

# How to Recognize an Adult When You Meet One?

## Adulthood in the Novel *Minoes* and Its Film Adaptation

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### INTRODUCTION

How people understand age and aging depends on their culture's age ideology (Gullette 11). Learning consciously and unconsciously about what age and aging means in their culture is thus an important part of children's socialization process. Children learn about the norms and values associated with life stages from their parents, teachers, peers, and the media, including children's books and children's films. Since Jacqueline Rose strongly criticized the Romantic concept of the timeless, essential child, it has become a widely accepted notion in the study of children's literature that representations of childhood in children's books are social and historical constructions that confirm or interrogate the ideology of their time. The same goes for images of adulthood in books for young readers, although this has so far received less attention in the research in the field of children's literature (Joosen). This makes children's media important educators, informing children on how one is supposed to act out certain ages.

In this article, I explore how age and aging are mediated in *Minoes*, a children's book published in 1970 and written by the most famous Dutch children's book author, Annie M. G. Schmidt (1911-1995). The book presents an intriguing case with respect to age discourse and age awareness for three reasons: First of all, in contrast to most children's books, the emphasis in *Minoes* is not primarily on childhood but rather on adulthood. The two main characters are grown-ups in terms of their age and also with respect to classic social markers of adulthood (Blatterer). Second, its author, Schmidt, has always presented herself as a writer with

a childlike mind. In an interview in a Dutch newspaper, she once said that she “never got any older than eight” (qtd. in Blink 2). Although authors do not always act in accordance with the things they say about themselves, it is interesting to see the way she deals with the differences between childhood and adulthood and with age hierarchy in the light of her remarks in this interview. The third reason is that the book appeared at a time in which the boundaries between childhood and adulthood began to blur, something that was visible in Dutch society through, among other things, the rise of anti-authoritarian models of education (Linders). As a result of this process, parental authority ceased to be accepted without question, along with parents naturally knowing what is best for their children. These views gradually gave way to a different kind of family life in which, from an educational point of view, parents and children became much more like equal partners, reaching agreements through negotiation (Bakker et al. 292).

The age ideology in the novel will be compared with that emerging from the film adaptation *Minoes*, which appeared in 2001. The film was directed by Vincent Bal and based on a scenario by Tamara Bos in cooperation with Burny Bos and Vincent Bal. By 2001, when the film was released, cultural narratives about age and aging had become even more blurred than they were in 1970. The comparison will be made against the background of the developments in aging within Western societies in the last fifty years, in particular with respect to the changing concept of adulthood.

#### **THE IDEAL OF YOUTH**

From the 1960s onwards, living conditions in Western societies have changed considerably. Gilleard and Higgs describe these changes in terms of the transformation from first to second modernity, fuelled by the emergence of the welfare state, the consumer society, and youth culture (*Contexts* 27-31). The rise of the welfare state provided people in second modernity with better educational opportunities, more spending power, improved health care, and increased social security. As a consequence of these changes in material conditions, processes of individualization,

which had already started during first modernity, were intensified in second modernity and paved the way for the consumer society to develop, with “individualized consumption-oriented lifestyles” ensuing as its main result (*Contexts* 97). This transition was reinforced by the emergence of youth culture in the 1960s, which caused class to be replaced by age and generation “as the dominant sources of distinction and market segmentation” (Gilleard and Higgs, *Ageing* 165). However, since the youth generation of the sixties has itself grown older and reached retirement age, a decline of this market segmentation by age group can be observed as “youth” has become the ideal for all ages.

Throughout their work Gilleard and Higgs argue that the socio-economic transformation that has taken place in Western societies since the 1960s forms the historical context for the changes in the organization of individual life courses that they observe from that time on. Consumerism, individualization, and “the youthful values of choice, autonomy, self-expression and pleasure across the life course” are held responsible for the fact that, at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, “ageing is not what it once was” (Gilleard and Higgs, *Ageing* vii). Age stages have become less stable and less homogeneous “as a ‘new normativity of diversity’ began to replace the standard life course model” (viii).

Whereas scholars such as Gilleard and Higgs and Stephen Katz have been mainly concerned with old age and the organization of life after retirement, sociologist Harry Blatterer focuses on adulthood, because, as he points out, up until recently this life phase has been, in sociology at least, “taken for granted” and “undertheorized” (Blatterer 26). In *Coming of Age in Times of Uncertainty*, he explores “the social constitution and meaning” of this stage of life against the background of “affluent, highly differentiated, contemporary societies” (3). After a brief analysis of the construction of “standard adulthood” (13) that dominated between 1945 and 1970, Blatterer argues that since that time, the boundaries between childhood and adulthood have become increasingly blurred. Although standard adulthood—with its social markers of stable relationships,

work, income, and independent living—still remains the norm, many adults today do not conform to this model and instead pursue more individual life trajectories, in which adulthood is no longer defined as a stable life stage in opposition to the liminality of childhood. The old life goals of standard adulthood are no longer self-evident. To be able to function in today's society, grown-ups need to be more flexible and open and, according to Blatterer, more self-centering, in the sense that they “come to realize that the only center that promises stability lies within” (110). With an emphasis on individual choices, Blatterer redefines adulthood as a period in which personal growth and fulfillment are central elements, characteristics that not too long ago were considered typical of childhood and youth (116). Although they focus on different life stages, both Gilleard and Higgs and Blatterer consider the “expansion of youth as an ideal across the life course,” together with the uncertain socioeconomic circumstances after the oil crises of the 1970s, the determining factors of this transformation of adulthood (Blatterer 8).

The changes Blatterer and others, such as Rebecca Raby, observe with respect to childhood and adulthood underline that these concepts do not have a universal meaning that remains constant in time and place. In an era in which “the contours of childhood and adulthood are changing rapidly” (Falconer 30) and in which the different life stages are increasingly recognized as part of a continuum rather than as separate categories, age socialization has probably become more complicated than ever before, making the role of cultural mediators, including children's books and films, even more important than it used to be.

#### **SIGNS OF ADULTNESS**

In his redefinition of adulthood, Blatterer argues that the more or less objective social markers of standard adulthood were accompanied by consensus about repertoires of behavior typical of adults (15-16). They include responsibility, commitment (Blatterer 16), self-control, and power, in particular over children (Gullette 17). It is this last characteristic of age-hierarchy that is dominant in many children's books. With respect to power relations in children's literature, Maria Nikolajeva proposes the

concept of aetonormativity, “adult normativity that governs the way children’s literature had been patterned from its emergence until the present day” (*Power* 8). According to Nikolajeva, this inequality between children and adults is most “tangibly manifested in the relationship between the ostensibly adult narrative voice and the child focalizing character” (*Power* 8). With respect to this perspective on age-related power structures and adulthood as the norm in children’s literature, *Minoes* provides an interesting case, because the book has some unusual focalizers.

In analyzing the construction of adulthood in the book and the film *Minoes*, I will follow the approach proposed by Peter Hollindale. In *Signs of Childness* he coins the word “childness,” defining it as a “composite made up of beliefs, values, experience, memories, expectations, approved and disapproved behaviors, observations, hopes and fears which collect and interact with each other to form ideal and empirical answers to the question ‘What is a child?’” (76). Hollindale analyzes the childness of children’s books by tracing the literary strategies writers employ to express their definition of a child. By replacing childness with adulthood, I take his definition as my starting point for the analysis of adulthood in *Minoes*. I will explore what literary techniques are used in the book and in the film to express adulthood and how these are applied. In line with Hollindale, who also foregrounds these story elements in his analysis of childness, and because of the importance Nikolajeva ascribes to them when it comes to age-norms and age-hierarchy in children’s books, the emphasis will be on characterization, narrative voice, and focalization. Characters are central to every story, as they are “the agents performing action” (Nikolajeva, *Aesthetic Approaches* 145). The principal characterization devices that will be analyzed if they are relevant with respect to age are the description of what the characters look like, the narrator’s comments on the characters, the character’s comments on and attitudes towards each other, their relationships with other characters, their use of language, and their thoughts.

**MINOES BY ANNIE M. G. SCHMIDT (1970)**

*Minoes* is not only Schmidt’s most translated book for young readers

(Linders 282-83) but also the most translated Dutch children's book to date (picture books excluded) (*Vertalingendatabase*). In 1992 the novel was translated into English as *Minnie* (by Lance Salway) and quite recently a new British English translation has been made by David Colmer, which was published by Pushkin Children's Books in 2014 and in which the title has been changed to *The Cat Who Came in off the Roof*.<sup>1</sup> In general, Dutch newspaper critics considered *Minoes* to be Schmidt's best children's book. Kees Fens, one of the most important literary critics at the time the book came out, praised it as "a superior example of an engaged children's book in which the message doesn't drown out the story, a book written in lively Dutch, where poetry is found in everyday things (looked at from a slightly different angle, which suddenly shows how extraordinary they are) and a book that is also exemplary in other respects. The beginning alone has a directness and vividness that almost all children's writers could learn from."<sup>2</sup> The few reviews of the 1992 English translation that could be retrieved briefly summarize the story and round off with a short comment, an example being the review that appeared in *Kirkus Reviews*, where *Minnie* is described as "a fanciful yet substantial book that is sure to become a classic."

Annie M. G. Schmidt is known as an author with a keen eye for social developments: "In the sixties and seventies both her work for adults and that for children cunningly reflected what people were talking about: the new opportunities for women, environmental problems, new and increasing possibilities for children, etc." (Linders 497). Because of the provocative content of many of her books and the social criticism voiced in them, Annie M. G. Schmidt, together with other Dutch children's authors such as Miep Diekmann and An Rutgers-Van der Loeff, brought about a major change in Dutch children's literature in the post-war era—a change in mentality that was in line with the anti-authoritarian models of education briefly outlined above. No longer taking the position of the adult who knows best, she constructed in most of her work an image of the child as resilient and competent, being able to take its life into its own hands and to take responsibility for it (Van

Lierop-Debrauwer 157). Annie M. G. Schmidt has often been compared to the internationally better known Swedish author Astrid Lindgren, and indeed, their attitudes towards children and children's literature are remarkably similar: "Both Schmidt and Lindgren show respect for and solidarity with children. They are subversive and humorous, and if there is a moral to their stories, then it is one of a world turned upside down" (Van Lierop-Debrauwer 158). With Schmidt being valued as a sharp observer of societal transformations and seeing the child as a competent communication partner, it is interesting to explore whether we find in her novel *Minoes* evidence of the changes in the life course that Blatterer observes have taken place since the 1970s and, if so, how these changes are dealt with there.

Schmidt's novel<sup>3</sup> is a fantasy story about Tibble, a journalist, and Minou, who used to be a cat in earlier days. Although she is now a grown-up young woman, wearing a dress suit, tights, and patent leather shoes and introducing herself as Miss Minou, she still retains some of her cat-behaviors: she purrs, she loves catching birds and fish, and now and then she still sings the "Great Yawl-Yowl Song" (29).<sup>4</sup> She can also still communicate with other cats. The only two persons who know that she used to be a cat are Tibble and Bibi, a creative girl and the only child character in the book. The first story line is about Tibble, who will be fired from his job as a journalist if he keeps on writing about cats. Ironically, it is the cats in town, with Minou acting as mediator, who prevent his dismissal and help him to become a respected and self-confident journalist who is ahead of the news. With the assistance of Minou, Bibi, and the cats, he exposes the most powerful man in town, Mr. Ellmore, owner of the deodorant factory, who presents himself as the protector of children and animals and is greatly admired by the other citizens. His real nature is revealed to be quite the opposite: he threatens children, he hates cats, and his factory is a danger to the environment.

Interwoven with the first storyline, there is a second one, that of Minou being both human and feline and having her doubts about this ambiguity.<sup>5</sup> Because as a cat she always ate what she found in a trashcan

of the Institute for Biochemical Research, located next to the house where she lived, she lost her tail and her whiskers and slowly turned into a human being. Right up to the end of the story, she keeps questioning her identity. Her doubts are reinforced by the reactions from her new human friends, Tibble and Bibi, and her old friends, the cats in town. Although the metamorphosis Minou goes through will first and foremost strike the reader as being a warning against environmental pollution, her ambiguous status is also interesting from the perspective of age ideology, as I will argue below.

The warning against the dangers of technological experiments for people and their environment is only one of the many comments in the book on topical issues of the 1960s and 1970s. Schmidt's novel shows how fantasy stories can address quite successfully the sociopolitical situation of a certain time. Besides commenting on the ecumenical movement in the Netherlands in the 1970s,<sup>6</sup> Schmidt criticizes the hypocrisy of people in power, represented in the story by Mr. Ellmore. It is no accident that the latter happens to own a deodorant factory, which he wants to expand to create more odors. This is obviously an allusion to the consumer society and its need "to ensure increasing consumer choice" (Gilleard and Higgs, *Contexts* 29). Moreover, Schmidt's decision to make it a deodorant factory might have been a reference to the emergence of the cosmetics industry at the time.

The novel's omniscient narrator immediately takes the intended child readers into his confidence and, in doing so, takes sides with them right from the start. By using this literary technique, Schmidt creates two parties: one that is informed about Minou's transformation and another, made up exclusively of adults, that knows nothing about it.<sup>7</sup> The informed party consists of Tibble, Minou, Bibi, and the cats in town; the reader is obviously as well-informed as Tibble and Minou and becomes their ally. The party ignorant of Minou's transformation consists of adult authorities of Killenthorn, in particular Mr. Ellmore, and adult inhabitants of the town such as the fishmonger, the milkman, Mr. Smith, the baker's wife, and the psychiatrist. Mr. Ellmore is constantly made to look

ridiculous, and the other adult characters are represented as uncritical and conforming to the general opinion. Tibble and Minou are separated from the adult world, although according to certain social markers they are also adults (Blatterer 15): Tibble has a job and lives on his own, and Minou dresses as a grown-up woman, does not live with her parents, is introduced to other people by Tibble as his secretary, and goes “shopping, like all the other humans out and about in this part of town” (52).<sup>8</sup> The novel further emphasizes the adulthood of these characters through the way, for the most of the story, they address each other as “Miss Minou” and “Mr. Tibble” and use the polite form of the personal pronoun in their conversations. Schmidt thus ignores the external characteristics of adulthood and childhood and emphasizes different repertoires of behavior. The picture emerging from the text is one where “adult” is synonymous with being authoritarian, complacent, humorless, unimaginative, and/or uncritical, whereas “child” stands for being anarchistic, creative, and imaginative. While “adult” seems to be age-restricted—only grown-ups in the book display the despicable “adult” behavior—“child” is not; Minou and Tibble are grown-ups showing childlike behavior.

In making this distinction between groups, Schmidt would seem at first to be holding on to the Romantic dichotomy of adulthood and childhood. However, although Tibble, Minou, and Bibi are described as sympathetic, imaginative, and flexible, they lack the innocence Romanticism ascribed to childhood, as they, together with the cats, intentionally entrap the authorities in order to expose them. Showing what the “adult” people are really like leads to a reversal of roles at the end of the story, when the childlike adults Tibble, Minou, and the young girl Bibi turn out to be the ones with the most power and most worthy of admiration, along with the cats. The cats play a decisive role in overthrowing power structures: All the cats in the novel combine feline traits with human characteristics like speech and intelligence, even though, apart from Minou, they cannot be understood by human beings. Together with Minou, they function as Tibble’s helpers. With their assistance he is able to expose the authorities and to develop from a shy, indecisive young man always behaving as

was expected by the adult authorities into a much more self-confident individual ready to make his own choices—a “self-centering individual” in the sense defined by Blatterer (110). Because of the help Tibble gets from the cats, in particular from Minou, some critics consider Schmidt’s book to be a variant of “Puss in Boots,” Charles Perrault’s famous fairy tale about a trickster cat who is half human, half feline and acts as a magical helper (Linders 278). Perrault’s story is undoubtedly the best-known fairy tale about a trickster cat, but Nikolajeva rightly points out that “Puss in Boots” fits in a long tradition of stories “in which the cat is female and often an enchanted princess, who pursues her own goals in making her master rich and socially established,” which, up to a certain point, is what happens in the novel (Nikolajeva, *Power* 161). Minou helps Tibble to develop more self-confidence and autonomy and to become a well-respected journalist. Meanwhile, she explores who or what she wants to be in order, finally, to be able to make the best decision for herself as an individual.

In her discussion of literary strategies that children’s book authors use to explore power structures in their texts, Nikolajeva further elaborates on the use of animals in general and of cats in particular: “Because of their trickster nature, cats can be easily employed as carnivalesque figures, turning order into chaos and interrogating higher authorities” (161). This is precisely the role the cats in Schmidt’s novel fulfill with respect to age ideology, as well. They consider themselves quite superior to adult human beings, particularly to those who express disdain for cats. They perceive Minou’s metamorphosis from cat to human as a “horrific punishment”<sup>9</sup> and want her to become a cat again as soon as possible (16). The only more-or-less acceptable human beings, according to the cats, are children and childlike adults like Tibble: “He is a good human, as far as that goes . . . But I just don’t like the species. They’re not too bad until they grow up . . . some of them at least” (37).<sup>10</sup> Although they side with the child Bibi and with childlike adults like Tibble and Minou, belonging to the informed party, the cats form a third category separate from the adult and the child categories. The cats’ unusual and

thus estranging perspective on humanness invites the reader to reflect on what is normal and what is not, or what is human and what is not. The sympathy the cats express for children here seems to mirror Schmidt's point of view, in that she preferred to associate with children rather than with adults. Moreover, the distinction Schmidt makes between unimaginative adults and imaginative children echoes her poetics: In her 1954 essay "Van Schuitje varen tot Van Schendel" (which means something like "From Tinker Tailor to Shakespeare"), in lectures, and in interviews, she never stopped stressing the importance of imagination as the key characteristic of good children's literature.

Part human and part feline, Minou—the most intriguing character in the story—is torn between the cats who can only fully accept her when she returns to being a cat, and Tibble and Bibi, who want her to "uncat" even more than she already has. Bibi gets angry with Minou every time the latter wants to catch a bird, and Tibble wants her to behave the way grown-up women are expected to behave. The conflicting opinions about her identity confuse Minou and create an identity crisis comparable to that of adolescents and emergent adults (Arnett 469). Tibble even sends her to a psychiatrist ("the head doctor") with whom she discusses the problem of her ambivalence about her ambiguous status:

"Things do get complicated," said Minou. "And sometimes it's very confusing being two creatures at the same time. Half cat and half human."

"Ah . . ." said the doctor. "It is also very confusing being *all* human."

"Really?"

"Absolutely."

Minou had never thought of that. She found it an interesting idea.

"Still, I'd rather just be one or the other," she said.

"And which would you prefer?"

"That's just it . . . I wish I knew." (76; emphasis in original)<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the story, she explores the possible courses her life might take. The turning point comes at the end of the story when Minou's sister catches a bird for her, which she has to eat to become a cat again. Minou finds herself freeing the bird instead, which makes her realize that she has changed: "I could *imagine* the bird's pain, she thought. I could

*imagine* how frightened it was. But if you can imagine something like that, you're not a cat anymore" (151; emphasis in original).<sup>12</sup> Then, despite her sister's anger, she decides that she prefers to be human, although she has to admit that she will never be able to drop certain typical cat habits. Here again, Schmidt emphasizes being imaginative as an important human characteristic. Minou understands her newly discovered ability to put herself in another creature's position as an indication of her movement into fuller humanness and away from "catness." While Schmidt sees imagination as an important human characteristic, she nevertheless seems to reserve it for children and childlike adults like Tibble, because imagination (and creativity) are also the salient characteristics that Bibi and Tibble share and that bring them together as friends.

When Minou returns to Tibble, it becomes clear not only that she is able to make individual choices regardless of what the people and cats around her might think of her, but also that Tibble has gone through a similar development thanks to Minou and the cats. For quite a long time, Tibble is very much concerned about what people may say and think about his behavior and Minou's. Again and again he acts in accordance with the age norms prevailing in his environment, with the socially constructed guidelines governing adult behavior. That is why he does not want Minou to behave like a cat. Because she does not conform to the norm, Tibble, at the beginning of the story, thinks she is crazy, and he refuses to take her ambivalence seriously: "Listen," he said. "I wish you'd stop all this nonsense. You never *were* a cat. It's all in your imagination. You dreamt it" (39; emphasis added).<sup>13</sup> And although Tibble tells himself and Minou that they need to be more daring, it takes quite a long time before he has the guts to stand up for himself and to no longer simply do what is expected of him. As we just saw, he even gets Minou to see a psychiatrist, because *he* cannot come to terms with her "strange habits" (72)<sup>14</sup>—in other words, because her deviation from the norm troubles him. Ultimately, Mr. Ellmore's hypocrisy makes Tibble so angry that he no longer cares what behavior is accepted by other people and what is not. In the end he no longer sees Minou as an incomplete (adult)

human being:

“After all, I’d always been so desperate to turn back into a cat,” she said.

“At least I thought so. And when it finally came down to it, I didn’t want to anymore. I spent an awfully long time shilly-shallying.”

“And is that over now?” Tibble asked.

“I think so,” said Minou. “My shilly-shallying is over. I want to be a human. But I’m afraid a lot of my cattish traits are here to stay. I just shot up that tree for instance. When the dog came.”

“That’s fine,” Tibble said.

“And I can feel that I’m going to start purring again.”

“It’s all fine,” said Tibble. “Purr away. And you can hiss and rub up against people too.” (156)<sup>15</sup>

Tibble accepts her as an individual now; he finally understands her struggle with ambivalence and takes it seriously. He no longer cares what is considered to be proper adult behavior and instead sets his own norms, adopting the youthful values of choice and autonomy that Gilleard and Higgs put forward as being responsible for the destabilization of age demarcations at the end of the twentieth century (*Ageing, Corporeality* 165). He wants Minou to be happy and hopes that she will share his life. One of the cats remarks that she has a feeling Minou is going to marry Tibble, but whether this will really happen is left open. From now on, they both want to make their own individual and independent decisions. They realize, in the words of Blatterer, that “stability lies within,” and not in what society expects from people (110).

Through the literary techniques of an omniscient, adult narrator who takes sides with the grown-up but childlike protagonists, using the trickster cats as focalizers, and emphasizing the personal growth of the main characters, Schmidt’s book reflects the boundaries between adulthood and childhood in a way that fits the redefinition of adulthood observed by Blatterer and others. Adulthood or adulthood as represented by the adult authorities in the novel is rejected and replaced by adulthood as expressed by Tibble and Minou. Their expression of adulthood embodies the idea of a continuum between childhood and adulthood, with the former gradually changing into the latter, rather than an opposition

requiring a radical shift from one to the other. From the perspective of aetonnormativity, having adults in the novel questioning adult norms is an interesting choice for Schmidt to make. In her discussion of how adult normativity always governs children's literature, Nikolajeva argues that adult norms being questioned by child characters in children's books is necessarily always temporary, because adult authors can never deny their own adulthood (*Power* 204). By having adults with characteristics usually ascribed to children question norms of the adults in power, Schmidt seems to find a middle ground in the age and power hierarchy between adults and children.

**MINOES BY VINCENT BAL, TAMARA BOS, AND BURNY BOS (2001)<sup>16</sup>**

Overviews of Dutch film releases between 1990 and 2011 reveal that many successful children's films are adaptations of contemporary or, even more often, of classic Dutch books. Children's films being adapted from well-known children's books is neither a new, nor a typically Dutch phenomenon. According to Wojcik-Andrews, filmed adaptations of canonical books appeared as early as 1899 and are still being released today (55). However, the number of adaptations in the Dutch language area is striking. In 2002 *Minoes*, one of the most successful Dutch adaptations, was awarded a Golden Calf for best film, and Carice van Houten, who played the role of Minoes, won a Golden Calf for best actress. When the film came out, Dutch newspaper reviews were unanimous in considering it the best of the Schmidt adaptations to date. An international review of the dubbed 2012 version praises the film as "appealing and with 'timeless values'" (Toumarkine). The film also won several international prizes, among them the Children's Jury prize for the best international film at the Chicago International Children's Festival. Although the reviewers in Dutch and international newspapers and on film sites do pay attention to Minoes's double identity, none of them relates the metamorphosis to age issues.

Adaptations, Linda Hutcheon observes, are characterized by sameness and difference, by repetition and a need for innovation, in particular because of changed cultural contexts. Although the storylines of the

film and the book are largely the same, there are also many changes in the film with respect to the details. Some changes are medium-specific, such as the reduction of the number of characters and the increased speed of the action. These transformations were obviously made to guarantee a gripping storyline for the duration of the film. Other transpositions are what Genette calls “movements of proximation,” which adapt the text to the new (in this case present-day) cultural context (304). For example, whereas in the book Tibble uses a typewriter to write his newspaper articles, in the film he has a computer and a voice recorder. In the film the editor-in-chief has been replaced by a woman, which can be explained as a sign of the emancipation of women since the 1970s. In what follows I will restrict myself to changes related to the age ideology of the book.

Because the “mode of engagement” in films is showing instead of telling, image and sound play a decisive role in the perception of the story (Hutcheon 22). Although the book does have some illustrations, the external characteristics of Tibble and Minou can easily be ignored when repertoires of behavior are foregrounded in the text. In the film, however, the adult status of the two main characters cannot be overlooked as they are played by adult actors. The adulthood of Minoes is made quite explicit by the way she is dressed, wearing a posh green coat and high-heels, and by Tibbe addressing her as Miss Minoes. To ensure that the viewer will understand that Tibbe and Minoes are different from the other adults, Bibi is presented as Tibbe’s friend at a much earlier stage in the film than in the book. She is the daughter of his landlady, and she often visits Tibbe to play on his computer and to eat ice cream with him. Tibbe, and a little bit later also Bibi, become friends with Minoes.

Another change in the film with respect to the age discourse is the absence of an omniscient narrator taking the reader into his confidence. In the film, it is the characters themselves, both through their actions and through what they say, that express who they are and what they stand for. At the beginning of the film, Tibbe explicitly tells his cat, and a little bit later Bibi as well, that he is not a good journalist because he is too shy. His behavior while he is working as a journalist underlines this shyness

visibly. Soon after he meets Minoes, we see him growing in self-confidence. When Minoes is afraid to go to a reception, he tells her, “We are both shy, and we both have to learn to be daring,” a statement that Minoes reminds him of later on in the story. A turning point in Tibbe’s development is when Minoes and Bibi accuse him of being a coward, “a real wimp,” when he does not dare to write about Mr. Ellemeet’s misbehavior.

In the book, it is the cats who comment on Tibbe’s behavior in this way, and since he cannot hear what they are saying, their remarks do not have any impact. In the film, however, the accusations by Minoes and Bibi trigger Tibbe’s decision to start making his own choices, whatever the consequences might be and in spite of the fact that all the adults in town turn against him. As is the case in the book, he is “rewarded” for this by a victory over arrogant adults such as Mr. Ellemeet.

In the film, the cats still play an important role in helping Tibbe to expose Mr. Ellemeet, but with respect to age identity, their contribution is less crucial than it is in the book. They still, every now and then, express their feelings of superiority over human beings, and they try to persuade Minoes to become a cat again. However, more than in the book, the identity changes of the film’s Tibbe and Minoes are the result of their inner development and of the interaction between the two. The book’s dialogue between the psychiatrist and Minou, part of which I quoted earlier, now takes place between Tibbe and Minoes instead, presenting them as being able to solve their own identity problems and to define who they want to be without any external help. Their conversation enhances the understanding between the two. Minoes’ words and her facial expressions tell Tibbe what she really feels like inside:

I sometimes have my doubts.

I wish I was a cat again.

With my tail in the air under the laburnum.

Going on a hunt when the baby starlings fly out.

Sometimes I even yearn for my cat box.

[a moment of silence]

On the other hand, being a girl has its bright sides as well.

When Minoes says these words to Tibbe rather than to the psychiatrist, they have an immediate impact on Tibbe, making him accept Minoes for what she is at an earlier stage than is the case in the novel, in spite of the adult behavioral norms upheld by the other adults that surround him. They both “absorb into their age identity an increasing sense of control over things, . . . over themselves, and trust in the future” (Gullette 17). From this point on both Tibbe and Minoes rely on their own judgments of what is important in life and on their own ideas of whom they want to be instead of being led by other people’s expectations.

Minoes in the film is a stronger person than she is in the book, a choice that was probably made to reflect social changes with respect to the division of roles between men and women that have taken place since the book was written. She is a more daring person in what she says and does. This also slightly reduces the tension surrounding her ambiguous status. At an earlier stage than in the book, there are signs that she will choose to stay human, for example when she encounters a huge dog. Instead of jumping into a tree like she used to do, she tells the dog to back off. The tell-tale gap in the book with respect to the relationship between Minou and Tibbe is filled in the film. At the end of the story, they are obviously in love and physically attracted to each other. While the credit titles are running, we get to see a clip from the home movie shot at Minoes’s and Tibbe’s wedding, featuring a song with the following lines: “I have searched for so long for what I should be, and what I should do, for who I was and what I liked, I have searched for so long, but everything falls into place now that I have found you.” As far as relationships go, the film thus confirms one of the old goals of standard adulthood, i.e., marriage.

#### CONCLUSION

In both the book and the film, the standard model of adulthood that Blatterer describes as being self-evident up until the 1970s is under revision. The ideal answer to the question of adulthood expressed by the two texts is a repertoire of behavior through which adulthood is no longer fixed and through which childhood and adulthood are no longer

mutually excluding categories. Adulthood is as much a process of becoming as childhood is, as it is characterized by inner growth and by making individual choices regardless of societal expectations. The book and the film elaborate on this age ideology in slightly different ways. Because of the open ending, this view of aging is at first sight emphasized somewhat more strongly by the novel than it is in the film, in which the marriage of the two protagonists is a traditional marker of the transition from adolescence to adulthood. On the other hand, in the film both Minoes and Tibbe show their individuality and their independence with regard to other people's opinions at an earlier stage than in the book, solving their problems without the help of a mediating adult, a difference that mirrors the ongoing process of shift towards a different perception of adulthood that had only just started when the book was published. The book's progressive point of view shows that Schmidt was, indeed, a keen observer of the societal developments taking place in her time, in particular the developments that indicated an increased respect for and recognition of the eternal childlike qualities in all of us—the childlike attitude she used to ascribe to herself. Published in 1970, the novel shows that Schmidt was, in fact, a little bit ahead of her time.

From the perspective of age socialization, *Minoes* by Annie M. G. Schmidt provides an interesting case. Both book and film invite readers to reflect on age identity by presenting different types of adulthood. The message young (and adult) readers can glean from both texts is that there is no such thing as a fixed age identity and that “the adult” does not exist. Aging should be defined not primarily by the attainment of certain social benchmarks, but as an ongoing development of the inner self, part of which is learning to accept other people in their own right.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The new title appears to be an allusion to the classic novel *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, the 1963 Cold War spy novel by John Le Carré, which, according to translator David Colmer, is “something only parents will realize. It's a bit of a stretch to apply this link to the book thematically, but it does add a sense of fun.”

<sup>2</sup> “een superieur voorbeeld van een geëngageerd kinderboek waarin de boodschap het verhaal niet bedekt, dat in springlevend Nederlands is geschreven, waarin de poëzie ontspringt aan gewone zaken (die een kwartslag gedraaid worden en ineens hun bijzonderheid laten zien) en dat voorbeeldig is ook in andere opzichten. Alleen het begin

al is van een directheid en levendigheid waarvan bijna alle kinderboekenschrijvers kunnen leren.” Kees Fens, *De Volkskrant*, 16 Oktober 1972. (Qtd. in Linders 282. The translation is mine.)

- <sup>3</sup> Henceforth I will refer to the characters in the novel by the names used in the most recent (2014) British English translation. For clarity’s sake I will give the English names here, followed by the corresponding Dutch names, which I will use when discussing the film adaptation, in parentheses: Minou (Minoes), Tibble (Tibbe), Bibi (Bibi), Mr. Ellmore (Meneer Ellemet). The quotations will likewise be from the 2014 translation. I will include in the notes the quoted passages as they appear in the original Dutch edition of 1970.
- <sup>4</sup> De “grote Mauwmauw-song” (29).
- <sup>5</sup> Against the background of her ambivalent identity, the new title deserves some attention. Whereas the original Dutch title *Minoes* leaves ample room for the double identity of the protagonist, since it does not specify who or what Minoes is, the new title *The Cat Who Came in off the Roof* at first sight emphasizes her feline origin. The new title literally refers to what happens at the beginning of the story as Minou enters Tibble’s house and life through the window. However, as the translator David Colmer explains in an e-mail conversation, “[i]n terms of the main character’s mixed identity I was aware of the slightly odd combination of ‘The Cat’ with the pronoun ‘Who,’ which is most properly used for people rather than animals. The publisher didn’t comment on this aspect, but I felt that it nicely encapsulated Minou’s dualism.”
- <sup>6</sup> The church cat is called *Ecumenica*, an allusion to the attempts being made at the time to unite the Christian churches.
- <sup>7</sup> On this point, also see Fens 32-44.
- <sup>8</sup> “Ik doe boodschappen, zoals al die andere dames in de winkelbuurt” (49). “Dames,” which literally translates as “ladies,” underlines her adulthood more strongly than the more neutral expression “humans” used in the book’s most recent English translation.
- <sup>9</sup> “Een gruwelijke straf” (16).
- <sup>10</sup> “Hij is een goed mens, voor zover mensen goed kunnen zijn . . . maar ik hou nou eenmaal niet van het soort. Zolang ze kind zijn gaat het nog . . . soms . . .” (36).
- <sup>11</sup> “Het is een beetje ingewikkeld,’ zei Minoes. ‘En het is soms erg verwarrend om twee wezens door elkaar te zijn. Halfpoes en halfmens.’ ‘Ach . . .,’ zei de dokter. ‘Het is ook erg verwarrend om *helemaal* mens te zijn.’ ‘O ja?’ ‘Jazeker.’ Daar had Minoes nooit over nagedacht. Ze vond het een interessante gedachte. ‘Toch zou ik graag of het een of het ander zijn,’ zei ze. ‘En wat wilt u het liefste?’ ‘Dat is het juist . . . wist ik het maar” (75).
- <sup>12</sup> “Ik kon me indenken dat die vogel pijn had, dacht ze. Ik kon me indenken dat het dier angstig was. Maar als je je zo iets kunt indenken, dan ben je geen kat meer” (147).
- <sup>13</sup> “‘Luister,’ zei hij. ‘Ik wou dat u ophield met die nonsens. U bent nooit poes geweest, dat is verbeelding, u hebt het gedroomd” (39).
- <sup>14</sup> “Uw vreemde manieren” (72).
- <sup>15</sup> “‘Ik wou toch immers altijd zo graag weer een poes worden,’ zei ze. ‘Tenminste dat dacht ik. En toen het erop aankwam wou ik het niet. Ik heb erg lang geweifeld en getwijfeld.’ ‘En is dat over?’ vroeg Tibbe. ‘Ik geloof het wel,’ zei Minoes. ‘De weifels en twijfels zijn over. Ik wil het liefst mens zijn. Maar ik ben bang dat er nog altijd een heleboel katse dingen overblijven. Ik ging immers weer in een boom. Toen die hond

kwam.' 'Het hindert niet,' zei Tibbe. 'En ik merk dat ik weer ga spinnen.' 'Het mag allemaal,' zei Tibbe. 'Spinnen en krabben en kopjes geven'" (152).

<sup>16</sup> Both in the English subtitles of the 2001 Dutch DVD as well as in the dubbed version of the 2012 American DVD the Dutch names used in the book are retained. For the quotes from the film I will use the dubbed version of the American DVD.

<sup>17</sup> Dutch film text: "We zijn allebei verlegen en we moeten allebei leren durven."

<sup>18</sup> Dutch film text: "Ik vind je superlief."

<sup>19</sup> Dutch film text: "O was ik maar weer een poes. Met mijn staart omhoog onder de goudenregen. Op jacht gaan in een tuintje als de jonge spreeuwen uitvliegen. Soms verlang ik zelfs naar de kattenbak [silence]. Aan de andere kant een juffrouw zijn heeft ook zijn prettige kanten." The English text of the 2012 DVD is slightly different from the original Dutch film text, which is interesting with respect to age discourse. Whereas the English text uses the word "girl," the Dutch film text has the Dutch equivalent of "miss." In the most recent book translation of 2014, David Colmer uses "lady" (76). These differences do not have any consequences for the way the characters deal with each other, but "miss" and "lady" do underline Minou's adulthood more than "girl" does.

<sup>20</sup> Dutch film text: "Ik heb zo lang gezocht naar wat ik moest, wat ik zou en naar wie ik was en wat ik wou. Ik heb zo lang gezocht, maar alles valt nu op zijn plek door jou." In the dubbed version the song is not translated, so the translation is mine.

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*Age, Culture, Humanities* 2 (2015)

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