

The Black Piet

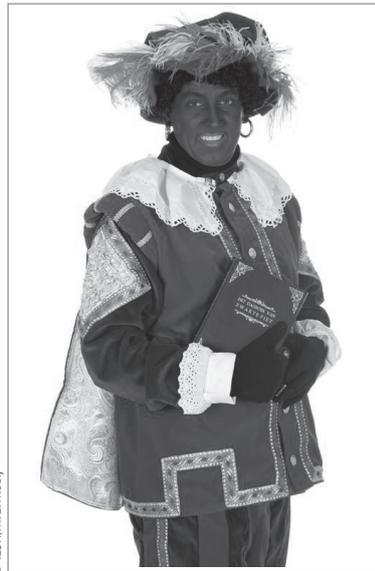
A CONVERSATION WITH MARIEKE VAN OOSTRUM*

Can you describe the Christmas tradition in the Netherlands?

van Oostrum: The Christmas tradition differs slightly from those in other countries. We don't open our big presents on Christmas Eve but on 5 December. They are brought by Sinterklaas – St Nicholas – and his helpers, the Pieten, on the eve before St Nicholas Day. The story goes like this: Sinterklaas arrives in the Netherlands every year in mid-November, around 3 weeks before December 5th, on his steamboat from Spain, where he lives during the rest of the year. He brings his Pieten with him and has all the presents ready in the boat. In the weeks between the arrival and December 5th, children every now and then put their shoes by the fireplace in the evening, sing a song and leave a carrot for Sinterklaas's horse or a poem for Piet. The next morning, they might find a little present or some sweets in their shoes. This is how the excitement builds up until the big day, 5 December, when the big presents arrive. Almost all children celebrate Sinterklaas. Sinterklaas also visits the nurseries, schools, clubs and shopping centres, and he is constantly on television. He is one of the most important aspects of our Christmas culture.

Who are the Zwarte Pieten?

van Oostrum: The "Zwarte Piet" or "Black Peter" is Sinterklaas's helper. The Piet always used to be the one who carried the sack with the presents. A long time ago, parents used Piet to threaten the children: "If you haven't been good, he'll put you in the sack and take you with him back to Spain, or you'll get the rod instead of sweets." People haven't said that for a long time now, though. Nowadays, the Pieten are



Ill. 1: The Zwarte Pieten are traditionally played by people with blackface make-up, a wig, gold earrings and red painted lips

Sinterklaas's funny and friendly helpers. In almost every Sinterklaas story there is a Head Piet, who is the leader, and whom Sinterklaas wholly relies upon when it comes to the presents. Then there's a Bakery Piet who bakes speculoos biscuits, the Handsome Piet, who is mainly concerned with his own appearance but is also responsible for the other Pieten's outfits, etc. It's a bit like with the Smurfs.

What do the Zwarte Pieten traditionally look like?

van Oostrum: Since the 30s and 40s, or probably even longer, the Black Peter has always been a white man with blackface make-up, a curly black wig, gold earrings and red painted lips (Ill. 1). Over the years, the bright red lips and gold earrings got less and less. But the black faces and wigs have always remained.

But this has brought accusations of racism, hasn't it?

van Oostrum: Yes. A few years ago the debate became very heated. People became aware that this image of "Black Peter" was racist and that the representation of the white St Nicholas with his black helpers was out of date. In 2015 the debate came to a climax. This tradition, which is purely a children's festival, became the subject – quite rightly – of a major political debate. And of course the debate also turned to children's television. The arrival of Sinterklaas in mid-November is always aired live on the public broadcaster. It is always in a different city. There are many children on the streets, and Sinterklaas is welcomed by the mayor. From that point onwards, he's in the country.

Children's television broadcasts a Christmas calendar. What is the Nickelodeon Netherlands one like?

van Oostrum: Traditionally, we broadcast a fictional series about Sinterklaas, one episode on each weekday starting the Monday after the weekend Sinterklaas arrives until Pakjesavond [the "eve of the parcels" when Sinterklaas brings the presents]. Every year we broadcast a story in which something endangers the present-giving evening and it nearly does not take place.

What did Nickelodeon do?

van Oostrum: When the debate intensified so much in 2015 and the image of the Sinterklaas celebration therefore changed in people's minds, we took the purposeful step of becoming the first national broadcaster that did not show Pieten with blackface make-up anymore. Our position: The festival is for



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Ill. 2: Since 2015 the Pieten in the Sinterklaas series by Nickelodeon have had a variety of skin colours, ethnicities, genders and backgrounds

everyone, and Pieten can be anything. So, we decided not to use make-up anymore. The Pieten now come with their own colour and are from any kind of background; they can be men or women; they can be people with a migration background – everyone is represented (Ill. 2). In the end, a Piet is not defined by the colour of the skin.

How was your programme received when it showed Pieten without black-face make-up?

van Oostrum: There were of course many reactions. We were indeed the first channel to abandon blackface Pieten. Often, it was parents telling us we had poisoned the festival for them forever; they said their children now no longer believed in Sinterklaas, because their neighbour could no longer appear as Piet because he was immediately recognised without make-up. But there were also reactions from people who were pleased that there was now finally an alternative. And the parents who got upset often, in the end, mentioned that the children hadn't actually noticed and had really enjoyed the series. Overall, we can say it was mainly the parents who found themselves stumbling over it. It was very well received by the children because the story was

good. They barely noticed – also because we deliberately did not make an issue of it. For example, we didn't try to explain it within the storyline; we just made a hard cut and said: "These are our Pieten, and this is what they look like – and that's it." And the Pieten were part of a story in the same way they had always been part of it, except they had no blackface make-up. We have been doing it this way since 2015, and we will keep doing it this way.

What did the public service broadcasters in the Netherlands do?

van Oostrum: They tried out different methods. One year there were the colourful rainbow Pieten who all travelled through a rainbow and were painted multi-coloured. The next time they were still a bit white with speckles of black rust because they hadn't climbed through the chimney so often yet. The explanation for them being black was actually that they had to come through the chimney so often.

In the meantime, how is the public dealing with Pieten of different colours?

van Oostrum: It's now 4 years on, however, the discussion keeps returning every year and seems to grow more intense, sadly resulting into demonstra-

tions and confrontations amongst proponents and opponents of Black Pete during the arrival.

On the other hand, people are beginning to accept that there are also Pieten of different colours. Big store chains, but also local initiatives and St Nicholas celebrations are also slowly adapting. It has been about working out how we – or society as a whole – can keep this festival accessible to everyone and, at the same time, let the tradition live on. But of course, the tradition changes because society changes.

And in the past, too, tradition always changed. The fact that the Pieten now have another skin colour or no longer wear make-up is just another step in this constantly developing tradition.

How does this development fit into your fundamental understanding of quality in children's television?

van Oostrum: Our philosophy is "kids first". This means that children – and indeed all children – are our top priority. Moreover, the Sinterklaas festival should be a big festival for everyone, which is why children of all ethnic or religious backgrounds should feel at home with Nickelodeon during this festival. In the end, we even won the Cinekid Award for the best children's programme with this show, a prize which is awarded by children, and this is actually the best argument for the fact that children really do not mind what colour the Piet is. ■

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