

# Chapter 11

## The Catwalk and the Mousetrap: Reading Diederik Stapel's *Derailment* as a Misconduct Novel

### 11.1 Introduction: Stapelgate

Diederik Stapel (1966) is a Dutch social psychologist who obtained his Ph.D. *cum laude* at the *University of Amsterdam* (in 1997), became professor of social psychology at the *University of Groningen* (in 2000) and subsequently at *Tilburg* (in 2006). Here, he was appointed as Director of the *Tilburg Institute for Behavioural Economics Research* (TIBER) and as Dean of the *Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences*. In 2011, however, he formally and publicly admitted to having fabricated and manipulated data for at least 55 publications, from 2003 onwards. Because of the prominence of the perpetrator and the astounding scale of the fraud, Stapelgate quickly became a widely publicised and discussed misconduct case, both in the Netherlands and abroad, – and something of an epistemic trauma: for academic research in general and for social psychology in particular. Indeed, the name Stapel became synonymous with scientific fraud as such. After his formal dismissal and public condemnation (by a triad of committees established by three universities to investigate the case in depth), Stapel became marginalised and fell into a deep depression. Yet, in 2012 he resurfaced with an autobiographical account in Dutch entitled *Ontsporing* (*Derailment*), the first in a series of literary books written in the wake of his exposure, containing reflections on his experiences from a first-person perspective (Stapel 2012).

In this Chapter, the focus will be on *Derailment*, a sincere and highly personal autobiographical account which, as will be explained in more detail below, and was explicitly acknowledged by Stapel himself, actually reads like a novel. As Stapel literally phrases it, *Derailment* “is a novel” (Stapel and Dautzenberg 2014, p. 130, p. 132, p. 134) and his book will indeed be treated as such. In other words, rather than on the Stapel case itself (as many commentators have already done), I will focus on *Derailment* as a research misconduct novel, the final one in the series, albeit a novel based on real events. And rather than developing an ethical assessment of the case, or a historical inquiry into the actual truthfulness of Stapel's

reconstruction, my analysis will use *Derailment* as a literary window into the dialectical dynamics of social science as an “impossible profession”, focussing on the manner in which the protagonist addressed integrity challenges emerging against the epistemological and political backdrop of contemporary academic existence. Thus, in my analysis, the issue of truth does not refer to the extent to which the autobiographical account actually corresponds with the facts (although overall this seems to be the case), but rather whether the existential dilemmas involved in experimental practice and university discourse are articulated in a revealing and convincing manner. In other words, my question is neither whether *Derailment* is ‘fictional’ or ‘factual’, nor whether Diederik Stapel has been sufficiently penalised or something like that (a discussion which is still on-going), but rather what can be learned and gained from this ego-document (both fascinating and disconcerting) when it comes to understanding and preventing scientific misconduct.

Multiple types of documents will be consulted in this chapter. First of all, *Derailment* itself of course,<sup>1</sup> assessed as a research misconduct novel. But I will also include other materials in the analysis, constituting the novel’s discursive environment as it were, namely (in chronological order): (a) a selection of papers published by Stapel as a prominent social psychologist (notably the paper published in *Science* in 2011, shortly before his exposure, discussed in *Derailment* and wholly based on fictitious data); (b) formal documents published by three committees of inquiry (a normative trinity), chaired by a triumvirate of prominent academics (Pim Levelt, Pieter Drenth, Ed Noort): I will especially discuss their final joint report entitled *Flawed Science*), (c) comments on the Stapel case by academic peers and (d) Stapel’s subsequent literary retrospectives.

As a final preliminary remark, it should be pointed out that *Derailment* not only tells the story of a fraudulent practice and its exposure, but also of a personal metamorphosis and transformation. As a social psychologist, Stapel consistently used *Diederik A. Stapel* as his author name. In his post-exposure oeuvre, however, the “A.” is consciously dropped. Starting with *Derailment*, Stapel now uses *Diederik Stapel* as his author name.<sup>2</sup> The elimination of a signifier (A.) actually symbolises a basic shift in terms of modes of discourse (as will be discussed in more detail below). Therefore, I likewise will use *Diederik A. Stapel* to refer to the academic author (i.e. to the pre-traumatic part of his oeuvre) and *Diederik Stapel* to refer to the literary author (to the post-traumatic part of his oeuvre).

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<sup>1</sup> *Derailment* is the literal translation of the title. A pdf-translation of Stapel’s account by Nicholas Brown, available on the internet, bears the title *Faking Science: A True Story of Academic Fraud*. [<http://nick.brown.free.fr/stapel/FakingScience-20161115.pdf>] My analysis is based on the Dutch original.

<sup>2</sup> “I now try living without the A.” (Stapel and Dautzenberg 2014, p. 11).

## 11.2 *Derailment*: Summary and First Analysis

*Derailment* starts with a preamble, a public confession of the author's fraudulent activities: "I derailed... I crashed... causing a spectacular pileup...", but he also emphasises that the writing of this book was actually meant as self-therapy, as an effort to come to terms (literally) with the traumatic events reported. Until his exposure, Stapel claims to have led a somewhat hasty, but nonetheless fairly normal and happy life, and his question basically is: how could it (how could I) come to this? How could something like this happen? To answer this question, and in accordance with the psychoanalytic rule, *anything* (however, trivial, personal, embarrassing, etc.) may prove relevant (Freud 1917/1940, p. 297), which may explain the radical frankness of Stapel's retrospect.

The first chapter of the book takes us straight to a decisive moment in the story. Stapel has just been informed by a close colleague and friend (the chair of the social psychology department) that three younger colleagues accuse him (the powerful professor) of faking his data. At a conference in London, they had taken their Department chair aside. They had been following Stapel for months and had developed well-founded suspicions regarding his fraudulent ways. Stapel responds with disavowal and denies the accusations flat out. What could they have found out? The fraud simply seems too big, too weird to be credible. No one will believe them. Still, the Department Chair decides to inform the Rector.

In despair, and realising that his version of the story from now on has to be as precise and convincing as possible, he jumps into his car and visits some of the places where the fabricated data allegedly had been collected. Eventually, he ends up at Utrecht central station where he claimed to have gathered data for one of his most impressive papers, published in the top journal *Science* in April 2011 (just a few months before the exposure), a highlight in his career (Stapel and Lindenberg 2011). In this paper (a prototypical Stapel-paper, an exemplification of his social psychological style) it is claimed that in a disordered, littered environment, research subjects are significantly more prone to adhere to stereotypical (i.e. racial) prejudices than in clean and orderly places. A unique opportunity for conducting the field experiment presented itself when the cleaners at Utrecht train station (where thousands of travellers pass through on a daily basis) went on strike, so that the area quickly changed into a dirty and disordered environment. Research subjects were allegedly invited to fill in a questionnaire concerning prejudice and stereotypes, and to do so on one of the six chairs lined up by the research team.<sup>3</sup> Respondents ("Caucasians") could choose any chair, except that the first chair in the row was already taken by either a black or a white ("Caucasian") team member. And indeed, according to Stapel, the data convincingly and consistently showed that messy environments resulted in more prejudice (operationalised as the increase of the distance between the chair chosen by the respondents and the chair occupied by the black

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<sup>3</sup>The *Science* paper mentions "six" chairs (Stapel and Lindenberg 2011, p. 251), in *Derailment* the number is reduced to "five" (Stapel 2012, p. 29).

team member). Stereotyping, Stapel and his co-author concluded, is a “mental cleaning device” that helps people to cope with physical chaos (p. 253).

But during his desperate visit to Utrecht station, Stapel discovers that the experiment could never have been conducted as reported. It is simply impossible to line up six chairs in a crowded place like this. For anyone acquainted with the situation, the whole design seems extremely impractical and highly improbable. On his way back home, driving through the dreary night, he finally realises that his sand-castle world is on the verge of total collapse, and that a full confession is the only realistic option left to him.

Subsequently (from Chap. 2 onwards) the book follows the course events more or less in chronological order. The narrator realises that, from now on, all the details of his apparently normal, straightforward (perhaps even “boring”) existence become potentially relevant. Anything may provide a cue for someone seeking an explanation.

Initially, Stapel was interested in theatre and theatre studies. He considers becoming an actor himself, and even appears on Dutch television in a drama series,<sup>4</sup> until he realises that, rather than trying to become a performer himself, he wants to study the impact of media and communication in an academic manner. Notably, he focusses on a research field called media ecology, the study of the psychological impact of mass media, inaugurated by Neil Postman's monograph *Amusing ourselves to death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (Postman 1985). This research basically claims that contemporary audiences have become tamed by and addicted to television and other mass media, to the detriment of rational public discourse. Before long, Stapel decides to focus on social psychology, i.e. the study of the drama of everyday life.

Here, he is confronted with the controversy between “personism” and “situationism”. An important source of inspiration is a Dutch psychology classic written by the prominent Dutch existentialist Benjamin Kouwer (1963) who (reluctantly) concluded that “personality” is an empty signifier, and that the human Self lacks a core. Thus, although we are inclined to attribute our behaviour to the kind of person we *are*, most of our responses are actually triggered and moulded by situational and environmental factors. In social psychology, this is known as the fundamental attribution error: the tendency of individuals to place undue emphasis on internal characteristics of the agent (character, intention, etc.), rather than on external factors. Thus, Stapel is drawn into social psychology as the science of everyday life, putting everyday behaviour under a magnifying glass, as he phrases it, studying it with scientific precision, seeing deviance as a result of toxic combinations of personality traits and organisational characteristics (Stapel 2012, p. 93). The social psychology laboratory is a “theatre” (better than fiction) allowing researchers to explore responses to behavioural triggers. Experimentation is an art, performed in a laboratory theatre with actors and actresses, props and scenery. Once you have learned how to press and turn the right buttons, it works. Stapel also learns, however, that there is a substantial tension between the “context of discovery” (the experiment as

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<sup>4</sup>In 1984, in the drama series *Schoppentreof* (‘spades trump’).

actually performed in a laboratory setting) and the “context of justification” (the study as reported in a journal paper: a smoothed reconstruction of what actually happened in practice). For Stapel, the craft of publishing is: finding out what journal editors want, learning how to push the right buttons.

Yet, shortly after his appointment as a professor at the *University of Groningen*, the upward curve of his career begins to hamper. Outwardly, Stapel is still very promising and successful, but all this now comes with a price. His teaching, for instance, becomes increasingly theatrical. His basic objective now is to amuse his students, at the expense of depth and content. Also in his work as a research manager (as Institute Director and Faculty Dean in Tilburg) Stapel is apparently quite successful. Shortly before his exposure, he even finishes a vision document, about to be distributed, in which a different style of working is propagated, less bent on churning out publications, and more focussed on quality and relevance. But his research is becoming a problem. Stapel frantically wants to score, wants to reap applause, and yet his publication performance dramatically declines. Increasingly, journals find his papers too complicated, too nuanced. Moreover, social reality proves much more recalcitrant and convoluted than expected. Increasingly, the social world refuses to live up to academic expectations.

2003 is an especially difficult year. Despite all his hard work, Stapel’s experiments begin to falter and he fails to publish a single academic paper. Thus, increasingly, he is facing a split between outward recognition and internal crisis. As a manager, he criticises the competitive university climate and challenges the obsession with citation indexes, and he even gives a course on research ethics, but on the personal level he seems utterly unable to contain his craving for success. Two identities in one person as it were (an explosive, if not Faustian situation).

And then, one day, sitting alone in his elegant office at the University of Groningen, he makes some subtle changes in his data.<sup>5</sup> It does not feel good at all, and he has the impression that someone is standing behind him, peering over his shoulder, so that he quickly pushes the *Undo Typing* button. But this ruins the significance of his results, so that he soon relapses into altering some figures again. *Redo typing, Undo typing* – eventually he gives up his resistance. The data look beautiful, but it feels wrong. He describes his misdemeanours as a toxic response, affecting him even physically.<sup>6</sup> Before long, falsification becomes an addiction. Increasingly, his research nauseates him. Reality is too chaotic, too contextual and too messy for his approach. The real world consistently refuses to concur with his predictions. He has to *force* reality into compliance, and proves increasingly willing to do so. Although even in this respect he is standing on the shoulders of others, as the saying goes, he begins to overdo it. The data for his *Science* paper, for instance, are *completely* faked: pure fantasy (p. 160). It is no longer a question of tweaking

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<sup>5</sup>The key example of how “a first minor transgression” may “escalate into career-killing behaviour” (Crocker 2011, p. 151); cf. “A gradual escalation of self-serving dishonesty, starting with small acts of dishonesty and escalating into larger transgressions” (Garrett et al. 2016, p. 1727).

<sup>6</sup>And this was only the “minimum variety” of his fraud: changing data of a research that had at least been executed (Abma 2013, p. 44).

some figures. The research has not been conducted *at all*. The whole thing is fabricated. Misconduct becomes addictive and Stapel becomes a junky, leading a secret life. He feels hunted and beleaguered. All efforts to return to a normal, non-fraudulent existence fail. It seems as if he has been conditioned to commit fraud, as if he himself is deceived by his own lies. Things continue to work out fine for quite some time, however, and luck has always been on his side, – until end of August 2011.<sup>7</sup>

The three young researchers must have monitored him closely for months. The facts are undeniable. Stapel has destroyed all the evidence, has covered his tracks, but in a hasty, sloppy kind of way. As soon as he had entered the data into his computer, he would throw the questionnaires away: deposit them in garbage containers, like contaminated material, as if a yellow and black biohazard symbol had been stamped on them (p. 192), – scenes which are strangely reminiscent of similar scenes in *Perlmann's Silence* discussed earlier. He not only deceived his research subjects (which is normal practice in social psychology, but I will come to that), but also his colleagues. When the Rector of the university confronts him with the accusation, he suddenly realises how weird and erratic his behaviour must have seemed to others: a Faculty Dean, wearing smart expensive suits, allegedly visiting all these schools and train stations himself, to collect his data, handing out chocolate bars and candies as a reward... How could it be that his academic colleagues believed all this? He now realises how feelings of guilt and anxiety had been gnawing away at him. Being 6 feet 5 inches tall, he now weighs almost 250 pounds. He tries to talk himself out of the situation for hours, and desperately tries to convince the Rector (who had become a personal friend) that, although his research style was undeniably sloppy and even bizarre, no real misconduct has been committed. He tries to continue talking, hoping that time will suddenly come to a stop. But then the Rector asks the fatal question: does he himself find all this believable? On the highway, he pushes the gas pedal until his car reaches maximum speed (a suicide attempt?), but eventually he slows down again. Via Zwolle and Groningen, visiting the sites where he claimed to have done his research, post hoc as it were, he ends up in Utrecht Central Station, where *Derailment* begins.

Before the media circus sets in, he has to inform his wife, his daughters and his parents. He confesses that he has faked his data, has written about research that never happened, and that he is about to be dismissed without further ado. His career is over, his world is about to collapse; he has ruined everything. He has created an enormous mess, has contaminated his research field, and is about to face a veritable tsunami of distress (p. 201). Although psychologically speaking the misconduct was due to an “increasingly toxic interaction” between himself and his environment (p. 208, p. 259, p. 291), he now accepts that he and only he takes all the blame, not the situation. It is a double confession, for besides admitting to fraud, he now also

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<sup>7</sup>Ironically, Stapel himself once conducted an experiment concerning a “widely published” misconduct case which drew “intense media attention” and affected “the image of psychology”. It had happened exactly 15 years before Stapelgate, namely in August 1996. The conclusion was that the misconduct only affected respondents who considered the case “self-relevant” (Stapel et al. 1999).

renounces “situationalism”. He is not the only fraud in psychology, but his misdeeds are his alone.<sup>8</sup> Stapel also confesses that he always hated games, that he could not stand the idea of losing and that he always had to win, so that he often cheated when playing some board or card game: anything to avoid losing. Neither could he accept the idea of becoming repetitive and boring, as happens to so many other academics. He wanted his lectures and publications to be exiting theatrical entertainment, allowing him to play the role of the great illusionist.

In the next chapter, it is wintertime, several months later. Stapel is at home. The thermostat is set to 60 °F, because he is basically bankrupt (no salary, no allowance and no compensation) and must try to spend as little as possible. No babysitter, no cleaning lady, no restaurant dinners, no car. The committees are still doing their work, but his career is definitely over. He has not only ruined his own reputation, but also the careers of many others. He is effectively isolated, a pariah, as everything he touches becomes tainted. News of his unprecedented misdemeanours quickly travels around the world, and discussions and speculations continue almost on a daily basis in the media for months.

In October 2011, the three committees present their interim report, and Stapel releases a short written statement admitting to having failed as a scientist and offering his sincere apologies to colleagues, supervisees and the academic world for the damage caused. In October 30, 2012, he expects to receive a draft version of the final report, to check it for factual errors, but there is a delay, and finally the report is published without his comments. Although it is basically a rehash of the first draft version (the interim report), Stapel finds it particularly annoying that the committee “psychoanalyses” him (p. 224).<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the media seem entranced by the fall from grace of a scientific “top-criminal” and Stapel prepares a second statement. What he had done was terrible and almost impossible to understand. The explanatory power of possible explanations (ambition, competition, nihilism, lust for power, arrogance, etc.) seemed insufficient. In his desire to come up with some robust and straightforward understanding of the phenomena he was studying, he had disavowed reality, until he suddenly crashed. Because the committees had concluded that his fraud was incompatible with the obligations of an academic Doctor, he persuades his wife to drive to Amsterdam to hand back his Ph.D. diploma. Meanwhile, he becomes an easy target for journalists and anonymous persons calling him or harassing him with messages.

In October 2011, he has the following dream. He is walking down the big marble stairway of a castle where a big Venetian Carnival festival had taken place. There is mist everywhere and he is wearing a huge black cloak, like a toga. In his hand he

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<sup>8</sup>Brown rephrases the quote “I – not some non-I, not a negation of myself – couldn’t resist [the temptation]” (2016, p. 149); cf. “I did it myself, not something or someone else” (Stapel 2016, p. 11).

<sup>9</sup>In Brown’s translation, something weird happens precisely here. He writes: “in the earlier document, the Committee had attempted to psychoanalyze me and enumerate the deficiencies in my character, and the final report reprises *its non-factual, non-evidence-based, non-scientific opinions of me*” (p. 160), but the words in italics are absent in the published (Dutch) version.

holds a golden mask. The other guests depart quickly, some of them still wearing their masks, others holding them in their hands. When he tries to look at them, they turn away their heads. Everyone is in groups or pairs and disappears, but he is left behind (p. 230). It is tempting, of course, to identify the castle with the university and the carnival with academic life, so that the removal of his golden mask symbolises his exposure, while others get away with it.

“Super science fraud” Diederik Stapel, the “Lying Dutchman”, becomes a national celebrity: the Han van Meegeren of social psychology (p. 249). After his scientific “suicide”, the official story of his life is drastically rewritten, so that he suddenly becomes a genius, a high-flyer of the academic scene, able to turn anything into gold by merely touching it. After the crash, a “mysterious metamorphosis” (p. 235) occurs, and his academic status is inflated in retrospect, as if such a spectacular case of fraud could only have been committed by a spectacularly successful wonder-boy. But many other people are damaged as well. Dozens of articles are bound to be retracted. Years of work by supervisees has been contaminated by his fraud. While never denying the facts, Stapel does challenge the committee’s view that the misconduct was committed in a calculated manner, on the basis of a masterplan by an arrogant, manipulative and power-crazed “serial fraud” with a vicious and evil personality. As will be elaborated more fully below: what is missing in such assessments is the element of despair, the element of crisis, not only individually, but of a whole field. Even the fact that he invited colleagues to dine at his house and organized occasional barbecues was cited as evidence of his manipulative behaviour. Was he really so calculating? Actually, his fraud was a mess, and had been committed in a hasty and sloppy manner (full of statistical errors and implausibilities, which should have made his fabrications easily detectable).<sup>10</sup> Stapel considers the report remarkably “Stapel-like”: it is a fascinating story, but the methodology (how exactly had the data been selected, processed, etc.?) seemed remarkably unclear.<sup>11</sup>

*Derailment* begins with a quote from Edward Albee’s *Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, – the play about a fictitious son made up to fill the existential gap in the life of the protagonists (George and Martha), until George decides to put an end to the self-deceit by solemnly announcing that their son has died in a car crash. *Derailment* is likewise an effort of the author to reconcile himself with the loss of a fictitious part of his Self: that part of him that was able to discern some kind of structure and direction in the messy, meaningless, misty chaos of reality. But *Derailment* is also a

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<sup>10</sup> Most commentators agree with him on this: instead of using smart, sophisticated methods, difficult to detect, Stapel’s misconduct was “poorly organised” (Abma 2013, p. 48). “In his autobiography, Stapel gives an alarming account of how easily he was able to keep on fooling himself and others. It is astounding how primitive his deception was and how long it took for him to be unmasked” (Bouter 2015, p. 150).

<sup>11</sup> In an interview in the Dutch Newspaper *Trouw* (24 August 2013), five ex-supervisees of Stapel complained that the committee’s research methods had been biased and unprofessional. The interviews were poorly structured and poorly recorded and the interviewees had not been able to read or comment on the transcripts. In other words, the work of the committee was discarded as “sloppy” and “verification biased”.



new beginning, and Stapel quotes an anonymous colleague saying: “your most important research begins right now” (p. 263). Now that his fraud has been exposed, he literally wants to “dis-cover” himself (p. 291). Diederik A. Stapel was a fraudulent scientist, but *Derailment* is written by the ex-professor Diederik Stapel, without the A., and this is someone else (p. 292).

### 11.3 Epistemological Setting: Social Psychology as the Science of Everyday Life

In November 2012, the three committees<sup>12</sup> published their joint report entitled *Flawed science: The fraudulent research practices of social psychologist Diederik Stapel*. In the *Foreword* it is stated that the scientific fraud committed by Stapel “sent shock waves” across the academic world in the Netherlands and internationally (p. 5), thereby breaching the trust which forms the basis of all scientific collaboration. The universities involved opted for full disclosure, in order to set the “self-cleansing” ability of science in action (p. 5). Co-authors and collaborators of Stapel were interviewed and statisticians were put at the committees’ disposal in order to subject all of Stapel’s publications to a “rigorous analysis” (p. 5). Indeed, it is not without a hint of pride that the committees state that this was the first time ever that a whole oeuvre, a whole body of scientific work had been scrutinized in this way (p. 5); – a remark which reminded me of the comment by Gospodin Gregg about the uniqueness of the Bloch file, discussed in Chap. 4.

Although the three committees concluded that Stapel was fully responsible for his misconduct, they also found it too simplistic to consider the case as a mere individual or local “aberration” (p. 48). The misconduct was facilitated by wide-spread unsound research practices, sloppy methods and (serious and less serious) violations of proper scientific standards. In other words, Stapel’s misconduct was facilitated by a “research culture” in which scientific integrity was “not held in high esteem” (p. 33). Yet, the committees hope that the exposure and analysis of Stapel’s wrongdoings “can contribute to this cleansing process”, so that Stapel’s fraud “may still have a positive impact”, despite all the damage and harm it has caused (p. 6).

My argument in this section will be that, by endorsing such a conclusion, something basic still seems to be disavowed by the report. The Stapel file as presented by the committees seems virtually complete, and yet: *something is decidedly missing*. Notably, there seems to be a more profound continuity between social psychological research as such (as a variant of university discourse) and Stapel’s derailment than the committees are willing to accept. This might be related to the fact that deception is already a core ingredient of the “normal” social psychological methodology as such, albeit deception of research subjects rather than of the academic

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<sup>12</sup>The Levelt, the Noort and the Drenth committee, investigating the extent and nature of Stapel’s infringements of scientific integrity while working at the universities of Tilburg, Groningen and Amsterdam respectively.

community, as in Stapel's case. Stapelgate somehow seems to call the established social psychological paradigm *as such* into question. The case may be symptomatic for a whole area of research, perhaps of university discourse itself, not only of a local "culture". The truth game of a whole research arena seems on the verge of collapse.

That there is more to Stapel's fraud than individual deviance fostered by a sloppy research culture is already indicated by Stapel's inaugural lecture, delivered on a rather ominous date, namely September 11, 2001. According to Diederik A. Stapel, social psychology has demonstrated that we perceive reality not as it is, but as we want it to be (Stapel 2001, p. 4). Reality as we experience it is coloured by desire.<sup>13</sup> Notably stereotypical expectations allow us to come to terms with an overwhelmingly complex socio-cultural environment. It is this process (the colouring of reality in everyday existence) which Stapel intends to disclose. Social psychologists study everyday social phenomena with laboratory precision, so that everyday existence becomes a psychological laboratory. Yet, this increasingly results in a frustrating tension between the desire for explanatory power on the one hand and the astounding complexity and contextuality of everyday life on the other.

Stapel already addressed this epistemological challenge in his "Jos Jaspers early career award" lecture, published in the millennial issue of the *European Bulletin for Social Psychology*. Here, Stapel addresses the question "what is it that we, social psychologists, do? What are the methods and practices of our science? What is it that we do when we do experimental social psychology?" (p. 5). His remarkable answer has been cited by multiple sources, including the committees' report, allegedly as evidence of Stapel's methodological opportunism and questionable research practice, even when he was not yet committing fraud:

We ruminate about an interesting social phenomenon and come up with a possible answer, a hypothesis... We design an experiment and go to our lab to test our conjectures. And then what happens? Our experiment fails. We don't find what we expected to find... We tweak and fine-tune the experimental set-up until we find something we do comprehend, something that works; something with a P-value smaller than .05. Champaign! Celebration!

My point is that whatever way we arrive at our theories and hypotheses, the experiments and tests we design are made to verify, not to falsify our conjectures. The leeway, the freedom we have in the design of our experiments is so enormous that when an experiment does not give us what we are looking for, we blame the experiment, not our theory. (At least, that is the way I work). Is this problematic? No... We find what we are looking for because we design our experiments in such a way that we are likely to find what we are looking for. Of course! Should we design our experiments such that we are unlikely to find support for our hypotheses? Should we try to prove ourselves wrong? No... (pp. 6–7)

According to the three committees, but also according to commentators such as Abma (2013), this quote reflects Stapel's "verification bias", which is considered an infringement of the methodological rule that "an investigation must be designed in such a way that facts that might refute the research hypotheses are given at least an

<sup>13</sup>This view is compatible with Freud's account (1920/1940) about reality as resulting from processing and filtering the flow of information coming from the chaotic and threatening real (discussed in Chap. 2).

equal chance of emerging as do facts that confirm the research hypotheses” (Levitt et al. 2012, p. 48). Stapel’s arguments therefore seem quite at odds with the official instruction that hypotheses and predictions should be phrased in such a way that they are falsifiable. Yet, as was already emphasised by Müller (2015), in order to adequately assess this section, it must be placed in its proper context. In other words, we must *read the whole text* (which is precisely what the three committees *fail to do*). For if we do this, if we submit Stapel’s lecture to a closer reading, this same text suddenly articulates something else: instead of methodological cynicism and opportunism, it reflects Stapel’s experience of *disenchantment* with social psychology as such.

To begin with, it is important to notice that the *Bulletin* is a rather informal podium. In the *Editorial* we are informed that the Bulletin only recently received “an ISSN number”, so that articles and reviews published in it can now be properly referred to. This informal atmosphere, however, is even more noticeable in Stapel’s introduction:

I am happy you all decided to come and listen at this late hour. I know that most of you have been listening to talks, have been dazzled with all kinds of hypotheses, data, interpretations, and explanations since 8.30 (!!) this morning. I am really happy that you chose to postpone the consumption of a glass of beer (or wine) for yet one more hour. Because of the late hour of this presentation, I decided not to bombard you with tons and tons of studies and empirical data. I will present some experiments, but a large part of what follows will be argumentations and anecdotes. (p. 4)

In other words, Stapel assumes to role of the jester who, in a decidedly frank, but fairly loose and anecdotal (rather than formal) manner, intends to articulate what is usually bypassed in more formal academic communications. Indeed, he even adds that “part of this lecture will consist of some personal, non-normative ruminations about the science of social psychology” (p. 5). His confession, his coming-out, does not pertain to personal sloppiness, but rather is meant to reflect the problematic nature of a whole research culture. It is, in other words, an exercise in collective self-criticism. Stapel points out, for instance, “that we are often unable to make appropriate allowance for the possibility that other research perspectives may come to different conclusions than we do. Hence, we all have a tendency to be overly optimistic about the generalisability of our research findings” (p. 8). Subsequently, he raises the question “what then determines which scientific perspective will be used in the design of an experiment or in the interpretation of data?” (p. 8). His answer is: fashion. Not all research paradigms are created equal, and some ways of doing research happen to be more fashionable or popular than others, more in line with the trend of the day. Indeed: social psychology is “a catwalk of ideas” (p. 8). And he also stresses that there is a danger that a research paradigm developed for assessing certain responses to certain stimuli may actually *create* the phenomena that are observed (p. 9). This is taken up again at the end of the paper: “Our theoretical perspective *creates* the data we are looking for” (p. 25, my italics).

And Stapel also addresses the replication issue, one of the big methodological quandaries tormenting social psychology as such:

I think most of us have suffered from “Failed Replication Syndrome”. We read an article about an interesting phenomenon, we are thrilled and think there is a nice extension to be made when X or Y is added. We decide to replicate and extend the experiment. In order to do so we read the procedure section and try to perform the experiment in a way as identical as possible to the published study. Everything is in place, but we fail to replicate the results. We try again. No luck. Again. Nothing. What is going on here? I have no idea. It frustrates me. (10)

Stapel provides the following explanation:

For every type of experiment ... there seems to be a “Hidden Procedure Section.” I was first confronted by the concept of “Hidden Procedures” when I started my research project on priming effects in person perception. I decided to ask several experts in the field for their stimulus materials. Fortunately, many researchers sent back large envelopes with examples of the materials used in their studies. Pictures, photos, questionnaires, scenarios, pretests, pilots, everything. It was amazing. The vast majority of those materials, however, came with yellow post-it notes. Those post-it notes revealed the World of Hidden Procedures (10–11).

Thus, rather than as a symptom of pre-fraudulent cynicism, Stapel's Jos Jasper's lecture must be regarded as an (albeit anecdotal and non-normative) articulation of budding epistemological despair. What Stapel is pointing out (albeit in a jocular tone of voice, somewhat reminiscent of Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*) is that formal (frontstage) academic accounts of experimental practice in social psychology papers tend to conceal and disavow the continuous improvisations that are actually conducted backstage. Rather than as a cynical swindler, Stapel poses as a disenchanting, divided subject, addressing issues, sharing and discussing his growing discontent in university discourse before an audience of peers.

Let me start with Stapel's concern that social psychological “facts” may actually be *created* by the research paradigm or theoretical perspective we use. This problem was already addressed by Friedrich Nietzsche in his famous exclamation *Facta! Yes Facta Ficta!* published in *Daybreak* (1881/1980, § 307). Nietzsche's exclamation plays on alliteration and highlights an intriguing etymological affinity between *fact* and *fiction*, terms which are usually seen as conceptual opposites. The alliteration reminds us of the fact that the word *fact* is actually derived from the Latin verb *facere* (to make, to fabricate, to create), while the word *fiction* actually comes from the Latin verb *ingere* (to form, to shape; literally: to bring forth with one's fingers). Thus, the etymology reveals that scientific facts are *fabricated* in laboratories. The alliteration emphasises that facts and fictions are related phenomena because ‘facts’ (like fictions) are *made*, are *produced*, rather than given, and this notably applies to scientific facts. Indeed, all scientific facts are *fabricated*, in the literal, non-pejorative sense of the term. They are *products* of laboratory research practices; they are *artefacts*, produced with the help of experimental set-ups and technical contrivances. What Nietzsche's alliteration reminds us of, is that all scientific facts are ‘fingered’: they are coloured, tainted if you will, by the knowledge production processes which brought them forth (and whose fingerprints they bear). The etymology reveals that there is something fundamentally artificial about scientific “facts”, so that the listing of “fabrication” as one of the three major forms of scientific misconduct is at least

in need of further explanation. What turns *certain* fabrications into fabrications in the pejorative sense?

A similar etymology can be discerned in the word *laboratory*, which builds on the Latin verb *laborare* and literally means “workshop”: a locality where certain entities are *handled* (manipulated, literally) and certain products (namely “facts”) are fashioned or moulded (in a hands-on, fingering way). This does not mean that scientific insights are worthless. What it means is that any effort to seriously address epistemological issues emerging in research practices such as social psychology should start from this awareness, rather than from a naïve opposition between “facts” (as something which is simply *found* or discovered, as suggested by the term *findings*) and “fiction” (as something which is consciously fabricated, for strictly speaking this applies to facts as well).

This is exemplified by a key symptom of the current crisis in social psychology, namely the replication problem, addressed by Stapel as well, as we have seen. Apparently, in social psychology, replication research does not occur very frequently (there is not much to be gained by it for researchers), but insofar as it is attempted at all, replication remarkably often fails, even when classical, paradigmatic experiments are being redone. And this constitutes an embarrassment, of course, because in principle, scientific knowledge should be replicable, and scientific “facts” should be reproducible by others.

An example of this problem is the inability of a Belgian research team (cited by Abma 2013 and others) to replicate a famous priming experiment conducted by John Bargh et al. (1996). The Belgian publication unleashed a vicious ad hominem attack by Bargh (who was not amused by what ought to be regarded as a normal procedure), while Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman argued that one should be “sceptical about replications by investigators new to priming research, who may not be attuned to the subtlety of the conditions under which priming effects are observed” (cited in Abma 2013, p. 68). This seems a fairly problematic argument. Should the testability of research depend on the socialisation of the researchers, on their familiarity with hidden modifiers and tricks of the trade (only known to the inner circle), one wonders whether the reported results have any validity at all. Basically, the experiment should be replicable as it is reported. And if not, the missing ingredients should in principle be producible upon request. By seeing research as a privilege of adepts or insiders who are familiar with the subtleties of the art, the difference between science and less highly respected pursuits, such as alchemy or astrology, evaporates.

This discussion again builds on the tension between the “context of discovery” (the experiment as actually performed in a laboratory setting) and the “context of justification” (the study as reported in a journal paper). The latter is a smoothed reconstruction, a “secondary elaboration” if you will, of what actually happened in practice. Still, although the published version will leave out all kinds of frustrations, erroneous attempts and dead ends, it should nonetheless provide a manual useable for replication efforts.<sup>14</sup> Authors such as Bargh should encourage rather than deplore

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<sup>14</sup>Medawar (1963) flatly denies this and calls the scientific paper a fraud because it misrepresents or even travesties the thought process that gave rise to the results reported in the paper.

replication attempts (unless they have something to hide of course). But the objective of this chapter is not to solve the (unsolvable?) replication problem (apparently more challenging even in social psychology than in science in general) about which so many books and papers have already been written. The question rather is what a dialectical-psychoanalytical view can contribute to our understanding of Stapel's misconduct in response to the challenges emerging in his "impossible profession". Was his misconduct perhaps a (misguided) response to the replication crisis and other embarrassing problems occurring in this type of university discourse? There may be more continuity between "fabrication" (in the non-normative sense) of social psychological facts "backstage", and the "fabrication" (now in a pejorative sense) of fraudulent data published in Stapel's papers than the committees (in their persistent use of metaphors such as "cleansing operation") seem able or willing to acknowledge. What I find remarkable is that the three committees, while claiming to have "scrutinized" a whole body of work, fail to address the methodological discussions that are part of this work (discussions which increasingly reflect a sense of despair on the part of the author). As if "scrutinizing" an oeuvre means something else than *reading and addressing its content*, but I will return to this issue below.

Interestingly, Stapel's fraud has been regarded as an experiment in itself. Question: how often and to what extent can an established scientist commit fraud before it is detected? Abma cites a colleague who argued that we should seriously consider the possibility that Stapel's fraud is actually a research trial, involving his peers and colleagues as research subjects, and that we should not be surprised if he (Stapel) at a certain point decides to publish an analysis of his results (2013, p. 157). What is pointed out here is that the technique of deception of research subjects (which is accepted practice in social psychology) is applied by Stapel to the research community as such. What is the crucial normative difference between these two instances of deception?

## 11.4 University Discourse and the Experimental Mousetrap

As indicated, I will regard social psychology as a particular form of "university discourse", as specified by Lacan:

$$\begin{array}{c|c} S_2 & a \\ \hline S_1 & \$ \end{array}$$

Social psychologist *Diederik A. Stapel* occupies the position of the agent ( $S_2$  in the upper-left position) as an (initially quite prolific) producer of scientific papers, in collaboration with 70 or so co-authors. Interestingly, this identification with social psychology (Stapel =  $S_2$ ), this decision to commit himself to social psychological discourse, was the outcome of an existential struggle as we have seen. In *Derailment* Stapel describes how, as an actor (i.e. before his conversion to academic

psychology) he had been a Harold Pinter adept. The theatre of the absurd, of which Harold Pinter is a prototypical protagonist, enacts an absurdist interpretation of reality, and Stapel performed Pinter plays already as a high school student. Elsewhere (Stapel and Dautzenberg 2014; cf. Stapel 2016 p. 45) he discusses Camus' interpretation of the Sisyphus myth (Camus 1942), an essay about the futile search for meaning in an unintelligible and godless world, where even revolt proves futile, – the very essay in which the term “absurdism” is used for the first time. Stapel's conversion from theatre to psychology implies a renouncement of absurdism and a willingness to adopt a more rational, optimistic and scientific worldview. As a psychologist he endorses the belief that, in principle, social psychology provides the conceptual and methodological tools allowing us to understand human behaviour in a rational manner.

In terms of Lacan's schema, this means that a certain basic position, a certain worldview (or rather a clash between worldviews, namely optimistic technology-oriented rationalism versus existential absurdism) is discarded (pushed into the lower-left position) in favour of the scientific stance requested by university discourse. From now on,  $S_2$  (the objective scientific agent) is supposedly an individual *without* a worldview, although in reality science is spurred on by a particular worldview as well (namely technology-oriented rationalism). Thus, by becoming a scientist, Stapel suspends a (fundamental, philosophical) question which until then had occupied him, namely whether reality is basically rational or basically absurd. Stapel, one could argue, considered both options, wavered between two vocations, two callings: the absurdist option (a career in Pinter-like theatre) and the rational option (a career in science). Eventually, he converts to social psychology:  $S_2$  in the upper-left position, pushing the disconcerting but revealing *truth* of absurdism beneath the bar. But this struggle of scientific rationalism (fuelling a knowledge-production system) against the disconcerting, but nonetheless revelatory truth of absurdism continues to haunt him at times, as we will see, and even resurges in times of crisis (a phenomenon known in psychoanalysis as the return of the repressed).

As a qualified university expert, Stapel focusses on discovering the decisive factor X, the “x effect”, as he phrases it in *Derailment*: that which makes the difference between significant and insignificant, between publishable and unpublishable results (the object *a* of social psychology research, in the upper-right position). But this increasingly leads to frustrations. Reality seems too messy and recalcitrant (too absurd?) to comply with his theories; and this leads to loss of productivity and to despair:  $\$$  as an (unintended) by-product in the lower-right position. Eventually it even results in the resurgence of absurdism, but I will come to that.

Psychoanalytically speaking, his scientific vocation remains marked and compromised by the struggle (on the level of metaphysical worldviews,  $S_1$ ) from the very start. The kind of research to which he became committed, namely experimental social psychology, actually constitutes a kind of middle position (or compromise) between these two vocations, for social psychology, according to Stapel, is both a science and an “art”, and the psychological laboratory is basically as a “theatre” where human behaviour can be primed and moulded in various directions

(Stapel 2012, p. 102). An important ingredient of theatres in general (and of the social psychology theatre in particular) is deception. Research subjects (usually psychology students) must be naïve. As soon as subjects are aware of the (objective of) the experiment, this will affect their responses and ruin the results. Ideally, research subjects *believe* that they know what the research is about, but this actually proves to be an illusion, a distraction; a lure. Like Claudius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Act III, scene 2), they are lured into a mousetrap. According to Hamlet, *mousetrap* is title of the play performed by the actors in Shakespeare's drama. While research subjects erroneously believe to know in what kind of situation they are becoming involved, they are suddenly exposed to an unexpected stimulus, while their responses are being meticulously monitored (as happened to Claudius as well, cf. Chap. 3), so that these responses may be considered as an indication of a disavowed flaw (racial prejudice).

The experimental set-up of Stapel's fictitious *Science* experiment at Utrecht train station is a cunning exemplification of the mousetrap theme. The respondents *believe* that, by filling in a questionnaire, they are participating in a survey, and that the chair is merely placed there for their convenience (filling in questionnaires while standing upright seems rather impractical). Thus, they are unaware of the fact that the row of chairs is actually a *mousetrap*. By keeping their distance vis-à-vis the black male, they *betray* their obfuscated prejudices. So, in other words, Stapel is social psychology's *Hamlet*, who masterfully inserts a play into a play (the row of chairs representing the mousetrap scene), while Utrecht station is the theatre of life, where a plethora of prejudices are steering our daily behaviour (in subliminal, unconscious ways). In order to come to terms with them, social psychologists must design a device that *captures* them. The problem is, of course, that Stapel's "play" has never been performed, that his experiment has never been conducted. Like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it is fiction. Stapel is actually a playwright and his article a form of drama, parodying the vernacular of fashionable science. The respondents (playing the role of Claudius, but in a contemporary setting) were not really put to the test.

But this means, dialectically speaking, that the prejudices attributed to the research subjects (in the *Science* article) actually reflect the prejudices of the researchers themselves. It is the prejudice of the researchers that their research subjects will prove prejudiced (by keeping their distance to the non-Caucasian male). In other words, the prejudices and stereotypes enacted in this paper are actually the (prejudiced, stereotypical) expectations of the researcher (Stapel) himself, projected onto the research subjects. He *wants* and *expects* his research subjects to be prejudiced, to be biased, even if (all too often) this proves not to be the case, for otherwise he could simply have *conducted* the experiment instead of fabricating it. In Lacanian terms, the hidden prejudice, which *must* be there, proves so difficult to capture because it is the "object *a*" of social psychology. It is that which somehow *must* be brought to the fore (with the help of mousetraps), an objective which is considered so important that it even legitimises the use of deception. To paraphrase Gospodin Gregg (Chap. 4), social psychology is bent on exposing *the Mr. Hyde* in us, the evidence of prejudice, the object *a*, something which somehow remains hidden (first



and foremost in “Caucasians”) and stubbornly refuses to give itself away. Thus, instead of capturing the “x effect” (racial prejudice), the mousetrap-paper rather captures (or reflects) the way in which social psychologists tend to frame and perceive their research subjects (to phrase it somewhat bluntly: social psychologists seem to believe that all Caucasians are racists, especially those who claim to be unaware of this unconscious flaw).

The congruency between social psychology and theatre (between fact and fiction) already seems reflected by the fact that experiments as well as plays are “conducted” or “performed”, and the similarities multiply once we submit the texts by Shakespeare and Stapel to a closer comparative reading. Hamlet urges his actors not to overdo it, not to overact, for this might ruin the willingness of the audience to suspend their disbelief. “Observe my uncle”, he ask his friend Horatio, to see whether, once exposed to the mousetrap, he will give away his “occulted guilt”. In other words, Horatio is Hamlet’s (Stapel’s) experimental collaborator, who assumes an “oblique” perspective: while everybody else is watching the play, he will focus his attention on Claudius instead, who consistently manages to feign innocence, in order to analyse his response to the dramatic stimulus. And after the event, Hamlet and Horatio will compare their judgements in censure, so as to determine whether the revelations of the ghost (the hypothesis) are fictitious or true. In the case of social psychology, naïve respondents, who erroneously believe that they are unprejudiced (i.e. innocent), will be confronted with a critical mirror, which may force them to adapt their self-image. Indeed, “The play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (*Hamlet*, Act II, scene 2) and the row of chairs is the mousetrap employed to capture obfuscated “Caucasian” prejudices. This is in line with the vocation of experimental social psychology as such, whose founding fathers (Lewin, Festinger, etc.) were Jewish immigrants coming from Europe and personally interested in the question whether Americans might be as prejudiced and anti-Semitic as their fellow-Caucasians in Europe.

Yet, to Stapel’s frustration, the mousetraps of social psychology no longer seem to function. The prejudice described in his *Science* paper is the prejudice that research subjects are prejudiced; it is the prejudice which social psychological theory *attributes* to research subjects, as we have seen, a prejudice which exists in the minds and theories of the social psychologists themselves. Therefore, by concocting the missing, elusive data (his object of desire, his object *a*), Stapel captures his scientific peer group (and their prejudices) in his trap. His readers (the social psychologists) believe the data because the outcomes concur with their headstrong conviction that Caucasians are secretly prejudiced.

To understand how such a thing could happen (how next-generation social psychologists apparently fell into this social psychological trap), Lacan’s specification of university discourse provides important clues. We have seen how Stapel temporarily resolved the struggle of scientific objectivity ( $S_2$ ) with persistent absurdism ( $S_1$ ) by endorsing the first and disavowing the latter. His susceptibility to absurdism (the theatrical calling of his youth) was pushed beneath the bar (into the lower-left position) in order to fully endorse social psychology as a normalised scientific research practice ( $S_2$  in the upper-left position as agent). As an experimental

researcher committed to social psychology ( $S_2$ ), Stapel is desperately looking for what he refers to as the “effect  $x$ ” (p. 103), i.e. a decisive (but often intractable and allusive) factor which makes the difference between significant and non-significant results ( $a$  in the upper-right position). Social reality, he discovers, is a messy and convoluted realm, where countless factors interact, and the desire of the normal researcher is to find *one particular effect*, the factor “ $x$ ”, that may lead to a publication in a top journal (and rebut absurdism once and for all). In Stapel’s case,  $x$  becomes connected with the difference between a littered and a clean environment. In a littered environment, the mousetrap is expected to do the trick: racial prejudices will be unmasked. Like Claudius’s guilt, the subjects’ prejudices will be exposed.

But what if the mousetrap fails to work? Stapel basically decides to extrapolate the element of deception from *research subject* to his professional *readership*. Deception (of research subjects) is a perfectly acceptable ingredient of social psychological research, but Stapel takes it one step further. His *Science* paper becomes an experiment indeed, a mousetrap of the second order, so that peers, reviewers, colleagues, etc. are unwittingly lured into the position of research subjects: will they fall into this trap, will they really believe that this (absurd) experiment actually happened, basically because their second-order prejudice (namely that Caucasians are prejudiced) is confirmed by it? Stapel’s experiment seems to confirm what social psychologists expect to happen, namely that the “ $x$  effect”, the object  $a$ , the prejudice (as a coping mechanism, as a mechanism of defence) will give itself away in a disorderly, polluted environment. Stapel’s parody, a piece of fiction which reads like a *Science* paper, confirms what purports to be “normal science” although it actually reflects – a worldview.

Notwithstanding the success of his *Science* paper, however, his failure to achieve significant results is unsettling for Stapel and even produces despair ( $\$$  in the lower-right position). The absence, the intractability of the  $x$  effect (the decisive factor, the object  $a$  of social psychology research) reinforces his inner split, his *Spaltung*, his inability to satisfy his *cupido sciendi*. This *Spaltung* reveals an insurmountable gap between knowledge and truth. Stapel suffers from conflicting imperatives, from the struggle between his rationalistic leanings and his absurdist worldview, a struggle which is still raging beneath the bar. On the one hand, Stapel (as a scientific subject) is fuelled by the imperative which, according to Lacan, drives all contemporary research practices: “go on, produce more knowledge! Never enough!” (Lacan 1969–1970/1991, p. 120). Researchers are never literally *told* to do so, but the imperative ( $S_1$ ) functions as an unconscious injunction, coming from beneath the bar (the lower-left position), fuelling contemporary social psychology as well (p. 121) in order to keep the absurdist alternative at bay. It is only by producing more knowledge that the unsettling realisation that reality may well be a random and meaningless mess can be countered. On the other hand, notwithstanding the avalanche of publications resulting from this imperative, the absurdist attitude is still very much alive in him as well. The decisive factor  $x$  of social psychology may prove difficult (or even impossible) to detect *precisely because* reality is so fundamentally chaotic and absurd. In other words, the viability of his aim to produce knowledge is *called into question* by an absurdist truth.

For the time being, however, instead of reverting to absurdism (as an academic apostate so to speak), he keeps trying to discern some intelligibility in recalcitrant reality, but he seems only able to do this by tweaking his results. And step by step, the absurdity of his “solution”, the absurdity of his fabrications, increases. How is it possible that his professional colleagues fall into this trap? Although tweaking your results may be part of certain research cultures, Diederik A. Stapel somehow manages to take this strategy to the limit, by drastically *exaggerating* this questionable type of behaviour, so that in his case the fraud itself becomes absurd (and indeed, grotesque exaggeration is a well-known technique in absurdist theatre of course). Psychoanalytically speaking this confirms the view that Stapel is basically a craving, tormented subject facing an epistemic crisis, whose misconduct is symptomatic for frustration and despair, as “by-products” of university discourse (§).  $S_2$  becomes an increasingly divided (*spaltet*) subject in the force field between the resurging absurdist worldview on the one hand and the recalcitrant object  $a$  on the other ( $S_1 \leftrightarrow S_2 \leftrightarrow a$ ). By taking his deceptions one step further, building on the congruence between experiments and plays, his research really becomes theatre, so that eventually social psychology (as a particular strand of university discourse) gives way to absurdism ( $S_2 \rightarrow \S$ ).

## 11.5 The Collapse of Truth: Three Responses to the Crisis

The Stapel case is thus a symptomatic by-product of a proliferating crisis which concerns the scientific credibility of social psychology as such. And this, I would argue, cannot be addressed or contained by self-cleansing operations, as suggested by the three committees (the normative “trinity”, playing the role of the authoritative voice:  $S_1$ ). Such a procedure builds on the rotten apple metaphor: the idea that integrity problems can be solved via individualisation (Broad and Wade 1982, p. 60). As a rather embarrassing experience, Stapel at a certain point reports that some of his colleagues actually claimed to have replicated his faked research! After making up his research and publishing his fantasies, some other research team suddenly announces that they successfully incorporated his absurdist fiction into university discourse! What was decidedly fictional becomes factual after all.

The papers published by Diederik A. Stapel (until September 2011) seemingly adhere to the discursive requirements of university discourse, although they increasingly parody or travesty this discourse. After his exposure, university discourse as such becomes challenged.<sup>15</sup> A temporary shift into another mode of discourse now

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<sup>15</sup>When it comes to lessons learned, the results seem fairly disappointing. Abma’s most concrete remedy is to enforce a maximum number of academic publications (2013, p. 162), which probably would result in a proliferation of pseudonyms, but the real problem of course is not the number of publications but rather the quality of many of these publications, the ways in which the data are procured, etc. The proposal would result in (yet another) top-down rule, but fails to explain or address what really drives this issue: the *cupido scribendi* – the academic *will* (desire, urgency, *Trieb*, etc.) to publish (a drive which also applies to Abma himself no doubt, as author of his book).

seems inevitable. In the next sections, three responses to this crisis of university discourse will be analysed, in accordance with Lacan's theorem: three moves away from university discourse, in the direction of (a) the discourse of the Master, (b) the discourse of the hysteric and (c) the discourse of the analyst.

The three committees (the normative trinity) try to re-establish order by operating in accordance with the dynamics of the Master's discourse, denouncing Stapel's wrong-doings in a top-down, apodictic manner and calling for a cleansing operation, so that the resurgence of absurdism can be abated and university discourse can become functional again. This Master's discourse (discussed more fully below) is exemplified by their final report, published on 28 November 2012.

A few days later, however, Stapel responds with a document of his own which adheres to a completely different mode of discourse, namely the book *Derailment* which, as an autobiographical *Fallgeschichte* (or self-analysis) rather reflects the basic structure of the discourse of the analyst, as specified by Lacan. Now, the question basically is how the pervasive desire to discover the *x* effect (the object *a* of social psychology research, occupying the upper-left position of the agent) could have such a derailing impact on an ostensibly normal and successful researcher, driving him into such desperate, fraudulent actions ( $a \rightarrow \$$ ).

A third response is Stapel's subsequent relapse into the theatre of the absurd, notably exemplified by his dialogues with literary author Dautzenberg (Stapel and Dautzenberg 2014), an instantiation of the discourse of the hysteric as we will see, of cynicism even, in the sense as it is discussed by Sloterdijk (1987). But I will now further explore these three responses in the upcoming sections.

## 11.6 The Normative Trinity: The Power Dimension and the Master's Discourse

The narrative of Stapel's derailment can be briefly summarised with the help of the standard dramatic curve or arc, described by Freytag (1863) and others, consisting of five successive steps. During the "exposition" stage (1) Stapel is presented as an actor who decides to become a scholar, and the next stage (2) describes his rise to fame. At the climax of his career (stage 3), however, the tension between academic prominence (his appointment as Director and Dean, his managerial standing etc.) on the one hand and his faltering research practice on the other becomes unbearable, giving rise to fraud, although other, safer, more acceptable and more respectable options could have been available (such as the decision, made by many scientists in his position, to relinquish his ambitions as a researcher altogether and to focus exclusively on his managerial tasks). Exposure leads to his inevitable yet spectacular downfall (stage 4) and finally, looking back on what has happened, he decides to make a new beginning by analysing his own case (stage 5: denouement or catharsis: the writing of *Derailment* as a practice of the Self). Thus, Stapel's rise to academic power reflects the dimension of verticality already referred to earlier, a combination

of prominence and *Fallhöhe*, also known as the Icarus complex (described in Chap. 4), ending with Stapel's "plunge" into depression (Stapel 2016, p. 11), because the wax in his wings had molten (2016, p. 8).

On the epistemological level, we have analysed this tension as the *Spaltung* between knowledge and truth. Scientists, driven by the imperative to produce more knowledge, are increasingly unable to satisfy their *cupido sciendi*, the thirst for truth that drove them into research in the first place. But it is also a tension between knowledge and power. In response to the depressing trauma of Stapel's fraud, the triad committee (the normative trinity or triumvirate) aims for reparation and restoration. Yes, a career has dramatically imploded, but the republic of science (the castle in Stapel's dream) can still be repaired, provided the self-cleansing mechanisms of science are put to work to remove this rotten apple.

The three committees were established "in mutual consultation between the three universities" (*Flawed Science*, p. 5) where Stapel had worked, chaired by Pim Levelt (the Levelt Committee), Pieter Drenth (the Drenth committee) and Ed Noort (the Noort committee). Who were the members of this triumvirate and why were they appointed? Prof. Pim Levelt is a psycholinguist who became the founding director of the *Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics* in Nijmegen and President of the *Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences* (KNAW) (2002–2005). Prof. Pieter Drenth was a psychologist who became rector of the *Free University Amsterdam* (1983–1987) and president of the KNAW (1990–1996) and of ALLEA (*All European Academies*) (2000–2006). Prof. Ed Noort was professor of ancient Hebrew literature at the University of Groningen, but also dean of the faculty and pro-rector of the university (2005–2008), board member of the KNAW and Vice-President of the European Federation of National Academies of Sciences and Humanities (ALLEA). In short, these academics were appointed, not because of specialised expertise concerning FFP or research misconduct ( $S_2$ ), but because of their institutional prestige, their aura of authority ( $S_1$ ), so that their report reflects the discourse of the Master ( $S_1$  in the position of the agent). Stapel is condemned, and the research community is called upon to rebuild and strengthen its epistemological super-ego by dealing with the culture of sloppiness.

The report ( $S_1$ ) addresses the experts in the field ( $S_2$  as recipients) and orders an operation of cleansing and repair, in accordance with the mode of discourse referred to by Lacan as the discourse of the Master:

|       |       |
|-------|-------|
| $S_1$ | $S_2$ |
| $\$$  | $a$   |

The authoritative voice (the normative trinity) functions as agent ( $S_1$  in the upper-left position). Doubts and uncertainties concerning the validity or viability of the social psychological paradigm *as such* are pushed beneath the bar ( $\$$  shifting into the lower-left position). The imperatives of proper scientific conduct ( $S_1$ ) are presented as indisputable, and the normative trinity acts as the guardian of these principles, which are to be reaffirmed rather than questioned ( $S_1$  as agent, upper-left

position). These guardians are respected authorities who formally address the research community of academics in a top-down manner ( $S_2$  as recipient of the message). This involves social psychologists in particular, but also other academic professionals such as editors, funders, research managers and so on ( $S_2$  in the upper-right position). Basically, Levelt, Noort and Drenth belong to the older generation of emeriti professors ("fathers") who sternly address the younger generation, those who are still in active service and apparently take their job too lightly.

These "fathers" are allegedly taken aback by the sloppiness of the "research culture" they encounter, but they also clearly enjoy the confessions about deflections. There clearly is some *satisfaction* involved in what they have brought to the surface, in what they have produced and achieved (*a* in the lower-right position): "As far as we are aware, this was the first time ever that the whole of a fraudster's body of scientific work had been scrutinized in this way" (p. 5).<sup>16</sup> Trawling through a complete oeuvre is without precedent, it is an accomplishment which is likely to draw attention (as well as citations, etc.). And yet, something essential, which would enable us explain the whole enigma (the object *a*), still seems missing, still seems to elude them, but I will come to that.

The power dimension is addressed in their report on several levels. First of all, they address the power games of Stapel himself, the powerful professor who seemed invulnerable because of his power position. Stapel is depicted by the three committees as a gentleman-swindler ( $S_1$  in the upper-left position) who fabricated his data while others conducted the actual, hands-on work. The Dutch name Stapel literally means 'pile' or 'heap' and is strangely reminiscent of the German word *Hochstapler*, i.e. gentleman-swindler. His position of Master ( $S_1$ ) is emphasised by the fact that Stapel "occupied a special position in the Faculty. The Executive Board granted him a variety of exceptional allowances and reimbursements, he was extremely generously facilitated and in a special position" (p. 45). It is stated that he "Mr. Stapel used his position of great prestige and power", his "considerably powerful position" (p. 37) and "the power derived from his celebrity-like status" (p. 54) to "commit fraud and to stifle any possible doubt about his methods" (p. 37). As a gentleman-researcher, he was a "solo performer to the extreme", who "did not hesitate to use his power, prestige and charisma to prevent the detection of fraud" (p. 38). In other words, Stapel as the absolutist Louis XIV of social science: *l'université, c'est moi*.

At the same time, Stapel is clearly depicted as a kind of rebel ( $\$$  now in the upper-left position), whose blatant, provocative and absurdist practices threaten to subvert established order, sending a "shock wave" though the scientific community, so that order has to be restored by expelling the imposter (who *posed* as a master but who was actually a kind of boisterous cynic or actor).

In one of his papers (Johnson and Stapel 2011), Stapel portrays himself as an "alchemist", able to convert ambiguity into positivity, namely by reinterpreting ambiguous information (Johnson and Stapel 2011 p. 165), but the committee now

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<sup>16</sup>The Committees arrive at the conclusion "that the extent of Mr. Stapel's fraud is very substantial. The Committees encountered a total of 55 publications in which fraud has been established. (34 in Tilburg), from 2004 onwards".

seems eager to reverse-engineer the process by converting Stapel's "gold" back into messy research. What is remarkable in this portrayal of Stapel as Master-swindler (alternating between  $S_1$  and \$), however, is that, although his whole body of scientific work is allegedly scrutinized, something is missing, namely: the work itself, the work as such, the work in terms of content! By this I mean that the committees, while scrutinising his oeuvre, focussed on producing a quantitative estimate of the extent of the misconduct ("The Committees encountered a total of fifty-five publications in which fraud has been established", p. 25), but for some reason they do not really *read* Stapel. But as soon as we *do* read his (pre-exposure) papers, in a textual, content-oriented manner (as philosophers are inclined to do), a rather different picture emerges. What Diederik A. Stapel (rather consistently) articulates is that he is driven, not by a lust for power and prestige, but first and foremost by a kind of epistemological desire, namely to use the symbolisation techniques of social psychology to discern (or fabricate) some extent of order in a chaotic, *littered* environment known as "culture". Social psychologists map the world with the help of dichotomous patterns (*littered* environments vs. *clean* environments; *stereotypical* responses vs. *non-stereotypical* responses, etc.) to enhance some kind of order in the Real. To relinquish this vocation would mean to give up social psychology as a meaningful endeavour, and to revert to the absurdist credo of his youth. A faint echo of Stapel's self-analysis is audible in the Committees' report when Stapel is quoted as saying that, although the fraudulent practices started in Groningen in 2003, in Tilburg the manner of fabrication became "ever crazier, faster and stranger" (p. 32), a phrasing which indeed presents Stapel as a divided, craving subject (\$) rather than as a cunning Mastermind. But in the committees' report, Stapel is not really given the floor, – which explains why he decides to publish his own ("bottom-up") version of the events (i.e. *Derailment*) just a few days after the formal presentation of the ("top-down") report.<sup>17</sup>

But Stapel is also portrayed as a dangerous rebel, as we have seen, as someone who, while feigning to act as a successful researcher, was actually an intruder, posing a threat to the knowledge production system ( $S_2$ ) as such. Therefore they urge  $S_2$  (the recipient of the message) to "sanitise" the ecosystem in which someone like Stapel was able to hide and flourish. This is reflected in the use of the cleansing metaphor. The "self-cleansing ability" of science should be put to use for a drastic "self-cleansing operation" (p. 5). In order to restore credibility, the scientific "literature", the scientific "record" must be *completely cleansed of everything that is fraudulent* (p. 6, my italics).

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<sup>17</sup>This also pertains to Abma (2013), who distrusts Stapel and decidedly keeps his distance. When Stapel at a certain point tries to contact Abma, the latter seems embarrassed or even intimidated ("Diederik Stapel is back in town", p. 11). Apparently, he refused to speak to him (refusing to consider the first-person perspective as a valuable source of information). He is even concerned that, by writing his book, he may provide Stapel (who already received so much attention, etc.) with yet another podium. In a letter to Stapel, Dautzenberg reverts this by arguing that Abma is actually creating a podium for Abma via Stapel (Stapel and Dautzenberg 2014, p. 69), while scolding the latter "for seeking contact with the world again!"

As indicated, the “fathers” deplore the “general culture of careless, selective and uncritical handling of research and data”. A methodologically defective research practice (“sloppy science”) constitutes “an unintended and unexpected finding” of the inquiry (p. 47). “Numerous discrepancies were found between the way the experiment was actually carried out as could be deduced from the available data and the research material, and what was stated in the article”, thus obscuring what actually had happened and thereby “rendering the experiment unverifiable for others” (p. 51). But it is clear that in such statements the fathers are articulating their imperatives in a top-down, distanced manner ( $M_1$ ). Researchers who are actively involved in a work-floor setting will be aware of the inevitable discrepancies between context of discovery (the laboratory world) and context of justification (the paper world of research papers). This discrepancy is part of their daily experience no doubt ( $M_2$ ). In real laboratory life, there will always be the parallax between context of discovery and context of justification; there will always be a gap between “monitoring procedures” on the one hand and the actual research culture on the other (which enabled Stapel’s violations to go unnoticed for quite some time). For all the complaints about the “impossibilities” the committee members discover (such as: “impossible p-values”), or about the “peculiarities” and the “sloppiness” of the work of Stapel and his environment, the public degradation by the committees fails to answer questions such as why, in 1999, a formal international visitation committee had given this same research environment an exceptionally high score, suggesting outstanding international excellence.

But the key question, dialectically speaking, is how to sublimate this crisis, how to bring this mess of contradictions to a higher level ( $M_2 \rightarrow M_3$ )? As indicated, I find it remarkable that, while trawling through Stapel’s oeuvre in search of indications of fraud, the committees more or less ignored the *content* of this oeuvre: the actual papers in which many of the tensions between discovery and justification ( $M_2$ ) are explicitly addressed. As if the normative trinity did not *read* the 137 papers which they “scrutinised”. And this is remarkable because precisely this seems to be part of the malaise: the widespread malady of counting, citing, indexing and processing scientific papers instead of *really reading* them. This reluctance to really *read* the content may actually reflect a major aspect of the current academic crisis, which is confirmed rather than repaired by the report. The committees analyse the oeuvre<sup>18</sup> in a rather functional manner, using the hashtag symbol (#) to indicate whether a particular paper is considered contaminated by fraud. But they ignore, for instance, the content of a paper by Stapel and others (not-retracted, without the # label, and therefore apparently non-fraudulent) which analyses a previous, widely-discussed Dutch scientific misconduct case, namely the Diekstra case (Stapel et al. 1999). The authors had asked Dutch social psychologists (as respondents) to reflect on “a widely published plagiarism scandal involving a Dutch psychologist which affected themselves and the image of their profession” (p. 397) and their analysis resulted in the intriguing conclusion that “expert investigators of social influence” (i.e. social psychologist) who feel “framed of “tainted” by certain manipulations may often

<sup>18</sup>“...het gehele oeuvre van een fraudeur [is] op de korrel genomen...” (p. 6).



become “victims of the phenomena they investigate” instead of being “inoculated” by the insights they produced (p. 401). In other words, if you study fraud you may *become* a fraud. And in another (non-retracted and therefore apparently non-fraudulent) paper, Lammers and Stapel (2009) analyse the connection between morality and power, arguing that, whereas powerful agents (such as the Trinity committee) tend to rely on rule-based (deontological) styles of moral thinking, less powerful agents (work-floor researchers) rather rely on outcome-based (consequentialist) styles. In other words, while the powerful are more inclined to defend the rules, the powerless are more inclined to improvise. According to this theory, the committees can be expected to embrace a deontological approach (focussed on rule-compliance) because they are powerful, while Stapel commits fraud because he experiences himself as relatively powerlessness (in view of Stapel's increasingly frustrating inability to bridge the gap between knowledge and truth, between social phenomena and first-generation psychological theories). In other words, the social psychological expert *Diederik A. Stapel* ( $S_2$ ) may pose as an impassive researcher, but actually experiences himself as a tormented subject (*Diederik Stapel*, without the A.), who is facing an existential crisis. And this suggests that the return of the repressed (of absurdism) cannot be contained only by reverting to  $S_1$  (the Master's discourse, represented by the Committees). In order to understand the depth, the content of the crisis, we must give the floor to two others modes of discourse which aim to respond to the collapse of university discourse in the Stapel case, namely the hysteric's discourse ( $\$$ ), – represented here by a series of publications in which Stapel indeed seems to relapse into the absurdism of his adolescence years –, and the discourse of the analyst, represented by *Derailment* (Stapel's self-authored *case history*).

## 11.7 Cynicism and Absurdism: The Hysteric's Discourse

University discourse places  $S_2$  (qualified knowledge) in the position of the agent, but eventually, the divided, craving subject ( $\$$ ) re-emerges as a by-product. The split (*Spaltung*) between knowledge and truth becomes unbearable, as the pretensions of qualified knowledge cannot be realised in practice (Lacan 1966, p. 794). This gives rise to a repositioning of the divided, tormented subject ( $\$$ ) vis-à-vis this knowledge ( $S_2$ ). The position of the impassive academic agent becomes subverted ( $S_2 \rightarrow \$$ ), and the divided subject ( $\$$ ) now emphatically takes the floor in the position of the agent ( $\$$  in the upper-left position).

As Lacan indicates, in academic experimental psychology (as a social or human science, notably in its American version), the subject of research (i.e. the professional researcher as an individual) tends to be eliminated and obliterated. The social scientist is not an Author with a capital A: someone with a distinguishable style, with a vocabulary and a world-view of his or her own, but a person *ohne Eigenschaften* (without qualities) as it were (besides his or her professional academic qualifications). He or she tends to be fully replaceable. Foucault (1969/1994) thematised this as the “death” of the academic author. The experimental researchers, as co-authors

of academic papers, become replaceable as scientific discourse becomes fully standardised and cleansed of anything too personal. In reality, however, this is never fully realised. Already as a social psychologist, Diederik A. Stapel developed and maintained a style of his own. His (quite lively) papers reflect a recognisable stylistic signature. He evidently knew how to write and engaged his readers. His papers convey a *cupido scribendi*, a lust for writing. Already in this, Stapel may have been exceptional.

Precisely this radical anonymity of normal social science is reverted in the “discourse of the hysteric”, a type of discursivity which is blatantly subjective. In Stapel’s recent publications, the replaceable, anonymous subject of science has given way to a more “hysterical” position (in the Lacanian sense), due no doubt to the impact of the “shock wave” of the Stapel case on the individual micro-level, where the divided subject now emphatically speaks out as agent:

$$\begin{array}{c|c} \$ & S_1 \\ \hline a & S_2 \end{array}$$

Impassive, professional and self-contained objectivity now gives way to boisterous frankness, to an all-too-personal type of discourse, notably when it comes to challenging the establishment, the authorities (the recipients of the message:  $S_1$  in the upper-right position). A provocative gesture may already be discerned in Stapel’s decision to publish his personal account only a few days after the formal report by the three committees was distributed, as if *Derailment* is basically a reply, not in the sense that the author challenges or retorts the arguments and conclusions of the report, but in the sense that he publishes an account of the events that is fully his own and written in a completely different discursive mode. In the formal assessment, the voice of Stapel himself is barely audible,<sup>19</sup> but in *Derailment* as a case history, he speaks in his own voice. It is a text which emphatically bears his signature as a (born again) author.

But this confrontation between  $\$$  and  $S_1$  (above the bar) is only part of the story. Something more subtle is going on beneath the bar. According to Lacan, divided subjects ( $\$$ ) tend to ignore what is really fuelling their activities (a basic truth, which has nested itself at the reverse side of the Moebius ring). A pose of excessive cynicism, for instance, may actually obfuscate a disavowed fidelity to the quest for truth. Unwittingly, the knowledge gap, the knowledge deficit is still speaking out to him. Allegedly, Stapel has given up his quest for the “x effect”: the intractable target of his will to know as a social psychologist, but this object  $a$  (the missing link between findings and predictions) may nonetheless still haunt him, as an unfinished project, an unquenched desire ( $a$  now in the lower-left position). At the same time, it is clear that he began to look for the object  $a$  elsewhere, not in the restricted environment of

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<sup>19</sup>As indicated, his voice is audible only once, as far as I can tell, namely when he is quoted as having remarked that at a certain point his fraud became “ever crazier, faster and stranger” (p. 32).

social psychological experiments, but in literature and cinema as laboratories of the imagination (Stapel and Dautzenberg 2014; Dautzenberg and Stapel 2017).

This relapse into hysteria, this second adolescence, may constitute an intermezzo, in preparation for a second start, as Stapel recently embarked on a new career, as an expert in derailment management ( $S_2$  resurging in the lower-right position, as a by-product of the crisis), although on closer inspection this rather seems a parody of the very concept of expertise.<sup>20</sup>

As indicated, Stapel's biography follows a curve, beginning with a fascination for theatre, which becomes eclipsed by his conversion to scientific rationalism (social psychology, American style, grafted on a natural science methodology), so that theatre is now something to be studied rather than something to be performed (for instance: Utrecht train station as a socio-cultural "theatre"). But after his downfall, the theatrical dimension resurges, notably in the form of a fictitious collaborative theatre project, which apparently faltered, but which nonetheless resulted in an epistolary dialogue with co-author A.H.J. Dautzenberg, in whose work the dividing line between fact and fiction is consciously obfuscated. The extent to which the events reported in Dautzenberg's stories are fabricated or really happened (for instance: his decision to become a voluntary, Samaritan kidney donor) remains unclear, notably because of various contradictory statements about these events made by the author himself. Their joint publication bears the title *The Fiction Factory* (Stapel and Dautzenberg 2014). For Stapel, this project exemplifies a relapse into the theatrical absurdism of his youth. It is a conversion into what Sloterdijk (1983) refers to as the ancient strategy of cynicism.

Dautzenberg is an absurdist<sup>21</sup> author who made his debut with a collection of short stories entitled *Vogels met zwarte poten kun je niet vreten* ("you cannot stuff yourself with black-legged birds"). In 2011 he published a prize-winning book called *Samaritan*, about his decision to volunteer as a kidney donor,<sup>22</sup> but subsequently he published a short story in which he claimed that the story about his donorship was actually fictitious. In short, the confusing fluidity of the dividing line between fact and fiction is a key motif in his writing, and the author seems to be conducting experiments by making confessions which are later revoked. *Samaritan* is Dautzenberg's counterpart of *Derailment*, apparently a truthful autobiographical account which may nonetheless be fabricated and which functions as an experimental window into the socio-cultural theatre of the transplantation industry. Stories which may or may not be true are used as literary mousetraps to capture the latent convictions (prejudices, etc.) of the author's readership.

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<sup>20</sup> See for instance his website where he, albeit in a slightly ironical tone of voice, advertises himself as advisor on things like organisational change and dilemma analysis, or even as a kind of taxi driver with whom clients may discuss their existential problems, a chauffeur who is at the same time a kind of existential therapist [<http://diederikstapel.com/> consulted December 2016].

<sup>21</sup> [https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton\\_Dautzenberg](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton_Dautzenberg) [consulted December 2016].

<sup>22</sup> The kidney (present/absent, life-saving/intractable, foreign/intimate etc.) is the "object *a*" of transplantation medicine (Zwart 2014b).

In their unruly stream of letters to each other, the authors are bent on “celebrating” absurdism, and they explicitly opt for “derangement”, “nihilism” and “provocation” in their textual materials. Initially, the idea is to create a theatre production and their intention is to appear naked on stage, as swaggering show-offs (much like the provocative Cynics of the ancient school). And indeed, their epistles contain ample body talk, especially focussing on asses and dicks. Science as such is criticised because it has grown into a secular religion, a questionable effort to overcome chaos, absurdity and human deficits.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, science and religion are both regarded as “fiction factories”. According to the authors, the ivory tower of academic research has refashioned itself into a publication industry. In short, they raise a voice of protest against highly respected institutions ( $S_1$ ) in order to demolish self-serving illusions.

Although the literary quality of the work (basically a collection of free-floating, epistolary confessions of two slightly overweight males experiencing a mid-life crisis) may be questionable (I myself experienced the book as rather mediocre compared to *Derailment* and *Samaritan*), it is nonetheless an interesting document, precisely as a prototypical exemplification of what Lacan refers to as the hysteric's discourse. For *The Fiction Factory* does contain some intriguing passages. At a certain point, for instance, Stapel discusses the question whether the “why?” of his fraud can be satisfactorily explained on the basis of experimental psychology. From a psychological point of view, Stapel seems a perfectly normal person. Should a CT- or MRI-scan be made, nothing unusual about his brain would be detected (no object  $a$ , no  $x$  effect would suddenly light up on the screen). There will be no green stain or button somewhere in his brain where normal people have a red button. As a dyed-in-the-wool professional psychologist, he had filled in countless questionnaires in the course of his academic existence, had been tested multiple times, but nothing unusual or remarkable had ever been found. Stapel simply seems to be a perfectly normal person. Stapel's problem was of an existential nature: he could not cope with the idea of chaos and disorder. He really believed in science and his oeuvre is marked by a persistent fidelity to a truth event (Badiou 1988), namely September 11 1956, the birth of the social psychological paradigm, commemorated on the opening page of his inaugural lecture (2011). Because of this persistent fidelity to the quest for the object  $a$  (lower-left position) he could not accept that theory now clashes with reality. And therefore, in order to escape the unbearable tension between knowledge (the mass production of social psychological papers) and (dwindling) truth, he reverts into absurdist literature and theatre. He now looks back on his scientific career as a rationalistic intermezzo (university discourse as interregnum).

Another interesting section, psychoanalytically speaking, is Stapel's and Dautzenberg's discussion of Pinocchio. For Stapel, Pinocchio, the wooden doll produced from left-overs, is a reality born from desire (p. 57). His key feature is his nose, which becomes hard and suddenly grows into embarrassing proportions whenever he tells a lie, whenever he claims something to be present which is not, so

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. “Human existence is a perpetuum mobile of distressing lack” (Stapel 2016, p. 12).

that his nose is actually a kind of phallic lie detector or tangible conscience (p. 58).<sup>24</sup> From a Lacanian perspective it is interesting that Geppetto needed the piece of wood because one of the legs of the table was too short. A piece of wood that should be there was missing, there was a gap, and a replacement was therefore needed. But as soon as he strikes the piece of wood, so as to mould it into shape and to fabricate the missing piece (to make his furniture more robust), he suddenly hears a voice and discerns a gaze. The missing, intractable piece is the “object *a*” of wood carving, comparable to the “factor *x*” of social psychology, which was absent in reality, so that Stapel “fabricated” the missing piece so as to fill the disconcerting gap, so as to maintain his fidelity to his truth event. But instead of fitting smoothly into the picture, the object *a* proves a fairly recalcitrant entity, taking on a life of its own, speaking out against its fabricator, – precisely as in the case of Stapel.

That there is a connection with *Derailment* is emphasised by a quote from Albee in the beginning of the book, about the fictitious son, “fabricated” by George and Martha to cover up the painful domestic gap. But there is also a connection with Stapel’s most recent novel *Zuchten* (“sighing”) which contains a scene about a speaking, ventriloquist puppet. The narrator tries to deny the puppet’s existence, tries to tape the puppet’s mouth, but it keeps coming back to him shouting “It is all rubbish! Everything is meaningless!” By focussing on this puppet, however, Stapel’s (externalised and reified) object *a* comes into view, which is actively addressing the divided subject, as recipient ( $\$$  now in the upper-right position), exposing him to an inconvenient truth. But this means that we have already entered another mode of discourse, involving another clockwise quarter turn, taking us from the discourse of the hysteric into the discourse of the analyst.

## 11.8 Writing as a Practice of the Self: The Discourse of the Analyst

While university discourse gives the floor to the qualified, replaceable subject (the academic expert in the upper-left position), in the discourse of the analyst the qualified person ( $S_2$ ) is literally called into question, by someone who is “qualified”, but not in the usual (university discourse kind of) way (Lacan 1966, p. 794). Psychoanalysis is not a science, but rather a practice in which the *subjects of science* are questioned, not as carriers of knowledge ( $S_2$ ), but as craving and deflecting subjects ( $\$$ ). In comparison to the discourse of the hysteric, however, rather than simply allowing the craving/deflecting subject to take the floor so as to challenge and provoke the establishment (as happens in *The Fiction Factory* for instance), the craving subjects are *questioned*, and the question basically is: what is their desire, what is the object *a* (the object of desire) that is driving, haunting and addressing them, what is it that they *want*? The dynamical interaction between *a* and  $\$$  (rather than

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<sup>24</sup>Dautzenberg’s analysis focusses on the Walt Disney movie version rather than on the original story which, as Dautzenberg demonstrates, is full of subliminal Freudian symbolism.

between  $\$$  and  $S_1$ ) is now given the floor (occupying the upper-left and upper-right positions above the bar). The discourse of the hysteric had barred the subjects from assessing their desire. This relationship between subject ( $\$$ ) and object ( $a$ ) is captured by Lacan's matheme of desire ( $\$ \diamond a$ ) where the lozenge (an arrow pointing in both directions) indicates that the subject is not only focussed on (or even obsessed by) the object  $a$  (zooming in on it as it were), but is at the same time actively *drawn towards* this toxic and intoxicating target. As if the deflecting subject is actively addressed by the object  $a$  (as blinking figures on a computer screen for instance), so that this enigmatic object actually occupies the (upper-left) position of the agent:

|       |       |
|-------|-------|
| $a$   | $\$$  |
| $S_2$ | $S_1$ |

The object  $a$  takes the initiative and *draws* the recipient, the craving subject into action. Pinocchio (object  $a$ ) deflects the life of Geppetto ( $\$$ ), for instance, while the seductive nature of the “effect x” deflected Stapel from his initial course. Psychoanalysis aims to reconstruct this dynamics by following the *Fallgeschichte* with evenly-poised attention. The psychoanalytic reader is not interested in social psychology (for instance: in prejudice studies) as such, but rather in the question: what exactly is it that is drawing/deflecting the tormented subject into this apparently desperate trajectory.<sup>25</sup>

What is the difference between experimental social science (the field for which Stapel qualified until he *disqualified* himself) and psychoanalysis? In his inaugural lecture, Diederik A. Stapel (2001) defined social psychology as “the science of everyday life”, combining specificity with precision, a title which is reminiscent of one of Freud's publications, namely *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (*Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens* 1904/1941). In this book, Freud aims to demonstrate how minor, everyday instances of malfunctioning (forgetting names, memories or foreign words, slips of the tongue, reading errors, etc.) are symptomatic of unconscious complexes and inhibitions. Quite a few examples used by Freud involve ethnic prejudices and anti-Semitism, and this is comparable to social psychology as we have seen. For the prototypical social psychologist, the Mr. Hyde of European Caucasians is an anti-Semite (especially the ones who do not know this about themselves). According to Freud, psychologists such as Wilhelm Wundt cannot really explain *specific instances* of forgetfulness or mistakes. His laboratory knowledge fails to elucidate concrete examples taken from everyday life. In the case of psychoanalysis, however, whenever a specific mistake occurs, a dialogue will evolve, building on free associations, which is expected to disclose the inconvenient, obfuscated factor. Whereas social psychology aims at discovering general mechanisms,

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<sup>25</sup>“Desperado, why don't you come to your senses?”, to quote a well-known piece of *Eagles* lyrics (“These things that are pleasing you will hurt you... you only want the things that you can't get...”, etc.).

psychoanalysis focusses on the subject, who is haunted by idiosyncratic existential challenges.

In his inaugural lecture Stapel tries to move away from social psychology as a field of research focussed on general (generalisable) mechanisms (inaugurated by first-generation social psychologists on September 11, 1956, his truth event) and to establish a kind of neo-paradigm (social psychology 2.0), guided by what he refers to as the specificity principle. According to this principle, our responses are often triggered by highly unique and transient aspects of the situation. The question is how to conduct social psychological research (whose generalisations no longer seem to work) in such a way that it becomes sensitive to seemingly trivial, situational details? Stapel feels increasingly inhibited by the traditional social psychology paradigm (the legacy of the founding fathers). He is a qualified social psychologist who increasingly experiences the limitations of his own paradigm. But the question is whether social psychology will ever be able to achieve the level of microscopic specificity Stapel is after (which only seems to be realised in works of fiction, as well as in psychoanalytical case studies).

In his inaugural lecture, which basically strives to unleash a re-inauguration and revitalisation of his field, Stapel recalls the birth scene of cognitive social psychology in detail. It all happened during a (now famous) conference at MIT in Boston, where a series of seminal papers was presented, on – September 11 [sic] 1956: exactly 45 years before. Time seems right to call for a new paradigm shift, no longer focussed on the general principles of behaviour, but rather guided by the *specificity principle*. Why did Stapel's paradigm shift fail? Should he have deflected to psychoanalysis to make it work?

After his downfall, in the post-traumatic part of his oeuvre, the opening to psychoanalysis is finally made in the sense that he develops a therapeutic writing practice, meant as self-analysis and resulting first of all in *Derailment* as a *Fallgeschichte*. Stapel's dramatic exposure proves a liberating experience in the end, releasing him from his epistemological imprisonment within the confines of the classical paradigm. Unlike the report by the three committees discussed above, a psychoanalytic reading is not bent on detecting misconduct with the help of statistical devices. Rather, Stapel's case study challenges us to come to terms with the (potential) "fraudster within us all", as Crocker (2011, p. 151) phrases it.

The dialectical movement in *Derailment* can be represented as follows. Initially (first moment, M<sub>1</sub>) Stapel is interested in theatre and literature, in fiction, which at a certain point leads to a painful, but nonetheless decisive experience: I am *not* an actor, *not really*, because it will never evolve into a monomaniacal vocation, which should be the case if an actor wants to become successful, rather than mediocre. Therefore, he decides to shift his perspective and to *study* communication and interaction, rather than enacting it in a hands-on manner. Rather than *practicing* film, literature or theatre, he becomes interested in film and theatre *studies*, in media studies, as an instance of university *discourse*. This negation of Stapel's original vocation (M<sub>2</sub>) guides him into social psychology, the socio-pathology of everyday life. And yes, as is reflected both in his Jaspers Lecture (Stapel 2000) and in his Inaugural Lecture (Stapel 2001), this exposes him to an important, albeit frustrating

and eventually derailing experience, namely that social psychology (as an established paradigm) is unable to reach the level of specificity needed to comprehend everyday existence the way novels, plays and movies do. The contradiction resurges between the *specificity* of fiction and the *generality* of academic research ( $M_2$ ).

In order to reconcile the two, established social psychology must be *sublated* (in the Hegelian sense of the term *Aufheben*) by combining the experimental method with the “specificity principle”, so that social psychology becomes sensitive to the complexities, nuances and idiosyncrasies of everyday life. It would also entail a reconciliation of social psychology with the genres of the imagination practiced by Stapel during the pre-academic stage of his career. In other words the specificity principles aims to achieve a *negation of the negation*, a convergence of the quest for general cognitive mechanism (social psychology) with a radical openness to the transient theatre of everyday existence, bringing social psychology on a higher level of complexity ( $M_3$ ). But unfortunately, this third moment proves unreachable ( $M_2 \rightarrow | M_3$ ) so that his project of transforming (sublating) the paradigm falters.

The reconciliation of social psychological theory and everyday phenomena proves unattainable. More precisely, Stapel is unable to overcome the tension between reality as a *littered*, messy, disorderly environment and the mapping techniques of social psychology. He keeps looking for the causal factor  $x$  which allows us to address a problem by pushing a button, but this presupposes that the world is as makeable and modifiable as the behaviour of test animals in research facilities. While aiming to develop a level of specificity comparable to novelists or playwrights, Stapel continues to turn research subjects into lab rats in a labyrinth. But the human world proves too recalcitrant and transient to be captured in Stapel's mousetraps. This leads to discontent and stagnation ( $\$$ ). The publication factory falters. This crisis precedes his misconduct. Fabrication and falsification are desperate efforts of a craving subject to remain faithful to the logic of the established paradigm, so that the infringement could be seen as a desperate act of fidelity, committed in response to the fact that the social psychological *fact-fabricating factory* as such is faltering. But social psychology fails to realise a cleansing of reality, so that it is ironical that the normative trinity eventually calls for a “cleansing operation” to clean up the Stapelgate mess.

Could journal articles such as Stapel's *Science* paper (a fingered, fabricated story) be regarded as a piece of fiction, a Zola-like, literary experiment? This interpretation is negated by the decidedly *dichotomous* or even stereotypical style of thinking of Stapel's paper (*clean* versus *littered* environments, *prejudiced* versus *non-prejudiced* subjects, etc.), while novelists and playwrights tend to depict a greyer and more ambiguous ambiance. The stereotyping inherent in social psychology itself is a mental cleaning device for cleaning up the messy chaos of reality.

Stapel becomes a novelist only in his subsequent, post-traumatic effort to overcome the crisis, namely via writing *Derailment* as a “therapeutic” practice of the Self, an auto-pathography which at least partly allows him to overcome his *διασχίσθημεν* (Aristophanes), his *Spaltung* (as discussed in Chaps. 2 and 8), while being sufficiently “specific” to acknowledge reality's messiness. It is an act of apostasy, mirroring or counteracting Kouwer's classic, for whereas Kouwer's publication



exemplified the paradigm shift from “personism” to “situationism” (the Dutch version of the 1956 inaugural event), Stapel now moves from a situationist study of general mechanism back to a highly personal account whose singularity, concreteness and specificity is on a par with novels and movies. It is the true story of a fabrication. Thus, *Derailment* represents a shift from the imperative of knowledge production to a quest for truth. Rather than trying to “make the world more beautiful and predictable”, *Derailment* concurs with Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s final play, a severely criticised masterpiece which thematises the world primarily in terms of *garbage* (1975/1998; Stapel and Dautzenberg 2014, p. 185). The collision between the rational desire for order and the artistic acknowledgment of garbage is sutured via a “therapeutic” writing practice.

In *Sighing*, Stapel articulates an idiosyncratic experience, namely the sense that something (a particular organ?) has been removed from his body, that some intimate piece is suddenly missing, a partial object, psychoanalytically speaking, so that what is left is basically packaging. But the absent partial object suddenly resurges in an externalised form, namely as a ventriloquist puppet. Where Dautzenberg voluntarily donates a kidney, in Stapel’s case the extimate thing or object (both intimate and foreign, both familiar and intimidating, both me and not-me: Zwart 2017a) seems to have escaped from his scarred body spontaneously, acquiring a voice of its own. And the moment the duct-tape (that temporarily silenced the puppet) is removed, it ventriloquizes the absurdist credo (“I believe in and celebrate the ultimate absurdity of everything”). Stapel tries living on neuro-pharmaceuticals, as if the brain can be chemically modulated like a machine. But because the happiness-pill inevitably disappoints him, he commences his daily writing practice.

Both in *Derailment* and in *Sighing*, Stapel continues to refer to social psychological theories, but in a Bachtinian, heteroglossia-like context, because the *Fallgeschichte* stages collisions between multiple forms of discourse. Social psychology no longer represents a hegemonic position, translating the theatre of everyday life into its dichotomous schemes, like a mechanical word processor. *Derailment* is “a novel” about a person who at a certain point decides to opt for academia rather than theatre (Stapel and Dautzenberg 2014, p. 130) and who, like Musil, sees humans as “beings without qualities”, controlled by external incentives and moulded by their social environment. But his absurdist nihilism resurges when he fails to discover the beauty and order he is looking for (p. 132) and which allows him to produce fashionable academic papers; and therefore he derails. This denouement concurs with the dream scene where Stapel removes the mask of his social psychology persona. It was Kouwer, of course, who already argued that “life is a masquerade” (1963, p. 378). Contrary to what Jakob Böhme envisioned, this “tragic unmasking” does not expose the “valuable jewel” within (the intractable object *a* of personality theory), but rather empty nothingness. The mask was covering up a gap, a trough, a deficit (p. 379). In *Derailment*, social psychological expertise is suspended ( $S_2$  in the lower-left position), so that the focus shifts to the object *a* of social psychological research (*a* in the upper-left position), the missing entity “x”, frustrating the tormented subject ( $\$$  in the upper-right position). This results in the awareness

that there is no core Self and that the subject, as Lacan already argued (Chap. 2) is structured like a Möbius ring.

Stapel's misdemeanour concurs with the problem of the plagiarist as described by Kris: ironically, only *fabricated* data are publishable or worth publishing, meaningful, *significant*. This is the *negation* of social psychology as the *negation* of absurdism (the negation of the negation) which allows Stapel to develop a more sincere and revelatory style of writing, oriented towards ἀλήθεια rather than *adequatio*.

In his most recent book, Stapel (now using the signature "d.") compares two types of discourse on cinema, namely the scholarly writings of David Bordwell (representing contemporary university discourse in film studies) and those of his flamboyant antagonist Slavoj Žižek (wavering between the discourse of the analyst and the discourse of the hysteric). These types of discourse represent a "parallax" (p. 313), Stapel argues (borrowing the term from Žižek), for both open up important perspectives, although both perspectives remain impossible to converge into a comprehensive, overarching view. The pre-traumatic and post-traumatic parts of Stapel's oeuvre likewise represent reverse sides of a Moebius ring. From his position as a social psychologist, Stapel spiralled back into a more literary form of authorship, and the cover of his latest book announces that he is currently working on "three plays".

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