



Violetta Krawczyk-Wasilewska

# Folklore in the Digital Age: Collected Essays

**Foreword by Andy Ross**

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Łódź-Kraków 2016

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# Foreword

Folkloristics is the study of folklore using approaches and insights from science and the humanities. Folklore expresses a people's culture and heritage, and so helps define our ethnic and cultural identities.

Professor Violetta Krawczyk-Wasilewska, the author of the essays in this book, has enjoyed a long and successful career as a folklorist. She has worked with various folklore resources, most of them narrative genres, transmitted orally and locally, but also in printed and pictorial form. More recently she has expanded her resource base to include online folklore.

Online and digital cultures are both driving and following a process of globalisation. Global multimedia culture not only endangers traditional folklore but also creates new folklore, often in surprising ways. The miscellany of themes that the author touches upon in this book amply illustrate the range of modern folklore studies. My brief remarks here merely hint at that range.

Serendipity can play a role in such studies, as it did when the author discovered by chance, while browsing the web, a folkloristic painting known as *The Netherlandish Proverbs* painted in 1559 by Pieter Bruegel The Elder (chapter I). This fascinating work of art illustrates perhaps a hundred Flemish proverbs and sayings, most of them still in use in many European languages.

Today anyone at home with a tablet or a smart phone can read and write gossip, rumours, jokes, hoaxes, urban legends, chain letters, and fact and fiction of all kinds, and publish it worldwide in seconds. Much of the outpouring that results is highly ephemeral, but such ephemera are prolific breeders of new ephemera in an exploding profusion of what author calls e-folklore (chapter II).

New media are used both for serious business and for entertainment as well as for sharing personal opinions and emotions. The web has become a global folklore encyclopaedia, not only through Wikipedia but also as a platform for creating and publishing content of all kinds. This activity feeds the world



of digital folklore, which now forms a major part of our collective human culture and heritage (chapter III).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has the mission to protect the world cultural and natural heritage, while promotion and protection of the European cultural heritage is regulated by the Council of the European Union. So UNESCO and the EU are now guardians of our folklore.

Digital technology has political consequences too, as the Arab Spring showed. In chapter IV the author recalls that after the 9/11 attacks the world of online folklore produced some nasty memes. These at least reminded us that verbal and visual folklore humour regarding terrorism has three roles: as information, as warning, and as therapy. Even the bad memes are good food for a folklorist.

Items in the news also trigger folklore explosions online, as the author records in chapter V. On January 12, 2010, an earthquake struck the small island nation of Haiti. It affected millions of inhabitants, leaving hundreds of thousands of dead and injured as well as about a million very poor people homeless.

Disaster brought not only sympathy and support but also hostility rooted in the moral or magical ways of the past. The day after the Haiti earthquake, the US televangelist Pat Robertson suggested that Haiti's history of natural disasters and political turmoil stemmed from a deal with the devil made by the leaders of its 1791 revolution against French rule.

Haiti also appears in the folklore of AIDS. In the early years of the epidemic, many said the spread of HIV was due to a group called 4H: homosexuals, heroin users, haemophiliacs, and Haitian voodoo cultists. All this is part of a long tradition of plague legends citing the sacred and the profane. Even modern US televangelists can regard a plague as the wrath of God. Folklore texts stemming from the Middle Ages and from today's news treat plagues as arising from people breaking taboos.

The new world of digital devices and social media is changing many aspects of modern life. Powerful online applications and attractive social media running on handy mobile devices are encouraging people to move into the new space to do things previously only possible in person.

Online dating is now a part of everyday life for millions of people. This trend seems to reflect an increase of human loneliness in many developed countries. Even relationships have become commodities, and online dating sites provide them with a marketplace and a currency.

We see a correlation with globalised lifestyles, increased mobility, and the breakdown of traditional family structures.

In the United Kingdom, the number of people living alone has increased by more than four times in four decades, and now is over a quarter of the population. British online dating services have a large number of users compared to other European dating sites. The author explored British attitudes to online dating in action research conducted during 2008 and reported in chapter VI.

For many centuries, personal identity was inseparable from group identity, and a person who tried to live as an outsider faced social exclusion. Today people can overcome their isolation by creating new online identities. The author explored this philosophical theme with my help in an essay on dating through avatars (chapter VII).

An assumed personal identity is often accompanied by an animated graphical image called an avatar. Online dating through avatars can allow people to explore each other more freely than they could by dating in the physical world. Much as airline pilots today spend most of their training hours in simulators, so future married couples might spend much of their time getting to know each other on avatar dates.

Finally, in chapter VIII, the author discusses food culture. Modern discourses about food, especially on social media, affect the dietary choices of many people on a daily basis all over the world. The Internet is a global cookbook, and global food culture reveals a wide range of attitudes toward food and eating. All of this is revealed in the narrative representation of food by modern food tribes.

Professor Krawczyk-Wasilewska is to be commended on bringing all this material together for future folklorists to ponder from the comfort of an armchair. The book is a fascinating and fruitful exercise in the creative use of modern resources to enrich and extend an established discipline.

*Andy Ross*  
Formerly at Oxford University, UK  
June 2016

# **Chapter I**

## **The Art of Bruegel and the Folklorist**

During my long career as a folklorist, I have dealt with various folklore resources. Among these were predominantly narrative genres, transmitted orally and locally, but also printed and visual versions circulated throughout Poland and Europe.

Towards the end of the 1990's and the beginning of 2000's, globally transmitted variants of electronic genres and forms began to arise, and an increasing number of primary and secondary sources became available through the Internet. The most fascinating aspect of the Internet as a database has been the possibility of studying oral and intangible heritage in a diachronic, and not merely a synchronic, way.

One day whilst browsing an Internet site, by chance, I found a 'folkloristic' painting known as *The Netherlandish Proverbs*, painted in 1559 by the Dutch Renaissance master Pieter Bruegel The Elder. Though the picture was unknown to me (perhaps because proverb is a non-narrative genre), I was familiar with a few samples of the artist's enormous iconographic heritage, especially those works called 'peasant' or genre paintings of ethnographic character.<sup>1</sup> Remembering that his 1564 painting *The Procession to Calvary* inspired the 2011 Polish-Swedish co-produced drama film *The Mill and the Cross*,<sup>2</sup> and that another of his works, *Two Monkeys* inspired a 1957 poem by Polish poet Wisława Szymborska,<sup>3</sup> and because „needs must”<sup>4</sup>, I decided to start browsing the web in search of more information about this Netherlandish painting.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. *The Battle between Lent and Carnival* (1559), *Children's Games* (1559–1560), *Peasant Wedding* (c. 1568).

<sup>2</sup> The film made in digital technology CGI and 3D was directed by Lech Majewski and based on Michael Francis Gibson's book: *The Mill and the Cross. Peter Bruegel's Way to Calvary*. Acatos: Lausanne 2001. The film focuses on a dozen of 500 characters depicted in the painting. Everyday peasant life scenes are intertwined with monologues from main characters, including Bruegel interpreting his painting symbolism. In the film a religious persecution in Flanders (1564) is contrasted to Christ's suffering.

<sup>3</sup> W. Szymborska, *View With a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, translated by Stanisław Barańczak, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston 1995, p. 3. Szymborska was awarded the 1996 Nobel Prize in Literature.

<sup>4</sup> A proverbial expression derived from the old English proverb *Needs must when the evil drives* quoted in the poem *Assembly of Gods* (c. 1500), and in Shakespeare's plays, <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/needs-must>, retrieved 16.05.2016.

Pieter Bruegel's paremiographic and iconographic masterpiece, titled *Die niederlandischen Sprichwörter*, has been stored at the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin since 1913. This oil-on-oak-panel painting, 117 x 163 cm in size (Fig. 1), contains illustrations of over 80 Flemish proverbs, proverbial phrases and idiomatic sayings, the majority of which are still in use in many European languages (Fig. 2). Wikipedia's entry *Netherlandish Proverbs* has been translated into 24 (*sic!*) languages, each offering varying degrees of information about the painting.<sup>5</sup> Fortunately, the Polish entry also includes a list of all the proverbs and idioms featured in the work, together with explanations of their meanings and where they are located (thumbnail sized fragments (Fig. 3.a, b). We should add that quite a large number of enlisted northern Brabant proverbs and proverbial expressions are historically well documented in the Polish paremiological catalogue;<sup>6</sup> some of them are still in use today in a direct or indirect form, and many have been quoted early enough to appear in Polish-Language Renaissance literature as well as Latin versions.<sup>7</sup>

While studying Internet resources associated with the subject, I discovered that both the artist<sup>8</sup> and his son, Pieter Brueghel, made several copies and variants of the *Netherlandish Proverbs*, also known as *Flemish Proverbs*, *The Topsy Turvy World*, *The Folly of the World*, or *The Blue Cloak* (probably originally named – *De Blauwe Huyck*), but not all versions depict exactly the same sayings that were documented within the website. All the above mentioned works indicate that Bruegel was not only an illustrator of proverbs, but also a wise man and a collector, cataloguing human shortcomings and folly. In the latter aspect I am convinced he followed

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netherlandish\\_Proverbs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netherlandish_Proverbs), retrieved 12.05.2015.

<sup>6</sup> J. Krzyżanowski et al. (eds.), *Nowa księga przysłów i wyrażeń przysłowiowych polskich* [New Book of the Polish Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions], Vols. I–IV, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1969–1978.

<sup>7</sup> E.g.: G.Cnapius [Grzegorz Knapski], *Thesaurus Polono-Latino-Graecus seu promptuarium linguae Latinae et Graece*, Vols. I–II; F. Caesario, *Cracovia* [Kraków] 1621, Vol. III (*Adagia Polonica...* [Polish Proverbs...]) was edited in 1632 and counted 1400 pages of size A4.

<sup>8</sup> Bruegel himself had painted several minor paintings on the subject of proverbs including *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* (1556) and *Twelve Proverbs* (1558), but the *Netherlandish Proverbs* is thought to have been his first large-scale painting on the theme. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netherlandish\\_Proverbs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netherlandish_Proverbs), retrieved 12.05.2015.





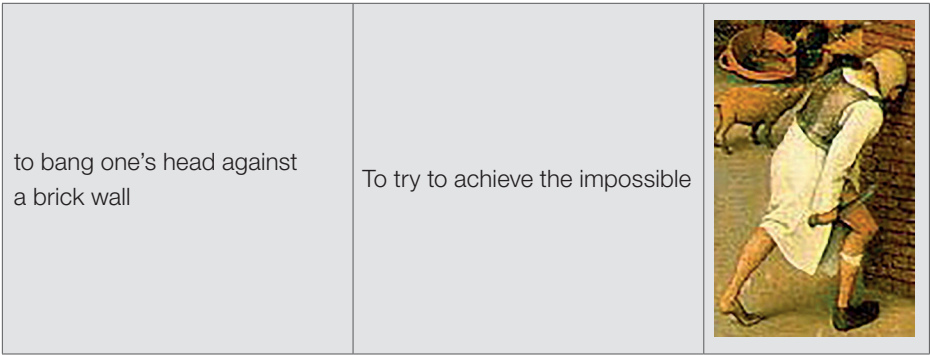
**Fig. 1.** Pieter Bruegel, the Elder, *The Netherlandish Proverbs* ([https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/7e/Pieter\\_Brueghel\\_the\\_Elder\\_-\\_The\\_Dutch\\_Proverbs\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg/](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/7e/Pieter_Brueghel_the_Elder_-_The_Dutch_Proverbs_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg/))



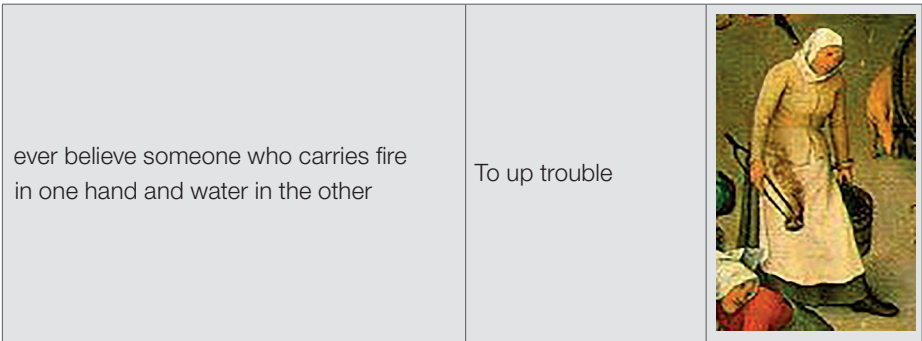
**Fig. 2.** *The Netherlandish Proverbs* (<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/c/c9/Bruegel6.jpg/500px-Bruegel6.jpg>)



Erasmus of Rotterdam’s *Adagia* (1500) and *In Praise of Folly*,<sup>9</sup> a genial satirical essay on folk superstitions, bigotry and other traditional faults of the European society of those times.



**Fig. 3a.** Thumbnail sized fragment (issue No. 4)



**Fig. 3b.** Thumbnail sized fragment (issue No. 3)

Browsing further, I found that there already existed a great interest among folklorists’ in the *Netherlandish Proverbs*,<sup>10</sup> but it sadly became apparent through the Polish libraries’ online catalogues that at the time these resources were not available in my country. Then started to investigate academic online

<sup>9</sup> Written in Latin as *Stultitiae Laus* [a.k.a. *Moriae encomium*], first published 1511. See: D. Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, translated by J. Wilson, London 1668. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/9371/9371-h/9371-h.htm>, retrieved 17.05.2016.

<sup>10</sup> W. Mieder (ed.), *“The Netherlandish Proverbs”: An International Symposium on the Pieter Brueg[h]els*, [in:] *Proverbium*, 2004, Supplement series, vol. 16 (Univ. of Vermont: Burlington).

directories and shared digital libraries (JSTOR,<sup>11</sup> EBSCOhost,<sup>12</sup> the British Library<sup>13</sup> catalogue), and discovered that the most interesting interpretive materials were published as early as the beginning of the 1980's by the great American scholar Alan Dundes, whose few innovative folkloristic publications I have read, and whom I knew in person, in spite of the fact that I was based behind the iron curtain. Alas, I did not know he also dealt with Bruegel's masterpiece. But it is "better late than never",<sup>14</sup> and eventually I became acquainted with Dundes' outstanding research. The study was made in co-operation with his Dutch undergraduate student Claudia A. Stibbe and their monograph entitled *Mixing Metaphors: A Folkloristic Interpretation of the "Netherlandish Proverbs" by Pieter Bruegel The Elder* was published in Finland in 1981 as a volume of the famous Folklore Fellows Communications series.<sup>15</sup>

The work starts with an outline of the characteristics of the painting and copies stored at Belgian and Dutch museums, followed by a concise survey of the current state of research. There was also information about a 'technical' method of depicting proverbial items in order to facilitate their identification.<sup>16</sup> Special attention has been put to fact that the corpus of painted 'proverbs' are in majority not proverbs in the meaning of folklore genre theory, but "Rather the genre represented is folk metaphors or what are sometimes called proverbial phrases. A proverb is a fixed phrase sentence in which neither

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<sup>11</sup> JSTOR [Journal Storage] is a non-profit US organisation created in 1995 as a licensed system to over 10,000 academic institutions worldwide. Since 2012 JSTOR enlarged offer to individuals who may register free of charge. JSTOR currently includes 2,300 academic journals (dating back to the first volume ever published) and thousands of books and other academic materials. <http://www.jstor.org/>, retrieved 15.05.2016.

<sup>12</sup> EBSCOhost is a fee-based service working as a part of EBSCO Information Services (a branch of EBSCO Inc. founded in 1944 by Elton Bryson Stephens Co.), that currently includes 375 full-text databases, 600,000 e-books, subject indexes, digital archives, etc. <https://www.ebscohost.com>, retrieved 15.05.2016.

<sup>13</sup> The British Library collection contains c. 56 million items. <https://www.bl.uk/>, retrieved 15.05.2016.

<sup>14</sup> Old English proverb quoted by Geoffery Chaucer in his *The Yeoman's Prologue and Tale*, *Canterbury Tales* (c. 1386). <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/better-late-then-never.html>, retrieved 15.05.2016.

<sup>15</sup> A. Dundes, C.A. Stibbe, "Mixing Metaphors: A Folkloristic Interpretation of the "Netherlandish Proverbs" by Pieter Bruegel The Elder", Folklore Fellows Communications, No. 230, Vol. XCVII, Suomalaisen Tiedakatemia, Helsinki 1981.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 11.

subject nor predicate varies, e.g. ‘When the house is burning, one can warm himself from the coals’ (# 13). In contrast, a folk metaphor, normally reported in infinitive form, may vary with respect to either subject or predicate or both. Thus the folk metaphor ‘to look through one’s fingers’ (# 3) might occur in speech as ‘He looks through his fingers’”.<sup>17</sup>

It is interesting that the number of northern Brabant proverbial expressions claimed to be represented in the painting varies from a few dozen up to more than one hundred items depending on the copy or interpretation. For Dundes and Stibbe the painting consists of “over one hundred mini-pictures, a kind of proverb-filled landscape, but in larger sense, all the little pictures are interrelated and they combine to produce one overall scene portraying an image of man”.<sup>18</sup> Authors analysed the Bruegel’s play with binary oppositions, two-in-one structures (e.g. ‘killing two flies at one blow’), ritual reversal of reality (folly is wisdom and *vice versa*), and other witty combinations with paradoxes and conundrums mixed with the obscene and erotic traditions. It portrays the artist as a genial master of “making sense of nonsense”: “By rendering metaphors, folk metaphors, literally, and cleverly combining them, Bruegel succeeded in constructing a rationale for the seemingly irrational behaviour of man. The successful translation of verbal foibles into visual fables will undoubtedly stand for centuries to come as an endearing monument to the artistic genius of Bruegel”.<sup>19</sup>

The whole study is in essence a brilliant folkloristic analysis and identification of 115 proverbial saying items supported and enriched by illustrations and paremiological bibliography. They themselves are monographical miniatures offering linguistic and etymological explanations, as well as cultural and psychological *versus* psychoanalytical interpretations.

Returning to the beginning of the story, I would like to underline that the day I met the *Nederlandish Proverbs* in the digital world of the Internet, I discovered the power of how modern technology can be used for inter-cultural and comparative folklore studies. This was a recognition of the ontological impact of the digital revolution on my own discipline: from an analogue folkloristics towards a digital one and *vice versa*. I am sure my young colleagues who were born in the digital era will be astonished by my delight and sensation.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 69.

# **Chapter II**

## **e-Folklore as a Part of Digital Culture**

The origins of interpersonal communication can be traced back more than 35,000 years to the Paleolithic age. Since that time forms of oral, aural and visual communication have developed in many ways; landmarks being the emergence of chirographic forms of language (invented 5,000 years ago) and, of course, the epochal Johann Gutenberg's invention of printing processes in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Europe. But even until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century communication amongst populations generally was primarily based upon face-to-face oral practices – the use of printed media being largely the preserve of educated and literate social minorities.

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, saw the rapid development of European democratisation, education, literacy and technological inventions. In the sphere of communication telegraphic, telephonic, gramophonic and photographic technologies were developed. These were revolutionary milestones in two ways. The first two, telegraphic and telephonic communication, enabled synchronous exchanges between parties who were distanced from one another (using, in the case of telephones, purely oral practices, with no requirement for literacy). The second two, gramophonic and photographic technologies opened the door to mass consumption of a single phonic or visual message by much larger populations – again with no requirement for literacy. These were the beginnings of a shift in human communication from small scale local practice to an age of mass media communication.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the arrival of radio and film media built further on these changes and by the middle of the last century developments in cybernetics and electronics, and the invention of computers, satellite technology and mobile phones added further to the explosion of a global information society. This revolution reached its apogee in the 1990s with the emergence of the Internet idea initiated by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989, and the World Wide Web (www), that in 1992 connected 1 million computers all over the world. By the end of 2015 there was the widespread availability of computers (3 billion users) and mobile phones (5 billion users) at high street prices in many parts of the world. It was further enhanced by the move towards integrated multi-media digital technologies (Integrated Services Digital Networks) and interactive electronic services (iPads, iPhones, tablets). Communication without wires *via* mobile phones soon was transformed into further phone functions: photo and video camera and mini-computers. Nowadays we are surrounded by new information