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"A rope breaks. A bell chimes. A man dies." The kwispel: a neglected international narrative riddle

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“A rope breaks. A bell chimes. A man dies.”

The *kwispel*: a neglected international narrative riddle genre

It seldom happens that a folk narrative genre is so neglected that it does not even merit a generally accepted name – but here is one. Folklorists do not have an established name for it, and neither do the narrators. This applies for the Dutch and German-speaking countries as much as for the Anglophone world. In the present essay, we would like to fill this gap and stake a claim for the word *kwispel*. Our new animal is all the more interesting for being a hybrid, a cross between the riddle and the tale. First spotted in the US during the 1950s (Dorson 267), the *kwispel* is a truly modern narrative genre, sharing content and structure with other modern narrative genres: the contemporary legend, the short story, the whodunnit, and the joke. Our second aim is to demonstrate the genre’s modern character. Here is a classical example of one such *kwispels*:

NARRATOR: “A man lies dead in a phone booth. There is broken glass on the floor.
 What happened?”

From this ending, the audience is supposed to reconstruct the story’s plot by asking questions the narrator may only answer with “yes” or “no” (and the occasional “maybe” or “irrelevant”). Typically, they will ask questions like “Was the man murdered?”, “Was it suicide?”, “Were other people involved?”, and “Was it an accident?” Those who already know the solution are forced to keep their mouths shut (Lash). Finally, the entire plot is revealed when the audience has successfully solved the riddle, or, alternatively, the narrator lists the full facts of the case when the audience gives up or fails to uncover crucial details:

This man went fishing and he caught a huge fish. On his way home, eager to brag about his catch, he stops at a phone booth. Carried away by his pride, the fisherman violently gesticulates to indicate the fish’s size, shattering the glass on both sides of the booth and cutting the arteries in both wrists. He falls down and bleeds to death.

(cf. Knierim 24, Af Klintberg (1992), Brill 42-43, Lash)

If the *kwispel* proves extremely difficult, a friendly riddler may use his tone of voice to indicate whether the riddlee is ‘hot’ or ‘cold’, and he may even start giving hints (Moore 119). One of the basic social rules of the game is that the participants stay attentive: questions that have already been asked or that are superfluous, will often be followed by sounds of dismay (cf. Kelly). Solving a *kwispel* takes a lot of deductive reasoning and imaginative creativity, but in practice, it is not as serious as it sounds: there is a lot of laughter involved as well.

Ever since we heard the phonebooth mystery in the early 1970s, we came across this story and this genre every once in a while. We encountered it again when Dutch

Internet users started to play the game by e-mail in discussion groups from the early 1990s onwards. In a face-to-face situation, the question-and-answer process can be quite chaotic, but on the Internet, it is more structured: every contestant is limited to five questions a turn. One of these virtual get-togethers was a Yahoo group devoted to *kwispels*, which ceased existence in 2003 after solving some 74 of these riddle stories.

The *kwispel*'s popularity comes in waves, as if every new generation has to rediscover the game anew. In the Netherlands as well as abroad, it is especially popular amongst (educated) young people, particularly high school and college students. It is pre-eminently fit for a pastime during long vacations and journeys, as well as evenings around the campfire (cf. Moore, Bronner 44-45, Lash).

The *kwispel* is an internationally known genre, recorded in Canada, the USA, the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Spain, and Argentina.¹ It was first mentioned by Richard Dorson in his 1959 overview of *American Folklore*, as "a recent game fad to sweep the campuses", known as "parlor mysteries, logic games, or thought puzzles". Dorson defines the genre as "a modernized riddle with a shaggy-dog twist" (267). Until recent years, little research has been done on the *kwispel*. Most of it can be found in papers published or presented during the last two decades (Moore 1974, Knierim 1987, Af Klintberg 1992 and 1998, Brill 1996, Kelly 2003, Lash 2004) and in scattered references in collections of urban legends (Le Quellec 154-157, Ortí & Sampere 98-101). In spite of this activity, not even all specialists are aware of the genre's existence: it was overlooked, for instance, by Elias in his study of that better-known offspring of the riddle and the tale, the neck-riddle. Nor have these publications established a generally accepted name for it.

What's in a name?

Kwispels are known by a multitude of different names, none of them in general use. These are some of the English ones: brainteasers, situation puzzles, mystery questions, mini-mysteries, (two-)minute mysteries, mystery puzzles, story riddles, lateral thinking puzzles, thought puzzles, missing links, how come?, law school puzzles, albatross stories, intrigue puzzles, whodunnits, please explain, monkey puzzles, conundrums, parlour mysteries, logicals, logic posers, logic games, deductive riddles, reverse riddles, twenty questions, and charades (Moore; Brill 29; Kelly; Lash). Not all of these names are accurately used: charades, for instance, is actually a guessing game in which

¹ CANADA: Kelly 2003; USA: Moore 1974, Lash 2004; GERMANY: Knierim 1987, Brill 1996; SWEDEN: Af Klintberg 1992 and 1998; FRANCE: Le Quellec 1991:154-157; SPAIN: Ortí & Sampere 2000: 98-101. A Google search for Spanish versions of one of the best-known *kwispels*, the one about the albatross sandwich or albatross soup (described in more detail below), reveals that the tradition is known in ARGENTINA (search terms used: *sopa de albatros*).

a person mimes words or syllables. Another guessing game called ‘twenty questions’ (Moore 119, Kelly), which also provides the format for a popular television quiz show in the Netherlands, is similar to the *kwispel*, but still not quite the same: it can be a ‘Who Am I’ game¹, or a game in which one has to guess an object (animal, vegetable or mineral) by posing the Boolean (yes/no) questions. So the questioning format is alike, but the aim is not to reconstruct a plot.

The name ‘lateral thinking puzzle’ refers to the buzz-word coined by creative thinking guru Edward de Bono (cf. Brill 37). *Lateral Thinking: Creativity Step by Step* is one of the books published by the prolific De Bono, who is still active as a writer and lecturer. The designation ‘albatross story’, an appealing *pars pro toto*, derives from one of the most famous *kwispels*:

CLUE: A man eats an albatross sandwich (albatross soup, pelican, seagull sandwich etc.) and commits suicide. Why?

SOLUTION: A few people survive a shipwreck and strand on a desert island. Hunger strikes but after a while, one of them comes up with meat, taken from an albatross he somehow managed to catch. Several days later, the party is rescued and everyone returns home. One of the saved men later enters a restaurant that serves albatross sandwiches. As soon as the man finds out that real albatross tastes quite differently, he figures out that he must have eaten meat from the dead shipwreck victims and kills himself.

(cf. Knierim 26; Le Quellec 154-57; Af Klintberg (1992 and 1998), Brill 63-65, Lash, Ortí & Sampere 99-100)

The names we found in German are: “Wie-kommt’s?-Geschichten” (how come? Stories), Quätsel, Aha-Rätsel (aha-riddles), Kreativrätsel (creative riddles), Horror-Rätsel (horror-riddles), Rückwärtsgeschichten (literally: backwards stories; reconstruction stories), kriminalistische Ratespiele (detective-like guessing games), Ratekrimis (guessing detectives/crime stories) and Kurzkrimis (short detective stories or whodunnits) (cf. Knierim 1987, Brill 1996: 28-29). We left *Quätsel* untranslated, because it is not a real German word, but an odd contraction of ‘Quäl-Rätsel’, i.e. ‘tormenting riddle’.

In various parts of Europe, the genre is supposed to be called ‘quistel’ – a word without meaning, sounding a bit like, and perhaps even deriving from ‘Quätsel’ (cf. Brill 29). In the Netherlands too, it was occasionally called ‘kwistel’ (again, a meaningless word) in the past, but most of the time the genre remained nameless or was simply called ‘raadsel’ (riddle). Then, in the 1990s, next to the word ‘situatie-

¹ For an intriguing digital version of this game, see: <<http://www.smalltime.com/dictator.html>>. The player thinks of a dictator or an English sit-com character, and the computer starts asking questions that have to be answered with yes or no. Most of the time, the computer succeeds in guessing the right person, and if it does not, it starts learning by asking the player to add a question that will distinguish the wrong guess from the right answer.

raadsel' (situation riddle) the word '*kwispel*' pops up. *Kwispel* does have several meanings in Dutch, but none of them apply: wag of a tail, sprinkler, brush, whip and (only in dialects) fool. Instead, *kwispel* may be an erroneous or even a deliberate variation on 'kwistel', and if one tears the two syllables apart, one gets 'kwis' (quiz) + 'spel' (game). So the evolution of the word *kwispel* may be as follows:

Quätsel (Germ. comp. Quäl-Rätsel)

→ quistel

→ kwistel

→ *kwispel* (Dutch comp. kwis-spel)

Olaf Brill, who published the most elaborate article on the subject (1996), calls the *kwispels* 'Horror-Rätsel' (horror riddles). Although a lot of *kwispels* deal with the morbid, fatal accidents, suicides, crime and handicapped people, we do not consider horror to be the most appropriate genre description, since the stories are neither about zombies or vampires, nor about gruesome murders and mutilations. For an interrogative, detective-like genre, the small number of murders in *kwispels* can even be called striking (Knierim 30).

Retrospective and future-oriented riddles

To put the genre into sharper focus, we will compare the *kwispel* with riddle-stories or story-riddles that may look similar at first sight. To begin with, this is a classic Dutch *kwispel* that has been found in the international tradition as well:

CLUE: In the church square lies a dead man with a broken match in his hand.

SOLUTION: Two men were in a hot-air balloon that lost altitude. After they threw out all of the ballast, the balloon still threatened to crash into the church tower. To decide who had to jump overboard in order to save the other, they drew matches – the man in the church square drew the shorter match.

(cf. Knierim 24, AfKlintberg (1992;1998), Brill 58-59, Lash).

As usual in oral tradition, the story circulates in different versions: the dead man can be found in a meadow or near a mountain as well. Another version involves the crew of a crashing aeroplane that finds itself one parachute short.

The *kwispel* resembles traditional riddles in which the audience has to solve an actual dilemma, a mathematical or logical problem, like the one internationally known as AT 1579, *Carrying Wolf, Goat, and Cabbage across Stream* (see Aarne & Thompson 1964):

PROBLEM: A farmer has to ferry a cabbage, a sheep and a wolf across a river in a small boat. He can only carry one of them at a time and he has to prevent the wolf from eating the sheep or the sheep from eating the cabbage. What does this farmer have to do?

SOLUTION: He rows over the sheep first, returns to fetch the wolf, but then takes the sheep back to the other side again. Now he brings the cabbage to the wolf, goes back and finally takes the sheep across the river.

The audience plays an active part to solve the riddle, but in this case, it is not really necessary to ask the riddler questions, although it might be helpful. Most of the time, the riddler just comments on the validity of the suggested solutions. Here is another traditional example, in which most interaction is about the whole situation and what solution will work or not:

PROBLEM: You are confronted with two doors and two guardians. One door leads to freedom, the other to certain death. You are allowed to ask one question to one guardian, but you will have to realize that one guardian always speaks the truth, whereas the other always lies (and you don't know which one!). What question do you have to ask to make sure that you open the door to freedom?

SOLUTION: You have to ask one of the guards: "What door will *the other* guard tell me to take to obtain freedom?" Now, whatever the guard answers, there will always be a lie involved. Take the other door and you will be safe.¹

This riddle was visualized quite well in the movie *Labyrinth* (1986), and it returned in the fairy tale mini-series *The Tenth Kingdom* (2000) as a parody. Still, these are actual riddles or even narratives with riddles in them. The traditional riddles mentioned above *look ahead* and ask the question: "What's next?" The *kwispel* *looks back* and asks: "What happened?" In the case of traditional fairy tales that feature riddles, like – for instance – AT 922, *The Shepherd Substituting for the Priest Answers the King's Questions* and the neck riddle AT 927, *Out-riddling the Judge*, there is no need for interaction between the narrator and the audience to reach a solution at all (cf. Lash).

Our definition of the *kwispel* as a retrospective riddle shuts out some types that other researchers and narrators themselves would include. Consider this riddle:

A father and his son are involved in a car accident, as a result of which the son is rushed to hospital for emergency surgery. The surgeon looks at him and says, "I can't operate on him, he's my son". Explain.

(<<http://eluzions.com/Puzzles/Lateral>>; cf. Moore 121, Af Klintberg 1992; 1998)

Although this puzzle may raise a lot of questions, the solution is not a sequence of previously unknown events, but rather a re-interpretation of the events as they have been set out by the riddler: the surgeon is – of course – the boy's mother. Usually, the answer to the *kwispel* is more elaborate than the clue or question (cf. Moore). Consequently, although Lash includes the surgeon's story in her collection, we would not label this riddle as a true *kwispel*.

¹ Summary of the riddle told by Micky Marsman (*1932) to Theo Meder and a group of people. Fieldwork in Epe (Gelderland) on June 22nd, 2002.

Content and structure: border traffic

A *kwispel*'s content is not necessarily traditional. On the internet, participants play with the traditional *kwispels* in the beginning, but after a while people start to make up *kwispels* of their own, probably because they run out of traditional ones (Brill collected 25 types, Lash found 34). On a website <<http://huizen.dds.nl/~ddr/kwispels.htm>> that no longer exists, the following typically Dutch *kwispel* was invented and introduced in October 1998:

CLUE: When he lost, he cheered . . .

SOLUTION: A man was a minister for the Dutch Christian democrats party CDA. The man was a homosexual. As a party-member he had to vote against same sex marriage, but as a person, he was in favour of it. Therefore, he was happy when he lost.

In time, players on the Internet started to use bizarre newspaper stories and other real events. A Dutch aficionado of the game presented this puzzle in the Dutch Yahoo group (March 2001): "TUIG geeft bescherming", meaning: SCUM protects. This referred to a newly introduced police telephone number, broadcast in commercials: 0900-8844, easy to remember as 0900-TUIG. Strictly speaking, one could argue if this riddle is a *kwispel*, since there is not much of a plot to uncover.

As far as themes and motifs are concerned, the genre shows a distinct preoccupation with death (especially suicides), nasty accidents (for instance in the circus) and disabilities (blind people, midgets etc.). It shares this predilection for the morbid with the detective story, upon which it draws for motifs and – as we shall see – for its elliptical structure.

A comparatively young genre, the detective story is usually thought to originate with Edgar Allan Poe's "The murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841). Several *kwispels* play with traditional crime motifs and genre expectations, like the one in which a bankruptcy turns out to be about a game of Monopoly, or the one in which the dead Romeo and Juliet on the floor turn out to be goldfish (cf. Moore 122; Knierim 25, 31; Af Klintberg (1992; 1998); Brill 30, 36, 43-45, 67-68; Lash). Many *kwispels* feature the well-known crime story motif of the locked room mystery (Shojaei Kawan 452-53). In an empty room, a man has hanged himself. How? Answer: he climbed on a block of ice that has melted since he died. Although the locked room motif is as ancient as the tale of Rhampsinitus (AT 950; Shojaei Kawan 452), it is best known as the obligatory tour-de-force of any whodunnit writer worth his salt. The following classic *kwispel* began life as a crime story:

CLUE: A man lies dead in his room. On the floor are sawdust and small pieces of wood.

SOLUTION: The man was a blind midget and worked in a circus. He was famous for being the shortest man on earth. A jealous competitor secretly sawed small pieces of wood from the blind midget's cane, as well as from the legs of his chairs, his table etc. This made the midget believe that he had started to grow and that, soon, he would no longer be the smallest midget on earth. Finally, in his despair, he committed suicide (and now the com-

petitor is the smallest midget on earth).
(cf. Knierim 25, Af Klintberg (1992; 1998); Brill 46-50).

Crime reporter and contemporary legend connoisseur Brian McConnell (2001) located the source of this ingenious if not far-fetched plot in the 1934 short story 'Coroner's inquest' by Marc Connolly. Interestingly, McConnell collected this narrative not as a *kwispel*, but as a tale:

Nearly 30 years ago when I first took a serious interest in contemporary urban legends, I heard this tale verbally from Miss J. G., a young executive at the Law Society's *Gazette*, London, the solicitor's journal, to which I contributed. She told the story she had heard in social conversation about the worried midget who was found dead at the foot of some London theatre cellar stairs in suspicious circumstances.

Contemporary legends present another major source of inspiration. In some cases the direction of this border traffic is hard to determine. Our hunch is that the slashed-wrists-in-phonebooth story we told in the introduction began life as a *kwispel*, but we have also collected it as a tall tale. The tale of the charred scuba diver however first reached notoriety as a legend (Brunvand 1990, 47-48; 1994, 335) before being turned into a *kwispel*:

CLUE: There is a dead man lying (or hanging in a tree) in the forest. What happened?

SOLUTION: There was a large forest fire, and a fire-fighting plane scooped water from a nearby lake. Someone swimming (or diving) in the lake was scooped into the water reservoir and dumped over the fire. (cf. Brill 40-41)

We collected this *kwispel* from informants in the early nineties and from the aforementioned Dutch Yahoo group <<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/kwispels>> For their 1994 collection of *Great lateral thinking puzzles*, Paul Sloane and Des MacHale availed themselves of a large number of classic urban legend plots, such as the as-sailant in the backseat (18), the kidney heist (21-22), and the choking Doberman (23).

A curious example of a crossover between the *kwispel* and the legend is the following story, presented by the narrator as an urban legend (please note that the most common Dutch term for urban legend is *broodje aap*, i.e. monkey sandwich)¹:

An old man notices a new item on the menu of the local snack shop: "monkey sandwich". He buys one, chews, paying attention to the taste, suffers a heart attack and drops dead.

You know why? Years ago he survived a plane crash on an island. He and his party were taken prisoner by natives who fed them roast monkey, but again and again, one of the prisoners would disappear.

Years later, tasting the monkey sandwich, he realized that what he had eaten during his imprisonment was not monkey meat.

¹ From the message board of <www.paulvanloon.nl>, the official fansite of a Dutch writer of children's books. The message, posted on 22 February 2005, is no longer accessible. Translation ours.

Several researchers have noted a more general likeness between *kwispels* and contemporary legends as regards content. It has been argued by Moore (124) that the *kwispel* is a relatively new genre, containing technical elements and developments of modern society like elevators, parachutes, female surgeons, sunglasses, (mobile) phones and scuba divers. In this sense, the *kwispel* resembles a genre like the urban legend à la Jan Harold Brunvand more than the traditional legend: in *kwispels*, there is no place for the supernatural (Knierim 28-29, 32).¹

These examples show a frequent give and take between the *kwispel* and related genres. This relationship extends beyond the level of content. *Kwispels*, detective stories and a considerable amount of contemporary legends share a back-to-front structure: they typically start with a mysterious dénouement. Comparing urban legends and detective stories, Daniel Barnes puts it very succinctly:

In both urban legends and detective stories, what is to be dis-covered (un-covered) is the "real plot", as opposed to the "apparent plot". Plots themselves thereby become metaphors for mystery. (Barnes 70)

Urban legend plots, says Barnes, are unlike *Märchen* plots, but very much like detective plots or mystery plots. The listener to 'Snowwhite' knows that the old woman offering an apple is really the evil stepmother; the listener to 'The hairy-handed hitch-hiker' does *not* know that the old woman asking for a ride is really the mad axe-murderer. The same elliptic structure can be found in other types of story, such as the short stories of Roald Dahl, which are heavily indebted to contemporary legends (Burger). Barnes also notes the resemblance of urban legends to *kwispels* ('mini-mysteries', he calls them) such as "The music stops. The girl dies." Explanation: the girl is a blind tightrope walker. The end of the drumroll is her cue for stepping off the rope onto the safe perch. One day, out of spite, the drummer ceases his drumming too soon and she steps to her death (Barnes 73).

This condensed quality has also been identified as typical for the modern joke (Neumann). Consider the efficiency of the following joke: "You're much better at it than Daddy." – "That's what Mummy says, too." (Neumann 131). The *Schwänke* of Renaissance joke books needed many more words to tell the same sort of story.

A narrative can not be much shorter than "The music stops and the girl dies". Appreciating these compact stories presupposes a familiarity with other modern, elliptic narrative genres, in the same way that appreciating a present-day crime movie or a fast-paced video clip presupposes a familiarity with the conventions of film montage not available to older generations.

¹ The dearth of supernatural motifs in most popular urban legend collections is more a result of collectors' bias than a genuine difference between so-called traditional and so-called modern legends (Af Klintberg 1990).

In this sense, the *kwispel* is a truly modern narrative genre. It plays with expectations of form and content established by detective stories, contemporary legends and jokes. If all of these are characterized by their potted plots, *kwispels* surely beat them by presenting the most potted plots. The pottiest, some would say.

The *kwispel* as a specific riddle genre

As we see it, the *kwispel* serves several purposes (cf. Le Quellec 155-56). First of all, it can be regarded as an entertaining pastime. Secondly, solving a riddle and reconstructing a story presents an intellectual challenge. In this playful competition the participants try to outriddle each other and show just how smart, creative and witty they are. It holds a reward for the initial narrator as well: since the riddler already knows the solution, he can feel superior to the contestants. Both the riddler and the riddlees become narrators: most of the storytelling happens during the interaction (Brill 32).

Which brings us to the third function of the *kwispel*: more than any other folk narrative genre, the *kwispel* is a vehicle for interhuman contact and interaction and – especially in contexts of holiday leisure – for bonding (Moore 124, Kelly). When played on the internet, the bonding is of course much less.

One could ask if there is even a fourth function on the level of morality: is there any sense or meaning in *kwispels* like in other folk narrative genres? We think so. One of the basic messages *kwispels* seem to give is that reality can be bizarre and life can be absurd, but on the other hand, complex problems can be solved by means of reasoning. Above all, *kwispels* reveal our preoccupation, macabre fascination and discomfort towards mortality, blind fate and misfortune, disease and disabilities. *Kwispels* can tell us more about taboos (like cannibalism) and how social outsiders (like circus artists) are looked upon (cf. Knierim 27, Brill 32, Lash). As we said in the beginning, the *kwispel* is not a very well-known folk narrative genre: it is a more or less underestimated form of narrative game play, and probably for this reason, folklorists have hardly researched it. One last example will clarify the title of this article, as well as underscore the proper content and structure of the *kwispel* once more:

CLUE: A rope breaks. A bell chimes. A man dies.

SOLUTION: A blind man likes to take a walk along a cliff on the seaside. As a means of orientation, he always listens to the sound of a bell on a buoy in sea. One day, the rope attached to the buoy breaks, and the buoys drifts into the sea. The blind man fails to hear the bell and falls off the cliff.¹

¹ Put on the internet on February 7th, 1995, the site <www.loet.rug.nl/~erikt/Kwispel> no longer exists. This *kwispel* has been found by Lash 2005, but is lacking in Brill's 1996 collection, although he mentions a version in which a blind swimmer drowns because his radio on the beach stops playing: now he will not be able to find his way back to the beach.

We would like to close off with our definition of the *kwispel*: a *kwispel* is a narrative riddle game, in which the narrator / riddler in a few words unveils the mysterious conclusion of a story and asks what happened, whereupon it is up to the audience to unravel the entire plot of the story by asking questions that can only be answered by 'yes' or 'no'. If scholars want to debate a genre on an international level, they need an unambiguous identifying name for the tradition. Over the last decades, the Dutch language has been enriched by many English words. It is about time the Dutch did something in return. From our own rich vocabulary, we therefore would like to offer the international folklore community the *kwispel*.

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