame back.

Over the years, a fair amount of literature has preoccupied itself with this kind of *manager*. Mostly discussing David Brent, these texts understand this character as a typically post-Fordist phenomenon. While perhaps the Mr. Burns, Miranda Priestley's and Gordon Gekko's seem to practice a more *fordist* form of authority, which rules by enforcement; Brent et alia. attempt to practice a kind of authority (or must we say *leadership*) which more fits the economic culture we have come to call post-Fordism. Let me sum up a few of these texts:

Benjamin Noys discussed the "David Brent"-effect (a mixture between "the master and the fool") of authority, dubbing post-modern boss (2014, 145). Using Lars von Trier's *The Boss of It All*, Noys argued this new style of authority practiced by such managers depends upon an imagined *outsourcing* of authority to a Big Other (Ibid., 153-155). In an essay called "What Is It You Say You'd Do Here?", a contribution to a volume on *A New Product* by Harun Farocki, Mark Fisher provided an account of the *pathology* of workplace comedies like *The Office*. Fisher wrote Brent's overidentification makes him a post-Fordist subject *par excellence* (74-75). By channeling all of his personal desires in his role as a manager, the character represents the post-Fordist blurring between private and professional (Ibid.). Fisher's text made much mention of Adam Kotsko's *Awkwardness*, an essay from 2010 in which he dedicated an entire chapter to uneasiness and cringe-worthy situations arising in the UK and US versions of *The Office* (32-37). Like all the mentioned authors above, Kotsko regarded the economic paradigm of post-Fordism as the *root* cause for the detachedness of modern office space.

As mentioned, this small body of work (I will revisit some of the mentioned texts) concerning this comic *archetype* has predominantly pre-occupied itself with the British version of *The Office*. However, as David Brent's offspring can be found in sitcoms which portray work *beyond* the dull office workplace, the antics of these characters remain similar and seem fitting in the many contexts they have appeared in. Out of this then emerges an interesting research potential. Namely, of attempting to explore how these non-office workplaces are shaped by, and reflect the paradigm of post-Fordism.

This is exactly what I will do with this text on the portrayal of the manager in the Dutch hit series *De Luizenmoeder* (2018-2019). A show which spoofs the culture of elementary schools in a style very much akin to mockumentary shows such as *The Office*, *Parks and Recreations* etc. Like these anglophone predecessors, the portrayed workplace is led by a dysfunctional manager in the form of *meester Anton*. Portrayed by Diederik Ebbinge, this figure will serve as my prime subject of analysis. Using this type of managerial character as my locus of research, I aim to display how post-Fordist labour relations, working conditions and affective experiences are reflected in a workplace comedy like *De Luizenmoeder*. I do this in two chapters: In the first chapter, I provide a contextual backdrop which accounts for post-Fordist structures we see portrayed in the case study. It concludes with a character analysis of manager Anton. The second chapter addresses the *comedy* of the manager. Drawing on the writing of Zupančič, Kotsko and Ngai, two "comic movements" in the show which both revolve around affects induced by post-Fordist working conditions.

Introduction Case Study

De Luizenmoeder is a Dutch tv show which ran for two seasons between 2018 and 2019. A feature film was released in 2021. The show revolves around primary school *De Klimop*. Returning themes of the show are the interference of parents in the education process; the lack of order within the school and issues concerning gender and differing cultural backgrounds. Two 9 episode-long seasons were produced, with each episode having a runtime of approximately 25 minutes. *De Luizenmoeder* aired on Dutch public television under *AvroTros* and was produced by *Bing Film & Televisie*. The show was written by Ilse Warringa, Jan Albert de Weerd, Eva Aben and Diederik Ebbinge. Warringa and Ebbinge also acted in the show, respectively as *juf Ank* and *meester Anton*. The latter will be the primary focus of my case study, as this character fulfills the role of the school's manager. The other main characters can be subdivided under two groups: staff and parents. The staff consists out *juf Helma* (Leny Breederveld), a no-nonsense teacher with little regard for the school; *Nancy* (Bianca Krijgsman), an overly dedicated "classroom mom" and *Volkert* (Henry van Loon), a traumatized veteran who joins the staff as a janitor. The parent-characters are *Hannah* (Jennifer Hoffman), a single mom child psychologist whose daughter recently joined the school; *Karel* (Arnoud Bos), a know-it-all overly concerned dad; *Ursula* (Maaïke Martens), a posh mother often angry with Ank; *Walter* and *Kenneth* (Andre Dongelmans and

Rop Verheijen), a gay couple who have an adopted Chinese daughter and *Kim and Mel* (Rian Geritsen and Meral Polat), two judgmental, somewhat naive, mothers. The show doesn't really contain a strong, ongoing story arc. Instead, each episode starts with a new plot and subplot which is resolved by the end. However, there are of course some ongoing threads throughout the series, such as the romantic tension between Hannah and Volkert; the affair between Anton and Nancy and Helga's retirement. All the parents have children who are part of the same class, group 3 and later group 4, which are both taught by Ank. The title literally translates to "the lice mom", referring to the task of parents checking the student's hair for lice. In a wider sense, the refers stands symbol for the culture of Dutch primary schools and, by extension; the struggle of how parents should properly relate to the school and other parents. Although the show does not really have a main protagonist, Hannah seems to serve most as the point of identification for the viewer. Especially since her daughter is new to the school, we are introduced to the many comic characters following the *normal* Hannah.

De Luizenmoeder quickly became an extremely popular show, the first episode of the second season even attracted 5,1 millions viewers (AD 2019). Next to being well watched, a vivid discourse on the series emerged. It is fair to say the show was a *hype*. Many of the show's word gags and catch phrases, such as: *participipizzavond*, the GLANS method or "Dat vinden wij niet raar, dat vinden wij alleen maar heel bijzonder!" (We don't find that weird, only very special!) became popular references. Especially juf Ank's welcome-song to her students, *Hallo Allemaal* became an audience favorite and was parodied many times. Dutch comedy legend André van Duin notably sang a version of the song during a broadcast of *De Wereld Draait Door*. Commercial parties responded to the hype too: Supermarket Albert Heijn discounted its mocha pastries by 35%, referencing a scene in which Anton offers one of these to Helma as a "token of appreciation" and New York Pizza introduced a *participizza* (Borgdorff 2018; Scheulderman 2019).

Many articles were published in newspapers and magazines which attempted to provide an account of the show's success. Some articles referred to the "recognizability" of the comedy, as it would accurately satirize the culture of Dutch elementary schools. The notorious *Algemeen Dagblad* columnist Angela de Jong thought the show's success could be attributed to its "political incorrectness" and would cause relief amongst audiences since it contained jokes that presumably "couldn't be made anymore" (2018). Several other articles commented upon this claim, insisting that it was not this "political incorrectness" which made audiences laugh but rather the spoofing of the underlying racist assumptions still commonly held in Dutch society (e.g. De Jong 2018; Fransen 2019). In an NRC article, Wilfred Takken criticized the show and the discourse which had developed around it (2018). He questioned the perceived "rebelliousness" and pointed out the inconsistency of plotlines and characters of the show. If one is interested in a critical scrutinization of the show, I recommend watching the episode of *De Snijtafel* on the show (Jansen 2018). The episode touches, amongst other things, upon the show's style: which is akin to its mockumentary predecessors, containing shaky camera work and some confessionals but ultimately conforms to a more conventional, non- *vérité* style (Ibid.).

In an interview held with the entire cast, Ilse Warringa told much events and situations in the show were inspired by their experience as parents of elementary school students (2018). For example, Hannah taking on all sorts of tasks is inspired by Warringa's own experiences at her daughter's elementary school (Ibid.). The much discussed "*Participizza avond*" had

also actually taken place at the school Eva Aben's daughter attended (Ibid.) . Ebbinge attributes the show's success to the freedom they got in its development, with the *AvroTros* allowing them to write a comedy which did not shy away from sensitive subjects (Ibid). Two years after the final season, the feature film *Luizenmoeder- De Film* was released during the pandemic. Notably, Diederik Ebbinge did not want to take part anymore in the project and is thus absent in it. The film was met with lesser acclaim but still drew 400,000 visitors (NU.nl 2021). Following the Dutch success, Hungarian, German and Flemish versions of the show were made (Scheulderman 2019).

I will close this introduction with two pictures of Anton, since it is perhaps good to have a grasp of his appearance as I will extensively discuss this character.





Figures 0.3. an 0.4.: Two impressions of Anton

The stylists involved made sure to make Anton like the most average and ordinary Dutch man. He is, as you can see, often dressed in checkered shirt with a colbert on top. A common way of dressing professional yet casual, Anton appears to us as a somewhat dull, everyday man. What adds to this are his typical, wired glasses; his overweight body and moustache. Ebbinge plays the rol using a lot of hand gestures, especially when Anton is explaining one of his grandiose ideas. He is soft-spoken without any particular regional accent.

Let's now start with this exploration of the post-Fordist manager!

1.The Culture of post-Fordist Management in De Luizenmoeder

In this chapter I will discuss how the typical manager-character is shaped by the specific economic culture of post-Fordism. Around this economic “restructuring”, a managerial discourse has developed which incorporated Leftist anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist critiques, creating a manager which is somewhat a “wolf-in-sheeps-clothes”; Appearing to hold similar interests to its employees, but ultimately prioritizing corporate objectives. Although Anton is not the manager of a profit-driven corporation, the policy reforms have introduced market incentives in public education which make this sector act corporation-*like*. Divided over 2 sections, I will explain all of these developments which form the contextual backdrop of the analysis which concludes this chapter. In this dissection of the show, I display how Anton aspires to execute this managerial style but fails to do so. However, his lacking qualities also seem to cement his position at De Klimop; as proper, “real” managers form a disruptive threat to values of “good education”.

1.1. What is post-Fordism?

Although now very much part of common academic jargon, it was British economist Robin Murray who coined the term post-Fordism. He first used it in a 1988 article called *Life After Henry (Ford)* published in the communist magazine *Marxism Today*. I will use Murray's description to make clear what exactly is meant by post-Fordism.

Fordism

During the early decades of the 20th century, work in western countries was characterized by the economic culture we call *fordism*. Firstly, it was marked by the idea that through mass production, assembly line-work, workers should be able to buy the goods they are manufacturing (Murray 1988, 9). This resulted in a bigger middle class of semi-skilled workers. Next to this, this class enjoyed stability in the form of long-term contracts and stable wages, acquired through collective bargaining (Ibid., 9). The companies they worked for were characterized by a centralized, hierarchical organization (Ibid.). Murray writes that Fordism originated in the late 19th century but that "its most dynamic expression occurred during the postwar boom" (Ibid.). It is important to remember that British economist described fordism as an economic *culture*, going beyond "complex assembly industries". He insisted that Fordist way of production and labour that could be seen in all sorts of domains; the agricultural, service and cultural sector but also parts of the state were all marked by the threads of "competitive job strategy; centralized planning by authoritarian relations; and a rigid organisation built around exclusive job descriptions" (Ibid.). Murray also makes the intriguing claim that Fordism very much is integral to Modernism itself and can be seen in avant-garde dance, design; modern architecture and even American football (Ibid.).

However, he notes Fordism has always been criticized from by both the Left and Right. Murray writes the revolts of 1968 attacked the "central principles of Fordism, its definitions of work and consumption, its shaping of towns and its overriding of nature". Events of 1970's further marked how these old principles of Fordism remained hard to sustain: demand became more volatile; profits declined and oil prices went through the roof; culminating in the economic recession of 1973-1975 (Ibid.).

Post-Fordism

However, a different manner of production became more dominant in the 1980's: One which lay its emphasis not on *scale* but on the *scope* (Ibid., 10). A shift not pioneered in manufacturing but in retail. By gathering information on consumer behaviour, a better indication could be made on how much is bought and *what* is bought. In this effort, product innovation became more important. This led to a diversification of production, with retailers attempting to appeal to particular demographics (Ibid.). Murray sums this up the following: "(T)he revolution in retailing reflects new principles of production, a new importance for innovation. As such it marks a shift to a post-Fordist age." (Ibid., 11). Although thus pioneered in retail, a parallel development occurred in manufacturing. Manufacturers became more flexible in what they produced due to technological innovation. However, Murray notes that the most successful cases of this new paradigm of post-Fordism can be found in companies such Japanese car manufacturer Toyota, which combined quick, just-in-time manufacturing with new methods of "labour control and organisation" (Ibid). The economist notes how the company developed a new style of management, in which organizations became decentralized and its employees became "multi-skilled workers" which

not only manufactured but also *monitored* products and processes (Ibid.). Just like Fordism, post-Fordism would also encompass more than just the economic paradigm it is rooted in (Ibid., 12). He mentions how the Leftist alternatives formulated in opposition to Fordism have now been incorporated by this (then) emerging *culture* of post-Fordism (Ibid.). Something I will discuss to a greater extent in a bit.

I want to add two more characteristics to post-Fordism which are undiscussed in the Murray article but have become part of how we understand the notion. My two descriptions of these features are sourced from an EBSCO entry on the concept. The first characteristic is the increased amount of jobs in the service and financial sector. Globalization allowed for an outsourcing of manufacturing to cheaper labour markets in foreign (non-Western) countries (Casteel 2024). In turn, work in western countries evolved more around service and financial sectors. Especially the financial sector has grown as more profit has become derived from (re)selling credits, derivatives and insurances (Casteel 2024). The second important characteristic attributed to post-Fordism is the *feminization* of the working place (Ibid.). Due to lower wages; feminist emancipation and the increase of management jobs which demand more communicative and social skills (also referred to as “soft skills”), more women have entered the workforce than during the period of Fordism.

Having provided a general outline of what post-Fordism generally entails, I will now “zoom in” on the specific discourse and role of the manager under this economic culture.

1.2. History and Discourse of the post-Fordist Manager

The notion of the *manager* as we know it today has its roots in ideas developed by the American accountant James O. McKinsey, who founded the management consultancy *McKinsey* in 1926 (1889-1937) (Quené 2018, 14-15). His ideas can be regarded as part of the development of “scientific management” of Taylorism, a manner of optimizing production by analyzing workflows. McKinsey propagated the idea that firms had to plan their budget basing themselves upon the estimated profit. In this manner, the maximum amount of costs then also was decided upon the basis of this set budget (Ibid.). He designed methods and procedures which rendered key figures which helped to optimize production. As a consequence of this, new strategies were developed which helped to manage employees in order to make them perform their work more efficiently (Ibid., 15). As this Taylorism became popularized, more firms were run by professional managers who did not own the company they had a leading position in (Ibid.). During the 1970’s, when shareholder capitalism became dominant, managers became more and more tasked with creating as much shareholder value as possible (Ibid.). With the further incorporation of post-Fordist production strategies during the 1980s, the role of the manager also changed (Ibid., 16-17). Let’s turn to the work Chiapello and Boltanski to see *how* this role changed and what kind of discourse emerged around it.

The New Spirit of Managerialism

In their influential 1999 book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, French sociologists Ève Chiapello and Luc Boltanski argue that under post-Fordism a new mode of capitalism emerged which

has absorbed many anti-capitalist critiques. Something also mentioned by Murray in his 1988 article. In the chapter *Management Discourse in the 1990's*, Boltanski and Chiapello outline how a new *ideal* manager emerged under this “new spirit of capitalism” (1999, 57-103) .

The two French sociologists performed research in which they compared literature on management from the 1960's with that of the 1990's (1999, 57) . Thus the former stems from the era in which the economic culture was still “Fordist” and the latter “post-Fordist”. Analyzed texts from both decades both claim that managers cannot “motivate” their employees by the need to make money or profit for the company. In order to then motivate the workers, labour must be a “meaning-making” practice. Be it in the form of contributing to society or personal development (Ibid., 63). Furthermore, in both discourses “bureaucracy” was very much something that had to be avoided, as it is regarded as patronizing and stiffening (Ibid., 70). However, in the 1990's discourse, this critique was much more fleshed out and mentioned. The post-Fordist discourse emphasized anti-hierarchical relationships which rejected “dominant-dominated” relationships (Ibid., 70). Flowing out of this was a disregard for “planning”. Chiapello and Boltanski write that planning is seen as “too rigid and based upon coldly quantitative data that do not take into account the “true reality” (Ibid., 70) .

In this 1990's discourse on the *ideal manager*, the army often functions as the ultimate opposite of what it aspires to be. Whereas the army represents strictness, hierarchy and anti-individualism; the post-Fordist manager seeks to promote egalitarian relationships, “creativity” and diversity (Ibid., 71).

The authors found in the analyzed corpus that management has to respond and anticipate shifts in the market (Ibid., 73). The literature identifies two factors that cause managers should always anticipate changes. The first one is the rise of non-western economies which can affect the world market (Ibid.). The second one is the ongoing technological developments which have potentially alter production or infrastructures (Ibid.). Boltanski and Chiapello argue that much of this discourse is shaped by aforementioned *lean manufacturing* pioneered by Toyota. “Lean manufacturing” refers to a set of production methods which make it able to manufacture goods more efficiently and quicker due to just-in-time production. Part of *lean manufacturing* is laying off the hierarchical grades within a firm and outsourcing a considerable amount of the company's operations. What then remains in this *lean* business is a “slim core surrounded by a conglomeration of suppliers, subcontractors, service providers, temporary personnel making it possible to vary the workforce according to the levels of business and allied firms” (Ibid.). As a consequence of this slimming down, workers are asked to take on a bigger variation of tasks and responsibilities (Ibid., 74). The managerial discourse responds to these changes and asks employees to be “creative”, “flexible” and “inventive”. Together, these slimmed down units of workers with less hierarchical layers above them are supposed to become more self-organizing and monitoring (Ibid., 75). Despite the emphasis on these self-governing “teams”, Chiapello and Boltanski argue that there is of course still the need for some sort of authority overseeing them (Ibid.). Enter the role of managers as “leaders”. A leader does not enforce the commitment of their workers but by stressing the meaningfulness of the job and the “potential” of these employees. Their authority is based upon charisma instead of imposition (Ibid.) . This emphasizing of *natural leadership* implicates a form of power which is accepted *voluntarily* instead of being imposed. With their *vision*, these leader-managers then foresee the aforementioned changes in the market (Ibid., 76). Chiapello and Boltanski, using solemnly French sources, note that the term “manager” only appeared in the Gallic context

during the 1980's. Beforehand, the term French "cadre" was used to refer to managers. They remark that the 1990's discourse very much imagines the ideal *manager* in opposition these old-style management *cadres*, similar to how the army would also represent its great polarity:

"Managers are in fact distinguished from cadres in terms of a contrast between creative intuition and cold calculating administrative rationality. (...) Managers are "intuitive", "humanists", "inspired", "visionaries", "generalists" (as opposed to narrow specialists) and "creative". The universe of the manager is opposed to that of the cadre as the rectangular is opposed to the categorical." (Ibid., 78)

Although Boltanski and Chiapello describe a discourse which emerged during the 1980's and 1990's, this conceptualization of the manager still seems to prevail in more current discourse. In his 2013 book *The Triumph of Emptiness*, critical management studies scholar Mats Alvesson provides an overview on the dominant discourse on leadership which is very much similar to the findings of Boltanski and Chiapello (2022, 163-173).

Manager as Middleman

Thus, this managerial discourse which emerged during post-Fordism gave rise to a new form of authorial identity which is shaped by seemingly "progressive" market ideals with an emphasis on change and flexibility. In his analysis of Lars von Trier's *The Boss of it All*, Noys also discusses this particular style of leadership. Using the renowned Swedish provocateur's comedy, he also points out that the "post-modern boss" (as he calls this kind of manager) outsources authority to a symbolic Other in the forms of contracts, regulations or "the boss of it all" (2019, 152). In *The Boss of it All*, this happens quite literally as the CEO of a tech company hires an actor to play his non-existing superior so that he does not have to take the responsibility of selling the company. Noys makes the case that this style of practicing authority which pretends to be "on the side" of employees but in reality executes power through this pretension of being equal to the rest and just following the orders of this symbolic Other (Ibid., 159). Thus, while attempting to juggle between differing interests of workers and corporations, this "post-modern manager" functions as a kind of middleman whose ultimate loyalty lies with the corporation it is serving. This understanding of managers as "middlemen" also ties in with Barbara and John Ehrenreich's concept of the Professional Managerial Class (often abbreviated as PMC). In their 1977 essay, the couple suggested the "managerial class" stood between capitalists and the proletariat (7-8). They argued that this PMC's function was to reproduce capitalist class relations. Mediating between these two classes, these "salaried mental workers" do not own any capital but act in its interest since their position of authority over workers makes them align more with the capitalist class (Ibid., 9). In this way, the PMC attempts to "soften" the antagonistic relationships between capital and proletariat.

We will see in a bit how both the post-fordist managerial discourse and the manager as dubious "middleman" are represented in *De Luizenmoeder*. First, we need to take a detour to explain why post-Fordist managerialism has extended beyond manufacturing and retailing as it now also permeates public schools.

1.3. New Public Management: The Manager in Dutch Public Education

In order to understand how a “manager” much alike to those encountered in private companies is also able to appear in the context of a public school; we have to take a look at the reforms which deregulated the Dutch school system and made it, in its ways of behaviour and governance, more alike to a private company. For the sake of my case study, I will focus on the Dutch context but the deregulation of public education can be regarded as a global trend which occurred in many countries (Van der Sluis 2017, 304).

In 1985, the then minister of education Wim Deetman (CDA) wrote government policy on education “worked against innovation” (Mellink 2020, 7). He promoted the idea of the “autonomous schools”, which use their unique qualities to compete with each other in order to deliver high quality education (Ibid.). Under Deetman, a policy trend set off in which the Dutch public school system (including elementary, secondary but also higher education) got reformed according to the *New Public Management* (NPM) style of governance. (Van der Sluis 2017, 305). New Public Management is a doctrine which is based around the assertion that public institutions should be made more competitive and goal-oriented (opposition to the idea of elaborate bureaucratic systems) (Ibid.). This is done by turning (to varying degree) these public institutions into more autonomous organizations by making them respond and organize themselves around market incentives. Thus under NPM-policy, these institutions ought to become “entrepreneurial”.

A highlight in the transformation of the Dutch education system towards an NPM-model is the 1993 “Scheveningen Akkoord” (Lucie 2020, 5). This marked a decentralization of the public school governance from a national level to a local level. Furthermore, the Scheveningen Akkoord tasked schools with much more responsibilities on their expenditure. In the aftermath of these policy changes, schools often fused and turned into umbrella organizations (Ibid.). Boards of directors had to govern over increasingly complex administrative and financial issues. Due to this, it became perhaps more convenient to have a degree in public administration than in education. Since 1997, the schools were no longer obliged to choose from one of the methods of the 3 educational foundations (APS; CPS and KPC) (Ibid.). Instead, schools themselves got money (based upon their number of students) to decide which methods they could invest best in. This led to a growth of commercial companies which offered educational methods (Ibid.). In 2006, this so-called “lumpsum system” was introduced in elementary education. In this way, the Netherlands has strayed from its original “input-oriented” model of governing public education; which entailed that the government interfered more on a descriptive level on what a school *should* teach; to a “output-oriented” model which concerns less descriptive demands and rather looks at the learning outcomes and average grades (Van der Sluis 2017, 304).

Thus, although Dutch public education remains part of the public sector, it has become subject to market incentives which have made it act more alike to private companies. Just like the manager has to oversee the ways in which money gets allocated in order to reach the outcome of profit, the lumpsum-regulation has introduced a style of governance in which

schools have to allocate money in order to achieve a satisfactory output. On top of this are schools now tasked with buying their methods from a “market” of suppliers. Although there is no exact account of how the NPM-style reforms have altered the working culture in Dutch primary education, it is perhaps safe to assume that the managerial way of governance as I described it earlier has entered public education too. A fair amount of investigative journalism dedicated itself to questioning the outcomes of this “marketization” of primary education. For example, a 2023 *Groene Amsterdammer* article has linked the downfall in average grades to the marketization of educational methods (Van den Braak, Salomons and Veen). In 2022, two articles published by investigative research platform *Follow the Money* discussed how school boards are too much concerned with budgeting instead of assuring good education, leading to a decline in average grades (Eerkens).

1.4. The dysfunctional post-Fordist Manager in *De Luizenmoeder*

Having now “set the stage” by outlining the developments that produced the post-Fordist manager, I will turn to *De Luizenmoeder* to show how these structural shifts resonate within a cultural text. My focus will be on Anton, whose persistent failure to embody the “ideal” post-Fordist manager becomes the central thread of his characterization. Rather than presenting him as a competent leader, the show constructs Anton as a comical archetype *precisely* through his shortcomings. This lack will serve as a guiding theme for my analysis, which will highlight what Anton strives, but consistently fails to achieve. Importantly, his dysfunctionality does not mark him simply as inadequate: the series reconfigures his lack into a kind of “humanity”, contrasting him with figures who more successfully embody “the manager”.

Conflict of Interest

As I discussed in the *prologue* of this text, much workplace fiction displays the boss as an “evil” or at least amoral/sociopathic character. This anti-social behaviour might still be present in the, what I have dubbed, “post-fordist manager”. Anton is portrayed as a *deceiving* middleman. Many situations occur in which he pretends to act in the interest of his employees but is actually serving his own or *De Koepel’s* agenda. A dynamic similar to that described by Ehrenreich’s in their writing on the PMC; the manager as “middleman”.

This deceitfulness is very apparent in Anton’s behaviour. A great example of this can be found in the episode *Afspraak is Afspraak* (season 1, episode 2) in which janitor Volkert gets hired. Volkert is a former military who suffers from PTSD and receives guidance to reenter the workforce. Anton receives Volkert and his supervisor Wilma in his office for a job interview. Looking at Volkert’s dossier, Anton remarks to him and his counselor:

“A dossier is only just a collection of words. A term like PTSD. It is just a term.”
(closes dossier and addresses Volkert) “I think that if you feel comfortable here at this school, you will eventually tell us about your trauma and the horrible things you have seen.. or done, also possible”.

During this job interview, Anton mentions the “egalitarian” character of the working place in contrast to his former employment in the army:

“You come from a hierarchical system, right? (..) But here at De Klimop, we are all very much equal. Manager, teacher, janitor.” While saying this, Anton signals with hands that all these positions are at the same level. He continues: *“I always say, we are all shackles and together we form an as strong as possible chain. That is how I lead, I believe in that.”*

After agreeing that he will provide a job to Volkert, Anton goes after his supervisor Wilma. Although he pretended to hold an open stance to everyone and stated that he believes in second chances, Volkert’s undercooled attitude and troubled past somewhat fear the manager. He asks Wilma if it’s all right to hand him over to her if he does not function well in his new job. She then tells him this is all right but this would also mean that the subsidization which he gets for hiring Anton would stop. Anton then pretends to have forgotten about this, as if it were a small detail (*“I don’t think about that”*). Wilma and we, the audience, of course understand that the whole reason of hiring of Volkert had to do with the money he received for it. This scene is much telling for the overall characterization of Anton as a *deceiving* character; he attempts to be an open, accepting person who regards dossiers concerning someone’s mental stability as a “collection of words”; while he actually seems to be mostly interested in the financial gains this opportunity offers. Notice also how in this conversation the discourse of the post-Fordist manager is articulated by Anton; he first expresses a disdain for paperwork, claiming PTSD is “just a term”. An articulation of the “visionary” manager’s disdain for “bureacracy”. This of course funny since the diagnosis of PTSD is something which, normally, would be taken into account when having a job interview. In the second citation, Anton contrasts his egalitarian workplace with that of the hierarchical army. A contrast which, as we learnt through Boltanski and Chiapello, appeared a lot in managerial discourse of the 1990s and strongly defined what the post-fordist manager *sought* to avoid.

Another instance in which this characterization of the manager as a deceiving, double-agenda holding figure comes across very clearly is in the episode *Kanjertraining* (season 1; episode 8). During this episode, Anton is holding performance reviews with his staff. He first wanted to hold these interviews in the sports hall of the school, as his own office would be “too intimidating”. Something which Helma, his eldest employee, refuses since she thinks the boss is more scared of these conversations than she is. We then see the first performance review taking place, which is with Helma. It becomes clear quickly what he truly wants to get out of this conversation: Getting Helma to retire. Anton’s speech leans into the “empowering”, human resources-style language. Let’s take a closer look at some of the dialogue¹:

Anton: *“Helma, when I look at you, I see a tightrope walker.”*

Helma: *“A tightrope walker?”*

Anton: *“Yes, you always know how to keep the balance between work on the one side and leisure on the other. And not only this year, but during all the years that you have worked here. In that sense, you have not contributed one stone but perhaps even ten stones to the foundation (Dutch: fundering) of De Klimop.”*

Helma: *“You mean the foundation (Dutch: fundament)?”*

¹ There is some small wordplay in the dialogue, This translates poorly to english. I have thus put the original Dutch words between brackets to make Anton’s usage of *fundering* instead of *fundatie* clear.

Anton: *"That too; because how long do you work here now?"*

Helma: *"Uhm..thirty years?"*

Anton: *"Thirty years! Incredible..thirty years..thirty years.. Do you still like it? Do you never have the feeling after all these years of hard work to just let things be?"*

Helma: *"No."*

Anton: *"You don't have to hold back for me."*

Helma: *"I am not holding anything back!"*

Anton: *"Because that is what I sometimes think. I think:Helma, she is hard on herself; she just keeps on going."*

Helma: *"I do not think that at all, but if you want to dismiss me I would check the severance packages since I already work here for 30 years. So this would cost you a lot of money."*

Anton: *"Who is talking about dismissal ?"*

Helma: *"You! Or didn't you want to fire me?"*

Anton: *"Ofcourse not, I am trying to think from your perspective ."*

Later in this episode Anton has a performance interview with Ank in a similar tone; this time he attempts to make her voluntarily relinquish her salary. During this scene, Anton admits that he is over budget. He then insists Ank should accept this cutting of her salary since she would then "take on for the team". In both cases we see Anton attempting to reason from the interest of the wellbeing of the individual employee or the "team" as a whole, while his actual motivation has to do with financial matters. What I identify here is of course something which is very explicitly recognized and played with within the series. As you can read from the written out dialogue above, it is very apparent to Helma that Anton has a different intention than just caring about their well-being or *the team*.



Figure 1.1.: *"You always know how to keep the balance between work on the one side and leisure on the other."*

Lack of Masculinity

As I mentioned earlier, Noys argued the “post-modern manager” practiced a kind of cloaked authority by *pretending* to be on the side of the employees and to be anti-hierarchical. However, this practice of authority fails miserably in the case of Anton. While Anton aspires to have charismatic overweight, he is completely lacking of this. This impotence is clearly visible in a scene from earlier mentioned *Afspraak is Afspraak*-episode in which Anton is staring out of his office at a quarrel he is supposed to intervene in “hiding” behind the window of his room, Anton watches a situation in which one of the students’ parents has hit the parked car of another parent with his cargo bike. Anton stands in the opening of the school’s doors just watching. Looking somewhat anxious to act, Ank confronts him. Anton, of course, answers with his manager-speak, saying that he is “mapping it”. The show then cuts to a “confessional” in which Ank calls for the necessity of “clear rules” for parents, a rigidity which she brings to the table and Anton does not.

This lack of Anton to actually *act* upon problems and the chaos of the school is often paired with his “lack” of masculinity. This becomes most clear in situations in which he is confronted with a more “capable” man. This comes afore clearly in the episode *Gezien als Man* (season 2, episode 2), in which the overarching theme seems to be gender. When discussing Helma’s successor at the table in the teacher’s lounge, Helma and Ank insist upon hiring a *man*. Ank wants this new teacher to be male since he would be able to deal with the “boy’s behaviour”; someone who knows how to deal with their “constant fighting” and the “never-ending urge to be competitive”. Helma adds that she simply wants someone to bring calmth to the “chicken shack” (Dutch: kippenhok) the school is. Anton then responds to his colleagues, elaborating upon the expression used by Helma: “Well, the rooster will keep them in check!” Anton is obviously referring to himself here. Helma then replies that *if* there is a “rooster” present, it is janitor Volkert who is also sitting at the table. He then performs a “cock-a-doodle-do”. Smiling at this imitation, Helma wants Anton to show-off his rooster imitation. Anton declines however. Helma then bitterly concludes that he is incapable of doing it.

This scene is much revealing as we see that the chaos and lawlessness of the school is imagined by Ank and Helga to be solved by a comforting, order-bringing male figure. Again, Anton is under the false-presumption that he is that sort of *male leader figure* while everyone else understands that he most certainly is not. During the same scene, it becomes clear that Anton has lied about responses to the vacancy that was set out. As a matter of fact, it turns out that he has rejected a *male* teacher who had a promising CV. While Anton then explains his rejection basing himself upon some argument of a female’s “natural capacity” to be a teacher, his true intentions are again very much clear: This handsome man forms a threat to him since he would be potentially able to fulfill the role of leading male much better than him.

After Ank’s insistence, the applicant is still invited for a job interview. A few scenes later, we see the applicant, the Flemish Mathis, enter the school. After sitting down in the teacher’s lounge, Ank, impressed by his good looks and suiting flemish accent, remarks it is good to have a “real man applying”. Mathis mentions he is a “hybrid teacher”, who does not want to teach every workday so he can also spend time on “innovation and renewal of education”. It is interesting how these terms, which would come across as pretentious and corrupting managerial talk out of Anton’s mouth, are suddenly completely believable and promising when coming out of Mathis’. Anton quickly sends Mathis away without having held a proper

job interview. Instead, he invites a very young female applicant for the job interview. During this conversation, he attempts to impress her by using Mathis' talk on "hybrid teaching". Ofcourse, when Anton speaks of this, it suddenly becomes unbelievable and ridiculous sounding. The young applicant also does not seem much impressed and asks if she can go to the toilet. In the following sequence, we then see Anton listening to the girl as she is peeing. This is, as earlier revealed, a fetishistic interest of his. Both Ank and Helma then catch him doing this and as well find out that he has sent Mathis away. Once again, Ank gets angry at Anton for not hiring this "real man". The overall impression of this scene articulates the constant shortcoming of Anton as a *leader* and a *man*. Instead of allowing another man (which would perhaps be more in line with the non-authorial, soft leadership style Anton aims to practice), he chooses to hire an inexperienced young female teacher who he then also uses to fulfill his sexual desire.



Figure 1.2.: Anton after he is caught in bathroom by Helga and Ank

These instances very much reveal that Anton's self-presumed natural *leadership* is linked with his masculinity. A *leader*, as we learnt through Boltanski and Chiapello's study, is someone who rules with a natural *charisma*. A person who does not enforce but is able to persuade its employees through convincing arguments. Mathis, although appearing shortly on screen, seems to be able to do so. He is not some authoritative, old school patriarchal-figure but instead he seems to embody authority by soft-natural charisma. On top of this, he is able to convince Ank quickly of things such as *hybrid-learning*. In this way, Mathis is what Anton is aiming to be; having that *je-ne-sais-quoi* of charisma which makes him able to practice authority through his persuasive charm. It becomes even more evident that this natural leadership goes paired with having a, masculine, phallic-force; Anton's interest in the sound of women peeing counters this. This sexual interest comes across as a perverse fetish, focusing on something very particular and not requiring any active engagement; let alone penetration. It further signals Anton embodies a kind masculinity which counters that of the potent, charismatic leading male.

De Koepel

Although the examples I discussed above seem to suggest some kind of deep hatred or despise against Anton as a manager, this is not exactly the case. Instead, it seems that Anton is also very much forgiven and sometimes even *liked* for his lacks. He is, in this lack, part of *De Klimop*. This becomes most clear in the scenes in which the umbrella organization (ominously referred to as; *de koepel*) appears. In the show, *de koepel* is a sort of symbolic Big Other which represents this managerial culture *too* but in a cold and efficient way. It is the authority to which Anton has to account himself to. The two representatives of *koepel* we see in the show, Pjotr Jan and Agnes (Vincent Rietveld and Marieke Heebink), are dressed in black and have an arrogant, cold attitude. They are perhaps more alike to the old-school managers the post-fordist management literature sought to contrast. Whereas Anton is a *wannabe* manager, these two characters *are* managers.



1.3.: Agnes and Pjotr-Jan

To discuss this, we can best look at the episode *Send in the Clowns* (Season 1; episode 9). In this season finale, Pjotr-Jan holds a performance review with Anton. He concludes that Anton achieves well in certain areas but poorly on *education management*. To evaluate how the school functions under his management, *interim manager* Agnes joins some classes.

After observing a class by Ank and seeing Helga smoke a cigarette in-class, Agnes quickly comes to the conclusion that Anton's management is intolerable. She and Helga have a small exchange after she catches her. Agnes asks the near-retirement teacher if Anton tolerates her in-classroom smoking. Helga answers that he just does not know since he is a man and "men never notice anything". She then proceeds on saying that he also does not notice that her true intention is to "dethrone" him. However, Helga tells Agnes *she does* understand this since "she is a woman". While Helga and Ank are suspicious of her, Anton fails to notice that he might lose his job. In the teacher's lounge, he calms the two ladies by

assuring that she is just there to “pingpong”. He sees Agnes as an equal, colleague-manager. The two alert teachers believe something different and regard her as an external force who wants to change *De Klimop* for the worse. We are then presented some much telling dialogue with regard to the subject of this text:

Helga: “*She is a manager Anton.*”

Anton: “*So ?*”

Ank: “*Managers and education, you have to distrust that combination ?*”

Anton: “*Girls! It’s not that big of a big deal !*”

Helga: “*Girls?! I am getting crazy over here !*” (she then walks away)

Ank: (to Anton) *If I need to punch her, call me.*

It is clear that manager Anton, although attempting to speak and behave *like* a manager, is not at all seen as a manager along the lines of the cold, mean, efficiency-oriented characters like Agnes and Pjotr-Jan. Instead, the show seems to portray him as a delusional and mal-achieving middle man who, in his failures, is unable to execute the “management” which supposedly is in contradiction with a sensible and *good* education.

A little bit later in the episode, Nancy catches Agnes and Pjotr-Jan (with whom Nancy had a short fling) in Anton’s office. Further articulating their disrespect towards Anton, Agnes sits in his chair while cackling at a joke of Pyotr Jan on Nancy’s *camel toe*. After confronting them, Pjotr-Jan admits that Anton will be replaced by Agnes. He calls him a “bungler”. Nancy gets mad over this and tells him he is wrong: Anton is not a “bungler”, he is *a friend*.

After Anton finds out about his planned replacement, he disappears. The concluding scenes of this episode take place at a circus-themed to celebrate the end of the school’s year. Anton is still absent, while he is supposed to provide a speech. Instead, Agnes takes the word and introduces herself as the school’s new manager. Addressing the parents, teachers and students in a suspiciously warm tone, she is then interrupted by the reappeared Anton. In a dramatic re-entrance, he screams “*Stop the show! This is my school and this is my circus*”. Dressed like a circus director and wearing a clown’s nose, he then starts to sing the Dutch evergreen *De Clown*, originally sung by Ben Cramer. The song, its lyrics were written by Pierre Kartner, tells the story of a clown who dies during a performance. It makes use of the *sad clown*-archetype: a comic performer who is smiling on the outside but crying on the inside. Of course, I do not think we should understand this song choice as relating word-by-word to Anton. However, the reappearing lyric “*he was only a clown*”, repeated throughout the song, does seem to serve as an acknowledgement of his many flaws as the school’s manager. This acknowledgement also seems to serve as a (temporary) resolvment of Anton’s constant *pretending* of being a well-performing manager. In extension of this, he also suggests that this is “his circus” further affirms that his incompetence is somewhat in place in the context of the chaotic, lawless (circus-like) primary school. This only gets emphasized when Anton’s performs returns into a sing-along. The name of the episode, *Send in the Clowns* also carries such an acknowledgement as the Sondheim-penned song revolves around the understanding that everyone is *a clown: Don’t bother there here*.

These final scenes are interesting because they suggest that the “take-over” of Agnes would mean the loss of the chaotic status quo we have seen the entire season: Ank and Helma’s teaching methods and behaviour would have to change and Nancy would be forced to leave as the “hulpouder”. After Anton returns, this status quo is saved. We even see that he and

Nancy reconcile, as Hannah and her daughter see them kissing after his performance. For Anton to come back, he had to acknowledge his lacking capacities and stand up against *De Koepel* instead of fearing them and pretending he stands on equal foot with them. These scenes are rare moments for the show with regard to Anton, whereas he normally fails to convincingly practice authority, he finally seems to do so in this finale of season one. I think this has to do with this acknowledgement of his lack. The staff despise the “real manager” Agnes, who embodies *management* in the sense of a rule-driven, surveilling authority. Anton, being the anti-thesis of this, embodies the imperfections and *humanness* which supposedly is more in-line with how they want *De Klimop* to be. This is why all of a sudden, Anton has what it takes to be the school’s manager; a flawed, under-achieving *clown*.



Figure 1.4.: Anton, dressed up as ringmaster-clown, gives his passionate performance.

“Good Education”

What is suggested in this finale of the first season, a grim future for the school if Anton would leave, becomes reality in the 2021 feature film. In the movie, simply called *Luizenmoeder*, Anton has died from a sudden heart attack. A plot twist which appears to have been written in following Diederik Ebbinge’s departure from the project. Ank takes over his job as the school’s manager. However, she proves to be unable to perform this hectic job properly but nevertheless continues to do so since an interim-manager would then be flown in. Ank regards that as a worst-case-scenario as “managers do not have a heart”. After she finally acknowledges she is unable to do the job, *De Koepel* introduces manager Thomas (Dragan Bakema). In contradiction to the stiff, technocratic appearance of Agnes, Thomas is more of a smooth *yuppie*. He wants to introduce all sorts of digital teaching methods which would supposedly improve and optimize the teaching process. Thomas also uses the managerspeak which sounded so ridiculous when delivered by Anton. He mentions the school is a “breeding ground” (*broedplaats*) and states repeatedly that “we are doing this

together". Hannah cynically remarks this expression actually means "making people do the work for you".

Whereas Anton sounded laughable using such expressions and Mathis convincing, Thomas delivers the words with an undertone of malignance. His misguided tech-optimism is then the basis for all sorts of jokes in the film which portray how these digital tools fail to teach the children properly. For example, we see a robot failing to learn Ank's class English words. This loss of integrity and the "dehumanization" of this new regime under manager Thomas comes to its summon when it turns out that the newly introduced intranet is able to film the parents in their houses via the laptop's webcam.

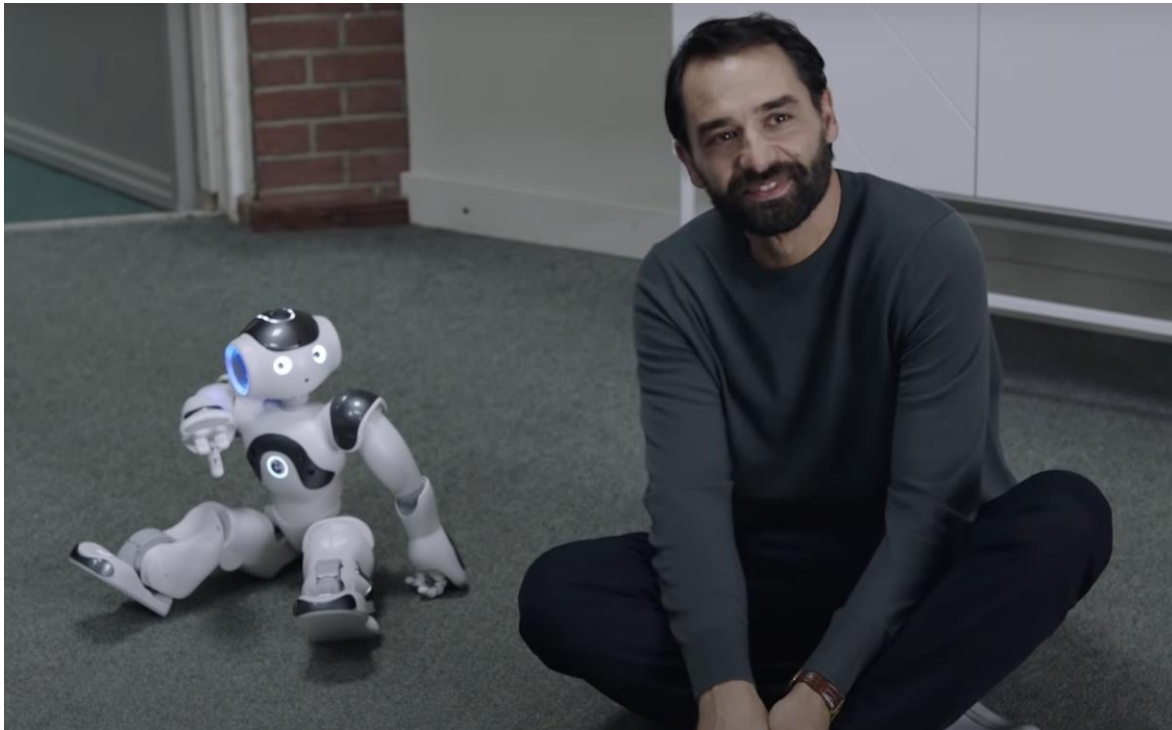


Figure 1.5.: Thomas sitting next to his teaching robot

This problem gets resolved when the students, led by Helga and the newly-introduced extremely young teacher Lieke (Aiko Beemsterboer), stage a coup against the parents and Thomas' regime by occupying the school's building. The children furthermore barricade the *De Klimop*; make a huge artwork in the school and Helga eventually instructs them to sit with tape over their mouths while holding fake guns. This coup alludes to the occupation of Amsterdam University students of the *Maagdenhuis* in 1969, a protest action in which protestors demanded more democratization in the board of the school. It also becomes clear Helga participated in this well-known moment in Dutch history. By this reference to the resistance of the '68-generation, the film seems to suggest that this act of protest calls for what the parents and the management have lost out of sight; eye for what the children themselves want.

The characters of Helga and Lieke then seem to embody what the film proposes as the *right* education. Earlier in the film, we see that Thomas both dismisses their teaching methods. Helga teaches the children about the '68 spirit by showing them a poem by Lucebert and displaying footage of the student revolts. Lieke is a dreamy girl who wanted to go to art

school but had to study teaching instead. Leading the occupation, they become representatives of what good education is supposed to be like; playful, creative, autonomous and opposed to the over-controlling helicopter-parents and Thomas' technological novelties. After the parents manage to enter the barricaded building, the children quickly fall out of their role as though protestors and run into the arms of their parents; they are children after all seems to be the message. However, their critique is heard and now Thomas is gone after the webcam-scandal, the school seems to be "saved" from the corrupting forces. The movie concludes its final scenes in which Helga marries ambulance worker Janny (Beppie Melissen). During this scene we learn Helga has become the school's new manager, signalling that the school is now in the "safe hands" of a rebellious, motorcycle-driving, but responsible teacher.

There is of course a great irony in all of this when we remember one of Boltanski's and Chiapello's core arguments in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. The movie *Luizenmoeder* evokes a return to the ideals and critiques of the '68-generation as the key to "good education" by choosing its represent Helga as *de Klimop's* new manager : However, the management discourse we now have seen so often in the film and series very much incorporates these same New Left ideals: eye for the individual, less authority, creativity and self-expression.

While its plot brings the movie to a new level of implausibility unprecedented in the television show, a morale emerges which was also present in the series but is more outlined in the film: the manager from outside introduces rigidity, unnecessary novelties and "optimizing" methods which are in conflict with "good" teaching practiced by Ank and Helga.

Chapter Conclusion

I began this chapter with accounts of the managerial discourse which arose as a consequence of post-Fordism and how the public sector got subject to these managerial structures too. I explained that educational institutions have to act like private companies due to the lumpsum-regulation, in line with the international trend of what is called New Public Management.

I then turned to an extensive discussion of how *De Luizenmoeder* portrays its manager-character Anton. We see that he, as a manager, is a middle man between the staff and *de Koepel*. He is in charge of the budget of the which granted with and must not go over it. Although this is not mentioned explicitly all that much in the series, we see a behavioural pattern shaped by this dynamic. Anton is a character who is constantly deceiving his employees. Pretending to act in their interest, his actions are mostly motivated by financial matters. However, Anton performs his schemes so transparent that they ultimately making him a harmless character. We see a "clown" who actually is the school's manager but performs this role so poorly that he is unable to practice any real authority. In fact, every gesture which is supposed to signal some form of dominance or charisma becomes funny when performed by Anton.

I also dedicated some words to Anton's lack of a potent, charismatic masculinity which seems to go paired with his incapacity to be a *good* manager. Janitor Volkert and the much-promising applicant Mathis form a threat to Anton since they are "real men" who supposedly would solve the school's problems. Although Ank complains repeatedly about De Klimop's

lack of structure, rules and leadership under Anton's regime, the school seems to lose its essence when he leaves and, in the film, dies. In the finale of season 1 and the 2021 film, a different kind of manager is introduced. Although two highly differing characters, the dull, technocratic Agnes and silicon valley-adept Daan both present a threat to the quality of teaching and the integrity of the school. They are *real* managers.

This *lack* of Anton is something which I will explore at greater length in the following chapter on the *comedy* of De Luizenmoeder, as this seems to be the very premise of why he is so irresistibly funny.

2. Understanding the post-Fordist Comedy of the Manager

We have seen now that our case study, *De Luizenmoeder*, portrays its manager as an incapable, laughable middleman who is unable to *inhabit* his role properly to come across as a real manager. In the next chapter, I will further explain *the comedy* of Anton and by extension the whole show, seen as a product of post-Fordist working conditions. To support this claim further, I will use the work of three authors. I will firstly explain *why* we laugh at Anton using Zupančič's ideas on comedy. Then, I will describe two sorts of comic *movements* (a notion which I will explain later) on which very much dominate the show's humour and bear a relationship to the post-fordist mode of labour. These comic movements are *awkwardness*, as theorized the work of Adam Kotsko; and *zaniness* using the work of Sianne Ngai.

2.1. Zupančič's Comic Subject

I purposely already used words such as *inhabiting* or *embodying* to describe the relationship between Anton and his role as manager. This is because it will help us to explain the comedy, or why we laugh at him. As I explained in the prologue *Evil Bosses*, a lot of fictional bosses and managers *overidentify* with their job. This is also the case for meester Anton. However, whereas Miranda Priestly has *become* the boss, we can see that there still remains a gap between Anton, his role as the school's manager and the subject who thinks he *is* the manager. Although Miranda Priestly is funny *too*, at times, as her over-identification sometimes takes on grotesque forms; Anton seems to be constantly funny as his own belief in his identity as the leading, visionary manager is something which he has to make clear constantly, while we, as the rest of the cast and the audience only see a manager *striving* to be a manager.

Let's further unpack this assertion by looking at Zupančič's ideas on comedy. Alenka Zupančič (1966) is a Slovenian philosopher. Often regarded as a member of what is called the "Ljubljana school of psychoanalysis", a school of thinking which combines (Lacanian) psychoanalysis, Marxism and German idealism (predominantly Hegel). Its most well-known counterpart is Slavoj Žižek. In 2008, Zupančič's essay *The Odd One In: On Comedy* got published as part of the ongoing *Short Circuit*-series. Zupančič's theorizing on comedy, which is will use as a framework in this text, is taken from this publication.

In *The Odd One In*, Zupančič provides a basic structure for what constitutes "comedy". She argues that that which is funny can be found in a particular juxtaposition between the "concrete" and the "universal". Although Zupančič sometimes turns to different namings of these concepts, I will consistently use these particular terms to avoid confusion. In her text, Zupančič attempts to counter the common idea comedy "humanizes" and that laughter has some sort of egalitarian working which reduces each and everyone to a flawed being (dumb, stupid, vain, etc.) (2008, 37). However, elaborating upon Hegel's ideas upon comedy, Zupančič argues *real* comedy does not take off the mask of pretensions and taken on identities but rather how people are human "within" these identities and roles.

To Zupančič, this contains not *only* identification but also a sense of *disidentification*.

“To put it in psychoanalytical terms, the ego-ideal turns out to be the partial comical object and ceases to be something with which we identify via the identification with one of the partial features of its reverse side. The ego-ideal is a human weakness- which is to say that, in this kind of comedy, the process of identification with the partial feature is, by virtue of its comic character always also the process of disidentification. The point is not that an aristocrat is also an ordinary man. He is an ordinary man precisely as an aristocrat at the very height of his aristocracy. Here we should remark that a lunatic is a king who believes he is a king. Does this not even hold more for comedy? It is not some poor chap who believes himself to be a king who is comical (this is rather pathetic) but a king who believes he really is a king.”

Thus, as this quotation tells us, Zupančič understands comedy as consisting out of something one relates to (via ego-ideal), however, by being exposed to this *flipside* of the ego ideal, one also recognizes the silliness of the pretensions of attempting to adhere to the ideal. This is why, according to Zupančič, comedy often works with stereotypical characters (Ibid., 37). By stereotyping, *universal* signs and symbols are conjured and represented by actors, however the joke can be found portraying these universalities as subjects. However, in contradiction with a tragedy or drama, these are not subjects who play, a *human* attempting to adhere to a certain role but a *typification* who is shown to be a subject in itself. Zupančič describes this in the following way:

“Stereotypical characters as abstract universalities are set in motion and, through different accidents and events, the concrete, subjective universality is condensed or produced- the universal as subject, so convincing and powerful in good movies.” (Ibid., 37).

To get a further grasp of what this entails, it is worth discussing what Zupančič opposes comedy to: *tragedy*. To the Slovenian thinker, tragedy separates itself from comedy in the sense that it portrays and *individual who has* to suffer for a greater universal cause. It is a subject confronted with some universal principle (e.g. injustice, death, love). While in comedy, a character starts out as representing this universality in itself but is then confronted with events which make it show its concreteness. Take for example the movies *Der Untergang* (2004) and *Er ist wieder da* (2015), which both feature Adolf Hitler. While in the former, Bruno Ganz attempts to portray the dictator as a man made of flesh and blood, the man *behind* the image; In the latter, Oliver Masucci portrays Hitler as the idea of Hitler we have, confronted with modern everyday life which then reveals that he, in his status as a *universal* symbol, is a subject *while remaining the führer*.

In this sense, comedy is able to reveal something about the very structure of identity itself. Moder, elaborating upon Zupančič’s conceptualization, writes that comedy confronts us with the Lacanian question of identity (2019, 234). The author means by this that comedy in its very structure refers to the idea that the subject *thinks* they inhabit a stable, conscious, form of personhood. According to Lacanian discourse, this idea of selfhood is false as the subject never inherently *is* this self (Ibid.). On the other hand, one cannot do anything else but function through an assumed identity (Ibid.). I think this way of approaching comedy, thinking specific

Comic Movements

We can see this structure constantly back in comedy. In *The Odd One In*, Zupančič presents her formula best by the example of the baron and the banana peel. She sketches the scene of a “toffee-nosed baron” who slips over a banana peel (2008, 29). After this, he

reassembles himself, getting off the ground in an elegant, *baron*-like way. The baron walks around arrogantly until the next slip, which might threaten his baron-hood (Ibid.). What Zupančič seeks to illustrate with this example is that comedy is able to show us the *immanence* of identity: a baron, so convinced of his role *as a baron*, slips. This is something which might threaten his status as a courtly, chic, high-class character. We see he attempts to maintain his identity by getting up in a dignified, face-saving manner. This is what makes us laugh: the comic *movement* in which this immanence of identity becomes clear. This is why comedies rely upon an ongoing series of actions in which the subject keeps on manifesting its identity: errors; slips; falls; mistaken identities.

A good example in which this presumed structure of comedy becomes clear is Joel and Ethan Coen's *The Big Lebowski* (1999). In this classic comedy, an aging pothead hippie, Jeffrey Lebowski, who insists upon being called "the Dude" gets mistaken by a group of gangsters to be the "selfmade" *millionaire* Jeffrey Lebowski, who shares the same name. After the gangsters have confronted him, the dude goes to Jeffrey Lebowski and asks him to pay for his rug. This then sets in motion an ongoing series of such comic movements in which the Dude, a not-so-smart douchebag constantly finds himself in situations in which we laugh at his "dudeness": the idea that this man is so utterly convinced of his self-image.

Thus, it is rather this *conviction* of one's identity which gets exposed we are laughing at. This is then why over-identification can be such a grateful subject for laughter. Film scholar Peter Verstraten has made the case that, elaborating upon a text by Žižek, comedy very much relies upon over-identification (2024, 219-220). He mentions the famous Monty Python "dead parrot"-sketch in which a salesman of a pet shop sticks so much to his role that he refuses to deny the absolute truth that the parrot has died so quickly (Ibid., 216). Reading Verstraten's example through the lens of Zupančič, it is these denials which then form the *comic movements* in which he attempts to sustain his role as a salesman.

The (Tragi)-Comedy of Anton

It is not difficult to see then why Anton is such a *laughable* character; he is a manager who is convinced of himself as this ideal, visionary post-fordist manager. While he factually holds the position as *De Klimop's* manager, it is the constant expression of this self-belief which makes him funny. It is this convincedness which turns Anton also into a tragicomic character.

To address this, it is good to compare Anton with Ank. Both have in common that they stick to their so much that they become caricature-like, laughable characters. However, Ank seems to differ substantially from Anton on the basis that she is portrayed as more than just this strict teacher persona. At these moments, Ank becomes a somewhat tragic figure and the comedy of her character stops; we see the *person* behind the teacher. A good example of this can be found in the *Laat ze maar Glanzen* (season 1; episode 4). In this episode Ank's partner Bert (Bas Keijzer) goes to her classroom to announce that he wants to take a break from their relationship. At this moment, we learn that Ank is *more* than just the over-identifying teacher but also the someone who is able to have a relationship next to her job. Observing this conversation, which takes place in Ank's classroom before the school day starts, parents Kim and Mel joke about the idea that she is able to have a relationship. In a way, their snarking remarks echo the surprise of someone watching this scene for the first time; one does not take into account someone so much defined by their identity as a teacher to have a private life, let alone serious romantic relationships. After their emotional

exchange, Ank lets in the children who were waiting outside the classroom. She then starts singing her famous *Hallo Allemaal*-song with a broken voice which is on the verge of crying. Sliding back into her role as a teacher while doing this, Ank's *funniness* is exchanged for the *tragicness* of a *woman* being caught in performing her professional role despite being heartbroken.

Such instances are rarer in the case of Anton, he is a *manager who always keeps thinking he is a manager*. Whereas having a failing relationship exposed us to Ank being something else beside a teacher, the on-and-off affair between Anton and Nancy remains somewhat laughable. In their romantic tension, Anton always keeps acting as the manager that he is, which sabotages them getting closer.

However, this non-escaping is able to bring about a particular kind of tragicness. Let me return to the likening of Anton to a clown in explaining this. Especially in the first season, there are some clownesque references. In the first episode, Anton says that he likes *humour* and sees it as a great tool. We then see him putting on a red nose. He also always drinks his Senseo coffee from a circus-themed mug and behind his desk we can see a photograph of the famous clown Popov Oleg. This clown motive gets pressed in our (red) noses in the earlier discussed finale of season 1 in which Anton sings "*hij was maar een clown*". As I stated before, this sad-clown archetype evoked by the show can also be related to the over-identification of Anton to his role. We never see him admit his failings or hardships verbally, like Ank does, we only see him constantly striving to fulfill his role as a manager. However, in this finale, a certain *tragicness* to his character becomes more apparent; just like the sad clown is unable to escape his identity as a *clown*, marked by the fact it can put off his appearance; Anton is unable to put off his striving to be a manager. This *trappedness* is then what gives the character a somewhat tragicomic aftertaste; a subject suffering from an identity it is seemingly unable to leave. .

2.2. Comic Movements

Having explained how Anton is a *funny* character by using Zupančič's thinking on comedy, I want to use this understanding of humour further in approaching *De Luizenmoeder* as a post-fordist comedy. Whereas I earlier explained that the discourses and style of authority relate to the culture accompanying these economic structures, I will discuss particular *comic movements* which relate more to the affects and emotional labour which characterize post-Fordism. I will first turn to a discussion of the comic movement of *awkwardness*, as theorized by Adam Kotsko.

2.2.1. Comic Movement I: Awkwardness

The first comic mode I would like to draw attention to is that of *awkwardness*, which seems to appear all over in *De Luizenmoeder*. Next to the show's characters, the specific comedy of awkwardness very much aligns the show to its American and British predecessor of *The*

Office. As a matter of fact, this distinctive way of portraying uneasy social traffic seems to be one of the aspects De Luizenmoeder has borrowed most of its Anglophone predecessors.

Awkwardness, as I will further explain in a bit, refers to a situation in which one does not know how to act correctly in a social situation. It is a strong affect which seems to be so strong that it can embarrass those observing an awkward situation, leading them to *cringe*. Moreover, other shows which have used the mockumentary form, such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Arrested Development* and *The Rehearsal* all seem to belong to what a Wikipedia article defines as “cringe comedy” (2025).

What does it mean ?

To get a more precise grasp of what this *awkwardness* entails, we need to turn to Adam Kotsko’s account of it. In his essay *Awkwardness* (2010), the philosopher asks himself why so many post-2000 comedies seem to evolve around characters misunderstanding social etiquette. Kotsko attributes this affect of unease to wider cultural and economic developments.

First of all, Kotsko defines awkwardness as a “mood” (Ibid., 8). Drawing from Heidegger, the philosopher argues this entails a relationship between the subject and the world around it (Ibid.). A “mood” would then be able to shape how a subject perceives a situation and how it responds to it. In the philosopher’s own words, a mood “colors” the world a subject sees around itself (Ibid., 9). Thus, although the author does not use this world explicitly, it may be justified to regard “awkwardness” as an *affect* similar to how it has been used in the tradition of affect theory.

Awkwardness then, relates to the experiences of security when there is no clear set of governing norms. For Kotsko, this makes it evident “that humans are fundamentally social” but lack built-in norms which regulate social traffic (Ibid., 8). He distinguishes between different kinds of awkwardness. The first mode discussed is “everyday awkwardness” which evolves around an unclarity on which social role to follow. For example, the uncertainty on whether to give a kiss, hug or handshake when meeting someone.

The second category mentioned is “radical awkwardness” which would occur when there is an entire lack of social rules which might govern the social interaction (Ibid., 8). Kotsko sees this variant occur in encounters with foreigners or people coming from vastly different cultures. Kotsko exemplifies this by the case of a middle-American who speak extremely slow and loudly English to people who do not speak this language. The awkwardness, caused by the Middle-American person, is caused by following a wrong social norm. In this case this norm would be the rationale of assimilation, which prescribes that foreigners need to be helped and guided in speaking the language of the country they have entered (Ibid., 9). The awkwardness is thus caused by a misconception of what rules to follow.

The third and last category listed by Kotsko is “cultural awkwardness” which occurs when: “*there seems to be a set of norms in force, but it feels somehow impossible to follow them or even fully know them. Just as it is easier to criticize than to create something, a social order in decline maintains its ability to tell what you’re doing wrong even as it is losing its ability to provide a convincing account of what it would look like to do things right*”.

Thus, cultural awkwardness relies upon a dynamic in which there is no clear set of guiding norms of uncertainty on how to act in a social situation. Kotsko argues that this kind of awkwardness seems to prevail so much in the “awkward age”.

In his account, Kotsko argues that the mode of “awkwardness” is the outcome of a failure to replace the Fordist middle class white norms and values (heteronormativity; whiteness; the nuclear family; Christianity; stay-at-home mothers) another stable “status quo” which regulates the social order (Ibid., 17). The philosopher argues that the emancipatory movements of the 1960s which advocated, amongst other things, for granting equal rights to women and people of colour caused a questioning of this set of values (Ibid.). However, throughout the 1970s until 2009, Kotsko identifies how these valid critiques have failed to form a coherent system of norms and values (Ibid., 18-19). For example, the conservative revival of the 1980s sought to bring back the 1950’s mindset of the nuclear family in order to overcome this uneasiness. On the other hand, inventing new terms to address marginalized communities often even caused “awkwardness” as these new ways of addressing them caused confusion on how to actually address these groups (Ibid.). In this development, neoliberal ideology with its focus on the individual was also unable to provide guiding norms which guaranteed a social order (Ibid., 18).

While these emancipatory movements have caused more culturally diverse people and white women to enter the middle class workforce, with no clear “right” way of relating to women and non-white people in a less hierarchical position also causes feelings of uneasiness (Ibid., 19).

This absence of a clear social order is utilized by Kotsko to explain the era-defining comic modes. He points at Woody Allen's cynicism and nihilism as an outcome of the “ideological vacuum” of the 1970 (Ibid., 17). The 1990s brought a cool, distanced irony best seen in *Seinfeld* (Ibid., 19) Kotsko writes that this detached style of comedy is caused by the prevalence of neoliberal capitalism and the end of the cold war; As there is no higher cause left in the form of ideology of religion, one cannot do otherwise than embrace anything sincerely and instead relate to the world in an insincere way. The author poses that by the early aughts, this comic style of ironic detachment was “tired” and that “awkwardness” became the replaced it as a new domineering comic mode (Ibid., 19). Shows such as *The Office* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* show how *awkwardness* manifests the same kind of uneasiness towards individuals and the world around them but in their case they really try.

While Kotsko writes that *awkwardness* somewhat replaced irony as a domineering comic mode because it became too outlived perhaps is perhaps somewhat a bit disputable. It is worthy to mention that in her *New Yorker* essay, *The Awkward Age*, Elif Batuman provides a different explanation to why such an affect as awkwardness seems to have thrived so much in the first decades of the 2000’s (2014). She argues that events such as the Iraq War expose the difficulty of living under an economic system and government that exploit and act immorally, while still requiring individuals to function within them (Ibid.). Batuman writes the following:

“Awkward” implies both solidarity and implication. Nobody is exempt. Awkwardness comes from the realization that, when you look around the world, it’s difficult to identify anyone who isn’t either the victim or the beneficiary of injustice. Awkward moments remind us that we are

never isolated individuals, and that we are seldom correct when we say, "Not in my name." Awkward moments are, by definition, relatable. Hence the tagline for "Curb Your Enthusiasm": "Deep inside you know you're him." (Ibid.)

Either way, it is perhaps safe to argue *awkwardness* is part of the cultural wave of "new sincerity", which portrays subject lost and detached but without the nihilism which characterized post-modernism. The awkward subject perhaps seeks to *genuinely* connect it is detached from, without properly knowing how. In this way, the *awkwardness* expresses something existensial.

Office Awkwardness

In the second chapter of his book, Kotsko discussed the workplace awkwardness as seen in both the UK and US versions of *The Office*. Although characters like David Brent and Michael Scott seem like inherently awkward individuals, the author makes the claim that there are internal contradictions which "*point toward the possibility that the contemporary white collar workplace is inherently awkwardness-inducing*" (Ibid., 24). He argues that *vague* white collar work as seen best in *The Office* and Mike Nichols' *Office Space* (1999) portray work which is hard to identify with as the outcome is unclear and much of the labour performed behind is computers, increasing this detachedness (Ibid., 29).

The meaninglessness and unfulfillingness of this work is best described of course by David Graeber and his notion of the "bull shit job". Looking at his work provides a better account than the sometimes hasty writing of Kotsko. In 2013, he published an essay in *Strike Magazine* called *On the phenomenon of bullshit jobs*, which he would later work out in the 2018 book simply called *Bullshit Jobs*. In this essay, Graeber asks himself why there are so many jobs in the financial and service sector (jobs brought to us by post-fordism) which seem to be extremely unnecessary and pointless. He argues these positions cause a "profound physical violence" for those practicing such jobs (he lists "CEOs, lobbyists, PR researchers, actuaries, telemarketers, bailiffs or legal consultants" as examples) also often fully acknowledge the meaninglessness and futility of their labour (Ibid). Expressing a similar sentiment regarding post-Fordist office work, Kotsko writes that the Fordist worker perhaps rhetorically asked themselves "*What am I doing?*", having a sense that the work they do could be more well spent but that the fruits of their labour would always be clear (Ibid., 31). The post-Fordist worker however, would have a harder time answering such questions, as the work seems to add little value to anything. The author even describes an imposter-like sentiment: "*(...) it feels like getting paid for it can't continue forever, like someone is going to figure out what's going on and send you home.*" (Ibid.).

It is within this context that it seems somewhat logical that the protagonist of *The Office* is the *manager*, being somewhat the pinnacle of these awkward labour conditions (Ibid.) . Discussing Ricky Gervais' David Brent, Kotsko states his overidentification with the role of manager is the *outcome* of this absence of his job contributing to anything is so extremely vague (Ibid., 35). He argues that this self-aggrandization serves as a justification to compensate for this meaninglessness (Ibid.).

Near the end of his discussion on *The Office*, Kotsko situates Brent's overidentification in contrast to the ironic detachment practiced at a certain point by the US Office's Jim (Ibid.,

36). To him, these are both stances which attempt to *overcome* the awkwardness of the working place which only lead to more of it as they further would make uncomfortable and feel uneasy (Ibid., 36-37).

Although our case study, *De Luizenmoeder*, does not take place in such a “bullshit job”-office, the show seems to successfully transplant the affects of awkward- and cringiness to the context of Dutch public school. Most of the awkwardness we encounter in the series seems to evolve more around uneasiness concerning differences in culture or gender. Although this awkwardness is certainly not limited to the subject of this research, manager Anton seems to be the *absolute pinnacle* of awkwardness in the show; much like David Brent is that in *The Office*. The idea of this wannabe- ideal manager functioning in the everyday, humbling practice of an elementary school seems to be an already *awkward fit*. There seems to be an extreme contradiction between the cause of educating young children and the efficiency-driven discourse of post-Fordist manager: A simple get together can already be dubbed by Anton as a *brainstorm!* Furthermore, the uneasiness regarding the outcome of work might not apply to proficient teachers like Ank and Helga but the added value of many of Anton’s activities seems to be sometimes unclear. Especially when it concerns the many over-the-top events and self-made methods with which Anton seems to pre-occupy himself with. In this manner, Kotsko’s theorized pathology of Brent’s overidentification also seems to apply to Anton: with self-aggrandization only leading to more awkwardness.

Awkwardness as a Comic Movement

Awkward encounters can also be regarded as “comic movements”. A confusion or absence of guiding norms on how to properly, *smoothly* interact and then how to subsequently deal with is not a far stray away from Zupančič’s toffee-nosed baron; One *slips*, attempts to get up in a *face-saving* way and walks on until the next slip.

I have actually already discussed some encounters which we can retrospectively also recognize as *awkward*. For example, the performance review with Helga held by Anton seems awkward in the sense that the elder teacher wants to skip over the management-speak of empowerment while Anton uses this discourse to euphemistically suggest that she can retire early. In this sense, the afore-discussed difference of interest might also induce a social interaction in which there is no clarity on *how* to behave if both parties adhere to a different set behavioural norms on how to deal with this.

Either way, let’s look at some “awkard” comic movements regarding Anton and his dealings with non-Dutch cultures. Good examples of this can be found in *Harikiri* (season 2; episode 7). After having celebrated Easter in an extravagant manner (by performing a *Klimop*-version of the Dutch media spectacle *The Passion*), the parents of Achmed would like to talk to Anton on organize a festivity which educates on Islamic culture. Anton welcomes them, sided by Nancy, in his office. The scene which then plays out contains some “awkward” comic movements. It starts off with Anton offering Achmed and Esma (played by Walid Benmarek and Dunya Khayame) by offering them a cup of tea. We see him pouring the hot water into a glass cup, with him drawing the kettle further and further away. It is clear Anton is emulating a Moroccan tea ritual in his office. He goes on and offers the Pickwick

"Moroccan Mint" tea, showing them the half open box as if he were offering them some oriental treasures.

There is already much we can elaborate on in this scene regarding "awkwardness". What seems to constitute this affect of unease is Anton's idea of how to treat Moroccan-descent (and by extension all Islamic) people. Our manager thinks he is doing the "right thing" by performing gestures he thinks belong to Moroccan culture, adopting a "welcoming" stance towards "foreigners". The obvious joke here is of course that the people sitting are not represents of the exotic Other Anton think they are. This awkwardness of this joke very much depends also upon the visual outlook of this scene. Achmed parents sit across him, not representing the travel guide-marocca Anton has in his mind. Instead, these are "real" Maroccans, culturally accustomed and behaving just like other Dutch-descent characters. Them not responding to these gestures seems to enhance further the "awkwardness" of this scene.

This stance of being "welcoming" and becoming extremely appreciative also seems to be very much induced by Anton's managerial pretensions. As I mentioned earlier, Boltanski and Chiapello described how the discourse on the post-fordist manager very much imagined the ideal manager to "look ahead" and anticipate changes, also in the form of upcoming new markets.

Such sentiments are also decisive in Anton's motivation to organize an event which has to do with Islamic culture; or, at least how he wants it to come across. Sitting in the teacher's lounge, he informs Ank, Helga and Volkert about this planned event. While Ank and Helga initially do not understand why such an event needs to be organized, the school only has one Islamic student, Anton insists upon organizing it since he is "anticipating" upon a future with much more Muslim students. However, Nancy, also sitting at the table, then tells Ank that Anton promised Achmed parents to organize something. Anton is agitated by this additional remark and insists upon the "higher goal" of letting De Klimop be a school which is tolerant and welcoming to "all cultures". He first proposes that the children could participate in Ramadan by fasting for one day. Ank and Helga dismiss this idea and Helga then proposes to do something with food, on which everyone agrees. Anton organises an iftar-theme night called *Ramadanmadoendan*. On the evening of the event, we see the manager entering the decorated gymnasium dressed in kantra, a kaftan-like clothing piece. Amir then offers a cup of *harira* soup to Anton. Anton, again attempting to display his familiarity with the world, calls the soup *harikiri*. After Amir corrects him, Anton realizes *harikiri* is the name of the notorious Japanese suicide ritual. While correcting himself, Anton makes the gestures of piercing himself with a knife. Amir does not respond laughingly to the manager's correction and tacitly stares at him bemused by Anton's mistake. Anton then leaves the scene and joins some other people, embarrassed by his mistakes. This whole sequence is schoolbook awkward. First of all, it again seems to evolve around the dynamic in which Anton presents himself as a knowledgeable cosmopolite who is familiar with Moroccan customs. The "slip" of confusing *harira* with *harikiri* then suggests he cannot even keep apart terms coming from vastly different cultures. His attempt to "get up from the fall" seems to make the situation more awkward. Again, it takes two to (awkwardly) tango; Had Samir responded to Anton in an understanding way, or laughed at his *harikiri*-impression, Anton's mistake would have been compensated. Instead, his non-responsive reaction.



Figure 2.1.: Anton mimicking harakiri

So, to recapitulate all that I have written above, the comedy of manager Anton is very much characterized by a sense of awkwardness. Firstly, there is the unease of the manager figure in an elementary school. The discourse and methods feel extra grotesque when confronted with the “everyday reality” of *De Klimop*, in which the corporate-thinking of the manager feel out of place. Secondly, following Kotsko’s pathology of David Brent, the futility of much of Anton’s practices seem to lead to a self-aggrandization which further make him further detached from how to behave according to the normal social order.

However, Kotsko’s argument was not simply dependent upon one person. Instead, his account made the case “awkwardness” as a mode would have caused by a lack or unclarity of how to relate to the world: An existential uneasiness caused by a series of developments which have exacerbated precarity and waves of emancipation. Indeed, when watching the show, almost all characters are guilty of being “awkward” (Helga seems to be the exception): Hannah has trouble in responding properly to the “moedermaffia” of Mel and Kim; Karel’s idealistic and sexually liberal parenting methods are often bit “too free” for the other cast members and Ank (especially early on in the show), although well-meaning, makes plentiful mistakes in addressing non-Dutch people. Kotsko argued David Brent is the epitome of awkwardness of his local Wernham Hogg office; Anton seems to take a similar position in *De Klimop*.

When I turned to the finale of the *Send in the Clowns* episode for the first time, I argued that Anton’s many flaws as a manager can be understood as that which makes him part of *De Klimop* (as opposed to the external “real” managers). Perhaps we can address this scene also as Anton’s *overcoming* of his awkwardness by acknowledging his *clownish* self and incapacity to be the manager who he often thinks he is. Note how the troubled and *awkward* family Hoover in *Little Miss Sunshine* (Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton 2006) also seems to overcome its own shortcomings by collectively dancing to *Super Freak* on stage during a perverse beauty competition for young girls and overcoming its own *cringe*. Thus, instead of compensating for awkwardness like Anton did in the discussed small exchange with Samir,

which only leads to further *falling*; an acknowledgement of one's uneasiness might induce an affect based upon the understanding that *everyone is awkward*, as the kind of comedy *De Luizenmoeder* employs seems to imply.

2.2.2. Comic Movement II: Zaniness

The second comic mode which characterizes the comedy of manager Anton is that of *zaniness*. Although perhaps a hard to grasp notion when used in everyday life (a direct Dutch translation of the word does not seem to exist), in the sense that everyone knows what it refers to but fails when attempting to fully bring it to words. However, we do not have to do that as I will be using Sianne Ngai's conceptualization of the term as an *aesthetic category*. By aesthetic category, the author refers to the *everyday* categorizations one uses to describe objects and subjects. In *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* Ngai provides thorough accounts of these 3 three and their particular relevance in a world shaped by "the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism" (2012, 1).

To Ngai, the aesthetic relevance of the contemporary use of *zaniness* refers to the increasing precarity and flexibility under post-fordist working conditions. Characterizing this paradigm as one in which service work-jobs demand a constant sense of performativity towards customers ("Be open! Be kind!" Be true to yourself!"); and the "temporary roles" such work demand; *zaniness* is the *aesthetic* which expresses the stress and precarity experienced under such labour (Ibid., 201-202). When someone (or something, but I will leave that out of discussion in this chapter) is *zany*, one performs so full of conviction that it disrupts the seamlessness which belongs to convincingly performing such a role or task: one overperforms their part (Ibid., 179) . She attributes the relevance of this aesthetic also to increased labour precarity; Out of uncertainty on whether one can keep or get a certain position, one gets *zany* when one's job guarantee can depend upon it. Next to this, Ngai adds that the shifting demands of work, which are less about "objective exigencies" and

more about “subjective attitudes” also cause an increasing sense of uncertainty on whether a job is performed “right” (Ibid., 10). This then also leads to the *zany* worker who overperforms their work. In the introductory section of her chapter on zaniness, *Zany Science*, Ngai argues zaniness is a mode of comedy rendered by the expectations of post-fordist labour. She rhetorically asks the question:

“If the Fordist/Taylorist capitalism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made people laugh at characters incapable of adjusting to new roles and social situations quickly (an inflexibility Bergson famously captures in his image of “something mechanical encrusted on the living”), how does one respond to characters who seem almost too good at doing so?” (Ibid., 174)

Thus, to recapitulate in my own words: with her chapter on zaniness, Ngai seeks to argue that *zaniness* (in its modern iterations) provides a comedy of the post-fordist work, with its ideals of flexibility, adaptability and service-oriented skills; Zaniness is a mode in which seamlessly sliding into a different role/persona is disrupted by doing this with *too much* enthusiasm that it becomes laughable and obnoxious.

Ngai writes on this:

“The unfunnyness of total or absolute adaptability, while arguably brought to a head by the flexible network capitalism of our current moment, goes a long way toward explaining the discomforting aspect of all of modernity’s zanies. Far from being “divinely untroubled,” zaniness projects the “personality pattern” of the subject wanting too much and trying too hard: the unhappily striving wannabe, poser or arriviste. The utter antithesis of ironic cool (..).” (Ngai 2012, 189)

Ngai provides a few examples of *zany* characters. I will discuss two of them to further explain her conceptualization.

The most prominent example appearing in Ngai’s text is that of Lucy Ricardo, protagonist of legendary sitcom *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), played by Lucille Ball. In the show, Lucille performs all kinds of tasks which require a different skill, all for the sake of “making it” in showbiz or either being a housewife (Ibid., 175). To Ngai, Lucy Ricardo anticipates the intersection between post-fordist service work and the unpaid reproductive labour of a stay-at-home-mother, which both require *affective labour* and being able to perform (and quickly learn) multiple skills (Ibid.). However, the many different tasks and schemes undertaken by Lucille are never executed in the *right* manner, something which seems to bear a relationship with her determination to end up in show business (just like her husband Ricky). This ongoing series of *bad* performances is what seems to make Lucille so *zany*; all the different *roles* (visually expressed by the different costumes she wears for each occasion) she takes on are always *off*. Something which seems to be definitive in describing zaniness as a comic mode for the post-fordist age.

Another example listed is that of the dark comedy *The Cable Guy* (Ben Stiller, 1996). The titular character, played by Jim Carrey, is an over-committed electrician whose *services* exceed that of installing the electricity cables at the house of architect Steven (Matthew Broderick). The cable guy interferes in the love life of the just-single architect; buys him a home stereo set and more, all under the veil of *service*. This extreme dedication is accompanied by exaggerated performances of basketball and karaoke which give further expression to this (Ibid., 198-199). Without going into further detail, Carrey's character is also an example of *zaniness* and its relationship to post-fordist labour. What binds these two characters is their assigned *role* as providers of services. Ngai writes:

"It is precisely the cable guy's generic role as "service provider", that commits him to being a being a basketball player, a medieval knight, a rock singer, and a party guest, much in the same way Lucy's status as housewife and would-be actor commits her to being an agent, a saleslady, a magician's assistant and a ballet dancer." (201).

In the next section, we will see how Anton's positionality as a *wannabe* manager also seems to turn him into a *zany* figure; striving to be visionary, entrepreneurial and assertive while making a fool of himself.

Zaniness as a Comic Movement

It's perhaps not hard to find a link between the highlighted failed performances of the *zanies* discussed by Ngai and the *comic movements* of Zupančič. Zaniness shows how the subject fails to deliver a seamless performance, often taking on the role of someone else. The comedy of this then seems to be that the subject, attempting to take on a different role but *whilst* playing it, is still very much the person the subject it is trying to mask off. The *failure* to convincingly deliver such a performance is then what we can identify as *zany*. The multiplicity of different roles and performances taken on by the subject then also seem to make a character more *zany* and thus more funny, as this would only highlight the overload of enthusiasm and committedness of the character.

Anton's role as manager, with its ideals of *leadership*, *creativity vision* and so-forth seems to be very much defined by *qualities of character* than the concrete output he delivers, making his job more dependent upon his personality (Ibid., 203-204) In this way, there's an increased uncertainty to whether when his job is performed *right*. His over-identification with the role of manager, perhaps also motivated by the aforementioned *awkward* position of such a role in a public elementary school, turns him a character who wants to make himself known desperately as the *ideal manager*.

This over-determinacy then makes him incompetent to perform properly, making him a "striving wannabe". *De Luizenmoeder* contains many cases in which the plot seems to evolve around one of Anton's many schemes culminating in a *performance* in which our manager operates as focal point. As I stated before, the *zaniness* seems to lay in the repetition of such performances and perhaps not in one single case; as this gives expression to the multiplicity of demanded roles and skills (Ibid., 202). However, I will discuss one of Anton's most evident *zany* moments.

The case I would like to discuss is that of *Winterklaas*, appearing in the titular fifth episode of the first season. Attempting to avoid the debate concerning black pete and to make the

festivities more inclusive, Anton replaces Sinterklaas with *Winterklaas*: the brother of Sinterklaas who lives on the north pole and is assisted by polar bears. Besides being inclusive, *Winterklaas* also informs children about the catastrophes of climate change. In this way, this new alternative to the traditional Sinterklaas serves multiple purposes. He even summons Volkert to compose songs to his self-written *Winterklaas* songs. When one of Rianne's father Kenneth, wants to play a "brown polar bear", Anton refuses to do this as his black skin colour conjures up associations with Black Pete. This already displays how the manager's rigid fixation upon his scheme betrays its supposed goal of the *colourblind* *Winterklaas*. However, Anton later on solves this "problem" by suggesting Kenneth's face should be painted white. This follow-up joke which further implies how *Winterklaas* rather seems to invoke exclusion and whiteness rather than being inclusive. The manager attempts to attract media coverage on *Winterklaas* by inviting a journalist to *De Klimop*, to whom he explains his concepts, helped by a maquette. Both the maquette and the desired media attention are signifiers of the grandiosity with which Anton executes his project.

This blind faith into his newly developed solution to the then ongoing debate on Black Pete seems to be funny for *zany* reasons. There is the extreme dedication towards his freshly invented tradition: It rather feels like an ignorant passion project than a convincing initiative to promote inclusion. Something which further stresses Anton's extreme involvement into being an ideal, visionary manager which is so grotesque that it exceeds this purpose. In fact, his superior Pjotr-Jan wants Anton to call *Winterklaas* off. The zaniness of this whole endeavour gets crystallized in a concrete comic movement at the end of episode, in which we see Anton dressed up as *Winterklaas* *sliding* over the schoolyard sided by his polar bears. Although Pjotr-Jan already attends the school dressed up as Sinterklaas, Nancy came up with the idea of his "cousin" *Winterklaas* welcoming him at *De Klimop*. We see Anton delivering his long-desired performance as *Winterklaas* in front of the school's students, parents and *hulpsint* Pjotr-Jan. After stating he came to The Netherlands to ask for more attention on the melting pole caps, Ursula accidentally pushes over Anton's *Winterklaas*. He falls hard to the ground, starting a riot amongst parents, which aesthetically borrows from a warzone.²

Winterklaas proves to be a complete mistake, the overly ambitious project to offer an alternative seems to backfire. Whereas Anton hoped to attract media attention which praised him, the opposite seems to have happened. We also see that *Winterklaas* has made it to national television but not in the positive, celebratory way Anton earlier hoped to provoke. Instead, a clip of *Winterklaas* falling over is aired as a "funny video" during a broadcast of *De Wereld Draait Door*. More grimly, a newspaper claims Anton "succumbs to Islam" by introducing an inclusive alternative to Sinterklaas.

All of this seems to reveal that the *zany* comedy of this episode relies upon a schemer who, through his pretension to be a good manager, fails to *perform* righteously. Thinking he would be praised for his visionary and creative solution, Anton misunderstood how this character would land in a crowd of parents who found such alternatives to Sinterklaas too drastic. The new songs; the small details on the theatrics of the feast; the maquette and the press coverage all further emphasize Anton's grand ambitions.

² Although I only focus on Anton's *zany* part, this episode also contains subplots centred around disputes and sentiments on *how* to celebrate Sinterklaas.



Figure 2.2.: Anton as Winterklaas with polar bear Nancy

Ngai notes how zany characters are often accompanied by *fellow* zanies who only enforce their delusional enthusiasm (Ibid., 182). In our case, this fellow zany is obviously Nancy who helps to bring to life Anton's project out of her desire to be with him. Seeing it as some gesture of love, she finds it an honour to play the *head-polar bear*. To the audience, this response of Nancy rather articulates her desperateness to have Anton's love. A desperateness which motivates her to take part in grotesque over-performances of Anton. And for what? After the fighting scene on the school yard, we see Anton bruised and still bleeding in his office. After discussing this debacle with Pyotr-Jan, Nancy attempts to get intimate with our manager while saying she is "very proud" of his efforts to organize an inclusive festivity. Nancy then tries to kiss him, but when her lips touch Anton's, he exclaims that it hurts. This moment seems to illustrate that her great devotion goes unrewarded. We can perhaps even draw an analogy between her affection and his ambition to embody the ideal manager: In both cases, excessive eagerness results in overperformance and, consequently, in failure.

Thus, similar to what I said about *awkwardness*; although these comic movements very much originate in the premise of Anton convincedness of his managerhood; *zaniness* is not exclusive to the manager only. With this final observation I will close this chapter in which I discussed two prevailing comic modes which bear a close relationship to post-fordist working conditions. To avoid redundancy, I save my further concluding remarks for my final conclusion, which addresses this whole research.

Final Conclusion

In this extensive paper, I sought to provide a further understanding of the manager-character which has appeared in so many popular workplace comedies. I paid special attention to highlighting how this manager character is shaped by the discourses and working conditions that are considered part of the economic culture of post-Fordism. *De Luizenmoeder* provides an interesting case as it displays this type of post-Fordist manager can also be *transported* to the sphere of a public school. Something which can be explained by the decades-long trend of *marketization* of education.

Analyzing the characterization of manager Anton revealed an *ambiguous* position. Ambiguous in the sense that on the one hand, he seems to agitate his colleagues due to his poor performance as a manager in which he so bluntly deceives his staff to serve the interest of his own self-aggrandizing ambitions and that of the umbrella-organization *De Koepel*. However, *due* to this unconvincing performance of Anton as a manager, none of his gestures come across *real*. Instead, what we see is a man who aims *to be* a manager but never virtually is. However, interestingly enough, Anton's striving character ultimately preferred above "real managers". The series presents a series of other manager characters who execute their job but more importantly, their *role* much better than Anton. The dull Agnes and *techbro* Thomas are both antagonistic managers who want to "take over" the school and change it for the worst. Both introduce an increase of rules (in Agnes case it is never executed, only strongly suggested) which hinder the teacher in doing their job. In this light, Anton is rather concerned as harmless as Ank, Helma and Volkert can easily overrule him. In this sense, Anton is not even considered as a manager. This becomes most apparent in the two times when Ank directly articulates her despise against management: "*Managers and education, you have to distrust that combination*".

In the second chapter, I turned to explaining the comedy of Anton which is telling about the mental demands of post-Fordist labour. I argued that Anton seems to be such a funny character due to his constant self-delusion that *he really is a manager*, while we as a

manager see his *not*; we see a manager who is convinced he is a *manager*. Using Zupančič's theory of comedy, I discussed two *comic movements*: Awkwardness and zaniness. Both his uneasy ways and extreme dedication cannot be understood as merely personal quirks; they emerge from his positionality as a manager and his attempts to practice this role properly. In this sense, his eccentricities are not merely individual traits but responses to the structural mental demands of post-Fordist labor.

I started this text with a prologue in which I described how much fiction on the workforce evolves around characters losing their "lives" to their jobs. We must rephrase this formulation in the case of our subject: Anton lives his life "through" work. What does this mean? Like the "evil bosses", Anton overidentifies with his job. But in his case there seems to be a twist which confronts us with something else: He puts so much of *himself* in his job that he becomes dysfunctional. His inherent awkwardness and zany scheming are both symptomatic of the post-Fordist working condition and the mental capacities it demands. Paolo Virno argued post-Fordism is characterized by a type of labor which demands someone's *total being*: Diffusing the line between work and play, professional and private; demanding thus this channeling of all one's libidinal force into their profession (204, 102-104). Silicon Valley companies like Pixar, Apple and Google set the model for building campuses which offered all sort of amenities to employees "to help them do their job and get away from their job" (Flaig 2016, 69). Following the rationale of lean-manufacturing, these tiki bars, free breakfast cereals and inspiration-inducing decorations served a function: provoking "creativity" from workers which they can eventually channel in their work (Ibid.). Perhaps we could say that Anton's campus is *De Klimop*, his drives, fantasies and desires are all lived through his profession. Little is known of his private life, we only learn that he has a mother and an Islamic friend. When Anton in an episode remarks to Ank that she has to keep "private life and work separate", she snarkingly remarks: "*Private life? "You?"*" I earlier mentioned how Ank is portrayed as repressed in her identity as *juf Ank*, which betrays that she is *more* than just a teacher but also a woman. However, whereas she keeps parts of her life at home; Anton brings all of *himself* to work. So perhaps Anton confronts us with what Zupančič formulates as the "universal becoming concrete" with him embodying the "ideology" of post-Fordism, showing its pitfalls, false presumptions and perhaps hazardous effects when confronted with the "concrete" of everyday reality. Falling over again and again.

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Figure 0.1: *The Corporation*. Poster. Directed by Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott. Canada: Big Picture Media, 2003.

Figure 0.2: *The Devil Wears Prada*. Poster. Directed by David Frankel. USA: 20th Century Fox, 2006.

Figure 0.3., 0.4.: "*Het zijn altijd de nieuwkomers*." Screenshots from the episode *Het zijn altijd de nieuwkomers*, *De Luizenmoeder* (Netherlands: VPRO, 2018). Screenshot by author.

Figure 1.1.: "*Kanjertraining*." Screenshot from the episode *Kanjertraining*, *De Luizenmoeder* (Netherlands: VPRO, 2018). Screenshot by author.

Figure 1.2.: "*Gezien als meisje*." Screenshot from the episode *Gezien als meisje*, *De Luizenmoeder* (Netherlands: VPRO, 2019). Screenshot by author.

Figure 1.3., 1.4.: "*Send in the Clowns.*" Screenshot from the episode *Send in the Clowns, De Luizenmoeder* (Netherlands: VPRO, 2018). Screenshot by author.

Figure 1.5.: *Luizenmoeder – De Film.*" Screenshot from *Luizenmoeder – De Film* (Netherlands: VPRO, 2021). Screenshot by author.

Figure 2.1.: "*Winterklaas.*" Screenshot from the episode *Winterklaas, De Luizenmoeder* (Netherlands: VPRO, 2018). Screenshot by author.

Figure 2.2: "*Harakiri.*" Screenshot from the episode *Harakiri*, directed by [Director's Name], *De Luizenmoeder* (Netherlands: VPRO, 2019). Screenshot by author.