

## **Staging the Resurrection: The Public Theology of Dutch Production and Broadcasting Companies**

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### **Abstract**

*This article looks at the particular ways in which the resurrection of Christ was staged in the public domain during four editions of a popular musical event named The Passion. Since its first edition in 2011, this annual performance on the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has become a large media event in Dutch society. The author argues that its organizers – a television production company and two broadcasting companies – in their annual choices on how to shape and stage The Passion, make theological choices. Moreover, she argues that the staged theology of the organizers is to be considered a form of public theology. Pointing out that authority in late-modern network culture is subject of change, the author reveals how the production and broadcasting companies by organizing and actualizing a passion both prove themselves a leading party in the actualization of Christian tradition and turn up as players in the field of public theology.*

### **Keywords**

Passion performance, media event, television production and broadcasting companies, staged public theology, late-modern culture

### **Introduction**

Since 2011, *The Passion* in the Netherlands has become a popular annual music performance on the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It has grown into a large media event, organized by the Dutch television production company *Eye2Eye Media* in cooperation with the broadcasting companies *EO* and *RKK*. Some twenty VIPs (mainly famous singers and actors) participate in the presentation of the passion narrative that is staged on a platform 12 meters wide set up on a large square of a big city.<sup>1</sup> The production leans on covers of well-known Dutch hit songs from the recent national pop music history; these hits – all (except for one) different each year – are performed within the framework of the biblical Passion that is being narrated. By choosing Dutch-language hits, the biblical story of Jesus' last days and hours is performed in an explicitly Dutch context. As previous empirical research brought to light, people

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<sup>1</sup> All editions *The Passion* has seen so far are available via <[http://www.npo.nl/the-passion/POMS\\_S\\_EO\\_113985](http://www.npo.nl/the-passion/POMS_S_EO_113985)> [accessed 30 July 2014].

appropriate *The Passion* by giving new and/or other meanings to the pop songs as performed in this particular context.<sup>2</sup>

The story line of *The Passion* is basically in close keeping with the canonized passion narratives as recorded in the four gospels. The performance structure has a relatively fixed format, in which the narrator serves as the anchor-man connecting the various scenes. The organizers thus annually deal with the *grand themes* of the passion narrative, such as suffering, betrayal, trust, faith, trial and tribulation, the question 'who is Jesus?', and the resurrection. These themes are staged differently in each of the four editions of *The Passion*.

In this article, I address one of the passion themes – the resurrection – and the way in which it was staged over the last years.<sup>3</sup> I thus aim to make clear that the specific choices the organizers make in the presentation of this contemporary passion are, among other things, theological choices, and that they therefore do public theology. After an introduction of this large musical event and the way it is embedded in Dutch society (2), I will focus on the resurrection and, using ethnographic research methods, describe the ways in which the resurrection was staged in the four editions of *The Passion* (3). Investigating the lyrics of the consecutive songs sung by the resurrected Jesus characters, as well as the physical positions where they subsequently appears, I take the staged resurrection as a case to show that, and in what manners, theology is constructed in *The Passion*. I will complete the article by arguing that the production and broadcasting companies by staging *The Passion* exert theology in public, and thus offer a new shape of public theology (4).

### **The Passion: a Biblical Narrative in a Contemporary Shape**

Since the beginning of Christianity, painters, theologians, musicians and others have translated the passion narrative. Through the centuries they have, either in paintings, language, music, and/or play, explained the gospels by creatively actualizing theme's, translating kernel notions, mediating and interpreting the narrative of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, making God's story audible and intelligible to the people of their times. I consider *The Passion* as a contemporary representation that stands in this tradition of creatively actualizing a narrative that belongs to the heart of Christianity.

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<sup>2</sup> These empirical data are processed in Martin Hoondert & Mirella Klomp, 'The Streets of Gouda', in P.G.J. Post, Ph. Nel and W.E.A. van Beek, eds, *Sacred Spaces and Contested Identities. Space and ritual dynamics in Europe and Africa* (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 2014), pp. 313-330 at 320-322. Also see Mirella Klomp, 'Moderne liturgie, stadsmarketing of heiligschennis? Reflectie op The Passion vanuit cultureel-antropologisch perspectief' in *Handelingen. Tijdschrift voor Praktische Theologie en Religiewetenschap* (2012/4), pp. 45-54.

<sup>3</sup> Over the last years I have empirically investigated *The Passion* using ethnographic methods. For an elaboration on empirical research in ritual, see Marcel Barnard, Johan Cilliers, Cas Wepener, Mirella Klomp, Ronelle Sonnenberg, Stefan Belderbos, Nienke van Andel: 'Investigating liturgical ritual', in M. Barnard, J. Cilliers and C. Wepener, eds, *Worship in the Network Culture: Liturgical Ritual Studies. Fields and Methods, Concepts and Metaphors*, Liturgia Condenda 28, (Leuven/Paris/Walpole, MA: Peeters Publishers, 2014), pp. 49-63. A previous version of this chapter was published as Marcel Barnard, Mirella Klomp, Ronelle Sonnenberg, Stefan Belderbosch & Nienke van Andel: 'Dots on a Blank Sheet. Procedures in Ritual and Liturgical studies', *Yearbook for Liturgical and Ritual Studies* 25 (2009), pp. 35-46.

As mentioned in the introduction, *The Passion* has recently grown into a large media event, organized by a Dutch television production company and two broadcasting companies. Other partners are the local municipalities of the cities concerned, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and the Roman-Catholic Church, as well as the Dutch Bible Society.<sup>4</sup> The production leans on covers of well-known Dutch hits: the lyrics of these songs remain unchanged. One of the unique characteristics of this contemporary passion is the fact that these hits are put into the framework of the biblical passion narrative, and thereby receive new meanings. A love song about a man and a woman, for instance, when sung by Mary (the mother of Jesus), gets an entirely different meaning: within the context of the passion narrative, the words suddenly apply to the love this particular mother feels for her son Jesus. The entire passion performance is based on this principle.

Part of the 70 minutes lasting live show, is a procession of some 1000 people carrying a bright neon-lit cross 6 meters long through the streets elsewhere in the city. The procession heads for the large square where the event takes place and arrives at the dramatic climax of the evening: the condemnation and carrying away of Jesus.

The event annually airs live and prime time on national television on Maundy Thursday and attracts increasingly more visitors. The fourth edition in the city of Groningen in 2014 culminated in 20.000 people standing in the city square and a viewing share of 44.9% on television.<sup>5</sup> *The Passion* is among the biggest live television events annually. It generates an increasing amount of publicity: it was headline topic on primetime news, front-page news in several newspapers, and a prime topic on all national entertainment and news shows on radio and television. Press officers of the organizing broadcasting companies work with a large and well thought-out media campaign. Starting a few weeks before Maundy Thursday, they reveal the participating VIP's in phases in some ten national newspapers, ten programme guides and various popular television and radio programmes.

The organizing partners all attribute their own meanings to *The Passion*, and related to these meanings are their motives to engage in the event. The event to the television production company fits in their mission that focuses 'on communicating positive values to a broad audience in a creative, attractive and accessible manner' (*Eye2Eye Media*).<sup>6</sup> One of the initial reasons for the broadcasting companies to put up *The Passion* was a research report that showed that 75% of the Dutch youngsters between 12 and 28 years old does not know what the feast of Easter is about. Based on their mission statements that aim to 'bring the gospel to the street' (RKK) and to 'shape and pass on the Kingdom of God (EO), they want to

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<sup>4</sup> Eye2Eye Media, EO and RKK take the lead in the organization. EO is an evangelical broadcasting company with members. RKK is a broadcasting company without membership that airs on behalf of the Roman-Catholic Bishop's Conference of the Netherlands. Nederlands Bijbel Genootschap is a foundation that aims at a wide distribution of the Bible.

<sup>5</sup> Absolute viewing figures, television rating and market share per year and location were respectively: 1.0 million, 6.8% and 17.6% (2011, Gouda); 1.9 million, 12.2% and 25.9% (2012, Rotterdam); 2.5 million, 16.3 and 32.4% (2013, The Hague); 3.6 million, 23% and 44.9% (2014, Groningen). Source: document created by Bas Koolen, market researcher at KRO-NCRV, obtained on 17 June 2014. Definitions: Market share: 'the percentage of the total viewing audience watching over a given period of time'. Television rating: 'the relative audience and measure of the popularity of a programme'. One TVR is numerically equivalent to one per cent of a target audience, in this case being all viewers aged 6+. Definitions taken from <[http://www.barb.co.uk/resources/barb-facts/glossary?\\_s=4](http://www.barb.co.uk/resources/barb-facts/glossary?_s=4)> [accessed 30 July 2014].

<sup>6</sup> Source: [http://www.eye2eyemedia.nl/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=73&Itemid=101&lang=en](http://www.eye2eyemedia.nl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=73&Itemid=101&lang=en) [accessed 24 November 2014].

represent the biblical narrative to a wide audience.<sup>7</sup> They present pop stars, politicians and other celebrities as role models who can link the event to the intended audience.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, considering the announced cutbacks on the government media contribution and the future revision of the Dutch broadcasting system, the popularity of *The Passion* may work out positively for the organizing broadcasting companies: it might lead to increasing numbers of members. (Broadcasting companies like EO are required to meet a minimum number of members, in order to keep their broadcasting licence in the future.) For the organizing production company and the broadcasting companies *The Passion* is thus a product and identity marker: a popular tv show on a religious subject. Apart from representing a biblical narrative to a wide public, there is definitely also broadcasting policy involved. The Dutch Bible Society participates in the organization of *The Passion* because they see it as a shape that brings the Bible close to people.<sup>9</sup> 'The Bible bears relevance for everyone. We are positive that the narratives still have the power to reach a wide audience. But the language and shapes that Christians normally use, often appear to be a barrier.' Obviously, they consider *The Passion* as a successful form that includes language accessible for a wide audience. To the municipalities of the cities where *The Passion* takes place, this event is a successful form of city marketing.<sup>10</sup> They are co-operators in organizing the event; their share mainly regards the public security during on Maundy Thursday, consisting of the deployment of police and security guards and availability of extra auxiliary services.<sup>11</sup> The participating Roman-Catholic Church and the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (on a national level) see *The Passion* as a way of giving ear to their missionary task in the world. They have also come to observe a positive side effect, where local parishes and congregations are inspired to stage their own passion, or seize the opportunity to draw young people to the church to watch *The Passion* on a large screen together with their peers and other church members.

Of course, the attribution of meanings to *The Passion* is not limited to the organizing partners alone. Recognition of the event differs deeply, e.g. particular orthodox churches considered it a severe form of sacrilege and distanced themselves from *The Passion*.<sup>12</sup> To a group of teens and their minister who came to one of the performances, the event was part of their catechesis program. A Dutch journalist and TV presenter on Twitter called it 'religious kitsch' that made him feel sick.<sup>13</sup> Also, many individuals consider *The Passion* as 'just entertainment': a nice tv show and/or freely accessible pop music event on a city square. Besides the participation of popular artists, the link with popular culture, and the accessibility of the event, the fact that the event is open to the attribution of a variety of meanings undoubtedly plays a part in the 'well-knownness' of the event.

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<sup>7</sup> Sources: interview with Leo Fijen (head of broadcasting company RKK), 5 December 2011 and <http://www.eo.nl/algemeen/overdeeo/bestuur/> [accessed 24 November 2014] respectively.

<sup>8</sup> Source: interview with Leo Fijen, 5 December 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Source: <<http://www.bijbelgenootschap.nl/ervaar-de-bijbel/the-passion/>> [accessed 30 July 2014].

<sup>10</sup> Source: interview with two people of the municipality of Gouda, 13 February 2012.

<sup>11</sup> This allocation of tasks is partially related to the separation between church and state in the Netherlands; the state is supposed to keep a distance to organized religion, with respect to the content of their practices of faith.

<sup>12</sup> This example is addressed and further elaborated in Hoondert & Klomp, 'The Streets of Gouda' in Post, Nel, Van Beek, eds, *Sacred Spaces and Contested Identities. Space and ritual dynamics in Europe and Africa*, pp. 313-330 at 324-325.

<sup>13</sup> Source: tweet by @Teunvandekeuken on 15 April 2014. 'De Passion is een verkrachting van, van, van zoveel dingen, dat je er hartstikke misselijk van wordt. #relikitsch'

The original format of the event stems from the United Kingdom, where BBC3 aired the *Manchester Passion* on Good Friday, April 14, 2006. This remained a once-only event. After a first performance in the Netherlands in 2011, which was – at least in the eyes of the organizers –surprisingly well-received, the annual repetition allowed for an increasing popularity. A few hours before the fourth edition in Groningen, the national news announced that an American television producer, following the Dutch format, will probably transfer *The Passion* to the USA.<sup>14</sup> It looks as if the Netherlands made it a large event and indeed managed to represent this biblical narrative to a wide audience.

#### **Four Times the Resurrection of Jesus and their Theology**

I will now focus on the final part of the performance. Towards the end of the story – after a rather detailed description by Pontius Pilate of how a crucifixion works, and a song sung by the Mary-the-mother-of-Jesus character – *The Passion* normally closes with an apparition of Jesus that refers to his resurrection. This resurrection is suggested and staged differently in each of the four editions of *The Passion*. In this section, I will set this final scene apart from the rest of the spectacle in order to examine a particular theological theme and the manner in which it is staged. I will do so, making use of ritual ethnography, first and foremost focusing on elements such as location and lyrics. The physical ways of staging as well as the songs put in the mouth of the risen Christ, among other things, are implicit theological constructions: they create and at the same time express particular theological meanings of Jesus. They are products and producers of theology; below I will – in chronological order of the performances – describe and analyse in what manner.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Gouda 2011*

The first edition of *The Passion* for the production and broadcasting companies was a hazardous undertaking: no one knew how the event would be received in Dutch secularized culture. Anticipating the risk of a negative reception, the organizers chose to let the narrator mockingly suggest the resurrection of Jesus, rounding up the performance as follows:

It is finished, so to say. Some people said that he will rise from the dead. I also learned that Jesus himself said this a couple of times. [He mockingly chuckles:] Don't you believe it? ... Well, we all know that this story does not have a happy end. And this end may not be a very good end, but

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<sup>14</sup> Source: <<http://nos.nl/artikel/637135-the-passion-goes-usa.html>> [accessed 30 July 2014].

<sup>15</sup> English translations of Dutch spoken text and lyrics in this section are by the author, and based on the Dutch as rendered in the organizer's line-ups of the performances.

hey... we are after all in fucking Gouda! ... Thank you for coming. From the Market Square in the city centre of Gouda on Maundy Thursday 2011: thank you, good night.

After these words, all lights are switched off. It is suggested that the show is over. Still, the orchestra plays dissonant sounds. Then, spotlights are put on the tower of the monumental St Jan's Church right behind the stage, where the person playing the role of Jesus, dressed in white clothes, singingly appears. The first verse of the song he sings a cappella, so that no attention is drawn to anyone but him; later on the orchestra accompanies his singing. People down on the square wave with the glow-in-the-dark-gadgets they received when they entered the square; some people sing along. Probably, some associated the high position where Jesus stood with heaven; others may have identified his physical position with the message of the church.

The song sung by the Jesus character is a cover version of a song by André Hazes, one of the most famous Dutch singers of vernacular pop music in recent history (in Dutch: 'Nederpop'). A previous cover version was sung by Guus Meeuwis at the artist's own funeral that took place in a football stadium, in 2004. The lyrics of its chorus read:

Now give me your fear, I give you hope in return.

Now give me the night, I give you a new day in return.

As long as I do not lose you, I am sure I find my way with you.<sup>16</sup>

The original lyrics have various metaphorical layers. In the context of *The Passion*, the lyrics maintain their metaphorical layers, but some of its meanings may change. For instance, in the verses, the main figure inveigles a second person to stay overnight. In the new context, from the mouth of Jesus, this song may become more of an offer to help the spectators, or an invitation to follow him. In that case a suggested sexual meaning of the lyrics moves to the background. Still – and this is kernel to the presentation of the resurrection in this first edition of *The Passion* – whether they put their faith in God, allow Jesus to go with them in life, believe in the resurrection of Christ, etc. people all decide for themselves. The song thus can be seen as a call for trust: it is an invitation to confide all fear and all darkness and night to the first person narrator, in this case being the risen Lord who is staged on high – and those who *do* confide all this darkness, will be given hope and a new day in return. Given the organizers' aim to familiarize a wide audience with the narrative of Jesus, the physically and textually

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<sup>16</sup> Full lyrics available on <<http://www.songteksten.nl/songteksten/3330/andre-hazes/geef-mij-je-angst.htm>> [accessed 30 July 2014].

shaped theological message may be: the risen Lord offers every individual a new start, a new day, resurrection to every person who decides to put his/her trust in the Lord.<sup>17</sup>

### *Rotterdam 2012*

The next year, the second edition of *The Passion* took place in a city bigger than Gouda. The organizers more or less followed the same format. However, the first edition was generally quite well received, and this seemed to have opened the way to change the tune of the narrator in a more neutral (and less sceptical) one: at the end of the second edition, he rounds up the event, saying

It is finished, so to say. Maybe this is not really a nice end. ... And what was the use? ... Some people said that he will rise from the dead. According to the Bible, Jesus himself said this a couple of times. Whether you believe he did, is up to you... And with this, our story seems to have come to an end. Or doesn't it...?

This second edition ends with a question. Following this open end, using sound and light effects the organizers create a transition to something unexpected for the audience. People who saw the first edition may expect the Jesus figure to appear, but no one knows where this appearance will take place. Spotlights are placed on the top of the Erasmus Bridge – one of the city's highlights – and there, the protagonist appears – clothed in white, like the preceding year – and sings a song by Marco Borsato, another famous Dutch singer:

There is no such thing as bidding farewell.

I am going away, but I do not leave you.

You must believe me, my love, even though it hurts.

I want you to let me go,

and to carry on tomorrow.

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<sup>17</sup> My reconstructions of the staged public theology in sections 3.1-3.4 are based not just on the quoted lyrics, but lyrics of the entire song.

But when you feel lonely or afraid, I will be there.

*[Chorus]*

I come as the wind and the rain that you feel,

I follow your acting as the light of the moon.

Look for me in everything and you will find me.

Whisper my name and I will come.

Believe the unbelievable; what you believe is true,

just open your eyes and I will be with you.

The only thing you have to do is believe me.<sup>18</sup>

These lyrics in the context of *The Passion* portray the risen Jesus as someone who comes very near in the lives of people: he can be encountered in nature, he can be met in the shapes of things visible and invisible, he is at whispering distance. After his death, Christ lives on and will be recognized by those who seek him. All one has to do is take his word for it. From a theological perspective the lyrics in this setting express a sacramental view on forms and shapes: through these, Christ may be encountered.<sup>19</sup> The person playing the role of Jesus, who in the first minutes of the passion event was introduced singing the song called 'Mens' (*Man*) at the very end appears at a large physical distance (actually, for logistical matters, his stand-in shows up). The audience sees the Jesus figure at the top of the bridge, high up in the sky, close to where people traditionally locate(d) 'heaven' and 'God'. This direction – from earth to heaven – may suggest a Christology from below: *The Passion* begins with the man, Jesus of Nazareth, represented first of all as a man (during the opening song surrounded by friends) and then moves on to suggest a close relation to God, when after his death he appears in white clothes in the sky above Rotterdam. The Rotterdam edition thus combined a Christology from below (through a 'speedy ascension in 70 minutes') with a Christ who, after his death, still encounters people – not physically, but in various sacramental shapes. The organizers present a God who is close to the people who dare taking a step forward and believe him.

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<sup>18</sup> Full lyrics available on <<http://www.songteksten.nl/songteksten/42869/marco-borsato/afscheid-nemen-bestaat-niet.htm>> [accessed 30 July 2014].

<sup>19</sup> For an elaborate sacramental, particularly incarnational theology of sound, cf. Mirella Klomp, *The Sound of Worship. Liturgical Performance by Surinamese Lutherans and Ghanaian Methodists in Amsterdam* (Leuven/Paris/Walpole MA: Peeters Publishers 2011), pp. 223-262, at pp.225-239.



*Den Haag 2013*

In the third edition of *The Passion*, that took place in The Hague in 2013, the organizers found a new way of staging the resurrection of Jesus. The text of the narrator closing the performance, however, is very similar to the text in Rotterdam: neutral and open to a variety of possible meanings that could be ascribed to the passion narrative. Fascinatingly, the narrator this year mentions both Hollywood and the bible in this closing text.

It is finished, so to say. Maybe this is not really a Hollywood happy end... And what was the use?

Some people said that he will rise from the dead. According to the bible, Jesus himself said this a couple of times... But our story tonight seems to end here tonight. Or does it not...?

After these words the narrator searchingly looks up to the sky, plays with the expectations of those who saw earlier editions of *The Passion*. Again sound and light effects are used to suggest that something is going to happen – spotlights then all of a sudden focus on Jesus who appears in the middle of the adjacent pond; wearing white clothes. This image of Jesus refers to bible verses in the gospels of Matthew, Marc and John, where the disciples see Jesus walk on the water. These verses are not directly part of the passion narratives; according to an informant at the broadcasting companies the choice to stage the resurrection on the water therefore was on the brink of what was still acceptable.<sup>20</sup> The appearance of Jesus this time is staged on the same physical level as the audience, and is – compared to the tops of the church in Gouda and the bridge in Rotterdam –relatively close to the audience.

The song sung by the risen Jesus is a cover of a song by Nick and Simon, a young Dutch male duo, who are relative newbies in the Dutch pop music scene. The lyrics of the chorus read:

Take my hand, do not pose to many questions,

you cannot carry the world on your own.

Let me show you the way, it is no problem

that you want to prove yourself time and again,

but you cannot do it on your own.

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<sup>20</sup> Telephone interview with Reinder van Dijk (press officer at broadcasting company RKK), 8 May 2014.

I reach out to you, so seize the opportunity:

I offer my assistance and hope that you trust my hands.<sup>21</sup>

Sung by the person playing the role of Jesus, the theological image that appears is one of Jesus Christ as a guiding assistant. Human beings tend to go-it-alone in life, and to rely on themselves, but they cannot do without the help of other people. In this case, one of these other people offering assistance is the son of man: Jesus. He reaches out his hands to every spectator and offers to be a guiding companion on the path of life of every single person.

The physical position of Jesus standing in the water, on the same level as the audience, underlines this son of man image: Jesus was truly human. Yet, the suggestion that he has risen from the dead (in the previous scenes he was led away to be crucified and Pontius Pilate detailed the crucifixion), the reference to the miracle of his walking on water, and the white clothes may refer to a divine intervention, but at least – in combination with the lyrics of the song – suggest that with Jesus all is possible. The unattainable appears no longer unattainable with this assisting guide. Do not ask how Jesus can walk over water, it is okay that you want to prove yourselves, but do neither be stubborn, nor think that you can reach everything in life all by yourself. Again, as in 2012, there is a strong emphasis on the individual choice of the people involved: Jesus offers, people decide for themselves whether or not they respond to this offer with believe.

### *Groningen 2014*

In the fourth (and, at the moment this article was written: latest) edition of *The Passion*, the producer and broadcasting companies on the night before the performance decided to change the representation of the resurrection. They had planned to let Jesus appear on the tower of the Martini Church – one of the highlights of the city of Groningen, close to the Vismarkt, the big square where *The Passion* would be performed. But the night before the event, they decided that this church tower would be a place too predictable for a resurrection. ‘After all,’ one of the press officers told me, ‘it is also a show and it is important that it has to be some surprise to it as well’.<sup>22</sup> The effect of the eventual surprise was increased by the fact that they played with the audience and their expectations, and with the famous slogan that is used for the marketing of the city and province of Groningen. This Dutch slogan is a play on words that combines the natural location of Groningen in the upper north of the country with the claim that Groningen delivers quality in its events, products and services. In previous editions, the narrator had looked up to suggest that Jesus would appear somewhere there. This year too, he said:

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<sup>21</sup> Full lyrics available on <<http://www.songteksten.nl/songteksten/76728/nick-en-simon/pak-maar-m-n-hand.htm>> [accessed 30 July 2014].

<sup>22</sup> Telephone interview with Reinder van Dijk, 8 May 2014.

It is finished, to put it nicely. Whether you believe that this is the end of the story, is up to you.

The fact that we still tell this story here, 2000 years later, on the Vismarkt, leads me to the question whether the death of Jesus may not be the end of the story... Some people said that he will rise from the dead. According to the Bible, Jesus himself said this a couple of times...

The slogan of this beautiful province is: 'Nothing exceeds Groningen...' Or...?

As the narrator searchingly looked up, as sound and light effects were used, and as the camera's focused on the tower of the Martini Church, the singer who played the role of Jesus start singing:

Look up, to the sun; do not search for answers;

let it go and hold on to me.

This road leads itself, it leads you to the future;

this cloud will quickly pass by.<sup>23</sup>

But he did not appear on the tower. All of a sudden, the cameras quickly moved down and showed the Jesus figure standing among the audience on the city square. The artistic director decided to let him appear among the audience, right there, in their midst. This way, Jesus appeared in a place where no single TV viewer had expected him to appear (the people at the back of the square naturally must have noticed that something was going on). The Jesus character touched, or suggested to touch the people surrounding him. The audience in his immediate neighbourhood took pictures with their smart phones. The 'look up'-call of the song contradicted the physical presence of the Jesus figure amidst the people. The theological image of Jesus is one of a guide to stick to, or maybe even of Jesus as the Way ('the road that leads itself') that will lead to the future; that has future, in the sense that death is not the end, in the sense that there is no dead-end with him. Although this theological construction is totally at odds with, for instance, the narrative of Mary Magdalene who takes Jesus for the gardener (John 20:17), where Jesus says: 'Stop clinging to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father', the suggestion here is different: clinging to the risen Lord explicitly does help a person to let everything else go, and

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<sup>23</sup> This final resurrection song, like in 2013, was a cover of a song by the duo Nick and Simon. The verses were left out; only the chorus was sung and repeated. Full lyrics available on <<http://www.songteksten.nl/songteksten/76349/nick---simon/kijk-omhoog.htm>> [accessed 30 July 2014].

knowledge, or maybe even ratio, does not solve everything. In the end, the cloud of incomprehension, of misunderstanding perhaps, will pass by and the unexpected will occur: it is not knowledge, but Jesus who will bring light/enlightenment. In a late-modern network society where faith is often set aside as irrational, the organisers of *The Passion* in this fourth edition make a clear statement about the meaning of Jesus, and suggest what an attitude of faith may look like. Another element of the theology they construct is that, in line with Luke 24:36-53 where holding (on to) Jesus is encouraged to emphasize that his appearance is real, Jesus still appears amidst the people: he is among people up until today.

### **Production and Broadcasting Companies doing Public Theology in Late-modern Network Culture**

As stated above, I consider *The Passion* as a 21<sup>st</sup> century creative actualization of a narrative that belongs to the heart of Christianity.<sup>24</sup> I hasten to add that there has never been (nor will ever be) a fixed original or a fixed set of contents of the passion: until today, all passion forms are part of a tradition of constructing, deconstructing and reinventing the presentation of a story that circles around the suffering and death (and sometimes resurrection) of a man who is called the Son of God. In all these shapes, theological meanings are expressed, and as such *The Passion* is no exception.

In this section, I will point out that and in what manner the production and broadcasting companies by organizing and actualizing a passion do public theology. Since public theology is generally understood as a(n academic) reflective practice of theologians, I will make clear that in their offering a performed theology, the organizing companies created a new shape of public theology. Thus, I state that forms of public theology vary, and that its practice is not reserved for the academia.

#### *Doing (public) theology*

The organizers of this actualization of the passion narrative are (among others) a producing and two broadcasting companies. This means that the media do not 'just mediate' a ritual by simply broadcasting it. They create the shape themselves, and with this shape create its theological content. As I have shown in the previous section, the production and broadcasting companies do so by their choice of a particular position for Jesus, their choice of particular songs, and by playing with timing and the expectations of the audience.<sup>25</sup> In order to gain a more profound insight in how the spectacle is actually shaped (for instance in terms of the plot, dramatizing effects and climax, and in terms of camera work, lightning and interplay with social media) a multidisciplinary next step in the research is required – narrative theories, performance as well as media studies will prove useful here – but such deeper analysis is beyond the

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<sup>24</sup> For an elaboration of musical actualizations of the passion narrative in Christian history, see Mirella Klomp, 'Joseph & Jesus. Bible-based musicals and contemporary Passions staged in the public domain: an exploration of a research perspective', *Yearbook for Liturgical and Ritual Studies* 27, Tilburg/Groningen 2011, pp. 49-65 at 52-55.

<sup>25</sup> On the concepts of 'mediation' and 'mediatisation', see David Morgan, 'Mediation or mediatisation. The history of media in the study of religion' in *Culture and Religion*, 12:2 (2011), pp. 137-152.

limits of this article. In this article I isolated the apparition of the Jesus character in order to focus on the fact that the organizers actively steer the theological meaning of a performance staged in the public domain, and claim that they thus exert theology in public.

I make this claim leaning on the theory of John McClure, who challenges the general academic conception of the nature of theology by pointing to the world of pop music.<sup>26</sup> Using contemporary music-making – in which a song is written in relation with a tradition (either in continuity or discontinuity), is sampled across traditions and genres, remixed and mashed up with the newest technologies – as a metaphor, he explains how theological invention arises when a mashup of the traditional and the novel is created. McClure argues that ‘theological invention is a matter of stylistically layering four central authorities (tracks): Scripture, culture, theology and reason.’<sup>27</sup> Referring to Gadamer’s aesthetic, he points out that song-writing within a tradition is a deeply hermeneutical practice: it ‘is created and comprehended primarily within the horizon of meaning represented by a historical tradition. (...) All new, autonomous, and authentic words are improvisations on a living tradition and gain heteronomy by being beholden to traditions of communication long established and revered within the community itself.’<sup>28</sup> Song-writing *out of* a tradition ‘means working from models within a tradition, while “deliberately breaking conventions and forms”, adding a “twist and stretching boundaries”.’<sup>29</sup> McClure pursues using popular music-making as a metaphor throughout his book in order to propose a shift of emphasis in the theological education of students: they could learn how to ‘do theology’ by acquiring the skills and knowledge to ‘cover’ and ‘riff on’ the great works of exemplars within theological traditions.<sup>30</sup> Students thus learn to deal with theological themes and concepts, and to carry these forward in new ways. Focusing ‘attention on small patterns of behaviour, types of words or phrases, colours, sounds, attitudes, styles, furnishings, habits, expressions’, they relate reality to the larger scheme in which these realities exist. More than an applied theology, they thus develop a lived theology.<sup>31</sup>

I state that this is exactly what the production and broadcasting companies do in case of *The Passion*. They deal with theological concepts and themes and carry these forward in a new way. Revitalizing the musical shape that is deeply rooted in Christian historical traditions, they engage in a Christian hermeneutical practice. Sampling Dutch top hits, remixing the passion narrative, and employing all kinds of technologies and engaging social media, they create a mashup passion that conveys a Christian theological message in a contemporary shape. Whether production and broadcasting companies are aware of it or not, in *The Passion* they stylistically layer the aforementioned four central authorities. The ‘Scripture track’ takes the general shape of the passion narrative based on canonized gospels. It is explicitly expressed when, just before the Jesus character appears, the narrator states: “Some people said that he will rise from the dead. According to the bible, Jesus himself said this a couple of times...”

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<sup>26</sup> John McClure, *Mashup religion. Pop music and theological invention*. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9. McClure makes clear that ‘not all theological compositions will use all of these tracks, and they will not always be used consistently’, see pp. 51-55.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

The 'culture track' becomes visible in, among other things, the shape of a large media event, the live broadcast, the Dutch pop songs, the use of technologies. In the 2014 construction of the resurrection, the cameras that quickly moved down from the Martini tower and showed the Jesus figure standing among the audience on the city square is one of the sound bites that constitute the culture track. The 'theology track' becomes clear in the theological meanings I uncovered in sections 3.1-3.4. The 'reason track' (McClure also calls this the 'message track' that regards the understanding of religious truth) is hard to discover, particularly because *The Passion* combines the conveyance of theological meanings with the explicit message that it is up to the meaning maker to decide what is the religious truth.

By layering these four tracks in a passion event that they staged in the public domain, the organizers constructed a theology of the resurrection (and likewise of other grand themes of the passion that are part of this performance). This theology is not so much a *lived* theology, as, according to McClure, is to be developed by students in theology, but a *performed* theology. Obviously, academic reconstruction of the constructed theology, as delivered in this article, is necessary to be able to demonstrate that and how public theology is done. This does, however, not alter the fact that the production and broadcasting companies themselves do public theology as well.

#### *Transfer and the Transformation of Meaning Making and Authority*

At the beginning of this section, I situated *The Passion* in the age-old Christian tradition of shaping the passion narrative. It is one of many constructed, deconstructed and reinvented presentations of the passion story throughout history. But compared to ages past, the cultural context in which this passion is presented is quite different. The tradition of annual passion performances arose in the liturgy. But whether performed inside the church (as a musical form) or outside (as a passion play), these performances took place in cultures that were steeped in Christianity anyhow. Thus the authoritative Christian meaning of the passion prevailed. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but mainly in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries the passion was transferred to the cultural domain that got separated from the ecclesial domain more and more. Meaning making today takes place in an entirely different cultural context: *The Passion* is staged in a secularized culture, where people are no less religious, but church attendance continues to decrease, and the profound influence of the Christian church in society has vanished.<sup>32</sup> Thus ecclesiastical meanings prove no longer authoritative.

This transfer of the passion is not accidental. In late-modern times, religious immaterial heritage of Christianity (the bible, ritual repertoires, symbols, musical forms, etcetera) constantly moves from the ecclesial to the cultural or public domain (and reverse).<sup>33</sup> Religious immaterial heritage leaves the structures that come with the church, and becomes a common asset. It thus also leaves behind the

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<sup>32</sup> Klomp, 'Joseph & Jesus', pp. 58-59.

<sup>33</sup> Gabriël van den Brink, 'De migratie van het goddelijke. Over geloof en kerk in de moderne maatschappij', in W. van de Donk, ea, eds, *Geloven in het publieke domein: Verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie*, WRR Verkenningen 13, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), pp. 417-33; Marcel Barnard, 'Bijbellezen als textiele werkvorm. "O Meester, Slaaf en Broeder, Geslachte en Verrezen God"', *Schrift: Tijdschrift over de Bijbel*, 270/46:1 (2014), pp. 30-34 at 31-32.

ecclesial frames of interpretation, such as religious doctrines. It is common knowledge that churches in Western countries rapidly lose members; they are no longer the central institutions in charge to interpret this heritage. People increasingly decide for themselves what things mean: they all attribute meanings (also religious meanings) according to their own collection of interpretive frames. The way in which religious immaterial heritage (including rituality or, as in our case, large musical forms) is experienced and obtains meaning is affected by the tendency towards individuality that is part of modernity: people are dealing with these things in their own individual ways. Everyone is creating his or her own system of meaning: we are all 'like a spider in a unique web'.<sup>34</sup> 'Rites and symbols are increasingly becoming an expression of the unique person we are, they have, so to say, become expressions of our own identity. Thus, in addition to reproducing meanings, we are also appropriating them. Moreover, we are not only appropriating them collectively, as groups, but also more and more individually.'<sup>35</sup> As a consequence, the meaning of a performance like *The Passion* has become a process of ongoing appropriation of meaning that reflects our (individual and group) identity. The dominant ecclesiastical meaning of the church no longer naturally prevails. This loss of authority is in keeping with the decline of authoritative institutions as such. Authority and power in our times no longer fall to central institutions:

Late-modern society is characterized by a 'plural authority structure'. Power and authority are divided and to a considerable extent are with individuals, small groups or interest groups that express themselves through ubiquitous networks. This also holds for the authority by which particular events or texts are being interpreted. (...) No church owns the exclusive right to religious rituals or symbols. People compose their own religious life, if so desired.<sup>36</sup>

The Passion thus does not simply stand for the commemoration or proclamation of the suffering and crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. As previous research proved, individuals, small groups and interest groups ascribe multiple and diverse meanings to the event.<sup>37</sup> Many of these already rose to the surface in sections 2 and 3.1-3.4 (The Passion as a product, city marketing, entertainment, etcetera). As indicated, in late-modern society people all can attribute meanings according to their own (and self-compiled) interpretive frames. No church owns the exclusive right to religious rituals or symbols or to the interpretation of these rituals and symbols. Surely, the construction of meaning has somehow always been an interactive process, but I here mean to highlight that the dominancy of the ecclesiastical frame of interpretation is what changed. The media – maybe a new authoritative player in

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<sup>34</sup> Marcel Barnard, *Liturgiek als wetenschap van christelijke riten en symbolen* = Inaugural lecture Universiteit van Amsterdam (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2000), p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Klomp, *The Sound of Worship*, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Barnard, 'Bijbellezen als textiele werkvorm', p. 31 (translation mine, MK); also see Barnard, Cilliers, Wepener, *Worship in the network culture*, p. 77. Barnard takes 'plural authority structure' from Manuel Castells, *The information Age 2. The Power of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997/2004). Castells quotes David Held, "Democracy, the nation-state and the global system", in *Economy and Society*, 20/2 (1991), pp. 138-172 at 161-167.

<sup>37</sup> See footnote 2.

the construction of meaning networks? – with their own theology of the passion reach a wide and varied audience.

### *The Public Theology of Production and Broadcasting Companies*

Like the church, the academia – which has been (some would even say: used to be) another authoritative institution – in the Western world seems to have lost some of the authority it had over the last centuries. The common man appears to consider an academic reflection or scholarly interpretation as ‘just another meaning’. By analogy with the interpretive frame of the church, which has become just one of many possible interpretive frames, we may say that the practice of its academic counterpart – theology – is no longer solely reserved to scholars. As I pointed out in section 4.1, the academia is not the only place where public theology can be located: the field shows that others, whether individuals or groups, also theologically reflect upon what is or will be going in society. Public theology, which I take as publically reflecting on (Christian) practices, narratives, themes and doctrines in new situations, in this late modern time is not solely practiced by academic theologians. In the present case, in shaping and staging *The Passion* and thus constructing temporal and situational theologies of the resurrection, the production and broadcasting companies exert public theology. Obviously, their public theology is not academic in character and thus not similar to the academic public theology (and their output does not take the shape of a scientific article). Still the event that they put on stage in the public domain is a ritual practice that they have theologically reflected upon. With the transfer of this large musical form to the public domain, the production and broadcasting companies transform *The Passion* into a large media event and meanwhile shape its content, as is shown above. Doing so, they theologize, in the sense that they theologically think through their choices, and the reflection of their theology is the event itself. Indeed, *The Passion* itself is the public embodiment of the organizers’ theologizing.

In the representation of the resurrection as part of a public event like *The Passion*, theology is constructed before the eyes of millions of people. In the Editorial of the very first issue of this journal in 2007, Sebastian Kim stated that ‘public theology is an engagement of living religious traditions with their public environment’.<sup>38</sup> This is exactly what the production and broadcasting companies do: by organising *The Passion* they engage with the cultural sphere of common life. If the academic public theology is to make sense in late modern society, it takes its societal developments very seriously, and thus acknowledges that the circle of public theologians has further widened and shapes of public theology have come to vary. This acknowledgment will offer great chances and challenges to work and interact with partners in society and will only advance the practice of public theology as a whole and contribute to the prominent place of theology in the public sphere.

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<sup>38</sup> Sebastian Kim, ‘Editorial’, *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1:1 (2007), pp. 1-4 at 2.