

1

Transformations of the Public Intellectual

In order to provide a theoretical framework for the individual case studies presented in this book, this chapter offers a discussion of the concept of public intellectual and the contexts in which it has been used.

I am speaking like an intellectual, but the intellectual, to my mind, is more in touch with humanity than is the confident scientist, who patronizes the past, oversimplifies the present, and envisages a future where his leadership will be accepted. (E.M. Forster, 1972 [1946], p. 58)¹

Big thinker

On 27 April 2014 *The New York Times* published an article on Thomas Piketty's magnum opus *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) characterising the author as a celebrity intellectual whose stardom reflects the fashions and feelings of the moment.² The French economist Piketty, who graduated from the London School of Economics, worked at MIT and later became director of the French National Centre of Scientific Research in Paris, wrote in *Capital* an extensive study on the inequality of wealth and income. Clearly referring to Marx's *Das Kapital* from 1867, Piketty brings together historical narratives and big data from 20 countries in a readable book, the main thesis of which concerns the unequal accumulation and distribution of capital in our age, generating discontent and undermining democratic culture. The economist writes well, apart from being an academic, he also is a columnist for the newspaper *Liberation* and occasionally for *Le Monde*.

Piketty, according to *The New York Times*, is filling a void; he has written his book at the right time, capturing the *Zeitgeist* and personifying it in the right way. He is one of the two or three authors per decade who are receiving the intellectual *rock star* status, not (only) because of a grand idea or encouraging new argument, but rather because of their thesis and style of writing as well as their publicly performing the role of an intellectual. Piketty is fashionable, just like other public intellectuals were at the time: the 'curmudgeonly' Christopher Lash or the 'flamboyant philosopher-king' Allan Bloom.

Piketty's fame in the United States was immediately noted in Europe. *Liberation* published a piece with the headline 'Piketty, Superstar aux States' and remarked that the book sold better than *Game of Thrones*, although the author still preferred his modest Parisian bureau over an American university chair.³ *Die Welt*⁴ wrote about his success overseas, after which the article shifted to an in-depth analysis of the ideas on capitalist structures and the differences in various European countries. The prestigious Dutch publisher De Bezige Bij bought the rights for the translation of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* for an exceptional amount of money,⁵ after which television programmes, newspapers and weekly journals covered the book in critical articles.⁶

Big thinkers are intellectuals as superstars, triggering an audience that in our media-overloaded era is not so easily seduced. As a big thinker, Piketty knows how to achieve and maintain the attention of his readers, combining economy with cultural history, and theory with narrative. He brings us back to the *belle époque* described in the novels of Honoré de Balzac and Jane Austen in which the aristocracy, the bourgeois and the proletariat had their own fixed positions, his message being that in the twenty-first century we have not left behind this system of social inequality.

Piketty's urgent and provocative study contradicts the observation of *The New York Times* that the Internet and social media favour bite-size thought over grand theses and sharp insights over the belles-lettristic narratives, underlining that this is more the age of idea-savvy journalists rather than of scholars and intellectuals. It is this contradiction that will be investigated in this book, by exploring the hypothesis that the position of intellectuals today has changed, and that strategies of celebrity behaviour and the subsequent responses of the public are transforming the traditions and modes of intellectual thinking and writing. There still are intellectuals today, but as public speakers and writers they are operating on various platforms using multiple rhetorical strategies. Writing and thinking have become part of a wide-ranging public performance, often characterised by theatricality.

Piketty, 'the new Marx' and at the same time posing as the charming Frenchman, had his big event in the sold out Amsterdam pop temple *Paradiso* on Wednesday 5 November 2014, after having informed Dutch parliamentarians of his book earlier that day, something that marks a relevant activity of the public intellectual: to inform politicians who have no time at all for a further reflection on all the complex subjects they have to discuss and form a serious and persuasive opinion about. One of Piketty's statements that evening was that he believes in the power of books, that books can contribute to a better future.⁷ Evidently, the audience thought so too, since many of them could be observed with the thick *Capital* in their hands.

Characterisations of the public intellectual

The public intellectual intervenes in the public debate and proclaims a controversial and committed and sometimes compromised stance from a sideline position. He⁸ has critical knowledge and ideas, stimulates discussion and offers alternative scenarios in regard to topics of political, social and ethical nature, thus addressing non-specialist audiences on matters of general concern. Public intellectual intervention can take many different forms ranging from speeches and lectures to books, articles, manifestos, documentaries, television programmes and blogs and tweets on the Internet. Today's public intellectual operates in a media-saturated society and has to be visible in order to communicate to a broad public.

The terms 'intellectual' and 'public intellectual' have a long history, fuelled by theorists from different disciplines. The specific term 'intellectual' was coined after the Dreyfus affair in France at the end of the nineteenth century, and was used to point at a collection of novelists, artists, journalists, university professors and other cultural figures who felt it their moral responsibility and collective right to interfere with the political process. The *Dreyfusards* organised themselves in a group and put their signatures to a petition to mark their independent critical position underscoring the innocence of the Jewish military officer Alfred Dreyfus, who was sentenced to life imprisonment because of alleged treason. Although the term 'intellectual' as such was not used before the nineteenth century, theorists have emphasised that many writers since the Renaissance have been in the position of the intellectual, expressing a similar independent and critical view on political, social and ethical issues in the public sphere (Melzer et al., 2003; Lacroix and Nicolaïdis, 2010).

As is argued in this book, the recent addition of the term 'public' to intellectual, interchanging with 'celebrity' or 'media', points to the activities of translation, mediation and the popularisation of ideas, aimed at a wider outreach and communication. Significantly, the public intellectual sometimes makes compromises with regard to the intellectual content of ideas in order to address a larger audience. The *public intellectual* addresses an audience beyond intellectual peers, whereas the *intellectual* mainly interacts with other intellectuals (Baert and Shipman, 2013). 'Public' originally was an American, instead of a European addition, as we can read in Posner's *Public Intellectuals, A Study of Decline* (2004 [2001]) analysing public intellectuals as they appeared in the media in the United States in the period between 1995 and 2000. Posner emphasises that the terms mark the fact that the intellectual makes a serious contribution to the improvement of public communication. There is a strong need for that since the universities in the twentieth century have specialised too much and academics have become university specialists only and have lost interest in a general audience and public debate. Posner and others (Debray, 1981; Jacoby, 1987; Bauman, 1989 [1987]; Furedi, 2006) thus point to the decline of an academic intellectual impact in late modern societies. It is the assumption of this book, however, that public intellectuals today have a different position since they address the public, or fragmented counter-publics, while at the same time they have become part, and often consciously play to be a part, of the audiences themselves. The position from which the intellectual could present a general, independent, rational overview has definitely changed in our media society into a position from *within* the audience, which implies the managing of strategies of visibility, participation, critiquing and the bringing in of new ideas. The alleged decline of public intellectual intervention has more to do with a transformation of rhetorical strategies rather than with a lack of insight, courage or influence. Furthermore, we have to be aware of the 'knowledge transfer' that is becoming more and more of a default strategy of academics. European governments have made it an explicit agenda for public funding that writers and academics bring their work out of the academy and make it accessible and relevant to wider audiences. Before further elaborating on this, I will briefly take a route along definitions and characterisations in order to make clear in which sense the terms public intellectual are used here.

From the outset, the thinking about intellectuals was based on dichotomies. Almost all theorists place one type of intellectual in opposition to another. In 1927, the French critic Julien Benda was the first

to offer, in *The Treason of the Intellectuals* (2009 [1927]), quite a pessimistic perspective on the intellectual as 'clerk' rather than a 'traditional thinker'. The clerk was reacting out of impulses and passion, while the traditional thinker – *the* intellectual as such – was considered to be capable of making a rational analysis based on universal Enlightenment values.⁹ Benda argued that emotional response had become the ground of politics and disturbed a more contemplative critique, the result of which was nationalism and xenophobia.

We observe how in Benda's exposé a dichotomy is constructed, which is repeated in various discussions on public intellectuals at the end of the twentieth century. Michel Foucault (1980 [1972]) discusses general and specialist intellectuals, Antonio Gramsci (1971) introduces the traditional and organic intellectual, Zygmunt Bauman (1989 [1987]) categorises the legislator and interpreter. The change of accents in regard to these dichotomies is related to the alternation of cultural paradigms. Bauman for instance, distinguishes between intellectuals as 'legislators' representative for modernity, and as 'interpreters' representative for the era of post-modernity. The legislator – akin to Benda's traditional thinker – makes authoritative statements, underlining moral power and universal knowledge as the structural elements in a society, whereas the interpreter emphasises the different positions and perspectives, thus facilitating communication between diverse participants in a society.

No objective measurements can prove that someone *is* an intellectual, since the intentional meaning of being an intellectual is 'to rise above the partial preoccupation of one's own profession or artistic *genre* and engage with global issues of truth, judgement and taste of the time' (Bauman, 1989 [1987], p. 2). Yet, the intention of having something to say to an audience, of teaching it something, is only part of the story and does not instantaneously legitimise the intellectual position. As is argued in this book, we also have to consider and qualify the medium and style of writing, the visibility of the intellectual persona, the specific issue discussed, and the addressed public or the participants in the debate accepting (or not) the intellectual's authority. More than before, the current public intellectual is functioning in a media context that can amplify or devalue his position. The intellectual can become a 'collision point', as Paul Berman (2010) correctly observed in his book on Swiss intellectual Tariq Ramadan, implying that various audiences could project their own ideas upon the intellectual. The public intellectual thus becomes a sort of empty vessel for publics to inhabit with their own ideas. Ideas lead to responses, and these again to other reactions, while serious points can become more controversial once the discussion

is taking place and the media coverage on the Internet is getting faster and wider, and in a way is spinning out of control. Rumours and insinuations can turn polemics into nasty debates resulting in sceptical judgements and spectacle, in which intellectual assumption and rational arguments seem to have disappeared completely.

Rousseau, Diderot and Heinrich Heine can be considered as historical forerunners of public intellectuals. Thomas and Heinrich Mann, George Orwell, Czeslaw Milosz, Václav Havel, Simone de Beauvoir, and Hannah Arendt are twentieth-century ones. And today's public intellectuals are for example Timothy Garton Ash, Martin Amis, Jens Christian Grøndahl and Zadie Smith. But not only canonised writers, historians and philosophers are intellectuals; filmmakers (Werner Herzog, Heddy Honigmann, Bruno Ulmer), visual artists (Donald Rodney, Marlene Dumas), and journalists or television makers (Henryk Broder, Sabrina Guzzanti) can be considered public intellectuals as well, influencing the public debate with critical statements and provocative ideas expressed in cultural practices providing imaginary scenarios. And although public intellectuals might earlier have had their roots in the humanities, many of them today derive from the natural or technical sciences. An evolutionary theorist such as Richard Dawkins is a public intellectual, as is astrophysicist Stephen Hawking, just as are economist Milton Friedman making television documentaries, and Dutch scientist Robert Dijkgraaf doing 'academic' public lectures on television. Today's public intellectuals often appear on various platforms, accentuating that the public sphere is a space of differentiated discourses. They have their own circles and national habitat within Europe as well as elsewhere on the globe; in the United States, in Latin America and India, and even in China, where dissident writers as public intellectuals are making use of the Internet or Weibo (the Chinese Facebook/Twitter hybrid), critiquing the political authoritarian regime and pleading for an alternative social order.¹⁰ Traditions of thinking and writing are rooted in local and cultural contexts but often cross boundaries and attain global relevance.

Not everyone likes to identify as a public intellectual. Historian Stefan Collini argues in his outstanding *Absent Minds, Intellectuals in Britain* (2009 [2006]) that the denial of the existence of real intellectuals has always been a prominent aspect of national self-definition in Britain. The word intellectual evoked pretentiousness, arrogance and *hubris*. By presenting a careful historical analysis of the main debates in the past two centuries, however, Collini demonstrates that there definitely does exist an intellectual tradition in Britain. He distinguishes three senses of the noun intellectual as it is used in the United Kingdom: the

sociological sense, in which intellectuals are considered as those whose occupations are involved with ideas and not with practical issues; the *subjective* sense, having to do with an individual's attitude towards ideas, reflectiveness and truth-seeking; and the *cultural* sense, focusing on those individuals regarded as having an acknowledged intellectual position (Collini, 2009, pp. 46–7). Intellectuals with cultural authority have acquired a certain standing that provides them with the opportunity to address a wider public than that at which their occupational activity is aimed. A fourth, *political* sense, is not as clear in Britain as it is in France. In France *les intellectuels* are recognised by their attempt to constantly intervene in the political sphere. An example in this respect is the appeal by the French 'new philosopher' Bernard-Henri Lévy to free Libya from the Ghadaffi regime in the spring of 2011.

The cultural sense is the most relevant in the context of this book (as it was in Collini's), since the main focus will be on the public intellectual with a certain artistic prestige and writing career, who tries to convince an audience beyond his main readers or followers, and in doing so deliberately uses various media platforms, styles and genres. An example, to be discussed in the following chapter, is German literary author, H.M. Enzensberger, who has written poetry, novels and documentaries as well as the critical essay *Brussels, The Gentle Monster or the Disenfranchisement of Europe* (2011), and who is taken seriously as an authority on issues regarding the European Union. Enzensberger thus addresses people beyond his literary audience. His case confirms that there is no intellectual without his 'own' public, but also that an intellectual moulds himself on the basis of his idea or perception of the public. The interaction between the audience and the intellectual is fundamental when discussing the transformation of the public intellectual in the late modern public sphere.

We can draw a line of argument from Benda to Collini, based on the configuration of the intellectual as someone having cultural authority. The intellectual has knowledge and prestige, and addresses an audience while cultivating a position of detachment, that increases his awareness of the things going on. We have to go to Italy, again in the 1920s, to see the development of another line of argument, starting (once more) from the idea that there are two dichotomous categories of intellectuals, the traditional and the organic. This idea was introduced by the philologist Antonio Gramsci, who, during the 11 years of his imprisonment under Mussolini's fascist regime, wrote in *Prison Notebooks* (1926–37) that all men are intellectuals though not all of them have the function of intellectuals in society (Gramsci, 1971). He distinguished between

the traditional intellectual (the teacher, priest or literary writer ‘independent’ of a social class) and the organic intellectual (the organising and reflective element in a particular social class or group.) The organic intellectual criticises the claims of objectivity and performs the role of the spokesperson for a specific social group formulating interpretations of their identities, interests and needs. As such, Gramsci was the first to emphasise that organic intellectuals have an essentially mediating function, and thus the capacity to be an organiser of a group of individuals with effects on society in general.

Edward W. Said took up exactly this Gramscian idea in the Reith Lectures delivered on the BBC radio in 1993, and connected the concept of the organic intellectual to current practices of broadcasters, consultants, experts and mass journalists in Western societies. Everyone working in any media field associated with the production or the distribution of knowledge is, according to Said, an organic intellectual in giving voice to certain ideas and groups. All these different media participants have become members of a culture of critical discourse. As such, they are part of the audience they address, and this makes their authority self-evident but also more subjective. This organic or practical performance of the intellectual is also pointed at by Arthur M. Melzer (Melzer et al., 2003), defining the intellectual as a generalist, who has a vital concern for the application of ideas. In contrast to Benda’s traditional clerk, the public intellectual – it is here that the ‘public’ element is again significant – writes opinion pieces and magazine articles, his ‘practice’ being the deliberative balancing of opinions and analyses. The public intellectual is committed and takes a stand, and is *not* ‘the enlightened or intellectual statesman ... for he holds resolutely to a posture of detachment’ (Melzer et al., 2003, p. 4). Melzer’s ideas however, can be contrasted with the example of public intellectuals such as Václav Havel, the dissident absurdist playwright who after years of writing critical pieces, became the first president of post-communist Czechoslovakia, or Mario Vargas Llosa, critical opinion maker, writer and candidate for the presidency in Peru in 1990. As public intellectuals they also accepted a role in the political arena.

Cultural authority and popularisation

At this point, we are confronted with what can be considered the fascinating paradox in the discussion on public intellectual thinking and writing, connected to what Patrick Baert and Josh Booth (2012) have called the tensions within a set of contradictions when examining

intellectuals and their public engagement.¹¹ While the unique and defining characteristic of intellectuals is that they take a stand and deliver critique from either a universal (Benda) or a more private (Said) point of view, public intellectuals by the very fact of their having to present their ideas to a broader public are also forced to popularise ideas in order to make them accessible to the audience as well as attractive to the media. Public intellectual is not a modish term as Collini suggested (2009, p. 470) but it carries a specific connotation since public implies the translation and mediation of knowledge to the audience(s) to which the intellectual feels committed.

It was French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu,¹² who defined the intellectual as both 'a paradoxical being' and a 'bi-dimensional being'. In his view, the paradox involves the classical distinction between pure culture and political engagement. The intellectual grounds his authority and independence in the autonomous world of art or philosophy, but on the basis of his prestige he can also interfere in political life. The intellectual is a bi-dimensional being, because he has to fulfil two conditions: to belong to an autonomous intellectual field, while at the same time investing competence and authority in political action that is carried out outside that field. He reinforces autonomy from temporal powers and resists the temptation of withdrawing to the ivory tower for too long by creating institutions or mechanisms to interfere in politics in the name of a specific authority. The solution to the paradox lies in what Bourdieu provocatively calls a collective intellectual, that is: individuals, who, through research and participation on common subjects constitute a sort of ad hoc collective.¹³ Intellectuals should work together in defence of their specific interests and the protection of their independence. The present time, according to Bourdieu, seems to be calling for a conscious and organised mobilisation and cooperation of intellectuals. Hence, the paradox of the intellectual is that he is in fact sending a *double* message: leave me alone so that I can stay detached and autonomous, and let me create opportunities to engage in politics with other intellectuals.

Significantly, autonomy and independence, as Bourdieu argued, are threatened by journalism and its mundane criteria: legibility, topicality and novelty. The ability to come across well on television is considered a criterion of intellectual effectiveness. To Bourdieu this was unacceptable. In the third millennium, however, this situation has become even more strong and complex, since social media have opened many platforms for intellectual discussion and visibility, on which responding adequately and quickly is demanded. More requirements have to be

fulfilled by today's public intellectual, due to the variety and speed of the media debates. Detachment and autonomy do not seem adequate qualifications anymore. In this book, Bourdieu's pessimistic view on the participation of intellectuals in various media is confronted with a more optimistic perspective on the new opportunities and activities that are performed by public intellectuals, in online as well as offline environments. This concerns, as we will see, the philosopher using radio and television programmes to ask attention for specific topics and stances, as well as the literary author participating in a discussion on the Internet to defend democracy, the sociologist participating in a television satire, or the novelist promoting her popular fiction on Facebook and Pinterest while at the same time writing intellectual pieces in blogs on *The Guardian* website. No public intellectual today sticks to one genre or just one platform.

The role of the intellectual in a mediatised public sphere was also questioned by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who in his acceptance speech on receiving the *Bruno Kreisky Preis*¹⁴ spoke quite negatively about the position of intellectuals in the age of the Internet and television. In Habermas's view, intellectuals on television are more interested in self-promotion than in putting their knowledge to work for a public goal. He argues, in line with his famous dissertation *The Structural Transformation of The Public Sphere* (1991 [1962]), that intellectuals in the modern liberal society are supposed to influence the formation of opinions through rhetorically pungent arguments. In doing this, they depend on a responsive, alert and informed liberal-minded and well-educated audience. The ideal type of intellectual is supposed to take normative stances and express them in novel perspectives, and it is important that he resists the lures of power and remains an observer from the sideline. The intellectual is supposed to speak out only when current events are threatening to spin out of control – but then promptly, as an early warning system. This constitutes the most interesting characteristic that distinguishes intellectuals from other actors in the public sphere: 'an avant-gardistic instinct for relevances' (Habermas, 2009, p. 55). It is this notion that could help us to further gauge the paradox of the intellectual. The avant-gardistic instinct involves

- a mistrustful sensitivity to damage to the normative infrastructure of the polity;
- the anxious anticipation of threats to the mental resources of the shared political form of life;
- the sense for what is lacking and 'could be otherwise';

- the spark of imagination in conceiving of alternatives;
- a modicum of the courage required for polarising, provoking and pamphleteering. (Ibid., p. 55)

Sensitivity, anticipation, the thinking through of alternatives, imagination and courage are thus the main conditions for taking up the role of the public intellectual. The subsequent question then is, why Habermas considers these intellectual virtues as not applicable to television. The answer could be that his idea of the public sphere is still based on a modern and liberal society with clearly separated venues for rational discussion on the one hand, and pleasure on the other, while television obviously belongs to the sphere of late modernity in combining information and entertainment, seriousness and popularisation. Though Habermas is sensitive to the current societal changes, his perspective – at least in his Bruno Kreisky lecture from March 2006 – still is a modernist one, in particular when he points to the recalibration of communication from print and press to television and the Internet, resulting in an expansion of the public sphere in which the exchanges between the public and the intellectual become more intense and informal. The price to be paid for the increase in technological egalitarianism, Habermas argues, is a blurring of roles:

the horizontal and informal networking of communications diminishes the achievements of traditional public spheres. For the latter pool the attention of an anonymous and dispersed public within political communities for selected messages, so that the citizens can address the same critically filtered issues and contributions at the same time. (Ibid., p. 53)

Television and the Internet provide intellectuals with opportunities that were unavailable earlier, including the ability to reach a huge (trans) national audience, but the fact that these audiences can be reached does not mean that the public will be receptive to intellectual ideas and will accept the authority of intellectuals. Filters are lacking, and in consequence, according to Habermas, it is more problematic for the audience to decide upon the relevance of an opinion. Furthermore, the mixing of the rational discourse and self-promotion of the intellectual leads to a loss of differentiation and to the assimilation of public and private roles that the intellectual in a modern society consciously kept apart.

Bourdieu's and Habermas's rather nostalgic perspectives, I argue in this book, can be nuanced when taking a closer look at the various and

diverse strategies that are used in the media-saturated public sphere with interactive radio and television formats and the emergence of social media such as the Web 2.0 and the blogosphere. A new role of the public intellectual is created in late modern society, one not only funded on cultural authority and autonomy, or for that matter on rational argumentation and independence, but also influenced by a 'vertical engagement with the public' (Baert and Shipman, 2013, p. 44). This implies the acceptance by and persuasion of the audience(s), as well as participation in the sense that dialogues and responses emerge in two directions, from speaker to addressee and vice versa. The Habermasian bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has changed into several macro (transnational), meso (national) and micro (bottom up, small scale) public spheres as discursive spaces in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest. These public spheres coalesce around issues and self-images rather than around individuals gathering in a specific venue (McCallum, 2013, p. 170).

The celebritisation of the intellectual

The perspective on the self-promoting intellectual on television is a biased one, not paying enough attention to the new opportunities and complexities of the mediatised public sphere, and not applicable to all contributions by television makers, talk-show guests and invited 'experts' in the televised public debate. Being on television and speaking on behalf of different groups, values or ideas does not yet make one a public intellectual, but staying in the ivory tower and never appearing in public or on a screen certainly does not, while on the other hand, not every self-promoting celebrity or media star is a pinhead. To really grasp the diversity of the public sphere in regard to public intellectual roles, voices and positions, we have to consider media and celebrity studies with a focus on infotainment and the manufacturing of a *persona*, as well as on participating publics in the position of consumer or fan. What celebrity studies definitely also brings in, is a focus on the market in which public intellectuals are operating.

The celebrity concept serves as a discursive bridge between the social centre of the media and the everyday life of ordinary people, as Graeme Turner (2014) has argued. The celebrity is someone who is visible through the media and whose private life will attract great public interest. The celebrity is a person 'well-known for his well-knownness', while the self-fabrication is an intriguing process of various discursive regimes. Celebrities can be people from royal or aristocratic descent, but

also film stars, sports heroes, television personalities and even literary authors, who

create their prominence through publicity campaigns, interviews on talk shows, in-store book signings, personal appearances, feature articles in newspapers, press coverage of their private lives, entries in gossip columns, biographies, advertisements, and promotional gimmicks, as well as that whole other dimension of publicity that comes with their being taken up as serious writers within schools and universities (Ibid., p. 21).

Additionally, the literary celebrity, such as novelist Salman Rushdie, is at least partly produced by his own writing, Turner argues, and by mentioning this specific author it is immediately clear that the distinction between a celebrity and a public intellectual is fluid. Rushdie, after publishing *The Satanic Verses* (1988), became the symbol of the creative author silenced by an authoritarian conservative Muslim leader when Ayatollah Khomeini issued a Fatwa on him on 14 February 1989. Immediately, the author was protected and hidden in the English countryside, becoming the icon of freedom of speech and the autonomy of literary imagination, while opponents accused him of blasphemy. As a 'celebrity intellectual' Rushdie undoubtedly reached a larger public than just that of his readers, becoming a prominent personality, a 'hunted author' of a novel that 'became more than literature' as *Vanity Fair* puts it.¹⁵

In contemporary culture the production of an identity as celebrity intellectual is as much a performative practice as a mediated and marketed one (Turner, 2014; Marshall, 2006; Redmond, 2014). Social networks, microblogs and television formats confirm the presentation of a self as construction, a performance in which private and public phenomena are intermingled. The celebrity as well as the public intellectual is aware of his visibility on specific media platforms. It would be much too simplifying to state that the public intellectual offers knowledge to the general audience, while the celebrity offers entertainment. In today's public sphere, public intellectuals such as Salman Rushdie or French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy deliberately make use of celebrity strategies by displaying their private life and even intimate relationships in public, as such attracting more attention regarding the message they want to bring over. Rushdie's love affairs as well as Lévy's marriage to a famous French singer and television personality are decisive with regard to their visibility and authorial persona. Without the cameras

registering 'intimate' moments, their voice would not reach that far. In observing this, traditional claims to intellectual authority are obviously challenged; the celebrity-intellectual performance, indeed, is not only about books and ideas, but includes an orchestrated performance in interviews, clips, on blogs, and so on, prompting a response by the audiences. We have to be aware, though, that many traditional fellow intellectuals do not accept the celebrity's self-exposure as a serious one. Bourdieu openly turns away from Lévy's shallowness on television, as we will see in one of the coming chapters. This, of course, brings us back to the arguments of the declinists, and to Habermas's reproach that the intellectual on television is more focused on self-promotion rather than on keeping a critical distance.

In contrast, and to understand the zones and scales in which celebrity and intellectual roles are performed, we might think of film star Angelina Jolie, definitely a celebrity, playing out her private relationship with Brad Pitt with whom she has six children – we can know all the names and details from the tabloids – but who also postures herself as an engaged director when making the movie *In the Land of Blood and Honey* (2011) on mass rapes committed by Serbian forces during the war in Bosnia. *The Guardian* concluded that the film project was not just a vanity project, since Jolie has kept herself well in the background. The Hollywood star seems to be interested in (a particular topic of) European history and tries to make a serious movie about it while asking attention for the topic of violence and rape in times of conflict and war. Jolie also is involved in humanitarian work with the UN and with PSVI (Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative).¹⁶ In addition, another example of her contribution to the societal debate, marking the celebrity as hybrid figure, is the opinion piece Jolie published on 14 May 2013 in *The New York Times*. In 'My Medical Choice',¹⁷ she explains that she had a preventive double mastectomy. During three months of medical treatment she was able to keep this private, but in this opinion piece she wants to share her experience as an example to other women: 'I feel empowered that I made a strong choice that in no way diminishes my femininity'. So, the Hollywood star, representative of the glamorous entertainment industry, fashions herself as 'real person' in sending a brave personal message on a very difficult decision, and in doing this she tries to make women more aware of the risks and possibilities in regard to breast and ovarian cancer, realising that having a gene test done is for most of them too expensive.

The 'celebrity intellectual' is indeed a useful trope for examining the current status of the public intellectual whose credentials are often

academic or based on a writing career, but whose performances occur in an intellectual as well as a celebrity *zone* or configuration of the public sphere. Celebrity here serves as ‘an allegory of the triumph of mass commodity and mass consumption, readers, audiences, and fans’ (Jaffe and Goldman, 2010, p. 9), and offers an interpretative paradigm focusing on self-fashioning and theatricality as the negotiation of rational thinking, attention and life style. The celebrity or media intellectual thus becomes a blended construction, where status, appearance and discursive meaning shift depending on context, issue, style, and media specificity (Redmond, 2014). My point is that we have to nuance the idea of the public intellectual as only an *homme des lettres*, and realise that the persona of the intellectual never is a disembodied one, on the contrary, it is connected to visible individual features and manners. A shift towards the celebritisation of the public intellectual subsequently involves the configuration of physical, verbal, visual and aural signs. As Tania Lewis correctly observes in regard to the performances of art historian Robert Hughes appearing in an Australian television series: ‘it is the combination of his distinctive accent and voice, his large somewhat cumbersome body and his lively use of language that come together to produce the celebrity package that is Robert Hughes’ (Lewis, 2001, pp. 240–1). The same can be said of the appearances of Salman Rushdie, Bernard-Henri Lévy or Ayaan Hirsi Ali on television or YouTube clips; stylisation is part of their performance, and aesthetic effects are produced by the interplay of words and physical appearance, by behaviour, rhetoric and the very awareness of their visibility. Today’s public intellectual gains access to the media-enhanced public sphere only if he is capable of negotiating a visible outspokenness.

Literature in the late modern public sphere

The public intellectual in the cultural sense will be the main focus in this book, implying an interest in intellectuals with a certain *artistic* prestige and writing career, who by self-fashioning try to convince an audience and in doing so intentionally appear on various media platforms using a specific style and voice. Now that we have examined various notions of the concept of the public intellectual, what is to be discussed before going into several public intellectual case studies, is the nature and function of ‘literature’ as it is tied in with intellectual authorship. How important is it to consider texts as artistic, and is it necessary to make a distinction between literary writers and political authors or essayists? As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁸ the erosion of the

dominance of the autonomous writer as a consequence of the spread of the mass market and the increased commodification of literary products in the twentieth century (Marx, 2008 [2005]; Galow, 2011; Thompson, 2012) has become even more urgent because of the digitalisation and mediatisation of the public sphere. Authorship and readership have definitely changed in the past two decades and are more intertwined than ever before. New infrastructures of reading have emerged on fan sites and micro blogs, providing new discussion and encouraging the author to vent his opinion. Furthermore, the literary work is opened up by writers who depict and rethink social and political issues in their texts, and in doing so are interweaving aesthetic culture more and more with (items of) popular and politicised culture. The distinction of two forms of authorship, as made by Czech/French author Milan Kundera in *The Art of the Novel* (1986)¹⁹ is less convincing than three decades ago. Kundera argued that authors can take *various* positions; some take position as *writers*, others as *novelists*:

The writer has original ideas and a unique voice. He can employ any form (including that of the novel) and because everything he writes bears the mark of his thoughts, carried by his voice, it is part of his work. Rousseau, Goethe, Chateaubriand, Gide, Camus, Malraux. The novelist does not attach so much importance to his ideas. He is an explorer, busy feeling his way to unveil an unknown aspect of existence. He is not fascinated by his voice, but by a form he is after, seeking to make it his own, and it is only the forms that can meet the demands of his dreams that become part of his works. Fielding, Sterne, Flaubert, Proust, Faulkner, Céline. (1986, pp. 146–7)

The division in political writers and autonomous novelists ties in with the ideas of American philosopher Richard Rorty, who in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*²⁰ distinguishes between writers on autonomy and writers on justice. The former, the ironists, are primarily interested in the *private goals* of self-creation and re-description within the context of an acute awareness of the contingency of their belief system. The latter, the liberals, are primarily focused on the public goals of freedom, justice and solidarity. In the 1980s both Kundera and Rorty, thus, defined positions that today cannot be as sharply distinguished. In the third millennium we come across writers exploring moral dilemmas (such as Julian Barnes, Ian McEwan or Juli Zeh), writers creating extreme characters and scenes (Zadie Smith, Haruki Murakami), and writers posturing themselves in detailed realism (Michel Houellebecq, Karl Ove

Knausgaard). Moreover, many authors in the current public sphere take various positions on different platforms and *move* between the poles of autonomy and politics, and in doing this they perform specific roles as public intellectuals intending to have an impact in the public domain. Most writers discussed in this book write memoirs and essays, and often combine documentary and fiction within the same text. Because of the prestige earned in writing, these writers are regarded as authorities on topics beyond their written work. In addition, they clearly create a public persona to deal with specific social, ethical or political issues in the public sphere. As a consequence, the in- and outside of a literary text become blurred.

Let us briefly take the work of Dutch novelist Leon de Winter as an example here, later in this book we will see other illustrations of the construction of a persona and the fictionalisation of the self. On the one hand, De Winter is an outspoken neoconservative columnist and blogger with clear and provoking ideas on the upcoming anti-Semitism and anti-Israel tendencies. He is regularly invited to discuss these ideas on Dutch public television. On the other hand, De Winter describes himself, in a novel entitled *VSV* (2012), as the author-character Leon de Winter who is less brave and convinced and is depicted from the point of view of several characters as ‘a charlatan’ (De Winter, 2012, p. 23) and as ‘meek’ and ‘innocent’ (Ibid., p. 49). Many characters in this novel are based on real persons, more or less fictionalised, such as the character of filmmaker Theo van Gogh, who was murdered in Amsterdam in November 2004 by a Muslim fundamentalist. In the novel we follow Van Gogh after his death on his way in the underworld. As if in a Greek epic Van Gogh, a spirit after having left his mutilated body on the street in the Dutch capital, has to earn a good position in the afterlife by fulfilling ‘communication with the living’ (Ibid., pp. 22–3). Van Gogh has to communicate with Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Dutch politician with whom in reality he had made the film *Submission: Part 1* (to be discussed in one of the following chapters) as well as with the character Leon de Winter – who in real life was considered by Van Gogh as an opponent and arch-enemy. Thus, what we read is a novel intermingling fiction and reality, blurring real facts and made up things, and as such discussing ideas on politics in Dutch society at the start of the new millennium. The fascinating consequence of reading this novel is that we have to concern ourselves with a political context, and to rethink the issues regarding the Dutch multicultural society that the author in his novel brings to the fore. To put it differently: the author places us in the position of discussant rather than that of a reader of fiction.

In May 2011 a list of *Britain's top 300 intellectuals*,²¹ ranking public figures who were leading in the cultural discourse, was published by *The Guardian* and *The Observer*. It shows 25 categories of intellectuals²² of whom the biggest are 'Authors' and 'Journalist/editors'. This *hit parade* demonstrates that the cultural public debate is still very much a matter of text, in particular written text, though the written words are published on various public online as well as offline platforms, and are supported by images, performances, and responses on the particular persona of the author. The 54 authors and 61 journalist/editors are men and women of letters who establish, in one way or another, by using words and writing texts an 'active custodianship of cultural values' (Small, 2002). They live through the battle of ideas, and they take action by wording and (re)phrasing new ideas and perspectives. Most of the authors on the list are novelists as well as essayists (for example Umberto Eco, Salman Rushdie, Orhan Pamuk, Chinua Achebe, Zadie Smith, Hilary Mantel, Dorris Lessing, Ian McEwan, V.S Naipaul, Tim Parks, Julian Barnes, Martin Amis), often intermingling the genres, and they have earned cultural authority as canonised and honoured writers of literature. (Some of the categorised journalists have published popular novels or fictional documentaries as well, for example Ian Buruma and Robert Harris.) Could we conclude from a list like this one, that literature still is the main motor of public intellectual activity, and thus that society still follows Jean-Paul Sartre in 'placing the creative writer at the heart of the category of the intellectual' (Collini, 2009, p. 265)? Before answering this question, I will briefly elaborate on the nature and function of literature today.

Every few years or so, a study is published on what literature *is* and how we should use it and guard it.²³ One of the more readable ones, Marjorie Garber's *The Use and Abuse of Literature* (2011), can be taken as representative. The book aims to explain the specificity of literature and literary reading and underlines that literature asks questions instead of presenting answers. Garber disagrees with the idea that literature needs to be applied to the experiences of life, as well as with the idea (put forward by for instance Matthew Arnold or Martha C. Nussbaum) that it is a path to moral improvement. Garber sees two main threats leading to the current devaluation of literature: on the one side, hard science, technology and social science, on the other side, contemporary visual and musical culture, framed by moving images, file swapping, and the Internet. Literature is stuck between two poles, one defining literature as a potentially useful social enhancement for success in practical life, and the other leaving literature behind in favour of livelier, more supposedly

interactive cultural forms (Ibid., p. 14). Though her definition of literature is elastic, even Marx and Freud are considered literary authors, not only because they write well, but because they set up an argument, offer detours and counterexamples, and contradict and reverse themselves, Garber's neglect of the contemporary setting of literature in an infrastructure of markets, new media and globalisation is disappointing. In arguing that 'literature is always contemporary', she could have taken the transformation of the public sphere as effective on the conditions of literature as an assertive and interrogative text. Garber's stress on the 'impossibility of closure', that is a final meaning or interpretation of a text, needs recontextualisation; it is because literature is embedded in a more dynamic (digital and global) media environment, that we have to *rethink* the potential meaning of the literary text, and for that matter the position of author and reader.

There are two arguments involved here. First, the literary text as book (novel or volume of poetry but also many mixed genres) is part of a literary world that is evolving from elite to popular culture – a process that started already at the beginning of the twentieth century but that is rapidly proceeding today, due to new technologies and globalisation. A novel can become a bestseller, a film, or an item on a fan-fiction blog. Jim Collins (2010) gives the fascinating example of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992), first

a Booker Prize-winning example of Canadian postmodern fiction, (...) it also became a hugely successful film by Miramax, winning nine Oscars, including Best Picture of the Year in 1996, at which point it became the subject of an episode of *Seinfeld* and was later voted "Most Romantic Film of the Decade" by the readers of *Romance Times* magazine (the bible of the romance genre industry). (Collins, 2010, p. 3)

Collins underscores the redefinition of what literary reading means within the context of massive infrastructural changes, introducing new sets of players, locations, rituals and use values for reading literary fiction. We could add that not only the reading has changed, but evidently, also the writing, and thus the position of the author. Authors, defending a reputation, are more visible than before and, while obeying the market, have to present themselves consciously on stages, on television, in newspaper interviews, and so on. In consequence, they will be aware of the marketing effects of their performance, and most of them will even create a persona or *posture* in order to maximise this

performance to its best. The self-fashioning of the author outside the book is very much like the creation of a character in a book (Meizoz, 2007; Galow, 2011).

Second, since reading has become a more social and participatory experience (texts can transform into a fan response), and since authors play a recognisable role *outside* the text, we observe more levels in the literary field than previously experienced. And this, it can be argued, further complicates issues of genre and interpretation, and of style and voice, bringing fiction and narrative sincerity as more encouraging concepts to the forefront than 'autonomy' or the idea that literature possesses an inherent and transcendent value.

To come back now to the Sartrian question if literature still is the drive of public intellectual activity, we could answer affirmatively, while underscoring that literature is a lively and complex negotiation of text, author, reader and society. The main aim of this book is to show that authors performing the role of public intellectual discuss ideas and opinions regarding society, while using literary strategies and devices in and *beyond* the text as such. This implies that intellectuals are visible, that they create a persona (or different personas) – we will see in this book some cases of self-fashioning in extremis – and that they read the world as a book, interpreting it and offering alternative scenarios for understanding it. Referring once more to Habermas, authors as public intellectuals have an avant-gardistic instinct for relevances, as is shown by their sensitivity, anticipation, and imaginative power. A major line of argument in this book is that literature affords a set of strategies and devices for the communication of rational ideas. Literature is more than fiction or the volume of poetry, it is a broad and dynamic constellation of texts and responses and of flexible and exchangeable roles, performances and scenario's. The intriguing topic, as we will see, is that of authenticity related to integrity and responsibility. The public intellectual negotiates between rational thinking, posture and audience, and while his intention is to take responsibility in regard to certain issues, the outcome can be the compromising of intellectual content in order to persuade a broader public. Intellectual debates do have practical consequences and not always are just abstract or subversive.

How to study public intellectual activities and roles?

For more than two decades many studies on public intellectuals based on various methodological approaches have been published. Debray (1981) and Posner (2001) combined qualitative and quantitative

research on French and American public intellectuals, McLaughlin and Townsley (2011) did an empirical sociological study on American and Canadian public intellectuals, Charle (1986) and Sirinelli (1986) published empirical research on French elites intellectuals, Collini (2009 [2006]) offered an extensive book on British intellectuals from the perspective of cultural history, while other scholars have used more impressionistic, narrative and journalistic approaches (Said, 1996; Berman, 2010). In this book I will employ a flexible methodology for the analysis and comprehension of the various activities and roles of the public intellectual, thus making it possible to distinguish between intellectual repertoires and ideas, the visibility of the intellectual, the mediator function, and the responses of the publics. The model, so to say, helps us to examine and organise various activities and negotiations in the late modern public sphere, and points at the dynamic relationship between the public intellectual as role, the writing and debating as activities, and the audience(s) as responsive. By employing a four component frame (Table 1.1), we can demonstrate which themes and strategies are dominant in regard to certain cases of public intellectual performance.

Some notions in the model in Table 1.1 need further amplification. In the line of Stefan Collini, *cultural authority* or the intellectual profile of a writer mostly stands for the prestige based on an (academic) education or specialisation, but it can also refer to artistic achievements, to a body of work. Not every intellectual is an academic, but all of them are

Table 1.1 Heuristic four-level scheme for researching public intellectuals

Public Intellectual	
<i>Cultural Authority</i>	The PI has ideas, cultural authority and credentials, and the talent to give a broad, contestable, popularising and new perspective on issues of general concern.
<i>Social and Cultural Context</i>	The PI operates in a specific (trans)national, societal and economic context, which provides a narrative frame that is used as well as criticised.
<i>Mediated Context of Production and Reception</i>	The PI introduces an issue, using the appropriate media, and a particular rhetoric (style of arguing and framing).
<i>Aesthetic Performance and Theatricality</i>	The PI implements aesthetic features in text and performance, and consciously creates a persona in the media with an effect on audiences.

men of letters, meaning that they write and put their ideas into words (a scientist as well as a novelist has to do this in order to function as a public intellectual). Communicable knowledge is spread through different genres of public intellectual work: translating one's scholarly work into an insight that the general public can understand, or into politically inflected literary criticism, satire, documentary, and so on (Posner, 2004, p. 7). Criticism here implies taking an analytical or comparative perspective towards an issue, distancing oneself from the ongoing debate and as such establishing a corrective view (Collini, 2009, p. 61). The audience obviously has a role as well, in responding to and accepting or rejecting the ideas offered by the public intellectual.

Social and cultural context points at a complicated intertwining of private and public worlds, of the individual writing position and the specific (trans)national context, in which people debate and make decisions, and of the negotiation between writer and publisher or the ones in charge of a platform. The aim of the public intellectual's activity is to enhance critical discussion within a public sphere with a specific public or counter-public. This is a political aim, as Edward W. Said underscored: 'the moment you publish essays in a society you have entered political life; so if you want not to be political, do not write essays or speak out' (Said, 1996, p. 110). The intellectual often is part of a collaborative circle, from which he gets support, critical responses and critique as well as a certain visibility (Farrell, 2001; McLaughlin, 2008; Berman, 2010).

Mediated context of production and reception implies that the focus is on the words used in their social embedding. Every intellectual is aware of the rhetorical power of language, and knows that framing persuasive and effective speech, using or resisting *doxa* and stereotypes, and emphasising the sincerity of voice are crucial in bringing the message to the public. Thus, when examining the work and performances of a public intellectual, we have to analyse and consider meticulously the words, symbols, images and arguments used. There are different ways of addressing a public, and each decision on form, style and procedure carries effects with regard to the audiences reached and invited to respond. Public is, as Michael Warner (2005) has observed, a social imaginary, like 'nation' or 'market'. To address a public or to think of oneself as belonging to a public is to be or to create a certain kind of person, and 'to inhabit a certain kind of social world, to have at one's disposal certain media and genres, to be motivated by a certain normative horizon, and to speak within a certain language ideology' (Ibid., p. 10). The relation between intellectual and public always is one based on circulation; without a perceptive audience willing to accept normative stances there

is no public intellectual, and without the intellectual taking a stance there is no public debate.

The final level (without suggesting a hierarchy between them) that needs elaboration is *Aesthetics* or stylisation that ties in with the textual work as well as with the performance or visibility of the public intellectual. The way one presents oneself in words and images has consequences regarding the credibility, persuasiveness and attractiveness of the public intellectual. In offline as well as online environments the public intellectual has to be consciousness of what he represents, when, where and how. He always constructs a posture, a public persona connected to a particular social discourse (Meizoz, 2007, p. 15) but connected to his own experiences as well. Posner introduced the idea of the charismatic intellectual, and that is a concept of relevancy here. To be a truly effective public intellectual is 'a *charismatic* calling. It isn't primarily a matter of being intelligent and well informed and writing clearly, but of being able through force of rhetoric of the example of one's life (...) to make fresh, arresting, or heterodox ideas credible' (Posner, 2004, p. 85). The point is that there are 'aesthetic' devices involved in foregrounding one's life and making it representative for the lives of other people, and subsequently convincing in an intellectual argument.

Using this flexible four-level model for describing various showcases of public intellectual writing and performing, involves combining theories of life writing, literary criticism, general sociological perspectives, rhetorical analysis and media studies. Although each case discussed in this book is different from another – that is the work as such, the persona, the medium and the message, the circle in which someone operates, and the responses of the public – some elements and topics evidently are similar. The model is thus used as heuristic instrument and helps to focus on a dynamic public sphere in which several actors are intervening.

The structure of the book

In this book various case studies of public intellectual writing will be discussed. Each chapter can be treated as a self-contained textual analysis, but all parts were designed to communicate with one another and support a number of larger arguments that emerge over the course of the book. The second chapter provides an analysis of the work of prestigious German author H.M. Enzensberger, whom I consider the 'prototype' of a contemporary literary writer who performs the role of the European public intellectual. Enzensberger positions himself clearly in a

transnational context in which conflicting cultural, social and political issues can be observed and have to be thought through. He is very much aware of his role of criticaster and committed diplomat, his sharp questioning always provides answers, whether or not the audience accepts them as such. His work is encouraging in that it intermingles facts and ideas, representation and imagination, history and the present, and always encourages a serious analysis of democratic culture.

The work of two female authors, Dubravka Ugresić and Slavenka Drakulić, will be discussed in the third chapter. They were both born in the former Yugoslavia, and have built up their careers in the Netherlands and Sweden respectively. Their oeuvres consist of various text genres in which critical ideas and opinions on current societal and political issues are expressed. The main focus of this chapter is on how different voices are encapsulated in the texts: there is the voice of the author writing fiction, the voice of a citizen from a lost nation, the voice of the European East-West traveller, the voices of witness and perpetrator, and the personal voice criticising nationalist tendencies.

In the fourth chapter I will explore the public performances and posture of Bernard-Henri Lévy, a French celebrity philosopher and activist. He was politically active in Sarajevo in the 1990s, and in Libya during the North-African spring revolutions. He has written essays and pamphlets on this political occasion and is an ardent blogger on the *Huffington Post*. Lévy's texts and performances will be analysed and a particular focus will be on his activities in Libya in 2011 as described in his political memoir. Subsequently in Chapter 5, we will discuss the work and performances of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, born in Somalia, who developed from a Dutch single-issue politician to a global celebrity intellectual and dissident. Hirsi Ali's intellectual position is based on political activism focusing on the issue of women in Islam. She has written two autobiographies in which she combines detailed description of her personal life with opinion making and fictionalisation. Interestingly, the two life narratives offer different portraits of a former asylum seeker, who started out as a liberal Dutch politician, later to become a member of a prestigious American conservative *think tank*.

Two intellectuals from Brussels, David van Reybrouck and Geert van Istendael, are introduced in Chapter 6, in particular in the context of the current status of democracy. Belgium affairs and solutions are taken as example for Europe. Chapter 7, then, will consider the case of Hamad Abdel-Samad in his role as German television maker. In a satirical television programme Abdel-Samad goes 'on safari' in Germany and Europe together with Jewish intellectual Henryk M. Broder, and discusses

provocative issues of integration. The final chapter zooms in on the work of Elif Shafak, a female author born from Turkish parents. She writes popular fiction, building on a post-feminist discourse and criticising as well as playing with the issue of gender equality. She enjoys international critical acclaim and media visibility, and she regularly contributes to *The Guardian* as a columnist on Turkish politics and social issues. Shafak typically is a transnational author, establishing the bridge between cultures and national identities.

If we take H.M. Enzensberger in the first chapter as typical of the *man of letters* in offline media and canonised literature, we can take Shafak as exemplary of the contemporary author visible on social media and the Internet and deliberately crossing borders of high-brow and low-brow literature, and of online and offline forums, as such reaching for a broader (and probably also younger) audience. The claim is that both authors in their roles as public intellectual have an impact on the public debate and contribute to a critical democratic public sphere.