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# Introduction

Judith Thissen

Are the humanities still relevant in the twenty-first century? In the context of pervasive economic liberalism and shrinking budgets due to a deep and prolonged recession, the exigency of humanities research for society is increasingly put into question, even within academia. Why should governments finance research that does not generate computable and marketable results? Are the immediate costs worth the alleged long-term social benefits? Similar arguments are also made about the arts and culture more generally – one of the main fields of inquiry in humanities scholarship, past and present. With *Contemporary Culture: New Directions in Arts and Humanities Research*, we want to show that the humanities matter and in fact offer much-needed insights into contemporary cultural and social practices, thus opening up new ways of understanding the cultural contexts that shape societal transformation.

The essays in this volume come out of a large-scale research program that was initiated in 2002 by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). The *Transformations in Art and Culture* programme was launched with two aims. It challenged scholars to think how the humanities could contribute to a better understanding of present-day processes of cultural and social change. The programme also aimed at reinvigorating the theoretical foundations and conceptual frameworks of humanities research and at building bridges with other fields of inquiry, notably the social sciences and the arts. By doing so, NWO sought to enrich the scholarly debates about the nature and future of the humanities and thus set the agenda for the years to come, well beyond the scope of the program itself.

This volume investigates how the interlocked processes of mediatization, globalization and commercialization have shaped cultural practices, social behaviour and feelings of belonging since the 1990s. While it is not a book about new media per se, most essays directly or indirectly address the profound impact of new information and communication technologies on everyday life. The introduction of the World Wide Web thereby figures as the implicit starting point for studying new modes of cultural production, distribution and consumption as catalysts for societal change. While such a perspective runs the risk of epochal thinking, overlooking continuities and relations to earlier periods, there is little

doubt that the rapid expansion of new ICT technologies, fuelled by intensified globalization and commercialization after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, have changed the world profoundly, propelling us into a new stage of history.

In methodological respect, this volume favours non-hierarchical dialogues between theorization and empirical investigation. It stands for so-called middle-level research as opposed to Grand Theory. Middle research, as David Bordwell points out, is “problem- rather than doctrine-driven” and thus allows scholars to “combine traditionally distinct spheres of inquiry”.<sup>1</sup> Localized questions, interdisciplinary approaches and “piecemeal theorizing” unite most essays in this volume. Theory is primarily deployed as an instrument to integrate the empirical findings and case studies into larger frames of interpretation. As a consequence, the authors offer modest proposals rather than overarching theoretical explanations of the workings of culture in contemporary society. Moreover, their work repeatedly calls into question the vested hierarchies that stratify the cultural field and compartmentalize the study of its institutions. The authors broaden the spectrum of analysis to include insights from related academic disciplines as well as from the arts. By doing so, they draw up new interdisciplinary ways of thinking about art, popular culture, media entertainment and the dynamics of urban life.

At the heart of the present book are questions surrounding the issue of media-tization, that is, the long-term meta-process of the increased and pervasive spreading of technological communication media and media organizations. In postmodern society, the latter have become instrumental in defining the stakes and the patterns that structure human behaviour in all spheres of social life. Andreas Hepp refers to this function as the “moulding forces of the media”.<sup>2</sup> Knut Lundby talks about “media-saturated societies” wherein “the media are everywhere, all-embracing”, and he follows Scott Lash in considering it the key characteristic of the second modernity.<sup>3</sup> “The first modernity describes a process of rationalization. And the second modernity describes one of mediatization”, according to Lash.<sup>4</sup> Along similar lines, John B. Thompson has argued in *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (1995) that since the invention of the printing press, communication mediated by way of technology (as opposed to face-to-face interaction) has irreversibly altered our sense of space, time and community as well as the frameworks for self-formation and self-understanding, for reflection and action both in the public and private sphere. Thompson proposed to analyze systemic cultural transformations by focusing “on symbolic forms and their modes of production and circulation in the social world”, instead of taking *mentalités* – values, attitudes and beliefs – as the starting point for understanding changes in contemporary society.<sup>5</sup> In line with Thompson, a strong emphasis on cultural practices (rather than on institutions) characterizes the contributions to this volume. Drawing on the well-established

tradition of audience-oriented research within cultural studies, the authors demonstrate a clear preference for studying social and cultural processes from the bottom up. Instead of examining top-down forgeries of collective identity, notably by the nation-state and its key institutions (e.g. state-controlled media platforms like public television), they offer an exploration of the processes of fragmentation, deterritorialization and disintegration of existing cultural and social spheres as well as the formation of new ones.

### **Structure of the book**

The book is divided into four sections and concludes with an outlook on the challenges that the humanities face today. The first part is devoted to “media cities”. It establishes a larger context within which most contributions to this volume fit because cities are generally seen as the cradle of modernity and the most dynamic places for art, culture and creativity. Urban-based lifestyles, rooted in the mixed socio-cultural backgrounds of metropolitan populations, are vitally important for the construction and performance of identity and the development of new modes of sociability and social cohesion. However, as René Boomkens points out in his opening essay, “the interesting thing about cities is that there does not exist any serious formalized knowledge about them”. They are primarily studied as prominent examples of society or specific examples of influential political institutions, he argues, but there is no theory defining what cities and urban life are actually about. Boomkens offers the beginning of an integrative approach by defining cities as a *cultural reality*. He breaks away with reductionist, mono-disciplinary approaches to develop the notion of the city as a *whole way of life*. Evaluating a varied body of critical thinking and research on urban public culture, he investigates the historical continuities and contemporary discontinuities at work in urban culture and its public sphere in relation to the increased mediatization and denationalization of “the everyday”.

Boomkens’ philosophical analysis is grounded in the case studies of Judith Vega, Martijn de Waal and Martijn Oosterbaan. Oosterbaan examines the on- and offline practices of Brazilian migrants in Amsterdam and Barcelona. His anthropological field work revealed that social network sites such as Orkut and Brasileiros na Holanda are not only used by migrants to keep in contact with friends and relatives around the world or to exchange practical information on local living conditions, but also function as public platforms for (trans)national political debates and diasporic identity formation. More importantly, he found that these virtual communities do not replace or hamper face-to-face encounters among Brazilian migrants. On the contrary: the multiple, interlocked networks of online and offline communities constitute a decentred, transnational public sphere rooted in the city as well as in cyberspace. Judith Vega and Martijn de

Waal approach the cultural reality of the city from the perspective of the visual arts and the ways in which they shape our perception of urban life and (post)modernity. As actual embodiments of urban subjectivity and interaction, Vega argues, paintings and city films provide the spectator with a sensory rather than a discursive experience of the urban public sphere and offer, intentionally or not, a far more fragmented and less linear understanding of the functioning of the modern city than urban theories typically present. Whereas Vega zooms in on examples from art history, Martijn de Waal focuses on the contemporary art scene. Grounded in a close analysis of the interactive video installation *Body Movies – Relational Architecture 6* by the Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, he demonstrates how new media technologies have profoundly altered the urban fabric and invites us to view the city itself as an interface, following Manuel Castells' interpretation of the city as a communication system and material reflection of shared social representations, but expanding it beyond the physical urban space to include blogs and social network sites.

Part II focuses on the notions of play and the “ludic turn” in contemporary culture. This section brings together two very different strands of thinking about digital culture and consumer participation. The team around philosopher Jos de Mul makes the case for taking “play” seriously. Their intellectual starting point is *Homo Ludens*, a study of play by the renowned Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, originally published in 1938. This work has been remarkably neglected in the Netherlands over the last decades, in sharp contrast to its international comeback. Combining a critical assessment of Huizinga's conceptualization of play and empirical research into playful practices in the realm of digital media (mobile telephones, games), Frissen, De Mul and Raessens propose a new theory of play and playfulness, which overcomes the contradictions and ambiguities in Huizinga's study and effectively addresses the ludification of contemporary culture in relation to postmodern identity formation. An altogether optimistic interpretation of consumer agency characterizes their approach as well as the case studies by Michiel de Lange and Sybille Lammes. With a keen eye for the narrative dimensions of everyday life, including her own use of the social network game *Foursquare* on her commute to university, Lammes explores how digital maps change our sense of place and space by looking at cartographic applications for smartphones. With Michiel de Lange, the urban setting shifts from Amsterdam to Jakarta, where he examines how in the Indonesian context of consumer society the culture of mobile phones is positioned between the art of modern socializing (*bergaul*) and the display of prestige (*gengsi*). Like Lammes, his analysis not only focuses on how identities are fashioned through media use and storytelling but also take into account the playful conditions under which these identities are produced.

Renée van de Vall adopts a more cautious attitude towards the participatory potential of new media technologies in her reflection on digital gaming, which is grounded in the empirical studies carried out by her research team composed of René Glas, Martijn Hendriks and Maaïke Lauwaert. She systematically addresses issues of power and control, thereby drawing attention to the ways in which the economic interests of the game industry shape play practices and thus limit players' agency and choice. Yet, a small minority of players – typically highly active and dedicated users – do engage in deviating play practices and other transgressive activities to expand their playing space beyond the hardware, software and contractual boundaries imposed by game producers. René Glas' study of regulatory mechanisms and creative practices in and around *World of Warcraft* provides an acute insight into the complex, multifaceted relationship between game designers and fans who appropriate *World of Warcraft* materials to develop their own artistic projects. While this kind of detailed empirical research of active gamers offers much-needed empirical grounding for theories of interactivity and participatory cultures, De Vall convincingly argues that what is still missing are studies of hardly-active users and people who do not care about games and other new media platforms such as social network sites. Overlooked by new media scholarship, knowledge of what drives the people to engage in new media practices or not, may well turn out to be crucial for our understanding of contemporary digital culture in all its complexity.

Part III – Thinking Analogue – opens with a methodological essay by Karin Bijsterveld, José van Dijck, Annelies Jacobs and Bas Jansen. Playing upon the difference between analogue and digital technological thinking, and drawing notably on insights from Science and Technology Studies (STS), they develop the concept of “analogies” as a methodological tool to investigate transformations in cultural practices from a comparative perspective, whereby they distinguish between analogies made by the historical actors themselves (e.g. consumers, producers) and analogies made for analytical purposes by the researchers who investigate cultural practices. Their approach is exemplified by looking at the ways in which new sound technologies triggered (or not) changes in music listening, recording, sampling and archiving and how these new practices shape musical memories. Tape recorders, for example, facilitated the conservation and exchange of personal sound souvenirs, while the multimedia *Top 2000*, a yearly five-day broadcast event of all-time hit songs on Dutch radio, has evolved into a vehicle for collective nostalgia and reminiscing. In Bas Jansen's case study, the analogies strategy is successfully deployed to get a grip on the cultural and social dynamics at work in the online ccMixer community, disclosing the various roles – remixer, genealogist and reviewer – that members assume to ensure a fair system of credit-giving within a sharing cultural economy.

Part IV deals with the hybrid practices of the art-science CO-OPs projects that were set up by NWO and partners within the framework of the *Transformations in Art and Culture* programme to foster theoretical innovation within humanities scholarship and stimulate the exchange of ideas, concepts and research practices between academics and artists. For those working in the natural sciences collaboration with artists has become commonplace, but this kind of interdisciplinary teamwork was and still is in an experimental phase within the humanities and social sciences. As a result, the challenges were sometimes underestimated, in particular the need to find a common language to bridge two fundamentally different modes of thinking: one focused on the visual, the other geared towards the production of words and texts. Nonetheless, the CO-OPs contributions to this volume confirm that hybrid practices have great potential for the development of new academic insights. After a short introduction by Robert Zwijnenberg, who situates the CO-OPs programme in the larger public debate about the social relevance of science and technology, four teams reflect upon their project and its outcomes.

The first two essays in this section focus on contemporary art. Art historian Kitty Zijlmans and Ni Haifeng, a Chinese-born, Amsterdam-based artist, investigated in a series of installations the globalization of trade and the concomitant circulation of people, products and ideas, questioning concepts like freedom, borders, and passports. In mutual dialogue, Zijlmans and Ni reveal how their *Laboratory on the Move* project induced them to rethink their respective positions within an increasingly global art system and vis-à-vis each other. In “Embedded in the Dutch Art World” by Judith Thissen, the central focus shifts from globalization to commercialization. Her collaboration with the American multimedia artist Edith Abeyta was part of a larger research project on the economization of culture in the Netherlands. Instead of exploring the dynamics of exchange and co-creation that emerge when an artist and an academic work together, Thissen takes their own experience as a case to study the political economy of the Dutch field of contemporary art, using Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology of culture to disclose the capitalist logic at work in the not-for-profit art sector.

A strong engagement with history and science characterized the projects discussed in the last two chapters. *Back to the Roots* was initiated by Alex van Stipriaan, a specialist of Caribbean history, and explored what roots and cultural heritage mean in a globalized world. This art-science project involved a mixed group of upcoming talent and established artists, all of Afro-Caribbean background. In his essay, Van Stipriaan relates with careful attention for the intense personal emotions involved, the group’s physical and artistic journey in search of their African roots and place in Dutch society. DNA research played a key role in *Back to the Roots*. In the *Observatory Observed*, scientific technology also figured prominently but primarily as object of scholarly and artistic fascination.

Geert Somsen, a historian of science and Jeroen Werner, a visual artist whose work consists of optical installations, discuss the insights gained from their joint exploration of observatories, ranging from a massive fifteenth-century stone quadrant in Samarkand to the high-tech radio telescope Lofar in Dwingeloo in the north of the Netherlands. Werner's *Moonzoom* and *Zonzoom* installations at the Sonnenborgh observatory in Utrecht and Discovery 07 in Amsterdam were received with great enthusiasm by the organizers, the media and the general public alike. The team concludes with a critical reflection on this apparent success as they point at the underlying motivations of their institutional sponsors, who seemed above all concerned with marketing a hip image of science.

In the final section – Looking Back, Looking Forward – the present volume is more firmly situated in the framework of the *Transformation in Art and Culture* programme, its history, contingencies and impact. In an open dialogue, José van Dijck and Robert Zwijnenberg, the driving forces behind the programme, assess its results and share their views on the challenges of humanities scholarship in the years to come. They passionately call for a more engaged humanities that reclaims a stronger position in the public sphere. In their view, the humanities can play a crucial role in social innovation when its scholars work in multidisciplinary teams that cover the full range of academic research, including the natural sciences, and demonstrate that different forms of knowledge can mutually reinforce each other. Van Dijck and Zwijnenberg thus draw the contours of a next chapter in arts and humanities scholarship, in which the humanities strengthen their relevance within academia and for society at large, while maintaining their core values: critical reflection, analytical nuance and historical consciousness.

## Notes

1. David Bordwell, "Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory", in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 28.
2. Andreas Hepp, "Differentiation: Mediatization and Cultural Change", in *Mediatization: Concepts, Changes, Consequences*, ed. Knut Lundby (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 143.
3. Knut Lundby, "Introduction: 'Mediatization' as Key", in *Mediatization: Concepts, Changes, Consequences*, ed. Knut Lundby (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 2.
4. Quoted in Lundby, "Introduction: 'Mediatization' as Key", 2.
5. John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 46.

