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## Chasing after wind? In conversation about vanity

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# Chasing After Wind?

## In Conversation about Vanity

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The word ‘vanity’ may evoke the image of a prophet stumbling out of the desert to decry that ‘all is vanity and a chasing after wind’. The *Etnofoor* issue on vanity was, in fact, inspired by a book published by Dutch anthropologist André Köbben, a one-time scholar of prophetic movements, and while Köbben remained an influential and public figure until his death in 2019, the fact that he published the book in his 93<sup>rd</sup> year – a rare feat! – inclines me to see him as a prophetic voice of wisdom warning against aberrant ways. And indeed, that appears to have been his mission with his final book on the role of vanity in academia (Köbben 2017), which singles out ten scholars, whose names even appear on the book cover, for their excessive self-regard. These scholars, all of them men, were mainly active in the social or behavioural sciences and neighbouring disciplines at the rank of full professor, but the

exact nature of their missteps varies from simply being pompous to being actively deceptive and fraudulent.

While we encounter some colourful language in the Vanity issue – the words ‘asshole’ and ‘wanker’ appear prominently on several pages – the agenda of contributors is not, in fact, score-settling, but empirical research through the lens of vanity. In my discussion, I relate contributions to each other, highlighting common themes and points of contact, but also exploring a significant difference in approach to the issue of vanity. I end by articulating my reservations about a cultural critique of vanity.

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## A digital bonfire of the vanities

I could not help but notice that the Vanity issue begins and ends with the digital. We start with a text to accompany Marije Peute and Annemarije Rus' film *Instawaardig*, which captures how two young Amsterdam-based women with sizeable Instagram followings live with the platform and its inducements to flaunt one's inner peacock. Peute and Rus' contribution is one of the first multimodal attempts at what Angèle Christin (2020) has called 'algorithmic ethnography', which seeks to develop contextual understandings of how algorithms shape culture and society beyond seeing them as overpowering vectors of normalisation. Against a growing strain in tech criticism that would see these two women as victims of 'the all-compelling algorithm' (Peute and Rus 2021: 18) manipulating their dopamine flows for the sake of maximising platform profits, the film shows how they actively develop an 'algorithmic imaginary' (Bucher 2017) and integrate the platform into diverse projects. At one point, the film cuts from Instagram's characteristic grid of images to a cabinet of curiosities mounted on the wall in one of the participants' homes, serving as a reminder that collecting, curating and displaying objects as a means of defining ourselves is something that predates social media and its algorithmic feeds.

The issue closes with Sjaak van der Geest's (2021) contribution, which follows Köbben's lead of tracing the play of vanity in the scholarly field itself. Van der Geest details some of the ways digital platforms such as ResearchGate and Academia.edu use what user experience (UX) researchers call 'dark patterns' – 'dirty tricks designers use to make people do stuff' – to appeal to

academics' thirst for recognition.<sup>1</sup> Through the use of 'vanity metrics', such as the ResearchGate Score, and constant 'nudges' to tend to our profiles flooding our inboxes, they draw academics in. The reason these kinds of predatory appeals work has not only to do with the desire for recognition that drives many academics, but also with the precarious employment situation and ongoing struggle over research funds we almost universally face and which can make or break careers. We can never escape the nagging question: what if this particular metric is the one that the reviewer of my next job or grant application deems indicative of my qualities?

My hunch is that it is not a coincidence that the digital bookends the Vanity issue, as the permeation of daily life by digital technologies has rekindled scholarly interest in forms and practices of self-display. There may be no better indicator of this than the rising star of Erving Goffman and his dramaturgical framework. Although curiously absent from the pages of this issue, Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) has become a go-to reference far beyond anthropology and sociology (see Boy and Uitermark forthcoming), driven by studies of online interaction in the years since mobile devices and social media helped fade the boundary between online and offline life, making the notion of a separate 'cyberspace' seem quaint. Networked cameras mean that we are potentially on display in more and more situations, and as a result almost all of life is turned into a front stage where we are compelled to embody a self and do the work of impression management. Of course, impression management is not to be equated with vanity; in fact, most impression management happens not out

of regard for one's ego ideal, but out of observance of the social order and its rules of decorum. Even so, it is true that social media are frequently – to use a Dutch coinage by Marieke van Dijk (quoted in Rogers 2018) – *opschepmedia* (media for bragging), since their ritual idiom is so closely tied to markers of status.

Peute and Rus, by portraying self-display as a strategic tool rather than mere navel-gazing, seek to de-moralise vanity. Van der Geest suggests that, while vanity in the academic field may breed anxiety and even bad scholarship, it may also play a more positive role in animating scholars' creative pursuits. The digital presentation of the self may be intense, but these scholars give us reason to believe it may also be fairly innocuous. To look at vanity therefore also means to look beyond it, to the social relations in which it plays out.

### Collective vanities

Three other contributions tie vanity not primarily to the self, its performance, ethical commitments or existential orientation, but to a collective level. Lynda Dematteo's (2021) analysis of the 'suit affair' in French politics understands vanity as a 'total social phenomenon' in which many dimensions of French political culture are interwoven. Following in the footsteps of Marcel Mauss (1990), Dematteo analyses the series of events that led to the downfall of François Fillon, who served as Prime Minister under Nicolas Sarkozy, as an interplay between institutions. In their interplay, these institutions, some of them dating back to the absolutist court, produce not mutual obligation and solidarity, as in Mauss' gift exchange, but resentment and discord.

Clearly, this is a more morally charged conception of vanity, seeing it at the root of rivalry and contempt.

Chris Farrell's (2021) contribution provides us with ethnographic insight into how Brexit can still be seen as a good idea, despite the – to put it mildly – bumpy road the UK has travelled, and continues to travel, on its way out of the European Union. Farrell's answer, wrought from interactions with elderly male residents in a post-industrial town in England's northeast, is that 'collective vanity' stands in the way of a more clear-eyed assessment of the Brexit project. Brexit supporters take offence at the insinuation that supporting Brexit might not have been a smart idea. The feeling of being insulted activates vanities relating to generation, masculinity, class, and especially nation. Discourses and performances of intelligence, already prominent in everyday interactions, form the repertoire through which they enact a vain politics of distinction that draws a boundary around acceptable forms of public expression. This fits hand in glove with the politics of indignation reverberating in the 'resonance machine' (Connolly 2005) made up of right-wing media and the sorts of local community spaces that Farrell's interlocutors frequent.

Andrew Dawson (2021) reflects on the rise of another form of collective vanity, namely 'epistemological vanity'. His article calls attention to the ways reflexivity – the foremost contribution of the post-modern turn to anthropology – can turn into a warrant for self-absorbed, even self-deluded, posturing. Drawing on his experiences teaching at the University of Melbourne, where a class on 'Self & Other' was informally renamed 'Let's Talk about Me 101', Dawson's exercise in 'meta-reflexivity' seeks to salvage

the potential of reflexivity for pedagogical practice. Reflexivity can be an excuse for self-centredness, but Dawson remains convinced that it can also direct our vision toward a cosmopolitan horizon. His discussion brings to mind a related debate on the practice of ethnography that adds a further wrinkle to the relationship between collective vanity and reflexivity. Kimberly Kay Hoang (2015) has discussed the uneven ways reflexivity on the part of ethnographers is rewarded. While white male ‘cowboy ethnographers’ are still frequently lauded for joining hard-to-reach populations and providing first-person accounts of their ethnographic journeys, ethnographers of colour working in similar settings are quickly discredited with accusations of engaging in self-indulgent ‘me-search’. This suggests that what Dawson calls epistemological vanity – that is, ‘inappropriate regard for one’s own self-reflection as enabling access to knowledge and truth’ (Dawson 2021: 74) – is especially pernicious for scholars who face heightened scrutiny on account of their age, gender, or racial identity, and are thus more likely to have their expertise questioned.

### All in vain?

Looking at these contributions together, one general observation I will hazard about these accounts is that vanity in relation to the self appears innocuous, while collective forms of vanity are linked to various social evils. In the first case, vanity is a mundane part of life; in the latter, vanity fuels rivalry, undermines public deliberation, and erodes expertise. The gap between these two conceptions is considerable.

Are both approaches to vanity equally viable? As van Roekel and Schut (2021: 8) state in the issue introduction, the move to de-moralise vanity is in line with common anthropological practice. Allowing readers to see the world through the eyes of those being studied is the discipline’s bread and butter, and that involves suspending one’s own values and preconceptions. However, the morally charged perspective also stands in a long tradition of critical cultural commentary in anthropology. Adopting collective vanity as a framework for cultural critique has much to recommend it, as several contributions to the Vanity issue show. For instance, Farrell is able to powerfully link the shifting tone in discussions in his field site to broader shifts in public culture.

It is instructive to compare collective vanity to an earlier tack of cultural critique with which it has some aspects in common. I am referring to Christopher Lasch’s (1979) influential cultural narcissism thesis. Since its publication over 40 years ago, it has been a frequent reference for cultural critics excoriating a pathological culture that revolves around the self and leaves little room for collective arrangements. Lasch’s thesis needs to be historicised in the context of backlash against the hard-won victories for women’s liberation. Lasch subsumed feminism under the various other pathologies he lamented, such as the decline of the family. My worry about a cultural critique that sets out from a concept of collective vanity is that it may set itself up to similarly caricature, pathologise and misrecognise present-day social and cultural developments.

Contributors to the Vanity issue steer clear of this danger, as they stick closely to ethnographic

case material, but a more encompassing narrative of collective vanity seeking to make sense of our digitally mediated present would almost inevitably step into such a trap. Arguably, such a narrative is already taking shape and framing public debates on youth, social movements and contemporary cultural transformations. One indicator is the career of the right-wing epithet ‘virtue signalling’, meant to discredit all activism as vainglory, which has entered the general lexicon of cultural commentary over the past few years. The term makes it possible to dismiss all concern for social justice as mere vain posturing. Such a form of cultural criticism turns into its opposite, because it fails to recognise hopeful developments, which often enter the stage of history in the vain guise of the oddball.

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## Notes

- 1 See Harry Brignull, <https://90percentofeverything.com/2010/07/08/dark-patterns-dirty-tricks-designers-use-to-make-people-do-stuff/>. Accessed on 8 November 2021.

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