

Facing the death of the Author. Cultural professional's identity work and the fantasies of control

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Abstract: This article takes Barthes' concept of the death of the Author as a starting point to organize a reflection on the role of Author-related discursive structures (termed subject positions here) in participatory processes within cultural institutions, focusing on cultural professional and audience subject positions. The theoretical assumption in this text is that identities (and subject positions) are not stable or homogenous, but contingent and diverse, and fed by social fantasies. This assumption (supported by culturalist identity theory and psychoanalytic theory) allows analyzing how the subject position of the cultural professional has been articulated through a series of contemporary fantasies. This article will first focus on two fantasies: The resistant modernist fantasy of the cultural professional as Author, and its still modernist counterweight, the democratic-populist fantasy of the death of the Author. The strong disconnection of both these fantasies with the present-day cultural-democratic configuration, characterized by a more post/late/liquid-modernist logic, allows for the articulation of a third fantasy, which foregrounds the notion of participation. At the same time the notion on participation is reframed by articulating it within an agonist framework, in order to increase its alignment with this post/late/liquid-modernist culture through the recognition of difference and conflict. This third fantasy attempts to offer a way out of the deadlock created by the still strong presence of modernist fantasies about cultural professional – audience relationships.

Keywords: Identity; Subject position; Cultural institution; Cultural professional; Audience; Power; Fantasy; Modernism; Participation

1. Introduction

Barthes' (1984) *Image Music Text* contains the seminal essay *The Death of the Author*, which pointed to the convergence between the producers and receivers of discourses at the level of interpretation. The death of the modernist Author was a metaphor, not to be taken literally, implying that there was no privileged vantage point that fixed the interpretation of a text. But it also referred to structural power changes in society, where members of cultural elites could no longer claim control over their writings. 'Ordinary' readers became (seen as) more and more capable of producing their own interpretations, which might structurally diverge from the intentions of the Author. As we have more recently witnessed an increased convergence between the producers and receivers of discourses at the level of the production process, we could say the Author died a second time. The old Author is no longer solely in control of the

production process, as the ‘produser’ (e.g., Bruns, 2007) has overcome the rigid separations between both categories. Again, this is seen as a major step towards the democratization of our cultural realms.

There are a number of problems with this type of argument. First of all, the argument tends towards an individualized interpretation of the social, which leads to a downplaying of societal structures, including the importance of organizational structures in providing cultural elites with safe havens, and the importance of discursive structures like professional identities and audience identities. Obviously, these structures are interdependent, as institutions act as discursive machineries, producing identities, and professional identities are driving forces for the functioning and legitimization of cultural institutions. These structural components make the Author more resistant than it seems. S/he has indeed found shelter in a series of organizations and institutions, protected by their professional structures and organizational cultures that provide networks of support and resources. The Author is also resistant at the cultural-discursive level, as the contemporary subject positions related to the Author (or the many cultural professionals¹) turn out to be more rigid than expected (and sometimes desired). In other words, cultural professionals’ identities remain embedded within hegemonic discourses on for instance management, autonomy and expertise.

But this is not the only problem with the death-of-the-Author argument. Especially in the 1990s and 2000s we have witnessed a strong revival of this argument, connected to the changes in the communicational landscapes. The popularization of the internet, with all its potentials for interaction and participation fed into the cultural democratization argument, combined with the belief that these changes were new and driven by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). This claim for novelty is highly problematic, as it tends to ignore the history of cultural participation, which stretches out much further than utopian ICT theories want us to believe. Articulating ICTs as the driving force of the social is equally problematic, as societal changes are multidimensional and highly context-dependant. Moreover, ICTs are not the only sites of meaning production, as the social consists of a multiplicity of discursive machineries.

This article wants to discuss the role of Author-related discursive structures (like subject positions) in participatory processes within the cultural realm, (partially) focussing on museum studies examples, which provides unusual but very rich and relevant case study material for media scholars interested in audiences and professionals. Arguably, the cultural-democratic discourses and practices that have been circulating for a considerable amount of time have required cultural professionals to develop specific strategies –termed identity work here- to deal with these discourses. The theoretical assumption in this text is that identities (or subject positions) are not stable or homogenous, but contingent and diverse, and fed by social fantasies. This assumption (supported by culturalist identity theory and psychoanalytic theory) allows analyzing how the cultural professional has been articulated through a series of contemporary fantasies. This article will first focus on the resistant modernist fantasy of the cultural professional as Author, which sometimes takes an antagonist/oppositional position towards the audience, and then move on to its still modernist counterweight, the democratic-populist fantasy of the death of the Author. The strong disconnection of these fantasies with the present-day cultural-democratic configuration, characterized by a more post/late/liquid-modernist logic, allows for the articulation of a third fantasy, which foregrounds participation, but reframes it to increase its alignment with this post/late/liquid-modernist culture through the recognition of difference and conflict by placing it within an agonist framework.

2. Identities at work

As the notion of identity carries many different meanings, it is instrumental to start by explaining how I use the concept here. In relation to the two major theoretical strands that define identity, namely the more psychological strand (personal identity) and the more socio-cultural strand (social or cultural identity), this text aligns itself with the second strand. More specifically, identity is seen as a discursive structure that provides meaning to objects, individual and collective agents. From this perspective, the social is characterized by a multitude of circulating identities, contested and contestable, that offer subjects opportunities for identification (which creates the link with the more psychological approaches) and provide them with the building blocks of their subjectivities. Support for this position can be found in Sayyid and Zac's (1998, 263) approach, when they write that identity is to be defined in two related ways. First, identity is "*the unity of any object or subject.*" This definition is in line

with Fuss' (1989, ix) definition of identity as “the ‘whatness’ of a given entity.” A second component of the definition of identity comes into play when the concept is applied to the way in which social agents are identified and/or identify themselves within a certain discourse. Examples Sayyid and Zac (1998, 263) give in this context are “*workers, women, atheists, British.*”

Laclau and Mouffe call this last component of identity a subject position (i.e., the result of the positioning of subjects within a discursive structure), which will be used in this analysis to describe the discursive positionings of actors. An important characteristic of the subject position concept is that it emphasizes the role of discursive structures to provide people with positions within the social, but simultaneously allows space for the contingent articulation of these positionings:

Whenever we use the category of ‘subject’ in this text, we will do so in the sense of ‘subject positions’ within a discursive structure. Subjects cannot, therefore, be the origin of social relations—not even in the limited sense of being endowed with powers that render an experience possible— as all ‘experience’ depends on precise discursive conditions of possibility. (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, 115)

In other words, Laclau and Mouffe’s definition implies neither a structuralist nor a voluntarist position. Although they endorse Althusser’s critique of the autonomous and self-transparent subject (a voluntarist position), they vehemently reject Althusser’s economic determinism (a structuralist position), because in their view this aspect of Althusser’s theory leads to a “*new variant of essentialism*” (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, 98). However, Laclau and Mouffe’s rejection of this aspect of Althusser’s work does not keep them from borrowing from him the originally Freudian concept of overdetermination, although not without altering its meaning:

Society and social agents lack any essence, and their regularities merely consist of the relative and precarious forms of fixation which accompany the establishment of a certain order. This [Althusser’s] analysis seemed to open up the possibility of elaborating a new concept of articulation, which would start from the overdetermined character of social relations. But this did not occur. (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, 98)

The notion of overdetermination is one of the strategies that Laclau and Mouffe use to emphasize the contingency of the social and of identities. This contingency can already be found at the heart of their discourse theory, namely when they are discussing the nature of

discursive structures (including identities and subject positions), the importance of articulation, the floating of signifiers and the infinitude of the field of discursivity. A discourse is seen as a structured entity that articulates different elements, whose meaning is altered by the process of articulation itself. Inspired by early semiology, Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 106) claim that "*all identity is relational*", which implies the establishment of relationships of inclusion and exclusion, but also a process of modification. This becomes clear in their definition of articulation, which is seen as a "*practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice.*" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 105) Contingency originates from the specificity of the articulated elements (where some elements become articulated in a discourse, and others are not –they remain available in the field of discursivity), from the process of articulation and the specificity of the combination of elements, and from the possibility of re-articulation (where new elements become articulated or old elements become dis-articulated, which affects the entire discourse).

But also in Laclau and Mouffe's political identity theory (which builds upon their discourse theory in the strict sense –see Carpentier & Spinoy, 2008) contingency features prominently, as the political is seen as a site of conflict, antagonism and struggle for hegemony (see also Mouffe (2005) for an elaborate argumentation). Although their political identity theory focuses more on the attempted stabilizations of the social through hegemonizing processes, they still base their theory on an ontology of contingency where hegemony can never be total. As Mouffe (2005, 18) writes: "*Every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counterhegemonic practices, i.e., practices which will attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install other forms of hegemony.*" Also the actual process of establishing a hegemonic social imaginary presupposes societal contingency. This struggle for hegemony takes place in "*a field criss-crossed by antagonisms*" (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, 135), where different sets of identities are aligned into a hegemonic project² and opposed to another negative identity, a constitutive outside. Through the interplay between antagonistic identities, these identities become constructed and can (in some cases) gain dominance. But Laclau and Mouffe's negative-relationalist approach to identity also allows them to show the limits of the formative capacity of antagonism (in constructing identities), as the presence of the 'other' identity remains a necessary component in the identity construction process. This means that

identity can never be fully developed and foreclosed: “*The presence of the Other prevents me from being totally myself.*” (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, 125) Antagonistic identities try to (discursively) eliminate each other but simultaneously need each other as each other’s outsides.

Despite Laclau and Mouffe’s careful positioning of the subject between structuralism and voluntarism, Žižek critiqued their reduction of the subject to its subject positions. In an essay published in Laclau’s *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, Žižek (1990, 250) explained this reduction as “*an effect of the fact that Laclau and Mouffe had progressed too quickly*” and did not manage to combine the “*radical breakthrough*” at the level of the concept of antagonism with an equally well elaborated theory of the subject. This criticism has led especially Laclau to acknowledge “*the importance of an understanding of subjectivity in terms of the subject-as-lack.*” (Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2004, 202) Although in *Hegemony and socialist strategy* (Laclau & Mouffe 1985) identities were already seen as a fusion of a multiplicity of identities, where the overdetermined presence of some identities in others prevents their closure, Laclau’s later work more clearly distinguishes between subject and subjectivation, identity, and identification. The impossibility of the multiplicity of identities to fill the constitutive lack of the subject prevents their full and complete constitution because of the inevitable distance between the obtained identity and the subject, and because of the (always possible) subversion of that identity by other identities. In Laclau’s (1990, 60) own words: “*the identification never reaches the point of full identity.*” Or as Sayyid and Zac (1998, 263) put it: “*the subject is always something more than its identity.*” As Torfing (1999, 150) illustrated, there are many possible points of identification:

A student who is expelled from the university might seek to restore the full identity she never had by becoming either a militant who rebels against the ‘system,’ the perfect mother for her two children, or an independent artist who cares nothing for formal education.

Precisely the contingency of identities and the failure to reach a fully constituted identity creates the space for subjectivity, agency, freedom, and the particularity of human behavior:

The freedom thus won in relation to the structure is therefore a traumatic fact initially: I am condemned to be free, not because I have no structural identity as the existentialists assert, but because I have a failed structural identity. This means that the subject is partially self-determined. However, as this self-

determination is not the expression of what the subject already is but the result of the lack of its being instead, self-determination can only proceed through processes of identification. (Laclau 1990, 44)

The self-determination that Laclau mentions generates space for subjects to become actively involved in the identity construction process, working with the building blocks that are available within the social, (re-)articulating and performing them, struggling against them and adopting them. Identity politics (and the politics of identity – see Hall 1989) is for instance very much based on the political agency of those engaged in the deconstruction of dominant identities. Another concept that refers to the active role of subjects in dealing with their identities, is identity work. This concept –originally used at a more individual level (see Snow & Anderson 1987) but later applied to collective identities and subject positions (see e.g. Reger, Myers & Einwohner, 2008)– captures the discursive efforts that people have undertaken in order to (re)construct and maintain their identities.

This self-determination is of course not unlimited. As Laclau (1990, 44) argues, “*self-determination can only proceed through processes of identification,*” which generates the connection with discursive structures (or subject positions) which are outside the subject itself. At the same time, there is a strong desire for the wholeness of identities and the harmonious resolution of social antagonisms, although this wholeness and harmony is structurally lacking. If we turn to a Lacanian perspective, we can see that desire is conceptualised exactly through a relation with a lack (and not as a relation to an object). What causes the desire is exactly the lack, the incompleteness of identity, which lies at the core of all subjectivity (Lacan 1991, 139; Kirshner, 2005, 83). Subjects crave for fully-constituted identities, but these can never be realized. The lack can never be filled; the desire can never be satisfied. Desire is the “*lack of being whereby the being exists*” (Lacan 1988, 223) which turns it into an endless unconscious driving force. The mechanism that allows dealing with this structural inability and the frustration it generates, is fantasy, as fantasy provides us with hope and protection. (Lacan 1979, 41) Fantasy provides the subject with the (imaginary) frames that conceal and promise to overcome the lack (Lacan 1994, 119-120); in this way, fantasy functions as “*the support that gives consistency to what we call 'reality'.*” (Žižek 1995, 44) Nevertheless, this ultimate victory remains out of reach, and eventually all fantasies become again frustrated and their limits visible, showing the contingency of identity and the social.

3. The subject position of the cultural professionals

When turning to the relations between cultural professionals and audience members in cultural institutions, also their interaction is structured by their identities (or subject positions). Embedded within a societal context, these identities are not completely rigid, but can become re-articulated over time (and space). Simultaneously, radical re-significations are rare, and traces of older articulations remain present in contemporary subject positions. One example here is the postmodern itself which still contains (traces of) the modern, as Lyotard (1984, 78) puts it: *“A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.”* A similar argument can be made about the modern cultural professional, who is still articulated as Author.

In the case of the modernist articulation of the cultural professional -the cultural professional as Author- the use of the word ‘profession’ provides us with a series of meanings that are attributed to this (articulation of this) subject position. Using McQuail’s (2008, 53) helpful list of characteristics of the professional (but also work more focussed on the media professional (Deuze, 2005; Carpentier, 2005)), we can distinguish a series of signifiers that construct the subject position of the modernist cultural professional, in an oppositional or sometimes antagonistic relationship with the identity of the audience. Together they form an equivalential chain of particularities that construct the identity of the modernist cultural professional.

A first basic element is the notion of expertise, which is acquired through training and education. Expertise is based on a combination of knowledge and skills, which structures and legitimizes the decisions that allow for cultural production, but that also distinguish the cultural professional from the audience of the cultural production. In a more traditional articulation, these knowledges and skills would encompass contextual knowledge (for instance about the field, its history and its actors) and object knowledge (for instance the canonical meanings of the objects to be displayed), but also the skills to use technologies of display to translate these knowledges into spatial orderings and secondary texts. But in more

market-driven environments, these knowledges and skills would be complemented and sometimes replaced by market-related knowledges (for instance about the potential visitors and target groups) and management skills. Quite often this expertise is based on what Bourdieu (2000) called legitimate knowledge (and skills), and can be seen as a way to impose a legitimate vision on the world, while other types of knowledge (and skills), like the situated knowledges circulating in communities, are facing the permanent risk of being discredited.

A second element of the professional subject position is the public service that is provided to both specific audiences and society in general. Cultural professionals are articulated as transcending self-interest and commercial and institutional interests. As care-takers of cultural heritage and enablers of cultural production and education, they act out of a vocation or calling, maintain a certain degree of detachment and impartiality, and provide a cultural experience to an audience which is attributed societal ('public') value that cannot be reduced to its exchange value. This positioning also affects the audience identity, which often finds itself articulated as passively receiving the service provided to them (although the activation of the audience could be seen as a form of public service).

A third element is linked to the concept of ethics, which is in turn connected to notions of truth, authenticity, integrity and honesty. A wide range of ethical principles can be invoked: In their discussion of media ethics, Christians, Rotzoll and Fackler (1991) for instance refer to Aristotles' golden mean, the Kantian categorical Imperative, Mill's principle of utility, Rawl's veil of ignorance, and the Judeo-Christian's persons as ends principle. Whatever framework is preferred, ethical behavior is seen as an intrinsic part of the identity of the cultural professional. This need for ethical behavior is not exclusively related to the outcomes of the cultural production process (for instance requiring truth-telling) but also impacts on the process itself (for instance requiring the proper treatment of 'outside' actors). Again, ethics generate a difference between cultural professional and audience identities, as audience members are not bound by the same ethical principles (although they are for instance bound by codes of conduct).

The public service and ethical behavior generate a logic of difference which legitimizes a certain degree of autonomy to the cultural professional, which is further strengthened by the

identity's link with the epistemological framework of expertise. Expertise is still very much seen as an individualized activity, which requires the protection against 'outside' intervention to come to fruition. Cultural production has often been regarded as a freespace where the colonizing forces of the market and state would not manage to penetrate (in its entirety), which legitimized the need -some would say the myth- for autonomy as a key identificatory signifier. But also in more commodified cultural environments, autonomy remains to play an important role, as the capitalist enterprise still structurally privileges individualized expertise that is autonomously deployed. Finally, the audience takes on a specific position here, as it is seen to pose a potential threat towards the autonomy of the cultural professional, as 'unwarranted claims' from individuals, organizations, stakeholders or communities might attempt to affect the cultural professional's activities.

The fifth element is the institutional embeddedment of cultural professionals, which is often translated into a relation of employment. Cultural professionals are rarely articulated as amateurs, although they sometimes can be employed as free-lancers. However weak (and often problematic) the link of employment is in the latter case, it still exists and structures the identity of the cultural professional. Here employment creates an important indicator for this professional identity as it regulates the access to the professional system which supports this identity. Moreover, these institutional environments provide cultural professionals with support systems but also with the presence of peers, who perform and protect the professional culture. Integrated into networks of peers, cultural professionals can define themselves as members of a professional / intellectual / artistic elite, which is articulated as different from (for instance) audience members, who through this oppositional logic become positioned as 'ordinary'.

This brings us to our last element, the deployment of management and power. Cultural professionals are often placed in a hierarchically structured entity and attributed specific responsibilities for the professional production of specific cultural products. This responsibility is complemented by the notion of psychological property (Wilpert 1991). To realize the professional goals, cultural professionals can make use of the production facilities that are owned (in the strictly legal sense of the word) by the media organization. Wilpert's (1991) theory of psychological appropriation provides support for the thesis that the control

over these production facilities leads to a sense of property. It is precisely this combination of responsibility, (psychological) property and authorship that supports the articulation of the cultural professional as a manager of a diversity of resources, from technology via content and objects to people. I should of course be careful not to attribute absolute power to cultural professionals (eliminating the possibility of resistance of those who are affected, but also the influence of the organizations' hierarchy), but cultural production often entails the management of audiences' bodies and the targeted exposure of audiences' minds to carefully selected meanings.

4. The opening up of the cultural realms

One can wonder whether this modernist articulation of the cultural professional still has some connection to our everyday worlds. The contemporary context of postmodernity (or late / liquid modernity) unavoidably increases the levels of hybridity and liquidity in the social configuration. Processes like ideological fragmentation and cultural amalgamation (or the end of the 'great divide' between low and high culture –see Huysen 1986), but also of detraditionalization, individualization, globalization and commercialization (see e.g. Krotz, 2007) have had a structural impact on contemporary societies and have affected the circulating power relations, in the political realm but also in the cultural realm. The democratic revolution has not only increased popular participation in institutionalized politics (at least when looking on the long term), but opened up and decentralized different other societal fields.

One field that is often attributed a key role is the field of so-called 'new' media, although care should be taken not to fall into a communicational reductionist trap. Of course, the arrival of a new generation of media technologies did impact on democracy, participation, and the media system, and did put pressure on the Author (mainly the media professional). In the 21th century, not only ordinary users but also civil society organizations (van de Donk et al., 2004; Cammaerts, 2005) are more enabled or empowered to avoid the mediating role of the 'old' media organizations, to publish their material (almost) directly on the web, and to establish communicative networks that (often) support more decentralized models of democracy. There is a potentially beneficial increase in information, which challenges the "*existing political*

hierarchy's monopoly on powerful communications media" (Rheingold 1993, 14), might result in the strengthening of social capital and civil society (Friedland 1996), and might even open-up new public spheres, or "*global electronic agora[s]*." (Castells, 2001, 138) But we should keep in mind that the role of ICTs to deepen the democratic process is context-dependant. ICTs can have many different applications, and can be used in many different constellations. In other words, ICTs are not inherently democratic, although some ICTs might have characteristics that can facilitate more democratic-participatory usages. ICTs remain firmly embedded within their societal contexts, where we can see the political, social, cultural and technological interlock in a dynamical process, feeding into societal change or sedimentation, into processes of hegemonization or resistance, into historical continuities or ruptures.

The fetishization of media technologies can be avoided by looking at a series of other fields. Lyotard (1984) pointed -quite some time ago- to the changes in field of science: While science managed to mobilize a self-legitimizing meta-narrative in the 18th and 19th century, the fracturing and dismantling of discourses ended science's position of taken-for-grantedness in the 20th century. These problems of self-legitimization not only affect science, but also other expert fields, as Lyotard (1984, 14) explains: "*The ruling class is and will continue to be the class of decision makers [...] [but] the old poles of attraction represented by nation-states, parties, professions, institutions, and historical traditions are losing their attraction.*" Using another perspective, Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994) refer to the contemporary configuration as a reflexive modernity, based on the realization of a wide range of democratic ideals, and the shift from emancipatory and centralized politics to life politics and/or subpolitics. These life / subpolitical issues are both global and part of everyday life, and still provide expert systems ("*scientists and professionals*" (Lash 1994, 198)) with significant roles. As Lash (1994, 198) remarks, these expert systems are "*affecting everyday life,*" but they are "*now open to democratic debate and contestation from the lay population.*" Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994) locate a prime source of social change in these expert systems, as they might constitute new public spheres. At the same time, Foucault's governmentality model produces a slightly less optimistic perspective on the social, where ever more sophisticated disciplinary and post-disciplinary power plays work through individualized freedom to still generate (and legitimize) societal control.

Also the institutions of display and conservation –the museum- became implicated in the debates about participation, as a series of museum theorists started to advocate a new museology or new museum theory. One foundational text was Vergo’s (1989a) anthology, appropriately entitled *The new museology*, in which he and a number of authors advocated a reconfiguration of our ways of looking at the museum. In his introduction, Vergo (1989b, 3) refers to the dissatisfaction with the ‘old’ museology, which focussed too much on museum methods, and was not reflexive enough about the museum’s purposes and identities. In the same introduction, Vergo also distanced himself from claiming ultimate novelty and exclusivity³, and mono-perspectivism. Within this diverse collection of articles, a number of authors (plead to) rethink the museum’s relation to the visitor, and the power imbalances that characterise that relationship. For instance, Merriman (1989, 167-168) -drawing heavily on Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of distinction- concludes that “... *the action of museums in contemporary culture is to divide society into those who have the ‘competence’ to perceive museum visiting as a worthwhile leisure opportunity, and those who do not.*” Wright (1989, 148) takes a similar position: “*The present fiction in museums –that every visitor is equally motivated, equipped, and enabled ‘to experience art directly’- should be abandoned. It is patronising, humiliating in practice, and inaccurate.*” Secondly, also the political nature of the museum and its functioning as a discursive machinery is thematized. Especially Greenhalgh’s (1989, 96) chapter on international exhibitions offers a strong case, where he shows how these exhibitions “*recognized the socio-political climate of their time and how they responded to it.*”

In later publications on new museology / new museum theory, this emphasis on representation, the political and power is deepened, and combined with a more explicit agenda for social and cultural change. Critiques on the elitism, exclusionary practices and monovocality of museums (Ross, 2004) form the basis of a museum reform project that aims for “*the transformation of the museum from a site of worship and awe to one of discourse and critical reflection that is committed to examining unsettling histories with sensitivity to all parties.*” (Marstine, 2006, 5) Secondly, also the emphasis on the inclusion of the museums’ communities is continued, witness Marstine’s (2006, 5) plea for a museum that “*is transparent in its decision-making and willing to share power.*” Through this strong emphasis

on inclusion and power, the notion of audience participation is brought into the debate again, for instance through the recognition that visitors and communities also have cultural expertise, as Halpin (1997, 56) writes:

the new or critical museology about which I am speaking might be a useful museology in service to a community, instead of the state and the élite. A museology practised by named, committed and creative professionals who know that people other than themselves are also cultural experts.

Readers like *Cultural diversity. Developing museum audience in Britain* (Hooper-Greenwill 1997) and *Museums, society, inequality* (Sandell, 2002) focus strongly on the importance of inclusionary practices, combined with the provision of series of examples. One example is Hemming's (1997) chapter in the first reader, which has the (rather telling) title *Audience participation: working with local people at the Geffrye Museum*. In this chapter, Hemming discusses the exhibition *Chinese Homes: Chinese traditions in English homes*, which ran for three months in the Geffrye museum in Hackney (London), in combination with the educational courses organized by the museum for different groups of people within the community. Through the collaboration with a Chinese Community Centre, members of the Chinese community were involved in the construction of the *Chinese Homes* exhibition, by combining group discussions on content (and access to preparatory meetings) with oral history approaches. In his non-celebratory process evaluation, Hemming (1997, 176) points to the problems related to language, resources and time, but also emphasizes the importance of audience participation:

Involving the community in making decisions does take time, but also the will to make it happen. However, if the museum had tried to impose its own narrative on the exhibition without the consultation process, the results would have been disastrous. The chances are that the exhibition would have alienated the Chinese community and been a rather shallow attempt to portray their culture.

5. Cultural professionals, fantasy and their identity work

These transformations have put pressure on cultural professional subject positions, requiring them to perform additional identity work. In the case of cultural professionals this identity work implies the development of coping strategies to deal with -amongst other issues- the

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increase of audience, visitor, reader, and spectator power to interpret cultural products on their own terms, to demand to become involved in the machineries of cultural production and to produce cultural artefacts themselves.

The modernist articulation of the cultural professional has not fully disappeared, but it has been highly problematized in contemporary societies. Nevertheless, cultural institutions still provide shelter to this articulation, which is based on the fantasy of full control and management. In some cases this leads to nostalgia, where the complexities of fluidity and hybridity are mourned over and the return to a more straightforward past with ‘clear’ subject positions is desired for. In other cases antagonistic identity strategies are applied, whereas these audience members, visitors, readers, and spectators are defined as others, sometimes even ‘enemies’. Through these dichotomising articulatory processes, ordinary people are constructed as a homogeneous mass, and detached from social structures (like civil society or communities). Their everyday life knowledges are discarded as irrelevant and illegitimate. They are deemed to lack any expertise, and in dire need for education. Their behaviour is considered to be uncivilized and a potential threat (for instance to the cultural objects on display), which necessitates the deployment of sophisticated management techniques. For instance Macdonald’s (2002, 160) ethnography of the Science museum (in London, UK) provides some nice examples of antagonistic staff members’ rhetoric on the audience:

In everyday talk in the Museum it was fairly common for visitors to be referred to as problems, as “in the way”, as disruptive and as “stupid”. [...] For many curators that visitors might not understand certain Museum-imparted information was evidence of visitor ignorance. Stories would circulate about visitors who had completely misunderstood exhibits in amusing ways – perhaps trying to look into the wrong part of an interactive [display] or confusing an effect with a cause. Visitors were also sometimes depicted as deviants, especially as vandals.

In other cases, more benevolent (but not necessarily less problematic) discourses are used to construct a difference between the cultural professional and the societal groups they aim to serve. Here we can for instance mention the strategy of respectful detachment, where the otherness is acknowledged and the other is respected but no attempt for communication or interaction (let alone participation) is initiated. Given the societal context, the modernist fantasy will be permanently frustrated, because visitors’ bodies and minds will not behave according to the preset requirements, and the dominance of cultural professionals fixating

cultural meaning will be privately and publically contested and resisted by audience members, but also by other elites. Also within the cultural institutions themselves the modernist articulation of the cultural professional will be resisted, as is illustrated by Macdonald's (2001, 133) description:

Those arguing for constructing the visitor as relatively ignorant were accused of being 'patronizing' and of 'dumbing down,' those who constructed the visitor as more educated faced charges of 'elitism' and of being potentially 'exclusionary'.

The modernist fantasy of the powerful and knowledgeable cultural professional also has an inverse variation, the democratic-populist fantasy which articulates the cultural professional as superfluous. In contrast to the othering processes which privilege the cultural professional, this democratic-populist fantasy is based on the replacement of a hierarchical difference by total equality. This fantasy remains embedded within a modernist framework because of its focus on equality. Moreover, it is a populist fantasy, because (following Laclau's approach) it is based on an antagonist resistance of the people against an elite. As Laclau (1977, 143) puts it: *"Populism starts at the point where popular-democratic elements are presented as an antagonistic option against the ideology of the dominant bloc."*

This democratic-populist fantasy has a number of variations. The celebrative-utopian variation defines the equalization of society, and the disappearance of its elites, as the ultimate objective for the realization of a 'truly' democratic society. Cultural professionals become in this perspective problematized, as the symbolic power that is attributed to them is seen to be obstructing the process of cultural democratization. The process of equalization can be articulated as political, but also as economic, where the annihilation of hierarchical difference through capitalist market logics is met with approval. In this latter case, the notion of the cultural professional itself is transformed into a supplier of cultural goods, equalizing the power relationship between the suppliers and consumers of cultural goods. But there is also an anxietatic-dystopian variation, based on the fear that the democratic-populist fantasy might actually be realized. Here, the democratic-populist fantasy becomes supportive of the modernist fantasy of the powerful and knowledgeable cultural professional, as the democratic-populist fantasy serves at a constitutive outside for the modernist fantasy. One recent example is Keen's (2007) *The Cult of the Amateur*, where the 'amateurs' which

produce user-generated content become seen as a threat to (expert) tastes, knowledges and truths.

Both fantasies remain firmly locked with a modernist framework, which renders them inherently problematic in the era of post/late/liquid modernity. The modernist articulation of the cultural professional (and the anxietatic-dystopian variation of the democratic-populist fantasy) privileges an elitist, Author-based model of society, where the construction of cultural meaning remains monopolized and the death-of-the-Author discourse is simply ignored. However resistant it is, this fantasy is in permanent conflict with the demands for opening up and democratizing the cultural field. The celebrative-utopian variation of the democratic-populist fantasy is equally problematic, because it conflates democratization with a stiffening equalization of society, and the reduction of power imbalances with the annihilation of difference. This radical denial of difference and its implicit rejection of “*the best which has been thought and said in the world*” (Arnold, 2004, 2), in other words of specialization, talent, expertise, and the Author, also finds itself in permanent conflict with society’s structures and institutions, expert systems, discursive structures on cultural value and power dynamics. Moreover, both fantasies remain problematic because they are antagonistic, which is difficult to reconcile with the notion of democracy itself.

To resolve this apparent deadlock, I want to turn to another fantasy, which I will term the participatory fantasy. Here, the starting point is Pateman’s (1970) definition of ‘partial’ and ‘full participation’. Partial participation is defined by Pateman as: “*a process in which two or more parties influence each other in the making of decisions but the final power to decide rests with one party only*” (Pateman 1970, 70), while full participation is seen as “*a process where each individual member of a decision-making body has equal power to determine the outcome of decisions.*” (Pateman 1970, 71) The importance of Pateman’s work is that it allows emphasizing the need for more balanced power relations in society (and not exclusively in the political system). Moreover, Pateman’s definition does not imply that the position of (one of) the involved parties (in our case cultural professionals or audience members) should be erased. On the contrary, her definition entails a decision-making process that is respectful to all parties involved, on the basis of power sharing. This plea for an increase of societal power balances still has a clear utopian, fantasmatic dimension. Situations

of full participation are utopian non-places -or, better, ‘never-to-be-places’ - which will always remain unattainable but which simultaneously remain to play a key role as ultimate anchoring points for democratization processes. Despite the impossibility to fully realize these situations in the social praxis, their fantasmatic realization serves as breeding ground for democratic renewal in the field of culture.

Simultaneously, we need to avoid the articulation of another modernist fantasy -this time when talking about participation- which ignores difference and the conflicts that difference brings about, or which frames differences as necessarily antagonistic. Here, we can turn to Mouffe’s (2005) work, who suggested the concept of agonism to describe a *“we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents.”* (Mouffe, 2005, 20) An agonist relationship does not hide the differences in position and interest between the involved parties; they are *“in conflict”* but *“share a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes places.”* (Mouffe, 2005, 20) Translated to the participatory fantasy, this implies that the structural differences between cultural professionals and audience members are acknowledged, but that both parties accept that they share a common cultural space and accept each other’s perspectives, however different they may be.

6. Conclusion

If we combine the agonism concept with the notion of (full) participation as outlined by Pateman, then we can describe this participatory fantasy as a respectful and balanced negotiation in cultural production processes, where all become authors (without a capital A) in interpretation and production, where difference is acknowledged, and where all voices can be heard and used to structurally (and not occasionally) feed the decision-making processes. This re-articulation of the cultural professional’s subject position does not reject expertise, but recognizes different types of expertise. It does not reject public service, but sees the facilitation of participation as part of the public service remit. It does not reject ethics, but inscribes the equalization of power imbalances in the ethical framework of the cultural professional. It does not reject autonomy, but replaces one of its components, detachment, with connectedness. It does not reject institutional embeddedness, but respects amateurism (in

Said's (1994) meaning⁴). The only identity component it does reject is the modernist privilege of the cultural professional to solipsistically detach him/herself from the social, without sharing his/her symbolic power.

Replacing fantasies is of course easier said than done, and the modernist fantasy of the powerful and knowledgeable cultural professional, and the equally modernist democratic-populist fantasy will not disappear. As fantasies, they remain important driving forces and sites of struggle that persist in the present-day cultural configuration. What the debates on the increase of participation in the world of cultural institutions shows is that people have managed to deconstruct these modernist fantasies and the subject positions that produce them (and are produced by them). We also see that this participatory fantasy was threatened by oblivion in the heydays of neo-liberalism and that only now the conditions of possibility of its resurgence have been created.

One of the problems of participatory fantasies has been that they did not manage to cut themselves free from the modernist origins of the ideology of participation. Because of this modernist anchoring, it has been proven difficult to reconcile participation, difference and conflict, which unavoidably kept participation within the antagonistic framework of either the cultural professional as Author fantasy or its democratic-populist death of the Author counterpart. Possibly, the combination of participation and agonism might offer a much-needed departure from this theoretical vacuum caused by an unnecessary dichotomization, allowing for the acceptance of difference in combination with an engagement towards more equalized power relations in processes of cultural production.

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Notes

¹ Cultural professionals are seen in this article as people that are professionally active in cultural institutions and that are involved in processes of cultural production. From this perspective, they are condensations of the Author discourse(s).

² This happens through the so-called logic of equivalence, however without totally eliminating their differences: A chain of equivalence “*can weaken, but not domesticate differences.*” (Laclau, 2005: 79)

³ See Halpin (1997) for a brief historical analysis of earlier museum (theory) reform projects.

⁴ Said (1994: 84) defines amateurism as “*an activity that is fuelled by care and affection rather than by profit and selfish, narrow specialization.*”