

## 9 Pre-enacting *The Passion*

### Restaging Religious Heritage, Producing Unruly Audiences<sup>1</sup>

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‘Tonight we see this century-old story once again, but this time in a very contemporary guise. Because the story (...) is still relevant and addressed to you!’<sup>2</sup> Thus reads the booklet published on the occasion of the first Dutch *The Passion* performance in 2011. Since the first edition of this multimedia spectacle depicting the suffering, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, *The Passion* has garnered audiences between two and three million ranking annually amongst most watched Dutch TV shows of the year.<sup>3</sup> *The Passion* has become a mainstay in the run-up to Easter in the Netherlands.

*The Passion* is performed annually in a different city on Maundy Thursday by a changing cast of well-known Dutch artists, actors and celebrities. The passion play<sup>4</sup> takes the form of a multi-pronged musical performance: pre-recorded acts on locations across town enact Biblical episodes, and a narrator live on stage connects these episodes in the story of Christ. The Biblical episodes alternate with performances of Dutch pop songs. Beside the musicalised narrative, the event consists of a procession, during which a heavy, six-metre-long neon-lit cross is carried from the outskirts of the city to the centre by a diverse group of participants. Some of these participants are interviewed by a reporter who asks them what *The Passion* means to them. Simultaneously, a social media campaign stimulates the viewers at home to ‘share their passion’ on Facebook and on Twitter as well as to join in ‘the virtual procession’, in which over 25,000 people participate.

The popularity of this multimedia spectacle is met by a form of wonder articulated in a questioning of the popularity of *The Passion*. Each year, media coverage includes questions as: ‘Why has attending *The Passion* become a tradition in the Netherlands? Is it the way in which Christ’s narrative presents issues like death and redemption? Is it the perpetual longing by secular societies for some form of religion?’<sup>5</sup> The apparent contrast between a secularised country as the Netherlands and the popularity of *The Passion* has fuelled a particular interest in and speculation on stereotypical self-perceptions of ‘the Dutch’ as secular and down to earth (*nuchter*). The organisers themselves frequently attribute the success of *The Passion* to the healing capacity of a narrative of redemption: ‘even or perhaps especially

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secular societies like ours still have a longing for a tradition to rally around. The Christian story remains a universal story'.<sup>6</sup>

The popularity of *The Passion* unfolds against a current anxiety and growing contestation of the place of religious heritage in the Netherlands as well as elsewhere in Europe. As argued by scholars a general decline of institutionalised religion in Europe is mirrored by renewed interests in the Christian past (Meyer 2019), stirring a search for so-called Judeo-Christian roots as the source of the continent's culture (Hemel 2014; Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy 2016).<sup>7</sup> As a result religious traditions, rituals and performances are increasingly embraced and presented as relevant for present-day society. *The Passion* is presented as a (Christian) tradition, 'a centuries old-story' that still contains much value for a diverse and secular society as the Netherlands, framing the performance as connected to the alleged importance of Christianity-as-heritage for present-day Dutch society. In this manner, *The Passion* is a restaging of the European tradition of Passion plays.<sup>8</sup>

The discourse on the relevance of *The Passion* – as a story worth to be preserved and revitalised – is a heritage discourse; its mode of presentation – as a restaging – a heritage performance. However, this does not yet explain how such invocations of heritage succeed in drawing in such large and diverse audiences. Interested as we are in understanding the success of *The Passion*, we therefore focus on how *The Passion* 'works'. How to understand the power of persuasion that makes this novel 're-enactment' of the story of Christ's crucifixion so convincing that it allows a diverse secularised audience to participate?

For our analytical framework, we will build on insights formulated in the interdisciplinary field of 're-enactment studies' (Agnew, Lamb and Tomann 2020; Daugbjerg, Eisner and Knudsen 2017). Relying on the potential to create and generate affects, experiences and feelings, re-enactments are performed imaginations of past events. This makes re-enactments, according to scholars such as Agnew and Daugbjerg, a platform for a potentially liberating and open-ended way to stage the past and allow a diversity of meanings and experiences to be connected to it. In so far as it is a heritage performance, staged in ways that emphasise emotional attachment and participation by a diverse audience, *The Passion* can productively be approached as the re-enactment of an event that took place in a biblical past. What is more, the organisers emphasise that the emotionally effective and participation-oriented performance of *The Passion* is key to its success. Our ethnographic material, however, made us realise that the image of *The Passion* as a successful re-enactment of the last days of Jesus is based on quite some complex practices behind the scenes.

We introduce the notion of 'pre-enactment' to make sense of how organisers deploy a range of strategies to ensure the public image of *The Passion*. As an analytical tool, this notion will help to do two things: firstly, we use it to investigate how emotional involvement of audiences with *The Passion* is organised, and secondly, how this prescribes and produces what is supposed to take place. But first we will introduce *The Passion* in more detail.

### Christ on a Bicycle: The Timeless Relevance of *The Passion*

The first edition of *The Passion* took place in Gouda in 2011. From the first scenes onward, it was clear that in multiple ways the passion narrative is squarely placed in the present. The Gouda performance opened with a recording of Jesus riding his bicycle into town (see Figure 9.1). Jesus, played by Dutch pop singer Syb van der Ploeg, was dressed ‘as himself’ in present-day clothing, singing pop songs. In terms of their content the pop songs are not directly connected to the biblical narrative or religious at all, but instead are incorporated in the narrative by means of association. For instance, before his betrayal of Jesus, Judas sings *Ik leef niet meer voor jou* (‘My Life Is No Longer About You’). This well-known pop song by the Dutch-Italian singer Marco Borsato is usually understood as addressing the break-up between lovers. In *The Passion* setting, however, the song communicates the despondent feelings of Judas towards Jesus. For the audiences, of whom many know such pop songs by heart, this strategy of deploying popular culture enables an enthusiasm for the event, which otherwise would possibly be absent (Gärtner 2020).

*The Passion* is organised by a collaboration of broadcasting companies KRO/NCRV and the EO (from 2011 until 2020), the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN), the Dutch Roman Catholic Church, the Netherlands Bible Society (NBG) and the participating municipality. Each of these stakeholders have different aims and motives, which in turn, are related to



Figure 9.1 Screenshot *The Passion* 2011, Jesus, played by Syb van der Ploeg, enters the city of Gouda on his bicycle. EO/ RKK

broader dynamics in Dutch society. Collectively, organisers present *The Passion* as motivated by the desire to promote social values (for instance, ‘the universal story of connectedness’ is the performance’s annual returning slogan), yet each of the stakeholders relate to *The Passion* in a different manner. This will be illustrated by focussing on the way in which *The Passion* situates the story in contemporary locations.

The 2011 edition of *The Passion* sees scenes take place against various backdrops of the historical city centre of Gouda, a medium-sized town in the province of South Holland. Because of its association with Gouda cheese and its historical city centre, Gouda has an aura of iconical Dutchness. The city’s historical aesthetics served as a backdrop to *The Passion*: The Garden of Gethsamane was located in the picturesque thirteenth century Spieringstraat, Judas’ kiss took place in the Houtmansplantsoen, a nineteenth century city park known for its lavish scenery, and Christ appeared resurrected on the roof of the Sint Janskerk, Gouda’s monumental church also dating back to the thirteenth century. The location of central episodes of the Passion story at iconic places is a returning feature in all *The Passion* editions. In 2018, Christ met his pupils in front of the twenty-first century film museum in Amsterdam; he is betrayed in a monumentally restored prison building in Leeuwarden in 2017; and so far, he is resurrected each year by appearing on top of the most iconic high-rise building near the central stage, which allows for providing panoramic views of the city. This blending of city landscape and biblical scenes allows, so state the organisers, the audience to find a familiarity in the biblical narrative which they might not have experienced otherwise (Hoondert and Klomp 2014). But non-biblical considerations are important too: *The Passion* is an attractive marketing vehicle for city councils and municipalities. The spotlight placed on the landmarks of the host city makes the event a suitable and profitable form of city marketing.

Going into the world of funding behind *The Passion* here will lead too far from our central concerns. But it is important to realise that the staging of *The Passion* reflects the interests of stakeholders in multiple ways. For instance, *The Passion* financially depends on the funds allocated by the participating municipality, whose aim – drawing interest in the city – is different from that of, what could be denoted as, religion-oriented organisers. The choice of songs, attire and location thus package the biblical narrative to a contemporary audience, while at the same time articulating the interests of other stakeholders. The design of the performance of *The Passion* is the outcome of a complex process of negotiation between the various stakeholders’ interests.

### ***The Passion*: Societal Crisis as a Window of Opportunity**

The initiative to organise *The Passion* came from Jacco Doornbos, an evangelical media entrepreneur and, until 2020, *The Passion*’s creative director. Doornbos identifies himself as someone who combines his interest in spreading the gospel with a career as a producer of television programmes. After

having seen the first (and only) *The Passion* performance in Manchester in 2006, Doornbos was inspired by the potential of the ‘contemporary take’ on the story and decided to make a Dutch version when he realised that Dutch society was in the process of losing knowledge of Christianity. Looking back at his motivation at the time, in an interview in 2019 with Christian magazine CIP, Doornbos said:

When, more than ten years ago, I read that no more than 27 percent of people in the Netherlands know what Easter is about, I thought: ‘what can I do about this?’ Because whether you look at it from a religious, cultural or historical perspective, everybody should know this story.<sup>9</sup>

Doornbos explicitly sees *The Passion* as an attempt to intervene in a society in crisis, a society that loses interest in Christianity and thereby loses something which is of religious, cultural and historical value. He sees *The Passion* as an attempt to help counter this crisis by presenting the story of Christ in new ways.

Now, ten years later, Doornbos and other *The Passion* organisers agree that the performance is not just a success, but a phenomenon that has reached a popular appeal beyond expectation. Doornbos attributes the success of *The Passion* to a number of factors: the use of pop music, the use of participatory methods and the creative re-interpretation of the Christian tradition. According to Doornbos, the success is a tell-tale sign that *The Passion* succeeded in getting a secularised society interested in the Passion narrative. In an interview on Dutch radio in 2013, Doornbos explained that *The Passion* worked in the first place because people could identify with the emotions they knew or had experienced before when listening to a particular pop song or singer. The emotions form the medium, so to speak, that enable people – often for the first time in their lives – to connect with the story of Christ.<sup>10</sup> The combined use of multimedia, popular culture and contemporary ‘network society’ makes *The Passion* a narration of the Passion story that speaks the language of our time. *The Passion* follows the way of Jesus who also always reached out to the people by approaching them in their language. In a later interview, Doornbos attributed the success of *The Passion* mainly to the emotive power of music:

If you want to communicate emotion, music is a fantastic way to do that. You can see this in the Christian tradition. When you take music that is recognizable and you place it in the context of a story, all of a sudden people are moved. And yet, I never expected it to be so successful. And I think this is really because of the story [of Christ].<sup>11</sup>

As we see, in the end, he is also a bit puzzled by this success and speculates that this is proof of the strength of the story of Christ and the latent but sustained interest of secularised societies in this story.

A particularly remarkable occurrence is that virtually without exception commentators tend to copy the discourse of *The Passion* organisers themselves. In the work of journalists, academics and government reports, the success of *The Passion* is seen as indicative of the interest in a secularised performance of the story of Christ. In a recent report by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (*Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau* or SCP), the popularity of *The Passion* is connected to a presumed need for belonging in times of secularisation: ‘The popularity of *The Passion* might be related to a longing for collective connectedness and a shared sense of belonging in a secularised, individualised society’.<sup>12</sup> But is the success indicative of a general interest in the story of Christ? Is it proof that this story is seen as a collective tradition suitable for bringing together a diverse secularised society? Doornbos himself assumes so, as do the organisers of *The Passion* as well as commentators and certain scholars. For theologian Mirella Klomp for instance, *The Passion* is the living proof that there continues to be a space for God in a (post)secular society and that the Passion narrative is used, even by post-Christian populations, in meaningful and playful ways (2020). Without wanting to speculate about God in post-Christian societies, this article contrasts with the interpretations outlined above in that we focus on how *The Passion* and its audiences are made. Are such claims about the enthusiasm of the audience not also part of strategies used by organisers to make, market and promote the event? *The Passion*’s success might not be a straight-forward emblem of post-secular longing for religiosity or collective belonging.

It is against this backdrop – the sustained success of *The Passion* and the presence of a strong narrative about its significance as an indicator of societal longing for new ways to experience the story of Christ – that we embarked on a multiple-year ethnographic engagement with *The Passion*. In what follows we will draw on our first fieldwork trip to *The Passion* performance in 2017.<sup>13</sup> In that year, the event took place in the city of Leeuwarden.<sup>14</sup>

### Leeuwarden, Maundy Thursday 2017 – *The Passion* 7th edition

Case 1: ‘... And then something about my grandmother who passed away’: the cross-bearer interviews

The centre of the city was already abuzz with anticipation. Making our way to the square we passed cafes and restaurants with signs outside offering a variety of *The Passion*-inspired combo platters (‘Passion menu: apple pie with coffee 3,50!’). Broadcasting company KRO/NCRV had organised a free passion walk (*Passiewandeling*) for its members, a route leading along highlights of the city and the locations where scenes of *The Passion* were to take place. Although we were not members, we could join the walk for a fee of 7,50 pp. All passion walkers received a black-purple wristband with *The Passion*’s slogan for this year #ikziejou, (literally, ‘I see you’ connoting a conscious noticing,



not an indifferent watching), plus a goody bag filled with information on *The Passion* and a booklet of discount coupons to be spent at local entrepreneurs. We could recognise participants of the walk by their wristbands and the goody bags clenched under their arms. From short conversations with some of our fellow walkers, mostly elderly couples and women friends, we quickly learned that they would not stay to see the performance live in Leeuwarden, but would return home at the end of the day to watch *The Passion* on television that evening. *The Passion* event thus offered an excellent opportunity for a touristic discovery of Leeuwarden.

Around 2 PM, at the end of our city walk, we arrived on Wilhelminaplein, the central square of this year's *The Passion* performance. The stage, consisting of a catwalk, screens, and an elaborate lighting rig, had been set-up the day before and was ready for use. At this, in our opinion, early hour some fans were already lining up to assure a front row place for the performance starting at 7:30 pm. Passers-by made pictures of the stage and the preparations with their cell-phones. All in all, there was a pleasant atmosphere of anticipation. Technicians and stagehands were busy setting up the lights, testing the soundstage and checking the audio and video connection between the various elements of *The Passion*.

The latter is no easy feat. *The Passion*, as we outlined above, takes place in multiple locations simultaneously.<sup>15</sup> The square's stage is the performance's centrepiece: it is the place where the choir sings, the band plays, where the actors' singing is performed live, where the narrator presents the story, and where the final scenes of Christ's arrest, his (not-performed!) crucifixion and resurrection take place. It is also the place where the huge, neon-lit cross arrives, perfectly on time to symbolically articulate Jesus' final moments. During the performance, the narrator will switch back and forth between – mostly previously – recorded scenes at various places in the city, the procession and the events taking place at the square itself.

Not long after the opening scenes, mainly consisting of the narrator introducing the Passion story, its continuous relevance for society today, and the protagonists, the cross will be shown to the public via one of the screens on stage and, for the people at home, on their television screens. Waiting for departure at a peripheral location in the city (at Cambuurstadion, the local sports stadium), the cross – carried by eighteen cross-bearers – will move in slow pace (see Figure 9.2), guided by journalists and camera-, sound- and light- engineers, and followed by a crowd of mainly locals, who take the opportunity to participate in this element of the event. The cross is carried through local neighbourhoods, passing inhabitants watching the procession standing in their open doors, on their balconies or on pedestrian areas. This out-of-the ordinary performance evokes, in the Dutch context, associations with silent marches as well as funeral processions, a sensation also induced by the largely, but not always, solemn atmosphere.



Figure 9.2 Participants in the procession carry the cross, *The Passion* 2015, Enschede. Copyright ANP

In the meantime, on the square, every now and then the story of Christ is interrupted by a short interview with one of the cross-bearers. To this aim a designated *The Passion* reporter, usually a well-known Dutch media personality, walks along with the cross to conduct the interviews. These interviews unfold along the following format: a cross-bearer is asked why he or she carries the cross, upon which the answer will always involve a motivation that relates the personal life of the cross-bearer to the story of *The Passion*. The interviews focus on a variety of emotional episodes, like the loss of a loved one, overcoming hardship, celebrating being cured from a disease, or a general concern about the state of society today. By and large, the experienced hardships or feelings are not explicitly related to biblical messages or theological reflections about the afterlife or religiously-inspired morality. What matters instead is that a connection is made between the emotional charge of the narrative of the last days of Christ and the emotions felt by the person interviewed during that particular episode in his or her life. In order to assure meaningful and varied connections with *The Passion*, as well as to present an image of the event that is appealing to a diverse audience, the organisers take care in selecting their cross-bearers beforehand.<sup>16</sup>

That afternoon at Wilhelminaplein, we got a brief impromptu insight into what the organisers expect from a cross-bearer interview. While we were hanging out on the square, watching the testing and the people assembled, a sound-engineer busy with the audio and video installation, checked the connection with that year's reporter, presenter Kefah Allush. With the



wisdom of hindsight, one could label this moment as the channelling of an interview. The sound-engineer had been walking back and forth, communicating in technical lingo with what was presumably the control room. All of a sudden, the face of Kefah Allush appeared on the central screen. He clearly was somewhere out of the city centre. To our surprise, the sound and screen check took place in an ‘as if taking place during the procession’ fashion. While mirroring a walking in a slow trot, a mimicking of the speed at which the procession usually proceeds, Allush, as we see it, *pre-enacted* an interview situation with an imagined cross bearer. He did so by, almost mockingly, mimicking a fragment of an imagined interview:

‘And then something about my grandmother who passed away or something. Yeah, *The Passion* is really emotional for me.’

The episode opened our eyes to what we have come to understand as the phenomenon of pre-enactment. As we will elaborate below, other than the notion of re-enactment that places the emphasis on repeating what has been done before, pre-enactment highlights the importance of selection and control in an orchestrated attempt to ensure that the audience’s emotional reaction meets the organisers’ expectations. As with any spectacle in which audiences are expected to behave in a certain manner, audience participation is usually well prepared, and the organisers and engineers in charge of preparations for such a live event try to prevent the unexpected as much as possible. The sound-check we witnessed was aimed at preventing any technical mishaps, while at the same time revealing what was anticipated and prepared in the seemingly spontaneous and emotional interviews that would take place with the cross-bearers later. The short mimicking of *The Passion* crew of what is to be expected from a procession’s interview demonstrates the extent to which the performance of the procession is pre-figured well before the live event takes place. As we will outline in more detail below, an important element of pre-enactment is the attempt by the organisers to orchestrate the emotional reaction of the audience. However, as we will show now, there is always the chance that something unexpected happens, precisely because the topics are ‘emotional’.

Case 2: *‘Jesus makes me fart’: below the happy surface of the virtual procession*

‘If you can’t join us here, you can still be with us by joining the virtual procession! People have already posted lots of reasons for joining the online procession. (...) For instance, Esther says ‘The Passion is for me a beautiful musical telling of a century-old but still relevant story.’ You can also join us! Go to [www.live.thepassion.nl](http://www.live.thepassion.nl) and join’ (Reporter Kefah Allush inviting the audience to join the virtual procession).<sup>17</sup>

During *The Passion* viewers are regularly reminded that they can share what *The Passion* means to them by joining ‘the virtual procession’,

a second-screen application of a google-maps resembling interface, showing a slowly moving miniature luminescent cross. This cross, in other words, virtually follows the route of the physical cross procession. Those who want to join the procession have to log in by providing an on-screen name and a motivation for joining. To that end, participants are invited to finish the sentence: 'I join the procession because...' (*ik loop mee omdat...*). Subsequently, submitted sentences will appear floating across the screen, while the miniature cross moves. The screen also shows the total number of participants joining. In 2017, the counter showed 34.347 at the end of the procession.

The motivations that appear on screen are without exception uplifting and inspirational, and consist of a mixture of religious and secular motivations: 'I join the procession...' 'Because I think our time needs healing'; 'Because the story of Jesus is of value to us all'; 'Because I lost my mother last year and this story provides comfort'; 'Because we should all be nice to each other'. The virtual procession mirrors the format of the offline procession, where the cross-bearers are invited to express their reasons for joining. The motivations of the virtual procession participants confirm once more that a diverse audience, including large numbers of non-believers, participate and find meaning in the story of *The Passion*.

Curious to discover how the virtual procession digitally worked, we were happy to find out that the 2016 virtual procession was still accessible in November 2016. We signed up and provided the word 'test' as our motivation for participating. When we did not see the word test appearing on screen, we presumed that some sort of selection process was at play: presumably, a *The Passion* social media team was selecting motivations. Only motivations deemed eligible, apparently, would appear on the second screen application.

Armed with this modest insight, the 2017 Leeuwarden performance offered a first opportunity to zoom in on how participation was set up in the virtual procession. By means of digital methods, we were able to record and save the data: We downloaded all submitted motivations to participate in the virtual procession of *The Passion* 2017. This empirical material allowed us to compare those motivations selected by the organisers to appear on the second screen application with those that were not selected.<sup>18</sup> This way we gained insight in the kind of motivations the organisers deemed an appropriate expression of the meaning of *The Passion*. We argue that these sorts of pre-selections and selective presentations of audience participation may be understood as 'pre-enactments'. Pre-enactments attempt to orchestrate reactions to a performance. Orchestration can take place by rendering less desirable reactions less visible or obscuring them from view altogether.

Because we were able to compare the motivations that appeared on screen to the entirety of submitted motivations, we were able to identify the contrast between the image crafted by the selections and the complete dataset. The latter contrasts sharply with the motivations as they appeared on screen. It was an eye-opener to learn that out of 24.000 submissions,

only 150 had been marked as 'carousel'. In other words, *The Passion* social media selection team had marked the submissions almost in their entirety – 99.04% – as rejected. The motivations that were selected present an image of a diverse, not exclusively Christian community of participants. As one might expect, explicitly derogatory submissions were rejected, as with racist content ('fuck muslims', 'death to the cancer jews'), lewd content ('Because I miss my mistress', 'Jesus makes me fart') or nonsensical content, seemingly submitted just to get past the login screen ('asdfsadgdag').

Also, submissions with exclusivist confessional content were rejected, for instance those invoking Christian religion as the exclusive entry into heaven, ('Only Jesus saves, non-believers go to hell!') or those that expressed a religiously motivated rejection of *The Passion* ('I refuse to join the procession out of principle: so much of *The Passion* goes against the Bible why are the most important elements left out?') Comparing the complete dataset with the selected motivations also made clear that submissions that expressed apparently undesirable emotion were excluded. Examples include negative motivations such as 'because my son and grandchildren were taken away from me by a Judas' or 'because our culture is so much better'.

Motivations deemed suitable conveyed messages of healing, unity, compassion. The selection expressed emphasis on diversity on multiple levels: christian and non-christian, young and old, as well as a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds were apparently seen as desired illustrations of the audience of *The Passion*.

Altogether, these selections craft an image of the virtual procession, and by implication of *The Passion* as a whole, as emotionally uplifting and universally inclusive. As we have shown, the complete dataset showed a much more complicated and less lofty reality. *The Passion* may evoke all sorts of reactions, inclusive and uplifting but also exclusive and vitriolic, seriously engaged but also playfully sacrilegious. In short, the complete dataset shows an unruly dimension of audience participation that needs to be kept under control. This element of control is aimed at ensuring the public image of *The Passion* mirrors how the organisers envision it. Such crafting of audience participation is not limited to the virtual procession but it is equally important in real-life performance of *The Passion* as it unfolded on the square.

#### Case 3: *Barabbas, titties and beers: Lewd chants and city marketing*

Twenty minutes before *The Passion* would start the area closest to the stage was closed off because the maximum capacity of people had been reached. This generated some hassle and tussle between those whose friends or relatives had found a place on the other side of the fence. The security lining the perimeter however was strict: no one was allowed to cross to the other side anymore. Small groups of teenagers had gathered at the back of the square, their behaviour beginning to show some of the effects of the number of beers we had seen them consuming.

The atmosphere changed from a calm sense of anticipation to a more boisterous expression of excitement. Slowly, some activity could be seen on the stage: the choir rehearsed its entrance, the narrator appeared walking up and down along, for the audience invisible, choreographed lines and camera positions. Then, although well before the start of the performance, he addressed the crowd. After asking for attention, first by greeting the audience, subsequently by hushing them, he said:

Dear people, we are about to start. But we also need something from you. On two occasions. The first is when we ask you whether we should release Jesus or Barabbas. You are going to yell 'Barabbas!'. The other moment is in a couple of minutes, just before we will begin. I will ask you for your associations with your city, Leeuwarden. And you may for instance yell 'Cultural capital of Europe!' and 'The Glass House' (*Het Glazen Huis*).

The narrator's latter suggestions refer to Leeuwarden having been the host of The Glass House, a popular annual Christmas charity show, organised by Dutch national radio, in 2013, and its nomination as Europe's Cultural Capital in 2018. One could say that these were indicative of city marketing.<sup>19</sup> His suggestion for Barabbas, on the other hand, resorts to the passage in the New Testament, where Pontius Pilate asks the assembled crowd who to release: Barabbas, a known convict in biblical Jerusalem, or Jesus? Pilate qualifies his question by stating that according to him, Jesus did nothing wrong. However, the crowd, bent on seeing Christ executed, shouts 'Barabbas', thus sealing Jesus' fate and becoming complicit in his death. Here, the narrator follows, one could say, the biblical story.<sup>20</sup>

The latter is a recurring part of the *Passion* performance (see Figure 9.3). Every year the audience is invited to chant Barabbas' name. What is more, in the build-up towards *The Passion*, the disclosure of who is to play the role of Barabbas is kept a surprise. Each year a different celebrity plays the role of Barabbas, preferably a celebrity who has committed a faux pas of sorts. When the narrator announced that we, the audience, were to chant the name 'Barabbas' people speculated who was to play the role and people exchanged anecdotes about previous years and potential candidates. As it turned out, the choice had fallen on a disgraced athlete, who had been caught using doping and cocaine.

After having made his suggestions, the narrator instructed the audience to rehearse the participation:

So, let's rehearse so that when the performance starts we will know what to do. What do you think about when I say Leeuwarden?

However, instead of answering 'Cultural Capital of Europe' or 'The Glass House', a group of young men in our vicinity began to chant 'Titties and Beer: lalalala!' (*Bier en Tieten: Tralalalala!*). Laughter erupted from the crowd. Elsewhere on the square, people also started chanting this tune, a lewd rendition



Figure 9.3 Christ, played by Dwight Dissels, is arrested and brought before Pilate, *The Passion* 2017, Leeuwarden

Photograph taken by Ernst van den Hemel.

of a popular song often chanted by supporters during football matches. Did we see a slight frown of dismay on the face of the narrator? He concluded by stating: 'Okay! We will start in about ten minutes!' and walked off.<sup>21</sup>

Sure enough, when the performance started, the narrator opened the event by asking the public to shout out what their associations were with the 'beautiful city of Leeuwarden'. By now, it had become a running gag and from various sides people started to chant 'Titties and Beer' instead of the desired hallmarks of Leeuwarden. Unperturbed, the narrator put a hand to his ear and said: 'I hear 'Cultural Capital of Europe', I hear 'The Glass House', wonderful!'. And thus, owing to a stoic narrator and an attentive sound engineering, rendering the chants inaudible to the television audience, three million viewers were informed of the fact that Leeuwarden was not just the backdrop to *The Passion*, but also the Cultural Capital of Europe and host of the charity event 'The Glass House'.

### Pre-enacting *The Passion*

Our ethnography has shown how the organisers of *The Passion* aim to craft an ideal form of audience participation. Herewith, the organisers aim to achieve a performance that does justice to what, in their vision, the story of

the last days of Christ may do for present-day Dutch society. To that aim, as our cases have demonstrated, they take great care in selecting their central participants, their submitted motivations and the desirable answers from the public. Such precaution is, as we have also seen, not an unnecessary exaggeration. Apparently, an unpredictable unruliness constantly lures, threatening to destroy or negatively impact the moral emotionality that *The Passion* is supposed to convey. This vulnerability highlights that although *The Passion* re-enacts time and again the scripted story of Jesus, something more than performing the story is always needed. We suggest that this is not something particular to *The Passion*, but is the case with any Passion Play, and – for that matter – a feature of re-enactments in general.<sup>22</sup> Arguably, re-enactments are always predicated on already existing frames of expectation and anticipated outcomes. Re-enactments, therefore, arise out of preparations and practices aimed to steer the outcome in the desired direction. Studying these practices offers a good inroad into how re-enactments are used to influence public perception (and the public itself, so to speak). We have come to denote such practices as instances of pre-enactment.

Here we warn for a merely practical understanding of pre-enactment as a focus on strategies deployed to assure a smoothly proceeding performance. Instead, as a concept, it helps to flesh-out the moral politics underlying participatory performances such as re-enactments. To further clarify our line of argumentation on the relevance of pre-enactment for understanding re-enactments, we first return to re-enactments and its underlying moral politics.

In her article, 'History's affective turn: Historical reenactment and its work in the present', Vanessa Agnew outlines that, although precise definitions are lacking, re-enactments generally 'share a concern with personal experience, social relations and everyday life, and with conjectural and provisional interpretations of the past' (Agnew 2007: 299). Because of the capacity of re-enactments to engage audiences by appealing to a variety of sensory experiences, re-enactments have become a popular mode of presenting history for audiences that might otherwise not be drawn to it. As outlined by Mads Daugbjerg in his article 'Re-enactment and Engagement':

It is common to view historical reenactment and living history contexts as particularly accessible and engaging educational settings, catering to audiences unaccustomed to more conventional, academic modes of appropriation. Proponents of re-enactment-based approaches stress the three-dimensional and multisensory quality of the experience, the possibility of dialogic engagement between re-enactors and audiences, and the chance to work physically and materially with historical or archaeological traces and theories.

(Daugbjerg 2018: 1465)

Agnew, Daugbjerg and others highlight the emancipatory potential of re-enactments: 're-enactment's emancipatory gesture is to allow participants



to select their own past in reaction to a conflicted present. Paradoxically, it is the very a-historicity of re-enactment that is the precondition for its engagement with historical subject matter' (Agnew 2004: 328).

Many of the elements that Daugbjerg and Agnew deem as integral to re-enactments are integral to *The Passion*, too. *The Passion* can be interpreted, albeit to a limited degree, as a successful attempt to actualise the story of Christ's suffering by highlighting its resonances with current affairs, while simultaneously downplaying historical accuracy or theological aspects of the story so as to allow a maximal emotionally appealing, multimedial, participation-oriented performance. Yet, our ethnography has shown that what is presented as an overall, inherently feel-good event is, at least partly, the result of active orchestrations and framings on the side of the organisers. Re-enactments might foster emancipatory engagement with the past, but they are also events in which participation is selected, moulded and presented as emblematic for simplified claims about audience engagement.

Both Agnew and Daugbjerg have pointed towards the potential risks involved in re-enactments' tendency to emphasise affect. Based on his analysis of a Viking re-enactment, Daugbjerg shows how re-enactments constitute a 'grey zone' (...) in which personal incentives and identifications, playful leisure settings, and institutional interests intersect' (2018: 1469). Though Agnew lauds the potential for re-enactments to engage audiences, she warns that 'the past [might be] reduced to a conceit for dealing with the present' (2007: 309). In particular, she says: 're-enactment has the tendency to collapse temporalities, and this implies forms of historical continuity that are not only potentially inaccurate but also exploitable for ideological ends' (ibid.).

In short, re-enactment is always predicated upon pre-existing elements. The rise of re-enactment as a seemingly convincing, emotionally appealing way of getting audiences to participate on their own terms in the staging of heritage, should be coupled with a focus on the organising principles and practices which make such a staging in the present come across as authentic and emotionally convincing. One of the ways in which scholars can be attuned to how re-enactments collapse temporalities is by focussing on what precedes and organises, both materially as well as conceptually, the restaging of the past in the present.

The notion of pre-enactment aims to bring to light these dimensions as integral to scholarly understanding of performances of the heritagised past. As the notion of re-enactment entails re-presenting the past in a participatory performance, the notion of pre-enactment highlights the importance of selection and control to create a performance that will meet expectations. Pre-enactments thus precede a re-enactment, veiling the ideologies of those in charge. By invoking the right emotional connection to a performance, pre-enactments are practices aimed to help establish what a re-enactment should mean or evoke.

Other scholars working on performance, tradition and mediation have tried to capture the significance of temporalities and potential change

inherent in cultural performance. According to MacAloon ‘there is no performance without pre-performance’; all cultural performances follow some pre-existing scripts, yet each performance entails the risk that things ‘might not go well’ (1984:19). As our ethnography has shown, ‘things’ indeed may evolve differently than envisioned by the organisers. Other than MacAloon’s general theoretical interest in cultural performances, we have focused more specifically on understanding the strategies used by organisers of performances in their attempt to control emotional outcomes. Such worries about emotional control have been addressed for instance by Richard Grusin who highlights the role of affect in his notion of premediation. Grusin defines ‘a logic of premediation in which mediation (...) preceded the events themselves’ (2010: 45). Whereas premediation concerns how mediated narratives prefigure (anxiety about) future events, pre-enactment in contrast focuses on the concrete steps taken by organisers of re-enactments to create, orchestrate and safeguard emotions.

## Conclusion

The notion of pre-enactment allows us to highlight the unruly potential inherent in re-enactments. With any re-enactment, in as far as they are characterised by invoking ‘bottom up’ audience participation, the risk is always present that audiences, stimulated to express their own view, take the meaning of the performance in radically different directions. In this sense, pre-enactment involves the selection of certain aspects of audience participation whilst attempting to downplay or obscure ‘deviant’ aspects from view. In our ethnographic observations, we saw this occur in a variety of forms: the virtual procession, the pre-enacted interviews with the cross-bearers as well as audience participation on the square were all moments in which the invocation of emotion was directly connected to concerns with the (un)controllable.

The concept of pre-enactment helps us to understand contemporary developments in which the crafting of emotional audiences is part of polarising debates about cultural identity and emotional citizenship. Pre-enactment highlights how audiences of heritagised performances are geared towards prefigured emotions and how ideologies of a seemingly self-evident desire for tradition, ritual and collective morality are shaped and circulated.

## Notes

1. This article results from the HERA/HERILIGION research subproject ‘The Dutch Passion for the Passion’ (Salemink et al 2015). We want to thank HERA for the financial support and for enabling the research for the present publication.
2. ‘Vanavond zien we het eeuwenoude verhaal weer, in een heel eigentijds jasje. Want het verhaal (...) is nog steeds actueel en bestemd voor jou!’
3. Out of a population of approximately seventeen million people. See <https://www.mediacourant.nl/2016/03/voor-het-eerst-geen-nieuw-record-the-passion/>

4. A passion play can be defined as a multimedial staging of the story of Christ's Passion from the Last Supper to the Crucifixion. See van den Hemel (2020) and Baraniecka-Olszewska (2017).
5. The question was directed verbatim at Ernst van den Hemel in a recent interview on radio, see [https://11.nl/de-stemming-5-april-2020-156256/?pagina=12&l1%2Fnieuws\\_%28L1%29=](https://11.nl/de-stemming-5-april-2020-156256/?pagina=12&l1%2Fnieuws_%28L1%29=)
6. <https://www.nd.nl/geloof/geloof/1027062/the-passion-als-een-universeel-verhaal-waaraan-niemand-aanstoot>, accessed September 23d, 2022.
7. As we have argued elsewhere, this resurgence of religion takes place against an influential rewriting of religion and secularity. Debates about 'the post-secular' largely revolve around how the sustained relevance of religion in the 21st century means a revisiting, rewriting or undermining of the secularisation thesis and the conceptual distinction between religion and secularity (see, amongst many others, Gorski et al 2012, Bader 2012, Molendijk et al 2010, van den Hemel and Stengs forthcoming). As, to our understanding, deploying methodological secularism is unproductive, we have opted instead to focus on how notions of secularity and religion arise in our fieldwork, rather than applying these terms ourselves.
8. Passion plays, of course, are part and parcel of a long-standing Christian, European tradition and in that sense not particularly Dutch. We may also think here of the continuing relevance of the well-known Oberammergauer passion plays, performed once every decade since 1634 (Shapiro 2007) or of passion plays in contemporary Poland (Baraniecka-Olszewska 2017).
9. Toen ik ruim tien jaar geleden las dat maar 27 procent van Nederland wist waar Pasen over ging dacht ik, 'wat kan ik daaraan doen?' Want of je het nu uit religious, cultureel of historisch perspectief bekijkt, iedereen zou dit verhaal moeten kennen'. <https://cip.nl/cip+/72930-jacco-doornbos-bereikt-miljoenen-mensen-met-the-passion>
10. <https://web.archive.org/web/20160924214545/http://www.kro-ncrv.nl/schep-perencoradio/seizoenen/2013/30-127178-24-03-2013/290-75289-de-drijfveren-van-jacco-doornbos>
11. 'Voor het overdragen van emotie is muziek een geweldig middel. Dat zie je natuurlijk ook in de christelijke traditie. Als je de muziek gebruikt die als mijn muziek voelt en je plaatst die in de context van een verhaal, worden mensen opeens geraakt. (...) Toch had ik nooit verwacht dat het zó succesvol zou zijn. En volgens mij heeft dat echt te maken met het verhaal'. CIP 18 Augustus 2019.
12. 'De populariteit van *The Passion* heeft wellicht mede te maken met een hunkering naar collectieve verbondenheid en gedeelde nestgeur in een geïndividualiseerde, ontzuilde samenleving' (SCP 2018, 60).
13. Our team consisted of three researchers: Irene Stengs participated in the procession, Ernst van den Hemel was located on the square, and Emile den Tex documented the virtual procession.
14. Leeuwarden is the capital of the province of Friesland in the north-west of the Netherlands. Friesland has a distinct cultural identity and a separate language. Although this regional identity played out in multiple ways during the 2017 performance, the focus in this article is placed elsewhere.
15. As we see it, *The Passion* is on the one hand a multimedial innovation, but on the other it also follows an established format of presenting the story of Christ's passion in condensed episodes, reminiscent of the Stations of the Cross.
16. In our efforts to be selected as one of the cross bearers, we had to fill in a form that asked for a motivation. Apparently, 'research on *The Passion*' was not deemed sufficient reason. However, in a later year, we succeeded to become

selected as one of the ‘followers’, as part of the procession. Obviously, these forms provide the resource from which the organisers select a fittingly, diverse range of interviewees.

17. 11:30–12:20 *The Passion* 2017.
18. The unfiltered dataset is to be understood as, what in software terms is called, the ‘backend of an interface’, in this case of the virtual *The Passion* procession. The downloaded material showed a twofold classification: submissions had either been classified as ‘rejected’ or as ‘carousel’. Only those marked ‘carousel’ appeared visibly on the virtual procession screen.
19. In the minutes of the city council of Leeuwarden we found a discussion spanning multiple years in which a team of civil servants presents the case that organising events such as *The Passion*, Het Glazen Huis or being the Cultural Capital of Europe is an effective way to promote the brand ‘Leeuwarden’. Besides raising the profile of the city, this may also lead to increased revenue for the local economy. In these discussions documentation of earlier editions of *The Passion* are used to illustrate an expected rise in revenue and tourism.
20. In Scripture, Christian theological tradition and the mediaeval history of passion plays, this passage is the locus for a complex discussion about who is to blame for Jesus’ death. In some interpretations the assembled crowd demanding Christ’s death is associated with Jewish reluctance to accept Jesus as the Messiah. The bloodlust of the crowd has fueled anti-judaic and antisemitic interpretations (Chazan 2016). A different tradition is formed by the interpretation that the assembled crowd stands for the iniquity of mankind in general, aiming to bring the message home that Jesus sacrificed his life for all of humanity. Though nothing of this is explained or explicitly addressed during *The Passion*, the latter interpretation of this passage seems prevalent as the assembled crowd/audience is invited to participate by chanting ‘Barabbas!’, making the entire audience part of the reason why Christ is executed.
21. One could argue that the plight of the narrator resonates with that of the Biblical character Pontius Pilate, who, after all, also tried to steer audience participation. We owe this insight to Ferdinand de Jong’s astute observations. However, would Pilate have succeeded in convincing the crowd to free Jesus, the divine plan of Christ’s sacrifice would not have been fulfilled.
22. Though this chapter focuses on *The Passion*, it would be interesting to explore pre-enactments of other performances, including other Passion plays. Bach’s Saint Matthew’s Passion, for instance, has always been the site of a complex series of pre-enactments ensuring audiences’ proper behaviour and affective engagement with a variety of universal claims (the universal beauty of classical music, the brilliance of Bach, the superiority of Western culture or the profound truth of the Christian narrative). This leads stakeholders to pre-enacting appropriate circumstances of and audience participation in performances of Bach’s Passion. See van den Hemel (2022).

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