

Flowing

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Abstract

‘The absence of a terminology is not a problem of the absence of truth for things that cannot be named, but the problem of the incompatibility in principle between, on the one hand, the need to order and, on the other, the result of an ordering, as this incompatibility is expressed in the procedure of particular inclusion and exclusion’. [Kooistra, 1988]. This quote represents the dilemma De Zeeuw was – and still is - trying to by-pass during his scientific life. How to judge the quality of reasoning in the social sciences whereas you are part of the same system? *Flowing* was written on the occasion of the superannuation of De Zeeuw. It is showing the kind of escape from this dilemma that systems theory is offering. At least the kind of escape De Zeeuw is offering from his view of systems theory. Flowing refers to a special kind of systems. The structure of these systems is simultaneously both the *means* and the *outcome* of the social practices associated with elements of the system. Flowing is a narration. A narration about the social practice of survival.

Flowing

“ A claim has the desired quality if in the construction process attention has been devoted to the construction progressing in such a way that using the claim serves to improve the quality.”
Gerard de Zeeuw, 1980 *)

The man sighed. He had just tried to drag that dolly-like thing on wheels that his iv drip was attached to through the swinging doors. The automatic door closers foiled his effort. The tripod with the swivel castors couldn't get past the raised rubber ridge. The doors were closing again. He was stuck on one side, his hand and the iv drip on the other. A swinging door has the desired quality if in the construction process attention has been devoted to the construction progressing in a certain direction in such a way that using the swinging door serves to reduce the heating costs. The man grimaced. A door versus a drip. Not exactly a fair match. It should be possible to do better than that. At any rate here at the hospital. Some vague memory came to mind of a commercial. It had something to do with a swinging door at a hospital and a man getting stuck in it. That was all he could recall. Now the doors were swinging open again. A white coat and clunky white clogs came striding by. He had been right to think he would be able to see to the rest of the liberation on his own. The white coat only hesitated for a split second and then dashed down the corridor. “How much wood does a woodchuck chuck,” he thought for no apparent reason. Totally off the wall. Though it might have had something to do with a white coat.

Downstairs in the lobby, he sat down. That is what he did every day. Sit at the entrance until it was the exit. Slightly hunched over. His hand on that gizmo on wheels. His stiff leg stretched out in front of him. Waiting for the entrance to become the exit took about two hours. An entrance has the desired quality if in the construction process attention has been devoted to the construction progressing in a certain direction in such a way that the use

of the entrance is not obstructed by outgoing traffic. The man nodded. By now he could predict to a T what time it was. Now the tide was coming in. That is what he compared it to. He had lived near the seaside. First when he was still living in Europe and then later in Asia as well. There were still just little clusters of people. By half past seven though, there would be a constant flow of visitors. Flowing past a beacon. Past a man with an iv drip on a tripod with swivel castors. It struck him that maybe he ought to let his beard grow. Moses with his staff leading his people through the entrance. But that beard of his was not likely to amount to much. His brother was the Esau. He could still hear his father say that: Gerben is our Esau. And he remembered how jealous he had been of his brother, who seemed to have hair all over. Jealous up until the Jap picked his brother out at roll call and beat him and beat him and beat him. Monkey! Monkey! The Jap with the moustache that just wouldn't grow. A little guy. Not a single hair on his skinny little chest. And as mean as they come. What a scream he had though. He used to call him screamoustache to try and make his brother feel better. Without a moustache, screaming is all you have. They used to make silly jokes about it when they crawled into their bunk together. In the dark. Night fell by six. All Gerben could do was sit. His hand on the ceiling beam, his left leg stretched out straight. Crying without making a sound.

It was just past eight now. Slack water. Outside the car doors had stopped slamming. Inside the shiny tiles had floated to the surface again. The reservoir had filled up. A building filled with voices at warm beds. A high-ceilinged corridor. It would be ebb tide any minute now. The tide would turn. The man squinted to see more clearly. The entrance and exit had a special relation. They excluded and simultaneously included each other. They constituted an inseparable pair. Whirling round and round in an eternal dance. Pressing close to each other. Passion? He looked for the border between the two. Every day. An exit has the desired quality if in the construction process attention has been devoted to the construction progressing in such a way that the use of the exit is not obstructed by incoming traffic. There was a border on each side of which the exact same thing went by a different name. You went on your merry way and the door you went through was either the entrance or exit. And who decided which? He would have to think about that. In a way it was like that game he and Gerben had made up. Together they had somehow survived the camp. It was a miracle, and at the same time it wasn't. The game had saved them. That was one thing he knew for sure. Flowing. The game was called flowing. "How much did you flow today?" At night in the bunk, they would share the information. "Up until the afternoon, I flowed three times." That was good, though it certainly was no record. You flowed if you didn't have to think, and still got through the day. Thinking meant thinking about food. And once you started thinking about food, the world would change. Everything became hard. The sun. The shade. The roof. The others. The sound of the pouring rain. The commander's moustache that wouldn't grow. Flowing was better. Then the day couldn't get the better of you. When you were flowing, you felt better. You might even say you were happy. You were happy when you weren't thinking about food. So there was still a chance you would get some. Having ideas enter your mind stops the flow, the man thought. It sets something in motion that shouldn't really be happening. It struck him that he ought to try and remember that. Write it down. Instead of doing that though, his attention shifted to the ebb flow. EXIT, the sign said that was suspended from the ceiling on a metal bar. He wondered whether the sign had been lit a minute before.

It was time to head back to his room. He lifted himself up by grabbing on to the pole of his iv drip and crossed the ebb flow. Some Moses he was. The people were not paying the slightest bit of attention to him. Iv drip or no iv drip, they had to go outside now. I am asking for understanding now, the thought struck him, as he tried to speed up and get to the other

side just before a group of leavers. The flow caught up with him, curved neatly around him, soundlessly, took on a convex shape for a second and released him on the other side. That confused him. It was not he himself but the iv drip that had taken care of him. The talking drip. He grinned at the idea and thought of what the iv drip might have said. The words, "look out, here is someone with an iv drip," came to mind, but that was too simple. It had to be the other way around. The flow had examined his iv drip. The flow tasted from a distance, drew conclusions, and acted. A flow has the desired quality if in the construction process attention has been devoted to the construction progressing in such a way that if there is an iv drip in the way, the flow automatically splits in two and is then subsequently reunited. He thought that was a fine idea. A flow that observes, makes sure there are not any obstacles in the way. There was something unexpected about that. Like data flowing around the edges of a programme. Instead of being programmed, the data ignore the programme. They don't want to become a concept, they want to flow. It struck him that he ought to devote more attention to computer programmes. And to viruses. Wayward viruses.

There was no stroke of luck awaiting him at the swinging doors. Nor at the elevator. So how much wood does the woodchuck chuck? It was all the clunky white clogs' fault, he was sure of that now. The iv drip was almost done dripping by now. That meant he had better hurry up. The man walked faster than he actually could. His knuckles were white, that is how tight he was clutching the pole. His leg ached. It took him back to the camp. At night under the starry sky, that is when you could flow. Black. For the rest, everything black. Past the stars. Even blacker until you got dizzy. There were no words for it. You felt yourself being lifted up, and Gerben said a rat could easily scurry under your back without your even feeling it. Gerben called it being parallel. You are parallel to the earth. When I grow up I am going to be a stargazer, he knew. Then I'll go parallel. I'll design a flow language. A language that can speak and flow at the same time. You don't have to think any more and you are still thinking. You don't have to eat and you are still eating. A language has the desired quality if in the construction process, attention has been devoted to the construction progressing in such a way that in the event of understanding, the flow continues. He was quite satisfied with that. He had to make sure to write it down before he forgot it. It was a nice definition of quality. It had the characteristics of circular reasoning. Yet there was also something unpredictable about it. The definition seemed to be able to escape itself. This was an idea that satisfied him even more. Escaping from understanding, that was what it was all about, he thought, while he saw that he saw his hand, pushing along a pole on wheels.

No solution had been immediately at hand for how to escape the Jap's attention. Gerben said that Moses had made a path through the Dead Sea by striking the water with his staff. And that it would happen again, if only you really believed. That if you struck the ground with your stick, it would split open and the Jap would fall in. If only you believed. He himself thought that maybe it would be better to whiten your face. With dust and sand. That way maybe the Jap would start appreciating his own moustache more. He couldn't help chuckling to himself. Dust and sand. By now he was in for the nurse's temper. The ten commandment bell was tolling. With a new drip on the pole, he was shoved under the shower. Moses is a chump, he thought. As soon as understanding emerges, the relation disappears that the elements have with each other within the bounds of understanding. Understanding swallows up whatever is understood. As soon as I understand who I am, I have swallowed myself up. This was even better than the last one he hadn't written down either. I have to think up some way to express a difference, he thought. You shouldn't have to understand a difference, it ought to be able to flow in you. The Swedish nurse came to dry his back. There was no getting around it, he thought. An iv drip on a tripod and a stiff leg combined to meet

with the objective criteria to warrant assistance. Besides which he quite liked her, he thought. A nurse has the desired quality if in the construction process attention has been devoted to the construction progressing in such a way that while she is helping you, work goes on as usual.

He left the night lamp off. Never again would it be as dark as at the camp, but at least you could try to preserve conditions as best you could. This was how you kept the relation with your own history in order. The professor in room 32 likes the dark. That was enough. Once he got her in bed, he could always tell her that stuff about the stars. Gerben would lie down and die here, he thought. Because ever since the war, there was no keeping him indoors. He wanted to walk. Walk and walk and walk. He had been spotted in Isfahan and Beijing. In Lima and Darwin. He had become a walking legend. He was spotted all over the place at one and the same time. The man did not even bother checking the reports any more. There had been a time when he expected his death. The police ringing the doorbell. Or maybe in a crowded lecture hall. Professor, we regret to say we have some bad news. But Gerben had long preempted his own obituary. If he had died in the meantime, he had been resurrected in Moses with sand and dust on his face.irate and hirsute. Thou shalt not kill! How could one element transcend a complete collection? How could one part all by itself be more than the sum of all the parts? It could be done. As a legend. Gerben had become the legend. Not him. Though he was renowned, he was not a legend. He had made peace with that. But that had not always been the case.

Of course he was damaged. But he had survived. Survival and damage belong together. The man was familiar with how intertwined they are. It was an insight that had given him peace of mind. Even way back then. It had become his substratum. It was from that foundation that he acted. The layer that meant his economics. The economics of flowing. If they are to move, people have to suffer. Thus the man measured his distances in the pain that they entailed. If we are to speak, we damage silence. Thus as much as possible he allowed silence to speak his words. If we are to connect, we must dare to break. Thus he assessed his connections in terms of the trouble it took to break them. There is no survival without damage. That is why he was here. That is why he was walking like a retarded Moses. It was the economics of his operation. The pain in relation to his age. His eye on the Swedish nurse in relation to the strength needed for his recovery. His telephone call to his successor in relation to the courage to look death in the face. An operation has the desired quality if in the construction process, attention has been devoted to the construction progressing in such a way that in the event of damage, there is a greater chance of survival. He smiled in his five o'clock shadow. Well what do you know, he had done it again. His hip had been put back together again and all he had to do was decide which connections to break again.

At night there were the dreams. He had to give a lecture and the Jap brought him a box with living rice in it. The Swedish nurse was sitting at a sewing machine on swivel castors. A pack of viruses swerved around him and arranged his crossing. He woke up, he dreamt. He helped his stiff leg shift position. It was still dark. Five o'clock camp time. He nestled his head in Gerben's armpit, brushed his hair out of his face, and flowed on his breath. He was happy. Life has the desired quality if in the construction process attention has been devoted to the construction progressing in a certain direction in such a way that

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Note

The quote comes from a Dutch publication of Gerard de Zeeuw [Groen, *et al*, 1980, p. 69] and has been translated for the occasion. Originally the quote is about quality of claims. For the sake of the narration it is paraphrased repeatedly. For instance into a statement about the quality of design, the quality of help and – at the end – the quality of life in general. The repetition emphasises the idea that quality itself can be looked at from a systems point of view. It refers to a special kinds of systems. The structure of these systems is simultaneously both the *means* AND the *outcome* of the social practices associated with elements of the system (economies, technologies, social security practices, etc.). This *mean/outcome mechanism* is what I refer to as an ice-canoe. I reported earlier on the true story of the ice-canoe [Kooistra, 1991] [Kooistra *et al*, 2001]. The story is as elementary as it is illustrative: an artist once built a canoe out of the material ice, launched it in a pond and paddled around till his boat melted/vanished back to its original state: water. One can think of knowledge as an ice-canoe. It is made of the very material we try to sail on. Knowledge is frozen ignorance. Only with a lot of energy (social constructions, education and technology) we can succeed in keeping our knowledge frozen.

Reading De Zeeuw [De Zeeuw, 1980, 1985, 1998] you might say that he is a skilful builder of ice-canoes. On the top of that he also teaches us how to built them. One could learn from De Zeeuw that it takes four kinds of quality to keep your knowledge frozen. First of all you need: *constructive quality*. Constructive quality is more than a design or an hypothesis. It is an intuition that springs from comparison. However, constructive quality has no quality unless you are able to persuade other people (scientists) to believe and invest in your construction. Thus, according to De Zeeuw, objective quality is also needed. You need repeatable observations-scientific facts. Unfortunately, facts don't have a meaning without human intentions, wishes, drives or whatever you will call them. So intention represents the third kind of quality. De Zeeuw calls it: *relational quality*. Producing survival knowledge relates people. Lastly, the fourth kind of quality is the *subjective quality*. This kind of quality signifies your personal taste, conviction and interest. It is presenting what you yourself are thinking and feeling and through that it represents your position in the quality system. Special about subjective quality is that it only can exist in *opposition* to objective quality. Objective quality is a (scientific) domain. Subjective quality simply disappears if it comes within the range of this domain. Then you have become a *normal* scientist and thus nobody.

A claim has the desired quality if in the construction process attention has been devoted to the construction progressing in such a way that using the claim serves to improve the quality. Who knows a *better* definition of an ice-canoe? And for the rest of it: of course the characters in *Flowing* are fictitious.

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