




Edited by Aagje Swinnen, Amanda Kluveld, and Renée van de Vall

# Engaged Humanities

Rethinking Art,  
Culture, and  
Public Life



Amsterdam  
University  
Press

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Aagje Swinnen, Amanda Kluveld,  
& Renée van de Vall*

Amsterdam University Press

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# Foreword

## *Culture and Anarchy* Revisited

Joep Leerssen

For some reason, the anxiety of usefulness has been itching the humanities for a long time. When Jacob Grimm in 1846 convened the *Germanisten* (scholars of the German language, literature, and legal history) to a conference in Frankfurt's Paulskirche, one of the main items on the agenda was to find themes and topics with which these scholars, newly incorporated in dedicated university departments, could demonstrate their usefulness to the public. (In one of the great ironies of history, politics would cater to their craving soon enough: two years later, in the same Paulskirche, many Germanisten would meet again, this time as delegates in the 1848 Frankfurt Parliament, and many of them would claim a role as intellectual counselors to emerging German nationalism.)

Anything to avoid looking like a bookworm, or a dilettante erudite. Perhaps the strongest argument for a socially useful humanities was made by Matthew Arnold around the same period. Drawing on the German concept of *Bildung*, he formulated a pedagogical usefulness in his classic *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). Writing in a dourly pragmatic, intolerantly moralistic Victorian climate, Arnold stressed society's need for a creative, mental agility to break through the blinkered vision of those he called "Philistines," "people who believe most that our greatness and welfare are proved by our being very rich, and who most give their lives and thoughts to becoming rich" (1869, p. 16). The power of the creative imagination to dispense "sweetness and light," he argued, would allow people to imagine a world beyond their narrow self-interest, to connect more easily with other people and other nations, and to replace the default attitude of mistrust and competition by an open-minded curiosity. That was the power of culture, "the best that is known and thought in the world"; and people were needed to "learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world" (Arnold, 1865, p. 283).

Readers may sense how uncannily Arnold's mission reflects our modern-day needs. The heyday of the humanities culminated (and ended) in the 1970s and 1980s when humanities scholars, fired by new theories, played a vanguard role in ethnic and sexual emancipation movements. That heyday has now passed. The humanities are everywhere embattled when it comes

to their funding, their standing in the university system, their outreach in education, and their leverage in public opinion. The humanities are ill-suited to thrive in the prevailing neoliberal climate of market deregulation, in the entrepreneurial approach to higher education, and in a Darwinian model of research funding (as a competition for limited resources, with the fittest surviving and presumably achieving “excellence” in the process). The Philistine principle once again holds sway that “greatness and welfare are proved by being very rich,” and as academic researchers, too, our worth is measured by that criterion.

Is it a coincidence that the neo-Philistine revival of deregulated entrepreneurial competition coincides with a decline of “sweetness and light,” and with a scornful disregard for “the best that is known and thought in the world”? We live in a public sphere where the toxically wielded accusation of elitism has blunted cultural and political debate, in a public opinion at the mercy of trolls, hate speech, irate tweets, and fake news. Is the declining position of the humanities linked, perhaps, to the rise of intolerant untruth?

The point of the humanities was never just to train bookworms to become better bookworms; to develop an appreciative form of cultural wine-tasting, comparing different châteaux and vintages and capturing the character of subtle flavors in well-chosen descriptive terms. The point was always to teach people to think (clearly, critically, imaginatively) by means of teaching them how to engage clearly, critically, and imaginatively with their historical and cultural heritage and ambience.

The power of culture is to make us think differently: to empathize, to imagine how life could be different or how it might feel to others quite different from us. Culture connects us to others quite different from us: it circulates over many decades and centuries, and across great distances and cultural differences, binding people from different centuries and backgrounds into “affective communities.” How could the humanities, as the academic curators of the study of culture and of its transmission to younger generations be anything otherwise than “engaged”?

The point cannot be missed. The spread of populist, intolerant anti-intellectualism and anti-cosmopolitanism has occurred in tandem with the institutional decline of the humanities, with their emphasis on the connecting and self-transcending power of the human mind – critical, empathetic, imaginative. I see before me a mental panorama of mendacious political strongmen, specious xenophobic rhetoric, manipulative social media, a dumbed-down public sphere dedicated to facile entertainment and facile political messages, and a public incapable of telling fake from real – and something within me says: that’s what you get after 30 years of

disinvestment in the humanities. The pedagogical need to train people to think clearly, critically, and imaginatively has been proved, beyond all doubt, in the negative, much as the need for vitamin C was proved in the negative by scurvy. Dismiss it as useless or inconsequential and then see what you end up with.

Do not, in other words, disengage. Engagement is not a desideratum, a neglected or imminent necessity for the humanities, in order for them to emerge from what others frame as their chronically “problematic” afflictions. Humanities are not the problem; they are, if anything, part of the solution and engagement is their middle name, their very nature. Just as culture – that most refined and complex form of communication, which defines humankind as a species – connects people within and across societies, so too, humanities are about the things that connect us, that humans are, *qua* humans, engaged in.

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## About the Author

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# Introduction

Engaged and Engaging Humanities

*Miriam Meissner, Aagje Swinnen, & Susan Schreibman*

## Why Engagement? Why Now?

The perception of the humanities researcher persists as sequestered in the library surrounded by books or in a near-silent archive gingerly pouring over manuscripts (Nyhan & Duke-Williams, 2014). The image is of an isolated scholar, disconnected from the public and from contemporary societal concerns. And while much important research in the humanities is carried out in an isolation that provides the necessary environment for insight and reflection, as the chapters in this volume demonstrate, research in the humanities is increasingly carried out collaboratively, within inter- and transdisciplinary settings, with the public as co-creators, and with the knowledge that it is important, if not imperative, that we bring a humanities perspective to current societal debates as well as influence their outcomes. Accordingly, what underpins the research in this volume, through a wide range of approaches, theories, and methods, is a focus on engagement.

This volume collects many modes of engaged research undertaken by the researchers affiliated with the research group Arts, Media, and Culture (AMC) of Maastricht University's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. The AMC faculty is diverse and includes (art) historians, philosophers, sociolinguists, archaeologists, and media and literary scholars. Increasingly, a majority of the faculty also does research within interdisciplinary settings, either through collaboration or by branching out from their original research domains into inherently multidisciplinary fields, such as gender and diversity studies or heritage and conservation studies. In terms of theoretical approaches, AMC scholarship follows new developments in critical theory, ethics, and digital and environmental humanities.

AMC research also relates to paradigms such as post-humanism and new materialism that may transform the humanities beyond its anthropocentric

foundations. It follows digital developments that enable us to explore new forms of data collection, analysis, and presentation, as well as new ways of audience participation. Methodologically, research projects within AMC often combine approaches from the humanities and the social sciences, linking up critical discourse analysis, philosophical reflection, or close reading with, for instance, design thinking, arts-based interventions, field observations, and qualitative interviews. Defining the identity of such a heterogeneous group is a challenge, of course – more so, at least, than for traditional departments or research groups whose scholarship fits more neatly into established disciplinary silos, such as history, classics, philosophy, linguistics, and literature. As a means to reflect on what unites AMC scholars, we organized colloquia and workshops and initiated a book project. Over the past few years, these combined efforts allowed us to identify the commitment to engagement as a common denominator.

While in our view the notion of engagement offers a particularly useful concept to capture the mode of humanities scholarship undertaken by the AMC research group, it also provides an opportunity to reflect more generally on the contribution of engaged humanities to the outside world. This introduction thus seeks to demonstrate that engagement in the humanities can be best understood as a plurivalent concept comprising both the adjective “engaged” and the verb “to engage.” Both these variants of engagement carry multiple denotations and connotations. *To be engaged* means to be committed to someone or something. Beyond that, it connotes active and affective commitment. To be engaged means to work for or towards a larger commitment that is close to one’s heart. In most cases, this larger commitment relates to a social institution (such as marriage) or an ethical ideal (such as justice). Of course, being engaged can just as well denote a state of being busy or occupied. In contrast to the notions of busy and occupied, however, engagement tends to connote a situation of being busy because of having one’s hands full and/or one’s mind captured. It suggests a state of being immersed in an activity. The verb *to engage*, on the other hand, tends to be directed toward people. To engage someone means to draw in, motivate, and/or mobilize this person. A person holding an engaging talk captures her audience. An engaging film might change viewers’ thoughts and emotions. It might even encourage viewers towards a certain action or activism. Finally, to engage someone may simply mean to involve someone in a process, such as a research or reflection process. Citizen science, for example, engages citizens in the research processes, which can include data collection and analysis, metadata creation and transcription, opinion-making, and/or solution-finding.

We conceptualize engagement as a continuum: engaged research in the humanities tends to entail – to different degrees – various of the abovementioned variants of being *engaged* and/or *engaging*. This includes being committed to a social and/or ethical goal, being immersed in an activity, collaborating with, mobilizing, and/or motivating people. The point of conceptualizing engagement as a continuum is not to measure and evaluate humanities scholarship along a scale. Rather, it is as a conceptual tool that makes it possible to capture a multiplicity of engagement practices within today's humanities scholarship without reducing engagement in the humanities to any one practice, such as, for instance, public humanities, which is most often cited as engaged research in the humanities (see, for example, Jay, 2010). Clearly, not every humanist is also a well-known artist, activist, and/or public intellectual. Nevertheless, the kinds of knowledge and expertise developed within the humanities as demonstrated by the research in this volume have the power and relevance to speak with publics about socio-political, cultural, environmental, and/or ethical controversies in ways that reach beyond the academic ivory tower – to the extent that humanists sometimes directly mobilize publics for civic engagement and/or political activism.

If humanities scholars have studied extensively what makes narratives engaging, their field has rarely been studied in terms of engagement itself – an approach that we hope to stimulate through this collection of essays. Engagement characterizes the research practice of those connected to the AMC research group, defines who we are as scholars, and represents our mission. Undertaking engaged research is a political as well as an intellectual decision, manifesting itself in different ways.

For example, many of the chapters in this volume engage with topical issues characteristic of our times, such as inclusive societies (chapters Cornips et al.; Swinnen et al.; Richterich). But this volume also includes reflection on how to make historical sources relevant for the present (chapters Papadopoulos & Schreibman; Brunotte; Kluvelde). AMC researchers study the whole spectrum of high-brow, middle-brow, and low-brow culture, ranging from novels, blogs, and self-help books (chapter Meissner) to installation and performance art (Laurenson, van Saaze, & van de Vall), from historical archives and oral history to television series (chapter Verbeeck) and home videos (chapter van der Heijden & Wachelder), and from online communities (chapter Meissner) to hacking spaces (chapter Richterich). What unites these inquiries is a focus on the practices in which cultural artifacts, more broadly characterized as texts, are produced, distributed, and received, with an increasing focus on their sites of production, reception, and/or co-creation, such as classrooms and factories where language practices are a means of inclusion and exclusion



(chapter Cornips et al.), websites where candidate parents present themselves to mothers of potential adoptees (chapter Wesseling), museum departments where the futures of performance artworks are shaped (chapter Laurenson, van Saaze, & van de Vall), nursing homes where people who live with dementia become co-creators in participatory arts activities (chapter Swinnen et al.), intergenerational communities where citizens meet to learn about the past (chapter Papadopoulos & Schreibman), and Facebook platforms where practitioners of minimalist lifestyles meet (chapter Meissner). This emphasis on situated practices is another form of engagement, in the social and historical as well as the material and bodily constituents of culture-in-the-making.

Many of projects reported on in this volume have an ethical and normative component and several AMC academics identify as activist-scholars. In this light, we asked contributors to this volume to reflect on what engagement means to them in relation to their scholarship. Each one of them received feedback from one or more AMC group members to facilitate an ongoing dialog. Following on the proposition to consider “engagement as continuum,” this book offers contributions that can be situated somewhere between engaged research on subjects of topical relevance on the one hand and engaging scholarship through activities of practical and/or affective involvement, collaboration, and participation on the other. This is not to suggest that a particular type of engagement is exemplary, but rather to argue that this richness of engaged and engaging research is indicative of the resilience of the AMC research group in the increasingly fraught environment of higher education in general and the humanities in particular.

## **Stereotyping the Humanities**

The concept of engaged and engaging humanities, and its profiling through examples, can work as an antidote for the decades-old and incredibly persistent “crisis” of the humanities. Emerging as a term and as a topic in the 1960s (Plumb, 1964), the sense of a worsening predicament has only intensified in recent decades due to repeated economic downturns followed by austerity measures and funding cuts to institutions of higher education, coupled with a tendency toward privatization in which society is less willing to fund higher education as a public good.<sup>1</sup>

1 To give a recent example from the Dutch context: the Dutch Plan van Rijn is investing significantly more in beta-technical programs which has a direct negative impact on other domains, including the humanities.

The crisis of the humanities is perceived to be both qualitative and quantitative. The sociologist Rosário Couto Costa argues that the depreciation of the humanities within higher education has, over the years, “severely disrupted the balance and the complementarity of wisdom in society” and, in so doing, contributed to “the environmental disasters and social crises that have marked the last decade” (2019, p. 4). For Costa, then, the marginalization of the humanities is much more than an academic concern. This development has actually weakened societal resilience as a whole: it has led to generalized deficits in knowledge, sensitivity, and imagination – cognitive resources crucial to the acknowledgment of real problems within society and likewise to the formulation of possible solutions. As a consequence, the ability of citizens to employ a critical mindset has been severely undermined (p. 3).

Costa calls this marginalization a “vicious cycle of devaluation” (p. 3), leading to a shrinking of resources within humanities departments and a loss of influence of the humanities in society at large. This becomes apparent in reduced enrollment figures, larger class sizes, fewer academic positions available, and lower salaries paid, while it is also accompanied by a “culture of mistrust” toward the humanities and their contribution to societal progress and wellbeing (Docherty, 2011). A 2009 report published by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science, for instance, reads: “The humanities study expressions of the human mind, as representations and interpretations of the world. ... Being an academic field in which discovery, collecting, classification and interpretation are some of the predominant methods, the humanities are constantly returning to their own past. Because humanities studies are specific to their own time and context, new approaches must continually be found for the same subjects, while at the same time the old era-specific interpretations still retain their value” (p. 11). The report, which is entitled “Sustainable Humanities,” expresses strong appreciation for the humanities. Simultaneously, however, it promotes a constricted understanding of what the humanities do. The wording “expressions of the human mind,” for example, suggests a focus on stable and isolated expressions that reside within selected individuals (such as artists or philosophers) or selected cultural artifacts (such as novels or films). Instead, many humanists study what happens to cultural meanings when they enter social interaction or when they travel between different geographical and/or historical frames and contexts. While it is correct that scholarly efforts in the humanities return to the same subjects (such as Greek mythology, Shakespeare, or ancient philosophy), it would be wrong to assume that the humanities are exclusively about the past. Overall, the

report tends to promote an understanding of the humanities as a field of scholarship dealing with sources from the past and abstract ideas and values (such as theories and concepts).

This perception perpetuates the notion that humanities scholarship is considered a field that by and large relies on hermeneutical methods geared to the analysis of already existing primary sources (e.g., literature, archival documents, or the visual arts). Indeed, humanists excel in the practice of close-reading sources of any kind, whether textual, visual, or audio-visual, but their scope is neither limited to hermeneutical data, nor to analysis through close-reading. Humanists use a broad range of both hermeneutical and empirical methods of data construction/collection (e.g., storytelling in oral history, the creation of new corpora in the digital humanities) and analysis (e.g., “distant-reading” practices, such as network analysis and geo-spatial analysis). And while the natural sciences have been involving the public in research, such as to document birds beginning in the nineteenth century (Silvertown, 2009, p. 467) and in collecting rainfall data in the British Isles (Shuttelworth, 2015), well before the advent of the Internet, scholars in the humanities have eagerly adopted participatory practices in recent years as well. This can be seen in such participatory projects as the digital database *Letters of 1916-1923*,<sup>2</sup> which has created a new collection of letters focused on the Irish Revolutionary period through a participatory process, and *Transcribe Bentham*,<sup>3</sup> which asks the public to help transcribe the thousands of letters written by the philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Indeed, these types of projects signal a new mode of engagement within the humanities.

## Value, Impact, and Engagement

Interestingly, mistrust is an issue not only outside but also within the humanities. Humanists question their own field, continuously inquiring about its value. As suggested by the literary scholar Louis Menand, “[i]t is possible to feel that one of the things ailing the humanities today is the amount of time humanists spend talking about what ails the humanities” (2005, p. 11). Menand here raises the issue of whether the crisis of the humanities emerged, at least in part, as a form of self-fulfilling prophecy. Could it be that the crisis of the humanities works like a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1994) – a simulation with real-world consequences?

2 See <http://letters1916.ie>

3 See <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bentham-project/transcribe-bentham>

The search term “value of the humanities” shows 2,480 results within Google Scholar. Countless books and articles have been published on the topic. Within this discourse, Helen Small distinguishes between five main “claims of value of the humanities” (2013, pp. 4–6). The first is that the humanities study meaning-making practices of our culture, focusing on interpretation and evaluation, which creates their distinctive disciplinary character. The second is that the humanities are instrumental to the creation of economic value (e.g., within the creative industries). For Small, this second value claim coincides best with what contemporary governments expect from research and higher education in terms of societal use- and exchange-value. The third value claim is that the humanities contribute to “happiness” on the individual and collective scale. It stipulates that the humanities can help us understand and evaluate forms of happiness, wellbeing, and the good life. The fourth claim is that democracy needs the humanities (see also the chapter by Koenis & de Roder in this volume). This claim, made by scholars such as Martha Nussbaum in *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), closely relates to the influence of critical theory – stretching from (neo-) Marxist ideology to feminist to postcolonial critique – on humanities scholarship. The fifth and final main value claim is that the humanities matter for their own sake. While somewhat unspecific, this fifth claim seems to combine all previous value claims in assuming that, due to its distinctive research subject and focus, the humanities positively contribute to societal wellbeing, politics, and cultural life (Small, 2013, p. 6).

Each one of these value claims, as demonstrated by Small, contains both strengths and weaknesses in terms of their logic. If some of the existing scholarship on humanities in crisis and/or the value of the humanities mainly aims to defend humanities scholarship, the aim of this volume is rather to showcase this scholarship in its various modes and moments of engagement. This book, in other words, is not about humanities in crisis; it is about *engaged and engaging humanities*. It is about what happens when humanities scholars do not necessarily question the humanities and its value through theoretical reflection but, instead, reflect this value through engagement. In many ways, humanities scholarship has always been engaged and engaging, but the modes of this engagement have been transforming within the context of contemporary inter- and transdisciplinary scholarship.

AMC research is performed by scholars employed by Maastricht University’s Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, which is a pioneering institute in the Netherlands in terms of pursuing and facilitating fruitful exchanges between the social sciences and the humanities. Differences between the humanities and social sciences are often gradual and relate to focus, rather

than overall subject. For instance, a sociologist, a linguist, and literary theorist might study how novels are being debated within a contemporary feminist reading group. All three of them would probably examine issues of literary form and meaning, language, and social interaction, but their focus on these issues and their means of analyzing them would vary. Beyond that, all three scholars would probably interact in different manners with the objects of research (e.g., novels) and the people involved in it (e.g., participants). This is when questions of engagement become central. How do humanists from different sub-fields engage with their research subjects, including people and artifacts? And how do the various forms of engagement practiced by humanists affect societal constellations – from social groups to social rituals, from social media to social change?

We argue that engagement provides a process-oriented and flexible concept to grasp how humanities scholarship makes a difference in society. We suggest that engagement offers a more suitable concept to capture what would otherwise be measured as the “societal impact” of research projects within contemporary academia. Clearly, the questions addressed in this book closely align with the topic of impact, which forms a key concern in contemporary university funding. When societies, represented by their governments, allocate resources for research and education, they expect to know the impact of this resource allocation. Impact, in this context, is usually understood in terms of scientific and societal impact. Currently, scientific impact is mostly measured through peer-review and bibliometrics. Societal impact, in contrast, is more difficult to measure. Scholarship today is expected either directly or indirectly to contribute to the Global Sustainable Development Goals, which include good health and well-being, climate action, gender equality, peace and justice, and many other concerns (Brown et al., 2019; Leal Filho et al., 2018; Annan-Diab & Molinari, 2017). But how is this contribution evaluated?

According to sociologist of science Lutz Bornmann, three main methods of measuring societal impact based on a citation equivalent have emerged: evaluation of citations within patents (technological impact), evaluation of citations within clinical guidelines (medical impact), and altmetrics, which measures how frequent research findings are cited in media, policy documents, and related public sources (2017, p. 778). Furthermore, impact is increasingly measured in terms of interactions between researchers and societal stakeholders. Interactions, in this context, “can be in the form of personal contact (e.g., joint projects or networks), publications (e.g., educational and assessment reports) ... and artefacts (e.g., exhibitions, software or websites)” (Bornmann, 2017, p. 779). Bornmann criticizes these impact measurements – in particular impact metrics – for being distorted.

Accordingly, “science is marked by inequality, random chance, anomalies, the right to make mistakes, unpredictability and a high significance of extreme events” (p. 775), all of which affect impact unforeseeably. Contemporary impact metrics, as such, predispose impact to result from a rather constant and linear research flow, which fabricates units of impact like products from the conveyor belt. Thus, while the notion of impact increasingly co-determines the societal value of a scholar, a research project, a research discipline, or even a scholarly field (such as the humanities), we have not yet found a fair and reliable means of measuring societal impact. Moreover, existing impact measurements tend to quantify impact, while ignoring the qualitative variations that distinguish different forms of societal contribution. This, in our view, provides an important incentive for examining the societal impact of humanities scholarship beyond metrics, as well as through the notion of engagement. In the Dutch academic context, there has been a development towards a narrative approach instead of a quantitative one (cf. the discussion surrounding the position paper “Recognition and Rewards”) when it comes to assessing output and impact. Our proposition to work with the concept of engagement is in line with this development.

In contrast to the concept of impact, engagement invites a focus on research as a process, rather than merely on the results of research. This can be seen in this volume’s chapters that report on engagement with individuals outside academia. In this respect it is possible to distinguish three different forms. First, several AMC scholars subscribe to the need of translating, packaging, and tailoring knowledge to different groups within society at large. Secondly, more traditional formats and genres of outreach activities, such as popularizing publications (journal articles etc.), public lectures, and debates, are increasingly complemented with newer approaches, including best practice guides, exhibitions, historical reenactments, theatrical performances, and games (chapters van der Heijden & Wachelder and Papadopoulos & Schreibman). Thirdly, the common notion – in the Dutch context – of “valorization” has promoted the development of public humanities practices whereby the conventional model of a scholar addressing an audience is replaced by more interactive and participatory forms of engagement (chapters van der Heijden & Wachelder; Papadopoulos & Schreibman; and Swinnen et al.). In an ideal scenario, such audience engagement feeds back into the scholarship.

This third form of engagement implies that more and more AMC scholars involve communities outside academia in the production of knowledge. This can vary from a more passive engagement similar to the involvement of human subjects in qualitative social sciences research to more active

engagement involving people in the processes of researching; from the formulation of research questions to the interpretation of research data. AMC faculty increasingly immerse themselves in specific communities/settings to collect/create data through online and offline (participant) observation and interviewing. Examples of such communities vary from hackerspaces (chapter Richterich) and museums (chapter Laurenson, van Saaze, & van de Vall) to schools and nursing homes (chapters Cornips et al. and Swinnen et al.). Data collection/creation through collaborations with these communities outside of academia often have the character of interventions, as they ultimately serve to change the very settings in which the research takes place, or, at least, change how they are perceived (e.g., chapter Richterich – more gender equality in hackerspaces; chapter Laurenson, van Saaze, & van de Vall – advance the conservation of contemporary art; and chapter Papadopoulos & Schreibman – using new technologies to engage secondary students with history). When activities are developed that otherwise would not exist in the given settings (e.g., films created and screened for people living with dementia in a psychogeriatric ward – chapter Swinnen et al.), this type of approach clearly has affinities with action research.

Together, these chapters exemplify how involving people from outside of academia, not only in the production of knowledge but in the entire research process from formulating questions and research design to final results, is participatory and engaged research at the same time. This research is actually part of a broader trend in the humanities in which humanists set up citizen science projects in which they invite volunteers/non-professionals to help archive, curate, interpret, and exhibit sources. This type of set-up encourages civic engagement and lifelong learning together. All these ways of engaging with people other than scholars are examples of how AMC faculty is committed to a humanities field that is more engaging than traditionally perceived. This volume in fact underscores that a diversity of modes of engagement within the humanities is flourishing already. To understand the societal impact of the humanities, these versatile modes of engagement within and through the humanities merit closer attention and narrative description.

## **Four Clusters of AMC Research Engagement**

The chapters in this volume are divided into four clusters: “Subjectivities and Communities,” “Engaging Narratives,” “Collaborations,” and “The Humanities Tradition: Pioneers and Longstanding Debates” which highlight and exemplify the types of engaged and engaging research described above. The

cluster “Subjectivities and Communities” brings together scholarship that inquires how selfhood is socially constructed and performed in relation to other people. It signals engagement through its specific focus on “precarious” selfhood, ranging from people who desire a child and people who live in institutionalized care settings to people with a migration background. The chapter by Elisabeth Wesseling studies how prospective adoptive parents stake out a socially acceptable identity for themselves on the American platform *Full Circle Adoptions*. This platform is organized as a dating site where adopters profile themselves to convince parents to give their child to them through a variety of aesthetics strategies. The chapter by Aagje Swinnen, Ike Kamphof, Annette Hendriks, and Ruud Hendriks looks into how people who live with dementia in the closed wards of the long-term care facility Klevarie in Maastricht respond to three film montages. Based on visual material from the archives of the Limburgs Museum, filmmaker Joël Rabijns sought to appeal to the sensory and emotional capacities of the designated viewers (people who live with dementia) and to support their embodied being in the world. The chapter by Leonie Cornips, Jolien Makkinga, Nantke Pecht, and Pomme van de Weerd presents sociolinguistic and anthropological research conducted within the context of the Chair in Language Culture in Limburg. Through several case-studies, their contribution reveals the role of linguistic resources in regional and social identity constructions and how speakers of distinct backgrounds in various contexts identify with others, or dis-identify themselves from others, through language, labeling, and addressing practices.

The “Engaging Narratives” cluster comprises contributions that reveal the urgency of a renewed engagement with various types of narratives across media that critically intervene in the present and the past. The chapter by Georgi Verbeeck studies the reception of the German mini-series *Generation War* by academic, journalistic, and political critics. It focuses specifically on the debate surrounding moral choices and dilemmas in the series’ representation of Hitler’s Germany at war with the Soviet Union in 1941–1945 as an example of how popular culture feeds into contemporary academic historical research. The chapter by Amanda Kluveld reconstructs interwar life in the former Galician Jewish community of Grodzisko Dolne in South-East Poland. The reconstruction is based on the childhood memories in the oral and written life histories of Holocaust survivors born and raised in this community. The chapter by Miriam Meissner examines how advocates for and practitioners of minimalist lifestyles understand social and ecological engagement. In her reading, these lifestyles tend to focus on individual experience and choice, while foreclosing the consideration of collective



political action and institutional change. Meissner advocates an “engaged mindfulness” that demands the alignment and mutual reinforcement of individual experience and collective political engagement.

The cluster on “Collaborations” includes three chapters that offer insights into the diverse ways in which scholars, lay people, and professionals collaborate, mostly to engage in the co-construction of knowledge. The chapter by Tim van der Heijden and Jo Wachelder looks into the authors’ experiences with several valorization activities developed in the framework of a project on the history of home movie making and screening as twentieth-century family memory practices. They understand valorization as a reciprocal process beneficial to all the partners involved. The chapter by Costas Papadopoulos and Susan Schreibman discusses the design principles behind and experiences with *History in a Box*, a technology-driven blended learning activity in which people from different generations collaborate to investigate the battle of the 1916 Irish Battle of Mount Street Bridge. The chapter by Pip Laurensen, Vivian van Saaze, and Renée van de Vall examines the dynamics of collaboration between humanities scholars and museum-based researchers who have already worked together on the conservation and stewardship of contemporary art for two decades. The chapter by Annika Richterich focuses on civic developer communities where “hacking” is understood as creative practice pushing the boundaries of technology. It asks how members of such hacker- and makerspaces establish and negotiate rules for social interactions, particularly in relation to communal values.

Finally, the cluster on “The Humanities Tradition: Pioneers and Longstanding Debates” offers insights into the important contributions of selected key figures in humanities scholarship as well as interventions in long-standing humanities debates. The chapter by Ulrike Brunotte introduces us to the work of Jane Harrison (1850–1928), the Hellenist and so-called Cambridge Ritualist who was the first to focus on the meaning of ritual in the study of culture and religion. Brunotte argues that Harrison is a pioneering scholar who paved the way for the current material, affective, and performative turn in the humanities. The chapter by Sjaak Koenis and Jan de Roder goes against the widespread assumption that reading enhances empathy and makes us better citizens by questioning the alliance between politics and literature in the work of Martha Nussbaum.

What this volume substantiates through examples is that the image of the humanities scholar withdrawn in her ivory tower’s splendid isolation is a myth. It has never been exemplary of humanities scholars per se, and it is certainly not representative of what we are and do today. The members

of the faculty behind this book actively contribute and intervene in public debate and practice, involve people outside academia in varying ways, emphasize dialog and co-creation, and contribute to shaping the collective social process of creating common futures. We argue that the established notion of scholarly impact does not fully grasp these multiple and often interactive motivations and practices because by relying on this notion one will overlook the qualitative variety according to which social impact happens, focus on the end result rather than the process, and conceive of the impacting process as unidirectional (i.e., scholar impacts society). The concept of engagement, in contrast, refers to both the state of being engaged and the activity of engaging. It thus captures the multifaceted process of scholarly interaction with societal issues and actors, while it also accounts for the fact that this process is necessarily reciprocal. This implies that engagement cannot be pinned down to a single definition but needs to be fleshed out through a range of examples. This is what this volume sets out to do. Its authors draw on their experience in order to show, analyze, and critically reflect on engaged and engaging humanities scholarship. The various results, we believe, go beyond arguing the value of the humanities. Through its tools, ideas, narratives, and self-reflection, this volume may serve as groundwork and source of inspiration for future practices of engaged and engaging humanities scholarship.

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# **Part I**

## **Subjectivities and Communities**



# 1. “Literature as Equipment for Living”

## Parental Self-Fashioning in Full Circle Adoptions

*Elisabeth Wesseling*

### Abstract

Approaching social life as a vast stage on which actors perform certain roles in order to achieve specific effects on each other and on the intended audience, this chapter studies how prospective adoptive parents stake out a socially acceptable identity for themselves on the online platform of the adoption agency *Full Circle Adoptions*. It shows how humanities perspectives and concepts can be brought to bear upon pressing social issues by analyzing how prospective adopters negotiate the ethical quandaries involved in adoption from a dramaturgic perspective. This case study of adoptive strategies reveals that aesthetic strategies for creating a specific imago for yourself are not confined to some self-contained fictional universe but have a way of spilling over into real-life situations.

**Keywords:** self-fashioning, intercountry adoption, children’s literature, ethos, symbolic interactionism

## From Child Saviors to Child Snatchers: The Changing Imago of Adoptive Parents

Academic research into intercountry adoption (ICA) used to be dominated by social scientists (especially developmental psychologists) and legal experts. The first monitored the social and psychological well-being of adoptees post-adoption, while the latter focused on the construction and implementation of international conventions for regulating the cross-border mobility of adoptees, most notably the *Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption* (1993). This disciplinary spectrum expanded when the interdisciplinary field of



“critical adoption studies”<sup>1</sup> emerged in the nineties, which scrutinizes the deep-cultural assumptions about family, childhood, and nation that are enacted in ICA. Critical adoption studies employ a wide array of research methods, such as participatory observation, interviewing, surveys, and discourse analysis (including narrative and rhetorical analysis), for studying an equally great variety of sources, such as archives, narratives (both fiction and non-fiction), interview data, and social interactions. It makes a concerted effort to include all actors involved in ICA pre- and post-adoption into the picture, that is, not only adoptive parents and adopted children, but also birth parents and adult adoptees. Critical adoption studies offer a fine example of “engaged humanities,” as they bring humanities perspectives to bear upon pressing social issues. And ICA has developed into such a burning issue, for sure.

ICA used to have the humanitarian glow of “saving” children from underdeveloped regions or war-torn zones from the 1950s onward. This humanitarian ethos ceased to be credible around the turn of the century, because of:

1. the rising demand for adoptees, caused by (a) delayed parenthood and a concomitant decline of fertility in the West and (b) the claims of single-sex couples to the right to adopt;
2. the increasing shortage of adoptable children caused by the newly restrictive policies of China and Russia (Selman, 2009), and
3. the swelling criticisms of ICA that exposed the blurry boundary between legal and illegal practices.

Given the disbalance between “supply” and “demand,” adoption has come to be seen as a means for serving wealthy Western couples’ supposed “right” to a child, rather than every child’s right to a family (Bos, 2009a, 2009b). Adoption scandals about “child laundering” (Smolin, 2010) cast a shadow over adoptive parents as self-centered, ruthless baby-snatchers, prepared to sacrifice the human rights of birth parents and adoptees to their own desire for a family. The persistent marginalization and disempowerment of birth parents, who generally live in the poverty-stricken regions of this world and tend to be non-white, while prospective adopters are affluent Western whites, is susceptible to accusations of ethnocentrism, if not downright racism. For example, the majority of adoptees imported into the US through intercountry adoption are

1 See the special issue “Critical Adoption Studies” of *Adoption and Culture*, 6(1) (2018), edited by Margaret Homans.

Asian, while Asians count as the preferred "other" race, preferred to blacks that is, who are amply available through the domestic "market" (Dorow, 2006). Around the same time, a significant number of Korean adoptees had reached adulthood, who organized themselves into anti-adoption lobbies vilifying "sealed records" procedures,<sup>2</sup> which deprived adoptees of their family histories, and clamoring for the abolition of adoption altogether.<sup>3</sup> In short, critics have it that adopters are easily tempted to capitalize on the inequities of race, class, and nationality to use others as means to their own ends (Briggs, 2012).

This chapter aims to contribute to critical adoption studies by a rhetorical analysis of how prospective adoptive parents craft a favorable social *imago*<sup>4</sup> for themselves in the face of the increasingly vociferous criticisms of ICA. I focus on the case of *Full Circle Adoptions* (FCA), an online, US-based adoption agency that strives to do justice to the rights and needs of birth parents ([www.fullcircleadoptions.org](http://www.fullcircleadoptions.org)). FCA has clearly been designed to help prospective adopters navigate the ethical and political minefield of ICA, in search of "good" adoption practices that may transcend the criticisms described above. It is organized like an online dating site, with prospective adopters profiling themselves persuasively within the format imposed on them by the FCA agency in the hope they will be selected by pregnant women who consider adoption. Thus, FCA grants birth parents priority in the adoptive process, while encouraging adoptive and birth parents to settle for a lasting relationship with each other, rather than having the first write the second out of existence by sealing the records. Persuading birth parents to yield their children to prospective adopters is hardly a matter of rational argumentation ("logos"), but rather of refashioning and rehabilitating the ethos of prospective adopters from discriminatory "baby-snatchers" into the safe-keepers of "open" families in the broadest sense of the word. Ethos is all about the motives and values which may be regarded as a warrant of reliability and credibility by a given audience.

2 "Sealed records" procedures include the erasure of all traces of the adoptee's family of origin in his or her adoption papers, making it very difficult for adoptees to ever retrace their families of origin.

3 An important lobby group of adoptees is United Adoptees International: <http://uai-sti.blogspot.nl>. The scholarly and creative work of Korean adoptees such as Jane Yeong Trenka, Deann Borshay Liem, Tobias Hübinette, and Jane Jin Kaisen has been vital in exposing the darker sides of intercountry adoption.

4 In this chapter, the terms "imago," "ethos," and "persona" are used more or less interchangeably, as a set of values and motifs that are thought to define reliability and are enacted in everyday self-fashioning.

This chapter draws on the theoretical framework of “dramatism” or “symbolic interactionism,”<sup>5</sup> which conceptualizes society as a vast stage on which the theatre play of social interaction is performed. Developed by literary scholars and sociologists such as Kenneth Burke, Erving Goffmann, and Stephen Greenblatt, it demonstrates how critical approaches developed for the analysis of narrative genres (theatre plays, films, novels, life stories), may be profitably brought to bear upon what is traditionally considered to be the object of the social sciences, i.e., orchestrations of real-world social interactions.

What does it imply, precisely, when we study social life as theatre, from a Burkean perspective? First of all, it means that social action is **symbolic action**, i.e., mediated through interpretations of symbols or signs, which assign meanings to social “situations”: Symbolic action includes the reflection upon and display of one’s own motives and values, as well as surmises about those of others, upon **ethos attributions**, in short. In other words, social actors fashion specific roles or *personae* for themselves while interpreting the *personae* of others.

The dramatic model understands all social interaction as essentially persuasive: it is always about displaying one’s own attitude with a view to affecting the attitudes of others and impacting on a situation. This means that **rhetoric** is an integral part of the dramatic model.

Rhetoric is always about enabling **constraints**: language orders our experience by constraining it, by imposing frameworks and foci, by classifying situations and events in ways that are inevitably selective and tradition-bound. The art of persuasion strongly relies on the strategic mobilization of time-honored **commonplaces** to make them suit one’s purposes through **tropes**, i.e., figures of speech that project the meanings of one set of associated commonplaces upon another one, thereby giving a specific twist to the established meanings of both.

The dramatic model imputes a certain scenario or **plot** structure to social interaction which pivots around conflict, redemption, and transformation, while conflict is intimately linked up with the maintenance or subversion of social hierarchies, according to the following causal sequence: “if drama, then conflict. If conflict, then hierarchy. If hierarchy, then guilt. If guilt, then redemption, If redemption, then victimage” (Gusfield, 1989, p. 33; see also “Terministic Screens,” Burke, 1966, pp. 54–55).

5 This term was, in fact, also introduced by Burke himself, as he defined language as a form of “symbolic action,” rather than representation. See, for instance, the title of a collection of essays by Burke: *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, Method* (1966).

Drama thus involves a ceremonial or **ritualistic** dimension, which forges collectivities through **scapegoating**. Symbolic action is always intentional and reflective from a Burkean perspective, but not necessarily rational or well thought through. Myth, legend, folklore, religious motifs persist in modern society and are re-enacted time and again.<sup>6</sup>

Kenneth Burke's fundamental insight that narrative fiction epitomizes specific persuasive strategies which also govern everyday interactions has been corroborated and expanded by contemporary literary scholars. Liesbeth Korthals-Altes, for example, has argued at length that narrative fiction has a particular role to play in making acts of ethos attribution amenable to reflection, transformation, and transfer from literary contexts to everyday interaction and vice versa. Ethos attributions are crucial to the act of interpreting narrative texts on various levels according to her. First, readers attribute specific values and motifs to characters, narrators, and authors, just like they do to the people they meet in everyday life, as they play along with the game of make-believe that the fictional world is a world they can enter, peopled by characters they can identify and interact with since they have been staged as thinking, speaking, acting, and embodied *personae* just like readers themselves. Second, narrators and characters within the text are also shown to draw inferences from each other's behavior all the time. This layeredness is one of the distinctive features of narrative fiction at large. Narratives do not merely report on events, but they also represent perspectives on those events, as well as perspectives on those perspectives. Third, where novels are concerned, we do not only have to make do with visible behavior as a sign of ethos, as is the case in ordinary life, but we are also provided with direct access to the inner life of fictional characters. Contrary to real-life persons, fictional characters have "transparent minds" (Cohn, 1978), meaning that we can literally read their thoughts, enabling a meta-perspective on the act of ethos attribution:

... literary works "regale us with something we hold at a premium in everyday life: perfect access to other people's minds via observable behavior," offering the "illusion of superior social discernment and power" (Zunshine, 2006, p. 72). Literary works also offer, one might observe, the more melancholy, yet just as familiar, confrontation with characters' and our own opacity, obtuseness, inconsistency, and duplicity (Korthals-Altes, 2014, p. 35).

6 Burke elaborated his dramatic model all throughout his work. Some important loci are: Burke, 1968; Burke, 1974, pp. 3–20.

Narrative fiction's game of make-believe, its enactment of attitudes, its layeredness, and the transparent minds of fictional characters, all facilitate meta-reflection about standardized inferences from culturally shared behavioral repertoires. The play with different modes of narration and focalization in fiction may disrupt these standardized inferences, making way for the renegotiation of petrified associations of specific behaviors with specific values and motifs. Conversely, through the sheer force of plot, narrative fiction may also numb our critical faculties, as readers go with the flow of the story while growing oblivious to alternative courses of action. Reading literature does not necessarily transform us into better persons. As we shall see, all this certainly also applies to adoptive family making, which is closely dependent on adoption narratives in various ways. For one thing, adoptive family making is an *as if* mode of family making, with adoptive parents taking in other people's children as if they were their very own, participating in the game of make-believe that is proper to fiction. Prospective adopters have to fashion themselves into parents by cultural means only, meaning that they have to create a *persona* for themselves just like authors of stories create characters. Furthermore, adopters do not perform their cultural work all on their own. Rather, they make use of the templates offered to them by narratives that are already in place, most notably narratives about adoption, written by adopters, for adoptees. Finally, adopters capitalize upon fiction's potential to renegotiate the values and motifs attributed to adoptive family making, tinkering with their parental *personae* in response to the numerous criticisms that dog adoption into the twenty-first century, as I now hope to demonstrate.

This chapter explores how parental self-fashioning draws on narrative fiction in both a broad and a narrow sense. In the last case, prospective adopters draw upon specific works of fiction as repertoires for self-fashioning. In the first case, they take their cue from genre conventions more broadly that figure most saliently (although not exclusively) in narrative fiction. Granting that FCA tries to work towards a renewed adoption practice that is inclusive, non-discriminatory, non-racist, and sensitive toward the rights and needs of birth parents, this chapter nevertheless concludes that adoption cannot just paper over the very substantial differences in social and economic status between birth parents and adoptive parents, making it ultimately hard to imagine how adoption could ever be "innocent."

### “Dear Birth Parent/s”

At the time of the analysis, the FCA website featured 107 prospective adoptive families: 102 of these families had been “placed,” 5 were ready to adopt, 23 out of these 107 adopters were gay couples, 3 were single moms, nearly all of them are North Americans, except for 3 gay couples, who all happened to be Dutch. Three couples were interracial.<sup>7</sup> These prospective adopters all construct a parental *persona* for themselves within the format of a letter to the birth parent/s/mother (“Dear birth parent...”). The authors waver continually between female and gender-neutral modes of address, as well as between the singular and the plural. These letters all follow a set sequence of steps. They open and end with a direct address to the birth parent/mother, extending words of commiseration with the difficult process of giving up her child for adoption. Prospective adopters subsequently assure the birth parent both in the introduction and in the conclusion of their letters that they will do everything in their power to make a happy home for her child, and to include her in the family circle in whatever way and to whatever degree that she thinks fit. They often also add that they welcome a child of whatever race in their midst, meaning in most cases that they do not object to a black child. In between, the prospective adopters narrate the story of their love relationship and their family backgrounds. Last but not least, each partner details what s/he loves in the other one, always foregrounding his or her eminent suitability for parenthood. The letters to the birth parent tend to be lavishly illustrated by full-color photographs, revealing the housing situation of the couple and the spare time activities they like to engage in, especially their interactions with their family members on festive occasions. The latter always include pictures of the prospective adopters doing fun things with infant relatives such as nieces and nephews, children of friends, or godchildren. Home making features quite prominently in these shared spare time activities, especially cooking family meals. The prospective adopters are rarely depicted in their professional roles. In fact, I have only witnessed this once, in the case of Niko&Dennis. On the rare occasions at which a single mother profiles herself, the format is slightly different. It opens and ends in the same way, with the prospective adopter describing her family history and housing situation at length, plus the ways in which she thinks she can make time for the child in her (professional) life.

7 These numbers apply to the date at which I last accessed the FCA site for the purpose of analysis: July 26, 2016.

Casting your profile in the format of a letter to the birth parent is not exactly a virtuoso literary manoeuvre. Nevertheless, this move does place parental self-fashioning squarely within the game of make-believe, the enactment of attitudes, the layeredness, and the reflexive transparency that is typical of ethos attributions in narrative fiction. The readers, in this case the pregnant women considering adoption, infer a specific set of values and motifs from the posturing of prospective adopters, who enact their aptitude for parenthood through their favorite activities, their self-disclosure, and the virtues they attribute to their partners. Even before the adoption has actually been consummated, the reader may already become a part of this virtual world, imaginatively interacting with the prospective adopters and trying out what it might feel like to join this family through a game of make-believe. In the process of imaginative identification and interaction, standardized assumptions about adopters' motives ("these prospective adopters are bent on taking my child and obliterating me from their lives as soon as possible") may be disrupted. This may create room for alternative ethos attributions, rehabilitating adoption as a sensitive, open, and respectful mode of family making that may potentially be of benefit to all parties involved.

The FCA format obviously remediates an older genre, namely the written paper letter, which carries connotations of in-depth communication and investing time and effort in cultivating personal relationships. It evokes reminiscences of the good old days in which people were supposedly less pressed for time, less hurried, less career-centered, less distracted by different media all clamoring for fleeting attention. By directly addressing the (as yet unknown) birth parent, prospective adopters already go ahead and forge a relationship as "pen pals" of sorts, acting out the promise of FCA that birth parents will be included in the newly formed family circle. Thus, both the contents and the genre of the letter to the birth parent underscore the idea that FCA is not just about the adopters' desire for a child, but that the birth parents also matter. These preludes to alternative ethos attributions to adopters are further substantiated by a number of recurrent tropes that put a specific spin on (family) relationships.

### Love Comes Full Circle

The most complex trope involved in FCA is the very name of this adoptive agency. *Full Circle Adoptions* refers to the idiomatic expression "to come full circle," meaning that some agent or act returns to its original position or

state of affairs. The expression implies that this return is a positive form of fulfillment, with origin and destiny finally coalescing in a felicitous sort of way. The image of a circle departs from the more conventional figure of the "adoptive triad" or "triangle." While a triangle or triad suggests neutral and rather uninvolved stasis, i.e., equality in the form of equal distance between birth parents, adoptees, and adopters, the image of a full circle suggests dynamism, with some good circling around from origin to destiny and back again. This raises the question of who or what comes full circle to what or to whom in FCA. The FCA website duly obliges: "In full circle adoptions, love comes back to the child." This deceptively simple statement has in fact mind-boggling implications, as it suggests that the adoptee is the *primum movens* of adoption. The child supposedly sends out its gift of love into the world and when the adoptive process is successful, its gift will be returned, while love is also showered on the other agents involved in the process of adoptive family making. Although the idea that the adoptee could ever be the primary causal factor in adoption is wholly irrational, this is nevertheless a recurrent trope in adoption fictions, more precisely, in children's books about adoption for adoptees from China, which often exemplify the trope of the so-called "red thread." This metaphor, which derives from a Chinese folktale, has it that those who are destined to end up with each other are tied to each other from the moment of birth by an invisible red thread that stretches out from the heart of the infant adoptee to the hearts of its parents-to-be. The as yet parentless couple feels an ache in their hearts as soon as the infant begins to pull their strings, which compels them to embark on a quest to relieve their pain. The quest ends when they are finally united with the child who is drawing them near. In a magical reversal of the adoptive situation, the adoptee is pulling the strings of its adoptive parents rather than the other way around, settling issues of entitlement, and moving the birth parents effectively out of the picture. The trope surreptitiously naturalizes the adoptive process, in that the oxymoron of an invisible thread that nevertheless has a color (red) creates a likeness to the umbilical chord and to blood ties, meaning that adoptive family making is as inexorable as genetic family making.<sup>8</sup> Both tropes steer free from the negative imago of adoptive parents as baby snatchers, suggesting that fate has predestined adoptees and adoptive parents to be with each other, with the adoptee figuring as the primary agent through which destiny is fulfilled, and constructing adoption as a child-centered practice, never mind the birth parents.

8 For a full analysis of the trope of the red thread in children's books about adoption from China, see Garcia Gonzalez & Wesseling, 2013.



The question is how the trope of love coming full circle to the child tallies with the declared intention of FCA to facilitate the formation of extended families which may also accommodate the birth parent, since the image of the adoptee as the *primum movens* of adoption is hardly propitious to the acknowledgment of the birth parent. Let us take a closer look at the other tropes involved in FCA to gain greater clarity here.

### **Love is Friendship**

In order for love to circulate between all agents involved in the adoptive process, it has to be equally sharable between adults and children, meaning that it needs to be divested of all erotic and sexual connotations. Accordingly, when prospective adopters narrate the history of their relationship and detail what they love in the other person, nobody ever mentions physical attraction. The word “passion” is employed on a regular basis, but it is strictly reserved for activities (cf. a “shared passion for traveling”). It is character qualities that prospective adopters love in their partners, with a fine sense of humor being prized above anything else, followed by the assertion that the child will grow up in a house that is always filled with laughter. The partners basically elaborate the idea that they are each other’s best friends (Sarah&Jonathan: “Although it is cliché, we are best friends.”). Indeed, love is construed as friendship on this site, with partners feeling drawn to each other because of a shared interest in specific activities and because of the appeal of the other person’s character. If love is basically friendship, this means that the couples profiled do not have an exclusive relationship, for friendship can be shared with whomever likes to join their favorite pastimes and appreciates virtues such as diligence, commitment, generosity, and a good sense of humor.

### **Friendship is Family**

Prospective adopters go to considerable lengths to display not just their desire, but also their suitability for parenthood, which is a bit of a challenge, given the fact that they have not yet had the opportunity to actually prove this. They employ two strategies to make up for this lacuna. First, their families of origin occupy a prominent place in the profiling letters. Without exception, the adopters forward the harmonious family lives they enjoyed when growing up as a solid basis for their own impending parenthood,

clearly subscribing to conventional psychological lore that those who had good parents will also turn out to be good parents themselves, as they only need to repeat their own upbringing. "I learned a lot about being a good father from my parents," Dennis says (Dennis&Niko). Lurking underneath the tenet that good parents bring forth good parents is the negative version of developmental determinism, namely that those who had the ill fortune of growing up in deficient families are doomed to become deficient parents themselves, the supposed unstoppable compulsion to repeat now becoming fatal rather than fortunate. Indeed, the families figuring in the profiling letters exude a sense of warmth, intimacy, harmony, and closeness in such an effective way, that the pregnant women visiting the FCA site may easily find their own families of origin lacking in comparison. This may be interpreted as a subtle exhortation to birth parents to abandon the futile hope that they might be able to do the job themselves, and to join a proven happy family, rather than run the risk of creating a deficient one of their own making. And it looks fairly easy to join these harmonious families, since the letters to the birth parent have a way of categorizing all vital relationships as family relationships. For example, the opening line of Bonnie&Tara's profile reads: "For us, family means everything. We cherish the times we can share with our immediate families, and our close friends who are like family to us. We look forward to knowing the future birth-family of the child we're blessed to adopt. You are your child's family too, and we respect you as you consider all the best choices for your child." In a similar vein, Brian&Andrew have it that, in addition to their families, they also have a wonderful "family of friends" in their Boston neighborhood. Friends do not always figure in the profiles of prospective adopters, but if they do, they are invariably cast as relatives, as also comes out in the observation that the children of these friends matter greatly to the adopters in question, and that they already function "as if relatives" of these children, which is another way of flaunting their suitability for (adoptive) parenthood.

By presenting friendship as family, the distinction between genetic and elective belonging is blurred. This erasure is quite typical of adoption fictions as well (Wesseling, 2014), which loom large on the FCA website under the heading "Resources." Clearly, FCA considers works of (children's) fiction important resources for fashioning a parental self, and also for refashioning a little stranger from abroad into next of kin in due time. Take the children's book *Beginnings: How Families Come to Be* (Kroll, 1994),<sup>9</sup> for instance, which

9 The children's books discussed in this chapter both figure on the FCA website under the heading "Resources."

tells a number of origin stories in response to a child's request for an explanation of how s/he ended up in this particular family. Various modes of family making are presented in the successive chapters of the picture book, all on a par. The book opens with "Ruben," who emerged out of his mother's belly in hospital, to continue with "Katherine Grace," who was the reward for a long journey overseas, filling an empty space in their parents' hearts that only she could fill. "Mark" is adopted by the brother of his mother after the latter had died before he turned one, "Olivia" was adopted by a single woman who was chosen by her birth mother as she was too young for mothering, "Habib" was adopted from Morocco by an African American Muslim family, "Nicole" is a special needs girl from South America who was adopted by a North American family who already had three strapping sons, and that is where the book ends, with only one child out of six being born to a heterosexual couple, the rule being the exception in this book, with every form of family making working out just fine, to the great satisfaction of all concerned. The origin stories are illustrated by acrylic and pastel drawings in deep warm colors, with orange, red, and deep yellow and brown dominating the scene, a clear visualization of domestic warmth. If there is no essential difference between genetic and elective belonging, and if friends are family, then the prospective adopters have already demonstrated their fitness for adoptive parenthood by including the people they love into their flexible family circle, which makes it perfectly plausible that they are quite capable of doing this again to include the adoptee and his or her biological parent/s.

### **The Neighborhood is Family**

The description of the family home forms a significant part of the letter to the birth parent. Couples emphasize the idea that they have already taken their-child-to-be into account in the selection of their house and neighborhood. The photographs tend to feature a spacious house (way too large for two) with a bucolic garden, most of them "colonial" style, which, just like the letter format, bestows a retro feel upon adoptive family making, in reminiscence of the time in which the American homestead was celebrated as a utopian microcosm of how society at large should ideally be. There is no direct reference to society at large whatsoever in the FCA profiles, but the meso level does come into view, for in addition to family and friends, there is also such a thing as "the neighborhood" or "the community." These neighborhoods or communities were an important reason to settle in the family home in question, as they tend to be safe, diverse, and friendly, with

plenty of facilities and amenities that matter to children within reach such as schools, playgrounds, other children to play with, etc. Because neighborhoods and communities remain nameless and faceless, they tend to figure as an extension of the family home: there is no clear boundary where the family home stops and the neighborhood begins. This also reinforces the idea that all relationships are essentially family relationships, whether through elective or genetic belonging, which is indicative of the promise that in these large, diverse, extended families there is bound to be a place for the adoptee (and his or her birth mother) too.

It is not difficult to see how the four tropes discussed, i.e., "love comes full circle," "love is friendship," "friendship is family" and "the neighborhood is family" feed into each other in an ongoing feedback loop. Neither the love between the prospective adopters, nor their family relationships, are presented as exclusive, for there is no natural limit to the extension of one's friendship cq. family. If love is friendship, and if friendship is family, and if family extends into the neighborhood, then family is bound to lead to love, and love to more friendship and more family, a stronger affiliation to the neighborhood and so on, and so forth, *perpetuum mobile*. Love comes full circle indeed, but not just to the child, who, in fact, in most cases has not even been born yet, and therefore cannot initiate anything. It is the birth mother who sends out her gift, and because it is thought to be in the best interest of the child if her existence is at least acknowledged, she may legitimately expect to receive something in return as well, especially in those cases in which the birth mother has not yet reached adulthood herself.

### Dramatis Personae

The letters to the birth parents are there to help pregnant women select parents for their children. However, the irony of the pre-structured FCA format is that all prospective adopters come out at the other end looking the same. Together, they don one shared *persona*, who displays the same set of distinctive features again and again. There are basically two *dramatis personae* on the scene of FCA: the birth parent, who is portrayed as a heroic, altruistic, self-sacrificing character whose impending abandonment of her child is depicted as a labor of love.<sup>10</sup> All prospective adopters exert themselves to express their admiration and respect for the courage and

10 See also the dedication in *Beginnings: How Families Come to Be*: "For Maureen, who loved enough to let go."

selflessness of the birth parent in the opening and concluding paragraphs of their letters, who does not egoistically cling to her own child as if it were her personal possession, but is willing to share this source of joy with others, thereby augmenting it up to the point at which there is enough love and happiness to go around for everyone. The heroic *persona* of the birth parent is not to be taken for granted here; it is anything but a cliché. There are plenty of other ways in which unwed pregnant mothers have been depicted in the past: as wanton and lascivious sluts, who are rightly punished for their promiscuous behavior by an unsolicited pregnancy, as uncaring and cold-hearted egoists who do not even care about their own progeny, as irresponsible and flippant childlike characters refusing to grow up, etc.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the heroic and self-sacrificing imago of the birth parents is a carefully crafted *persona* which, once again, draws on literary resources. The FCA site warmly recommends the children's book *The Mulberry Bird: Story of An Adoption* to its clients. This adoption narrative dwells at length on the arduous struggle of a single mother bird to hatch, feed, and protect her one and only youngster that emerged out of a single blue egg.<sup>12</sup> This is a loving, devoted, and enduring mother, who weathers several storms and mishaps until she is finally prepared to yield her dearly beloved, but drenched and worn-down baby bird to a wise mediator, an owl, who transports the young mulberry bird to a bird couple in a safe, warm, and sunny habitat far away. The mulberry bird has no other thoughts but for her child's well-being upon departure: "How safe he will be," she thought, "and warm and dry" (Braff Brodzinsky, 1986, p. 35). The young bird finally manages to grow up in its new nurturing environment, now protected by two, rather than just one, parent. The conclusion of the story pays one last tribute to the birth mother: "Being adopted, he decided, was like having two families – one far away but not forgotten, and one that greeted him each morning, surrounding him with the flutter of their warm feathered bodies and the noisy chorus of their singing" (p. 45). The parental self-fashioning of

11 Adoption from South Korea was strongly driven by Korean society's severe condemnation of Korean women who had conceived children with American fathers out of wedlock, with both children and their mothers reduced to the status of outcasts. Western countries were not necessarily any better. The Catholic institution of the Magdalen laundries (only disbanded in the 1990s) condemned unwed mothers to nothing less than years of slavery, while Dutch society could not even look kindly upon women who had had sex with allied soldiers who had liberated the country from Nazi occupation (Okkema, 2012).

12 The color of this one egg is not insignificant, evoking associations with blue blood, suggesting that this one bird is very special indeed. Many adoptive origin stories attribute an exclusive, if not royal status to the to-be-adopted child, as a fictive compensation for the trauma of abandonment, see Garcia Gonzales & Wesseling, 2013.

prospective adopters attributes the same heroic ethos to the birth mothers who will hopefully select them, but with an added advantage: contrary to the mulberry bird mother, who bravely continues to fend for herself after losing her baby, there is a promise in FCA that the birth parent may somehow join the “warm feathered bodies” and the singing “chorus” of the alluring adoptive families. All these pastoral metaphors and references to animals also serve – again – to naturalize the adoption process and to downplay its social, cultural, and economic aspects.

The *persona* of the prospective adopters may be characterized in terms of all sorts of virtues that nobody could ever have any objection against and definitely warrant their trustworthiness, such as devotion, commitment, diligence, loving kindness, etc., but this is not really what makes them stand out. Its distinctive feature par excellence is its nested embeddedness. The prospective adopters are embedded in each other’s secure love and complementary relationships,<sup>13</sup> in their harmonious families of origin, in their safe extended family circles of friends, in their spacious but cosy family homes, in their safe and diverse neighborhoods. This parental *persona* is the builder and guardian of the ultra-nest one could say, with one ring of safety encircling the other one, and so on, and so forth. This nest is anything but empty, but there is room for many more. Contrary to the deplorable situation of the mulberry bird, there are no uncontrollable external forces to threaten this ultra-nest. This is not the proverbial haven in a heartless world. Rather, this is utopia. The heartless world does not enter into the picture here.

The parental *persona* of the prospective adopters is characterized as much by what is absent as by what is present. The one thing absent here is the working life of the prospective adopters. It is not that they hide their professional identities. On the contrary, we tend to know precisely what it is they do for a living, and a handsome living it is: some are lawyers, some are scientists, some are teachers, some run their own businesses, and so on. However, no matter what their profession may be, work is presented as completely subservient to the adopters’ home making. There is no sign

13 Capitalizing on the layeredness of mutual ethos attributions in the profiling letters, couples involved in FCA have a way of attributing complementary features to each other. In Bonnie&Tara’s letter to the birth parent, one reads “There is no doubt Tara is the brains of our family and I am the creative one. I think we complement one another very nicely.” Especially gay couples insist on this complementarity, also in terms of the ways in which they will divide tasks once the much-desired child will arrive in their family, one partner figuring as the homemaker, and the other as the provider. Thus, although FCA features a significant number of prospective gay parents, this does not necessarily imply that they have done away with heteronormativity.

whatsoever of anything that could threaten this work-life balance, in spite of the fact that the adopters tend to have rather competitive jobs and earn way above average, judging from their housing situation. Although the prospective adopters are clearly highly educated, successful professionals, there seems to be no risk of careerism getting in the way of their parental duties. They either indicate that one partner will become a full-time stay-at-home parent (especially in the case of gay couples), or they argue that they can easily ply their working hours and days around the needs of a growing child. Macro-social forces of unemployment, job insecurity, overly demanding professional expectations, exploitative employers, of precarity, in short, are kept at bay. Although the adopters must have invested quite heavily in their careers to reach the considerable level of wealth that they have obviously attained, they are quite confident that the demands of the job market will not interfere with their family lives. All prospective adopters go to great lengths to explain to the birth parents how they will make time for a child in their lives.

## Scapegoating

Upon entering the utopia of *Full Circle Adoptions*, one is inclined to forget all about the Burkean sequence: “if drama, then conflict. If conflict, then hierarchy. If hierarchy, then guilt. If guilt, then redemption, If redemption, then victimage.” According to Burke, social order and unity are achieved at the price of scapegoating, but does this also apply to FCA? This adoptive agency seems to have gone pretty far in making short shrift with ethnocentrism, heteronormativity, the disempowerment of birth parents, and with obfuscating the genealogies of adoptees. Birth parents are endowed with agency in FCA, as they get to pick and choose, and they are unlikely to choose adopters who are eager to write them out of existence. Who is it then that could possibly be excluded from these family utopias and sent off into the desert?

There is drama in FCA, for there are two *dramatis personae* working toward some sort of resolution; there is potential conflict between the interests of adopters and birth parents, or, differently put, between adopters' prior ethos of self-centered baby-snatchers and the desire of birth parents to receive some form of acknowledgment. There is hierarchy, for sure, between prospective adopters who seem to have it all made and pregnant women who most likely have far less. Adoption is also always a potential threat to social hierarchy, with persons from a higher social class and ethnic

background taking in children from lower-ranking social groups. There is likely to be guilt over the one taboo that is silently passed over in the FCA profiles, namely the link between money and parenthood. All prospective FCA adopters are wealthy middle-class persons, but class seems to be a non-issue at the same time because their professional lives and hence their social status are consistently downplayed. Sexual preference, skin color, marital status, religion, nationality – none of these social variables seem to offer a good reason for anyone to be excluded from anything, and hence they are conspicuously displayed in the letters to the birth parent. But class or social status probably does, and hence this variable is treated gingerly. To return to the fable of the mulberry bird: as a single parent whose nest is brought low by two successive storms, the wise owl has but one piece of advice for her: give your baby away. And she complies in the end, which is presented as an admirable, courageous, and self-sacrificing act. In spite of his wisdom and his overview of all sorts of bird habitats far and near, the owl is apparently unable to muster a little help for the mulberry bird so she can finally manage and keep her child. Isn't there another single bird somewhere who would love to become involved in this family of two? Isn't there another bigger family somewhere who is willing to join forces with this smaller one? How about all the other mulberry birds nearby? Wouldn't she have been able to pull through with a little help from her friends? The story does not encourage any of these speculations as we tend to go with the flow of narrative sequence. In Aristotle's rhetoric, the persuasive power of story (the *exemplum*) is associated with inductive reasoning: we are invited to generalize from the single instance to the general observation, with stories illustrating proverbial truths (the moral of the story) by demonstrating what certain types of actions may eventually lead up to as an extended metaphor or allegory. Metaphors basically work through foregrounding and backgrounding, or blinding and illuminating, sensitizing us to specific aspects of certain acts while necessarily obscuring others through the force of plot (Rigney, 1991). Stories therefore do not only promote critical reflection on stereotypical associations of certain types of personae with specific behavioral patterns, but they may just as well solidify stereotypes.

In the case of FCA, it is not so much the birth parent as a person, but rather the birth parent in her capacity as parent, who is sent off into the desert, because of her inability to build and keep the ultra-nest that the FCA couples have already made. She will be involved in the life of her child, in whatever way she sees fit, the prospective adopters all promise, but not as a mother. More likely, she will figure as another friend or extended family member, or perhaps as another child.



## Literature as Equipment for Living

As I have argued at length elsewhere, adoption and fiction are intimately interwoven with each other, adoption being an “as if” mode of family making (Wesseling, 2014), partaking of the game of make-believe, the enactment of attitudes, the layeredness, and the mental transparency that are typical of narrative fiction. Communities of adopters tend to share narratives, mostly children’s literature, that they have found to be particularly useful, for answering any delicate questions adoptees might pose in a non-traumatizing way, but also, as we have seen, to conceptualize and enact their new-fangled parental identities on (semi-)public fora, which tend to be digital fora these days. Narrative helps readers to renegotiate stereotypical associations with specific *personae*, shed one persona and don another one. Although the literary works involved in self-fashioning need not be complex at all, the cultural work involved in ethos attribution certainly is. Narratives, however, do not only stimulate transparency and reflexivity, but also partake of the scapegoating that, according to Burke, is a necessary precondition for stabilizing hierarchies in social units. Adoption narratives have attributed a wide array of changing meanings to adopters, adoptees, and birth parents in the course of time. There is one thing they never do, however, namely consider the possibility of helping and empowering the birth parent *as parent*. For this reason, we should not make the mistake of single-mindedly associating narrative art with bestowing reflexivity upon the act of ethos attributions, thereby creating room for change. Stories do not only present “transparent minds,” even though this is certainly their most prominent feature in the case of modernist literature. But narrative fiction is also plot-driven. This confronts us with another aspect of the persuasive power of narrative that has received relatively little attention in contemporary inquiries into the rhetoric of fiction, which tends to focus on characters and narrators.<sup>14</sup> Narratives do not only stimulate reflexivity, disrupting stereotyped associations of specific behaviors with specific forms of ethos. They may just as well solidify stereotypical scripts and commonplaces, by blinding the reader to possible alternative courses of action as the story unfolds. Narrative closure has a way of presenting the outcome of a series of events as necessary or inevitable, thereby legitimizing it and seducing readers into consenting to its point of view, often unwittingly. Adoption narratives come in all shapes and sizes and change significantly in the course of time

14 Inquiry into the ethics of narrative fiction takes its cue from Wayne Booth, Martha Nussbaum, and Booth’s pupil James Phelan in the Anglophone world. If we consider that Booth is a pupil of Burke, we are once again reminded of the seminal position of Burke’s work.

alongside changing adoption practices, but one thing seems to be anathema here, namely the idea that child removal is not the only possible and not even the most logical response to parental deprivation. Theoretically speaking, one could at least entertain the possibility of helping the birth parents, empowering them to keep their children. One may therefore conclude that questions concerning the ethical functions of narrative fiction cannot be addressed through textual analysis only. It all depends on *how* literature is put to use as equipment for living in everyday contexts. Thus, literary studies may become part of "engaged humanities" when they acknowledge that and study how literature is engaged in the daily business of living.

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## 2. “Look! Look Now, So Beautiful”

Collaborative Engagement with an Artistic Film Installation  
in Residential Dementia Care

*Aagje Swinnen, Ike Kamphof, Annette Hendriks, &  
Ruud Hendriks*

### Abstract

In the project “Beyond Autonomy and Language: Towards a Disability Studies Perspective on Dementia,” we collaborated as researchers with the Limburgs museum to find ways to include people who live with dementia by means of the arts. Instead of focusing on reminiscence, we advocated appealing to people’s imagination. In collaboration with filmmaker Joël Rabijns, we developed three films with archive material from the museum. We did ethnographic research in three psychogeriatric wards to study how people engaged with the film screenings. Findings show how the film-set provided a stable material setting and subjective forum for participants to appear as a person, e.g., by creating conditions that appealed to sensory and emotional capacities of the viewers and supported their embodied being in a process of playful interaction.

**Keywords:** person-centered care, dementia, artistic intervention, embodied identity, film and embodiment, relational identity

### Introduction

A sea of waving sunflowers, a butterfly spreading its wings, leaves rustling in the wind – these dreamy images merge into each other, alternated with mundane scenes of a boy cuddling his horse, a woman hanging the laundry to dry while smiling at the camera, or a little girl holding a bucket. The montage underscores the rhythm of human life – a woman cleans beans,

workmen shovel coal into an oven or pick apples, a family enjoys a free day at the beach – as well as the slow pace of nature: sunflowers are visited by butterflies, clouds are drifting by, waves are rolling onto the beach.

All these images are impressions from a film installation that we realized within the framework of a two-year research project, “Beyond Autonomy and Language: Towards a Disability Studies Perspective on Dementia”<sup>1</sup> (2010–2012). The premise of the project was that people living with dementia frequently are confronted with social exclusion and discrimination. On the one hand, they are largely invisible in public space; on the other hand, popular media, as well as many research reports, tend to portray them as abject “others” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010) that are to be feared. If rarely intentionally so, people with dementia are often stereotyped and treated in ways that Tom Kitwood (1997) and other scholars identified as harmful to their well-being and their personhood. Our research aimed to improve our understanding of how people with dementia and the people who surround them can resist such negative framing and become part of a more inclusive “dementia-friendly” society. To this end, we studied innovative artistic and technological practices within and outside dementia care, including poetry, visual arts, theater, and clowning.

Committed to the rationale behind *engaged humanities* and disability studies, we felt it was crucial to include in our project people living with dementia as co-producers of knowledge. We wanted to make room for them to show their actual abilities and communicate these to the outside world. Working with non-academic partners from the cultural sector was a way to make this possible. When the Limburgs Museum (Venlo, the Netherlands), with its special collection of amateur film on the region’s history and culture, approached us for collaboration, we seized the opportunity. The museum’s ambition was to reach out to audiences that usually do not find their way to the museum and, more in particular, to share their heritage collection with vulnerable older people living in residential care facilities. We collaborated with the museum in the creation of a film installation consisting of a series of film montages by the Belgian filmmaker Joël Rabijns based on materials from the museum’s archives. These montages were shown in three psychogeriatric wards at Klevarie, a long-term residential care setting in Maastricht, the Netherlands.

1 The Netherlands Organization for Health Research and Development (ZonMw), program Disability Studies in Nederland, project nr. 416020005. See: <https://www.zonmw.nl/nl/onderzoek-resultaten/gehandicapt-en-chronisch-zieken/programmas/project-detail/disability-studies/voorbij-autonomie-en-taal-naar-een-disability-studies-perspectief-op-dementie/verslagen/>.

The idea behind the film project was twofold. First, when developing the montages and installing them in the wards, we aimed to support residents living with dementia in their personhood by sharing images that they might be able to relate to in enjoyable ways. The films served to assist the residents' latent *receptiveness* to their immediate surroundings. More specifically, we wanted to create conditions that offered residents an opportunity to be affected by the visual world around them, not so much by providing visual stimuli *tout court*, but by nurturing their senses and receptivity. Secondly, when showing the montages through the on-site film installation, we wanted to learn about the value of this type of arts intervention from the engagement of the participants during the film sessions. In line with disability studies' credo "nothing about us without us," we wanted to make room for the voice of the participants. To this end, we opted for an approach that included ethnographic fieldwork in which all members of the research team joined the recurrent screenings of the films.

This chapter offers a review of the theoretical perspectives that informed our research and the creation of the film montage and installation. Next, we introduce our methodological approach, followed by a presentation of our findings in four vignettes and their analysis. We conclude with a discussion and summary of the main insights. Our study was designed as a contribution to the further development of arts interventions in dementia care, as well as to raise our critical understanding of the meaning of such interventions for people who live with dementia.

## Literature Review

### Artistic Approaches to Dementia Care

Against the background of scant success in medical treatment and increased attention for the socio-psychological conditions of living with dementia, interest in the potential contribution of artistic approaches to dementia care has been on the rise in recent years (Zeilig, Killick, & Fox, 2014; Camic, Zeilig, & Crutch, 2018). Arts-based interventions comprise a variety of performing (music, drama, dancing) and visual arts (making and viewing). Some are a regular part of everyday care; others are on offer on special occasions or in the context of temporary projects in a nursing home or other setting (e.g., a museum or community setting). Some work with individuals, others involve groups. Many projects share the premise that to engage in artistic activity is to nurture and celebrate the human capacity to create and express



feelings. Kate De Meideros and Anne Basting (2013), for instance, describe cultural arts as a unique way to “tap into imagination and foster creative expressions and meaningful experiences” (p. 352).

Arts-based interventions allow for passive forms of enjoyment, but also invite people to take part actively in (joined) artistic creation. While dementia weakens the short-term memory of people who live with it, their creativity and imagination seem to transcend dementia-related cognitive decline (Basting, 2009). One assumption is that the arts offer a style of communication and foster forms of (embodied) expression (Kontos, 2003; Hendriks, 2012) that capitalize on persisting emotional and social capabilities of people living with dementia, as well as on a basic human capacity to play (Swinnen & de Medeiros, 2018). Dementia may even release people’s innate creativity (Craig & Killick, 2011). Professional artists and art-therapists specializing in dementia care may develop particular sensitivity to the continuing personhood of people who live with dementia, as well as skills in generating meaningful exchanges in the here and now (Allan & Killick, 2000; Lee & Adams, 2011; Hendriks et al., 2013).

Documented benefits of arts in dementia care include effects on behavioral outcomes, psychological well-being, cognitive function, the care process, and quality of life (Curtis et al., 2018). Arts-based interventions within the framework of a person-centered care approach (Kitwood, 1997) may help people maintain well-being and cope with their changing condition. By creating a “safe and nurturing space” (Baines, 2007, p. 23) of acceptance and possibility, sustaining people’s creativity may help “keeping a person positively engaged with the world” (p. 15) and allow them “to feel valued and acknowledged” (p. 32). Gill Windle et al. (2018) identify two “key conditions” (p. 721) for effective interventions. The first, a “provocative and stimulating aesthetic experience,” implies basic standards as to the quality of artistic materials (i.e., age appropriate, multisensory, original works that stir imagination), the artistic environment (failure free, inspiring), and the selected approach (maximizing residual ability, celebrating, being in the moment) (p. 721). The second, a “dynamic and responsive artistic practice,” involves “artistic expertise” and “skilled facilitation” of the aesthetic encounter. Together, these conditions may underpin effective visual art initiatives in dementia care, with regard to people’s social connectedness, well-being (e.g., improved mood), positive changes in staff and caregivers’ perceptions of dementia, and cognition (e.g., improved memory) (p. 706).

Supporting mutual connectedness, communication, and community development, arts-based projects also suggest innovative ways to advance

the inclusion of people with dementia in society (Basting, 2018). Participating in arts can be vital to people otherwise excluded from exercising "narrative citizenship" and may help us to defy the tragedy discourse of dementia, showing that "despite loss, change, and sadness, persons with dementia are supported by loving networks, embracing life, remaining active and engaged, breaking the silence, and transforming with new possibilities" (Dupuis et al., 2016, p. 364).

### **Examples of Visual Arts Interventions Involving Photography and Film**

Given that our project involved film montages, we will now introduce several inspiring examples of artistic approaches in person-centered care that make use of photography and/or film. These examples range from reminiscence-based activities (which dominate the Dutch nursing home setting) to more creative and imaginative interventions.

Reminiscence activities often use a combination of audiotaped and visual materials to prompt long-term (emotional and embodied) memories of people with dementia and facilitate communication (Finnema et al., 1999). Reminiscence sessions presenting nostalgic imagery related to people's life histories may trigger associations and memories, leading to stories of recognition or to joy because of the subject, the emotional sphere, or beauty of the picture (Alm et al., 2004). In traditional reminiscence projects, the use of images is sometimes limited to randomly selected, generic pictures, which residents are assumed to enjoy, if passively only. In contrast, participatory visual media projects actively involve participants in decisions about the subject, in capturing pictures, or in editing (Capstick, 2011, p. 143).

John Killick and Kate Allan (2008) present various initiatives that actively involve people with dementia in reminiscence projects based on pictures or film, as an "alternative and rich way of presenting and conveying information, acting as a 'meeting point' for shared experience and communication" (p. 195). An example is the project "Captured Memories" that supported people with dementia in camera-handling and taking pictures when on a field trip. Participants valued their autonomy and felt proud about what they achieved. Another example is Sitar Rose's series of personal portraits filmed in collaboration with people experiencing dementia, some presenting people in their present life, others featuring people reminiscing about their past. Participants were proud of their film, which (re)established a sense

of identity, and they also enjoyed seeing it again. Allan used photographic pictures that people could have a personal stake or autobiographical interest in, as well as pictures from magazines or newspapers that they specifically enjoyed, thus offering care staff valuable clues for conversation with a person (Killick & Allan, 2008, pp. 199–206).

Another participatory filmmaking project, reported by Andrea Capstick and Katherine Ludwin (2015), actively involved people with Alzheimer's disease in making short autobiographical films. The researchers first elicited the telling of narratives and recorded participants' stories about their life and the people and places associated with it. A compilation of historic images, (preferably colored) pictures, and other visuals associated with the most significant places was turned into film, adding excerpts of people's stories as soundtrack. During the process, people consistently referred to places with an emotional meaning to them when aged between five and 30, i.e., the "reminiscence bump" (p. 162). Some places evoked memories of freedom and escape (e.g., going to the cinema when young), many of which sharply contrasted with their current situation of dependency. Others were associated with historical trauma, such as people's evacuation during the war or a stay at a children's home. A third category entailed places associated with overcoming adversity (e.g., stammering in school), often combined with a positive attitude to present care environments.

Basting's creative use of photographic pictures in her renowned TimeSlips storytelling project is different in the sense that it primarily appeals to people's collaborative imagination rather than to individual memories in order to support their creative capacities and relational identity (Basting, 2001). Open-ended questions invite participants in the creative storytelling project to respond to pictures that allow for surprise and wonder. All responses are considered equally valuable and are collected. Every participant is recognized as a storyteller, contributing to the final, collaborative story about a given picture, which might reflect various emotions such as hope, fear, sorrow, joy, and happiness. Killick, on the other hand, used photographic pictures and video as starting point for engaging people with dementia in poetry improvisation (Killick & Allan, 2008, p. 208).

In a similar vein, we did not primarily use visual materials in our project for reminiscence activities. When people lose their ability to build their selfhood from memory, pictures and film may be enjoyable and give people a socially valued role as contributors to a shared and imaginative creative process. In fact, for many people living with dementia, participating in artistic creation may be the only way left to "accomplish something meaningful" (De Medeiros & Basting, 2013, p. 351).

## A Phenomenological Approach to the Film Experience

What does film and art theory have to offer in terms of how to approach the meaning of our film-based intervention in dementia care?

For too long, according to Vivian Sobchack (2004), academic film theory has been dominated by interpretive ways of approaching film, as if seeing film is a (primarily) cognitive affair. A phenomenological approach, alternatively, aims at a better understanding of the "actual *experience* of the cinema" resonating in popular "tactile, kinetic, redolent, resonant, and sometimes even taste-full descriptions" of this experience – one that film scholars have tried to "explain away" (pp. 53–54). Sobchack highlights cinema's ability to speak to our sensate bodies; she is interested in the "carnal sensuality of the film experience" (p. 56) to clarify how films "physically arouse us to meaning" (p. 57).<sup>2</sup> This is not an effort on her part, however, to reduce the experience of seeing film to sensations as such, to nothing else "than 'mere' physiological reflex" – rather film speaks to the reflexive capacities of the body "making sense' in its own right" (p. 58).

For instance, when you see a beautiful fabric on screen, your body prepares itself to reach out to the outside world and touch that fabric. Your fingers begin to tingle, as it were, because of the attractiveness of the fabric that you can almost touch and feel – almost, but not quite. That is why the experience bounces back to you: you feel your own body and the fabric on your own skin, and you feel yourself (reaching at the) feeling. Likewise, understanding a story on screen relies on an eye that locates movements of actors in their bodies, and on grasping the intentions of those actor-bodies by identifying them in your own body. The "carnal modality" we are in when watching a movie enables us to touch and be touched by the substance and texture of images; to feel a visual atmosphere envelop us; to experience weight, suffocation, and the need for air; to take flight in kinetic exhilaration and freedom, as it were, even when bound to our theater seats; to be knocked backward by sound; to sometimes even smell and taste the world we see on the screen (p. 65). Looking is something we do with our entire body.

Amilia Jones (2002) also addressed "the visible in the tangible" and "the tangible in the visible." She focuses specifically on images of the body as "a flesh-like screen ... that presupposes the depth and materiality of the body

<sup>2</sup> Sobchack traces early phenomenological understandings of film in Benjamin's account of "cinematic intelligibility" as "tactile appropriation" based on the spectator's "mimetic faculty," and in Kracauer's account of film in terms of its unique ability to "directly stimulate the *material layers* of the human being" as a "corporeal-material being ... with skin and hair" (2004, p. 55).

as subject” (Jones, 2002, p. 970). Engaging with a photograph of a body as a flesh-like screen establishes a relation of intercorporeity: “It is our being looked at by the photograph-as-flesh that makes us fully corporeal subjects in vision; this being looked at also substantiates the subjectivity of the person in the picture, but always already in relation to us, those it ‘views’” (p. 970).

## Sensory and Emotional Perception of People Living with Dementia

If we – inspired by Sobchack and others – want to relate to the film experience of people who live with dementia beyond the cognitive, the question arises what we can learn from scholarship on their perception and emotion in general, and on their aesthetic preferences in particular. This scholarship is still scarce, while most of it does not enter into a dialog with humanities scholarship.

Psychologists use visual cues (film, pictures, etc.) to study how people who live with dementia respond and process information, e.g., to assess people’s memory function or sensory perception. Elissa Koff et al. (1999), for instance, found that participants with Alzheimer’s disease (AD) showed impaired recognition of emotions that were depicted visually as compared to auditory forms (e.g., seeing a picture of versus hearing someone crying). However, when corrected for visuospatial and abstraction abilities involved, group differences in affect-recognition partly evaporated. The authors concluded that this confirms previous research on AD patients, indicating they “do not have a primary deficit in processing emotional information” (p. 38). On the other hand, when testing the recognition of emotional gestures and bodily movements on video excerpts “that demand rapid integration of multiple complex stimuli” (p. 38), participants had more difficulties, especially when having a more advanced level of dementia. People living with a milder dementia are likely to have a relatively intact emotional perception that may help them to attune to others, e.g., in casual social settings.

Recent studies partly confirm the suggestion that emotional abilities remain preserved, but that this varies with the *type* of dementia. Madeleine S. Goodkind et al. (2015), for instance, showed that people diagnosed with (mild) AD retain the ability to recognize various modalities of emotions (e.g., amusement, fear, or shame) that feature in film fragments, also in comparison to healthy controls. The same study suggests that for people with a variant of prefrontal dementia, deficits in emotional functioning are widespread (which is congruent with their problems in real life). The

findings for people with (early stage) AD "suggests an area of preserved functioning that can be leveraged in ways that can improve interactions with loved ones and preserve general quality of life as long as possible in these patients and their families" (p. 425).

Dementia has been associated with sensory impairments, i.e., deficits in hearing, vision, smelling, and, to a lesser degree, tasting. However, a review of available research on the subject by Sophie Behrman, Leonidas Chouliaras, and Klaus Ebmeier (2014) indicates a limited understanding of the implications of these impairments for dementia diagnosis and therapeutics. People with impaired cognitive function experience the world "at a sensory level, with reduced ability to integrate the sensory experiences" (p. 305). When we restrict ourselves to possible therapeutic implications, the authors suggest that people with dementia are "very sensitive to sensory experiences and their environment needs to be managed carefully to make it understandable, comfortable, and (if possible) therapeutic" (p. 305). Although the authors mainly refer to the need to carefully study and manage sensory dimensions of daily life (e.g., lighting systems) in dementia care, sensory-based interventions (e.g., music, dancing, *snoezelen*) – which are sometimes recommended in the management of dementia symptoms – may also help to restore balance in the sensory regime. Such balance would imply avoiding both sensory deprivation and sensory overload, which have been suggested to explain discomfort and functional decline in people living in suboptimal residential settings.

## Aesthetic Perception of People Living with Dementia

Let us finally look into studies on aesthetic perception of people living with dementia, as a field of knowledge that may help us relate to their film experience beyond cognition.

Andrea Halpern et al. (2008) studied the ability of people to appreciate aesthetic qualities of visual arts. More specifically, they compared the stability of aesthetic preferences for various styles of paintings in people with (early-stage) AD and age-matched healthy controls. Preferences for specific paintings (e.g., Picasso's "Weeping Women" or a "Composition" by Mondrian) differed between individual participants, but their artistic taste remained stable. As the participants living with AD did not have explicit memories of the paintings, the researchers argued, they seem to retain their aesthetic judgement independent of cognitive abilities. In a similar vein, Daniel J. Graham, Simone Stockinger, and Helmut

Leder (2013) found indications that aesthetic perception is “an island of stability” (p. 1) in people living with AD. The suggested permanence of a sense of beauty does require explanation, given that in the case of AD “brain areas that seem to underlie normal aesthetic perception appear to be damaged” (p. 6). Possibly subcortical structures compensate for the apparent damage.

Following Halpern et al. in their suggestion that care should offer AD patients more occasions to experience and appreciate (visual) arts (2008, p. 72), Hannah Zeilig, John Killick, and Chris Fox (2014) found support for the value of visual arts-interventions for people with dementia. “Memories that are visually encoded are vivid and can be easily stimulated,” they argue, and this “explains the powerful nature of visual stimulation,” as noted in work with people with dementia in art galleries and museums (pp. 23-24). A deeper understanding of people’s visual perception and aesthetic appreciation may lead to the development of new therapies and programs.

To sum up, several studies have established the idea that film, if well attuned to the limited capacities and to the sensory experience of people with dementia, can serve as a positive force in care, for instance as a medium for the expression and recognition of (basic) emotions and by engaging people in meaningful experiences. Our discussion of the literature presented in this section theoretically serves to frame our research into the meaning of a film installation for people who live with dementia in the everyday setting of a psychogeriatric ward. In the findings section below, we discuss our insights into the residents’ practices of looking in interaction with us and other people present.

## Methodological Approach

### Action Research: Film Montages *Aqua*, *Sonne*, and *Jardin* by Joël Rabijns

#### *Affinities with Action Research*

Our project has similarities with so-called action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2007) in that it “takes action” to enhance the lives of people who live with dementia in closed psychogeriatric wards, which usually have a limited offer of meaningful activities for its residents. As such, this mode of research takes a specific social concern as its starting point, after which a particular “action” or intervention is developed. The action here is a film installation consisting of three film montages, entitled *Aqua* [Water], *Sonne* [Sun], and *Jardin* [Garden] (2012), which were shown in three wards with



Figure 2.1 *Children in bed.*

the same name in Klevarie, a local care home in Maastricht. The Belgian filmmaker Joël Rabijns created the montages from material available in the archives of the Limburgs Museum. This museum has a special collection of moving images (amateur films – home movies in particular) that are illustrative of the history and culture of the Dutch region of Limburg (cf. chapter van der Heijden & Wachelder in this volume). We used the film installation to collect data, as is common in action research. What differs from general understandings of action research, however, is that the review of the action was not solution-oriented in the end but rather focused on the experiences of the participants. Also, we did not intend to implement our installation on a larger scale in other settings after the project was finished.

#### *Film Montages and Projection*

Insights into the sensory, emotional, and aesthetic perception of people living with dementia, such as the ones sketched above, as well as Rabijns' own creative affinity with the topic, served as input for the selection of the footage and the editing choices. Rabijns honored the names of the wards where the films were shown in the titles of his montages (*Aqua, Sonne, Jardin*) by tailoring – to a certain extent – the subject and/or atmosphere of the



Figure 2.2 *Sledding.*Figure 2.3 *Sailing boats.*

films to the themes (water, sun, and garden) of the wards. Characteristic of all three films is that they move away from the need to convey a narrative or from the requirement that viewers should be able to identify people, things, locations, or events.

Rabijns selected a variety of images from the archives, such as universal images of landscapes (e.g., the sea, beach, and flowers), animals (e.g., horses and butterflies), and actions (e.g., eating, sleeping, dancing, and playing). Some images are especially playful (e.g., an older man on a carousel and a sled, jolly children at bed-time – Figure 2.1) or portray people from different generations (including children and older people). In addition, the director chose so-called haptic images that are both visual and tactile (e.g., sheep shearing and horse petting).

When bringing the images together, Rabijns opted for clever repetition of shots (e.g., a running dog that seems to continue running through reappearances) and rhythmic variation through slow motion and acceleration (e.g., an accordion player next to a row of dancing girls). He also made use of associative and metaphoric editing (e.g., smoking chimneys next to smoking men, foam of the sea on the beach next to images of clouds). The editing choices also comprise surprising color effects and playful visual layers (Figures 2.2 and 2.3). The film montages (each having a length of about 20 minutes) were projected as loops in each of the wards. They were not accompanied by music or other sound.

We experimented with unconventional film screens by projecting the montages on a sheep's woolen carpet and cow skin, as well as a white plastic cloth. We were curious whether that would invite participants to approach and touch the screen. Because the woolen carpet jeopardized the visibility of the images, we exchanged it for a white cotton bed sheet.

### **Ethnographic Approach: Experiencing Film in Three Psychogeriatric Wards of Klevarie**

Inspired by authors such as Renée L. Beard (2012), we emphasized subjective meaning making and experiences of meaningfulness, enrichment and other person-centered aspects of the participatory arts in dementia care, rather than stressing objectively measured, clinical outcomes (e.g., managing and reducing symptoms) that prevail in health-oriented research. This emphasis matches well with the ethnographic approaches increasingly implemented in the study of personhood in dementia (e.g., Sabat, 2001; Kontos, 2004; De Medeiros et al., 2011) and creative approaches to dementia care (e.g., Hendriks, 2012; Swinnen, 2014). We think that it potentially does more justice to the voice of people living with dementia than research that lets formal or informal caregivers speak for them (Hendriks et al., 2016). In the long run, this approach should help ensure that people with dementia "receive the services *they want*, since strictly allopathic methodologies will continue to fall short of adequately evaluating what are deeply idiosyncratic psychosocial issues" (Beard, 2012, p. 633).

#### *Participants and Context of Screening*

The film montages were screened in three different psychogeriatric wards of Klevarie on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons (a total of 3 x 7 sessions of ca. 2 hours), June 2012, when all authors, together with research intern Désirée Coenen, took turns in participant observation (total hours of observation: ca. 45 hours). This did not take place in the living room of the wards (where a television set was omnipresent), but in a half-open separate room in the hallway, visible from three adjacent corridors. Parts of the space were shaded off as two of its three walls were windowed. In front of one window, we installed the screen. The projector was placed opposite from it.

The screenings of the films took place during the day, as the residents engaged in their daily life. In so doing, they were also actively invited and stimulated by the members of the research team and care staff to pause and watch the films. On average, five to seven people would attend most or

several parts of the 2-hour screening. As our project did not entail clinical research, we did not have access to personal and medical information of the residents. To live in the ward, however, participants had to be diagnosed with a type of dementia or experience cognitive difficulties resulting from other diseases.

### *Ethics*

Through a personal letter and an interview in the care home's magazine, family members of the residents were informed about the content and purpose of the activity and the possibility not to participate. Also, the letter explained that the anonymity of the participants would be guaranteed in the process of data collection, analysis, and reporting. During the screenings, we took a process-approach to consent (Dewing, 2008), meaning that when people indicated that they did not want to interact with us or wanted to terminate the interaction, we retreated. The participants were free to roam the ward, including the room where the film montages were shown. In this respect there was a practical obstacle for people in wheelchairs: they could indicate whether they wanted to remain in the installation or not, but their request had to be honored by caregivers or team members.

### *Variety in Responses*

Responses ranged from verbal comments to non-verbal reactions such as pointing out elements on the screen or in the room, facial expressions, and closing one's eyes. We also examined whether certain characteristics of the films invited particularly strong responses, both in a negative and a positive sense. Some of the responses to the installation, such as a woman's comment that "it doesn't amount to much," seemed to reflect a habitual response to participation in public space, rather than being a comment on the installation per se. In fact, the woman involved had a small stock of such phrases, as revealed by data from other screenings. While her verbal comments were mostly negative, at the same time she cheerfully participated in the gathering. This taught us that we needed to acquaint ourselves with the repertoire of possible responses of each participating resident, which called for careful observation and our recurrent presence in the wards.

### *Data Analysis*

In order to analyze the detailed descriptions (in the field notes) of how residents responded to and interacted with the films, with each other and with other people present, as well as the auto reflections of the participant observers, all members of our team analyzed their data by identifying

vignettes representative of what happened when the films were projected in the living space of the residents. Below we discuss four of these vignettes in more detail.

## Findings

### User Expectations and Critical Appropriation

#### *Vignette 1*

June 7, 2012: while installing the projector and the sheep's woolen carpet screen at *Sonne*, a caregiver addresses us: "What do you want? Should we have some residents come and watch?" Shortly after, she brings over three people in wheel-chairs, Mrs. O., an energetic woman who talks incessantly to herself; Mr. C., a small, quiet gentleman; and Mrs. D., who is originally from Germany. As the film is started, three other residents pass by and take chairs: Mrs. R., Mrs. Z., and Mrs. L. The general atmosphere is one of anticipation, but also of puzzlement. "What is this?" Mrs. L. asks. "There is no sound." "I didn't see any fancy homes yet," Mrs. O. remarks, scanning the space of the installation more than looking at the film. A little later, she asks me whether I can see the screen properly, as I am seated behind her. At one point during the showing, Mrs. Z. gets up and walks out. Twenty minutes later she returns and takes a seat with her back to the screen. "It doesn't amount to much, does it?" Mrs. R. remarks. Sitting straight up in her chair, she occasionally scans the screen. Mostly, she looks around the small gathering of fellow viewers. She does not appear displeased. In fact, she seems to enjoy the occasion. Mrs. L., who busied herself trying to straighten Mrs. D.'s blouse, dozes off. "The same images return all the time, isn't it?" a caregiver passing by asks her. After which Mrs. D. points to the screen: "Look!" she exclaims, half in German, half in the local dialect. "Look now. So beautiful!" and she pounds on the armrest of Mrs. L.'s chair: "Look!"

The way the installation space was arranged allowed residents to "enter" it and choose one of several chairs, with or without a view of the screen. But they could also see parts of the film and the activity in the inner space from the corridors, when passing by. This happened a lot in fact, both during the screenings and when setting up the screen and the projector, involving residents of the ward, but also caregivers, visiting relatives, and maintenance staff. Sometimes, these passers-by would stop for a moment to watch a scene or make a comment.

In its formal structure, any media installation contains a “script” that suggests specific user behaviors, while constraining others (Akrich, 1992, p. 208). In this case, the presence of chairs, a projector, and a screen, which also dimmed the light in the small space, obviously indicated that something was going to be screened. However, even in this simple set-up, the structure of the installation was ambiguous, leaving the script only quasi determined. For instance, the chairs were standing in a circle around a table. When entering the space, some residents turned their chairs to the screen, others sat down with their backs to it. Some remained standing or took up positions further away in the hall, with or without having a view of the screen.

Next to the user script, socio-cultural practices further determine how media installations are commonly used. In movie theaters, for instance, the large screen and the fixed position of rows of chairs scripts a preferred position for watching. The darkened room enables viewers to watch the movie together with many others, while being secluded from them at the same time. But there are many other specific rituals and implicit rules of conduct in a movie theater: one arrives on time, does not speak during the screening, does not block other people’s view or hinder their ability to be immersed in the film in other ways. Watching a movie in a movie theater, moreover, is an event or an occasion (Howells & Negreiros, 2012). In contrast, watching TV is done either alone or with a small number of others and usually takes place in more private settings. Partly depending on the contents, the “rules” of TV watching tend to be more informal. One may decide, for example, to comment on what is seen or to refrain from doing so, to watch TV and have supper at the same time, to walk in or out of the room during a program, or to switch channels all the time.

Based on familiarity with activities organized on the ward, as well as on memories dating back to their earlier lives, residents came to our film installation with expectations – if not necessarily clearly articulated ones. The film installation as shown at Klevarie had characteristics that reminded of cinema (the projector, the screen, the dimly lit room), but also of TV viewing (the living room-like arrangement of table and chairs, the only half dark room, the open entrance). It also had some features that did not fit with any of these media, such as the unconventional screen. Moreover, by lacking sound and storyline, the montages also had an unconventional structure.

The vignette presented above reveals that the ambiguity of the installation raised questions, both with residents and caregivers, about what was supposed to happen during screenings. Should residents enter the screening space and watch? And, once seated, were they supposed to sit through the entire screening? Should they even watch the screen at all, or was it also

okay merely to enjoy each other's company? In the vignette, Mrs. O., while not very focused on the screen herself, makes clear that she is conscious that others should be enabled to watch the screen. Other residents too would make place for each other. With her empathic response, "Look! Look now, so beautiful..." Mrs. D. indicated that she felt that what was shown on the screen was worth watching. She urged others to look and shared that she appreciated what she saw. Other residents appeared confused about the set-up or critical about the film content, commenting, as did Mrs. R., on the lack of sound or storyline, the repetition of images, or the looped screening in general.

Interestingly, however, even though Mrs. R. seemed capable enough of leaving, she did not. On other screening occasions, it became clear that she was not just being polite by staying but that she actively enjoyed the get-together. She arrived to take a seat before the screening started and formally re-introduced herself each time in a polite and ritualized way. Her comment "it doesn't amount to much" turned out to belong to a repertoire of similar stock phrases that at regular intervals she expressed throughout the screenings. This suggests another possible way of using the installation. While most of the time Mrs. R. hardly paid attention to the screen, she appeared to much enjoy the ritual of getting together and the opportunity to express her opinions.

As the screenings continued, the initial atmosphere of expectation and confusion made way for a variety of ways of using the installation. Some residents approached the installation as an open square, walked in and out, watched for a while, sometimes offering comments. Others entered and remained in the installation space and focused on the film. And again, others watched intermittently, while chatting with their neighbors or with the member of our team, or they dozed off. Opinions on and feelings about the installation and about specific content were expressed, either in verbal comments, such as "such old-fashioned stuff" and Mrs. R.'s cheerful "it doesn't amount to much." But non-verbal behavior could be meaningful as well: lingering while passing by, getting up and leaving, returning, focusing on the screen or looking away, and dozing off. Some residents were constrained in their expressions by their physical situation, such as Mr. C., who toward the end of one screening session tried to conclude his engagement in the activity by saying "Well, I'll go now and get my coffee," followed after a few minutes by "Well, I'll go get my supper now, bread and cheese." Although being in a wheelchair he could not leave on his own, his comments revealed sensitivity to and engagement with the activity as something to be explicitly terminated.

During the days of the screenings, residents thus critically assessed and appropriated the installation in various ways. On occasion, caregivers or other passers-by attempted to stimulate specific use of the installation. In some cases, where residents wanted to leave after a while, caregivers would urge them to stay. Or, they suggested “proper” viewing behavior to dozed-off residents by pointing to the screen or asking them questions about scenes. With regard to the film material, they would often suggest approaching it as a reminiscence activity, asking residents where they thought a specific scene took place or whether they had memories of similar activities as the ones on the screen. However, other forms of use emerged as well, such as making fun together by playing out the absurdity of repeated actions on the screen.

As a demarcated space and a repeated activity, while at the same time being under-determined as to its “proper” use, the installation enabled residents to come together and to express themselves in relation to the ambiguous artifact to which they were exposed. In *The Human Condition* (1958), political philosopher Hannah Arendt argued how a common, objective setting is crucial to public expressions of human identity. Artifacts, through their stability and the shared nature of their appearance, create “a place fit for [human] action and speech” (p. 173). Not any collection of artifacts may be equally suited to serve as an objective “in-between” for subjective action and speech (p. 182). Arendt claims that creative artifacts, such as artworks, are specifically fit to form a common objective world because of their durability and obvious lack of utility. The vignette shows that a combination of relative stability and ambiguity may be particularly inviting to words and deeds that articulate the meaning of a common world and express people’s identities.

The range of critical and creative ways of appropriating the film material is further elucidated in the next two vignettes.

## The Fluidity of Possible Worlds

### *Vignette 2*

While we are watching a sequence of images with deer that start fighting (*Jardin*, June 14, 2012), Mr. X. remarks:

“Look, there he is again. I used to have one just like that. In the back of the yard. Behind a fence. On top of St. Pietersberg. Whenever I want to stroke them, they come towards me. Look at them with their antlers. Behind the wire.”

In response to film shots of a little boy and a house in the meadow with cows, he continues:

"Look at the little one smiling. If he was with me, I would let him pat the small one first and then the big one. Ah, I see where it is now. I wanted to buy that little house. A kind of farm. My uncle is living there now."

The following dialog between Mrs. E. and Mrs. G. was triggered by images of men smoking a pipe

(*Sonne*, June 26, 2012):

"The one man blows out puffs of smoke worse than the other."

"A pipe for all."

"I wouldn't want to sit there. That smell."

"Look there, the little brat smoking pipe. If we had behaved like that!"

Later during the same session, they continued:

"Look, the little clowns, funny, isn't it?"

"Laurel and Hardy. Oioi."

"Funny, isn't it? A golden oldie."

One afternoon (*Jardin*, June 12, 2012), in response to the rhythmic imagery of a row of men shoveling, Mrs. M. casually remarked:

"Those are busy at work."

This remark was soon followed by other comments:

"Such old-fashioned clothes! What kind of film is it? There is no talking in it."

A little later, Mrs. M. looked at images of two men picking apples together and commented:

"That's kind of sweet. They really help each other. You don't see this that often anymore. There still are some good people in the world. That makes you feel good."

As revealed by this vignette, the boundaries between the so-called shared actual world of the psychogeriatric wards where the participants watched the film montages, on the one hand, and the possible worlds of the films themselves (Ryan, 2001), on the other, seemed to have become very fluid



in the experiences of most residents. This did not seem to pose problems in terms of their co-existence while watching, however.

Sometimes, residents commented on the film in its capacity as film. They formulated meta-commentary, such as expressing discontent with the quality of the images. Illustrative examples are: "It's unclear, isn't it? Some parts are hard to see," and "There is no talking in it." Also, several participants pointed out that the images re-occurred frequently, for instance, "There is the merry-go-round again," and "There he goes again." In these instances, participants expressed verbally that they acknowledged the images as images to be looked at and separated them from the surrounding world of the ward. They also recognized that the montages depart from contemporary film conventions; they expected sound and no repetition or blurring of images that is not narratively motivated.

Some residents verbalized that they recognized locations, people, and animals from their past in the films. Without explicit encouragement of us in our capacity of participant observers, these participants started reminiscing over their personal history, a thought process elicited by the filmic images. For example, Mr. X. recognized the house in one of the films as the house of his uncle, while the lengthy responses of Mrs. J. to images of sheep shearing (not in the vignette) illustrate that she was very familiar with the process. And Mrs. H. claimed to know one of the boys in the film, recalling that she spanked him after having caught the boy in some naughty act. Since the film montages build on footage from the local heritage collection of the Limburgs Museum, it is not unlikely that specific qualities of the images (e.g., formal qualities such as the black and white color scheme and grainy texture, the choice for universal images such as making bread, and pictures referring to Limburg heritage such as carnival) triggered memories. Apart from color effects, rhythmic variation, and metaphoric editing, the montages hardly comprise fictional aesthetic elements. Their episodic non-narrative structures are free from any suggestion of endings and closures. As such, the films come across as a series of images shot by a static camera, not unlike those in early home movies and slide shows, which may have contributed to the sense of familiarity that the people living with dementia experienced.

In terms of their episodic non-narrative structure, Rabijns' film montages have clear affinities with what Gunning (1986) called "cinema of attractions." In this type of early cinema, it is the "monstration" of images (cf. Gaudreault) not yet edited into a narrative that result in visual pleasure. Characteristic of monstration is that story and fabula are ordered in an identical chronology (Verstraten, 2009). It is remarkable that subversive age performances, such as the shot of an older man going downhill on a sled,

which is repeated numerous times, triggered apparent verbal and non-verbal responses of amusement. Images of older people in their "ludic" capacity, just enjoying play with little regard of other people's acceptance of their behavior, were perceived as hilarious. As shown in Vignette 2, Mrs. G. made the link between the film montages of Rabijns and Laurel and Hardy films. This suggests that the montages are reminiscent of the cinematic devices of slapstick. Another example in this respect is the impact of the image of pipe-smoking men. By repeating the same image several times, including visual emphasis on the smoke generated and fast alternation with an image of smoking factory chimneys, the juxtaposed shots produce a comic effect. For many participants, this type of humor worked time and again.

The participants would differently connect images from the past with the present of viewing. In general, the participants had no difficulties in expressing preferences and opinions. Some made remarks about the old-fashioned nature of what was shown, thereby distancing themselves from the images. Mrs. K., for instance, pointed at what she called "an old-fashioned rocking horse." Seconds later, though, she added that these are becoming popular again today. Occasionally, the worlds of the film and the ward conflated, which can be signaled by a shift from past to present tense in the verbal responses to the film. Mr. X. in Vignette 2 first claimed that he used to have a deer "just like" the one in the film. He then jumped from the past to the present as if he was still with his animals: "Whenever I want to stroke them, they come toward me." Similarly, Mrs. M. appreciated the image of the men picking apples as evidence of goodness in the world, not just in that of the film but also in that of the here and now of the ward and the grand scheme of things. As she said: "There still are good people in the world." The imagery pleased her and enabled her to express how much she values collaboration.

It would be easy to dismiss these confluences as "mistakes" symptomatic of dementia. Yet, there is another, non-normative way of looking at this type of response. Formal characteristics of the films themselves might invite responses that move from one world to another and back. The lyrical and associative repetitions of specific actions, such as picking apples or shoveling, highlight the then and there of a remote scene and draw attention to the here and now of the film as an organizing entity/monstration.

Some participants did not distinguish at all between the films on screen and other elements in their surroundings, such as the ceiling or the floor. They had no experience of images being present to be watched at. As one participant asked in response to stains on the carpet in the room where the screening took place: "Are that potatoes there on the

floor against the wall”? In her perception, the frame of the screen did not present a border between the world she is in and the film world. As such, the practice called “recentering” by Ryan (2001) does no longer apply to her way of looking at and taking in the environment. The filmic world and the world of the ward seem to have merged completely. This experience is very different from comments, such as “I wouldn’t want to sit there,” or “What if we had behaved like that,” which illustrate the imaginative possibility of positioning oneself as viewer in the film world. Mr. X. in Vignette 2 imagined to be in the scene with the boy and to let him pat the deer in a particular order. This act of imagination goes hand in hand with the earlier conflation of worlds in reference to the animals and who takes care of them.

It is remarkable that the residents did not seem to be bothered by the fact that as a group they did not always inhabit the same world, and, instead, constantly moved in and out of different worlds. With great naturalness, they accepted their co-residents’ way of looking and experiencing. They were not actively searching for a narrative in the film, let alone a shared narrative, and they showed great tolerance for the world the other person was part of on particular moments. However, for outsiders, such as family members and caregivers, it was harder to accept this diversity in experience and to keep up with the pace of it. Some were inclined to steer toward “proper” recognition of images and shared experiences, as illustrated in Vignette 1.

## **Embodied Responses and Expressions of Joy and Concern**

In order to foster people’s ability to experience their sensorial and emotional foothold in the world, the films specifically offered imagery of activities that emphasized embodied action, such as through repetition or a close focus on ordinary behavior of people in everyday life. Such images triggered recognition in some residents that was clearly also embodied. Take the following field note.

### *Vignette 3*

The film *Sonne* shows images of a middle-aged man, well-dressed in a suit who is trying to mount a horse. The imagery is repeated several times. Finally, the man succeeds. Mrs. W. has just joined the small audience gathered in the installation this afternoon (June 7, 2012). She has remained alert, ready to get up and

go any minute, but the imagery appears to captivate her. She is looking intently at the action on the screen. When the rider succeeds, she exclaims with a sigh, "Ha! he did it." Shortly after, the film shows girls throwing serpentines from a window and waving to the carnival parade below. Mrs. W. waves back, rises from her chair and leaves. A little later, Mrs. G. passes by and stops to watch imagery of schoolchildren standing upright behind their chairs in a short ritual. "Stand up straight, they must," she says with cheerful gusto, almost as if clicking her heels.

Residents frequently expressed embodied recognition in vocal approval of the things happening on the screen, sometimes accompanied by bodily responses (sighing, tone of exclamation) that confirmed the meaning of the action perceived. This recognition and the articulated confirmation also betrayed a sense of joy. Mr. A., responding to the image of a man harvesting hay in the field, for instance, exclaimed in line with what he recognized as such: "Sweeping something, haha!" Apparently, something had resonated in his body, while he was drawn in both physically and emotionally by the meaning of the actions displayed. Sobchack (2004), as we have seen, wrote about the embodied involvement with film that results in a "sensuous experience" (p. 65), both on-screen and off-screen. When a film is screened, in other words, its projection and its reception are dynamically related, rather than involving separate dimensions.

Indeed, as suggested by our observations, residents in Klevarie seemed to follow and "grasp" the meaning of the film's action, as it were, mimetically and emotionally with their entire body. This was subsequently expressed in an exclamation that vocalized the physical meaning of what they saw happening, which was accompanied by joy, the pleasure of finding and expressing a resonance with the world. While this is in a sense a normal part of all experience of visual imagery, the installation seemed to enable explicit enjoyment of this. *Sharing* this joyful experience of resonance seemed to be an important part of the game, as illustrated by the eagerness with which residents sometimes joined in the communal activity of naming. Take Mrs. D. and Mrs. L., for instance, who almost made a contest out of simultaneously naming what they saw – i.e., girls in a 1970s' summer holiday atmosphere jumping from one stepping stone in the water to another: "To the other side, across the water!"

The vocabulary they used was often strikingly close to the images' content, suggesting that experiencing this film and its resonance in the body was not primarily about personal memories or involving cognitive reflection. The verbal confirmation, for instance of people working the land and harvesting

fruits, rather seemed to express an immediate and shared form of recognition and appreciation of the meaning of the depicted act: “Look they are working; these are farmers working the garden,” and: “Look at them plowing! They are working hard,” or: “Look: they are picking, berries or something like that, little apples.”

The simple act of *naming*, with or without a (clear) emotional expression, suggests an immediacy and closeness of the visible world and the onlooker that we try to capture with the term “resonance.” This suggests that participants learned to become affected “in a primary, pre-personal, and global way that grounds those later secondary identifications that are more discrete and localized” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 65).

Responses to the imagery of animal behavior, as well as to shots in which animals and people interact, stand out in terms of eliciting embodied reactions. Closely focusing on the sensory qualities of both farm and companion animals, such images seemed specifically interesting to the residents. They directly appealed to their latent ability to stay involved in a mostly joyful form of sensory conversation with the world (cf. Hendriks, 2012). Mrs. V., for instance, exclaimed “Ah, sweet little guy” while seeing a boy cuddling cheek to cheek with his horse. Mrs. U., laughing, while being prompted by the film shot of a piglet: “Look, cute little girl.”

Where sensory qualities of animals and the vulnerability of (especially young) animals coincide, people often responded with empathy. Their empathy went along with their concern about and care for the animal, but also with emotional expressions of joy and endearment. Responding to a film shot showing little lambs, Mrs. W. remarked: “They are so tired, these little animals,” while her neighbor added a simple “yeah” to the conversation. Many of these verbal exchanges were in the local Maastricht or another Limburg dialect, which underlines the immediacy of their expression. The shot of a vulnerable little roe in particular elicited concern from viewers, as it was lying in the snow and seemed cold (see vignette below).

#### *Vignette 4*

*Jardin*, June 26, 2012

Mrs. U.: “There’s snow on the ground, right.” (“D’r ligk snie hè.”)

Mrs. U.: “Little kid.” (“Kinneke”)

Observer: “Little deer.” (“Hertsje”)

Mrs. V.: "Two little hares." ("Twie häöskes")

[image of a deer]

Mrs. V.: "Poor thing, in the cold." ("Gerrem in de kaw.")

[image of fighting deer]

Mrs. V.: "It's lying there now." ("Dao ligk h'r noe.")

Such feelings of concern and empathy also extended to other characters in the film, most notably young children.

Occasionally, the imagery resonated with people's concern about possible dangers. Again, residents sometimes followed and caught the meaning of the scene mimetically and emotionally within their body, as exemplified in Mrs. U's response to the close-up of a sunflower with bees: "There is a bee on it. And there's another one. You should watch out." And, while gesturing how a hand can swell because of a bee-sting: "Can give you a hand like this!"

As an activity that involves embodied interaction of man and animal, film shots of sheep shearing were much appreciated by residents. Mrs. F. still asked herself: "Who is that? Two hands? Ah, yes two hands," while seeing the scene of sheep shearing. Then she exclaimed: "Rabbits!" referring to the piglets running after each other on screen. At another occasion, the shot of sheep shearing elicited joyful responses from Mrs. J. about the "beauty" of the sheep and the amount of wool that the film suggests that it yields: "So much wool, isn't it? Nice. One just cannot grasp how they manage. They undress the animal until he's naked. And that person is ironing." After this remark, other residents joined in and verbally confirmed the meaning of the scene and the manual processing of wool they recognized. One of the residents also physically supported her story with gestures, demonstrating how sheep could shake their heads.

## Discussion

Having provided an impression of the engagement of people with dementia with the film montages in our vignettes, it is possible to identify several theoretical issues in relation to the literature presented. We discuss them in more detail below.

## The Appearance of “Who” in Relation to an Artifact

In the literature review, we discussed how artistic activities can make room for people with dementia to express their personhood and to participate in meaningful ways in community development. Vignette 1 showed how a specific artifact, by being relatively stable (e.g., repeated viewing occasions) *and* having an under-determined script, may serve as the objective shared setting for people with dementia to “appear” to others, to follow Hannah Arendt (1958). However, sharing an objective setting is only one part of appearing as a human being. It sets the stage, as it were. Arendt also makes clear that a subjective in-between is just as necessary: the web of other people who see and recognize what we do and say.

Personhood, as also argued by Kitwood (1997), is achieved in interpersonal interaction. While the “what” of human beings, their qualities and their shortcomings, can be described from the outside, “who” someone is is expressed in what people do and say and how they do this as recognized by others (Arendt, 1958, p. 179). Although disclosure of someone as a unique individual is implicit in all their words and actions, the fate of people living with dementia in our society teaches that expressions of “who” someone is easily disappear behind a focus on the “what” of the disease and its symptoms. The installation in Klevarie provided a temporary objective setting and subjective forum for residents to gather together and to appear as a “who” in relation to the artifact and to each other, as well as to us as participant observers.

While the ambiguous and creative organization of the installation and film material was to an extent deliberate, other features, such as the half open space, were accidental. They depended on the architecture of Klevarie. How these under-determined features of the installation were important for providing a fitting common setting for self-expression, we only fully understood through the various ways in which people with dementia appropriated the installation and expressed themselves in relation to it.

## Resonance, Becoming Affected

For residents watching the film in Klevarie, the body as a whole was central to their experience. Indeed, “Seeing is also touching, smelling, hearing and feeling a body move through the space in front of us” (Kamphof, 2012, p. 76). The specific conditions created by the film installations allowed people in dementia care to no longer remain indifferent, as well as to regain their embodied, sensory, and emotional involvement in the world. Borrowing

from Despret's (2004) and Latour's (2004) vocabulary, the film installation can be said to have created artificial conditions for the viewers to "acquire a body" that learns to become "affected" (moved, etc.) by outside stimuli. An "articulated subject," as they call it, not only shows differentiated behavioral reactions but also learns to talk about nuances experienced. The embodied and emotional resonance of the film montages was often accompanied by verbal approval of what the residents saw.

Of course, touching and becoming touched by something or someone on the screen is not the same as touching and becoming touched by something or someone in the real world. Still, there is a specific intensity to seeing film. The smelling, tasting, sensing, etc. is "real" and "as if real" at the same time. In Sobchack's terms, seeing the wool on screen invites our body to reach for the wool, preparing itself in an act of "mimetic sympathy," as it were, to receive the wool. Our reaching cannot be completed, however, in an actual tactile experiencing of wool. As there is no real wool to touch, the direction of the intentional act reverses. I feel an object that is actually there, say my cotton blouse, which I can really feel. As a result, the experience of wool becomes diffuse, reduced, and generalized. If the experience is cut short, or remains incomplete or unfinished, it also becomes intensified. My body is appealed upon, it has become sensitized and feels itself feeling. It is this that explains, according to Sobchack, the synaesthetic intensity of the experience of feeling and not feeling the wool that rebounded to our own body.

Supporting people's ability to remain receptive and in touch with their surroundings was how our intervention tried to support people in a way that did not overly depend on language and memory. At Klevarie's psychogeriatric wards, people's physical footing in and resonance with the world revealed itself in emotional and sensory responses to what they saw, such as sighing, tone of exclamation, and other expressions of enthusiasm, endearment, or joy and, arguably, also in their (local) vocabulary.

## **Reminiscence versus Imagination**

In activities organized to support people with dementia in expressing their personhood, reminiscence is often claimed to be vital to the identity of people with dementia, and, on occasion, even posited as the "only way to preserve their identity and to present themselves" (Bendien, 2015, p. 167). Importantly, in the vignettes discussed here the range for expression of identity proves to be much wider than that, including stock phrases, exclamations, and other verbal and nonverbal articulations. This confirms the value



of creative approaches to personhood presented by Basting (2009). It also ties in with findings by Bendien (2015) who showed that the appropriation of a museum space dedicated to reminiscence by people with dementia was actually all but limited to reminiscing.

This is not to say that reminiscence activities cannot support people living with dementia. It means that one might want to be careful not to limit the use of photo and film material – or also of objects for haptic, olfactory, or auditive stimulation – as basis for reminiscence, as some of the caregivers mentioned in the vignettes seemed to want to do. Designers may also “script” reminiscing as the core activity into the presentation of material, thereby limiting the opportunities of people with dementia to appear as persons. As the vignettes show, moreover, there is also an intrinsic danger of essentializing older people in selecting archive material for them to watch. Not all older people share the same past or respond to similar events and objects in the same way. For people living with dementia, as it turned out, objects, events, or habits from the past are not necessarily desirable and pleasurable, even though this is often presumed to be the case.

Advocates of arts approaches to dementia care, such as Basting (2009), suggest moving away from reminiscence activities altogether, because it confronts people living with dementia with their loss. Instead, they propose to turn to imagination in order to enable the participant to take on another role than that of patient, such as the creative role of storyteller. Our project shows that an all too radical differentiation between memory and imagination in reference to arts approaches in dementia care may not always be productive. Many of the responses of the participants did build on personal experiences from the past: personal memories, embodied memories, memories of a shared general past including a past one may want to distance oneself from. There is also the possibility of “imagined memory,” the practice of appropriating the image, making it part of your personal past or present identity. At the same time, the range of responses presented above is evidence to the creativity with which people with dementia reacted to the film montages.

## **Playing Together as Adults**

To support people who live with dementia in the expression of their personhood, Kitwood (1997) has explained the importance of positive person work (in contrast to personhood undermining behavior) on the part of the caregiver. Taking seriously the notion of the relational subject, however, also means that the personhood of caregivers, and in our case of the participant

observer, comes into being through the exchange with the participants in the setting of the film installation. What does collaborative looking mean in the failure-free context of our artistic intervention for both "parties" involved (not to mention other possible parties, such as family members and professional caregivers)?

The residents at Klevarie seemed to feel acknowledged in their presence by the participant observers who watched the films together with them and were sensitive to their responses. Collaborative looking in a joined film screening provided us a new perspective regarding the possibilities for exchange with people living with dementia. We discovered that it was more productive to approach the event through the lens of play, rather than trying to imitate or steer towards a more conventional film experience (cf. Swinnen & de Medeiros, 2018). One example in this respect, addressed in Vignette 2, is the ease with which people with dementia moved through possible worlds, which taught us a different and non-normative way of engaging with the worlds we are part of. It requires creativity, an open mind, and a fresh look to accept this fluidity of worlds and to arrive at a sense of mutual play.

We also learned that the artistic montage of the images and screening from the archive came with limitations. Too much manipulation of the images (through, for instance, the alternative screens or the blurring of shots) jeopardized visibility and enjoyment, something the residents explicitly commented on. On the other hand, the appeal of the montages to early cinema of attractions worked quite well in terms of the humor it evoked. One of the participants' explicit reference to Laurel and Hardy films illustrates that people with dementia, just like anybody else, have acquired a whole repertoire of film experiences that they can easily tap into (probably on a level beyond cognition). To us, this emphasizes the need to honor people's artistic capacities and the development of these over the course of their lives, while it may also serve as a warning against developing programs that come close to treating people like children.

## Conclusion

As part of the research project "Beyond Autonomy and Language," the film installations *Aqua*, *Sonne*, and *Jardin* helped us to explore our concern with how people with dementia are represented and treated in our hypercognitive society. We aimed to contribute to the personhood movement in critical dementia studies by zooming in on the person behind the disease through the engagement in joint film screenings. But we also pursued collaboration

in the design and execution of the project, including with the filmmaker and museum staff, but also with staff from the residential care facility and the people living and visiting there. In this sense, our project came close to co-creation, being one end of the spectrum of engagement as introduced in the first chapter of this volume.

When working on the project, we faced several difficulties linked to external factors, such as the museum's restructuring that happened to be underway and specific time constraints. But we also struggled to come to terms with leaving the participants behind after the project – something we try to make up for by writing about their experiences (cf. Hendriks et al., 2013). By including their voices in our writings, we aim to further extend the public settings in which people who live with dementia can appear as active and creative participants in knowledge production and the co-creation of meaning. Indeed, first and foremost, we wanted to learn about the value of this type of film intervention from the participants themselves. A future step could be to not only reach out to people living with dementia and learn from their experiences but to find ways to make these experiences visible again, for instance by giving them back to the heritage collection of the Limburgs Museum where the collaboration started.

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### 3. Examining Multilingual Practices in a Peripheral Region

Social Categorization and Belonging

*Leonie Cornips, Jolien Makkinga, Nantke Pecht,  
& Pomme van de Weerd*

#### Abstract

This chapter scrutinizes how current sociolinguistic research at the Chair “Languageculture in Limburg” at Maastricht University is conducted by outlining three case-studies investigating regional and social identity construction. Makkinga reveals how processes of in/exclusion take place through address terms in a nursing home; Pecht highlights how a combination of social factors has influenced language mixing in a former coal mining community in Belgium; and van de Weerd sheds light on how students at a Dutch secondary school negotiate their “multi-ethnic” context by constructing social boundaries and negotiating the implications of category membership. Our research is characterized by an interdisciplinary approach, by a focus on languagecultural practices in the periphery in the context of globalization, and by close attention for societal concerns.

**Keywords:** sociolinguistics, membership categorization, language mixing, linguistic ageing, linguistic identity construction

#### Introduction

In this chapter, we will present current sociolinguistic research at Maastricht University that we carry out in the Dutch and Belgian provinces of Limburg. The two provinces border each other in the Southeast of the Netherlands and the East of Belgium, respectively.



Since Dutch and Belgian Limburg are located at some distance from the economic and political centers in their country, i.e., the Randstad in the Netherlands and the conurbation of Antwerp in Belgium, they are perceived both within and outside Limburg as a peripheral region. Moreover, in Dutch Limburg, a strong sense of regional identity is expressed linguistically and culturally. People living in Limburg consider themselves culturally quite distinct from residents of the other Dutch regions, and they attach great importance to speaking “their” dialects (Cornips & Knotter, 2017; Thissen, 2013, 2018). In recent years, however, the intensified global connections and novel infrastructures such as the Internet, have changed the scope and nature of migration movements and the way people interact with each other (Wang et al., 2014). As a result, language use and how people linguistically (dis)identify with others in “peripheral” Limburg have become less predictable and more complex.

## Theoretical Framework

To capture the way in which people make use of the different linguistic resources at their disposal for regional and social identity construction, scholars across the fields of anthropology, geography, sociology, and sociolinguistics, to name only a few, have tried to find new analytical concepts in the past decade to overcome the concept of “language” as a monolithic, fixed object. New concepts include notions such as “superdiversity” (Vertovec, 2007), “crossing” (Rampton, 2014), “transidiomatic practices” (Jacquemet, 2005), “metrolingualism” (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010), “linguaging” (Møller & Jørgensen, 2009), and “multiethnolect” (Quist, 2008). Pia Quist, inspired by Michael Clyne (2000), characterizes the latter as a linguistic “‘something,’ a variety or style, which has developed in multiethnic urban communities and which is associated with speakers of mixed ethnic groups” (p. 44). Whereas the first ground-breaking studies focused mainly on linguistic variation of young speakers in multiethnic urban areas (e.g., Kotsinas, 1998; Ganuza, 2010; Quist, 2008), similar linguistic developments can be observed in places that are regarded as peripheral such as Limburg. Indeed, people in the periphery have become more conscious of power differences between themselves and those in the center(s) through new media and their contexts. It is, therefore, important to investigate how people in Limburg, but also people from comparable peripheral places and regions, find ways to (re)shape and strengthen local and social identities through language practices in these times of rapid social change (Cornips & de Rooij, 2018).

Our research at Maastricht University, situated within the research program Arts, Media, and Culture (AMC) of the Faculty of the Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS), can be labeled as sociolinguistics. Sociolinguistics emerged as a framework in the early 1960s, stemming from the need to contextualize the study of language or, in other words, to study both language (in) use and society. Sociolinguistics “attempts to establish causal links between language and society, pursuing the complementary question of what language contributes to making community possible and how communities shape their languages by using them” (Coulmas, 1997, p. 2). Language is thus considered as an indispensable means for people to construct social relations and to construct regional and social identities. Sociolinguistics is a broad and open field, but its theory and methods are thoroughly empirically informed (Johnstone, 2016).

Our sociolinguistic research has four characteristics which together make it quite unique in the Netherlands. First, our research is informed by an interdisciplinary approach with either a more linguistic or a more anthropological focus. Secondly, this research is geared to studying language and cultural practices in the periphery in the context of globalization. Thirdly, it puts societal concerns center stage in the formulation of research questions, and this specifically pertains to the challenge of inclusion and exclusion practices. Finally, it focuses on language practices as part of the process of social semiosis, i.e., as the locus of regional and social identity formation.

The basic concern of our research is to investigate how different actors (individually as well as collectively) engage with power dynamics and how they make use of linguistic resources in regional and social identity construction. Every language user associates particular languages and linguistic forms with specific kinds of speakers and practices within a social, political, and economic hierarchy. People’s choices of languages and linguistic forms is connected with ideas about and stereotypes of and by the speakers we investigate as well as in society at large. Within AMC, we always examine these choices empirically and in doing so our research is an example of Engaged Humanities: it deals with pressing issues in society at large, such as the obligatory allocation of elderly to a nursing home and the process of (un)belonging (Makkinga, 2017), how to identify oneself when growing up locally but being born in a migrant family with various home languages in an isolated coal mining district (Auer & Cornips, 2018; Pecht, 2013, 2015, 2019, 2021), and social categorization of and by students with and without a migration background and their labeling practices (van de Weerd, 2019). In addition, our research is interdisciplinary by tapping into both the

humanities and the social sciences. In order to study language use as a social phenomenon, we make use of a wide range of theories and methodologies found at the intersection of linguistics (both applied and theoretical), anthropology, sociology, and social psychology. Finally, we pursue active collaboration with non-academic partners such as the Limburgs Museum in Venlo (Makkinga) and the Mijnerwerkersmuseum (coal mining museum) in Eisden, Belgium (Pecht), with artists creating sound installations that “broadcast” the narratives of the residents in the nursing home (Makkinga),<sup>1</sup> and with policymakers at the local level who address issues of migrant youth (van de Weerd) and policymakers at the level of the Province of Limburg who work on the design of policies concerning the recognition of Limburgish as a regional language (Cornips).

## Methodological Approach

### *Data Collection and Case Studies*

The three projects described in this chapter follow the methodological guidelines of ethnography and sociolinguistics. Ethnography is “a family of methods involving direct and sustained contact with agents, and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing *at least partly in its own terms*, the irreducibility of human experience” (Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 6). Ethnographic researchers aim to understand the (grouping of) individuals under study by spending a prolonged period of time with them; by first-hand experiencing their day-to-day life, participating in their activities, and getting to know their way of viewing their world. The practice of ethnography is a highly reflexive process that unfolds in often unexpected directions as it aims to take account of participants’ daily lives (O’Reilly, 2012). Sociolinguistics studies how individuals actually speak. A well-known method is the sociolinguistic interview setting where people are placed together to interact for some time while being recorded (Labov, 2001). In the following, we briefly describe the specifics of each case study in terms of context, participants, and method of data collection.

Jolien Makkinga<sup>2</sup> (2017) has conducted ethnographic fieldwork for a period of two years in a fairly large nursing home in the city center of Maastricht. The majority of its residents mainly spoke the Maastricht dialect or another

1 See <https://stichtingludio.nl/project/mia/> (accessed July 30, 2019).

2 This research received funding from the European Union’s Seventh Framework Program under grant agreement no. 613465, Meertens Institute and Maastricht University.

local dialect in addition to Dutch. Makkinga, who is not from the province of Limburg herself, conducted participant observation at different times and in different areas in this nursing home. She made beds, handed out food, played games, and had many informal conversations with residents in public or private areas. Since the boundaries in the nursing home between public and private places are blurred, it was possible that conversations in the private sphere were overheard by non-intended listeners. Conversations between the researcher and the study's participants, as well as between the residents and staff, were audio-recorded in diverse contexts in which Makkinga also was a participant observer. The data were coded and transcribed in the annotation tool Nvivo. To complement the audio recordings, she wrote fieldwork notes that focused on the context, surroundings, and nonverbal communication taking place during the conversations. As the fieldwork covered a period of two years, many residents passed away or were diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease or related dementias and therefore they could not participate anymore.

Nantke Pecht<sup>3</sup> has investigated linguistic variation among speakers of the former coal mining district of Eisden, Maasmechelen, in Belgian Limburg (the *cit *). Between August 2015 and July 2017, she collected data by means of several methods. First, she obtained speech data produced when speakers feel *not* being observed. To minimize the effects of observation, she conducted in-group recordings (audio and video) in informal settings (sociolinguistic interviews) with three groups of well-acquainted former coal miners, all of them born and raised in Eisden-cit  in the 1930s (14 male participants, a total of some 340 min.). All data from in-group recordings were transcribed with the linguistic annotation tool ELAN and labeled with MOCA (Multimodal Oral Corpora Administration). In addition, she conducted 38 semi-structured interviews with diverse members of the community resulting in roughly 27 hours of recorded speech. She talked to and audio-recorded 21 women born in the 1920s/30s, i.e., wives and sisters of former miners, and seven men of the same age, as well as ten speakers of the younger generation (children of former miners, around age 50). Most of the interviews took place at the homes of the interviewee and had the character of a friendly visit. Interviews were done in the language(s) the speakers felt most comfortable with, which often was Dutch, but also German. Furthermore, in-group recordings of female speakers in groups of three to four participants were made. Moreover, Pecht

3 This project is financed by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (number 322-70-008). Fieldwork in 2015 was carried out under a grant from the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service).

took fieldnotes and photographs of relevant signs and cultural events. Finally, she analyzed archive files stored by the *Stichting Erfgoed Eindhoven* to trace back the socio-historical background of the community. The combination of these methods allowed her to gain a more comprehensive understanding, implying that in addition to observing the in-group speech of the men she managed to observe linguistic behavior in a variety of other settings as well (see Pecht, 2019, 2021).

Pomme van de Weerd<sup>4</sup> has analyzed language and social practices of secondary school students enrolled in a vocational training track in Venlo (in the North of Limburg). She gathered data during nine months of ethnographic fieldwork among one group of students, during their third and fourth year in high school, from January to June 2017, and from November 2017 to March 2018. The population participating in this research consisted of 35 students aged 14–17. They followed “basic vocational education” (*VMBO basis* and *kader*). Of the 35 students, seven students had a Moroccan migration background, five had a Turkish migration background, and four students had migration backgrounds in other countries (Bosnia, Afghanistan, Gabon, the Dutch Antilles). All these students, except for two, were born in the Netherlands. To the researcher’s knowledge, the remaining 19 students had no migration background. Van de Weerd attended 333 classroom hours of this group, resulting in daily fieldnotes and 140 hours of audio-recordings of classroom interaction. These data were coded and transcribed in NVivo, leading to a collection of 265 interactions among students, and sometimes between students and herself of teachers, in which references were made to ethnic labels such as “Turk,” “Moroccan,” “foreigner,” or “Dutch.” Analysis of this dataset resulted in the identification of topics and themes that students associated with these social categories, as well as common interactional contexts in which ethnic labels came up (see van de Weerd, 2019, 2020).

### *Data Analysis*

In order to analyze the collected data, Makkinga used the analytical concept of belonging, understood as referring to both an intimate feeling of being at home in a place (‘place-belongingness’) and a discursive resource to construct forms of inclusion and exclusion (politics of belonging) (Antonsich, 2010). Residents related the various dialects spoken in the nursing home to different places in Limburg. They would actually experience being surrounded by others (residents, staff, visitors) who spoke the same dialect or not, and in this nursing home context this gave rise to feelings of belonging or unbelonging

4 This project was financed by NWO, project number 406–12–050, 01–11–2016 to 31–10–2019.

(Antonsich, 2010; Thissen, 2018). Residents made clear distinctions between (groupings of) residents who spoke the dialect of Maastricht labeled “Us Mestreechtenere” (we from Maastricht) versus speakers of other dialects in Limburg (they from surrounding towns of Maastricht) and between the use of dialect in Limburg versus Dutch such as “Us Limburgers” (we from the province of Limburg) versus “they Hollanders” (people from other provinces of the Netherlands).

Pecht primarily conducted a grammatical analysis of the speech of the former miners. This analysis reveals that speakers use linguistic features that can be associated with several “languages” such as German, the Limburgish dialect, and Dutch.

In order to examine students’ identification and labeling practices, van de Weerd differentiated between labels as ethnographic facts (i.e., as the research participants’ tool) and labels as analytic tools (Cornips, Jaspers, & de Rooij, 2014). Next, the aim was not to determine what differentiates so-called *Marokkanen* (“Moroccans”) from *Nederlanders* (“Dutch people”), but rather to understand how students constructed and negotiated the *idea* of the existence of such different social categories, to examine how they were talked into reality, and given meaning, in daily interaction (Hester & Housley, 2002; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Brubaker, 2002). She elaborated on a framework called “tactics of intersubjectivity,” developed by Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (2005, 2004), which explains how “social and political relations are engendered through semiotic acts of identification” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 370). This framework recognizes three broad types of social identification practices: adequation-distinction, authentication-denaturalization, and authorization-illegitimation. Adequation-distinction emphasizes that sameness, as well as difference, is a social achievement rather than an objective and stable state of being: it is made, not found. The construction of either similarity or distinction serves a social purpose. Although these relations are highly complex and layered, they are often expressed through binary terms and thereby reduce complex social relations to the one-dimensional “us versus them.” The second “tactics,” authentication-denaturalization, is “the construction of a credible or genuine identity and the production of an identity that is literally incredible or non-genuine” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 385). This process of identity construction is necessarily based on essentialist understandings of identity. Finally, authorization-illegitimation draws on institutional or other types of authority in the legitimation, or the structural dismissal, of identities. Later in this chapter, an interaction will be analyzed in which the first two “tactics” – adequation-distinction and authentication-denaturalization – are especially salient.

### *Ethical Considerations*

For her ethnographical fieldwork in a nursing home, Makkinga obtained ethical approval from the Medical Ethics Committee of Maastricht University, and the Scientific Committee of the nursing home organization. Informed consent had to be obtained for each participant every three months. Moreover, nursing staff had to be consulted to estimate whether the cognitive functions of residents were still good enough to participate. During her fieldwork, Makkinga found out that the consultation of nursing staff to assess the ability of residents for research was problematic because nursing staff and residents differed in their evaluations (see also Lehto, Jolanki, Valvanne, Seinelä, & Jylhä, 2017). Moreover, Makkinga observed that opinions on the cognitive functions of residents to participate in the research varied strongly among the nursing staff. Therefore, she did not only consult the nursing staff, but she also took the resident's opinion and her own assessment into account when deciding on whether or not residents could participate in the research. The research projects by Pecht and by van de Weerd were approved by the Ethical Review Committee of Maastricht University. All participants were informed of the purpose of the research, and of the fact that the researcher was recording their speech. They were given the chance to retract permission to use their interactional data throughout the research. The names of all participants in the three case-studies are pseudonymized to ensure their privacy, and fictive names are used for the nursing homes.

## **Comparative Analyses of Situated Language Practices**

By concentrating on the three case-studies mentioned above, this section demonstrates how sociolinguistic research is conducted within the context of the Chair in "Languageculture in Limburg" at Maastricht University. For each case-study, we will briefly describe and analyze an example from the data generated.

### *(Un)Belonging to the Nursing Home Community through Language Practices*

People may encounter many difficulties in their transition to a nursing home. For instance, it cannot be taken for granted that they experience a nursing home as a place where they belong (Boelsma et al., 2014; Makkinga, 2017). During Makkinga's fieldwork, residents were also faced with financial cuts in care for the elderly by the national government. As a result, many nursing homes in the Netherlands had to close down. The residents of Mola, a nursing home in Maastricht (Limburg), were transferred to the nearby nursing home

Leem (where the fieldwork took place). Both nursing homes were part of the same health care organization. Even though Mola was located only a few hundreds of meters away from Leem, while residents spoke the same dialect, the residents of the two nursing homes did not get along well. “Extract 1” below shows how Mrs. Poem perceives the new residents from Mola when conversing with fieldworker Makkinga. Mrs. Poem had already been living at Leem for six years at the time of recording, and she perceived herself to be a “Maastrichteneer,” speaking the Maastricht dialect. The former residents of Mola had been living at Leem for six months at the moment of the recording.

1	Poem:	Ik zeg <i>altied</i> , en <i>daan moot</i> mevrouw	I say <i>always</i> , and then Mrs. X <i>always has</i>
2	Poem:	X <i>altied lache</i> , (.1) ik zeg <i>hej zit krapuul</i>	to <i>laugh</i> , (.1) I say there is <i>scum</i> here but there are
3	Poem:	<i>meh hej zitte</i> ook nette <i>mense</i> .	also decent <i>people</i> here.
4	Jolien:	Ja.	Yes.
5	Poem:	Dat zal je <i>eueval</i> wel <i>höbbe</i> .	Which you will <i>see anywhere</i> , huh?
6	Jolien:	Ja (.1) en wie zijn die nette mensen	Yes (.1) and who are those decent
7	Jolien:	dan?	people here?
8	Poem:	Die <i>haal</i> je er wel oet hoor.	You can easily <i>pick</i> them out.

Extract 1. Interaction between Mrs. Poem (Poem) and Makkinga (Jolien). Recording conducted in October 2015.

Mrs. Poem made a sharp distinction between people originating from Leem, who are “decent” people, and people originating from Mola, whom she labels “krapuul” (line 2). Mrs. Poem explained when asked by Makkinga (line 6–7) that “it is easy to pick out” the decent people in Leem (line 8). As the research continued over time, it became clear that the distinction made between people from Mola and Leem was related to their language practices. The majority of the residents who originated from Maastricht and spoke the Maastricht dialect perceived this dialect as the norm that should be spoken within the nursing home. While residents from Leem and Mola both spoke the Maastricht dialect, the original residents from Leem informed Makkinga that the former residents of Mola did not adjust to the language norms, values, and language practices considered to be typical of Leem, and therefore they were evaluated as showing non-social behavior. As Makkinga found out, language practices between residents of Mola and Leem differed to a large extent in the use of terms of address: former residents from Mola were used to address and being addressed by staff and other residents much more informally, calling each other *joong* (“boy”) or *sjat* (“honey”) (see “Extract 2” below), a practice they continued to sustain in



their new nursing home. The original residents of Leem, on the other hand, were used to being addressed and also wished to be addressed as Mr. or Mrs. followed by their surname. This they perceived as the norm, also after the arrival of the Mola residents. As Mrs. Peeters explains in “Extract 2” below, she knows it whether people originally belonged either to Leem or to Mola.

1	Peeters:	Ze zegt geen dingen als (.1) bijvoorbeeld	She doesn't say things like (.1) for example
2		(.1) sommige zeggen schatje	(.1) some say honey
3	Jolien:	Oja.	Yeah, really.
4	Peeters:	En zoiets allemaal. Ja dat was ik niet	And such thing and all. Yes I was not used
5		gewend.	to that.
6	Jolien:	Nee, (.1) nee.	No, (.1), no.
7	Peeters:	Enneh, zij is toch een beetje	And, uh, she is bit more civilized,
8		beschaafder, eigenlijk, vind ik. Dat	actually, I think. I
9		merkte ik meteen.	noticed that immediately.

Extract 2. Interaction between Miss Peeters (Peeters) and Mackinga (Jolien). Recording conducted in August 2016.

The formal way of addressing by Mrs. Poem and Mrs. Peeters is meant to indicate politeness, decency, and a sense of belonging to the group of established residents already living at Leem. Many of the new residents from Mola, however, felt excluded by the use of words such as *honey* and *boy*; like Mrs. Poem and Mrs. Peeters, they felt these words to be too informal, if not slightly indecent, for mutually addressing each other. This illustrates that in subtle ways residents engage in a politics of belonging by sustaining boundaries (Yuval-Davis, 2006) that are informed by and construed through language practices, and that in turn contribute to residents' sense of being more or less entitled to belong to the place.

### Linguistic Resources in the Former Mining Cité of Eisden, Maasmechelen (BE)

A peripheral area where speakers have been engaged in dynamic multilingual practices for decades is the cité of Eisden (BE) (see Auer & Cornips, 2018; Pecht, 2013, 2015, 2019, 2021). The speakers, now all men in their eighties, have socially interacted with each other closely since their childhood. They label their way of speaking *Cité Duits* (“mining district German”). Whereas *Duits* refers to the “German language,” the word *cité* is French for “district”

and refers, in the given context, to a residential area for coal miners built by the mining companies. *Cité Duits* developed among the locally born male children of immigrant miners in the common miners' district in the 1930s. It mainly consists of features of German, Belgian Dutch, and the Limburgish dialect called "Maaslands" spoken in this area, but it also includes lexical items from other European languages such as Polish and French. In addition, it contains residuals from the local coal mining vocabulary (van de Wijngaard & Cromptvoets, 2006). Yet, *Cité Duits* clearly goes beyond the commonly attested processes of lexical borrowing.

Despite significant bodies of work within the field of language contact focusing on a variety of linguistic contexts (Poplack, 1980; Matras, 2009; Muysken, 2014; Bakker, 1997) language practices within coal mining districts have been little studied, and this is true in particular for Eisden (Auer & Cornips, 2018; Pecht 2015, 2019; Cornips & Muysken, 2019). The fact that these speakers are now in their eighties and grew up in a socially isolated environment makes these practices even more interesting and worth investigating (for a sociohistorical overview, see Pecht, 2019, 2021). To give an impression of what the language practices of the community investigated look like, an example of the data from sociolinguistic fieldwork is provided below in "Extract 3."

1	L:	godverdomme. een paar dage später	Damn! A few days later came-
			Came
2		kam- kam der chef-guarde. nach schule. (...)	the head controller [mining terminology] to our school. (...)
3		un(d) da war der mutter van, r.s.	and there was the mother from R.S.
4	J:	ahh.	ha.
5	L:	der hat uns verrate.	she betrayed us.
6		joa:. un dann, bei dinge, maar von vatter kezem abgetrokken.	Yes, and then, but things, but fathers' salary was subtracted.
7	R:	und dann noch, hammel gekrieche, ja.	and then, we got beaten up. <sup>5</sup>
8		uhh, die habe geschmeckt.	those were tasty.
9	R	jaa, de(r) wart gut.	yes, that was good.

Extract 3. Interaction between J., L. and R., recording conducted in November 2015.

In this fragment, we find a number of linguistic features that can be associated with Dutch (*godverdomme*), German (*Schule*, *Hammel*), the Maaslands dialect (*wart*, 3. person singular past tense "to be"), and French (*garde*, *kezem*, coming from *quinzaine*). In a similar vein, speakers use pronominal

5 Due to the nature of the speech (unstructured informal spoken language), literal translation into English does not always work; in these instances, a slightly less literal translation is provided.

forms that are not found in Dutch but do exist in German (*der*, 3. person singular), and word-internal mixture, for example in *dage* (“days”). In the latter case, the final syllable *ge-* is a stop, and it is realized according to German phonology whereas the initial syllable corresponds to Dutch *dagen* (compare German *Tage*). Final *n*-deletion in words such as *verrate* und *habe*, on the other hand, is rather typical of spoken Dutch/Maaslands. What we see here is that boundaries between two or more varieties are not clear-cut. In other words, the speakers mix the languages to such a degree that it is often impossible to identify the source language of the clause. Thus, grammatical constructions are not fixed but negotiable, and they may reflect fuzzy boundaries.

The preliminary findings by Pecht suggest that *Cité Duits* is only spoken by men who grew up in Eisdén-cité in the 1930s. Women of the same generation do not speak it, although they are as multilingual as the men, as illustrated in “Extract 4”:

1	F:	Wat is uw moedertaal? (...)	What is your mother tongue?
2	L:	Ja, wat is mijn moedertaal? Ik ben in	Yes, what <i>is</i> my mother tongue? I
3		België geboren, dat zal wel eh	was born in Belgium, thus it must
4		Nederlands zijn, maar eh, mijn eh	be Dutch, but my parents were
5		ouders waren Italiaan(e), dus eh,	Italians, so primarily Italian
6		primer het Italiaans ook wel. Ik weet	as well. I don't know. (Pause)
7		het niet. [Pauze] En eigenlijk, Frans	Actually, we also spoke a lot of
8		hebben we ook veel gesproken in huis	French at home since my brother
9		met mijn, mijn broer is in eh Charleroi	was born in Charleroi <sup>6</sup> and went to
10		gebore, dus daar ging hij ook naar	school there before they moved to
11		school, eer dat ze naar hier kwamen,	this place. Therefore, we often
12		Frans gesproke. Het was een beetje	spoke French at home. It was a
13		alles. En dan, eh, mijn schoonzuster	little bit of everything. And then,
14		was een écht Italiaanse, en die kont,	my sister-in-law was a ‘real’ Italian
15		toen ze naar hier kwam alléén	and she spoke only Italian when
16		Italiaans, dus met haar werd ook weer	she moved here. With
17		Italiaans gesproke. En zo, ‘t is een	her, we spoke Italian. All in all, it was
18		beetje een mengelmoes geweest.	a bit of a mishmash.

Extract 4. Interview between Nantke Pecht (F=Fieldworker) and Lena (L), conducted in September 2015.

As this example shows, Lena (age 80), daughter of a miners’ family that originated from the Italian-Slovenian border region and married to a former Italian miner from Modena, hesitated when being asked about her mother tongue and she repeated the question (“What *is* my mother tongue?”). She

6 Charleroi is situated in the French-speaking part of Belgium.

then went on to explain that it is supposed to be Dutch, but the reality is a different one: she grew up speaking French, Italian and Dutch. Furthermore, as she reported during the interview, she picked up bits and pieces of the local dialect. As illustrated by these two extracts, speakers from this former mining district, both men and women, grew up highly multilingual. While women mainly seemed to switch between the different language varieties, the language use of the men exhibits such a high degree of mixture that often the boundaries between language A, B, and C have completely disappeared, leading to what the speakers themselves refer to as *Cité Duits*.

### Social Categorization by Students in a School Context

About half of the students in section “4b” of “South High School” had a migration background. These adolescents were confronted with diversity on a daily basis through their contact with (and in many cases, personal affiliation with) people, goods, information, languages, and cultures perceived as originating in other places. Although almost all students were born in the Netherlands, those with a migration background frequently labeled themselves *Turk* (“Turk”), *Marokkaan* (“Moroccan”), and/or *buitenlander* (“foreigner”), while calling others (but not themselves) *Nederlander*. They constructed these categories as self-evident, naturally distinct kinds of people. The following “Extract” and its analysis illustrates how students engaged in such identification practices, and thus how the tactics of intersubjectivity played out in ordinary conversation among students. The transcribed conversation took place between Nikki (age 16, labeled herself *Nederlander*), Amira and Dounia (both age 15, labeled themselves *Marokkaan*), Hatice and Meryem (both age 15, labeled themselves *Turk*). These girls were sitting together, waiting for the bell to mark the end of class, while discussing two common acquaintances (who were not classmates). The researcher was sitting nearby but did not participate in the conversation.

1	Nikki:	wie valt er nou op een wannabe	who would ever be into a
2		Turk? Asjeblijft	wannabe Turk? (.) please
3	Amira:	is hij Turk?	is he Turk?
4	Dounia	nee ( ) ze is Algerijn	no ( ) she is Algerian
5	Nikki	ja daarom (.) hij doet de hele tijd	yes that's why (.) he always
6		↑e ↑e ↑e ↓e dan begint ie helemaal	does ↑e ↑e ↑e ↓e then he starts helemaal
7		Turks te praten zogenaamd	speaking Turkish supposedly
8	Amira	wat de [fa:k]	what the [fu:ck]

9	Dounia	[o hij] is een wannabe Turk	[o he] is a wannabe Turk
10	Nikki	ja daarom	yes that's why
11		(1.2)	(1.2)
12	Amira	hij is alles wannabe heh heh	he is wannabe everything heh heh
13	Dounia	ja wannabe Marokkaan, wannabe Turk	yes wannabe Moroccan, wannabe Turk
14	Hatice	wat is ie nou eigenlijk?	so what is he really?
15	Dounia	hij is Pakistaans	he is Pakistani
16	Nikki	dan kan hij toch geen Turks?	then he can't speak Turkish right?
17		(1.5)	(1.5)
18		((iedereen praat 1.5" door elkaar))	((all speak for 1.5"))
19	Meryem	hij praat gewoon (.)	he just speaks (.)
20		hij zegt alleen die scheldwoorden	he only says those swear words

Extract 5. Nikki, Amira, Dounia, Hatice and Meryem in informal conversation before the start of class. Recording conducted in June 2017.

In “Extract 5,” two tactics of intersubjectivity can be clearly distinguished. By introducing the term “wannabe Turk” in lines 1-2, Nikki calls into existence the possibility of a “real Turk.” She thereby engages in the “tactic of intersubjectivity” authentication-denaturalization (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). She denaturalizes the identity supposedly presented by someone who used language that – in the girls’ eyes – is incongruent with his category. The students assumed that, underneath any potential “fake” identity, there is always an objective and “true” membership to be uncovered. This is illustrated by Hatice’s question in line 14: “what is he really”? At the same time, Nikki engages in the tactic of adequation-distinction: by distinguishing herself from this “inauthentic” individual, she can (implicitly) present herself as authentic, as on a par with the other participants in the conversation.

It occurred very frequently that these students discussed other individuals who they, at some point in the conversation, would label as member of a certain category. They treated category membership as a given and discussed it with an air of naturalness and commonsense, and furthermore as a rich source of information. Identification with ethnic categories in this peer group was much more complex than suggested by their essentialist terms, however. Although most students did not hesitate overtly to label themselves “Turks,” “Moroccans,” or even “foreigners,” they also explicitly dis-identified with Moroccans in Morocco and Turks in Turkey. These categories were thoroughly embedded in their local context: people labeled themselves and others on the basis of their (family’s) migration history, but the labels came to be associated with characteristics that had little to do with the country they referred to.

Instead, when discussing *Turken*, *Marokkanen*, or *buitenlanders*, students often mentioned dress style, physical appearance, having a good sense of humor, or being generous. Labels functioned to engage in local, intra-national categorization.

Furthermore, as can also be seen from “Extract 5,” students used labels to construct a local social hierarchy, in which the categories *Turk*, *Marokkaan* and *buitenlander* had status (van de Weerd, 2019). This local prestige led to the possibility of “wannabes.” This represents a striking reversal of particular discourses in Dutch society that exclusively problematize people with migration backgrounds (Bouabid, 2016). This overt reversal of categories’ social status may well be seen as the students’ commentary on, and resistance to, the stigmatization they experience in much popular discourse.

### The Added Value of the Three Case-Studies

In the three interdisciplinary projects discussed in this chapter, societal concerns are center stage in the formulation of the research questions. More specifically, they address the challenge of inclusion and exclusion practices, as well as regional and social identity constructions in a nursing home, in a former coal miners’ district, and in a peripheral region school. What is more, they study individuals in different communities and in different stages of life: older people in a nursing home, retired coal miners in a *cité*, and teenagers in a classroom. In all three contexts, communication is increasingly determined by both societal and individual multilingualism rather than by monolingualism, and linguistic practices of today’s speakers involve the use of features that can be associated with several linguistic resources, as illustrated most in Pecht’s project. By analyzing seemingly ordinary, day-to-day conversations against a background of ethnographic knowledge about participants and their context, one can observe how different kinds of identities are invoked and put to work. The teenagers in van de Weerd’s project conjured up a social universe in their everyday classroom interactions, in which they discussed ethnic category membership as being all but stable or straightforward. As such, their negotiation shows that “identities” may take on specific new meanings all the time, and that social boundaries are created, maintained, and shifted in interaction. By problematizing processes of identification, and examining the meaning of labels in their context of use, we can avoid over-simplifying social oppositions. Makkinga also shows how social and local identities are invoked

through language practices, and how the use of specific terms of address contribute to a sense of (un)belonging. As such, these projects contribute to the research effort within the context of the Chair in “Languageculture in Limburg” by shedding light on the local particularities and situational elements that shape the experience of people in a region perceived as peripheral, but which is also affected by processes of globalization in its own ways (cf. Wang et al., 2014).

## Conclusion

Once people from different sociocultural backgrounds will begin to move through space, they will also take their linguistic knowledge with them, and share and alter it together with those they encounter along the way. The contemporary reality of linguistic interaction encompasses a vast array of linguistic resources, ranging from the alternating use of several linguistic varieties to all sorts of language mixing. To examine how language practices and the choice for particular linguistic varieties and forms are a resource for identity formation, we relied on a combination of methodologies: ethnographic fieldwork completed with participant observation, informal conversations and audio recordings, and sociolinguistic interviews in the more language-oriented research.

All our case-studies illustrate that speakers deal with linguistic resources and social realities in creative ways. The research conducted by Makkinga shows that processes of inclusion and exclusion by residents of a nursing home take place through language practices, and through terms of address in particular, resulting in experiences of (un)belonging. Pecht’s research highlights how a combination of social factors has influenced language choice and mixing within a former coal mining community in Belgian Limburg. Van de Weerd’s project demonstrates that the effects of globalization are recognizable in regions perceived as peripheries. Her analysis of language use in daily interactions among students at a school in the North of Limburg (NL) sheds light on the ways these students negotiate their “multi-ethnic” context by constructing social boundaries and negotiating the implications of category membership.

All three projects reveal how (groups of) individuals (dis)identify with others through specific language, labeling, and addressing practices. As such these practices constitute a robust social semiotic system that allows actors to express a full range of social concerns in a given community.

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## 4. Hacking Rules

### Facilitating Inclusivity in Hacker- and Makerspaces

*Annika Richterich*

#### Abstract

The notion of hacking is commonly associated with cybercrime. In contrast, many civic developer communities understand “hacking” as a creative practice pushing the boundaries of technology. Since the 1990s, such communities have labeled themselves “hackerspaces” or “makerspaces.” Both terms refer to physical locations where tech-savvy, and often tech-enthusiastic, members meet in order to engage in and discuss shared interests. Such interests have been conventionally related to electronics and programming, but increasingly they also include practices such as sewing and textiles, laser cutting, and 3D printing. This chapter explores how members of hacker- and makerspaces establish and negotiate rules for their creative and social interactions, in particular in relation to communal values.

**Keywords:** hackerspaces, makerspaces, inclusivity, diversity, communities of practices, affinity spaces, communal governance

#### Introduction: “Do Not Hack”

When entering *London Hackspace* in August 2016, they did not catch my eye right away. Only after a while, I frequently noticed them: small, rectangular stickers on various objects. They were for example placed on a full-size *Rebel Leader Dalek* inspired by the BBC series *Doctor Who* and on an empty vending machine. They stated, “Do not hack.” To me, rules on what *not* to hack seemed counterintuitive, in particular given the image of subversive hacker cultures. Hackers understand and pursue hacking as creative interaction with digital technology. They push the boundaries of

technology and (collaboratively) innovate – often by subverting intended modes of media use (Lindtner, 2014; Coleman, 2013; Nikitina, 2012). Although public perception of “hacking” may be that it is merely an illegal activity, this creative interaction often occurs within legal boundaries (Jordan, 2016; Levy, 1998). Moreover, it increasingly takes places in communal, physical environments called “hacker/hackspaces” or “makerspaces.”

After returning from my visit, I searched for more information regarding the stickers on the *London Hackspace's* Wiki. I learned that the “Do not hack” labels are put on members’ items, which were approved for storage at the space, in order to make sure that others would not remove or modify them. This practice is also related to the fact that storage space is scarce in this hackerspace, as it is located in a city with skyrocketing rental prices. In the past, communal tensions arose from large projects that were simply left behind and started to take up too much precious space. As a consequence, members nowadays need to apply for storing larger items at the space for a certain amount of time. They do so via the publicly available mailing list. Once this request has been approved, the respective member may leave the item at *LHS* – after filling in and affixing a “Do not hack” sticker.

My initial astonishment turned out to be justified in part, however. As stated on the *London Hackspace* community Wiki: “As hackers we hate making rules almost as much as we hate following them, so we really want to keep the number of rules to a minimum” (“Rules,” 2013). In this sense, rules appear to be a rather reluctantly acknowledged necessity in communal interaction of *LHS* members and visitors. This encounter with ways of communicating and conceptualizing rules triggered my interest in the questions discussed in this chapter: what kinds of rules are established in hacker- and makerspaces, and how do these relate to communal values as well as cultural identities of involved individuals? Starting from these issues, this chapter explores how rules and values are negotiated in hacker- and makerspaces. These are physical environments where community members meet in order to engage in and discuss diverse interests such as programming and electronics, but also sewing, 3D printing, welding, or laser cutting (Kostakis et al., 2015; Kera, 2014). In contrast to the common perception that hacking *only* refers to illegal activities and cybercrime, I illustrate some of the rather mundane ways in which hackers and makers try to figure out how they can be community-law abiding members – while still maintaining the spirit of hacking in thinking and creating “outside the box.”

Methodologically, my analysis is based on rules, codes of conduct, and online communication between members of one hacker- and one maker-space in London. Moreover, I draw on observations of interactions at these

physical spaces, as well as on non-directive conversations with members. I combine primary sources and interpretive analysis characteristic of cultural media studies with material collected by means of social science research methods. In blending these approaches and sources, this chapter responds to the need for analyses paying attention to physical user contexts as well as communal statements and communication online (see, e.g., Pink et al., 2016; Hine, 2015). In analyzing these sources, I show how rules, social values, and communal practices are interrelated.

Thematically, by investigating these interrelations, my argument contributes to a better understanding of (normative) assumptions guiding members' individual and communal practices. I argue that even though following rules appears to run contrary to the idea of hacking as subversive, creative practice, members in hacker- and makerspaces establish certain rules in order to accommodate inclusivity and facilitate communal diversity. This can be seen as part of processes in which the individuals involved aim at ensuring values – such as inclusivity and autonomy – that proved difficult to reconcile at times.

The need to establish explicit rules for hacker- and makerspaces arises from tensions in groups which are increasingly less homogenous if still rather moderately heterogeneous and under pressure to account for a lack of diversity (concerning, e.g., gender and ethnic identities). I will conceptualize this diversification as transition and overlaps between homogeneous “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998; Hughes, Jewson, & Unwin, 2013; Rohde et al., 2007) and heterogeneous “affinity spaces” (Gee, 2005). Specifically, I propose that frictions in hacker- and makerspaces relate to competing values such as inclusivity and fairness versus “do-ocratic” tendencies. The notion of “do-ocracy” refers to the (explicit or implicit) assumption that expertise is decisive for agency within a community. In examining how hacker-/makerspaces negotiate values and rules, I shed light on tensions emerging between two main sets of values and related dynamics: efforts aimed at facilitating inclusivity and ultimately diversity are negotiated and occasionally collide with do-ocratic principles.

In the following sections, I first reflect in more detail on the link between hacking and rules as well as the emergence of hacker- and makerspaces. Subsequently, I introduce the abovementioned concepts of “community of practice” and “affinity spaces.” After describing the methods informing my argument and the interrelated ethical considerations, I provide an analysis of material from the abovementioned sources allowing for insights into the emergence and negotiations of “hacking rules” and hacker identities. The final section summarizes my results and points out some directions for further research.

## Hacker- and Makerspaces: Definition, Development, Tensions

Hacking cultures are strongly related to (and often identical with) communities concerned with the development of free and open-source software (Jordan, 2016; 2008; Coleman, 2013, 2004; Himanen, 2010; Söderberg, 2008; Nissenbaum, 2004). The historical evolution of the *Open Source Movement* “can be traced back to the ‘hacker culture’ that created Unix, Linux, and parts of the Internet infrastructure” (Zhao & Elbaum, 2003, p. 66; see also Alleyne, 2011; Kelty, 2008). Open-source as production and development model ensures that anyone may have unrestricted access to a product’s structure, blueprint, and design. Therefore, openness has been emphasized as an important communal value. However, it has been questioned whether claims to such openness are also reflected in communities’ dedication to inclusivity and diversity – in particular with regard to the dominance of white, male members in many communities and debates on sexism, harassment, and discrimination (Fox et al., 2015; Reagle, 2012).

Going back to the hacker ethic, depicted by Levy in 1984, hacking is rooted in the fundamental conviction that individuals need to be able to deconstruct technology, to “take it apart,” in order to understand how it works, to acquire knowledge, and to use this for future innovations. Levy explains the need for non-proprietary, open systems: “If you don’t have access to the information you need to improve things, how can you fix them? ... The best way to promote this free exchange of information is to have an open system” (Levy, 1998 [1984]). This assumption has inspired and fostered the abovementioned links and overlaps between hacking and making communities and free and open-source projects.

Yet, as Coleman and Golub (2008) point out with reference to hacker Elias Ladopoulos (Acid Phreak 1990): there is no *universal* hacker ethic, but rather ethical diversity among hackers. In contrast to Levy’s infamous argument that there is such a thing as a “hacker ethic,” the authors argue that “hacker morality in fact exists as multiple, overlapping genres that converge with broader prevailing political and cultural processes, such as those of liberalism” (Coleman & Golub, 2008, p. 256). Also from a genealogical perspective, it has been stressed that hacking is rooted in very diverse practices such as phone phreaking, early programmer subcultures, idealistic free software projects as well as more commercial strands of developer cultures (Jordan, 2016).

Increasingly, one can observe an institutionalization of hacking communities in so-called hacker- and makerspaces (Kostakis et al., 2015; Lindtner, 2014; Moilanen, 2012). Hackerspaces (also called hackspaces) and makerspaces are physical locations where community members meet in order to engage in and

discuss activities such as programming and electronics construction. These members are commonly very tech-savvy, enthusiastic IT users, and experts in various programming languages and electronics. While hackerspace members already possess high levels of IT expertise, they are constantly expanding their knowledge and skills by experimenting with digital technology. Their learning practices take place in communal contexts, involving collaboration and playful interaction between peers, while they are often pursued simply for fun. Scholars have emphasized the relevance of such informal, social environments for learning by pointing out that hackerspaces are “education in disguise” (Schrock, 2014) and highlighting their potential to facilitate civic IT innovation (Lindtner, 2014). Although hackers and hackerspaces provide key insights into IT learning and can act as innovation hubs, it is important to recognize that many communities are male dominated (Fox, Ulgado, & Rosner, 2015). More recently, feminist hackerspaces have countered this tendency and female hackers have called attention to misconceptions as well as sexism in hacker cultures (Toupin, 2014; Henry, 2014). Such developments are also related to grave concerns about incidents of sexual harassment and assaults in hacker communities (Montgomery, 2013; Mills, 2012; Reagle, 2012).

In particular the San Francisco-based hackerspace *Noisebridge* was experienced as a precarious place for vulnerable groups in the past (Montgomery, 2013). In 2013, *Noisebridge* – which presents itself as an anarchist community – added an anti-harassment policy to its former one-and-only rule: “Be excellent to each other.” This change in communal principles was implemented after female members reported experiences of sexual harassment and assaults. In 2016, a longstanding, male member of the community was expelled after being accused of sexually harassing several affiliates (*Noisebridge*, 2016). Just like the incidents leading up to *Noisebridge*’s anti-harassment policy, this decision was controversially discussed (see, e.g., the comment section in Montgomery, 2013; Isaacson, 2016; Loll, 2016; Fuchs & Weisbrod, 2016).

This development is an illustrative example of a case in which values related to anarchism – or the rejection of rules – conflicted with the need for rules. The ensuing compromise, i.e., the implementation of an anti-harassment policy, was meant to stress the community’s commitment to inclusivity, diversity, and its condemnation of harassment and violence. Drawing on a year of field research at *Noisebridge*, sociologist Lallement argued that despite the community’s claim that there is only one rule, “*Noisebridge* is full of rules” (interview with Lallement in Bosque, 2015). The author argues that these rules are often made and maintained by those who are able to bring them about “do-ocratically.” He observes that while the community



emphasizes the relevance of consensus for decision-making, in many cases this is undermined by do-ocratic forces. This fosters contradictions and tensions between principles and practices, particularly due to “do-ocracy, which comes down to letting each person do whatever they want. Legitimacy belongs more precisely to the one who does. ... recognition is heavily based on technical skills” (Bosque, 2015; see also Lallement, 2015). “Do-ocracy” as form of communal governance in hackerspaces has also been called “actocracy.” As observed by, for instance, Rosnay: “A hackerspace in Oslo is governed as an actocracy: ‘they that do – rule. If you would like to organize an event, build something or improve upon the space, just do so.’ A community of software developers applies the principle to the decisions related to product development: ‘Ultimately whoever ends up doing the work should have final say’” (2014, p. 6). Regarding free/open source developer communities, Coleman examined the role of deciding-by-doing with reference to the notion of *meritocracy*. She depicts the emergence and governance of the *Debian* free software computer operating system as a “combination of majoritarian democracy, meritocracy and ad-hoc consensus” (Coleman, 2013, p. 134).

As illustrated by the *Noisebridge* example, principles generated in a context of meritocracy/actocracy/do-ocracy may foster tensions and fallouts in hacker- and maker communities. Technical skills and the capacity to enforce one’s preference by implementing it do not necessarily mirror and comply with the consensus. Moreover, do-ocratic decision-making is likely to neglect power asymmetries and to privilege technical, practical capacities. As observed by Lallement: “Some hackers consider themselves to be hardcore because they are kings of code and declare that those who work in the Kitchen have nothing to do with hacking” (Bosque, 2015). This implies that tasks and expertise held by certain individuals will meet with a lack of recognition, if not outright disregard. Moreover, this comes with the risk that decisions are pushed merely to the benefit of those individuals who are able to implement them, while these may not be in the interest of those who do not possess the needed skills (yet). As a consequence, in an uncompromised do-ocracy, certain members are condemned to subordinating their interests to peers who have the necessary skills and networks to realize particular aims. Tensions emerging from do-ocratic tendencies are meanwhile well-known to many hacking communities, and in some cases they were also addressed, such as through rules and policies aimed at fostering inclusivity and fairness.

These tensions are also one reason why some communities prefer the terms/labels “making” and “makerspace” – rather than describing themselves as “hackerspace.” “Maker” culture has been described and used as phrase avoiding the negative connotations related to hacking. Strategically,

communities have used “making” in order to re-define themselves and stress, for instance, values such as inclusivity. As one user argued in an online debate on inclusivity: “I find the words DIY or ‘maker’ to feel a little more open to women” (“This Space Unintentionally Left Male,” 2014). Similarly, in an online debate among members of U.S. hackerspace *Knox Makers* it was stated that “I think ‘makerspace’ is more inclusive than ‘hackerspace’ on the spectrum of tinkering, and that’s a great reason to use that name” (Knox Makers, 2013). As mentioned above, it is not uncommon for the term “hacking” to be closely associated with illegal activities, immoral use of information technologies, and breaking into closed systems. In the light of these problematic connotations, Dale Dougherty – founder of the tech DIY magazine *Make* and its website *Makezine* – described “making” as a term that also circumvents confusion triggered by the notion of hacking: “While hacking is a wonderful way of viewing the world, ‘making’ was a more positive framing for customizing and changing the world” (Dougherty, 2014). In this context, also the term *makerspace* has become more commonly used in order to refer to communities that are dedicated to similar or the same areas of interest and that are equipped with the same tools as hackerspaces. In hacking and making communities the two terms tend to be used interchangeably. Although *Knox Makers* describes itself as hackerspace, in a forum debate most members agreed that using the term “making” rather than “hacking” can conveniently avoid confusion: “I called us a Makerspace when talking to them [visitors], because it helped me transition into explaining things we do without pausing to explain what hacking means. ... I got the message across without ever touching the word ‘hack.’ For me in this situation, I did not feel like I was compromising integrity of something I believe in or walking on eggshells, I was just communicating content with my audience in mind” (Knox Makers, 2013). These negotiations also motivated me to select two communities that present themselves, respectively, as hacker- and makerspace. They are dedicated to similar tech- and DIY-related practices, but it remains to be explored whether they differ with regard to efforts aimed at inclusivity, diversity, and fairness.

### Concepts: “Communities of Practice” and “Affinity Spaces”

Hacker- and makerspaces have been likewise described as potential “communities of practice” (Halverson & Sheridan, 2014, p. 502; Guthrie, 2014, p. 3) According to Wenger, communities of practice (CoP) are “formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain

of human endeavour”; they are defined as “group[s] of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 2011, p. 1; see also Wenger, 1998). The author stressed that interaction in communities of practice is characterized by strong social ties, frequent communication, shared interests, and group activities. According to Wenger, three main features are decisive for CoPs: a shared **domain** of interest; the establishment of a close-knit **community** and relationships between members which facilitate learning; and a shared **practice**, i.e., engaging in communal activities and debate and a common repertoire of resources (Wenger, 2011, pp. 1–2).

Certainly, there are hacker- and makerspaces to which these criteria apply, in particular when involving smaller groups in which social bonds are easier to maintain and groups which focus on specific skills (rather than diverse sets of skills and interests). As pointed out by Wang and Kaye, however, such communities “can range from the more familiar communities of practice to looser ‘collectives of practice.’” (2011, p. 8) While a maker-/hackerspace may have long-time, firmly invested members, eager to support each other’s learning and expertise development, it may equally have “short term, ephemeral members, using the community in the short time in a legitimate way as a source of information, but not contributing in the long term” (p. 8). Aside from these differences concerning the social investment that members may be willing and able to make, one should also take into account that hacker- and makerspaces accommodate a wide range of DIY interests. They are home to practices as diverse as (digital) sewing, electronics building, laser cutting, 3D printing, programming, welding, and woodwork. This also implies that members do not necessarily share and pursue merely one overarching practice and domain of interest, but that instead they engage in varying practices and interactions, if to different degrees.

Accordingly, many hacker- and makerspaces are better described as “affinity spaces,” a concept coined by Paul Gee (2005). Frequently, as argued by Gee, groups with shared interests are not characterized by a strong mutual sense of social belonging. He questions the possibility to identify membership and criteria that allow us to define who is “in” or “outside” of a group. Instead of starting from the assumption that there is a social community, he suggests a focus on shared spaces bringing individuals together. In the sense of “affinity spaces,” hacker- and makerspaces are a combination of physical locations, tools, online platforms, and social interaction facilitating learning and skills development. But the concept does not assume that there are equally strong social bonds between individuals. Main characteristics of affinity spaces are the diversity of involved individuals, i.e., “newbies” as

well as experienced, skilled members, as well as volatile, fluid social ties. In such contexts, “[l]earning becomes both a personal and unique trajectory through a complex space of opportunities (i.e., a person’s own unique movement through various affinity spaces over time) and a social journey as one shares aspects of that trajectory with others (who may be very different from oneself and inhabit otherwise quite different spaces) for a shorter or longer time before moving on” (Gee, 2005, p. 231). In this sense, hacker- and makerspaces are not exclusively close-knit “communities of practice.” They may likewise function as “affinity spaces” where members share diverse interests and practices and engage in social activities to varying degrees.

These reflections on hacker- and makerspaces serve as contextualization for the case-studies below. My analysis implies that communal governance becomes more complicated and more regulated in hacker- and makerspaces with a large membership base. Growing membership commonly means that spaces need to accommodate more diverse interests, different levels of involvement among members, as well as a comparatively increased, yet still moderate diversity in terms of, for example, members’ ethnic or gender identities. Conceptually, I found that these groups are not accurately described as communities of practice overall, but rather function as affinity spaces. Yet within such affinity spaces, smaller communities of practice may emerge, which are dedicated, for instance, to techno-creative learning or engaged in efforts such as communal governance, rule establishment, and enforcement. The latter groups are often represented by boards of trustees and commonly involve individual members as well.

## Methods and Ethical Considerations

Methodologically, this chapter is based on an analysis of online communication and content shared by members and affiliates of *London Hackspace (LHS)* and *South London Makerspace (SLMS)*. I combine this material with insights derived from non-directive conversations with members of these communities. In addition, I draw on observations of the physical community spaces and interactions during one visit at these two spaces in August 2016. I documented these visits in field notes and recorded some of the interviews (only when members felt comfortable with this). Furthermore, as of February 2017, I have continuously consulted the online message boards, *Google* groups, and Wikis used by these groups (as far as they are publicly available). I selected *LHS* and *SLMS* because they vary in group size and lifespan. *LHS* was founded in 2009 and has a membership base of more than 1,200. *SLMS*

was founded more recently, in 2013 (initially for about two years), and it has 120 members. These communities are funded based on membership fees, to pay for rent and tools. In some cases, members need to pay for using certain equipment such as laser cutters.

While the abovementioned numbers refer to registered, paying members, there are commonly a few core members who frequent the spaces more regularly while others only visit occasionally. A member of *SLMS* called this the “gym effect,” or the dynamic that new members sign up but eventually do not visit regularly and are not necessarily involved. In addition to members, visitors are welcome during regularly organized open days or particular events. These different roles also indicate that hacker- and makerspaces can function as environments for establishing communities of practice, while simultaneously serving as affinity spaces for others. Although there are no exact data on gender and ethnic diversity, members of all spaces with whom I spoke estimated that about 25% of the membership is female while there is very little ethnic diversity; moreover, very few members identify as transgender.

In terms of selection criteria for these case-studies, community size and founding date may be relevant in relation to diversity data (even if moderately in these cases, as indicated above with regard to ethnicity and gender). For the same reason, I aimed at including one community labeling itself as makerspace, rather than hackerspace, because I considered the possibility that this might reflect differences in communal values. One also needs to consider the option, however, that this is merely an effect of the more recent establishment – a feature more common of makerspaces.

Ethical considerations regarding my analysis are mainly related to members’ privacy expectations, the emergence of potential tensions among individuals (e.g., within and between spaces), and unjustified negative perceptions of hacker- and makerspaces. All websites I accessed for my research are publicly accessible. However, as pointed out by Markham and Buchanan, Internet researchers should not only consider technical accessibility, but also the privacy expectations of individuals involved. The authors argue that “[p]eople may operate in public spaces but maintain strong perceptions or expectations of privacy. Or, they may acknowledge that the substance of their communication is public, but that the specific context in which it appears implies restrictions on how that information is – or ought to be – used by other parties” (Markham & Buchanan, 2012, p. 6; see also Zimmer & Proferes, 2014; Ess, 2013; Zimmer, 2010). I assumed that such restrictions are implied when members post information that could be harmful for their perception in wider public or communal contexts, e.g.,

when engaging in controversial topics or discussing other spaces. Therefore, I have anonymized and paraphrased some of the material, rather than including direct, referenced quotes. This applies in particular to conversations shared via groups and communal platforms which are not overly public and in which members have few or no possibilities to adjust their comments. In contrast, I treat material shared via *Wikis* and official homepages as less sensitive because such material explicitly pertains to representative content and does not reflect communication between members (during which some may have been oblivious of comments shared publicly or their wider ramifications).

### **Hacking Rules: Observations and Analysis**

Hacking is rooted in creativity, subversion, and thinking “outside the box.” This also means that rules are somewhat counterintuitive when it comes to practices understood as hacking. However, as illustrated above, it has transpired in communal contexts that constant negotiations of basic “do’s and don’ts” may not only be exhausting and counterproductive but also put vulnerable groups at risk. Therefore, most hacker- and makerspaces have come to establish rules facilitating the interaction between involved individuals, as well as uses of spaces and tools. Practically speaking, such guidelines are commonly expressed in lists of rules and regulations, community standards, and anti-harassment policies.

Inspired by techno-social developments in free and open-source software, as well as (increasingly) hardware, hacker- and makerspaces are commonly grounded in the ideal of “openness.” Just like the technical development process, which is accessible to everyone (assuming that they are willing and able to get involved), hacker-/makerspaces are presented as open communities. As pointed out, however, this openness does not necessarily comply with inclusivity, as it neglects barriers created by skills and power imbalances. Reagle depicted some of the risks and pitfalls of confusing openness and inclusivity, in particular with regard to do-ocratic tendencies in developer communities: “the ideology and rhetoric of freedom and openness can then be used to (a) suppress concerns by labeling them as ‘censorship’ and, to (b) rationalize low female participation as simply a matter of women’s choice” (2012). Potentially, this may also “rationalize the gender gap as a matter of preference and choice” (ibid; see also Tanczer, 2015). But it is important to realize that this is not exclusively a matter of gender. Instead, the same goes for ethnic and gender identities, i.e., concerning communal diversity overall.

In this context, it is insightful to provide an overview of the kinds of rules implemented in hacker- and makerspaces and how these reflect communal negotiations of values. Three categories recur:

1. Health and safety: rules concerning, for instance, the correct and safe use of specific tools and the prevention of accidents/health risks. These rules are often presented in rather humorous ways, most likely in an attempt to reconcile the tediousness of having to state (sometimes obvious) safety measures and their (likewise obvious) relevance – as illustrated by a “rule” like “Do not be on fire.”<sup>1</sup>
2. Respecting shared spaces and tools: rules referring to moral responsibilities and mutual considerateness in order to ensure that other members can have access to the same spaces and tools as well (e.g., cleaning up after using particular areas or devices).
3. Social interaction: practical rules regarding moral and legal responsibilities for respectful, considerate interaction between community members and visitors. These rules are often implemented to protect vulnerable groups.
4. The *South London Makerspace* uses a communication system called “Discourse”: it allows members and visitors to create new posts and react to messages from others in a forum environment. One of the subpages here is solely dedicated to “Rules” (“Rules,” 2015). This page includes, for example, a “Code of Conduct,” “Grievance Procedure,” and “Values.” *London Hackspace* defines a list of rules (“Rules” 2013) and its code of conduct on its *Wiki* (“Code of Conduct,” 2013). When following members’ communication and when searching for the term “rules” on these websites, it becomes clear that individuals implicitly and explicitly refer to rules and guidelines when interacting (e.g., when discussing cases of temporarily banned members). In the following analysis, I will focus on two main themes which I encountered during my observations and interviews: 1. reconciling do-ocracy and inclusivity; 2. codes of conduct and communal dedication to harassment-free environments. In my conclusion, I will also relate this to the fact that rules are not necessarily static but may be contested and further developed.

### “If You Can’t Fix It...”

As community-run groups, hacker- and makerspaces depend on members’ engagement and enthusiasm. The infrastructure needs to be paid and

1 See, for instance, [https://wiki.nottinghack.org.uk/wiki/Do\\_Not\\_Be\\_On\\_Fire..](https://wiki.nottinghack.org.uk/wiki/Do_Not_Be_On_Fire..)

maintained by members, and commonly members design the interior of their work space, such as in the case of *SLMS*. Frequently, members will have an opinion on how a certain decision, such as on the space's interior design, should be implemented, but they may not all have the necessary skills to do it. At *LHS*, this potential cause of tensions is addressed in rules 4 and 5, illustrating an attempt at reconciling consensus and communal self-responsibility or self-regulation: "4. If something is broken, fix it; don't complain. If you can't fix it, tell the trustees ASAP; 5. If you're doing something major, ask the mailing list first" ("Rules," 2013). Rule 4 establishes that ideally members should address certain problems themselves. At the same time, it accounts for the possibility that a member may not be able to do so. Here, skills-imbalances are considered, particularly in relation to those members who may not be able to perform a certain technical/practical repair. In contrast, Rule 5 is aimed at members who are capable of performing a certain task or intervention, but it reminds them, that they should do so only after ensuring communal consent. These two rules can be seen as a way of finding a middle ground between do-ocratic tendencies and the approval of all members for minor issues – regardless of differences in skill.

In a similar vein, *SLMS* stipulates that "[t]he space should normally be self-regulating. Every member has equal authority to enforce the rules, and should lead by example," and that "[m]ajor incidents should be reported in strict confidence" ("Grievance Procedure," 2015). In a conversation with three members of *SLMS*, they discussed the challenge of balancing between realizing necessary tasks and allowing for wider consensus. They stressed that one needs to keep in mind qualitative differences between tasks, especially in the light of the space's recent establishment and the infrastructure investments asked from members. When the makerspace was set up in a railway arch in Herne Hill, this took a major effort, including putting in new inner walls, a restroom, a kitchen, and a ventilation system (to make it possible to do woodwork and welding in the indoor space). As not all members were able to perform these tasks, at times alterations were simply implemented to make sure that the space could be used. When putting in the core infrastructure, however, members still considered and discussed how it would affect the communal dynamics.

During the conversation at *SLMS*, one of the members illustrated this with an example: "There is a culture of 'you want it, you make it.' But if you, let's say, sit in a wheelchair and need accessible facilities, you obviously cannot simply go and build these." Members' reflections stressed the awareness that accommodating inclusivity and self-reliance can be challenging for hacker- and makerspaces. As revealed by these conversations on communal



governance and the challenges experienced, rules are one way to address potential tensions. But, at the same time, it was emphasized that the inter-related challenges are not merely resolved through rules, but that they have to be established and negotiated in communal, day-to-day interactions.

In this context, particular humor appears to be an important factor in problem/tension-solving. Based on her ethnographic work on hacker communities, Coleman underlined that “there is a close kinship between hacking and humor” (2012, p. 104). Stressing that humor as a form of cleverness is vital for hacker cultures, she argues that hackers “utilize humor or clever code to perform their craftiness” (p. 94; see also pp. 100ff). Another function of humor in hacker- and makerspaces appears to be its power to resolve differences and conflicts. As I mentioned above, a humorous twist can be used as a means of dealing with rules that may seem tedious or rather self-evident but that still need to be formally articulated. This is evident in *LHS*’s Rule 0: “Don’t be on fire.” With regard to safety when using the laser cutters, it was jokingly mentioned in the *SLMS* conversation that one may likewise add a rule such as “Don’t lick the laser” to the device. In addition, an important contribution of humor was seen in its potential to address conflicts: humor features frequently in communication among members, but also in the *SLMS*’s crowdsourced history. For example, after a meeting during the establishment phase of the space, a member was reminded more than once of the embarrassing moment when he “somewhat displeased with the high talk-to-action ratio, made his ‘dramatic exit’ out of the meeting only to return moments later for his bike helmet and his tail between his legs. However this ‘let’s get on with it, rather than talk about it’ attitude is almost certainly what pushed us to where we are now” (“History,” 2013–2017). In the spirit of hacker cultures, as described by Coleman, this example illustrates that humor can be an effective and elegant way to resolve communal tensions around consensus building and do-ocracy.

## Codes of Conduct

Despite a tendency to favor amiable problem-solving and humorous approaches to rules and regulations, hacker- and makerspaces increasingly show awareness that certain problems require top-down interventions and support. Such cases may be related to gross negligence of practical rules, such as storage and cleanliness/hygiene, which may interfere with the usability of spaces or tools for a majority of the community. But these concerns may also refer to incidents involving harassment and discrimination. Related issues

and approaches are commonly addressed in *Codes of Conduct*. These sets of rules and values suggest that diversity may also be an issue in hacker/maker communities, but that they aim at establishing conditions for facilitating inclusivity as foundation for further diversity.

The most obvious difference between the codes of conduct of *SLMS* and *LHS* is that the one of the latter is significantly shorter. In its code, LHS is described as “inclusive community where all our members and visitors should feel welcome. This code applies to everyone’s conduct on all public communication channels (such as IRC and mailing lists), as well as at the Hackspace itself. This code of conduct is in addition to the Rules which cover safety and the ethos of the space” (Code of Conduct, 2013). It is accessible as part of the Wiki and – similarly to the rules – one of the links mentioned prominently in the header section under “Visit us.” It consists of four main rules regarding (1) dismissal of harassment and discriminative behavior in any form, (2) a plea for polite and respectful communication, (3), a statement opposing any form of public “trolling,” and (4) any form of personal attacks. As suggested by Coleman (2010), “trolls,” in particular in hacker cultures, may be more positively seen as tricksters. However, in this context, and increasingly more widespread in Internet cultures, the term carries negative connotations corresponding to those described by Bergstrom (2011): “To troll is to have negative intents, to wish harm or at least discomfort upon one’s audience. ... We are warned ‘do not feed the troll,’ as by responding to their frivolous posts we risk adding fuel to the fire – a troll is merely looking for any reaction as validation to continue with their activities.” Harassment can occur as a result of trolling; yet, online trolls do not necessarily engage in discriminative behavior because of particular beliefs or political aims; they may do so merely for the sake of creating annoyance and uproar (flame trolling/flamebait).

Offenses against the abovementioned LHS rules and the code of conduct may have two main consequences: offenders may be banned from communal, digital communication channels and a “grievance procedure” may be initiated, potentially resulting in their expulsion from the community and its physical space. One of the most striking aspects of the *LHS*’s code of conduct is that it does not mention particular reasons for harassment and discrimination. Nor does it say anything about factors such as gender and ethnicity. A search for “gender” among the messages on the LHS mailing list, however, reveals 32 threads (on March 8, 2017). Most of them suggest that members are aware that gender and (ethnic) diversity are seen as important issues – and commonly agree on their importance. But these issues also appear to be perceived as a somewhat tiring, familiar subject – one that

may be instrumentalized in conflicts. In a debate concerning a visitor's ban due to the use of a device exclusively available to members, it was claimed, for instance, "[p]lease don't bring gender into this." Rather than singling out hackerspaces as environments where these issues can be solved, the wider societal imbalances and biases are expressed in such spaces just as well. In a thread on more general, diversity-related criticism voiced in an article on hackerspaces, members engaged in a discussion on how to address lack of diversity. While some expressed a genuine interest in actual strategies and reflected on ways to counter this tendency, the topic was hardly perceived as particularly new. For example, one post referred to "the sexism argument that comes up again and again." In this same context, a (female) member commented as follows:

Speaking as a lady ... (quiet at the back) I don't think there is a special need to reach out to female members. As long as the hackspace is not obviously misogynistic (and it's not, from what I've seen!) then you'll probably get the same percentage of female geeks as in the general population ... which is to say, not many. That's just the way things are at the moment. Until you get more girls being given Meccano sets at Christmas and more female science graduates you're not going to get more female geek space members.

If this comment describes hackerspaces as places where gender and diversity-related issues present themselves, it suggests that such places do not serve as active contributors to the problem (neither its emergence, nor its solution). Although the comment ends with the note "ready herself for gender flame war\*," the anticipated heated controversy failed to materialize. Based on the comment, one may expand upon Reagle's (2012) argument that a lack of female developers in the open-source movement may be rationalized as a matter of choice. The explanation given above traces such choices back to wider societal and educational conditions, but not to the hackerspace environment as such. It is striking that this perspective on gender issues diverges (for some members) from the hands-on and "less talk-more action attitude" regarding technological developments. These tendencies in communal debates seem equally reflected in the lack of explicit references to gender and diversity as crux for harassment and discrimination in the *LHS's* code of conduct.

In comparison, the *SLMS* code of conduct is more specific with regard to features and identities that may expose individuals to harassment and discrimination. It states that "South London Makerspace is dedicated to providing a harassment-free experience for everyone, regardless of gender,

gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, body size, race, or religion. We do not tolerate harassment of people at our events or space in any form” (“Code of Conduct,” 2015). In addition, harassment is defined as including “offensive verbal comments” concerning abovementioned characteristics and “also includes sexual images in public spaces, deliberate intimidation, verbal or physical threats, stalking, following, harassing photography or recording, sustained disruption of talks or other events, inappropriate physical contact, and unwelcome sexual attention” (“Code of Conduct,” 2015). It was derived from the *Geek Feminism* wiki, which in turn was written by volunteers from the *Ada Initiative*.<sup>2</sup>

These comparatively specific guidelines also need to be seen in the context of the space’s emergence. During the interview with *SLMS* members, it was mentioned that the community evolved as a smaller-scale offshoot of *LHS*. Therefore, differences can also be attributed to members’ strategic efforts at addressing aspects that were experienced differently at *LHS*. This seems partly also reflected in communal debates. A search for “gender” in the communal communication yields eight results (this needs to be seen in the light of the space’s more recent founding). Similar to *LHS*, diversity is recognized as a challenge, but the perspectives differ from those dominant in their mailing list. Furthermore, it is stressed that diversity should not merely be narrowed down to issues of gender (identity), but that it is likewise “important to remember that diversity is more than just about gender which is under represented in the space, there is also age and underrepresented minorities such as the tiny number of BAME members, almost no openly LGBTQ+, or members with disabilities.”<sup>3</sup> This comment was added to a thread on “Inclusion and diversity at Makerspace.” The thread includes more practice discussions on possible outreach activities, female trustees, technological equipment, and activities catering to more diverse interests.

Overall, *SMLS* appears to address the issue of diversity and inclusion less defensively, while this community does not mainly conceptualize it as a dynamic beyond its control. This is also illustrated in the comment of a member who states that “[i]t’s interesting that 41% of Facebook followers

2 The U.S. charitable organization was mainly active from 2011–2015 and “supported women in open technology and culture through activities such as producing codes of conduct and anti-harassment policies, advocating for gender diversity and teaching ally skills” (see <https://adainitiative.org>).

3 See <https://discourse.southlondonmakerspace.org/t/inclusion-and-diversity-at-makerspace/2148/3>.

are female but only 17% of members are. That suggests it's not lack of interest that's behind the unbalanced numbers, but something else." Such observations, as well as the general tenets of the thread (including practical suggestions for increasing inclusivity and diversity), indicate that the interrelated issues are not seen as conditions on which the community has little influence. Instead, they are depicted as developments which may partially be tackled in communal practices and strategies. When comparing the two codes of conduct, then, it becomes clear that these types of rules are seen as having different functions in part. This can be linked to their distinctive conceptualization: while *LHS* acknowledges a lack of diversity among community members, this is perceived as an outcome of broader societal trends that members are largely incapable of tackling. In this context, the code is predominantly a document aimed at ensuring that those members who do join *LHS* can feel safe and experience a harassment-free environment. The same goes for the *SLMS* code, but in addition this document also has a more public, communicative function. It is aimed at encouraging further diversity and relating very explicitly to (vulnerable) groups and members, which are currently in the minority or not present yet. *LHS* likewise stresses that it conceives of itself as an "inclusive community where all our members and visitors should feel welcome." But in the respective code of conduct, factors that may interfere with this aim are less clearly defined and hence more open to negotiations.

### **Conclusion: Making, Following, and Negotiating Rules**

Hacker and maker cultures are rooted in a creative engagement with technologies and hands-on crafts. Practical skills in electronics and programming, as well as expertise in a wide range of crafts such as woodwork and welding, are commonly vital for members' identities and reputation. The importance of these skills and knowledge, on which these communities are founded, facilitated do-ocratic approaches to communal governance. In turn, these have ramifications for social interaction. This tendency goes back to widely circulated principles of Steven Levy's hacker ethic, including "Always yield to the Hands-On Imperative," "Mistrust Authority, Promote Decentralization," and "Hackers should be judged by their hacking, not bogus criteria such as degrees, age, race, or position" (Levy, 1996). While the latter principle was meant to avoid discrimination, Levy did not take into account that age, gender, and ethnicity biases in related developer professions were

inherently problematic. In contrast, hacker- and makerspaces have realized and experienced – at times in painful ways – that diversity biases and injustices pertinent to the crafts they are involved in have ramifications for their communities. Many of them are keenly aware of and were exposed to the criticism that their communities tend to be predominantly frequented by white, male members. Communities such as *London Hackspace* and *South London Makerspace* openly discuss the implications of their moderate diversity. Moreover, they have established rules and codes of conduct, which support them in balancing members' common commitment to do-ocracy with individuals' diverging capabilities to ensure pleasant and safe interactions in physical or digital spaces.

Such rules require members' commitment and sustained interaction – a process potentially difficult to reconcile with hacker/makers' tendency to prefer “action over talk.” In this sense, rules are the result of negotiations, and they may be contested, causing many of them to be subject to re-negotiations, amendments, and updates. This principle applies eminently to hacker and maker cultures that are grounded in ideals of creativity, freedom, and subversion. The “Do not hack” sticker, as available in the *London Hackspace*, is a good example for practical solutions for communal governance: the sticker makes sure that an item is not appropriated by another member, and – more importantly – indicates if the owner has the necessary approval to store the object labeled with a sticker. At the same time, the initially mentioned “Do not hack” sticker on the “vending machine” project is an illustrative example of member's critical engagement with rules and how they are put into practice. When taking a closer look at the sticker, one can read the following instructions and hand-written entries (the latter in italics): “Expected day of completion (your best guess!!!) *Heat Death of Universe*. Tell us more about it? *Hackspace Institution*. → *Convince people that your project is LHS infrastructure and normal rules do not apply.*” The latter comment, which most likely was added at a later point, hints at the possibility that even though rules have been established, they may not be perceived as applicable to all members in fair ways. The initial replies to the information requested on the sticker, as well as to the comment added, suggest that there are not only “hackerspace rules” but that attempts at hacking these rules take place as well – which may be appreciated by some and criticized by others.

Concerns related to the fair enforcement of rules are also expressed in some of the mailing-list debates, such as in proposing new rules. For example, one member proposed that large projects left at the space beyond the date indicated on the “Do not hack” sticker should be removed within 24 hours.

Following up on the original idea, another member wrote that instead a fee could be charged for each additional day of storage. This in turn led to a critical as well as cutting comment that the criteria for deciding on and enforcing this fee would end up being a mixture of “amount of space used, risk, benefit to the space, coolness, number of members involved, popularity of the member, how good their English is, their race and their gender.” The provocation received a (humorous) reply that one would be charged extra for trolling. While the comment on criteria for enforcing storage roles was meant ironically, it does illustrate that members are aware of risks following from certain rules. Moreover, it shows once more that rules are not simply created in straightforward, top-down decisions, but that they emerge from communal negotiations, informed by members’ values, interests, and practices.

### **Feedback and Response from Community Members**

I sent a draft version of this paper to those interviewees who were happy to share their contact details with me. I am very grateful for their feedback as well as the following response.

#### *Daniel*

From a personal perspective, on the subject of diversity and inclusion, I feel there is an element of social profiling that is not part of the discussion at large – I mean everywhere!

About social profiling, what I have been conjecturing is that if an environment is said to be lacking diversity, it means that the environment has been subject to some form of social profiling. So, a statement in the lines of “the majority of the people in this environment are white, middle-class males” implies that some sort of social profiling went on. I guess the opposite is also true, if an environment is said to be diverse, the same must have happened. What bothers me about social profiling is that I believe it goes against equality, because it establishes differences. Now I understand that someone would say for instance, that at such and such a university, certain minority groups are underrepresented, and that something must be done about it. So, an onus is laid on the university to accept more students from minority groups. This happens in Brazil, where there is a system of ethnic minority group quotas built into the admissions program of so-called federal universities.

I am a member of a rowing club at Kingston-upon-Thames in the London metropolitan area. Let's say we asked how socially diverse is that club? Where do we start? I could, as a member, get a sample email list (60 out of about 300 members) containing names and surnames, so we could infer gender, majority male, and also that the majority of surnames are or seem to be Anglo Saxon. We could go on to say, by observation, that the majority of members are white in color. We could make inferences about income based on anecdotal evidence of lifestyle, and so forth. And that is what I define as social profiling. Then, going a bit further and creating a high dimensional vector space, where each member is represented as a vector of attributes, we could compare the rowing club membership vector with the corresponding vector space of Kingston-upon-Thames residents, and obtain a measure of distance, between the diversity of the population (which must be 1, for most diverse) with respect to the rowing club membership sample. By the way, this technique is used for text retrieval – measure of distance between vector spaces, with blocks of text encoded as vectors, with higher scores denoting higher similarities.

From there, I guess we could have a list of scores, from various social organizations, and sort them in some kind of order, to find out how diverse, or not, these organizations are. And leave it to policy makers to decide, if something has to be done about it.

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# Part II

## Engaging Narratives



## 5. Generation War

### Dissonant Perceptions of the Second World War and the Holocaust

*Georgi Verbeeck*

#### **Abstract**

*Generation War* was a miniseries on the Second World War in three parts, aired in 2013 by the German public broadcasting organization ZDF. If this TV drama was a huge commercial success, it provoked sharp criticism as well. The debate touched a nerve in Germany's memory politics, as it revitalized the old debate on victims and perpetrators, on national guilt and trauma. This chapter looks into the reception of *Generation War* in media and academia. To do so, I made a selection of critical commentaries which addressed the problems of representation of the war at the Eastern Front in 1941–1945. I will argue that the multifaceted responses to the miniseries represent another chapter in Germany's long-term struggle with its past.

**Keywords:** (re-)writing the history of the Third Reich, cultural memories of the Second World War, totalitarianism and dictatorships: history and legacies

### **German Memories of the Third Reich**

Germany has a rich tradition in political and intellectual debates on how to deal with the legacies of its troublesome past (Assmann & Frevert, 1999; Fischer & Lorenz (Eds.), 2015; Reichel, 2007; Herf, 1997; Fulbrook, 1999). In its various attempts to confront its past, the country stands out when compared to other former “perpetrator states” (Kellerhoff, 2013; Buckley-Zistel & Kater, 2011; König, Kohlstruck & Wöll, 1998). Intense debates on the proper interpretation of the Third Reich (1933–1945) arose in the immediate aftermath



of the Second World War, and they continue to this day. Scholars, politicians, and public intellectuals of the Federal Republic, and the new Germany after 1990, have been engaged in an ongoing process of (re-)negotiation, (re-)thinking, and (re-)writing of the major catastrophe in 20th-century European history. Discussions on the national *Sonderweg* (Germany's "special path" in history and its disastrous deviation from European "normalcy") in the 1960s and 1970s, the *Historikerstreit* (the so-called "historians' debate" addressing, among other things, the unicity of the Holocaust) in the 1980s, new research on public opinion and the role of ordinary citizens during war and genocide since the early 2000s, new perceptions on the "Germans as victims" – to name just a few specific topics – represent as many stages in 75 years of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (reworking of the past) (Judt, 2005, p. 830; Leggewie, 2010). A multitude of voices has been heard and various positions have been taken, and at least two major recurrent lines of argumentation can be discerned. Moderate conservative voices have tended to argue in favor of normalization and reconciliation, while liberal and leftwing voices have continued to stress the permanent need of critical self-reflection and acceptance of guilt. Neither position has ever acquired discursive hegemony and future outcomes remain difficult to predict.

Most of the historical issues and controversies in the exchange among scholars and academics also reached the wider public through the media and political interventions (Große Kracht, 2005). In fact, the media, TV, and films in particular, increasingly influenced the historical imagination. TV productions – fictionalized drama as well as documentaries – even turned into key suppliers of historical awareness. No wonder, then, that they also became objects of investigation by scholars who study the ever-widening range of collective memories (Kansteiner, 2006). While academic disputes among historians usually tend to center on questions of methodology or empirical fact-finding, debates reaching the wider public often concern issues of identity-building and ethics. Because professional historians prefer to preserve their professional status of investigators, rather than becoming assessors, they rarely feature as key players in controversies around identity, and quite often their views are overshadowed by those of public intellectuals, journalists, and politicians. In particular when national (and global) trauma is at issue, such as regarding the Second World War and the Holocaust, history gains urgency among the general public, rather than just being relevant to historians.

This chapter presents another example of what the editors of the volume have described in their mission statement as "engaged humanities." "Engagement" in the humanities has been widely defined as the added value

offered by academic scholarship to the wider field of politics, culture, and society – where research in the humanities can “make a difference.” This chapter does not aim to “defend,” but rather to “showcase” a prominent example of practical interaction between humanities scholars, such as historians, and the wider public domain. As it is almost generally accepted, the task of professional historians is not restricted to the scholarly study of the past alone but serves a wider agenda. The pursuit of history is, as only few will dispute, a political occupation (Jordanova, 2019, p. 5). Historical awareness is subject to debate and trickles down to the construction of national, cultural, and political identities. This is what the ever-growing field of “memory studies,” or the scholarly study of the “usages of the past,” has mapped over the last decades. It is quite possible that the past, especially ancient histories, is a “foreign country” (Lowenthal, 1985), where people “did (do) things fundamentally differently.” More recent histories, however, tend to provide for continuing battlegrounds for political, ideological, and national opponents. The 20<sup>th</sup> century, with its exceptionally bloody records of war and genocide, serves as a good example here. For contemporary Europeans, the Second World War and the Holocaust in particular have not yet enabled the past “to pass away.” These historical experiences of massive trauma will keep the public debate going on how to remember the past properly.

### **A German Media Sensation**

Over the past several decades, German viewers have become used to programs on television (fiction as well as nonfiction) dealing with the Third Reich, the Second World War, and its aftermath. But rarely did a program on TV trigger so much public interest and controversy as the screening of the mini-series *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* (translated as “Our Mothers, Our Fathers”) in 2013. This three-part series tracks the lives of five ordinary Germans between the years 1941 and 1945. It was commissioned by the German public broadcasting organization ZDF, produced by the UFA subsidiary “TeamWorx,” and first aired in Germany and Austria simultaneously. The project was directed by Philipp Kadelbach, with actors Volker Bruch, Tom Schilling, Katharina Schüttler, Miriam Stein, and Ludwig Trepte in leading roles. This fictional drama, based on scrupulous research, was a huge ratings success, each episode reaching an average of 7.6 million viewers (Weis, 2013). It soon achieved success elsewhere in Europe and North America. An English language version became available in 2014 under the title *Generation War* (Kirsch, 2014).



Figure 5.1 *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*, commissioned by the German public broadcasting organization ZDF and produced by the UFA subsidiary TeamWorx (March, 2013).

*Generation War* tells the story of five friends, all in their twenties, on their different journeys through Germany at war with the Soviet Union. They represent a wartime generation forced to negotiate the moral choices and compromises of daily life under the Nazi regime. The main characters are two brothers who enlisted in the *Wehrmacht*, one of whom is a level-headed, highly decorated officer and the other, his more sensitive younger brother, is an ordinary soldier; an ambitious war nurse who looks forward to serving in the German Red Cross; a talented singer who longs to become another Marlene Dietrich; and a secular Jew who works as a tailor in Berlin (Kirsch, 2014).

The narrative spans four dramatic years starting in the summer of 1941, when the friends meet up for a last time before embarking on their journeys, enthusiastically vowing to meet up again the following Christmas. The story's conclusion is set in a time shortly after the end of the war in 1945. Four years of war and bloodshed are covered in three episodes, entitled "A Different Time" (*Eine andere Zeit*), "A Different War" (*Ein anderer Krieg*), and "A Different Country" (*Ein anderes Land*). And, indeed, everything would be different after they met for the last time, days before Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, his doomed assault on the Soviet Union. This last meeting was also the last episode of their youth, after which their lives would change dramatically during the war. This also marked the end of the world as they had come to know it. The war itself would soon transform fundamentally as well: instead of being a "normal" war between enemy states, it turned into a *Vernichtungskrieg*, an unlimited war of extermination. Those who survived finally returned home, but they went back to a country that sharply differed from the one they left before the unfolding of the catastrophe.

## Ordinary Germans in a Different War

Wilhelm Winter (Volker Bruch) is the main protagonist and the narrator on the auditive track. He provides the opening monologue for the episodes and connects the various chapters with his own summaries of the progressive war developments to account for gaps or transitions in the plot. Initially, Wilhelm represents the character who firmly believes he is bound by honor to fight as a soldier for the Fatherland. He is praised for his sense of purpose and ambition by his father, an ardent believer in the National Socialist cause and proud of his son as a promising young officer. Wilhelm is set as an example to his cynical younger brother, who has no enthusiasm whatsoever to fight for the *Heimat*. Subsequently, Wilhelm is determined to do what he considers to be his duty, and he leaves home to lead his troops as a platoon commander. It soon proves inevitable for him to be actively involved in war crimes, including the mass execution of civilians and prisoners following the so-called *Kommissarbefehl* (commissar order). As the war continues, hopes of a quick victory evaporate, and so do Wilhelm's naive idealism and dedication to the cause of Germany. Facing the destruction of his whole unit, he collapses emotionally and deserts from his fellow soldiers. Soon arrested as a deserter, he ends up in a *Bewährungsbataillon* (penal battalion), where he is subject to constant humiliation and physical threat. This strips him of his last illusion and finally he kills the sadistic commander of the battalion. As an utterly broken man, he flees and returns to Berlin on foot in the midst of the Third Reich's total collapse.

Wilhelm's younger brother, Friedhelm (Tom Schilling), serves in the same platoon as an ordinary soldier. Initially, Friedhelm is the *Schöngeist* in the story, a sensitive young man who has no ambitions as a warrior, but rather prefers to read poetry and literature while the bloodshed on the battlefield continues. His comrades deride him as a wimp and regularly beat him up. The hardships and atrocities of war gradually turn him into a brutal, foolhardy, and ruthless man. His cynicism remains in place but takes on a new guise, moving from disinterest in war as a cause to outright moral indifference and insensitivity. He consequently becomes a fanatical killing machine, routinely obeying criminal orders. Friedhelm's mental transformation epitomizes the rapid brutalization of warfare at the Eastern front. As the final defeat of the Third Reich is approaching, he leads a group of very young and very old *Volkssturm* soldiers (the national militia during the last months of the war set up to fight the advancing troops of the Red Army). The young boys of the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth) are shaped by their stubborn will to fight against the Soviet troops to the last man. Friedhelm

orders them to stay behind and sacrifices himself by attacking an entire Soviet unit single-handedly. The old men of the *Volkssturm* wisely prefer to surrender in the face of Friedhelm's heroic but futile death.

Wilhelm's secret admirer, Charlotte (Miriam Stein) volunteers as a nurse in the German Red Cross, but initially, she can hardly bear the bloodshed she witnesses. Only slowly she becomes hardened to the atrocities. Because the medical staff is constantly overworked and in short supply, she is allowed to get assistance from local Ukrainian medical personnel. She selects a Ukrainian medical assistant named Lilija to assist her. Soon however Charlotte discovers that Lilija is Jewish. This is a moral dilemma for Charlotte, but eventually she decides to report her aide to the authorities, after which Gestapo officers put her on a transport to an unknown destiny. Charlotte's grief further deepens when a wounded Friedhelm is brought into the field hospital where she works, and he tells her that Wilhelm was killed in action (which was actually not the case).

Charlotte finally shares the fate that many German women had to endure as the Third Reich's final defeat was near. Charlotte and a Russian aide Sonja, together with a group of heavily wounded soldiers, fail to flee and are left behind to face the rapidly approaching Red Army. The wounded soldiers are cold-bloodedly shot, Sonja is arrested as a collaborator, and Charlotte is raped by Russian soldiers. At that point Lilija, who had meanwhile been freed by the Russians and was now in their service as a political officer, unexpectedly appears on the scene, interrupts the rape, and saves Charlotte from further humiliation. This intervention does not motivate her to rescue Sonja as well, however. Lilija actually shoots her, claiming there was nothing that she could do to prevent her from being punished to death for being a collaborator, adding that by killing her she still saved her from suffering further sexual abuse at the hands of revengeful Russian soldiers.

Probably the most ambivalent and enigmatic character in the story is Greta Müller (Katharina Schüttler), an ambitious singer who wants to promote her career in every possible way, seeing herself as the new Marlene Dietrich. Greta has a secret love affair with Viktor Goldstein, who is Jewish (see below). Yet she also starts a love affair with a high-ranking SS officer, named Dorn, in an obvious attempt to save her friend from eventual deportation. Dorn backs her career, but when the affair starts jeopardizing his own marriage, he organizes a tour for her, not to Vienna or Paris, but to the Russian Front, where Greta witnesses the brutalities of war. By chance she manages to return to Berlin, where she openly expresses her doubts about the *Endsieg* (Final Victory) and frustrates Dorn by revealing their affair to his wife, both of which lead to her arrest and imprisonment for

*Wehrkraftzersetzung* (undermining of the war effort). “Defeatism” is a mortal sin in Hitler’s Germany during its bloody final phase. Right before the war ends, she dies in front of a firing squad.

Finally, there is Viktor Goldstein (Ludwig Trepte), Greta’s “illegal” lover. Because of his Jewish background there is the constant threat of being accused of *Rassenschande* (racial disgrace). In an obvious attempt to save him from deportation, Greta manipulates Dorn into giving him a passport to flee the country, but Dorn’s filthy games lead to Viktor’s arrest by the Gestapo and his deportation to the East. Unexpectedly, it is here that the old friends’ paths cross again. On the way to his seemingly inevitable death, Viktor escapes from the train along with a young Polish woman named Alina. Both join a group of underground resistance fighters of the Polish *Armia Krajowa* (AK, or Home Army). He does not reveal his Jewish identity as he fears widespread antisemitism within the group. By chance, Viktor and Friedhelm run into each other during an ambush carried out by the AK on a motorized German army squad. Later, the group raids a German train for weapons, whereupon they discover that a large part of its cargo consists of Jews on transport to the concentration camps, but they refuse to let them escape. An emotionally disturbed Viktor decides to defy his AK saviors and finally frees the Jews, angering the other partisans who exclude him from the group. He is not shot by the (more or less sympathetic) leader of the group, and he manages to escape. Next, the resistance fighters are betrayed and wiped out by Friedhelm’s men, but Friedhelm recognizes Viktor and allows him to escape again amidst the confusion. After the end of the war, Viktor returns to Berlin. His apartment has been allotted to a German family, whose members have equally “suffered a lot during the war”; he finds out that his parents and Greta are dead. He finally meets Dorn who, much to Viktor’s surprise, is now a high-ranking member of the Allied Forces’ police administration. Dorn successfully presents himself as a “good German,” whose role as “rescuer of Jews” can be corroborated.

Out of the original five characters only three survive and return to their pre-war favorite meeting place: the former *Wehrmacht* officer, the Red Cross nurse, and the Jew. The cynical soldier died during the last days of the war and the defendant accused of defeatism was executed in prison. Against the background of the chaotic and deadly circumstances of war, the paths of the five protagonists frequently cross, which, from the perspective of the historian, is barely realistic, yet it contributes to an underlying atmosphere of optimism in the series. Emotional recognition and a suggestion of historical authenticity are deepened as, at the end of the concluding third episode, the audience is led to believe that the main characters were real persons



Figure 5.2 Tom Schilling as Wehrmacht soldier in *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*.

by listing their years of birth and death as follows: Viktor 1921–1997; Greta 1921–1945; Charlotte 1921–2003; Friedhelm 1923–1945; Wilhelm 1920–.

*Generation War* is a fictional drama that conveys a highly unlikely narrative of the journey of five individuals through the years of war, violence, and bloodshed. It seems improbable that the fate experienced by this group of five young German men and women would have actually occurred in real life in this way. The theatrical showdown of the narrative, in particular, meets the needs and expectations of TV drama in the first place. It can also be argued, however, that by providing an unambiguously fictionalized drama, the program displayed all the typical elements and characteristics of a “real” historical episode (Bösch, 2007, p. 19; Cohen-Pfister, 2014, pp. 104–123). The mini-series comprised all the ingredients needed for understanding the idiosyncratic nature of Germany’s role during the Second World War: popular opinion and dissent in the Third Reich; the gradual brutalization of warfare during the Russian campaign; the murderous anti-Communist and anti-Jewish crusade; the mechanisms of oppression and obedience; the slippery roads of passivity and resistance; the interaction between occupying authorities and local populations; the horror and despair experienced by those who fled the advancing Soviet troops; the chaos, destruction, and paranoia during the last days of the Hitler regime; and, above all, the eternal mechanisms of accommodation, betrayal, and survival. The series revealed, in other words, the human condition under exceptional circumstances. Most notably *Generation War* managed to show the flexibility of human beings to constantly navigate between moral choices and to adapt to ever-changing conditions. In this way, *Generation War* certainly was successful at triggering

a real sense of “historical sensation.” Seen in this light, it is hardly surprising that this series also prompted a wide spectrum of responses, rather than a broadly shared consensus about its merits.

## Praise

Immediately after its release, *Generation War* received lots of appreciation. The series was awarded the *Deutscher Fernsehpreis 2013* (German Television Award) for the year’s best multi-part television drama series. Many felt that the film would give the remaining survivors of the Second World War generation an opportunity to discuss it with their families (“The Third Reich Revisited,” 2013; Freidel & Hanfeld, 2013; “Filmproduzent Nico Hofmann im Gespräch,” 2013; Michal, 2013; Thiel, 2013). The series had introduced a new phase in historical drama on the Nazi era. Many critics saw the project as a “turning point” in German television for examining the crimes of the Third Reich at an individual level and for exploring the seductive aspect of Nazism (Schirmacher, 2013). *Generation War* was therefore presented as another chapter in the Federal Republic’s confrontation with a painful past, which was already esteemed as an achievement in itself (Fischer & Lorenz, 2009). The series rightly acknowledged, for instance, what scholars have established in recent years: that the *Wehrmacht* played a major role in committing atrocities in the occupied countries (Hartmann et al., 2005).

Compared to the many documentaries produced by the famous German “television historian” Guido Knopp (Kansteiner, 2003, pp. 626–648), which deal with various episodes in German twentieth-century history, *Generation War* was generally received as a major contribution to a better and more balanced portrayal of the complex survival mechanisms of ordinary German citizens under extreme circumstances of war and totalitarian rule (Pakier, 2013, pp. 133–146). Many shared the opinion that its makers did a great job indeed. Norbert Frei, for instance, praised the film for showing, for the first time on German television, an unpolished portrait of Germany’s war against the Soviet Union, including the entanglement of the German regular army in the Holocaust, the systematic shooting of hostages as reprisals against partisan resistance in Eastern Europe, and the looting of homes vacated by Jews (Büchse et al., 2013). He wrote that the film did not present “idealized one-dimensional figures, but people of broken character who become aware of their share in the burden of guilt” (Scheer, 2013). Even critical academic historians, such as Götz Aly, recognized their own family memories in the narrative of the TV drama (Cammann & Soboczynski, 2013).



The “grand old man” of the German historical profession and a man who during his lifetime frequently engaged in public debate on historical issues, Hans-Ulrich Wehler (1931–2014), joined this critical acclaim. He admired *Generation War* as a successful attempt to evoke the general public atmosphere at the beginning of the war. For Wehler the mini-series rightly uncovered the widespread popular enthusiasm, including the general belief that the German *Endsieg* was at hand, during the first months of the Russian campaign. But the series also revealed that the process of dehumanization and gradual loss of moral compass constitute the narrative’s skeleton, which, according to Wehler, had rarely been shown in German television productions (Büchse et al., 2013).

Critical praise also came from the Israeli writer, politician, and activist Uri Avnery (1923–2018) in his article *Their Mothers, Their Fathers* (Avnery, 2014). Born in Germany, Avnery had fled the country and moved to British Palestine in 1933. That the mini-series did not show Nazi death camps directly was not disturbing in particular to Avnery: “The Holocaust is not the center of events,” as he observed, “but it is there all the time, not as a separate event but woven into the fabric of reality” (Avnery, 2014). The narrative describes the progression of two of the main protagonists, the journey of two young men through a moral no man’s land:

Death is all around them, they see horrible war crimes, they are commanded to shoot prisoners, they see Jewish children butchered. In the beginning they still dare to protest feebly, then they keep their doubts to themselves, then they take part in the crimes as a matter of course. (Avnery, 2014)

For Avnery, the drama’s frame is provided by the fate of its heroes, not by the political and military developments during the war. More important are the small moments, the scenes from daily life, the portrayal of the various characters in German society. Two examples offer a glance at the perceptions and living conditions of ordinary people in wartime (Avnery, 2014). In one instance, a blond Aryan woman comments as follows on the apartment allotted to her, which used to be the home of a deported Jewish family: “They didn’t even clean up before they left! That’s how the Jews are, dirty people!” Another example pertains to the constant German denial of the realities during the last weeks of the war, in order not to lose courage. Any hint of doubt about the Final Victory uttered by a soldier on the battleground, with death staring him in the face, is immediately silenced by his comrades: “Are you crazy”?

This is what Avnery saw as the very essence of totalitarian rule: the omnipresent mortal atmosphere of universal agreement. As he put it:

From the highest officer to the lowliest maid, everybody is repeating endlessly the propaganda slogans of the regime. Not out of fear, but because they believe every word of an imposed higher truth. They hear nothing else. In the totalitarian state only the very few free spirits can withstand the endlessly repeated slogans of the government. Everything else sounds unreal, abnormal, crazy. When the Soviet army was already fighting its way through Poland and nearing Berlin, people were unwavering in their belief in the Final Victory. After all, the Führer says so, and the Führer is never wrong. (Avnery, 2014)

Avnery adopted Hannah Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism. To Arendt, totalitarianism is the total domination of a people through a combination of simplistic ideology and constant terror. Ideology internalizes the physical use of terror. Propaganda becomes an omnipresent reality – the only reality citizens know. It is more effective than even blank physical terror. The series addresses not so much the Holocaust itself, but the mechanisms that enabled it. Planned by a few, it was implemented by hundreds of thousands of Germans, from the engine driver of the train to the officials who did the paperwork (Goldhagen, 1996). How could they engage in it? They could do it because it was the natural thing to do, and a totalitarian idea had taught them to do so.

Although *Generation War* does not make the content of the totalitarian idea explicit, the series does suggest its pervasiveness in German public opinion: the imagery of a Jewish conspiracy and the threat of the “Bolshevik hordes,” Germany's entitlement to *Lebensraum* (living space), and Hitler as savior of the German *Volk* (Kershaw, 2008). The focus of the TV drama is on war, not on totalitarianism as such. It depicts life under the conditions of totalitarian rule in a penetrating fashion, if only indirectly. Above all, the narrative centers around the dehumanizing effect of war, hardly leaving any room for heroes. It shows that the conditions of war allow the totalitarian idea to turn into a horrific reality.

Avnery's positive appraisal of *Generation War* is remarkable while reflecting a strong awareness of Jewish-German symbiosis and a commitment to pacifist and humanist ideals. He considered the TV drama as very important, not only for the Germans, but for every people, including his own. Avnery applauded the project for its underlying universal message that transcended memories of only one nation:

People who carelessly play with (totalitarian) ideas don't realize that they are playing with fire. They cannot even imagine what it means to live in a country that tramples on human rights, that despises democracy, that oppresses another people, that demonizes minorities. The film shows what it is like: hell. The film does not hide that the Jews were the main victims of the Nazi Reich, and nothing comes near their sufferings. But the second victim was the German people, victims of themselves. Many people insist that after this trauma, Jews cannot behave like a normal people, and that therefore Israel cannot be judged by the standards of normal states. They are traumatized. This is true for the German people, too. The very need to produce this unusual film proves that the Nazi spectre is still haunting the Germans, that they are still traumatized by their past. (2014)

## Controversy

Should the German people be seen as traumatized by the Nazi regime and the Second World War, just like its main victims, the Jews? It is precisely this assumption that provoked such sharp controversy in Germany and beyond (Benkert, 2019, pp. 155–168). The equation between offenders and victims made many academics criticize the film. Ulrich Herbert wrote that the film showed Nazis as “others,” different from “our mothers and fathers.” It showed all Germans as “victims.” The film discussed nothing of the blind trust that Hitler inspired in German youth, or of the widespread belief that Germany deserved to rule Europe. In reality, he wrote, “these mothers and fathers were a highly ideological and politicised generation, who strongly believed in the *Endsieg*, because that would be inevitable and morally right (“Nazis sind immer die Anderen,” 2013; Peitz, 2013).” Habbo Knoch voiced the view that the TV drama failed to show how the Nazi system had actually functioned. The series zoomed in on 20-year-olds and how they became victims of war, but it ignored the older generation of German citizens who had built the Nazi system and supported it out of a mixture of ideological conviction and socio-economic self-interest. For this reason, the series failed to show who had truly profited from the Nazi system (Büchse et al., 2013).

Quite some critics in Germany noticed a deeper sense of pathetic self-pity in the series. Its underlying message was therefore clear: “We perpetrators (of war crimes) didn't have an easy time either” (Kaufman, 2013). The Germans, in other words, as a nation of *arme Täter* (poor culprits) (Classen, 2013; Classen, 2014, p. 11). In the German Jewish weekly *Jüdische Allgemeine*, for instance, the reviewer wrote that the producers' achievement was to make a

film about World War Two in which the crucial question of how six million Jews were systematically killed had simply been skipped and omitted. *Generation War* provided the final excuse for those who had always known that not only Jews had been Hitler's victims, but, more importantly, "all Germans were Hitler's victims" (Pyka, 2013). According to Martin Sabrow, director of the Institute for Contemporary History in Potsdam, the basic historical distortion in the film resulted from the central focus on the 1920s' generation in Germany. It left the older generation unexposed, and precisely this generation enabled the rise of Hitler to power and continued to provide popular support for the NS regime (Büchse et al., 2013). Or it is, in other words, the typical distortion that results from a strong focus on "communicative memory" transmitted through family conversations with the effect that the war generation is gradually seen as a generation of heroes and victims, while refusing to conceive the aspect of perpetration (Welzer et al., 2015, pp. 195–210; Wildermuth, 2016, p. 64).

What many critics pointed at was the misleading perspective taken by the main characters. Putting five sympathetic (either idealistic or naive) young protagonists into a harrowing story is not only anachronistic, misleading, and historically distortive; it also offered the war generation a fresh bunch of excuses ("The Third Reich Revisited," 2013). Could it be the case that *Generation War* was yet another attempt at "revising the Third Reich," resembling Ernest Nolte's plea during the *Historikerstreit* in the 1980s to rewrite the history of National Socialism (Maier, 1988, pp. 66–99)? It is precisely the sense of moral relativization that disturbed most American observers. When *Generation War* was released in the United States in January 2014, the response was overwhelmingly critical ("'Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter' in den USA," 2014). Sharp criticism was raised against the notion that ordinary Germans were duped by the Nazis and ignorant of the extent of their crimes. The narrative conveyed, in other words, that young men and women had been seduced and then savagely betrayed – brutalized by the Nazis and the war itself, but essentially still remaining in passive roles. Their complicity, in this account, had been forced, never chosen (Denby, 2014). The reviewer in the *New York Times*, for instance, concluded with the intriguing observation:

Of the five protagonists, the artist, the intellectual and the Jew are all punished, for wantonness, weakness and naïveté, and pushed into extreme states of moral compromise, [while] the chaste, self-sacrificing Aryans, the lieutenant and the nurse, though they are not without guilt, are the heroes of the story, just as they would have been in a German film made in 1943. (Scott, 2014)



Figure 5.3 Fighters of the Polish *Armia Krajowa* (Home Army).

Could it even be suggested that, ironically, *Generation War* stood in remarkable continuity with Nazi propaganda movies made during the war (Álvares, 2014)? Particularly sharp was the response in Poland, specifically with regard to the events in the third episode of the TV drama (Ponz, 2013; Gnauck, 2013a; Gnauck, 2013b). Many viewers in Poland were outraged about the depiction of Poles as fanatical antisemites, even more so than the Germans who are shown as “basically good people” misled by the Nazis. When the killing of Jews was shown in the series, it was always almost directly related to the actions of ruthless collaborators in Nazi occupied territories in Central and Eastern Europe, with Germans as inactive bystanders. In particular the depiction of the Polish anti-Nazi resistance underground army *Armia Krajowa* as rabidly antisemitic provoked bitter responses. Equating AK and SS was an offense that deeply touched the nerves of many Poles (Gnauck, 2013c; Flückiger, 2013). Polish official authorities in Germany and Austria, but also in the US and Great Britain, expressed their deepest concern. In a letter to the ZDF, Poland’s ambassador to Berlin, Jerzy Marganski, wrote: “The image of Poland and the Polish resistance against the German occupiers as conveyed by this series is perceived by most Poles as extremely unjust and offensive” (Marganski, as cited in Robson, 2013).

Reactions in the Polish press were overwhelmingly negative. Many described the series as “falsification of history” and saw it as another example of “German revisionism,” echoing the debate around the establishment of a monument for the German refugees after the war from their homelands in Eastern Europe (Röger, 2011). What the Polish media observed was the tendency to downplay the deeds and responsibilities of the Germans



Figure 5.4 German Chancellor Angela Merkel as concentration camp inmate in Polish Magazine *Uważam Rze* (April 8–14, 2013).

by shifting the burden of violent antisemitism to the Poles. One Polish newspaper wrote that the TV drama “tastes like a western movie, but in the background waves a flag with a swastika” (Wielniński, 2013). Strong anti-German sentiments further fueled heated reactions. A popular Polish newspaper had a picture of Angela Merkel in the outfit of a concentration camp inmate behind barbed wire on its cover, under the warning title “Falszowanie historii” (falsification of history) (Saryusz-Wolska & Pioru, 2014, p. 128; “Eklat um ‘Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter,’” 2013).

Many arguments against the alleged antisemitism of the Poles were put forward by Polish critics. Indeed, the Polish anti-Nazi resistance movement had many Jews among its members, and a substantial number of its actions were directed at the rescue of endangered Jews. Above all, it was argued, Poles constituted one-quarter of the “Righteous among the Nations” honored at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. And finally, did Poland not belong to the nations with, at least in relative terms, the highest death toll during the Second World War? It explains why an unflattering portrayal of the AK touched a nerve in post-Communist Polish society. Poland’s Home Army has gradually acquired a status as a non-partisan national resistance movement indeed, embodying the aspirations of all sectors in Polish society, rather than merely as a political party with a distinctive program.

The relations with Jews and the persistence of antisemitic tendencies in the AK remain very controversial and subject to debate in historiography. Whereas public debate in Germany was largely dominated by the historians’

arguments, controversy in Poland was largely fueled by political interventions. Nothing less than the reputation of the AK as a national symbol was at stake. The nationalist wing in Polish politics took the lead in the anti-German controversy. Left-wing and liberal commentators equally criticized the one-dimensional representation of the AK, but strongly refuted the suggestion that contemporary Germany as a whole was still masking or downplaying its historical guilt (Schuller, 2013). General public opinion, however, does not necessarily intersect with the at times sharp responses in the media and by politicians. When aired in Poland, the TV series eventually scored record ratings (Jaeger-Dadek, 2013).

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly, *Generation War* represents a milestone in the cinematographic representation of the Second World War through a German lens. While many viewers commended the series as well-crafted and providing a balanced view of ordinary people under extreme circumstances of war and mass killing, many others were outraged by parts of the story, including the portrayal of the Polish anti-Nazi resistance as fanatical and brutal antisemites, the trivialization of the persecution of Jews by Nazi Germany, the downplaying of the German role in the Holocaust, and the blurring of the difference between victims and perpetrators. Presenting the real villains as “others” separate from and different from most ordinary Germans provoked sharp criticism and disbelief, and was criticized as historically inaccurate. Most observers would agree that *Generation War* is an artifact of the present, more than a representation of the past. It reflects the current battle over the cultural significance of the war for the present-day generation in Germany. What kind of German history do current Germans deserve? It is a public discussion that started in the 1980s and continues to trouble the Federal Republic, representing an attempt to “normalize” German history.

As Aleida Assmann indicated, what *Generation War* had provoked, was not a transnational dialogue, but rather a “national monologue” (Assmann, 2013, p. 199; Saryusz-Wolska & Piorun, 2014, p. 130). The role of the AK was center-stage in the Polish debate. The perception of the wartime generation – “Our Mothers, Our Fathers” – was crucial to the inner-German debate. In both cases, however, an implicit appeal for forgiveness informs the tone of the debate (Benkert, 2019, p. 156). Nationalist voices in Polish society will consistently decline such appeal, because it is based on a moral equation of the historical burden and a diminishing of Germany’s particular

responsibility. The same dividing line was drawn during the controversy over the German population expelled from postwar Poland. *Generation War* also contained a call for forgiveness within German society. Its lesson is that ordinary Germans – born in the 1920s – were not so different from anyone else, and that they deserve the empathy and understanding of their children and grandchildren. In this sense the makers of the series obviously hoped to elicit reconciliation between the generations (Scott, 2014). This actually involves a debate on the significance of cultural memory that transcends the boundaries of meticulous historical research. The question remains, however, as to what should prevail: a nostalgic reconciliation with our ancestors or a lasting critical inquiry of a troublesome past?

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## 6. Revisiting a Vanished Shtetl

A Reconstruction of the Everyday Life of the Jews of Interwar Grodzisko Dolne Based on Oral and Written Testimonies of Holocaust Survivors

*Amanda Kluveld*

### Abstract

This chapter is inspired by a project proposed by prominent Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer to create monographs of the Jewish life in the shtetls of interwar Poland that were destroyed during the Holocaust and then forgotten. It aims to reconstruct life during the 1920 and 1930s in the shtetl of Grodzisko Dolne through oral histories and the written memories of Holocaust survivors born and raised in this former Galician Jewish community. Insights into this vanished world are almost only available through the memories of those who remembered their childhood and discussed it in the aftermath of the Holocaust. In this chapter, life in the interwar shtetl is approached through their eyes, recorded either in interviews or in personal and published texts.

**Keywords:** Holocaust, shtetl, testimonies, Jewish history, Galicia, Grodzisko Dolne

### Introduction

World War II caused the demise of the prewar Jewish daily life and culture of the Polish shtetl<sup>1</sup> in Grodzisko Dolne (Kluveld & Weitkamp, 2020, p. 38). On September 27, 1939, only a few weeks after the invasion of Poland, German soldiers entered this Jewish village in the southeastern part of the country.

<sup>1</sup> Originally a Yiddish word, connoting a Jewish town or settlement. Plural: shtetls (en.), shtetlach, or shtetlech.

They humiliated the Jewish men by cutting off their beards (Stieglitz, 1996). Next, they expelled a large number of the Jews of Grodzisko Dolne to Soviet territory (Spector et al., 2001b, p. 459), a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact that enabled Germany and the Soviet Union to partition Poland between them (Wallis, 2017, p. 211). Some escaped by secretly crossing the San River, while others went into hiding (Lukas, 2009, p. 62). The Germans ghettoized and stripped the remaining Jews of their possessions (Wallis, 2017, p. 211), and they destroyed their beautiful synagogue and the Jewish cemetery (Kluveld & Weitkamp, 2020, p. 38). In July 1942, when the ghetto was disbanded, the Germans took 214 Jews from Grodzisko Dolne and Tryńcza to the destroyed cemetery, where they were individually shot in the head by a 21-year old German soldier, Adolf Jeske (Wallis, 2017, p. 211). From July 1942 until April 1943, 90 more Grodzisko Dolne Jews were shot and buried in the cemetery, thus creating an unmarked mass grave (*Grodzisko Dolne | Zapomniane*, n. d.). The shtetl of Grodzisko Dolne and the life and culture of the Jews living there before the Second World War was forever destroyed. In present day Grodzisko Dolne, we find no Jews among the population and almost all traces of their history in that area have vanished.

Destruction befell all shtetls as well as Jewish life outside these communities throughout Eastern Europe. For Poland this happened within a few weeks after the invasion by Nazi Germany in 1939. That year's Rosh Hashanah seems to have been deliberately chosen as the initial date for the annihilation of the shtetls. In the end, the fate of Grodzisko Dolne would be the fate of all shtetls: an entire way of life was extinguished when the Jewish East European world was "almost entirely wiped out by the Nazis" (Polonsky, 1993, p. XVIII).

This horrific truth is expressed in *Ils ont tué mon village: Main shtetl* (1981) (transl. *They Killed My Village: My Shtetl*), an album of the paintings by the Jewish-French self-taught artist Ilex Beller. Beller was born in Grodzisko Dolne in 1914 and emigrated at age 14 to Belgium, and next to France. The book comprises Beller's personal memories of Grodzisko Dolne, including some information from sources other than Beller's recollections. This text accompanies 40 paintings that depict shtetl life as the artist remembers it (Fabre, 2005). Two years after the publication of his album, in April 1983, Beller returned to Grodzisko Dolne. He concluded that the only thing left of the shtetl was the gravestone of his grandfather in the cemetery that was destroyed in 1939. After this experience, he published a second album in French, English, and German, *La vie du shtetl: La bourgade juive de Pologne en 80 tableaux* (1986b), with another 80 paintings featuring his memories of his native village. He also published part of the diary he had written

after leaving Grodzisko Dolne and an account of what happened after his return in 1983 entitled *De mon shtetl à Paris* (1991).<sup>2</sup> In the first two books, Beller explains that the purpose of his paintings is to provide a testimony of the destroyed village of his youth and an attempt to record as best as he can everyday life in the shtetl of pre-Holocaust Poland. Beller belongs to the last generation of Polish Jews to have known this life. He states that he is neither a writer, a painter, or a historian.

Despite such claims, the publications of Ilex Beller are the only books available about the vanished Jewish life and culture in Grodzisko Dolne in the years between the two world wars. The same lack of scholarly studies applies to almost every shtetl. In recent years, prominent Holocaust scholar Yehuda Bauer has addressed the urgent need for monographs of the shtetl (Bauer, 2007). In *The Death of the Shtetl*, Bauer argues that the interwar Polish shtetl and the subsequent destruction of Jewish communities in Poland before the Holocaust is an under-researched aspect of the genocide of the Jewish people. According to Bauer, a high proportion of the Jewish population in pre-war Poland — possibly between 30 and 40 percent — lived in shtetlach (2007, p. 4). We do not know, explains Bauer, “how Jews lived before they were murdered, and how they reacted on the assault. It will take generations of scholars to carry out this task” (2011, p. 4).

Consequently, the descendants of these millions of Jews find great difficulty in attempting to acquire information about their family histories and heritage. Since the 1970s, children and other family members of Holocaust survivors, but also of those whose ancestors immigrated prior to the Second World War, have endeavored to reconstruct their family’s broken histories (Stein, 2009). Among them, there is a great desire for information about physical and cultural Jewish spaces, as the shtetls can in fact be characterized (Gromova et al., 2015; Mann, 2012; Markowski, 2007). In Jewish culture, remembering is a deeply felt religious and cultural duty. For example, *Yizkor*, translated as “He shall remember” is the opening word of the prayer recited in Ashkenazi communities on Yom Kippur to commemorate the dead. *Yizkor* books are a genre created by Holocaust survivors to capture the essence of a destroyed community; they have been published worldwide beginning in the 1950s (Amir, n.d.; Amir & Horowitz, 2008; Jones & Siegel, 2006). Some are based on the memory of a sole survivor. Although far from errorless, they are invaluable to historians as well as professional and amateur genealogists

<sup>2</sup> The author of this chapter proposes the following titles for Ilex Beller’s albums, translated from the original French and Yiddish: *They Killed My Village: My Shtetl, Life in the Shtetl: Poland’s Jewish Village in 80 Paintings*, and *From My Shtetl to Paris*.



("Yizkor Books," n.d.). Beller's albums are not officially defined as Yizkor books, but the command to remember is clear through both the texts and paintings, which articulate a transnational memory practice (Törnquist-Plewa, 2018).

In consulting academic historiography, it is rare for those conducting genealogical research to uncover aspects of their family heritage. Certain organizations (typically volunteer-based), however, are dedicated to making genealogical information available and facilitating and initiating research, as well as connecting researchers and unlocking Polish administrative sources by digitizing and translating them (Dwoskin, 2009; *Klauzińska – A Modern Approach to the Genealogy of Polish Jews.Pdf*, n.d.; Stein, 2009). Holocaust historians do not always make use of what such smaller "communities of memory" have collected and made available concerning Jewish regional history. Others such as Samuel Kassow do this most successfully in reciprocity. Consequently, to date there has yet to be an optimal interaction between academic historiography and organizations designed to assist the descendants of Jews from former Galicia and Poland. However, memory communities such as Geshet Galicia, KehilaLinks (part of JewishGen), Virtual Shtetl – the portal of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw – and YIVO, the Institute for Jewish Research, serve as an essential starting point for research into individual shtetls and facilitate the continuous development of research in this field.

Research of shtetls in Poland during the interwar period is challenging and complicated because, as Bauer explains, sources are scarce, have been destroyed, or do not convey much about everyday life or even the social structure of townships (2007, p. 6). Such difficulties also apply to the earlier period when the shtetls were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Wróbel, 1994). There is not only a lack of scholarly monographs but also "no proper historiographical treatment" of shtetls and shtetl life (Pinchuk, 2001a, p. 169). Even scholarly studies are, according to prominent scholar of Jewish and comparative literature studies, Arnold Band, "a product of historical reconstruction by no means free of imagining" (cited in Kassow, 2006, p. 6), as the authors of several studies on the topic have made clear (Pinchuk, 2001b; Polonsky & Redlich, 2004a; Shandler, 2014; Veidlinger, 2013; Wisse, 1986; Zieliński, 2007).

However difficult, according to Bauer, a historian must ultimately "analyze the factors and historical processes that may explain a given historical reality while also accepting history as a story of real people in real situations" (2011, p. vii). With this goal in mind, Bauer combines analysis with stories such as testimonies of Holocaust survivors who were born and raised in

shtetls. He claims that with a great deal of effort, actual events can be reconstructed “at least in their main outlines, the events happened to real people whose stories must be heard and analyzed” (2011, p. vii). Firsthand accounts are essential to historical research and, when used in conjunction with scholarly accounts of events and archival materials, they add a broader dimension to personal experiences (Hall, 1999).

This chapter aims, however modestly, to assist in carrying out the task set by Bauer. Specifically, it attempts to reconstruct everyday life in the shtetl of Grodzisko Dolne during the interwar period based on oral and written memories of Holocaust survivors born and raised there. Two questions are central to this research. First, what do the memories of Holocaust survivors tell us about daily life in the shtetl of Grodzisko Dolne? Second, to what extent is it possible to reconstruct daily life in this shtetl, at least its contours, based on their testimonies? And, as an extension of the second question: what do we learn regarding the importance of the VHA and other archives as well as (genealogical and other) communities? For this prelude to a monograph on Grodzisko Dolne, I consulted the following sources: two Holocaust survivor testimonies from people born and raised in the shtetl of Grodzisko Dolne: Samuel Rotter (b. 1921) and Frieda Stieglitz nee Einsiedler (b. 1933), which were drawn from the Visual History Archive (VHA) of the Shoah Foundation<sup>3</sup>; one testimony of Holocaust survivor Mina Kalter nee Basseches (b. 1921), who was born and raised in Przeworsk and regularly visited her maternal grandparents from Grodzisko Dolne (1996; 1997); and the albums of Ilex Beller (b. 1914) and his testimony to the *Association Memorie et Documents* (1994). Based on the proposed approach embraced by Bauer, these testimonies will be cross-referenced and compared with the historiography on shtetls in Western Galicia, administrative sources, and information gathered by several memory communities and platforms. If a witness notes that there was a communal bakery, for example, I reviewed other sources for confirmation. When no other data is available, this is indicated in the text. In addition, I conducted genealogical research for insight into the family structures of survivors. This information is used to complement the data gathered by several of the abovementioned memory communities.

The following section of this chapter begins with a clarification of the underlying historiographical framework of this research and why it should be considered a form of engaged humanities in the sense of humanities that

3 All testimonies used in this chapter are available online or appear on several sites created by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

are not exclusively aimed at the academic debate but also at interaction with memory communities and descendants of Holocaust survivors. Next, I introduce several challenging and ambiguous sources from a source-critical perspective. An important aspect of this approach is to discuss how engaged Holocaust scholars could make use of sources like the VHA and, subsequently, support the commitment expressed by memory communities, whether smaller genealogical organizations or internationally renowned institutes, such as the Arolsen Archives and Yad Vashem (Belkin & Library of Congress. Congressional Research Service, 2018). The chapter continues with an analysis of the memories of survivors according to the specific historical context of Grodzisko Dolne, connecting narratives of personal recollections with scholarly definitions of the shtetl.

### Engaged Holocaust Studies

Interwar life in Grodzisko Dolne through the eyes of Holocaust survivors comes from a widely shared approach to engagement that has been described and defined by prominent writers, scholars, and artists. It is found in the legacy of photographer Roman Vishniac, a Russian-born Jew who ended up in Germany (Vishniac, 1984; Vishniac & Wiesel, 1993). Vishniac was living in Berlin when Hitler came to power and understood that his people were on the brink of destruction, which, if successful, would ultimately lead to oblivion. He felt that he could not save his people, but he could save their memory. As a result, he set out to photograph Jewish life in Eastern Europe, from cities such as Warsaw to the shtetls. He took approximately 16,000 photographs, of which 2,000 survived the war. In the foreword of *A Vanished World*, in which 200 of these photos were published, Elie Wiesel characterizes Vishniac as obsessed with documenting life and preserving memory, preventing victims from vanishing into the abyss. Instead, through images, they live on, despite their torture and massacre. The work of Ilex Beller, who attempted to recreate the shtetl universe that was destroyed, reflects a similar engagement. This also applies to Mayer Kirshenblatt, a “memory painter” from Apt, in his album *They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland before the Holocaust* (Kirshenblatt & Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2007).

My work on interwar life in Grodzisko Dolne is linked to an earlier project. I first heard of this village during my research for an investigation of forced labor, specifically a group of 70 Jewish prisoners from the Dutch concentration camp in Vught. One of them, Samuel Rotter, was born in Grodzisko

Dolne. I set out to reconstruct his life in order to explore a transnational perspective on the persecution of Jews in the Netherlands during the German occupation (Goda & Bartov, 2014). The study resulted in an article published in *The Galizianer*, the quarterly research journal of the Gescher Galicia, an organization dedicated to carrying out Jewish genealogical and historical research on Galicia. Today this territory, which used to be a province of Austro-Hungary, is divided between southeastern Poland and western Ukraine (Kluvelde & Weitkamp, 2020). Gescher Galicia emerged from the desire to explore the Jewish heritage of Polish Galicia, which was, for almost three centuries, the principal center of the Jewish diaspora and the largest Jewish community in the world (Shneer, 2010).

My subsequent research regarding the shtetl of Grodzisko Dolne relates to the overall goal, as articulated by Christoph Münz in his scholarly work on the Jewish theology of history, to “give the world a memory” (Münz, 1996). In so doing, the historian expands beyond the boundaries of the traditional historical method. In this approach, research is not merely a reconstruction of the past, but also a guide for the descendants of the Jewish inhabitants of the shtetl of Grodzisko Dolne, many of whom hope to learn more about the lives of their ancestors to help establish their own identity. “The shtetl is gone. Forever,” as Elie Wiesel put it, adding a specific invitation: “The shtetl is my childhood. I remain attached to it. And faithful. Let us try to revisit it together” (2009, p. 293).

By incorporating such a perspective, this project explicitly aims to move away from a discussion of abstractions, e.g., including the number of victims without revealing a single name, or formulating theories distant from empiricism. Although things have changed since the 1990s, for a long time the victims of persecution were largely treated as belonging an amorphous mass with little individuality, “predominantly remembered by their murder” (Ehrenreich & Cole, 2005, p. 213; Hilberg, 1995, p. x).

Due to technological changes, the access to sources through digital means has made individual histories and reminiscences more accessible (Arolsen Archives, 2020; Belkin & Library of Congress. Congressional Research Service, 2018; Borggräfe et al., 2020; Dwoskin, 2009; Shorb, 2007). But, on the other hand, public Holocaust historiography based on individual memories and disconnected from the insights and perspectives of academic historiography has been quite limited, in both scope and quantity. In this respect, an interaction between the two may prove to be most beneficial for the largest number of people.

As a historian, I believe that engagement has a double dimension: there is a personal-ethical side inspired by authors such as Presser who quotes

*Das Brandopfer*, writing “Aber zuweilen muss einer da sein, der gedenkt”<sup>4</sup> (Albrecht Goes cited in Presser, 1985, p. v); but there is also a second, more practical side, which relates to seeking rapprochement with communities of memory and remembrance, of which there are many. Without consulting the knowledge gathered by these memory communities, or platforms with contributions and questions from citizen historians, it would not have been possible to conduct this research. My ongoing research into the history of Grodzisko Dolne will also support such platforms reciprocally, thus building communal knowledge about interwar shtetl life in Poland and the individuals who lived there. The insights and the use of sources are shared with these communities, of which I am a part. For example, I am involved in an information exchange with individual members (such as the family and friends of the Rotter family) who provide photographs, documents, or anecdotes from oral family histories that are inaccessible or absent in the relevant archives. Furthermore, I write for the research journal of Gesher Galicia and have built a network of contacts, especially in the world of genealogy, comprised of amateurs and professionals who provide me with rigorous feedback. At times, this has led me to sources that I would not have found on my own.

The information I have obtained through this approach serves as a guideline for searches in the larger and more well-known memory communities, including the Arolsen Archives in Germany. The world’s most comprehensive archive of data on the victims and survivors of National Socialism, the Arolsen Archives are recognized by UNESCO and its staff processes inquiries about some 20,000 victims of Nazi persecution every year. For decades, clarifying fates and searching for missing persons were the central tasks of the institution, which was founded by the Allies in 1948 and originally known as the International Tracing Service.

In sum, the approach taken by this project will ultimately contribute to the aims of Yad Vashem, which is “dedicated to preserving the memory of the dead of the Holocaust and honoring the Jews who fought Nazi oppression and Gentiles who aided them. Connected to that goal, it researches the phenomenon of the Holocaust to avoid it in the future.”<sup>5</sup> Bauer, one of the academic advisors to Yad Vashem, counters arguments from postmodernist theorists through his claim that “real events that happened in real time,

4 “But at times there must be one to commemorate”.

5 Yadvashem.org. The Yad Vashem Archives house the largest collection of Holocaust documents in the world: over 210,000,000 pages of documentation. The collections include over 131,000 survivor testimonies, over 500,000 photographs, and approximately 4.8 million names registered in the Hall of Names.

can with a great deal of effort, be reconstructed, at least in their main outlines, the events happened to real people whose stories must be heard and analyzed” (2011, p. vii). It is to this combination of preserving memory and honoring those who perished that I hope to contribute as a scholar.

## Holocaust Survivor Testimonies

This outline of interwar life in Grodzisko Dolne through the eyes of Holocaust survivors is based on oral testimonies from the Visual History Archive (VHA) of the Shoah Foundation (Kalter, 1997; Rotter, 1997; Stieglitz, 1996), incorporating testimonies that are part of a broader set of memory practices (Langer, 1991). These accounts serve both as personal histories and as part of a larger effort to preserve the memory of the Holocaust. It is perhaps unavoidable that, to a certain extent, the personal narratives have been influenced by the desire to contribute to the collective goal of remembering the Holocaust (Shandler, 2017, p. 4). A number of interviewees have recounted these memories numerous times, and sometimes they have done so as active participants in a broader culture of Holocaust remembrance and education (Shandler, 2017, p. 7). This applies to Mina Kalter, who is experienced in the articulation of memory practices as part of Holocaust education. In her testimony, she displays certificates from these activities. Frieda Stieglitz appeared in the Canadian documentary film *Hidden Children* and her testimony to the VHA was recorded two years later (Insdorf, 2003; Walker, 1994). After the publication of his first album, Ilex Beller was invited to give lectures throughout France that were frequented by Jewish youth with questions about their heritage (1991, p. 4). He was also part of documentary film *Miasteczko* about his return to Grodzisko Dolne by the Polish film director Jacek Gąsiorowski.

Beller supplemented his paintings and texts about Grodzisko Dolne with other sources. Samuel Rotter and Frieda Stieglitz were also familiar with the work of Beller and both refer to it in their testimonies. Frieda Stieglitz notes, for example, that her childhood memories of Grodzisko Dolne were “confirmed” in the paintings of Ilex Beller (Stieglitz, 1996, sec. 19:05 min.). Samuel Rotter and Mina Kalter had family ties to Beller and were also related to each other through their maternal grandmothers, even though only Rotter mentions this in his account, which was subsequently confirmed by genealogical research. Further, Rotter refers to Beller’s *Life in the Shtetl* (Rotter, 1997, sec. 40:26 min.).

This is not the only aspect worthy of consideration. All interviewees discussed in this chapter had a Hasidic upbringing in a highly religious shtetl

or town. There is a rich tradition of storytelling among Hasidic communities and the approach to remembrance by these believers often occurs in the form of deep and layered narratives, which are all but easy for outsiders to fathom. It is not always clear why certain details are stressed, and others left out, for example (Stein, 2009). In his preface to his first album of paintings, Beller explains in thoughtful terms that the choice to paint his shtetl and to depict the people who lived there may defy the Second Commandment. He does not explain why he chose to do so, after all, but it seems related to his wish to resurrect his shtetl from his memories.

Another aspect to consider when approaching these testimonies is language. In his third book, Beller expresses that it was very difficult for him to write about his childhood village in French, rather than in Yiddish. He chose French because he was afraid that Jewish youth in France was unable to understand Yiddish. In the VHA interviews, we see the interviewees sometimes struggle to express themselves in English and frequently use Yiddish words.

In addition, the memories of the interviewees that served as data for this project, are derived from immigrants who participated in a world and way of life that is often highly romanticized in literature and popular culture. It is possible that some of these memories have also been nourished by the romanticization of life in the shtetl. Of course, this does not only apply to those who are Holocaust survivors. Among migrants from the Dutch East Indies and their descendants, Holocaust experiences (at least for the majority) do not play a role (unlike imprisonment in Japanese prisons and oppression during the Bersiap period). However, there is a discourse of "*tempo doeloe*" (Pattynama, 2014), a nostalgic longing for the "good old days" related to daily life that no longer exists (Dragojlovic, 2014). This *tempo doeloe* culture is not only a result of the collapse of the Dutch empire but can be traced back to the nineteenth century. It should not be dismissed as simple conservatism but approached as a "complex phenomenon in which multiple nostalgias layer each other in an often reflexive manner" (Bijl, 2013, p. 128). Longing for shtetl life also predates the Holocaust, for example in the work of Joseph Roth (Battagay, 2016):

The major problem is that the shtetl has been idealized, much like in the play *Fiddler on the Roof*, to represent people's nostalgia, not reality. Shtetl society was also taken by Zionists and others as representative of an objectionable Jewish role model, the contrary of what Zionist sought to achieve. (Pinchuk, 2001a, p. 169)

When analyzing the testimonies contained herein, this well-studied phenomenon should be taken into account (Polonsky & Redlich, 2004).

Moreover, it is important to recognize that the childhood memories of those who once lived in or visited Grodzisko Dolne serve as starting point for recollecting the events and their experiences during the Holocaust. The testimonies follow a prescribed order, as Shandler explains, thus tracking the process of each interviewee's life (2017, p. 3). It would be wrong to underestimate the role of the interviewer in what eventually is highlighted in the narrative of the testimonies and what is left out. In the interview, Samuel Rotter is repeatedly interrupted when he stresses things important to him but that do not relate to standard knowledge of the persecution of the Jews. When he grasps that his interviewer does not have the knowledge to value the significance of what he wants to explain, he seems to give up and proceeds to tell his story following the narrative she apparently requires. The interviewers, as Shandler points out, were indeed "instructed to begin and end with specified questions and to progress chronologically through the survivor's life story devoting proportionally more attention to the Holocaust area than to the prewar and postwar area" (2017, p. 3). This turns the childhood memories of Grodzisko Dolne into a prelude, rather than an isolated or equal subject of research. Although these youthful memories were collected in the service of the narrative about the Holocaust, we still discover details of life in Grodzisko Dolne that we otherwise would not know, in particular in terms of which historical events influenced individual lives.

### A Shtetl in the Shatterzone

Kassow (2007) and Zieliński (2007) argue that a shtetl should not be studied in a vacuum, meaning that it should be seen in its specific historical context, notably during the turbulent years of the First World War and its aftermath. The same applies to memories of a specific shtetl. Obviously, historical developments affected the lives of the people of Grodzisko Dolne and, consequently, their recollection of the shtetl's daily life.

In the introduction to his first album, Beller seems to picture his native village as the Gan Eden,<sup>6</sup> an earthly paradise we find in Talmudic teachings, which also reflects his Hasidic upbringing:

There are two shtetlekh in Poland that bear the name Grodzisko. One is located not far from Warsaw. The other one, the one I want to tell you about, is in the south of Poland, in the old Galicia, near the Carpathians,

6 Based on Genesis 2:10–14.



between the San and Wislok rivers. It is a beautiful region with black and fat soil, endless fields and deep forests. (1991, p. 7)<sup>7</sup>

The only similarity between paradise and Grodzisko Dolne is that both were lost. The shtetl's history shows that it was located in a "Shatterzone" of empires (Weitz & Bartov, 2013), where, as Joseph Roth cites from a letter from an emigrant, "a war might break out from one year to the next, and from one week to the next a pogrom" (Roth, 2012, p. 8). Jews lived in Grodzisko Dolne prior to 1772, when the Habsburg Empire created the province of Galicia after annexing the southern part of Poland. Grodzisko Dolne was part of western Galicia, which was predominantly Polish (Bartov, 2007, p. 3). It became part of Poland again in 1918 following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of World War I. During this war, Galician Jews were impacted greatly. The total death toll for Jewish civilians in Eastern Europe between 1914 and 1918 was more than 100,000, and many more were displaced (Rechter, 1997). In 1914, there was also an outbreak of typhus in the Grodzisko Dolne area and, in 1918, Poland was hit hard by the Spanish flu pandemic (Goodall, 1920; Spector et al., 2001a). During this time, Green Cadres – fused groups of army deserters and radicalized local peasants – resisted re-enlistment and ravaged Galicia, attacking both civilian and military authorities, as analyzed by Beneš (2017). In Grodzisko Dolne, a post commander who refused to release arrested Green Cadre comrades was shot dead. Authorities were not the only figures to fear the Green Cadres; Jews were also considered oppressors of common rural folk (Beneš, 2017, p. 126). As was the case for most Jewish villages and towns throughout Galicia, Grodzisko Dolne had been plagued by pogroms, which continued into 1918. Moreover, the community faced economic decline and would fail to recover during the interwar period (Spector et al., 2001a, p. 459). From 1939, this area was crushed and destroyed by Nazi and Soviet powers, as noted in *Bloodlands*, the comprehensive history by Timothy Snyder (2010).

This history and the resultant economic situation also influenced daily life and the daily lives of those living in the shtetl of Grodzisko Dolne in the interwar period. Ilex Beller was born when it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the year of his birth, the shtetl appeared at the frontline of the colliding empires of World War I and, as a result, Beller's family was deeply

7 Translation by the author. "Il existe en Pologne deux shtetlekh qui portent le nom de Grodzisko. L'un se situe non loin de Varsovie. L'autre, celui dont je veux vous parler, est au sud de la Pologne, dans l'ancienne Galicie, tout près des Carpates, entre les fleuves San et Wislok. C'est une belle contrée à la terre noire et grasse, avec des champs à l'infini et des forêts profondes."

affected: his father's sister was hit by a stray bullet and died. His father died the same year, four months before Beller's birth. Also, in 1914, Ilex Beller's eldest brother died at the Italian front as one of the 275,000 Jewish soldiers fighting in the Austro-Hungarian army. Frieda Stieglitz's paternal aunt and uncle also died during that time as a result of the Spanish flu. During the war, Mina Kalter's Grodzisko Dolne-born mother was sent to Chechia (Kalter, 1997, sec. 10:58 min.) because her parents were afraid of what could happen to a young girl. Often, unrest led to pogroms that could involve the rape of Jewish girls and women, in particular when soldiers were involved.

Samuel Rotter's father emigrated to The Hague in 1930, anticipating the Dutch law that he would be eligible for family reunification if he could provide for himself economically. Rotter's uncle (maternal) had already emigrated to the United States in 1901.<sup>8</sup> Frieda Stieglitz's father emigrated via Jerusalem to the United States and arrived in New York in 1937.<sup>9</sup> Several other accounts of Jewish inhabitants indicate that their families had members who emigrated from Grodzisko Dolne. Before 1918, the majority went to the United States. When admittance grew more difficult, they went to Western Europe. In some cases, the immigrants lived close to each other in an unfamiliar country. For a while, for instance, Samuel Rotter's father lived with a former Hebrew teacher from Grodzisko Dolne in an apartment in The Hague.

Migration usually meant that one would never return (Beller, 1986a, pp. 111–112). The families stayed in contact through letters (according to Beller, the arrival of the mail was a major event).<sup>10</sup> Gentiles also left. Beller remembers how poor illiterate *goyim* (non-Jewish) peasants would bring their letters to the rabbi of Grodzisko Dolne to have them read and answered (p. 75).<sup>11</sup> The letters were usually accompanied with some dollar bills (p. 113). According to Beller, money received from family abroad made up for half the income in the village (p. 113). Polonsky notes that it was indeed “a significant financial help, particularly to the smaller shtetls” (2019, p. 143). There is no way to confirm Beller's statement, but there was indeed, as noted by Kassow, a vital relationship between the shtetl and its emigrants abroad, including organizations like *landsmanshaftn* (n. d.). As Seigel argues, “from dances and banquets to health insurance and free loan

8 US NARA, Passport Applications, M1490, 1962, 12399275114.

9 Passenger and Crew Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1897–1957 (National Archives Microfilm Publication T715, roll 6086); Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85. Frieda does not mention this fact and may be unaware that the immigration path occurred via Jerusalem.

10 Paintings: Farwell, All Alone, A Letter Arrives from America.

11 Painting: The Peasants at the Rabbi's House.

societies, *landsmanshaftn* helped immigrants in New York and many U.S. cities. *Landsmanshaftn* are Jewish community organizations of immigrants from the same city in Eastern or Central Europe” (2015). In the documents from the *landmanshaftn* database of the Center for Jewish History, we find also a mention of Grodzisko (Weisser, 1985).

Those who left the shtetl through emigration thus remained part of the Grodzisko Dolne community. After Samuel Rotter and his family were reunited with his father in the Netherlands, the rabbi from Grodzisko Dolne, David Horowitz, managed to stay in touch. For his Bar Mitzva, Samuel received a letter from him (Rotter, 1997, sec. 46:21 min.). On occasion, family members even returned to visit from the United States, as was the case with the Goldbrenner family from Grodzisko Dolne. A descendant of this family posted a photo picturing the Goldbrenner family in front of their shtetl house for an occasion: one aunt and two boys had returned for a visit home in circa 1932–1934 (*Grodzisko Dolne List*, n. d.). Visiting family from the United States, however, was probably a rare occasion. It is likely that every family in Grodzisko Dolne had at least one relative who emigrated and that their contribution to the village’s economy, but also culture, was substantial. Letters from America brought information that, in combination with the news in the Yiddish newspapers from Kraków, would provide the shtetl’s families important details on current affairs, such as the growing power of Hitler.

After her return from Chechia, Mina Kalter’s mother, Pesha Beller, was rewarded with a trip to see her uncle in the United States. During this visit, she met her father-in-law-to-be, who, after hearing that she was from a good family from Grodzisko Dolne, decided that she would be an ideal wife for his son. Similarly, contacts with family members would turn out to be of great value during and after World War II. Samuel Rotter’s brother Bernard would flee via Belgium and France to Switzerland with the help of members of the Beller family who migrated to these countries (Isenberg, 2012). After the war, Harry Brod, the maternal uncle of Samuel and Bernard Rotter, would sponsor their immigration to the United States. Frieda Stieglitz, whose entire family from Grodzisko Dolne perished during the Holocaust, was eventually claimed by her father. He came from the United States to fetch his daughter, who could not remember him because she had been too young to consciously experience his departure. All such experiences highly affected the lives and therewith the memories of the Jewish inhabitants of Grodzisko Dolne and the way they were later conveyed. Family lives were shaped by a tumultuous history. To appreciate what this meant in the context of shtetl life during the interwar years, it is vital to understand the essential features of the shtetl community.

## Childhood Memories of a Jewish Space

It is challenging to reconstruct and locate shtetl life in Grodzisko Dolne, as there were hundreds of shtetls and none of them were identical (Kasow, 2006, p. 1). Even the definition of the concept “shtetl” is not without difficulties (Markowski, 2007, p. 51). Definitions are sometimes based on literary fiction rather than scholarly research. Shandler concludes that the Yiddish word for town, shtetl, has obtained additional significance in the post-vernacular mode, its new value based on the meaning of the word in vernacular Yiddish (2014, p. 2). Before the Second World War, “shtetl” was used in the most important European languages only rarely. By advancing the use of the term after the Second World War, a transformation has occurred in the manner in which Eastern European life would be perceived and negotiated. According to Hans Peter Althaus, as cited by Shandler, shtetl has become “the central word for indicating Yiddish-speaking East European Jewry and its endangered culture” (Althaus, 1995; Shandler, 2014, p. 3). As a word, shtetl “has the desired pithiness, it is easily understood and clearly identifiable” (2014, p. 3).

Against this historical background, there have been serious attempts based on thorough research to specify the features of a shtetl (Pinchuk, 2001; Katz, 2007; Bauer, 2011; Coben, 2012). These components can provide a reference point for approaching the testimonies presented in this chapter. In some, the shtetl is defined as a small town in Eastern Europe, especially Poland and Russia, where Jews made up the majority of the population. Others state that the Jewish inhabitants of such a town should be over 40% of the population. According to KehilaLinks, shtetls were:

interwoven together like a tapestry and the Jewish people of neighboring shtetls linked by marriage or by trade. They shared schools and cemeteries, kosher butchers, bakers and more. Births, marriages and death were registered in a nearby larger shtetl. Research of an individual shtetl should therefore include the neighboring area. (*Grodzisko Dolne List*, n. d.)

This seems applicable to Grodzisko Dolne, at least according to Beller. Situating his shtetl between two rivers, he proudly adds that “my Grodzisko is located between the villages of Leżajsk, Przewosk and Łańcut” (Beller, 1981, p. 11). Frieda Stieglitz explains that her grandmother was the daughter of a Jewish mother and a *goyim* father from a family in Leżajsk.

## Network of Jewish Spaces

To appreciate this perspective of the shtetl as part of a larger network of villages, it is important to know that the name “Grodzisko Dolne” refers to both an administrative district, or *gmina*, and a village. Within the district, there were several villages, such as Grodzisko Miarteczko (which means “Grodzisko little town”) and, according to some, “Grodzisko shtetl,” because it was the location where allegedly most of the Jews were living. Frieda Stieglitz states that her grandparents lived a bit outside the main shtetl, “where the Jewish people lived” (Stieglitz, 1996, sec. 1:07:16 min.). In this area, removed from the main shtetl, there were few stores, which is why her grandmother had a little store in her home with a few shelves, selling needles or sugar or candy. Samuel Rotter also remembers that in his family home there was a small shop (Rotter, 1997, sec. 7:47 min.). Finally, it is unclear if Ilex Beller lived in Grodzisko Dolne village or in Grodzisko Miarteczko, the town that Frieda Stieglitz indicated as the main shtetl. His paintings seem to cover the district, not just one town or village.

In all accounts of Grodzisko Dolne, the district was experienced as a single unit, both geographically and as a community. It was also considered to be a Jewish space, with Grodzisko Miarteczko at the center. According to Kehilalinks/Jewishgen contributor Violetta Reder, around the market and the streets, 70 wooden houses were home to 82 Jewish families involved in all kinds of trades and crafts (n. d.). Most Jews lived in wooden houses, and their streets were muddy when it rained. One of Beller’s paintings shows the muddy roads that were characteristic of his village. Further, one of the few remaining Jewish houses after the Second World War was photographed by a memory community member, and it shows that the house was indeed made from wood. Samuel Rotter indicates that he lived next to the communal bakery of the village, a place also referred to by Frieda Stieglitz. The women would bake their bread and delicacies and would take the small children there (Stieglitz, 1996, sec. 19:58 min.). Samuel remembers that he would sometimes sleep in the communal bakery when it was very cold in the winter.

How many people lived in the district of Grodzisko Dolne, or, for that matter, the village Grodzisko Dolne, is unclear. When this question is posed to Frieda Stieglitz, she notes that she was a child and did not think of asking such questions. She supposes it could have been 300 people (Stieglitz, 1996, sec. 22:05 min.). According to the 1921 *Encyclopedia of Jewish Life*, the birth year of both Samuel Rotter and Mina Kalter, Grodzisko Dolne had a total population of 589 people, 367 of them Jews; in 1935, Grodzisko Dolne was

inhabited by 442 Jews; and in 1939, according to the International Jewish Cemetery project, 400 Jews lived there. This would comprise 62.3% of the population. About the district, we only have incomplete and sometimes conflicting information. The 19 Jews remaining in hiding in the area of Grodzisko Dolne after the Nazi assaults of 1942 stated that the town flourished before the War and had about 600 Jewish inhabitants (Wallis, 2017, p. 211). We know that it cannot be the case, as Ilex Beller suggests, that 95% of the population of Grodzisko Dolne was Jewish. This shows, however, that the town's Jewish spaces are central to his memories, in which Gentiles feature only to some extent and also play a different role.

In evaluating a variety of definitions, Kassow stresses that a shtetl would be big enough to house the basic network of institutions essential to Jewish life. This was certainly the case in Grodzisko Dolne:

Similarly to the Jews residing in Leżajsk, the Jewish population of Grodzisko Dolne (former Grodzisko Miasteczko) had a synagogue, a Jewish cemetery, a ritual bath (mikveh), and a ritual slaughterhouse of cattle and poultry (chickens, turkeys, geese, ducks). There were also several chadarim providing religious education for boys from the age of three, thanks to which it was not necessary to commute to remote Leżajsk. The community's life centred around the synagogue and religious services held at the temple. In Grodzisko Miasteczko, all streets and alleys ran towards a hill with the synagogue at the very top. The centuries-old building was made of beautiful carved wood and had a high artistic value. (*History | Virtual Shtetl*, n. d.)

Samuel Rotter also remembers that Grodzisko Dolne had a Bais Yaakov school, a Jewish school for girls (Rotter, 1997, sec. 9:17 min.). The first Bais Yaakov was founded in Kraków in 1917, and subsequently these schools spread quickly across Poland (Ginsparg, 2011; Seidman, 2019). There were at least 45 schools with over 5,000 students in Poland and Lithuania, as recorded by Rabbi Leo Jung. However, there is no official mention of a Bais Yaakov in Grodzisko Dolne. This does not necessarily mean that there was no such school in this shtetl, as "these numbers are questionable because many schools started without first contacting the Central Office, and schools opened and closed with alarming rapidity" ("Places," 2018). Rotter seems proud of the fact that his shtetl had such a modern institution near his Uncle David's house. He connects the existence of this school to other signs of worldly entertainment, such as circuses.

## Occupational Diversity

Another important aspect of the shtetl, distinguishing it from previous forms of diasporic settlements, is what Kassow describes as “occupational diversity” (2006, p. 2). Instead of being clustered in a few occupations, there was a great variety of employment in the shtetl. This seems to be the case for Grodzisko Dolne. There were all kinds of crafts, such as tailors and shoemakers, but also traders, including Beller’s uncle who traded in vodka and apparently had a special license to do so as a result of his contacts with the authorities. There were flax workers and furriers. The grandparents of Mina Kalter in Grodzisko Dolne owned an enormous storage space for ironworking and the like. Samuel Rotter’s father was a trader in leather and fur. Before his emigration to the Netherlands, he sometimes spent days or even weeks away from home, trying to sell his wares to surrounding towns and farms (Rotter, 1997, sec. 2:30 min.). In both Beller’s and Rotter’s memories, the occupational diversity of the shtetl serves as an important feature of the community of Grodzisko Dolne.<sup>12</sup>

Within the occupational diversity of Grodzisko Dolne, we also find people whose occupations were to provide services for the shtetl. The water carrier’s task was to provide every household with water. He carried this water from house to house. Generally, this was a poor man who was responsible for heavy and important work. A similar function, at the service of shtetl life, was that of the *Shabbath Goy*, a non-Jew who performed all sorts of odd jobs during the sabbath that Jews were not allowed to do. He was also a poor man who was well informed about life in the shtetl and, undoubtedly, as did many non-Jews in Grodzisko Dolne, he spoke Yiddish quite well.

According to Kassow, the occupational diversity of the shtetl led to both a rich folk culture and social tensions:

The social differences that divided shtetl Jews were felt everywhere, from the synagogue to the marketplace. At the top of the social scale were the *sheyne yidn*, the well-off elite who ran the shtetl’s institutions and controlled its politics. In the synagogue they usually sat along the eastern wall. Just below the *sheyne yidn* were the *balebatim*, the “middle class” whose stores and businesses did not make them rich but afforded them a certain measure of respect from the community. Further down the social scale came the skilled artisans, such as watchmakers and exceptionally

12 Beller portraits: rabbi, tailors, bagel man, blacksmith, shoemaker, knife-grinder, dairyman, water carrier, coach man, merchants. Rotter references both flax workers and traders.

skilled tailors. Near the bottom were ordinary tailors and shoemakers, followed by water carriers and teamsters. Lower still were the beggars and the marginal types that every shtetl seemed to have. (n. d.)

Kassow also explains that those with little education or money were constantly reminded of their lack of status and that women from poor families were especially disadvantaged. Mentally or physically disadvantaged people were also subject to discrimination (Meir, 2020); according to Beller, every shtetl had a “simpleton” (1986a, p. 78). In Grodzisko Dolne, his name was Itche.<sup>13</sup>

### Social-Economic Standing

The sensitivity of the socio-economic position of families within the shtetl community is also reflected in the narratives of Beller, Kalter, and Stieglitz. They take great care to accurately situate themselves and their families in the social hierarchy. Interestingly, Kalter and Rotter are related via the maternal family line to the Beller family. Beller explains that his father belonged to one of the wealthiest families in Grodzisko Dolne. When Naftali Beller, the son of the famous scholar and linen merchant Aron Yehuda Beller, married Ilex's mother, guests arrived to attend the wedding from all over Galicia, including famous rabbis and other personalities. There was an enormous party with an orchestra and all kinds of festivities. Beller notes that, before World War I, his grandfather and later his uncle were considered major figures in the shtetl and no important decisions were made without consulting them. However, after the death of his father four months before Ilex was born, his mother was living in great poverty. She was a widow with two small children, and she attempted to hide her deplorable situation from the outside world. Beller indicates that Grodzisko Dolne was a frontline of World War I. The village suffered high levels of destruction and, along with it, his family's business and wealth diminished. After a short period of flight, his mother returned to Grodzisko Dolne after the war. Although the Jews of the shtetl rebuilt the village as much as possible, the Beller family was ruined. This meant that his mother remained impoverished. When Ilex emigrated at the age of 14, he did so without his mother (Beller, 1991, pp. 5–7).

Mina Kalter was convinced that her maternal grandparents, also members of the Beller family, came from a line that served for at least 350 years as the economic and cultural support of the shtetl. Without them, she explains,

13 Painting: Itche, the Village Simpleton.



the village would not have been the way it was (Kalter, 1997, sec. 6:01 min.). Kalter's grandparents' enterprise consisted of a large warehouse where they sold, among other goods, building materials and iron. The business itself was run by the women in the family; the men were occupied with the study of religious texts and were not to be disturbed while doing so. It seems that, in part, a person's prosperity was also measured by the amount of time they could spend studying. At the very least, this was how life was perceived by Kalter. Beller also explains that his grandfather's brother spent the majority of his time reading the Torah and that everything else was arranged by his wife.

Rotter reveals little regarding his assessment of the social position of his family. In the context of the shtetl, it was probably difficult to assess his family's status. If his father was a trader in leather, he was also an artisan who was able to make clothes and shoes from leather. As Antony Polansky explains in his groundbreaking series about Jews in Poland and Russia, merchants had been the dominant element in Jewish society. However, due to the economic decline of the interwar period, their position was undermined: "while the previously despised artisans found a new confidence" (Polansky, 2019, p. 143). In Beller's paintings this shift is also noticeable: he paints artisans as well as traders. He does so with great appreciation for the artisans. In the title of one of the paintings he also comments on the traders: they are traders, he suggests, who have no merchandize to sell.

Several of Beller's paintings also show glimpses of modernization that affected the shtetl community during the interwar period: Zionism, the *Bund* (socialism), and communism. In the accompanying text he explains the appeal of these movements among young Jews, especially Zionism and communism (Beller, 1986a, pp. 105, 107, 109). In Rotter's and Stieglitz's memories, references to politics are absent, although clearly some of the unrest between Jews and their neighbors in the shtetl was caused by political developments. If Rotter acknowledges that a small percentage of Jews in the shtetl were not Orthodox, he does not elaborate on this topic.

Rotter's silence regarding the social position of his family changes when he speaks about his life in The Hague, to which the family emigrated in 1934 to reunite with his father. As Rotter claims, they easily survived financially, but they were not wealthy. They were unable to afford the cost of emigrating to Chile, for example, which was a practice pursued by wealthy Jews, with whom his family associated without being in the same class (Rotter, 1997, sec. 56:14 min.). However, he does note with some pride that, before the family was reunited, his father sent packages to Grodzisko Dolne. Once there were fur coats for his two eldest sons, Samuel and Bernard. Samuel remembers

how the people of the village looked up to them because they knew that wealthy people had fur coats, and that they had never seen anything like that for children. When they left for The Hague, the boys left the fur coats behind for their friends (Rotter, 1997, sec. 15:33 min.).

Frieda Stieglitz notes that her grandparents had a small mill that they operated by hand with the help of her father. Frieda lived together with her mother in a wooden house consisting of one room. She hastily explains that her grandmother was the daughter of a good family from Leżajsk and that they had been landowners. She stresses that Leżajsk is the birthplace of Rabbi Elimelech Weisblum, a famous rabbi, indicating that this was also a part of her family's heritage. Her deceased aunt, whom she never met, was known throughout the area as an eligible young woman. She was skilled at sewing and baking bread, and she was beautiful and modest. Frieda stresses that the non-Jews spoke admiringly of her. Her grandmother, whom she admired and considered to be a role model (Stieglitz, 1996, sec. 10:46 min.), was also poor but honest and deeply religious (Stieglitz, 1996, sec. 1:44:34 min.). About her mother, Frieda states that she had very refined tastes and decorated the house as if she were a woman from a big city. For Frieda, the status of her family was in part articulated through the way her aunt, grandmother, and mother were perceived and remembered by *goyim*. This may have to do with the fact that she survived the Holocaust with the help of Catholic Poles. For her, they were an important part of her life, and non-Jewish residents also helped her to reconstruct her family history and youth upon her return after the War (Stieglitz, 1996, sec. 7:22 min.).

## Gentiles

These examples demonstrate that shtetl life in Grodzisko Dolne cannot be explained without insight into the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. Beller portrays illiterate Polish peasants and poor peasants,<sup>14</sup> who went barefoot in the summer and had to take turns in leaving the house during the winter because the entire family shared one pair of shoes (1986a, p. 93). This relates to Antony Polonsky's conclusion that Jews considered these peasants "uncivilized and uncultured," although they pitied their poverty, which was more apparent than that of the poor Jews in the shtetl. The peasants considered the Jews untrustworthy and despised their lack of connection to the land, but admired their business skills (Polonsky, 2019,

14 Painting: Peasants.

p. 143). Although Beller depicts several Gentiles, including peasants and the Shabbath Goy, it is interesting that they remain anonymous, as opposed to the subjects of most of his paintings, including Itche, the “simpleton.”<sup>15</sup>

The children of Grodzisko Dolne, Jewish and Gentile, attended the same Polish public school. As Rotter comments, however, he did not play with the Christian children, noting that he did not have many Jewish friends either. This is because in the period 1921–1934 the economic situation was such that many families in the Grodzisko Dolne shtetl left temporarily to find work elsewhere. They moved to the larger cities so that their sons could learn a profession, or they engaged in short-term employment and returned to Grodzisko Dolne only in the summer or at heydays. Beller, who was born seven years earlier than Rotter, says that he did have Christian friends at the public school. At the same time, he indicates the differences between Christian and Jewish pupils. For example, three times a week, a priest came to school to give religion classes. Even before he entered the school, he would shout loudly that the Jewish students had to leave. At that moment, Beller remembers, the Jewish pupils were looked at with hostility by the other students, which made them realize they were different. Stieglitz relays that the Jewish pupils were a bit intimidated by the Gentile students. At the same time, she explains that it was pointless to befriend Christians for they did not honor Shabbat. For her, Shabbat was something that defined the Jewish space of the shtetl. Stieglitz’s memories of daily life in Grodzisko Dolne reflect the religious divide between Jews and Catholic peasants. Jews considered Christianity hypocritical because it combined turning the other cheek with sometimes violent anti-Semitism. In turn, Christians believed Jewish religious customs to be bizarre and incomprehensible (Polonsky, 2019, p. 143).

## Migration

Beller left Grodzisko Dolne at age 14, as he explains in his testimony to the Association Memorie et Documents, because of anti-Semitism and economic circumstances. From the memories of Samuel Rotter, we learn that these issues were indeed intertwined (Kluveld & Weitkamp, 2020).

15 There are also paintings of Jews that are unnamed (The Bagelman and several paintings of merchants). However, no Gentile in the paintings is named. Further, non-traditional Hasidic persons such as communists, socialists, and Zionists are also unnamed in the titles of Beller’s paintings.

Rotter's father was one of many Galician Jews who left to seek shelter and build a life elsewhere. Although economic considerations played a role in his decision to emigrate, he was also reacting to the strong anti-Jewish mood that had taken hold in Poland. The hatred of the Jews also played a role in their economic plight. For example, in Dynów, where Samuel's father was born, its 400 Jewish families had been forced into poverty through numerous taxes and trade restrictions that only applied to Jews. There were bans on selling alcohol and tobacco and on running a hotel. Describing Jewish life in the 1930s, Abraham Mosinger (1979) writes that in the translation of the Yizkor book of Dynów "their lives were like a walk on a narrow rope above the chasm of endless hatred of the Jewish person from his birth until his death." Antony Polonsky has concluded that the situation of Jews in Polish towns and cities during the interwar period was paradoxical: "They were subjected to a sustained and often violent campaign," compelling them to leave the country, but they also were an active part of Polish life. In the shtetl they managed to maintain to some extent an equilibrium (2019, p. 149).

The Jews in Grodzisko Dolne lived in constant fear that their windows would be smashed or that they would be physically attacked following traumatic incidents, such as a murder or the drowning of a child. On these occasions, the Jews were invariably blamed. They were constantly on guard and, when they felt trouble brewing, they left Grodzisko Dolne to find temporary shelter elsewhere, afraid that their houses would be under siege. Samuel Rotter explains in his testimony that this was an integral part of shtetl life. He came to know the troubles of that life through the most important person in his childhood: Rabbi David Horowitz. We also find references to this wise rabbi in Beller's albums. When there was a theological dispute among the men of the shtetl, which frequently happened, the fierce rabbi was consulted, and he would resolve the debate. With his father absent and without children of his own age to play with, Samuel was very much drawn to this figure.

As in all shtetls, in the close and predominantly Hasidic Jewish community of Grodzisko Dolne, faith played a role that could hardly be overestimated. Prayers were recited at sunrise, in the afternoon, and at sunset, as well as before each meal. Hebrew was the language of prayer, but everyday communication took place in Yiddish. In his book *Il's ont tué mon village*, Ilex Beller recalls the celebration of Shabbat and other Jewish holidays. He vividly describes the synagogue on the hill and its ceiling painted with animals that signified what he refers to as "the 12 generations of Israel" (1981, p. 25). As Beller writes: "The Lion, which represents Jechuda's generation, looks at me with its human eyes and I have remembered that look for my whole

life” (p. 25). Although it is likely that a lion was depicted in the synagogue of Grodzisko Dolne, as in many synagogues in Galicia, we should also interpret this observation in the context of the fact that the lion is the symbol of the lost Jewish heritage in Galician Poland (Shneer, 2010).

## The Rabbi

As referenced above by Samuel Rotter, the linchpin of religious and cultural life for the Jews in Grodzisko Dolne was Rabbi David Horowitz (1905–1942). Known as a wise rabbi, he succeeded his father, Eliezer (1880–1942), and descended from a prominent rabbinic lineage. According to Rotter, there was a direct line of succession between Rabbi Horowitz and the father of the Hasidic Ropshitz dynasty, Rabbi Naftali Zvi of Ropshitz (1760–1827) (Kluveld & Weitkamp, 2020). Rotter was dazzled by the way Rabbi Horowitz worked to strengthen community life in the shtetl. For instance, the rabbi would organize religious celebrations and target the individual houses of those who failed to appear, pounding on their doors and windows and encouraging them to attend. Upon arriving at one of the rabbi’s celebrations, each person was fed a spoonful of fish or other food. Rotter wanted nothing more than to be close to the rabbi, which sometimes created conflicts with his mother. As the eldest in the family, he was expected to be the man of the house when his father was on the road (Kluveld & Weitkamp, 2020). Often, though, Rotter’s mother did permit him to visit the rabbi, who appreciated his young admirer. The rabbi taught him songs that he would recite and involved the little boy in much of his daily routine. Rotter was present during conversations that the rabbi had with people about their worries and their secrets, and thus learned a great deal about the social life of the Jews in Grodzisko Dolne, which, in retrospect, he considered a privilege. Rabbi Horowitz took Rotter to places outside the shtetl, including the annual pilgrimage to the tomb of the Hasidic leader Rabbi Elimelech Weisblum in nearby Leżajsk, where thousands of Jews from all over Poland came together to dance and sing (Kluveld & Weitkamp, 2020). There are countless anecdotes about Rabbi Elimelech (1717–1787) in the majority of collections of Hasidic stories, and Samuel Rotter learned many of them directly from Rabbi Horowitz (Bar-Zev, 2010). At times, he was also present during discussions between Rabbi Horowitz and his father-in-law, who was also a well-known religious leader. “I don’t want to brag,” he says to the interviewer, to whom it is unclear that this had been an enormous honor (Rotter, 1997, sec. 19:16 min.).

The memories of Frieda Stieglitz, Mina Kalter, and Ilex Beller are also intertwined with religion. Frieda Stieglitz notes that her family was very religious and that her grandfather was a follower of the Blushover rabbi, Yisroel Spira Zatzal. The most important person in her life, her maternal grandmother, was, according to Frieda, a good woman who was strong and never lied because she was so God-fearing. Beller shares a religious experience, describing one Pesach when his mother asked him to open the door because the Prophet Elijah visits every household and drinks the cup of wine left for him. Beller opened the door and, back at his place at the table, he watched the cup of wine tremble as Elijah drank from it. Although Beller is the only source who remembers such religious experiences from his childhood, religion is the framework within which all participants ascribe meaning to the events before and during the Holocaust. Frieda Stieglitz, for example, explains that she felt the obligation to become a special person as a result of surviving the Holocaust.

In the end, it is the memories they share about the shtetl of Grodzisko Dolne that serve as an articulation of these informants' religion, since they feel obliged to remember its death. Toward the end of the interview for his VHA testimony, Rotter is asked if he has ever been angry with God. He does not think that is an appropriate question. He concludes his testimony with the Hallel, a verbatim recitation from Psalms 113–118, which is recited by observant Jews on Jewish holidays as an act of praise and thanksgiving. The part of the Hallel Samuel recites can be translated as follows: "The highest heavens belong to the Lord but the earth he has given to mankind. It is not the dead who praise the Lord, those who go down to the place of silence; it is we who extol the Lord both now and forevermore."

## Conclusion

The shtetl of Grodzisko Dolne is gone forever, as another tragic example of the Nazi attempt to erase all Jewish traces in the former Galicia. They largely succeeded in doing so, but they were unable to destroy the memories of people who escaped their reign of destruction and the unbridled efforts of memory communities to rediscover this past. Without these organizations and the family of Samuel Rotter, it would not have been possible to reconstruct Grodzisko Dolne as presented in this chapter. The lack of such sources would have prevented efforts to contextualize the personal memories of the Holocaust survivors whose families lived in this shtetl prior to World War II. It leads also to new perspectives on the more than 50,000 oral histories of the VHA. It is possible to find out more about the

world prior to the Holocaust – not just about the events during this disaster. We do not only know what happened to the victims of the Holocaust and how they died; we also know how they lived. This will give direction to new interviews that will be added to the VHA, which has begun to collect testimonies about other genocides as well.

The memories of Samuel Rotter, Frieda Stieglitz, Mina Kalter, and Ilex Beller provide ample clues for further genealogical research. After all, each person from Grodzisko Dolne they mention can be traced in this way, an approach embraced by the practices of the engaged humanities: to give the world a memory. Based on the childhood memories of the Holocaust survivors from Grodzisko Dolne and common definitions of a shtetl, one might conclude that these men and women had more or less the same memories of daily life as people who lived in another shtetl in the territory of former Galicia. The importance of rabbis and synagogues, for example, applies to the majority of shtetls, as does the at times romantic picture of traditional Jewish shtetl life. However, following the specific historical events that took place in Grodzisko Dolne, these personal memories acquire meaning within the context of that specific shtetl, leading to a better understanding of the stories told, in this case about Grodzisko Dolne. From historiography we know that social status was important in shtetl life. In the stories told by the interviewees this becomes more concrete. At the same time, it proved impossible fully to understand the oral and written memories without the context and analysis provided in academic studies. This is all the more reason to contribute to Bauer's call for more academic monographs about interwar life in individual shtetls.

Through additional genealogical and historical research, it is possible to obtain information that will serve as basis for a monograph on Grodzisko Dolne. Memories provide details on the culture, social structure, economy, and faith in the shtetl Grodzisko Dolne, and they may illuminate the ways in which Jews related to non-Jews and to the wider world. Their memories of the shtetl are first and foremost memories of people who have been forgotten as a result of the Holocaust: the water carrier; the rabbi; the grandparents, fathers, and mothers; the children of the shtetl; the tailors and the shoemakers; the poor and the wealthy. Their descendants are looking for them in (digital) sources that are scarce and sometimes difficult to contextualize. The same goes for academic historians. An engagement between the two groups – descendants and historians – through memory communities and platforms is bound to strengthen the knowledge of both. Our duty to remember will fuel such engagement.

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## 7. Minimalist Lifestyles and the Path to Degrowth

Towards an Engaged Mindfulness

*Miriam Meissner*

### Abstract

This chapter combines hermeneutic and empirical methods to discuss contemporary minimalist lifestyles – lifestyles that revolve around the reduction of material belongings, mental distraction, and work-life stress. It examines understandings of social and ecological engagement among the advocates and practitioners of minimalist lifestyles in order to explore if and how minimalist lifestyles might promote a societal transition to degrowth. The chapter reveals that minimalists and degrowthers share concern about socio-environmental exploitation and the ideal of a good life under conditions of material sufficiency but that they diverge on their theories of change. To envision an alignment between minimalist lifestyles and degrowth ambitions, the chapter develops the concept of “engaged mindfulness.”

**Keywords:** engaged humanities, societal impact, research valorization, minimalist lifestyles, environmental politics, degrowth

### Introduction

This chapter is about minimalist lifestyles, mindfulness, and eco-politics. It discusses lifestyles that revolve around the reduction of material belongings, mental distraction, and work-life stress. Specifically, I examine understandings of social and ecological engagement among the advocates and practitioners of minimalist lifestyles. In so doing, I aim to address a much broader question. By examining what it means among minimalists to “be

mindful” of contemporary socio-ecological problems, I seek to understand if and how minimalist lifestyles predispose effective and socially just action on global heating and biodiversity loss. Drawing on degrowth literature, I argue that minimalist lifestyles carry potential in culturally popularizing eco-friendly sufficiency lifestyles among societies with unsustainably high consumption standards. At the same time, minimalist interpretations of socio-ecological mindfulness tend to focus on individual experience and choice, while foreclosing the consideration of collective political action and institutional change. Based on a critique of this approach, the chapter sketches the contours of an *engaged mindfulness*. Characteristic of this engaged mindfulness is that it stipulates the alignment and mutual reinforcement of individual experience and collective political engagement, such as campaigning and activism.

### Notes on Methodology

For this research, I combined hermeneutic and empirical methods. Specifically, I conducted a narrative analysis of minimalist lifestyle narratives and qualitative research with minimalist lifestyle practitioners. At the time of writing this chapter, the research is still in progress. So far, I have analyzed a total of 19 minimalist self-help books, films, podcasts, and blogs. The examples were chosen to incorporate a variety of different forms of minimalist lifestyle narratives. To that end, narratives largely focused on different targets for minimalist reduction (such as material objects, household waste, and work-life stress), advocating a variety of different methods of applying minimalism in everyday life. A second criterion for the choice of narratives was visibility. Most of the selected books were displayed in various charts of Anglophone non-fiction books, translated into different languages, and they received attention in a number of news and social media. While it was impossible to track the exact sales figures for each book, most of the examples were advertised as “bestselling.” All of the analyzed films, podcasts, and blogs were related to these books.

For the empirical part of my research, I conducted eight semi-structured interviews of about an hour with minimalist practitioners. Participants were recruited through open calls in minimalist Facebook groups. In addition, I contacted three participants with experience in working with minimalists via email (a zero-waste shop owner, a tiny house architect, and a Netherlands-based tiny house pioneer). To confirm and diversify my findings from the interviews, I posted open questions about minimalist

practice in selected minimalist Facebook groups, inviting members to share their views and experiences via the platform's comment function. To that end, I selected forums that are English-speaking, have the term "minimalism" in their title, and have between 20,000 and 180,000 members. Overall, I received 280 answers to my open questions. For the interviews and Facebook surveys, I informed participants beforehand that their responses would feed into my research, while I also specified how I would make use of their quotes.

The overall aim of the analysis was to examine how advocates and practitioners of minimalist lifestyles contextualize their lifestyle practice in response to different personal, societal, and ecological problems. Particular attention was given to the logical relations minimalists establish between problems, causes for these problems, and their minimalist solutions. Because minimalists use storytelling in order to establish these relations, I analyzed both lifestyle narratives and interviews using narrative analysis. Based on the analysis of minimalist narratives and interviews with practitioners, I asked about specific minimalist practices, experiences, and attitudes in the Facebook groups. The responses to my questions allowed me to better understand if my findings from narrative analysis and interview analysis reflect or diverge from what self-identifying minimalists think and experience in their everyday practice.

At the time of writing this chapter, it is hard to define minimalist lifestyles in historical and geographical terms. Google Trends indicates that, in the period between 2016 and 2021, the search term "minimalism" received interest in a number of global regions, with Iceland, Singapore, the Philippines, Estonia, and Sweden as locations where the term was most popular relative to the total searches at these locations. Moreover, Kyle Chayka found that Google's index of published books indicates that the term "minimalism" shows a fivefold increase between 1960 and 2008, and that as a Google search term it peaked in January 2017 (2020, p. 37).

Given that contemporary minimalist practice is such a broad, diverse, and emerging phenomenon, I wish to underline that this chapter does not present generalizable findings about minimalist lifestyles in their various global articulations, but that, instead, I concentrate on critically discussing the lines of argumentation put forward in the minimalist narratives, interviews, and surveys that I have analyzed. In the discussion below, the focus will be on minimalist lifestyle narratives. If transcripts from the interviews and notes from the online research will not be quoted directly, I draw on this data in order to contextualize why and how individuals engage in minimalist lifestyles in their everyday lives.



## Minimalist Lifestyles

Contemporary minimalist lifestyles span a diverse set of narratives and practices. Practices range from tidying and de-cluttering the home (Kondo, 2014), to zero waste living (Johnson, 2013), the celebration of idleness (Hodgkinson, 2005), and the practice of a 4-hour work week (Ferriss, 2009). Often, it is well-connected influencers who promote minimalist lifestyles via self-help books, films and podcasts, blogs and vlogs, TED talks, and speaking tours. The US American duo The Minimalists (aka Ryan Nicodemus and Joshua Fields Millburn) serves as an example here. In addition to their books, podcast, speaking tours, and documentary film, the duo held Ted-talks, gave interviews in a range of mainstream news media (including *The New York Times*, Forbes, BBC, et cetera), presented their ideas at Apple, Google, and Harvard Business School, and engaged in many other public activities.

The fact that minimalism is well-marketed makes it seem as if, above all, it has featured as a lifestyle fashion. *Guardian* author Chelsea Fagan, for example, describes minimalism as “another boring product that the wealthy can buy” (Fagan, 2017). In contrast, my research indicates that minimalism is more than a lifestyle product (although I agree with Fagan’s points of criticism). Via my interviews and online questions, I found that many individuals discovered minimalism as a strategy of dealing with difficult life challenges, such as illness, depression, anxiety, and burn-out; demanding caring obligations; unemployment and precarious flex-work conditions; the loss of a loved one; the experience of having to clear out a deceased family member’s home; and many other issues. Within the various online groups that I have researched, individuals communicate about these challenges. Of course, minimalists do exchange pictures of their Scandinavian furniture, capsule wardrobe, or “no make up make up” – as Fagan suggests (Fagan, 2017) – but that is by far not all they do. In 2020, for example, they also frequently advised each other on how to practice minimalism in response to anxiety, unemployment, and other life changes in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This variety of conversations in minimalist online groups indicates that minimalism cannot be reduced to the notion of a lifestyle product or fashion. For some, it may be just that. In other cases, however, it is also self-help and mutual care.

The fact that minimalist lifestyles involve a diverse set of practices, motivations, and benefits raises the question of how I define minimalist lifestyles in my work. I wish to emphasize that there is not a single coherent practice of minimalism, but, instead, a plural range of minimalisms. What all narratives, practices, and experiences I studied so far have in common

is that they lament a “world of too much”: too much clutter, too much waste, too much stress, too much distraction. To deal with this “too much,” minimalists advocate the reduction of consumption and belongings, work and competition, social commitments and (social) media consumption. To that end, minimalists promote specific techniques of selection and focus on “the important things.” While most minimalists maintain that individuals should self-define what these “important things” are, values such as family, health, and the pursuit of a “mindful” and “meaningful” life reappear in minimalist lifestyle advice and in conversations with practitioners.

The perhaps most famous representative of this kind of advice is the Japanese organizing consultant Marie Kondo who – in her books, courses, and Netflix series – helps individuals, couples, and families declutter their homes until everything that remains “sparks joy.” Yet, in minimalist lifestyles, decluttering is not limited to the reduction of material belongings only. The Dutch business psychologist Tony Crabbe, for example, helps his readers and clients “declutter” the daily “attention grabbers” that do not spark joy – such as draining work tasks or unpleasant social contacts. The goal, for Crabbe, is to “thrive in a world of too much” (Crabbe, 2015). The same applies to Sarah Knight, who in *The Life-changing Magic of Not Giving a F\*ck* (Knight, 2015) advises her readers to distinguish carefully about the things in life that they care (“give a fuck”) about, and those that they are “not sorry” about. The latter is to be decluttered from individuals’ mental maps and agendas. This gives a basic overview of minimalist lifestyles and narratives. The question to address next is why these lifestyles are ecologically relevant.

### **“Make Having Less Stuff Cool”**

The journalist Florian Raith summarized the ecological relevance of minimalist lifestyles as follows: “Within a few years, minimalism has managed what decades of the green movement has not: make having less stuff cool” (Raith, 2019, n.p.). Minimalist lifestyles have re-invented anti-consumerist ideology. Through minimalism, living with less transmutes from a necessary evil – a sacrifice consumers have to make for the planet – into a pleasant and voluntary exercise – which comes with its own fashion and interior design, as well as its own Instagram feeds. In addition, minimalist lifestyles appear to have therapeutic potential. They help people deal with practical and psychological challenges of various kinds: having to move due to labor precarity, living on small incomes, dealing with stress and burn-out, et cetera.

From an ecological perspective, the fact that minimalist lifestyles reframe “having less” from a sacrifice into a trend is important in particular. It matters because environmental scientists increasingly agree that contemporary industrialized societies – in particular those of early industrialization – need to reinvent their ideals of wellbeing. In its 2019 Global Assessment Report, the Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), for instance, warns that, in order to effectively address alarming levels of biodiversity loss, affluent societies need to change “the definition of what a good quality of life entails – decoupling the idea of a good and meaningful life from ever-increasing material consumption” (Díaz et al., 2019, p. 29). To see why this is necessary, it helps to consider recent insights from the environmental sciences.

In the past decade – in particular, the last three years – even those scientific bodies whose assessment reports predispose a rather high degree of scientific consensus agree that, in order to effectively reduce global heating and biodiversity loss, societies need to question the ideal of unlimited economic growth. The IPBES, for example, identifies “steering away from the currently limited paradigm of economic growth” as “key element” for the building of a global sustainable economy (IPBES, 2019, n.p.). Similarly, the European Environment Agency (EAA) criticizes prioritization of economic growth within EU policy. “To be clear,” the EAA writes, “Europe will not achieve its sustainability vision of ‘living well, within the limits of our planet’ simply by promoting economic growth and seeking to manage harmful side-effects with environmental and social policy tools” (EAA, 2019, n.p.). The reason why environmental scientists and policy advisors increasingly question economic growth is that there is too little evidence for the fact that so-called “green growth” approaches, which seek to decouple economic growth from its fierce negative environmental impacts, deliver what they promise.

In 2018, the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), a large network of environmental citizens’ organizations in Europe, published a report on the following related question: is it possible to enjoy both economic growth and environmental sustainability? Reviewing a range of science papers and arguments, the report concludes that the answer to this question

is both overwhelmingly clear and sobering: not only is there no empirical evidence supporting the existence of a decoupling of economic growth from environmental pressures on anywhere near the scale needed to deal with environmental breakdown, but also, and perhaps more importantly, such decoupling appears unlikely to happen in the future. (Parrique et al., 2019, p. 3)

In a context of rapid global heating and biodiversity loss, green technologies – such as recycling, carbon capture, electronic cars, renewable energy – can help those individuals and institutions who can afford them to reduce their ecological footprints. There is no question about that. Yet, unless they are paired with sufficiency – with producing and consuming less – industrialized societies will not manage to keep environmental pressures anywhere near what is considered a “safe operating space for humanity” (Rockström et al., 2009, p. 472).

These findings indicate that, in addition to “green” technological innovation, present-day industrialized societies need to innovate their economic structures and socio-cultures. They need to develop degrowth societies – societies that thrive, in an equitable manner, without ever-increasing their collective economic throughput (D’Alisa et al., 2015; Jackson, 2009; Raworth, 2018). This requires that societies reduce average levels of production and consumption, in particular those with a harmful environmental footprint (such as aviation, animal proteins, etc.); but it also requires a range of policy reforms, such as the introduction of extraction limits, new social security guarantees, work-sharing arrangements, a universal basic income, and many others (Kallis et al., 2012a).

As it stands, policymakers across different political camps are reluctant to follow this urgent scientific advice. Of course, there are exceptions. Under the initiative Wellbeing Economy Governments, the governments of Iceland, New Zealand, and Scotland are currently seeking to redefine national success in a way that valorizes citizens’ quality of life, rather than the growth rate of each country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In general, however (and as the COVID-19 pandemic clearly showed), economic growth remains a high, if not the highest, priority on international policy agendas. Interestingly, GDP growth remains a priority even though 65 percent of adults in fourteen nations claimed, in a 2020 Ipsos survey, that they would prefer their governments to prioritize climate change in the economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic (Ipsos, 2020).

In other words, there are strong divergences between environmental scientists’ advice for tackling environmental pressures, international citizens’ opinions on the matter, and contemporary policy. In a way, this hesitation is also reflected in everyday conversations. Anyone who ever sought to convince friends or family that we, affluent societies, need to transition to degrowth will have come across the following counter-argument: “Degrowth? People just don’t want that!” (see also Drews & Antal, 2016). For decades, consumer capitalism has taught individuals to want potent cars, fashionable outfits, sun vacations, and so on. Moreover, individuals want

jobs in order to afford all this. How would they react if this were not on offer any longer? More often than not, then, degrowth is considered as a perhaps well-intentioned but unrealistic scenario for the future.

Changing this perception is an important goal in contemporary degrowth advocacy (Büchs & Koch, 2019), and lifestyle minimalism can be instrumental in realizing that aim. To understand why, it helps to envision two key arguments for degrowth advocacy. The first, perhaps most evident, argument for degrowth is that it is ecologically necessary. The argument crystallizes in a common environmental protest slogan: "There are no jobs on a dead planet!" If industrialized societies go on with business as usual, and permanently pursue higher production and consumption, they will eventually run out of the ecosystems that afford all joys of life in the first place. To substantiate that this is not an exaggeration, degrowth advocates can cite a range of environmental science insights.

Global average temperatures are currently projected to increase by more than 3°C beyond pre-industrial levels within this century (Raftery et al., 2017), and, while a temperature increase beyond 3°C is considered "catastrophic" (Xu & Ramanathan, 2017, p. 10315), the prospect of hitting irreversible tipping points within the Earth system is even more alarming. It could set into motion a cascade of self-reinforcing geophysical feedbacks, thus accelerating global heating (Steffen et al., 2018). Because this is considered an existential threat to civilization, the title of a recent comment article in *Nature* described it as "too risky to bet against" (Lenton et al., 2019, p. 575). One does not need to point to the distant future to underline the urgency of the current predicament, however. Pandemics, wildfires, heatwaves, droughts, cyclones, floods, crop failures, and mass extinction are in fact happening today. As a consequence, humans and animals across the globe are suffering, losing their homes, and forced into migration. Air pollution alone is causing an estimated seven million premature deaths every year (WHO, 2014). Meanwhile, plant and animal species are going extinct at rates unprecedented in human history. A million of them are currently threatened with extinction, many within decades (Díaz et al., 2019).

While this list of arguments could be continued, it is important to note that science communication studies indicate that dramatic climate change messages are not particularly effective in mobilizing audiences for transformative action (Moser, 2010; O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009). Dramatic messages do, at least initially, capture audiences' attention for the issue. References to human and animal suffering also generate a sense of importance. At the same time, however, dramatic messages are interpreted as disempowering at the personal level. The recommendation, therefore, is

that communicators combine dramatic messages with messages that create a sense of “self-efficacy” – telling audiences that and how “they (and others) can positively respond” (O’Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009, p. 376).

This insight connects to the second key argument in contemporary degrowth advocacy: the argument that degrowth is a *socially beneficial* and *realistically feasible* response to urgent problems of global heating and biodiversity loss. Contemporary degrowth advocacy underlines that degrowth is not just a necessary reaction to the ecological crises of our time but also an answer to a range of twenty-first century socio-economic problems. Degrowth advocates argue that never-ending economic growth – which also predisposes the relentless expansion of production and consumer demand – does not live up to its promise of wellbeing anymore, not even for the privileged places and social strata of this planet. To substantiate these claims, they can point to high levels of public and private debt (Mbaye & Badia, 2019), global and intra-national inequality (Niño-Zarazúa et al., 2017; Picketty, 2014), depression and burnout (Han, 2015), and precarity (Alberti et al., 2018; Kalleberg, 2018). They can also mention that research shows that the relationship between material wealth increase and individual happiness is anything but proportional (Kallis, 2015; Kasser, 2002; Lyubomirsky, 2011). It is more complex than that, and so should be our concept of and pathway towards the good life.

Building on these findings, it is easy to reason that it is not a given that “people just don’t want” degrowth. To contest the taken-for-granted correlation between economic growth and societal wellbeing, contemporary degrowth advocates argue that a different and better kind of wellbeing is on offer; a kind of wellbeing that values leisure, mental focus, creativity, time to care for loved ones, societal engagement, quality products, and healthy environments – instead of careers and high salaries, SUVs and short-term plane trips, fast fashion, and the latest techno-gadgets (Soper, 2020). To prove that this is possible, degrowth advocacy takes inspiration from a range of existing practices, such as voluntary simplicity and back-to-the-land movements (Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Jacob, 1997), the Latin American concept and development critique of *Buen Vivir* (Gudynas, 2011), and the philosophy of *Ubuntu* in the Bantu-speaking regions of Africa (Ramose, 2014) – to name just few examples. Drawing on these case-studies, degrowthers seek to show that the existence of degrowth-aligned forms of wellbeing is not a theoretical hypothesis but a practiced reality, performed in a range of socio-geographical contexts already.

My work on minimalist lifestyles contributes to this pool of evidence. So far, my analysis of minimalist self-help narratives, my interviews with practitioners and the responses to my online questions indicate that there is a growing movement of individuals who (1) are unwell due to an overload in

work, stress, material belongings, and waste; and (2) improve their subjective levels of wellbeing by owning and consuming less, while at the same time reducing their hours of wage labor and financial debts. Overall, individuals improve their wellbeing through minimalism and, at the same time, reduce their environmental footprints. In reconciling wellbeing with sufficiency, minimalist lifestyles illustrate that degrowth ideals of living are not only possible but also desirable and increasingly popular.

### **Will Minimalism Save the Planet?**

In what follows, I draw on existing studies and my analysis of minimalist self-help narratives in order to provide three reasons explaining why this question must currently be given a negative answer.

The first is that minimalism is not a lifestyle option available to everyone. While certain, fairly privileged groups can afford to work less by consuming less, others will find that even if they reduce their needs to a bare minimum, they still cannot make ends meet. Fagan describes this dilemma as follows: “The only people who can ‘practice’ minimalism in any meaningful way are people upon whom it isn’t forced by financial or logistic circumstances” (Fagan, 2017). For Fagan, there is a voluntary and an involuntary practice of minimalism. The latter might just as well be called “poverty,” which hardly corresponds to what I meant to say when describing minimalism as a blueprint for a post-consumerist kind of wellbeing. In fact, in order for minimalism to become a source of collective wellbeing, it must go hand in hand with the building of societal institutions that alleviate socio-economic inequality and precarity.

This relates to my second argument. The reason why minimalist lifestyles alone will not save the planet is that frequently, if perhaps unintentionally, these lifestyles live off systemic injustice and inequalities. Anthropologist Jason Rodriguez, for example, has shown how the US minimalist movement relies on both domestic and international inequalities: “This includes the ability to consume cheap goods that are kept inexpensive through such social relations as labor exploitation abroad and the exploitation of migrant agricultural workers in the United States” (Rodriguez, 2018, p. 8). Put simply, the fact that minimalists can fulfill their basic needs inexpensively relies on the fact that others have to sell their labor inexpensively, often under harmful working conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered some of these conditions in relation to the meat industry, agriculture, and the health and care sectors, among many others (Amnesty, 2020; Dickerson & Jordan, 2020; FRA, 2020; Grant, 2020). As the next section of this chapter will show, the

advocates and practitioners of minimalist lifestyles are often aware of these problems. But their proposed solutions tend to focus on consumer choice, which is limited when it comes to solving systemic injustice and inequality.

Finally, there is a third more structural reason why minimalist lifestyles alone, even if they are practiced across large segments of society, will not suffice to solve urgent ecological problems. A brief thought experiment serves to illustrate this reason. What if citizens around the globe – in particular those with high standards of consumption – would wake up tomorrow and have an epiphany? What if they realize – intellectually, but also emotionally – that, as IPBES chair Robert Watson put it, they are “eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide” (qtd. in IPBES, 2019). What if, as a result, citizens around the globe would radically change their habits? What if they would stop flying, eating animal protein, upgrading their smart technologies, and buying new things?

My research on minimalist lifestyles indicates that many would feel relieved to have “done their share” for the environment. Some would feel less stressed, more focused, and somewhat liberated. Practicing minimalists frequently report on these benefits. Something else would happen, too, however. Just like during the COVID-19 pandemic, consumer demand would fall, companies would have to lay off staff, individuals would lose their jobs, or default on their rent and mortgages, and lose their homes. States would lose their tax revenues and cut on public services, or they would borrow heavily. The experiment would confirm a central dilemma of our time: what is good for the environment is not always good for the economy – at least not the economy as we know it.

Again, minimalist influencers often recognize this tension. In a blogpost titled “Stimulate the economy like a minimalist,” The Minimalists write:

If everyone immediately stopped spending their money, our economy would crash. This goes without saying. Consequently, one of the biggest (supposed) arguments many people have against minimalism is that if everyone became a minimalist, then we'd all be doomed: the financial system as it stands today would collapse, and no longer would we have the wealth necessary to purchase cheap plastic shit from Walmart. (Millburn & Nicodemus, n.d.)

One might expect that what follows from this quote is a political call for changing “the financial system as it stands today.” If living sustainably and saving the economy are at odds with each other, then perhaps the economy as we know it ought to change. Yet, this is not how the blogpost continues. Instead, the authors argue that the problem was not consumption but



consumerism, and that minimalists could very well stimulate the economy by investing “in experiences over possessions. Travel, indie concerts, vacations, community theater, etc.” (Millburn & Nicodemus, n.d.).

From a socio-ecological point of view, there is certainly nothing wrong with indie concerts or community theater. The same applies to travel, if it happens within limits and relies on low-carbon means of transportation. Still, I feel, there is a problematic side to The Minimalists’ line of argumentation in this blogpost. In arguing that practicing minimalists can “stimulate the economy,” the authors tend to avoid – and thereby distract from – an urgent question of our time, namely how to create social justice and wellbeing in a context of an (ecologically necessary) shrinking of production, consumption, and GDP growth?

Significantly, this question is multidimensional and transdisciplinary. It is about everyday lifestyles and political economy, about cultural values and planetary ecology, about individual behavior and collective social institutions. If this makes it a difficult question, good proposals have been made to answer it (D’Alisa et al., 2015; Kallis et al., 2012b; Kallis et al., 2020; Soper, 2020). Unfortunately, few of these proposals managed to gain broad attention in present-day public and political debates. In the next section, I explore how the kind of socio-ecological mindfulness that minimalist lifestyle advocates currently promote contributes to this problem.

### **Minimalist Mindfulness vs. Degrowth Ambitions**

Minimalists and degrowthers share some key characteristics. They both advocate reduced consumption. They are concerned about problems of socio-environmental exploitation. They argue that wellbeing under conditions of material sufficiency is possible and even desirable. In this section, I examine on which points they diverge. To that end, I first present three proposals put forward by contemporary degrowth advocacy. All of these proposals respond to what I have previously described as a socio-ecological key question of our time. I contrast these proposals with the suggestions that minimalist influencers make for tackling problems of excess consumption, waste, and personal stress. My overall argument is that the kind of consumerist and individualist mindfulness that contemporary minimalists promote tends to distract from and, therefore, foreclose the collective and political engagement that a societal transition to degrowth necessarily presupposes.

The perhaps most obvious, yet important, proposal put forth in degrowth advocacy is to *redistribute* economic resources. The logic is simple: if

industrialized societies cannot continuously grow the collective economic pie – assuming that there would finally be a piece of pie for everyone –, they must distribute the existing pie differently – at least if they want to ensure that no one falls short of life’s essentials. Oxford economist Kate Raworth’s proposal for a so-called “doughnut economy” provides a blueprint for how this might work on a global scale:

Below the inner ring [of the Doughnut] – the social foundation – lie critical human deprivations such as hunger and illiteracy. Beyond the outer ring – the ecological ceiling – lies critical planetary degradation such as climate change and biodiversity loss. Between those two rings is the Doughnut itself, the space in which we can meet the needs of all within the means of the planet. (Raworth, 2018, p. 10)

Interestingly, Raworth’s doughnut proposal is sometimes reduced to the concept of the circular economy – perhaps because it is envisioned as round (see also Savini & de Kok, 2020). Yet, the doughnut economy, as conceptualized by Raworth, is not just about reusing and upcycling. It is “distributive and regenerative by design” – an economy “whose dynamics tend to disperse and circulate value as it is created, rather than concentrating it in ever-fewer hands” (Raworth, 2018, p. 156).

While Raworth’s proposal focuses on revising the basic assumptions that underlie the discipline of economics, degrowth advocacy also includes specific policy proposals for re-distribution. These include, among other suggestions, the introduction of work-sharing schemes (Schor, 2015; Zwickl et al., 2016) and a universal basic income (Alexander, 2015). While the latter has been considered a political utopia for a long time, sources are increasing that either straightforwardly advocate its implementation (Bregman, 2016; Haagh, 2019) or examine it in further detail, including the 2019 volume *Exploring the Universal Basic Income*, published by the World Bank (Gentilini et al., 2019).

An important aspiration linked to these proposals for redistribution is to foster and value the currently unpaid and undervalued work that individuals – in particular women – carry out for the wellbeing of society, such as caring labor and volunteer work. Interestingly, these contributions to social welfare are not at all reflected in a country’s GDP, which currently remains the most-used tool for measuring social wellbeing (O’Neill, 2012). In contrast, the production of war munitions or the commercial cleaning of an oil spill contributes positively to GDP, which indicates the inexpedience of GDP as a measure in this context.

Another proposal formulated by degrowth advocates is to foster what economist Tim Jackson calls the economy of care, craft, and culture (Jackson, 2017). Activities within this economy share four characteristics, to different degrees (Rammelt et al., 2020). First, they directly improve our wellbeing, including health, creativity, knowledge, and social relations. Health care, social work, and higher education fall into this sector and so do science and culture, among other professional domains. The second characteristic of these activities is that they are labor-intensive and cannot be replaced by automation. This also implies that they have a relatively low carbon footprint. They run on human labor rather than fossil energy. Fourth, these sectors operate through short value chains. They do not require global trading but local distribution and proximity.

Finally, the degrowth literature proposes new practices of sharing and caring for collective resources – the so-called commons (Bollier & Helfrich, 2014). Communities can be empowered to autonomously create and sustainably manage such commons – for instance through the promotion of “cooperatives.” Cooperatives are “people-centred enterprises jointly owned and democratically controlled by and for their members to realise their common socio-economic needs and aspirations” (ICA, 2020; see also Johannisova et al., 2015). The reason why cooperatives align with degrowth aims is not only that they foster communities’ autonomy and conviviality, but also that they do not have to make a profit, compete, or grow. Cooperatives are directed towards fulfilling the needs of their members rather than increasing market value.

Those are three out of many proposals put forward in contemporary degrowth advocacy. While it would go beyond the scope of this chapter to examine all degrowth ideas (for an extensive overview please see D’Alisa et al., 2015), the examples show that degrowth involves changes at the individual and collective-societal scale. It includes individual sufficiency or anti-consumption, but it cannot be reduced to these practices. The reason is that, if practiced at mass-scale, sufficiency and anti-consumption would – from finance to labor markets and welfare schemes – lead to a collapse of contemporary capitalist institutions. This, in turn, would not foster societal wellbeing but rather intensify precarity. Degrowth, therefore, hinges on a transformation of social policies and institutions toward redistribution, the strengthening of commons, the promotion of care, craft, and creativity sectors, et cetera. For these kinds of societal transformations, however, a broad-scale political mobilization is needed, which is currently far from being seriously debated in public, let alone realized.

In what follows, I present two reasons why the kind of socio-ecological mindfulness that minimalist lifestyles promote contributes to this current lack

in political mobilization. My argument is not that minimalist lifestyles are to be blamed for degrowth not being realized. Rather, I wish to argue that their forms of envisioning solutions to contemporary problems of overconsumption, waste, stress, and mental overload exemplifies an interpretation of mindfulness that is quite prevalent in contemporary self-help and lifestyle culture (Purser, 2019a). Characteristic of this mindfulness interpretation is that it individualizes the responsibility for societal problems and, in so doing, distracts from the consideration and pursuit of collective solutions. Implicitly (and likely involuntarily), minimalist lifestyles thus contribute to political inertia.

First, minimalist lifestyle advocates' recommendations for social and ecological engagement consider individual consumer choice as the main pathway towards solving social and ecological problems. Minimalist author Francine Jay, for example, advises her readers to mind the labor and environmental resources that went into the products that they purchase:

Whenever we purchase something, we need to consider the people who made it. Under what kind of conditions did they labor? What effect did the production of this item have on their lives, their communities, and their environment? If it's negative, is our need (or desire) for this thing worth their suffering? (2010, p. 46)

While the quote indicates an acute awareness for problems of labor and environmental exploitation, it also has significant limits.

The fact that Jay distinguishes between “our need (or desire)” and “their suffering” indicates that the advice given comes from a position of privilege. Jay addresses her readers in the first person (“our need”) and assumes them – like her, the author – to be in a position to choose between products. If the products in question do not cover basic needs, this assumption may not be a big problem. After all, individuals of all socio-economic backgrounds can choose not to buy an item they do not need, and minimalism stipulates that individuals refrain from non-essential purchases whenever possible. Jay's advice serves this sufficiency aim. Yet if the item in question falls into the category of need (such as food, basic clothing, etc.), the situation is different. If readers of *The Joy of Less* are in a position to choose between fair-trade/eco-products and their opposite, they belong to a geo-economically privileged fraction of society. If, by contrast, they are not in a position to choose, they simply cannot contribute to the alleviation of labor and environmental exploitation through their minimalist practice.

This leads to another limit of the advice provided in *The Joy of Less*, which, in its logic, epitomizes a range of minimalist lifestyle narratives. Minimalist

lifestyle advocates often assume that problems of labor and environmental exploitation can be tackled through market mechanisms of supply and demand. The underlying idea is that, if only a substantial number of consumers chooses not to demand items that are produced under harmful socio-environmental conditions, these conditions will gradually vanish. To tackle urgent problems of overwork, indebtedness, and environmental pollution, Jay for instance argues that “[w]e don’t have to protest, boycott, or block the doors to megastores; in fact, we don’t even have to lift a finger, leave the house, or spend an extra moment of our precious time. It’s simply a matter of not buying” (2010, p. 265). Jay calls this “consumer disobedience” (p. 265), which – if sounding similar – has little in common with the kind of civil disobedience that international social movements practice in order to effect political change (Engler & Engler, 2016). While Jay’s “consumer disobedience” proposes an individual, perfectly legal act of consumerist abstention that has the aim of changing market demand, civil disobedience describes “an intentionally unlawful and principled collective act of protest that has the political aim of changing (a set of) laws, policies, or institutions” (Celikates, 2015, p. 130). Both could hardly be more disparate.

Similar to Jay, Bea Johnson – the author of *Zero Waste Home* – considers consumption a political act for solving problems of excess resource use and pollution. For Johnson, “shopping is voting and the decisions that we make every day have an impact. We have the choice to either hurt or heal our society” (2013, p. 9). The impression being given is that, if only individuals mind their own business as consumers, and if they mind it correctly, they can save the planet. This logic, however, is questionable from a practical and ethical point of view. Not only does consumer research indicate that consumers’ intentions to consume ethically rarely find reflection in their actual acts of consumption (Eckhardt et al., 2010; Gleim & Lawson, 2014); there are also ethical arguments against making socio-environmental exploitation a matter of consumer choice only. Cindy Isenhour clarifies this point in relation to the example of organic food consumption:

[A]rguing that consumers should be able to choose cheaper conventional foods or more expensive organics is essentially like saying that those families who cannot afford nontoxic products do not have the right to feed their children clean foods or that agricultural laborers are not entitled to safe working conditions. (2015, p. 145)

What the example illustrates is that socio-environmental exploitation should be a matter of legal restriction rather than consumer choice. Anything else would be like offering individual consumers a seemingly neutral, taste-based

choice between the abolition versus the sustenance of child and sweatshop labor, global heating and ocean acidification, deforestation and species extinction, as well as many other harmful developments. In suggesting that “shopping is voting” and that consumers should evaluate whether their “need (or desire)” is “worth their [others’] suffering,” Johnson and Jay implicitly accept this logic.

In portraying the alleviation of socio-environmental problems a matter of consumer choice, minimalist lifestyle narratives tie in with the neoliberal agenda of individualizing responsibility for collective issues (Brown & Baker, 2012; Foucault, 2008). This directly relates to the second reason why minimalist interpretations of socio-ecological mindfulness tend to foreclose the kind of collective and political engagement that a transition to degrowth would presuppose: minimalist lifestyle advocates tend to encourage self-focus, while at the same time discouraging the identification and the tackling of collective problems.

To illustrate this point, it helps to consider a quote from minimalist author Dominique Loreau, who in her book *The Art of Simplicity* argues that “[s]hifting our focus to the self acknowledges the importance of concentrating on immediate, direct concerns rather than natural catastrophes, or the evil and stupidity of the world at large” (2017, p. 164). In directly advising readers against the consideration of problems of “the world at large,” the quote provided admittedly forms an extreme example. Most minimalist lifestyle influencers do not explicitly discourage their followers from pondering broader societal questions but instead encourage them to focus on their individual emotions and priorities. Kondo’s decluttering advice exemplifies this tendency. Kondo holds that individuals should ask themselves (rather than their partners or families) whether or not their belongings “spark joy” enough in order to survive the decluttering process. Most minimalists hold that choosing “the important things” in life – those items and relationships that ought to remain – is a personal and deeply emotional affair. Within minimalist lifestyles as they are currently promoted, there seems to be little room for inter-personal debate, negotiation, or compromise – let alone collective political struggle.

In emphasizing individual focus and consumer choice, rather than collective mobilization and politics, minimalist lifestyles promote a form of mindfulness that illustrates what management professor and Zen teacher Ronald Purser criticizes in his book *McMindfulness* (Purser, 2019a). Purser describes current interpretations of mindfulness as the ultimate enemy of activism. For him, these interpretations of mindfulness constitute a “new capitalist spirituality” (Purser, 2019a) inviting practitioners to adjust – rather

than address – the very conditions that caused their malaise in the first place. “Mindfulness,” he writes, “has depoliticised stress. If we are unhappy about being unemployed, losing our health insurance, and seeing our children incur massive debt through college loans, it is our responsibility to learn to be more mindful” (Purser, 2019b, n.p.).

I see contemporary lifestyle minimalism as a manifestation of this kind of mindfulness. Implicitly and perhaps unintentionally, lifestyle minimalism depoliticizes the socio-ecological crises of our time. If we are strained by clutter and work stress, it is our job to be better minimalists – never mind the fact that our economies are structurally designed to ever-maximize our productivity and consumer demand. If our ecosystems falter, it is our job to take a deep breath and meditate on our “immediate direct concerns” (Loreau, 2017, p. 164) – never mind the fact that the problem is real and that eco-anxiety is becoming an increasingly prevalent mental health concern (Panu, 2020; Usher et al., 2019). This does not imply, however, that minimalism and the kind of mindfulness it promotes are useless practices of self-help and socio-environmental engagement. In what follows, I explain why this is the case.

## **Towards an Engaged Mindfulness**

As with journalism and public debate, engaged scholarship needs to take a critical perspective – discussing the pros and cons of emerging socio-cultural practices. Minimalism and mindfulness are such emerging practices. Both are related, growing trends and industries. By now, they are established referents in popular lifestyle and (social) media culture. Following the popularization and commercialization of minimalism and mindfulness, voices of criticism have been increasing as well (Fagan, 2017; Meissner, 2019; Purser, 2019a; Rodriguez, 2018). In my view, this is vital. It is a key task of engaged scholarship to develop reasoned and substantiated criticism. Yet, I find it just as important not to let scholarly engagement end on the criticism. Instead, I envision engaged scholarship as a practice that commits to a dialog with emerging socio-cultural practices – a dialog the goal of which for each practice is to learn from each other and (if wanted) to improve.

Both minimalism and mindfulness have huge socio-ecological potentials. Minimalism is relevant because, limits aside, it remains important that individuals consider the social and ecological repercussions of their consumption choices. Beyond that, minimalist lifestyles can offer great inspiration for envisioning futures wherein the good life is uncoupled from productivity, profit, and material accumulation. They “make having less

cool.” Finally, both minimalism and mindfulness show that – in societies of work-, material- and communication-overload – it can sometimes be absolutely vital to take a deep breath and meditate. What I would wish for these lifestyles to accomplish in the future is that they increase their already existing capacities for experience sharing and mutual care. In addition, I recommend that they stress in their critiques of “too much” the fact that contemporary issues of clutter, waste, stress, and distraction are societal problems, the solution of which requires collective mobilization for politico-institutional change.

It is important to re-emphasize that there is not a single coherent minimalism, nor is there a single and coherent form of mindfulness. As explained by Purser, contemporary practices of mindfulness derive from Buddhism but are frequently stripped of the “teachings on ethics that accompanied it [Buddhism], as well as the liberating aim of dissolving attachment to a false sense of self while enacting compassion for all other beings” (Purser, 2019b, n.p.) It would be a fallacy to lump different manifestations of mindfulness practice together. Kyle Chayka develops a similar argument in *The Longing for Less* (Chayka, 2020). Contrasting lifestyle minimalism with historical precedents that range from Donald Judd’s minimalist art to medieval Japanese aesthetics, Chayka shows that there are vast divergences in philosophy behind the different actors and practices that call themselves minimalist. This indicates that there is a plurality of “minimalisms” and “mindfulnesses,” which can learn from each other, and from their critique in journalism, public debate, and critical scholarship. Moreover, I wish to emphasize (though I cannot really prove this point) that most advocates and practitioners of minimalism and mindfulness have good intentions. Many want to actively tackle urgent socio-ecological problems.

The question remaining, therefore, is how “mindful minimalists” can further develop their practice and philosophy in order to effectively achieve social justice, ecological regeneration, and individual self-help at the same time. While I cannot give a complete answer to this question, I will – in the remainder of this chapter – make three suggestions for this endeavor, which I propose to describe as *engaged mindfulness*.

My first suggestion for an engaged mindfulness practice and philosophy is to specify the issues that it seeks to tackle. It happens quite often that minimalist lifestyle advocates give vague or metaphorical titles to the problems that their practice aims to alleviate. They speak of clutter, busyness, modern society, industrialization, a world of too much, or a world of excess. I have analyzed this rhetoric elsewhere (Meissner, 2019) and will not develop an extensive analysis here. What I wish to underline, however,



is that it is impossible to tackle shared problems of “too much” (stress, waste, anxiety, etc.) if it remains unspecified which social paradigms and institutions cause and aggravate these problems in the first place. To that end, contemporary degrowth scholarship and literature can offer great support, though degrowth is not the only relevant source of social analysis available in this context.

The second suggestion is to avoid considering individual-lifestyle and politico-institutional change in isolation from each other. The task at hand is to live sustainable and happy personal lifestyles while at the same time building just and ecologically regenerative societies – for instance by following the models of “doughnut economics” (Raworth, 2018), the “economy for the common good” (Felber, 2019), or the “green new deal without growth” (Mastini et al., 2020). To achieve this, political mobilization, such as campaigning and activism, is needed. In my view, electing political representatives with a green and/or social agenda is an important but by far not the only possible and necessary form of engagement in this context. After all, voting is a bit like consumption. Voters choose between pre-designed programs for social reproduction and development. The political, in contrast, is “the contested public terrain where different imaginings of possible socio-ecological orders compete over the symbolic and material institutionalization of these visions” (Swyngedouw, 2015, p. 90). Political engagement extends far beyond consuming and voting, but the opposite is true as well. Political campaigners or activists who do not strive for integrity in their personal lifestyles run the risk of being accused of hypocrisy. George Monbiot describes this tension as follows:

Had we put as much effort into preventing environmental catastrophe as we've spent on making excuses for inaction, we would have solved it by now. ... The commonest current excuse is this: “I bet those protesters have phones/go on holiday/wear leather shoes.” In other words, we won't listen to anyone who is not living naked in a barrel, subsisting only on murky water. Of course, if you are living naked in a barrel we will dismiss you too, because you're a hippie weirdo. Every messenger, and every message they bear, is disqualified on the grounds of either impurity or purity. (2019, n.p.)

Contemporary socio-environmental engagement is subject to a hyper-mediatized, scrutinized and contested public debate, which is ready to disqualify campaigners and activists on multiple grounds. In this special context, it is a matter not only of personal integrity but also of political strategy

that campaigners and activists have their political goals reflected in their personal lifestyles – as much as this is possible, that is. Achieving a feasible and strategic alignment between individual lifestyles and political mobilization is, therefore, an important characteristic that qualifies engaged mindfulness.

My third and final suggestion for engaged mindfulness is to combine personal experience with political engagement. Social movements increasingly recognize that it benefits their practice to involve mindfulness practice in their activist routines. The socio-environmental movement Extinction Rebellion (XR), for example, dedicates substantive attention to the concept and practice of *regenerative culture*. XR's regenerative culture seeks to combine self-care, people-care, and planet-care (Westwell & Bunting, 2020). Its goal is to foster habits and procedures that prevent activist burn-out, avoid and mediate conflict, and prefigure the caring and regenerative socio-ecology that XR envisions for the future. Regenerative culture for instance involves the facilitation of “check-ins” before and after meetings, workshops, or actions. During such check-ins, activists practice the non-judgmental sharing of their feelings and experience. XR holds emotional debrief sessions after protest and civil disobedience actions, as well as climate grief workshops, during which activists are invited to openly express their emotion, embrace despair and grief, and, again, share their experience (with the option to remain silent). In facilitating the non-judgmental reflection on and sharing of experience, XR's “regen” routine overlaps with mindfulness, which has been defined as “a process of regulating attention in order to bring a quality of nonlaborative awareness to current experience and a quality of relating to one's experience within an orientation of curiosity, experiential openness, and acceptance” (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 232). In contrast to the mindfulness practice that Pulser critiques in *McMindfulness*, however, XR's appliance of mindfulness principles is oriented towards channeling emotion and experience into collective action. In their analysis of XR's regenerative culture, Emily Westwell and Josh Bunting argue that XR's “practices of emotional expression aim to build a culture of care and compassion that systematically produces and regenerates its activism” (2020, p. 547). In its set-up, XR's regenerative culture is therefore an ideal example of engaged mindfulness, and it is not the only one.

Jenny Odell's *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* is an inspiring example of a self-help book that promotes minimalist principles and engaged mindfulness. In contrast to the minimalist lifestyle narratives that I have discussed above, Odell's plea for doing nothing departs from a specific analysis of the social paradigms and institutions that cause contemporary problems of mental overload and ecological breakdown. “My

argument is clearly anti-capitalist,” Odell writes (Odell, 2019, p. xii) and she continues: “I believe that capitalism, colonialist thinking, loneliness, and an abusive stance towards the environment all coproduce one another” (p. xviii). In order to tackle these problems, Odell proposes doing nothing. Yet, in her view, doing nothing is not just a minimalist self-help hack that allows individuals of privilege to disengage with socio-environmental problems. On the contrary, she frames doing nothing as a form of refusal toward what she calls the “attention economy,” because, for her, there are parallels between what the economy does to an ecological system and what the attention economy does to our attention. In both cases, there’s a tendency toward an aggressive monoculture, where those components that are seen as “not useful” which cannot be appropriated (by loggers or by Facebook) are the first to go (Odell, 2019, p. xviii).

Doing nothing is presented as “resistance in place” to this exploitative, monocultural economy, which values productivity and profit above all else. It means making “oneself into a shape that cannot so easily be appropriated by a capitalist value system” (Odell, 2019, p. xvi). Interestingly, doing nothing also involves mindfulness practice. Odell invites individuals to do nothing in order develop an awareness for their embodied experience and, importantly, for their bioregional entanglements – “the many life-forms of each place” and “how they are interrelated, including with humans” (p. xviii). The book illustrates this proposition with anecdotes from Odell’s own practice of contemplating in a rose garden of her neighborhood in Oakland, California; and her engagement with a group of crows visiting her home and following her on the street.

*How to Do Nothing* is a special case of minimalist lifestyle narrative. It laments problems of “too much,” advocates a reduction in work and social media consumption and seeks to help readers focus on their personal and embodied experience of reality. Yet, in contrast to most minimalist lifestyle narratives, the book frames this as a deliberate act of anti-capitalist refusal and as a prep-work for political mobilization. For Odell, doing nothing is “an active process of listening that seeks out the effects of racial, environmental and economic injustice and brings about real change” (Odell, 2019, p. 22), a “deprogramming device and ... sustenance for those feeling too disassembled to act meaningfully” (p. 22), and “a rest stop for those on their way to fight the good fight” (p. xxii). In advocating the mutually reinforcing combination of social critique, embodied experience, self-care, and political activism, Odell’s *How to Do Nothing* and XR’s regenerative culture resist overstrain and de-politicization at the same time. In so doing, they inspiringly illustrate the kind of *engaged mindfulness* advocated in this chapter.

## Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to address engagement in a double sense. In critically discussing engagement in contemporary minimalist lifestyles and mindfulness practice, I sought to illustrate engaged and engaging humanities scholarship. It is important to emphasize that minimalist lifestyles, mindfulness practice, and humanities scholarship are intrinsically diverse as well as constantly developing. They resist generalization. It would be impossible to pin down the notion of engagement in these fields of practice to a single definition. What is possible, however, is to identify characteristics of engagement that these fields seem to share. A basic characteristic that they share is a determination towards what might be called “deep listening.” By this I mean the commitment towards engaging with people, objects, and environments in detail and – as much as this is possible – on their own terms. As opposed to hearing, listening involves an active commitment towards perception. The concept of deep listening underlines this active or “engaged” quality of perception in its multiple forms (auditory, visual, haptic, etc.).

When XR activists practice the patient and non-judgmental sharing of feelings and perceptions, they engage in deep listening. When Odell maintains that “[t]o do nothing is to hold yourself still so that you can perceive what is actually there,” she advocates a form of deep socio-ecological listening (Odell literally uses the term “deep listening” in her work). Something similar happens when humanities scholars close-read narratives and visuals, or when they engage in conversations with people – whether online or offline. When analyzing minimalist lifestyle narratives, interviewing practitioners and asking questions in minimalist online groups, it was my goal to listen attentively to what the advocates and practitioners of minimalist lifestyles have to say about their practice. Humanities scholars share this commitment to deep listening with the qualitative social sciences, even though it may be argued that the “deep listening to objects” (such as literature and art) plays a more pronounced role in the humanities.

Another vital characteristic of engagement that the examples of engaged mindfulness discussed in this chapter and humanities scholarship share is that they are committed to social change. What distinguishes XR’s regenerative culture routine and Odell’s life-advice from the other minimalist and mindfulness practices discussed is that they are committed to channeling experience, knowledge, and self-care towards political participation. My understanding of engaged humanities scholarship is similar. It analyzes and also criticizes cultural objects, practices, and phenomena. Yet, such approach never just ends in analysis and critique, but commits itself towards mobilizing

analysis and critique for a broader goal as well. The broader goal of my research for this chapter was to understand if and how emerging minimalist lifestyles could act as cultural-political steppingstones towards a degrowth society.

My findings are that the advocates of degrowth and lifestyle minimalism share a range of characteristics, such as concern about socio-environmental exploitation and the vision for a good life under conditions of material sufficiency. In contrast, they diverge on how they relate to what I consider an urgent question of our time: how to create social justice and wellbeing in a context of an (ecologically necessary) shrinking of production, consumption, and GDP growth? Degrowthers highlight that the individual and ecological benefits of sufficiency lifestyles can only be realized in manner that is socially just and effective in halting ecological breakdown provided that they go hand in hand with institutional changes, such as regulation; redistribution; the strengthening of the care, craft, and culture sectors; the fostering of commoning; and so on and so forth. In contrast, the advocates of minimalist lifestyles tend to consider sufficiency lifestyles as a matter of individual consumer choice and personal mindfulness. In doing so, they – and here I echo Ronald Pulser's critique in *McMindfulness* – tend to foreclose the kind of collective and political engagement that the urgently needed societal transition to degrowth presupposes. It is therefore important envision a new and engaged form of minimalist mindfulness. Characteristic of this mindfulness, I suggest, is that it specifies the problem it seeks to tackle, that it avoids considering individual-lifestyle and politico-institutional change in isolation from each other, and that it combines personal experience with political engagement. In so doing, I think that minimalist lifestyles could transcend from a lifestyle trend into an inspiring and much-needed eco-political force.

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# Part III

## Collaborations



## 8. Embedded, Embodied, Engaged

Studying and Valorizing Home Movie *Dispositifs*

*Tim van der Heijden & Joseph Wachelder*

### Abstract

Building on our experiences in the NWO-funded research project “Changing Platforms of Ritualized Memory Practices: The Cultural Dynamics of Home Movies” (2012–2016), this chapter reflects upon the heuristic potential of the concept of *dispositif* for both studying and valorizing the history of home movie making and screening as 20<sup>th</sup>-century family memory practices. Our experiences with a wide variety of valorization activities – such as the making of two museum exhibitions, a historical re-enactment, and an online best practice guide – support an understanding of valorization as a highly reciprocal process between all stakeholders involved. Rather than involving a one-way dissemination of findings, embedded and embodied valorization practices, we argue, can facilitate engaged humanities research and raise the societal relevancy of historical investigations.

**Keywords:** home movies, *dispositif*, re-enactment, valorization, embedment, embodiment

### Introduction

The engaged university is back (Van der Zwaan, 2017; Smidt & Sursock, 2011). After the demolition of academia’s ivory tower in the 1970s and 1980s (Wachelder, 2003), the world of higher education began to embrace the emerging ethos of neo-liberalism, marked as it was by innovation, competition, and excellence. After the opening years of the new millennium, this period was followed by one in which outreach and research valorization

were given more attention again. Maastricht University, for instance, has required the inclusion of a valorization addendum in PhD theses since September 2014. For a definition of valorization, the university's dissertation regulations referred to a report of the National Valorization Committee (2011, p. 8) which defines knowledge valorization as the "process of creating value from knowledge, by making knowledge suitable and/or available for social (and/or economic) use and by making knowledge suitable for translation into competitive products, services, processes and new commercial activities" (Maastricht University, 2018). The specter of neo-liberalism is very present in this definition. Meanwhile, it is generally recognized that the term "valorization" falls short when it comes to acknowledging the highly reciprocal interactions between stakeholders (Van der Heijden, 2018b). In that respect, the word "co-creation" sounds more sympathetic – as maintained by the Faculty of the Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS) in its definition of knowledge valorization<sup>1</sup> – yet it also black-boxes the phenomenon. This is why it has become relevant once again to explore the nature of engaged humanities and its characteristics, also because in current reflections on engaged higher education the notion of engagement is used in such a wide variety of meanings and contexts (Van der Zwaan, 2017, p. 154; Heijnen & Van der Vaart, 2018).

This chapter reflects on how we used the concept of *dispositif* for studying and valorizing the history of home movie making and screening as twentieth-century family memory practices in the research project "Changing Platforms of Ritualized Memory Practices: The Cultural Dynamics of Home Movies," funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) between 2012 and 2016.<sup>2</sup> In this long-term historical study, we investigated home movie practices by focusing on the question of how film, video, and digital media, as changing technological means of family memory production, have shaped new forms and meanings of home movie making and screening. Three multidimensional concepts served as heuristic and analytical tools to study the cultural dynamics of home movies: *dispositif*, *generations*, and *amateurs* (cf. Aasman, Fickers, & Wachelder, 2018a, pp. 9–12). The *dispositif*-concept allowed us to analyze

1 See <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/research/institutes/fasos-research-institute/valorisatie-fasos>.

2 The members of the project team were Andreas Fickers, Joseph Wachelder, Susan Aasman, Tom Slootweg, and Tim van der Heijden. For more information on the research project, including its activities, presentations, and publications, see the project's weblog: <https://homemoviesproject.wordpress.com>.

the relationships between technology, content, and perception within and between different media constellations. The concept of *generations* was helpful to analyze the dynamics prevalent among users and user groups involved in changing home movie technologies and user practices over time. The concept of *amateurs*, lastly, proved useful in understanding the kind of (tacit) knowledge and expertise developed by, and attributed to, a specific group of users, and the dynamic and complex relationships implied in the concept for other user categories, such as professionals, laymen, and experts. Here we will predominantly focus on the heuristic value of *dispositif*, not only as an analytical tool, but also as a useful concept in our project's valorization activities.

The research project entailed a collaboration between Maastricht University, the University of Groningen, and the University of Luxembourg, as well as various partners from the cultural heritage field, including museums, libraries, and national and regional audiovisual archives. First, we collaborated in the production of two *museum exhibitions* on the history of home movies: one held at the Limburgs Museum in Venlo, the Netherlands, and the other at the Huis van Alijn museum of everyday life in Ghent, Belgium. Secondly, we created and participated in a *historical re-enactment* and theatrical performance called "Staging the Amateur Film *Dispositif*" at the International Orphan Film Symposium held at the Eye Filmmuseum in Amsterdam. At this event, we staged and re-enacted *dispositifs* of family home movie screening practices of the 1950s, 1980s, and 2010s. Thirdly, the team developed an online *best practice guide* on how to preserve family memories stored in various memory technologies and formats, including film reels, analogue videotapes, and digital media.

This chapter has a threefold objective. First, we aim to highlight, exemplify, and discuss the heuristic potential of *dispositif* as an analytical concept in media historical research. Secondly, we will discuss how the concept of *dispositif* contributed to our project's valorization activities, sometimes in surprising ways. Our project activities did not merely translate research results from academia to the public, but nourished the research as well. Thirdly, we will discuss the apparent suitability of the concept of *dispositif* to mediate between research and valorization activities. It will turn out that among the three dimensions constituting the *dispositif*, especially the perceptual dimension, referring to social embedment and embodied perception, offers intuitive opportunities for engagement in various ways. In the conclusion, we will reflect on how our project activities can be regarded as forms of embedded, embodied, and engaged humanities research.



## Studying Home Movie *Dispositifs*

### *Dispositif as Analytical Concept*

The original French term *dispositif* is often translated in English as “apparatus” or “device.” However, as film historian Frank Kessler noted in “Notes on *dispositif*,” an unpublished seminar paper on the evolution and use of the *dispositif*-concept in media studies, such translations are problematic because they tend to reduce the concept to its mere technical level while overlooking its spatial dimension. The aspect of “disposition,” in the sense of “arrangement” and “tendency,” is of equal importance to the meaning of the concept (Kessler, 2007; cf. Meunier, 1999, pp. 83–84). Although it is possible to find earlier theoretical reflections on the technical and spatial arrangement of subjects, for instance in Plato’s allegory of the cave and Freud’s explorations of the human mind, *dispositif* emerged as an influential analytical concept in French post-structuralist philosophy of the 1970s. Most notably, Michel Foucault and Jean-Louis Baudry used the concept as an analytical framework to describe the ideological processes of subject construction and positioning. For instance, in Foucault’s well-known treatise on Bentham’s panopticon, the *dispositif* of the architectural design of the late-eighteenth-century prison was discussed to illustrate how the prisoner, as a subject, was constructed or “dispositioned” through a spatial arrangement of power relations and discourses (Foucault, 1980; cf. De Certeau, 1984).

Baudry (1978, 1986a, 1986b), in contrast, used the concept in relation to cinema. He showed how it is helpful in analyzing the spatial and ideological positioning of the film spectator through what he called the “cinematic *dispositif*.” In the 1970s, Baudry’s approach to cinema – known as the “apparatus theory” – was highly innovative in addressing and theorizing the spatial and material dimensions of the cinematic experience. While structuralist and semiotic approaches to film predominantly focussed on the linguistic, aesthetic, and narrative characteristics of the “cinematic text,” Baudry considered the materiality of the cinematic apparatus of equal importance. His apparatus theory proposed to describe the identity of cinema not only by looking at the “illusions of reality” projected on the screen, but also by considering the cinematic *dispositif* as a whole: the content of the moving images, the materiality of the film projector and screen, as well as the architecture of the darkened screening room in which the spectators are sitting – all contribute to cinema’s “impression of reality.” In other words, it is not just the cinematic text, but the interrelationships between the textual, material, and perceptual dimensions that

constitute the identity of cinema and the cinematic experience (Baudry, 1986a, p. 290).<sup>3</sup>

While Baudry's theoretical reflections on *dispositif* provided a new way of thinking about cinema through his emphasis on its material and spatial dimensions, his work was later criticized for its essentialism and trans-historical tendency by favoring classical narrative cinema and the mainstream theatrical setting (Kessler, 2007, p. 12). To sidestep this criticism, recent scholarship interpreted and deployed the concept pragmatically (cf. Albéra and Tortajada, 2015; Fickers, 2014; Röther, 2012; Masson, 2011; Kessler, 2007). Kessler, for instance, proposed a pragmatic re-evaluation of the *dispositif*-concept as a heuristic tool in media historical research, which allows for studying the interrelationship between technology, its specific form, and its viewing position: "At different moments in history, a medium can produce a specific and (temporarily) dominating configuration of technology, text, and spectatorship. An analysis of these configurations could thus serve as a heuristic tool for the study of how the function and functioning of media undergo historical changes" (Kessler, 2007, p. 15; cf. Fickers, 2014, pp. 46–47). A pragmatic implementation of the *dispositif*-concept in media historical research helps to take into account different uses of the same text within various exhibition or screening contexts, or "spaces of communication" (Odin, 2014). The experience of watching moving images in a cinema differs from watching the same images in the classroom, at home on television, or on a smartphone while on the move. We take inspiration from Kessler, who maintained that it is more accurate to describe the "history of media as a history of *dispositifs*," rather than by focusing on a medium's identity or specificity (Kessler, 2007, p. 16; cf. Hickethier, 1995).

### *Historicizing Home Movie Dispositifs*

By considering the history of home movies as a history of changing *dispositifs*, we investigated how changing domestic or amateur media technologies in the twentieth century have shaped new forms of home movie making and screening as memory practices from a long-term historical perspective. In particular, we deployed the *dispositif*-concept for the historical analysis of the changing interrelationships between film, video, and digital media

3 With respect to the cinematic apparatus, Baudry distinguished between the screening apparatus itself (*dispositif*), which exclusively refers to the viewing situation, and the basic cinematographic apparatus (*appareil de base*), which refers to all technologies necessary for film production and screening: "the film stock, the camera, developing, montage considered in its technical aspects, et cetera, as well as the apparatus (*dispositif*) of projection" (Baudry, 1986b, p. 317; original emphasis).

as memory technologies, their mediated content and perception (Van der Heijden, 2018a, 2018b; cf. Aasman et al., 2018b). We historicized 'home movie *dispositifs*' by explicitly thinking together the following three interrelated dimensions:

1. *Material dimension* (technology): the recording and screening technologies (e.g., 35mm, 9.5mm, 16mm, 8mm, Super 8 film cameras and projectors; video recorders, videotapes, television screens; digital cameras, smartphones, computers).
2. *Textual dimension* (content): the narrative and aesthetic qualities of the audiovisual text (e.g., colour, sound, movement, duration, montage, genre, style, narration).
3. *Perceptual dimension* (perception): the cultural meanings, embodied perception, social embedment, use and interpretation of the text by the spectator or audience (e.g., memory, archival and sharing value, screening context).

Several historical *dispositifs* can be distinguished in home movie making and screening as twentieth-century memory practices. As established by our research, each historical home movie *dispositif* emerges after the successful introduction of a new domestic or amateur medium. Based on a historical discourse analysis of amateur magazines, journals, and handbooks providing guidelines on amateur film and video usages, at least five historical home movie *dispositifs* can be identified: (1) kinematography *dispositifs*, (2) small-gauge *dispositifs*, (3) Super 8 *dispositifs*, (4) home video *dispositifs*, and (5) digital media *dispositifs*. Each of these historical *dispositifs* is characterized by a specific constellation of an amateur media technology, its mediated content and perception (Van der Heijden, 2018a, 2018b). The home movie *dispositif* of the 1920s and 1930s, for instance, was characterized by the arrival and use of 9.5mm, 16mm, and 8mm "small gauge" technologies (technology); static, soundless, and predominantly black-and-white imagery (content); and large screen film projection in the living room (perception). Recordings of children growing up, birthday parties, holidays and other memorable family events were documented on a three-minute film reel, which after developing the film stock at a laboratory could be projected at home. Often, both the recording and screening of a home movie were special family occasions and required extensive preparations. The introduction of lighter, cheaper, smaller, and semi-automatized amateur film equipment during the post-war decades led to the popularization of home movie practices. Especially after the arrival and widespread dissemination of Kodak's Super

8 and Fuji's Single 8 cassette-based film technologies in the late 1960s, amateur filmmaking became increasingly user-friendly and accessible to middleclass families (Van der Heijden, 2018b).

In the 1970s and 1980s, the home movie *dispositif* was affected by the arrival of consumer video technologies. The videocassette recorder became part of the household media ensemble, and the television set gradually replaced the film projector as a means to screen moving images at home. Video formats like VHS and Betamax also generated a new sense of immediacy when capturing events with a video camera. Many users benefited from a significantly extended recording time, the ability to effortlessly record sound and image synchronously, and the possibility to instantly replay recordings afterwards on television at home (cf. Moran, 2002; Sloomweg, 2018; Van der Heijden, 2018b). Moreover, the replacement of film-based *dispositifs* by video as an electromagnetic-based medium came with many new possibilities and challenges in user practices, such as electronic editing and the possibility to overwrite or erase previous recordings. As the digital age emerged by the late 1990s and 2000s, the home movie *dispositif* changed once more. Nowadays almost everyone has access to digital media technologies, such as digital video cameras, tablets, or smartphones. Online and social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp allow for instantly sharing one's personal and family recordings in or outside the domestic sphere (cf. Motrescu-Mayes & Aasman, 2019). By looking at these changes from a long-term historical perspective, it becomes clear how the *dispositif* of home movie making and screening has significantly changed over time. Yet, it is also true that the succession of dominant *dispositifs* is not simply a given, nor is it an example of teleological progression.

What, then, makes the concept of *dispositif* a fruitful heuristic tool for analyzing the long-term history of home movies? If one manages to avoid its essentializing and (technological) deterministic inclinations, distinguishing between a material, textual, and perceptual dimension not only helps drawing the researcher's attention to these three aspects, but also raises specific interest in their interrelationships. The perceptual dimension entails, among other things, the social embedment of recording and screening practices, as well as the embodied experiences of relevant subjects. As such, the concept of *dispositif*, stemming from the 1970s, foreshadows diverse theoretical developments over half a century, and is capable to accommodate these.

### *Valorizing Home Movie Dispositifs*

The *dispositif*-concept not only guided our study of twentieth-century home movie making and screening, but also proved useful in the project's various research valorizations. Below we will focus on the development

and impact of three types of valorizations: (1) the historical re-enactment and theatrical performance called “Staging the Amateur Film *Dispositif*,” (2) two museum exhibitions, which dealt in different ways with the material and spatial dimensions of home movie practices, and (3) the development of an online best practice guide for the general public on how to preserve family memories stored on film, video, and digital formats.

### *Staging the Amateur Film Dispositif*

In March 2014, the project team performed a historical re-enactment called “Staging the Amateur Film *Dispositif*” at the 9<sup>th</sup> International Orphan Film Symposium, which was held at the Eye Filmmuseum in Amsterdam (Aasman, 2014; Fickers, 2015, 2018). The symposium welcomed contributions from scholars, archivists, and artists on “The Future of Obsolescence,” an urgent topic in the field of audiovisual cultural heritage and preservation. The event provided an opportunity to reconstruct and share with a broader audience the changing *dispositifs* of home movie screening as a twentieth-century family memory practice. In three “tableaux” we explored and demonstrated how past media usages of film, video, and digital media may have altered home movie screening practices.

While the various forms of screening family memories entailed watching and reliving these moments together, such moments themselves have rarely been recorded. These past social interactions, and the media constellations in which they took place, are “ephemeral,” so to speak (Aasman, 2014). This poses a challenge for historians. Not only because screening practices have hardly been materialized in historical documents. But also because the various technological artifacts used in such events (e.g., cameras, projectors, video recorders, television sets, et cetera) have become obsolete and were discarded over time. Moreover, the tacit knowledge employed in screenings may not be directly accessible anymore.

This prompted us to explore an alternative method, going *beyond* traditional discursive modes of historical analysis, to understand and engage with the changing means and meanings of family screening practices in the past. We were inspired by the method of experimental media archaeology, proposed by Andreas Fickers and Annie van den Oever (2014, 2019) as a sensorial and experimental way to “re-sensitize the media scholar to the social and cultural inscriptions in the materiality of media technologies beyond the discursive level” (2014, p. 273). Instead of analyzing textual or descriptive sources, such as amateur magazines, journals, advertisements, and how-to-do manuals, we explored home movie screenings by employing our own bodily senses and sharing our *experiences* with an audience.



Figure 8.1 Still from the media archaeological experiment and live performance of “Staging the Amateur Film Dispositif.”

In collaboration with the Eye Filmmuseum, Groningen Audiovisual Archive (GAVA), the Dutch Foundation for Amateur Film (*Stichting Amateurfilm*), and with the help of a stage director, we developed a theatre play to re-enact, reconstruct, and experience how families screened and watched their home movies and videos in different periods of time.<sup>4</sup> In the historical re-enactment, we staged how a fictional family named the “Mavericks” watched home movies in the 1950s with an 8mm film projector, screened home videos in the 1980s with a VCR on the television set, and watched digital videos on mobile phones and shared them online in the 2010s (Fig. 8.1).

As a media archaeological experiment, it helped to reconstruct and experience the changing *dispositifs* of home movie screening practices. It turned out that recommendations regarding the spatio-technical arrangements of screening, as they appeared in, for instance, how-to-do manuals, were difficult to realize in practice. In particular, we witnessed the contingent and unpredictable nature of the technology: some devices may cease to function properly at unforeseen moments. However, as Susan Aasman explains in her reflection on our media archaeological experiment, this “art of failure” actually proved to be quite revealing and, above all, an important finding:

One of the biggest lessons was in fact a major failure. In the first scene [when we reconstructed the 8mm film *dispositif*], at a particular moment,

4 The historical re-enactment was performed by Andreas Fickers, Susan Aasman, Guy Edmonds, Tom Slootweg, and Tim van der Heijden. The stage director was Marjan Sonke. The project team made a video recording of the performance with the help of camera operator Charlotte Storm van ‘s Gravesande (Team ENG).

the father failed to wind the reel in the projector. And even worse: when the film was finally in the projector, the lamp broke and we were unable to screen our home movie. Bad luck, but... the audience laughed. And even more surprising, they accepted this moment as part of the screening practice. They thought it was a moment that was scripted! That moment of laughter made us aware of the importance of people's relation with technology. And this becomes most clear at those moments when technology fails. Or better put: when people's interaction with technology becomes a struggle. (Aasman, 2014)

The audience also reacted unexpectedly when we re-enacted the digital media *dispositif*. In this scene, we performed the current dynamics of recording and sharing of personal videos. In contrast to film or video as memory technologies, digital devices like a smartphone or tablet, for example, combine the formerly separated recording, screening, and sharing functionalities. When the audience saw themselves projected on the big screen in real-time, as we turned our camera toward them, they started participating in the performance by waving their hands in acknowledgment. Throughout the performance, several people in the audience in fact made videos of the re-enactment, and subsequently shared them online. This equally resulted in new forms of unscripted togetherness and reinforced the point we wanted to convey to the audience as regards the changing rituals of memory staging in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. By staging the changing *dispositifs* of home movie screening in this specific valorization activity, we were thus able to experience, grasp, and document some of the spatial, sensorial, material, and temporal dimensions of past home movie screening practices.<sup>5</sup>

## Museum Exhibitions

Another important valorization activity was the production of two museum exhibitions on home movies in the Limburgs Museum and Huis van Alijn. The exhibition in the Limburgs Museum, entitled "A Century of Home Cinema: From Film Projector to Smartphone" (*Een eeuw thuisbioscoop: van filmprojector naar smartphone*), was programmed between May and October 2016. The exhibition provided an historical overview of the home

5 The historical re-enactment "Staging the Amateur Film *Dispositif*" was recorded on video. The full version can be watched here: <https://vimeo.com/95314562> (16:43). A shorter version can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/137589495> (2:54).

movie as a cultural practice in six episodes, starting with the first moving images of the late nineteenth century and concluding with the contemporary practice of vlogging on YouTube.<sup>6</sup> The exhibition in the Huis van Alijn was titled “Homeless Movies” and ran from June 2016 until January 2017.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to the historical orientation of the exhibition in the Limburgs Museum, this exhibition focused more on the artistic potential of historical home movies.

The project team was involved in the planning and preparation phase for both museum exhibitions. Tim van der Heijden, moreover, became a (voluntary) project assistant to curator Frank Holthuizen of the Limburgs Museum. This allowed Van der Heijden to employ research results from his then ongoing doctoral research. His work in this context proved essential in the creation of exhibition texts. As a project assistant, he furthermore was able to select (and lease-lend) for the exhibition important archival objects held in the collections of various external project partners. Van der Heijden also collaborated in the production of thematic videos featuring archival footage for the six historical time-periods presented. As this intensive collaboration was highly valued by the museum, specific concepts, ideas, and findings from the research project found their way into the exhibition. Conversely, the insights gained by co-producing the exhibition enriched the research project.

Both exhibitions explicitly or implicitly dealt with the *dispositif*-concept, yet in different ways. How, then, and to what extent did the exhibitions represent or emulate historical *dispositifs* of home movie making and screening as twentieth-century family memory practices? Are there also other possibilities to let museum visitors experience historical home movie *dispositifs* that go beyond historical reconstruction or emulation? What did we learn about the embedment and embodiment of the historical *dispositifs* of home movie making and screening from the two exhibitions? We will address these questions in the sections below, comparing and contrasting both exhibitions.

### *A Century of Home Cinema*

The concept of *dispositif* played an important role in “A Century of Home Cinema.” The suggested route through the exhibition spatially represented the historically distinct home movie *dispositifs*, first of all by staging the

6 For more information about the exhibition in the Limburgs Museum, see: <https://www.limburgs-museum.nl/nl/tentoonstelling/eeuw-thuisbioscoop>.

7 For more information about the exhibition in the Huis van Alijn, see: <http://www.huisvanalijn.be/collection/expo-homeless-movies>.





Figure 8.2 Overview of the first episode of the exhibition “A Century of Home Cinema.”

materiality of film, video, and digital media as domestic recording and screening technologies. The chronological display of characteristic historical media objects – including a magic lantern, Phenakistoscope, and Zoetrope in the “pre-cinema” episode; a replica of the Lumière Cinematograph; an original Pathé-Baby 9.5mm film camera and projector from the 1930s; a Super 8 film camera from the late 1960s; as well as various analogue and digital video recording devices, like an AKAI V-100 portable video recorder and a DVD-camera – aimed to generate historical awareness about technological changes in family memory practices. The thematic videos with fragments of home movies and videos, which were produced for each of the historical episodes, in turn emphasized the textual dimension of the historical home movie *dispositifs*. These videos were combined with a series of still frames taken from the museum’s own moving image collection, providing context to changes in content and style, aesthetic, and narrative qualities of home movies and videos throughout the twentieth century. Other objects related to contextual sources, such as film accessories, handbooks, magazines, and print advertisements elucidated the perceptual dimension of the historical home movie *dispositifs*. They illustrated how amateur filmmaking changed throughout the years as regards practices and norms (i.e., how to make a “good” film according to journals, handbooks, and how-to-do manuals), discursively (i.e., how women were framed or constructed as “new users” in various amateur film advertisements of the 1960s), and institutionally (i.e., the rise and fall of amateur “ciné-clubs”) (Fig. 8.2).

The exhibition not only represented but also emulated historical home movie *dispositifs*. The final episode, which addressed the blurring of



Figure 8.3 Viewing cabin with a 9.5 mm film projector for activating the documentary film.

boundaries between the private and the public as online video platforms such as YouTube and Facebook gained influence in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, featured a special “selfie corner,” where museum visitors could dress up and pose for a selfie in an enlarged frame resembling the YouTube interface. This interactive and playful installation was meant to sensitize visitors to the new ways in which our daily experiences and memories are recorded, shared, and archived in today’s social media age. Historical home movie *dispositifs* were furthermore emulated in special viewing cabins positioned at the transitions of each of the exhibition spaces. Each of these viewing cabins screened a part of the documentary *Ik film, dus ik besta* (I Film, Therefore I Am) – one of the highlights of this museum exhibition.<sup>8</sup> In four chronological episodes, the documentary tells the story of the renowned German-born Jewish photographer Werner Mantz (1901–1983), who settled in Maastricht in 1938. Aside from being a professional photographer, Mantz also filmed his family for many decades as an amateur filmmaker – a family tradition sustained by his children and grandchildren. The documentary, which chronicles Werner Mantz’s life and family memories, features actor Hans van Leipsig who portrays Mantz and takes the museum visitor back in time. The *generational* aspects of amateur filmmaking become apparent when Mantz’s son Clément and grandson Marc react and reflect

8 The documentary *Ik film, dus ik besta* was produced by Tanja Nabben and Wiek Lenssen, in cooperation with the Limburgs Museum Venlo, the Netherlands. For more information, see: <http://limburgfilmfestival.nl/film/film-dus-besta-2016> and <http://wielenssenfilm.nl/ik-film-dus-ik-besta>.

on the family stories and film footage from their own points-of-view. The *dispositif*-concept, however, plays an equally important and perhaps more subtle role. As mentioned, the documentary was presented in parts, at four viewing cabins. All viewing cabins shared a similar spatial arrangement with regard to the spectator or viewer. They differed, however, in the sense that each cabin included the historical screening technology symbolic for the specific time-period covered: a Pathé-Baby 9.5mm film projector, an Eumig Super 8 film projector, a Video 2000 video recorder, and a Samsung tablet. The museum visitor could press a button attached to the respective historical devices to activate the digital projector and start one of the four fragments of the documentary (Fig. 8.3).

The various interactive elements of the exhibition aimed to engage the museum visitor. The spatial arrangement of successive *dispositifs* provided an embodied experience of change over time. Simple emulation elements, like pushing a button, furthered this embodied experience. The multidimensional presentation of the different episodes added historical embedment to the technologies and texts of home movies and sensitized the museum visitors to the continuities and discontinuities in home movie making and screening throughout the twentieth century.

### *Homeless Movies*

The collaboration with Huis van Alijn was less directly integrated in our project. The project team had several meetings in which the researchers shared their approaches and preliminary findings. Furthermore, project members Andreas Fickers and Tim van der Heijden organized a Maastricht Research Based Learning Experience for Bachelor students of the FASoS Arts & Culture program at the museum in Ghent. Despite these previous collaborations, the two-part exhibition surprised the project team in terms of both its content and its form. The first part of the exhibition was created by Jasper Rigole, an artist who is fascinated by home movies and who researched them at the museum's archive. Rigole made a number of impressive home movie installations to create, as he puts it, an "archive of someone else's memories" (Rigole, 2015). He is particularly interested in "orphaned" home movies in the archive, or those he found himself at flea markets. Together with the historical devices that were used to make and screen them, he created an installation in which all of these elements were materially brought together into a whole. Therefore, the installation can be interpreted as a material representation of home movie *dispositifs* (Fig. 8.4). In another installation Rigole continued to confront his own spectatorship in order to address his fascination with the "authenticity" of

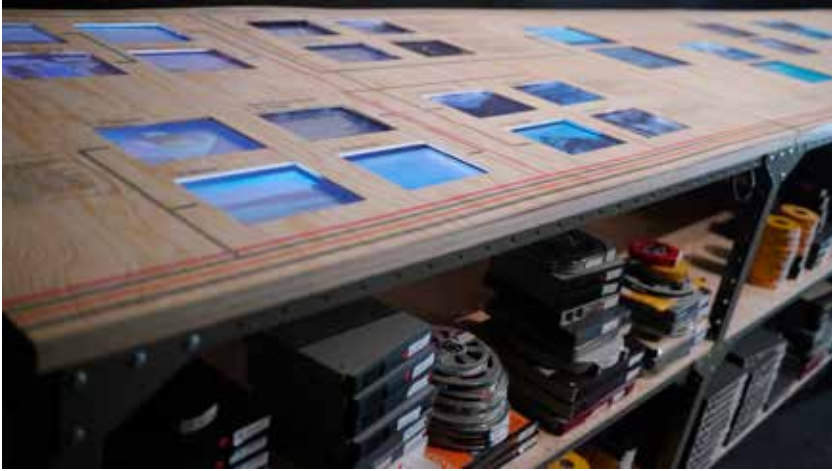


Figure 8.4 Image of Jasper Rigole’s art installation as part of the exhibition “Homeless Movies.”

personal memories. Here, he juxtaposed the material traces left behind by a home moviemaker from the past with fake ones he himself constructed. This juxtaposition thus allowed him to interrogate the authenticity of the home movie *dispositif* from a perspective of artistic appropriation and re-use.

Curator Edwin Carels developed the idea for the second part of the exhibition. He deliberately chose to explore a reversal of the home movie *dispositif*, which traditionally is geared toward the living room for screening. He turned home movies into *homeless* movies by replacing the intimacy of the living room with the anonymity of photo booth-like cabins scattered throughout the city of Ghent (Aasman et al., 2018a) (Fig. 8.5). These booths, six in total, colored in a cardboard color, could only accommodate one, maybe two spectators, and contained a rather uncomfortable wooden sitting bench. While the pervasive background noise of the city made it challenging to listen to the sound featured in the films, Carels nevertheless was able to keep some elements of traditional home movies *dispositifs*. He wanted to avoid presenting films with a narrative structure – something more seasoned filmmakers rather than home moviemakers would opt to do. The six invited visual artists as producers of the “homeless” movies were furthermore subjected to the conditions that their movies should be around three minutes in length (like early celluloid-based home movies) and needed to engage with the archival collection of the museum.

The deliberate mirroring of home movies *dispositifs* resulted in some remarkable movies and in an interesting experience for the spectators. Mekhitar Garabedian, Eva Giolo, Katrin Kamrau, Jasper Rigole, Meggy Rustamova, and Lisa Spilliaert – the visual artists involved – all made



Figure 8.5 Private film cabins as a way of mirroring the home movie dispositif.

highly personal and idiosyncratic films. As was required, all of them worked with the archival materials held by the museum, but they did so in highly surprising ways. Katrin Kamrau, for example, was overwhelmed by the sheer number of available home movies and the way in which the collection could be queried in the digital catalog by key-word search. Browsing the catalogue, in fact, proved so challenging that she ultimately was unable to fully engage with the actual footage. She got fascinated by the personal characteristics of home movies. She therefore asked to what extent they have local meanings, or also refer to global experiences and universal values? To explore these various aspects, Kamrau specifically used sound in her video. She opted to have the museum staff responsible for the catalogue read aloud the keywords she used, one after the other. Most of the time the screen was black, aside from the moments when translations of the keywords were given. Kamrau used actual fragments of the home movies only a few times, when a particular keyword referred to a specific location or situation.

Mekhitar Garabedian also made a noteworthy, once again highly creative “homeless” movie. Taking a closer look at Garabedian’s artistic oeuvre reveals that the notion of “memories” features prominently in his work: from the perspective of the personal, but also in terms of their collective nature. This is in part due to his family history. As members of the Armenian diaspora, Garabedian’s family immigrated from the Middle East to Belgium to build a new life. His artistic work often entails a documentation of the daily life of

his family members. During the homeless movies project, he nevertheless found that the archival collection of the museum did not contain any films or videos made by immigrants. For this reason, he interpreted Carels's requirement to work with the archive of the museum in a surprising, perhaps even subversive way. Instead of re-using home movies made by others, he donated the compilation video made for the exhibition, entitled *Nora (Gentbrugge, 2000)*, *Laurice & Nora (Gentbrugge, 2010)*, *Nora (Gentbrugge, 2016)*, to the archival collection. In so doing, he added everyday footage to the archive from an otherwise invisible immigrant family in Belgium.

Carels's curatorial decision to invert home movie *dispositifs* thus resulted in several interesting artistic contributions that also seem to articulate, interrogate, or criticize these *dispositifs*. To the spectators roaming the noisy city, the cabins offered an option to find the unfamiliar in the familiar; or to find refuge in the "unhomely," on an uncomfortable wooden bench, while watching an artistic reworking of someone else's home movies and memories. The unconventional embedment of reworked home movies, exploiting inverted home movie *dispositifs*, produced extraordinary, embodied experiences.

## Best Practice Guide

The best practice guide *Het Behouden Waard* ("worth keeping") was created to underline the value of amateur audiovisual heritage and to raise awareness about the need to document, preserve, and contextualize amateur media productions stored on various film and video formats, and as (online) digital data. Project members Susan Aasman, Tom Slootweg, and Tim van der Heijden, supported by student-assistants Jody Kok and Lieuwe Jongma, created this online user guide for the Dutch general public. It has been integrated and embedded in the Amateur Film Platform, a website and online repository initiated by the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, in collaboration with the Groningen Audiovisual Archive (GAVA), the Limburgs Museum Venlo, and the Rotterdam City Archive. The Amateur Film Platform presents a growing collection of digitized amateur films and videos as well as digital-born material.

The project members structured the guide according to three distinctive themes. The first one, "saving and digitizing" (*bewaren en digitaliseren*), provides an overview of the wide variety of technological carriers that are, or have been, used over the years. The guide discusses their various technical specificities, but also suggest some important requirements for

preservation and digitization. The guide differentiates between celluloid-based formats, like 16mm, 9.5mm, 8mm and Super 8 film; electromagnetic video formats, like Betamax, VHS and Video 2000; and various digital media carriers and (online) storage possibilities, like a CD-ROM, external hard disc, and the cloud. The second theme is “describing my collection” (*mijn collectie beschrijven*), which offers recommendations regarding the description and contextualization of amateur film, home video and digital collections. The project members explain that context information – or “meta data” – increases the value of the film or video as archival document. The third theme, “what is the value?” (*wat is de waarde?*), discusses the emotional, historical, cultural, and economic values that private amateur media collections may have.

The concept of *dispositif* played a role in the development of the best practice guide, albeit far more implicitly than in our other valorization activities. First of all, the guide foregrounded the materiality of film, video, and digital media as memory carriers, as well as the practical impact of technological change and obsolescence for amateur users. The textual dimension was addressed in the second theme, where we offer guidelines for enriching the collection by adding technical information (i.e., whether the film contains sound), content information (i.e., identifying who is there to see in the picture), background information (i.e., what has been the occasion or reason for making the film or video), and information about ownership and its legacy. The perceptual dimension of the home movie *dispositif*, finally, resurfaced in the third theme, especially when we discuss the value of amateur media as important historical and cultural sources. The embedment of the best practice guide in the institutional context of the Amateur Film Platform, hosted by the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, warrants its prolonged accessibility.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have reflected on the heuristic potential of the concept of *dispositif* for both studying and valorizing the history of home movie making and screening as twentieth-century family memory practices. The *dispositif*-concept proved to be highly useful as a multidimensional tool for analyzing, historicizing, and thinking together the changing interrelationships between the materiality of media technologies, their mediated content and perception within various social, cultural, and spatial contexts. We believe that such a pragmatic deployment of the concept

allows for an intermedial and non-essentialist approach to the history of media technologies and their practices. The concept was also suitable to mediate between the research and valorization activities of our project. In fact, it inspired us, and our project partners, to explicitly engage with the material, textual, and perceptual dimensions of historical home movie *dispositifs*. This sometimes led to unexpected and surprising results, which nourished our research as well.

The project valorization activities, we can conclude, provided different forms of embedment, embodiment, and engagement. In the historical re-enactment “Staging the Amateur Film *Dispositif*,” we made use of our own bodily senses to reconstruct and experience past home movie screening practices. By developing a theatre play, we created a (new) space not only to re-embed now obsolete devices, but also to re-enact those historical experiences we rarely find in available historical sources. The historical re-enactment, moreover, elicited various sensorial experiences that were highly situated and embodied. The live performance and staging of past home movie screening practices created both an audience on stage and in the theatre hall, bringing about an interesting mix of “hypermediated” and “immediate” experiences (cf. Bolter & Grusin, 1999), both for us, performing on stage, and for the audience in the lecture hall. The performance constituted a spatial and social embedment, the latter especially in those scenes when the film projector broke down (in the film tableau) and when the audience reacted to their own live streaming (in the digital tableau). The video documentation of the historical re-enactment furthermore served as a material embedment of the performance.

The best practice guide *Het Behouden Waard* engaged the general public with the subject of technological obsolescence and the value of amateur film, home video and digital collections by raising awareness about the need to document, preserve, and contextualize home movies, videos, and online content. For the best practice guide the project team searched for a stable, unambiguous social embedment, which was found in collaborating with the Amateur Film Platform and its initiating partners from the archival world. Only an established institution is able to warrant continuous modifications in infrastructures resulting from the ever-evolving Internet.

The exhibition “A Century of Home Cinema” in the Limburgs Museum showed that strategies to communicate historical change to the visitor cannot rely solely on historical screenings just striving for immediate experiences. The succession of and interactions between *dispositifs* suggested rather reflective, multiple, and hypermediate approaches in the exhibition design.



The exhibition featured various heterogeneous, but interrelated elements, such as collages, memories, and obsolete technologies, to communicate the complexity of the experience of historical change. The documentary film and other multimedia installations aimed to engage the museum visitor through embodied experiences and historical sensations, in which the documentary viewing cabins moreover embedded the visitor both spatially and materially. The surprising way in which the exhibitions at Huis van Alijn addressed all aspects of home movies *dispositifs* created embodied experiences that prompted much reflection. The “Homeless Movies” exhibition was particularly evocative and engaging in how it played with the material, textual, and perceptual dimensions of home movie *dispositifs*. The artistic installations and the screening of “homeless” movies by means of photo-booth cabins situated in public spaces interrogated, inverted, and criticized the ways in which home movies were traditionally screened and watched. As such, they displaced the social, material, and spatial embedment of the home movie as a family memory practice in order to construct new or alternative embodied experiences, as well as forms of historical engagement.

Referring in an historical study to engaged research is an ambivalent undertaking. It is almost obvious, yet not really revealing, in case both the researcher and the audience share an interest in history. Our project valorization activities show how historical engagement can nevertheless be stimulated through various forms of embedment as well as embodied experiences. For our project, embedded research created opportunities rather than limitations (McGinity & Salokangas, 2014). In particular, the historical re-enactment “Staging the Amateur Film *Dispositif*” benefited from the reciprocal dynamics between the audience and our performance. Drawing from the experiences in our project activities, we argue that valorization is not a one-way street but can provide many valuable opportunities that go beyond reaching out to the general public. Instead of the one-dimensional dissemination of findings from academia to the public, valorization is potentially a highly reciprocal process that requires interaction and collaboration and is mutually beneficial for all stakeholders involved. Such interactions can serve as an eyeopener, or become even critical, as was shown in the “Homeless Movies” exhibition. In our case, the valorization activities nourished the research as well. The various forms of embedment as well as the embodiment of experiences in our valorization activities helped to shape our conceptual and methodological framework, and vice versa. In this way, embedded and embodied valorization practices can facilitate engaged humanities research and raise the societal relevancy of historical investigations.

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## 9. History in a Box

Bringing Families Together through Technology

*Costas Papadopoulos & Susan Schreibman*

### Abstract

History in a Box is a technology-driven, team-based blended-learning activity that fosters multigenerational/family-based learning. The premise of the activity is to encourage historical thinking and teach historical reasoning by placing participants in the position of researchers as they investigate an important battle of the Irish 1916 Rising, The Battle of Mount Street Bridge. Utilizing a sophisticated tablet-based interface, participants become active generators of knowledge by looking at primary source material, evaluating conflicting sources, and forming new interpretations. This chapter discusses the design principles of the project and presents our findings from family-based events in the context of socially engaged research.

**Keywords:** family-based learning, historical reasoning, participatory design, user study, technology-enabled pedagogy

### Introduction

History in a Box is a technology-enabled, team-based inquiry activity, originally designed for secondary school students in Ireland.<sup>1</sup> By blending the physical and the digital, two modalities that complement and reinforce each other, it enables students to construct knowledge about a historical event, seamlessly moving between physical material and an Augmented Reality (AR) mobile application that provides them with tasks, hints, and directions, and which triggers digital content on the physical material they

<sup>1</sup> <https://mountstreet1916.ie/projects/history-in-a-box/>

are provided with (maps, photographs, letters, state records, 3D printed buildings, etc.).

The project is based on the content developed for *Contested Memories: The Battle of Mount Street Bridge*,<sup>2</sup> a virtual world project that (re)constructed in three dimensions the battlefield of the most successful Irish engagement of the 1916 Easter Rising, a week-long rebellion against the British rule of Ireland. The Battle of Mount Street Bridge took place in Dublin on a single day (Wednesday April 26) at the midpoint of the Rising as British troops from the UK sent to reinforce the troops already stationed in Ireland approached Mount Street Bridge, one of the southern routes into the city center where the rebels (or Volunteers) had taken The General Post Office and made it their headquarters. The 3D (re)construction was used to investigate how the battle unfolded, mapping it spatially and temporally to provide researchers with greater insight into how seventeen Irish Volunteers kept at bay two battalions of British troops (some 1750) for the better part of a day, and which accounted for almost half the British casualties of the week-long engagement (Hughes et al., 2017; Papadopoulos & Schreibman, 2019). This early and decisive victory for the Irish was in contrast to a week of defeats (culminating in the Irish surrender on April 29) and it has taken almost mythic proportions. It is also of interest to military historians as it is one of the first well-documented accounts of fighting in a built-up area. Despite an abundance of primary and secondary sources, establishing an accurate British casualty figure has remained problematic. Contemporary figures range from 165 (War Diary, 178th Brigade) to 234 (General Sir John Maxwell's post Rising figure [Maxwell, 1916]), with most subsequent sources in Ireland citing Maxwell's higher total. The much smaller Irish casualty figures, four killed, remains uncontested.

In order to understand the battle, the battlefield was spatially (re)constructed from a variety of extant sources (3D scans of existing buildings, with models created for destroyed buildings from photographs or 6" city maps). Establishing the temporal contours of the battle was more problematic, with sources that ranged from contradictory (see the discussion below on the capture of 25 Northumberland Road) to simply unstated. No contemporaneous documentation exists (the official War Diaries from the battalions involved are missing) and later accounts, from the British battalion histories written in the early 1920s to Irish witness statements taken in the late 1940s are either silent on when specific events happened or vague (e.g., in the evening or the afternoon). One of the few things that can be established with accuracy is the time the battle began: midday on

2 <https://mountstreet1916.ie>

Wednesday April 26, 1916. Ultimately, utilizing the 3D (re)construction as well as a multitude of primary and secondary sources, the project team arrived at a more holistic understanding of the trajectory of the battle, troop movements, and substantiated British casualty figures: 134 wounded and 26 killed (Hughes et al., 2017, p. 2).

The renewed public interest in the commemoration of the centenary of the Easter Rising and the Irish national educational agenda that emphasized technologically driven blended-learning applications as one of the key factors for enhancing students' digital literacy, provided us with an opportunity to open up our academic research to a broader audience and repurpose the project into a problem-based learning activity for schools. Our work followed Colby's (2008) historical narrative inquiry model, which combines historical thinking, historical empathy, disciplined inquiry, and historical narrative theory to infuse students with the ability to think critically and comparatively about historical interpretations; work with, analyze, and evaluate primary sources and historical narratives; and, develop their own perspectives and articulate them through guided group tasks and activities. As a result, History in a Box created an opportunity for students to not simply read the results of our research, but to become researchers themselves, sleuthing through and analyzing the sources we used, ultimately reflecting on the fluidity, variability, and plurality of historical interpretations (Chapman, 2017).

Following from our experience with students and taking into account the constraints and challenges imposed by scheduling an extra-curricular activity in an already crowded academic calendar, we decided to modify History in a Box for a family-based learning activity. In our work, we define "family" broadly and inclusively, including parents, grandparents, guardians, carers, relatives, stepfamily as well as close friends. By re-situating the activity this way, we fostered reciprocal learning (Hatton-Yeo, 2006; Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008; Jessel, 2009; Mannion, 2012) by encouraging a two-way interaction in which adults cooperate and share knowledge, experience, and insights with younger learners, while youths share their values, historical understanding, and technological skills.

We based the reconfiguration of the activity on family multi- and inter-generational learning research that has shown that groups of people coming from different age groups, backgrounds, and experiences learn from one another by transferring "knowledge, skills, competencies, norms, and values" (Hoff, 2007 as cited in Newman and Hatton Yeo, 2008, p. 31) through processes such as observational learning (Fryling et al., 2011), imitation (Bandura, 1962), and modeling (Sanderse, 2010). According to The International Consortium for Intergenerational Programs that was established in the Netherlands in



the early 2000s, intergenerational programs are “social vehicles that create purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations” (as cited in Kaplan, 2002, p. 306). For example, Corrigan et al. (2013) in their research about intergenerational learning for higher education students, demonstrate that the knowledge and skills gained from their participation in such activities transform the attitudes between generations, while nurturing intergenerational as well as intercultural solidarity. Ohsako (2002) has also explored the potential of intergenerational learning as a tool for healing and reconciliation in contested histories, while other researchers have used its potential for performing arts, language learning, the development of technology-related skills (Kaplan, 2002), and environmental education (Ballantyne et al., 1998).

Research on intergenerational learning focusing on family units has highlighted the reciprocity of knowledge transfer (Jessel, 2009), emphasizing the importance of language and power relationships (Mackenzie, 2010), conversation (Ash, 2003; Riedinger, 2012) as well as of play and playfulness (Kanhadilok & Watts, 2016) to co-create knowledge. Research that has particularly focused on family learning mechanisms, interactions, and engagement strategies in the context of museum visits (Ellenbogen et al., 2007; Falk & Dierking, 2018) has also stressed that although learning is informal, it reproduces dynamics that can be observed in both institutional and family contexts (Rogoff et al., 2016, pp. 387–388).

In our case, up to three generations (e.g., child, parent, grandparent) collaboratively construct and communicate their understanding of the battle, and in doing so, reconsider identities and contested memories. This chapter will first discuss the rationale behind the original development of *History in a Box* as a school activity and will then focus on the family-based aspects of the project, emphasizing the guiding principles of empathy, historical reasoning, engagement, and togetherness. It will outline the design principles of the project, our observations and participants’ feedback, and will reflect on the lessons learned, positioning this approach in the context of digital literacy and socially engaged research.

## **History in a Box: Developing the Project**

*History in a Box* was originally conceived as a school activity for Transition Year (TY) students in Irish Higher Education (15–16 years old), an optional year between the Junior (12–15 years old) and Senior Cycle (16–19 years old), during which students follow a more flexible curriculum that provides them



Figure 9.1 a & b The interface of the History in a Box Mobile App.

with critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Particular emphasis is placed on group activities, project and research work, and experiences that make them responsible for their own learning. The flexible and experimental nature of TY provided us with an ideal setting to explore a technologically

driven blended-learning application that blends the physical and the digital through participatory and hands-on engagements.

History in a Box was designed for both impact and as participatory in its approach to development and testing, involving diverse stakeholders at different phases in a co-creation process. It followed an iterative design methodology during which focus groups with history teachers were carried out, early versions of the technological intervention were prototyped and tested, and evaluation sessions with secondary school students, history teachers, and undergraduate students were conducted. Due to the constraints identified, mainly in regard to access to mobile devices and wireless Internet in schools, the project decided to follow the paradigm of museum handling boxes, which include all materials required to run an activity.

The learning experience was created along two themes, “Before the Battle” and “Fighting the Battle,” each divided into five key topics that, taken together, provide a multi-perspective vista into the conflict and the preparations that went into it: The Buildings, Irish Volunteers, Sherwood Foresters, Local Population, and Medical Response (Fig. 9.1.a & b).<sup>3</sup>

The first theme prepares the groundwork for what follows by focusing on the site of the battle, the groups involved (soldiers, but also residents and medical personnel), while the latter focuses on the events of the battle. The themes are narrative based, highlighting, as much as possible, the stories of individuals as a conduit into the wider conflict; thus, through the particular we sought to bring greater historical empathy (Brooks, 2009; Yeager & Foster, 2001; Endacott & Brooks, 2013) of the experience of war on a wide range of individuals affected by it. Each topic was designed for a group of five (a total of 25 participants). Each person in the group takes on a specific role, i.e., reader, note taker, folder keeper, and presenter, while the most demanding roles can be shared by two people (e.g., note taker). Roles were introduced to the project after the first rounds of testing which showed that group dynamics led to some students dominating the activity and others stepping back. Finally, each group receives a colored folder corresponding to their topic, with the physical material and a tablet of a matching color.

All groups are introduced to the activity with a brief tutorial video that explains how the mobile application works. The activity begins for each

3 The mobile application was built using the Wikitude Software Development Kit for Android Studio. As initial focus groups with high school teachers highlighted the wide variance in technology in schools across Ireland, including wireless Internet access, the framework chosen allowed us to develop an app that came pre-installed on tablet devices and did not require Internet access.



Figure 9.2 Task screen in the History in a Box Mobile App.

group with a common action: scanning with their tablet an image found in their folders, which enables an AR Video that lays out the general contours of the battle or pre-battle activities along with the specific focus of the group. These videos, created by the project team, feature narrators who provide the groups with their challenges, i.e., exploring their piece of the larger story to share with the entire class at the end of the session, hence pooling their research to form a more holistic view of the event. After the initial video, multimodal content (videos, authentic audio of combatants, images, and AR) specifically designed for the experience help them to construct the narrative.

Since the exploration of the battle is task-based, the main premise of our design was to minimize the cognitive load by keeping the user interface simple and avoiding clutter (irrelevant visual information) so users could perform tasks without the need for detailed instructions (Fig. 9.2). The navigation is only performed by two buttons, next and back, while the interface guides users by visually signaling with a call-to-action box, when they have to respond to a task. Sub-tasks that would help them complete the main task, e.g., listening to an audio, reading a source, activating an AR element, or watching a video, are provided step-by-step, thus minimizing the risk of getting lost or missing part of the story. Task-based activities are accompanied by bespoke worksheets to further focus the group, keep track of information, and keep the users on task.

While the feedback we received from our mixed-methods evaluations was generally positive, we noted that students were often frustrated by technical glitches and had difficulties evaluating sources. They were also reluctant to summarize their findings in front of the rest of the class and could lose interest when they were not engaged in the subject or when they did not have a substantial role in the team (due to group dynamics). These observations led us to consider expanding the context in which the activity was conducted.

### **History in a Box in the Context of Family-based Learning**

It was clear from our initial focus groups with teachers that they were not simply participating to test how their students would respond to this activity, but that they were actively engaged and genuinely interested in both the content as well as the collaborative, task-based exploration of a historical event. We thus sought to re-engage adults in the activity as an antidote to the problems mentioned above. With minimal re-development, we reconceived History in a Box as a family-based activity, in which each group of five students was replaced by one or more families, consisting of at least a parent/grandparent, guardian, or other relative, and a child or children. This allowed us to take advantage of family learning and the impact of knowledge co-production as an informal learning process. It also provided a social opportunity for value to be created between generations (Hanmore-Cawley & Scharf, 2018, p. 1). Given the presence of an adult to help scaffold the learning for the younger generation, we also opened the activity to a wider age group, with children from ten to eighteen years. Since families have always been one of the main target audiences for museums, it was decided to choose museums as the setting of these events. This also made it easier to use existing museum contacts and networks to reach out to a wider audience.

The family activity brings together two and even three generations to learn together (Finden & Formosa, 2011) through mutual respect (Thomas, 2009). Since generations are increasingly being shaped within age-defined institutional structures, a premise of our design was not to encourage stereotypical constructs typically seen in technology-driven projects in which a younger generation, being more confident with technology, passes their knowledge to the older generation (Watts, 2017, p. 40), but rather to enable a reciprocal process of learning (Mannion, 2012, p. 4) where all participants become intellectual leaders contributing to meaning-making and knowledge creation according to their skills, experiences, and memories.

## Historical Reasoning, Togetherness, and Empathy

Within *History in a Box*, informal learning is embedded in a meaningful activity that builds on learners' interest or choice (Callanan et al., 2011, p. 647), supported by the structure and design of the activities that require social interaction to achieve a common goal (Rogoff et al., 2016, pp. 359–360). Historical reasoning, i.e., actively constructing knowledge by critically approaching and interpreting historical phenomena, is encouraged by asking descriptive and evaluative questions which require the use of primary sources, often contradictory, situating a particular event or phenomenon in the broader spatial, temporal, and cultural context, building an argument supported by evidence, and using concepts or meta-concepts that guide participants to evaluate and combine the evidence, and formulate an informed opinion (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2008).

An example of a historical reasoning exercise is the fall of 25 Northumberland Road, the first building captured by the British. The 2/7th battalion history claims that the unit had taken the building soon after 2:45pm (Robin Hoods, 1921, p. 285) while the sole survivor, Seamus Grace, placed it c. at 8:30 pm, based on his testimony taken 33 years after the event (Bureau of Military History Witness Statements, n.d., WS 310, p. 9). In 1924, the mother of the deceased Lieutenant, Michael Malone, also in Building 25, submitted a request for a pension, stating that "About 8.o.c. on the night of April 26, 1926 the house occupied by the deceased was entered by a storming party of the British..." (Malone, 1924, p. 13). Both statements position the fall of Building 25 unrealistically late given other events for which we have more precise timings, such as the beginning of the battle around noon and the accounts of other buildings north of 25 vacated by early evening. With this exercise, participants had the opportunity to scrutinize the different pieces of evidence to come up with a reasonable argument in regard to the contradictions we often see in historical narratives, as well as to reflect on concepts such as time and memory in the context of such events.

Our reconceptualization of *History in a Box* into a family-based activity was based on the premise of "togetherness" (Tison Povis, 2017) that uses the mechanisms of framing, joint attention, and conversation to present a framework for family connection, interaction, and co-participation. Although Tison Povis (2017) developed the concept of togetherness in the context of museum learning, it works particularly well for *History in a Box*, "where parent and child feel connected, are co-participating, are mutually invested, and are attuned to one another's actions and thoughts" (p. 25). In both our original and adapted design, togetherness is the driving force of the learning

experience, not only because of the different roles in each group that require members to work in unison but also because the tasks developed require conversation and action that often draw from skills and experiences held by participants of different backgrounds and age groups. Togetherness was further enabled in our case as the battle took place approximately a century ago, with many of the older participants having living memories through their parents and grandparents which they were able to share with both their family and the wider group.

Our aim was also to develop narratives that provide historical context, enable perspective taking, and allow affective connection, which are the three necessary components to develop historical empathy (Endacott & Brooks, 2013).<sup>4</sup> As Ellenwood (2017) argues, without historical empathy “we generate judgment and interpretation of historical events and people based on our context ... resulting in false interpretation and unfair judgements” (p. 2). In the case of a battle, it is rather challenging to create connections between the past and the present, also given the very different social and political conditions of the time. Historical context was provided by the introductory videos as well as a brief presentation by the project team that introduced the 1916 Easter Rising as well as the events that preceded and followed the Battle of Mount Street Bridge. In the case of the school-based activity, there was an expectation that teachers would provide students with an adequate historical context before doing the activity and that they would also follow up after the activity with further contextualizing exercises.

We also decided in the original project design to equally focus on the experiences of both the Irish and the British soldiers (the latter of which typically gets villainized in accounts of the Easter Rising). We wanted to have participants not take sides, but to take a broader perspective that would help them understand the nuances and personal stories of all those involved, situating those in the wider historical context which influences how different actors responded to the events (Endacott & Brooks, 2013, p. 53). For example, despite the fact that the vast majority of the participants were Irish, we wanted them to “read” the British soldiers with tolerance and sensitivity; to understand that they were young (close to the age of the teenagers who participated) and inexperienced, and not prepared, physically or mentally, for what would follow. To achieve this, we focused as much as possible on decisions and actions taken by individuals (also as part of a larger societal or military group), designing tasks that allowed individual voices to be

4 For the application of Endacott and Brooks's historical empathy model to a digital archaeology setting, see McKinney, et al. (2020).

heard or read (e.g., combatants' audio recordings, witness statements, and handwritten documents). Taking a broader perspective also created affective connections to the actions, decisions, and experiences of people who took part or were affected – directly or indirectly – by the battle and related events, thus creating the necessary conditions for cultivating historical empathy (Endacott & Brooks, 2013, p. 42).

The activities developed were not explicitly designed to give participants the opportunity to display historical empathy (e.g., Davison, 2017), for example, by responding to questions that would allow them to connect present situations and past events. However, a premise of our design was that the activities developed for classroom use would be complemented by activities developed by teachers, e.g., role-playing, interviews, newspaper articles, etc., thus allowing students to further develop both their cognitive and affective understanding (Brooks, 2011) of the battle. This aspect was limited to informal discussions during and after the activity at the family-based events.

## Methodology: Design, Testing, and Evaluation

The literature on intergenerational learning is not clearly defined, nor are there established practices for how it should be applied. Still, it is clear that bringing two or more people together, who come from different generations, is not enough to characterize a learning activity as intergenerational (Schmidt-Hertha, 2014, p. 151). Thus, our primary research question was how to redesign the activity as family-based with an emphasis on mutually experienced learning (Mannion, 2012, p. 4). As the original activity was designed to promote peer-learning (Topping, 2007), our redesign focused on fostering progressive multigenerational learning in which all would gain knowledge and skills.

During our testing phase between February 2018 and November 2018, 23 groups of 4–6 people participated. The first stage in redesigning History in a Box was to test if the activity would work for a different audience and group dynamics without changing any of the tablet-based content or the physical material. This way, we could keep control over the type and number of changes required (if any), especially given that any changes in the app would require changes in the physical material, and *vice versa*. Despite the fact that the content remained the same, we had to reconceive the interaction so that a) children were engaged the majority of the time, b) parents acted more as mentors and coaches rather than teachers, and





Figure 9.3 Up to three generations came together during the events held at Maynooth University, Kerry County Museums, The National Museum of Ireland, and the Epic Museum to explore different facets of the Battle of Mount Street Bridge. Top left: Family groups in the focus group session at Maynooth University. Top right: Family groups in Kerry County Council Museum. Bottom: Final knowledge sharing activity in the Kerry County Council Museum.

c) there was ample opportunity for children to take chances on offering answers and filling up worksheets without being admonished for incorrect or implausible ideas. As Istead and Shapiro (2014) suggest, children's decisions to share information with parents are influenced by factors related to the children's self-confidence and whether their knowledge will be accepted or appreciated.

To test this, we invited colleagues from Maynooth University, Ireland (February 2018), who had children at home between the ages of 12–16 to join the activity on a Saturday afternoon. The 28 participants registered for the focus group were informed in advance about the aims and content of the focus group, which consisted of three elements: a) a contextualizing introduction to the Easter Rising delivered by the project team, b) the History in a Box activity, and c) an evaluation session. Since a primary goal was to encourage collaborative conversation rather than didactic instruction, we sent an email to parents/guardians/caregivers a few days prior to the event describing their roles and responsibilities. In particular, we wanted them to become behavioral catalysts (Benckendorff et al., 2018), encouraging them to employ an inquiry behavior by collaborating with the other family(-ies)

in their group to mentor and help the children locate information which allowed them to posit answers and construct hypothesis. Also, we suggested that they could provide children with prompts that will enable them to better understand the concepts and clues provided, but that they should resist shutting down conversation by providing the answers to the various tasks.

Participants were divided into five groups based on the age and gender of the children, with each group consisting of two or three families; each family comprised of an adult (parent and/or grandparent) and their child/children (Fig. 9. 3). Four members of the project team were observing the family interactions during the activity, which lasted approximately 90 minutes, followed by an evaluation questionnaire (different for adults and children) that included both quantitative and open-ended questions.

The funding that we received from Science Foundation Ireland to support this phase of the project, somewhat dictated our priorities. By organizing intergenerational events, our aim was to provide topical content that must be engaged with through advanced technologies, thus opening a dialogue with the public and exposing them to the value of STEM careers. Given that the purpose of the events we organized was to engage audiences in the activity, we designed the feedback instruments so as to be minimally invasive. In the testing session at Maynooth University, the audiovisual equipment that was set up for recording family interactions was not used, as many parents found its presence disturbing and did not consent to its use. Therefore, we decided to only observe and take notes and ask participants to fill out a feedback form at the end of the event.

For the qualitative analysis, we used a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012) in order to identify, organize, and analyze common themes across our collected dataset. In the first section of the questionnaires for children, participants were asked to give a general assessment of the activity by describing the things that they liked the most and the least. It was part of a design decision not to provide predefined, multiple-choice answers so as to allow them to freely express their thoughts and describe advantages and limitations. In the next two sections, participants were asked to rank how easy and interesting the activity was and also write down thoughts related to their ranking. The final section asked participants to rate their overall experience regarding certain aspects of the experience, such as the flow of the story and the enhancement of their knowledge about the battle. The first part of the evaluation remained the same for adults' feedback forms, while the final section was substituted by an invitation to rank their children's engagement in the activity. Since parents are familiar with their children's behavior, attention span, and motivations, these questions provided us with

a richer account of children's engagement with the activity, especially in relation to more conventional ways of learning history. A demographics section was also included in both cases to assess if any observed patterns can be related to different age groups, professions, and educational background.

In parallel to the questionnaires, we were observing participants' interactions during the activity; both their interactions with the tablet devices as well as their interactions and conversations with other members of their groups. We particularly focused our attention on how participants' attention shifted from the analogue/physical to the digital content and vice versa, as well as on the discussions and information exchange for the tasks that had to be completed in each group. Any issues in using the tablet devices and especially the interactive, AR content were also noted.

Finally, although formal interviews might have offered further insights, we decided to limit parents' and children's commitment to informal discussions at the end of the events. All comments and suggestions became part of our observation record.

Our observations and the answers to the evaluation questionnaire during the testing event at Maynooth University highlighted that both adults and minors remained engaged during the whole activity. Among the things that the majority of adults liked the most was the collaborative character of the activity, with one mentioning that it works "well for family bonding." The social dimension of the activity was also highlighted: "good to meet and interact with other families." The children focused on the range of physical and digital materials and on what they learnt by doing the research. What several did not like was listening to original audio recordings (dating from the 1950s and 1960s); one respondent wrote: "[it] was a bit weird." The children found it interesting to learn about history this way, with some elaborating "it was a way I had never learned before" and "it was learning in a fun, enjoying [sic] way." While none of the children complained about the ambient noise in the room, most adults found it distracting.

The responses to the quantitative questions (Figs. 9.4 & 9.5) interestingly highlighted that children did not show more interest in the technology than in history and that they typically only asked for clarification and collaboration rather than answers to the tasks. Finally, children overwhelmingly enjoyed the presentations, probably because it was their parents who gave them at the end, while highlighting that they would like to see more technology involved.

Finally, our observations highlighted that some parents, mainly those who were university lecturers, tended to have a more didactic tone, while in a few cases, adults, probably because of their interest in the subject,

dominated the group activity, engaging more with the other adults and less with the children, also giving them more passive roles (e.g., folder keeper) and/or passing information to them.

Following from the successful testing event, which did not indicate that any of the physical or digital material needed to be changed, we decided to hold the next events in museums as originally intended. We also wanted to explore if the overwhelmingly positive response of the focus group was due to the fact that adult participants were mostly our highly educated peers (6 PhDs, 3 Masters, 1 postgraduate), which is not a situation we would typically encounter in a community-based museum setting. In the months that followed, we implemented *History in a Box* in three institutions, two in Dublin (National Museum of Ireland [NMI] and Epic Museum [EM]) and one in Kerry (Kerry County Museum [KCM]), a provincial town in the southwest of Ireland. Here, we will mostly focus on the latter, while incorporating in the discussion some of our observations from the other two events.

For the event in KCM, we followed the same data collection and analysis process as for the university-based testing session described above. We held two sessions for a total of 45 participants with children being between ten and seventeen years old. Due to the consistently negative feedback regarding the audio, as it was difficult for participants to concentrate on their audiovisual pieces while listening to other group discussions and digital material, we decided to use earphones. As we did not want to isolate them from their environment and collaborators, a common criticism for audio tours, only one of the two earphones worked. In comparison to earlier feedback, far less participants mentioned audio as one of the main problems of the activity, while our observations indicated that using earphones made it easier to concentrate on the tasks and comprehend the information given.

Given our observations in the earlier event regarding adults' potentially dominating attitude within the groups which could marginalize children, we suggested to parents to allow the children to be more active participants, while allocating to them the most active roles, e.g., reader and note taker. When groups followed our instructions, working as a team, children, as young as 10, stayed engaged. Only in one case, at the NMI, a group consisting of three parents and three children collapsed, since the adults, despite our repeated suggestions, kept passionately discussing the historical content among themselves, thus ignoring the children, telling us that they were having too much fun themselves. Although the children tried at first to amuse themselves, they became increasingly vocal about being bored. As a result, the children became so restless and complained so loudly that the entire group had to leave early.



Figure 9.4 a & b Responses of parents/guardians/caretakers to questions regarding the overall experience of their children with History in a Box. Top: Maynooth University Focus Group Session. Bottom: Kerry County Council Museum event.

During the KCM events, groups worked as teams, with family members taking on different roles as the activity progressed and new skills/competencies were needed. Roles and responsibilities were shared both with members of their own family and with the family(-ies) they were paired with. For example, primary sources with especially small handwriting proved difficult for many adults (particularly grandparents) to read. However, the children had issues reading the script. This, therefore, became a real collaborative effort with children making (or attempting to make) out the individual letters with older members of the team forming them into words.

The formal feedback we received from the two KCM events was consistent with participants' responses to the earlier event (Figs. 9.4a&b & 9.5a&b). More specifically, more than half of the adult participants highlighted the collaborative and social aspects of the activity: "parents and kids on the same level," "a great way to work as a team," "meeting with other people,"



Figure 9.5 a & b Responses of children to questions regarding their overall experience with History in a Box. Top: Maynooth University Focus Group Session. Bottom: Kerry County Council Museum event.

“we worked well as a team though we previously didn’t know each other.” Particularly interesting were comments about the fact that the activity focused equally on the British and the Irish side and that provided glimpses to past lives: “It was interesting learning about the lives and opinions of people back then,” “take a person back in time.” One of the older participants (65+) indicated in her feedback (more than once) that she would have preferred being in the Irish Volunteers group (she was placed in the British Soldiers group). Nevertheless, within her group were teenagers who were around the same age as those who died in the battle. This had an impact on her when she wrote in her feedback “some of us were the same age as the soldiers/all sides were mothers-sons.”

Such comments correspond well to our design goal to have participants understand the nuances of the battle and have an empathetic approach towards the British side. Both adults and children also commented on

taking such an approach to learning history, for example: “It is way better than reading a book. Get it in to all schools,” “It was interesting because it’s very different to the way I learn in school,” “more interesting than how it is taught in school,” “better than school.” Finally, we ought to highlight a response that we never had when we ran the activity in schools. One young person in response to the question “what did you like most about the activity” said: “My presentation which conveyed my imaginative flair.”

Positive feedback in the other two events (NMI & EM) also highlighted the collaborative and peer-learning aspects of the activity: “lots of co-operation and talking,” “learning from each other,” “good to share experience across generations.” One respondent wrote that this was “a great forum to learn together even if you know the overall story” and described the family experience as a “memorable shared activity” and “we will remember this stuff.”

It is worth mentioning that children complained more than the adults about the tablets and technological glitches, mainly highlighting the small size of the screen that made it awkward for a group of 4–6 people to watch/read the content at the same time. One parent highlighted this in their response in that “Children have technology available at all times now, it doesn’t please them!” Although we chose tablets due to people’s familiarity with the technology, the affordances of the medium, and our ability to fit everything needed in a box, it is clear that future iterations and/or similar projects would benefit from different technological solutions.

## Reflecting on the Project

Participants’ responses and our observations highlighted the success of the activity in a family-based setting, probably beyond our expectations, especially given that this was not the audience it was originally designed for nor did we repurpose content. We surmized that the success of the activity was because, in the original project design, we did not oversimplify or sanitize the content, as we were committed to utilizing primary sources, which we presented as researchers would find them. Therefore, rather than summarizing long documents, such as Military Bureau Witness Statements (many of which were over 100 pages long), we edited them down, not, however, to the specific paragraph(s) that might have helped answer a particular question, but to the pages where this information could be found. This required students to analyze the source, discarding irrelevant information to focus on “essential questions” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), which are not answerable with a single word or sentence and that are not

necessarily right or wrong. Rather, essential questions were designed to be extracted from the mixture of primary sources and bespoke content created for the project (particularly video and AR content), which stimulated thought and provoked inquiry, engendering conversation, analysis, and debate.

When parents supported their children, treating them as equals when appropriate, and supporting them other times, keeping them focused when their attention waned, even children as young as 10 (and as old as 18) remained focused and worked through the activity until the end. Based on our experience in schools, in the e-mail to parents during our first test settings, we also suggested that they might reserve the role of “presenter” for themselves, as with the school activity we noted that the students had extreme difficulty in synthesizing so much information into a short presentation. Some groups heeded our advice, but others did not, and children were frequently given this role. To our surprise, with the support of the adults prior to the presentation, the children were able to summarize and successfully present. Moreover, they did this with confidence, something we observed less frequently in schools. Thus, in subsequent instructions we eliminated this suggestion.

The subject matter was ideally suited for inter/ multi-generational learning in which different generations brought different experiences and engagements with the subject. For example, at one event direct descendants of one of the combatants signed up. In the sharing activity at the end, the father disclosed to the rest of the group that his daughter’s great grandfather<sup>5</sup> had been a combatant who died in the battle. This was a “one handshake away” moment for both participants and ourselves, as we listened with rapt attention to the story of his grandfather’s experience. In a reciprocal collaboration that added to our shared knowledge that was so common at these events, we were able to point him to a digital source he did not know about, in which his grandmother applied for a state pension on the death of her husband, thus furthering their family knowledge.

The engaged nature of the activity brought families as well as strangers together to share knowledge and allowed us to bring our research to a far wider audience. This engagement reflects an older mission of the university, that of making a cultural and societal contribution in terms of a public sphere, the place where “open conversation and collaboration in a public space happen, where critiques are generated in pursuit of the public good” (Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2017, p. 6). Perhaps the space where

5 We noted that he described the relationship in terms of his daughter rather than himself, thus indicating an inclusive and shared familial tie to the event.



this was most evident was neither at a school or an intergenerational event, but at a Senior Center. We had not intended bringing the activity to this audience (we were working with them on another engaged research project), but when they heard about *History in a Box*, they asked if they could experience it. Thus, four women and one man spent two hours enthusiastically involved in the activity, continually interrupting “the play” to bring their own experiences into what we provided, ranging from programs they saw on television to men they remembered as children who their parents told them participated in the Easter Rising. In the feedback session, one of the women told us that she almost did not come, as she thought the technology was beyond her. But she was so interested in the history that she came only to declare at the end that the technology was not that difficult after all and that she would be asking her grandchildren to show her how tablets work.

As the majority of our family-based sessions were carried out in museums in Ireland, curators repeatedly asked us if they could apply the same concept tailored to their own museum holdings. With the current project design (both digital and analogue), this would not be possible, as the content was hardwired into the app and worksheets were developed for the specific contexts. The success of the approach, however, made us believe that future research could explore the design of a more template-based approach wherein a user-friendly content management system would allow to “drop” into the app multimedia learning objects, intuitively design worksheets and tasks, thus enabling institutions to design holistic experiences that focus on learning and knowledge, engagement, and togetherness.

Despite the fact that early on in the design cycle, there were still some issues with the technology, given the feedback we received, this did not hamper the learning goals. Throughout the testing phase, we received overwhelmingly positive feedback. Children and parents provided us with feedback on the novelty of this method as a way to bring historical events to life, develop empathy by creating a connection to the experiences of others through own voices (quite literally) or their handwriting. This effective connection provided a bridge to the past, as one young respondent wrote: “It was interesting learning about the lives and opinions of people back then.” Moreover, by not feeding the students answers, but providing a research environment, like the ones we typically deal with as researchers, in which ambiguity and an incomplete historical record are common, participants followed the clues, discussed their significance, and clearly embraced the opportunity we provided to form their own opinions in a collaborative problem-based learning environment.

## Conclusion

The project as it was reconceived for family-based learning fulfilled a dual goal. It provided us with the opportunity of reconceiving our research as a public good (Calhoun, 2006, p. 19), not simply disseminating it beyond the traditional audience for academic research (e.g., our peers), but providing the opportunity for a wide range of individuals to become invested or reinvested in our scholarship via a historical event that has been significant in shaping the founding story of the Irish Free State. The development of a technology-based app allowed us not only to provide new modalities for exploring a historical event, but also to promote and foster digital literacy. It enabled students to use the technologies that they typically use for pleasure in a learning-environment, providing a glimpse into how we could or should be developing learning materials, not simply for Generation Z, but for this generation to enjoy learning and co-creating knowledge in a mutually respectful environment with both their peers and their parents and grandparents.

History in a Box was designed to foster awareness and empathy, to provide a vehicle for the public to have the same opportunities for insights and discovery that researchers experience when engaging with primary sources, that “aha” moment when the pieces of the puzzle fall into place. Ultimately, it provided us with an experimental space for multimodal and multisensory storytelling in which participants moved naturally between the corporeality of the physical record and the evanescence of the binary, creating a liminal space between the analogue and the digital: a safe space for the co-creation of their own meaning-making from and of the narrative.

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# 10. Bridging the Gaps between Theory and Practice through Cross-Institutional Collaboration in the Conservation of Contemporary Art

*Pip Laurenson, Vivian van Saaze, & Renée van de Vall*

## Abstract

This chapter examines the dynamics of research collaboration between universities and museums in the field of contemporary art conservation through two theoretical frames: mode three collaboration and post-critical museology. Taking a past research project as a case-study, it explores three questions: what are the benefits and challenges for theory and practice when academic and professional researchers work together? How to respond to the suspicion that academic research might lose its critical edge by answering to the pragmatic goals of the institution it works with? What makes collaborations work in such a way that they acknowledge the value of working together? The chapter argues the importance of moving beyond the practice/theory dichotomy and promoting the transparent development of a shared problem space.

**Keywords:** conservation research, performance art, mode 3 collaboration, museum studies, practice theory

## Introduction

*In a back office of a gallery dedicated to time-based media and performance-based artworks, museum curators and conservators sit with the artist's widow and a gallerist to discuss the form the work might take as part of the collection. The work has a long and winding history, having been performed in different configurations over its 40-year life outside an institution. Before the artist's*



*death the work was taught in person by the artist to new performers; it was adapted to different spaces sometimes on the fly, working with different arrangements of musicians and projected images. While the artist was alive, the curator introduced the idea of adding the work to the museum collection. The artist was initially dismissive of the idea, but in the course of the conversation he began to understand what the curator was proposing. After his death, it was left to the gallery and the artist's estate to negotiate the possible practical implications with the museum. When they are looking at images of the work's last performance, a range of questions present themselves: is it important that the chairs for the musicians are placed on Persian rugs? Is there a minimum or maximum image size? How high should the images be? What does the audience see? Where should the musicians sit? What is the status of the instruments – can they be replaced? As the work involves a performance of film, music, and sound, more questions are raised. Can the work exist in any way other than a live performance? How do we transmit the work, is there a score? The work's performance was always tied to a degree of informality and improvisation, but how can a museum retain these qualities while ensuring its preservation?<sup>21</sup>*

This narrative about the difficult choices that have to be made when an open and evolving work of art enters a museum collection after the artist's death is a good example of the kind of complexities museums face when collecting, conserving, and re-exhibiting contemporary artworks. It also demonstrates how the task of preserving the legacy of contemporary art – in this case performance-based art – combines apparently mundane and practical issues (like “is it important that the chairs for the musicians are placed on Persian rugs”?) with questions of a more theoretical nature. After all, what, exactly, is the essence of a particular work? How can the work continue to have a certain degree of informality and improvisation when the artist is no longer there? Can it be reconstructed with new materials without compromising its authenticity? Can the work exist in any way other than a live performance? Who has the authority and expertise to decide on this?

Around such questions a distinctive and dynamic field of research has developed since the early 1990s, resulting in conferences, working groups, research projects, publications, and networks bringing together conservation professionals from various backgrounds, including, increasingly, academic

1 This scenario is based on conversations in the context of Tony Conrad's *Ten Years Alive on the Infinite Plain*, a work featuring as one of the case-studies of a research project funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, called *Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum* <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/reshaping-the-collectible>. Retrieved May 14, 2019.

scholars as well. The reason behind this development is that works stemming from the experimental art genres of the 1960s, such as conceptual art, land art, installation art, performance art, and time-based media art, have been coming of age, so to speak, triggering complex and unprecedented technical and ethical problems for collections holding such works. The premise that museums should preserve works of art as much as possible in their original material condition became problematic when conservators were faced with problems that are inherent to contemporary art: decaying organic materials, degrading plastics, outdated technical equipment, and installations that had to be disassembled and reassembled again and again, often with different components and in other contexts than the ones defining their original creation, while there was also the challenge of conceptual artworks actively seeking the “dematerialization of the art object” (Lippard, 1973). The practical question of how to conserve a specific work of art instantly gave rise to the art-historical and philosophical question of what in fact constituted “the work” in any given case, as well as what the role of the museum should be in the making or remaking of the work and its meaning.

By the very nature of the issues at stake, the conservation of contemporary art offers a potentially fruitful breeding ground for collaborations between academic and professional researchers, and between universities and heritage organizations, and as such it may serve as an ideal testing ground for what it could mean for humanities scholars to be directly involved with a field of practice, as they are more and more urged to be through increased demands of evidence of the societal relevance of their efforts. This makes the field an interesting area to explore a vital aspect of engaged humanities: that of cross-institutional collaboration. Our aim is not to advocate a particular future for conservation research, but rather to look at how it has developed and to understand this emerging field within broader theoretical frames. Our chapter will focus on three central questions: what are the benefits and challenges both for theory and for practice when academic and professional researchers work together in what could be called “emergent problem spaces”? How to respond to the suspicion that academic research runs the risk of losing its independence and critical edge by answering to the pragmatic goals of the profession or institution it works with? What makes such collaborations work in such a way that they serve not only political and economic institutional drivers but also acknowledge the value of working together?

We have been engaged in the field of contemporary art conservation research for more than 20 years and represent both sides of the collaboration. We will address these questions on the basis of our experience and

in particular by examining the case of the collaborative research network *Collecting the Performative* led by Tate (UK) and Maastricht University (The Netherlands). Focusing on relevant practices in the Netherlands and the UK, we will first describe the conservation of contemporary art in terms of its identification as a field of research with the help of the concept of Mode 2 research. We will explain why this collaboration, despite its potentially fertile ground for interaction between academic and museum-based research, took a long time to develop. Our analysis of this case-study will follow two main theoretical leads (to be explained in more detail in the sections below). The first is the notion of “post-critical museology,” an approach to museum studies that advocates “collaborative and embedded research in which audiences, museum professionals and academic researchers co-produce knowledge” (Dewdney, Dibosa, & Walsh, 2013, p. 222). The second lead is the notion of “Mode 3 collaboration,” coined to articulate a type of collaboration in which participants share the work of defining problems from the beginning and submit to changes in their habits and procedures if so required by the evolving process (Rabinow & Bennett, 2009; 2012). In addition, the concepts of “epistemic communities of practice” (Amin & Roberts, 2008) and “epistemic objects” (Knorr Cetina, 2001) will help us to connect the characteristics of Mode 3 collaboration to those in the field of contemporary art conservation research. After introducing the theoretical framework, we describe the development, execution, output, and follow-up of the *Collecting the Performative* research network. We will demonstrate how this collaboration between an academic and a museum-based researcher indeed contributed to a redefinition of the problem space in theoretical and practical terms, indicate the possibilities for and limits of the degree of criticality deployed, and outline some of the conditions necessary for such collaborations to flourish.

### **Conservation of Contemporary Art as a Field of Research**

What it means for humanities scholars to be engaged with social partners and institutions will vary according to the institutional landscape of the specific issue or field of research addressed. Conservation of contemporary art may be different from other fields of research in that it defies many of the assumptions about the ways in which research is conducted by the different institutions involved and, with that, many of the presumed contradictions that dominate debates about the role of academic research in society. In general terms, and despite all criticisms, the dominant picture

is still that universities concentrate on “basic” or “pure,” question-driven or curiosity-driven research, whereas professional institutions such as museums conduct applied research aimed at solving highly specific, practical problems. Within the parameters of this framework, knowledge is first generated by academic research and subsequently applied in professional contexts, professional contexts being framed as objects of study for academia rather than as research subjects themselves.<sup>2</sup>

From its beginnings, the field of contemporary art conservation research has presented a more complicated picture of the dynamics. Initiated by researchers from the museum and heritage sectors, theoretical and practical questions were raised and addressed simultaneously. In the Netherlands, for instance, the research project *Modern Art: Who Cares?* was initiated by fifteen Dutch museums and other heritage institutions from 1995 until 1997; it was coordinated by the Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art (SBMK) and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (ICN), today called Cultural Heritage Agency (RCE). During the project, a theoretical and a practical working group investigated ten non-traditional works of art.<sup>3</sup> The contribution from the academic world was marginal: not a single person of either the nineteen members of the theoretical working group or the 20 members of the practical working group was based at a university. Of the seven members of another working group, which developed a decision-making model, only one person was a university lecturer. And of the eight members of a working group on documentation and registration, again only one held an academic position (not the same person).<sup>4</sup>

This picture changed gradually, as more academic scholars and institutions became involved. A subsequent international project, *Inside Installations* (2004–2007), was initiated by the newly established International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) and again coordinated by the Cultural Heritage Agency (RCE); among its co-organizers was one academic institute, the Cologne Institute for Conservation Sciences of Cologne University for Applied Sciences. When we look at the list of 32 contributors to the resulting publication (Scholte & Wharton, 2011), it shows that seven were affiliated to universities or other academic institutes, while six of them worked in conservation training programs or academies of

2 As we will explain elsewhere in this chapter, this approach is part of a particular organization of research often referred to as Mode 1 research.

3 Such as *Città Irreale* by Mario Merz, *Gismo* by Jean Tinguely, and *Still Life of Watermelons* by Piero Gilardi.

4 See the list of participants in Hummelen and Sillé, 1999, pp. 430–432

fine arts. An important subsequent development was the increase of PhD dissertations, both from within the profession and from outside of it, focusing on topics related to contemporary art conservation,<sup>5</sup> and the establishment of smaller and larger research projects initiated by consortia comprising both universities and museums. Building on existing networks and insights from the practitioner-led research projects on *Modern Art: Who Cares?* and *Inside Installations*, Maastricht University took the lead in developing the research project *New Strategies in the Conservation of Contemporary Art*, in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam and the Cultural Heritage Agency (2009–2015, funded by NWO), followed by the development of the *Network for Conservation of Contemporary Art Research* (NeCCAR 2012–2015, funded by NWO), and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Innovative Training Network on *New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art* (NACCA 2015–2019, funded by the European Union H2020 Programme).

Museums and heritage institutions, then, took the lead in developing the research field, while universities began to engage in it later on, contributing to the further development of larger European research networks. If strictly academic, university-based researchers, for instance in art history, philosophy, cultural studies, and the social sciences, have an increasing presence, they still constitute a small minority in these examples. Many current university-based researchers involved have a background in conservation practice and pursued their research in an academic environment after obtaining a PhD degree. It is important to note that aside from museums, “intermediate” institutions operating in between theory and practice, such as the RCE, the SBMK and INCCA as networks of professionals, and institutions for professional education in fine art conservation, have played an important role in the field’s emergence in the Netherlands.

The various research initiatives led from the Netherlands were highly significant in the UK in terms of providing a wider European and international research context, in particular for the large and highly specialized conservation department at Tate, the UK’s National Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art.<sup>6</sup> Lacking umbrella organizations such as SBMK and

5 In response to the growing number of PhD projects, the PhD and Postdoc Network for Conservation of Contemporary Art Research was established in 2015 – and is still active under the name CoCARE. Its main goal is to encourage and facilitate exchange among early and mid-career researchers in the field of conservation of contemporary art. To date, the network, hosted by INCCA, brings together international researchers from the humanities, social sciences, conservation science, and interrelated areas.

6 Tate holds the national collection of British art from 1500 to the present day, as well as a collection of international modern and contemporary art. Contemporary art conservators

RCE, Tate's involvement with the founding of INCCA,<sup>7</sup> participation in the concluding conference of *Modern Art: Who Cares?*, and the partnership in *Inside Installations* supported the development of new areas of contemporary art conservation research at Tate and in the UK. Previously, modern and contemporary art conservation research at Tate had focused largely on modern paintings, with some work in the conservation of modern and contemporary sculpture.<sup>8</sup> Involvement in these projects broadened this engagement to include newly formed areas of conservation expertise in time-based media. The connection to these projects also served to build a European network in the conservation of contemporary art, where previously connections with the US prevailed. Involvement in these initiatives helped to build Tate's international research profile in the conservation of contemporary art, a profile that subsequently became an intrinsic element of the application by Tate for the Arts & Humanities Research Council for Independent Research Organisation (IRO) status in the UK in 2006, as well as of the establishment of a research department and a dedicated position leading the Collection Care Research. IRO status conferred the ability to apply directly for research council funding, including schemes such as the Collaborative Doctoral Award program,<sup>9</sup> significantly enhancing the research profile of Tate and other museums that succeed in being awarded IRO status, within the UK's national research base. In contrast, there is no equivalent status for museums as research organizations conferred by the Dutch Research Council NWO. This changing status within the UK can also be seen as instrumental in creating fertile ground for new modes of research collaboration between academic and practitioner-based institutions, with

working in the UK who have been operating outside of Tate tend either to work within private practice and have less access to participation in research, or they are less specialized and have been working with broader collections.

7 1999–2002 INCCA was established by a group of 23 individuals from eleven organizations; the founding project was supported by the European Commission's Raphael Programme. For more information on the founding of INCCA see <https://www.incca.org/network-history>. Retrieved May 19, 2019.

8 See, for example, a group of initiatives on modern paint research carried out in collaboration with the Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles, National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the University of Torino in Italy, supported by The Leverhulme Trust, The Deborah Loeb Brice Foundation, and AXA Art insurance (<https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/contemporary-art-research>. Retrieved May 19, 2019). Another example is the conference entitled "From Marble to Chocolate: The Conservation of Modern Sculpture," held at the Tate Gallery from September 18–20, 1995 and funded by The Gabo Trust for Sculpture Conservation.

9 For additional information on the IRO status, see <https://ahrc.ukri.org/funding/research/iro/> and <https://ahrc.ukri.org/research/readwatchlisten/features/how-having-iro-status-helped-tate-build-a-truly-adventurous-research-programme/>. Retrieved August 31, 2018.

museums in the UK demanding collaboration in research partnerships and a role in agenda-setting in research, rather than simply being the object of study or the keepers of collections to be accessed for research.

The outcome of this particular history is that the landscape of conservation of contemporary art research rather resembles the “Mode 2” model of knowledge production than the model of the traditional division of labor between pure versus applied knowledge as sketched in the beginning of this section (Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny et al., 2001; Nowotny et al., 2003). The notion of “Mode 2” was coined in the 1990s to articulate the specificities of dynamic research fields such as computer science, materials science, and the biomedical and environmental sciences, and later it was applied more broadly.<sup>10</sup> Mode 2 research has been described as a form of engaged research that stresses the co-production of knowledge, and as such it contrasts with the more hierarchical Mode 1 model of research, in which theoretical knowledge is developed by scholars and subsequently applied in specific professional contexts (Beech et al., 2009, p. 197). Although the Mode 2 model is not only extensively discussed, but also highly contested (see Hessels & Van Lente, 2008), the characteristics listed in its first presentation (Gibbons et al., 1994) help to make visible how conservation of contemporary art constitutes a distinctive research field with its own dynamics and theoretical and practical impact.

As summarized in the Mode 2 model, conservation of contemporary art research is not the prerogative of universities but is conducted within *heterogeneous networks of institutions* (Gibbons et al., 1994, pp. 6–7), such as museums, heritage institutions, conservation studios, institutes for professional education such as fine art academies, professional networks and platforms, and also universities. Moreover, the goal of knowledge production is not the solving of disciplinarily defined, academic problems, but rather a kind of problem-solving *organized around a particular application* (pp. 3–4): the changing dynamics of the conservation of contemporary artworks. Results are highly *contextualized* – focused on the conservation of singular works of art in specific institutional contexts – and *diffused through the mobility of practitioners and diversity of communication networks* (pp. 6–7), such as the various workshops, conferences, and publication

10 The concept of “Mode 2” form of knowledge production was introduced in the 1994 monograph *The New Production of Knowledge* (Gibbons et al., 1994), authored by a team of six science (policy) studies and commissioned by the Swedish Council for Research and Planning, FNR. It was further developed in a subsequent volume by three of the authors, called *Re-Thinking Science: Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty* (Nowotny et al., 2001), and in an Introduction to a special issue of the journal *Minerva* (Nowotny et al., 2003).

venues of organizations like SBMK, INCCA, ICOM-CC, or VoCA.<sup>11</sup> Like Mode 2 knowledge, conservation research tends to be *transdisciplinary* (pp. 4–6), rather than mono-, inter-, or multidisciplinary, in that the nature of the problems demands a cross-disciplinary use of technical, art-historical, conservation-ethical, social, juridical, and other considerations, with results that cannot be reduced to their constituent disciplines' contributions. *Social accountability* (pp. 7–8) is not only embraced in the interpretation and diffusion of knowledge, but already implied in the definition of the problems to be investigated, the setting of research priorities, and the research design, all of which include scientific and non-scientific stakeholders. Finally, like Mode 2 research, conservation of contemporary art research tends to be highly *reflective* (pp. 7–8), both in its awareness of the role of the conservator in the biography of the artwork and in the awareness of the situatedness of problem definitions within contingent interpretative frameworks and institutional contexts.<sup>12</sup>

## The Gap between Theory and Practice and the Response of Post-Critical Museology

It is possible to explain the comparatively modest role of academic scholars in the early days of this lively field of contemporary art conservation research with reference to the observation of Cassity and Ang that, in contrast to the suggestion of Gibbons et al. that the humanities have always demonstrated

11 ICOM-CC stands for the Committee of Conservation of the International Council of Museums, a non-governmental organization established in 1946. VoCA (Voices in Contemporary Art) is a non-profit organization that addresses the production, presentation, and preservation of contemporary art through interdisciplinary programming.

12 This awareness of the interpretative frameworks at play in the judgments of conservators and restorers is not limited to contemporary art conservation. During the mid to late 1990s and early 2000s, a number of meetings and publications focused on presenting conservation and restoration as historically situated and subject to the influence of tastes and fashions of the time. Particularly influential were publications such as Stanley-Price, Talley, & Melucco Vaccaro (1996). Other specific scholarly endeavors, such as Burnett Grossman, Podany, & True (2003), included prominent conservator Jerry Podany's careful study of the impact of historical restorations on the reading and interpretation of history, with the resulting heritage seen as palimpsests containing many layers of restoration that served to contribute to the meaning of objects. The profession was also under pressure at this time from James Beck, who in 1991 published "Bill of Rights for a Work of Art," defending works of art against what he saw as the excesses of conservation and restoration practices and a misguided faith in claims of scientific objectivity within conservation and restoration practice.



Mode 2 features, most humanities scholars have tended to prefer the Mode 1 approach:

Over the past century, the humanities in general have tended to prefer “Mode 1,” with its emphasis on disciplinary organization and individual autonomy, rather than “Mode 2,” with its problem-focused, multidisciplinary, and collaborative orientation. While the *form and content* of humanities research may well display “Mode 2” characteristics, its outcomes fit less easily within the *social and economic expectations* of “Mode 2,” given their emphasis upon calculable outcomes in clearly demarcated contexts. (2006, pp. 51–52)

As Cassity and Ang (2006, p. 51) seem to agree with Gibbons et al., the humanities have always shown Mode 2 features with respect to their form (exemplified by the essay) and content (as embodying notions of reflexivity). However, issues of form and content may nevertheless play a role in explaining why academic scholars were late in becoming involved in contemporary art conservation research. Dewdney et al. (2013) point to the “yawning gap” between the academic production of *certain kinds of cultural theory* and concrete practices of the museum. They observe a twofold separation between theory and practice and the museum and academia. If there is a gap within academia between theoretically informed reflection in research and contingent operational knowledge in teaching, there is one within museums between the know-how of operational practices and the know-why of strategic knowledge. Furthermore, there is a gap between the museum as a concrete operational sphere and academia using the museum as an object of abstract reflection: in this Mode 1 model of research the museum is conceived as an object of study for academia, the latter producing knowledge about the museum that is subsequently mobilized, or not, within the museum.

However, according to Dewdney et al., with the emergence of critical theory and its impact on museum studies, a situation arose in which academia insisted on revealing the problematic nature of the museum’s practical operations. Critical theory questioned canonical art history’s function – of providing universal standards by which the value of objects could be ascertained and meanings assigned – as serving the global art market and perpetuating (post)colonial patterns of cultural domination; in this criticism museums were portrayed as hegemonic institutions whose role in the public realm could and should be contested. Due to the logic of academic institutional performance, this criticism was mainly elaborated

from a distance and mainly by producing more theory. In response, museums found academic theory wanting. Academic theory was seen as failing to reflect and recognize current practice and thinking within museums, nor providing useful knowledge and responded by looking for knowledge elsewhere, considering the museum as a separate professional sphere producing its own reflexive knowledge. To respond to this situation, Dewdney et al. propose a *post-critical museology* that “is intended not to find the museum wanting from the remote position of analytical critique, but on the contrary, to develop a position which brings together academics, museum professionals and others in productive ways in order to open up new avenues of meaning and purpose” (p. 2).

Dewdney et al. were not the first or only ones to respond to the growing disconnection of theory and practice in museum studies. McLeod (2001) argued for a model that considers both museum professionals and academic scholars as part of the same community of practice. Macdonald (2006) called for an “expanded museum studies” that brings together new museology’s emphasis on theory with the practical concerns of traditional museology. Shelton, author of the manifesto for critical museology (2013), argued that the division between practice and theory should be rejected altogether and that the problem for museum practice “is not over-theorization, but working through the implications of theory and criticism to help redefine museum operations, purposes, resources, as well as ... providing perspectives on new issues” (2015, p. 618). According to Shelton, the kind of reflexivity that is exercised in critical museology “is a necessary precondition for establishing a theory of practice, from which a practice of theory can emerge” (2013, p. 14). In the same vein, McCarthy (2015; 2016) argued for a model that integrates theory, practice, research and professional development by regarding them as part of the same continuum.

The alternative Dewdney et al. propose is interesting because of the role and place of criticality. Post-critical museology wants to insist that research relating to the problems of contemporary practices in museums, whether conceptualized analytically or met operationally, takes place in and with museums and their extended collaborators in a reflexive theoretical mode. This leads to a working method that involves processes of translation between different registers of knowledge and dialogic iteration in which theory and practice are equally questionable. (Dewdney et al., 2013, p. 224)

Rather than opposing a “free” and thereby potentially critical academic scholarship to an “applied” and as such inevitably instrumental form of museum research, post-critical museology places criticality firmly within the museum. Critical reflection would be conducted *from within* rather than

from the outside, in the form of a reflexive and dialogic examination of the difficulties exposed through experimental practices within the museum.

This notion of post-critical museology is itself an outcome of such an experimental museum research project, *Tate Encounters: Britishness and Visual Cultures*, in which an interdisciplinary team worked together with twelve arts and humanities undergraduate students in order to critically investigate the ways in which the museum conceived and approached its audiences. Although different in terms of topic, this project shared with contemporary art conservation research that it addressed open-ended and multifaceted problems, involving many stakeholders and perspectives, that can only be approached by experimentally building up new kinds of expertise and forms of exchange.

What interests us here is the question of what can be learned from such experimental projects with regard to the requirements for fruitfully working together – of theoretically and practically oriented researchers, of various forms of expertise, and of experts and institutional contexts. We will approach this question with the help of Rabinow and Bennett's concept of Mode 1, 2, and 3 collaboration. Amin and Roberts's (2008) concept of epistemic communities of practice and Knorr Cetina's (1999) concept of epistemic objects will enable us to theoretically connect these forms of collaboration to the professional field of contemporary art conservation and its objects of research.

### **From Cooperation to Collaboration: Working Together in Emergent Problem Areas**

In their analysis of their experimental participation in SynBERC, a research center in the rapidly developing field of synthetic biology, Rabinow and Bennett (2009; 2012) have distinguished three modes of collaboration,<sup>13</sup> which help to unravel the various ways in which contemporary art conservation researchers from different disciplines and sectors work together.<sup>14</sup> The first of their three modes is *cooperation*. Cooperation is not the same as collaboration in Rabinow and Bennett's definition:

13 Of these three modes, only one (Mode 3) is called collaboration.

14 Mode 1 and 2 are related to what Nowotny et al. defined as the Mode 1 and Mode 2 of knowledge production; to what extent Rabinow and Bennett's Mode 3 of collaboration was implied in Nowotny's Mode 2 of knowledge production is a question that falls outside the scope of this chapter.

As a mode of work, *cooperation* should be distinguished from *collaboration*. A collaborative mode proceeds from an interdependent division of work on shared problems. A cooperative mode consists in demarcated work with regular exchange; cooperation does not entail common definition of problems or shared techniques of remediation. (2009, p. 266)

We can see Mode 1 cooperation exemplified in good practices of traditional art conservation, like the well-documented restoration of Barnett Newman's color field painting *Cathedra* (Bracht et al., 2001). This mode prevails where the outlines of the problems addressed are fairly well-known and the types of expertise invoked are considered adequate for dealing with emerging problems. There is uncertainty about specific aspects of the problem (for instance: how will the mending of large cuts in the canvas hold in the future?), but this uncertainty can be diminished by transferring existing knowledge or techniques to the new problem situation. The task is to identify, consult, and coordinate the work of the appropriate experts (like commissioning Technical University Delft to experiment with putting pressure on mock-ups made with different mending techniques). If this type of technical research with its concomitant cooperation remains important also in contemporary art conservation and increasingly involves new areas of expertise (for instance in the preservation of modern synthetic materials, or new media), it may conceptually become subordinated to other concerns. The underlying ethical concern governing Mode 1 is to *protect* works of art, not only against damage and decay, but also against unprofessional conduct of conservators.<sup>15</sup>

The second mode became more prevalent with the growing awareness of the social accountability of science. The task of Mode 2 collaboration is to bring various actors together in a common venue and to create a space for and facilitate the expression and representation of the values, perspectives, and interests of different stakeholders. In conservation, this approach is particularly pertinent in cases of contested – for instance colonial – heritage, as well as for art in public spaces, participatory and community art, and user generated forms of online art. The ethical concern here is that of inclusiveness, social accountability, and responsibility, to be guaranteed by implementing appropriate channels of representation and following appropriate procedures. Interestingly, although within the research and

<sup>15</sup> The kind of protection Rabinow and Bennett mention is protection of research subjects against abuse by medical researchers, such as the Tuskegee experiments in which patients with latent syphilis were not given proper treatment (2012, pp. 32–33; 37; 39).

decision-making process for contemporary artworks there are various platforms and procedures in which different actors are brought together,<sup>16</sup> involving the wider audience is not yet a well-developed practice.

In Rabinow and Bennett's project, the third mode of collaboration – collaboration in the proper sense of the word – is appropriate in those situations in which problems and their significance are not clearly determined yet. In such cases the most significant challenges for scientific practices cannot be known in advance and the relevant contexts can best be described as *emergent*.

We understand *emergence* to refer to a state in which multiple elements combine to produce an assemblage, whose significance cannot be reduced to prior elements and relations. As such, the problems and their solutions ... cannot be identified and addressed until they unfold ... The knowledge needed to move toward the desired near future will be developed in a space of relative uncertainty and contingency (Rabinow & Bennett, 2012, p. 41)<sup>17</sup>.

Problem spaces emerge for instance when the nature and significance of a problem are thoroughly questioned, or when the problem area is very heterogeneous, complex, or instable. In such cases an interaction of various research skills and expertise is asked for without it being clear in advance how such an interaction should be organized and what the outcome will be (Rabinow & Bennett, 2012, p. 6). Collaboration in such an emergent problem space means an experimental attitude from the participants who should be willing to share the work of defining problems from the beginning and to submit themselves to changes in their habits and procedures if the unfolding of problems demand this. Collaboration, they argue, anticipates the likely reworking of existing modes of reasoning and intervention, adjusting these

16 Within contemporary conservation practice, decisions regarding individual case-studies are discussed and presented at professional meetings such as conferences, or project meetings or within formal advisory platforms such as organized by the SBMK. It could be argued that this is in fact the primary mode of discourse within the field.

17 To ground this in an example, the AHRC funded research network *Mind the Gap: Rigour and Relevance within Heritage Science Research* (<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/mind-the-gap-report-jan-2014.pdf>) opened up additional research questions about the dynamics of collaboration between academic and museum-based researchers that were picked up within the doctoral project conducted by Zoe Miller within the NACCA project. This doctoral project on *Ownership, Information, Control, and Access: A Study in Practice and Ethics* explores questions of authorship within conservation practice and virtues of invisibility within the conservation profession. It illustrates the value of long-term research collaborations, something more often recognized in the funding of STEM subjects than within humanities research.

modes to the topography of the emerging problem-space. Collaboration proceeds with the assumption that new capacities, skills, arrangements, and distribution of power may well be required to carry out a successful inquiry (2012, p. 6).

Ethically the third mode aims to design practices that bring the biosciences and the human sciences into a mutually collaborative and enriching relationship designed to facilitate a remediation<sup>18</sup> of the currently existing relations between knowledge and care in terms of mutual flourishing (2012, p. 42).

The term “flourishing” is a translation of the Greek word *eudaemonia* (comparable translations are: thriving, the good life, happiness, fulfilment, etc. (2012, p. 44)) and is connected to an ethics of *care* – for others, the world, things, and ourselves. What flourishing means needs to be defined time and again according to contemporary conditions.

Mode 3 collaboration is not easily achieved. Actually, the outcome of Rabinow and Bennett’s own involvement in SynBERC was rather disappointing, due to lack of collaboration of the scientists and of support of the governing board – to such extent that they conclude “that any form of engagement that would focus ethics on a change of habits and dispositions ... will be ignored or blocked” (2012, p. 173). Established power relations and institutional audit mechanisms favoring immediate and measurable results tend to pre-empt more experimental, reflective, and transformative forms of weaving ethical concerns into research practices. Nevertheless, in contexts in which commercial and institutional stakes are less predominant, such experiments may have a greater chance of success. Although not undisputed, the abovementioned project *Tate Encounters: Britishness and Visual Cultures* could serve as an example of a Mode 3 collaboration responding to the challenges changing audiences pose to museums.

Characteristic features of Mode 1, 2, and 3 research are also reflected in distinctions made between different types of community of practice by Amin and Roberts (2008). Here the authors identify four types of collaborative working: craft- or task-based work, professional practice, epistemic or high-creativity collaboration, and virtual collaboration (Amin & Roberts, 2008, p. 354). Within the conservation of contemporary art research, we see a need for conservation to move away from the standard craft type, involving communities of practice or professional communities of practice (where membership to a profession is facilitated via academic learning plus doing), to epistemic communities, in order to respond to the need for a

<sup>18</sup> Remediation in Rabinow and Bennett’s definition means both to remedy, to make something better, and a change of medium (2012, p. 42).

greater degree of innovation. The knowledge dynamics within these groups are not the same, and the importance of innovation to these groups varies dramatically. For example, epistemic communities (Lindkvist, 2005; Knorr Cetina, 1999; Gittelman, 2007; Haas, 1992) specifically bring communities together to develop new knowledge and have a high propensity to innovate, whereas craft-based communities are more concerned with the preservation of skills and incremental innovation. It is in the construction of epistemic communities where the desire to draw in academic collaboration from a variety of different disciplinary perspectives is noted (Amin & Roberts, 2008). Such communities are designed in such a way that through variety, creativity is nurtured and the “mobilisation of difference in conditions of uncertainty as a means of generating new interactive knowledge” is realized (Creplet et al., 2001). Amin and Roberts also note the strong loyalty to a shared problem space within these communities of practice (Amin & Roberts, 2008, p. 361).

Similar to the drivers for establishing epistemic communities of practice, the main reason why the conservation of contemporary art is currently engaging in Mode 3 types of collaboration is in order to respond to change, for example the changing nature of artistic practice where works of contemporary art have become – to a varying degree – open-ended processes, rather than objects that interact with their spatial, institutional, or social environments.<sup>19</sup> What conservation means for such works is often highly indeterminate and beyond the control of any of the participants, artists and museums included. The sociologist Knorr Cetina (2001) focuses on knowledge-centered professional practice, which she characterizes as both creative and constructive; it is the type of practice that is present when we confront non-routine problems. She also characterizes this type of practice as relational, meaning that the focus is on the relationship to a differentiated epistemic object. In the case of conservation and contemporary art practice, the artwork can be seen to act as an epistemic object that unfolds over time in response to the engagement of these practitioners.<sup>20</sup> Although *protection* might still be a significant purpose, for instance when precarious materials or media are involved, care for a work’s continued *flourishing* may entail quite different and even contrary actions (Sterrett & Laurensen, 2015). In this way contemporary art objects have also been characterized as “unruly” by Dominguez Rubio:

19 Other examples would be the changing notions of the role of collections and their preservation or changes in social and political context.

20 <https://www.incca.org/articles/video-pip-laurenson-asks-can-artworks-live-museums-collection> Retrieved August 31, 2018.

In practical terms, unruly objects can be identified as those artworks that behave as *variable* rather than stable, *elusive* rather than classifiable, and *unwieldy* rather than portable objects. If docile objects are typically elusive objects of study, unruly objects tend to be highly visible. They are typically described as “problems,” “disruptions,” “glitches,” or “challenges” that need to be fixed or solved. (2014, pp. 632–633)

And, again emphasizing their function as non-standard challenges to the museum and its practices:

unruly objects can be described as vectors of institutional and cultural change: as elements that require creative adaptations and negotiations, and the shifting of positions and boundaries around them (Dominguez Rubio, 2014, p. 633).

In short, our theoretical exercise suggests that the open-ended and evolving, ‘unruly’ nature of contemporary works of art make them act as epistemic objects (Knorr Cetina, 1999) and necessitates conservation professionals to engage in the more open-ended and innovative kind of practices described by Amin and Roberts as belonging to epistemic communities of practice. Such experimental practices require collaboration between practitioners and academics within the museum as indicated by post-critical museology, in the Mode 3 form defined by Rabinow and Bennett: a way of working together in which the boundaries between roles and areas of expertise are blurred, which allows new problem spaces to emerge and which aims at the flourishing, rather than the protection of the works to be conserved. In the following case-study we will investigate to what extent the project *Collecting the Performative* actually came close to these suggestions and what this meant for its outcomes in theoretical and practical terms. We will establish whether and in what ways the project allowed for criticality and institutional change, as well as what were the conditions that made it possible for the collaboration to go beyond institutional drivers and become valuable for its own sake.

### **Collaboration in a Post-Critical Museological Setting: Collecting the Performative**

*In the context of the co-authored research project on Collecting the Performative, Tate invited Dr. Vivian van Saaze to spend some time as a fellow at Tate Britain in London. Her research was to focus on the further investigation*



*of performance-based artworks in the collection of Tate, and, accordingly, interviews were scheduled with staff from the curatorial and conservation departments. At the time, however, no desk space was left in the research department, and the only desk available was located through the corridor in the shared office space of the Health and Safety department at Tate Britain. While the museum host was relieved that a working space had been found, the visiting researcher was disappointed not to be part of what was considered the epicentre for research: the curatorial and conservation research department. Yet after a few days of overhearing staff members at Health and Safety, it became apparent that they held valuable knowledge about the practicalities of displaying performance-based art in the highly secured and regulated space of the museum. For example, which measures had to be taken to accommodate Tania Bruguera's Tatlin's Whisper #5, a performance during which two mounted policemen in uniform are brought into the museum and patrol the space, guiding and controlling the audience by using crowd control techniques? How far can health and safety rules and regulations be stretched to accommodate the unruly objects of performance, and how much do works of performance art have to adapt to their institutional context in order still to be acceptable? In short: what was first considered to be unconnected from the focus of research would in fact shape the problem space and provide an otherwise overlooked but vital aspect of understanding performance-based art practices in the museum.*

This narrative derived from our case-study illustrates what may happen when an academic researcher enters the museum to study an experimental practice "from within." *Collecting the Performative* was an AHRC and NWO funded research network led by principal investigator Pip Laurensen, based at Tate and co-investigator Vivian van Saaze, based at Maastricht University.<sup>21</sup> The project examined emerging models for the conservation and documentation of artists' performance, drawing upon the practices of dance, theater, and activism to explore legacy in these domains and in order to identify parallels to related notions of authorship, authenticity, autonomy, documentation, memory, continuity, and liveness. The project ran from April 2012 to January 2014 and brought together Dutch and British academic scholars from a variety of disciplines and museum professionals. The project aimed to provide greater insight into the conceptual and practical challenges related to collecting and conserving works of performance art.

21 At the time of the proposal writing, Pip Laurensen was Head of Collection Care Research at Tate. Vivian van Saaze was postdoctoral researcher at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Maastricht University.

In the analysis of this case, we examine the modes of collaboration and the explicit and implicit drivers for the collaboration against the backdrop of the discussion above. In order to scrutinize the modes of collaboration, as well as tensions and benefits of this collaboration, we will describe the different instances of collaboration through four stages of research: 1) project development, 2) delivering the project, 3) output, 4) subsequent collaboration.

### *1. Project Development*

The idea for this research network was initiated by Pip Laurenson and evolved in response to a joint funding call between the AHRC and NWO “Humanities Research Networking and Exchange Scheme.” The call concerned a network grant and the explicit drivers within the project proposal were framed around questions of building bridges between academia and the museum, as well as the UK and the Netherlands. Building on the investigators’ previous research collaboration through *Inside Installations* and continued shared interests, the project aimed to provide greater insight into the conceptual and practical challenges related to collecting and conserving artists’ performance. While the network-grant did not provide funding for research time, both investigators envisioned the project to provide an opportunity to further develop collaborative research and strengthen the ties between the two institutions involved. The ambition to develop a non-hierarchical form of collaboration was articulated as follows: “The research practitioners (artists, curators and conservators) and the academic researchers will be treated as equal partners, able to share methodologies and questions: no group will be conceived as the subject of research of the other” (grant proposal, p. 3).

The development of the extended research network, involving internal and external museum staff as well as academics from a range of disciplines, was based on the research interests of Laurenson and van Saaze and their history of collaboration within the field of contemporary art conservation. For this reason, the focus of the research project was both interdisciplinary and inter-departmental, enabling internal conversations about the acquisition of live performance works to take place in an open environment of enquiry, as well as provide a network opportunity for staff. Within the contemporary art museum, questions might be raised as to the role of conservation for live performance works. Conservation is a discipline traditionally defined by its material focus. This is why it has been important within contemporary art conservation theory and practice to demonstrate how the profession has developed in response to different forms of art that may not be defined by their materiality. That the project was developed from within Collection Care Research at Tate was therefore an indication internally to the institution

of emerging thinking in this area within the Collection Care Division, signaling that in addition to specialist curators, staff from conservation, archive, and registration were actively engaged in thinking through these questions and developing new approaches. The project also examined the nature of expertise for creating legacy in different professions, including the role of the dramaturge in theatre as well as the roles within the museum of conservator, archivist, curator etc. The purpose of this was to provide a space for thinking about expanded professional roles in response to changing artistic practice. The project was therefore designed to involve staff within Tate from both curatorial, conservation, archive, registration, and learning as a way of understanding a range of perspectives and acknowledging different forms of their expertise both as practitioners and researchers.

One of the benefits of the collaboration was that each party was able to benefit from each other's networks and perspectives. While van Saaze managed to draw in a range of academics, Laurenson was able to bring in a range of practitioners and artists. Within the museum the ability to bring in external participants from academia and also other contemporary art museums made membership of the network attractive to staff as a networking opportunity, more so than if the network had been purely internal. The structure and partnerships in the network therefore were designed in part with this in mind. Within the university, the relationship with Tate through this collaboration and the access afforded to van Saaze was considered of value as a form of engaged humanities and in relation to her academic department's valorization agenda.

While the project proposal was written in a collaborative manner and with a shared goal to create a research network around the challenges of bringing live works into the museum, Laurenson and van Saaze did not articulate a shared theoretical ambition. Nor were underlying individual drivers made explicit. For instance, what was not explicit was the importance to Laurenson of this network acting as a vehicle to create dialogue internally between curators, conservators, collection managers/registrars, and Learning Department in order to identify and assert the relevance of these institutional practices within the museum to collecting live performance works. Equally, it was not made explicit that van Saaze rendered the project as a form of fieldwork, potentially producing materials for ongoing research into museum practices, as well as the wish to produce academic output drawing on the project. As the project initially did not include the articulation of a shared theoretical ambition and did not address the researchers' individual drivers stemming from the different institutional contexts, at this stage, the project proposal may not have achieved true collaboration in a Mode 3 sense. However, as

discussed below, the development of a shared “emergent problem space” can be seen to have evolved during the delivery of the project, output, and subsequent collaboration.

## *2. Project Delivery*

One of the areas of tension within collaborations between the museum and academia concerns an anxiety on the museum’s part regarding public criticism that would be seen to damage the reputation of the museum. On the part of academia this concern translates as a sense that the museum will curtail criticism of its practices, in effect limiting the ability of academic researchers to publish and disseminate the results of their research if it is critical of the museum. How to respond to the suspicion that academic research might lose its independence and critical edge by answering to the pragmatic goals of the profession or institution it works with? The question assumes that within a collaboration between the museum and academia, the museum and its practices are the subject of the research and hence the object of criticism and critique. This has been described by Dewdney as “an epistemic fault line,” which refers to two points of tension: the tension between theory and practice, and the tension between the museum and academia. The museum is seen as a concrete operational sphere considered as the object of abstract reflection by academia (Dewdney et al., 2013, p. 221). In this account the academics are seen to view theory as their sole domain which can be mobilized to provide external criticism of the museum, with the museum seen as anti-theory and as a separate professional sphere of operation based on its own reflexive knowledge. What Dewdney et al. point to in this account is the uncertainty of the status of the knowledge produced from a deeper collaboration and co-production of knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

22 In her short paper “From Criticism to Critique to Criticality,” Rogoff (2003) describes the development of her use of terms and their associated modes of enquiry in the move from “criticism” to “critique” to “criticality” that is useful to our discussion in their relationship to the three modes of knowledge production. In this paper, “criticism” is seen as externally situated fault finding from a position of certainty, a position that is akin to Mode 1 knowledge production. “Critique,” on the other hand, is characterized as more closely situated within what, in our chapter, we identified as sharing some of the features of a Mode 2 collaboration, where assumptions are examined and questioned in the development of the problem space, and the embodied identity of the researcher are present and a mode of shared knowledge production that is both reflexive and contextualized. However, for Rogoff the problem space of “critique” is still identified with an “external knowingness,” explored from a position of the outsider looking in. Whereas for Rogoff it is “criticality” that fully inhabits a mode of knowledge production where the researcher shares a current and emerging problem space that Rogoff, referencing Hannah Arendt, would identify as a position of being a “fellow sufferer.” Following Rogoff, we therefore use “criticism”

How are we to understand this aspect in relation to the way it played out in the research network *Collecting the Performative*?

The overall framing questions for this network was: “How is legacy created in the performance traditions of dance, theatre and activism? What might we learn from the way in which legacy is created in these traditions that might help us understand how we might bring live works into museum collections?” These questions arose from museum practice and were focused on questions that would inform practices. The questions were addressed in four closed network meetings in conjunction with a public lecture: 1) Performance and Dance (hosted by Tate, with a keynote lecture by the dancer and choreographer Boris Charmatz), 2) Performance and Activism (hosted by the Van Abbemuseum with a keynote by the artist Tania Bruguera), 3) Performance and Theatre (hosted by Tate, keynote artist and writer Tim Etchells), and 4) Drawing Conclusions (Maastricht/Amsterdam). In addition, Tino Sehgal’s work *This is Propaganda* in the collection of Tate was selected as a case-study, and a remembrance meeting was organized which included the former interpreters and the artist.

A brief recap of the meeting about performance and theater provides an interesting example of a failed attempt to arrive at a shared problem space among the participants. The meeting was held at Tate, and in addition to an artist, there were twelve museum practitioners and six academics present for a discussion covering a wide range of topics, including the impact of theatre on performance within an art context, the different logics and conventions of re-performance and re-interpretation in the contexts of theatre and the museum, and the parallels that can be drawn between the role of a dramaturg and that of a conservator or curator. In this session, which essentially looked at how legacy is created in theatre, Marijke Hoogenboom, then professor of Art Practice and Artistic Development, Amsterdam University of the Arts, raised fundamental questions about the motives behind performance entering the museum, questions that somewhat fell on deaf ears. Pointing to the power of the museum and the availability of resources, Hoogenboom asked: “But why does that have to be the museum, why don’t you outsource that to a specialized organization from the field of the performing arts?”<sup>23</sup> In this quote, Hoogenboom is highlighting the importance of supporting and developing the infrastructure for theater and the museum’s responsibility

to capture a mode of external fault finding found in Mode 1 knowledge production and assume “critique” to be closer to a Mode 2 perspective, whereas “criticality” is akin to Mode 3 knowledge production.

23 Edited transcripts of *Collecting the Performative Meeting III – Performance & Theatre Meeting*, November 26, 2013 at Tate Modern.

as an arts organization not to jeopardize the existing infrastructure for the performing arts. These comments fell flat as the moderators of the session did not consider them to be part of the problem space, which was defined by the museum logics of ownership. By not critically engaging with voices questioning whether the museum should be collecting live works at all, the opportunity to arrive at an inclusive, shared problem space was missed.

In the session on Performance and Activism, which took place at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, on March 8, 2013, a shared problem space unfolded over a conversation between the curator and Head of Collections, Christiane Berndes, curator and Head of Research, Diana Franssen, the artist Annette Krauss, and several academics about the work *Read the Mask. Tradition Is Not Given* (2008–2009) by Petra Bauer and Annette Krauss. The work in the collection of the Van Abbemuseum consists of a film (transferred to video and acquired in 2009) which is part of an ongoing project investigating the Dutch tradition of “Zwarte Piet” (Black Pete) and its social and political implications. For the start of the project, the artists and the Van Abbemuseum had planned a performance/protest march in the city of Eindhoven aiming to kick off a public debate. The march was however canceled as its announcement already triggered so much media coverage and hate mail that performing the protest march was deemed irresponsible. While revisiting the project and reflecting on the acquisition of the work by the Van Abbemuseum, the Performance and Activism meeting became a platform to discuss the parameters of the work again. The work and collecting practices were re-negotiated as the public uproar and media coverage were recognized as a significant aspect of the work. Several of the participants, including the artist and the curator and head of research raised the question whether these comments should not also be collected and preserved as part of the work. Soon the discussion moved to the shifting boundaries between a museum’s archive and its collection. The relationship of these types of works to an “archive” of responses that might also grow each time the work is reinstalled or re-performed became a shared concern linked to how the identity of a work is conceptualized and may alter over time. This issue, as will be addressed below, was later taken up in a subsequent research project *Reshaping the Collectible*.

Another example of an emergent problem space related to the Performance and Activism meeting can be found in the discussion about being realistic about the level of resources that might be available and sustainable within a collection to support one artist’s work or practice in terms of works that arise from a tradition of activism. Here the meeting reflected on how the museum was instrumentalized within this practice and on the promise an

art institution is making when acquiring a work. Here, the shared problem space emerged for artists and the museum about the honesty of the dialogue.

### *3. Project Output (Theoretical and Practical Gains)*

A very literal example of a situation in which an experimental attitude from the participants and a willingness to submit themselves to changes in their habits and procedures actually contributed to a redefinition of the problem space is described in the narrative with which this section of the chapter opened. The practical fact that the academic researcher doing her research in the museum was housed in a seemingly peripheral part of the building, the shared office space of the Health and Safety department, proved to be an important factor in shaping her perspective on the problems at hand. Insight into the valuable nature of the knowledge of the staff members within the Health and Safety Department about the practicalities of displaying performance-based art helped to substantiate a theoretical “turn to practice” exemplified in one of the outputs of the collaborative project, a chapter co-authored by Laurenson and van Saaze (2014). The impact of this turn – away from the tradition of critical theory and toward what has by now come to be known as “practice theory” (cf. Schatzki et al., 2001; Nicolini, 2012) – goes beyond the specific practical questions that gave rise to the research project, of which the chapter is an outcome redrawing the outlines of the problem space. It opens up a different way of thinking about the nature of both artworks and (museum) institutions, about a different ethos and a different research practice.

The chapter starts with observing that “historically, performance or live works seem to have been perceived by artists, theoreticians and curators as a form of practice which defies absorption into an art system dependent on the currency of objects” (Laurenson & van Saaze, 2014, p. 31). Defined as being non-material, intangible, ephemeral, conceptually bound to their liveness, performance works could by definition not be collected and conserved. The chapter quotes the well-known dictum by Peggy Phelan: “Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does so it becomes something other than performance” (quoted in Laurenson & van Saaze, p. 32). Phelan’s position has been criticized extensively by questioning the ontology behind it, for instance with the argument that it is documentation that grounds an event as a performance (Auslander, 2006) or by redefining performance not in terms of its disappearance or its dependence on documentation, but as a material, affective, and embodied “process of perpetual variation” with a potential to change its audience (Van den Hengel, 2017, p. 138). Laurenson and van Saaze’s chapter does something else: rather than aiming at a refinement

of categorical definitions, it looks empirically at concrete instances where performance works were collected by a museum, Tate, and investigate “where the points of friction *actually arise*” (2014, p. 31; our italics). This enables them to claim that “the main challenge to the museum currently is not the non-materiality or even the liveness of these works, but rather what they demand to maintain their memory, the skills needed for their enactment, or perhaps even their currency” (p. 31).

In other words, Laurenson and van Saaze do not answer the question whether performance art is collectible or not by deducing the answer from an a priori definition of its ontological nature. They empirically investigate how performance artworks and collections interact in practice – which, at the end, enables a more differentiated view on ontologically different types of performance works. The exploration reveals that performance works are indeed challenging to the institutionalized practices of a museum collection, but not all to the same degree and in the same way, and not always for the reasons expected on theoretical grounds. Moreover, neither performance art nor the museum is “set in stone”; both sides of the presumed opposition have changed and will continue to change because of and in the encounter. Nowadays, many performance artworks no longer focus on the artist’s own body or on the unrepeatable liveness of the act; they have been made durable and repeatable by others through the use of instructions (pp. 33–34). Museums have had to mobilize new types of skills, networks, and procedures to adequately maintain the works. In the process, assumptions about what constitutes conservation have changed as well: rather than securing sameness to an original event, conservation of performance art aims at maintaining relations to a social or historical context and may require translation to another time or situation (pp. 34–39).

The shift in problem space from one determined by ontological definitions to one determined by the identification of actual frictions foregrounds the practicalities required to allow performances to endure, the skills and knowledge needed for, and the compromises involved in their re-stagings, the translations demanded to convincingly revive them in always new situations. Whether and how a particular ontology is viable depends on highly practical conditions, which need to be instituted and conventionalized in skills, networks, procedures, and resources – such as, for instance, available time and attention. Conversely, there are many different types of performances, requiring different forms of care. Finally, Laurenson and van Saaze’s approach foregrounds a possible area of (at least some) performance artworks’ transformative power that an ontological approach tends to overlook: not only the *audiences* may change in the encounter,



*institutions* may (have to) change as well.<sup>24</sup> This insight in particular has opened up types of research questions that are relatively new for conservation, focusing on the museum's infrastructures and procedures, on networks with external experts and stakeholders – essential for maintaining the conditions for the mutual flourishing of the work and the museum. In Rabinow and Bennet's terms, this would represent a "remediation of currently existing relations of knowledge and care" (Rabinow & Bennett, 2012, p. 42).

What the example of *Collecting the Performative* also shows is that the traditional (Mode 1) role distinctions between the museum-based and university-based researcher became blurred. The museum-based researcher, for instance, was equally involved in developing theoretical concepts and preparing publications, while the academic researcher took on the role of manager to co-organize the meetings at Tate, and contribute to more practical tools that may improve the conservation of performance art.

In the light of more practical gains, it is useful to mention another concrete output of the collaborative project: *The Live List: What to Consider When Collecting Live Works* (2014).<sup>25</sup> The Live List, which was co-produced in the final session of the network, was a list of what to consider when a museum should want to bring a live work into their collection. The final session brought together different practitioners and academics to work together to coproduce without specific authorship a resource for other museums and collectors when thinking about acquiring live work. In this sense, academics engaged with the concerns of practice in the same ways as the article might be seen as evidence of practice engaging in and supporting the development of theory. The Live List has continued to be developed within time-based media conservation at Tate with a focus on the documentation of performance,<sup>26</sup> and it is being tested within a further research project on *Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum*.<sup>27</sup>

24 Likewise, Domínguez Rubio (2014) has argued that "unruly objects" may constitute "vectors of change in the process of cultural production" by creating "the kind of discontinuities that lead to the transformation of organizations and institutions" (p. 641).

25 <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/collecting-performative/live-list-what-consider-when-collecting-live-works>, Retrieved June 5, 2019.

26 'The Live List' for documentation was developed within time-based media conservation led by Louise Lawson with the input of Acatia Finbow as part of her collaborative doctorate between Tate and Exeter University: <https://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/english/research/students/acatiafinbow/>, accessed June 5, 2019.

27 The project ran from January 2018 to June 2021 and was led by Pip Laurenson. Project website: <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/reshaping-the-collectible>, accessed June 5, 2019.

#### 4. *Subsequent collaboration*

Duration is an important aspect of collaborative relationships. In this case the continued collaboration allowed not only the development of trust and understanding, but also critical reflection on the impact of their institutional perspectives and identities on the research and its design as both Laurenson and van Saaze's roles changed within their respective institutions as their careers evolved. For both, the bridging role between the museum and academia remains important and in development.<sup>28</sup> Van Saaze became co-founder and Director of the transdisciplinary research center MACCH (The Maastricht Centre for Arts and Culture, Conservation and Heritage) which champions cross-institutional collaboration.<sup>29</sup> For Laurenson this has included taking up a special chair in January 2016 as Professor of Art, Collection, and Care at Maastricht University. The preparation for the inaugural lecture and two additional lectures allowed Laurenson to develop her thinking, in particular around practice theory, knowledge production, and the importance of social networks underpinning contemporary artworks that inform her current research. The problem space that began to emerge within *Collecting the Performative* fed into a current Tate research project *Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum*. This three-year research project, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, returns to the theme of collecting works that challenge the boundary of forms of artistic practice that might be considered able to flourish within a museum collection. Very directly, a central concept for *Reshaping the Collectible* is "legacy," a concept used to frame the proposal and the contributions of three artist's keynotes within *Collecting the Performative*, even if at the time of this earlier project the concept was not fully explored or critically examined.

The networks of people and skills, which underpinned some of the more complex performances examined in *Collecting the Performative*, were touched upon in the course of the project but again have only subsequently been the focus of research, for example in a collaborative PhD project established

28 The research conducted as part of the *Mind the Gap: Rigor and Relevance in Heritage Science Research* project pointed to the value of those who were interested and able to take on bridging roles between the different communities engaged in collaboration (Bell et al., 2014).

29 The Maastricht Centre for Arts and Culture, Conservation and Heritage (MACCH) was established in 2015 and brings together economic, legal, (art) historical, philosophical, sociological, and practical expertise to the context of arts and heritage. MACCH initiates collaborative research projects with researchers, professionals, and students from diverse backgrounds. It is a joint effort of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, the Faculty of Law, the School of Business and Economics, and the Faculty of Science and Engineering of Maastricht University, as well as the Sociaal Historisch Centrum voor Limburg (SHCL) and the Stichting Restauratie Atelier Limburg (SRAL) [www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/macch](http://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/macch). Retrieved June 9, 2019.

between Tate and Maastricht University.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, questions about the relationship between the aims of artists who produce highly political works and the museum, and also works that question the boundaries between the artwork, the archive, and the record, have resurfaced in *Reshaping the Collectible*. This project required the bringing together of a new research team and, in its establishment, it became quickly apparent that it was important for that team to understand the history not only of the development and framing of the questions being pursued, but also of the importance of the collaborations and past projects it draws upon – influences that go beyond the shared literature and the methodologies employed. This was important not only in understanding the problem space being explored within the research, but also in understanding the research project design and the collaborative values underpinning how the research will be pursued.

This project, while rooted in the museum, invites four academic fellows to engage in the project. One of these scholars is van Saaze, and this makes it possible to continue the collaboration with Tate and to have the research again evolve beyond the life of any single research project.

## Conclusion

What does *Collecting the Performative* demonstrate about the potential benefits and challenges for theory and practice when academic and professional researchers work together in what could be called “emergent problem spaces”? The project resulted in theoretically and practically relevant forms of output: the co-authored chapter and The Live List. Neither of them would have taken the shape they had without at least some instances of an intensive kind of Mode 3 collaboration, in which the researchers were prepared to take on bridging roles and were open to have their initial thinking and approach changed. Both researchers took on additional tasks that do not correspond with the traditional Mode 1 division of labor: the museum-based researcher was involved in developing theoretical concepts and preparing publications, while the academic researcher co-organized meetings and contributed to the development of more practical tools. Where Rabinow and Bennett’s project stranded on an unwillingness of participants to change habits and dispositions, in this project both researchers were willing and through

30 The doctoral project *Precarity in the Social-material Networks of Time-based Media Works of Art* is conducted by Dirk van de Leemput, who is variously employed by both Tate and Maastricht University.

their background were indeed already accustomed to operate between the two worlds, brokering knowledge, combining different roles, and forms of expertise. This flexibility paid off even on the level of research practicalities: the fact that the academic researcher did move into the museum and into an off-center office space was a constitutive factor in the re-conceptualization of the problem space. This problem space was further developed in the project's afterlife: the follow-up project *Reshaping the Collectible* further articulated concepts (legacy), relevant areas of research (sustaining networks of expertise), and questions (about relations between activist artists and museums, blurring boundaries between the artwork, the archive, and the record, and the limitations of different modes of transmission) that had surfaced but were not yet given due attention in *Collecting the Performative*. The challenges facing the collaboration were caused by a lack of clarity about the specific drivers and expectations of the two main investigators in the beginning of the project.

How to respond to the suspicion that academic research might lose its independence and critical edge by answering to the pragmatic goals of the profession or institution it works with? The idea of a post-critical museology suggests that the most effective form of criticism may be one that comes from within, from a collaborative engagement with experimental projects that may lead to a change in institutional practices and a shared space for criticality.<sup>31</sup> *Collecting the Performative* demonstrates that such changes are indeed possible, for instance the development of practice in the adoption of The Live List (2014) and the growing acceptance that conservation is a participant and contributes to the teams collecting and producing performance based artworks in the museum. It also shows that not all possible critical notions will be adopted or lead to redrawing the outlines of a problem space. A questioning of the assumption that a museum should collect performance at all, rather than outsource this task to a specialized organization from the field of the performing arts, was not taken up, indicating that there may indeed be limits to the degree of criticality that a museum can effectively address. However, when concerns are voiced about academic research losing its critical edge in collaborations with external institutions, the pragmatic goals of academic institutions themselves should also be critically questioned. For instance, the emphasis on high profile peer-reviewed publications, often rooted in specific single academic disciplines, rather than publications for a professional audience is one such institutional demand that tends to curtail the possibilities for successful cross-institutional collaboration.

31 "Criticality" is used here in the sense that is used by Rogoff (2003).

What makes such collaborations work in such a way that they serve not only political and economic institutional drivers but also the value of working together? Our case-study has shown that fruitful Mode 3 collaboration asks for a long-term engagement, far beyond the time limits of a single project. One reason is that it takes time for a problem space to unfold. The potential of a specific idea or practice for the reshaping of the problem definition may only become apparent after a while; many of the questions arising may well need a next project to be addressed. Another reason is that not only the problem space but also the collaboration needs time to develop. Frictions between expectations and assumptions may not have been explicit during the project's development; trust, openness, curiosity, sensitivity, and generosity toward each other's interests and institutional requirements need time to flourish and develop. Indeed, some of the values cherished in "pure" or curiosity-driven research are (possibly even better) exemplified by the theoretical/practical collaboration (interdisciplinary, risk-taking research, openness to what happens) as discussed above.

As researchers we have remained committed to collaboration as fundamental to the way in which we want to conduct our research and have grappled with how we can change the terms of the discussion to move beyond the practice/theory dichotomy. We believe that, in many cases, it is in some sense (yet to be articulated) ethically the right way to work and that we benefit from our different drivers and approaches, because these serve to reveal our own institutional frames and biases. Building enduring partnerships between museums and universities allows us to connect with communities, to open up our institutions, to invite participation, and create spaces of shared criticality. While collaboration serves as a tool as we re-shape our institutions to better serve our goals to connect in a deeper way with our publics, as well as address histories of injustice and a future of shared global challenges, it also points to values embedded in our way of working. Together, we share a joy in our collaborative relationships, the challenges, and the companionship they bring to grappling with things that we care a good deal about and ultimately assert the very human qualities that mark deep collaborative relationships as having value.

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# Part IV

The Humanities Tradition:  
Pioneers and Longstanding Debates



## 11. Between Female Hellenism and Suffrage

Jane Ellen Harrison's Feminist Engagement and the Early Performative Turn in the Study of Religion

*Ulrike Brunotte*

### Abstract

This chapter focuses on the classical scholar and archaeologist Jane Harrison who revolutionized the study of religion in ways that stressed the role of images and rituals as equal to that of texts and literature. It analyzes how her multiple feminist engagement was intertwined with her bottom-up-approach to ancient Greek religion and helped to recognize the importance of material objects and embodiment. The chapter draws on Harrison's insights to reveal the strong ties between religion, ritual, and art, and presents her work as early genealogy of current innovations such as the "aesthetics of religion" and "material religion." It highlights the role of her feminist engagement to show that Harrison's ideas have been fruitful for the *performative turn* in the humanities.

**Keywords:** ritual, performativity, Jane E. Harrison, material religion, feminism

### Harrison's Engaged Anti-Classical Humanism

On December 7, 1909, the newly founded *Cambridge Society of Heretics* invited Jane Ellen Harrison to be one of their two keynote speakers. The self-claimed *Heretics* rejected traditional Christianity, and "all appeal to Authority in the discussion of religious questions" (Florence, 1968, p. 228), including the exclusive male humanistic tradition and education. Therefore, a radical anti-clerical scholar like Jane Harrison was their first choice as a

speaker. “The first woman ever to give university lectures at Cambridge (in 1898), Harrison had become, by 1909, one of the most controversial figures on campus” (Fiske, 2008, p. 2). Already her first major work, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903) had gone beyond the text-based approach of elitist-humanist Greek studies in focusing on the performative bodily as well as popular every-day *material* dimension of ancient (and modern) lived religion. Moreover, Harrison was not only a famous and controversial figure in the scholarly world of Cambridge and one of the first lecturers at the newly found women’s college in Newnham, her engagement for the popularization of knowledge about ancient Greece’s art and culture led her far out into London and then all-British society. From 1879 to 1897, Harrison studied and later taught classical archaeology at the British Museum. However, she became known through her public lectures. She used objects from the museum for her maverick and methodologically innovative lectures on Greek art, religion, and visual culture. She furthermore utilized her theatrical talents and diverse innovative media. Aside from her voice and eccentric antique clothes, she employed a kind of *laterna magica* to produce special light and picture effects and even used a re-constructed bull-roar for certain ritual-“authentic” sound effects (Beard, 2000, 47 and 9; Robinson, 2002, 60–65; Brunotte, 2013, 169–171). How successful she was with her performative popularization of archaeological and classical knowledge is illustrated in particular by reports about the growing number of her audience: “At the height of her popularity she was able to draw an audience of 1.000 in the Midland Institute in Birmingham and 1.600 in Dundee” (Evangelista, 2011, p. 517). Most of her audience were women, who until then had been excluded from the elitist (male) classical humanist and especially Greek Studies.

Harrison’s engagement at Cambridge as a lecturer on the material and ritual dimensions of ancient Greek lived religion at Newnham women’s college and her public lectures at the British museum and beyond documented also her turn to a greater diversity in categories of knowledge. With a radical step beyond the classical philological preference in traditional humanist studies, she placed the knowledge of material things, images and actions as equal to that of texts. Her appearance in the field of the sciences and in London society was not only connected to the broader development of the opening of the first women’s colleges at Cambridge, but to an early women’s movement, which claimed not only the right to vote but also a share of the so-called higher classical education. As illustrated by the dancer Isadora Duncan and the author Virginia Woolf, many middleclass women without profound knowledge in ancient Greek language wanted to appropriate the antique culture with their imagination, their emotions, and their bodies.

Harrison developed a theory of ritual culture, which linked art, (modern) theater, and religion and analyzed them – as *social drama*. In a way her work was performative itself: in her writings but also her famous lectures, she made the vase-pictures in the British Museum start moving.

If Virginia Woolf became a fan of Harrison, this was even more true of the famous modern dancer Isadora Duncan. Principally through the study of vase paintings, Duncan endeavored to assimilate antiquity through mimetic acts. In so doing, the dancer proceeded in accordance with a life-philosophical theory of art and “gave emphasis to the dynamism of expressive potential in the re-enacting and representation of sculpture and painting” (Brandstetter, 1995, p. 28). It was no coincidence, then, that Harrison not only inspired the antique costumes of some suffragists, but also helped with the dance choreography of Isadora Duncan (Brunotte, 2013). In general, for her, the study of archaeological findings and vase paintings or rituals from ancient Greece was immediately connected to modern life, dance, and everyday experience. In her bestselling popular book *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1913) she wrote:

If there is to be any true living art, it must arise, not from the contemplation of Greek statues, not from the revival of folk-songs, not even the re-enactment of Greek plays, but from a keen emotion felt towards things and people living to-day, in modern conditions, including, among other and deeper forms of life, the haste and hurry of the modern street, the whirr of motor cars and aeroplanes. (Harrison, 1913 [1951], p. 236)

Shortly after she participated in her first *Suffragist March* in 1911 at the age of 61, she gave a lecture at the *Union of Suffrage Societies*, the title of which is still a topical issue today: *Women and Knowledge*. In this controversial speech she questioned neutral rationality: “Knowledge is never, or very rarely, divorced from emotion and action. M. Bergson has shown us very clearly that all science grows up out of the desire to do and to make” (Harrison, 1913, p. 125).

### **The Aesthetics of Religion and Performativity: New Approaches**

The performative turn in cultural studies during the 1990s reinvigorated the attention for rituals, the body, and body knowledge (Koch 2007; 2012, pp. 3–42). This shift “to material culture and sensuous practices, which was partly inspired by ethnographic research, offered important new resources

for the study of religion,” and in particular “the new significance of ritual studies re-centred the study of religion into everyday life” (Brunotte, 2017a, p. 161; see also Morgan, 2011). As one of the main promoters of the so-called *performative turn* in the United States, the theatre anthropologist Richard Schechner looked back in 2003 to his own start in performance theory: “Taking a cue from Erving Goffman’s 1959 breakthrough book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, [I was] ... learning about ‘body language’ and a whole range of expressive behavior outside of spoken or written words” (Schechner, [1988] 2003, pp. ix–x). The “so-called performative turn, in the social sciences, leads toward an explicit reception of performance and theatre studies in the study of ritual” (Kreinath 2009, 235; see also Brunotte, 2001, pp. 85–102; 2000, pp. 349–367; 2013a, pp. 35–522).

The current heterogeneous discourse on performativity links Austin and Searle’s theory of *Speech Acts* and the concept of *performance* in theatre studies with the notion of *performative acts and gender constitution* introduced by Judith Butler (1990) and the theories of *social drama* and the *liminal*, as advanced by the anthropologist Victor Turner (1969; 1974). “Ceremony *indicates*, ritual *transforms*” (Turner, 1982, p. 80) was Turner’s concise and fitting distinction for a reading of ritual actions that is both somatic and aesthetic (i.e., aisthetic). Common to all of these approaches is a special link between speaking and acting, which suggests the power of the speech act to produce and transform reality. Austin developed the crucial innovations in his *Words and Deeds* lectures (1952–1954 in Oxford) and *How to Do Things with Words* (1955 in Harvard). Although Austin did not incorporate the long religious and juridical tradition of performative speech acts into his theory, it is apparent “that many of the performative utterances he examined represent the carrying out or ‘part of the carrying out of a ritual,’ that is, ‘ritual phrases’” (Därmann, 2013). This has to do with both the event aspect of completing a ritual and the *emergent* aspect of the physical and theatrical dimension of their perception and presentation. “It is first and foremost the magical performative quality of rituals – their capacity to let something inaccessible appear – that represents an intermediary field between religion, culture, and art” (Brunotte, 2017a, p. 162).

Recent research on the *performative* has also raised the question of the transformative dynamics of embodied ritual actions and how an affective ephemeral ritual act or dance can be materialized and remembered (see van den Hengel, 2017). Rebecca Schneider (2011) has asked: “What is the evidentiary status of the trace [of past events] carried forward and backward in the form and force of affective, incorporated, ‘live’ actions” (p. 38)? In answering this question, it can be helpful to concentrate on the

material-religion approach (Meyer, 2011; Meyer & Houtman, 2012; Keane, 2008) and the “aesthetics of religion” (Grieser & Johnston, 2017) because ritual enactments and religious feasts were, according Jan Assmann (2011), not only the “primary forms of organizing cultural memory,” but also provided the media which as “poetic form, ritual performance, and collective participation, captured the unifying knowledge in a manner that would preserve it” (pp. 41–42). Like art historian Aby Warburg, Harrison emphasized the emotional, performative, and memory evoking power of images and religious practices. Like Warburg in his *Pathos Formulas* (see Brunotte, 2013, pp. 119–124), Harrison reinforced the role of sensual and emotional media and “formed” feelings. Birgit Meyer’s recently coined concept of “sensational forms” (2009; 2011), which stresses the importance of the senses as media of knowledge production without negating the role of “meaning production,” furnishes a helpful analytical tool to further elaborate on these early innovative achievements in religious studies (2011, pp. 29–30).

Following Ursula King’s work (1995) on the pioneers of comparative religion studies, and based on my monograph from 2013 on her, I argue that Harrison’s innovative approaches to ancient Greek religion were linked to her feminist engagement and to her emphasis on the role of gender in religious constructions. Two guiding questions are: did Harrison’s critical problematization of the gendered coding of religious figures and practices act as a trigger for studying how religion happens in rituals and how it is felt and embodied? And what role did her feminist and “bottom-up-approach” to ancient (and recent) *lived religion* play for her *material* and *aesthetic* conceptualization of (religious) knowledge itself?

### Colonial *Frontier-Discourse* and Archaeology

Jane Harrison was one of the first students at the newly founded Cambridge women’s college, Newnham College. From 1879 to 1897 she lived in London and studied and taught classical archaeology at the British Museum. During this time, she was also “lecturing on Greek art and archaeology, first at the British Museum itself, then packed series held throughout London and notable one-off occasions all over the country” (Beard, 2000, p. 54). Jane Harrison was one of the first women to lecture on the Greek classics at university and also one of the first scholars to understand the importance of the then recent archeological findings in Troy and on Crete. Already when she worked at the British Museum, she developed her passion for the pictorial cultures of antiquity and began participating closely in the



archaeological discoveries of her time on sometimes adventurous travels through the Mediterranean countries. Moreover, she studied the newly founded archaeological museums of Europe. Harrison based her material approaches to the study of religion on archeology and material objects, especially on Sir Arthur Evans's discovery of the early Greek Mycenaean-Minoan culture on Crete, in which she participated on site. From 1898 until she left for Paris, Harrison worked at Newnham College, as a research fellow and lecturer. She was, according to Robert Ackermann (1990), "the first female British scholar to achieve international recognition" (p. 3). Together with her colleagues Gilbert Murray and Francis Macdonald Cornford, she formed the circle of the so-called "Cambridge Ritualists," including, later on, Arthur Bernhard Cook as well. Inspired by the studies of William Robertson Smith and James George Frazer, they integrated ethnological material into the analysis of Greek myths and rituals and invoked the evolutionary comparative method prevalent in British anthropology. As David Chidester has shown, early comparative religion was based on and reproduced the colonialist world view of the British Empire. It was set in the context of colonial frontier discourses. In *Savage Systems*, Chidester (1996) argued that "comparative religion was at the forefront of the production of knowledge within these new power relations" (p. 1). Harrison, however, critically opposed the colonial perspective and evolutionist rationalism of Tylor and Frazer, focusing on marginalized traditions, colonized indigenous groups and religious expressive behavior. Marianna Torgovnick (1996) identified the same focus on subaltern groups in Harrison's study of ancient Greek cults and images:

For her, Greece was *not* the cradle of Western civilization. In *Mythology*, for example, Greece is a cauldron of cultural conflicts. It is, above all, a meeting ground between indigenous groups and colonizing cultures from the North. It is a model, almost, of how invasions occur and how 'native' and invasive groups can and often must merge over time. In this case, it was necessary for patriarchal invaders to live alongside and with indigenous matrilineal beliefs. (p. 143)

Harrison's approach sometimes provoked polemical criticism from established classicists and archaeologists at Cambridge, above all William Ridgeway. Far less controversial was Harrison's intense involvement in the excavations of Schliemann, Dörpfeld, Curtius, and Evans at Troy, in the Peloponnese, and on Crete. She was a pioneer of the way of thinking that saw in archaeological finds – sculptures and vases – not only important

illustrations of myths and epics, but also “commentaries” and “variants” of myths (Schlesier, 1994, p. 155). Both methodological peculiarities, the integration of comparative ethnological material and the concentration on visual and material objects and evidence are closely linked to her feminist view of (for her) matrilineal Minoan culture. Both were intertwined with her ritualist approach to ancient Greek everyday religion.

In the course of her research, she stepped out of Cambridge's colonial paradigm of religious studies and developed a self-critical Eurocentrism. In her romantic-enthusiastic way, Harrison tried to give a voice to the marginalized narratives, daemonic figures, and the dark and “irrational” side of ritual practices in ancient Greek religious history. Her first major work, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* of 1903 (Harrison, 1991), already looked beyond the anthropomorphically formed, beautiful and harmonious Olympian gods and asked about the material knowledge of the “ugly,” of monsters, daemons, and spirits. She was moreover concerned with the *performative* relationship between art and religion, or more precisely with the inner connection of images, emotions, and objects within the ritualistic cultic process. In *Themis* from 1912 (1963), she pointedly stated that the Olympians were “*non-religious*, because really the products of art and literature” (Harrison, 1963, p. xi). In the *Prolegomena* from 1903, Harrison (1991) explored local Greek cult practices with the help of her new historical-critical method, inspired by Karl Otfried Müller. According to Ackermann (1990), for the conservative majority of Cambridge classicists Harrison's scholarly approach embodied “everything that was wrong with modern life” (p. 90) and classical philology, such as the struggle for admission of women to higher education, the comparison of the ancient Greeks to the “primitives” of the colonies, the assumption of non-rational substructures of culture, reason and science, and not least the scholarly treatment of gender questions. Harrison was not a pugnacious feminist, though she was committed to women's integration into the university and women's suffrage. Nevertheless, in the *Prolegomena*, she already recognized in the mystery religions around Dionysus, Orpheus, and Demeter “repressed” layers of allegedly “matriarchal” Minoan-Mycenaean cults in which, in addition to the dyad of mother and daughter, those of mother and son were enshrined. Yet, Harrison was concerned not only with the rediscovery of older forms and “survivals” but also with relics of myths and cults which were suppressed by the “Olympian hegemony” and which, in their own way (for example, in the mystery cults of Dionysus and Demeter), already “recurred” transformed in antiquity. At the end of *Prolegomena*, Harrison summarized her ambivalence toward the widespread opinion among researchers that religion develops

in a linear progression, culminating in the anthropomorphism of the Olympian gods. She acknowledged the beautiful world of Olympian myth and its well-formed (super) human bodies, but she also sees in this a loss. She critically emphasizes in particular the disappearance of *formlessness*: “We are apt to regard the advance to anthropomorphism as necessarily a clear religious gain. A gain it is in so far as a certain element of barbarity is softened or extruded, but with this gain comes loss, the loss of the element of formless, monstrous mystery” (1991, p. 258).

With the help of her anti-classicist approach, which put the Enlightenment image of heroic antiquity and the individualized forms of the Olympian gods behind it, Harrison re-constructed a “primordial religion” of the collective. Starting from archaeology, particularly the discoveries that Sir Arthur Evans (Schlesier, 1994, p. 179) made in Crete of the early Minoan civilization of Greece, Harrison began to revolutionize the predominantly text-oriented scholarly study of antiquity (Brunotte, 2013; Schlesier, 1994, pp. 185–226). After returning home in 1888 from her first trip to Greece, she developed her initial theory of ritual and myth, which “was to inspire religious studies for decades” (Kippenberg, 1997, p. 154). In *Mythology and Monuments of Ancient Athens* from 1890, which combines an English translation and a commentary on Pausanias’ work, Harrison wrote:

I have tried everywhere to get at, where possible, the cult as the explanation of the legend ... Some of the loveliest stories the Greeks have left us will be seen to have taken their rise, not in poetic imagination, but in primitive, often savage, and I think, always practical ritual. (p. iii)

Of course, she did not focus solely on belief in hybrid, intermediary beings and daemons, but also on folk cultural practices, lived religion, and everyday cults. To get a glimpse of those practices in ancient Greece, Harrison studied archaeological findings and the writings of Pausanias. In 1888, together with her colleague Margaret de Gaudrion Verrall, Harrison started not only to translate the part on Attica in Pausanias’ *Descriptions of Greece* but also “to provide the translation with an illustrated archaeological commentary” (Brunotte, 2013, p. 67). In April 1888, they began their three-month journey to Greece, which took them to Athens and Eleusis, Delphi, and Olympia in the Peloponnese. As one of her students and her first biographer wrote in 1959: “*Mythology and Monuments*, familiarly called ‘Blue Jane’ and still a requisite of travellers to Athens, established Jane’s position in the archaeological world” (Stewart, 1959, p. 12). Harrison studied not only the aristocracy and the cult of the Olympian gods, but also the objects and often enough “daemoniac”

embodiments of the “the material activity of the ancient masses” (Comentale, 2001, p. 479). Long before the intersectional approach was established in gender and postcolonial studies, she linked feminist questions about the role of power in mythical gender narratives and practices with those about the role of suppressed minorities and colonized traditions (see Harrison, 1991, p. 222; Brunotte, 2013, pp. 91–99).

## Collective Emotions and Imagined Communities

Following Emile Durkheim, Harrison emphasized in her second main monograph, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* from 1912, the affective, performative, and social dynamics of ritual-cultic actions (see Brunotte, 2017b). For her, it is above all the group of local ritual actors who, during the collective self-experience of their dance, first “creates” the sacred figures in living visions, as expressive and embodied forms of their affects and relationships: strong emotion collectively experienced begets this illusion of objective reality; each worshipper is conscious of something in his emotion beyond himself, stronger than himself. He does not know it is the force of collective suggestions, he calls it a god (p. 46). With this work, Harrison theoretically constituted a sphere critical of subjectivity and rationality, in which, first and foremost, an imagined and felt *community* in the emphatic sense emerges. Thus, she started from the needy and desiring body as a hybrid boundary object and actor mediating the subjective and objective formation of desire, longing, and will. Her work, as Richard Comentale (2001) observed, “redefines the public sphere by emphasizing the desiring body and its ability to enact law” (p. 479). According to Harrison, it is in the communicative process of symbolic action, dynamized by desire and need yet at the same time playful, that not only all the images and names of gods had their origin but also the “higher” value system of society. As she put it programmatically in the introduction to the second edition of *Themis*: “All religious representations arise from collective action and emotion” (Harrison, 1963, p. xv). Here Birgit Meyer’s concept of “sensational forms” (2011; 2009) can help to analyze further Harrison’s early theories of ritual performativity. Drawing on Webb Keane’s (2007) idea of “semiotic ideology” (p. 16), Meyer (2011) writes:

Sensational forms are relatively fixed modes for invoking and organizing access to the transcendental, offering structures of repetition to create and sustain links between believers in the context of particular religious

regimes ... Addressing the paradox of mediation and immediacy requires developing a new synthesis of approaches that stress the importance of the senses and experience with those stressing the forms and codes that are at the basis of cultural and religious systems. (pp. 29–30)

As I have observed at the beginning of the chapter, Harrison already developed in *Prolegomena of the Study of Greek Religion* the thesis that Greek myths, hitherto studied by philology exclusively as exalted literature, are only the surface of a complex substructure consisting of chthonic cults and rituals. In *Themis*, Harrison reconstructed the emotional power of ritualizations and sensational forms. But she also analyzed the structure of social relationships that were religiously created and reshaped in each case. In *Themis*, she formulated the following programmatic thesis: the social structure represented by the Olympians is the same as that of the modern family; it is patrilineal. The figure of Dionysus, his *thiasos*, and his relation to his mother and the maenads, is to be understood only by reference to an earlier social structure, which is known as matrilineal (Harrison, 1963, pp. xxi–xxii). These innovations in religious research drew heavy criticism from classical philologists. She was criticized not only because of her interdisciplinary approach and appreciation of image and ritual media, but also because of the “‘female’ qualities of her scholarship” (Arlen, 1996, p. 165). Her public response to this criticism implied a radically new concept of knowledge. In 1915, Harrison maintained that “Knowledge is never, or very rarely, divorced from emotion and action” (p. 125). This thesis contains a critique of the myth of “objectivity”: “Harrison prefigured the current feminist critique of masculinist objectivity” (Arlen, 1996, p. 172). In a much-noticed lecture entitled “Woman and Knowledge,” published in 1915, which Harrison presented in 1911 to the London Sociological Society and later to the National Union of Suffrage Societies, she asks why the pursuit of knowledge is considered “unfeminine.” She answers that one of the greatest gaps in the scholarly research of her time was not knowing what women are really capable of. Combatively, she continues: “We must free women before we know what they are fit for intellectually and morally. We must experiment” (Harrison, 1915, p. 139). She, who often ironically described herself as a scholarly heretic, lived up to her words.

We can summarize her innovative approach to Greek religion in the following points each of which was and still is among the most advanced in research on religion. First, the parity of archaeological finds – visual cultures, sculptures, vases, architecture – with texts in the exploration of the ancient religious culture. Secondly, the integration of the desiring and

needy body as a social medium and actor in public space and the treatment of gender as a category of analysis. Thirdly, the focus on social and ritual actions of the local cult communities as a performative collective practice and, last but not least, her direct comparison of Greek rituals with rituals of indigenous peoples and the treatment of struggles of colonial conquest in ancient Greece.

### Initiation, Community, and Ritual Remembrance

Her sociological turn became obvious in *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*, her second main work, which she published in 1912. After reading Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, Harrison developed a social theory of ritual and myth. As a pioneer of Greek studies, she was now trying to reconstruct the social reality in and behind the rituals. She saw the mystic unity with the god no longer as a reality *sui generis*, but as a representation of “collective emotion” and “group consciousness.” In her view, “Strong emotion collectively experienced begets this illusion of objective reality; each worshipper is conscious of something in his emotion not himself, stronger than himself. He does not know it is the force of collective suggestion, he calls it a god” (Harrison, 1912, p. 47). Especially in *Themis*, Harrison focuses on the ensemble of rituals that shape and dramatize the integration of the individual into the community: the initiation complex (Burkert, 1979; Versnel, 1993). A child of her time, she was searching for the origins of religion and society. In contrast to Robertson Smith and Durkheim, however, for her the search was primarily about the origin as the model of a material, pre-patriarchal, and communal religion, which she imagines as egalitarian, matrilineal, and affective-centered: “Specifically, she locates an alternative model of social order and change within ritual practice” (Comentale, 2001, p. 480). Walter Burkert, Robert Ackermann, Henrik Versnel, and Renate Schlesier all agree that “Harrison’s most important independent contribution to the study of Greek religion lies in the concentration on the initiation complex and the ritualist approach to the Dionysian mystery cults” (Brunotte, 2008, p. 74). The Minoan-Mycenaean culture of mother and son, or of mother and daughter, newly discovered behind the individual Olympic deities, behind Homer, Hesiod, and Plato, also represented for Harrison a Greek variation of the primordial religion, which could act as “living material” on her own time (Brunotte, 2013, pp. 207–215). In addition to Durkheim, it was surely Friedrich Nietzsche’s work on tragedy (see Brunotte 2013, pp. 175–186) that stimulated Harrison to conceive of the process of transformation and the

emanation of the gods' "images" from the group. She was also fascinated by Nietzsche's view of the ancient tradition, which was consistently based on modernity and its questions, and the philosopher's analysis of this tradition, which freed it from the antiquarian corset of classicism.

Religious ritual, according to Harrison, is also a collective medium of remembrance and at the same time a medium of desire. While the significance of a ritual is indeed to re-present an action, it is especially, and this is important, to anticipate something long-desired: to "pre-do, to pre-present" (Harrison, 1963, pp. 44–45). The ritual event, which according to Harrison mediates as a liminal space between desire and fulfillment, creates a zone of distance, which simultaneously functions as a space for creating images and culture in general. In terms similar to those that Aby Warburg later used to describe his anthropological analysis of pictures as *pathos formulas*, and especially his theory of ritual "thinking space" (Warburg, 1988, p. 58), Harrison formulates her concept of a ritual-based cultural theory: "It is out of the delay, just the space between the impulse and the reaction, that all our mental life, our images, ideas ... most of all our religion, arise" (Harrison, 1963, p. 44).

As Mary Beard has emphasized, Harrison always remained, in the interpretation of rituals as well, above all a historian of the visual and the arts (Beard, 2000, p. 54; Robinson, 2002, p. 60). In this way, she not only expanded the concept of the image, which had hitherto been fixed on individual works of art and artists, but also gave autonomy to the visual dimension as a vehicle of cultural desires and knowledge. Vase paintings were no longer only aesthetic masterpieces collected in museums, but independent sources for exploring rituals and myths. They were not merely an illustration of literature, but an autonomous archive of memory. A memory of course that was less about thinking, the ordered logos and writing, than about collective actions, feelings, visions, everyday cultic songs and gestures. Often enough, according to Renate Schlesier (1994), Harrison discovered on vases ritual scenes or variations of myths. Her switching of media, from text and writing to image, body and ritual, thus joined forces with the feminist integration of gender issues into her research on religion. This also applied insofar as the repressed dimensions of a matrilineal-connoted religion could be found in previously little noticed or (still) unknown visual and ritual evidence. On the one hand, in the hermeneutic process Harrison translated the content of images into words, that is, into texts; on the other hand, in her enthusiastic and at times evocative celebration of the "living ritual" and the "dancing body" of the maenads, she clove to the genuine expressive power inherent in these media.

## Feminist Engagement, Suffragist, and Female Hellenism

For Virginia Woolf, who dedicated a famous passage in “A Room of One’s Own” to Harrison, the militant researcher was a role model (Carpentier, 1998; see Brunotte, 2013, pp. 20–23). Harrison’s fame spread far beyond the walls of Newnham and Cambridge. Harrison, the researcher into religion, exerted as a ‘new woman’ and scholar an effect beyond the bounds of the university. In a reflexive combination of ancient ritual and modern practice, she designed, more implicitly than explicitly, a model of social change. Her theory of religion was concerned not with some static original state or the conjuration of the “Great Feminine,” but with a model of symbolic action: the performative activity of a group, like the suffragists. For example, Harrison saw the Dionysian maenads not only as mythical figures but as representations of a “state of mind” (Harrison, 1991, p. 390) of normal – ancient and contemporary – women. In her *Prolegomena*, Harrison collected visual representations of early Dionysian maenadism on “the mountains.” These were found on Athenian vase paintings and in textual sources such as Pausanias’ descriptions of local cults and Euripides’ *Bacchae*. For her, the wild followers of the god of wine, play, and ecstasy also represented the female transgression of the public order and “public gender division” (Seaford, 1994, p. 258). As Harrison also showed in the analysis of early women’s rituals such as the *thesmophoria* (Harrison, 1991, p. 148; see Brunotte, 2013, pp. 144–150), the politics of ritual practice is the social force field in which desires are symbolized and power arises. By laying bare an early social structure that was shaped by “feminine practice” and then interpreting this as a ritual performance of desires, her work forges a reference to a possible recurrence of such practices (Comentale, 2001, p. 483). She was not, she wrote, really a political person, but her studies of primitive and ancient rituals had made her a “suffragette.” Especially the symbolic actions and often antique-style masquerades of the women demonstrating for the right to vote had brought her, coming from the study of ritual, to the conviction that she must become a “suffragette.” For Harrison, suffrage was primarily about “a ritualized effort to rewrite the terms of cultural power. She confirms that militant activity is based on the same unity of knowing, feeling, and acting that marked ancient ritual” (Comentale, 2001, p. 483). The aspirations of the suffragettes, according to Harrison, are based on “an awakening of desire to know,” which is “the wakening of the intention to act, to act more efficiently and to shape the world completely to our will” (Harrison, 1915, p. 26).



In her time in London, Harrison also came into contact with circles of the literary-artistic avant-garde. Thus, the researcher took part in the modern break-out from Victorian culture, which started in the 1900s especially among London artists and groups of women. As mentioned, before taking up her lifelong fellowship at Newnham College, she earned her living with public lectures. From 1879 to 1898, she taught Greek art and archaeology at the British Museum, supported by director Charles T. Newton. After growing demand, she would lecture at various museums, women's educational institutions, and London salons, and, finally, throughout the country (Beard, 2000). At the same time, with her liking for sensual stage productions, she also entered into contact with a second avant-garde movement in the arts of her time: "new" or "free dance." Above all Isadora Duncan, who appeared in London at that time, was inspired in her choreographies by Harrison's works. In her physical-emotional way, Duncan sought to appropriate antiquity through mimetic acts, primarily through the study of vase imagery. In this, the dancer followed a vitalist theory of art inspired by Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Whitman, which emphasized "the dynamics of expressive potential in the representations of sculpture and painting" (Brandstetter, 1995, p. 28). Like Harrison, Duncan put the androcentric, Winckelmannian ideal of the Apollonian, of the serene sculpture full of *noble simplicity and quiet grandeur* behind her.

### Harrison's Engaged Humanities and the Performative Turn

This chapter discussed a neglected strand in the history of religious studies by presenting Harrison's work as an example of "engaged humanities," analyzing her revolutionary methodological and theoretical shift from text to images and to rituals embedded in political and gendered contexts: her engagement in the suffrage movement and its new symbolic practices of protest. Furthermore, the chapter has tracked the intertwining of Harrison's methodological engagement with image, material objects, and ritual with her feminist approach to religion and culture. Harrison was questioning herself about the use and the impact of her scholarly work on ancient Greek religion for real-life societal problems of contemporary society. In *Ancient Art and Ritual*, she asked if her endeavor is a purely "antiquarian enquiry" and "Why is it, apart from the mere delight of scientific enquiry, important to have seen that art arose from ritual?" (Harrison, 1951, p. 204). She answered with a reference to the "revival of the ritual dance" (p. 207) in the avant-garde movements of her time, in part inspired by the *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life) school. This is yet further evidence of how much she participated

in opening up the text-centered theatre of her time to another social field of cultural rituals (that is, cultural performances). She enthusiastically claimed: "Some of the strenuous, exciting, self-expressive dances of to-day are the soil and some exotic, but, based as they mostly are on very primitive ritual, they stand as singular evidence of this real recurrent need. Art in these latter days goes back as it were on her steps, recrossing the ritual bridge back to life" (p. 207).

Harrison's work and her feminist engagement offer a radical representation of the shattering of the elite, classicist Hellenism (Humanism) and its discursive glorification of a text-centered *logos*. "The crisis of this hegemonic and male-coded order of knowledge, which to be sure was not brought about by Harrison alone, ultimately evolved into a democratization of knowledge and to multifarious appropriations of antiquity. Harrison thus shed light on the performative dimensions of cultural practice that were lost in text-analytical approaches" (Brunotte, 2017a, p. 180). This chapter has considered Jane E. Harrison's pioneering contribution to analyze "the transformative power of performance" and the "aesthetics of performativity" (Fischer-Lichte, 2008) and has placed her in relation to the emerging fields of "material religion" (Meyer, 2013) and the "aesthetics of religion" (Grieser, 2015, Grieser & Johnston, 2017). Finally, the chapter has tracked the intertwining of Harrison's methodological engagement with image, material objects, and ritual with her engaged feminist approach to religion and culture.

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## 12. Educating for Democracy

Empathy, Reading, and Making Better Citizens in Martha Nussbaum's Public Education Project

*Sjaak Koenis & Jan de Roder*

### Abstract

In discussions about the usefulness of the humanities, it is generally accepted that reading literature will enhance empathy, e.g., make for better doctors and, more generally, better people, and that more empathy will also improve politics. In this article, we discuss these claims about empathy, focusing on some central ideas of Martha Nussbaum. She turns reading literature into a public education project in which good and bad emotions are demarcated from each other and government is given the task of strengthening good emotions, among other ways by stimulating the reading of "good" literature. This project of making better citizens through reading brings literature and politics into an unholy alliance in which essential elements of both politics and literature are discarded.

**Keywords:** democracy, citizenship, Dutch politics, empathy & reading novels, humanities, public education, Martha C. Nussbaum

### Setting the Stage: The Rise of a Concept

In the September 1999 issue of the *London Review of Books*, Jerry Fodor wonders with a touch of despair: "Why, why, does everyone go on so about the brain?" With a keen eye for trends, Fodor noticed a striking increase of articles reporting on "where exactly things happen in the brain," and we now know that this flow of articles has continued ever since. Without wanting to be as theatrical as Fodor, our main question could, in fact, be phrased quite similarly: "Why, why, does everyone go on about empathy?" Our eye for trends by no means matches Fodor's, but to be able to see what

he saw we merely needed to keep track of the science section of any major newspaper. In the case of “empathy,” however, we are dealing with a more complicated trend. The point is that whenever the concept of empathy is used, in particular in public debates but more and more in academic debates as well, the assumed role of empathy is mostly taken for granted. In a way, the concept sneaked in furtively. There seems to be little awareness of the fact that stressing what tends to be considered the crucial role of empathy in the arts as well as in politics is a fairly recent development, hardly outstretching a decade. If, then, the use of empathy is certainly a trend, it is an unrecognized one.

We start our discussion with two examples, both from the context of Dutch society and politics. While the first one concerns the realm of literature and poetry (§ 2) and the second one relates to politics (§ 3), both are representative of how empathy is currently deployed: as a seemingly self-evident notion, with the exception of some critical voices, such as in Paul Bloom’s *Against Empathy* (2016). Next, in § 4, starting from the Dutch discussion on the refugee crisis, we analyze Martha Nussbaum’s take on emotions in politics, after which, in § 5, we discuss how this works out for the role of literature in her public education project, in which her views on politics and the arts converge. We argue, in other words, that in order to be able to understand Nussbaum’s take on political emotions in a practical, non-theoretical sense, we need to scrutinize the role of literature in her educational project.

Why Nussbaum? Nussbaum’s moral philosophy informs an overall view – of which she is the most prominent spokeswoman, not merely in the United States – on the intertwined role of empathy and emotions in politics, society, and the arts, especially literature, with a prominent role played by the novel. Nussbaum expects the government to foster good emotions in society; in fact, it should take the lead in a public cultivation of these emotions. How the government should do this concretely she does not always clarify, but one level involved here is the institutional one. A decent tax system is one example of an institutional measure that could represent the desirable kind of emotion, in the sense that it is ideally based on impartial compassion. Another level is the psychological one. Through political rhetoric, songs, symbols, poems, and novels, in what Nussbaum calls the pedagogy of public education, the government can and actually should directly influence people’s psychology. Whether Nussbaum is aware of the possible flip side of a government’s role in nurturing emotions, e.g., emotions like xenophobia, is not our concern here. Our claim is that if Nussbaum’s project is realized, politics will become a top-down affair and citizens will not only be sidelined

as agents in any thinkable democratic power configuration, but also, and in line with this, be made passive consumers of prescribed socio-political readings of literature.

### Reading Literature for Raising Empathy

In the popular Dutch radio show *Nieuwsweekend* (“Newsweekend”) of December 22, 2018, professor of neurology Bas Bloem was interviewed about an article he, his colleague Paul Krack, and poet and novelist Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer published in the *BMJ*, formerly known as the *British Medical Journal* (Bloem et al., 2018). The occasion prompting this article, Bloem tells us, was a meeting of EU ministers of culture at the Edinburgh International Festival in August that year, where Bloem tried to convince the audience of the damaging public health effects of budget cuts in the arts. He argued that the arts have a profound comforting effect on patients, often of a therapeutic nature. This is why medical doctors and students should add the arts to their therapeutic repertoire, in the sense of stimulating artistic expression by patients, while the arts should also play a role in making doctors better observers. “Paint what you see, not what you think you see,” is an example of an assignment under supervision of artists in a Dutch medical curriculum. Another example is looking at art together with artists *and* through the eyes of artists. Next, Bloem turned to literature and novels in particular. Inspired by his mentor Andrew Lees, whose idea it was that all doctors should read one novel a month to broaden their horizon and to open up their mind to new ideas, Bloem believes that reading novels adds to understanding what patients are really concerned about and encourages doctors to consider the person, his or her needs, rather than physical complaints. Jeroen Vullings, a literary critic and a regular guest on the radio show, intervened and appeared to summarize what Bloem was trying to say by stating that reading novels teaches us to empathize with others. Empathy, seen as crucial in more personalized medical care, is even “easy” to learn this way in Vullings’s view. Another guest, Else-Marie van den Eerenbeemt, a family therapist who teaches family doctors, added that before her students are allowed to join her class, they first have to read P.F. Thomése’s novel *Schaduwkind* (*Shadow Child*) to learn what it is like to lose a child and subsequently Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, to learn about the impact of previous generations on our mission in life (in fact, previous generations make us aware that we actually have a mission in life, she argues). The hosts and the guests all agreed on the role of novels in fostering empathy.



In the article by Bloem, Krack, and Pfeijffer, empathy is discussed as well: “Perhaps the greatest value of literature is that it teaches empathy. Reading a novel is a way of living other people’s lives, thinking their thoughts, looking through their eyes, and following a logic that may not coincide with one’s own” (2018, n.p.). Remarkably, the functions attributed to novels by Andrew Lees – opening up the mind to new ideas and broadening a reader’s horizon – and Van den Eerenbeemt – appreciating the role of generations in human life, a fascinating function to be sure – are not that obviously connected to empathy. The same applies to another function discussed in the article: providing readers and doctors in particular a verbal repertoire, in the sense of a metaphorical language, from novels as well as poetry, for dealing with issues of life and death, a function brought in by co-author Pfeijffer, a well-known poet *and* novelist. These functions, however, appear to be considered as secondary to what literature really is about: learning empathy. While paintings and painting teach us to look carefully, even unbiased, as the authors of the article claim, novels teach us to feel, to feel and appreciate what others feel, by feeling what the novel’s characters feel, through identification with them. In the article as well as the radio show, empathy is presented as simply a matter of fact, rather than as a new and possibly interesting perspective on literature and its role in training medical doctors.

A week after the *Nieuwsweekend* radio show, a leading Dutch newspaper, *de Volkskrant*, published its yearly report on scientific findings that were proven to be false. One of them was that reading novels improves empathy in children. The results of several experiments could in no way be reproduced (Kras, 2018). The problem, however, is that these critical responses to claims of a positive correlation between reading literature and empathy hardly got any press, at least thus far, whereas the original research was widely received, not to say warmly welcomed, by newspapers, weeklies, and book reviews. Although some scientific articles making the very same claim were hardly noticed, an article by David Kidd and Emanuele Castano published in *Science* in 2013 caused a worldwide proliferation of what all readers of literature, it seemed, in some way wanted to be true, not to mention the humanities professionals involved in teaching and studying literature.

This proliferation no doubt started with Pam Belluck’s *New York Times* response to the study (a response to which most European newspapers reporting on the study refer), which begins seductively with the following statement: “Say you are getting ready for a blind date or a job interview. What should you do? Besides shower and shave, of course, it turns out you should read – but not just anything. Something by Chekhov or Alice Munro will

help you navigate new social territory better than a potboiler by Danielle Steel” (Belluck, 2018). Although this is not quite what the goal of the study was about, this popularized account can of course help to sell a scientific idea. On top of this, it seems, the combination of a *New York Times* article reporting on a study published in one of the most prestigious scientific journals on a “soft” topic like the value of reading literature proved to be irresistible.

Earlier studies on the very same topic never escaped from their less distinctively profiled academic realm. One notable example is the earliest study touching on the topic in a psychology journal. As claimed by Raymond Mar et al. (2006), “a linear relation between individual differences in literary preference and individual differences in social processing abilities” (p. 708). One of the major problems of the study, the authors admit, is the causal direction for the observed relation. They hope that future research will show that fiction reading yields improvements in empathy. Yet, even if this research shows a reverse causality of the established relation, in the sense that people with stronger empathic skills are drawn to reading fiction, the authors think that we learn something interesting about the empathic personality as well as about fiction. The distinction made in this study between the bookworm and the nerd is particularly noteworthy. While the bookworm compensates a lack of actual social contact and activity by engaging in the social action provided for in fiction, the nerd prefers non-fiction and is thereby missing out on the social realm on both counts. A few years later, Raymond Mar et al. (2009) go a step further claiming that non-fiction readers are far more prone to depression, loneliness, and stress than fiction readers, which contradicts the stereotype of the bookworm as being closed off from real life.

When confronted with these kinds of strong claims based on small-scale experiments, it is difficult not to think of the current “replication crisis” in psychology, especially in social psychology (see Pashler & Wagenmakers, 2012, for one of the first overviews). This crisis is far from over yet, as established by the replication by Colin Camerer et al. (2018) of Kidd’s and Castano’s *Science* study on fiction reading and empathy. There was no evidence for the original finding: the average relative effect size was very close to zero according to the statistical significance criterion. This is all the more remarkable since Kidd & Castano build on the findings of other studies trying to correlate reading fiction and empathy, like the ones by Raymond Mar and colleagues. This is exactly the kind of result that Harold Pashler & Eric-Jan Wagenmakers (2012) explained by “showing how easily researchers can, in the absence of any real effects, nonetheless

obtain statistically significant differences through various questionable research practices" (p. 528). However, except for *de Volkskrant* (Kras, 2018), we could not find any newspaper, weekly, or book review that reported on this failed replication – perhaps because good news should not be spoiled. In the humanities, the preservation of the unsubstantiated claim resulted in a prominent role of empathy in the recent *Cambridge Companion to the Novel* (2018), to give just one of many examples. And in a recent volume of essays, the Dutch literary essayist Maarten Asscher encourages especially boys to read because "it is an undisputed fact that reading adds to knowledge, insight, the ability to express oneself, the capacity of interpreting information, and empathy" (2019, pp. 79–80). However, in studies of a decade earlier, such as the authoritative *The Social Impact of the Arts*, in which Belfiore and Bennett (2008) give an intellectual history of the claims made over time on the value, function, and impact of the arts, empathy plays no role at all, as is true in the no less authoritative *Uses of Literature* (2008) by Rita Felski.

An interesting question is why there was no critical response from literary scholars to Raymond Mar et al. and, in particular, Kidd and Castano. One possible answer could be that the findings were welcomed without question by literary scholars and critics, because they were giving new and powerful relevance to a discipline under threat (Jay, 2014). Another one would be that literary scholars did not feel that their expertise was called for in response to these kinds of experiments. But scrutinizing the experiments from a literary studies perspective shows that their problem is not just about failing replications. In one of their experiments, Kidd and Castano aimed to compare literary fiction and popular fiction, after an experiment on comparing literary fiction and non-fiction. The literary fiction was taken from a collection of the 2012 PEN-O. Henry Prize stories (Furman, 2012) and the popular fiction from an earlier anthology (Hoppenstand, 1998). This seems to be a pretty straightforward approach, but only if we excuse the experimenting psychologists for their ignorance of an age-old discussion on what the difference is between literary language, coined by Wordsworth as "peculiar language" (Attridge, 2004), and any other form of language, such as the one of popular fiction. In his classic study from 1988 on language as difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce, Derek Attridge persuasively argued that numerous attempts to distinguish literary texts from other kinds of text by means of the analysis of inherent features have failed.

There is simply no way literature can be defined by its inherent properties. Yet, this is exactly what we expect from an experiment like that by Kidd and Castano, who claim to be able to differentiate between real literature and its popular derivatives in terms of their potential for improving

empathy. As claimed by Attridge (2015), “even if someone were to devise a computer program based on all existing works classified as either ‘literary’ or ‘non-literary’ and capable of making a sharp distinction between the two categories, the next significant literary work could defy its predictions and render the program worthless” (p. 25). We do not need such a computer program, however, to prove the point because countless works of literature that once were meant to be literary and indeed were considered to be literary are now read as historical or sociological documents. This is often the case with novels, but the opposite – historical documents now read as literature – happens as well, of course, as in the case of letters.

In response to Kidd and Castano (2013), Anežka Kuzmičová et al. (2017) try to define literature by pinpointing stylistic features “typical” for literature, thereby suggesting that a logical analysis of the difference between literary and non-literary language is possible. By doing this they basically revitalize the Renaissance notion of literary language, exemplified by George Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesy* (1589), in which particular rhetorical and metrical devices are meant to safeguard literary status. In their experiment, Kuzmičová et al. asked one group to read Katherine Mansfield’s short story “The Fly,” which is full of stylistic foregrounding, and another group to read a non-literary version of the story rewritten by an author of young adult fiction, resulting in a story stripped of any form of stylistic foregrounding. The main finding of the experiment was that the non-literary version elicited significantly more empathic responses than the literary one, leading to the conclusion that the widely accepted idea of a close connection between reading literature and empathy should be seriously questioned. The authors present an alternative account of the observed effects, however, for which they introduce the concept of “aesthetic distance”: “According to this framework, aesthetically marked stimuli are experienced as if from a greater ‘distance,’ i.e. in partial awareness of one’s pre-existing concerns *as well as* of the fictional world’s artificial nature” (p. 147). So, instead of an empathic response the readers show more of a “self-oriented” affect, which is not to say, as the authors claim, that an empathic response is precluded by this distanced reading. On the one hand, the authors show that the link between literary reading and empathy is not as strong as suggested by previous research, most notably by Kidd and Castano (2013) (if such link exists at all). On the other hand, they are hesitant to give up on the idea, convinced as they are that, in the end, stylistic studies is the perfect discipline for future experiments with a distinctly “naturalistic research design” dealing with this issue. The problem of their approach, however, concerns their notion of “aesthetically marked stimuli,” which suggests, as did George Puttenham

more than 400 years ago, that we are able to objectively determine stylistic devices as literary, as if there is a natural connection between these devices and literariness (in Puttenham's time, this would have meant choosing a realist instead of a nominalist view), and to characterize texts without any stylistic foregrounding altogether as non-literary.

After Kidd and Castano (2013) published their research, one of the first reactions came from Steven Pinker who dealt with empathy elaborately in his *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2012). In a tweet, he stated: "I cite the fiction → empathy link in *Better Angels*, and want to believe it, but the newest study is iffy" (Pinker, 2013). Pinker is far from the only one wanting to believe the findings, but for him the wish is not the father to welcoming them as firm facts. Except that the scope of all experiments is simply too limited, his main concern is that even if the findings were sound the correlation between reading literature and high scores on empathy tests does not show whether reading literature makes people more empathic or that more empathic people are more drawn to and gain more from reading literature.

One conclusion seems inevitable: the claim that we should read literature because it improves our capacity for empathy is not a claim anymore. However contested and ill-founded, and even to some extent fraudulent in the sense of obvious statistical manipulation, this claim has become a fact and is here to stay, not only in the humanities but also in politics, to which we will turn in the next paragraph.

## Empathy, Politics, and Society

On November 11, 2016, Jesse Klaver, political leader of *Groen Links* (Green Left party), is one of the principal guests in the popular Dutch TV talk show *De Wereld Draait Door* (meaning "The world keeps on turning" as well as "The world is going crazy"). Klaver just published his pamphlet *De Empathische Samenleving* (The Empathic Society), but talk show host Matthijs van Nieuwkerk starts with the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States three days earlier. "We seem to be all in shock," he says, "because nobody saw this coming" (Bos, 2016). Klaver responds by saying that there is an electorate in the US that nobody was aware of and he expects the same kind of electorate playing a substantial role in the upcoming Dutch national elections of 2017. In Klaver's view, this electorate does not feel at home in the Netherlands anymore, nor does it feel itself politically represented. Surprisingly, he claims that one of the causes of this anxiety is not so much socio-economic inequality, since this is something that can

be dealt with easily according to Klaver (as argued in his earlier pamphlet on what he called the “the myth of economism”). The main problem, in his view, is that there is a lack of feeling united in society, a lack of a sense of community, which boils down to the unanswered question of “Who are we”? The controversy on “Black Pete” (“Zwarte Piet,” a blackface character, acting as help of the Dutch version of Santa Claus) is the example Klaver elaborates on here. The people in favor of this tradition should not be called racists, Klaver says, because they are not. In fact, the Black Pete controversy is about the question of what unites us, without the contesters realizing this.

This is where empathy comes in. First, we should try to empathize with the children targeted by this tradition. For them, Black Pete is not about color, as is true for parents supporting Black Pete, but, according to Klaver, it is politics that misuses Black Pete as a symbol of what the Netherlands supposedly stands for. The host intervenes by reminding Klaver of the title of the book. “You ask the opponents of Black Pete, people who feel deeply offended by it because it reminds them of the history of slavery, to empathize with the supporters of Black Pete, to feel what they feel,” the host says, “and, in turn, you ask the supporters of Black Pete to empathize with its opponents. If they do, well, what then? Especially when you take into account that 75% of the Dutch believe that Black Piet is simply part of their tradition.” Klaver is clearly evading the question which in essence is a political one: how to deal with different groups with different interests in society, in a controversy that generated violent, face-to-face confrontations? Klaver believes that we need to find a way to be able to speak with each other, hence his notion of the “empathic” society, in order to decide on the kind of celebration of Santa Claus that we all feel part of, which is exactly what all Dutch people want anyway. It may be inevitable to radically change the Black Pete tradition, Klaver admits, but there are much more important values that define us and that should be discussed. We need a debate that will never cease because Dutch identity, or what we have in common, is not fixed, as the populist parties want us to believe, but shaped by the people, day in and day out. Klaver adds to this the idea of a Dutch Independence Day in commemoration of the self-declared independence by the provinces of the Netherlands from allegiance to the King of Spain in 1581. Klaver sees this as our national birth-certificate, expressing a desire to be free, free in our choice of religion, free to choose any identity one prefers.

Klaver’s turn to fostering Dutch national identity may be somewhat surprising for a left-wing politician. In fact, his Green Left party seemed to be the last one following the advice of Dutch historian E.H. Kossmann, who wrote that the issue of national identity should be avoided like a huge

jelly fish on the beach (1996, p. 68). But it is clear that the difference with populist parties, and, more recently, the Christian-Democratic party under Sybrand Buma, is that national identity should be constructed bottom-up in a never-ending national debate, instead of top-down. Dutch populist leaders like Geert Wilders have stated again and again what Dutch national identity is *not*: first and foremost, it is not Islamic, not multicultural, and on the positive side – if a somewhat underdeveloped side – our “heroic” history is full of traditions and symbols that yearn for revitalization. According to then Christian-Democratic leader Buma, we should adhere to and share “Judeo-Christian” norms and values, neglected in the wake of the French revolution and that of the 1960s. Only then, we will feel at home, safe, and secure as a people (Buma, 2017).

By introducing primatologist Frans de Waal in his pamphlet on the empathic society, Klaver implicitly criticizes the idea of our capacity of empathy or compassion solely as a legacy of Christian thought and teaching. In line with Darwin’s contention that the difference between human and non-human animals is not one of kind but of degree, the aim of De Waal in his *The Age of Empathy* (2009) is to show that human and non-human animals share, if to a different degree, a capacity for empathy, which is why such capacity is a product of Darwinian evolution. As the subtitle of De Waal’s study puts it, the book is about “Nature’s lessons for a kinder society,” not Christian lessons. We are biologically pre-wired for empathy, which is something else than suggesting, as Klaver does, that we feel empathy vis-à-vis others “automatically.” By invoking De Waal, however, Klaver paves the way to a conception of society that builds on what we as human beings potentially all have in common, regardless of our religious, cultural, sexual, or gender differences. Of course, we may think differently on how to organize society but “only through empathy we will be able to fruitfully discuss these different views” (2016, p. 66). Nevertheless, the issue of national identity, the core of which in Klaver’s view is reflected in the democratic constitutional state, is closely connected to the role of empathy, because “only if we are self-conscious about who we are, we are able to open up to others” (p. 97). This suggests an ideal of a “self-conscious empathic society,” as Carel Peeters (2016) concluded in his sympathetic review of Klaver’s pamphlet. On the one hand, we are self-conscious about our ideas, preferences, culture, desires, and beliefs, however fluid and unstable they may be. On the other hand, being self-conscious is a necessary condition to be able to be curious to know about other people, to be able to empathize with them. This double-edged dimension of Klaver’s empathic society leaves room for politics or, in other words, for keeping track of the conflicts of interest that politics has to deal

with – even though there are no easy answers, as he repeatedly claims whenever mentioning current political issues.

The main differences between the ideas of Klaver on empathy and society and the studies he is inspired by are, first, that he, unlike De Waal, abstains from any reference to the notion that empathy should not only be fostered but also be taught. Empathy, in De Waal's view, is “material to work with either by countering it, as we do when we dehumanize our enemies, or by enhancing it, as when we urge a child who is hogging all the toys to be more considerate of her playmates” (2009, p. 210). Here we come close to the idea of reading literature to improve empathy in children. Secondly, unlike Jeremy Rifkin in his *The Empathic Civilization* (2009), Klaver avoids a utopian dream of mankind inevitably reaching for universal empathic connectivity. In this sense, Klaver's pretensions are of a more modest kind. But however modest, his ideas on empathy, as De Waal's and Rifkin's, were generally welcomed by predominantly left-wing politicians, journalists, and intellectuals – perhaps not as a panacea but at least as a positive and necessary voice in a time of polarization, radicalism, extremism, and fundamentalism (Devisch, 2017).

The most interesting question is still: what does empathy imply for doing politics when a society is confronted with a humanitarian crisis, with people suffering? Klaver refers to the refugee crisis of 2016 in his pamphlet by mentioning that he was criticized for trying to imagine in one of his political speeches how it would feel to be the father of the little Syrian boy Alan Kurdi who drowned during his family's attempt to reach Greece. The photograph of Kurdi's body lying on a Turkish beach shocked people all over the world. In Klaver's view, his speech was not at all playing to the gallery because, however difficult a political answer to the refugee crisis might be, every attempt will have to start with empathizing with the refugees, and with the little boy in particular. It is not sure what exact policy Klaver would have in mind here, but it would certainly answer to George Lakoff's statement that “Behind every progressive policy lies a single moral value: empathy” (2008, p. 47).

Right-wing Belgian politician Bart De Wever responded to the photograph, too, saying that his father-heart bled when he saw it but that he did not want emotions to guide him since the child died not because his parents were fleeing from war and violence but because they were in search of a better economic future (Devisch, 2017, p. 26). Whereas Klaver is avoiding politics in his response to the photograph, De Wever makes it political by basically stating that the child's parents are to blame here. To him, it seems, the question is not whether we should empathize, but who we should empathize with. The same applies to Klaver's call to empathize with Dutch-Moroccan



juvenile delinquents instead of wishing them away because they hardly got a fair chance in Dutch society. Populist parties for many years have countered this, with an appeal to empathize with the victims of this group. Both left-wing and right-wing politicians seem to empathize, yet they do so with different groups and propose policies in line with the interests of these groups (in this sense, Lakoff's dictum is to be understood as partisan politics). This phenomenon was the impetus for Paul Bloom to write his *Against Empathy* (2016). When in the fall of 2014 African Americans in the US died at the hands of the police, many comments boiled down to the lack of empathy in the US with racial minorities, but Bloom also read many complaints about the lack of empathy with the police or with the victims of crimes. What all comments agreed on was that we are in need of more empathy. There is *mutatis mutandis* an analogy here with Klaver's example of Dutch-Moroccan juvenile delinquents.

Another example is the issue of gun control in the US. After yet another school shooting, Barack Obama in a speech at the Denver Police Academy mentioned what Michelle Obama told him: "You know, if I was living out on a farm in Iowa, I'd probably want a gun too. When somebody just drives up into your driveway and you don't know who these people are, you don't know how long it's going to take for the sheriffs to respond, I can see why you'd want some guns for protection" (Bloom, 2016, p. 123). It is clear what Klaver's main inspiration was in his pamphlet, as Obama continues by saying that when the issue of gun control is concerned "we first should put each other in the other person's shoes." From this it follows that people against gun control should imagine what it is like to lose a child in a random act of gun violence. This is an example of Obama's powerful rhetoric because, in quoting his wife, he seems to defy one of Bloom's main problems with empathy: its inevitable narrow focus in a world full of people in need, while we also tend to empathize with people that are literally closer to us and more like us when it really comes to the crunch.

What is more pertinent here, as amply made clear in the examples, is that empathy not only reflects but also strengthens our biases. Empathy threatens to deepen our differences instead of overcoming them. Bloom is not saying that empathy is not a crucial capacity for love, friendship, work, and community building; rather, he considers it a bad counselor in politics, even though, remarkably, politics is not his main concern. The case Bloom wants to make is that the act of feeling or trying to feel what others feel is something different than being compassionate and being kind and good to others. His plea is that of a rational, more distanced compassion. The relation between doctor and patient is the example here that Bloom is repeatedly

referring to, especially in view of the increasing role of empathy in the curricula of medical schools. In empathizing with the pain and suffering of his or her patients, the doctor runs the danger of being incapacitated or, at least, distracted from giving professional medical help. A doctor is expected to be as effective as possible, and, to this end, the doctor needs to feel *for* the patient – feel responsible for the patient, rather than feel *with* the patient, in the sense of sharing in the suffering and the pain, which does, of course, not rule out trying to understand the patient.

Much more than Bloom, philosopher Ignaas Devisch is interested in how compassion would work in solving pressing societal issues, even though he prefers to speak of “practicable detachment” rather than “rational compassion.” Devisch is worried by the increase in political pleas, like Klaver’s, for more empathy at a time when institutionalized solidarity and the welfare state – he is referring to the Netherlands and Belgium – are under pressure, if not systematically undermined. In this perspective, asking for more empathy and spontaneous forms of solidarity, whether or not because the role of government should be reduced anyway, is simply overcharging citizens. Devisch’s answer to this problem is intriguing because he remains firmly within the frame of the pros and cons of empathy for society: the institutions that safeguard solidarity should be rebuilt in such a way that the citizen is unburdened by not having to wonder how others live and whether or not they deserve certain rights or support because of the way they live. It does not even matter whether people dislike you or find you interesting, and, more importantly, one does not feel pressed to empathize with others or just to understand them to be able to function in society and even to improve it. To put it in cynical terms, Devisch’s solution is one way of making politics obsolete and, as we will see, it is not unlike Nussbaum’s take on politics and emotions. But even if we would go along with this solution, what about people not part of our society who some of us think deserve rights and support while others do not hold that view? What about one of the most polarized political issues of our time, the so-called crisis of refugees?

### **Nussbaum’s Good and Bad Emotions: The Case of the Refugee Crisis**

In December 2016, still at the height of the refugee crisis, Marli Huijter published an appeal for cultivating compassion for refugees (2016). This appeal was in line with an earlier one in which she tried, in her capacity as designated “national philosopher,” signed by 182 “professors, writers, philosophers, and artists,” to increase understanding of the refugee’s fate,

under the motto “we are all migrants” (Huijer & Van Hees, 2016), reminding many readers of the comparable slogan “Je suis Charlie.” This appeal for opening the borders for refugees was received with skepticism in the press, especially because it did not take into account the complex political issues involved in sheltering refugees, not only in the Netherlands but in the whole of the European Union. One of these issues was, and still is: how to practically realize an unrestricted shelter when dealing with hundreds of thousands of refugees. But other questions were raised as well. Wasn’t it all too easy to claim the status of refugee without suffering any of the consequences of being an actual refugee? And what about the serious resistance in society to an unrestricted shelter of refugees? Should this not be taken into account? In her second article, Huijer addressed exactly this resistance, but she refuses to interpret it as one of a political nature, seeing it rather as a symptom of a decrease if not a crisis in solidarity in the Netherlands, as well as in other European countries with refugees and “displaced” persons. The traditional appeal made by ethicists and philosophers that hospitality is a moral obligation, as is helping people in need, is not enough in Huijer’s view. We need to take the argument a step further: “In how far is cultivating compassion helpful in overcoming the European crisis in solidarity, so that European governments and citizens will contribute substantially to the worldwide improvement of the fate of displaced persons?” (Huijer, 2016, p. 28). According to Huijer, cultivating compassion is the only way to counter the undeniable fear, uncertainty, envy, and xenophobia among people caused by footage of long queues of refugees. These are the kind of negative emotions that led to protest and even to riots and violence.

Many people responded positively to Huijer’s appeal. The thousands who voluntarily helped refugees in any way they could did not even need this appeal. But think of the woman in the small Dutch town of Purmerend asking for understanding her rejection of a small-scale shelter for refugees across her street, because she was convinced that these refugees would resent seeing two cars on her driveway (Van der Linde, 2015). The fear and obvious xenophobia displayed by this woman many people would qualify as negative emotions. However, this does not yet mean that emotions like fear, uncertainty, and envy lack any rational ground. There is a problem here that is not only rooted in reducing the refugee crisis to a moral crisis, in stating that resistance to refugees is a matter of lack of compassion; it also has to do with the ease with which a distinction is made between “positive” and “negative” emotions. Is compassion always a good emotion? The compassion many bishops in the Catholic church had for priests who abused children caused a lot of suffering among the victims of the priests. And, whoever

doubts that these bishops acted out of compassion, remember what Mother Theresa said about compassion with the poor: “There is beauty in seeing how the poor accept their fate, to see them suffering like Jesus on the cross. The world has much to gain by the suffering of these people” (Popham, 2015). On the other hand, are fear, uncertainty and envy always negative as emotions? Are there no reasonable grounds at all for these emotions, as there are for compassion, and who decides what good and bad emotions are? Professors, writers, philosophers, or artists? And even if it were possible to make such a distinction, is it a governmental task to either foster emotions or fight them? These questions touch upon the heart of not only Huijer’s project but also that of Nussbaum, Huijer’s main philosophical source.

Before we go into Nussbaum’s view on emotions, it is important to realize that at first glance Nussbaum appears clearly to distinguish empathy from compassion. In her view, compassion is possible without imagining oneself in the situation of the other or taking the perspective of the other (like suffering animals in the food industry), which is our human capacity of empathizing. Empathizing on the other hand is possible without compassion, like in the case of an actor having empathy for his character but refusing any compassion (here Shakespeare’s Richard III is just one of many possible examples). That Nussbaum’s distinction in *Political Emotions* (2013) involves a somewhat academic matter shows from her contention in this study that compassion “is often an outgrowth of empathy” (p. 146) and that empathy is “often extremely helpful,” even to an extent that “given the imperfection of the human ability to assess predicaments, we should try as hard as we can to imagine the predicaments of others, and then we see what we think about what we’ve imagined” (p. 146), thereby attributing a key feature of compassion to empathy. Earlier, in her *Upheavals of Thought* (2001), Nussbaum even stated that without empathy “we are likely to remain obtuse and unresponsive, not even knowing how to make sense of the predicament we see” (p. 330). It is fair to say, then, that whatever the theoretical differences may be, empathy is not only a vital part of compassion, but also “a very important tool in the service of getting a sense of what is going on with the other person, and also of establishing concern and connection” (p. 330–331).

According to Nussbaum, emotions are intelligent responses to specific situations, rather than feelings or instincts opposed to reason. Emotions involve a cognitive element: besides a feeling, a value judgement is implicated. We become jealous because we are afraid that we will lose our loved one. We envy someone because he or she has something we would like to have. We get angry because we fear someone will take what is ours. These are not just value judgments; they are also about assessing facts. Which

facts serve as base of our fear of losing someone? In line with Nussbaum, Huijer assumes that compassion arises when three cognitive requirements are met: 1) there is an unquestionable and demonstrable serious suffering; 2) the person who suffers cannot be blamed for his or her suffering, and it is not self-inflicted; and 3) the suffering of the other is positioned in what really matters to the person feeling the emotion, in what he or she feels human life to be about. This is what Nussbaum calls “eudaimonistic thought.” In Nussbaum’s view, human emotions are always eudaimonistic, meaning “focused on the agent’s most important goals and projects, and seeing the world from the point of view of those goals, rather than from some impersonal vantage point” (2013, p. 144). Think again of little Alan Kurdi. A child should be safe at home instead of lying dead on a Turkish beach because the political situation made it impossible to shelter him and his family in a decent way.

When there is a lack of compassion manifesting itself in opposite emotions of fear or uncertainty, people are inclined to protest against sheltering refugees, even if they, as citizens, have a duty to do so based on laws and treaties. The point is that these protesters may well have different values, different “goals and projects” and, therefore, make different political choices. According to Huijer, what needs to be explained is why compassion is lacking. Therefore, she scrutinizes possible arguments against hospitality, like losing jobs to immigrants, overburdening the underprivileged in society, or allowing cultures and religions – think of Islam – alien to one’s own. The *fear*, however, for competition with newcomers that the underprivileged *feel* is never mentioned by Huijer. The fear of people living in existential uncertainty, because of their underprivileged position in a society that in their view is even more under pressure because of the intake of refugees, is deemed not to be based on any form of reason. Fear seems to be an emotion for which reasonable grounds and motives do not count.

It would be in line with any methodological rigor to treat emotions, good or (seemingly) bad, in the same way; or, to put it in other terms, they should be questioned equally on their cognitive content. In any possible case, there are more or less intelligent responses to specific situations in which a value judgment as well as an assessment of the relevant facts is involved. Huijer claims that compassion is or should be the normal reaction to the refugee crisis. Why does she not allow this to apply to fear and uncertainty? To treat emotions equally means in this case that we have to find out on which values and which facts this fear and uncertainty are based. Of course, Huijer admits that people in an underprivileged situation show emotions of fear and uncertainty when confronted with a substantial intake of refugees, but

she does not take their fear of yet another decrease in their socio-economic position seriously. It may very well be that these people based on their values or their interpretation of the facts have good reasons to resist and protest.

This unequal treatment of emotions is exactly what Nussbaum does. In *Anger and Forgiveness* (2016), she basically concludes that anger is never reasonable. At best, anger as an emotion could play an instrumental role in giving attention to certain problems, but it is morally problematic when someone stays angry. The only morally sound form of anger is what Nussbaum calls *transition-anger*: “while it acknowledges the wrong, it then moves forward. Its entire cognitive content is: ‘How outrageous. That should not happen again’” (2016, p. 93). In *Political Emotions* (2013), she deals with another emotion that she considers condemnable: envy. Her strategy here is that she creates a division between “bad” and “good” aspects of envy and deals with the good aspects separately: “emulation,” striving to perform better when confronted with the achievements of others that cause envy; “resentment,” “good” or “just” anger as a result of situations or institutions that are unjust; and, finally, the fairly harmless feeling that things turned out the way they did. In the distinction between envy and resentment, Nussbaum relies on John Rawls, but this “moral purification” of the good (or innocent) and bad aspects of envy in different emotions – characterizing all the bad ones as envy – does not do any justice to the complexity of envy. On top of this she does not make clear why envy experienced by people confronted with class distinction should always be unreasonable. In Nussbaum’s view, fixation on relative status is just bad.

This is not just another example of what Raymond Geuss (2008) called the “ethics-first” reading of political philosophy, an example of how philosophers only have little sense of the political aspects of emotions like fear, envy and anger. But it also shows the lack of insight in the increasing importance of the politics of status in meritocratic societies, whereby the values of merit and equality increasingly operate as opposites of each other. Nussbaum prefers to see emotions like anger and envy from the perspective of moral heroes like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela. They were the ones capable of turning their transition anger into the right actions for themselves and their followers. But to understand the functioning of anger and envy in our society, the example of these moral heroes is perhaps a bridge too far.

Instead of differentiating between good and bad emotions, we would prefer (in line with Koenis, 2016) to make a difference between a) the sources of emotions, or the question where the emotion comes from, b) the justification people give for their emotion, or the grounds they give for feeling what they

feel, and c) what people do with their emotions. In making these distinctions, it is hardly fruitful to think in terms of bad or good emotions. People are driven by motives ranging from what is traditionally seen as “low” emotions such as envy, greed, or fear to “higher” principles like justice and equality. How this mix exactly should be assessed is a matter for psychologists, but we should not confuse this mix of driving forces, frustrations and principles that motivate people with the quality of the arguments they give to justify their emotions. On this second argumentative level, it is not about good or bad emotions but about good or bad grounds for these emotions. The same holds for the third level concerning the actions resulting from these emotions. Envy may lead to rancor, but it can also lead to doing something about the situation people are in. Instead of creating a division between “bad” and “good” aspects of envy, and calling the former “envy” and the latter “resentment,” we better assess the grounds people give for their anger and the actions resulting from these emotions. Not the emotions themselves but these actions may be deemed bad or good. For this assessment, the values of the people involved should be taken into consideration as well as the relevant facts. When compassion leads to covering up criminal behavior, we should disapprove of these practical consequences. When the ideal of equality motivates people but leads to a political regime that seriously curtails people’s freedom, these consequences should be condemned. When envy because of a deprived situation causes people to organize themselves to better their fate, this should not be condemned. When fear following from being confronted by large groups of refugees leads to xenophobia or racism, the consequences should be condemned, not the fear as such. When we, like Nussbaum does in most cases, condemn anger as a bad emotion, it is impossible politically to understand what people actually do with their fear. It seems hard to believe that the anger of women and the working classes, or any group in an underprivileged situation for that matter, is no more than the transition anger that Nussbaum deems acceptable. Socialists and feminists were angry about what they experienced as an unjustified difference in status. In the end, it seems that only the stylized anger of her moral examples is acceptable for Nussbaum, instead of also acknowledging the powerless as angry citizens. Even rancor may be an understandable emotion in some cases.

It is possible for us to set our moral standards so high that only a few moral heroes will be able to meet them. In two respects, this would not be productive. First, it would cause frustration in citizens whose behavior will always be felt to be falling short. Being confronted with everyday anger and frustration about refugees and envy about the fact that other people

in higher positions condemn these emotions as not tolerable, based on principles defined in the high tower of philosophy, is bound to give rise to even more anger and frustration. Secondly, we will not gain any insight into the productive role of anger and frustration in our democracy. This democracy not only produces anger of the rebellious kind, meaning anger inspired by the desire for emancipation, but also of the spiteful sort, the kind of anger of those who are simply envious. The latter anger is not washed away merely by banning these all too human emotions. What makes our democracy strong is that it is not just suitable for moral heroes but also for angry, uncertain, fearful, and envious people. These angry people do not want to be judged by someone like Nussbaum who thinks that anger or envy are bad emotions leading to nothing. Neither do they want to hear from Huijer that they should feel compassion because the reasons underlying their not feeling compassion are not rational. They want their anger to be acknowledged, not in the sense that they want it to be proven right. Rather, they want their anger to be seen for what it is: anger about the situation they are in and the circumstances they have to deal with. It would be a huge step if only we would look at the grounds given why they are angry, uncertain, and fearful about the influx of migrants and refugees. There is no point in telling the woman from Purmerend that she is sailing on the waves of fear or xenophobia. What is needed is what many Dutch mayors actually practiced at the height of the refugee crisis: taking this fear and xenophobia seriously and starting debates to find out where, exactly, it hurts. This will allow us to see that something can actually be done. In many cities, citizens turned out to be willing to cooperate in finding solutions acceptable for all parties. Of course, there are obdurate racists with whom any debate will fail, but their number tends to be grossly exaggerated.

One of the reasons why so many people develop a certain anger in response to controversial issues like migration and integration pertains to the contrast between reasonable and unreasonable emotion: while the feelings or perceptions of one group are regarded as reasonable emotion or even sensible, informed by reason, those of the other group are condemned as unreasonable emotion, as reprehensible. The point of the anger is that one is not allowed to feel it, and this only makes it worse. Much of the support for the first contemporary Dutch populist Pim Fortuyn, and later for Geert Wilders, came from people feeling aggrieved and/or not taken seriously.

From this perspective, Nussbaum's and Huijer's politics of encouraging good emotions should now be looked at in a different light. In Nussbaum's "welfarist" political universe, citizens are first and foremost individuals who have rights and "capabilities." Her conceptual framework is suitable



for those situations in which people are not able to enjoy their rights and freedom. The government is made responsible for creating the circumstances in which they can do so. At best, Nussbaum's framework creates a standard to determine what the minimum of rights and possibilities is that should be available for everyone, but it does not give an answer to the question of how to divide the available resources or how much inequality is acceptable in a democracy in which we all want the same freedom for developing our capabilities. These are the political issues about which Nussbaum's moralism has nothing to say.

In this political struggle, it is not the task of the government to judge emotions as good or bad. It is the government's task to facilitate the dispute on the values and relevant facts behind these emotions and to protect citizens against the potentially negative consequences of particular emotions. When racism is involved, for instance, there is a cause to act based on the rules of our political order. Instead of a politics of good emotions, we believe in a "negative politics" in the sense of Avishai Margalit (1996) of preventing discrimination and negative stereotyping, hoping this makes our society a little more decent in the long run. But it is clear that this is not Nussbaum's take on the matter. In the next paragraph, we will show that Nussbaum's view on politics and emotions, which informs her public education project involving the arts and literature in particular, is also at the core of an educational approach driven by her political agenda.

### **Educating for Democracy, Educating Out of Democracy**

In 2010, Nussbaum published her much discussed *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. The arts and humanities were downsized all over the US, a development still ongoing, causing, in Nussbaum's view, an erosion of the qualities needed for democracy. Education is increasingly seen in terms of its value for the nation's economic growth and students in their potential of becoming economically productive. Education should be reconnected to the humanities in order to give students the capacity to be true democratic citizens who think critically and are knowledgeable and emphatic: "A democracy filled with citizens who lack empathy will inevitably breed more types of marginalization and stigmatization, thus exacerbating rather than solving problems" (Nussbaum, 2010, p. x). The call for empathy we already criticized in the sense that, in our view, empathy runs the danger of escalating problems rather than solving them in politics. Here, our concern is with the crucial role attributed to reading novels for

being able to identify with the situations of others, to imagine what it is like to be in the shoes of someone different from ourselves, to understand the emotions, wishes, and desires of a person in a particular situation – hence to cultivate the capacity for empathy, within the framework of public education.

Nussbaum coined this “narrative imagination” in her earlier study *Cultivating Humanity* (1997). Of course, the cultivation of empathy also takes place within the family in which we are raised, as an important first phase in which storytelling plays a role and children practice narrative imagination in playing with other children, improving responsiveness to other people’s needs. But the point here is that it continues at colleges and universities in a literary education that carefully considers novels – many of which were never central to the Western canon – that in particular will “bring students into contact with issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and cross-cultural experience and understanding” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 108).

One of Nussbaum’s oft-repeated examples is Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), a novel of humiliation, suffering, and racial stereotypes about the fate of a black man who describes himself as “invisible.” The invisibility of the novel’s character is a construction of the “inner eye” of the others who only want to see what the mind creates. To Nussbaum, this novel epitomizes the idea that democracy does not only need institutions but also a “quality of vision,” so as to guarantee, in the words of Ellison in his introduction to a later edition and quoted by Nussbaum, “to defeat this national tendency to deny the common humanity shared by my character and those who might happen to read of his experience” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 88). Nussbaum shows her educational cards by saying that the novel “works upon the inner eyes of the very readers whose moral failures it castigates” (p. 88). This way, Nussbaum makes the reader, the white reader, an agent in the suffering of the novel’s character: “The hero is invisible to white society, but he tells us [sic!] that this invisibility is an imaginative and educational failing on the part of the white people” (2010, p. 107).

A comparable example is Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1939), the story of Bigger Thomas, a poor young black man living on Chicago’s South Side who ends up murdering his white boss’s daughter Mary and his black girlfriend Bessie. Nussbaum taught this novel to a group of white students and they all recognized that they were “in effect, in the position of Mary Dalton, well-meaning but grossly ignorant and undeveloped in sympathy, desirous of knowing what it is like to live the other side of the ‘line’, but unable or unwilling to carry that desire into action” (1994, p. 93). Any teacher of literature would very much doubt this univocal response by a group of students to a work of literature. What the reading of this novel could at

least begin to give white readers in Nussbaum's view is "a knowledge of their ignorance," and a start in empathizing with the main character. It is almost as if Nussbaum simply suggests that the black man's murderous aggression, like that of Bigger Thomas, is a result of a lack of interest, knowledge, and empathy by white people. It is no surprise, then, that the crucial role in the novel of Bessie, not to mention her rape and murder by Bigger, is not mentioned at all in Nussbaum's five-page analysis, because this would complicate her less than subtle reading, which is all about "our" failure to understand that racial hate deforms a human personality like Bigger's, that oppression inevitably leads to violence and that novel-reading leads us to "call out for political and social equality" (p. 97).

Of course, *Native Son* is an important novel. But it is a novel that first appeared almost 80 years ago. Nussbaum's analysis largely ignores this fact (as her analysis of *Invisible Man* does not historicize this novel's dating back almost 70 years). There is no mention at all of the contemporary political or social context of both novels or of their reception, most importantly *as literature*. This applies not to the issue of whether we are dealing with literature in both novels, but to the more than relevant discussion that has been going on for decades now about the literary representation of the black experience in terms of literary technique. The late Toni Morrison was quite clear about why Richard Wright's *Native Son* and in particular Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* made her feel uncomfortable. Of the latter, she once said "Invisible to whom? Not to me!," implying that Ellison wrote for a white audience, as in fact did Wright (Alt, 2003).

In a similar vein, James Baldwin, in a famous 1951 essay on Wright's *Native Son*, emphasized that "Such a book, we felt with pride, could never have been written before – which was true. Nor could it be written today" (p. 32), regardless of whether we are dealing with a black or white audience. For Baldwin, in other words, this novel was thoroughly connected to the social climate of the time and as such it was one of the last expressions of pure anger as a result of economic inequity in the US. The problem, however, is that in Bigger Thomas the novelist created "a monster," "the Negro as a fearful image," which the novel attempts to redeem in social terms. At the same time, this image is confirmed if not strengthened and this is primarily because in Baldwin's view "Bigger has no discernible relationship to himself, to his own life, to his own people, nor to any other people, and his force comes, not from his social (or anti-social) unit, but from his significance as the incarnation of a myth" (p. 35). Baldwin is bothered by the isolation of the main character within his own group, by the fact that he has no tradition, no involvement and no shared experiences. This is all the more

problematic because the reader sees the world through the eyes of Bigger, limited by his perception. Not long ago, African American novelist Ayana Mathis returned to Baldwin's critique of *Native Son* and, although she thinks it is a groundbreaking novel, it is obvious to her too that "Bigger Thomas is a rapist and a murderer motivated only by fear, hate and a slew of animal impulses. He is the black ape gone berserk that reigned supreme in the white racial imagination" (Mathis, 2015). It is this myth Baldwin was referring to.

Based on Nussbaum's ideal of reading novels that lead us to call out for political and social equality, then, *Native Son* is a problematic choice, to say the least. Within the context of a group of privileged white students, it is no less than a perverse one – who exactly are we empathizing with? – and this is the result of abstracting from any possible historical, cultural, and literary context, in this case the context of twentieth-century African American literature in particular. Roughly at the time of *Native Son*, Mathis points out, writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, and Ann Petry wrote novels in which the protagonists were black, poor and suffering from segregation, but unlike Bigger Thomas "they are robust and nuanced characters, not caricatures endlessly acting out the pathologies of race" (Mathis, 2015).

A second example of the risk of choosing literature, in particular novels, in a project like Nussbaum's, without taking any historical, cultural, or literary context into consideration, is demonstrated in her reading of Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), presented in particular in *Poetic Justice* (1995). We are expected to empathize with the undervalued workers and their working conditions in the fictitious industrial Coketown. And it is not difficult to do this as readers, Dickens being the master of sentiment and storytelling. But does the novel work as an inspiration or a call for political engagement in fighting poverty and inequality in our time? The role of the trade unions in the novel is a case in point. Slackbridge, union representative in the novel, is portrayed as a villain, a poisonous orator, expressing not only Dickens's dislike of working-class action and the general fear of mobs "rattling at the gate," but also his disregard of any necessary changes in social structures or institutions, despite his heartfelt indignation at the conditions of the working class. There is change in the novel, but this is change within individuals, moral change. In a famous address delivered at the Mechanic's Institution in Birmingham (dedicated to educating working men in technical subjects), when he began to write *Hard Times*, Dickens stated what eventually would become the central idea developed in the novel: "It is in the fusion of different classes; in the bringing together of employers and employed; in the creating of a better common understanding among those whose interests are identical, who depend upon each other, who are vitally essential to each

other, and who never can be in unnatural antagonism without deplorable results" (1853, n. p.). Here, Dickens clearly reveals his Victorian ideology of social paternalism, which is symbolized not only by the fact that social circumstances at the end of the novel are the same as at the beginning, but also by the kind of melodramatic reconciliation typical not only of Dickens's novels but of all novels about social issues, involving characters from different classes who used to be antagonists.

Raymond Williams, in his early seminal study on *Culture & Society, 1780-1950* (1958), has demonstrated that the nineteenth-century "industrial novel," as he coined it, articulated serious criticism of "the evils of industrialisation" (p. 145). Nevertheless, he concluded that without exception, these novels showed no sense of countering these evils, let alone concrete ways of doing so. On top of this, as amply argued in Gertrude Himmelfarb's *The Idea of Poverty* (1983), the significance of *Hard Times* lies in its demonstration of a thoroughly Victorian view on the poor and the working class (or the "lower order," as they were referred to at the time). The literary representation of this group in society is characterized by different mixes of stereotypes that led Himmelfarb to distinguish between the "Gothic Poor," the "Newgate Poor" (stories of the poor involved in crime), and the "Dickensian Poor," all embedded in narratives that betray a romantic mode (in the sense that the plot draws heavily on melodrama and romance) rather than a realistic one. For a through-and-through Victorian writer's take on the sufferings of workers in industrial England, then, we should read Dickens's *Hard Times*. This is not to say that this is a bad novel, let alone that Dickens is a bad writer; he is as seductive and sometimes even as irresistible in his storytelling as in *David Copperfield* or *Oliver Twist*. Yet it is puzzling indeed that Nussbaum, one of the most prominent voices in poverty studies, chose this particular novel to demonstrate the power of the narrative imagination in "its contribution to moral and political life, both representing and enacting the novel's triumph over other ways of imagining the world" (1995, p. 3).

Years later, Nussbaum, in an online essay on "How to write on poverty" (2012), returns to Dickens and *Hard Times*. "Suppose you want to wake people up to the human cost of poverty and to energize them with some urgency towards productive social action." In her view, obviously, just data on poverty will not reach out to the hearts of people. What Dickens knew intuitively as no other writer in regard to empathy, "that you can't change the heart without telling a story" (n.p.), is in Nussbaum's view now experimentally confirmed: "a particularized narrative of suffering has unique power to produce motives for constructive action" (n.p.). We know now that social, political or constructive action was among the least of the novel's concerns,

as it was among the least of Dickens as a writer and commentator. His take on improving living and working conditions of the poor even transcends politics. After all, politics is about dealing with conflicting interests, not striving to make them identical, and again, as in the case of *Native Son*, we have to ask ourselves who exactly are we empathizing with? The “fully human” quality of suffering that Nussbaum attributes to the narrative imagination surely cannot be found in *Hard Times*. The problems of nineteenth-century literary representations of the poor, addressed not only by Williams and Himmelfarb, should lead us to the conclusion that these narrative imaginations of poverty first and foremost mirrored and expressed contemporary social and political preoccupations of a privileged class, Dickens being part of it.

Why does Nussbaum ignore the historical and literary-historical context of *Hard Times*, or indeed of any novel she discusses? The only explanation we can think of is that Nussbaum is caught in an intertextual trap hinted at by Barbara Korte and George Zipp (2014). In literature of the twentieth century, they detect a “conspicuous intertextual dimension of poverty representation” (p. 126). Frequently, they found “allusions to famous Victorian depictions, and above all to *Oliver Twist*, serving to evoke images of victimisation or arouse compassion and perpetuate nineteenth-century perceptions of the poor” (pp. 126–127). In our view, this would exactly be the value of reading *Hard Times* after a good 150 years: first, as a means of making us aware of the modes of literary representation of social issues or any other issue (we have seen that this is not just a matter for literary scholars), and, secondly, to make us wary, within the context of poverty studies, of revitalizing nineteenth-century ideas, like Christian inspired charity, or fostering Dickensian social paternalism. The latter is surprisingly close to Nussbaum’s take on the government’s role in encouraging positive emotions. Through political rhetoric, songs, symbols, and what Nussbaum calls the pedagogy of public education, in which novels play a crucial role, the government is not only capable of directly influencing people’s psychology, but, in her view, it should also do so.

It is significant in this respect that F.R. Leavis is mentioned by Nussbaum as her main inspiration in her reading of *Hard Times*. He was one of the most influential twentieth-century voices of liberal humanism’s view on literature and the arts, with its prime goal of building moral character, of making us better persons (Leavis does not use “citizens,” perhaps because of his anti-democratic stance). Leavis (1948) refused to include Dickens in his “great tradition,” because he saw the genius of Dickens as that of an “entertainer,” lacking any sense of “seriousness” (p. 29). However, he considers *Hard Times* an exception. His view of the novel is that of a “moral fable,”

thereby extracting from the historical context in which it was written. It is the moral knowledge the novel conveys that counts, which is true of any novel for that matter, according to Leavis. What this entails concretely is shown by Leavis in discussing the depiction of the circus in the novel, as opposed to industrial Coketown. One would expect from a traveling circus in those days, as he puts it, “squalor, grossness, and vulgarity” (p. 256). The point is not that the representation of these people is obviously far from realistic; what counts is that it is not “sentimentally false” (p. 256). A moral fable like *Hard Times* is defined by its intention, and the success of the novel lies in the circus symbolizing no less than “the humanness of humanity” (p. 258). That the concept of “humanity” is not in any sense historically determined in Leavis’s reading of *Hard Times* – and of all novels in his great tradition – betrays his Platonic view of morality. Although Nussbaum would qualify her views on literature as distinctly Aristotelian in the sense that, unlike historical works, “literary works typically invite their readers to put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and to take on their experiences” (1995, p. 5), in her actual reading of *Hard Times* she shares Leavis’s Platonism, rejecting the contingency of modes of representation in literature.

We would not want to discard novels like *Hard Times* when it comes to issues of poverty and industrialism, or *Native Son* when discussing the black experience. On the contrary. It is hard to overestimate the social relevance of the novel since its inception. This equally applies to novels written today, despite an increase in death-of-the-novel rhetoric (Will Self, 2014). When poverty is the issue, for instance, young authors like Édouard Louis (*Qui a Tué Mon Père*, 2018) or Cash Carraway (*Skint Estate: A Memoir of Poverty, Motherhood, and Survival*, 2019), reach a young readership in novels that go far beyond any Dickensian sentimental mode of depicting suffering as a result of socio-economic deprivation. Anger and despair, never allowed by Dickens, neither by Nussbaum, is at the heart of their narrative imagination, if not its source. Although they are not part of any canon yet, it is clear that Nussbaum has been carefully constructing her own for many years now, especially in view of public education. But as is the case with all canons, it is not the question of which works are selected to belong to it that is really interesting, but which works are left out.

Here John Dewey, one of Nussbaum’s prime inspirations, and especially his *Democracy and Education* (1916), comes to mind. Dewey wrote his most important book on education not long after the well-known *Harvard Universal Classics*, also known as “Dr. Eliot’s Five-Foot Shelf,” was published. Nussbaum mentions Dewey’s wariness of the classical “Great Books.” In

Nussbaum's view, this is because "he saw such books turned into authorities, and name-dropping substituted for real intellectual engagement" (2010, p. 65). Indeed, Dewey was skeptical about the "Great Books" concept, not only because they preclude active engagement of students, reducing them to passive consumers of authoritative texts, but also, and this is neglected by Nussbaum, because "there is an enormous difference between availing ourselves of them as present resources and taking them as standards and patterns in their retrospective character" (Dewey, 2001, p. 78). Dewey is not denying the importance of "utilizing" literature or any other product of the past for the benefit of the future, but the great books are, first and foremost, "part of the *present* environment of individuals" (p. 78). Here, Dewey seems to undermine liberal humanism well before it peaked in the works of F.R. Leavis, Northrop Frye, and many others, and again found a voice in Nussbaum today.

## Conclusion

In our view, literature is of the utmost importance in the humanities, not because it makes us better persons or better citizens – literature should not be expected to take on a secular religious role (in liberal humanism, the function of literature is not unlike the one of the Bible in Christianity) – but because literature through the ages has been dealing with issues of many kinds, issues we are still dealing with, among them social, personal, and cultural ones, not as manifests of moral truth but as demonstrations of how these issues are dealt with by our ancestors, in our case primarily *as literature*. Although literature is surely about more than moral questions, we would like to refer to Robert Musil's view of art and literature as a "moral laboratory," which is not about providing "clothes for the soul," but instead about searching, analyzing, and scrutinizing moral issues (1978, p. 1351), which was practiced by Musil himself in his seminal novel *The Man Without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, 1930–1942). To understand twentieth-century black experience as expressed in *Native Son*, we need to take into account James Baldwin criticizing this novel as literature, and Toni Morrison on the white perspective in *Invisible Man*. The question is not whether they are right or not, or, in Nussbaum's terms, whether they encourage us to make "the good choice." In contrast to liberal humanism's view that literature gives meaning to us and our lives or even guides us, we believe that it is rather about us giving meaning to literature. Sometimes, as in the case of Baldwin on *Native Son*, we are not able to save literature



as literature because of a particular mode of literary representation, which makes us aware of the contingencies of literature, of the fact that we change in our expectations of literature and that societal contexts change. *Native Son* is still important, as part of the history of expressing the black experience, but not so much as literature anymore.

As argued, the literariness of a text is not something fixed before we read it. Instead, we realize a work of literature in the very act of reading, sometimes in the case of texts that were never intended to be literary. Baldwin no longer was able to read *Native Son* as a work of literature, thereby demonstrating that “the literary work comes into being only in the event of reading” (Attridge, 2015, p. 25), based on new views on literature, on society, and on what it means to be black. Nussbaum defended her approach of literature by creating a false opposition: if literature is not used with a political agenda geared towards the urgent social issues of our time, the result is “an extreme kind of aesthetic formalism that is sterile and unappealing” (1997, p. 89). But in creating a trans-historical and trans-cultural canon in which the right moral view on a particular issue is expressed, in which the right emotions prevail, and in which the right characters are presented for empathy, she is taking the literature out of literature.

Literature assumes an ongoing activity of reading and re-reading, a historical process the study of which should be part of any liberal arts program, if only to show that sometimes we are misguided by clichés, stereotypes, and caricatures in the very works of art and literature that we are supposed to hold dear. With respect to Nussbaum’s view on political emotions, we see a striking analogy. In fostering good emotions and in condemning bad emotions – if not denying them – as a result of real social concerns rooted sometimes in deep conflicts of interest (as discussed in section 4), Nussbaum takes the politics out of politics – politics as a means of negotiating and organizing often hard-to-reconcile differences of interest that transcend any possible emotion connected to them. Indeed, it seems that Nussbaum, like Dickens, firmly believes that in the end we are all in the same boat and that what we really should strive for is Jeremy Rifkin’s global empathic connectivity. If Nussbaum’s voice is hailed by many as defining what engaged humanities should look like, in our view her project is not about educating *for* democracy but educating *out* of democracy. Striving to be engaged in the humanities should also mean unmasking any pretense to engaged humanities projects that go against the very spirit of the humanities – the spirit of free, critical, and never prescribed thinking.

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- Figure 9.3** *Up to three generations came together during the events held at Maynooth University, Kerry County Museums, The National Museum of Ireland, and the Epic Museum to explore different facets of the Battle of Mount Street Bridge. Top left: Family groups in the focus group session at Maynooth University. Top right: Family groups in Kerry County Council Museum. Bottom: Final knowledge sharing activity in the Kerry County Council Museum* © C. Papadopoulos & S. Schreibman. 256
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What is the role of the humanities at the start of the 21st century? In the last few decades, the various disciplines of the humanities (history, linguistics, literary studies, art history, media studies) have encountered a broad range of challenges, related to the future of print culture, to shifts in funding strategies, and to the changing contours of culture and society. Several publications have addressed these challenges as well as potential responses on a theoretical level. This coedited volume opts for a different strategy and presents accessible case studies that demonstrate what humanities scholars contribute to concrete and pressing social debates about topics including adoption, dementia, hacking, and conservation. These “engaged” forms of humanities research reveal the continued importance of thinking and rethinking the nature of art, culture, and public life.

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