Cultural Difference and Development in the Mirror of Witchcraft

The Cultural Policy of Display at Steilneset Memorial

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ABSTRACT

This article is a close reading of Steilneset Memorial for the victims of the witch trials in Vardø, Norway. In the official discourse it is underscored that Steilneset is a reminder both of those who were sentenced to death for witchcraft and victims of present persecutions. The line of inquiry refers to this past/present assimilation: How are past witches represented? Why should we use this as a model for understanding current concerns over cultural difference and human rights? I read the memorial with reference to the cultural analytical obligation of understanding “others” on their own premises. To tackle the tension between the language of the memorial and relativist heuristics, I turn to a notion of cultural heritage that pinpoints affinities between symbolical forms across cultures. In this way I show that Steilneset presents a Manichean history of good versus evil, and thus repeats the cosmological distinctions behind witchcraft beliefs. The discourse on the memorial erases the cultural difference of the past. This makes it a weak model for understanding present concerns with human rights and cultural differences. Furthermore, I link the main message of the site to how different institutions and interests involved in the construction of the site have influenced it. Official texts presenting Steilneset use the language of traumatic memory. However, there is also an explicit commercial interest behind the memorial. Assuming that it would be inappropriate to convert the memory of victims of more recent atrocities into an economic asset, this indicates that the memory of the accused witches does not belong to the same zone of reverence as, for example, the victims of the Holocaust. To analyse the cultural policy aspects of these issues I turn to a distinction between “cultural policy in the proper sense” and “cultural policy as display”.

Keywords

steilneset memorial, witchcraft memorials, cultural memory, traumatic memory, uses of memory and history, cultural difference
INTRODUCTION

The following is a critical close reading of Steilneset memorial for the victims of the witch trials in Vardø, Norway. My aim is to examine the notions of history and cultural difference articulated at the site and in discourses on it.

The memorial was inaugurated by the Queen of Norway in 2011. In her inaugural speech, and other official discourses on this museum site, it is underscored that Steilneset is a reminder of those who were sentenced to death under witchcraft legislation in the seventeenth century and of victims of contemporary persecutions. Thus the site addresses its audience with a double memento. The line of inquiry refers to this past/present assimilation: How is the past presented? Who are the witches that are remembered at Steilneset? What past characters and events are presented as a model for the understanding of present issues of human rights and cultural differences?

I read the memorial and an accompanying set of official text, in particular texts relating to the inauguration of the memorial, while paying special attention to tensions between memories from “our” cultural history and the cultural analytical obligation of understanding “others” from the “native’s point of view” (Geertz 1983). I maintain that the discourse on the memorial erases the cultural difference of the past culture and inscribes the witch trials in a conventional master narrative about modernity as the suppression of intolerance and superstition. It is my contention that this makes it a weak model for understanding present concerns about human rights and cultural differences. Actually, the official discourse on Steilneset shows little concern for cultural difference and the historical subjectivities of the remembered victims. This is puzzling since outstanding work has been done in presenting, publishing and interpreting the original court records of the proceedings in Finnmark (Willumsen 2010). This observation notwithstanding, the memorial narrative resembles the kind of story making that Primo Levi, a Holocaust survivor, cautioned about. Purkiss quotes Levi in warning against difference-blind appropriations of the historical witch figure by construing a history with a “[m]anichean tendency which shuns half-tints and complexities” and reduces “the river of human occurrences to conflicts, and the conflicts to duels – we and they, the good guys and bad guys” (1996: 7). How should we approach past and present cultural difference – and the memorial itself – without entering into this kind of a duel? To tackle these issues I turn to a notion of cultural heritage that underscores affinities between symbolical forms – across times and cultures. Bearing this in mind, I argue that the presentation at Steilneset to some degree repeats the symbolic coding of the events it sets out to remind us about.

1. I am indebted to the Institute for Comparative Research on Human Culture, Oslo, for support for my research on Steilneset. Furthermore, I am indebted to my Master’s degree students in Cultural History in the course KULH 4002 (spring 2012 and 2013) for discussions of the case material presented here.
Furthermore, I link the main message of the site to its historical process of production; to how different agents, institutions and interests involved in the construction of the site have left their mark on the memorial and its main message. Official texts presenting the memorial inscribe Steilneset in the discourse of traumatic memory. However, there is also an explicit commercial interest behind the memorial: to establish an international “tourist icon” that is part of the development of the local community. Assuming that it would be deemed inappropriate to convert the memory of victims of more recent atrocities into an economic asset, this indicates that the memory of accused witches does not belong to the same zone of taboo and reverence as, for example, the victims of the Holocaust. But what about the more recent victims the site serves as a reminder of? In one text these range from victims of the Gulag to people accused of witchcraft in modern Africa, and the allies of Ahmadinejad, the former president of Iran, who was accused of witchcraft by political opponents (Varanger Museum 2011). Should these be “remembered” as similar examples at a “tourist icon” constructed to brand a particular place?

To analyse the cultural policy aspects of these issues, I turn to what McGuigan, re-employing a distinction taken from R. Williams, calls “cultural policy in the proper sense” and “cultural policy as display” (2004: 61–91). The last notion points out that the state is not only the “central organ of power”, but also the central agent behind cultural displays that exhibit and perform master narratives, values and cultural heritage with ritual “pomp” (ibid: 61–62). “Cultural politics proper”, on the other hand, refers to the administrative apparatus involved in selecting, supporting and canonizing art and cultural heritage. Applying this distinction, I analyse the official message of the memorial as a ritual display, and the process and policy behind it as cultural policy proper. Cultural policy as display also necessarily passes through cultural policy in “the proper sense”, as there will be decision making at various administrative levels concerning what to display, what to fund and which groups to include in canonized heritage and memory (Hall 2002) – or inversely, what to store away in what Assmann calls “the archive” and “crypt” of cultural memory, i.e. keep out of public sight (2005).²

First I examine how the memorial presents its relevancy as a cultural politics of display by articulating itself with a Norwegian master narrative of development (1). Then I present an approach that mediates between relativism and teleological or developmental history (2). Next, I turn to the processes of cultural policy behind the memorial and how widely divergent languages – from

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² Public patronage of the arts or UNESCO’s nomination for world heritage, are examples. In the Norwegian context, Vestheim has also observed that cultural policy “proper”, decisions made in the “cultural sector”, implicates “culture” in the last analytical instance in the anthropological sense of shared assumptions and values: “Kulturpolitikken uttrykker derfor to sider ved kulturomgrepet, både kultur som aspekt og kultur som sektor: Kulturpolitikk som teori og praktisk handling spegler av grunnleggende verdier, holdninger og livsmønstre (i antropolgisk forstand) i eitt samfunn, samtidig som kulturpolitikken som praksis definerer kultur som eit avgrensa sett av produkt og handlingar, administrativ samla i ein sektor” (Vestheim 1995: 40).
traumatic memory to tourism – are deployed to present the place as a “tourist icon” (3). Finally, I analyse the characterisation of the remembered witches and the representation of early modern culture at Steilneset (4).

1.0 THE AESTHETICS OF STEILNESET

One hundred and thirty-five witchcraft cases were tried before the courts in Finnmark between 1600 and 1692 and in ninety-one of them the death penalty was administered. On St. John’s Eve in 2011, a memorial was inaugurated by the Queen of Norway, at Steilneset, the place where many of the executions are assumed to have taken place. The choice of date links the inauguration to a popular feast associated with witchcraft and bonfires. As we shall see, this forms part of a strategy for branding Vardø as a “magical” tourist site.

The memorial pertains to Varanger Museum, a cultural historical museum documenting regional history. To this more conventional historical display was added an aesthetic register; the work of the Swiss architect Peter Zumthor and the French-American sculptor Louise Bourgeois. Zumthor designed a memorial hall covered by sailcloth. The form of the hall both resembles hjeller (the wood racks upon which cod is dried) and local boats. Zumthor’s work thus cites the forms and materials of vernacular architecture. International avant-garde art is clearly combined with cultural conventions to express local identity.

Inside the hall, we again turn to history. Here we find ninety-one memorial plaques with excerpts of the cases against the convicted witches. These texts, based on court records, were written by the historian Liv Helene Willumsen. Moreover, each victim is represented with a perpetually burning lamp and a window.

Bourgeois contributed to this with an installation placed inside a dark cube; a chair with a perpetual flame surrounded by seven mirrors that reflect the fire and the gaze of the spectator. Thus the spectators see themselves displayed in mirrors illuminated by the “purifying” element that once burnt the convicted to death.\(^4\) The seat of Bourgeois’s chair is empty. Perhaps the seat represents the place where the interrogated were placed (before being burnt), and thus symbolises the absence of the dead with the eternal presence of fire. One possible reading is that the reflection in the surrounding mirror represents “us”, current spectators, as potential perpetrators or passive witnesses to persecutions. This interpretative possibility is not dominant in the official discourse on the site.

1.1 THE MESSAGE OF STEILNESET

In her inaugural speech, the Queen identified the causes behind the persecution. She also underscored that past events should serve as a reminder of present persecutions. In contrast to the mirrors in the dark cube this safely situates intolerance and abuse in the past and at other places in the present:

Steilneset is a memorial honouring the ninety-one [persons] who were sentenced and executed in Finnmark in the seventeenth century, as victims of the witch hunts. […] They were victims of the intolerance and prejudice of society – and they were executed here, in Vardø, about where we stand today. […] Steilneset stands as a symbol of the intolerance of the time, but can also serve as a reminder of prejudice, abuse and persecutions occurring in our time (Kongehuset 23/06/2011, my translation\(^5\) and emphasis).\(^6\)

\(^4\) In addition to this reference to the historical events memorised, the everlasting flame appears to cite the iconography of war memorials, where flames burn perpetually in memory of self-sacrifice for the national community.
\(^5\) All the following translations are mine.
Here a set of boundaries between the living and the dead, past and present is demarcated by the use of linguistic shifters (“here”/“there”, “we”/“they”). Steilneset should remind us not only about the past, but also about present persecutions. Indeed, this manner of inscribing time on a particular place by pointing out that it happened “here” is a commonplace in heritage rhetoric (Eriksen 1999:93). Steilneset, however, combines cultural memory with cultural foreign policy: By reminding “us” of contemporary events, it tells “us” about an exterior world still struggling with similar events.

This double memento is the main message of Steilneset as a display of cultural policy. The Queen enters a discourse: The historian who furnished the historical documentation for the memorial had already made the assimilation of past and present events. With Steilneset, she claims, “we finally get a clarification of what happened here”. Once again the memorial should remind “us” of “other places in the world where abuse of women and children occurs even now” (Finnmarken 2011).

Actually, this manner of distributing negative characteristics to the past and the present of others can be traced back to a former inauguration speech. In 2007, Helga Pedersen, a leading member of the Norwegian Labour Party, also placed the trials in the context of current human-rights concerns. The occasion then was the inauguration of a conference on witchcraft in Vardø. In a manner that will be repeated, Pedersen underscored that “we can use the knowledge we have about the witch hunts of the seventeenth century to grasp what I will call the witch hunts in the world today” (ABC News 28/6/2007). Here as well, the focus is on exterior politics, and in particular traditional practices often associated with religion: Islamic dress codes for women in Gaza, and female circumcision.

These speeches and comments perform a ritual purification of the place spoken from, for this appears to be free from “intolerance”, “prejudice” and “persecutions”. Hence, a collective identity (“us” living “here”) constructed around contrasts with present and past otherness, what the present “we” is not, is established.

1.2 DEVELOPMENT AND THE TIMING OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

The places referred to in the text cited above – “here/before” and “there/now” – are loaded with historical and cultural value. We could say that they articulate what Bakhtin called a chronotopy; they invest places with historico-temporal values (Bakthin 1982; Clifford 1988). A loaded vocabulary – “intolerance”,

6. «Steilneset er et minnested til ære for de 91 som ble dømt og henrettet i Finnmark på 1600-tallet, som ofre for hekse-prosessene. […] De var ofre for samfunnets intoleranse og fordommer – og de ble henrettet her i Vardø, omtrent hvor vi står i dag, […]. Steilneset står som et symbol for datidens intoleranse, men kan også være med på å minne oss om fordommer, overgrep og forfølgelser som skjer i vår tid (my emphasis).

7. Shifters are words that mark relationships (“here”/“there”, “now”/“then”, “I”/“you”), but do not have a fixed reference outside the concrete situation of communication (“here”/“we” are always relative to “there”/“they”).
“prejudice”, “superstition” – characterises a period in “our” past. Next, this vocabulary is targeted upon “other places” in the present. Through this double memento an equivalent is established between “our past” and the present “there” – while “our” present appears to offer a culturally neutral vantage point from which judgments about other times and places can be made. Do women in Gaza and practitioners of female circumcision live in our past?

This manner of distributing cultural and political qualities in time and space resembles what critical anthropology has called the historization of difference. Larsen, for instance, observed that Scandinavian reflections about the honour-killing of Fadime Sahindal attributed Islamic and Kurdish practices to the past by comparing it with Norse and Medieval “equivalents”. Roughly, the formula was the following: “we” also practised honour killings and arranged marriages “before”. Thus it is implied that “they” live in our past, but eventually will become like “us” given time and a cultural pedagogy that enhances integration (2009: 283–284). Steilneset as cultural display appears to confirm this notion of development by reversing the formula, the past that we have been able to overcome is a model for understanding the present of other places.

Furthermore, this model could be related to what Tvedt has called “the Norwegian Regime of Goodness”. Norway has “branded” itself as a cultural-political agent on the world scene, he claims, by donating the gift of development to “the South” (2010: 488). The self-construal as a benevolent agent, acting “there”, offered the nation a new master narrative at a time when others had been discredited. A national consensus about “extremely complicated issues in other countries and the factors behind development” was established, furnishing a simplified script for dealing with factors opposing “development” (ibid: 487). Traditions are, for instance, construed as obstacles; “medieval or […] early modern phenomena that will pass away” as a result of the deployment of development schemes that aid history in reaching its natural goal (ibid: 497).

These notions of development and traditions as an obstacle to progress appear to be in play at Steilneset. In the context of the cultural politics displayed there it is also significant that this manner of seeing “the South” does not have a language through which the real otherness of others could be recognized, i.e. a form of historical subjectivity where “the other” is not simply waiting to become like us, or shows us stages of our past development (ibid: 497).

Much of the discourse around Steilneset also reveals a lack of interest in the historical subjectivity of the past, and key narratives have the plot form that Levi warned against. To present an alternative angle on the past/present relation I shall turn to a notion of cultural heritage as an instrument of cross-cultural translation.
2.0 CULTURAL HERITAGE – BETWEEN RELATIVISM AND HISTORICAL TELEOLOGY

In official texts about the memorial it is stated that women, children and Sami were victims of a miscarriage of justice, *justismord* (Ulekleiv 2011). Here the term does not apply to particular cases of miscarriage of justice (procedural errors leading to wrongful convictions), rather all the cases constitute *justismord*. This is because witchcraft is regarded as an impossible crime. On this premise there can be no punishment administered in such cases that would not be fundamentally wrong. The denunciation consequently concerns the whole legal category and the cosmology of which it is a part.

If we turn to the issue of historical subjectivity, however, we can actually assume that many people regarded themselves as capable of conjuring events through magical means. Gilje’s study of Anne Pedersdotter is highly relevant here. He turns to “the principle of subjectivity”, which demands that we ask whether Anne herself held that she was a witch. If so, and if she intended to cause harm, she was subjectively a witch (regardless of whether she “objectively” failed to deliver [2003: 253]). Gilje concludes that we, in this case, lack the evidence to settle the matter. Yet, we know that Anne accused others of witchcraft, and thus lived in the half-tint world where she, according to circumstances, was both accuser and victim. Remembering Anne and others like her as “pure victims” consequently implies forgetting that witchcraft was a cultural fact in their lives.

From the vantage point of a certain cultural history, Steilneset could be accused of disregarding the assumption that “the past is a foreign country” – a culture that should be carefully translated not “dismissed” because it contrasts with our scheme. Even more radical voices have recently called for an ontological turn, demanding that the point of departure must be to take other ontologies seriously, not disclaim them as flawed “fictions”. In cultural theory the issue of magic has been central to the question of cross-cultural translation and rationality. I shall briefly pass through this slippery terrain to establish an analytical perspective upon the issue of cultural difference at Steilneset.

The official discourse around Steilneset associates witchcraft with irrationality and superstition. In the influential and disputed article “Understanding Primitive

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8. Literally: “justice murder”.
9. Steilneset is not a memorial for victims of the death penalty as such – only people executed with reference to witchcraft laws. Significantly more people were executed for other crimes in the period, some of these would also be construed as absurd by contemporary standards, e.g. various forms of illicit sexual activity were punished with death (cf. Naess 1982).
10. Peter Burke, for instance, compares the task of the cultural historian to that of the translator, and through this, construes history as a kind of “translation”. A consequence of this approach is that the historian becomes one among others devoted to the task of studying “otherness”: “If the past is a foreign country, it follows that even the most monoglot of historians is a translator. Historians mediate between the past and the present and face the same dilemma as other translators, serving two masters and attempting to reconcile fidelity to the original with intelligibility to their readers” (Burke 2007: 7).
Society”, Winch maintains that magic for the modern age constitutes a “paradigm of irrationality” (1964). Influenced by Wittgenstein, he held that magic should be studied as a language game in its own right, with a context-dependent rationality and seen as part of a “coherent universe of discourse”. Winch further argued that truth was relative to particular language games. However, he also maintained that all languages must have a concept of truth to function as such. “Truth” is thus a formal requirement for the use of language, but there is no substantial truth, no truth-content, to be found outside particular language games (ibid).

In his a ground-breaking work on demonology, Clark built on and expanded Winch. He urged scholars to search for the historical language that constituted witchcraft as a phenomenon.\textsuperscript{12} The historian should capture “the concept of reality” behind such beliefs. Furthermore, this should “be traced to a different version of reality”, not be “condemned as unreal” with reference to current versions of what counts as real forces: “some set of social, political, or psychic conditions”, which “we” regard as causes of beliefs and events (2001: 5).

On the one hand, this approach opens for the historical subjectivity that is erased at Steilneset. On the other, this manner of speaking about truth is fraught with other difficulties: The consistency of the claim about the linguistic relativity of truth – itself a truth-claim pretending to speak the truth about all language games, is inconsistent. Moreover, this position erects insurmountable barriers between cultures that are construed as self-contained wholes modelled on languages. In the last instance, then, this approach distinguishes just as sharply between “here” and “there”/“past” and “present” as the official discourse on Steilneset. Consequently, there is also little space for cross-cultural value judgements, and “hybrid” cases, like that of Fadime, that cannot be securely placed, neither “here” nor there”, among “them” or “us”, are difficult to account for with reference to one “coherent universe of discourse”. In this context it is also important that we will not have any language to criticise the

\textsuperscript{11} Cf. Holbrad: “So what makes the ontological approach to alterity not only pretty different from the culturalist one, but also rather better, is that it gets us out of the absurd position of thinking that what makes ethnographic subjects most interesting is that they get stuff wrong. Rather, on this account, the fact that the people we study may say or do things that to us appear as wrong just indicates that we have reached the limits of our own conceptual repertoire. When even our best description of what others think is something as blatantly absurd as ‘twins are birds’ then we have grounds to suspect that there is something wrong with our ability to describe what others are saying, rather than with what they are actually saying, about which we a fortiori know nothing other than our own misunderstanding. The anthropological task, then, is not to account for why ethnographic data are as they are, but rather to understand what they are – instead of explanation or interpretation, what is called for is conceptualisation” (2010:184). Incidentally, here there will be no place for a distinction between subjective and objective truth, as in the example from Gilje above.

\textsuperscript{12} “Thus, if it could be shown that it did in fact make sense […] to accept the reality of witchcraft phenomena […] then initial doubt about the felicity of demonological arguments would simply disappear. There would be no cause to look for an explanation of them other than that they followed recognised linguistic conventions, that they were part of what Peter Winch has called ‘a coherent universe of discourse’” (Clark 1980: 100).
memorial discourse around Steilneset if this is considered as an autonomous language just expressing its own truth about memory and history.

To tackle the issue of cultural difference at Steilneset, its manner of assimilating the past and the present in a tale of development, we could turn to another analytical option in Wittgenstein. Tambiah identifies a middle road between teleological history and relativism in the philosophers' remarks on the cultural evolutionism in Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Here cultural heritage becomes the central analytical category. Confronted with ritual practices like magic we should “reflect upon our own […] cultural heritage, and the mythological and the ritual conceptions embodied in our own language, and the fusion in it of ‘written and spoken signs’ and ‘mental images’”. Then “implicit affinities in all ritual actions, whether enacted by the primitive or the modern” will emerge (Tambiah 1993: 63). This notion of heritage as an instrument of translation – by means of conceptions found not only in tradition, as in “main stream” hermeneutics, but calibrated in specific cultural forms, images and signs – will enable us to see the half-tints and the interstices of the distinct demarcations between “us” and “them” in Steilneset’s inaugural language. I shall turn to this when I search for the cultural heritage behind the display at Steilneset, and how this repeats the Manichean form of the early modern cultural policy concerning witchcraft.

Before doing this, I shall examine how the machinery of cultural policy proper left its mark on the memorial site, and through this perhaps contributed to the above-mentioned repetition. I shall examine salient factors in the process that led to the construction of Steilneset. My contention is that the cultural policy of display is constructed at the interfaces between different language games brought into play by agents and institutions with different agendas. Nevertheless, the official message turns out to be a united celebration of “our here and now” that erases past and present difference. On the one hand, the depiction of “us” in relation to past and present societies under the sway of superstition and intolerance is clear. On the other, the image of the remembered witch is very vague. Is this merger of distinctness and vagueness also a product of the process of cultural policy in the proper sense?

### 3.0 LANGUAGES OF CULTURAL POLICY PROPER

Towards the turn of the millennium Norwegian counties and municipalities were invited by The Ministry of Culture and Church Affairs to nominate millennium sites. These should serve as places for reflection on past heritage and future possibilities – and as a bulwark against the commercialization of public spaces. Cultural institutions, the minister asserted, are the basis of society, and art and culture make humans into empathic and reflective beings (Regjeringen 18/9/99). Thus, the cultural sector should produce something similar to a sacred place.

Vardø was chosen as a millennium site. As a response to the initiative from the ministry, a display of artefacts relating to the Pomor trade was created, and a
trail was cleared through historical sites. The trail ended at Steilneset, which had some of the sacred qualities the minister asked for, but which lacked a monument (Balsvik 2012: 43).

Vardø local authority did not choose to construct a witchcraft memorial until 2000, when a committee was appointed to supervise the work (Ulekleiv 2011: 15). The committee had representatives from various administrative branches: the local authority, Finnmark County Council, Varanger Museum and the Norwegian Public Roads Administration, who through the sub-project National Tourist Routes in Norway, has the goal of promoting tourism (ibid: 7 and 15). Thus, local and national interests and agencies with different agendas joined forces.

In the application from the committee and the county for funding through the budget of the Ministry of Culture and Church Affairs, the rhetoric of both retribution and local development are mobilised. It is underscored that the witch trials were administered from the centre, and the alleged responsibility of the early modern Danish-Norwegian state for the processes is turned into an argument for funding from the national budget: “The government and the church were responsible for the ideology” behind the processes (Finnmark county council 2008). This inscribes the memorial in a discourse of cultural recognition and retribution. However, it remains unclear on behalf of whom this demand is made (the witches, the county?). Indeed, no living minority culture is being recognised by the majority as a result of the construction of the memorial.

The memorial forms a part of the National Tourist Routes in Norway. This is a governmental project that applies art “to inspire auto tourists to use Norway as a holiday destination” (Finnmark county council 2008). Economic development is also part of the reasoning for the project: Vardø could become a “tourist icon […] at the outskirts of the world,” if a monument that “has the potential to be in the upper echelon of international art and culture” is constructed. Evidence of this is the fact that the magazine Wallpaper has promised to present the site (ibid). Furthermore, international art will serve as a memorial for “a little honorable part of our history, the witch hunts in the seventeenth century”. “International” is an important source of value; both for the art (“international” is simply synonymous with high aesthetic value) and for the visibility as a tourist attraction.

13. The theme of witchcraft was also explored in a series of scholarly conferences arranged in 2004, 2006, and 2007. One of these was entitled “The Midnight Sun Witchcraft Conference”, thus making an association between the theme of witchcraft and the natural environment in Vardø (Balsvik 2012: 43).

14. «Myndighetene og kirken var ansvarlige for den ideologi, rettsoppfølging og fortolkningen av troen som lå til grunn for det som skjedde, og det gjør at komiteen primært henvender seg til regjeringen ved Kultur- og kirkedepartementet for finansiering av monumentets». Finnmark Fylkesting 2008: Soknad om fullfinansiering av minnesmerke over de trolldømde i Finnmark, Finnmark fylkesting. Arkivsak 06/02210.

In the application, then, the languages of tourism, regional development, cultural identity, national guilt and traumatic memory are all interwoven. Røysland has suggested that instrumental uses of art, even if this is contested by those who want to keep it within the limits of a gift economy, implicitly assume art’s intrinsic value (2004: 108). Hence, if such policies sin against the requirement that the cultural sphere should remain a disinterested zone – as in the classical discourses on the aesthetic in Kant – it also demonstrates that the aesthetic is an “asset” that can be deployed commercially. In the case of Steilneset, “international” art in remembrance of convicted witches serves several interests:

- **Commemorative justice**: A wish to remember witches harnesses the artistic expression to fit a place and a cultural theme (the citation of vernacular architecture, fire).

- **Economic**: Memorial art is deployed in a branding strategy that aims to make visible local nature and culture in a “tourist icon”.

- **Community**: The development of a sustainable local community (tourism).

Different languages and interests here become entangled. The economic language is contrary to the notion of a quasi-sacred space – disinterested and free from commerce as in the original motivation for the millennium sites.

The memorial site that serves as a dual reminder of past and present persecutions is also an aesthetic “tourist icon”. The multi-functionality of the site appears to be caused by different interests behind the memorial and the rhetorical work to assure funding from the government and the Public Roads Administration.

This multiplicity of languages and interests was quickly criticised, not because the project infringed upon the aesthetic, but because it sought to capitalise upon death. In 2006, Ole Lindhardsen, curator at Varanger Museum, argued that the female victims were being exploited commercially. He compared this


17. As is well known, seminal work in cultural sociology (not least Bourdieu) has aimed to demonstrate that the alleged disinterest of aesthetic judgment served functions of social distinction. Recently the reduction of culture and meaning to social function has, in a manner related to Clark’s contribution to witchcraft studies, been contested (e.g. Larsen 2013).
to commercializing Second World War executions and concluded that “most people would find [that] morally reprehensible” (Forskning.no 15/9/06). No attempt is made to hide *homo economicus* in the discourse on the memorial. In accordance with Lindhardsen, one suspects that it would be inconceivable to transform memorials for the victims of the Holocaust or other recent atrocities so smoothly into an economic asset. Nevertheless, it was the traumatic memory of the executed witches that furnished the aesthetic ‘tourist icon’ with its cultural theme. This manner of conceiving the theme also fits well with a story about witches as “pure” victims – purged of cultural historical subjectivity.

### 3.1 TRAUMA AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Who are the victims that are commemorated at Steilneset? To determine this, and how the remembered past as a tourist icon is used as a model for understanding the present, we have to search for the characterisation of the victims in the official discourse on the site. One source to examine is the publication *Steilneset Memorial – To the Victims of the Finnmark Witchcraft Trials*, a luxurious catalogue published for the inauguration. This book “for the victims” is another part of the official discourse produced to interpret the memorial (Ulekleiv 2011).

We observed that Steilneset formed a part of a cultural historical exhibition complex. The catalogue, however, is not a conventional textual presentation of a cultural historical exhibition. It contains artistic photography of Steilneset along with essays by curators, critics and one historian of religion. Different disciplines are called upon to present Steilneset in the format of the art-exhibition catalogue.

The text written by the artist and curator Anne Karin Jortveit, presenting Bourgeois’ work, is entitled “a place for never forgetting” (Jortveit 2011: 45). The curator of Steilneset, Svein Rønning, also turns to the idiom of memory “[t]he starting point for the artwork at Steilneset was the wish to remember what happened in Finnmark in the seventeenth century” (Rønning 2011: 21). On the one hand, it appears that art is ancillary to the memory of the dead even though more textual space is devoted to the art. On the other, notions of memory are operative in almost all the texts.

This “wish to remember” must be linked to what Nora has called an “urgent duty to remember” (2011: 438). Even if this duty is nominally connected to “memory”, it is principally a moral political obligation; the “urgency” has to do with unjust representations, or forgetting, of minorities and victims in pub-

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18. «De fleste har en etisk ryggmargsrefleks knyttet til det morbide ved et slikt prosjekt, men når det gjelder kommersialiseringen av kvinneforfølgelse, virker det som den etiske vurderingsevnen er koblet fra, mener Lindhardsen» The occasion was the witchcraft conference held in Vardo in 2006. http://www.forskning.no/Artikler/2006/september/1157977761.46. The debate was also reported in the journal of the museum sector, Museumsnytt (Hovland 2006: 17)

19. The book was financed by the Public Roads Administration.
lic culture. In “the age of commemoration”, Nora maintains, the duty of memory is basically “to call for justice”, and is thus firmly inscribed in what Taylor calls a politics of recognition that seeks to heal wounds caused by unfair representations (ibid; Taylor 1994). This memorial duty and its concomitant idiom have increasingly gained power in the twentieth century. As a consequence, a wide range of collectives have become the new subjects of public memory (oppressed groups, victims, minority cultures).

The language of memory saturates all the disciplinary language games in the catalogue. Mari Lending’s contribution, presenting Zumthor’s architecture, is a particularly intriguing example:

The witch burnings in northern Norway were a dark chapter in history which few but experts and locals know much about. The memorial […] will bring this trauma back to the surface, reminding us of something that has been largely forgotten or repressed (2011: 42).

Surely this is a testimony to the power memory holds over imagination when it is taken for granted that a collective trauma can survive for centuries. It is further implied that artistic representation will bring the trauma from the “dark chapter of history” into aesthetic daylight, and thus initiate a healing process. This construal of collective trauma as a passage from darkness to light, modelled upon psychoanalysis, disregards the difference between individual and collective memory. As Kansteiner observes:

[...] even in cases of so-called delayed collective memory ([…] Holocaust or Vietnam), the delayed onset of public debates about the meaning of negative pasts has more to do with political interest and opportunities than the persistence of trauma (2011:301).

In the case of Steilneset, the delayed interest in the witches’ destiny has more to do with the branding of a tourist destination than with the political interests of a particular group. There are simply no social groups that can claim “ownership” of this particular traumatic memory. It is most likely that the absence of a particular collective of victims facilitates the transformation of past suffering into present investments in Steilneset as a “tourist icon”. Perhaps the historical distance and the lack of collective ownership of the traumatic memory also enable the transition to contemporary human-rights issues.

3.2 THE CHARACTER OF THE WITCH

There are few clear characterisations of the victims in the catalogue. On one page it states that “they were different […] because they were regarded as a threat to law and order” (2011: 52). Thus, it is our duty to remember victims
who were “different”. The standard against which they differed, the past “law and order”, however, is not accounted for. Indeed, this is an extremely general characterisation that applies to a broad range of “deviants”. Actually, it could equally well serve as a description of the rules of modern art, which, paradoxically, must obey the rule of breaking aesthetic and socio-cultural norms to be significant. This vagueness, and the aesthetic analogy, makes one suspect that the standard for measuring the difference of the witches is entirely present minded. Another catalogue text, identifying the executed victims, reinforces this suspicion:

[1.] Most of them were women; eighteen percent were men. [2.] The authorities believed that storms, shipwrecks and disease could be attributed to contact with the devil. [3.] Today we find such attitudes hard to comprehend. Yet similar phenomena still occur. Around the world, people are considered “dangerous” for thinking differently; they are hunted down, ostracized, isolated, put on trial and even put to death, just because totalitarian regimes or religious fanatics refuse to accept deviations from their narrow definitions of “acceptable” behaviour (ibid: 21, my emphasis and numbers).

First [1] historical statistics are quoted. Next [2] the belief in compacts with the devil is attributed to the elite, suggesting that only the elite held such beliefs (as we shall see below, social distinctions between elite and common people enable the telling of a Manichean tale). Then [3] the text turns to the present. Actually, the vague traits claimed to be “similar” (“similar things still occur”) furnish the positive traits characterising the past victims whom we are asked to remember. They were “considered dangerous for thinking differently”. Here it appears that present concerns over the human rights of dissidents are what furnish the model for understanding past persecutions – rather than the other way around. But if “our” present criteria are being used to portray the victims, these memorial discourses symbolically do what the witch-hunters did literally, erase difference, not now in the name of religious authority, but under the banner of tolerance and difference itself.

Nevertheless, Steilneset is presented as a model for the understanding of current issues of rights and cultural difference. I shall now delve in more detail into the issue of how the memorial tackles the issues of historical subjectivity (Tvedt) and the “concept of reality” of the past (Clark). To examine this, we will have to turn to the cultural historical language games articulated about Steilneset.

**4.0 THE CULTURE OF THE WITCH**

Different sets of connotations are already associated with the witch in popular culture. Some of them have been used to brand Vardo as a “magical place” (e.g. girls dressed as witches meet the Queen at the dock for the inauguration on, of
course, St. John’s Eve). Moreover, a specific cultural heritage can be found in the ancient association of witchcraft and the North often attributed to Olaus Magnus.\textsuperscript{21} The Northern periphery earned a central place in European symbolic geography, as is testified by how Cervantes and Shakespeare, and a demonologist like Bodin, located magical scenes there. The linkage between the North and magic is, however, older.\textsuperscript{22} “Magic, witchcraft, and sorcery as a means of identifying or characterising […] that which was understood to be foreign, distant, or “other” appears to be a common theme in medieval Norse texts” (Mitchell 2011: 106). However, this is mainly a negative heritage; an act of othering from outside the region. The cultural stereotype has been seen as an explanation of the high number of witch trials in Finnmark, and the fact that sixteen Sami men were put on trial between 1600 and 1692 (Willumsen 2010).\textsuperscript{23} Although this old association contributes to the fascination with witches, it plays but a peripheral role in the discourse on the memorial in the catalogue. As observed, the cultural context of the trials appears to be toned down in much of the official discourse. One reason for this could be that the dubious history of constructing an authentic cultural heritage out of witchcraft, involving among other things Nazi investments in the figure of the witch, was pointed out early in the process.

Lindhardsen’s attack on the commercialization of death is also an example of a purging of the cultural context around the victims. The attack was combined with a denunciation of confusions about “who the witches really were”. The culprits were women who “identified themselves with the witches, whom they regarded as strong and independent women belonging to a religion almost feminist” in nature (Varanger Museum, n.d.).\textsuperscript{24} The argument is thus against feminists who construe the witch as a repository of female wisdom. This was a heritage from romantic historians who saw witches as subversive figures opposing the patriarchal law of the church, members of a feminine fertility cult and custodians of an ancient culture.\textsuperscript{25} Furthermore, the notion of a cultural heritage of witchcraft inspired neo-paganism and feminists (Purkiss 1996).

\textsuperscript{21} In \textit{Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus} (1555)
\textsuperscript{22} It is present in Saxo, as well as in the mid-twelfth century \textit{Historia Norwegie} and the \textit{Vetus Chronica Sialandie} (Mitchell 2011: 106–107).
\textsuperscript{23} «Ideen om det overtroiske nord kan ha påvirket trolldomsforfølgelsene i Finnmark. Bøker av Olaus Magnus, Peder Claussøn Friis og Johan Schefferus, publisert i 1555, 1632 og 1673 respektive, portretter alle samiske menn som eksotiske og hedenske for et samtidig lesende europeisk publikum. Forfatterne vektlegger samenes overtro og deres evne til å utføre trolldom. Olaus Magnus’ historiebok om de nordiske folkene legger vekt på samenes utøvelse av vindmagi og sjamanisme, som inkluderer bruk av runebomme og det å gå inn i en annen verden gjennom transe. I tillegg hevder han at djevelen holder til i nord, og på denne måten lanserer han nord som et mystisk område. […] Det er ingen tvil om at blikket fra utsiden så på samiske menn – ikke samiske kvinner – som hovedutøvere av trolldom. Dette kan delvis forklare at så mange samiske menn og relativt få samiske kvinner ble retningsfulgt under prosessene i Finnmark» (Willumsen 2010: 15).
\textsuperscript{24} «Lindhardsen mener forvirringen om hvem heksene egentlig var i stor grad stammer fra 1970-tallets feminismebevegelse. Mange feminister identifiserte seg med heksene, som de oppfattet som sterke og selvstendige kvinner som tilhørte en nærmest feministisk religion. Men hekser fantes bare i hødet på heksejegerne». 
The SS’s concerns with Ahnenerbe were also based on a Manichean tale of oppressors and victims. The Hexen Sonderauftrag was organised by the SS from 1935 to 1944. Its core assumption: Aryan women were the bio-cultural site of a German heritage that had been lost as a result of persecutions led by priests promoting a Semitic religion (Bauer 2000).

Lindhardsen is certainly correct in his criticism of a construal of witches that provides them with a clear cut cultural identity (as Aryans or pagans), associates them with a specific corpus of knowledge (female cunning, Aryan culture) and inscribes them as heroes in a civilizational duel between good and evil groups and forces, and sources of identity of a cultural self (Aryans versus Semites, Pagans versus Christians, patriarchy versus matriarchy). If we remember the notions of the North as the site of magic, we observe that this plot is just a reversal of the old formula using “witchcraft as a means of identifying or characterising that which was understood to be foreign, distant, or ‘other’” (Mitchell above). But is the alternative to an essentialist construal the total absence of culture and a historical subjectivity that differs from “our”?

To oppose essentialism the curator argues that “witches only existed in the minds of witch-hunters” (Varanger Museum, n.d.). Instead of an ancient, authentic culture, there is no culture at all, just ideology. This view is officially sanctioned by Varanger Museum. In a text written for the inauguration of the memorial on the museum’s website, social and psychological factors explain everything. Thus the curator, in Clark’s wording, turns to “some set of social, political, or psychic conditions”, which “we” regard as causes of beliefs and events (2001: 5, cf. Clark quoted above).

The seventeenth century was the century of war and superstition. One could claim that someone had to be blamed for the tragedies that the wars caused […]. For this purpose one had the men of the church […]. These theologists had created a tool called demonology, a teaching about how the devil and his followers functioned amongst people and how this could be fought. The administrative powers were free to use this teaching as they pleased (ibid, my emphasis).

The trials are a conspiracy, and “superstitious” beliefs are mere ideological “tools” used by the establishment to draw attention away from the misfortunes caused by their political ambitions. If the “superstitions” of the period at first sight appear to be intellectually irrational, they are sociologically reasonable, since the scapegoating they enable maintains order. Demonology is here perfectly understandable with reference to our concept of reality (as an elite ploy used to dupe laypeople).

25. Seminal authors are the brothers Grimm, J. Michelet and the later M. Murray, who also furnished the Wicca moment with the notion of an authentic, feminine cult (Gilje 2003:15, cf. Ginzburg 1989 and 2004 for a revised notion of a witch cult with roots in folklore).
This sociological explanation is followed by an excerpt from the deposition of twelve-year-old Maren Olsdatter (from 1662). Maren’s story of an encounter with the devil in hell is also explained as deception, now on a psychological level:

The problem with such a testimony is that the conditions it describes are non-existent. When it is made by a child, we must assume it has been instructed to say these things (ibid).

Maren’s tale cannot be construed as an account of experiences that uses available cultural symbols and idioms to interpret her life. Narrative agency is taken from the girl and attributed to a foreigner and a member of the elite, the exiled Anne Rhodius. Anne had been banished from Christiania, and it is assumed that she had access to the accused. Her reasons are explained in psychological language: “Her motive was probably to show the authorities how helpful she was with these cases”. If demonology was a “tool” to create order in the body politic, Anne’s “manipulations” were instrumental in a personal project: “[a]s a reward she hoped to be sent back home” (ibid).

There is no need for understanding different “concepts of reality” in these two cases. Once again, a Manichean plot, the adult foreigner, this time a woman, manipulates the local child – just as Machiavellian elites used witchcraft beliefs instrumentally to produce a cultural policy of display centred upon the witch as the scapegoat in a ritual of purification.

4.1 THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE PERSECUTOR

On the webpage of Varanger Museum, witch-hunting is associated with “superstition”. Actually, early modern theologians would have agreed. Tambiah urged us to “reflect upon our cultural heritage”, and “the mythological and the ritual conceptions embodied in our language” to “see implicit affinities in all ritual actions” (cf. above). The conceptual history of “superstition” sets us on the track of affinities between the present memorial site and the early modern cultural policy of display enacted ritually at Steilneset.

In present-day speech “superstition” refers to beliefs not warranted by science (Martin 2004: 10). In the theological language games that influenced witchcraft legislation, however, “superstition” was primarily defined in relation to a religious yardstick – not an autonomous nature where supernatural beings have no place (Daston 1998; Latour 1993). Both notions of superstition, however, refer to erroneous reasoning about nature and causality, and designate the other of the (theological or scientific) logos (Ødemark 12/5/2013).

The Danish theologian Niels Hemmingsen was a seminal thinker on issues such as magic. For him magic was a sub-class of superstition. One reason for this was that practitioners were in error about the cause behind efficient magic:
Magic implied a pact with the devil, irrespective of whether the intention of the practitioner was good or evil. In the last instance, the devil was the efficient cause behind all “superstitious” rituals that worked. The use of magic therefore opened up space for diabolical forces in a godly society. This made it imperative to persecute practitioners of white magic, such as cunning women (Gilje 2001). In Hemmingsen’s case, then, there were also no half-tints; all magical practices belonged to the black end of the spectrum because they inevitably involved dealings with the dark lord.

The reasoning sketched above was a key element in the theological and elite construal of witchcraft. Research has also pointed out that the popular will to rid local communities of witches was a necessary cause behind the processes. Furthermore, in witchcraft cases, the chances of acquittal were better in the higher courts (Levack 2006). Bearing this in mind, we could say that the truth produced in the language games of current cultural historical research appears to contest the official Manichean story of Steilneset where the witch character is turned into a “pure victim” in a story about the fall of superstition and the rise of tolerance. It is simply difficult to harness the historical material and current research into a “pure” story of perpetrators and victims – and belief in the power of magic was a cultural contact zone between “folk” and “elite”. Furthermore, if we look at “the mythological and ritual conceptions embodied” in the symbolic forms of the site, a continuity of form in the manner of producing cosmological messages about good and the evil is revealed.

The memorial hall is an example of how the repressed returns as heritage. Each defendant is represented with a perpetually burning lamp and a window. Below each light there is a memorial plaque with a summary of the case. These summaries are written in white against a black background. This inversion of the conventional colour code of texts also conforms to the dominant visual symbolism of Steilneset – the contrast of light and darkness.
Most likely this is intended as a reversal of the cosmological colour code that informed the early modern cultural politics of display at Steilneset, when people taken to be allied with Satan were executed publicly. Clark has argued that the early modern witch was constructed as an inversion of the order of godly society – through representations of misrule (e.g. the Sabbath as a symmetrical inversion of the qualities of godly society). The symbolic form of demonology was opposition (black/white, good/bad), and the image of the witch was constituted in contrast to the good (1980). Thus good society celebrated itself by creating a figure and a social order that represented an inversion of everything it cherished, and which it associated with unlawful misrule.

As a result of the symbolic inversion at the modern site, the executed and the judges change colour and place in the cosmological narration about the duel between good and evil. However, this gesture still uses the same colour palette, the same cosmological contrast between black and white “forces”, to convey its message. By making this kind of inversion Steilneset could also be seen as a repetition of the polarizing form of a narrative about a duel between black and white forces. Considering symbolical form, then, there is here a cultural heritage that still informs the memorial, and how the good society, our identity, is symbolised by the representation of its contrary – intolerance, prejudice, superstition, and the misrule they produce.

5.0 MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL – CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have presented a critical reading of Steilneset and texts presenting it, and demonstrated a lack of interest in the cultural difference and historical subjectivity of the past in the official and inaugural discourse.

We could regard the cultural policy of display as an expression of an underlying ideology, such as the regime of goodness. However, the manner of relating our past to the present of others, through memorial and economic language games, is also produced as trade-offs between the various actors involved in the construction of the site. Steilneset had to meet a range of contradictory interests; it had to represent traumatic memories and cater to tourism goals. Thus the site ended up with a paradoxical and, in my view, morally problematic instrumentality: Using the suffering of others and “our” empathy and inclination for the “good” as a “tourist icon”. Consequently, Steilneset demon-

26. “Misrule involved the exchanging of roles or qualities which were themselves opposites or could be reduced to opposites; in the first instance, therefore, its impact was relative to an understanding of what it was for (say) wisdom to be opposite to folly, male to female, or authority to subjection. […] To a great extent this reflected the dominance of an inherited metaphysic. But it was also associated with two features peculiar to that period: a linguistic preference for standardised forms of argument and expression based on antithesis, and a preoccupation with the extreme poles of the religious and moral universe. Thus it becomes possible to attribute the era of witchcraft beliefs with an especial sensitivity to the idea of opposition and a consequently heightened appreciation of what was involved when the orthodox world was reversed or inverted” (Clark: 1980: 104–105).
strates that the interpretation of meaning needs to take a close look on the process of cultural policy through which the messages about “us” and “them” are produced. A corollary is that if we should want to produce more nuanced images of past and present life in the half-tint world – make us better equipped to live with difference – we should also criticise a regime of cultural policy that automatically assumes that relevancy and multi-institutional cooperation constitute the good.

The lack of interest in the cultural difference makes Steilneset a weak model for understanding present issues of human rights and cultural differences. The message of the display is more concerned with the confirmation of the identity of the self, as “modern” and “enlightened”, than with otherness and past and present suffering. Perhaps this is an inevitable function of the memorial language game and its ritual application. After all, the “duty to remember” has to do with identity. And constructions of cultural-historical identity must, to some extent, deploy the language of contrasts and linguistic shifters (“us”/“them”, “now”/“then”). However, it is not inevitable that the presentation of these contrasts will take an exclusive and Manichean form without affinities and zones of contact between “us” and “them”, nor that it will erase the culture, reasoning and world views behind what “we” perceive as evil persecutions. Indeed, there are and were persecutions and violations of human rights in our past and present world/s, but if we are to understand these we need to be attuned to the languages through which people have understood the history they have suffered.

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