

Commoning Infrastructures

Changing Places through Organizational Action in Vilvoorde

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Abstract

Stal Cheval is a bottom-up initiative run entirely by volunteers in the sub-urban region of Vilvoorde. It aims to expand networks within civil society as well as facilitate meaningful encounters. They temporarily occupy vacant buildings in the city and transform them into cultural leisure spaces. In order to reach their goals they navigate city and civilian infrastructures in the city. Creating these projects fuels the transformation of infrastructures and resources, skills and ideas that they use to reshape the spaces they occupy. These infrastructures which are made up of common resources are recursive entities. They exist because Stal Cheval uses them. However, to be able to draw on or use these infrastructures, one needs to conform to the kind of subject that in using them (said infrastructures) surfaces. If one wants to be included, gain access, it is important to have similar ideas, ways of presenting oneself, engagements and interests — things that one develops through being included. This paradox of exclusion makes us wonder whether a truly inclusive process of making the infrastructure common is possible or a myth. Can we create processes of commoning infrastructures that are accessible to all? Or do these commons exclusively belong to those who, in using them, keep them alive?

24 February 2020 — Personal Note¹

It is not an easy task to exactly describe what or whom this thesis research is about. It is about an organization — Stal Cheval. It narrates the locality in which this organization anchors itself — Vilvoorde. It explores relationships and the connections they create. Whilst it is true that the stories which will emerge throughout this work are centered upon one singular organization — and subsequently are confined by its social and spatial boundaries — they in fact are made up of nonlinear, multidirectional narratives. This is because the people who constitute the organization are not bound by the same boundaries. They mingle. They go places. Moving in and navigating the world around them they take the ideal and real plane on which Stal Cheval acts with them (which is also true the other way around). This does pose a big challenge to define what is relevant for this research into systemic influence in organizations, which establishes itself as an infrastructuring and commoning process. Whilst the bulk of this writing is based upon stories and joint experiences in the organizational context of Stal Cheval, they also transgress these experiences, and unfold in encounters in everyday life — recognizing and being recognized, finding cross-sections in networks of what I will call circulators: Those people who choose to invest their time in chasing their visions, ideas, futures. For it are these people who occupy strategic nodes, cross-sections or knots in the sociality of Vilvoorde, its organizations and its communities.

¹ The choice of narrative font was based upon the typeface used in promotional documents of Stal Cheval e.g. Simplifica.

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Now I wish to briefly acknowledge the help, inspiration and support I got throughout the research and writing process. First and foremost, there is the organization of Stal Cheval and those who take part in it. Their openness and willingness to let me investigate what we do on my own terms. Furthermore, they have picked me up into their community and shared with me their vast knowledge of Vilvoorde, the locality and the networks. In short, they shared with me the resources I will talk about for the coming fifty pages.

I wish to thank my promotor Filip De Boeck for the feedback and proofreading as well as the guidance he gave me throughout the research process. Merit should be given to the open suggestion to focus this piece of work on the interface between infrastructures and the commons, which added greatly to its substance and relevance.

Next in line is my father who proofread multiple drafts, his contribution is significant and has been a great help when I became blind to my lengthy or bizarre linguistic fabrications.

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Lastly there is of course my girlfriend who has had to hear listen to my continuous explanations and flow of thought, oftentimes at the most inappropriate times of day.

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Introduction

Places form the framework for our existence. We are always somewhere, when we move, when our mind wanders and loses track of our surroundings. We are always here and there is always a *where* – A where we were, are or have been; a where we met, will meet or saw this happen. Places are vibrant entities; they are always in a state of becoming. They form a central part in the equation we will present throughout this thesis. Places form the framework against which processes of commoning and infrastructuring unfold.

Places change. They change depending on the time of day or season of the year. They change with the people that move through it. They change in a multiplicity of directions under the influence of a plurality of actants. Among such actants are organizations. I will not provide a clear-cut definition of what to understand under the term organization, because this task would need a list in organizational forms which would be lengthy at best. We simply use the term to denote those (quasi-)official structures made up of more than one individual with a certain purpose or set of purposes. Thus, this ‘definition’ would range from small businesses to supranational governments.

The choice to give such a prominent place to the term organization in the title is a necessary but misleading one. Misleading because I will not explicitly venture into the broad field of organization theory². Necessary because what I research are (structured) forms of sharing resources – practices in which organizations are involved. This is also where the term commons comes in. We understand the commons as an ongoing and thus historic process of what we share and the way we share it (Stavros Stavrides 2016). Moreover, I emphasize the discursive properties that are part of the practices of sharing we discuss here. There exists of course an abundance of ways to share and reciprocate, but within the context which I examine here – Stal Cheval, a volunteer organization in Vilvoorde – the ties that are woven between organizations of different compositions form a remarkable infrastructure through which resources are shared.

The primary goal of this research is to take on an exploratory outlook into the relationship between the organization Stal Cheval and the socio-technical infrastructures of the locality Vilvoorde. I will explicate which infrastructures are accessible as well as the ways in which (equal) access is bordered. I will argue that in fact we can identify two processes which are at play. The process of commoning infrastructures and the process of infrastructuring the commons – these processes can be represented as follows.



The processes of commoning infrastructures and infrastructuring the commons are the encompassing tidal forces of this research. They represent the push and pull movements that we observe when looking at the ways in which we share resources. The process of commoning infrastructures refers to the opening motion, infrastructures are opened and the resources that circulate within are made available. These resources are commoned, the way they are shared is redefined. The second process – the process of infrastructuring the commons – makes the opposite move, it restructures or defines access to the commons. Both processes always emerge together. The opening of infrastructures goes hand in hand with the infrastructuring of a commons. A group gains access to certain types of resources

² See Greenwood (2016) on organization theory for an overview.

and their circulation, and incorporates them in their own infrastructures. Within this tidal motion there are actors which hold 'better' positions than others. We will call them circulators. Those people who have strong networks and therefore a certain amount of prestige within systems of sharing³.

These two processes represent the broadening and narrowing of circulations. They can be seen as part of a larger process of what we might call *inhabitation*: "Our subjectivities are constituted through regimes of governance, historical baggage, social stratification, and everyday fluctuations, interactions, and assemblage" (Lancione and Simone 2020). Habitation is a processual move; it is the ongoing way of living in space and time⁴. Lancione and Simone (2020) write their essay on living with the COVID-19 pandemic. They argue that we live in a spacetime of emergency where an impulse of biological austerity is used to augment and broaden the way our subjects are governed in face of a global neoliberalism. The processes of infrastructuring and commoning we discussed above, feed into these changes. On the one hand, the commons we created by interacting in the spaces we used to inhabit are hollowed out. They take on a limited form, because of the diminished potential and multiplicity of our trajectories through urban space. The human framework for circulation has come to entail those who inhabit our 'recent contacts-list'. At the same time, the process of commoning infrastructures moves into the digital realm where new ways of sharing are explored. There we see that informational commons are broadly distributed to a larger public. Furthermore, the social distancing prompts us to redefine ways in which we circulate as well as ways in which we share our life worlds.

Infrastructures are systems we collectively put in place. They exist because we use them. They provide us with resources and opportunities which we share. In using these resources, we conform ourselves to normativities that are present within them. These normativities foster a certain sameness amongst its users. We could state that in order to have full access to these resources you must already conform to the kind of subject the infrastructures create. But this sameness is not absolute. Infrastructures only exist because they are used, and therefore, the present normative qualities or sameness of actors is negotiable; there is room for improvisation; we can negotiate what this sameness entails.

The argument we briefly mentioned above will be deepened and explored throughout this thesis. We hit it off in part one – *Identifying Relations* – where I first explore the background of Vilvoorde and Stal Cheval. In the second chapter we will go on to explain the methodology of this research. We will end this part with a status questionis centered around the concepts of infrastructure and the commons. In the second part we will apply and analyze the ways in which the processes of commoning infrastructures and infrastructuring the commons play out in the city of Vilvoorde. This second part is rooted in the ethnographic reality which presents itself in excerpts of conversation and the description of situations. In the fourth chapter – *New Circulations, New Circulators* – we will first examine the social fiber of the city to identify the crucial positions within systems of sharing. We will identify the common infrastructures⁵ which we examine as constituting part of the cultural economy, a political economy centered on creative industries and the cultural field. Moreover, we will zoom in on certain situations in which it becomes clear that access to infrastructured commons is hierarchically bordered. In the fifth and last chapter – *Sharing Influence, Bordering Community* – we will take on the way in which forces of subjectivation take form and police individuals that take part in the cultural economy.

³ On page 28 I explicate the reasons for using this term.

⁴ Relevant here is the concept of *chronotope*, stemming from Bakhtin which refers to the unity of the dimensions of time and space as well as the ways in which they are governed ("Valverde 2015 Borrowing," n.d., 9).

⁵ We will use the terms 'common infrastructures' and 'infrastructured commons' interchangeably, but they are used to stress the different processes for which they stand. The first relates to the broadening of circulation, the latter relates to its narrowing down.

Part 1 — Identifying Relations

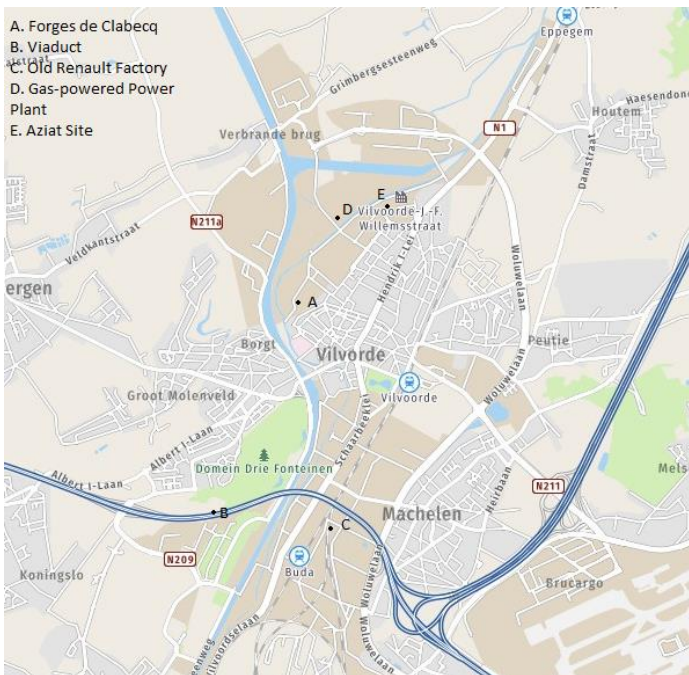
In the introduction we already established the encompassing narrative of this thesis. I spoke of structures of circulation and emphasized that some have a bigger capacity to make things go around. In this first part we will thus focus on identifying ways of researching and theorizing these structures and the agents that inhabit them.

The first chapter frames the background or context of this research. This is important to properly contextualize what is at stake. We will however refrain from saying too much as the second part will feature concrete narratives that contain contextual descriptions as well. In a second chapter we will discuss the methodology that forms the backbone of this thesis research. We will address the field, inspiring methodologies, (not) working with stakeholders, the interviews that were carried out as well as considerations for taking participant observation as the primary approach. In the last chapter of this part we will address useful concepts in a hybrid style featuring elements of literature review as well as in depth explanations of the theories that will prove to be important in part two.



Chapter 1. Vilvoorde – A Small Networked City

Vilvoorde is the locality in which this research unfolds. Whilst it is a rather small place, it has a lot to say. I argued in the introduction that the story I will tell here is an urban tale. It is a tale of sharing and creating meaningful space. In this tale I will narrate the (infrastructural) systems we collectively put in place, how its real and ideal properties mold our subjectivity and drive the circulation of people, things and ideas. In order to study what is at stake within these infrastructures we take an outlook of the city of Vilvoorde that approaches it as a fundamentally plural entity⁶. As such it should not come as a surprise that the way Vilvoorde will start to exist in your – the readers – experience will be quite different from the way in which it exists in mine. Therefore, to provide you with the proper divinatory tools, I will employ images of the city as often as is appropriate.



In this map the brown areas represent industrial terrain. Entries were made for the locations mentioned in the text (Source: “Plan Vilvoorde: Carte de Vilvoorde (1800) et Infos Pratiques” n.d.).

In what follows I will provide a brief history of the city. Thereafter, we will discuss its demographics and some other statistics. We will conclude this background with a description of Stal Cheval, which as an organization serves as the central knot that entangles the threads we weave between ourselves, others and the city.

The township Vilvoorde can be traced back to the roman times and in the late 8th century the name first appears in written documents. Through the ages it has been a key crossing of the Senne river for merchants and an excellent strategic location for controlling the region – as it is positioned between the city of Brussels and Mechelen and further north Antwerp. From the 14th century onwards it became a city with a military base. With the industrial revolution, Vilvoorde becomes a true economic center as the canal which had been built between Brussels and Mechelen gets deepened by dredging works (this would again take place in the early 20th

century to allow the passage of sea freighters) and in 1835 Vilvoorde became one of the first stops on the first railroad of continental Europe – the one between Brussels and Mechelen. The area between the canal and the railroad quickly started attracting new industries that could benefit from the unique combination of infrastructures. Gas- and cokes factories for generating electricity were the first. In the twentieth century a wide variety of industries settled in the city – from chemical works to steel, from the car-manufactories to cleaning products and paint factories (“Geschiedenis - Stad Vilvoorde” n.d.). In 1958 the gas-fired power plant was built, which created even more work-opportunity. From all over Belgium people migrated to the region of Vilvoorde and its surrounding villages, my own lineage can be traced to this labor migration. This exponential growth in industry continued up until the 70ies – with the oil crises and general recession. Some major factories closed their doors then and others moved their works in the decades that followed. Renault took the cake when it moved their factory in

⁶ Discussions on space and place will not be discussed in this thesis due to limited space but drawing on the lines of work of Cresswell (2009), Reckwitz (2012) and Rodman (1992) we can assume a place does not equal its physical materiality. Instead places are performed, narrated and experienced and as such they are relational and situational entities (Reckwitz 2012; Cresswell 2009; Rodman 1992).

1997. Parts of these sites are still vacant up to this day and most of them still mark the urban landscape (“Geschiedenis - Stad Vilvoorde” n.d.; “Vilvoorde - Wikipedia” n.d.).



The piles of concrete and brick rubble left over from the sanitation of Forges de Clabecq. Nature is creeping back in and the whole area has transformed into an enormous empty green space right in the center of the city.

Throughout the 20th century Vilvoorde was a point of connection where infrastructural pathways crossed. In 1908 a big road to Schaerbeek was built, accompanied by a tram. This tram was banned from Vilvoorde in 1993 (“Geschiedenis - Stad Vilvoorde” n.d.; “Vilvoorde - Wikipedia” n.d.) and this cut off easy circulation of people between Schaerbeek and Vilvoorde. In the 70ies the viaduct of Vilvoorde was built and has become the infamous urban landmark of Vilvoorde, constituting a crucial link in the circulation of car traffic in the center of our country.

Before going on to say a few words about Stal Cheval we look at some numbers. Vilvoorde counts 43.000 inhabitants for 21.48 square kilometers. This makes it one of the most dense areas of Flanders with 2.033 inhabitants per square kilometer. (Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur 2018, 19). Given its location it does not surprise that it has a very fast-growing population rate (a trend also visible in other suburban communities around Brussels). From the period of 2005, up to 2017 it has grown by 18.1 percent (Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur 2018, 6). Besides being one of the most densely populated areas of Flanders, it is also one of the most diverse and youngest. Half of the population was born in another country or have one parent that immigrated from abroad⁷. Flanders in comparison has an average of 20.46 percent of people with a foreign background and Brussels 71.9 percent. Between the two Vilvoorde leans more towards Brussels than towards the rest of Flanders. The same holds true for statistics on age. In general, Flanders is facing challenges pertaining to an ageing population, but this is not true for Vilvoorde. Vilvoorde is getting younger instead of older. People of more than 65 years old in Vilvoorde are diminishing by 2.3 percent a year, whilst in Flanders they are rising by an average of 19.8 percent (Jacques et al. 2017, 7). It does not surprise that the population looks very different from neighboring towns. For these reasons the city officials are putting pressure on the state to be able to get the statute and funding of a Flemish center-city. This is much needed to be able to fund more initiatives to augment the livability, small commercial activities and diversity in the city, alongside security and police force⁸ (Belga 2015).

⁷ This number is the addition of foreigners (those who do not have a Belgian passport) and of people of foreign origin (which are those who have at least 1 parent that did not have the Belgian nationality). This does not include third generation migrants (Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur 2018, 14; “Samenleven in Diversiteit in Cijfers” 2018).

⁸ 22 percent of the inhabitants always or often feel insecure in the larger commune of Vilvoorde (Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur 2018, 118). There are problems with gangs mostly operating in drug trade located in the zones neighboring the Brussels region.

Stal Cheval

28 May 2019 — Less than a month before opening, we have a big meeting in the living room of Kaat. An especially interesting one to observe group dynamics. Some volunteers who participated in the previous project are present. It instantly becomes clear that they occupy social positions which provide them with more attention and voice than mine or other newer volunteers, even though up until this moment they haven't been as active. They are more affiliated with PK-events⁹ another socio-cultural organization in Vilvoorde and the primary partner for the 2018 edition of Stal Cheval. Cedric is one of them, and he takes on the role of the joker throughout this meeting. He thinks of snappy comments and before long jokingly proposes to ritually kill an animal, *bad PR is PR all the same*. At this moment something small yet significant happens, Flavie answers equally fractious: "We are not *fuck-society*, we are *hey-society*!"

How members of Stal Cheval conceive of their engagement and attach certain images and practice to said engagements can vary. In some sense I could posit that there is no single organization Stal Cheval. Even among the board the vision and mission of Stal Cheval is narrated with different centers of gravity. The ideas, visions, sympathies and antipathies that through the volunteers define Stal Cheval as an entity also pervade the practices that unfold within its spaces. There are however lines of discourse and thought on which individual visions find collective support. Some of these lines are official, others are not. In this section I will discuss the official ones. The last chapter will readdress those active and pervading discourses that reside backstage in the creation of collectivity. Important to mention here is the use of 'we' to speak of Stal Cheval for I am still part of the organization and engaged therein.



Picture taken during a workshop camera obscura in *de Heerlijkheid* – 08 september 2018 (source: "Stal Cheval - Foto's" n.d.).

⁹ PK-events or *paardenkracht* in full (a reference to the inhabitants of Vilvoorde who are called *pjeirefretters* or horse-eaters) is an old organization that was the driving force behind the *mekitburn* festival which was a mayor festival in the region for approximately 15 years and therefore has a big community of past volunteers.

Stal Cheval is an organization that came into being in 2018 under the impulses of Raf¹⁰ and later Marie who also involved some of her friends – Mien and Silke – who were looking to take on a new challenge to create a brighter local civil society. To create a more vibrant living community, they pursue two goals. Firstly, by temporarily occupying vacant spaces in Vilvoorde and giving them a burst of life and consequently a new set of memories, they make their audiences rediscover certain places in Vilvoorde. In so doing they generate a whole new set of movements to these places. Secondly, they pair this occupation with an emphasis on the creation of local partnerships to make different kinds of audiences mingle. They do this by providing partners with a free space to use, to create, to organize or to participate in. One of the arguments to make this effort is that the ties they establish between Stal Cheval and other organizations in a limited time frame, benefits the network that is woven between all these actors in the long run. Making future partnerships easier and audiences stronger and more diverse (Stal Cheval 2019, 2; 2018).

Their first project was located in *de Heerlijkheid* a city owned historic building. It featured weekly yoga sessions, cheap workshop spaces for beginning artists, alongside parties, concerts and a wide range of workshops – from making your own artisanal sausages to graffiti lessons. The project I followed more closely unfolded on the Leuvensesteenweg at the Paridaens site. This is an old abandoned industrial site currently run by Entrakt, an agency that rents out vacant spaces and buildings all over Belgium.



(Picture by Kaat Geets on the opening of Stal Cheval – 22 June 2019 (“Stal Cheval - Foto’s” n.d.).

¹⁰ Pseudonyms are used for all people whom I talk about, this ensures a basic degree of anonymity. Of course, there is a big limitation for those who were official members of the organization as their names are mentioned on official documents. In addition, no incriminating information will be provided in this document.

Stal Cheval draws heavily on networks to make their projects succeed. We depend heavily on personal ties with all sorts of people. Do we know a plumber? Do we know someone with a concrete drill? Can we find wood somewhere? Do we know people at the newspaper? Where will we get furniture? Resources are found by drawing on one's own personal network and these very same networks subsequently find their point of entry in the organization's. The different networks, communities and organizations that are involved all bring their own frames of reference, their own visions on the city and their own actors. This is what makes the project valuable, but also unpredictable. What is painfully visible as well is that whilst some networks residing in Vilvoorde are addressed to take part in the project, others are not. The mingling is governed by certain unseen structures which are deeply rooted in the locality.

For now, I will only go this far in introducing Stal Cheval and the city of Vilvoorde. Both will continue to show themselves in their complexity throughout the rest of this thesis and will be at the center of inquiry in part two.

Chapter 2. Methodology

Before venturing into what can be seen as the corpus of this research, we devote special attention to the methodological and theoretical backbone of the work at hand. The next chapter will read as a status questionis, a summary of the most accredited sources that influenced the outcomes of this research. The chapter we are about to kick off can be read as a summary of methodological considerations, introducing the research design and its implications: the challenges and messiness of this ethnographic endeavor. I will mention the most important and conscientious decisions that were oftentimes made on the fly as well as the more structural changes to the design that had to be incorporated in order to achieve a working research practice in the organization and network of Stal Cheval. In what follows the start note created during the academic year of 2018-2019 as well as reflexive meta-notes during the research itself will provide the substance for discussion. Methodology does not end after it has received its cut in paper and ink – instead we approach it as a process. We will explore this process that was (and to a certain extent is) this methodology, its origins, its continuous growth, its deficiencies, its assembly and its disassembly.

Moving through Heterotopia¹¹ — An Applied Design

First of April 2019 - I find myself standing against the wall in the apartment of Raf, the chairman of Stal Cheval. A week or two before this event I had changed my desired course of action. I came across Felix at a climate march and mentioned that I was wondering whether researching Stal Cheval was at all possible. This was a poor choice of time and location; he responded brutally dismissive. But then I got an email, an invitation to the startup meeting of the 2019 project. I recollected my plans and assembled some rough ideas and came here — in a beautiful apartment which would become my primary residence less than a year later — with a double agenda. As the meeting starts, I notice that Felix is not part of the board and decide to wait until after the meeting is over to address Raf. I linger and listen. When finally, I have the courage to address Raf and put my plans on the table, I find much to my surprise that he is enthusiastic. After a brief talk he asks me to come up with a concrete plan for the next meeting.

This pivotal moment in the unfolding of this research is a good point of entry into our methodological section. Due to the central position of the chairman during this meeting, he instantly became my primary informant. The one who made me ruminate my ideas. But more importantly this first encounter in combination with personal motivation, and a lecture by Candelaria¹², made me design an applied research. An applied research usually has a receiving subject, with specific objectives. This approach heavily draws upon the vantage point of engaged anthropology, which ambitiously challenges itself to figure out ways in which anthropological perspectives can be a source of positive change in the locales and with the peoples it encounters as well as in the world at large (Robben and Sluka 2012, 569). In what follows I will describe how this led me to work with *knowledge utilization strategies*, stakeholders and applied objectives but also how this subsequently failed to crystallize in a good *applied* practice.

Knowledge utilization strategies are strategies one uses to promote participation in conceptual and applied knowledge with the goal to improve the usage of anthropological insights. I committed to the use of numeric data, self-advocating and collaborations with stakeholders (Rylko-Bauer, McElroy, and van Willigen 1986, 21–22; in De Mey 2019, 4). The first commitment led me to get inspired by social network research, where scientists map the action range of networks. This can be observed in the vox-pop questions. The second commitment is quite self-evident, I advocated my own viewpoints and got

¹¹ Moving through Heterotopia was the title of the start report. The concept of heterotopia by Foucault functioned as the guiding theoretical framework which has been turned away from.

¹² Candelaria. 2019. "Cultural Anthropology. What the *#!?" Leuven: KULeuven, March 28.

into conversation and dialogue as frequent as possible. This provided me with ample perspectives on a diverse range of topics – closely and more vaguely related to this thesis. The third commitment – working with stakeholders – proved to be a lot more complex than imagined. Therefore, we will start by discussing what this last approach entailed.

Drake (1989) provided a self-evident but far from simple systematic approach to using stakeholders in research. His method includes six steps: “(1) identifying stakeholders, (2) analyzing their needs, (3) mapping out the context in which they act, (4) involving them in all stages of research, (5) choosing how you involve their interests and (6) allowing time for negotiations to take place (Drake 1989, 252; in De Mey 2019, 5). This proved to be very difficult for several reasons: Firstly, the driving forces behind Stal Cheval – though being enthusiastic at times – often merely tolerated my presence as a researcher, they put more value in my presence as an engaged volunteer. In the same breath I should add that they did not care to be included as profoundly as suggested by Drake (1989), mostly because they did not have the time or interest to invest in this kind of engagement. Secondly, as I was not a part of what I will call the *circulators*¹³, I did not have a complete picture of the actors that were involved¹⁴. Thirdly, there was no time – both on my part and on the part of the volunteers. The attempt did however provide a partial (or official) list of the stakeholders of Stal Cheval which allowed me to perceive the socio-technical infrastructure behind the operations of our organization and volunteers.

Objectives and Research Questions

The use of an applied research design led me to jointly formulate objectives for the research together with the *circulators* of Stal Cheval. These objectives touch on the different levels/scales on which the organization operates – the personal, interpersonal; macro, meso and micro; group and individual (De Mey 2019, 5). They are formulated as followed:

1. Finding out why Stal Cheval is important to people.

This goal refers to different meanings and imaginations given to the cultural practices that are emerging in Stal Cheval. This at the level of the individual and the group.

2. Studying the ways in which Stal Cheval engages with its surroundings.

This objective emphasizes the research of the ways in which Stal Cheval is embedded in communities, relationships and organizations. It focusses on the agency of Stal Cheval as an organization and its creators. As well as the interactions they engage in vis à vis different communities, networks and organizations.

3. Investigating the influence these relationships have on the socio-economic fiber that constitutes the locality of Vilvoorde.¹⁵

These three objectives serve as a fixed guide; the backbone of the inquiry at hand. They provide a framework in which to work, without necessarily forcing a direction for content. They have been

¹³ See chapter 4 – New Circulations New Circulators.

¹⁴ On a side note, it is very doubtful that most of the *circulators* had a complete picture as I later discovered that there was a lot of miscommunication and lack of transparency on the part of the chairman.

¹⁵ Literally quoted from Jonathan De Mey (2019) *Moving through Heterotopia. Informalization and Appropriation of ‘Free’ Spaces in an Urban Periphery.*

inspiring guidelines for the defining, revising and refining of research questions. The prime research question we wish to work with here reads as follows: How does the relationship between the organization Stal Cheval and the socio-technical infrastructures of the locality of Vilvoorde unfold? Which infrastructures are accessible? Is there equal access to these infrastructures? What exclusionary qualities do these infrastructures have?

Observant Participation and the Field

Beside appropriating elements of applied anthropology, this research draws heavily on the more traditional ethnographic method. We will now go into the more classical approaches incorporated in this research.

Participant observation is the central method of gathering data. The observations / participations were spread over more than a year. They included preparatory meetings, building decorations and assembling spaces, two months and a half of managing our location, events, partners and publics each Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. Research continued as I became part of the board and co-created new workflows and processes, a new project and partnerships as well as new relationships. These participations did not merely unfold in one place, they took me to different places: The studio of Lites, pubs in the area, youth workshops, the Asiat site, city administration offices, etcetera. It is therefore logical to make sense of the field as an extended field-site (Andersson 2014, 287). Andersson uses this approach to map the business of clandestine migration and the European infrastructures that illegalize those who seek to better their lives coming to Europe. Another example is the research of Aud Talle (2010) who wrote an ethnography on female circumcision in exile. In her contribution to *Ethnographic Practice in the Present* she discusses the disjointedness of spaces and places to research. Hence, her field-site is not a demarcated location, rather, it is an “extended site in lived space and time (Talle 2010, 113).” The extended field-site is well suited to follow infrastructures, it incorporates more spaces and interactions. This is the reason for taking on this approach. Within the organization of Stal Cheval the extended field site corresponds to the socio-technical infrastructures that are accessible to its members. This proves especially useful, since it unambiguously shows the borders of the infrastructures as being the places and spaces, I did not gain access to. Moreover, a special place is dedicated to the absence of certain groups in the spaces we, as an organization create. Thus, we are prevented from having access to certain infrastructures, but we also prevent others to gain access to ours.

A reflexive note is appropriate here – The biggest challenge during participant observation was related to this research being an ethnography at home. With this being at home, two mayor challenges surfaced: the challenge of pre-determined relationships and the issue of defamiliarization. Firstly, I had established relationships with a lot of people I encountered – from ex-girlfriends, high school classmates, to best friends – they all invaded the research setting and my position as a researcher within. Surprisingly, the most difficult experience was to maintain a professional outlook when very close friends were nearby, mocking me about my notetaking or interviewing. The choice of primary informants was therefore based upon their (genuine) interest as well as social position and gatekeeper positions (Aull Davies 2008, 90–94). Take for instance Felix: he was my gatekeeper who at first kept the gate shut. However, during our joint efforts in organizing events at Stal Cheval he gave me access to the spaces surrounding Horst Labs on the Asiat Site¹⁶. Secondly, a lot of the interactions I had were not out of the ordinary. Some of the infrastructures I used throughout the period in which I was working

¹⁶ Horst Lab was a project from the arts and music festival Horst where several labs / residency projects unfolded within the timespan of two weeks. My presence there was disruptive, radiating the message that I was not to take part in its infrastructure. This example will be investigated in the last chapter *Sharing Influence, Bordering Community*.

with Stal Cheval were already in some manner familiar to me. Thus, I had to defamiliarize myself to remove previous predispositions. Especially the idea that it is normal to gain unproblematic access to certain resources. An idea that went on to inspire the whole of this thesis.

Interviewing

Participant observation forms the backbone of this research, but interviews add to it and are used as a means of triangulation. Two types of interviews were designed. The first – initially a structured interview – evolved into a vox-pop that not unfrequently gained properties of a focus group. We will come back to this presently. The second type of interview was in depth, mostly with the *circulators* of Stal Cheval, its purpose served to discuss and create ideas that surfaced during observations. These interviews thus not only acquired data; they were also a means for me to be evaluated by my primary informants.

The vox-pops came about by chance. At the start of Stal Cheval – the first week of July – I started conducting the first interviews with visitors. For these interviews I had prepared a list of questions (which you can find in the appendix). When creating these questions, I was convinced the list was not very extensive and it should not take a long time to conduct the interview. The structured interview consisted of twelve questions, talking about all of these would be an intrusive activity towards people who are trying to enjoy a drink, a show or simply each other's company. But this was not the reason for me to change the interview on the fly. I did not think about them as group interviews. Hence my questions were too specific – tailored for a single person. I did not realize the evident fact that humans go out in groups. Thus, I recreated the interview to consist of three questions or themes that were more in line with the objectives I had jointly created with the board of Stal Cheval.

The first question read as follows: **Hoe ben je op deze plaats terecht gekomen? / How did you get here?** It was a question that inquired into the point of access to the space and its infrastructures. It has sub questions on the frequency and purposes of visits. The second question was: **Hoe zou je deze plaats omschrijven / How would you describe this place.** By raising this question, I hoped to see what kind of language people would use, as well as the kind of value they attach to this kind of project – in short, the used discourse. The third question was whether they **frequented different places** as well. This in turn gave me an idea of the broader infrastructures and connectedness of places they have access to.

When participants were triggered, the vox-pop would evolve into a kind of focus group where I tried to steer the dialogue into interesting topics. This happened several times resulting in interesting conversations about diversity and infrastructure which oftentimes lasted for more than an hour. These conversations were not recorded. The decision was made to solely take notes during the vox-pops to manage dataflow. In retrospect it would have been rewarding if I had chosen to combine notes with recording in order to be able to turn back to the most interesting parts of conversations.

In conclusion I wish to add that it is necessary to perceive of this methodology as a learning process. By trial and error, I combined certain methodologies into a comprehensive whole. But in the course of action this design needed constant recalibration. As such the whole of this methodology as well as each vox-pop or in-depth interview is the prototype for the next.

Chapter 3. Infrastructuring the Commons—Status Questionis

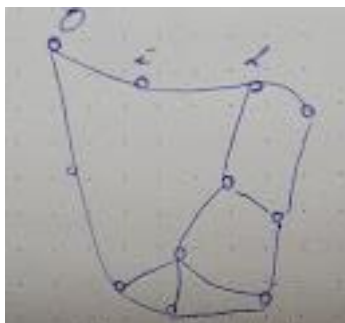
As anthropologists we think of (our)selves and (urban)spaces as evolving, processual and situational entities. Some of us look at micro interactions, but most researcher’s enquiries go beyond spaces and across scales. This holds true for the research at hand. It is therefore important to look at different conceptual perspectives and how they are assembled to make sense of the subsequent arguments.

In our anthropological thinking, *making a verb out of* it is a largely acknowledged method of putting things in a new perspective. Hence this new aberration of the title – Commoning Infrastructures. It can be read as a prelude into part two. Infrastructuring the Commons sets forth a very different story than that which is told in the introduction. Its emphasis lies on the discursive forces that rip apart that which is considered common. Whereas, Commoning Infrastructures is a constellation of hope, it lies at the heart of the ambitions of those previously called *circulators* – those creating new opportunities for sharing. Unfortunately, the reality is more complex – in practice both forces of commoning infrastructures and infrastructuring the commons emerge together.

This chapter will read as a literature review offering broad overviews of the important authors that contributed to the different concepts. These elaborations will be thematic and throughout this chapter we will delve deeper into those concepts we will use for analysis in part two.

Infrastructures and their Creation

Infrastructure is a concept that has gained traction in our discipline in the last decades. Some even speak of the infrastructural turn which lies in the wake of the ontological turn. Both will be important for the operationalization and understanding of the concept. First, we discuss a definition envisioned by Burchardt and Höhne (2015) to identify key components that need a deeper understanding. Then, we will venture into the history of the concept, pinpointing the different tendencies that surface. We address the ontological turn and have a talk on materials¹⁷ and materiality. Before providing an operationalization of this concept we will explore some authors who added to its theoretical canon.



(Excerpt from Vox Pop on 03-07-19)

“We suggest an understanding of infrastructures as **sociotechnical apparatuses** and **material artefacts** that structure, enable and govern circulation – specifically the **circulation** of energy, information, goods and capital but also of people, practices and images in the urban realm and beyond” (Burchardt & Höhne 2015, p.3)

This definition provided by Burchard and Höhne (2015) draws heavily on their investment in urban studies. They operationalized infrastructure by using three concepts: socio-technical apparatuses, material artefacts and circulation. Their aim is to show that difference and diversity are entangled with infrastructures as well as with their spatial regimes. Their argument is centered on the realization that the way we organize circulation through socio-technical apparatuses and things, also organizes our sociality – whom we encounter, what we talk about, where we work, what we do in our spare time.

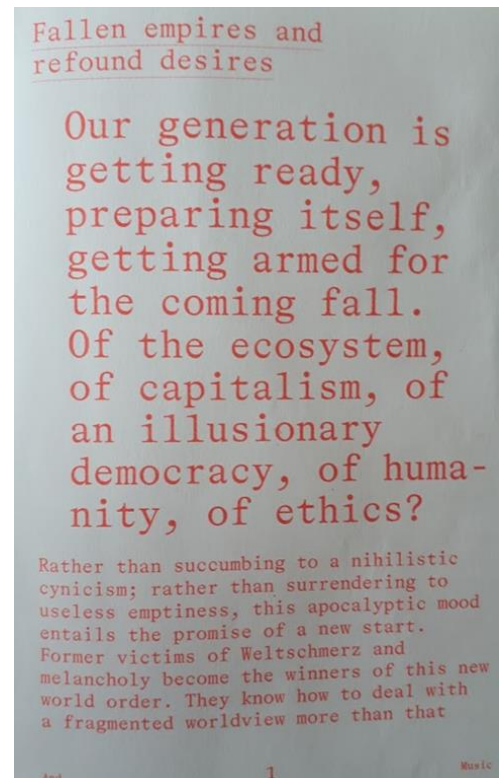
¹⁷ A disclaimer. Materiality is a broad field and we will not have the space to address all its arguments, opposing views, sub-fields, etcetera. Therefore, the choice was made to focus on scholars whose work was relevant **in relation to infrastructure**. Similar choices were made for literature on commons and connection/relationality.

Thus, sociotechnical systems not only govern circulation but govern our subjectivity as well, which can be considered a rather Foucauldian point of view (Burchardt and Höhne 2015, 3–4).

Let us take a closer look at what socio-technical systems are by using an example. The excerpt you see on the right is the first page of a booklet containing information on the artworks that have been created for and exhibited during the Horst Arts and Music Festival. This organization¹⁸ has moved from the municipality of Horst to the Asiat¹⁹ site in Vilvoorde. The organizers draw on a substantial amount of resources to curate the festival. During the summer up to the festival date they organized Horst-Labs and opened exhibitions in different spaces of their site. The site was then made accessible to public during the day. The site consists of old abandoned industrial buildings some of which have already started crumbling down. The festival uses these material properties of ruination, they transform old industrial and military infrastructure into art – a cooling tower, an engine room, a room previously filled with compressors, etcetera – and in so doing their infrastructures embody their ideas – we are living in ruins.

Referring to our definition of infrastructure we could state that the socio-technical apparatuses present here are manifold. There are the state apparatuses, providing financial and logistical support, networks of artists and the international cultural sectors. Stages are made by avant-garde architects. These apparatuses have their own discourses and logics. One must, for example, already be able to understand what is meant with *getting armed for the coming fall* (Simons 2019, 1) to be able to access the infrastructure’s circulation of ideas.

The material artefacts of this infrastructure are not only the industrial military ruins. They range from the old cooling tower to the wood that is used by the Fela architectural atelier to create a stage; from the beer in visitors’ cups to the microchips in the used audio-technologies. In other words, the infrastructure’s reach is extensive. However, what is really at stake here is circulation. The circulation of these imaginaries, information, materials and know how, networks, capital, people (both the international artists as well as the international and local public in Asiat) and practices (think about the different modes of watching art). The circulation of these goods is by no means accessible to all. The infrastructures are being bordered. We will come back to the discursive tendencies of infrastructures in this and other cases in the final chapter. Now we will delve into a historical background on infrastructure and the ontological turn.



Textual discourse of the program booklet of *Horst Arts and Music* (Simons 2019, 1).



A computer-generated image of the stage built by Fela architectural atelier (Simons 2019, 60)



Picture of one of the artworks exposed during the summer by Horst. The glass roof-windows of this space are now spread throughout its floor and moss and plants have crept in.

¹⁸ Horst arts and music festival is a festival created and curated by Horst Arts and Music in collaboration with Onkruid.

¹⁹ See the background section

Infrastructures through Time

The term infrastructure knows different interpretations and approaches that have changed over time. The term holds a central position in the disciplines of urban development, geography, ecological studies, architecture, engineering, etcetera. Some scholars have started to use the container term infrastructure studies to group those academics working with the concept in the most varied ways. Christensen (2017, 3) argues against such encapsulating tendencies. He posits that 'infrastructure' is a concept that knows different uses and competing understandings. This is especially the case in art, architecture, philosophical, anthropological and sociological disciplines (Christensen 2017, 3).

Historically the concept can be traced back to the first railways at the end of the 19th century. The term described railroad beds and other unmovable components of systems generating mobility (Burchardt and Höhne 2015, 2–3). The term literally indicated “fixed installations in service of mobility” (Van Laak 2001, 370). Van Laak (2001) continues to speak of state governed infrastructures. In the first half of the 20th century, most infrastructures and technologies were provided by the state. It was mostly used in military or economic discourse and later in that of politics, development aid and planning. From the 1970s onwards we see that capitalism is starting to attain its present global form. Governments start to sell certain of their own infrastructural services to companies. These privatizations of infrastructures have made the whole of services which we constantly use a rather obscure entity (Van Laak 2001, 370–75).

Van Laak (2001) argues that throughout the 20th century infrastructural systems have managed to situate themselves in between nature and nurture. These systems have invaded every corner of our earth and virtually every aspect of our humanity. Infrastructural processes are present when we make a search on the internet, when we take a picture, buy or consume something. There are always an enormous amount of processes active. These processes have become a second nature to us. Therefore, unless they come to a halt, break, or cease to function as usual, we do not question them. It is simply the way the world goes around (Van Laak, 2001, 367-76). This realization has been one of the instigators of the ontological turn – ultimately leading to the inception of critical studies on infrastructure and materiality in social sciences, geography and philosophy. The invisibility of infrastructures is also stressed by Niewöhner (2015), who points to the problematic character of this insight. Infrastructures steer our sociality, but we do not see them. They form infrastructural ecologies, comprised of a plethora of systems tightly interwoven and taken for granted by those who use them day by day (Niewöhner 2015, 120).

Most economic, urban and ecological planning or engineering disciplines today are still focused on the materiality of infrastructures. They solely inquire into the regulation of flows and mobilities. Take for instance Murray and Grubestic's (2007) *Critical Infrastructures. Reliability and Vulnerability*. Their contributors who have backgrounds in the disciplines of urban planning, spatial and ecological science might take human factors into account, but their outcomes are focused on quantifiable material data and system calculations (Murray and Grubestic 2007). How can we create the most versatile systems? What technologies do we need? How can we maximize global flows? We will not address these questions, instead we will address the obscure workings of the subject-object relation and the role infrastructures play therein. To do this we start out by examining the ontological turn and its aftermath.

From Ontological to Infrastructural Turn

Much has been said about the historic turns within and beyond the discipline of anthropology. Throughout history anthropologists have been at the forefront of self-criticism and critical thinking – especially when it comes to how we represent the world and its peoples. These tendencies have been expressed by the word ‘turn’. Turn signifies a turning away from certain perspectives and taking on a new one. This is quite important for it means we do not discard previous orthodoxies. Instead turns incorporate them to realign the focal point of our outlook on the world. One of the biggest of our contemporary turns is the ontological turn.

The ontological turn has its origins in accounting for fundamental differences in the way humans live their lives. To truly understand what it is about, we briefly delineate what ontology(ies) mean and sum up the work of some influential authors to show how they can be different. Ontology is “a part of philosophy concerned with what there is, how it is, and what forms of being there are” (Aspers 2016, 1). Ontology asks questions on the nature of reality. Descola (2014) is one of the authors who writes extensively on ontology. He argues that nature nor culture denote reality, instead it is the way humans practice the world that make up ontological domains. There is no such thing as one or **the** reality. We are in a constant process of worlding, making up reality (Descola 2014, 272–74). There is more, also things and other beings can add to the process of worlding. The underlying argument here is that there is no pre-existing reality, reality is (un-)becoming (Culp 2016, 29–31).

A second author famous for his contributions to this turn is Bruno Latour. His most influential work is the work on the actor-network theory (or ANT). This theory which he has devised towards the end of the 20th century has by now become textbook knowledge for those scholars engaged in critical social sciences and geography. ANT states that the social is entangled with all other realms, reality is assembled by a multitude of actants: from ghosts to butterflies, from the meat we eat to the sexual positions we use to make love. Think for instance of Edensor (2008) who explores the hauntings of absent presences and in so doing gives the same ontological status to things that are no longer there (Edensor 2008). The ghost of one’s deceased neighbor can thus also be an actant in the network that makes up one’s reality. ANT makes the argument that reality is assembled and all things that make up reality at a point in space and time are connected and have an influence over one another. This means that when studying the (social) world we should look at all these connections of actants – all those human and non-human beings and materials that have agency towards reality – and how they assemble. His sociology is a sociology of tracing connections (Latour 2005, 248–49). Kelly (2014) adequately summarizes that what we do is look at the “interacting realities of certain kinds of truths” (Kelly 2014, 359). He argues that the ontological turn posits the political at the center of our discipline: We should not make statements of what modes of living are real or right. Instead we examine them closely and strive to take all *worlding actants* into account. In so doing we allow different ontologies to coexist (Kelly 2014, 358–59).

Once again, I can identify connection as a focal point in theory and practice – be it between materials, humans or other beings – in the ontological turn as well as in our previous definition of infrastructure. It does not surprise that Burchard and Höhne (2015) speak of an infrastructural turn that builds upon work of the ontological turn. But they go against parts of it. They posit that ANT is too vague and gives agency in too unproblematic a way. Moreover, objects never circulate in unqualified ways. Whilst they might act upon themselves, they need to be written and read by humans for them to circulate to the fullest. When a tree blows over in an unknown forest, with no being to qualify its demise, did it ever exist at all? It is thus only in connected or connecting practice that assemblages are made. Furthermore, it is in difference between actants of a same assemblage, that one object can host fundamentally

different realities (Burchardt and Höhne 2015, 4–5). The by now rotting chestnut tree constitutes a different reality for the forest, the lumberjack or the squirrel.

Burchardt and Höhne (2015) emphasize the social properties of infrastructures by explicitly linking them with urban diversities. They make the argument that we cannot untangle infrastructural realities from their distribution and appropriation by people. Their usage and transformation are discursive, access to infrastructures is often bordered along the lines of cultural diversity. In this sense they stress the importance of looking at those who are considered ideal users of infrastructures and subsequently how infrastructures function towards them as opposed to others (Burchardt and Höhne 2015, 1–11).

Infrastructured Subjects

After these first conceptual explorations we now need to address the relation between subject and infrastructure. In this small part we will probe multiple conceptualizations and insights on this topic from a range of authors.

Ash Amin (2014) is one of these authors. He is a geographer who posits himself right at the interface between human diversities and urban infrastructures. In his article *Lively Infrastructure* (2014) he examines how infrastructure is also a *mise-en-scene* (Amin 2014, 143). Emerging infrastructures draw attention, and as such infrastructure “commandeers the settlement process” (Amin 2014, 143). Infrastructures force their own values and affects onto places – they govern the lives and affects of their settlers. Amin (2014) uses three concepts to deconstruct infrastructural performativity. *Infra-designation* (1) refers to the process of designing, delineating and designating space by making use of models and other techniques – this largely coincides with a preparatory phase of planning. Here, the models are the actants that balance future (planned) against present (unplanned) infrastructures or settlements (Amin 2014, 143–45). It thus symbolically measures and (ex)changes one set of values and normativities against another. With these calibrations, infrastructures’ underlying values and designations are subject to change and transformation. Other authors who have worked on the symbolic discursivity of infrastructures are Shove (2003) who approaches resource consumption and (infrastructure related) practices as governed by what is considered *normal* practice. She takes on a more Foucauldian post-structuralist perspective to divert the focus from individual commitments (of for instance cleanliness and comfort) towards structural governmental instigation – by policy, planning, design, nudging, etcetera (Shove 2003). Larkin (2013) provides his own overview of infrastructural thinking. One of the theoretical positions he emphasizes when talking of the *poetics and politics* of infrastructure is the insight that material infrastructures embody both aesthetic and political discourses (Larkin 2013).

A second way the performativity of infrastructures surfaces is in *infra-being* (2) (Amin 2014, 145–46). This term refers to the way infrastructures change our practices and subsequently our selves. This is often an invisible process of practices and performances. Amin (2014) however manages to give an unambiguous picture of how infrastructures shape us in his account of the slums in Rosa Leao. People’s households there are constructed piece by piece, they engage in daily practices of care to ameliorate the infrastructures that provide their basic human need, from water to sanitation pit. These infrastructures that in other cases are obscured become highly visible in the infrastructural improvisation employed here. Their practices show how feelings connected to basic needs, the home, spatial affects and neighborhood relate to simple infrastructures and how these infrastructures make us perform the practices that lead up to their emergence or maintenance (Amin 2014, 145–46).

The role of maintenance and repair is very apparent within this story, it is therefore important to mention some authors whose work will prove insightful in upcoming discussions. First there is Graham

and Thrift (2007) who describe processes of repair and maintenance as invisible modes of worlding, that in totality form a *material substrate* that is ever present and active – and thus constantly maintaining its performance, influence and affects (Amin 2014, 145–46; Descola 2014, 273; Graham and Thrift 2007). Subsequently, they argue that in order to get a good picture of the workings of infrastructures we also need to look at disassembly and disconnection. We need to examine the points where the infrastructural systems break or fail to establish themselves (Graham and Thrift 2007, 1–3). Gregson, Metcalfe and Crewe (2009) on the other hand, deconstruct maintenance and repair of home-objects. They take on a micro-perspective and show how different modes and processes influence the relationships we have with things (Nicky Gregson, Metcalfe, and Crewe 2009). Along these lines, other scholars such as Navaro-Yashin (2009) examine the interface between affect, space and objects in ruination.

Amin's third concept relating to infrastructural performance is *infra-commoning* (3). Infrastructures need to be commonly curated; this maintenance often comes with its own cultural practices – from ways of sharing knowledge, ideas of cleanliness, to the actual practices performed daily (Amin 2014, 146–50).

In conclusion of this subsection we mention Abdoumalig Simone's work. In his article *People as Infrastructure* (2004) he contends that it is the movement of subjects that form our infrastructures. We take infrastructures with us and transform them in our daily lives and dwellings (AbdouMaliq Simone 2004, 413–16). We will come back to this in the chapter on New Circulations.

Envisioning Infrastructures

Whereas the previous section was centered around practices, I now venture into the interface between the imagination and infrastructures. Amin's (2014) *infra-designation* could have fallen into this subsection – we divine the workings of the city, and in so doing we change its future materiality. In this part I will mention some works that highlight the intersection of the imaginary, epistemology, the urban and infrastructure. But I will refrain from deeper deconstruction now as this will be the topic of the section *Navigating Futurities* in the next chapter. In what follows we address some useful sources.

Harvey et al (2017) speak of infrastructural visions to undermine the assumption that infrastructures always move forward. The imagined teleology of ever more expansive infrastructures no matter the origin is false. Much has been said on how we conceive of infrastructures. But what is certain is that infrastructures are often less rational than it would seem. They are in constant conjuncture and disjuncture. Along their processual and ongoing emergence, they are often envisioned, re-visited or improvised (P. Harvey, Bruun Jensen, and Morita 2017, 7–11). This realization also surfaces in Amin's (2014) and Simone's (2004) work.

De Boeck (2015) focusses on this infrastructural improvisation. He translates concepts from the realm of divination and spirituality to accurately deconstruct the role of imagination and divination in the creation of the urban infrastructures in Kinshasa. Although his focus is centered on spatiality and urban rhythms, there is a special place for divining the urban. The sociality and urbanity of Kinshasa's infrastructure's is mystified. Its assembly is nonlinear, multidirectional. He makes sense of the urban by making use of the concept of knotting. Networks and infrastructures are assembled in such a way that is not possible to retrace which knots come from which interactions. What we can take from his work is the reference to the Lacanian notion of suture to indicate that problems have the possibility to be solved – it is in the urgent, the lacks, losses, disruptions that new forms of creating urbanisms, commons or infrastructures are imagined and put to use (De Boeck 2015, 3–6). Even though the context diverges, to a certain extent the same holds true for our society. Larkin (2013) addresses the problem of

responsibility in face of mystified or obscured infrastructural systems. For who can be held accountable for discursive infrastructures when their emergence is not traceable²⁰?

Another important aspect here pertains to infrastructural logics that can deviate depending on instigating actors. Governments often have a distinct set of logics pertaining to infrastructures. These discourses (ecological, security, economic) are a form of imagining future infrastructures. Furthermore, they have very real consequences for other (bottom-up) infrastructures, the urban and urban socialites as well as dwelling in the city. Burchard and Höhne (2015) mention the ways in which planning for diversity can have infrastructural ends and how by achieving these ends, discourse is made real in city infrastructure (Burchardt and Höhne 2015, 8). The same holds true in case of planning for ecological ends. Rosenfeld and van Criekingen (2015) look at how the creation of a park to mitigate pollution and livability in Brussels kills off the semi-informal infrastructure of secondhand car trade in Brussels (Rosenfeld and van Criekingen 2015). Moreover, we should add here that infrastructures and their corresponding imaginaries and discourses shape the spaces we appropriate and continue to assert influence over them even after they have perished. Stal Cheval and its occupation on the Paridaens site continues to resonate ideas of connection, culture and community after the project has ended. The remaining sofa, fridge and wall-paintings continue to speak.

The question of accountability thus stretches far into the future. Just like materials, ideas persist. But it is also important to ask: whose ideas? In so doing we venture into the more general realm of urban studies. Who is eligible to imagine and transform the city and its infrastructures? The right to the city which is described by Harvey (2003) as a human right lies at the heart of our inquiry. What we see happening in Stal Cheval is precisely this – an attempt to change the urban environment, independent of the larger forces already present.

The right to the city is not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it after our heart's desire. We need to be sure we can live with our own creations (a problem for every planner, architect and utopian thinker). But the right to remake ourselves by creating a qualitatively different kind of urban sociality is one of the most precious of all human rights" (D. Harvey 2003, 939).

²⁰ We can notice a trend in the positionality of these works. Most scholars now turn to critical realism – the philosophical position that sees the assemblage of our society, culture, world at large as fundamentally unknowable. We can conceive of individual relations, actants, processes at a certain point in space and time. The world is in flux, constantly emerging as it is. Hence, we can only describe the way it shows itself to us and never truly grasp all its individual pieces (Culp 2016, 23–25). The term emergence has got its academic connotation from this insight. It has come to signify the way reality comes into being in the moment. Its socio-technical systems, its infrastructures assemble in an instant – they emerge. Philosophers taking it a step further go against the idea of assemblage. Culp (2016) posits that the idea of a subject or body – human or non-human – as being the sum of its parts assembled, even if it is technically true, drains the world of life. It allows us to catalogue the networks of relations that constitute its attributes and as such we make them quantifiable and knowable. This in turn fits perfectly in a reality where capitalism produces subjectivity (Culp 2016, 28). Culp reaches to Deleuze's *transcendental empiricism* which states that "conditions of experiences are not represented through empirical tracing" (Culp 2016, 28). These discussions are interesting and useful to take with us in studying infrastructures which above all are obscure and in constant flux. They do however take us too far from the already broad theoretical body under scrutiny.



Foto taken by Kaat Geets on the opening day showing volunteers relaxing (“Stal Cheval – Foto’s, n.d.).

Harvey (2003) adequately describes several key components of making the city. First, desire, what do we envision? What do we want? What do we not yet have? We do this by changing our surroundings and in its process remaking ourselves. One night, working at the bar with Marijn, he told me: “you’ve constantly got to reinvent yourself to be able to go with it, to compete”. He was talking about his job, but also about our organization and how the urban environment is being transformed by putting yourself in it (D. Harvey 2003, 939–40). The implicit question he confronted me with was: Can I be the person who drives change? Am I able to be passionate, provide new ideas, thrive in a context where new excitements are the new normal? This shows once again that the ideas behind our changing urbanities and infrastructures have a profound influence in the way we experience sociality. In the following chapters we will make an in-depth analysis of situations pertaining to changing the city and the way we imagine ourselves in it.

Scaling Up — Infrastructuring Urbanity

To conclude this section on infrastructure, we now look at some authors who focus their research on the socio-economic features of infrastructures. We have thus far

established that infrastructures regulate access to shared resources and their circulation. In doing this they have a profound influence on the ways in which we organize our individual and collective lives. We now briefly look at this collective side in broad terms: Infrastructures structure our political economy.

Political economy is a term that is closely related to the study of urban political economy. This subfield is especially interested in the following question: what causes urbanization and who governs the city (Nevarez 2015, 1). Nevarez (2015) continues to delineate what is at hand: “Broadly speaking, *political economy* examines how material processes of production and exchange shape, and are shaped by, decisions and activities from economic and political institutions” (Nevarez 2015, 1). Important elements in this definition are material processes of production and exchange – or circulation. This definition is limited. Immaterial resources are also part of political economies. Furthermore, we need to conceive of institutions within this definition as ranging from the smallest economic actor to the biggest political structures.

Hall et al (2015) conduct research on migrant infrastructures in the UK. They clearly show how the institutions that were established on the one hand create a political economy that is based on informal contact, fostering an empowering climate for migrant entrepreneurs. On the other hand, these very same infrastructures in Leicester or Birmingham are constitutive of the movements of their users. Therefore, they play a central role in both place-making and the creation of livelihoods. As a conjoined infrastructure, it is also made present against other infrastructures belonging to different powers – the state. The infrastructural tensions combined with the growing poverty and racism in the area led to upheaval in 2011 resulting in 4 deaths. Infrastructures can thus grow against the state in conditions where access to state-owned infrastructure is strenuous (Suzanne Hall, King, and Finlay 2017, 6–11).

An example from another point of view is provided by Rizzo (2018) who studies the public transportation system in Dar es Salaam and how the creation of these infrastructures (by BRT – Bus Rapid Transit project) in developing countries can be seen as a campaign for neoliberalism and the creation of a more formal labor market in an informal political economy (Porpora 2015; Rizzo 2018)

Infrastructures are assembled entities, ever evolving. At times they are painfully visible at others completely obscured. They are mechanical, technical, but also social. Infrastructures provide a framework for the circulation of all these things. And the reason these things circulate is because they are valuable resources, commodities. In later chapters we will apply and examine these and other insights and project them on the locality of Vilvoorde, within the organization of Stal Cheval. But now, we will turn towards the concept of the commons to examine to whom the circulating resources belong.

Commoning

Thus far we have discussed infrastructures as being assemblages that allow circulation of people and material and immaterial resources. We now turn towards the commons. As a point of entry, we take on a basic definition by Stalder (2017). He considers the commons as: “resources to be managed by a community for joint use” (Stalder 2017, 1). We can already identify the central role of access (community) and circulation (management). Who has access to what resources? Henceforth, the commons will take us into the realm of the political. We will start this discussion with a historic take on the commons. Then we will talk of two contemporary modes of working the concept. We will then take a detour by examining access to language through codes. Finally, we discuss the urban commons, a concept that has become influential in thinking through sharing in urban conditions.

It has been largely understood that the commons throughout capitalist history have been sold off. A classic author who explicitly addresses this history from an economic point of view is Ostrom (1990). Ostrom (1990) refers to Hardin (1968) who famously but controversially coined the phrase the *tragedy of the commons*, which forms an inspiration for Ostrom. His phrase refers to the dictum that in our system everyone is compelled to increase their resources indefinitely, whereas the world only has limited resources to offer (Ostrom 1990, 2–4; Hardin 1968, 1244). Both addressed these problems of human-ecology and our limited resources, and in so doing brought environmental and social sciences closer together (for which Hardin is celebrated). How can we ensure everyone has access to the natural resources they need (Lundgren and Burnet 1999; Hardin 1968, 1244)? Both authors emphasize the natural commons – grazing grounds, firewood forests, hunting grounds, etcetera – which nowadays have largely been privatized. It is in the wake of these first scholars that integrated approaches to problems of technology, ecology and access have gained more traction. Mind that throughout the years their notion of the commons has received a lot of critique and by now has been replaced by more maneuverable conceptions. Moreover, in face of our rapid technological advancement the concept of the commons has received renewed interest.

The concept of the commons has resurfaced as a buzzword in a twofold capacity. First as the informational commons, secondly as central part of Negri and Hardt’s paradigm of the multitude. The informational commons have emerged with the spread of personal computers and the internet. Data is all around us and has by now gained an unimaginable power over our lives. In the wake of this development, groups of activists advocate free access to this data alongside free access to scientific knowledge. Organizations such as SPARC (open access activism), Hau or GitHub (learning platform), among others, make highly specific knowledge widely available. In the wake of this development, books have been written on the distribution of medical knowledge (Strandburg, Frischmann, and Madison 2017) or on how software patents directly influence our digital environments and limit our virtual freedoms (Vee 2010). Some authors, especially in computer science write distinct propositions for

improvements of open access knowledge platforms. Their aims are to improve opportunities for ongoing education for all (Drăgoicea and Borangiu 2012). These examples bring us far from what is at stake here, however, access to informational commons is something that is not limited to the technological realm. In fact, it serves little purpose to even distinguish such realm. For the informational commons are already accessed when we search something on google, even when we discuss present political climates or global diseases.

Let us now expand on the work of Negri and Hardt (2000). In their popular work *Empire* they describe how capitalism will construct its own demise. This – and forgive the simplified version – is due to its capacity to incorporate resistance. Throughout history capitalism has been able to keep its ground in face of societal changes. They refer to Marx’s modes of production in capitalist society to identify the modes that govern our globalized world as modes that fixate self-improvement, constant learning and human capital. Hence it is the social individual – and its ability to create movement – that forms the cornerstone of wealth. Furthermore, this movement is not reducible to formal wealth, it continues after desk-hours and contributes to common bonds. Those who come to this realization are the multitude (c.f. all members that no longer need capitalist systems to share because they are aware that they do so themselves). In doing this this multitude reinvigorates the commons (Hardt and Negri 2000; Bowring 2004, 116–25). This more activist approach – alongside the political approach that seems ever present in work on the commons – is shared by some other scholars. Linebaugh for instance, sees the commons as the only means by which we can become equal producers and consumers. In his vision, the economic realm is the foundation for our world. He advocates *thinking constitutionally*, referring to and making new constitutional rights – for humans, animals and nature – as a driving force for the working-class people to regain freedoms (Linebaugh 2008, 20). The commons are indefinitely tied to writings on class struggle and projects of overcoming the massive inequalities that govern our world. The open source journal *Borderlands* has a special issue on *Commons, Class Struggles and the World* (2012, 11:2). Contributors are amongst others Linebaugh (2012), who writes about resistance, the commons and history from below (Linebaugh 2012) and De Angelis (2012) who gives examples of how protest movements draw on common resources to organize, educate and perform actions (De Angelis 2012).

These macro-political considerations and philosophies are quite interesting but do not provide us with the tools we are looking for. Therefore, we look at Stavrides’s (2016) take on the commons. He refers to Linebaugh (2008) to state that the commons are not so much an entity but an activity (Linebaugh 2008, 279; Stavros Stavrides 2016, 32). Hence, it is more appropriate to speak of commoning instead of the commons. “Commoning is about complex and historically specific processes through which representations, practices and values intersect in circumscribing what is to be shared and how in a specific society” (Stavros Stavrides 2016, 32). Multiple levels are present within this distinction, and there is a relation between society, commons, subjects, values, normalization, orthodoxies and access. We will first address the matter of value, meanings, communication and normalization, through discussing the informational commons and how one can border access to the semiotic. We do this by making use of the concepts of coding and decoding as well as politics and community.

Commoning — Images and Codes

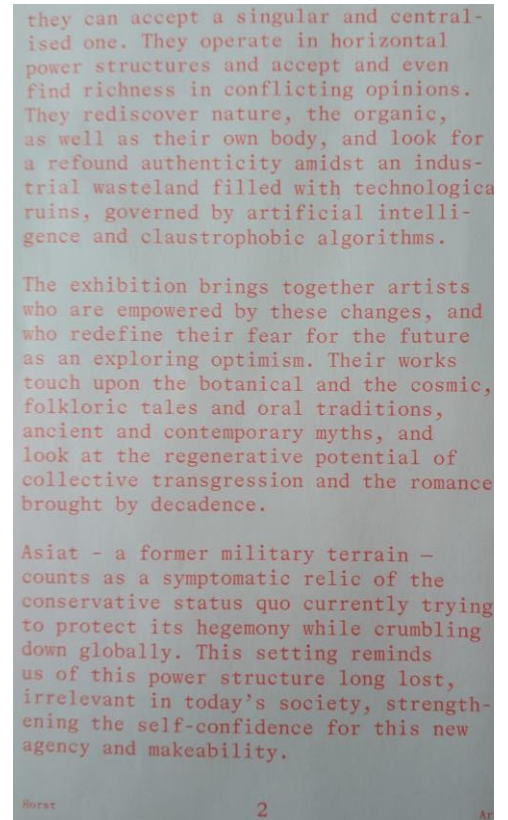
In the previous introduction to the notion of commons we already established that the informational commons that are centered around the digital world are of less value for this research. With previously mentioned perspectives on the commons in regard, we identify two broadly defined resources relevant for our purposes – knowledge and space. We will address the combination of both in the next section. Now we explore the first. However, not to get sidetracked, we will bracket all there is to say about

copyrights, privatization, etcetera. We will solely focus on the distribution of ideas and practices on a more mundane level.

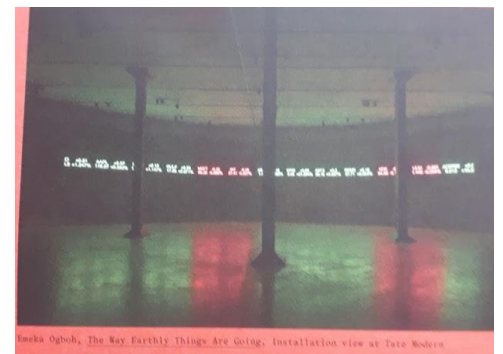
Every single individual has a multitude of ideas and visions, we all have in some way unique takes on the world. We have our personal set of skills and knowledges, we know, and we do things – we partake in common worlds. We can call this conglomeration of visions and ideas, knowledges and skills, cultural repertoires. Cultural repertoires are spread by different means – through online forums, simple flyers, a song you hear on the radio, an article in the newspaper, a little booklet you see lying around. We read these materials in certain ways and appropriate parts of them. It useful to look at this process which I will describe as encoding/decoding, a paradigm I lend from media studies. This paradigm specifically originates from Hall (1980). He proposes: “to think of this process [of communication] in terms of a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments – production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction. This would be to think of the process as a complex structure in dominance, sustained through the articulation of connected practices, each of which, however, retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence” (Stuart Hall 1980, 51). Hall (1980) is inspired by Marx’s ideological critique. He speaks of a dominating complex structure, a discourse hegemony. He sees the world as independent of, but always mediated by language. And in this mediation dominant discourses pervade the ways in which we see the world (Stuart Hall 1980, 52–55).

Looking at the textual discourse in our example we can hardly state that this vision on reality is one of a dominant discourse (see the image on the right). Taking this argument one step further we could add that there is no longer such a thing as a dominant discourse. Ideologies and ideas, people and goods are no longer limited by place. Most things now circulate globally. Appadurai (1990) called these circulations scapes. We have access to all kind of ideologies (ideoscapes) and media (mediascapes) which we in turn can appropriate (Appadurai 1990). However, some of the discourses behind them exist at the center of attention whilst others exist at the periphery, this depends of the place and community from which we approach them. This very basic insight invites us to address our postmodern condition – or the realization that we no longer have a uniform reality.

To make sense of this condition, we briefly relate to the term multivocality (Rodman 1992). Multivocality refers to the multiplicity of experiences and the way we voice them. The discourses, spaces, practices we encounter in our everyday lives are manifold and live on in our narration of them, but we do not experience the same things in the same way. That is why we speak of multi-vocal

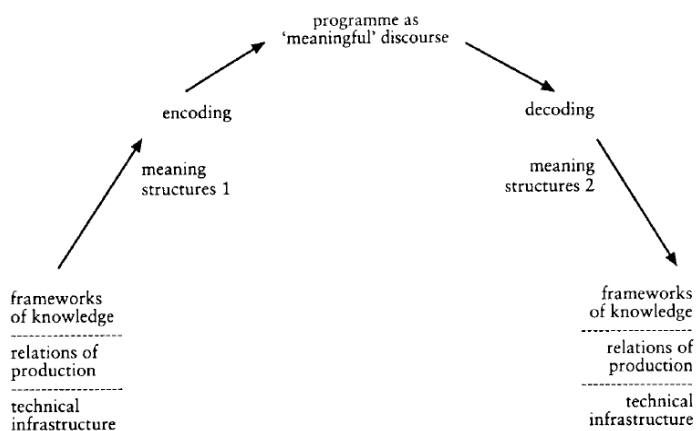


The second page of the program booklet of Horst. Here the discourse displayed on page continues (Simons 2019, 2).



Emeka Ogbob’s work with the title *The Way Earthly Things are Going*. A Greek acapella Lament is sung as we see a live stream of the Stock Market. This picture is one of his installation at the Tate Modern. He remade the same installation in the cooling tower of the power plant next to the Senne river (Simons 2019, 28–29)

experiences – each communication or interaction we have, is individually experienced and narrated in a certain way and adds to our own personalized realities²¹ (Rodman 1992).



(Stuart Hall 1980, 54)

Let us now briefly get back to the relation between coding/decoding and the (informational) commons. Hall (1980) sees the whole process of coding and decoding as presented on the left. The encoder is the producer of discourse, the decoder the receiver (Stuart Hall 1980, 54). In this whole diagram it is important one has the right *key* in order to understand the message/content of discourses without it being distorted. Furthermore, a point of critique is to be added here, for the whole process of encoding and decoding is in no way as linear as Hall (1980) proposes²².

This detour from our present inquiry is momentarily coming to a close, but we need still to explicate its relevance. When we imagine access to knowledge is mediated by language – if one does not grasp exactly what capitalism entails, the end of it might not mean much to said person. Then, to have access to visions of such a post-capitalist society – which is a system of ideas and futurities part of a certain type of (informational) commons – you need to have the proper *keys* that allow you to decode the contents of the message provided in the picture. These codes are not absolute, they can – relating to this example – be ideas pertaining to the arts, anarchism; apocalyptic and dystopic images; it might be useful should you have seen the movie *ex machina*²³. Previous knowledge is necessary to decode what is meant by the *regenerative potential of collective transgression* (see image on page 23). The case in point is that the commons do not rule out the discursive. Not all who get access to the little booklet can access its content, which as it is distributed in a certain public space can be considered a common (ideological) resource. Furthermore, there is a certain ‘we’ present, commons do not exist in a void, they are structured by our socialites. And in said example, the language speaks to those who belong to communities of artists, scholars and certain layers of civil society. What is common is also submissive to processes of normalization of a kind of (social) order – the leaflet in question posits that those who have the capability to cope with ambiguity and the paradoxes of everyday life are to be the powerful group in society. Being able to create and divine is here normalized as the most precious skill to achieve.

It is important to take on a community or group as an outlook from which to look at the commons (Stavros Stavrides 2016, 20–22). Being able to read said example, presupposes that one has certain interests, a certain level of education and, subsequently, that one goes to certain places – universities, museums, performances, etcetera. It thus becomes clear that what is common for a certain group of people is tied to their spatial relations and the social orders behind both – to the communities in which they take part. Hence, it does not suffice to have access to a certain resource, you also need the proper

²¹ It is important to add here that since we act from this personal reality, it engages with those of others.

²² He does emphasize that it is a non-linear process, but he has a lack of attention for creolization and the creation of hybrid forms of discourse (Stuart Hall 1980). He also keeps referring to dominant cultural forms, which is a highly problematic term in face of the variety and magnitude of cross-fertilization of cultural forms in our present globalized and digitalized society.

²³ 2014 Sci-Fi Thriller written and directed by Alex Garland.

key to access its contents. In a way, this key is not a singular thing, it is you as a person, your whole subject.

In this section we have addressed the commons as being highly political, submissive to processes of normalization and with restrictions in access. To understand politics we employ a simple definition by Stavrides (2016): “By ‘politics’ we may describe an open process through which the dominant forms of living together are questioned and potentially transformed” (Stavros Stavrides 2016, 55). Thus, there is a process of normalization at play. Stavrides (2016, 32-35) contends that commons come with certain expectations or naturalities which must be met in order to gain access to them. Normative conceptions are inherent in the commons, and they play a pivotal role in the creation of the groups or communities – the *we’s* that are commoning. According to Stavrides, (2016) these processes aim to carve out social worlds to which society’s different groups can belong (Stavros Stavrides 2016, 32–35). Jacques Rancière (1999) makes a similar move. He contends that our social order is constantly contested and with it what are considered the common meanings, practices, and ways of envisioning life.

Urban Commons

The urban commons is a relatively new conception of the commons which explicitly looks at how the commons are an urban construction. Huron (2017) addresses this precise issue in her literature review. According to her the subfield of urban commons is one that attempts to move beyond the two paths of addressing the commons we discussed above – a general political path (i.e. growing beyond capitalism and the state), and a path looking at managing the commons as resources (natural or on the internet). The commons are both resources and practices. In one of the books she reviews a three-part definition is used. This definition distinguishes resources, institutions for regulating those resources, and the community devising these institutions as well as benefitting from them and leading their circulation (Huron 2017, 1063; Dellenbaugh et al. 2015). The urban commons in the first place points to a place – the city and its (super)diverse and anonymous conditions. Hence one of the key challenges of the urban commons is the creation of solidarities that transcend difference (Huron 2017, 1063).

Kornberger and Borch (2015) take on a widely different perspective. They fundamentally argue against authors such as Ostrom (1990 or Hardin (1968) that the value of the commons in the urban context is not diminished by consumption; it is augmented by it. The urban commons draw value from their location and are therefore a relational phenomenon. If more activities and consumption is present in a single place, that place becomes more valuable. The question at hand is how can everyday urban dwellers access this value that is predicated on proximity and density (Huron 2017, 1064; Kornberger and Borch 2015)? In their conception they present the urban commons as small bubbles and the city as foam embodying all individual bubbles. The city is a meta-commons, a collection of urban commons that each have their small shiny membranes. The bubble metaphor explicates the relation between community and commons once more. We access the bubbles of which we can take part, that make themselves porous and allow us to enter (Kornberger and Borch 2015).

A last author to take into account is Łapniewska (2017) who conceptualizes the urban commons in a slightly different way, giving back weight to the purely economic and ecological conception of the commons. She discusses the housing estate market in Krakow alongside the city of Sopot which is a pioneer in participatory budgeting (Łapniewska 2017). Radywyl and Bigg (2013) examine multiple examples of activism in public space, how they draw on the urban commons and in turn try to transform both these commons and the city (Radywyl and Bigg 2013).

Before venturing into the concluding remarks on this status questionis, we take a brief glance at the *Assembly Movement* that took place in 2011 in Madrid as researched by Alberto Corsín Jiménez and Adolfo Estalella (2017). They narrate the friction in which the movement operates. In its assembly it tries to be as open as possible, to do so is to make the assembly like a format devoid of content. It has to continuously be reinvented on the spot. The assembly becomes a spatial object in the neighborhood system and in itself instigates a reimagining of the city and its relationships (Jiménez and Estalella 2014, 170). To keep this reimagining open to different forms, it has to make sure that the political and material qualities as well as cultural registers that through its members enter the assembly do not take institutionalized positions within (Jiménez and Estalella 2014, 158–60). In this attempt the city becomes the hardware of the assembly, it allows different takes on the right to the city to exist together.

In this last example the city and the way we imagine it, becomes the infrastructure upon which to build an urban commons, the assembly (Jiménez and Estalella 2014). This shows us how the way we imagine our neighborhoods can both be empowering, inspiring and connecting but at the same time this imagining can be exclusive. This is also the danger of encoding certain images in our organizational practices and textual discourses. The city as an infrastructure for the commons is in this manner partitioned. The commons restructured along the lines of imagined futurities; the sociotechnical apparatuses of infrastructures bordered. Those who have access are those whose (infra-)being is molded by the visions and practices that govern the infrastructured commons or the commoned infrastructures (Amin 2014; Burchardt and Höhne 2015). Because it is always both, the opening up of ways of sharing comes with a closing down of those subjects that are eligible to share.



Part 2 – Assembling Connection

The focal point of part one was the identification of ways of studying and theorizing the infrastructures and commons we scrutinize throughout this thesis. I believe that the structures we are looking for are best understood as vibrant infrastructures that continuously evolve or assemble in a process of commoning. We are engaging in a constant recalibration of what is to be shared and in so doing change the infrastructures that surround us (Stavros Stavrides 2016, 32). But our modes of sharing are also recalibrated by the way we infrastructure.

The system of commoning infrastructures and infrastructuring the commons provides us with resources and opportunities, skills and visions we can appropriate. But they are not as common as they appear. Infrastructures and commons are bordered by the communities that create them. In this section I will argue that in order to gain access to the resources inside, one needs to conform to the kind of subject that – through commoning and engaging with infrastructures – the community creates. Up until now my research might have given the impression that the human-material equation has been addressed in favor of the material side. This is not the case. Keep in mind that the commons as well as infrastructures work *through* humans, in material and social practice and thus in imaginings, cultural repertoires, performances etcetera. The material and human are co-constitutive. Like the commons or infrastructures, they are recursive entities.

In this second and last part of this thesis I will trace the workings of Stal Cheval, the way the organization makes resources circulate. I will also devote special attention to how they reach out to different organizations and individuals, how relationships form the basis of what they manage to create. Furthermore, I will devote special attention to what appears to be the incorporation of a certain type of discourse that is shared in what we can call a cultural or creative economy and how this discourse governs the people who partake in it.

The two chapters that follow will explicate this process by the use of concrete situations, talks and examples. I will first delve into Stal Cheval as an organization and look at how within this organization resources, contacts and networks circulate. Here I will look at how the organization of a community is in itself a process of commoning. Subsequently I will explore how access to the circulations and resources is organized. In the last section of this chapter I will center the discussion on the spread of ideas and how language and signification – codes – allow access to them. This brings us to the last chapter of this thesis where I address the discursive forces that govern said access. We observe two paradoxes that inform us of the exclusionary forces present in the process of commoning infrastructures. We will name these paradoxes the *obligation of being more than one thing* and the *doctrine of openness*.

Chapter 4. New Circulations — New Circulators

03 June 2019 — In the early afternoon we meet on the parking lot of Lites. We are only a handful of people as it is an ordinary Thursday. Lites is a huge film studio close to the train station, they have the largest underwater shooting basin of Europe. Unfortunately, we are visiting the set next to the huge tub. We got here through the contacts of Hilde, who has a friend who builds set decorations. Usually however, whenever shooting is done whole sets are dismantled and a lot of planks as well as wooden floorboards are thrown away. She got her connection to allow us to recuperate most of the wood that they consider thrash and (upon promising to paint them) use them to build decorations of our own.

As we arrive at the set, they ask us where our transport truck is. We haven't rented one. The lady in charge explicitly mentions the spirit of cultural vibrations and with ecological principles in mind she gets us permission to use one of their trucks. We start disassembling all things we thought we could use and load them into the truck. A few hours later we end up with a huge collection of wood, paint and tiles a little further down the block with which we could assemble our courtyard.

What an astonishing point of access we had in an environment so unfamiliar. The above is an example of access to (material) resources provided by one of the volunteers: Hilde. We can understand the practices that are linked to this productive relationship as a process of commoning. By going out there, talking with her contacts and getting us access to resources that were not destined to be ours, she redefines the patterns in which we share and subsequently operate (Stavros Stavrides 2016, 32). Furthermore, we can understand her position as being a node or knot in the relational meshwork we call our urban environment. And it is through redefining the line between herself and her contact that she redefines their relationships as one of exchange. But is the value produced by this relationship private or public?

In this chapter I will argue that it is both. To pinpoint the private value that can be extracted from the commons, we hit it off by addressing the term circulators. This term is used to refer to those members of the (Stal Cheval) community who set things in motion. Then I will go on to take a look at how we can perceive the commons in relation to the city. I will then venture into assemblage theory to theorize how we can understand the relationships and the city as producing value. This theory equally allows me to stress the historic and ongoing character of the commons and the city. In so doing I examine the difference between infrastructuring the commons and commoning infrastructures. Two processes that go hand in hand, the tidal motion of this thesis. After this I go on to talk about commoning and the right to the city; what the bespoke commons are and why they are valuable. I continue along this path and focus on the special place which the ideal – the world of meanings, visions and futures – has within this process of commoning. With a discussion on ideal forms of exclusion, I construct a bridge towards the last chapter that will discuss several of the exclusionary ambiguities that have a central role in thought and practice pertaining to these processes of commoning.

Circulators Assembling

I have previously designated those who hold central positions in networks as (new) circulators. With this term I wish to pinpoint two features – or privileges for that matter – that we can ascribe to them. First, it implies a certain power over circulations that are taking place. Second, it suggests that said circulators hold special positions in the social fiber – the social taxonomy – of the city and its organizations. Furthermore, the term circulator offers us a euphemism to speak of these privileges²⁴. Ultimately, we are talking of people who have access to resources that others have not, but it would be

²⁴ In talking with circulators about their positions the use of the word *elite* was off-putting. They did not perceive themselves, nor wished to be perceived by others in these terms.

wrong to describe this group as affluent. For they do not necessarily have financial or material affluence. Instead they have created a strong rooted position within the urban environment that branches out in a multiplicity of directions. To make sense of this kind of position I will first sketch a picture of the urban environment and its relationality through assemblage thinking.

Assemblage thinking has been mentioned when I spoke of the ontological turn. This type of thinking today is extremely influential in our discipline. Here I will use it to sketch an image of the urban, of knotting, and of connection. Then I will continue to use it to explicate the recursive nature of the infrastructural commons.

The concept of assemblage is an attempt to move beyond general descriptions of our life worlds. It allows us to address multiplicity and movement whilst maintaining some sense of the structural. Things, places, even people are considered to be continuously assembled (N. Gregson et al. 2010, 846; Marcus and Saka 2006, 102). Marcus and Saka (2006) identify two major points of reference when using the concept: “It can refer to a subjective state of cognition and experience of society and culture in movement from a recent past toward a near future (the temporal span of emergence); or it can refer to objective relations, a material, structure-like formation, a describable product of emergent social conditions, a configuration of relationships among diverse sites and things” (Marcus and Saka 2006, 102). We use the work by Gregson et al (2010) on Chock-Chocky furniture – furniture that is created from dismantling old boats in Bangladesh – as an example. In line of the first use of the term assemblage, we can read these objects as the emergence of a cultural good, a type of furniture that has come into being in the wake of globalized waste distribution. This piece of furniture is in a constant state of becoming. It is transforming from the final form of a boat to the first form of a closet. It then continues to (un-)become as it is moved, placed, decorated and used. At the same time, it is also a material assemblage of certain materials, styles, as well as social and material relationships. What is inside the closet? What are its uses? How is it appropriated? It is both a material configuration and a process of configurating, it is ongoing. It emphasizes both the actual and the potential (N. Gregson et al. 2010, 847–48; McFarlane 2011, 209).

Now let us draw a parallel to the story we uncovered at the start of this chapter. The wood we were able to collect knows a similar lifespan. It was destined to meet the end of its life, but by its involvement in the social relationships that brought us to the Lites studio, it was appropriated into the assemblage that is our project. And as such it has had multiple identities, it is in a continuous state of (un)becoming. It became a wooden terrace, a playground, and a mobile DJ-stage. Above all it becomes clear that assemblages whether looked upon in their material or processual form are made up of contingent relationships and thus they are pervious entities (Marcus and Saka 2006, 104).

Stal Cheval as a place and an organization continuously unfolds in such productive movements. We therefore need to address the relationality that is constitutive of these movements – the assembly. Subsequently we also need to address the exchanges that are being made in it, and how they are political and cultural (Pierce, Martin, and Murphy 2011, 59). Pierce, Martin and Murphy (2011) follow Massey’s (2006) conceptualization of places as bundles of “space-time trajectories” (Pierce, Martin, and Murphy 2011, 59). They literally address the movements of parts, human and material, and how their trajectories though time and space are constitutive of the continuous emergence of entities (places, organizations, closets, etcetera). Hilde can contribute or simply move the way she does in our example, because she herself continuously moves through spaces with people and things. Her movements are constitutive of the assemblage of Stal Cheval.

Felix, Mien and I get to sorting out all the materials we had gathered at Lites. We sort by size and material and immediately start to make plans to reconstruct the terrace. The place we had chosen to reclaim from abandonment used to be a bar and we hoped that the present infrastructures would be usable. Which was (with exception of the beer tap) not the case. Where there used to be a terrace, there are now only supportive beams, locked away in concrete.

More people arrive, Ben, Andreas and Mats. We start reusing the linoleum floorings we got from Lites to recreate the terrace. After some time into this puzzle work, a black van turns onto the premises. Lukas, a carpenter and handyman, but most importantly a friend of Ben gets out of the van. He brought all his materials with him and tells us we can use them. He stayed with us for the rest of the evening. "If there are any problems, don't hesitate to call me".

The place we created at the old bar Plan B is one that is constituted by the movements of people that frequented it. It is because Ben or Hilde were able to add their friends to the network of relations that started to emerge around this place, that the place started to exist as it did. This shows that the trajectories of these people alongside those of the circulating materials are the result of action; of choices made by individuals. Lukas chooses to make his own resources available for the community. His decision is of course influenced by social process and his network, but it shows that he inscribes himself in the idea that value is not a one-dimensional entity. In partaking in this network and contributing to its commoning, he co-propagates a cultural economy that gives weight to relations and encounters (Amin and Thrift 2007).

McFarlane (2011) argues that the urban itself is an assemblage, subject to historic processes of transformation. The urban is an assemblage of human and material parts that is: "structured through various forms of power relation and resource and information control" (McFarlane 2011, 210). Then in this equation the organization as well as the place Stal Cheval is a part of the assemblage that changes the ways in which this resource and information control takes place. Stavrides (2016, 32) talks of an ongoing historical construct of how and what we share. The process of commoning is accompanied by an expansion of the cultural economy. Amin and Thrift (2007) conceptualize this economy as an entity "organized around the lifeworld of passions, moral sentiments, practical knowledge, modes of discipline and measurement, and symptomatic narratives" (Amin and Thrift 2007, 157). It is that part of our economy that is hybrid, it resides in the urban and generates different kinds of value. At the same time, it is a political economy, a construct that can be advocated by those who take part in it (Amin and Thrift 2007). In this line of thought we can identify a series of ideas and discourses that advocates relations and encounters as resources that provide economic value.

Mehdi Ultimately it is a question about value. Do we value that which we cannot see? Do encounters constitute value?

Carlo Encounters are being outsourced. Organizations who take on the task to attempt to create more cohesion and bring people together are competing for resources. They need to cut back and work with others for the available means to be put to use.

[...]

We could add here that those who have access to these ideas are in a position where they have more power to shape their environment – the said assemblage.

Let us now use the intricacies of access to the Lites studio to turn back to the process of commoning infrastructures and infrastructuring the commons. We should not think of commoning infrastructures as resources moving from private to public, instead we should think of it as a process of opening up circulations that are usually governed by sociotechnical systems. In this case, getting access to the

studio of Lites makes us get access to flows of circulation – people, as well as materials – that are otherwise governed by involvement in the movie-industry. Hence a process of commoning takes place wherein how to share within certain systems is redefined. Subsequently we should make sense of the process of infrastructuring this newfound commons as a new structuring drive. The circulators, in using the resources they get access to – networks, materials, encounters – recreate socio-technical structures or assemblages which in turn are governed by their own set of ideas, their logics. In so doing they are made accessible for certain groups of subjects.

Before moving on, it benefits us to look at AbdouMaliq Simone’s (2004) notion of people as infrastructure. He contends that people in their daily activities and through their trajectories create infrastructures. He draws on the recursive properties of informal networks in Johannesburg to showcase how this works. He contends that by drawing on relations or materials, life is reproduced in the city (AbdouMaliq Simone 2004, 408). Ultimately it is a question of what we will ascribe value to and how we will structure our lives toward this value. It is because of action that lives, and environments are structured in certain ways. These actions also include how we talk and think of our infrastructures. All these things shape our situated socialities (Amin 2014, 146). This is what is at stake in both commoning infrastructures and infrastructuring the commons.

In our examples we see that a normative way of sharing as well as a normative conception of value surfaces. Processes of commoning are brought to live along the lines of these normative conceptions. These conceptions in turn structure the process of commoning. Therefore, it is normal – in the given context – that private resources are redistributed to be commonly accessible – i.e. accessible for those who take part in the community, the project. Subsequently, we can see that *recognition* becomes a central value throughout these processes of commoning.

The Powers of Recognition

“Gij kent hier iedereen zeker?”

I find myself in many situations in which this insignificant Flemish idiom is used: “Do you know everyone here?” In these situations I have both been the subject, the object, the proclaimer as well as the receiver of this commentary. This idiom is highly relevant because the discourse obscured behind its everyday simplicity touches upon the heart of this research. Furthermore, it is an example of the assembled and networked nature of our urban environments. Allow me to illustrate this with an encounter that unfolded on February 14th, 2020, during a night out visiting *Bright* the festival of light in Brussels.

This night out in the streets of Brussels mostly unfolded around an area which can be considered as one of the prime gathering points of a part of the Flemish community – The start of the Dansaertstraat²⁵. I was having drinks in De Bizon with close friends. We got prompted by a text to go to Café Kafka where there supposedly was quite a lot of ambience. Entering the overcrowded terrace giving into the street, I get tapped on the shoulder by an old neighbor. He used to host



²⁵ The area surrounding Dansaertstraat, the square of Sainte Cathérine and the area around Bloemenhof are considered to be Flemish neighborhoods. Partly because of big Flemish institutions: Beursschouwburg, Erasmus Hogeschool, RITCS, Bronks, De Markten, etcetera.

chill sessions and parties and his place was frequented by musicians, photographers, designers, academics, as well as social workers. Some of those who in the meantime have grown successful in one way or another²⁶. After interacting with some that made a part of this network back when I did, I joined in with my friends. My good friend Tom said to me: "Gij kent hier iedereen zeker." *Your really do know everyone here don't you?* At this point this idiom can be read as signifier of a social position, or even more so – prestige. I am *recognized* for whom I am/was in relation to the conglomerate of people that occupy – and occupied – this and other related spaces. Ultimately this being recognized ties in with the value that is given to encounters. Being recognized enables meeting more people, having a bigger network. Which ultimately boils down to a different form of accumulation. Hence, my position in relation to my friend who was not recognized for having made part of the network we encountered was one of more prestige or power.

And then you forget, find some seats, order some drinks, see some more people have some more fun. Until Felix entered the pub, he is one of the volunteers of Stal Cheval with whom I worked together to get a grip on our program and bookings this summer. As we both kept on running into internal issues last summer, he decided to no longer take formal part in our organization this year. After talking about the summer – for I had not seen him in half a year – he said to me: "All of Brussels is here tonight." I replied: "You really do know everyone here"

This example of an unexpected encounter in personal life shows how the field site does not let itself be confined to the locality of Vilvoorde. The networks under scrutiny here, emerge elsewhere. They are connected to other networks that take on a central role in different localities. It should not surprise that the way Stal Cheval emerges as a community in Vilvoorde holds in itself, through its participants' (in this case Felix), links to other communities primarily emerging elsewhere. If these ties are then materialized by the action of persons in their particular position, new links and knots surface. This is for instance what happens in the case of Hilde.

This is once again a story that touches on the right to the city (D. Harvey 2003). Access to common networks and subsequently, materials and practices is what drives our capacity to transform the urban environment – both materially and socially. Expanding on points of access or a better power position thus allows you to become, at least proverbially, a bigger part of the assemblage. Thus, there is a position of power interlinked with access to common resources. Stavrides (2016, 55) said as much when he theorized politics as everything pertaining to what are considered dominant forms of living. In conclusion we can then remark that when we gain access to certain networks with certain resources, we shape the urban environment and subsequently the ways in which those resources circulate within our cultural economy (Amin and Thrift 2007; Stavros Stavrides 2016). Thus, it is by using the network that we create it; it is by creating the urban that it starts to exist; and it is by having access to the commons that the commons of which we speak come into being. We are the producers and consumers of the common, the urban, the infrastructures and the ways of sharing within them.

²⁶ For instance, the founders of Lowkey Radio, an urban media organization that now got the opportunity to host a weekly show on BRUZZ radio station.

Navigating Circulations - Infrastructuring Futures

[...]

Jacob People are living on their own Islands, they do not come together. They have no joint interests. Diversity now is first women then ethnic communities and then the lower educated. We create a gap between ourselves and these groups. We talk fancy words they do not understand. What is more, through our engagements, our encounters we ourselves become the most valuable resource we have.

Carlo In Antwerp this is a reality, if you want to be given opportunities, you need to visit the right places, have the right look. You do not even need to sell your ideas. You simply need to be recognized.

Mehdi The political product is you. Look at those initiatives that try to open networks: Flemish Youth Consulate²⁷, Yussef Kobo's Citizen Tables, etcetera. The people who partake in these initiatives are not the ones who sell marijuana to their peers or the ones who are struggling to stay in school. The people who partake are educated youngsters who have a ton of ambition.

We are the new middleclass elite.

Up until now we have spoken of sharing resources and have stressed the discursive, unequal access in these processes of sharing and commoning. There is always a *we* present that infrastructures the commons. This can be seen in this excerpt of conversation as well as in our previous examples. The present *we* comes alive in the acts of sharing resources, ways of thinking, seeing and navigating the world that lie at the basis of said commoning. Being part of this group also comes with skills to read meaningful signifiers and in some cases even participate in performance registers to be able to access certain resources. In this part we will delve deeper into the discourses and ideologies that are present in this *we* and how they function to border access to the community's resources and have a profound impact on our socio-technical systems. Furthermore, these discourses and ideologies are what connects the localized commons of which we speak to the broader political economy in which we find ourselves.

The above excerpt of a conversation at Stal Cheval will serve to explore the images and codes that pervade the infrastructural commons surrounding Stal Cheval.

"We talk fancy words." We do, I do, and I have done so for the last thirty pages. This thesis can be considered part of the commons at hand, its language included. We talk fancy about sharing our passions, creating cross-fertilizations, etcetera. Talking fancy is something that is recognizable for all those who enjoyed education, those outgoing citizens that throughout their lives have been molded into a certain kind of subject. The processes of subjectivation that are entwined with the ability to read certain textual discourses will be addressed in the next chapter. Now we will limit ourselves to the discourses themselves and how they constitute what is considered sensible²⁸ in certain groups.

²⁷ Vlaamse Jeugdraad

²⁸ The sensible pertains to what we can see and make sense of. It is also where the sensible is expanding or diminishing that according to Rancière the political is at play (Baiocchi and Connor 2013, 96).

"We become the most valuable resource we have." This is an idea that is grounded in the communities we investigate. It can be tied back to forces of informalization that oscillate from what is considered the cultural or creative economy. This is a political economy that is taking a central position in society amongst those who have enjoyed higher education. The premise of this political economy is centered around human creativity as the quintessential source of economic value. Not human labor but human creativity, adaptability and knowledge is sensible and desirable (Lee 2017, 1079). This is also what we read in "*getting armed for the coming fall*" – the textual discourse of *Horst Arts and Music* with the help of which I explicated decoding in the status questionis. This political economy and its discourse are quite central in our world at large. Quite a lot of corporate cultures, design agencies, universities, as well as cultural organizations subscribe to its ideology (Gibson and Klocker 2004, 423). It is embodied in pseudo self-help books such as Godin's (2012) *The Icarus Deception*²⁹. The ubiquitousness of this discourse becomes apparent when looking at one's own agenda. You need to be outgoing, to maintain and establish the right contacts. Furthermore, this drive for networking is needed to access the common resources of which we speak. As provided in the example above, you need to inscribe yourself in this discourse of self-development and to a certain extent ambition; you need to be passionate, your greatest desire must be to get involved in meaningful encounters.

Turning back to previous discussions it becomes clear that the desire to gain access to certain processes of commoning can be tied back to discourse, ideology and political economy. Being part, having read or thought about how we organize ourselves and our common goods as well as what they entail, can in this case be perceived as imaginary labor that generates keys and codes to read infrastructures and constellations of people and organizations. This coincides with what Amin (2014) calls infra-designation, the creation of models for use of space and resources with a certain normativity attached to them. Having an understanding of the idea that humans constitute the primary value for the economy and here the commons, is an understanding that plays a pivotal role in gaining access to the language and resources of the common infrastructures. A very clear example is writing projects for city funding. Being in a circulator role, you have to learn the kind of language that emphasizes connection, community and diversity. A language with which you sell your ideas. Ideas that subsequently also crystallize in the infrastructures themselves.

When the idea of Stal Cheval emerged, it was centered around the search for vacant spaces and creating a pop-up bar. And then link it to drinks, food, music, expositions social gatherings. Getting different audiences in contact with each other, so that they get to know each-other and in this way we create a creative hotspot for a community of people that are diverse, engaged, highly motivated and driven (Raf).

This is how the previous chairman talks of the inception of the idea of Stal Cheval. It is infra-designation at its most tactile form. Informed by discourses and ideas of a political economy predicated on creativity, humanness and connection. Subsequently it is these ideas that create the infrastructure by concrete action. They are recursive ideas, they are present or come into being, because they are used – both here and elsewhere. Subsequently, it is the normativity behind these ideas as well as their actual spatial and physical emergence that drives forces of subjectivation of the individuals and groups that use them.

²⁹ A book advocating that we should all become artists in whatever we do (Godin 2012).

Chapter 5. Sharing Influence, Bordering Community

In the previous chapter we deepened our understanding of processes of infrastructuring commons and commoning infrastructures, and how we can make sense of and visualize these structures in an urban context. Furthermore, we have established that politics runs deep within and throughout these systems as well as the subjects that use them. We will now center our discussion on the relationship between these systems of commoning infrastructures and infrastructuring the commons and the subjects that take part in them. I will argue that in order to gain access to the common infrastructures, you need to conform to a certain type of subject with certain beliefs and opinions. We will address three distinct examples that show how the subject relates to the commons and with it we will explore distinct modes of thinking about the common, the infrastructural and the political. The first example shows us how projects can aim to police belief in the commons and mold the subjectivities of young people. The second is centered around the idea that you need to be more than one thing, constantly reinventing yourself along different lines. This drive or obligation for that matter is something that surfaced when speaking to volunteers and circulators. Lastly, we take on a more systemic approach and look at a joint but paradoxical quality of personhood that is required to be part of the community that has access to the infrastructural commons of Stal Cheval and by extension the cultural or creative political economy – the doctrine of openness.



20 June 2019 — Urban-Vil — Two young guys, the djs of Urban-Vil are playing tunes to warm up the audience. The performer arrives and stands in front of the DJ-booth. They brought their own audience: six young men and women. One is hiding a bottle of booze in his backpack. It is 20:30, in turn they occasionally take a sip. It is not the best for business, we don't mind. Their group forms half of the audience.

The show starts, the performer does not seem to mind the lack of audience. The two girls are having a photoshoot. They take poses with the singer and DJ's. The performer moves us into getting up. Felix and I (we were responsible for the bar) do so immediately, some others too, one guy present sighs quite explicitly as he joins his two friends. There are a lot of kinds of sighs, his is an especially expressive one. I read his sigh as saying: this type of thing does not adhere to the image of myself and my tastes. However, I am not an asocial being. I will do as is required in this social situation although without taking much pleasure out of it.

As we are standing up in between the performers' more regular and attuned public it immediately becomes clear we do not possess the same practices to properly deal with the situation. Their audience clearly has a better understanding of what the performer says. They often converse with shouts and brief remarks. Some give the impression that something insulting was said, at other times the shouts are rather affirming.

I was not able to comprehend some things that this performer sang. I did not have the same register to respond when he reached out in – observable from his regular audience – normal ways. It is clear they have some culturally specific shared repertoire pertaining to performances as well as ways of communication.

In this example, it is due to the city's head of the department of culture (Thomas) and his relations with Felix (who is an active member of different organizations) that this performer and his crew were able to perform at Plan B. The introduction of this different group of people and their different ways of appropriating the space, makes visible this process of commoning infrastructure. It shows how the networks that are navigated by mentioned circulators allow certain people to mingle and certain cultural practices to spread. Furthermore, participating also comes with ways of governing and inscribing one's own subject into practices corresponding with the appropriate ways of sharing resources in our cultural economy.

After the performance I get to talk both with Thomas as well as with the performers. Thomas explains to me that these guys and girls who come to Urban Vil do not know they can do things. They try to make them aware that there are opportunities for them. They try to reach out to them by using codes they know. Football, hip/hop, or urban photography. They get them into studios, to perform at partners. They start a project to show them that if they try, adapt and persevere they can reach their goals.

We can make sense of the position of Thomas as closely related to what Rancière (1999) would call 'the police'. "The police is first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise (Rancière 1999, 29)." This holds true for the journey these youngsters make. They learn how to create partnerships, make arrangements, work on a project. In a way they are policed to appropriate ways of doing and sharing that fit in with what we called the cultural economy. They work with writers who aid them with their texts, DJ's who share their knowledge.

I get up to the nook of the bar in which the performers and his friends are hanging out. I ask him whether he didn't mind that there weren't a lot of people around. He told me he always gives it his best. Because you never know when another opportunity will arise.

This answer shows how the performer taps into the notion that one can capitalize on the value of contacts and an extended network. It signals that by going through these processes with Urban Vil they take on part of the discourse that is prevalent in the political economy of which they are part. Hence, bettering their position therein.

But these performers do not take on this discourse literally, they infuse their own identities into it. If we get back at Rancière (1999), we see that he continues to describe politics as the activity antagonistic to policing. The moving or making visible noise or bodies in a place that is not by definition theirs (Rancière 1999, 29–30). We do not speak of police as that would smear the constant ambiguity and situationality of the positions that our circulators occupy. In this story Thomas is policing because he makes these performers take on the normative ways of doing and saying prevalent in our cultural economy. But he does not do so in a totalitarian way. There is room for the creation of their own registers³⁰. When they meet us and give us a hand, they politely introduce themselves in English, originating from West-London. Being guys from the neighborhood it is quite likely they go to Flemish speaking schools, but they choose to converse in English and at times French. They have their own performance register with ideas and practices of how to convey their group identity towards others. By using these registers they stress their difference, thus making explicit that they do not belong here. This difference does not necessarily close off access to the process of commoning, instead it negotiates what they wish to share as well as what we wish to share – and of course how we want to share it.

We can for instance approach their pop-culture references, practices and language as a type of cultural commons. An ideal and performative resource that the non-regular audience does not have access to. I did not have the proper keys to decode the messages of the performance (I had to google the word *mulla*). Thus, in prompting us to participate in the exchange, the performer opens up a process of commoning. He gives us the opportunity to create a first idea that can be used to decipher following experiences.

Turning back to Stavrides (2016) we can see this process as one where different groups become co-producers of a shared world (Stavros Stavrides 2016, 50). The group of artists negotiate their difference in space by occupying the most out of sight corner of the bar. They physically recreate the different island they usually occupy in the urban archipelago of Vilvoorde. This metaphor invented by Stavrides (2016, 19) approaches urban space as the sea; encapsulating different communities who use it – the islands. The common infrastructures then reside in the ocean, and some islands have better tools to fish for access (Stavros Stavrides 2016, 19). What we see happening here is two delegations meeting at sea and in so doing co-creating the space and present processes of commoning. The question remains whether this negotiation ends up creating common ground and makes the common infrastructures expand.

Stavrides (2016) speaks of institutions of commoning. He delineates dominant institutions and institutions of expanding commoning. The first borders access to its resources, the latter continuously opens itself and makes space to redefine and recreate its own process of sharing as well as what is shared. Stavrides (2016) conceptualizes these institutions of expanding commoning by making use of three characteristics. First the grounds of comparison between subjects and practices need to be formed (Stavros Stavrides 2016, 41). Different people need to become relevant for collaboration and subsequently collaboration needs to be based upon multiplicity. To do this they need to encourage

³⁰ “The concept of register can be used in the way it was theorized in sociolinguistics, for instance by Halliday and Biber, as referring to a constellation of a specific discourse environment and the exploitation of specific linguistic features for the sake of addressing certain audience” (Arnaut 2013, 87). Furthermore, it is differentially accessible and has its own spatial constructs. Think for instance of front-stage and back-stage (Arnaut 2013, 87–88).

differences to meet on common grounds, not on the terms of one of the parties present. Furthermore, for this aim the distribution of roles in the community must be bracketed. Secondly, the institutions of expanding commoning must provide tools for translation across difference. This process of commoning comes with a process of reinvention. Thirdly, there needs to be a mechanism by which accumulation of power is prevented. In what follows we will show how Stal Cheval and other cultural associations as well as the city in Vilvoorde are all in some way institutions of expanding commoning, but in an equally real way they are institutions that border the very same expansion.

In the situation we provided above this already becomes clear as the distribution of roles is not bracketed. It is not the case that the performers have an equal access to the commons that exist in the cultural economy of Vilvoorde. But we can neither speak of a bordering of said commons here. Their access is limited by the way of sharing therein. They need to conform to the pre-existing etiquette in order to get access. We will take this conception of Stavrides (2016) with us to the next sections to explore the two paradoxes that govern the subjectivity of those who take part in Stal Cheval and by extension the cultural economy of Vilvoorde.

The Obligation of Being more than one Thing

05 July 2019 —Marijn and I are hosting the bar tonight. Marijn is a volunteer who occasionally helps with the bar. He is currently working on getting a teaching degree for adult education. We are talking about Stal Cheval and his degree when he tells me that he has the feeling he constantly needs to reinvent himself in different situations. He needs to reinvent himself as a teacher, and here as a volunteer. He feels that in order to truly belong or be a productive member of the organization, he needs to be multiple things. You've got to be creative and such. The man who was now ordering his drink at the bar joins in. He tells us he sees it every day. For some reason there is this pressure to be quite a few things, a person with multiple passions, skills and goals in life. He is an iron worker at an art-foundry. I ask him whether he is an artist. He gravely denies, he is by no means an artist, artists come in to check on their work. These haughty types who have these ideas they wish to see realized. They come in and tell us, make this little corner mat and that one shiny. He doesn't like artists. He doesn't want to be the one with great conceptions of the world or with great ideas, he simply wants to mold and shape his metal.

The obligation of being more than one thing is a normative force of subjectivation. People feel obliged to be passionate and active, they are in a way policed towards being active members of the community. If we look back at the quote of Raf (p. 34), we can read as much. He wants people to be engaged, motivated, creative. These expectations, of passion, interesting stories, engagements to localities, etcetera form the line against which difference is measured here. Thus, we can state that the grounds on which different groups meet and get involved in processes of commoning are in fact opening up to difference. At the same time the line on which difference – or commonality for that matter – is measured, shifts and establishes itself as equally exclusive albeit to a different public. Thus, we should perceive access to the commons as infrastructured. Infrastructured, because the resources that are circulated within are once again governed by socio-technical systems that incorporate a new taxonomy of social relations based upon certain normativities. The social taxonomy consists of hierarchical positions, with who are the most things for the most people on top.

It proves useful to make a classification: Above are the circulators, those with a vast network, those who are recognized as representative for (multiple) organizations, networks or businesses. Those who depending on personal history and engagements are perceived to be more 'seasoned'³¹ and therefore have unique insights into the cultural economy. The resources accessible at this level are for instance ways of navigating funding, government agencies, but also (in)formal networks. They have access to learning skills (social media and communication, etcetera). In the middle of the taxonomy are those who are active, but do not facilitate the larger flows. People such as Marijn, who feel that they are somehow pushed to be more, but do not necessarily want to. Further, we can identify two more levels of access. The public of Stal Cheval, those who are present or simply consume. They participate in the discourse of the cultural economy through participating in the place, albeit in a more passive way and do not necessarily feel the same pressures that come with it. Lastly, there are those who do not have access to Stal Cheval or its ideas. Whilst everyone is welcome to partake in Stal Cheval we see that the more you want to do, the more you can do, the more you are recognized, the more access you get to the infrastructured commons. This can be seen as a paradoxical mechanism inside of this commons, because as we have seen in the status questionis, the socio-technical apparatus that is the infrastructured commons, governs our subject in such a way that we start to value encounter and exchange. We even start to live our lives accordingly, devote our time to do so. Hence, in order to rise on the engagement ladder, if I may call it such, we already need to have in ourselves the desire to rise. Therefore, it becomes impossible for those who are by no means connected to the commons to take the first step. However, knots and networks and the positions we take on in our social environments are never quite so clear cut. There are always unexpected points of access and messy openings. What we aim to highlight here, however, is the observation that there are structural forces at play as well.

We have thus established that the system or the common infrastructure pertaining to the cultural or creative economy, molds those who partake in it. They take on more things, redefine themselves as circulators of resources for this or that purpose – as individuals who in their spare time go the extra mile. People who are visible, who affect and are affected. These people appropriate different practices and viewpoints, they are open to difference, in certain cases even celebrate it. It does henceforth not surprise that they do invent new ways of sharing, they recreate the infrastructures they use to common³².

The infrastructured commons of the cultural economy emerges as an institution of expanding commoning. Common grounds are made for a rethinking of ways to share and thus new connections are made across lines of difference. But at the same time, it recreates new lines of difference that identifies those who are outgoing, passionate and networked as being part of the process of commoning while restricting access to those who do not conform to this ideal subject. Subsequently, tools for translation of practices are found for some encounters, ideas and registers – we can for instance see the performance we talked about above as such a tool. But people who do not inscribe themselves in the normativities of the cultural economy are prevented from access to this process of

³¹ On the fifth of February 2020, we had a meeting with Thomas, and he explained us the workings of the real estate market as if we had no clue of what was going on. For me – having just become a member of the board – this was true. I, therefore, found that it was a very educating meeting. But the others were quite insulted that the city did not propose anything concrete and told me they hadn't come out any smarter. This is at least partly due to Raf being the former chairman and in charge of primary communication and to a certain extent lobbying with the city.

³² Those who identify with the discourse we discussed in the status questionis: "Rather than succumbing to a nihilistic cynicism; rather than surrendering to useless emptiness, this apocalyptic mood entails the promise of a new start. Former victims of Weltschmerz and melancholy become the winners of this new world order" (Simons 2019, 1).

translation. The latter happens by the simple fact that they would not partake in events where these ideas are so clearly propagated. The normativities we propagate – of encounter, connection, openness, being more than one thing – crystallize in these narratives with which we carry out our projects. Something that will accompany us into the doctrine of openness and thereafter into the conclusion of this thesis (Stavros Stavrides 2016, 41–54).

The Doctrine of Openness

The doctrine of openness is a necessary misleading title. It is about a story we tell ourselves. The we employed here refers to those who partake in the cultural economy. We tell ourselves we are open to difference. This story is equally necessary as my necessary misleading title. We are open to what we (in line of the last section) can call old lines of difference, but we close off our communities against new lines. The doctrine of openness can be seen as one of these new lines on which difference is measured. It is a narrative construction that informs our identity and subject. The discourse that is woven around the concept of openness – being open, having open doors, being accessible, allowing different kinds of living – addresses the problem of diversity. How can we create a diverse society, how can we live with difference? These are problems that are central issues in the cultural economy of which we speak. And rightfully so, but they also cause polemics on a much broader societal field.

Openness is both an ideological and a normative force, it nudges you to not cross your arms when you meet someone, to fervently nod when someone is speaking to you. Its force reaches up to our very postures. But it is a slippery force, it is obscure. Moreover, there is an ideology at work behind its façade. The openness can obscure the closedness of our common social worlds. This brings us back to the idea that language is not just language, there are discourses at play that police us. Bakhtin (1981) sees the realm of language as filled with ideology, that strives through unitary language to centralize ideological and cultural thought and opinion (Bakhtin and Holquist 1981, 271). He speaks of dialects that campaign against each other, different discourses striving for dominant positions in language (Bakhtin and Holquist 1981, 275–78).

How we describe ourselves and how narrate what we do, is a way of expressing and distributing what we believe in and how we see and understand ourselves. It creates a much larger ever expanding we. It adds to the process of worlding (Descola 2014). A process that has previously been described by Simone (2001) who emphasizes that our (inter-)action adds to the universes we live in. As well as to the structural modalities that govern them (Abdoumalik Simone 2001). The emphasis is thus on a process of divining a world where difference doesn't matter, an open world. These narratives do not necessarily pertain to the present, they incorporate visions of the future. How do we relate to what is yet to come? The discourses we previously mentioned, both that of the chairman of Stal Cheval as well as in Horst's program booklet share this orientation. The cultural economy is directed towards a more equal, more open future. This does not mean that its common infrastructures are not bordered.

08 July 2019 —I arrive at the Asiat site where I have a meeting with Felix who is volunteering at the Horst labs as well. We will make all the official applications for public events that are coming up. Upon arriving I see he has sent me a text —he is picking up an artist at the airport and will be late. I didn't mind as I saw this as my first opportunity to get a look at what is going in this space. There are hardly any people around as I put away my bike. Some people of around my age are arguing under a tent, next to a large construction. As I walk around, I notice some people sitting on stairs drawing a building. I feel quite uncomfortable, I feel like I don't belong and even note a certain hostility. After taking a solo tour of the whole site I take a seat at the central square. Felix arrives. He tells me he went to pick up the artist who would put his installation in the cooling tower. He takes me to the kitchen and introduces me to him. As I am introducing myself to this man, two women enter. They go past me and introduce themselves to the artist. In positioning themselves they cut me off the conversation. After five minutes of being ignored they

turned to me inquiring who I am — interrogatory style — and halfway my explanation they had heard enough. I am clearly only one thing here, a stranger — out of place.

Even though the story does not end here, it is time to take a step back. This situation was one where my personal access to what was going on was bordered. I did not personify the right things to be able to belong there. Hardly anyone even looked at me, let alone made the effort to say hello. This was the most tactile moment of exclusion throughout my dwellings within the framework of this research. I will use it to give a final impression of how narratives can collide or endanger one another. Furthermore, it exemplifies how communities are always bordered in some way.

One of the women started talking about the cooling tower: “What a fantastic space. You will be astonished, the feeling ...” I responded — out of place I must add — “it is quite visceral right.” She looked at me and cut me off from the conversation by turning. Little did they know that I visited the place a few weeks before as my father in law works there and organized a family barbecue. I endangered the uniqueness of the experience and story, a mere stranger having access to such a magnificent ruin.

Narratives collide and my position within the social taxonomy of this example was as exclusionary as it gets. My story was denied a place to exist in this location. An exclusion of narrative entails more than the fact that my personal history and reality were being set aside. My narrative and by extension person are labelled *does not belong here*. Access to narration or dialogue, being able to decode or encode the meanings and discourse that is distributed in specific places is one of the first and foremost points of access or exclusion to the common infrastructures. But this example shows that it is not enough to understand or be able to decode the spatialized discourses to gain access. Your narrative, divergent or not, your discourses and language, need to be accepted, and granted the status of existence, before you can access the processes by which both are shared — a process we can also understand as a process of worlding (Descola 2014; Abdoumalig Simone 2001). Hence, it feels strange that openness is part and parcel of the discourse attached to our cultural economy, whilst at the same time, it is the unwillingness to listen to the voice of others — whether or not the contents are the same — that excludes them from access to the common infrastructures.

Felix leaves me to check out the cooling tower with the two women and artist. I am left alone once again. After a long while they return, and Felix and I start to work on the applications. A woman passes by on her bike, she is older than the others, Felix recognizes her and we both say hello and smile. She smiles back and says: “You’re the first two whom I see smiling here, what’s with all the bloody seriousness”.

Whilst this remark was not particularly addressed to me, it was all that was needed to instigate a feeling of acceptance and access to the place.

Reframing Narratives — Some Concluding Remarks

It would be wrong to end this thesis on a negative note. Even though it was necessary to follow the path I did, leading up to forces of subjectification and exclusion, we now need to add some final critical but positive notes.

The cultural expressions and experiences that surface at Stal Cheval (as a place and organization) do have a contingent character. But this does not mean the structural is not at play. The place and organization remain entities that act and move through the cultural economy; that establish relationships and structure access to the resources that circulate through it. And in this equation, we, the people who use the infrastructured commons embody the relations of which we form part. I spoke of a system that produces a new form of *sameness*; a sameness that is discursively distributed (Rutherford 2016, 68). This sameness through organizations and places takes on a material and relational form. It becomes an entity that governs us and the ways we (infra)structure and share within our communities.

It is also this *sameness* that takes us back to Stavrides' (2016) account of institutions of commoning. We can now see that it does not prove useful to distinguish institutions of commoning along lines of openness to difference, no preexisting taxonomy, etcetera. For the structural or structuring forces will creep in anyhow. Moreover, those institutions are rare, virtually non-existent. And we should ask ourselves whether they are desirable. In the context I find myself this drive of sameness is present and structures the common resources. But it is also a drive that is not absolute, it is systematic but also systematically negligent. There is wiggle space. It becomes present when difference takes the center stage in social interaction; when we formulate the ways in which we want to represent ourselves; when we think about the bigger picture and the futures we wish to partake in. The structural forces of our political economy work through humans. These humans are the infrastructuring nodes or knots that engage in the process of commoning. And in the human, there is always room for improvisation, be it in narratives or interaction. The human performances and interactions that recreate the common infrastructures in a recursive manner are always negotiating the way we see, narrate and act upon the sameness we described.

This is also where we find a final answer for the research question we explored here. Stal Cheval engages in infrastructuring the commons and commoning infrastructures, through its actors, its circulators. But these processes are multidirectional. They take on a plethora of forms, sometimes intended, sometimes not. Most of the time we create, define and institutionalize practices of infrastructuring resources and the way we share them without knowing we are. Involuntary addressing someone in a certain way, may constitute an unconscious act of opening or closing the commons.

Whilst the infrastructured commons from which we, as an organization, draw our resources, is to a certain extent an independent entity. It is an entity that is shared between a network of actors who are active in the cultural economy. But this entity is not solid. It emerges in our individual lived experience. It takes on a personalized form. For those circulators, who have a better understanding of what resources are available within the common infrastructure, it is a vast entity. For those who stand on the sideline it might be very small. Because these structures are at the same time personal and collective, they are fluid. They constantly become what they are – through narrative, thought, or practice.

This once again clears the way for improvisation. We are worlding, creating our community and city when we envision and narrate them. Furthermore, it is in the simple and immediate conversations that we create room for diverging visions of the city and of community to coexist. This is also what happens in Stal Cheval. When asked we can represent our ideas eloquently, our projects as being multifaceted,

corresponding to a shared and to a certain extent institutionalized image of what the good urban life entails. But in practice we often do not speak of these things, we simply enjoy, and talk of our project as a way for people to meet and have fun. In this manner, the normativities that are present and felt, are not necessarily reproduced. In taking the openness for granted, in leaving it in a place where it has no identity, it has the potential to become a situational reality. In the same breath, it is in just enjoying without pondering one's own place in the social taxonomy that we do not feel the drive to be more than one thing. We can just be a consumer or a bartender and enjoy the simplicity of that experience.

In the end it is not in meticulous infra-designation (Amin 2014, 143) that the ways in which we share are envisioned. It is in practice. This practice of sharing proves to be messy, and in its messiness, it opens up unconceived and unforeseen ways of interacting with one another. These ways hold in them the potential to make the city in alternative ways.

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Appendix

This appendix entails first and foremost some interesting points of discussion and methodological considerations that did not fit the corpus of this thesis. We will go over the initial research questions as well as what I conceived of as a mini-interview. I will refrain from theoretical analysis and only provide a brief description. Before going into these points, we will first say a word about writing in English.

The choice to write in English stems from one of the first courses I took at the master's program. During Ethnographic Fieldwork we were advised to think of audience when writing. Given the fact that the anthropological audience is largely international, writing in English would be beneficial. I took this to heart and subsequently did not write a single paper in Dutch throughout my master's education. Whether this was smart or desirable is something I will not address. The simple truth is that it became easier to write in English. Because in this language I cultivated more adequate anthropological vocabulary and better academic writing skills.

Initial Research Questions

The research questions presented here are the ones with which the research started. They are copied literally from De Mey 2019 *Moving through Heterotopia. Informalization and Appropriation of 'Free' Spaces in an Urban Periphery*.

"The main research questions are presented here in a retrospective manner, starting from the structural / societal level down to the practices occurring in Stal Cheval.

Can we speak of an informalized relational economy in Vilvoorde? Does this socio-economic occurrence have certain characteristics? Is it equally accessible for all people? If so, how do the practices that constitute it enfold? What cultural imaginaries, meanings and practices are circulating within this locality?

How does the initiative of Stal Cheval and other instances of 'free spaces' feed the emergence of an informalized relational economy in Vilvoorde? What practices occur in these 'free spaces'? How are these practices connected? What is the meaning behind these practices?

These are the principal research questions, further sub-questions are:

- How does a relational economy behave in comparison to a capitalist economy?
 - If relationships and affects constitute economic value in a relational economy, is this value then in turn appropriated by actors in a capitalist system?
 - Are certain cultural practices introduced that originate from specific subcultures?
 - How does the theme of resistance come forth in practices such as Stal Cheval?
 - How does Stal Cheval function as a catalysator in the production of relationships?"
- (De Mey 2019, 6).

Evolution of Structured Interviews into Vox-Pops

Presented here is the first 'mini'-interview. A not so small interview that was going to be used to interview guests in Stal Cheval. Obviously, it did not hold out. For it was too long and focused on individuals in a place that people access in groups. It evolved into three small open questions, in which room to expand on each one of them was created. In the end, I conducted twelve of such interviews of which approximately half became larger conversations.

Stal Cheval: Verzet, Vervorming, Verknoping.

Mini-Interview

Op welke basis komt u naar Stal Cheval?

- Doet u mee aan de activiteiten die er georganiseerd worden?
- Aan welke activiteiten neemt u deel?
- Doet u mee aan activiteiten die elders georganiseerd worden?
- Wat is de waarde dat u aan deze activiteiten hecht?

Komt u naar Stal Cheval met een vriendengroep en/ of ontmoet u mensen hier?

- Had u reeds relaties met de mensen die u hier ontmoet?
 - o Is dit een belangrijke reden voor jou om naar Stal Cheval of andere ontmoetingsplekken te komen?

Welke andere plaatsen bezoekt u nog op regelmatige basis of bent u van plan te bezoeken op regelmatige basis?

- Wat is de reden van uw bezoek aan deze plaatsen

Wat is voor jou de waarde van Stal Cheval en andere plaatsen die je bezoekt?

- Waarom vind je het belangrijk dat deze plaatsen er zijn?

Algemene Gegevens:

Naam:

Geslacht: M / V / X

Leeftijd:

Woonplaats: