

Ritual on Location

An Exploration of Literature with Relevance to the Study of Rituality in Rest or Nursing Homes

*Martijn de Ruijter*¹

1. Introduction

Rituality, these days, receives ever-growing attention from a multitude of scientific disciplines.² Within the research programme of the Institute for Liturgical and Ritual Studies (ILRS) one lens through which attention is focused, is that of place/space.³ Several research projects in this institute concentrate on a specific type of place, or location, to discover what rituals are being performed there and how they are being performed exactly. Public commemorative monuments, cancer forests, prisons, care facilities and, as a latest addition, so-called VINEX locations are the kinds of places that lay under scrutiny.⁴ For every one of these projects, a sound preliminary investigation of existing literature is an absolute necessity, if only for the construction of a proper theoretical framework.

This article is the compressed outcome of such a preliminary investigation of existing literature on the subject of rituality in rest or nursing homes. It originates from my own research at two particular locations in the city of Tilburg in the Netherlands. That research is still in its infancy. As a result, most of the material is chosen for a presumed practical applicability and here presented in a largely descriptive fashion. At a later stage, analysis of empirical data will be

¹ This contribution is a revised and compressed version of the theoretical framework of my dissertation on the ritual repertoires in two care facilities for the elderly in Tilburg.

² In the article 'Place of action' Paul Post sets an outline of disciplines (and multi-disciplinary platforms) that concern themselves with the relations between space, ritual and religion. He mentions philosophy, social sciences, ritual studies, comparative studies of religion, European ethnology, cultural studies, architectural studies, and religious and theological studies. Not all of these have a similar contribution and not all contributions are of equal importance but it may certainly be considered a striking fact that so many disciplines direct special attention to the convergence of these topics. P. POST: 'Place of Action' in P. POST & A. MOLENDIJK: *Holy Ground: Re-inventing Ritual Space in Modern Western Culture* (Leuven 2010) 21-34.

³ P. POST, M. BARNARD, J. KROESEN, G. ROUWHORST, L. VAN TONGEREN & T. QUARTIER: 'Reframing Liturgical and Ritual Identities: The New National Liturgical and Ritual Studies Research Programme, 2009-2012', in *Jaarboek voor liturgie-onderzoek* 25 (2009).

⁴ P. POST & A. MOLENDIJK: *Holy Ground: Re-inventing Ritual Space in Modern Western Culture* (Leuven 2010).

integrated as critical reflection. As yet, the contents should in no way be considered authoritative or exhaustive.

2. Organization

First off, it needs to be said that literature on the specific subject of rituality in rest and nursing homes is extremely scarce. Secondly, in the case of indirectly relevant literature, especially that on old age and the elderly, the task of *exclusion* has proven of equal importance as, if not greater than, that of *inclusion*.⁵ This type of literature is a thriving genre. The bulk of it, however, deals with the same issues over and over again. Those issues, generally of how to deal with frail or demented elderly in the most humane way possible, are of little importance to my research. Yet, because there is no distinct genre of 'elderly ritual', I have felt obliged to browse through these works for even the smallest amount of relevant information. While doing so, and every researcher knows this, it is all too easy to get 'sucked in'. It has been a continuously arduous task to keep that from happening but one I fervently committed myself to. For that reason the eventual outcome may reveal that, in separating the significant from the insignificant, I have intermittently excluded certain works of this genre rather boldly.

The same more or less holds for literature on ritual. Within the 'confinements' of this article, it would make little sense to try to present even an outline of only the more important works.⁶ I have therefore chosen the concept of 'location' to be the primary marker for this article and sought to select those works on ritual that direct special attention to the subjects of space, place and location, or those works on space, place and location that contain exclusive leads for a ritual perspective.

Consequently I commence this overview with some noteworthy observations of several specialists on the relations between ritual and space, place or location. From thereon I will 'zoom in' on a number of scientific studies about life in function-specific institutions like rest and nursing homes that also integrate a certain ritual perspective. I then proceed with a minute selection of books and articles from the vast body of literature on old age and the elderly that I consider to hold particular 'ritual relevance' in order to eventually comment on a single title which seemingly ties all threads together. In conclusion, I will enu-

⁵ It should be noted here that not all inhabitants of rest and nursing homes are elderly people. For the sake of clarity and the possibility of generalization these 'exceptions' are left out of the picture.

⁶ For such an overview I gladly refer to J. KREINATH, J. SNOEK & M. STAUSBERG (eds.): *Theorizing Rituals: Annotated Bibliography of Ritual Theory, 1966-2005* (Leiden / Boston 2007).

merate what I believe to be some important perspectives for my present and any upcoming research on this topic or certain comparable ones. These perspectives are mostly derived from the discussed literature but, in some cases, have undergone adaptations through my own field-work.

3. Ritual and space/place/location

One author, whose name inevitably comes up when examining the relations between ritual and location, is Jonathan Smith. As a historian of religion his take on the subject often differs, quite usefully, from that of actual scholars of ritual. In stark contrast with most of these scholars, Smith, for the largest part, remains firmly rooted in the legacies of Eliade and Durkheim by granting place the determinant role in rituality and describing that role as principally social.⁷ According to Smith it is place that actively shapes ritual. Ordinary things become sacred when relocated to sacred places. The place of ritual therefore is incongruent with that of everyday life as are acts of ritual with everyday behaviour. This becomes most clear in his earlier formulated definition of ritual:

Ritual is a means of performing the ways things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things.⁸

From this definition it follows that place of ritual, in the eyes of Smith, not only serves a geographical but also a metaphorical or even idealistic purpose, and even more so, it is this metaphorical aspect of place that is the ultimately determinative one.

The boldness of some of Smith's statements on the prominence of place, even when shrouded in opaque theoretical schemes, cannot be ignored for long. One of the more forceful reactions to his thoughts comes from Ritual Studies initiator Ronald Grimes.⁹ Although Grimes would be the first to admit that place is of great importance in rituality, he felt compelled to minutely 'dissect' Smith's assertions in a lecture at Princeton University.¹⁰ In this lecture, Grimes cor-

⁷ Smith demonstrates apt critique when discussing Eliade's theory of the 'Sacred Axis' but has no trouble at all in stating that it is place itself, first and foremost, that renders something sacred and thus turns performance into ritual. J. SMITH: *To Take Place. Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago / London 1987) 104; IDEM: *Imagining Religion. From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago 1982) 56.

⁸ SMITH: *Imagining Religion* 63.

⁹ POST: 'Place of Action' 44-46.

¹⁰ He later revised and published this lecture as R. GRIMES: 'Jonathan Z. Smith's Theory of Ritual Space', in *Religion* 29 (1999) 261-273 and again republished it in 2006 as

rectly pointed out some of the weak spots and flawed presumptions in Smith's theory. He clarifies that not all ritual is religious *per se*, that the domains of ritual and non-ritual are only incongruous in some cases but congruous in others, that no one component of rituality (in this case, place or location) can be determinative in all rituals, that place can play a passive as well as an active role, that the term 'place' is conceptually different from 'space' and 'emplacement' and needs to be treated as such that the metaphorical aspects of a location are not superior to its geographical ones, and finally, that places and schemes of emplacement may reflect or reinforce hierarchy but not necessarily.¹¹

It is not my intention to cast a final judgement on these views. In my opinion, it is the confrontation itself that generates some important and perhaps even complementary perspectives for research on rituality in specific locations, such as rest and nursing homes. Following Smith, one could examine how this location or a certain space within it, determines what type of ritual is performed there and what kind of hierarchical structures are represented by it. Another valuable point of departure might be his definition of ritual. With that definition in mind one could, for instance, investigate whether inhabitants of rest and nursing homes explicitly perform that which they feel 'ought to have been', in contrast to that 'which actually is' and how. Following Grimes, at least in this specific debate, one could focus on how people incorporate the location of the home or the spaces within it in, or even modify it to the performance of their rituals or ritualisations¹² and from thereon determine whether space is an active or passive component or resolve whether or not hierarchy plays any role at all. As an example one can think of how people with impairments are confronted with barriers and obstacles that never arise as such in the awareness of ambulant individuals. High thresholds, narrow corridors, steep inclines, heavy doors, stairs and rough carpeting actively determine how physically disabled people perceive a room. Because of their hindrance, however, they also form new potential for inventive (ritual) employment. A narrow hallway might become a 'memory lane', abundantly decorated with photographs and pictures of important events and people from the past, in the last tribute to a deceased fellow resident; stairs or steep inclines can become the attributes par excellence to symbolically demonstrate one's own autonomy or resilience; and a patch of rough carpeting *the* place for social gatherings as its softness not only hampers movement with a walker, rollator or wheelchair but also generates associations with safety and a slowing down of pace.

'Putting Space into its Place', in R. GRIMES: *Rite out of Place. Ritual, Media and the Arts* (Oxford 2006) 101-113.

¹¹ See also table 8.4. in GRIMES: *Rite out of Place* 112.

¹² Grimes employs this term to also include ritual-like performances that have not (yet) been acknowledged as 'true' rituals. R. GRIMES: *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Washington 1982) 36-39; IDEM: *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in its Practice, Essays on its Theory* (Columbia 1990) 9-15.

With Grimes, a multitude of potentially viable points of view come to the fore. For him other components of ritual such as action, time, objects, language and sound are equally important and thus deserve equal attention. Having chosen 'location' as the main marker for this overview, I will not delve much deeper into his oeuvre. Suffice it to say that almost every piece of work in that oeuvre carries valuable information, interesting examples and narratives, critical analyses and useful leads for anyone who intends to perform research on rituals or rituality.¹³ For analysis of rituals in rest and nursing homes specifically, I find his already mentioned notion of 'ritualisation'¹⁴ as well as his continuing quest for 'interlocking, rather than polarized conceptions of religion, spirituality and ritual' to be most relevant.¹⁵ Rest and nursing homes are generally places where people are put together randomly, where the difference between work and leisure has disappeared and the boundaries between functional and symbolical behaviour increasingly fade. To properly conduct research on ritual repertoires in such places, it is of the utmost importance to use definitions in which 'the social is not cast as the opponent of the personal; the sacred is not split off from the profane; and spirituality is not the opposite of either religion or ritual'.¹⁶

Having brought up Grimes, one can hardly pass over his mentor Victor Turner and Turner's own tutor at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, Max Gluckman. Both have made decisive contributions to the field of ritual studies. Especially the processual aspect of rituals and the concepts of 'social drama' and '*communitas*' could be of significance for research in rest or nursing homes.¹⁷ Later on I will briefly revisit Turner (and his main inspiration Van Gennep) when discussing a commendable synthesis of their concepts and the reality of daily life in a nursing home by Renée Shield.

The metaphorical or ideological potential of ritual places, as presented by Smith, is taken even further by Bruce Kapferer. In the article 'Ritual Dynamics and Virtual Practice' he explores the possibilities and consequences of understanding ritual as a virtual space of practice.¹⁸ He begins his exposé by discussing the inner dynamics of rituals and their constitutive power, as set forth by the likes of Susanne Langer and Victor Turner. Ritual, in this sense, is not just a

¹³ I would especially recommend GRIMES: *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*; IDEM: *Deeply into the Bone. Re-inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley / Los Angeles / London 2000); and IDEM: *Rite out of Place*.

¹⁴ See note 12.

¹⁵ GRIMES: *Deeply into the Bone* 70.

¹⁶ GRIMES: *Deeply into the Bone* 71.

¹⁷ M. GLUCKMAN: *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa: Collected Essays with an Autobiographical Introduction* (London 1963); V. TURNER: *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (London 1969).

¹⁸ B. KAPFERER: 'Ritual Dynamics and Virtual Practice', in D. HANDELMAN & G. LINDQUIST (eds.): *Ritual in its Own Right* (New York / Oxford 2004) 35-54.

process of progression but one ‘...that could create or generate original circumstances for human psychological and physical existence’.¹⁹ Having said this, Kapferer treads on thin ice, for one of the hardest questions to answer to date is that of ritual efficacy. Kapferer shows no desire to answer this question. Rather, he wishes to put across that ritual is ‘...a dynamic process in and of itself with no representational symbolic relation to external realities...’²⁰ This is not to say that ritual performances cannot effect changes in real life, but only through interpretation and reduction. The aspects of being ‘in and of itself’, Kapferer defines as a ‘virtuality’. Following Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari, he stresses that his concept of virtuality should in no way be considered less real than the ‘ordinary’ reality. It is merely a ‘...slowing down of the tempo of everyday life and a holding in abeyance or suspension some of the vital qualities of lived reality’.²¹ As such it is a space in which individuals have the possibility to ‘...reimagine (and redirect or reorient themselves) into the everyday circumstances of life’.²² What I find most attractive in this theory is the idea that the ‘ritual domain’ is just one of the many domains in which everyday life ‘takes place’, yet at the same time forms a space within that everyday life that enables individuals to adjust to its chaotic and uncontrollable nature. This to me seems a hugely important quality for inhabitants of rest and nursing homes as their, oft involuntary, confrontation with dependency, new environments and ‘strange’ people will put continuous strain on their dispositions.²³

Less ‘immaterial’ insights in the relations between space and ritual may be deduced from the works of Henri Lefebvre, of which most notably *The Production of Space*.²⁴ By some considered his *magnum opus* (rather than the usually mentioned *Critique of Everyday Life*),²⁵ it is entirely dedicated to the creation and ensuing function of space/place in post-modern society. As the title already discloses, the principal message of this work is that space is a human production.

¹⁹ KAPFERER: ‘Ritual Dynamics’ 37.

²⁰ KAPFERER: ‘Ritual Dynamics’ 46.

²¹ KAPFERER: ‘Ritual Dynamics’ 48.

²² KAPFERER: ‘Ritual Dynamics’ 47.

²³ A faintly divergent take on the virtuality of rituals has been proposed by Wouter van Beek. In his inaugural address at Tilburg University he describes virtuality as temporal, contra-intuitive and time-altering. The virtual world of ritual differs only slightly from the ‘actual reality’ as it lacks an inherent message in its otherwise very recognisable actions. Through this lack of an inherent message it incessantly demands interpretation. Thus the ritual serves perfectly as a vehicle through which meaning can be generated and uncertainties of life may be counteracted. W. VAN BEEK: *De rite is rond, betekenis en boodschap van het ongewone* (Tilburg 2007).

²⁴ Such a deduction is performed rather exemplarily in K. KNOTT: *The Location of Religion: a Spatial Analysis* (London 2005).

²⁵ See, for instance, R. SHIELDS: *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle. Spatial Dialectics* (London / New York 1999) 141.

Lefebvre discerns three dialectically related 'levels' at which this production occurs. The first level is that of spatial practices; the second that of representations of space; the third spaces of representation. Spatial practices are the concrete acts of people within their environment. Space here is perceived and created directly and simultaneously. Representations of space are the underlying principles or, modernly put, the 'blueprints' of places. Here space is that which is conceived, conceptualized. Spaces of representations are the overlaying ideologies, symbols or images of a place. At this level space is the lived reality, the way in which human beings 'use' what they perceive as the foundations for their dreams, wishes and ideals. Lefebvre also presents these levels as the triad perceived-conceived-lived space.²⁶ In his latest book, *Voorbij het kerkgebouw* [Beyond the church building], Paul Post more or less follows Kim Knott in suggesting that it is this triad that is most useful as an analytical tool for investigating modern-day relations between ritual, religion and location.²⁷

While performing my research on rituals in rest and nursing homes, I found all three levels to be at stake. Bearing in mind, however, that most inhabitants of these homes have to cope with a diminished agency that restricts their capability of performing spatial practices, I suggest that 'spaces of representation' become ever more important. A parallel view is communicated in the article 'Singapore and the Experience of Place in Old Age'²⁸ This article discusses the ability of the aged to develop various forms of 'insideness' with their surroundings. The authors argue that such 'internalisation' of one's 'immediate neighbourhood' is essential to remaining an active participant of society. With Graham Rowles, they discern three possible ways to do so: physically, socially and autobiographically.²⁹ Physical internalisation occurs by moving about within one's surroundings, social internalisation by meaningful encounters with other residents of these surroundings, and autobiographical internalisation by the connection or projection of personal memories onto these surroundings. In my opinion, this autobiographical internalisation strongly coincides with Lefebvre's notion of spaces of representation as they both presuppose mental

²⁶ Cf. J. LENGKEEK: *De wereld in lagen. Sociaal-ruimtelijke analyse nader verklaard* (Wageningen 2002).

²⁷ P. POST: *Voorbij het kerkgebouw. De speelruimte van een ander sacraal domein* (Heeswijk 2010) 88.

²⁸ L. KONG, B. YEOH & P. TEO: 'Singapore and the Experience of Place in Old Age', in *Geographical Review* 86,4 (1996) 529-549. Similar insights were also developed in G. ROWLES: *Prisoners of Space? Exploring the Geographical Experience of Older People* (Boulder 1978).

²⁹ G. ROWLES: 'Geographical Dimensions of Social Support in Rural Appalachia', in G. ROWLES & R. OHTA (eds.): *Aging and Milieu: Environmental Perspectives on Growing Old* (New York / London 1983) 111-130; G. ROWLES: 'Place and Personal Identity in Old Age: Observations from Appalachia', in *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 3,3 (1983) 299-313.

projections. When considered together, these concepts also disclose an important but easily overlooked tension for new inhabitants of rest and nursing homes. Any new environment logically lacks spaces of representation that build on autobiographical stimuli. The spaces of representation that are present (for instance a chapel), might then start to function as a 'surrogate' for other such spaces (one's own parish church), other communities and other experiences.³⁰ As a result they risk increasing individuality and seclusion rather than facilitating the creation of community and integration for which they are usually conceived (representation of space!) by planners, architects or management.

Apart from *The Production of Space*, at least one other work by Lefebvre deserves some attention here. In *The Urban Revolution* Lefebvre begins a train of thought that eventually leads to his theory on place and space as seen in *The Production of Space*. *The Urban Revolution* is still very laden with political and intellectual optimism. Lefebvre describes the urban society as a process. It is in no way a 'done deal' but developing all around us, at this very moment. As such it is full of potential. The 'revolution' mentioned in the title refers to the possibility of taking control of this process. Here Lefebvre also issues out a warning. It is a warning against the 'extraordinary passivity of the people most directly involved'.³¹ Modern day 'users' of urban space act far too submissive to the ideological and repressive abstractions that architects and urban planners unknowingly impose back onto lived experience. This warning, I feel, ought to reverberate to the very present, as much of the urban environment we live in and pass through on a daily basis gets taken for granted rather easily. Even more so, it might carry special meaning for those places within urban society, like rest and nursing homes, where passivity, in inhabitants as well as staff and visitors, is generally considered one of life's greatest foes.

In the article 'The land of Old Age', that warning seems to be taken to heart. As a geographer, author Glenda Laws, has examined the inception and development of urban-built environments for the elderly in the United States. Her conclusion is bold and revealing, especially when connected to Lefebvre's triad and admonition against the dominance of 'conceived spaces':

Accepting the argument that ageist attitudes and built environments are socially constructed implies that they can be deconstructed and reconstructed. Transformations of age relations are therefore intimately linked to transformations in the urban

³⁰ ROWLES: 'Place and Personal Identity in Old Age' 304-307.

³¹ E. RUPPERT: 'Henri Lefebvre. The Urban Revolution', in *Canadian Journal of Sociology Online* (September- October 2003).

built and social environments. And we must therefore ask if transformations in the built environment can lead to reformed age relations.³²

4. Life in institutions

One of the very first 'reality-based' descriptions of the life in rest and nursing homes can be found in an ominously titled work by anthropologist Jules Henry.³³ His *Culture against Man* is an attempt to show the underlying principles of cultural institutions. Most attention goes out to educational institutions, but the final chapter is an important exception. It carries the equally gloomy heading 'Human Obsolescence' and presents a moving narrative of Henry's experiences as a researcher in three 'hospitals for the aged'. The outcome is rather awful. Henry clearly aims at making a political statement against the way the elderly are treated. To do so he focuses solely on the negative, but apart from that, Henry's account offers some critical examples of 'ritual-like' activities and 'sacred-like' spaces within these hospitals.³⁴ It even paves the way for reassessing the quotidian act of watching television in a communal space as precisely such a 'ritual-like' activity.³⁵

In his highly influential collection of four essays entitled *Asylums* Erving Goffman uncovers the inner workings of places he coined 'total institutions'.³⁶ Some examples of these institutions are prisons, mental hospitals, boarding schools, boot camps and monasteries.³⁷ Rest or nursing homes are mentioned

³² G. LAWS: 'The Land of Old Age: Society's Changing Attitudes toward Urban Built Environments for Elderly People', in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 83,4 (1993) 672-693. See also ROWLES: *Prisoners of Space?*.

³³ J. HENRY: *Culture against Man* (London 1966).

³⁴ HENRY: *Culture against Man* 408-409, 412-413.

³⁵ HENRY: *Culture against Man* 458-459. In the last fifteen years or so, watching television has become somewhat of a subject in its own right. With regards to rest and nursing homes, I would definitely recommend W. HAJJAR: *Television in the Nursing Home. A Case Study of the Media Consumption Routines and Strategies of Nursing Home Residents* (London / New York 1998) and M. VAN DER GOOT: *Television Viewing in the Lives of Older Adults* (Nijmegen 2009).

³⁶ E. GOFFMAN: *Asylums. Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Harmondsworth / Middlesex etc. 1968).

³⁷ In addition to the concept of total institutions, Lewis Coser developed that of 'greedy institutions'. While the former rely mostly on physical ways of seclusion, the latter employ symbolical chains to bind their subjects. To Coser, places like military training camps and monasteries are typical examples of greedy institutions as their subjects arrive voluntarily and submit themselves to a great ideal or ultimate truth. Rest and nursing homes share qualities with both types of institutions. Whether or not they are regarded as belonging to one or the other therefore largely depends on the perspective of the beholder. See L. COSER: *Greedy Institutions; Patterns of Undivided Commitment* (New York 1974).

as belonging to one of five types of these institutions (i.e. the type that cares for persons who 'are felt to be both incapable and harmless').³⁸ Although Goffman does not dilate on this type of institution, one might infer from his introduction that the contents of his essays, particularly the first and third one, are fairly interchangeable.³⁹

In that first essay Goffman lays out the general schemes of 'total institutions' and their place in the whole. One of Goffman's most important insights is the almost absolute split between so-called inmates and staff members.⁴⁰ Near the end, he describes the inner ceremonial (and, I would say, ritual) practices of these institutions as 'well suited to a Durkheimian analysis' because they seem to function as the glue that holds such ('dangerously') split societies together.⁴¹ Yet, such a functionalist approach is not wholly convincing to him, as the institute itself not only emphasises a strict division between what is generally accepted as the norm and that which is deviant, but also formulates patterns of behaviour and organisational structures for both to remain exactly so.⁴² To put it more bluntly, the institute does not function as a remedy against an 'ailment' of society but as a cooperative organ in its creation.

At this point, a leap from Goffman to Michel Foucault proves not to be a very big one. Although they are usually perceived as representatives of different disciplines, respectively social sciences and history or philosophy, they arrive at comparable positions with regards to hierarchically structured institutions. Both have had their sway with communist idealisms and therefore show special interest in the division of power and the structures and mechanics that lie underneath. Goffman, however, is mainly concerned with the social reality of such structures and mechanics while Foucault directs his attention to their historical creation and evolution.

³⁸ GOFFMAN: *Asylums* 16.

³⁹ GOFFMAN: *Asylums* 11-12.

⁴⁰ While reading his work on 'total institutions' it would be beneficial to also take a look at his collected essays in *Interaction Ritual*. In this work, Goffman develops the thesis that even the simplest of everyday interactions are bound by ritual constraints. These constraints are there to enable the participants to present and acknowledge their own and each other's 'face', or worthiness. In the case of rest and nursing homes this type of 'ritual' becomes quintessential because of the aforementioned strict division between the staff and the so-called 'inmates'. E. GOFFMAN: *Interaction Ritual. Essays on Face-to-face Behaviour* (New York 1967).

⁴¹ GOFFMAN: *Asylums* 102.

⁴² GOFFMAN: *Asylums* 102-105.

Three of Foucault's works seem critically important here. These are *Madness and Civilization* (1965), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973) and *Discipline and Punish* (1977).⁴³ In all three works Foucault discusses particular function-specific institutions of present day society, namely the insane asylum, the hospital and prison. His approach in all cases is historical and of broad range. Close reading of these works clarifies that, rather than in the institutes themselves, Foucault is interested in how they either reflect the ways in which society perceives issues as insanity, illness and criminality or impose a 'framework of perception' upon it. For the purpose of comparison with contemporary care facilities for the elderly, these works thus contain little or no material. Their value, at least for my research, lies in what they add to Goffman's perspective on total institutions. As Goffman is mostly concerned with their inner workings and Foucault with their contextual 'power-knowledge' discourses, together they paint a complete picture: of the institution itself, of the cultural environment of its inception and of its context-related, and therefore ever shifting, *raisons d'être*.

In 1966 Foucault added one other, be it somewhat impalpable, perspective to his theories on social institutions. He did so in a radio broadcast on the themes of utopia and literature.⁴⁴ It is the perspective of the so-called *heterotopia*. What makes this perspective so interesting is partly its impalpability and partly its place in his oeuvre.⁴⁵ Chronologically it came into existence between his major works *The Order of Things* (1970) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972).⁴⁶ Yet, many interpreters connect it to his earlier works, the aforementioned *Madness and Civilization* and *The Birth of the Clinic*. This leads them to view the treatise on heterotopias as a text about a concrete function-specific place (i.e. one that exists alongside but differs in almost every aspect from all others). I prefer to place it in its chronological context and connect it to his later, more overtly epistemological and methodological works.⁴⁷ As such, I choose not to read it as a laudation of places that relativise others but as a critique on the modern-day obsession with their integral value. What Foucault shows us is that almost any

⁴³ Originally published as M. FOUCAULT: *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris 1961); IDEM: *Naissance de la clinique: une archéologie du regard médical* (Paris 1963); IDEM: *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris 1975).

⁴⁴ M. FOUCAULT: *Dits et écrits 1954-1988* IV. 1980-1988 (Paris 1994) no. 360; M. BISCHOF & D. DEFERT: *Michel Foucault: Die Heterotopien. Der Utopische Körper* (Frankfurt am Main 2005).

⁴⁵ One should note, however, that Foucault himself never published this speech nor acknowledged its contents as part of his official oeuvre.

⁴⁶ Originally published as: M. FOUCAULT: *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris 1966) ; IDEM: *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris 1969).

⁴⁷ H. URBACH: 'Writing Architectural Heterotopia', in *The Journal of Architecture* 3 (1998). As a possible corroborating fact one may also note that Foucault introduces the concept of *heterotopia* for the very first time in the preface to *The Order of Things*.

place, or, more correctly translated, any 'emplacement'⁴⁸, is potentially a 'space of difference' and that its (relative) value is always only the sum of discourses that are formed in the places that it is being related to at a specific moment.⁴⁹ The notorious last sentence of this broadcast then does not mean that existing heterotopias should be embraced and kept 'alive' at any cost, but rather that it is that which ties one emplacement to another (in coherence as well as in difference) that enables us to assess our existence within it (negatively as well as positively).⁵⁰ As a consequence, this radio-speech was not so much about losing the ability to dream but all the more about losing the ability to discern dream from nightmare, adventure from espionage and the sun-drenched beauty of freebooters from the hideousness of policemen.⁵¹

To me, the implication of this '*heterotopic* perspective' for rest and nursing homes, although not further developed by Foucault himself, is evident and logically follows from what I already decided to be the main value of his earlier works. Because of their secluding nature, these 'homes' are likely to depend heavily on relations with other locations of societal life (and their 'framework of perception') to function properly as facilities of care.

As one of the more critical readers of Foucault, it is Michel de Certeau who further develops another important factor in research on the value and influence of (ritual) place in modern-day society.⁵² This is the factor of 'everyday life'. Although previously introduced as one side of an existential rift by Mircea Eliade in *Das Heilige und das Profane* (the other side being the sacred/eternal) and by Lefebvre as an equally dialectic, illusory but empowering concept of stability in *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, De Certeau manages to shape it into a more applicable feature of human existence.⁵³ He does so by outlining the contrast between so-called 'strategies' and 'tactics'. 'Strategies' are the formal objectives of time and space. They represent the rules for usage that are laid down by the

⁴⁸ P. JOHNSON: 'Unravelling Foucault's 'Different Spaces'', in *History of the Human Sciences* 19,4 (2006) 75-90.

⁴⁹ JOHNSON: 'Unravelling Foucault's 'Different Spaces'' 77-78 and 84.

⁵⁰ The original French text reads as follows: 'Le navire est l'hétérotopie par excellence. Les civilisations sans bateaux sont comme les enfants dont les parent n'auraient pas un grand lit sur lequel on puisse jouer; leurs rêves alors se tarissent, l'espionnage y remplace l'aventure, et la hideur des polices la beauté ensoleillée des corsaires.' BISCHOF & DEFERT: *Michel Foucault: Die Heterotopien* 51s.

⁵¹ Based on my own translation of that last sentence. In a later version of this text, one that Foucault, only shortly before his death, agreed to publish, the image of the parental bed and the colourful descriptions of policemen and freebooters were left out. See FOUCAULT: *Dits et écrits* 752-762.

⁵² M. DE CERTEAU: *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley / London 1984).

⁵³ M. ELIADE: *Das Heilige und das Profane: vom Wesen des Religiösen* (Hamburg 1957); H. LEFEBVRE: *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (Paris 1958²).

governing powers. 'Tactics' are the actions of everyday 'users' of that time and space that diverge from the set 'strategies'. They represent the creativity or subversiveness of the subjugated.

The importance of this take on everyday life is best derived from the influential seventh chapter 'Walking in the City'. In this chapter De Certeau demonstrates how the infrastructure of the modern city functions both as the expression of strategies and as the potential for 'negotiating' tactics. In my opinion, this image may prove a fruitful way of looking at daily life in rest and nursing homes. What De Certeau presents on an urban scale, I deem applicable to an institutional one, especially when such an institution predominantly functions as a 'micro-universe' in which the inhabitants spend almost the entirety of their day-to-day lives. Regarding rituality, it would then become interesting to examine what kinds of rituals fall in the order of 'strategies' and what kinds in that of 'tactics'.

5. Old age and the elderly

For a general overview of old age, the elderly and the process of aging, one of the most valuable books, at least to me, has been *Aging: Continuity & Change* by Robert Atchley.⁵⁴ Written with a strictly educational purpose it aims to create empathy and simultaneously provides conceptual frameworks and information for practical applications. Ritual performances are not thematised as such but, because of the focus on inner experiences of and external influences on the aging process, it does offer many examples of situations, developments and activities that carry ritual elements within them or that seem quite suitable to be distinguished as such.

In 1945 Leo Simmons published *The Role of the Aged in Primitive Society*.⁵⁵ Although it may seem somewhat outdated it contains a treasure of information. In quite a vigorous manner Simmons has collected data on an extensive selection of so-called primitive societies. This results in an uncanny amount of facts, stories and myths through which one can hardly discern a general thesis. Nevertheless, for research on ritual behaviour of elderly there is an abundance of information. Especially chapters five and six, on political and civil activities and the use of knowledge, magic and religion, contain great comparative material. While most of the activities and roles of the elderly stated here are 'of yore' and represent very different cultures, they serve well to understand how our own concept of old age and the elderly as well as their roles and activities are merely few of many different possibilities. In general this book not only clarifies that

⁵⁴ R. ATCHLEY: *Aging: continuity & change* (Belmont 1983).

⁵⁵ L. SIMMONS: *The role of the aged in primitive society* (Yale 1945).

the elderly, even in poor physical condition, are quite capable of performing ritual activities, but also suggests that granting them a certain authority and responsibility in this field serves the stability of a society.

A very typical work on old age is *La Vieillesse* by Simone de Beauvoir.⁵⁶ This work perfectly represents a long-held standard of dealing with old age and its philosophical, historical and socio-psychological receptions in a purely theoretical manner. Although fuelled by indignation, to this very day it remains a brilliant study with an almost inhumanly broad scope. Unfortunately, little is to be found on either ritual or specific homes for the elderly. Still, both as a 'witness' of a certain *Zeitgeist* and as a source of background information, I would recommend this work to anyone with an interest in the process of aging or the aged in a societal context.

Within the discipline of anthropology of elderly (gero-anthropology) much has been influenced by the works of Barbara Myerhoff. Especially *Number our Days*, her 'narrative' of life in a centre for Jewish elderly in Venice Beach, Los Angeles, has led down a new path for anthropologists to follow ever since.⁵⁷ It might well be the first, and to date one of the very few, scientific works in which ritual among the elderly receives explicit attention. It differs from previous works on old age and the elderly in both content and form. Myerhoff has been one of the firsts to break with the traditional, distanced and philosophical ways of writing on this topic, even going so far as to 'practise' walking with impediments.⁵⁸ In her account she time and again discovers how rituals (secular as well as religious) at the elderly centre enabled people to cope with their daily adversities by (re)creating personal and communal continuity.⁵⁹

Not long after the appearance of *Number our Days*, a comparable study was published by Maria Vesperi. In *City of Green Benches*, Vesperi presents her findings on cultural constructions of old age and its impact on the self-perception of elderly in St. Petersburg, Florida.⁶⁰ She does not focus on one location like Myerhoff did, nor does she pay close attention to ritual among these elderly. She does, however, provide a meticulous report of the lives and living conditions of elderly of different race, gender and status, and the differences between

⁵⁶ S. DE BEAUVOIR: *La Vieillesse* (Paris 1970).

⁵⁷ B. MYERHOFF: *Number our Days* (New York 1978). During her fieldwork, Myerhoff was filmed by Lynne Littman. The material was then cut to an Academy Award winning documentary with the same title. See <http://vimeo.com/10082563> (consulted on 28-5-2010).

⁵⁸ MYERHOFF: *Number our Days* 18.

⁵⁹ MYERHOFF: *Number our Days* 108.

⁶⁰ M. VESPERI: *City of Green Benches. Growing Old in New Downtown* (Ithaca / London 1985). Originally Vesperi published her results in eleven parts in *Times*, from April 26 to May 6, 1981.

them, in one town. As with Myerhoff, continuity plays an important role but Vesperi shows that threats of change, be it economic, social-political or even geographical, are often counteracted intuitively and pragmatically rather than with elaborate performances.

Analogous methods of research as applied by Myerhoff and Vesperi underlie *The Ageless Self* by Sharon Kaufman.⁶¹ The question Kaufman set out to answer was how the aged themselves perceive the process of aging. In the many interviews she held, she discovered that elderly people 'structure' their life stories with the aid of so-called 'themes'. According to Kaufman, these themes carry 'explanatory power and symbolic force' as they represent what an individual perceives to be the most valuable or important ideas, concepts, morals or standards of human life.⁶² Examples are self-determination, acquiescence, work, marriage, religion and so forth. In follow-up interviews that focused on the discovered themes, Kaufman exposed that these elderly 'do not perceive meaning in aging itself; rather they perceive meaning in being themselves in old age'.⁶³ It is not age that defines who they are but their own integration of '...a wide range of experience – unique situations, structural forces, cultural pathways, [and] knowledge of an entire lifespan...'⁶⁴

Together these three works form a formidable background for ethnographic research on the elderly. They demonstrate perfectly what different kinds of approaches or points of departure are possible and what those may result into. Furthermore, they elucidate that no one approach can ever convey the 'full reality' and thus form a strong plea for complementarity.

In a gravely critical article, entitled 'Old Age: Cultural and Critical Perspectives', Lawrence Cohen reviews these last three and many other authors who have written about old age and the elderly.⁶⁵ Cohen intends to demonstrate some very persistent and, in his opinion, flawed viewpoints within gero-anthropology. According to Cohen, these viewpoints came into existence and remain vital only because no-one has ever devised a well thought-through epistemology of the science of old age. He summarizes them in three categories or 'tropes': the tropes of 'anger', 'exploration' and 'ambiguity'. The trope of anger entails all reactions of indignation about the present-day conditions of elderly life. The trope of exploration revolves around the notion that the elderly form a category of people that has hitherto been 'undisclosed'. Lastly, the trope of ambiguity

⁶¹ S. KAUFMAN: *The Ageless Self. Sources of Meaning in Late Life* (Wisconsin 1986).

⁶² KAUFMAN: *The Ageless Self* 30.

⁶³ KAUFMAN: *The Ageless Self* 6.

⁶⁴ KAUFMAN: *The Ageless Self* 187-188.

⁶⁵ L. COHEN: 'Old Age: Cultural and Critical Perspectives', in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994) 137-158.

points towards the given that virtually every piece of data on old age carries within it the adversatives of senility and wisdom, of resignation and re-activation, and of withdrawal from and interference in society. According to Cohen, these tropes time and again instigate a sudden and ill-founded 'jump' from critical thought to positivistic rhetoric. Alteration of this process, he argues, can occur in three ways: phenomenologically, rationalistically and hermeneutically. The phenomenological way stresses concrete experiences, physicality and identity without automatically considering these age-dependent. The rationalistic way exposes mechanisms of perceptions of and associations with the elderly in present-day society through communication of ideologies, nationalisms, modernity's, and gender constructions. The hermeneutic way aims to integrate the person of the researcher in the research itself to nullify the idealised but illusory separation of an 'ageless' and distanced researcher and his or her subject of study. Apart from its, in my opinion justified, critique and useful suggestions for future research, this article, through its bibliography, has great value for anyone with an interest in old age or the elderly. It consists of one hundred and thirteen titles of which only a very few prove less than mandatory reading material.

Within the context of Dutch society, at least two authors deserve consideration. They are Sjaak van der Geest and Jan Baars. In the late nineties, Van der Geest called for a specific anthropological approach within research on old age and the elderly.⁶⁶ In later works he extended that call into practical suggestions for anthropological fieldwork in the function-specific places of our society, such as hospitals and medical centres.⁶⁷ An interesting article from his hand is "Sacraments' in the Hospital'.⁶⁸ Here Van der Geest draws comparisons between 'primitive' or 'magical' rituals and the actions and performances of the medical staff. He reveals that what specialists see as purely scientific and logical interventions, patients, for the purpose of their recovery, often grant a symbolical or even 'ritualistic' meaning. The message is clear: research in this kind of environment is best served with broad and 'flexible' definitions that enable the researcher to integrate the perspectives of his subjects at any possible moment.

For more than two decades now, Jan Baars has been writing and publishing on old age very successfully.⁶⁹ His *Het nieuwe ouder worden* [The new ageing] went to

⁶⁶ S. VAN DER GEEST: 'Ouderen en welzijn: antropologische vragen en opmerkingen', in *Tijdschrift voor medische antropologie* 8,2 (1996).

⁶⁷ For an example of such an approach see J. RANKIN & M. CAMPBELL: 'Institutional Ethnography (IE), Nursing Work and Hospital Reform: IE's Cautionary Analysis', in *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 10,2 (2009).

⁶⁸ S. VAN DER GEEST: "Sacraments' in the Hospital', in *Anthropology & Medicine* 12,2 (2005) 135-150.

⁶⁹ Of the many publications, I here mention J. BAARS: 'De sociale constitutie van de ouderdom', in C. KNIPSCHER & J. BAARS: *Uitzicht op ouder worden* (Assen 1988) 21-36;

press in 2006 and already demanded a second edition within the year. In it Baars reveals how the present attitudes towards old age and the elderly have developed mainly under the influence of economic principles. The aged are commonly looked upon as a great financial burden on society. Yet, at the same time a large commercial apparatus tries to convince them into 'buying' their youth (back) or prolonging their life with all kinds of medicines, therapies or 'health activities'. With many historical and contemporary illustrations, Baars shows that growing older has thus become a much more complex and diverse process than numbers or demographics can convey. To escape such demographics, Baars strongly recommends replacing the ruling pathological approach with an existential one. Although clear and convincing, this theory turns out to fall subject to Cohen's critique, since it is fuelled by indignation and carries a strong political message but never manages to bridge the gap between this message and the actual subject.

6. Uneasy endings

A, once again quite ominously titled manuscript that seems to integrate many of the previously discussed subjects is *Uneasy Endings* by Renée Shield.⁷⁰ For her dissertation thesis, Shield sets out to investigate the day-to-day activities and experiences of the inhabitants of one specific nursing home (pseudonymously called the Franklin Nursing Home) in the North-Eastern United States. As a theoretical foundation, she combines Goffman's work on total institutions with reciprocity theory and the theory of rites of passage as put forth by Van Gennep and adapted by Turner. One of the true strengths of this dissertation is the fact that Shield has largely managed to keep herself from dramatising, oversimplifying or exaggerating the life in the hospital. This enabled her to 'dig deep' into its complicated reality of 'good intentions, budgetary constraints, federal and state regulations, bureaucratic officiousness, professional dictates, union loyalties, family divisiveness, religious prescriptions, human frailty, humane desires, and idiosyncratic individuality of a particular American type'.⁷¹ All these realities are voiced through empathic narratives, detailed field notes and critical

C. KNIPSCHER & J. BAARS: 'Ageing in the Netherlands: Structural and Cultural Characteristics', in *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* (1989) 129-142; IDEM: 'De verzorgelijking van ouderen. Maatschappelijke contexten van gerontologisch onderzoek', in J. BAARS & D. KAL (reds.): *Het uitzicht van Sisyphus. Maatschappelijke contexten van geestelijke (on)gezondheid* (Groningen 1995) 243-268; J. BAARS & H. VISSER (eds.): *Aging and Time: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Amityville 2006); J. BAARS, J. DANNEFER, C. PHILLIPSON & A. WALKER (eds.): *Aging, Globalization and Inequality: the New Critical Gerontology* (Amityville 2005); J. BAARS & F. BRINKMAN: *Het nieuwe ouder worden* (Amsterdam 2006).

⁷⁰ R. SHIELD: *Uneasy Endings: Daily Life in an American Nursing Home* (Ithaca / London 1988).

⁷¹ SHIELD: *Uneasy Endings* 11.

analyses of academic theories. Shield finally concludes that the entrance to a nursing home is a rite of passage with few if any rituals. The inhabitants are considered naturally non-reciprocal, which leads to a devaluation of their status as human beings.⁷² Their stay in the nursing home is a liminal phase without any clarity on expectations or rules of how to pass through and come out of it. Positive qualities of rites of passage, like the forming of '*communitas*', preparation for the next phase or obtaining 'worthiness', as described by Van Gennep and Turner, do not take place.⁷³ This condemns inhabitants to remain confused, uncertain and separated until the very end.

For my own research, this work by Shield has proven indispensable. As it accurately displays what dangers of prejudice and bias lurk and what results may be achieved when one remains aware of that, it offers an example of ethnographic fieldwork on location that is certainly worth following. Even though I have trouble accepting her statement that life in a nursing home is one great liminal phase and that there are hardly any rituals, I do believe she makes a valid point when she declares that rituals may play a crucial role in coping with the transition to and residence in such a place.

7. Some perspectives

All of the aforementioned works serve well in constructing a theoretical frame for research on rituals of the elderly in rest and nursing homes, but a theoretical frame remains always just that. It helps in demarcating the subject, in arranging the huge amount of related information and in focusing one's thoughts, but then its functionality basically ceases. It is then that the 'real' work begins: the actual research 'in the field'. Fortunately, I have been privileged to put my theoretical framework to the test quickly and thoroughly with the aid of two care facilities for the elderly in Tilburg.⁷⁴

My preliminary investigations left me with a rather large number of possible perspectives with which I could conduct my research. In the field, many of these perspectives proved to be 'unviable'. Of the ones that did not, some had to undergo austere adaptations, some only minor re-arrangements, and only a few remained as I had 'encountered' them. To conclude this article I will present a list of these perspectives, with which I am presently (still) conducting my research. They are categorised into three interrelated groups: transition, location and content. The first two groups contain those perspectives on rituality that

⁷² SHIELD: *Uneasy Endings* 214-215.

⁷³ SHIELD: *Uneasy Endings* 124-126, 183-184, 192-194.

⁷⁴ Zorgcentrum De Hazelaar (overkoepelende organisatie: De Wever) en servicecentrum Het Laar.

concern ‘influences from the outside’ while the latter engrosses those of its inner workings.

Perspectives of transition

- Leaving behind the familiar
- Dealing with the new: diminished agency, involuntary conditions of living, ‘strange’ people and surroundings

Perspectives of location

- Influence of architecture, hierarchical ‘strategies’, daily routine etc.
- Creative potential of spaces/rooms/objects (‘tactics’)
- Relations to other locations of societal life (for instance hospitals or guest houses) and common societal perceptions and associations
- Emplacement within the ‘urban environment’

Perspectives of content or qualities

- Performing what ought to be vs. what is, coping or practising adjustment
- Creating community or maintaining isolation
- Keeping identity
- (Re)constructing continuity
- Providing structure
- Avoiding idleness, maintaining worthiness
- Preparing for ‘the unknown’

Martijn de Ruijter MA is a doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Humanities, Tilburg University.

E-mail: m.a.g.deruijter@uvt.nl

