

Psychopoetic Encounters: Figurations of Difficulty

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Abstract

While going through some cultural expressions in texts and images, this article proposes reflections on ways in which the practice of poetics, in the sense of creative making, needs to encounter, address, and overcome difficulty in order to facilitate the contribution of the imagination and the acts of “imaging” it allows, to the figuration of the new. *Encounter* is the key word, indicating plurality and process. Nothing is fixed; hence, not “identity” as something permanent, but instead, in the encounter, identification with others, other fields, other ideas, other images becomes appealing and possible.

In the painstaking attempts to think up new ideas, one encounters difficulty, which needs to be overcome. Only through encounters this becomes thinkable, and that makes imaging something so far unheard of, possible. The ‘poetic’ side of psychopoetics, *making* through (as traversing) and with (as its material) the reflections emanating from the unconscious as they appear at the edge of consciousness, is what binds together the different disciplines as we know them, in a knot of creativity, imagining, and thinking what we did not know.

Keywords: *poetics, psychopoetics, encounters, figuration(s), imaging(s), the less-than-conscious*

Introduction

Speculation as seeing, sight, and vision; theory as seeing-through: going back to the plural meanings of terms we have inherited from antiquity can be very helpful updates, opening up a traditional commonsense use to an innovative future. For these two nouns with both an antique and a commonplace background, the point would be to connect them with the realm where rationalism and language are not exclusive masters, and vision receives its important place in reflections on thought and art. Of course, Freud’s unconscious is a special instance, but there is more to the less-than-consciousness we all practice, and to the heritage of ancient words that we continuously reshape as texts. Take the Greek noun ‘hodos’ or road, way, towards... to cite a recent article by Nanna Verhoeff (2023), in which ‘hodos’ is connected to ‘meta’ to coin the concept of ‘method’.¹

My method, in Verhoeff’s sense of meta-hodos that comprises movement, includes an exploration of psychopoetics through literature, visual ‘imagings’, and a complication of temporality. Going through some cultural expressions in texts and images related to older ‘cultural heritage’, I will reflect on ways in which the practice of poetics, in the

¹ Nanna Verhoeff, ‘Hodos: The Streets and Methods of (Post-)Pandemic Cities’, in *Urban Forms of Life / Per una critica delle forme di vita urbana*, ed. Andrea d’Ammando, Tomasso Morawski, Stefano Velotti (Maserata: Quodlibet srl, 2023), 159-79. For more extensive analyses, see her book *Urban Screens: Situations, Practices, Concepts* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024).

sense of creative making, needs to encounter, address, and overcome difficulty in order to facilitate the contribution of the imagination and the acts of imaging it allows, to the figuration of the new. The un- or less-conscious thoughts, feelings and moods we all have, shape, repress, or admit, are indispensable in this ‘figuration’, as I will call it. This has been made clear by others. The etymology of theory as seeing-through was once more brought up just this year in Isabel Capeloa Gil’s article that honours the work of Elisabeth Bronfen, one of the very excellent and creative, stimulating scholars of psychopoetics who brings ancient roots, long-standing theories, visual imagings and current popular culture together. Gil writes in a lucid statement that is programmatic for our issue at stake here:

The link that connects the visual to theory is in fact etymological, as the Greek *theoria* justly crafts a visual mode of contemplation. Gazing anticipates speculating, so that theory involves a practice that is always and already shaped in and through the visible. To see, to contemplate involves seeing while explaining.²

Connecting, crafting, gazing: to draw on this bond between visual contemplating and speculating, *encounter* is the key word, indicating plurality, connection, and process.

Nothing is fixed; hence, I will not discuss the current buzzword ‘identity’. I do not see identity as something permanent, static, unchanging. But instead, I argue that in the encounter, identification with others, other fields, other ideas, other images become appealing and possible. This is crucial in the painstaking attempts to theorize as thinking up new ideas, where one inevitably encounters difficulty, which needs to be overcome, or at least, traversed. Only through encounters this becomes thinkable, and that makes ‘imaging’, that visually inclined merging of time, imagination, and the concrete presentation of something so-far unheard of, possible. The ‘poetic’ side of psychopoetics, *making* through (as traversing) and with (as its material) the reflections emanating from the un-/less conscious as they appear at the edge of consciousness, is what binds together the different disciplines as we know them, in a knot of creativity, imagining, and thinking what we did not know. The knot matters more than the single threads, even if these cannot be discarded.³

This encounter of different appearances of ‘less than conscious’ is not necessarily (only) the solidly theorized Freudian unconscious but something more fluid. Forty years ago, I wrote an article on ‘psychopoetics’ as an introduction to a twin special issue of *Poetics* and of *Style* – two academic journals devoted to literary theory, not at all to psychoanalysis. I am still amazed that these almost rigidly literary-theory journals invited me to preface, introduce, and edit these issues. Obviously, our thinking about this subject has moved on, and so, I will not reiterate what I wrote then and there – although I still stand behind most of what I wrote. But it does seem a useful reminder that the issue at stake – how the (mainly) literary term ‘poetics’ can encounter the hidden caves of the human psyche – is an enduring one. Making and encountering: that is the current stake of this special issue. In the older article I proposed to distinguish two ways of considering

² Isabel Capeloa Gil, ‘Theory in a Post-Theoretical World: Beyoncé and the Afterlife of *Over Her Dead Body*’, in *Figures of Pathos: Festschrift in Honor of Elisabeth Bronfen*, eds. Frauke Berndt, Isabel Karremann and Klaus Müller-Wille (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann GmbH, 2023), 51.

³ See Gil, 49-57, esp. 51. For Elisabeth Bronfen’s crucial work on encounters between old and new imaginations, see especially her *Serial Shakespeare: An Infinite Variety of Appropriations in American TV Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020) and her *Crossmappings: On Visual Culture* (London: I.N. Tauris, 2018).

the connection between psychoanalysis and literature: through analogy and through specification. The former has well-known methodological problems; the latter is a way to use either one of the encountering disciplines as a ‘searchlight’ to examine objects considered to belong to the other. In the encounter, specific elements, aspects, forms, or words, light up and thereby, loose words come together as a text. This is the work of poetics, and it is the mission of the journal to examine how that ‘making’ works.⁴

Making Encounters Happen: The Unthought

I begin by staging an encounter between two key concepts/figures to come up with a mode of thinking/imagining/imaging that can help overcome the difficulty and thus lead us towards imaging the new. One difficulty is the obstinate appeal to fixed, old interpretations. Another, the provisional formlessness of the new. In a recent, posthumously published volume, the famous American historiographer Hayden White, whose 1973 book *Metahistory* has decisively transformed the general conception of historicity, devoted over twenty pages to arguing against the notion of identity. He severely indicts the current European search for an identity. Among other objections, he sees in it a complicity with antisemitism and an attempt to deny that this complicity has been part and parcel of the efforts to mark a European civilization. The word ‘identity’ is overdetermined; a signifier with too many – and quite a few contradictory – signifieds. He argues that the quest for a European identity flounders under the weight of the original Latin meaning of the noun. That was a tautological ‘self-same’. The end result of White’s argument is a choice for a process-oriented usage of the word, a preference for the verb. Now it means ‘identifying’, rather than something fixed and fixating, in other words, rigid. In that book’s third chapter, he ends up with the verb, meaning identifying-with, rather than identifying-as. The choice for the preposition ‘with’ beseeches encounter. This sense of identifying is frequently used in affect-oriented readings. Such identification is an intensive form of encounter, with enough duration to produce a new situation.⁵

The second interlocutor in the encounter is French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. He has caused an equally decisive change in our mode of thinking about language with his concept of the ‘figural’ (1971). This concept remains key for the overcoming of another difficulty: the rigid distinction between media, specifically words and images. In spite of the tendency to read ‘figure’ as visual in his proposed concept, Lyotard’s idea primarily concerns language. He argues for language as more dynamic, turning it into a force, a movement, closer to the Freudian unconscious as laid out in *The Interpretation of Dreams* than to any Saussure-derived structuralist conception of it. This brings Freud’s thinking and seeing into the orbit of the encounter. Including, especially, *force* in his concept of language, Lyotard sees meaning as sense, in terms that include affect, sensation, intuition, and also spatiality. Just spot the words I italicize in the

⁴ For the older article, see Mieke Bal, ‘Introduction’, *Poetics* 13.4-5 (Special Issue ‘Psychopoetics-Theory’, 1984): i-ii, 279-98; also ‘Introduction’, *Style* 18.3 (Special Issue ‘Psychopoetics at Work’, 1984): 239-60.

⁵ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); ‘The Discourse of Europe and the Search for a European Identity’, in *The Ethics of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1998-2007* (vol. I), ed. Robert Doran (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022), 33-60. Volume II of Doran’s generous endeavour to give White the last word is scheduled to appear in 2024. On White’s and others’ anti-identity arguments, see my *Un rêve culturel: L’Europe au pluriel* (Paris: Collège de France | Fayard, 2023).

following quote by way of a commentary. Force, for Lyotard, is inherent in language, and it is

... nothing other than the *energy* that *folds* and *wrinkles* the text and makes of it an aesthetic work, a difference, that is, a form ... And if it expresses, it is because *movement* resides within it as a *force* that *overturns* the table of significations with a *seism* that makes sense.⁶

These words affiliate language with, particularly, cinematic language, based on the etymological sense of ‘movement’ rather than any technical specificity or visual essentialism. This fits well with the conception of this special issue of *Word and Text*, since the title of the issue contains the noun ‘encounters’. For another solid explanation of the figural in relation to and distinction from ‘figure’ and ‘figurative’, within the context of art history in its relation to psychoanalysis and philosophy, Vlad Ionescu’s article from 2018 is illuminating. That author discusses the ideas of influential theorists of images, to which he brings to bear those important distinctions, avoiding the conflation with those two near-homonymous concepts, both so frequently and self-evidently used, and as words, hard to separate from the ‘figural’. Whenever I use the noun ‘figuration’ here, I mean in it the Lyotardian sense.

During the encounter between White and Lyotard, joined by Freud, more people, more ideas join the conversation. For example, this concept/conception of words and texts can be seen as affiliated with Gilles Deleuze who, considering *thought* a medium, made the medial distinction untenable. Nevertheless, says another joining discussant, the intense theorisations of intermediality by scholars such as Lars Elleström and his group are only possible if the media as such are recognised. And then, the temporal issue comes in, which will turn out relevant all through. First of all, this resonates with Walter Benjamin’s fifth thesis on images of the past: ‘[E]very image of the past that is not recognized by the present *as one of its own concerns* threatens to disappear irretrievably.’⁷

This statement that pleads for the indispensable need for what is generally considered and despised as anachronistic looking, has been a guideline for my work on art between history and, yes, anachronism. Benjamin’s warning is crucial for our projects in the Humanities today; it is one of their main motors, under the heading of ‘relevance’. The encounter between Lyotard and White with the participants who joined in, is best seen as the emergence of a live ‘thought image’ or *Denkbild*, to which Benjamin adds the temporal issue which is so important in my view. Benjamin’s statement plays a visual

⁶ See Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis, MS: The University of Minnesota Press, 2020 [1971]). I quote from D. N. Rodowick’s rendering of Lyotard’s concept in his *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy After the New Media* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 9-10. To grasp the concept in more depth, Rodowick’s first chapter, ‘Presenting the Figural’, 1-44 needs reading as a whole. The same holds for the article by Vlad Ionescu, ‘The Figure in Time: on the Temporality of the Figural’, in *Working Through the Figure: Theory, Practice, Method*, eds. Laura Marin and Anca Diaconu (Bucharest: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 2018), 11-61. I have analysed the conception of the cinematic as kinetic – another word from antiquity that is worth returning to – apropos of the paintings by Edvard Munch and Flaubert’s prose in *Madame Bovary*, making an implicit case for the figural. I did this in my book *Emma & Edvard Looking Sideways: Loneliness and the Cinematic* (Oslo: Munch Museum / Brussels: Mercatorfonds; Yale University Press, 2017), 24-43.

⁷ See Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, in *Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, trans. Harry Zohn, vol. 4. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003 [1940]), 389-400, emphasis added; the 5th thesis on the philosophy of history is also in an essay titled ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt, preface by Leon Wieseltier (New York: Schockenbooks, 2007), 155-200, slightly adapted.

key role in my recent film, *It's ABOUT TIME! REFLECTIONS ON URGENCY*. There, it is quoted by Aeneas when this figure enacts the student of Cassandra as a Benjamin look-alike. I will briefly comment on that film below.⁸

Given the closeness between White's anti-identity view and Lyotard's concept of the figural as linked with the Freudian theory of the unconscious, I propose to stage an additional encounter on another level, where theory and philosophy are as actively participating as are psychoanalysis and historiography. I contend that between Lyotard's concept of the *figural* and White's rejection of identity in favour of identification-with, a spacetime may develop where the 'unthought', including in one of the senses of the unconscious, can flourish. The 'unthought' may well be the best central concept that binds all our less-than-conscious experiences together. Psychoanalysis, in this way, becomes a partner in a three-way encounter between fields of study, domains of media, and material/physical/mental mergings. The most appropriate statement on this, that avoids any discipline-based boxing-in, would be what American-British psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas wrote so poetically in his 1987 book: 'I often find that although I am working on an idea without knowing exactly what it is I think, I am engaged in thinking an idea struggling to have me think it.' In his book title, Bollas adds the noun 'known' to 'unthought', as if insisting that what is shimmering on the edge of consciousness is not really thought-through, but still, somehow known. The central feature of psychanalysis is precisely the uncertainty, the desire and need to clarify what is so far hidden in a domain where language cannot reach. But 'repressed' does not mean absent, non-existent. Bollas's personification that suggests that the idea-in-becoming is eager to be theorized, is helpful in attempts to take objects, ideas, thoughts and other figural instances, seriously.⁹

Thus, the textual aspect of communication and art bumps into the walls of that deep pit of uncertainty of the impossible 'I know-it-all' where, instead, searching, thinking, hesitating, and imaging as the only solution, can be practiced. In order to clarify this process, I call on a few heroes of hesitation from canonical literature: Madame B(ovary), who wavers between capitalist and erotic desire; Don Quijote, who struggles with his sense of superiority as a man; and ending briefly on Cassandra, whose love for Aeneas flounders on the rocks of the national power brokers' making when he chooses for politics over love.

Figuring Emotional Capitalism

Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* (1856) led British artist Michelle Williams Gmaker and myself to create a figuration in the form of a feature film and an installation, *MADAME B*. We titled it Madame B rather than Bovary, to establish a distinction between our film work as not an adaptation, not obedient to the rules of imitation, and also to generalize the problems and flaws of the character. This film (2012-14) foregrounds *affect* in its

⁸ For the theory and tradition of *Denkbilder*, see Gerhard Richter, *Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writers' Reflections on Damaged Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). A clear example of a crafter, artisan, or poet of thought-images is Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London and New York: Verso, 2005 [1951]). For solid background, see Hanneke Grootenboer, *The Pensive Image: Art as a Form of Thinking* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 66-9. The film *It's ABOUT TIME!* can be seen on my website at <https://youtu.be/DK-5lbK4t5M>.

⁹ Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 10.

aesthetic, using that concept in the sense of Baumgarten's 1750 treatise (900 pages in Latin). To sum this up in an almost offensive succinctness: for him, the aesthetic is a 1) sensuous 2) encounter 3) in public space. Again, that word 'encounter' stubbornly remains.¹⁰

Flaubert, while committed to creating beauty, was (also) a brilliant seer-thinker, using the imagination to create thought-images. The anti-chronological conception of time becomes relevant here, for this literary (poetic) writer was really prophetic. He was able to 'invent' hysteria before Freud, and understanding capitalist exploitation before Marx. He figured these two syndromes together, not in a figurative sense but concretely narratively, by means of his imagination, in the creation of fiction rich in imagings. In terms of his conscious thinking, he was committed to offering a critique of his time, as severe as White's later one. And so, as filmmakers in charge of figuring, we concluded that to be 'loyal' (not 'faithful') to his art, we had to decline the genre of the historical costume drama, so frequently deployed in films made 'after' the novel. These are not in an adequate style. In fact, they betray its most crucial aspect: its acute critical contemporaneity. Flaubert's other strong commitment, the role of 'beauty' – in landscapes as well as figures – is made prominent in our film's cinematography, in order to raise the question of the affective charge of its combination with sadness, frustration, and despair. This is yet another encounter through figuring, between moods and between conscious and un- or less-conscious thoughts.¹¹

Another participant in the encounter comes in here: sociology. The merging of erotic and capitalist desires, solicited by means of erotic and capitalist seductions, is what Israeli sociologist Eva Illouz has aptly termed 'emotional capitalism' – a concept we discovered after already having staged it. Today, we live with the ongoing economic crisis and its world-wide consequences for individuals and families – and, responding to this sad situation, the resurgence of feminism. This occurred because, after laying to rest what we naively thought was a won struggle, the renewed awareness of the enduring need for feminist activism becomes clearer every day. Thus, it became more and more obvious that 'imaging', or visual thinking, is important; for my work specifically, as 'thinking in film'. The need for activism calls on the philosophical-linguistic concept of performativity; but the condition of its working out is that *activism* – struggling for a specific cause – is transformed into *activating* – making readers and viewers think, without dictating *what* to think. That distinction between activism and activating art is crucial. We must learn *from* (rather than *about*) art what matters in the world, but also realize and respect the fact that one of those important matters is the freedom of thought. Activism tends to focus on single issues; activating art leaves the freedom of viewers/readers intact. That freedom is indispensable for the sheer possibility of thought. Only then can we as members of the audience participate, act: perform. And this is where the temporal aspect comes in. Learning from Flaubert about Freudian and Marxian ideas requires an openness to anachronism. This together leads to theorising literature, art, and

¹⁰ Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Aesthetica* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1970 [1750 (vol. 1), 1758 [vol. 2]]). See Tomáš Hlobil, 'Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten: Ästhetik', *Estetika* 46.1 (2009): 105-10 for a lucid and succinct account.

¹¹ Most of the cinematography was brilliantly done by Christopher Wessels. On the need for contemporaneity in (socio-political) thinking and the tension between 'fidelity' and 'loyalty', see my article 'Intership: Anachronism between Loyalty and the Case', in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas Leitch (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 179-96. The work of Leitch is crucial in debates about adaptation where these two issues are so important. We reject the characterization as 'adaptation' in favour of 'response'.

film as forms of visual, speculative thinking. ‘Visual’ not as a medium-specificity, so easily turned essentialist, but as a qualifier of speculative, theorizing, forms of seeing as imaging.¹²

The clearest figuring of emotional capitalism appears when Emma, aware of her infatuation with Léon, thinks of herself as virtuous because the young clerk does not make a move. Instead, the capitalist money-monger Lheureux constantly makes moves. The encounter of poetics and a psychoanalytical probing of frustration demonstrates Flaubert’s temporal encounter between present and future, when he writes prophetically about how all Emma’s desires conflate, and she becomes attached to the pain in what is (too) easily called masochism:

Then the desires of the flesh, the longing for money, and the melancholy of passion all blended into one suffering, and instead of putting it out of her mind, she made her thoughts cling to it, urging herself to pain and seeking everywhere the opportunity to revive it. [Alors, les appétits de la chair, les convoitises d’argent et les mélancolies de la passion, tout se confondit dans une même souffrance; et, au lieu d’en détourner la pensée, elle s’y attachait davantage, s’excitant à la douleur et en cherchant partout les occasions.] (II, 5)¹³

This quotation lays it out so clearly, almost as if it came from a textbook on psychopoetics, that I can only be astounded by the author’s profound insight. This insight includes a sensitivity to the desires and feelings of women.

Then, the visual aspect comes in. This can be seen as an intermedial encounter. In a section titled ‘An Illness We All Have: Emotional Capitalism in Practice’ of my 2022 book *Image-Thinking*, I placed two still photographs made during the film shoot, in which this syndrome that merges emotional domains, is very clear. In the first photograph (Figure 1) we see Emma being capitalistically seduced by the salesman, who gives her a sense of self-worth that the indifference of the man she is desiring has denied her. She looks in the mirror with what might be an open curiosity. Nothing improper happens; arranging the fancy jacket on her, the salesman is careful not to touch her. We cannot read Emma’s face with real clarity. Is she riveted, excited, fearful? But more than her face, we do see the salesman’s carefulness. The gentle figure of the salesman reassures her in ways we can probably recognise from our own confrontations with the allure of capitalism and its ability to exploit emotions, insecurity, and hope for a more exciting life.¹⁴

¹² On emotional capitalism, see Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007) and *Why Love Hurts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012). Flaubert, literally, fore-saw it. The consequences of what is now a deeply disturbing reality has been analysed in persuasive detail (without reference to Flaubert’s novel) by Dutch-American sociologist-economist Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press), 2014.

¹³ When quoting from the novel, I reference parts (in Roman numbers) and (mostly short) chapters (in Arabic numbers) rather than page numbers, since so many different editions circulate. I quote from the most reliable French edition, *Madame Bovary. Œuvres complètes*, Tome I. Edition nouvelle établie, d’après les manuscrits inédits de Flaubert, par la *Société des Études littéraires françaises* (Paris: Club de l’Honnête Homme, 1971). I quote from the English translation by Alan Russell (Baltimore: Penguin 1950). The best study of Flaubert’s work with an eye for the encounters between literary theory and philosophy remains Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 1974 [rev. eds 1985; 2006]).

¹⁴ Mieke Bal, *Image Thinking* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), inaugural volume in the new book series ‘Re-fractions: at the Borders of Philosophy and Art History’, ed. Kamini Vellodi). The photos are on page 338, the section is at 337-42. On intermediality, see my book chapter ‘Citational Aesthetics:

But then, when he leaves her to ponder about the expensive purchase, stepping a bit away, she looks in the mirror and seems dismayed (Figure 2). Either she does not like what she is seeing, or she does not like the costume; or perhaps she fears the high price, and the subsequent frustration of not being able to buy the suit. Or, for me most likely, the photograph figures an enclosure into herself, a less-than-conscious dissatisfaction with her life and herself in it. It is as if she withdraws from the world and is totally self-absorbed. The salesman patiently waits her hesitation out. Whatever is about to occur, happiness is not in sight. And knowing the novel, we recognise that. Yet, in the second image we can identify with the unhappiness we see, figured in her face and body language.



Figure 1. Emotional capitalism in practice. Pierre Lassovski, Marja Skaffari. Photo: Thijs Vissia



Figure 2. No happiness in sight. Photo: Thijs Vissia

Although Flaubert does not use the same words for it, the confusion between the two seductions and the routines in pursuing them is clearly the point of his critique. Buying is not a *means* to seduce – by looking more beautiful, showing good taste – but *it is the same thing*. It is the translation of frustrated desire into another domain. The triangle consisting of Emma, her mirror image or objectified sense of self, and the salesman demonstrates visually that in moments like this, Emma literally doubles herself when she tries on the clothes and the mirror image shows the result. Her sense of self seems split, schizophrenically, into a corporeal and a visual version. The joint in the mirror foregrounds this even more strongly. Both figurations of Emma receive the affective support of the salesman who benefits from her translation of one craving into another. When we consider the increasing gap between wealth and poverty all over the world, we must understand the perverse nature of this bond between capitalist and emotional exploitation, in all ways we can, of which visual culture is one way. This can lure us, but it can also help us.

‘Visual culture’ is not a concept I endorse *qua* concept, as I have written earlier. I find it easily getting too close to a visual essentialism and an elitist or religion- or ethnicity-based notion of culture. The question whether visual culture studies is a discipline or an interdisciplinary movement, and which methods are most suited to practice in this field, can only be addressed by way of the object. And to get the object to ‘speak back’, as I have argued it should be encouraged to do, it needs (close) analysis. But the notion of visual culture is, of course, so commonplace that avoiding it is as hard as avoiding ‘identity’, even as the avoidance is just as necessary. My remedy for this would be to focus on ‘visual-cultural analysis’ instead. Speaking of the encounter between seeing and understanding, Gil calls Bronfen’s important book a ‘visual anatomy of the scene of culture’, quoting Bronfen while writing about a specific performance (by

Beyoncé) as an act that ‘repeats and resists the discursive formation from which it emerges and against which it performs’.¹⁵

This connecting of repeated representation and resistance against it is crucial in the struggle against stereotypical views, one of which is seeing Emma as a ‘bad woman’. Emma’s lethal trap is, then, neither psychological nor ontological. It is social and economic. By staging this, Flaubert exonerates Emma from varied charges of mediocrity, selfishness (her adulterous adventures), and other moralistic responses, which still go around today, as I have often witnessed in conversations. Flaubert’s novel confronts us with a thematic as well as stylistic exploration of the cultural conspiracy that turns business into an emotional issue, and love into a business venture. The impossibility of the character to get access to her own un- or less-consciousness is a wall erected around her by social and economic dogmas.¹⁶

Traumatic Poetics

My second example here is a 2019 project *DON QUIJOTE: SAD COUNTENANCES*. In that project, four of my long-standing intellectual interests come together, in a kind of internal-intellectual encounter. To enumerate them in counter-chronological order (in accordance with my rebellion against chronological thinking), these are ‘*image-thinking*’, starting explicitly with my filmmaking in 2002; *trauma*, which became an acute issue in the 1990s. This was the moment when Holocaust remembrance became important since most eyewitnesses were disappearing. The intellectual result of the awareness of that disappearance was that ‘cultural memory’ was theorized. Thirdly, *narrative*, which has been my career-long specialization; and then, *poetics*, the literary, which was the direction I took in my studies; my ‘official’ discipline.

In Cervantes’ novel these four interests are tightly intertwined. In literary studies, poetics as creative and productive, refers to the way the elements of a literary text come together, how the aspects of the text inflect the content and together, produce effects on the reader. Narrative forms, events told, and figures, imagery: they all *make* the work – in the two senses of ‘work’, as noun and as verb: the text, what it *is*, and its effects, what it *does*. This making is the etymological meaning of ‘poetics’. With this sense of poetics, let’s face it: I find Cervantes’ *Don Quijote* hard, almost impossible to read. The string of ongoing adventures and fantasies, interrupted by poems and inserted novellas, don’t seem to amount to any kind of unified literary work. Narrative it is, of course. From story to story, with a large number of narrators, and also a central, anonymous one, narrativity predominates. Yet it does not congeal into a coherent form.

The most intense internal-intellectual encounter with this novel happened unexpectedly. I became sensitized to what I now call the novel’s *traumatic poetics* when

¹⁵ Gil 51; Bronfen *Over Her Dead Body* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 396.

¹⁶ For more on the *MADAME B* project, see <https://www.miekebal.org/madame-b> and to watch the film, <https://vimeo.com/88231738> password: MadameBforFriends (case sensitive) I have critiqued the concept of visual culture extensively in my article, ‘Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture’, *Journal of Visual Culture* 2.1 (2003): 5-32, which has solicited a flow of angry commentaries. My answer to those can be read in ‘Mieke Bal’s Reply to the Responses to Her Article “Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture” [Journal of Visual Culture 2.1 (2003): 5-32]’, *Journal of Visual Culture* 2.2 (2003): 260-8.

I sat in on some classes at Cornell by the Colombian literary scholar María Antonia Garcés, who suggested the traumatic state that Cervantes must have incurred due to his five and a half years of slavery in Algiers. In spite of my ongoing resistance against biographical reading, the mad formlessness did fall into place. So when, at the initiative of, and in collaboration with French actor Mathieu Montanier, whose physical resemblance to the fictive figure of Don Quijote is so striking that people on the street in Spain remarked on it, we decided to try and make a video work based on the world's primary bestselling novel, our first, immediate decision was: no linearity, hence, no feature film. Just as *Madame Bovary* films betray the novel's main point by their choice of the genre of historical costume drama, similarly, all films made on or after Cervantes' novel betray its poetics by imposing a linearity that it denies, and many are visual and/or narrative failures, or remain unfinished. Orson Welles, not the least of directors, couldn't finish it. Perhaps there is one exception to this failure, Terry Gilliam's postmodernist version from 2018. This film took the director fifteen years to make. Its central flaw is that it obsessively ridicules the old man – an ageism to which I object. But all this is no wonder; it is so difficult to decide how to respond to this monumental novel with its un-monumental main character, that filmmakers struggle with it. For Mathieu and me, we immediately decided that, instead of a feature film, we could only make a disorderly video installation. The purpose was to evoke trauma and solicit empathy.¹⁷

First of all, I reiterate that it is imperative to distinguish between three aspects of trauma: its cause, the situation or state that cause produces, and the near-powerlessness of bystanders. This distinction can be formulated succinctly as follows:

- *violence* – an event (that happens)
- *trauma* – a state (that results)
- *empathy* – an attitude (that enables).

The subjects of these three facets are different: the violence has an agent (culprit, perpetrator); the traumatised subject-object is the victim; and the subject of empathy is the social interlocutor, who can help overcome it. This is the job of the public, the audience, the viewers. *The DON QUIJOTE: SAD COUNTENANCES* exhibition we made aims to activate visitors to become such empathetic subjects. The chaotic form of the display is meant to have performativity in this specific sense. We did this in the wake of earlier film work based on, and made with, French psychoanalyst of trauma Françoise whose book *Mère Folle* (Mother Folly) inspired our first 'theoretical fiction' film. It is no coincidence that the same author also wrote a book on Cervantes' novel.¹⁸

I just mention two scenes from this sixteen-screen installation, in both of which the poetic text figures psychopoetic issues. The first is titled 'Narrative Stuttering', focusing on traumatic incapacitation, the other, 'Woman as Anti-suicide Bomb', on projection, and a failed attempt to be a good feminist guy, spoiled by a slip of the tongue. In both, the audience is of key importance. To put it overly simply: to overcome trauma, an empathic

¹⁷ See the award-winning book by María Antonia Garcés, *Cervantes in Algiers: A Captive's Tale* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Françoise Davoine, *Mother Folly: A Tale*, trans. Judith G. Miller (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014 [1998]). *Mère Folle* has just been republished (2023, Érés). Davoine also wrote a book on Cervantes's novel, *Don Quichotte, pour combattre la mélancolie* (Paris: Stock, 2008). The film we made on the basis of her earlier book can be accessed with English subtitles here: <https://vimeo.com/665970395> Password: ALHoM_English Feature. For more on trauma and art, see my book chapter 'Improving Public Space: Trauma Art and Retrospective-Futuristic Healing', in *Arts of Healing: Cultural Narratives of Trauma*, ed. Arleen Ionescu and Maria Margaroni (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 73-98. I wrote that chapter when we just began to develop the installation.

interlocutor or, here, public, is needed. How can we approach this challenge as ordinary social agents, not professionals of mental health? In everyday life, images of violence conducive to trauma are considered informative ('the news'). We take them in, even get bored by their repetitive nature, not even absorbing what that repetitiveness says about the world. This is one way to consider Don Quijote's endless adventures. According to philosopher John Austin, it is better to change gears and consider such images not informative but enhance their *performativity*. This can result in the shift I mentioned above, from *activist* art, which persuasively focuses on specific political issues, to *activating* art. The rationale of this shift is the insight that the trauma and the powerlessness that result are not inherent in the violent events themselves. As analytical psychiatry has diagnosed and cultural analysis has studied, it is the impossibility to process, even to experience extreme violence that generates the trauma and obstructs its representation.¹⁹

The scene 'Narrative Stuttering' (Figure 3) shows Don Quijote alone on a dark stage. For most of the eight-minute episode, Sancho Panza sits on the side, holding the script, helping him when needed, as a prompter. The knight is trying desperately to tell his story, the adventures, his opinions, whatever happened to him and those around him, but he is unable to act effectively as a narrator. At the end, he bursts into tears. Then, Sancho holds him in order to comfort him, demonstrating, by physical touch, that he is not entirely alone. This physicality is a primary point this ending of the episode is designed to make. But more is happening here.

First, these two figures can do what they do because they have a space in which to do it: a stage; hence, a fictional and visual one. The darkness deprives the space of perspectival depth, at times making Don Quijote almost seem to float. The stage isolates him and, at the same time, gives him an audience. This can be seen as a case of material image-thinking. In line with this, I consider the theatrical setting as a material 'theoretical fiction'. It is material, built as a theatre. And once the figures are acting in it, it is a fiction. One that helps our thinking about, in this case, the social issue of empathy. Here is one encounter: Freud came up with the term 'theoretical fiction', to justify his fanciful story, in his 1913 book *Totem and Taboo*, of the sons who kill and eat their tyrannical father. A fiction indeed. But elaborating the story led him to, then helped him with, the discovery and elaboration of the Oedipus complex, a theoretical advance in his thinking. In that case, the fiction consisted of a narrative. This Freudian theoretical fiction is one 'genre' of what I call 'image-thinking'. Others can be visually compelling, cinematic, or poetic, such as some concept-metaphors.²⁰

¹⁹ Among the most useful sources on trauma, see Ernst van Alphen, 'Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, Trauma' in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, Leo Spitzer (Hanover NH: University of New England Press, 1999), 24-38 which analyses the encounter between trauma and narrative. In his article 'Second Generation Testimony, the Transmission of Trauma, and Postmemory', *Poetics Today* 27.2 (2005): 473-88 he analyses critically the term 'postmemory', introduced by Marianne Hirsch. Hirsch replied with 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today* 29.1 (2008): 103-28. A fruitful discussion results. These theorists build on a somewhat older text by Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, 'The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma', in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 158-82. Caruth's book *Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015) is also very useful, building on her earlier book from *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) and on the experience of practitioners.

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (1913), authorized trans. James Strachey (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

In our scene six, the hopeless and helpless hero, unable to narrate, is not ‘cured’ but helped by his professional helper, the squire Sancho Panza. Sancho helps, but he / she is not an analyst. In the scene from *DON QUIJOTE*, the stage with its black floor suggests the potential of the theatre to be affectively effective. This concerns disciplinary specialisations within the Humanities and the cultural practices studied there. The stage proposes a fictional space in which viewers can engage themselves, imaginatively going along with the fiction presented. In this sense the stage explores how theatricality can help to enable the narratively disabled. What Sancho is doing, physically, on the material stage, is what audience members are called upon to do, albeit without physical touching. If this call succeeds, the viewers can no longer be considered an audience, with the connotations of passivity, but become *participants*. Materiality, intermediality, and participation: these three elements and their encounter already go to show that image-thinking exceeds the limited view of fiction as unreal, irrelevant, and escapist.

For this emergence of empathy to be possible, a form of display is required that changes from the traditional museal display, which keeps audiences at bay. There is an important temporal aspect to this, which participates in the materiality of image-thinking. For, this traditionally imposed mode of viewing governs the temporality of looking. In the theatre, by contrast, people can sit, and if the display is nearby and accessible, and visiting can consist of quietly sitting, the museum can become a kind of theatre in this material sense. The *DON QUIJOTE* exhibition as a whole seeks to produce such material comfort for facilitating affective attachment in visitors, turning them into participants. The consequence is a radically different temporality of the art experience.

This scene is particularly relevant for my purpose here, because it demonstrates the traumatic poetics without references to the author’s biography. The Knight Errant set out here to try to tell his war experiences in a reasoned comparison between arms and letters. This is the most argumentative – let’s call it academic – episode in the novel. It is in that failing reasoning that the attempt to narrate flounders, dissolving into traumatic incapacitation. ‘Narrative Stuttering’ is the *traumatic poetics* of this episode – in loyalty to the novel. Significantly, in our project this is followed by the story of the Captive, a separate (embedded) narrative where the trauma is retrospectively ‘explained’, autobiography is hinted at, and fiction becomes exuberant.²¹

²¹ Mieke Bal, with Mathieu Montanier, *DON QUIJOTE: SAD COUNTENANCES*, episode 6, based on Cervantes’s novel, Part I, chapters 39 to 41. For the video, see <https://www.miekebal.org/installations-don-quijote>.



Figure 3. Don Quijote trying in vain to tell his story and make his argument. Mathieu Montanier. Two photos by Mar Saéz



Figure 4. Viviana Moin as Sancho Panza consoling her / his master. Photo: Mar Saéz

Making a film ‘on’ trauma is not obvious. For, due to the visual aspects of the medium, *showing* is profoundly problematic in itself. Confusions and ethical problems threaten in attempts to show such horrid acts of violence. Apart from the possibility of soliciting sadistic acts of looking, a solicitation of feel-good identification (‘trauma envy’) is also utterly unhelpful, and ethically problematic. As we know from Adorno’s caution against it, voyeurism lurks. Davoine writes in her 2008 book *Don Quichotte*: ‘Cervantes doesn’t try to arouse visions of horror for voyeuristic readers.’ This is where the crafting of poetics is crucial. Instead of representing it, he creates a *poetics* of trauma, in what we must consider as an instance of that encounter we call ‘psycho-poetics’.

The second scene from this project I want to invoke briefly has the title ‘Woman as Anti-suicide Bomb’, a title which we drew (again) from Davoine’s work. She writes in her commentary on the young woman Marcela in her 2008 book:

Marcela affirms forcefully that she does not give in at all to political ideologies that want to make you feel guilty.... She refuses to be complicit with death discourses disguised as utopian discourses, and she stands up against the political weapon of making you guilty.²²

This episode, based on *DQ* I, 12-14, questions the often-hysterical reactions to amorous rejection – the idea that some men won't take 'no' for an answer. In terms of psychopoetics, we see here an encounter between sympathy or empathy and its limits when gender issues creep in. The psychoanalytic concept of projection is also at stake, as is the 'Freudian slip' idea. It is an early-modern scene of an explicit contest of masculinity versus feminism, and at the same time the scene invokes contemporary sexual pressure.²³

A young shepherdess who declined to marry a man enamoured of her is accused of being guilty of the suitor's subsequent suicide. The friends of the diseased accuse her, call her a murderess, and a troublesome conversation ensues. Marcela totally adequately defends her right to refuse to marry. At that point, Don Quijote, who happens upon the burial of the suicided man, witnesses the grief of the friends, then intervenes and defends her. His discourse is almost entirely congenial with what a feminist defence would be. A case of Hayden-Whitean identification-with, regardless of specific identities. I was flabbergasted when I read it: how could this, the world's number one bestseller from early modernity, be so strongly feminist? Until the main character utters a slip of the tongue, which spoils the feminist tenor. Instead of simply saying 'no blame' he concedes to the men by saying 'little or no blame'. Embarrassing, given the rest of the statement. He couldn't quite sustain his feminist partiality, and his identification with the attacked woman fades away. Shame on him!²⁴

This is what he says, and the italicized slip can be seen as a Freudian one, in an encounter between the unknown cave of his psyche, his empathy overruled by his masculinity, in his social pride:

Let no man, of whatever state or condition, dare to follow the fair Marcela, under pain of incurring my most furious indignation! She has shown with clear and sufficient argument that she bears *little or no blame* for Chrysóstomo's death, and how far she is from yielding to any of her [suitors'] desires. Wherefore it is right that, instead of being pursued and persecuted, she should be honoured and esteemed by all good men in the world, for she has proved that she is the only woman living with such pure intentions. (*DQ* 110)

Nadie, de ningún estado ni condición, se atreva a seguir a la hermosa Marcela, so pena de caer en mi furiosa indignación. Ella ha mostrado con claras y suficientes razones *la poca o ninguna* culpa que ha tenido en la muerte de Grisóstomo, y cuán ajena vive de condescender con los deseos de ninguno de sus enamorados; por lo que es justo que, en lugar de que la sigan y persigan, sea honrada y estimada por todos los buenos del mundo, pues muestra que en él ella es la única que vive con tan honesta intención. (125; emphasis on the slip added)

²² Françoise Davoine, *L'autre pensée* (Paris: Stock, 2008), 93.

²³ I use the Spanish: Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha puesto en castellano actual integral y fielmente por Andrés Trapiello* (Barcelona: Ediciones Destino 2016 [1605, 1615]) and the English: Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *The Adventures of Don Quixote*, trans. J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin Books Ltd. 1950). Hereafter, *DQ* with page numbers in the text. Same as with *Madame Bovary*, the (short) chapter numbers are more adequate than pages to a book that goes around in so many editions. For more on the issue of feminism in ancient literature, see my chapter 'Woman as Anti-Suicide Bomb: Women Trapped between Past and Future', in *Feminism as World Literature*, ed. Robin Truth Goodman (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 147-63.

²⁴ The tight ambiguous relationship between shame and masculinity has been studied in a book I am alluding to here, edited by Ernst van Alphen, which accompanied an exhibition he curated on the topic. *Shame! And Masculinity* (Amsterdam, Valiz, 2020).

But Marcela, like a contemporary feminist, perhaps annoyed by Don Quijote's slip, does not need, nor even want his help. She already has expressed her desire to be free clearly enough in an anti-suicide statement: 'If Chrysóstomo's impatience and headstrong passion killed him, why should my honest behaviour and modesty be blamed?' (*DQ* 110); Que si a Crisóstomo lo mató su impaciencia y arrogado deseo, ¿por qué se ha de culpar mi honesto proceder y recato? (125). This is another encounter between times, an instance of intertemporality, between the early seventeenth century and today, in view of both the endurance of patriarchal thinking and the inroads of feminism. In this encounter, the Freudian slip is the poetic tool. No chronology can be applied here; that would be a denial of said endurance. But what matters is the enigma of the hero's incapacity to be loyal to his own identification with the attacked woman.²⁵

This scene explores another important psychoanalytic idea, which might seem contemporary for the present but is already expressed in Cervantes' novel: projection. The literary (psychopoetic) text says that the independent young woman Marcela does not need Don Quijote's help, and demonstrates that even men who try to be 'good guys' still reproduce some of the masculinist pitfalls in their interactions with women. The young men who lost their friend to suicide are grieving, but typically, they *project* their sorrow on the woman when she accidentally comes upon the burial, abusing causality. 'Because' she is beautiful, they are tainted by their dead friend's despair, and blame it on her. They identify with the dead Chrisóstomo, using projection to bring in the commonplace argument so frequently alleged in cases of rape, that 'she asked for it'. By being beautiful, she has provoked the disaster.

The moment Don Quijote hears the laments and the scolding of the friends of the diseased against Marcela, he decides to intervene. As we have seen, the young woman, however, is perfectly capable of defending herself, which she proceeds to do totally adequately. Her speech asserts her right to independence and is convincing enough. Implicitly, therefore, the suicide is what is indicted, not the woman who chose to live her own life. This turns Marcela into a feminist heroine. But Don Quijote's desire to feel important in his crusade against injustice spoils his empathy and leads to his being touched by the masculinism when he adds that Marcela may still have some guilt. Then, she simply pushes him out of the way. We may wonder why. Perhaps because of this macho slip, or due to the superfluidity of his help? This is the most feminist moment of the novel.

The photograph below (Figure 5) is quite telling. Looking at the two faces, we see that Marcela looks annoyed, and we may speculate that she is exasperated both by the accusations of the young men and by the superfluous support ruined by the slip, of the somewhat hysterical knight. Thanks to the great work of the actor, that hysteria on the face of the hero, together with his clearly shouting open mouth and the threatening sword pointed towards the men but also, almost, toward the viewers, makes his intervention superfluous even before Marcela's push. The intermedial transformation required a gesture of literally pushing the knight away, which can only be made visible by such a slightly aggressive gesture.

Gesture is a specifically theatrical device, which collaborates with, or encounters, the language of words. In this respect, the theatrical aspect that was materialized in the scene of narrative stuttering, is here continued in the encounter of cinema and theatre as two artforms engaged with psychopoetics. The face is the figural psychopoetic statement.

²⁵ I quote from Cohen's translation but this is not quite accurate, so I modified it a bit.

In these two episodes of the Don Quijote project, we have foregrounded a few of the psychopoetic aspects of which, upon close reading, this long novel is so rich.



Figure 5. Don Quijote's hysteria and his slip of the tongue betray his shameful unconscious masculinism. Irene Villaescusa as Marcela. Photo: Mar Saéz

Listening

In the practice of psychoanalysis, listening is the primary tool of the analyst. This brings up an encounter between that contemporary custom and a text, even older – as well as a version of it that is even newer – than the two precious literary works invoked. The famous figure of Cassandra is so marginal in the source texts that it took her resurrection in the 1980s to earn the fame that her actions and tragic fate deserved as of so long ago. On the side of the new: she is a victim-heroine of *#MeToo* as well as an anachronistic, antique companion to today's Greta Thunberg and the many young climate activists who are not heeded. The social and the psychological merge again. Cassandra, the young woman needs to be heard, listened to. The need counts for the entire world. For, she sees the future, and wants to warn us. But the gift of prophecy the god Apollo gave her as a means of seduction, was cursed when she refused to sleep with him: she would know the future, but no one would listen. This was Harvey Weinstein & Co, prefigured. A feminist, contemporary 'human rights' issue: to be safe on the workplace, and not forced to swap jobs for sex. Of my film works I am alleging here for the reflection on psychopoetics, this is the most recent one of these, made in 2020, one week before the corona lockdown: *IT'S ABOUT TIME! REFLECTIONS ON URGENCY*. Made at the invitation of the National Film School in Łódź, Poland, this commission was to make an 'essay film'. The film (31 minutes long) is spoken in Polish and subtitled in English.²⁶

²⁶ It can be watched at <https://youtu.be/DK-5lbK4t5M> or on my website at <https://www.miekebal.org/films/it-s-about-time!-reflections-of-urgency>. All the cast and crew are students of the Film School. The grant project was directed by Dr Jakub Mikurda. On listening, see my article from

The listening issue that binds psychoanalysis to this story was brought up when the East-German writer Christa Wolf rewrote the Cassandra story, with the focus on the figure who, in Homer and Aeschylus, hardly came through. Wolf's novel, apart from a short first paragraph that gives her, literally, a place ('It was here. This is where she stood. These stone lions looked at her; now, they no longer have heads'), is entirely written 'in the first person'. When reading it, you cannot help listening to her; the reader is staged as an adequate, listening, and hopefully empathic psychoanalyst. After these few short sentences, Cassandra recuperates narrative power; the poetics side kicks in. 'This fortress – once impregnable, now a pile of stones – was the last thing she *saw*.' Seeing: in an act of speculation, her final act of perception, what I term focalization, casts her gloomy eye on the destructive passage of time. 'Seeing through' as theorizing is told here. This is reinforced by the final short sentences of that paragraph, which enlists us all: '... no trace of blood *can be seen* seeping out from beneath. Point the way into the darkness. Into the slaughterhouse. And alone.' The passive voice and the negative of 'can be seen', and the decisive word 'alone' indicate that we readers as co-focalizers are as powerless as Cassandra is. That final clause foregrounds the fate of this young woman. Death, by violence ('slaughterhouse') and loneliness.²⁷

This beginning of the novel poetically sets us up as the listeners Cassandra lacked. From the nine lines of this opening paragraph on, we are compelled to listen to the voice of the 'first person'. It goes to show that art – here, literature – is not a luxurious, frivolous pass-time. In view of our topic here, it is a potential form of psychoanalysis 'in practice'. And looking at the text's details, those words that poetically coin the text, help that learning. When we listen to Cassandra, the first thing we hear is a single-sentence paragraph: 'Keeping step with the story, I make my way into death.' Then follows the narrative of Cassandra's thought and memories on her final day, analytically speaking, her 'free associations': '[...] the closer you come to death, the closer and brighter are the pictures of childhood and youth.' And when she says: 'I lived on in order to see' she states the importance of witnessing, that special, socially relevant form of focalization and/as listening. Witnessing can also be seen as the most needed and adequate work of the analyst.

What she sees is the horror-to-come. And in the act of seeing she is aware of the force as well as the problematic of time, of time as problematic: 'For it was, it is, an experience when I "see", when I "saw". Saw the outcome of this hour was our destruction. Time stood still, I would not wish that on anyone.' This temporality, and the urgency to listen to Cassandra's prediction of destruction, interwoven with testimonial focalization – seeing *with* her – is what makes this novel relevant for the issues of human rights it obliquely invokes. To see, but not in a voyeuristic riveting, as Adorno has warned us, after the Holocaust (2003). His caution is not an iconophobic censoring but an appeal to deploy our capacity for empathy. Cassandra opposes war and the heroism it demands, and as a result, she is rejected, cast out of her father's house. Today we see how war and other forms of violence, and the neglect of the ticking time-bomb of destruction – of the planet – are rampant. If only we would listen to Cassandra...²⁸

'Learning Listening', *Practices of Listening, Soap Box: A Graduate Journal for Cultural Analysis* 1.1 (2019): 187-93.

²⁷ Christa Wolf, *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*, trans. Jan Van Heurck (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988 [1983]). All quotations are from the first page.

²⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

As we must. This figure has been turned not only into a feminist but also an environmentalist and an anti-war activist. The backbone is Cassandra's temporal awareness. Her repeated call for urgency is key, both to the ancient myth and Wolf's subjectivation of it, and to my attempt to make an essay film on this issue. An adequate analyst listens; the patient does the talking. In this sense, but also in the thematic sense, psychoanalysis is a highly personal process. My call for loyalty came in again, this time to the encounter between White, Lyotard, and Freud. The most personal, intimate moment in the film, I thought, should be when the near-future infringes on the figures' personal lives. This is when Cassandra dumps Aeneas because he remains too close to the powers, resulting in a near future in which he would become stultified. This concerns the future – one she rejects. She abandons him with the poignant words, which end the novel: 'I cannot love a hero. I do not want to see you being transformed into a statue.' She breaks off their relationship, not because her feminism makes her hate men. It is the call to war that deprives Aeneas of his sweet nature, and that is what Cassandra cannot bear. These words end Wolf's novel, but not the film, where Cassandra walks into the future. We can see in them a running-away from the analyst's coach. Cassandra gives up when the analyst fails to listen, to heed her words when the situation becomes urgent. It is about time!

From the image in time, to the temporality of images, including, the moving images of film and video, time is currently a 'hot topic'. Politically, we block our ears and keep thinking '2030' while being in the midst of the climate crisis. Socially, time is participating everywhere, all-the-time. Think of sequential ordering, duration, rhythm, memory, uncertainty and undecidability, affect and suspense, and the kinds of time the combinations of these aspects entail, such as deep time, geological time, narrative time, and more. Some film scholars even developed a convincing concept of 'depth of time', best understood as a counterpart of 'depth of field'. Some, also, bring these considerations of time to bear on the capitalist time we are submersed in. This is where the 'emotional capitalism' presented above, resurfaces. Moreover, it is useful to remember that clock time, dating from the colonisation period, is fundamentally in the interest of capitalism. But not only scholars explore time in art; artists themselves do so in depth and creative research. So does, for example, William Kentridge in his 2012 opera *Refuse the Hour*.²⁹

Exiting the Office, Entering Poetic Figuring

The three psychopoetic works invoked here belong to our cultural heritage. They also have a take on feminism; in each case, somewhat ambivalent. Flaubert, the least feminist author imaginable, could not help himself, in his pursuit of formal perfection and severe critique of his time and place, to stage the sore fate of Emma Bovary in terms of her victimization, and thus indict both men and the social system that cause her demise. His literary experiment with the French language is a form of disobedience to words, making a poetics that suggests he is siding with his character when producing a text. As a man, he is not a feminist at all; as a writer, he is, strongly. His art overrules his biography. And because of that art, the novel, including the figured sympathy for the victim, is still forcefully actual today.

²⁹ Fragments from Kentridge 2012 opera appear in our film *MADAME B*. The phrase 'all the time' alludes to the art of Norwegian artist Jeannette Christensen, which is strongly focused on time. See my *Jeannette Christensen's Time* (Bergen: Center for the Study of European Civilization, 1998).

Cervantes' novel with its powerful poetics of trauma makes us aware again, not only of the horrible history of slavery, but of its ongoing actuality. And at the moment when the novel reaches a feminist high point, he, or the figure he staged, falls back into his gender stereotype. Then, Homer and Aeschylus did not compel a psychoanalytical hovering, an intense listening to Cassandra. Closer to our time, Wolf did figure the woman as capable of soliciting being listened to. But not enough; the figure had to escape the analytical coach in order to encounter a helpful making of less-than-conscious figurations of life.

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Intersecții psihopoetice. Figurații ale dificultății

Sintetizând câteva expresii culturale din texte și imagini, articolul propune reflecții despre modurile în care practica poetică, în sensul de facere creativă, trebuie să intersecteze, adreseze, învingă dificultăți pentru a facilita contribuția imaginației și a actelor de „a crea prin imagine” pe care și le poate permite aceasta, la figurarea noului. Intersecție este cuvântul cheie, care indică pluralitatea și procesează. Nimic nu este fix, așadar, nu „identitatea” ca permanență, ci, în schimb, prin aceste intersecții, identificarea cu alții, alte discipline, alte idei, alte imagini devenind provocatoare și posibilă.

În încercarea dificilă de a veni cu noi idei, putem întâmpina dificultăți care trebuie depășite. Doar prin intersecții acest fapt devine posibil și ceea ce face imaginea până atunci de neconceput, posibilă. Partea poetică a psihopoeticii, conceperea (văzută ca traversare) prin și cu (materialul său) reflecțiilor emanând din subconștient așa cum apar ele la marginea conștientului, este ceea ce leagă discipline pe care noi le concepem ca diferite, într-un nod al creativității, imaginându-ne și gândind ceea ce nu cunoșteam.