



FLUID IDENTITY

Archeology of the European DNA

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'Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'rhizome' draws from its etymological meaning, where 'rhizo' means combining form and the biological term 'rhizome' describes a form of plant that can extend itself through its underground horizontal tuber-like root system that develop new plants'

Felicity J. Colman ([1](#))

'The future of heritage, changing visions, attitudes and contexts in the 21st century' was the title of a colloquium organized by Ename expertise centrum in april 2007. A few words attracted my attention in the title of this colloquium when I saw them for the first time: At first sight the combination of future and heritage is a strange one. The future is something that has not yet been realised, something that has yet to happen. Heritage, on the other hand, has something to do with the past, something which has already happened. But the nice thing is that this combination underlines our position. Here and now as a type of membrane between the past and the future. A membrane which is moving forward in time, if you see time as a linear process. The second two words which attracted me were: changing and contexts. And in this paper it will become clear why these two words attracted my attention.

Romantic heritage in an industrial world

Heritage exists thanks to its social legitimacy. Heritage doesn't exist as autonomy. Heritage in itself is meaningless. It's a social or mental construction. This idea doesn't merely apply to heritage, but also to the arts, education, and every construction us humans have worked on to give meaning to the world we live in.

In the industrial world at the end of the 19th century, where the romantic idea of 'the world we have lost' grows, the arts and crafts movement demands attention for craftsmanship and originality and the idea that we have to preserve the past for future generations, heritage gets its legitimacy from these types of notions. So we started collecting stories, tools and appliances from the common people. We tried to preserve houses and buildings in open air museums, artists told their own romantic stories of the common people who are still connected to the earth. Like Van Gogh in his Dutch period, Millet and the Barbizon painters. Farmers and craftsmen like weavers are very popular subjects for painters in that time.

This romantic feeling still exists in many heritage circles today. It is the feeling of 'in memoriam' and 'pro memory'. But the question is if this legitimacy still counts in the 21st century. A great deal changed during the 20th century. And sometimes it seems as if these changes didn't take place in the heritage world. We always tell each other that a lot has changed during conferences, meetings, study days and colloquia, but in the meantime we continue to preserve the past and tell safe stories. We never talk about the consequences of the fundamental changes in the 20th century. Maybe I can illustrate this with a metaphor:

Two metaphors: mr. G.B.J. and the broken pottery

There was a radio programme in the Netherlands during the second half of the 20th century entitled 'The state of the world affairs'. It was a programme by mr. G.B.J. Hiltermann. Every Sunday at 12.00 o'clock



us children had two choices. Going outside and not coming back for the next half hour. Or stay in the house and do not move for the next half hour. Even breathing was a little bit risky. From 12.00 to 12.30 hours mr. G.B.J. analysed the state of the world affairs. We as children thought this man was the big friend of all the world leaders. We thought he visited the presidents and dictators and talked to them with their legs on the table, smoking good cigars and drinking whiskey or cognac. And in fact we thought he even told the great leaders how to deal and act in the world. After the half hour radio programme, my parents restarted whatever they were doing, knowing that everything in the world was watched by mr. G.B.J. He knew what was happening and would warn us if things went wrong. I think every country had its own mr. G.B.J. Hiltermann during that time. The one-dimensional idea of an authority who knows how the world works. The world of the expert.

But at the same time my parents' world changed radically. After the post-modern revolution, the world of the expert fell down like pottery. His one-dimensional world fell to pieces. As mr. G.B.J. Hiltermann was an icon of my parents' world, the image of broken pottery is the icon of the world today.

But what to do with these pieces. I think there are three possibilities. We can deny that the pottery has fallen in pieces and sweep then under the carpet as if nothing has happened.

the second possibility is to try to stick the pieces together in order to reconstruct the original pottery. The discussion all over Europe about rules and standards and values are the manifestation of a kind of homesickness for the world of mr. G.B.J. Hilterman. But the pottery didn't fall without a purpose. The world did change, the stories we used to give meaning to the world no longer fit in with reality. We have to construct new stories, develop new ways of thinking, use new paradigms. In other words, we have to stick the pieces of pottery together in a totally different way. Maybe we can learn something from Antonio Gaudi in his Parc Guell in Barcelona. Old pieces of pottery stuck together in such a way that new images arose. Or in the new housing estate near Nijmegen, where every house front has its own artist impression, and the most beautiful house is the one covered with a mosaic of fallen pottery. A new meaning based on old fragments.

The rhizome of Gilles Deleuze

What we need is a new way of thinking, of constructing reality. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze tried to develop an escape route away from traditional thinking. (2 He saw the world as a rhizome. In fact, a constantly changing and growing root system. The rhizome as an image for a way of thinking in which every traditional sequence is abandoned, a non-linear way of thinking. A nomadic lifestyle as a metaphor for a new way of giving meaning. The rhizome is constantly growing, constantly changing. You can enter the rhizome in many different ways; there are many possible tracks within the system. It is about parallel or synchronic thinking instead of the traditional linear approaches we are used to. A way of thinking which fits in with the idea of sticking the pieces of fallen pottery together; in order to give new meaning to the world we live in. A metaphoric way of thinking and constructing.

There is no place for the romantic belief in heritage or preserving 'the world we have lost' in these ways of thinking, and 'saving the past before it is too late'. In these ways of thinking heritage becomes more and more of a tool, an interpreting tool which can be used to construct new meaning, give material to new interpretations. In this way of thinking the practices of the arts and the heritage world come together. Both arts and heritage can act as guides to enter the rhizome of Deleuze, in order to explore the confusing reality of the world as it appears to us. As we use the objects of heritage as artists deal with the world, a very strong meaning-giving tool can be developed. But a tool is not enough. A tool always needs material to use it. A tool can't deal with nothing. I would propose a broad project to apply these ideas to the role of heritage in the 21st century. A project with European identity as the main subject, or material. And metaphoric thinking as a tool in the Deleuzian rhizome.

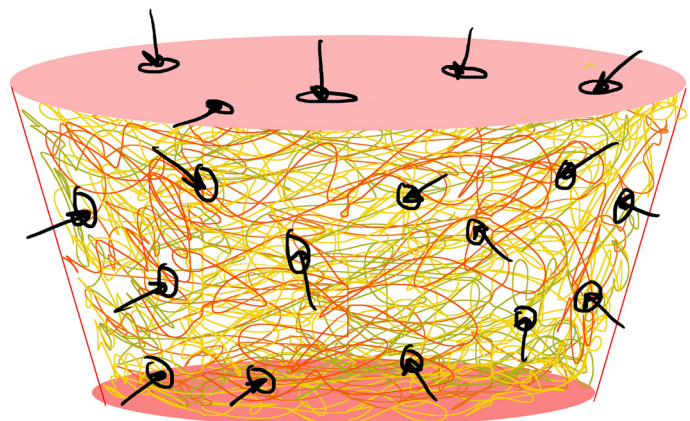
Fluid identity

Identity in the 21st century seems to be a problem. As the old stories and tools no longer fit in as a meaning-giving instrument in a global world, we often use the word identity in a variety of contexts. And the more a word is used in the media, the bigger the problem becomes in people's minds. We are constantly in search of the identity of a community. But as long as we deal with this phenomenon with the old tools of the past centuries, the results will not be satisfactory. We approach identity, especially European identity, in a 19th century way. As mr. G.B.J. Hilterman used to do. We try to write our identity down on a piece of paper; let's call it the European constitution. But identity in a post-modern society is not vast, it's fluid. Identity takes the form of the vessel in which it's poured. It appears in a particular context. Identity is a rhizome.

Identity in this way of thinking is fluid or a rhizome in its appearance, but of course not totally coincidental. There is always a reason why things are as they are. But we do not always know that reason. Maybe there is something like a European DNA which makes the rhizome grow as it grows. But we can only find that DNA if we accept the appearance of the outcomes of this DNA as a rhizome. And if we are willing to enter the rhizome. We have to enter that rhizome as archaeologists. Start with what we see and interpret our observations layer by layer.

Outlines of a project on fluid identity

The outlines of a project on 'Fluid European Identity', or maybe 'The Archaeology of the European DNA' would be a better title. So we have to start with the appearance of European identity. Therefore we have to accept it as a rhizome. All kinds of appearances which mingle together in a great vessel. Something like the upper part of the funnel in the image.



As archaeologists we should dig in this rhizome in as many different ways as possible. We have to metaphorically try to make Europe's cultural biography understandable. Using techniques of the arts on heritage items. In projects which challenge people all over Europe to express their answers to metaphoric questions. An example of such a project is about the borders of Europe. When an artist draws an object, he can do that in two ways. He can draw a line and show the outlines of the object. Or he can use his pencil to draw the surface. Two ways to show an object.



But what or where are the outlines of Europe? Select ten places on the topographic or political borders of Europe and give 20 people a camera. Together with the camera ten questions are asked. Questions like: where is the border; what does the border smell like, what does the border look like to you, ...? People are asked to answer every question with ten pictures. The second question is to write a story which connects the pictures in a personal meaningful context about the border. Afterwards the 200 stories and 2000 pictures from 10 places on the presumed border are published on a website and people from

inside Europe are challenged to react to the pictures and stories and add their own ideas.

Another possibility could be found in the idea of the surface of Europe. All the main European museums include paintings which represent the typical Italian, the typical Englishman, What if we produce a picture of these main characters, undo them from their paraphernalia, ... so that only the face remains.

Produce posters of these faces, publish them on the project website and ask visitors to the website if they have seen these people in their neighbourhood recently. The underlying question is if the typical Italian, the typical Englishman or the typical Frenchman actually exists. Or maybe new media like Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook could provide a European network for this purpose.

Several of these projects could dig in the rhizome of European identity: what is news on the newspaper front pages all over the different European countries, dialect map of European icons, For me Europe is ..., hang-ups, Europe through the eyes of ..., European pictures, Europe as a living museum, And of course existing projects which intend to show the variation of giving meaning within a theme which can be translated in a subjective map of Europe and add to the content of the central website.

All these projects will be published on the central website and educational programmes will challenge people all over Europe to add their comments, ideas, ... to the maps.

This way will allow us to map the rhizome of European identity.

Grammar, morphemes and European DNA

The next step in the project should be something like the Photoshop command 'flatten image'. Flatten all the fragmental information of all the different subjective maps to one map: what will the result be? What conclusions can be drawn from this flattened map? Is it possible to conclude something like the grammar of European identity?

Can we describe this grammar as a proposal for the way the appearance of European identity works, or expresses itself?

And as we can describe this European grammar, is it then possible to name the morphemes of European identity in the next step?

And can we extract the European DNA from these morphemes in the last phase?

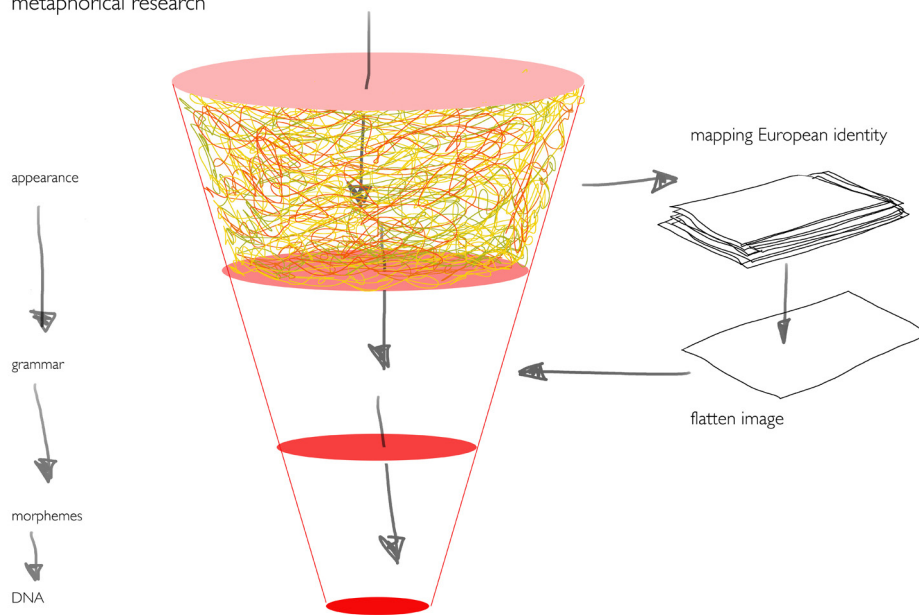
the key-rule in this method is the belief that is you can name the similarity, differences will be debatable. And will even be more interesting.

If we combine disciplines like heritage, philosophy, arts and identity in a multi-disciplinary approach. If we are ready to collect the pieces and stick them together in a new way, a new form. If we are able to develop a context where people can give meaning to the world they live in. And if we are able to leave the beaten tracks. Then heritage will have a

very bright future. It will acquire its legitimacy from a meaning giving society, it will be a tool to develop identity, not only by talking and discussing it, but by doing it.

Maybe the term heritage will then no longer be quite so adequate and maybe not even interesting. Heritage as a legitimacy from the 19th and 20th century meaning of the nostalgic and romantic idea of 'the world we have lost' will be no basis for the future of this discipline. It can find its basis as a tool for meaning-giving and constructing identity.

metaphorical research



NOTEN

(1) Felicity J. Colman, rhizome in: Adrian Parr (red) The Deleuze Dictionary, Edinburgh, 2005, Edinburgh University Press Ltd.

(2) Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, 1987, A thousand plateaus, London, New York, Continuum

VERANTWOORDING

Dit artikel is een lichte bewerking van de tekst van een lezing die werd gehouden ter gelegenheid van het colloquium The Future of Heritage. Changing visions, attitudes and contexts in the 21st century van 21 - 24 maart 2007 in Gent.

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