

DICK VAN LENTE

TEACHING CHILDREN CONFIDENCE IN A HIGH TECH WORLD: THE NETHERLANDS 1950–1962

INTRODUCTION

In December 1959, one of the Netherlands' most popular illustrated magazines, *Panorama*, ran an article about the recently released film *On the Beach*. Illustrated with three film stills, the article gave a summary of the movie, which narrates the extinction of humanity by radiation after a nuclear war. On the same page was an advertisement for a children's magazine called *Sjors van de rebellenclub* (*Sjors of the Rebels' Club*). Addressing the young readers, the ad announced *Sjors's* stories, puzzles, and suggestions for making toys and called it "a party every week" [Figure 1]. Nuclear Armageddon and fun therefore appeared right next to each other.

This was no coincidence. *Panorama* was known as a "family magazine": it was made for parents and children. Although children's magazines like *Sjors* existed, the market for illustrated magazines was not as differentiated as it would become in the later sixties, when specialized magazines appeared for boys and girls in different age groups, and *Panorama* developed into a magazine for lower-middle-class men. During the late forties and fifties, however, it still aimed at as wide a public as possible. Since at that time most magazines were sold by subscription and most people lived in family units, *Panorama* sought to attract men, women, and children in different social strata. Market research shows that it largely achieved this goal. With a print run of about three hundred thousand, it had more readers than any Dutch newspaper. It was read intensively by all age groups from elementary school age on, in cities and in the countryside, and by all classes, though a bit less at the upper and the lower sides of the social spectrum. People often passed issues on to friends and neighbors.¹



Figure 1: "Sjors" and *On the Beach*, *Panorama*, 1959.

Panorama's final page was the children's page. From 1949, children would find the adventures of Sjors and his friend Sjimmi there. Apparently, the series was so popular that Sjors became the main character in the magazine just mentioned, which was launched by *Panorama's* publisher in 1954 as a competitor to the Dutch version of *Donald Duck*.

Before television became common in Dutch households, during the 1960s, *Panorama* and similar weeklies, with their slick layout and beautiful large photographs (much better than in the newspapers at the time), must have been "windows on the world" for their readers. Leafing through a new issue, children could admire beautiful princesses and movie stars, the latest cars and airplanes, and cities and people in far-away lands, but they would also encounter terrifying things, like railroad disasters, car crashes, and people suffering from radiation disease, before coming to the happy adventures of Sjors and Sjimmi on the final page. Sjors and Sjimmi inhabited a world that children could easily recognize as their own: middle-class homes situated in cities, the surrounding

countryside, and the wide world of exotic lands and people they knew from lessons in school and pictures in newspapers or magazines like *Panorama*. This raises the question to what extent "the world" as presented in *Panorama's* main pages overlapped with that of Sjors and Sjimie, whether themes and issues that fascinated and worried adults entered into the "Sjors en Sjimie" stories, and how they were treated there. *Panorama* can be used as a kind microcosm for studying the much larger question of how popular media introduced children into the world in which they were growing up.

I will focus on the depiction of modern technology for two reasons. First, new technologies were among *Panorama's* favorite subjects. These were years of rapid innovation. Electronic computers, jet planes, helicopters, computers, plastics, and nuclear power, developed largely due to the World War and the Cold War, were now turned into all kinds of apparatus that invaded the daily lives and imaginations of people in Western societies: plastic and electronic gadgets in the home, fast air travel, rockets, nuclear weapons, and computers, reported on by newspapers and magazines. They were depicted in spectacular photographs and described and advertised as shaping tomorrow's world. Second, technology has a special meaning for the age group we are studying here. The Sjors and Sjimie stories were aimed at *Panorama's* youngest readers: children of about eight to twelve years of age. According to influential psychologists at the time, such as Erik H. Erikson and P. H. Mussen, this is the age when children become more aware of, and start exploring, the world beyond home. They also learn how to handle tools and to work together with others. They acquire, in Erikson's words, "the *technological ethos* of a culture," and if all goes well, they develop a sense of confidence in their skills and cooperative abilities.²

We will first take a brief look at how *Panorama* depicted new technological marvels, then look at how these topics were included in the world of Sjors and Sjimie.

WHAT FASCINATED ADULTS: MODERN TECHNOLOGY IN PANORAMA

Panorama often greeted new technologies with unalloyed enthusiasm and depicted them in glamorous photographs. Airplanes and air travel were by far the most popular technological subject. The Dutch airline company KLM's fleet of airplanes was an object of national pride. So were the products of the electronics firm Philips and large land reclamation and flood protection works that were under construction during these years. A much more ambiguous attitude prevailed, however, with regard to computers, automation, and

nuclear power. These technologies were considered at the time as the core of a new industrial revolution, which would transform society more thoroughly than the first one had.

Although the introduction of computers on a large scale started only during the 1960s, the anticipated "automation" by "electronic brains" of all kinds of processes was already a big subject in the late forties and fifties. Usually, *Panorama* took a positive view. Computers brought advances in the designing of airplanes and weather forecasting, and "automation" of routine jobs of calculation, administration, and industrial production would leave more interesting work for humans. Many articles, however, had an anxious undertone. One author remarked, in the middle of an admiring description of the speed of American calculating machines, and without further explanation, that these "electronic robots" were "the most gigantic, and perhaps also the most dangerous machines of our times."³ Humanlike robots often figured in cartoons, which played on the possibility of machines taking over human functions and behavior. The fear that humans might lose control over their own machines, so prominent in science fiction films and novels of these years, was not emphasized, but it certainly lurked here.

This concern was expressed much more strongly and explicitly in *Panorama's* coverage of nuclear power. On the one hand, the magazine reproduced government propaganda for the "Peaceful Atom," partly imported from the United States, which emphasized effective uses of radiation in research and treatment of diseases and claimed that nuclear energy would make the Western world less dependent on oil. On the other, *Panorama* reported extensively on the immense destructive power of nuclear weapons; the worldwide threat of radioactive fallout from tests; accidents with nuclear reactors; and scientists, workers, and nurses who had become ill by working with radioactive materials [Figure 2]. Other sinister subjects were environmental pollution and the increasing incidence of car crashes. Considering the fact that its readership included children, *Panorama's* reporting of such things was often remarkably harsh.⁴

Negative aspects of modern technology were articulated much more clearly in journals for teachers, social workers, and other professionals who worked with children and adolescents, a rapidly expanding profession during these years. A recurring theme in these journals was the sense of helplessness many adults felt in the face of the huge machinery of modern society. This "makes us fear that young people will not feel at home in these for their parents so confused times, and that they are rocked back and forth between dangerous extremes."⁵ Other sources clearly document the pervasiveness of this pessimism among intellectuals at the time. It must have colored many messages



Figure 2: "The Battle Against Blood Cancer," *Panorama*, 1958. Researcher fallen ill from radiation.

that reached a wide audience—from Sunday sermons to the advice columns in women's magazines.

SJORS EN SJIMMIE

The adventures of Sjors and Sjimmië, which appeared every week on *Panorama's* final page, were written by several authors and illustrated by Frans Piët. Each story ran for almost a year. Sjors had made his appearance in the 1930s as the Dutch version of Winnie Winkle's little brother Perry in a popular American comic series by Martin Branner. From 1936, when Piët took up the drawing of the strip, Sjors increasingly became a Dutch boy, in spite of his outlandish outfit. In a 1946 story, Sjors met a black boy named Sjimmië, a circus artist, and ever since, the two had adventures together.

These were simple tales in which the two little heroes chase crooks across exotic lands, are captured, and escape: the common fare of adventure stories. Technologies play three types of roles here. First, they facilitate the action in the stories, in the way flying carpets and crystal balls do in fairy tales: the boys travel by airplane or rocket, use gliding shoes that take them wherever they want, or use a telescope that can look around the world. More interesting are two other ways technologies appear in the stories: as artifacts that also exist in the real world, and as products of human ingenuity.

“Real technologies” often appear where contemporary problems enter the tale. The authors often used radio bulletins or newspapers to introduce these problems into the world of Sjors and Sjimmi. In “Naar de Pintoplaneet” (1961–1962), for example, Sjors and Sjimmi get stuck on a far-away planet. Radio and newspapers report their adventures [Figure 3]. Three world leaders, Kennedy, Khrushchev, and MacMillan, meeting in a stately building, decide to stop quarrelling and build a rocket together in order to save Sjors and Sjimmi. The happy news is, again, broadcast by radio, and the next frame shows Cape Canaveral, where the launch is being prepared. These images assumed that the young readers recognized the faces of the politicians, associated them with grave conflicts (these were the years of the Berlin crisis) and shared in the general hope that these would somehow be resolved. Children of this age also knew about space flight and had seen pictures of Cape Canaveral in newspaper photos.

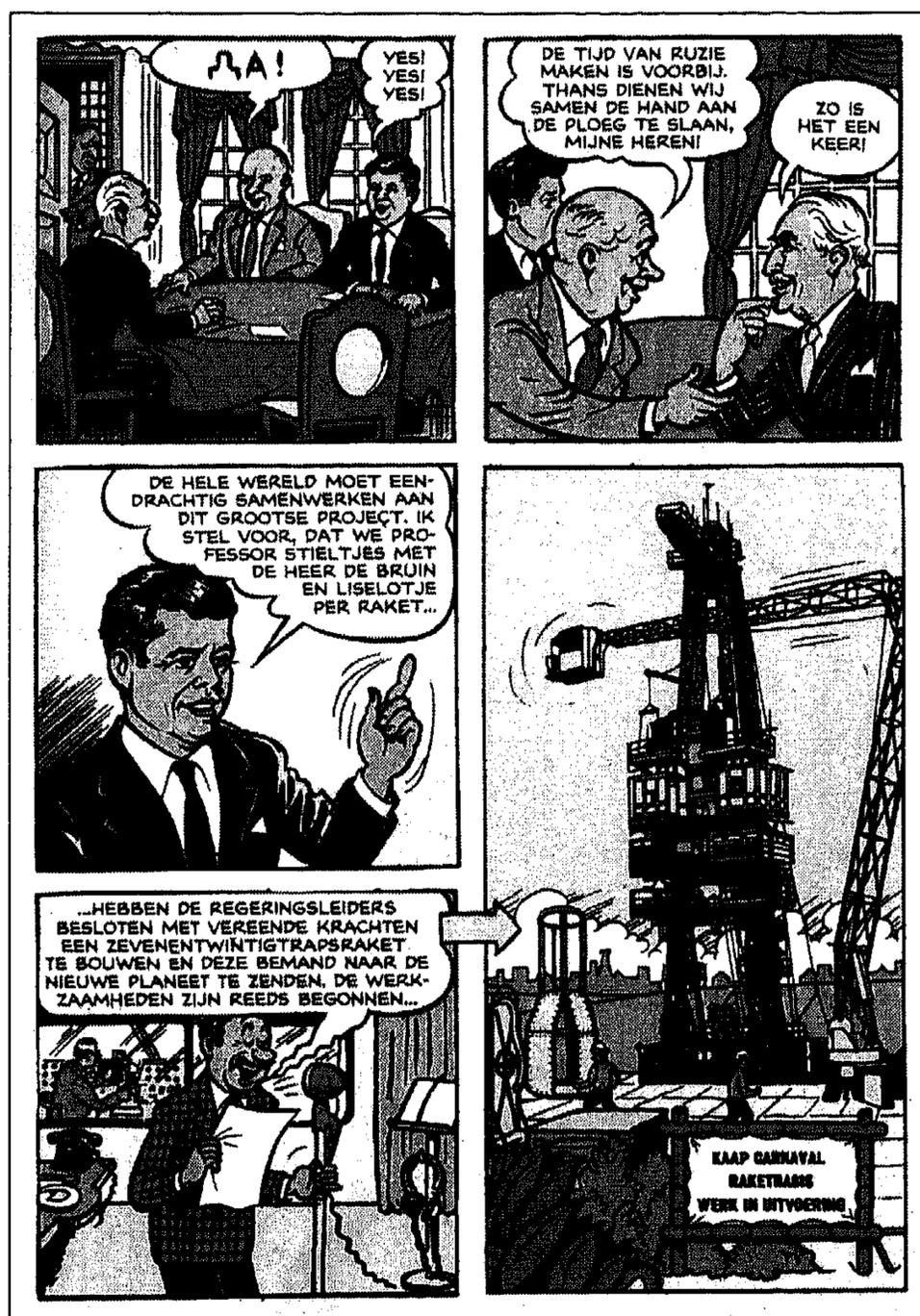


Figure 3: World leaders in “Sjors en Sjimmi naar de Pintoplaneet” (1961–1962), with permission of Sanoma Media The Netherlands.

It is striking how all the technologies that fascinated and worried adults made their appearance in Sjors and Sjimmié's adventures: automation (in the form of robots), space flight, radioactive materials, and lots of fast airplanes, ships, and cars. Practically always, these technologies served peaceful, constructive purposes: there were no evil scientists trying to take control of the world by means of advanced technology or technologies running out of human control, as often happened in comics for adolescents during this period (such as the Belgian "Blake and Mortimer," also very popular in the Netherlands). A good example of this perspective is "De bibberziekte" ("The Shivering Disease," 1959–1960). In this story, the heroes are confronted with a more serious problem than usual: the people of the city of Brongerstad have caught the contagious "shivering disease," which can only be cured by means of a very rare natural mineral called oranide. Of course, Sjors and Sjimmié set out to find it and bring it home, and everyone leaves the hospital cured. Oranide is a kind of radioactive material, like uranium. Sjors and Sjimmié discover it in an underground cave, where a civilization exists which uses oranide for light and energy [Figure 4]. These images more or less copied the "Peaceful Atom" propaganda of those years, demonstrating the beneficial uses of radiation. In another story, radiation moves vehicles and is used in surgery, and in the space adventure mentioned earlier, robots are friendly helpers.

The third way technology is depicted is also most clearly illustrated in "De Bibberziekte." The problems Sjors and Sjimmié encounter in this story are solved each time by the boys themselves, in cooperation with whoever they are with at the moment, using materials at hand and their own technical ingenuity. When their helicopter crashes in the African jungle, Sjors and Sjimmié use tin



Figure 4: Atomic civilization in De Bibberziekte, with permission of Sanoma Media The Netherlands.

cans to patch it up. A balloon is made from the parachutes they have used after another crash, made airtight by means of rubber from the local rubber trees and filled, by means of bamboo pipes, with gas emanating from a morass: the story moves from disaster to improvised technical solution to the next hurdle, and so on. The message seems to be that technology is not only simply and inexplicably there to serve human needs; it is something you can create with your own hands to overcome practical problems.

This technological optimism is similar to that in the Disney stories, which were also very popular in the Netherlands, but there are two important differences.⁶ Whereas Disney's heroes usually solve their problems all by themselves, Sjors and Sjimmi always work as a team, sometimes together with others they encounter on the way.⁷ Besides, although Sjors usually takes the leading part, Sjimmi is his equal in intelligence and courage, and often comes up with clever solutions. Although he is depicted in an extremely stereotypical way, the stories condemn racism (it is the crooks who make nasty remarks about his skin color, and in one story a doctor says that black and white people are the same under the skin) and emphasize the unbreakable bond between the two boys.⁸

CONCLUSIONS

Culture has been defined as an ongoing dialogue about "what is desirable, possible, or even real."⁹ During the postwar decade, much of this dialogue was about how spectacular new technologies would change society. The dominant mood was pessimistic, and although *Panorama* also celebrated modernity, children leafing through the magazine could hardly miss the more sinister images of war and disaster. They must have registered at some level the anxieties that surrounded modern technologies. The Sjors and Sjimmi stories can be read as a remarkably consistent answer to these fears. They taught their young readers that modern technologies were essentially a force for the good, expanding human possibilities and providing cures for diseases, and that technological creation is a human capacity, an innate ability to solve problems, together with others, by applying one's imagination and intelligence, rather than something running out of human control.

NOTES

Thanks to Kees-Jan van Klaveren (Universiteit Amsterdam) for support with the empirical research in *Panorama* and the Sjors stories, Nelleke Bakker (Universiteit Groningen) for suggestions on pedagogical journals, and Karen Sánchez-Eppler and the anonymous reviewers of this article for their help in clarifying my argument.

1. The marketing research is summarized and annotated in D. van Lente, "A Tamed Shrew? Images of the Atomic Age in Dutch Popular Culture, 1945–1957," in *The Culture of Energy*, ed. M. Rüdiger (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 136–57, there, 140.
2. E. H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1973 [first edition 1950, revised 1965]), 250–52. P. H. Mussen, *The Psychological Development of the Child* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963).
3. *Panorama*, 6 July 1957.
4. Van Lente, "A Tamed Shrew?," 139–150.
5. J. J. A. Vollebergh, "Moderne jeugd en maatschappelijke vorming," *Tijdschrift voor opvoedkunde* (1957/58): 163. A typical book title, reviewed in *Paedagogische Studiën* (1959): 266, was, in translation, *Young People and the Powerlessness of Adults*, by M. van den Dungen. On the expansion of family counseling and psychotherapy: H. Oosterhuis and M. Gijswijt-Hofstra, *Verward van geest. Psychiatrische en geestelijke gezondheidszorg in Nederland (1870–2005)* (Houten: Bohn Stafleu Van Loghem, 2008), 443–46, 745. On the influence of these professionals on counseling columns in women's magazines, see C. Brinkgreve and M. Korzec, *Margriet weet raad. Gevoel, gedrag en moraal in Nederland 1938–1978* (Utrecht: Het Spectrum, 1978), 126–27.
6. On individualism and technological optimism in Disney, see J. Wasko, *Understanding Disney. The Manufacture of Fantasy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 117; and S. Watts, *The Magic Kingdom. Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (Columbia & London: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 75–76 and 440–44.
7. I don't count the cooperation of Disney's piglets and Donald's nephews, who are hardly distinctive characters.
8. When making his first appearance, as a circus artist, Sjimmi represented the exotic (in a later African adventure all the local people look like him), but later on, he was simply Sjors's comrade: clearly different in looks and habits, but equal. Sjors, by the way, in his outfit derived from *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, looked rather funny as well. It is a common trick in stories: the creation of a world that is both strange and recognizable. In the sixties, the appearance of Sjors and Sjimmi changed: they were styled like modern schoolboys, and their interracial friendship was emphasized as a signal of political correctness.
9. D. E. Nye, *Narratives and Spaces. Technology and the Construction of American Culture* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 3; the notion of culture as dialogue was developed in the early twentieth century by American thinkers such as C. H. Cooley (see D. J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982], chapter 4, esp. 96, 98) and later J. W. Carey, in *Communication as Culture* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 28, 32.