



## Protestant Theological University

### Dots on a blank sheet

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# Dots on a blank sheet

## Procedures in ritual and liturgical research

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### 1. Dots on a blank sheet

Reflections on the nature of their research results are uncommon among scholars in Liturgical Studies. The work of Martin Stringer is an inspiring exception in this respect. His reflections on the notion of ‘discourse’ in his latest book and on Paul Bradshaw’s characterization of historical evidence as ‘a few faint dots’ on ‘a blank sheet of paper’ in his article in this volume, are good examples of this – in our opinion: indispensable – academic attitude.

Stringer, quoting Paul Bradshaw, distinguishes two responses to the dots and the sheet: the ‘splitters’ and the ‘lumpers’. Bradshaw’s lumpers ‘try to develop a unified story that manages to join up all the dots and to create a single coherent narrative’; the splitters ‘tend to focus on each dot as a unique individual instance, and resist any attempt to join them up or to create a coherent narrative’. Stringer, carefully searching for ‘a trajectory through the dots’, tries to construct a narrative by posing ‘what if’ questions. This ‘one possible trajectory’ may be termed ‘speculation’.

Stringer limits his reflections to the historical approach of liturgy, more specifically, to the origins of the Eucharist. Inspired by Bradshaw’s ‘parable of the dots on the blank sheet’, and by Stringer’s article, we will transfer Stringer’s reflections to the research of contemporary ritual-liturgical practices, and radicalize his thesis. We will state that also the investigation of present-day liturgical ritual results in data that are mere dots on a blank sheet of paper, and that the concluding section of our research reports is not to be characterized as a ‘provisional narrative’ of a thus far only partly known unlimited set of empirical data, but as one of an endless number of possible interpretations of a limited ritual-liturgical practice. We simply do not assume that any liturgical-ritual practices will ever be fully known. On the contrary, we presume that they can be understood in many ways that cannot be reduced to each other. These interpretations are guided by the selected methods of the research and by the position of the researcher or of the research group.

The ‘parable of the dots on the blank sheet’ raises a great many questions. What are these dots, do the dots of academic scholarly knowledge differ from those of artistic aesthetical understanding? (2). And what is this blank sheet (3)? If we investigate ritual and liturgy, what exactly do we explore, what do we get to know? These are ontological and epistemological questions. This article is thus about the character of our knowledge in liturgical and ritual studies.

## 2. What about the dots?

### Academic procedures

When discussing Martin Stringer's paper in our research group, we concluded that it is the researcher who makes the dots through his or her research. Dots are not 'pre-given', but consciously fixed on the blank sheet of the investigated rite. What is the character of the dots? Do the dots have an independent existence apart from their interpretation? We do not think so. We spatter the dots of evidence on a blank sheet through our empirical, usually qualitative, research and through our analyses of the empirical data. The methods that we use are as a rule borrowed from the social sciences.

### Empirical qualitative research

Let us first describe our dot-splashing process, in other words, the basic research design that we use in our research of Liturgical Studies, and then return to the character of the dots.

From the beginning, we started out by clearly limiting our research of the field through the research question, through the methods we select, and through a selection of elements in the research domain. We purposely aim at just a few dots.

The empirical research is the kernel of our projects. There are bookshelves full of methodological literature; we refer here only to a few publications that we frequently use as handbooks in our research projects, without suggesting that there is no other specified literature on details or on specific settings. Our research is qualitative and mainly ethnographic in character.

As a rule, we use methodological triangulation in the projects. According to Jennifer Mason, triangulation provides different 'levels' of answers, approaching the research questions from different angles.<sup>1</sup> It is not possible to obtain an accurate reading or measure of one and the same phenomenon by investigating it from different angles or positions, as if methods could be used to demonstrate the validity of other methods. It is a misconception to think of methods as corrective measures, because, as Mason states:

this implies a view of the social world which says that there is one, objective, and knowable social reality, and all that social researchers have to do, is to work out which are the most appropriate triangulation points to measure it by.<sup>2</sup>

Mason clearly rejects a one-dimensional perception of reality and encourages researchers to use triangulation in a rounded and multi-faceted way.

<sup>1</sup> J. MASON: *Qualitative Researching* (London 2002) 59f.

<sup>2</sup> MASON: *Qualitative Researching* 190.

Comparing the investigated Christian ritual – this is how we consider liturgy in our research – with a blank sheet, which we will go into further below, the dots that we splash on the paper by our research, differ in character. We generate these dots by observations, by interviews and conversations, and by consulting written sources like liturgy sheets, websites, prayer books et cetera.

For example, in our liturgical-ritual ethnographic research, we use participant observation to gain information on the actual performed ritual of the church's worship ('what they are actually doing'). Participant observation is a basic method of ethnography, and it exists in various shapes (complete participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant, complete observer).<sup>3</sup> The empirical data that we collect consists of field notes, sound recordings,<sup>4</sup> video clips and pictures of worship services,<sup>5</sup> as well as of sound recordings of interviews with churchgoers, ministers et cetera. As researchers, we join and observe activities concerning the liturgy, which takes place in the investigated churches. This provides information on what churchgoers are actually doing concerning the liturgy. Besides, participant observation enables us to acquaint ourselves with the native's points of view in these churches, i.e., to 'learn their language', to get to know the inside perspective. Churchgoers become sources of information. This is important with an eye to the interviews and conversations.<sup>6</sup> Since we wish to obtain answers that make sense, we need to pose our questions in the 'language' (the system of terms and concepts) of the explored field concerned. Sometimes we use methods in which participants in liturgical-ritual become observers, for example by giving them a camera and by letting them describe and interpret the photographs later. We did so in our research of youth worships at worship events.

In contrast with the reflective character of written sources, interviews and particularly informal conversations are often more spontaneous. These spontaneous reactions can be personal or even emotional, especially when people are asked to tell what they are doing in worship. In order to probe the meanings of liturgy to its performers ('what they say they are doing'), we involve these performers in the research and give them the floor as informants. Eventually, as performers, they are the ones who attribute meanings to the performance of ritual. By asking them what they were doing when performing the liturgy, by collecting their stories, we gain an insight into the way these people make sense of the ritual and the accompanying ritual actions and movements. Interviews and conversations proved to be ultimately suitable for this purpose.

The next step in the research process is processing the empirical data. We will not go into this in this article. The empirical data can be analyzed in various

<sup>3</sup> M. HAMMERSLEY & P. ATKINSON: *Ethnography. Principles in Practice* (London & New York: Routledge 2007<sup>3</sup>) 82.

<sup>4</sup> HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON: *Ethnography* 147f.

<sup>5</sup> HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON: *Ethnography* 148f.

<sup>6</sup> HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON: *Ethnography* 97-120.

ways, on a variety of levels and from various perspectives, and a range of concepts can be developed, all dependent on the research question. Hammersley and Atkinson's 'general principle' guides our analyzing procedures:

the most important lessons to be learned about ethnographic analysis derive from the necessity of thinking not only *about* one's data, but also *with and through* the data, in order to produce fruitful ideas.<sup>7</sup>

One more remark: in order to contribute to the development of the methods in Liturgical Studies, and, at the same time, to try and make our empirical research as transparent as possible, we report in detail on the way we processed the empirical data.

Further, the native's point of view, or: inside perspective, on the ritual is confronted with the 'outside', scholarly or theological point of view of scholars in Theology and Liturgical Studies. We will come to that.

### **The character of the dots from an academic perspective**

This is roughly how our research – and that of many others in our field – is designed. Now back to the question: what is the character of the data that we collected and of our reconstruction, analysis and interpretation of it?

We will introduce the answer to this question with an example: one of us reports her investigations on the sound of worship in two immigrant churches in Amsterdam. She says: 'I observed people singing, I saw someone drumming, I felt someone behind me was jumping while praying (first level: perceptions of a phenomenon by the researcher); I spoke with interviewees about their dancing sound performance in church (second level: reconstructions of their and my perceptions of a phenomenon), of which they said it was done orderly (third level: interpretation of their reconstructed perception of a phenomenon)'. By publishing the results of the observations, reconstructions and interpretations, and by presenting and discussing them in academic, societal and ecclesial meetings, a fourth level is added to the 'dots'. This final step makes clear that academic and societal discourse is part of the ritual discourse (see below on this concept).

With regard to the character of the dots, we have to conclude that we have to make distinctions within their character. We distinguish several levels in our research data, at least four, i.e. four different levels of interpretations of the same rite:

1. the liturgical phenomena as they are perceived by
  - a. the researchers and
  - b. the participants
2. the reconstructions of the phenomena by the same

<sup>7</sup> HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON: *Ethnography* 168.

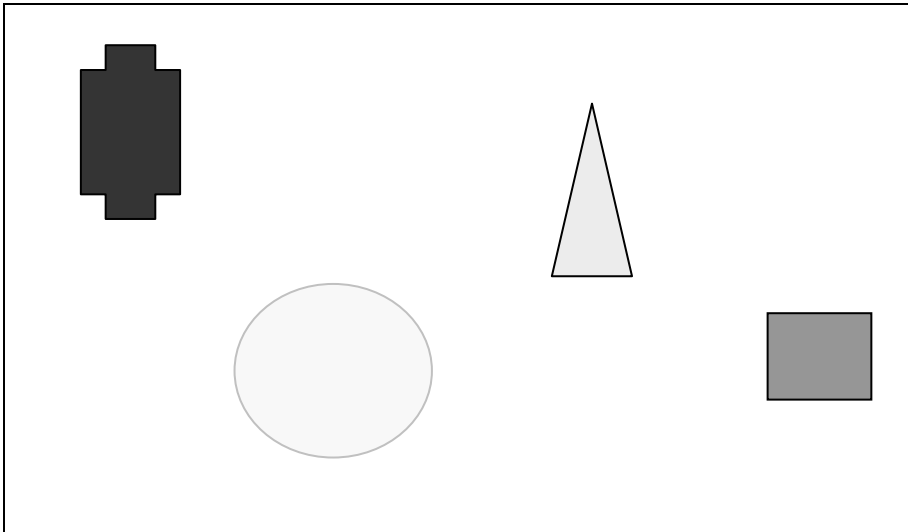
- a. researchers and
- b. participants
3. interpretation of their reconstructed perception of the phenomena by
  - a. the researchers and
  - b. the participants
4. the interpretation of the interpretation of the named reconstructions in further
  - a. academic discussions and
  - b. societal and ecclesial discourses.

None of these levels *is* the liturgical rite. They are all dots on the blank sheet of paper that the ritual is, and in so far they are part of the ritual.

### Method and design

The dots are put on paper through a method and design. They are not completely accidental. Perhaps it is better not to speak of splashing or spattering dots, but of a process of laying on graphics that can be imitated. The process of adding the dots to the blank sheet is pushed on by a process that can be verified and expressed *in a rational and discursive language*.

When we try to catch these considerations in a graphic design, it will show *regularly* shaped dots on a white field.



### Artistic procedures

Inevitably the notion of graphics leads us to the border region of science and art. Academic scholars as well as artists express themselves in 'dots'. The arts is

a relevant domain for liturgical studies. Liturgy has been investigated from a theological perspective and is usually researched by academic theologians, who are supposed to be able to handle *emic* and *etic* points of view (but see below in the third section of this article). Needless to say that there is no liturgy without artistic qualities: music, performance and the (furniture of) the liturgical space are phenomena that may be explored by methods borrowed from Theatre Studies, Musicology, Architecture, et cetera. From an *emic* perspective, these observable facts may be better understood by artists. If research in the arts is a legitimate possibility, it will deepen our understanding of the liturgy.

So the question arises whether research in the arts is a legitimate option and if so, whether there is any difference in the way academic scholars and artists acquire knowledge of reality, and thus in the way they splatter or lay on dots on a blank sheet? This is a much discussed issue nowadays.

For a theoretical framework on this topic we refer to the theory of Bruno Latour, professor in the anthropology of science at Sciences Po Paris. He says that religion, art and science are closely connected. For this reason we opt for Latour's theory, which offers a chance to discuss practices of faith and their academic and artistic study on one and the same level. In 2002 Latour edited a volume called *Iconoclash. Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*.<sup>8</sup> By using Latour's theoretical framework, we observe how the notion of 'dots' moves toward the concept of 'image'.

Latour construes a relationship between the three domains of science, religion and arts by postulating that all three of them require the image as an intermediary, and at the same time show ambivalence toward the image. Is the image an expression of truth, even of objective truth, or is it a human construct, 'showing the hands of humans at work'?<sup>9</sup> Is it reality or a construction of the human mind? Latour expresses this ambivalence with a neologism, the notion of *iconoclash*. We follow Latour in his explanation of the ambivalent relationship of religion, science and art toward the image. We will come back to the notion of 'truth' in a later section of this article.

In Latour's thinking image is a broad notion; it does not only include the visual image, but also writing, rites, music, words, statistics, concepts, pictures, descriptions – in short all expressions that claim to approximate the truth in the domains of art, science and faith, without being this truth themselves.

The question as to what is truth, cannot be answered without images and at the same time these images do not constitute the truth. Latour's volume *Iconoclash* is a search for the current meaning of the second commandment of Mosaic law and the ambivalences that are called forth. What does the commandment 'Thou shall not make a carved image for yourself nor the likeness of anything in the heavens above, or on the earth below (...)' mean within a culture

<sup>8</sup> B. LATOUR & P. WEIBEL (eds.): *Iconoclash. Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art* (Karlsruhe etc. 2002).

<sup>9</sup> B. LATOUR: 'What is Iconoclash? Or is There a World Beyond the Image Wars?', in LATOUR & WEIBEL: *Iconoclash* 16.

that is totally satiated with images that it consumes continually? Latour wishes to overcome the ambivalence and proposes to rephrase the commandment as: 'Thou shall not freeze-frame any graven image'.<sup>10</sup> The image as an intermediary is a prerequisite, in art, science and religion. But the image itself should not be equated with the truth, nor should its necessity be denied. Latour attempts to surpass the paradox of the inevitable creation of images, by pleading for not presenting images as stills, not freezing them, nor destroying them, but by keeping them in motion.

Application of Latour's theory to our theme may help us to obtain an insight into the character of the dots. The dots are 'images', splashed on the blank sheet of 'truth'. They cannot be seen as separate from the blank sheet, and thus they refer *anyhow* to the 'real' ritual. They refer to their author as well, for they are nevertheless added to it by the artist, or the academic scholar. Likewise, the levels in research data as we distinguished them above, are images that have an ambivalent relation to the blank sheet.

Within Latour's theoretical framework, the first question, whether research in the arts is a legitimate option, can be answered positively, because artists *as well as* academic scholars express themselves in images ('dots') of an always elusive truth. The second question with regard to research in the arts is, whether there is any difference in the way academic scholars and artists acquire knowledge of reality, and thus in the way they splatter or lay on dots on a blank sheet? The Dutch scholar Henk Borgdorff is developing theoretical insights in research in the arts.<sup>11</sup>

First of all, we have to ascertain, that not all art practices are research, albeit that some artists call their art practices research. Art practices can be research if they aim at gaining knowledge and insight. Further, there has to be a clear research question, which has to be answered through previously determined methods. Finally, the results have to be documented and presented to a broader public of researchers, artists and others.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> LATOUR: 'What is Iconoclasm?' 37.

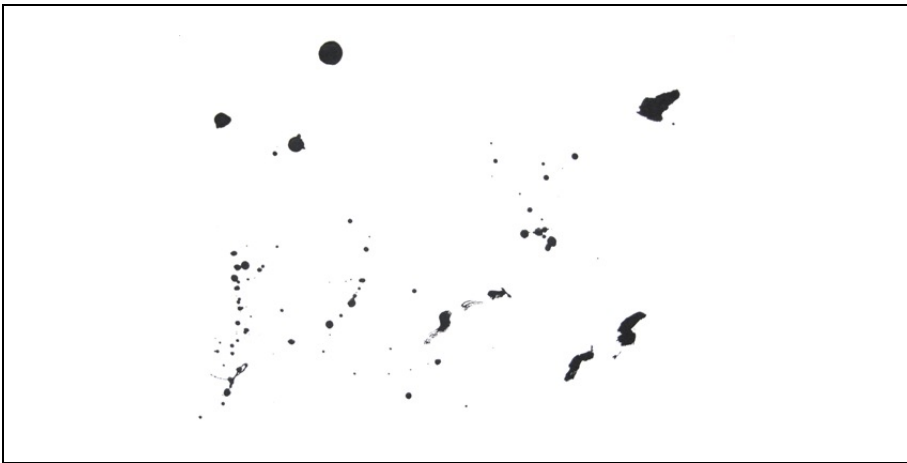
<sup>11</sup> H. BORGDORFF: 'Het debat over onderzoek in de kunsten' [The debate on research of the arts], at: [www.scienceguide.nl/pdf/20061018E.pdf](http://www.scienceguide.nl/pdf/20061018E.pdf), retrieved 2009.05.27; IDEM: 'Reactie op het artikel "Flexibele multipliciteiten" door Camiel van Winkel (20 oktober 2006)' [Reaction to the article "Flexible multiplicities" by Camiel van Winkel] (October 20th, 2006), [www.scienceguide.nl](http://www.scienceguide.nl), retrieved 2009.05.27. Borgdorff's position is contested, cf. C. VAN WINKEL: 'Flexibele multipliciteiten. Het discours over onderzoek in de kunst' [Flexible multiplicities. Discourse on research of the arts], [www.scienceguide.nl](http://www.scienceguide.nl), retrieved 2009.05.27.

<sup>12</sup> BORGDORFF: 'Het debat over onderzoek in de kunsten' [The debate on research of the arts] 19.



A main characteristic of research in the arts is, that ‘the art practice is a substantial part of the research process as well as of the results of that process’.<sup>13</sup> Borgdorff elaborates the identity of research in the arts on an ontological, an epistemological and a methodological level. *Methodologically*, research in the arts is being performed by artists, and he pleads for a peer group of artists to assess the research. He claims room for the experiment as a legitimate research method. On an *ontological* level, the main characteristic of research in the arts is that it is focussed on artistic objects as well as on creative processes. The making of the art and the art product itself, in their material as well as immaterial aspects, are objects to be investigated. ‘Research in the arts aims at articulating the embodied knowledge through the art process and in the art object.’<sup>14</sup> But how does one articulate in-art-embodied-knowledge? As a rule art practices are pushed on by non-conceptual and non-discursive processes. This question brings us to the main characteristic of research in the arts at an *epistemological* level. The knowledge embodied and situated in the art process and art objects ‘is non-conceptual, but definitely cognitive, non-discursive, but definitely rational’.<sup>15</sup> On an epistemological level, the question is how these contents should be expressed and communicated. In practice, it means that a systematic documentation of the creative process as well as of the art object itself should be part of the final presentation of the research.

When we try to catch these considerations in a graphic design, it will show *irregularly* shaped dots on a white field, the irregularity expressing the non-conceptual and non-discursive character of the dots.



<sup>13</sup> BORGdorFF: ‘Het debat over onderzoek in de kunsten’ [The debate on research of the arts] 7.

<sup>14</sup> BORGdorFF: ‘Het debat over onderzoek in de kunsten’ [The debate on research of the arts] 7.

<sup>15</sup> BORGdorFF: ‘Het debat over onderzoek in de kunsten’ [The debate on research of the arts] 16.

These considerations open new methodological fields in liturgical and ritual studies. One of us, Stefan Belderbos, is doing research on ecclesial liturgical ritual as a performing artist. Together with congregation members he initiates and performs artistic performances within Christian liturgy. The process of developing the performances, and the procedures of ‘entering the field’<sup>16</sup> of Christian congregations and convincing them of incidentally integrating art performances into the liturgy, as well as the performances themselves are the basic principle of the research. The starting point of the study was the conviction of the researcher, that the balance of discursive and presentative symbolism is disturbed in actual liturgical ritual and that the presentative qualities of ritual should be strengthened. Artistic performances are expressions of a presentative symbolic language par excellence. In them the non-present becomes present at a glance, in one moment. The discursive, on the contrary, expresses itself in distinctive thoughts.<sup>17</sup> The hypothesis of this new kind of research in the arts in the liturgical domain is, that the non-discursive and non-conceptual approach of research in the arts, results in a better understanding of the liturgical ritual. It will be clear that the nature of this understanding has to be distinguished from the more traditional academic approach.

### 3. What about the blank sheet?

What does the blank sheet represent in the parable of the dots and the blank sheet? In our understanding, the rite is more than its actual performance. We consider the blank sheet the liturgical ritual as it is understood *in its very nature* by its participants and by the researcher. In other words, the blank sheet is the rite as it is *ontologically* understood. In this sense it is something in itself, although we have no other access to the liturgical ritual, to the blank sheet, than by way of the dots that we ourselves splash onto the sheet. That is, we have no other access to the ritual than by way of the research data that we generate through participation, interviews and conversations, sound recordings and video clips, by consulting written sources. Otherwise, the rite escapes us. However, we subconsciously speculate on the character of the blank sheet, i.e. the character of the rite. Is it a completely human activity? Is the liturgy an act that should be understood as a co-operation or a mixture of a divine and a human reality? In theological terms: is the liturgy just a response to the divine reality, or is it part of or does it become part of that divine reality in the performance? Does the researcher start from a more reformed, a more Lutheran, a more roman-catholic, a more orthodox or a more secularized perspective on liturgy? The

<sup>16</sup> HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON: *Ethnography* 63-65.

<sup>17</sup> S. LANGER: *Philosophy in a New Key. A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* (Cambridge MA 1980<sup>3</sup>) 81, 96f, 260.

starting point, or more precisely, the point of view of the researcher determines the way he or she looks at the phenomena.

But the blank sheet is also the rite in as far as it escapes our knowledge and understanding. It is the sheet in as far as it is not covered with dots, the rite in as far as it is *not empirically investigated*.

In summary, the blank sheet is the rite in as far as it escapes us, in as far as it is open to speculations, convictions and beliefs.

In our respective research projects we sometimes have substantial discussions about the particularity of the researcher and the way in which his or her particularity should be introduced into the research project. We discovered by experience what we already knew from our reading of current, often post-modern, philosophy: that we had to make clear our starting point, our own particularity, and that we had to bring the language that belongs to that particularity into dialogue with the data that we obtained from our field work. Or, even more, we became conscious that our ontological view determines the empirical data that we collect and the story that we tell on the basis of our empirical data, and that we have no choice but to establish our ontological position. We have to do so because there is no universal meta-language comprising all particular languages. Particular languages can only be brought into a discourse that aims at a common understanding. One can think of academic, societal and ecclesial discourses in this regard.

It will be clear that these discourses include the perceived ontology of the rite as well as the empirically obtained data (the rite is only accessible through the data that we collect). The blank sheet and the dots cannot be seen separately from each other. It also means, that discourses cannot be approached, but only performed: the researcher inevitably participates in the investigated liturgical ritual and cannot take an external stand.

Here the notion of 'truth' comes in again. The different ontological positions reveal that there is no absolute and universal 'truth'. Nevertheless, we have our own ontological positions, convictions and beliefs, and they have to be recognized and described. We once more quote Jennifer Mason extensively:

(...) what you see as the very nature and essence of things in the social world, or, in other words, what is your *ontological* position or perspective. (...) Yet it is only once it is recognized that alternative ontological perspectives might tell different stories, that a researcher can begin to see their own ontological view of the social world as a position which should be established and understood, rather than an obvious and universal truth which can be taken for granted. (...) / ... different versions of ontology may be logically competing rather than complementary, so that one cannot simply pick and choose bits of one and bits of another in an eclectic *ad hoc* way, although nor do you have to take a doctrinaire approach. What is required is active engagement.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> MASON: *Qualitative Researching* 14f.

To give an example: three junior researchers associated with the chair in Liturgical Studies – although they are to a certain degree three comparable, young, modern, western, well-clothed, et cetera women – have completely different views on faith. In other words, they are to a high degree similarly coded on a cultural level, but differently on the level of faith. One of them is rooted in the classical reformed tradition and for her there is no liturgy without the notion of ‘faith’. The second one is rooted in the Lutheran tradition and she believes that liturgical-ritual is sacramental in character and although ‘faith’ for her is not absent in liturgy, the certainty of the gift of God’s grace in liturgy prevails, whereas the third one – she monitors the making of a new hymnal in our churches – is mostly interested in the anthropological phenomenon of liturgical discourse and its theological arguments, although the ecumenical-protestant discourse makes her feel more at home than other discourses. These different views are possible biases in the research and for this reason they should be clarified from the beginning. The research gains in transparency by doing so. Yet they are not only possible biases, but also challenges that make it possible to see things that others do not and to generate answers that others cannot give.

The former junior researcher, who is rooted in the classical-reformed tradition, is investigating youth worship, and meets a lot of young people with a reformed background. This is absolutely of added value to the research, because she understands the language that they speak better than those of us who are rooted in a more liberal reformed tradition. Familiarity with the field makes it easier to enter the field, but has the disadvantage that one may miss out on its all too familiar characteristics.

In other words, there are many presuppositions concerning the blank sheet, and we all speak in different languages about that sheet. There is no overarching language that comprises all others. There is no way out of our own particularity. What we should do is trying to learn other languages and to engage in dialogue. In other words, we should organize intersubjectivity as part of our research designs. Ethnographic research of liturgical ritual is about these efforts. But this means that there are many stories to tell about one blank sheet, depending on the particular starting point of the researcher.

So is there no standard at all? Not an absolute one, only a provisional one that results from dialogue. For example, in the research group around the chair of Liturgical Studies of the Protestant Theological University, Protestantism is the overarching notion of the particular positions in the group. But also this notion has to be reinvented in every new research project and in every conversation. And we admit that there are other positions and researchers with other particularities with whom we are happy to work.

#### 4. Radicalization of Martin Stringer's thesis

In conclusion, Derrida says that we have no choice but to limit ourselves to 'reading' the signifiers (the dots: the perceptions and reconstructions of rituals), which only present each other in their mutual connection. He admits that we always do so from a particular point of view. This particular perspective is one among others: there is no absolute centre to all discourses, no 'true word'. According to Derrida, there is no choice but to play the game with the signifiers and thus to create the fleeting function of 'meaning'. But neither within nor beyond the game there is a centre, a final meaning-founding truth which can be appropriated definitively.

Every case that we investigate is a limited field that can be observed, analyzed and described in an endless number of descriptions and interpretations. There is no true, or original, discourse. There is not a definitive knowable truth of the blank sheet. Sense is a fleeting function of the differentiation of the respective signifiers (dots) on the blank sheet, and within this structure there is not a knowable centre which is presented or focussed on and which can be appropriated definitively. Forever *significatum* and *significans* (signified and signifier, blank sheet and dots) are no longer thinkable within one fixed and coherent code. There are many codes, as there always have been many.

So, ultimately, to radicalize the thesis of Martin Stringer: the interpretations that we assign to the dots that we ourselves splash onto the blank sheet are not provisional in the sense of incomplete narratives (we need more dots on the blank sheet to arrive at a more complete understanding), but they are particular, and therefore each interpretation is one among an endless possible number of interpretations of a limited liturgical practice: every researcher or research group splashes his, her, its own dots onto the blank sheet. However, this does not mean that they are completely arbitrary: the procedures are anyhow performed methodologically, i.e. they can be checked and imitated. Furthermore, the results of the research are being discussed in academic, societal and ecclesial discourses and are thus assessed on their sustainability.

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