

## METHOD IN THE MADNESS

An Anthropologist's *Pensée Sauvage*

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### INTRODUCTION

For those familiar with current Dutch anthropology, Jojada Verrips stands out as one of its figureheads and a colourful and inspiring personality. There is even something that might be dubbed 'Verripsian anthropology,' although he has never indulged in attempting to recruit a group of intellectual followers, let alone epigones. Yet it is clearly recognizable, owing to his deliberate, eloquent and meticulous style of writing, the kind of questions he poses and the way he tackles them. Although Verripsian anthropology is inextricably linked to Dutch anthropology, it would definitely be difficult to delineate a national slant or style of anthropology. If anything, rather than representing a national school of anthropological thought, Dutch anthropology is heterogeneous and connected with local paradigms and interests, and it is pretty much tied up with the influence of particular individual anthropologists (usually, but not always, full professors). Some have characterized it as being modest and refraining from grand theorizing (at least in the early 1980s). At the same time, however, it is thorough, serious and reliable; it is not confined by disciplinary boundaries, and Dutch anthropologists have a keen eye for complex processes and contexts (Bois-sevain and Blok 1984:341). As for Amsterdam, one might say that the common denominator has long been – and perhaps still is – theoretical eclecticism, methodological pragmatism and empirical precision, usually based on a diachronic and a more or less explicit comparative approach.

These singularities to some extent also apply to (a part of) Verrips's work, but what better distinguishes it are his unrelenting efforts to unmask some persistent social science myths about Western societies as abodes of scientific, rationalistic thinking that are implicitly or explicitly contrasted

with the purportedly irrational 'them' who are remote from 'us' in either distance or time. Such binary reasoning goes against the grain for him, and this also applies to dichotomies such as infrastructure/superstructure, body/mind, object/subject and complex/simple, to mention just a few such dualities. In the 1980s, Verrips began staking out new fields of inquiry that penetrated more or less *terra incognita*. Feeling ill at ease with the predominant social science view of societal processes in the West that were seen as evolving towards growing rationality, social control and self-control and 'civilization,' he started to develop an anthropology of the 'Wild (in the) West' – that is, seemingly bizarre, violent, disorderly, chaotic and uncivilized phenomena that he considers integral but neglected dimensions of Western societies. In addition, he examined magical-mythical modes of conceptualization and representation in the West, particularly in regard to material culture. Increasingly, this interest has also led him to study the role of the senses in perceptions, imagery and metaphorical and discursive representations of the world we inhabit, and all sorts of embodied phenomena. In this brief introduction to Verripsian anthropology, I will not attempt to cover all the aspects of his work. Rather, I will outline some important elements, showing various significant developments and sources of inspiration and will hopefully clarify why his work might be dubbed 'interpretive materialism.' To understand his early work, it is necessary to also devote some attention to his biography.

#### COMING TO TERMS WITH CALVINISM: AN ANTHROPOLOGIST AT HOME

Jojada Verrips was born in 1942 in the small agricultural community of Schoonrewoerd, situated in the province of South Holland. His father, Dirk Verrips (1895-1984), was a self-employed tailor-cum-barber. His mother, Anna Bos (1907-2000), was an enterprising spirit who in addition to keeping house traded material and served on the board of committees and a rural women's organization. She was a devout believer and church-goer. The village of Schoonrewoerd is a part of the Dutch Bible Belt.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, Jojada Verrips grew up in a geographic and social setting that was deeply impacted by a rather orthodox branch of Protestantism, subdivided into a number of sabbatarian denominations, the main ones being the Cal-

vinist Reformed (*Gereformeerden*) and the Dutch Reformed (*Hervormden*). This biographic fact was to have profound consequences on his career in anthropology. As Verrips himself relates, it was an environment

where a sharp distinction was made between body and mind, where the flesh, on the one hand, was associated with a lack of reason, distracting and therefore negative emotions, and in its wake with abject practices called sinful, and where the spirit, on the other hand, was associated with the promising presence of reason and rationality, the imprisonment of all kinds of irrational feelings, especially sexual and aggressive ones, and the inclination to behave as if these feelings did not exist. God was an ever-present eye watching over people, seeing each and everything one thought and did, and keeping account of all the times one became a victim of dark bodily desires, irrational longings and thoughts as well as forbidden fantasies cropping up from the crevices of a corrupted and therefore impure mind. Though I managed to say goodbye to this rather depressing type of Protestantism, I guess that it was due to this outspoken dualistic, ocular-centric and reason-oriented religious background that I later developed a keen interest in alternative ways of perceiving the relation between body and mind and especially in the importance and meaning of irrationality, emotionality and other sensorial sensations than the visual, in our relations with the landscape and humandscape we and others are part of (67:29-30).<sup>2</sup>

I have the distinct impression that his childhood memories are ambiguous. On the one hand, a staunch version of Calvinism permeated local life and it would take Verrips many years to come to terms with this background and thoroughly distance himself from the less pleasant sides of uncompromising religious convictions. On the other hand, his emphatic and empathic stories of local and family scenes he witnessed as a young lad are legendary and his recollections of the visits he paid with his ageing mother to the spot where her parents' farmstead used to be are engaging and moving (see 52). Though probably an urbanite at heart now, there still is the love for the flat and expansive landscape of his homeland with its green pastures crosscut by rivers and canals. Some of his poetry also expresses a melancholy relating to the environs of his youth and the submerged feelings of the local

populace that would easily surface and be set aflame over matters of belief. His attitude towards Calvinism fluctuates between fascination and resistance. Still, and possibly most important of all, as Verrips once intimated in an interview, 'a Calvinistic childhood is a social scientist's goldmine' (quoted in Borst 1988:9).

As a boy, Verrips had a collector's itch and he amassed many old farming implements and other objects in the attic of his parental home. Early on, he developed an interest in material culture and folklore which would later be rekindled.<sup>3</sup> After finishing his secondary education in 1961, he went to the country's capital to enrol as an anthropology student at the University of Amsterdam. It was an era in which professors were still in full control of academic matters and held venerable and authoritative (not to say: authoritarian) positions. Verrips's main tutor was André Köbben, an anthropologist of the functionalist persuasion who had done fieldwork in Ivory Coast and Suriname. It was Köbben who transformed anthropology in Amsterdam from old-fashioned *Volkenkunde* into a discipline grounded on thorough empirical and comparative research. In the early 1960s, he prodded a number of students into conducting fieldwork among the followers of a Dutch charismatic religious leader who believed himself to be Christ. It was a first step towards the rise of anthropology at home in the Netherlands. However, the usual course of affairs was that students joined a collective research programme. So did Verrips. In 1969, he did a three-month stint of fieldwork in Tunisia (27). Subsequently, he wrote the equivalent of a master's thesis concerning Lévi-Strauss's kinship theory, graduating with honours the same year.<sup>4</sup> He had his career cut out for him and Verrips joined the staff of the anthropology department in Amsterdam.

Meanwhile, Jeremy Boissevain was inaugurated as professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam in 1966. He gradually developed a network of anthropologists who did or aspired to do fieldwork in Europe. Something new was cooking not only regarding fieldwork venues, but theoretically as well. Functionalism, still the dominant paradigm then, was about to make way for new perspectives, including the methodological individualism of the transactional 'school' of which Boissevain was a figurehead. Moreover, historicizing anthropology emerged when Eric Wolf's work – particularly concerning peasant communities – gained in popularity. The new influences clearly impacted Verrips's ethnographic work.

When at the end of the 1960s he launched the idea of starting large-scale anthropological research at home, Boissevain immediately gave his support. In addition to Verrips, two colleagues – Carla Jonker and Lodewijk Brunt – participated in what was soon dubbed ‘the Alblasserwaard project.’ In 1970 and 1971 they did fieldwork for their Ph.D.s in small communities in the rural Alblasserwaard, a rather peripheral polder area located in the province of South Holland. Although several incidental anthropological research ventures in the Netherlands pre-dated the project, it definitely proved its worth and contributed to legitimizing anthropology at home. Following the Alblasserwaard project, the country was put more firmly on the ethnographic map. It was no longer exceptional for Dutch anthropologists to study people in their own backyard and the project gave a fillip to the ‘repatriation of anthropology.’ For his fieldwork, Verrips returned to an area that was proximate to his native soil: the small dairy village of Ottoland, which is situated at a distance of some twenty kilometres from Schoonrewoerd and also part of the Dutch Bible Belt. Here, Verrips studied the changing relations within and between the local churches, spanning a period of more than a hundred years. To an extent, this fascination harked back to his childhood in his native village, where Protestant denominations also vied for moral righteousness and power positions in local political arenas, including the church and municipal councils. Moreover, the villagers’ religious outlook on life in general, and in regard to issues like sin, guilt, salvation and predestination in particular, constituted an important core of the research.

Verrips struggled with the question of what kind of religious identity to present to the Ottolandiers: that of the non-believer he had meanwhile turned into or that of a pious Protestant adhering to one or another denomination. In the latter case, he would be feigning. Still, being profoundly familiar with matters of Protestant creed and believing he would have easier access to interlocutors, he chose this option for pragmatic and methodological reasons. In hindsight, he regarded it a wrong choice, as it forced him into a role of continually performing as if he were either orthodox or latitudinarian, depending on the informants he encountered. This flexibility probably undermined his credibility instead of reinforcing it. In other words, his lenient ‘methodological belief’ was counterproductive. Moreover, he began feeling guilty about putting on this act and he even started

thinking that one day he would be punished for it – feelings that in turn were pretty much determined by his religious upbringing. For a considerable time, he continued pondering the issue (67, 70). Thus, his fieldwork experience literally brought home existential issues he had been contemplating for some time. However, despite being gradually sucked into a personal crisis, he succeeded in obtaining lots of information and gaining a detailed insight into what made the Ottolandans tick: not only in religious affairs, but also in other domains of life such as their economy and social and political organization.

Returning to Amsterdam with a wealth of data, it would take Verrips several years to conclude his dissertation. For one thing, he had to come to terms with his fieldwork experience in a more or less familiar setting where religious matters dominated local life. For another thing, he was grappling with the puzzle of how to mould his copious information into the kind of multidimensional ethnographic monograph he envisioned: holistic, historical and contextual. Whilst working on it, academic discussions in Amsterdam on new theoretical avenues for social science intensified. An important event that would be instrumental in establishing both a group of anthropological Europeanists and a research paradigm was the organization in 1973 of an international symposium entitled ‘The Meaning of Small Communities in the Context of (Supra)-National Processes in Europe.’ It formulated the basic principles for an approach that, instead of studying communities as static and isolated units, emphasized the importance of a dynamic and contextual perspective. The research programme was published in *Beyond the Community* (Boissevain and Friedl 1975). Boissevain encouraged anthropologists to take an embedded approach and devote attention to social processes, while maintaining ‘real people’ and their transactional behaviour in the picture (Boissevain 1975). The ‘diachronic turn’ was also partly a corollary of developments in the University of Amsterdam’s sociology department, where Norbert Elias was a visiting professor in 1969 and Johan Goudsblom elaborated his ideas on a sociology of figurations, focusing on the social genesis of socio-cultural phenomena and on social linkages and the connectedness and interactions between various levels of social integration. Thus, Dutch ethnography turned away early from the synchronous, slice-of-time and insular descriptions of communities and social categories which were still typical of most con-



FIGURE 1 Jojada Verrips (left) and Jeremy Boissevain (right).

temporary mainstream ethnographies written by American and European anthropologists. In addition, some informal initiatives contributed to the institutionalization in Amsterdam of Europe as a field of anthropological study. Inspired by the germinating theoretical approaches, a group of young anthropologists from Amsterdam attempted to develop new analytical vistas. The shared interest in a diachronic and contextualizing approach made for considerable internal cohesion, particularly following the establishment in 1977 of the department Euromed (Europe and the Mediterranean Area), which was chaired by Jeremy Boissevain.<sup>5</sup>

Verrips actively took part in these debates and the onset of a new anthropological approach. Synthesizing work of several social scientists (among whom such strange bedfellows as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Eric Wolf, C. Wright Mills, Clifford Geertz, Fredrik Barth, Talal Asad, Norbert Elias and Johan Goudsblom), he developed a sensitizing framework, a conceptual matrix based on three basic fields of attention: landscape (ecosystem), humanscape (society) and mindscape (culture). This heuristic model enabled the organization of his fieldwork data so that it systematically dealt with interrelated ecological, economic, social and

cultural dimensions as well as time and spatial vectors.<sup>6</sup> Verrips applied it in his 1977 Ph.D. dissertation which was awarded a *cum laude*. It was subsequently published and saw several editions (5, 6, 57).<sup>7</sup> It deals with the relationships between and within various local religious groupings and their respective worldviews, and also highlights local power struggles and shifting power balances, particularly in the religious domain, which he links to processes of state formation and social differentiation. He shows that the local farmers' power in the village arena gradually declined in the process of modernization, the church constituting the political arena where they succeeded in maintaining their influence for a long time. Moreover, Verrips examines how the lifestyles and religious orientations of the Calvinist Reformed and the Dutch Reformed varied and changed over time and in turn had consequences for the degree of social integration, social control and social cohesion. It is a type of ethnographic monograph that, had it been published in English, would be a forerunner in discussions that began evolving internationally in the second half of the 1980s. With its scope of social embeddedness and its depth of diachronic processes, it was a ground breaking study. In the Netherlands, the book would prove to be paradigmatic, becoming an example for several Dutch anthropologists who conducted historical-anthropological community studies, and also for scholarly and historical studies on relations and conflicts between members of local-level religious denominations. Up until the time of its publication, sociologists and historians did not pay much attention to what was happening with respect to religion in village communities. They focused their attention predominantly on the national level, developing a keen research interest in what is termed 'compartmentalization' (*verzuijing*). The concept refers to the process, originating in the late nineteenth century, in which political parties, associations, unions and other institutions such as newspapers and later other media became closely affiliated with particular religious denominations. Although divisive on the face of it, compartmentalization in fact was at the same time an integrative process, since it led to denser social relations and networks within the denominations and their leaders usually sought full social and political integration into the nation.

What went largely unnoticed in such bird's-eye views was that local churches often had their own specific internal power struggles. Verrips's anthropological accounts made it abundantly clear that these were highly

significant. For example, in an early article published in *American Anthropologist* (1) he deals with a conflict between two factions within the *Gereformeerde* church of Ottoland. He shows that this factional strife – which on the face of it concerned the religious ‘truth’ – was inextricably intertwined with the rise of modern, liberal theology and the conservative resistance to it, and also with the destitute economic situation of the conservative dogmatists. In a sense, this article and later work (6, 10) also tackled one of the pervasive myths about Dutch orthodox Calvinists, namely that they were all *kleyne luyden* (literally ‘little people’) – people of small economic means belonging to the lower socio-economic strata. Zooming in on the local level proved that such an undifferentiated view was not borne out by empirical evidence. The local Calvinist Reformed did not predominantly belong to the lower classes but included many farmers and petty entrepreneurs who were lower middle class and comprised the village’s elite. Following Verrips’s publications, such local-level studies of ‘politics of religion’ became en vogue among Dutch historians, yielding a series of monographs in the 1980s and 1990s. They were mostly rather critical of Verrips’s analysis (see 57:xi-xiv), as most authors clung to the predominant interpretation and analysis of the class bias in the ranks of the Calvinist Reformed in the communities they studied. The critique was partly a consequence of Verrips’s encroachment of the historians’ turf. In the Netherlands, the rapprochement between anthropologists and historians was rather reluctant and haphazard. For example, when Verrips (11) published an account of mid-eighteenth-century religious cataclysm in several Dutch rural towns and villages, and hypothesized that ergot poisoning due to eating rye bread might *partly* explain why the upheaval occurred, the historians’ response concerning this materialist explanation was sceptical if not downright dismissive (13). They entirely missed the point Verrips sought to make in delineating the pathogenesis, namely that the mental and the material are closely connected and that social scientists and historians should pay attention to the nature of this link and the complex interplay between biological, structural and cultural phenomena and processes. It is perhaps the earliest instance of Verrips’s work that might be termed ‘interpretive materialism.’<sup>8</sup>

Let me briefly summarize the case. From 1749 until 1752, there were several brief and dispersed spells of religious ecstasy in the Dutch countryside. Women and children, especially, began crying during or after church serv-

ices, begged for conversion, shouted Jesus' name or renounced the Devil. Alternatively, some indulged in blasphemy. Physical symptoms included convulsions, hallucinations, sweating, hiccups and so on. The phenomenon caused commotion and disrupted local life, which was why religious and municipal authorities attempted to check it. However, it seemed to just peter out by itself after a short time. Contemporary theologian explanations and interpretations were of an exclusively religious nature: the convulsions and other symptoms were believed to be the Devil's work or emanating from anxieties concerning sin and salvation. Surely, when people reach the end of their analytical capabilities they use religion to make the incomprehensible comprehensible again, as Verrips (11:127-28) paraphrases Geertz's classic treatment of religion (Geertz 1966). However, it is Verrips's hypothesis that religious imagination may be caused by physical malfunctioning, while mimicking might play an additional role. The consumption of black bread was widespread in the areas and among the strata in which the phenomenon occurred at the time. It may have caused ergot poisoning, perhaps leading to the symptoms that contemporaries in turn explained in a religious framework to make the incomprehensible understandable. In analysing the case and attempting to overcome the Cartesian body/mind split, Verrips uses Norbert Elias as a straw man to launch his criticism against the latter's 'civilization theory' (Elias 1969), which largely ignores somatic processes. Verrips turns to 'biogenetic structuralists' like Charles Laughlin and Eugene d'Aquili as a source of inspiration (Laughlin and d'Aquili 1974; d'Aquili, Laughlin and McManus 1979). In short, he states that controlling affects and passions ('psychogenesis') depends as much on what occurs and develops *between* people ('sociogenesis') as on what happens *inside* them ('biogenesis') (see also 59:23). Therefore, 'civilization' may be accompanied or surpassed by 'de-civilization' or 'barbarization.'<sup>9</sup>

Verrips further developed these arguments contra Elias in a 1983 theoretical piece dealing with ritual (15). Again, he foregrounds the impact of somatic processes on social and cultural phenomena, a theme he deems unduly ignored by Elias and many other social scientists. Reviewing a number of cases in which performing a ritual leads to a loss of cognitive, emotional and physical self-control, he argues that rituals bring about temporary changes in social, cognitive and motor behaviour. The two then dominant anthropological approaches towards rituals were concerned

with, on the one hand, their expressive, communicative and symbolic functions and meanings, and, on the other hand, the types of psychological dissociations and altered states of consciousness rituals effect. Still, the somatic processes leading to particular sensorial sensations, emotions and bodily reactions were treated as a 'black box' residing in the brain and the nervous system. Once more Verrips turns to biogenetic structuralists to get at this neuro-anthropological enigma, this time focusing on the work of Barbara Lex (1979). The details of the approach need not concern us here. The important point is that Verrips calls his colleagues to account by emphasizing that a truly holistic approach requires that anthropologists devote attention to what goes on in the brain so as to help explain what goes on between and in people (see also 59:35). This does not mean that the one determines the other, as it concerns co-evolutionary and intertwined processes. However, it is insufficient to stop short at interpretation and fail to take the material dimension into consideration.

#### ON SOLIDARITY, ANIMATED OBJECTS AND OTHER SUBJECTS

Whereas in the 1970s the emphasis in Dutch anthropology was on community studies researched from a diachronic and embedded perspective, at a later stage Dutch anthropologists began to focus on less specifically localized socio-cultural formations and phenomena. This turn was inextricably connected with the fact that conducting classical field research in a complex society and culture, departing from holistic principles and seeking to devote attention to various relevant aspects and interdependencies, proved extremely difficult if not impossible.<sup>10</sup> Those who had previously attempted to carry out such an encompassing and historicizing village study often made sure not to get involved in it again. Among those who turned away from conducting research in a community of place was Verrips. His second major stint of fieldwork (1980-1981) was among Dutch inland bargees, an itinerant occupational community living on their vessels, usually with a spouse, and sometimes their young children as well.

Most bargemen are independent and self-employed entrepreneurs, operating in small family firms usually based on occupational inheritance. Verrips's research yielded a number of publications, including a book that he

characterized as being 'mainly social history' (35). The book and several articles (14, 18, 23, 31) do, however, tackle an important social issue: the problem of sustained solidarity and collective action. Organization of these petty entrepreneurs has indeed time and again suffered from major setbacks. Scores of barge-masters' associations and unions have arisen and rapidly disappeared according to a similar pattern and few in existence today can pride themselves on a relatively long lifespan. The reasons why mutual solidarity cannot be sustained in the form of stable associations are the internal differentiation of the occupational community and the fundamental ambivalence of the bargees concerning their individual and collective adaptive strategies, especially when the economic tide is changing. Furthermore, their relations with shipping agents, who act as middlemen between bargees and shippers, are ambiguous. When the market is slack, many bargemen opt for a 'vertical strategy' by maintaining relations with these intermediaries and neglecting the horizontal ties with their colleagues. But they also perceive these middlemen, on whom they depend for a livelihood, as exploiters.

Religion was not an overriding theme in Verrips's research among bargees. It only briefly surfaces, because several associations of bargemen have a confessional background and their collective organization is thwarted to some extent by social compartmentalization based on religious denomination. Still, matters of belief are not as pervasive and intrusive as they are in Bible Belt communities. This fact perhaps provided a way for Verrips to cope with the detrimental psychological effects the Ottoland inquiries had had on him. Writing up the Ottoland material had possibly created system in the madness in that it had given order to his private experiences of Calvinism. Still, according to himself he was unable to empathize with the bargemen to the extent he had with his interlocutors in the orthodox Protestant village. The research among bargemen did lead him into a new field of enquiry, however. A topic Verrips dealt with in his bargee research concerns the naming of the barges, and the 'surface meaning' and especially the 'hidden meaning' of these names, which are indicative of a deeply anthropomorphic perception of the vessels (20, 34). A bargeman perceives his boat as 'feminine' and symbolically as an extension of his own body, which explains why he expects other people to also deal with this material object as a being, to wit himself. This requires particular modes of (spatial) behaviour aboard ship where certain areas may not be 'touched.'<sup>11</sup>

The 'hidden' significance of barges led Verrips on to examining the magical-mythical representations and conceptions of other material objects. It was an explicit critique of the evolutionist and 'Lévy-Bruhlian' perspective of Norbert Elias who posited that animistic thinking declined along with increasing control of nature, as well as the tenacious idea of the *Entzauberung der Welt* (disenchantment of the world) that was supposed to have occurred in the West. However, in a number of articles (39, 43, 59, 66) Verrips shows that animistic and anthropomorphic thinking has not declined but has, on the contrary, increased along with technological developments because 'more and more things are produced that just like human beings really seem to be able to think and even feel' (43:36). The alleged clear-cut distinction between object and subject is increasingly blurred – if such a rift has ever existed at all. Objects can be 'subjects,' while subjects can be 'objects.' Some other permutations are possible, too. One can find a plethora of examples of such anthropomorphic and animistic representations of things in children's books, comics, cinema (especially science fiction and horror movies) and tv commercials. However, it is not just these 'fantastic' images that are indicative of turning objects into subjects. In 'real life,' many people also attribute human-like traits to things. They are often given personal names, are referred to as members of a 'family' or belonging to a 'generation,' are ascribed a personality and sometimes a gender as well. Machines, robots and computers in particular seem to have an independent 'will' and can either be benevolent toward human beings or go berserk. With the increasing complexity of high-tech objects, many people are incapable of understanding how, exactly, they work. Especially if these objects malfunction, their users lapse into a 'fantasy orientation' and wonder why 'the thing didn't "do" what I wanted,' as the apt title of Verrips's piece runs. Hence, '[m]odern man is definitely not so imbued with scientific or causal-mechanical thinking as Elias and some anthropologists want us to believe' (43:46).

Elaborating his arguments in regard to people's relations with television and computer screens and what they signify and do to Westerners (59), for example be 'haptic,' Verrips also had an opportunity to research the meanings of material culture in Africa. On a number of occasions he accompanied his wife Birgit Meyer to Ghana for some time, where she conducted in-depth fieldwork in the early 1990s. He also did short spells of field research.



FIGURE 2 Jojada Verrips, the chief fisherman of La and his linguist.

Having been an editor of the journal *Maritime Anthropological Studies* for several years, he took up his interest in fishing communities and spent considerable time with Ga fishermen on the beaches in and near Accra, showing a specific fascination for canoe decorations and mottos (58). These symbols, pictograms, written texts and paintings appear to be saturated with hidden messages and meanings. As in his other work on material objects, Verrips discovered that Ghanaian canoes, too, are anthropomorphized and treated as animated beings that are given names and even food. Concerning the sense of their iconography, he concluded that the symbols are polysemic and largely 'in the eye of the beholder' (58:55), while the texts are cryptic messages that 'characterize and distinguish, ... tease and challenge, ... criticize and joke, ... invoke and ward off' (58:58-59). The canoe motifs symbolically express and signify the plural relations, identifications and sympathies of the canoe owners with their vessel, other human beings and ideas. All in all, a canoe is 'a "speaking" object, an entity with a "voice," a "messenger," or a vehicle of meaning with a particular identity' (58:59).

The Ghana fieldwork experience turned Verrips into an 'accidental Africanist,' enriching his anthropological outlook. With his wife, he authored an ethnographic gem, titled 'Kwaku's Car' (55). This 'auto-biography' deals

with the struggles of an Accra taxi driver to transform his derelict and completely stripped old Peugeot estate from a piece of scrap into a smoothly running vehicle that is well-adapted to Ghanaian road and climate conditions. The article beautifully expounds how the meanings ascribed to a material object and the ways of handling it may deviate entirely depending on cultural context. The authors' assumptions about car ownership and maintenance were seriously challenged when a local mechanic 'tropicalized' their vehicle. Whatever the outcome of the repair operation – or, rather, 'conversion' –, it surely resulted in a fine and gripping anthropological account.

As in his research among bargees, religious matters seemed to have disappeared somewhat into the background of Verrips's attention when he did fieldwork in Ghana. Nonetheless, religion continued to fascinate him, in particular the conundrum of why people who hold convictions that seem to have much in common so strongly oppose each other in matters of dogmatic detail. Differences of opinion about the 'right belief' – evidenced and supported by degrees of orthodoxy or heterodoxy – could trigger violence in the name of creed, 'even' in such a 'stable' and 'peaceful' society as the Netherlands. There are several (historical) cases of 'religious murders' in the Netherlands, and they have inspired Verrips to scrutinize some of them (24) and – elaborating on the theme – to study comparable historical and rather more recent examples at home and abroad (37, 48). The former article hinges on three extended cases of religious killing, where several men were brutally manhandled and murdered because they were believed to be the Devil in disguise.<sup>12</sup> The perpetrators were close to the victims and held the same orthodox Protestant faith. In the subsequent pieces (37, 48), he developed a tentative typology of 'reli-murders' based on a score of nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries examples of such fatal crimes in Europe and the USA. All these cases of homicide were based on – and perhaps even inspired by – a biblical frame of orientation. Verrips discerns three main types of lethal religious criminality, with a number of subtypes: 1) human sacrifices to please Satan; 2) killing to destroy the Devil or his associates (subdivided into 'execution of witches'; 'exorcism murders' and 'Devil's murders') and 3) human sacrifices to God (with the subtypes of 'Abraham's sacrifice' and 'crucifixion'). Underlying each of these types of gruesome killing are different sets of motives and ideas, but all are religiously inspired and have the

Bible as a common source of inspiration, although each type relates to different passages. The perpetrators firmly believed in acting in accordance with the Book and religious dogma for the betterment of the world. They wanted to eliminate evil so as to restore an order of (religious) purity and ultimately 'to become a human being equalling God' (48:41).

#### THE WILD (IN THE) WEST AND SENSORIAL SENSATIONS

The 'reli-murder' case studies put Verrips on what appeared to be a new research track. In the concluding remarks of one of his articles on the subject, he states that these cases show 'the frailty of the civilized husk covering our wild core' (48:41) and continues to quote James Frazer: 'We seem to move on a thin crust which may at any moment be rent by the subterranean forces slumbering below.' Becoming increasingly discontented with the then predominant Dutch social science – and especially sociological – view that the purported civilizing process had subdued the dark side of Western humanity, Verrips began focusing on what he dubbed an anthropology of the 'Wild (in the) West' (40, 44). It seemed to be a *Gestalt* switch, but on closer scrutiny, a number of his earlier publications presaged the issue, particularly his early 1980s work on the link between body and mind in religious events and processes (11, 15). Be this as it may, Verrips started to develop an appetite for studying the irrational, odd and unexpected in what appear to be everyday trivialities and self-evident matters. On closer inspection, the 'normal' is not so self-evident and unproblematic after all and is permeated by fantasies and figments of the imagination. Unpacking the taken-for-granted reveals a plethora of hidden messages and meanings and an underlying logic, as we have already seen in his articles on Westerners' animistic, anthropomorphic and magical-mythical conceptions and representations of material objects (20, 34, 39, 43, 50, 59). Some of his other publications pose questions such as the following: Why does cannibalism fascinate people in the West and why do they consume mimetic body parts (36)? Are werewolves and vampires still among us; in which guises do they manifest themselves and what do they communicate (28, 38)? In which caverns and crevices of the self does the 'wild man' hide (53)? Why is the general public's perception of and attitude towards scientists and, especially,

medical professionals highly ambivalent, harbouring fear and respect (50, 63)? What message underlies the representation of evil and violence or *eros* and *thanatos* in movies (45, 46, 49, 60, 62)? Why is viewing unconventional or 'sensational' art so unsettling for Christian observers (71)?

In seeking to answer such riddles, Verrips casts his nets widely, using information gleaned from, *inter alia*, the internet, novels, ethnographic and popular literature, media reports, poetry, images (for example, cartoons, photographs, film recordings, video games, commercial advertisements in magazines and newspapers, posters, billboards, works of visual art), theatre and music performances and even confectionary. Doing prolonged ethnographic fieldwork has not been a part of data collection for the phenomena under consideration. Verrips develops his arguments according to a particular procedure that is typically as follows: he takes a classic anthropological theme, concept or theory, commonly concerning so-called primitive societies, and wonders whether it can be usefully applied to European, or, more broadly, Western societies. Focusing on a particular phenomenon, he inventories popular or 'folk' representations and explanations from divergent geographical areas and historical eras. He analyses how scholars have exposed such meaning-making myths as misguided or 'false' stories of unscientific ignoramuses. However, Verrips explicitly refuses to simply accept them as fantastic imaginings and examines the empirical grounds that might underlie folk myths or representations – including popular culture products such as movies, which he views as 'modern myths' – and what they signify metaphorically or metonymically.<sup>13</sup> He takes position in scholarly debates by unequivocally critiquing or rejecting what he deems faulty and supporting what he deems right, culling evidence from a plethora of sources to build and support his hypotheses, supplying lots of additional information and thoughts in myriad notes. The 'ethnographic material' he presents is usually extraordinarily lush, with several illuminating cases illustrating key points, while the text is profusely supplemented with images. His method is comparativist but not for nomothetical purposes: Verrips's objective is to let one case throw light on another and to delineate family resemblances and differences between various folk myths and between folk myths and 'scientific' explanations. This 'Verripsian procedure' is, in a way, James Frazer systematized and theorized, and it often yields surprising insights into the hidden messages and meanings of the

phenomenon at hand. To arrive at his analysis and 'deep interpretation,' Verrips rarely confines himself to what the anthropological toolkit has to offer but instead operates as a multi-disciplinary *bricoleur*. Increasingly, Verrips has turned into an observant anthropological commentator who critically reflects on the riddles of Western mass consumption and popular culture, posing inquisitive questions and showing how modernist assumptions need qualification and social science analysis requires refinement.

In particular, Verrips attacks the pervasive myth of the West as a locus of civilization and shows how myriads of fantas(ma)tic representations, metaphorical conceptualizations and concrete manifestations of violent, destructive, abject and transgressive behaviour permeate Western societies (see, for instance, 46, 49, 51, 53, 60, 62, 65). In dealing with these issues, he found an ally in Mexican anthropologist Roger Bartra,<sup>14</sup> among others, and he was inspired by the work of Slovenian sociologist and philosopher Slavoj Žižek, especially his notion of the 'Real'; a horrible 'something' that pushes people forward yet also drives them into using their fantasy to get a grip on it (53:343).<sup>15</sup> But fantasy simultaneously conceals and creates horror and drives desires in either socially positive or negative directions. It is the latter in which Verrips is particularly interested (53:343-44). His fascination for the wild, diabolic and demonic dimensions of so-called civilized societies includes representations of destructive violence on the (human) body in horror films and splatter movies,<sup>16</sup> whose supply has increased and at the same time given rise to opposition and pleas for state regulation and control. Verrips (60) argues that the call upon the state to act as a moral guardian in this respect raises many questions, including: Why are people afraid of the immoral impact of such films? Why is demand for them increasing or what fundamental human desires do they address? What role do these films play in a secularizing world? Apparently, the state has superseded the church as a combatant of the purportedly morally corrupting and socially disintegrating 'forces of evil.' Orthodox Christians and bourgeois elites have joined forces in their campaigns against these expressions of popular culture, maintaining double standards as the Bible and the vehicles of elite culture are themselves replete with violence. Apparently, however, the effects on the minds and bodies of their respective consumers are believed to be entirely different. Horror films, claims Verrips, trespass extant taboos on violence and sex and here

it is important to realise that the 'civilised' always presupposes the 'uncivilised' or 'wild' and that the stronger demands to affect regulation and self-control go hand in hand with a conscious or unconscious desire for the contrary, that is, an unbridled expression of primary impulses – an abolition of 'the lid on the *id*.' In this respect films are a splendid mimetic means to meet that need. For, by showing the 'uncivilised' processes by which the intact (naked) body transforms into a terribly destroyed body, they offer the possibility to somehow undo, by way of the eye, the imprisonment of the concrete touch in Western societies (60:195-96; also see 46:62, n.26).

Such extreme representations are modern myths that contain implicit messages about latent possibilities too gruesome to otherwise contemplate, thus serving to bring across that they are untenable (an idea derived from Lévi-Strauss's [1967] work on myths). In other words, horror and splatter movies play to normative themes and educate viewers to subdue aggressive and sexual passions and emotions and not to undermine the social order (an analysis, one may note, with functionalist leanings). The films, writes Verrips, 'appear to be indispensable means of civilisation which, instead of provoking socially undesirable outbursts of "wildness," function to prevent these disorderly effects, and the breakthrough of unbridled sexual and aggressive impulses which would establish hell on earth' (60:200). He concludes that the Christian and bourgeois opposition against such films causes more harm than good. I have here quoted Verrips at considerable length to show something of the threads from which his analysis is woven.

In a similar vein, Verrips devotes attention to the effects of and response to what he dubs 'sensational art' (71) – art that aims to be provocative through the unconventional (obscene and sacrilegious) use of conventional Christian representations of the holy and the sacred. 'Shock art' is disruptive for believers because it does not match their embodied religious feelings and triggers strong somatic responses. It literally 'hurts.' However, it is not just images per se that interest him. The same goes for imagery through words and their creation of boundaries. Radical negative 'othering' in corruptive, invective and dehumanizing language may lead to exclusion and even elimination or extermination, as analyses of Nazi discourse have shown.

Through negative adjectives and metaphors, the Other may be animalized or objectified, purging him from what is regarded to be the truly human 'Us' domain and thus reaching 'a state of social purity and orderliness and with it, a pure and orderly state' (65:144). Fantastic representations of the Other, products of the imagination, are an important source for verbal perniciousness. However, such language is a double-edged sword and may also bring about radical 'selfing' in the sense that it is 'a means toward the most violent inclusion of selves into an overpowering "us"' (65:143). In army boot camps, for example, the same kind of dehumanizing and depersonalizing language is used, but with completely different effects: 'inclusion in a total institution with the character of a family, a clan or a brotherhood' (65:146). Humiliating words in this case lead to extreme bonding and solidarity – if at least recruits withstand their mental and physical ordeal – and the formation of killing machines who are so radically detached from the demonized or objectified Other that they are prepared to exterminate this (imagined) 'danger' to the body social and particularly the fictive kin of fellow soldiers. In this case, too, Verrips's argument is an example of interpretive materialism, and much the same could be said of his analysis of the public image and perception of 'mad doctors,' and their link with the kind of metaphorical language physicians use (63).

Without drifting away from his firm commitment to studying the 'Wild (in the) West,' in his recent work Verrips devotes special attention to the senses and to the 'touch' in particular. As a matter of fact, his current interest in the senses does not really imply a shift of focus but a gradual and 'logical' extension of his fascination for the uncivilized aspects of Western society, residing as it does, at least to a considerable extent, in sensorial sensations and bodily experiences. For instance, the interrelation of the 'wild' – extreme sex and violence – and sensorial dimensions is neatly dealt with in an essay on "'touching" images' (46; see also 49, 59).<sup>17</sup> He explains that in the West, the 'proximity senses' of smelling, tasting and touching have become less important than the 'distance senses' of hearing and seeing and that tactility is now the least valued and most feared sensorial sensation. Despite it being fundamental to reproduction and protection, the touch is increasingly shrouded in taboo. It is in this respect that he perceives a direct relationship between the ever tighter inhibitions on tactile experience and the increasing mimetic manifestations of sexual and aggressive 'wildness': the

latter are a means of remaining or getting in touch (con-tact) 'with an essential dimension of the self which is for social reasons not permissible in its rude, uncultivated form, but which can never be denied or even abolished' (46:59). The touch, writes Verrips (67:30), 'forms the cornerstone of our perception of the world and ... all the other sensorial modes are in the last instance based on or even reducible to tactility.' This even goes for watching films as well as TV and PC screens, for they involve much more than vision; they 'touch' and 'move' the whole body, leading to physiological effects and strongly embodied experiences that are functional to the extent that:

Screens help us at a deep corporeal level to grasp aspects of the world we live in, aspects that were not yet visible or graspable because they were hidden in time and space. We express ourselves in and on screens, and screens express themselves on and in us. On screens not only the outsides but also the insides of people and things are brought to the surface in an enlightening and penetrating, though sometimes frightening and disorienting manner (59:38).

In Verrips's view, anthropologists should avoid the Judeo-Christian and Cartesian hierarchical classification of the senses, and instead focus on the touch and 'how people have learnt to fragment this basic human experience' (67:29; see also 59). It is his plea to study the total sensorial experience of the material and social environment and people's sensitive knowledge of it – their *aisthesis* – and their anaesthesia or cultural narcosis of particular senses. Departing from this viewpoint would enable paying attention to the role of *all* corporeal sensorial sensations in daily life, not just sight (and sound). This, in turn, 'would imply a break with our ocular-centrism and our heavy emphasis on the role of the mind, reason and rationality, and would bring back an interest in our haptic somatic experience of reality' (71).

## CONCLUSION

As stated early on in this article, Verrips's scholarship endeavours to overcome the body/mind divide, as well as other dichotomous thinking in binary oppositions such as rationality versus irrationality, science versus

magic, civilization versus wildness. It is a thread running through most of his publications. In much of his work, starting in his dissertation, Verrips seems to be fighting a personal vendetta against Norbert Elias, the 'significant other' whom he often uses as a straw man to launch his critique. This may partly be explained as a consequence of Elias's profound influence among Dutch – and especially Amsterdam-based – qualitative sociologists and, in the 1970s at least, among anthropologists too. Elias's civilization theory was in the limelight and there were 'believers' and 'non-believers,' epigones and staunch critics, a situation giving rise to often heated debates among qualitatively oriented social scientists in the Netherlands. It provided Verrips with an opportunity to sharpen his thoughts on the wild sides of Europe and the importance of somatic processes in the psychogenesis and sociogenesis of particular social and mental configurations. In his programme for an anthropology of the 'Wild (in the) West' (40), he emphasizes that both civilized and wild aspects of Western societies need to be studied, as they presuppose each other and develop in dialectical fashion. One tendency may be repressed while the other may surface to a greater or lesser extent, but it is utterly wrong to exclusively attribute wildness to societies that are geographically or historically remote as wildness and civilization always go hand in hand and are structurally related. In this regard, he does not entirely dismiss Elias's theory but points out that it is profoundly one-sided.<sup>18</sup>

Having clear interpretative and materialist overtones, Verrips's anthropology might be coined interpretive materialism, though he does not use such a grand designation himself. In his analysis of concrete manifestations and, especially, fantas(ma)tic representations and conceptualizations of wildness in the West, he predominantly focuses on what they 'mean' and 'do' and how they are linked to material conditions ('things' included) and corporeal experiences and sensorial dimensions. The former aspects often lead him to uncover the latent functions of particular types of imagery, which he typically sees as providing mirrors for what might happen when people let the 'thin crust of civilization' actually burst. Through the looking glass, they can peep at the cracks and crevices of their wild inner selves, which may serve as an indubitable warning to not transgress taboos and to firmly keep 'the lid on the *id.*' In other words, modern myths or neo-mythologies often reflect on realities too horrific to otherwise contemplate and serve as pow-

erful reminders of why prohibitions are in place. At the same time, however, obsessive fears may be accompanied by strong desires to actually break taboos and these desires have to be symbolically substituted, sublimated or projected onto Others to arrive at an imaginary satisfaction of these 'needs' (see, for example, 36, 46, 60). Purportedly civilized people may find compensatory emotional surrogates in mimetic representations of excessive sex and violence, and these in turn may reflect fundamental uncertainties and anxieties concerning social life in Western societies (46). It is for these reasons that in Verrips's opinion anthropologists and other social scientists ought to simultaneously devote attention to both the (concrete and mimetic) wild and the (concrete and mimetic) civilized aspects of Western societies, for they are two sides of the same coin, not successive evolutionary stages. In taking up this challenge, anthropologists in Verrips's opinion should also systematically deal with sensorial sensations, and particularly the touch, as mimetic representations of extreme forms of sex and violence may function to compensate for increasing inhibitions on tactility. This materialist point of departure even applies to what would seem to be a purely visual experience: watching movies or screens, for it is 'a haptic or tactile affair involving the physical body of the beholder' (59:31).

If it is *part* of the business of anthropology 'to make superficially exotic practices appear familiar and superficially familiar practices exotic' (Boon 1983:131), then this has been Verrips's *core* business. An inquisitive mind, he is not content to take things for granted and unabatedly probes at the (hidden) moral and other messages and deeper layers of meaning of a variety of phenomena, particularly in European societies, which he regards as modern myths. In doing so, he definitely refuses to tread the beaten track. Perhaps not an extremely prolific writer, Verrips has refrained from endlessly recycling ethnographic material and his oeuvre contains many gems and thought-provoking publications. He tends to lament that 'everything I want to say has already been written down,' but in doing so he is hiding his light under a bushel. He has often paved the way for new research avenues and come up with programmatic statements, surprising insights and provocative analyses. It is due to these qualities that much of his work has triggered debate and proven paradigmatic, with several young anthropologists following his lead. However, perhaps more than anything else, Verrips has always been an inspiring guide for students, initiating several gen-

erations into the secrets and enigmas of anthropology and taking each and every one of them seriously. An incredible erudite and a formidable source of inspiration, he has also offered many colleagues guidance and feedback on an extraordinarily wide array of scholarly subjects. We will sorely miss his 'wild' presence in Amsterdam's anthropology department as well as his continual scrutiny and lateral thinking, although we are pretty confident that his role in and contribution to anthropology and his *pensée sauvage* will not end upon his valediction.

### *Acknowledgment*

I am grateful to Birgit Meyer who provided stimulating comments on an earlier version of this chapter. As the book in which this piece appears was intended as a surprise for Jojada Verrips, I have been unable to check my reading of his work with him. Any errors of fact or misinterpretations are, of course, entirely mine.

### NOTES

- 1 Through Verrips's mediation, in the late 1980s Nepalese anthropologist Rājendra Pradhan conducted fieldwork in the village of Schoonrewoerd. A documentary film was made about the latter's research experiences: *Nice Weather, Mr. Pradhan!* (dir. Hans Heijnen, 1989). The film also gives an impression of local (religious) life.
- 2 Numbers refer to the bibliography of Verrips's publications at the end of this article. All other references appear in the usual author-date format.
- 3 Some of his earliest publications include a number of articles (partly devoted to (anthropology's relationship with) folklore studies (4) and regional novels (7, 9) as a source of information regarding courtship practices and marriage conventions, in particular.
- 4 A few years later, he co-authored a rather critical article on the work of Lévi-Strauss (2).
- 5 On the history of Euromed, see 61. In 1991, Euromed was incorporated into a much larger organizational unit. Two years later, Boissevain retired. In 1995, Jojada Verrips was appointed professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology of Contemporary Europe.

- 6 Space forbids dealing at greater length with this model (but see notes 10 and 18). On its development and specifics, see 26. In a later stage, the work of the French structural Marxist Maurice Godelier became a major source of inspiration, particularly in regard to the interconnection between infrastructure (*le matériel*) and superstructure (*l'idéal*) (see Godelier 1984). Subsequently, the model was fine-tuned and captured in three diagrams (26).
- 7 The latest edition appeared in 2005. The research also yielded publications in English on the church as a political arena (1), the decline of small-scale farming (3) and the changing power position of Ottoland farmers in the post-war era (10).
- 8 I use 'interpretive materialism' for want of a possibly more appropriate designation. Verrips tackles particular questions from multiple angles and takes his cue from a variety of approaches: historical (how did a phenomenon develop?), symbolical and interpretive (what message does it communicate and what does it signify?), structuralist (how is it structured cognitively?), contextual (how is it embedded in larger configurations?), transactionalist (who stands to gain from it?), materialist (how is it linked to ecological conditions, natural phenomena and/or corporeal and somatic processes?) and functionalist (what does it 'do'?). His multi-faceted approach carefully avoids reductionism and teleology. On 'Verripsian procedure,' see below.
- 9 While Anglophone anthropologists had yet to discover the work of Norbert Elias, by the early 1980s several Dutch anthropologists had already begun to renounce it, as is for example evident in a special issue entitled 'Beschaving en geweld' ('Civilization and Violence') of the journal *Sociologische Gids* 1981, 29(3/4). They vehemently attacked the ethnocentric and evolutionist tenets of Elias's *magnum opus*.
- 10 In this regard, Verrips (26) refers to the 'hubris of holism.' His useful 'topical matrix' embedded in a time-space framework shows how hard it is to live up to the holistic ideal. Moreover, anthropology's holistic pretension seems to crumble if one studies an ecologically, economically, socially and politically less well-bounded entity. Nevertheless, the ideal remains worth pursuing.
- 11 The articles appeared as offshoots from a conference on proxemics and kinesics Verrips co-organized (see also 32, 33).
- 12 Just as in the mid-eighteenth-century religious ecstasy case, his analysis has provoked debate (25, 29).
- 13 For example, the continued popularity of vampire movies (38) may be a way of metaphorically dealing with particular types of evil, that is, sexual relations deemed dangerous or impermissible. For similar modes of analyses, see 28 and 36.

- 14 For instance, Verrips approvingly quotes Bartra who states that ‘the process of civilization runs parallel to the history of wildness’ (quoted in 40:9).
- 15 He does, however, disagree with Žižek’s idea that people temporarily lose their ‘immediate material body’ when visiting cyberspace. Instead, people just experience their material body in particular ways (59:22).
- 16 As well as in other expressive forms, including theatrical performances, ballet, rock concerts, videogames and so on (see 46, 49). This visualization of (mimicked) aggression would lead Elias to purport that corporeal violence (or *Angriffslust*) has been subdued and has made way for *Augenlust*. In what follows, it is apparent that Verrips utterly disagrees with such an analysis (see also 46, 62-63, n.31).
- 17 The themes of wildness and the senses are also elegantly integrated in one of Verrips’s reli-murder articles, in which he points out that there is a major difference between orthodox Protestants and Catholics in respect of particular types of religious manslaughter: ‘unlike Catholics orthodox Protestants subordinate the corporeal to the spiritual and ignore the possibility that devils and demons may take temporary possession of someone’s body and so reject exorcism rituals’ (48:40). Lacking a ritual to clean the sinful body of polluting evil, they may in extreme cases resort to destroying another person believed to be a demon or the Devil – representing ‘a sinful part of the self’ – so as to radically get rid of evil and purify oneself through the spilling of someone else’s blood.
- 18 Also compare Verrips’s earlier criticism that Elias neglected changing bodily functions in the civilization process and that he and his followers rejected structuralist views that in Verrips’s perspective might complement Eliasian analyses (26). It is striking too that in his topical matrix, Verrips (26) launches a number of sensitizing concepts such as ecogenesis, technogenesis, demogenesis, ideogenesis and so on that clearly extend on the Eliasian key concepts of sociogenesis and psychogenesis.

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