

Twenty others (of a total of approximately ninety academic staff members), from trainee assistants, university lecturers, senior university lecturers to professors from various departments did tell us who their favourites were. It resulted in a highly diverse list ("I can only judge about my closest colleagues", several said), with approximately twenty names being mentioned between one and two times. A few, however, stood above the others. Wiebe Bijker, professor of Technology and Society Studies, did so with head and shoulders. He was listed eleven times. Professor of an endowed chair Marjolein van Asselt, from the same department, followed in second place with six 'votes'. Karin Bijsterveld (another professor of an endowed chair at Technology and Society Studies) and Maarten Vink (university lecturer at Political Sciences) were both mentioned five times and share third place. Jos Perry and Lies Wesseling (university lecturer and senior university lecturer at Literature and Arts, respectively) were each mentioned four times and are both in fourth place. The first young talent (sharing the place with four others) is in fifth place: Maaïke Lauwaert, PhD student at History.

Science and Technology (CAST) research Masters learn to contribute in a different way to a research project than researchers who have had a monodisciplinary training."

He would like to say just one more thing: "Several times during this interview I was highly embarrassed listening to myself." The same modesty again: "As long as people don't get the impression that 'this Wiebe Bijker is very pleased with himself'."

## **The top dogs at Arts and Social Sciences:**

1. Wiebe Bijker
2. Marjolein van Asselt
3. Karin Bijsterveld and Maarten Vink

If there is one thing that cultural scientists do not like, it is lists. At no other faculty did the researchers object so much when Observant asked them the question: "Name five talented researchers within your faculty. Why do you think they are good?"

"I have a great problem with this question, because it is based on an assumption that I disagree with completely. It is that good research is the work of exceptional individuals. In reality it all depends on the co-operation between inspiring colleagues who are prepared and capable of putting extra time into consultation, discussion, comments and writing project applications together", a researcher writes. Another lets us know: "I never make lists, I don't like them. The university world is a little too quick to speak of 'top this' and 'top that'." A number of employees also mention the "heavy" teaching load "which prevents some talent from getting the opportunity to blossom". Nine researchers (some on principle, others because they had no time) therefore did not participate.

various proposals for the seventh Framework Programme together with some European partners."

The group is what it is all about at his faculty. A characteristic example of this is the CMW researcher who did not want to participate in the selection of top dogs for the series of articles, because the group is more important than the individual. "It is actually ironic that a remark like that was made in this faculty. The tradition that cultural scientists work in research groups has only existed for ten to fifteen years. Originally cultural scientists were the most likely researchers to lock themselves in their rooms working their way through the literature. But I do agree with the remark", says Bijker. "I realise how special the academic climate is at CMW: people are productive, interdisciplinary and intellectually open. That is why I have never really looked seriously at offers from elsewhere, and there have certainly been offers."

## **Children**

He "hates" the word 'networking', does not like receptions or people who only talk to other people because there may be something in it for them. At the same time, he recognises the importance of networking. "By attending conferences, you meet people with whom you may work. I really like to create a personal bond with the people I work with. For example, I like to know how things are with someone's children. I am not just being polite because I think it will suit me later on."

Bijker was dean of the faculty from 1996 to 2000, after which he was chairman of the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S) until 2003, the largest international scientific association in his field. He is also on the boards of research programmes and research schools, and on committees, including at research financier NWO. "It is not just important – you learn an awful lot from it – but it is also a duty to be part of these bodies. The fact that I was chosen to be president of 4S was first and foremost an honour, but peer reviewing and being on the editorial staff of scientific journals are also important, even if you don't get paid for it. Imagine if nobody wanted to do that anymore, the world of science would come to a standstill."

Last year he was chairman of a committee that carried out research into the risks of nanotechnology, commissioned by the Health Council. "There was a threat of the discussions halting, because people were mainly looking at the disadvantages and advantages of nanotechnology. I then proposed a constructivist approach: to look at the way in which risks arise. At what moments? In which context? Then you automatically ask other questions about how to manage those risks. Think of human enhancement, for example by improving the memory with nano-implants in the brain. This has ethical and social risks: what does it mean for a person's identity, for social relations?

This approach was well received by government and led to a cabinet point of view on nanotechnology and risk governance: that the risks of new technologies can be dealt with. What I like is to search for a line of approach that contributes to the discussion. Asking questions in a different way is typical of our interdisciplinary faculty. Students from the Cultures of Arts,

speak for themselves'. I am convinced that this is not the case, certainly not in my field. You cannot separate the form from the content: you have to think about your presentation. I think beforehand in which journal I will be able to publish something, keeping in mind the target audience that I am addressing."

He even takes the opportunity during speeches or prize-giving ceremonies to explain his research in a playful manner. When he received the Edmond Hustinx prize in 1991 during the opening of the academic year, he did so by putting the theory of social constructivism that he had developed up for discussion: "Should I accept this prize? You say that my work has intrinsic value. Social constructivism actually says that something does not have its own ingrained meaning but receives it through social processes. What should I do now?"

At a later prize giving ceremony in Montreal, he and co-author Karin Bijsterveld recited a poem in duet style and last year, when he received the John Desmond Bernal Prize in Canada, the highest international prize in his discipline, he wrote the acceptance speech as a "7-steps plan for accepting a prize" in which he presented his ideas on the field. "A good researcher must be able to tell a comprehensible, slightly amusing story of the content of his work at such a time in approximately two minutes. There is nothing worse than a researcher being 'applauded' away because he is being too long in the teeth and boring."

### **Stubborn**

Bijker is currently involved in eight research projects: from a comparative study of coastal civil engineering in the Netherlands and the United States, to the relation between music, sound and technology (an NWO project), and the relation between technology and religion. "One could say that a researcher should specialise in one field and not do too many projects at the same time. I feel that the latter is actually a good thing. I really like delving into the different research topics. But the most important thing is that in the end, the fields of research of the separate projects do not differ all that much. It is always about the relation between society and technology. Do I understand how technology develops in its socio-cultural environment?"

Bijker thinks that if a project doesn't get off the ground immediately, one should continue to believe in it for a while. "As a researcher you must have the courage to be like that. I had a number of research ideas about the vulnerability of technology, also sparked by 9/11. Firstly about the key role of technology: in particular a technological society is vulnerable, as can be seen in the case of power cuts or aeroplanes crashing into buildings; at the same time, technology is a cornerstone in our ideas on safety and the fight against terrorism. Secondly, a society without a certain degree of vulnerability is not flexible, not innovative."

So dare to believe: "At first I wasn't successful in getting an international research programme off the ground – I believe very much in co-operation with other countries, because it enables an international research community to emerge. But I was stubborn, also because I had the support of colleagues in the faculty. Eventually it got a fixed form and now we are submitting

## Colleagues choose professor Wiebe Bijker as best researcher at CMW

### "As long as they don't think: 'Isn't he pleased with himself'"

(interview by Irene Smeets)

*In the nineteen-eighties, when his field of specialisation began to develop, he launched a theory that the field needed at that time. Wiebe Bijker (56), professor of Technology and Society Studies, became a pioneer in the sociology of science and technology. Last year he received the John Desmond Bernal Prize, the highest international award within his discipline.*

Someone who knows how to network, is valued internationally, is innovative, pushes back the borders of science, received the 'Nobel prize' in his field, writes terribly well, dares to bring his own work up for discussion, shows earnestness and inventiveness, has created a good Masters study, provides brilliant feedback, leaves others the freedom to do their own research and is very creative. Colleagues' motivations to declare Wiebe Bijker the best researcher of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences are convincing and plentiful.

Bijker's reaction is a modest, almost apologetic one: "I think your list would have been just as long if you had asked people about my shortcomings." The professor of Technology and Society Studies himself claims that he has been "unbelievably fortunate" in his academic career. The start of his career coincided with the development of the Sociology of Science and Technology, the field in which he carries out research.

In 1984 he and the English sociologist Trevor Pinch together published an article about the interaction between technology and society. Technology is not an autonomous entity, but is affected by society and human action. The publication came as a real bombshell, "it had more impact than ten articles all together" and a few years later led to a new theory – social constructivism of technology – which still stands today within Bijker's discipline

### **Bicycle**

What makes him a good researcher? Bijker avoids the first person singular as much as possible: "The choice of topics and examples are crucial." For example, on the basis of his own theory, he studied the history of the bicycle, the fluorescent tube light and Bakelite, the first synthetic fibre that dominated the image of electrical appliances such as telephones and radios throughout the first half of the 20th century. "Choosing the bicycle at the time was a magnificent choice. Everyone recognises the example, which enabled me to bring across a complicated technical story to a larger audience."

Bijker believes that presentation is at the least as important. "Some researchers think 'as long as the research goes well, then the results will