

7 “High Culture at Street Level”

Oslo’s *Ibsen Sitat* and the Ethos of Egalitarian Nationalism

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Preamble

According to Anderson (2006 [1983]), the slow decline of sacral monarchy and the rise of nationalism in Western Europe in the seventeenth century generally had a democratizing effect. The rise of print capitalism and the strengthening of state languages in the eighteenth century led to the proliferation of novels and newspapers as new forms of imaginary for representing national imagined communities (24–25). In nineteenth-century European states, the old-time feudal hierarchies dependent on religious communities and dynastic realms gave way to structures dominated by the bureaucratic middle classes, commercial and industrial bourgeoisies, and the middle-class component of the officer corps (75–76). Literacy was on the rise, and the print market grew to include the old and new ruling classes, mid- and lower-ranking officials, professionals, and the bourgeoisies (76). How much the urban and rural masses participated in the reading culture varied greatly, but the increase in literacy tended to foster popular support for the imagined national communities (78–80). Having said that, nationalism, and the modernist project more broadly, created new centres of power, inequalities, and served specific class interests (Heller 2013, 18–21). Likewise, with regard to print culture, Bauman and Briggs (2003, 221) assert that “[t]he act of reading the daily newspaper ... often excluded or marginalized women, children, the poor, and people who have enjoyed less access to education.” More recently, in post-1989 discourses on post-Cold War transition to democracy, a tension was created between the pursuit of democratization, under the guise of “civil society,” and the pursuit of economic development (Calhoun 2007, 78–79). Yet, as Calhoun suggests, nation-states “remain the highest level of institutional structure at which programs of democratization themselves can consistently be advanced” (80). It is in this spirit that we set out to examine the semiotics of a literary-national monument, *Ibsen Sitat*, in Oslo, Norway, as an attempt by a Western democratic state to project the idea of egalitarianism to its citizens.

Introduction: A Literary Monument at Street Level

The aim of our chapter is to examine the semiotics of a linguistic object, a literary monument, in the production of an egalitarian ethos in the nation-building context. We focus on *Ibsen Sitat*, a typographical installation (Saccani 2013) embedded in the pavement in Oslo's city centre (Figure 7.1).¹ According to the Visit Oslo website, the artwork is a collection of sixty-nine

Henrik Ibsen quotes in stainless steel that have been placed on the sidewalks of Oslo. The quotes follow the route of Ibsen's daily walk from his home in Arbins gate, along Henrik Ibsens gate, and up Karl Johans gate to the Grand Café, where he used to eat lunch every day.²

The monument was designed by the artists Ingrid Falk and Gustavo Aguerre, also known as the FA+ collective (Figure 7.2). It was installed in 2006 (the centenary of Ibsen's death) and was modelled on FA+'s previous piece, *Strindbergs Citat*, created in Stockholm in 1994 (see Saccani 2013, 116–123). As stated by both artists, the quotations were selected by school pupils and other members of the public, including the homeless.³ Several maps of the monument's location in bronze relief are placed at eye level alongside the route, each accompanied by a trilingual text – Norwegian, English, and Braille – accounting for a different episode from Ibsen's biography (Figures 7.3 and 7.4). Other than this, the monument – a collection



Figure 7.1: *Ibsen Sitat* (detail).



Figure 7.2: *Ibsen Sitat* (title and artists' names).



Figure 7.3: *Ibsen Sitat* (map).



Figure 7.4: *Ibsen Sitat* (map, close-up).

of quotations in Dano-Norwegian, the language in which Ibsen wrote his plays – is resolutely monolingual and intentionally so. As Aguerre states, “this is a piece for the local people ... we wanted the people to understand, not to guess.” Therefore, in a narrow sense, its audience design (Bell 1984) is quite limited. However, we believe that the installation needs to be considered as something more than a list of isolated monolingual quotations. Rather, it is a spectacle of Norwegian national literary language, hence an emblem of Norwegian nationalism. This is why we do not attempt any form of close linguistic, literary, or content analysis of the installation. Rather, we consider it as a piece of visual art and thus “language to be looked at” (Kotz 2007, 2).

Monuments tend to conjure up images of elevated and imposing structures that dominate public spaces (Lefebvre and Régulier 1996 [1984], 237).⁴ Since ancient times, some of the most commanding architectural structures have been covered with commemorative or celebratory inscriptions, typically exuding power and triggering awe and wonder (e.g., Coulmas 2009; Eastmond 2015; Petrucci (1993 [1980])). Recently, regenerating city centres, water fronts, and commemorative spaces have seen a proliferation of monuments with a different orientation to the viewer. Many are positioned at ground level, so that the viewer is able to engage with the represented person or object on an equal footing or even from the position of superiority if the sculpture requires the viewer to look down, for example when the figure is that of a seated person on a bench (see Abousnoug and

Machin 2013, 43). Numerous contemporary public art projects take the form of text-based sculptures (Gonçalves 2018; Jaworski 2015), or “letter-scapes” (Saccani 2013). Hence, in this chapter we are primarily concerned with the meaning potential of *Ibsen Sitat* with regard to its placement, design, and materiality, in particular, in the context of the semiotics of verticality.

In their analysis of signage in the International Finance Centre (IFC), a commercial, business, transportation, and residential complex in Hong Kong, Lam and Graddol (2017) draw our attention to the semiotics of verticality. The authors argue that spatial analysis needs to take into account verticality due to the close connection between architectural verticality and height above and below the ground with status, power, and social hierarchy (Graham 2016, loc. 467). This needs to be combined with a functional analysis of space and its discursive framing, for example by displayed symbolic and material discourse (Lam and Graddol 2017, 527–528). Lam and Graddol demonstrate how IFC’s vertically arranged spatiality and styling manage the access and flow of people in the complex in a socio-economically stratified manner. The lowest (underground) levels, which are dominated by public transport routes and termini, convenience stores, and fast-food restaurants, are accessible to all but dominated by less affluent commuters and consumers; higher levels, which feature expensive shops, restaurants, and hotel and residential complexes, are typically patronized by affluent shoppers and diners, both tourists and locals; the highest levels of the towers dominating the complex have highly restricted access and are the preserve of people with greatest wealth, power, and privilege. These differences are reinforced by the choice of languages on signage and their pragmatic functions (Williams and Lanza 2016). Displayed language in the downstairs areas tends towards instrumental and regulatory usage, while in the upstairs areas it tends towards the symbolic and emblematic (Lam and Graddol 2017, 541).

How then can Henrik Ibsen’s writing, an emblem of Norwegian literature and identity, be apparently shunned through its allocation to “the messy realities of the street-level” (Graham 2016, loc. 3404, following de Certeau 1984, 92)? We propose to resolve this apparent paradox by shifting away from the one-sided and often contested view of verticality as *only* and *always* linking power, prestige, or prominence with height (Allan 2018, 265–266). While height is certainly an important semiotic of power (see below), two-dimensional, flat spatiality also embodies social hierarchy. In this regard, Kress and Van Leeuwen have noted the privileged role of the centre in visual images. They build on Arnheim’s (1982, 73) argument that in visual compositions, centrality, which is not to be reduced to the geometrical middle, is associated with domination, hierarchy, power, and permanence, so that the imagery presented in the centre of images establishes it as “the nucleus of the information on which all the other elements are in some sense subservient” (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996, 206).

Following that logic, embedding the 4,011 stainless-steel letters that make up *Ibsen Sitat* in the pavement of Oslo's main street, Karl Johans gate, bestows the work with instant gravitas. This emplacement of the installation, that is, its position in the material world (Scollon and Wong Scollon 2003, 142), could not be more prominent. Not only is it displayed on the city's grand thoroughfare, it is also surrounded by the capital's "iconic" buildings, such as the Royal Castle, the National Theatre, the National Library, the National Gallery, Stortinget (the seat of the Norwegian National Assembly), the University of Oslo's Faculty of Law, the Grand Hotel, and the Ibsen Museum, the playwright's former home. To the east, the area morphs into Oslo's central commercial district with numerous "flagship" stores of Norwegian and international retailers. Many of these grand and imposing buildings have staffs at their rooftops with Norwegian flags, making the flags, in contrast to *Ibsen Sitat*, the highest points of the cityscape in the area (Figures 7.5 and 7.6). The contrast between the ground-level emplacement of *Ibsen Sitat* and the elevation of Norwegian flags on state buildings is one of the principal concerns of this chapter.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. In the next section we outline our mixed-methodological approach for this study. We then review links between the national literary canon, monuments, and nation building. Next, we outline the elements of the social semiotic toolbox for analysing three-dimensional objects. In the penultimate section, we compare and contrast the semiotics of *Ibsen Sitat*'s placement at ground level with



Figure 7.5: Oslo's Karl Johans gate, Stortinget (Norwegian Parliament).



Figure 7.6: Oslo’s Karl Johans gate, view towards The Royal Palace.

the elevated aspect of national flags on the surrounding buildings, and we discuss the meaning potentials of the monument in terms of its design and material affordances. The final section concludes the chapter with a concise restatement of our main argument and a brief reflection on the significance of the monument’s materialization and display of writing.

Mixed-Methodological Approaches of Street-Level Art

Anyone who sets foot on Oslo’s Karl Johans gate is inevitably bound to be confronted with *Ibsen Sitat*. Whether staring down at its matte composition or viewing its shiny quotations from afar, its location, compositional elements, and materiality make the piece a striking spectacle to be visually consumed by most pedestrians. At least these were our first impressions. At the time of our data collection in April 2019, Kellie had been living and working in Oslo for over two years. She had come across, walked across, and gazed or stared at these quotations countless times. Every time she was with visitors to the city, they always stopped to look down at the emblematic display. Questions that continued to emerge – What did it all mean? Why was it on the sidewalk? – ultimately prompted this project, which draws on a mixed-methodological approach. We drew on an array of data resources, including images captured by Adam; interviews with the artists, Ingrid Falk and Gustavo Aguerre, conducted by Kellie; media discourse regarding

the installation from several national Norwegian newspapers; as well as a handful of semi-structured sociolinguistic interviews with passers-by from mixed national, cultural, and sociolinguistic backgrounds. For the purpose of this chapter, we focus primarily on the semiotic analysis of the installation. Throughout the chapter, we also incorporate extracts from the artists themselves in order to give voice to their ideas about the artwork and the decisions they made about its emplacement, materiality, and layout, which we believe provides a richer analysis of the monument's purpose and overall interpretation.

Literary-Dependent Culture, Monuments, and Banal Nationalism

Ibsen Sitat combines two important elements in the process of Norwegian nation building: the celebration of Norwegian literature and its emblematic display in the form of a public monument. The creation and celebration of national languages and national literary canons has been an important part of nation-building projects across the world, with writers, grammarians, linguists, and other intellectuals playing an important role in building “symbolic nations” (Casanova 2004, 195) or “national imagined communities” (Anderson 2006 [1983], 67–82; Woldemariam and Lanza 2015). “Literary-dependent culture” has become a basis for the emergence of nations as more or less territorially compact, industrial societies, providing citizens with a source of their shared identity and a point of reference for their loyalty (Gellner 1983, 63, 86), including in transnational contexts (Lanza and Svendsen 2007).

Another important development in the nation-building process has been the construction of monuments, statues, and memorials. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European capital cities bolstered their self-images through ostentatious building projects worthy of new nations and aimed to outshine their competitors. In Rome, for example, in the effort to match the grandeur of Paris, the assertion of national pride and gravitas included the construction of a massive Victor Emmanuel Monument in 1911. In Berlin, the unification of Germany resulted in a large number of massive construction projects, including the Column of Victory. The Eiffel Tower in Paris as well as the Washington Memorial and Lincoln Monument in Washington, DC, are just a few more examples dating back to the same period (Cannadine 1983, 126–127). However, monuments were also erected outside of capital cities. From the late 1860s, a large number of statues of Marianne as well as various male notables and politicians, ranging from modest busts to full-figure statues of varying sizes, were built all across France, tracing “the grass roots of the Republic ... and [demonstrating] links between the voters and the nation” (Hobsbawm, 1983: 272), suggesting that the egalitarian ethos, however

questionable, has been a driving force behind the construction of monuments for some time.

As sculptural and architectural landmarks, monuments draw attention to specific places or events and create symbolic landscapes of power and collective identities, most notably national ones (e.g., Hobsbawm 1995; Osborne 2001; Blackwood and Macalister 2019). They are repositories and anchors of memory (Zelizer 1995, 232), although, despite their apparent durability, their permanence is not absolute (Huysen 1994, 250). They often become sites of contestation, protest, and formation of counter-memories (Sturken 1997; Young 1993; see Szpunar 2010, 381, for a useful overview). Typically associated with immense, elevated statues of heroic masculinity, monuments have been referred to as “an open-air museum of national history as seen through great men” (Hobsbawm 1995, 13, cited in Osborne 2001, n.p.), though questions, concerns, and critiques about statues of women remain a pertinent contemporary issue (Furse 2017; Hauser 2018; Abousnougga and Machin 2013, ch. 7).

Sculptural and architectural landmarks establish specific spatial and temporal narratives for public consumption. Statues and monuments work performatively in tandem with other symbols circulating in public space and within state institutions: flags, anthems, currency, literary canons, national parliaments, museums, archives, libraries, theatres, and much more. In his study of German cultural memory, Koshar (2000, 9) considers architectural landmarks and monuments, together with street names, public squares, historic sites, city skylines, and natural landscapes, a part of the nation’s “memory landscape” (*Erinnerungslandschaft*), with some monuments, such as Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate, holding particularly strong resonance with vast numbers of people.

Following Billig’s notion of banal nationalism, we see capital cityscapes, with all their architectural and symbolic resources of nation building, as backdrops for a “form of life which is daily lived in a world of nation-states” (Billig 1995, 68). In contrast to the spectacular celebrations of national holidays, thanksgiving days, coronations, and other commemorative events that disrupt daily routines (Billig 1995, 45), for the most part state buildings and monuments, despite their grandeur, remain largely unacknowledged or, as asserted by Wells (2007, 137), “simply left in place, ignored, and disregarded like some latter-day Ozymandias, [a]waiting a moment, an anniversary perhaps, when they may be brought back into a line of vision.” Or, to quote Billig’s well-known sentiment, “the metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building” (8). Thus, while on a daily basis *Ibsen Sitat* remains an understated presence, it is co-present, if made invisible by the walking crowds, in more extravagant events on special occasions, such as the Norwegian Constitution Day (*Grunnlovsdagen*), when Karl Johans gate becomes a site

of fervent celebrations “with school units and massed bands under a sea of flags” (Elgenius 2011, 112).

Three-Dimensional Semiotics

In their discussion of the semiotics of three-dimensionality, Kress and Van Leeuwen note that unlike with two-dimensional objects, the third dimension creates “a relation between the representational structure and the position of the viewer” (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996, 248). Though not always possible in practice, depending on their placement, three-dimensional sculptures can, at least potentially, be seen from different angles. If permitted by their dimensions and placement, sculptures can be scaled by viewers, as is often the case with tourists standing next to Edwin Landseer’s four monumental lions surrounding Nelson’s Column in London’s Trafalgar Square or next to *I amsterdam*, the erstwhile place name sculpture in Amsterdam (Jaworski and Lee forthc.). In this position, the viewer not only reduces any symbolic distance between self and the represented object but also asserts a degree of symbolic power over it. This is uncommon with regard to objects of “high art.” In their section on “interactive viewing,” Kress and Van Leeuwen state:

In principle the viewer can decide whether to see the object from close up or from distance, frontally (hence with “involvement”) or from an oblique angle (hence with “detachment”), from above (hence from a position of power over the object) or from below (hence from a position in which the object has power over the viewer). We say “in principle”, because here too the viewer’s choice may be restricted by external factors, by barriers that prevent viewers from coming up close or seeing the object from a different angle. And large objects can make the high-angle viewpoint and the close distance impossible. What towers over us has, by design, power over us, and is, by design, socially distant: the vertical dimension is the dimension of power and reverential distance, the dimension of “highly placed” people, places and things. In this connection it is also significant that sculptures, as works of “high art”, cannot usually be approached from the most intimate distance, the distance that makes touching possible: as soon as the gallery visitor comes too close, a guard will become alert.

(Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996, 254–255)

In the above quote, Kress and Van Leeuwen link the placement of objects over the viewer as socially dominating (Lam and Graddol 2017). They associate this placement with objects of high art, which are expected to be viewed with admiration and respect. In this general framework (see also Van Leeuwen 2005, 204, 210–215), verticality is metaphorically and experientially associated with power, prestige, and prominence. As far as the

information value of top and bottom is concerned, the upper part is presented as the *ideal*, and what is placed at the bottom is presented as the *real*. As Kress and Van Leeuwen explain,

[f]or something to be ideal means that it is presented as the idealized or generalized essence of the information, hence also as its, ostensibly, most salient part. The Real [*sic*] is then opposed to this in that it presents more specific information (e.g., details), more “down-to-earth” information ... or more practical information. (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996, 193–194)

Yet, despite the high symbolic and material value associated with elevated places, excessive elevation may be morally suspect as too ethereal or aloof. Thus, a “low” placement can be associated with a firm, grounded, realistic, and “down-to-earth” attitude. Furthermore, three-dimensional objects can often be identified as having identifiable fronts and backs, such as the human body. Sometimes, the front and back must be “constructed,” for example by attaching a label to a bottle or a can. The front is typically the most prominent and identifiable side of the object. When a three-dimensional object does not have a recognizable front and back, its purpose may be to draw the attention of the viewer to its materiality, or its tactility over its visuality. Finally, to conclude this brief overview of three-dimensional semiotics, while the bottom or the underneath of objects is largely functional and rarely semiotic (with the possible exception of Louboutin’s red soles), the top, constituting the “crowning element,” is typically highly symbolic.

Few things are quite as elaborately and richly semiotic as hats, wigs, hairdos, etc. In addition, the top is often a cover, something which can be taken off to reveal an inside and a content. The lid of a jar can be taken off to give access to the jam. The lid of the box can be opened to reveal the jewellery. The hat can be taken off to reveal the person. But when the object is of equal size or larger than we are, the top will communicate only insofar as it can be seen from the front.

(Van Leeuwen 2005, 213)

The work of the American minimalist sculptor Carl Andre (1935–) is instructive in this regard. Andre has subverted some of the typical associations between sculpture and three-dimensionality. In the late 1950s, he started to work with modular arrangements of simple forms in a variety of industrial materials – wood, metal, stone, concrete, bricks – arranged on the floor. In this way,

he rejected the verticality of sculpture (which reaches back to monuments, the heroic depiction of the figure, the phallic) in favour of

sculpture “which runs along the earth.” The metal plate pieces are, he says, improved by people walking on them with normal soft-soled shoes.

(Stoddart 2000, 9)

Placing sculptures on the floor and inviting the public to walk on them drew attention to the “elemental” materiality of the sculptures, mediating the viewer’s sense of grounding, the gravitational pull of the Earth, and awareness of the surrounding space. A similar egalitarian ethos and links with the quotidian act of walking in the city (de Certeau 1984) are invoked in Lawrence Weiner’s (1942–) project, *NYC Manhole Covers* (2000). In the work, nineteen cast-iron manhole covers with the words “in DiRECT LiNE WiTH ANOTHER & THE NEXT” were installed in Manhattan, replacing the usual ones. The text references the grid of the city and pedestrians queuing, waiting, and walking alongside one another, while the sculpture’s industrial form, materiality, and placement of the sculpture invite (require, even) pedestrians to walk over the piece (Saccani 2013, 276). The work becomes a commentary on the notion of the city’s constructed “stable and grounded horizon” (Graham 2016, loc. 319) and the ground itself.

Ibsen Sitat’s Egalitarian Ethos *Vis-à-Vis* Elevated National Flags

In their heyday between the second half of the eighteenth and the early twentieth century, monuments tended to be grandiose, pompous, and colossal. They were “touching the heavens,” a feature that in the late twentieth century came to be associated with self-aggrandizing cults of personality in dictatorial states asserting regime stability and dominating public space (e.g., Kruk 2008, 35; Osborne 2001). As has been mentioned, late modernity brought about a shift from aloof, highly elevated monuments to ground-level, egalitarian ones that can be seen across newly (re-)generated city centres and gentrified post-industrial areas. For example, new urban piazzas, waterfronts, and pedestrianized shopping streets are commonly dotted with street-level bronze statues of local cultural figures (e.g., James Joyce in Dublin, The Beatles in Liverpool) or “common” men and women representing local heritage (e.g., the *People Like Us* bronze sculpture in Cardiff, which features a mixed-race, working-class couple and a dog; Irish immigrants in Boston). This shift from pomp and gigantism to mundanity and authenticity is reinforced by other co-occurring artefacts and discourses in the same areas that reference the quotidian and the nostalgic, the accessible and ludic, albeit in a highly aestheticized and styled manner: relics of the industrial past (e.g., anchors, cranes, goods wagons); repurposed old infrastructure (e.g., post-industrial buildings turned into galleries, decommissioned trams into bars, churches into visitor centres, barges into pleasure boats); highly narrativized “traditional” food outlets

(e.g., Mapes 2018, 274); street-level “dancing” water fountains; and text-based sculptures (Gonçalves 2018; Jaworski 2015, 2020).

Edensor (2020, 189) talks about the decentering and contestation of authoritative, institutional, and organizational modes of commemoration. He cites Atkinson’s (2008, 381) idea of the “democratisation of memory,” the decline from the latter half of the twentieth century of the “top-down” production and dissemination of hegemonic narratives and assumptions about the past, which

has resulted, according to Atkinson (2008, 385), in the supplanting of a singular “official” history by a “polyphony of voices that start to weave together a complex, shifting, contingent but continually evolving sense of the past and its abundant component elements.”

(Edensor 2020, 189)

Robertson (2016, 10) refers to this trend towards a polyphonic articulation of multiple sentiments, voices, and historical events, which allows for the construction of alternative identities and narratives of place, as construction of “heritage from below” (cited in Edensor 2020, 189). As suggested above, *Ibsen Sitat* presents itself as a prime example of decentred and democratized monumentality.

Because the metal casts of *Ibsen Sitat* letters are inserted into the ground to be flush with the pavement surface, as is demonstrated by an accidentally missing cast of one of the letters in Figure 7.7, they effectively appear two-dimensional. However, we need to consider the installation as three-dimensional with the z-axis made relevant by its reduction to an absolute minimum, although not completely obliterated. Following Karlander (2019, 204), we suggest that the erasure of the sculpture’s verticality is metasemiotic as it accentuates its conformity with the environment (blending with the surface of the pavement) and desirability (facilitating, or not inhibiting, pedestrian traffic). This is in contrast to symbolically transgressive and menacing *Stolpersteine* (“stumbling stones”) installed in different cities across Europe, for example. First laid in 1996 in Berlin by the artist Gunter Demnig (1947–), these commemorative paving stones, each with a brass plaque inscribed with the name and life dates of an individual Holocaust victim, are raised ever so slightly above the street level to create a metaphorical stumbling block, inviting passers-by to reflect on the lives of the victims and their own lives (see Ben-Rafael and Ben-Rafael 2016, 295, n. 9; Stevens, Franck and Fazakerley 2012, 956).

Ibsen Sitat is constructed to match the surface of the pavement as closely as possible. While inviting pedestrians to stop and read the quotations, which some do (Figures 7.8 and 7.9), it also allows their seamless, frictionless movement (Figure 7.10), integrating the sculpture with the rhythm of people’s lives that connect different areas of Oslo’s city centre, like Lefebvre’s steps of Mediterranean cities connecting their lower and upper

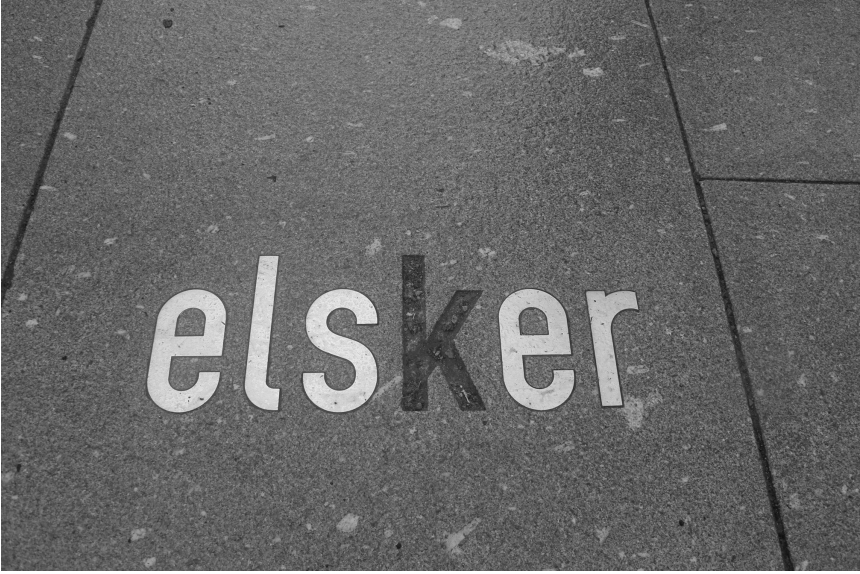


Figure 7.7: *Ibsen Sitat* (detail).



Figure 7.8: *Ibsen Sitat* (passers-by reading text).



Figure 7.9: *Ibsen Sitat* (passers-by reading text).



Figure 7.10: *Ibsen Sitat* (passers-by walking over text).

sections, their public and private spaces, their different architectures and historical periods, and guiding travellers from the known to the unknown. “More than that of a door or an avenue [the stairs’] blatant monumentality imposes on the body and consciousness the exigency of passage from one rhythm to another rhythm, as yet unknown, to be discovered” (Lefebvre and Régulier 1996 [1984], 237). Likewise, *Ibsen Sitat* serves as a cohesive device, tying up all the architectural elements of the city centre, with their unique rhythmicity and different scale levels, into a unified, national focal point.

This is in contrast to the numerous Norwegian national flags flying on windy days or “hanging limply” (Billig 1995, 155) in fine weather atop the public buildings alongside Karl Johans gate (Figures 7.5 and 7.6). No other symbol expresses nationalist sentiments more commonly and profoundly than the flag. Smith argues that “[t]hrough the process of their deification and politicization, flags have come to be predominant over other forms of political symbolism” (Smith 1975, 56). Nations have made them objects of “special reverence and high regard” through elaborate protocols and ceremonies (32). Flags (on land and sea) are typically “displayed where they can best be seen” (83), which typically means in an elevated position. In fact, other than as a means of political protest, the flag is not meant to touch the ground unless it is being used in a salute, rendering homage to an individual or institution (though touching the flag to the ground in a salute is not practised in all countries) (97, 104).

In the twentieth century flags were commercialized, turned into souvenirs, and used as designs on clothes, accessories, and novelty items (Smith 1975, 58). However, the default expectation is that the national flag is to be elevated, both symbolically and physically, which links it to the ideal position, as discussed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996). Thus, flags continue to be sacralized, a process dating back to antiquity. For example, in Roman times, the lines were blurred between “a flag as a sacred object to be worshipped and one rather to be employed simply as an instrument for communication with gods” (Smith 1975, 37). Furthermore, the infrastructure used to display flags, such as staffs and rooftops, or both, help elevate them further, turning them into symbols of power and dominance in their own right:

The staff is a symbol of power; it corresponds to clubs, swords, and other weapons as well as to the erect male organ – which simultaneously embodies regeneration of the race and male dominance over the female, the prototype of other master-slave relationships. From the practical standpoint, the flag staff is an object which can readily be carried aloft in battle, planted beside the throne of a chief, or made the central element in an altar. It is a portable version of the trees under which many societies have traditionally gathered in council or in worship. Its height makes the pole easy to see at a distance, to follow, and to rally around especially in military engagements. In form it expresses

the aspiration of earth-bound mankind towards the heavens, which undoubtedly accounts for the prevalence of the eagle as a finial motif.
(Smith 1975, 37)

Against this background, it is not hard to see the contrast between the elitist ethos of the flags flying over Karl Johans gate (and other similar locations) and the egalitarian ethos of *Ibsen Sitat*. The latter is metaphorically captured by Aguerre, who quoted an art critic’s comment that FA+’s *Strindbergs Citat* signified “high culture at street level.”⁵

In the remaining part of this section, which draws on Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (1996) multimodal framework and Abousnnonouga and Machin’s (2013) social semiotic analysis of UK war memorials, we comment on the meaning potentials and affordances of *Ibsen Sitat* that underscore its egalitarian ethos, while it at the same time remains a powerful symbol of national identity.

Distance/Proximity

As has been suggested, we consider *Ibsen Sitat* as a three-dimensional structure with the z-axis reduced to zero, yet metasemiotically salient (Karlander 2019). Therefore, it has no front or back, only a top. This allows viewers to walk on and gaze at what is its crown, looking straight at the top and revealing the true nature and content of Ibsen’s writing as it “really” is (Van Leeuwen 2005, 213; though see also the next sub-section). As suggested by Classen (2005, 277–278), in a museum context, touching an object that originates from a distant region or from the past annihilates spatial and temporal distance, thereby uniting the toucher and the touched. Paraphrasing Marinetti’s (2005, 331) 1921 manifesto, *Tactilism*, the feet see *Ibsen Sitat*; the experience echoes that of interacting with Carl Andre’s sculptures at ground level, when the viewer gets

permission of entry into and proximity to sculpture, which transforms it into a material marker [but] is nonetheless infused with a politics of solemnity and intimacy typically reserved for monuments, graveyards, tombs, and shrines, thus transforming the experience of art into a visit to a “place” where one enacts an unrepeatable event.

(Raymond 2014, 247)

In the same vein, *Ibsen Sitat* draws the attention of the viewer to the materiality of its writing, the Ibsen quotations sculpted in metal are hard, permanent, and almost indestructible. Embedded in the ground, Norwegian high literature becomes one with the nation’s territory, providing a foundation for the citizens’ feet and a shared identity.

Angle of Interaction

The emplacement of *Ibsen Sitat* at ground level requires viewers to look down at the text, affording them the position of power and placing the text in a position of vulnerability. However, the downward direction of the gaze is not the sole affordance of this emplacement. Pedestrians walking on/over the installation, just like the viewers of Carl Andre's and Lawrence Weiner's sculptures, unwittingly polish the metal with the soles of their shoes, giving the letters a shiny appearance and making them more reflective. As Falk states, "if it is dark and no light, you do not see it, but because it is in the city centre, it is always light." Thus, walking over the monument and polishing it become part of the iterative, ritualistic embodied practice, alongside stopping to read and photograph the text, that performatively invokes and actualizes the monument's cultural memory (see Assmann 1995, 130, cited in Koshar 2000, 8). The acts of walking, reading, and tracing the quotations add a fourth – temporal – dimension to the installation reminiscent of Stroud, Peck, and Williams's (2019, 5) semio-topological approach, which invokes close synergy and symbiosis between people and place, charting the ways in which different, multisensory forms of semiosis "dynamically and interdiscursively, affectively and aesthetically, link bodies, selves, and memories across times and places."

This is how the quotations exceed their referential function. To paraphrase and appropriate Baudrillard (1981, 69–76, cited in Foster 1985, 79), with its grand scale and reflective surface and its massive and mobile audience, the installation forms a "loss of the real," hence it becomes a theatrical experience. A metonym of Ibsen's work, the installation serves as a spectacle of nationhood, underscored by its prevalent monolingualism, as the default, ideological choice (Røyneland and Lanza 2020).

Shape and Materiality

Other than the elevated bronze maps of the monument and the trilingual episodes from Ibsen's life (Figures 7.3 and 7.4), the entire installation is realized at street level, perfectly aligned with the surface of the granite pavement blocks (Figures 7.11 and 7.12). According to Falk, the quotations are made of solid stainless-steel letters "because of the effect of mirroring." The font used for the quotations is Oslo Sans, a sans-serif typeface based on condensed Helvetica and inspired by the font of Oslo's street signs. The sans-serif font gives the "old" quotations a modern look, its relative narrowness allows for the economical use of limited space (Van Leeuwen 2006, 148), and it adds to Oslo's distinctiveness as the nation's capital city (see Järlehed and Fanny 2021). Following Djonov and Van Leeuwen (2011, 552, 554, who draw partly on O'Toole 1994, 101), we see this font choice and the



Figure 7.11: Ibsen Sitat (detail).



Figure 7.12: Ibsen Sitat (detail).

hard-edged, grey-black, shiny-steel finish of the letters give the installation a contemporary, industrial feel, suggesting extra effort and care (and cost) went into making it. Ibsen's quotations have a sense of being mass produced, yet they are resistant, stable, and durable, hence powerful and authoritative, just as "print culture" (Eisenstein 1979) of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries cemented the concept of authorship, "when the vocabulary of 'authorship' was, quite literally, a vocabulary of 'author-ity,' and the word 'author' was a word of power (Jaszi 1991, 270)" (Bauman and Briggs 2003, 12).

In contrast, the names of the installation designers (Figure 7.2), citation sources (Figures 7.13 and 7.14), and the names of the proposers of the quotations (Figure 7.15 and bottom of Figure 7.16) are traced in the granite paving stones with slightly hollowed out letters, resulting in a dull finish and providing less contrast with the background, suggesting a somewhat lighter, more airy, and hence less powerful stance. The names of the proposers of the quotations appear as "handwritten" in the slabs of granite or as remediated signatures (Grusin 2006), giving them a sense of spontaneity and immediacy but, even more importantly, downplaying the institutional and bureaucratic foundations of the monument, underpinning its nation-state symbolism (Noy 2015, 38), and suggesting a "community" feel (Li and Zhu 2021, 80).



Figure 7.13: *Ibsen Sitat* (detail).



Figure 7.14: Ibsen Sitat (detail).



Figure 7.15: Ibsen Sitat (detail).



Figure 7.16: *Ibsen Sitat* (detail).

These slightly sunken letters appear symbolically as lower than the letters of the quotations, hence slightly subservient to them. In contrast to their dull finish, the polished, shiny surface of the steel letters connote

luxury and also the clean minimalism of modernity. Polished objects also literally shine and can be brilliant and reflect as mirrors; Gage (1993) has discussed the use of polished surfaces in design in terms of the way they can increase levels of light and vibrancy in colours to add optimism.

(Abousnougou and Machin 2013, 51)

Yet, the inclusion of the names of the quotation proposers and their rendition as handwritten signatures, which are “based on corporeal presence” (Neef 2011, 239) always indexing their originators, individualizes and celebrates “ordinary” citizens next to their literary hero.

Layout

Unlike *Strindbergs Citat*, which runs in a straight line throughout the pedestrianized street of Drottninggatan in Stockholm, Sweden, *Ibsen Sitat* follows a less linear path (Figures 7.17 and 7.18) due to the complex topography of



Figure 7.17: Ibsen Sitat (detail).



Figure 7.18: Ibsen Sitat (detail).

Karl Johans gate and its mixed uses (pedestrian and motorized traffic). In the words of Ingrid Falk,

How we laid out the texts in Oslo was different because of the river under – the text is not a straight line. There is an underground waterfall; the whole Karl Johans gate, under the castle. There is a waterfall, the Bisse Becken [brook/stream], with these little hills in Oslo. Therefore, the text does not run in a straight line but follows water curves of the waterfall below.

Here, Falk implies a further deepening of the verticality of the sculpture by mapping it onto the subterranean riverbed, conjuring up the imagery of the mythological river Styx, thus, possibly at a stretch, invoking the common idea of every nation originating in an immemorial past and stretching into a limitless future (Anderson 2006 [1983], 11–12). Additionally, some parts of the quotations are set at 45 or 90 degree angles. This “breaking up” of a straight line of the quotations can be seen as creating a kinetic or dynamic effect reminiscent of the early experiments by Futurists and Constructivists (see Van Leeuwen and Djonov 2015, 247). This apparent animation of the quotations invokes a sense of the words being spoken, imbuing them with additional mood and inflection, making the typeface “come alive” (see Bellantoni and Woolman 2000, 44–45, 116), and echoing Aguerre’s own interpretation of the piece as “very much alive” due to its permanence, emplacement, and constant appeal to the public. This creates a sense of Ibsen’s quotations being rendered in the style of concrete poetry, all of which potentially makes the appearance of the text resonate with the contemporary viewer.

Conclusion: *Ibsen Sitat* as Egalitarian Nationalism

This chapter has contrasted the egalitarian ethos of the *Ibsen Sitat* with the reserve and aloofness of the national flags on the rooftops surrounding the monument. Our analysis focused on the street-level semiotics of the sculpture, underscored by the involvement of schoolchildren and other “ordinary” citizens in selecting the quotations and the inclusion of the proposers’ names in the installation. We have argued that while espousing a democratic stance, *Ibsen Sitat* remains a powerful and authoritative symbol of Norwegian high literature in the assemblage of architecture, artefacts, and activities to shape and sustain a national imagined community and its collective memory (Kosher 2000, 18; Woldemariam and Lanza 2015; Blackwood, Lanza and Woldemariam 2016).

Ibsen Sitat contributes to Norway’s memory landscape by drawing on the national literary canon and Ibsen’s authority as a foremost Norwegian

writer, thereby invoking the tropes of widespread literacy, mass education, accessibility, modernity, and scientific civilization (Fisher 1991, 58; Bauman and Briggs 2003). Although the soundbite format in which Ibsen’s plays are re-contextualized renders his work as a piece of pop art, its source in high literature contributes to the formation of the “artistic physiognomy, an intellectual identity” of the nation-state (Larbaud 1925, 233, cited in Casanova 2004, 129). In Nora’s (1989) terms, it acts as a site of [national] memory (*lieu de mémoire*), a collective history existing only in the imagination of individuals and investing it with a symbolic aura (Nora 1989, 19), rather than a tangible environment of memory (*milieu de mémoire*). It is a piece of history that has been transformed “from the tradition of memory ... into the self-knowledge of society” (Nora 1989, 11). Put differently, *Ibsen Sitat* is metacultural in that it repositions Ibsen’s writing from a spectacular acknowledgement of its value to a symbol of the nation (Urban 2001, loc. 744). And its visibility makes people aware of other people as coparticipants in the national project (Urban 2001, loc. 435) that, quite literally, connects and binds them with the shared territory.

We hope to have also added to the current sociolinguistic literature on language and materiality (e.g., Cavanaugh and Shankar 2017) by demonstrating how contemporary artists have been blurring the boundaries between literature and drawing or sculpture (Kotz 2007, 267, n. 3) by directing attention to the spatial, embodied, and affective potential of displayed writing. Writing in three-dimensional space created by contemporary artists can be read, looked at, or walked over and around, adding a fourth dimension to the consumption of art installations – time. The artwork reveals the mobile modality, the footsteps “echo” the layout of the underground river (as suggested by Falk) and the actual footsteps of Ibsen (as indicated by the VisitOslo website).

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Notes

- 1 All images by Adam Jaworski (April 3–6, 2019).
- 2 <https://www.visitoslo.com/en/product/?TLP=1167805>, accessed September 21, 2020.
- 3 Interviews with Ingrid Falk and Gustavo Aguerre were conducted by Kellie Gonçalves on April 9, 2019, and April 29, 2019, respectively.
- 4 Following Young (1992), Stevens, Franck, and Fazakerley (2012) discuss “counter-monuments” as a (new) genre of commemorative practice. In a somewhat paradoxical definition, they state: “One type of contemporary monument identified in recent academic literature is the ‘counter-monument.’ This term ... is often used interchangeably with other terms that may have very different connotations, including anti-monument, non-monument, negative-form, deconstructive, non-traditional, and counter-hegemonic monument ... A monument may be contrary to conventional subjects and techniques of monumentality, adopting *anti-monumental* design approaches to express subjects and meanings not represented in traditional monuments” (952). While *Ibsen Sitat* defies some of the traditional features of monuments (discussed in some detail in the “Literary-Dependent Culture, Monuments, and Banal Nationalism” section), we continue to refer to it with the term “monument,” used interchangeably with “installation” and “sculpture.”
- 5 See Jaworski (2017) for a similar argument on how the recontextualization of art (a traditionally elitist pursuit) as part of an educational television programme (TV being considered a “mass” medium) results in a democratizing ethos by presenting art to the viewer.

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