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**Creating spaces for encounter: The Grandhotel
Cosmopolis – a ‘social sculpture’ in the heart of
Augsburg, Germany.**



Master Thesis

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1. INTRODUCTION

Europe is in a period of crisis. This is nothing new – we are used to crises. This crisis however is not primarily connected to the finance sector or the housing market. It is a crisis of morals. While on the one hand, politicians are upholding ‘European’ values of basic human rights, the European Union is simultaneously increasing its border controls in the Mediterranean, building higher and more dangerous walls at the EU’s border in Morocco and imposing restrictive asylum policies which make it nearly impossible for members of particular third states to be granted asylum.

The lucky few who have managed to reach a European member state are then often socially or spatially segregated from the main population and sometimes face long periods of waiting for their cases to be determined. Being unable to work and often facing unclear housing situations, life for asylum seekers within Europe accords to a position outside the law – ‘bare life’ (Darling, 2009). Yet, the picture is not as black-and-white as it may seem. Local and regional initiatives are also forming, recognizing the dire situation of these subjects and are often not only critiquing the current situation of asylum politics, but also working toward an alternative future.

One such case of activist engagement and political protest is the “Grandhotel Cosmopolis – a social sculpture in the heart of Augsburg”, Germany. In a central part of the city, local artists and activists have turned a former home for the elderly into a ‘Grandhotel’, a hotel that has space for about 40 ‘guests without asylum’, i.e. tourists, and for about 60 ‘guests with asylum’, i.e. asylum seekers. Central to the project is its artistic approach, which infuses every aspect of daily life from hotel rooms designed by artists to the daily working motto of ‘just do it’. Inspired by Joseph Beuys concept of ‘the social sculpture’, it also sees itself as a form of creative political protest. Situated against the background of national and European politics of asylum, with which it collides full frontal on a daily basis, this combination has been unique within Germany at the time its concept was presented in 2012.

The self-proclaimed ‘Hoteliers’ have been invited to present their concept in a range of cities, the project has gained national attention, both of national newspapers such as “Die Zeit”, as well of national television stations. Next to that, the Grandhotel has received several prizes, amongst them the prize as winner in the category ‘society’ in the national competition ‘Germany – country of ideas’, chaired by the ‘Deutsche Bank’ (no prize money included). What all this attention has not been able to explain however is why the project was ‘hyped’ even before the actual guests moved in. One possible explanation of this is that this project’s underlying focus is not on a form of charitable, yet hierarchical idea of ‘humanitarian help’. A form of help that leaves the hierarchy of white, Western helper and non-white, non-Western receivers of help in place. The solid foundation of the Grandhotel is the belief that an equal relationship should exist between both parties and that both can profit from this relationship. Hence, seeing the human being in the asylum seeker and consequentially granting this human being basic human rights can be framed as one of the underlying claims of the Grandhotel Cosmopolis.

In this way, the Grandhotel seeks to build mutually beneficent relationships and foster exchange and learning between its ‘guests’ through common activities, such as gardening,

cooking or making music within and outside the particular spaces of the Grandhotel. By so doing, it offers ‘spaces for encounter’ with asylum seekers, for instance in its café/bar, its restaurant or even on the stairway. As such, it offers spaces for people to mingle that have little contact in everyday life, enabling so called ‘encounters with difference’ (Valentine, 2008). But more than just providing for encounters with asylum seekers, it is a space in which usually separate and distinct spaces overlap and become fuzzy: In the Grandhotel Cosmopolis, the lived and the mental spaces of citizens, tourists and asylum seekers overlap in the image and space of the ‘Grandhotel’. This space could then enable what Amin (2002, p.970) calls “moments of cultural destabilization, offering individuals the chance to break out of fixed relations and fixed notions, and through this, to learn to become different through new patterns of social interaction”.

The central question of this thesis thus revolves around the encounters that are enabled between asylum seekers and citizens in the micro-spaces of the Grandhotel. Up to now, the focus within the field of geographies of encounter has been on the reduction of prejudice and which spaces could provide for ‘meaningful encounters’ (Valentine, 2008). Yet, this debate exhibits an implicitly hierarchical framing of difference; difference that is incorporated by Otherness and as such is something ‘worth-less-than’ (Braidotti, 2011), something for which a ‘capacity to live with’ is required (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2013). Drawing on feminist and critical theorists such as Rosi Braidotti, Gilles Deleuze and Elisabeth Grosz, I will set out to argue that difference and life itself are the products of manifold encounters and as such should be seen in a more positive light. What I thus seek to uncover through my case study of the Grandhotel Cosmopolis is how encounters carry the possibility of recognizing the particularity of individuals.

This thesis is structured in the following manner: The second section delivers the theoretical underpinnings of this research. After a short overview of geographies of encounter, I engage with the notion of the encounter through the work of Sara Ahmed. By drawing on critical and feminist philosophers, I then question the current usage of ‘difference’ within work on encounters, arguing that it leaves a hierarchical understanding of difference in place. Thereafter, I will enquire into spaces of encounter and possible effects of encounters. I will end the theoretical section by reflecting on the political nature of encounters. The methodological section will not only provide a description of the research project and approach, but will also reflect on questions of positionality and ethics in research. The methodological section is followed by a presentation of the empirical findings, starting with a short interrogation of other perspectives on the Grandhotel Cosmopolis. I will then explore the different encounters occurring in the microspaces of the project. This includes a redefinition of the notion of the encounter itself, as well as possible factors other than spatial proximity which lead to encounters. Following this section is a closer investigation of the microspaces in which these encounters took place. Here, I differentiate between spaces of co-presence and spaces collaboration. Moving away from a ‘romanticization’ of encounters, I will outline how the Grandhotel was also the site of spatial exclusions and evidenced barriers to encounters. Before concluding, I present the effects of encounters on asylum seekers and volunteers.

2. THEORETICAL ENCOUNTERS WITH SUBJECTIVITY AND DIFFERENCE

2.1 Introducing Geographies of Encounter

The following pages outline the current debate on geographies of encounter. The fundamental question this line of research asks is how to ‘live with difference’ in European cities that are perceived to be at a new height of diversity. Closely affiliated with debates on multiculturalism, segregation and cosmopolitanism (Freitag, 2013; Gilroy, 2004; Illich, 1973; Nava, 2013; Wise et al., 2009), diversity in the debate on geographies of encounter is largely understood through the concepts of ethnicity, culture and/or immigrant vs. native. A new height in the diversity of European and North American cities is attributed to international flows of migration and increased mobility during the latter half of the twentieth century (Matejskova & Leitner, 2011; Valentine & Sadgrove, 2012). The intense debate on the issue of diversity is evidence to Stuart Hall’s earlier claim that “the capacity to live with difference is (...) the coming question of the twenty-first century” (Hall, 1993, p.361).

Through which means could this capacity to ‘live with difference’ possibly be generated in North American and European cities? This question pertains to the other key concept within the debate, namely, ‘the encounter’. Thereby, the geographical debate is drawing on ‘intergroup contact theory’ as proposed by the social psychologist Gordon Allport (1954). In short, he argued that interpersonal contact between members of different social groups can, under certain conditions, reduce prejudice and increase positive attitudes towards each other. The main conditions that have to be met for a successful reduction of prejudice are equal group status, having a common goal, intergroup cooperation and the support of authorities, law or custom (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005). Geographical scholarship on encounters has thus taken up and incorporated these insights of social psychology, while remaining critical about several aspects pertaining to the body of work of social psychologists within this field.

One reason to be critical of contact scholarship, as outlined by Matejskova & Leitner (2011), is that this field of research has placed too much emphasis on positive effects of contact and less on the problematic effects, such as an increase in prejudice and stereotyping. A second reason to be critical is that the causality of the hypothesis, i.e. frequent contact translates into a reduction of prejudice, might not be as straightforward as statistical findings suggest. Positive attitudes correlating highly with regular contact might not be the result of increased contact between prejudiced individuals with ‘Others’, but of contact between already relatively unprejudiced individuals with ‘Others’. Lastly, Matejskova & Leitner (2011, p.721) point to the fact that the aforementioned conditions stipulated by Allport “are hardly present in everyday life”. Rather, “real-life contact between members of different social groups is always structurally mediated and embedded in particular historical and geographical contexts of power-relations between and within social groups”. It is therefore vital to examine contact as it unfolds in everyday settings, and not merely in psychological experiments.

The critique of contact scholarship focusing too much on the positive effects of encounters with difference goes hand in hand with the critique of the so-called ‘cosmopolitan turn’ within geography. This line of research claims that cities and especially their public spaces enable the hybridization of cultures and the capacity to live with difference. Geographical research has thus been undertaken in public spaces such as buses or cafés in which “the proximity of strangers necessitates a pragmatic engagement across categorical boundaries” (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2012, p.2049). This line of research thus celebrates the potential of cities to create “acts of kindness and compassion” in everyday interactions (Thrift, 2005, p.140).

However, as Valentine (2008, p.325) argues, “some of this writing about cosmopolitanism and new urban citizenship appears to be laced with a worrying romantization of urban encounter and to implicitly reproduce a potentially naïve assumption that contact with ‘others’ necessarily translates into respect for difference”. Consequentially, before uncritically promoting encounters as a strategy to generate understanding, the reverse effect should be taken into account as well: Namely, that encounters with difference might not have any effect or worse, might not be desired by the individuals in question or are in danger of solidifying prejudice and stereotypes. In addition, some individuals may have an interest in remaining prejudiced, as Valentines (2008) research indicates, since some of the prejudices individuals held functioned as scapegoats for personal, social or economic struggles.

Further, even if encounters with difference lead to mutual respect between two individuals, the question remains how this respect can be maintained and ‘scaled up’ in space and time (Valentine 2008). This relates to the aspect that while negative experiences with a member of a minority group lead to a negative perception of the whole group, positive encounters with such a member are not as readily generalized. Instead, the people associated with the minority group are taken to be an exception. Thus, although a positive relationship between individuals is established, the encounter does not automatically reduce prejudices held about the group in general or induces a respect for difference. Through Valentine’s empirical research, she concluded that the reason for this lay in the fact that such encounters “do not destabilize white majority community based narratives of economic and/or cultural victimhood” which are used to cover up personal social or economic failures (Valentine, 2008, p.333). If prejudice is to be reduced through encounters with difference, the social and economic experiences and material circumstances of people that led to these prejudices have to be considered. Valentines central concern about current celebrations of urban encounter is that they tend not to consider the inequalities underlying everyday encounters. Of importance is therefore to include within the debate issues of the distribution of resources and rights of social groups and individuals (Valentine, 2008).

What has not yet been thoroughly discussed at this point is how ‘the encounter’ is defined within geographical research. Although not always defined explicitly, two definitions can be made out which are central to the debate. Mateiskova & Leitner (2011, p.722) suggest that encounters “hold open the possibility of either reinforcing or disorienting us from firmly held habits, stereotypes, and prejudices.” Or, in other words, “they may both (re)inscribe and help transcend existing boundaries between individuals and groups”. The second definition is closely associated to ‘intergroup contact theory’ discussed above. Valentine (2008, p.325)

specifies which kind of encounters might foster so-called ‘meaningful contact’: “Contact that actually changes values and translates beyond the specifics of the individual moment into a more general positive respect for – rather than merely tolerance of – others”. Subsequently, within the debate these encounters are often referred to as ‘meaningful encounters’ (see Andersson, Vanderbeck, Valentine, Ward, & Sadgrove, 2011; Askins & Pain, 2011; Gibson, 2009; Hemming, 2011; Ho, 2011).

How ‘the encounter’ is defined within geographical research impacts what is expected from it. Especially the focus on intergroup contact theory and its focus on the reduction of prejudice makes apparent that the geographical debate is primarily focused on how encounters can contribute to the reduction of prejudice and fostering ‘social cohesion’ between a mostly ‘white, middle class’ society and its ‘Others’. Valentine’s notion of the ‘meaningful encounter’ highlights this aspect of the debate, since it is geared towards enhancing ‘respect for others’. The ‘Others’ that are encountered strongly reflect not only policy needs, but also debates related to this strand of research, as has been indicated above. As such, research has mostly investigated encounters between members of different ethnicity, religion, race, socio-economic status and sexual orientation (see Andersson, Sadgrove, & Valentine, 2012; Andersson, Vanderbeck, Valentine, Ward, & Sadgrove, 2011b; Askins & Pain, 2011; Hemming, 2011; Ho, 2011; Leitner, 2012; Matejskova & Leitner, 2011; Valentine & Sadgrove, 2013; Valentine & Waite, 2012; Valentine, 2008; Wilson, 2014). In the following sections, I will return to the question of the definition of the encounter.

The unique contribution that the geographical debate is aiming to make is the focus on particular ‘micropublics’ (Amin, 2002), ‘zones, sites or spaces of encounter’ (Lawson & Elwood, 2013; Leitner, 2012; Valentine, Sporton, & Bang Nielsen, 2008) and ‘contact zones’ (Pratt, 1992). In short, geographical research increasingly focuses on a very specific ‘where’ of the encounter. Research has hence studied encounters in public spaces such as cafés, buses, libraries or playgrounds, but also in institutional spaces such as schools or the workplace and private spaces such as the home (Clayton, 2009; Laurier & Philo, 2006b; Wilson, 2011, 2013).

2.2 Different Encounters

At the core of this research is lies the concept of ‘the encounter’. The idea of the encounter provides the moment, setting or scene which this research revolves around and is focused on. The encounter, along with its verb ‘to encounter’, is a frequently used term not only in academic language, but also in everyday life. English language dictionaries give a quite clear indication of how ‘to encounter’ or ‘an encounter’ is employed within everyday language. Both the verb and the noun contain an element of unexpectedness: Someone is met unexpectedly; one is unexpectedly faced with something hostile or difficult (Oxford Dictionary, 2014).

The philosophical and empirical employment of the concept of ‘the encounter’ however is not as readily defined. Within geography, the definition of the concept is directed more towards a particular outcome: “Hold open the possibility of either reinforcing or disorienting us from firmly held habits, stereotypes, and prejudices” (Mateiskova & Leitner,

2011, p.722). In addition, an encounter, paraphrased as ‘contact’, “changes values and translates beyond the specifics of the individual moment into a more general positive respect for – rather than merely tolerance of – others” (Valentine, 2008, p.325). Whatever an encounter is, its outcome is expected to somehow challenge or affirm the habits, stereotypes or prejudices we hold. If it is deemed successful or ‘meaningful’ (Valentine, 2008), by a subject not yet defined, its ultimate goal is to change values and to generate respect for so-called ‘others’. Who these ‘others’ are is not defined by the concept of the encounter, but within the empirical research based on policy needs reflecting the current historical-political moment with its particular, marginalized and/or oppressed others.

At the current moment, the concept of the encounter is determined by its outcome, in in which case the concept itself remains vague: When defined by its outcome, an encounter can only be said to have taken place when the outcome is already clear – as such, it is not possible to name an encounter while it is happening. Therefore, is it possible to determine elements that demarcate an encounter, so that we are able to name an encounter while it is occurring? More, who is the subject judging the encounter as to whether or not it can be deemed meaningful? Which are the norms or standards underlying this judgement? If an external subject is judging the encounter on the basis of whether or not it is ‘meaningful’, how do we know that this judging subject necessarily holds the sufficient knowledge or ‘correct’ values that would allow judgement? If a definition of an encounter can be established that is not based on its outcome, does an encounter then necessarily have to change values? And how do we determine whose values need changing? I cannot promise to answer all of these questions within this thesis. What they should make us aware of, however, is the underlying complexity of the term ‘encounter’ and the hidden-power relations that constitute the underlying ‘knowing academic subject’ – research ‘object’ relationship.

Next to the definitions of an encounter provided above, the geographical scholarship distinguishes roughly between two types of encounter: On the one hand, the ‘fleeting’ or ‘everyday’ encounters that are ascribed to the more public spaces of the city (Laurier & Philo, 2006a, 2006b; Thrift, 2005) and on the other, the more long-term, sustained contact arising from a common activity or over sustained encounter (Matejskova & Leitner, 2011). Valentine (2008) has framed the distinction between these two forms as one between the quotidian, public encounter and other, more ‘meaningful’ contact. Opposing public encounter to meaningful contact however leaves the question of the role of public encounters and their contribution to meaningful contact unanswered. While encounters in public should not be ‘romanticized’ in the sense that proximity alone could transform values (Valentine, 2008), other research does point to important effects other than the transformation of values such as practicing tolerance towards others (Bannister & Kearns, 2013). In contrast to these short-term events, encounters are also described as intense or long-term, occurring over several instances. Scholars have pointed to the effects of working together in shared activities as a way to induce ‘meaningful’ contact (Amin, 2006; Ellis, Wright, & Parks, 2004; Matejskova & Leitner, 2011).

Feminist theory and especially the work of Sara Ahmed (2000) can help fill some of the gaps remaining in the geographical scholarship; opening up new ways for analysis and understanding. Describing an encounter as “a meeting which involves surprise and conflict” (Ahmed, 2000, p.6), it can take on several forms. Firstly, an encounter can be *face-to-face*,

that is, “eye-to-eye, involving a visual economy of recognition”, as well as “**skin-to-skin**, involving an economy of touch” (Ahmed, 2000, p.7). These face-to-face encounters necessarily involve at least two subjects which approach each other. In addition, Ahmed claims that these encounters are contingent upon time and space and as such should not be thought of as discrete events. Following this thought, encounters are thus *mediated*, for they “presuppose other faces, other encounters of facing, other bodies, other spaces, and other times” (Ahmed, 2000, p.7). Ahmed further relates that encounters are central to the process of identity formation, since a subject’s identity is an outcome of the everyday meetings with others and not simply a result of the subject’s relation to itself (Ahmed, 2000).

Secondly, encounters are not only ‘face-to-face’ or even human-to-human. Rather, encounters can be seen more broadly as the “**coming together of at least two elements**” Therefore, the activity of reading can also be framed as an encounter, in which a relationship is established between the reader and text. Assuming that the encounter is prior to the existence of the text, means that it is only “through being read that the text comes to life as text, that the text comes to be thinkable as having an existence in the first place” (Ahmed, 2000, p.7). From this idea follows that “it is only through meeting with an-other that the identity of a given person *comes to be inhabited as living*” (author’s emphasis, Ahmed, 2000, p.8).

A third element central to encounters is the element of ‘**surprise**’. Encounters are not meetings between subjects who know each other; rather, the lack of knowledge about the other that would enable the subject to control the situation is what defines the encounter. In reference to identity formation, encounters on the one hand are constitutive of the ‘I’, and thus allow for ‘fixation’. On the other hand, encounters also involve the ‘impossibility of fixation’. In facing others, “we seek to recognise who they are, by reading the signs on their body, or by reading their body *as a sign*”. This process of reading hence establishes ‘the subject’ in relation to ‘the stranger’, “who is recognised as ‘out of place’ in a given place”. When we are unable to read the bodies of others, that is, when we do not recognize this other, we re-read the stranger’s body and compare it to ‘other’ others. In doing so, encounters “reopen the prior histories of encounter that violate and fix others in regimes of difference” (Ahmed, 2000, p.8).

The fourth and last element specific to encounters is their *antagonistic nature*, that is, they involve conflict. An encounter, which gives existence to the ‘I’ of the subject, necessitates an asymmetry of power. An encounter between equals would be no encounter, since this would not involve the element of surprise. The connection of a particular encounter and forms of social antagonism lies in the circumstance that “the particular encounter always carries *traces* of those broader relationships [of power and antagonism]. Therefore, “differences, as markers of power, are not determined in the ‘space’ of the particular *or* the general, but in the very determination of their historical relation” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 8f). In essence, Ahmed’s argument is thus that differences have to be understood through the way they are constituted in everyday encounters, which are in turn historically contingent.

Summing up, the work of Ahmed contributes to understanding encounters in several distinct ways. Firstly, encounters can be ‘face-to-face’ encounters, which are mediated by past histories of encountering other faces, bodies or spaces. Secondly, an encounter does not necessarily have to be ‘face-to-face’, but can be framed more broadly as the coming together

of at least two elements, which brings a particular thing for a subject into existence in the first place. Thirdly, encounters involve the element of surprise, due to the fact that the Other is unknown. Fourthly, encounters involve asymmetries of power and are thus antagonistic. Therefore, difference itself is the outcome of encounters, which are themselves influenced by past relations. Although this theorization of the elements of an encounter is not exhaustive, it does open up the concept and provoke further analysis of the different elements that constitute encounters.

From the work of Ahmed it can be deduced that a central element within an encounter is the notion of difference, since a coming-together of the same would not be an encounter. More, the encounter is not only a coming-together of difference, but is itself the condition for the production of difference. Sameness only generates sameness. A geographical debate that is thus titled 'encounters with difference' therefore is a tautology, since an encounter is constituted by and productive of difference. An inquiry into the notion of difference can thus shift our conception of the encounter and its potential outcomes, as demonstrated by the following chapter.

2.3 Encountering Difference, Subjectivity & Representation

2.3.1 A different 'difference'? – Deleuze's 'difference-in-itself'

The concept of difference is, without a doubt, central to the debate on 'encounters with difference'. Since this thesis is to a large extent indebted to feminist theory, the most appropriate place to start elaborating on the concept of difference is through 'sexual difference'. While this at first may seem a long way off from the central theme of this thesis, feminist theory and most prominently Luce Irigaray have argued that sexual difference is the core concept of feminist theory. Grosz stresses, that it was Irigaray who understood that *"sexual difference is the most significant philosophical concept, the most significant thought, issue, idea, of our age, the concept that defines the social, political, and intellectual preoccupations of our era. By its careful articulation, through its entwinement with all the other concepts related to every category or type of lived difference, among them, differences in sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, religion, economic status, geography, and politics, that is, differences generally inassimilable within the forms of democracy that we currently recognize – sexual difference marks the threshold of a new way of understanding ourselves, the world, and conceptuality itself"* (Grosz, 2011, p.144).

Both Grosz and Braidotti draw on Irigaray's theorizations on sexual difference. In her writing, sexual difference is not taken as one difference among other differences that are made prominent in our societies, such as ethnicity, religion, race or class. Sexual difference, in the work of Irigaray, is an ontological concept; it is the difference that 'is not one'. Her argument is that without sexual difference, there would be no life and no differences, which includes no differentiation of humans into concepts of race or ethnicity. In the words of Grosz, "sexual difference is the very machinery, the engine, of living difference, the mechanism of variation, the generator of the new" (ibid., p.101). Sexual difference, a coming-together of 'more than one', generates creativity and newness, whereas "the forgetting of sexual difference [...] is the forgetting of the conditions of life itself" (ibid.,

p.102). When seen in this way, there is no possibility of overcoming sexual difference, although it should not be reduced simply to its biological form, which is itself open to contestation. Rather, “sexual difference is the principle of radical difference, the failure of identity, destination or finality. It is the eruption of the new, the condition of emergence, evolution, or overcoming” (ibid., p.103).

By contrast, if we neglect the question of sexual difference, it necessarily entails the neglect or repression of all other forms of (human) difference and their subsequent representation through singular norms, through ‘the one’ dominating form. This position of Irigaray has received a vast amount of critique, many of them claiming that she reduces all other differences to sexual difference and that this masks other forms of oppression based among others on race, ethnicity or class. However, as Grosz clarifies, Irigaray never claimed that sexual difference was the most important condition of oppression. Rather, “we should consider our oppression where it affects each of us most directly, where it touches each of us in our specificity” (ibid., p.107).

Sexual difference may therefore not be the most relevant category for the analysis of conditions of oppression. Yet, following Irigaray, sexual difference is a necessary accompaniment of other social categories, due to its ontological status as it is “the very mechanism for the transmission from one generation to the next of all other living differences” (ibid, p.111). While other differences, such as race, ethnicity and the like are dependent on their geographical and historical moment, sexual difference will always be present in the future, albeit in numerous expressions and representations. This constitutes a condition which, in the view of Irigaray, but also for Grosz and Braidotti, is not to be overcome or lamented, but celebrated and enjoyed. For Grosz, “the opening up of humanity through sexual difference is an opening up as well of class, race, ethnic, and sexual relations to difference, to variation, to multiplicity, to change, to new futures” (ibid., p.112).

Irigaray’s stance that sexual difference as an ontological force will always be present is oppositional to calls for egalitarianism. In her view, egalitarian projects interfere with the project of highlighting the specificity of difference. For Irigaray, “egalitarianism entails a neutral measure for the attainment of equality, a measure that invariably reflects the value of the dominant position. Egalitarianism entails becoming equal to a given term, ideal, or value” (ibid., p.148). More, “to whom or what should women become equal in order to free themselves from their age-old subjugation? ... In reality, equality tends to deny the existence of difference, rather than solve the problems difference poses” (Irigaray, 2004, p.77 f). As such, equality is not attainable, since it must detach itself from the real conditions of the lived body (Grosz, 2011). This recognition makes the freeing-up of the feminist political subject possible, which is a core theme in the work of Braidotti and which I will be dealing with later on.

Egalitarianism as the covering-up of the specificity of difference can be linked to the work of Gilles Deleuze (1994), who along with Irigaray gives difference an ontological status and has informed the work of Grosz and Braidotti in numerous ways. Deleuze’s argument can be more easily approached by looking at how ‘difference is most commonly understood: As ‘difference from the same’ or ‘difference of the same over time’. *“In either case, it refers to a net variation between two states. Such a conception assumes that states are comparable, and that there is at base a sameness against which variation can be observed or deduced. As*

such, difference becomes merely a relative measure of sameness and, being the product of a comparison, it concerns external relations between things". The crucial point here is, that difference then is "subordinated to sameness and becomes an object of representation in relation to some identity" (Stagoll, 2005, p.74f). What is thus overlooked is the particularity and singularity of every-thing and every moment, relegating difference to a comparison through sameness, which is in line with Irigaray's argument against egalitarianism. Deleuze's solution to maintain the particularity of every moment and thing is a two-way strategy: Firstly, he proposes a conception of difference which is not based on the concept of sameness. This is achieved through asserting that there is nothing that comes before difference, that is, there is no pre-existing unity and no aspect of reality is the same. Every individual, thing, moment, perception or conception contains an inherent singularity and particularity.

Secondly, he critiques the traditional theory of representation, by which is meant that "we tend to consider something as just another instance of a category or original" (Stagoll, 2005, p. 76). In consequence, 'difference-in-itself' is overlooked, since it is hidden behind the representational category or the original. This claim of Deleuze constitutes a fundamental critique of how philosophy has previously thought of difference, namely as in relation to 'the thing itself' (Marks, 2005). The problematic that lies within this traditional conception of difference, as can be derived from Grosz reading of Deleuze, is that "*representation is the limit of difference, rather than its privileged milieu or its mode of expression. Difference abounds everywhere but in and through the sign. It lives in and as events – the event of subjectivity, the event as political movement, the event as open-ended emergence. The sign and signification, more generally, is the means by which difference is dissipated and rendered tame*" (Grosz, 2011, p.94; emphasis original).

This understanding of difference as 'difference-in-itself' is taken up by Grosz. She highlights both Irigaray's and Deleuze's positioning of difference as an ontological entity, as "the generative force of the world, the force that enacts materiality" (Grosz, 2011, p.91). The differences that are more commonly spoken of in the context of the social sciences, such as ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation, pertain only to human subjectivity and are thus in their particularity within a human being only an expression of this wider, ontological force of difference. In line with Irigaray, Deleuze holds that difference cannot be equalized; it is only by generating more variation, differentiation, and difference that we can arrive at a concept of equality which is not built on comparison and sameness or the annihilation of differences (Grosz, 2011).

In conclusion, the understanding of difference as an ontological entity frees the concept of acting as a comparative device. Rather, difference can now be seen as the generator of life, rather than the counterpart of the same. This understanding is vital, for it enables us to place value on (sexual) difference, rather than devaluing it. Difference, incorporated by (at least) two entities, is now seen as indispensable to the creation of life, of something new. More, the notion of 'difference-in-itself' enables us to locate difference in every-thing and thus also in every human being and emphasize the particularity of everybody – indeed also the particularity of every material body, while relinquishing a universal subject position. With this ontological difference in mind, we are now able to relocate to the

level' of the subject and outline the implications of this ontological difference for subjects and their Others.

2.3.2 Subjectivity, Identity and Difference

Braidotti adds to our understanding of how difference is thought in relation to subjectivity within our Western societies: "Difference is not a neutral category, but a term that indexes exclusion from the entitlements to subjectivity: to be 'different from' means being worth 'less than'". Difference is thus connoted with pejoration, which in turn serves to assert Sameness. "By extension, otherness is defined in negative terms as the specular counterpart of the Subject. [...] This results in making an entire section of living beings into marginal and disposable bodies: these are the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others" (Braidotti, 2011, p.75). Difference as concept is then connected with inferiority; and as such, "rooted in European fascism, having been colonized and taken over by hierarchical and exclusionary ways of thinking" (Braidotti, 2011, p.138).

As depicted in the previous chapter, sexual difference is central to Western feminist theory. Simone de Beauvoir as one of the first critics argued against an association of difference with devalored otherness. Beauvoir then goes on to argue that the differences women represent are not yet represented and hence must be brought into representation (Braidotti, 2011). In similar fashion, feminist geography has cautioned 'not to exclude half of the human in human geography' (Monk & Hanson, 1982). However, following Irigaray, it is not possible to simply bring into representation what is not represented. In a move beyond the dialectical reasoning of de Beauvoir, Irigaray proposed that the 'otherness' incorporated by women is not merely unrepresented, but is actually unrepresentable in the first place: "Woman as the other remains in excess of or outside the phallogocentric framework that conflates the masculine with the (false) universalist position. The relationship between subject and other, therefore, is not one of reversibility; on the contrary, the two poles of opposition exist in an asymmetrical relationship" (Braidotti, 2011, p.152). Following Irigaray, no symmetry thus exists between the sexes. Their relationship is structured in a hierarchical manner by the phallogocentric regime. Braidotti concludes therefore, that since difference is seen as something negative, feminist theory seeks to redefine it in terms of positivity (Braidotti, 2011).

Braidotti's redefinition of difference is described as a three-level process: Level one is the differentiation between the universal subject and its other, Woman, who is the 'other-than' the subject. This Woman with the capital W is the Other of feminist theory and thus acts as an institution and representation. On a second level, Woman is again different to actual, real-life women, who are embodied subjects and as such bring with them a multiplicity of differences, coded as race, class and the like. The third level of differentiation is to acknowledge differences within each woman, that is, she is a multiplicity in herself. For Braidotti, this should account for the complexity of the embodied structure of the subject. The 'self', an entity with an identity, is part of the corporeal materiality called 'the body'. This body's materiality is coded and analysed in and through language; however, the body in its specific materiality cannot be completely represented, it exceeds representation. The third

level therefore tries to acknowledge every-body's particularity through stating that 'she' is a multiplicity in herself. These three layers of difference are nevertheless contained within the 'I' – so as not to again fall into the trap of excluding an Other while defining an alternative feminist subject. The differences or layers of difference within each subject “envisages the subject as the crossroads of different registers of speech, calling upon different layers of lived experience” (Braidotti, 2011, p.159). In essence, Braidotti proposes an epistemological and at the same time political way of action to bring an alternative feminist subject into being, which builds on the notion of sexual difference as it has been employed in feminist theory.

The merit of this scheme is its move beyond dualistic thinking and bringing into the picture the particularity and singularity of every-body, in this case, real women who do not coincide with Woman. In a similar way, this scheme can be applied to all of society's Others, whose self exceeds the political subjectivity they wilfully represent or are represented as. Therefore, the same distinction can be made for asylum seekers: They are the Other of the universal subject, in this case, the lawful citizens of a given nation. As such, they are represented in media as 'Asylum Seekers'. This representation has several functions: Under its flag, rights can be claimed and circumstances criticized; in short it is a means to empowerment. At the same time, its identity is fixed externally by media and politics, carrying with it connotations, stereotypes and prejudice and in the worst case can act as a scapegoat for deeper lying societal problems. Braidotti's third step enables the particular individual to distance him or herself from this representation – I am not Woman, I am not Asylum Seeker. While these positions – political subjectivities – can still be employed as a means to empowerment, the particularity and singularity of the individual is not lost in this frame. What thus stands between two entities, in the case of geographies of encounter, two individuals, is the representation they have of each other. What makes an encounter antagonistic therefore is not based on the actual particular person – an encounter is not between the known, but the unknown. The antagonism, the conflict derives from the representation that is generated by a reading of the coded body and its spatial surroundings. What we have thus gained through this philosophical detour is perhaps a new idea of what a truly 'meaningful' encounter might aim at: A destabilization of representation, a move beyond to uncover the particularity and singularity of the individual.

What such a destabilization of representation means for prejudice against a 'social group' is that rather than making the individual stand for the whole group, it is the idea of the existence of the group as such that needs to be challenged. This is not an argument against political representation, but against the idea that a political subjectivity equates with the identity of a person. Political subjectivity in this sense is defined in relation to the claims and actions of other groups and not through characteristics inherent to the group. Hence, it is the idea of an independently existing identity of a social group that needs to be challenged and destabilized (Young, 2000).

The geographies of encounter debate appears to have fallen prey to a hierarchical understanding of difference in relation to subjectivity: For instance, how to 'develop the capacity for living with difference' (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2012; Valentine, 2008a) or even “the challenges of living with difference” (Bannister & Kearns, 2013) implies that we have previously lived without difference, suggesting a previously homogenous society. As long as we think difference as comparison, we are subordinating difference to sameness, to an

identity. The asylum seeker, the immigrant, the ‘ethnic’ Other will thus always be subordinated to a universal subject, often termed ‘the majority society’. But who is this majority society, which subjects and which Others does it contain and which are excluded? When speaking of asylum seekers, are homosexuals or people marked as ‘ethnic others’ included into this majority society? Are homeless people, prostitutes or criminals included in this ‘majority society’? What about the richest ‘one percent’ or the poorest ten percent of society? Who are we actually addressing in the comparisons we make or when talking about specific goals such as ‘integration’ or ‘social cohesion’?

Implicitly, therefore, one could argue that feminist (!) geographical debates on encounters take on a universalist viewpoint, for they are ascribing differences to the Other, in this case, the ‘majority’ society, while failing to sufficiently take account of differences within the groupings or of the multiplicity of the self. A depiction of Others as outside the majority society not only reproduces the image of a universal standard as the white, male, Christian, heterosexual, able-bodied subject, but further makes any internal differentiation of the ‘majority society’ difficult, if not impossible. Designating ethnicity, race, religion or sexual orientation as the markers of difference without reference to the particularity of every human individual nor to the non-coincidence of political subjectivity with the identity of a person is not only a mis-representation, but also a reproduction of the an implicit universal standard. It keeps a hierarchical understanding of difference in its place and demarcates these people coded under these representations as ‘worth-less-than’. An equality based on the commonality of difference is henceforth not to be established if only one side is carrying ‘the burden’ of difference.

Encounters with difference in geographical research have not been encounters with particular individuals, although individuals encountered each other during the empirical research. The geographical research has instead been built on a misconception, or so it seems: They were encounters between individuals representing ‘white majority society’, i.e. the universal subject, with the Other as ‘representation’, not as the actual individual. However, the Other cannot be encountered or brought into representation, simply because the Other does not exist as a living human being. It is the Other to a universal subject, where both have been robbed of their embodied specificities and materiality. The Other in the former account is always the victim, robbed of agency, it is elevated and subordinated at the same time – but not a fellow human being. The majority subject in the former account is then the prejudiced, powerful, undifferentiated individual. Both hide the particular human subject which is multiplicitous and continually becoming, that is, constantly subject to and open for change.

The encounters with difference debate should thus revisit unquestioned assumptions in which particular individuals by virtue of one coding represent the universal or its Other. In addition, the notion of difference-in-itself informs the geographical debate in a second influential way. This relates to the potential problem of ‘up-scaling’, that is, not being able to ‘up-scale’ positive encounters between a person and an Other to the whole ‘group’ of ‘Others’. However, if difference is all there is, then this has far reaching implications for any categorizations, such as ‘asylum seekers’ or any kind of ethnic ‘Others’. If a person creates an exception for an Other, he or she is granting this person their ‘particularity’, i.e. seeing them as the differing individual every-body is. An attempt at this has been made by Valentine (Valentine, 2008b), who argued for the usage of the concept of ‘intersectionality’ within

research on encounters. Feminist theory thus makes us aware that the problem our societies are facing today is not ‘how to live with difference’; rather, it is to acknowledge that difference is life. Every being and every-body is different in itself and more than the representation he/she/it presents or is presented with. Difference is the force of life and this is a fact worth celebrating.

Celebrating difference as the force of life turns the ‘encounters with difference’ debate from trying to find a ‘capacity to accommodate difference’ to a more positive inquiry of what is to be gained through encounters. The focus is thus shifted from what is to be reduced, namely prejudice, towards what is sparked within and through moments of encounter. This is not to say that research into the reduction of prejudice through encounters is not a necessary aim. But by placing the sole focus on ‘prejudiced’ individuals - which are hard to make out in the first place – less prejudiced people fall out of the picture. If encounters between less prejudiced people do not necessarily transform values, as is demanded by the concept of the ‘meaningful encounter’, what else then is moved or created within these moments of encounter? With a new understanding of difference in mind, how can encounters enable a different view of Others, but also of ourselves? It is the task of empirical research to determine which personal and spatial characteristics are required for this move toward the ‘particular’ encounter.

2.4 The Right (to) Spaces for Encounter?

As outlined in the introduction to the debate, geography’s unique contribution aims to be a thorough analysis of the ‘where’ of the encounter. Recognizing one of geography’s core messages – spatial context matters – scholarship on encounters seeks to provide more detail on the exact circumstances and differences of encounters in space.

The specific setting where encounters take place has been given different designations: Scholarship speaks of ‘spaces of encounter’, but also of ‘sites’ and ‘zones’ of encounter. Scholars also frequently draw upon literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt’s (1991, p.1) notion of the ‘contact zone’: “*Social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.*” What is often left out of geographical accounts is Pratt’s emphasis of the contact zone as a site for learning. Pratt also seeks for “pedagogical arts of the contact zone” (p.6), which include

“exercises in storytelling and in identifying with the ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others; experiments in transculturation and collaborative work and in the arts of critique, parody, and comparison; the redemption of the oral; ways for people to engage with suppressed aspects of history (including their own histories), ways to move into and out of rhetorics of authenticity; ground rules for communication across lines of difference and hierarchy that go beyond politeness but maintain mutual respect; a systematic approach to the all-important concept of cultural mediation.” (Pratt, 1991, p.6)

Pratt's contact zone is configured as a site where 'cultures clash and grapple with each other', in addition to being inhabited by differential power dynamics. As such, her early notion of the contact zone carries many characteristics of 'spaces of encounter' as defined in the geographical debate. The geographical debate however differs on the ends these contact zones should serve; a topic that I will return to in the next section.

While some of the geographical debate has turned to a city's public spaces as the ideal site of casual encounters and mixture, Amin (2002, p.967) cautions that "these are not natural servants of multicultural engagement", since spaces are often "territorialized by particular groups (and therefore steeped in surveillance) or they are spaces of transit with very little contact between strangers". He cautions, that contact in itself is not sufficient to produce understanding. Similar to Valentine's (2008) later findings, he contends that habitual contact can also "entrench group animosities and identities". Amin (p.970) holds that

*"cultural exchange is likely if people are encouraged to step out of their routine environment, into other everyday spaces that function as **sites of unnoticeable cultural questioning or transgression**. Here too, interaction is of a prosaic nature, but these sites work as **spaces of cultural displacement**. Their effectiveness lies in placing people from different backgrounds in **new settings** where engagement with strangers in a **common activity** disrupts easy labelling of the stranger as enemy and **initiates new attachments**. They are moments of **cultural destabilization**, offering individuals the chance to **break out of fixed relations and fixed notions**, and through this, **learn to become different** through new patterns of social interaction." (emphasis added)*

The words marked in bold in the previous quotation all point to possible entry roads for a new conceptualization of spaces of encounter. Yet, while parts of this passage are often quoted and employed, scholars rarely build on or challenge Amin's thoughts. Summarizing the key points, spaces of encounter can hence be sites of questioning, of challenging dominant or dominating views and of providing the possibility of moving beyond these views. Amin also emphasizes the importance of 'a new setting', however without any reference what is specifically new about it. Amin also gives an indication of how this encounter should come about, namely through an engagement in a common activity, which should then result in 'destabilizing culture' and building 'new attachments' and learning 'to become different'. Amin's contention is thus that within a space of encounter, the old is left behind, 'fixed' conceptions or identities are 'broken out of', resulting in personal change. The product of such encounters is thus difference, an overcoming of the old. This echoes the discussion of encounters and difference in previous sections.

Returning to the question of spaces of encounter, Amin proposes that these should be new settings, offering individuals common activities to engage in. Where could such sites be located and what would they look like? For Amin (2002, p.969), the ideal sites of encounter are "where 'prosaic' negotiations are compulsory, in 'micropublics' such as the workplace, schools, colleges, youth centres, sports clubs, and other spaces of association." These 'micropublics' thus necessitate conversations, albeit not necessarily with great depth.

In a later publication, Amin (2013, p.59) distinguishes between co-presence and collaboration as different ways of being together with strangers: "The social dynamic of

working, living, playing or studying together is quite different from that of strangers rubbing along (or not) in public space or sharing a cultural commons. Co-presence and collaboration are two very different things, and the meaning and affective result of situated practice in each of these sites of 'togetherness' is not the same." Following Amin, spaces of encounter thus can be divided into **spaces of co-presence** and **spaces of collaboration**. In his earlier work, Amin (2002) thus saw the ideal sites of encounter to be spaces of collaboration, such as the workplace or school. In his later work however, Amin (2008, 2013) also investigates the meaning and value of co-presence for living with diversity. Drawing on Lefebvre's (1996) right to the city as "*the right of all its inhabitants to shape urban life and to benefit from it*", Amin contends that "*the conferral of universal rights [should be seen as] a first step towards recognizing urban multiplicity*" (Amin, 2013, p.75f).

Connecting rights to the question of encounter and the recognition of a city's diversity is particularly pertinent to encounters between asylum seekers and recent immigrants with natives or long-term residents of a particular place. Encounters between these groups will necessarily be mediated by the question of rights and the ability or inability to participate. Denying groups basic entitlements robs these groups of their ability to participate and contribute to urban life. A space of non-hierarchical encounter between different people then must offer groups the same rights, the same means to participation. To designate such a space, Amin employed the term 'common ground': "*For multiplicity to mean more than diversity placed in hierarchical order, the commons has to be widely understood as a gathering of equals, a meeting ground and shared turf*". Amin extends also his notion of 'common ground' to larger scales, arguing that "*an ethos of the urban as a shared plentitude might hold more promise, advanced through a culture of active usage of the city's shared resources, vigorous occupancy of the public sphere and public stewardship of the urban commons*" (Amin, 2013, 78).

Although the notion of a 'common ground' that promises basic universal rights to all its inhabitants seems appealing, it is still far from the current reality of Western Europe's urban areas. While the notion of 'common ground' may be based on Lefebvre's claim of 'right to the city', it remains somewhat opaque. This is partly based on the circumstance that Lefebvre's 'right to the city' is itself very broadly conceptualized, leaving the question of rights within a city a 'black box' (Attoh, 2011). Amin's call for a common ground for the meeting of equals remains nevertheless a helpful concept for conceptualizing the characteristics of spaces of encounter – if the notion of common ground is employed to demarcate distinct spaces with their specific rights and rules of conduct, rather than being associated with 'the urban' as a whole. What is helpful and potentially productive about a 'common ground' is its focus on the question of the distribution rights and inequality undermining encounters in these spaces.

The location of encounters is frequently circumscribed with 'in public spaces', and, less frequently, 'in private spaces'. While public space is often associated with encounters of co-existence such as a café or on the street, the private or semi-private spaces such as the home or the workplace are associated with sustained, collaborative encounters. This renders a somewhat dualistic picture of where encounters take place. However, when taking a closer look at what constitutes public and private spaces, a plethora of different definitions and usages can be made out (Staeheli & Mitchell, 2007). Looking into the nature of 'public' and

'private' spaces illuminates several aspects about encounters in differing spaces which an unquestioned, dualistic definition obscures.

Staeheli et al (2009, p.634) provide a helpful starting point from which to distinguish different usages of the word 'public'. They differentiate between five terms: **'Public space'**, **'the public/ a public'**, **'public sphere'**, **'public realm'** and **'publicity'**. They define public space as *"physical spaces that are relatively open to a range of people and behaviours"*. 'The public/ a public' *"refer[s] to a socio-political collective that is constructed through dialogue and action and that engages strangers or people not directly known to the speaker/ actor"*. The authors stress that the public cannot be observed in a direct manner; rather, it is constituted by discourse. In contrast to the material definition of public space, 'public sphere' is then *"the metaphorical space in which dialogue and action circulate in the construction of publics"*. 'Public realm' then designates *"the metaphorical and material spaces and relationships"*, while 'publicity' is employed as a measure of the inclusiveness of the public and the public realm.

The different distinctions of 'the public' and 'public space' provided by Staeheli et al (2009) then help distinguish between different usages of the word 'public'. The authors also distinguish between 'a public' and 'the public' – a crucial distinction. Drawing on the work of Nancy Fraser (1997) and others, they argue that 'the public' expresses an inherent imagination of a singular public, while 'a public' allows for the existence of multiple publics. More, they stress that the idea of a singular 'public' is often employed to support normative and hegemonic construction of a nation state, consistent with its boundaries, or *"when institutions and agents attempt to create an idea of a set of behaviours and norms to which everyone in a polity must assimilate or conform"* (Warner, 2002; in: Staeheli et al, 2009, p.645). Fraser (1997, p.80) questions the underlying association of a singular, public sphere as the desirable form of public life and its counterpart, a multiplicity of publics, as *"a departure from, rather than the advance toward, democracy"*.

Fraser argues for 'multiple publics' instead of a 'singular public' as has been implied in the work of Habermas (1962). Rather than being a sign of the fragmentation and decline of 'the public', the appearance and formation of alternative publics to Fraser can aid democratic societies. In stratified societies, that is, societies constituted by relations of inequality between different groups, the formation of alternative publics, termed 'subaltern counterpublics', promotes the ideal of participatory parity more than a singular public. *"In that case, members of subordinated groups would have no arenas for deliberation among themselves about their needs, objectives, and strategies. They would not have venues in which to undertake communicative processes that were not, as it were, under the supervision of dominant groups"*. By contrast, subaltern counterpublics are *"discursive arenas, where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs"* (Fraser, 1997, p.81). While these subaltern counterpublics are not inherently virtuous or beneficial, they nevertheless *"help expand discursive space"* (ibid, p.82). Having a conception of multiple publics thus frames these counterpublics *as publics*, and not as enclaves, exempt from a singular public.

Multiple, competing publics then also necessitate interpublic discursive interaction. Fraser describes the public realm as *"the structured setting where cultural and ideological*

contest or negotiation among a variety of publics takes place” (Fraser, 1997, p.82f). This formulation does justice to the existence of multiple publics and their negotiations of different cultural or ideological beliefs within the public realm, that is, both metaphorically and in actual, material public spaces. The idea of spaces for contesting beliefs resonates with the quote of Amin (2002) at the beginning of this chapter and turns us full circle: Encounters with difference can then be seen as contestations between multiple publics in public spaces. The spaces are termed public not because they are the opposite of private spaces, but because they are *made public* through the encounters between different people, representing in part different publics. Spaces of encounter are then public spaces, spaces in which opinions and beliefs can be contested and exchanged, understandings and misunderstandings challenged or reinforced. They are made public not because of their location, but through the heterogeneity of people encountering each other. In short, spaces of encounter are not in public space, they are public space – spaces for multiple publics to encounter each other.

It would be nice to end this chapter at the conclusion that public spaces are spaces of encounter. Yet, this would be inattentive to the current reality ‘public’ spaces are facing in many capitalist driven societies. This reality is sometimes described as “the end of public space” (Sorkin, 1992). The claim is, that the nature of the public realm is changing; while new metaphorical or virtual public spaces appear, such as the Internet, the material public spaces are being eroded. Traditionally, public space is viewed as something inherently good:

“[Public space] is also a representation of the good that comes from public control and ownership, as contested and problematic as these may be. This is a corollary of the vision of public space as a place of relatively unmediated interaction: it is a vision of public space that understands a space’s very publicness as a good in and of itself, that understands there to be a collective right to the city. And this vision and practice of public space is increasingly threatened in the American city” (Mitchell, 2012, p.137)

Mitchell (2012) further argues that a politics based on interaction has been banned from the public spaces of the city, while “*corporate and state planners have created environments that are based on a desire for security more than interaction, for entertainment more than (perhaps divisive) politics*”. These spaces are then created based on “*a perceived need for order, surveillance and control over the behaviour of the public*” (ibid., p.138). As a replacement, ‘pseudo-public’ spaces are being established, which are privately owned and market driven. They are carefully designed and regulated, even in terms of ‘controlled’ diversity, rather than “*[promoting] unconstrained social differences*”. For more, “*even as new groups are claiming greater access to the rights of society, the homogenization of ‘the public’ continues apace, since the sort of diversity that pseudopublic spaces encourage is a diversity bound up in the unifying, levelling, homogenizing forces of commodity, brand-oriented consumption*” (ibid., p. 139). Recognizing this ‘planned’ diversity is crucial: It means that spaces are not completely homogenous in who populates them; however, this so-called ‘diversity’ is planned for. Thus, while some of these pseudopublic spaces might allow for encounters, they only allow for encounters with certain kinds of difference – rather than all kinds of difference. Scholarship on encounters with difference should thus not only pay

attention to the encounters urban spaces allow for, but also, and perhaps even more crucial, the kinds of encounters they prevent.

The homogenization and privatization of public space, driven by the desire for control and security thus fundamentally impact the possibilities of encounter within urban ‘public’ spaces: These trends “*imply the increasing alienation of people from the possibilities of unmediated social interaction and increasing control by powerful economic and social actors over the production and use of space.*” (ibid., 140). If these observations hold true, the opportunities for ‘unmediated social interaction’, that is, encounters, are increasingly prevented by dominant economic and social interests. An analysis of spaces of encounter thus cannot stop at the recognition whether encounters happen in public or in private – a thorough analysis needs to inquire into the power-relations that constitute these spaces and into relations of property. Focusing on property sheds light on the rules and relationships, legitimated through law, that regulate access to spaces (Staeheli et al, 2009). All sorts of property, whether they are owned by individuals, corporations or the government, carry within them the ability to define their terms of access, and thus also, of exclusion. Hence, “*what are often described as ‘public spaces’ are, in fact, properties with attendant relationships, regulations, and norms that can be used to differentiate people, behaviours, and political claims. Owners of properties can set limits on the kinds of people and behaviours that are allowed on the property and the terms of access*”(Staeheli et al, 2009, p.643).

What all this boils down to is that relations of property, backed up by law, then can define who is the public and who is excluded from ‘public’ spaces – the ‘undesirables’, such as the homeless and by extension, the non-citizen or asylum seeker. Banned from these ‘public’ or pseudopublic spaces, “*their legitimacy as members of the public is put in doubt. And thus unrepresented in our images of ‘the public’, they are banished to a realm outside of politics because they are banished from the gathering places of the city*” (Mitchell, 2012, p.141). A result of the subtle privatization of public space is thus a narrow construction of who constitutes ‘the public’ – and who does not. The scholarship on encounters with difference reflects this narrow definition of ‘the public’ – it is indicative of economic and socio-cultural forces to include certain groups into ‘the nation’. The discussion has thus focused on the groups that ‘should’ be seen as part of our ‘multicultural’ societies at the moment. By contrast, encountering people representing other kinds of differences, such as asylum seekers, but also the homeless, prostitutes or former prisoners are not seen as necessary or interesting avenues for investigation.

This reflection on who constitutes ‘the public’ and what constitutes ‘public space’ has thus illuminated two broad ways of inquiry into this debate: One is a form of inquiry that serves current policy needs of accommodating ‘the desired’ differences into our ‘multicultural’ societies, thus, the inclusion of the ‘new publics’. The other form of inquiry could potentially be one that investigates encounters with all forms of differences, not just the ones nations are seeking to incorporate, but their ‘abject’ (Sibley, 1995). I argue, that it is the second form that will shed light on the true state of our democracies, on the nature of our not-so public spaces, on the people excluded from them and on the problems and political reasoning underlying these exclusions. Worrying about the ‘romantization of urban encounters’ is thus pertinent; as I have tried to outline, rather than the urban being a space for

multiple encounters, it appears as if there is a worrying decline of public spaces for encounters with multiple publics. It is thus necessary to take a closer look at the diverse spaces that make up the urban and to decipher the spaces that are still relatively accessible to a diverse set of publics to encounter each other and afford the possibilities for unmediated social interaction.

2.5 The Effects of Encounters

The inquiry into encounters is highly bound up with debates on multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and conviviality, as the subsequent chapter will outline. Conviviality derives from the Latin verb ‘convivere’, which means ‘to live with’. The debate, and simultaneously the desired outcome, is thus on finding strategies and ways ‘to live with difference’. Motivated by policy needs on the one hand, and the recognition of a so-called ‘heightened diversity’ induced by increased migration flows and processes of globalization on the other, scholarship is thus seeking to find ways of coping with ‘different Others’ on an everyday basis. Encounters, primarily understood as face-to-face encounters, are thus analysed for their potential to promote intercultural understanding, empathy and dialogue (Amin, 2002). This concern especially reflects policy requirements and national discourses on social cohesion and community building, particularly in the UK.

In addition, geographers such as Valentine (2008; 2010) and Valentine and Sadgrove (2012; 2013) have investigated encounters for their ability to reduce ‘majority’ prejudice against ‘minority’ groups (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2012, 2013; Valentine, 2008a, 2010). The main conclusion drawn from this empirical research is that “*proximity does not equate with meaningful contact*” (Valentine, 2008b, p.334). While people might behave courteously in public spaces, this should not be equated with respect for difference. She portrays a number of examples in which individual contact did not produce a “*generalized respect for difference*” (ibid., p.333). The reason Valentine gives for this circumstance is that “*they do not destabilize white majority community-based narratives of economic and/or cultural victimhood*”. These narratives serve as a means for rationalizing their attitudes towards minorities. Given these narratives, Valentine emphasizes the need to investigate how individuals’ previous social experiences, along with their material circumstances, affect encounters with difference. Valentine and Sadgrove (2012, p.2060) contend however that although spatial proximity alone is not enough to ‘overcome social difference’, closeness, defined as the “*production of intimacy*” does have the possibility of “[*aligning*] *bodies in time and space*”.

In alignment with Valentine’s research, other scholars have also arrived at the conclusion that there is an “*absence of any straightforward correlation between localities, multi-ethnic mixes, routine interactions, and social transformation*” (Neal et al., 2013, p. 318). Similarly, Clayton (2009, p.494) observes that “*racisms and inter-cultural accommodations exist side by side, making a straightforward distinction between those places which ‘work’ in terms of positive inter-ethnic relations and those which do not, a misleading binary*”. More, “*interpretations and experiences vary on the basis of specific individual and collective positions and trajectories*”. Studies on encounters with difference

thus conclude, that it is very unlikely to find any straightforward relationships that are not bound to the workings of a specific context and that any positive effects are highly dependent on an individuals' life experiences and mobility (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2012; 2013), as well as the concrete local setting in which the individual is placed (Amin, 2002; Neal et al., 2013).

Not only have scholars pointed out the complexity of finding spaces or practices which establish positive relations with difference, but they have also highlighted the potentially negative consequences associated with encounters. Wise (2010) pointed out that sharing 'contact zones' can be particularly challenging for particular social groups such as the elderly. More, encounters can also "*incite processes of Othering and racialization of immigrants in space [...] and illicit strong emotions – primarily fear and anxiety*" (Leitner, 2012). Leitner (2012) also found that encounters can lead to building and maintaining racial and cultural boundaries, founded on an idealized place and past.

Further complications arise when considering the different types of encounters. This point is highlighted by Matejskova & Leitner (2011, p.735), who have suggested that chance encounters and consciously constructed encounters "*hold different potential for negotiating across difference and for countering prejudice and cultural racism*". The authors conclude, that while fleeting encounters offered little potential of changing attitudes and prejudices, more sustained contact through continued interaction did spur sensibility and empathy toward immigrants. A vital condition for this is seen in the opportunity of individuals for working together with a joint purpose. They authors caution, however, that this did not necessarily lead to the overcoming of group-based stereotypes, concurring with the findings of Valentine (2008).

While these restrictions and challenges remain salient to debates on the effects of encounters, scholars have nevertheless highlighted that encounters do point towards *the possibility* of positive change (Leitner, 2012; Matejskova & Leitner, 2011; Swanton, 2010). This means, that while scholars should remain aware of potentially negative consequences of some encounters, we should not dismiss the overall possibility of an encounter to effect positive change. Reflecting on her research experience, Wise (2013, p.39) argues that "*affinities often do emerge, and that over time these sometimes lead to shifts in identity, the acquisition of accommodative forms of everyday practice, and more inclusive ideas of nation, community and belonging*".

In acknowledgement of the difficulties as well as the potentialities of encounters Lawson and Elwood (2013) suggest that encounters do not necessarily always have to lead to an appreciation or negation of difference; rather, the effect of encounters should be the gaining of new insights about not only the position of the Other, but also, and perhaps just as important, about one's own position. In their study, this learning effect led people to "*enact a new class politics*" (ibid., p.16). In essence, the authors therefore see encounters as an opportunity to learn, rather than as a pathway to a utopian, conflict free society. It is this approach that I found most helpful for conceiving of the effects of encounters in the Grandhotel Cosmopolis.

2.6 Encountering whom? On the Political Nature of Encounters

Where does the concern for ‘living with difference’ come from? That is, what are the forces, the actors, the networks driving this debate? More, which political and academic concerns does it express? These are not only important, but vital questions to ask for a truly critical inquiry. As has been evidenced by the previous chapters, the debate exhibits a concern *for certain kinds* of difference, while positioning difference as an element outside of a ‘majority’ society. While this reading might not be intended by all scholars, ‘how to live with difference’ does sound like we are only now facing ‘the challenge’, or worse, ‘the burden’ of ‘having to accept difference’ as part of our Western societies.

As the previous chapters on difference have shown, ‘difference’ can be read in a number of ways and should not, as feminist and critical theorists argue, be read as a pejorative term. Needless to say, a pure celebration of difference as inherently beneficial would also be a misinterpretation. Paraphrasing Grosz (2011), difference is ‘the force of life and change’, which can be beneficial for some and less so for others. It is a fact of life, of every-thing and every being. Opening up difference in this manner thus helps us recognize more clearly the discursive regime that constitutes debates on ‘living with difference’ and place in in a political and academic context.

Inquiries into ‘learning to live with difference’ are located in debates on the notion of multiculturalism and multicultural societies, as well as in visions of cosmopolitanism (see Noble, 2013). The concept of multiculturalism emerged in the 1960s *“in which cultural difference was acknowledged and valued and the national imperative for immigrants and minority groups to assimilate to a national ideal was greatly reduced”* (Mitchell, 2004, p. 642). In this historical context, ‘multiculturalism’ was understood as a ‘right to difference’ and hence as a ‘right to an institutional recognition of that difference’. The meaning of multiculturalism has shifted over the past decades, resulting in a range of different understandings. For the context of Mitchell’s (2004, p.642) inquiry, ‘multiculturalism’ *“is not just about inclusion, nor is it merely an acceptance of difference; rather it actively ‘achieves’ diversity, it ‘expands the range of imagined life experiences for the members of society’s core groups’”*. This understanding of multiculturalism as an active achievement, rather than inclusion or acceptance of difference emphasizes the processual nature of multiculturalism, rather than the imagination of an end state. Thereby, *“diverse ways of being in the world are recognized as legitimate, and the qualities of ‘out-group’ members are not stigmatized or relegated to the private sphere, but rather reconstitute the notion of civil competence within the public sphere”*. What has happened over the last few decades, has been a shift away from a definition of multiculturalism as minority group members’ ‘right to difference’ and their visibility in the public sphere, towards an understanding of multiculturalism emphasizing ‘assimilation’ (Mitchell, 2004). For European countries, this reflects a shift from the recognition of a pluralistic public sphere, towards a renewed emphasis on the values of liberalism and the need toward integration (Brubaker, 2004; Etzinger, 2003).

While some European states have proclaimed the ‘end of multiculturalism’, this in effect only means the end of state-policies directed towards the recognition of a pluralistic society. It does not mean the end of ‘multiculturalism’ as such. As Nagel & Hopkins (Nagel

& Hopkins, 2010, p. 5) argue, *“there was no single manifesto of multiculturalism; instead, multiculturalism from the start was a diverse and highly contested collection of ideas and policies revolving around representation, recognition and minority political inclusion. To speak of the death of multiculturalism is to ignore the struggles that have been central to multicultural politics”*. But, as Gilroy (2004, p. 1) points out, this could also be read as a political strategy directed towards *“abolishing any ambition towards plurality”*. It is, then, an attempt at re-creating images of homogenous, rather than pluralistic nations.

Instead of proclaiming the ‘death of multiculturalism’, some authors emphasize the continued existence of multiculturalism as a *“lived phenomenon that takes place in countless interactions between real people who recognize each other as culturally different. These interactions can be marked by prejudice, tolerance, empathy, hospitality and incivility”*. Multiculturalism in this understanding thus focuses on the everyday interactions between culturally or ethnically different people – an understanding which Wise and Velayutham (2009, p. 3) call ‘everyday multiculturalism’. Similar to the former definition, but more specific, they define ‘everyday multiculturalism’ as *“a grounded approach to looking at the everyday practice and lived experience of diversity in specific situations and spaces of encounter. It explores how social actors experience and negotiate cultural difference on the ground and how their social relations and identities are shaped and re-shaped in the process”* (emphasis original).

While multiculturalism thus lives on as an everyday practice in very diverse urban settings, the academic focus on the local, everyday dimension of multiculturalism may nevertheless reflect current policy needs. As K. Mitchell (2004, p.645) outlines, along with the proclaimed ‘death of multiculturalism’ go *“geopolitical efforts to shift the responsibility for controlling and facilitating immigrant integration from the institutions of the state to the local level”*. In effect, this means *“the devolution of responsibility for ethnic integration to the scale of the community and the individual”*. Is then an inquiry into the everyday practices of multiculturalism merely a reflection of policy needs with the aim of finding factors and spatial conditions of ‘everyday multiculturalism’ that enable responsibility to be deflected from the state to the local level or even to the level of the individual? Could the strong focus on majority prejudice within the debate be evidence to this trend of placing responsibility, or even, ‘the blame’ on the individual? Placing the task of ‘integration’ on the individual, whether this is the acceptance of an individual associating her- or himself with the majority group, or whether this is an individual associated with a so-called minority group, obscures the structural and economic conditions and state policies which mediate every encounter (Swanton, 2010). While individuals do have a certain agency in forming encounters, they are nevertheless impacted by their wider social and economic conditions that are influenced to a large degree by state institutions and find their way into everyday encounters in localized settings.

Next to this ‘everyday’ re-framing of multiculturalism, the notion has also been critiqued from various scholars. Scholars have proposed ‘conviviality’ as an alternative to multiculturalism, which moves beyond fixed conceptions of identity associated with the latter. Conviviality, to Gilroy (2004, p.344)

“is a social pattern in which different metropolitan groups dwell in close proximity but where their racial, linguistic and religious particularities do not – as the logic of ethnic absolutism suggests they must – add up to discontinuities of experience or insuperable problems of communication”.

Nowicka and Vertovec (2013, p. 344) argue that ‘conviviality’ in many accounts carries a ‘political dimension’, understood as “small ‘p’ politics”: *“Orientations, attitudes and actions aimed at establishing a more just, equal condition for all regardless of differences”*. In addition to the two former definitions of conviviality, a host of other definitions exist, emphasizing different aspects of the notion (see Nowicka & Vertovec, 2013). Overall however, it is presented as an alternative to multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, since it *“offers a new vocabulary to speak of a collective without referring to fixed categories of identity”* (Nowicka & Vertovec, 2013, p.346f). The authors argue that conviviality for some remains a normative concept in that it envisions a peaceful present and sustainable future. However, others argue that the notion can also be seen as an ‘analytical tool for comparison’ to assess different local configurations of diversity. More, some scholars challenge an oppositional understanding of conflict and conviviality, arguing that conflict can, to some extent, be seen as a *“productive moment that enables further cooperation and interaction between people formerly involved in situations of tension and violence”* (ibid., p.352). As such, conflict is thus part of the notion of conviviality, rather than its opposite and hence moves the notion away from any end-state vision of a ‘happy and peaceful’ society.

A thorough comparison of the theoretical notions of multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and conviviality and their associated policies could surely provide interesting avenues for investigation; focusing on the emergence of the concepts and the goals associated with them, as undertaken for multiculturalism by Mitchell (2004). Due to lack of space and time, such an investigation is the task of future analyses. What nevertheless can be said at this stage, is that all notions seek to investigate conditions and spaces enabling some form of ‘living together’ with people considered as different, with some including conflicting relations. The notions differ, internally as well as in comparison, in the categories they employ to define ‘difference’ and the way they frame ‘difference’ and ‘identity’ as static, unitary and/ or unchangeable or by contrast, as ‘in-becoming’, fluid or malleable. It is thus a question of how we think of individuals associated with different ‘labels’, or ‘social groups’. Reflecting on the discussion on ‘difference’ in chapter 2.3, this conception of social groups should include all individuals of a given society, not just the groups marked by dominant discourses as ‘different’.

Given previous chapter’s claim that spaces of encounter are spaces for different publics to interact, I argue that analyses of encounters, whether they are under the theoretical umbrella of multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism or conviviality, could profit from incorporating insights from two interrelated debates: This concerns firstly feminists’ and critical theorists’ discussion of difference (Braidotti, 2011; Grosz, 2011; Saldanha, 2010). At the most basic level, this is the question of ‘who and where is difference’, who is marked as different, and by extension, who is not? Do identity and political subjectivity coincide? A second profitable avenue for analysing encounters is to connect the challenges of and debates on ‘living with difference’ to questions of democracy, political inclusion and justice. Building

these connections is supported by the work of Iris Marion Young (Young, 2000, 2011). Critiquing certain views on ‘identity politics’, Young (2000) combines questions of difference with questions of political representation. She argues that ‘identity politics’ per se is not harmful to democracy, only a conception of identity politics that understands social groups as having ‘substantial’, rather than ‘relational’ identities.

Young employs ‘substantial’ identities to refer to groups as defined by a set of essential attributes, with individuals belonging to a group if they are identified as having certain attributes. A ‘relational’ understanding of the identities of social groups on the other hand does not fix a group as such in terms of specific attributes. Rather, *“any group consists in a collective of individuals who stand in determinate relations of both those associated with one another because of the actions and interactions of both those associated with the group and those outside or at the margins of the group”*. A group is thus defined in relation to others according to their actions and interactions, rather than fixed identity traits. Hence, *“there is no collective entity, the group, apart from the individuals who compose it”* (Young, 2000, p.89). Applied to the social group of asylum seekers, this means that they are not defined by essential identity attributes, such as ‘criminal’ or ‘lazy’ to name some of the worst, but by the actions that connect individuals of this group that separate them from other individuals, for instance the circumstance of seeking asylum in a particular country and not having national membership in their country of residence. In short, framed relationally, *“what makes a group a group is less some set of attributes its members share than the relations in which they stand to others”* (Young, 2000, p.90).

Learning to live with difference requires an understanding of why some individuals, composing different social groups, are positioned differently within a given society. At the heart of the ‘problem’ of learning to live with difference thus lie more fundamental dividing issues such as inequality and injustices. In this context, Young differentiates between ‘structural’ as opposed to ‘cultural’ groups, the former being social relations constituted by gender, race, class, sexuality or ability. She highlights that *“the social movements motivated by such group-based experiences are largely attempts to politicize and protest structural inequalities that they perceive unfairly privilege some social segments and oppress others”* (Young, 2000, p.92). Rather than focusing on identity, Young argues that we should focus on structural differences, understood as a set of relationships and interactions that provide for or preclude certain opportunities. This resembles the observations of conviviality studies arguing that fixed categories, such as identities defined solely in terms of race or ethnicity, *“increasingly become silent, and how other divisions – such as between the vulnerable and the protectors, between the newcomers and long-standing residents and between those who respect or violate norms of civility – become relevant for living together”* (Nowicka & Vertovec, 2013, p.353).

The arguments of this chapter on the political underpinnings of encounters with difference illuminate two directions of current and future analysis. The first direction of analysis is driven by state and policy-led requirements to ‘manage’ and ‘control’ diversity through encounters. Parts of the scholarship on encounters reflect this need for the development of a political tool in the form of ‘managed encounters’. The fundamental question is, do these antagonisms have to be managed and counteracted from a national or international level? Or, following Mouffe (2000, 2005) calling for an ‘agonistic pluralism’,

should we see antagonisms as a central part everyday politics? Such an argument would destabilize parts of the foundations on which state-led interest in multiculturalism and conviviality is based. That is, rather than seeing conflicting relations between people marked as different as essentially problematic, it would see conflicts to a certain extent as part of democratic politics. This leaves scholars with the question if the production of knowledge about the daily management of difference in everyday settings is in all cases a beneficial avenue of investigation or if such research contributes to the development of new forms of control over ‘different’ individuals in their everyday spaces. Contributing thus to the production of a nation-based, homogenous society.

If this were a purely theoretical paper, it would not be surprising to end this argument with these rather gloomy musings. However, as I have already mentioned, there is also a second direction of analysis for encounters with difference, highlighting the radical political potential of encounters. An example of which would be the work of Lawson and Elwood (2013), who claim that the encounters they observed between individuals of different classes contributed to the initiation of new local class politics within specific ‘contact zones’.

This mode of inquiry stands in stark contrast with the former approach aiming at a national ‘management’ of encounters with difference. It conceives of encounters as opportunities for learning about different, situated positionalities (Haraway, 1988) that include conflicts, struggles and misunderstandings, but also the possibility of gaining new insights about how the social and economic structures of our societies position individuals differently. This does not mean that these encounters are free from mediating individual experiences or political forces; rather it conceives of the individuals in these encounters as active agents capable of reflecting and at least partially understanding the societal workings they are woven into. At long last, we have thus arrived at a sufficient understanding for grasping the meaning and contribution of the Grandhotel Cosmopolis – a project, which is, in my view, an example of the second, radical political approach to encounters. The empirical findings will illuminate how the Grandhotel Cosmopolis, by enabling encounters with asylum seekers, potentially contributes to the initiation of a ‘new politics of asylum’.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Project Description

“The Grandhotel Cosmopolis is the concrete utopia to set up a boundary free, cosmopolitan culture of the everyday, in which refugees, travellers, guests, artists and neighbours encounter each other and feel welcome. “ (Grandhotel Cosmopolis, 2014)

The Grandhotel Cosmopolis was chosen as the site of this research since it constitutes a unique spaces of encounter between asylum seekers and citizens. At the time of research, no project existed within Germany that was similar in its practices or goals. Therefore, the Grandhotel Cosmopolis presented a singular opportunity for undertaking research into the process and effects of encounters between asylum seekers and citizens. While there were different types of user groups next to asylum seekers present within the hotel, such as

tourists, volunteer, social service workers, state officials and daily guests, this research was focused on the encounters between asylum seekers and volunteers. This group was chosen due to the opportunity to research effects of long-term encounters occurring between volunteers and asylum seekers.

The Grandhotel Cosmopolis is conceived as a ‘social sculpture’; an idea that draws on the work of German artist Joseph Beuys. This idea is based on Beuys’ theory of the ‘extended definition of art in which ‘everybody is an artist’. By this, Beuys meant that every person is part of the social body, and as such, is capable of transforming it (Beuys, 1985). The Grandhotel is hence to be understood as an art project involving all members of society – a ‘social sculpture’ (Grandhotel Cosmopolis, 2014).

The building that is now the Grandhotel Cosmopolis was built in 1963 as a home for the elderly by the protestant church and was used as such until 2007, after which it was left unoccupied. In 2011, a group of three Augsburg based artists formed with the desire to transform the building into a space for artists and cultural events. At the about same time, the state administration planned the transformation of the house into an asylum seekers centre. After a meeting with the protestant church, the three artists were given the keys to the building and granted the possibility to devise a concept. The concept was officially approved by the Augsburg’s city council in May 2012. During this time, a growing number of volunteers renovated the building. In July 2012, the Grandhotel was registered as a non-profit organization, with six equal members on its executive board. Since April 2013, it is financially supported by a number of national and government organizations.

Officially, the house is occupied by three stakeholder groups: The non-profit organization Grandhotel Cosmopolis e.V., the protestant church (‘Diakonie’) and owner of the building, and the local state administration (‘Regierung von Schwaben’) who is responsible for the asylum tracts. The Grandhotel Cosmopolis e.V. and the ‘Regierung von Schwaben’ rent different parts of the building from the ‘Diakonie’, as shown in figure 1. Marked in yellow, the building offers space for 56 ‘guests with asylum’, i.e. asylum seekers, and for 44 ‘guests without asylum’, i.e. tourists (green). In addition, there are 13 rooms available for artists (red). In total, the building encompasses 2.600 square meters, four entrances and two outdoor spaces – the tea garden and the rose garden.

Being an official asylum centre, the asylum seekers living in the Grandhotel are thus subjected to German asylum law. In 2013, about 110.000 arrived in Germany, of which fifteen percent, about 17.000 were sent to Bavaria. After about three months in a central distribution centre, fourteen percent are sent to the district of Swabia. The main countries of origin for 2013 were the Russian Federation, Afghanistan and Syria. In comparison with other German states, Bavaria has one of the most rigid asylum systems in terms of rights granted to asylum seekers. Asylum seekers in Bavaria were required to live in collective accommodations; a regulation that was loosened after 2010 (Bayrischer Flüchtlingsrat, 2014). Living in collective accommodation was supposed to “foster the willingness to return to their country of origin”, a sentence that was taken out of Bavarian asylum regulation in 2013 (TAZ, 2013). Still, about 34 percent of asylum seekers live in collective accommodations, which have repeatedly been critiqued for inhumane standards of living (Bayrischer Flüchtlingsrat, 2014). Asylum seekers living in collective accommodations are also forbidden to have an installed telephone or internet connection. In addition, asylum seekers are

forbidden to leave the district of their accommodation (“Residenzpflicht”) (Bayrischer Flüchtlingsrat, 2013). These regulations also hold for the Grandhotel Cosmopolis and have been the reason for conflictual relations between the official administrators of the asylum tracts and the volunteers.

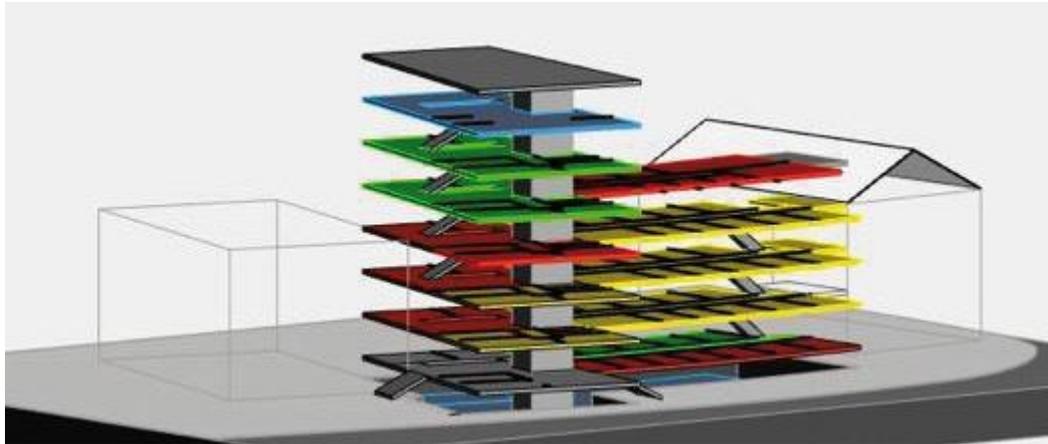


Figure 1 Internal Structure of the Building

Legend:

yellow: Hotel with Asylum
green: Hotel without Asylum
red: artists’ studios
blue: Restaurant & Exhibition Space (6th floor)
grey: Café/Bar/Lobby

3.2 Epistemological Foundations

“The ‘western industrial scientific approach values the orderly, rational, quantifiable, predictable, abstract and theoretical: feminism spat in its eye’.” (Stanley & Wise, 1993, p.66)

(During an event, in the café of the Grandhotel. Guests from inside and outside have been invited to a Bavarian-African Brunch. The café is full with people, children are mingling with the adults. The researcher is observing the situation, a research diary is in her hands.)

A hotelier: “So, what does the neutral eye observe?”

The researcher (jokingly): “Chaos, total chaos.”

The hotelier (emphatically): “Not at all!!!”

The above quotes give indications of the epistemological positioning of this research. As the first quote makes clear, this research is situated in feminist theories and methodologies. In short, this research adheres to the understanding that knowledge is produced not ‘from nowhere’, but from a particular embodied location. Objectivity is therefore not found in detachment from one’s own embodied specificity, but precisely by becoming accountable for this particular location (Haraway, 1988). As the first quote summarizes, feminists have long

questioned a positivist approach to research and its assumption that research was able to be undertaken in a value-free manner, seeking a universal truth while being completely unbiased. As England stresses, “no research inquiry, whether positivist or indeed humanist or feminist, exists outside the realms of ideology and politics; research is never value free” (England, 2006, p.287).

Feminist standpoint theorists critique positivist research for several reasons. Firstly, positivist research generates knowledge which is per se universal. In that way, it assumes a subject of knowledge which is culturally and historically disembodied or invisible. Secondly, the producer of knowledge is assumed to be fundamentally different from its research 'objects', since these are culturally and historically specific. Thirdly, coherent and consistent knowledge requires a unitary and homogenous conception of the subject of knowledge, since knowledge itself would otherwise be multiple and contradictory (Harding, 1993).

By contrast, feminist standpoint theorists argue that the subject of knowledge is always embodied and visible, since thoughts are produced by visible and embodied subjects. In addition, knowledge production is never independent of the social context in which this production takes place. This is coined by the term 'socially situated' knowledge. As Harding notes, “scientific method provides no rules, procedures, or techniques for even identifying, let alone eliminating, social concerns and interests that are shared by all (or virtually all) of the observers” (Harding, 1993, p.57). Culture-wide assumptions thus tend to go unquestioned and subsequently filter into the scientific research process.

This critique of positivist research is referred to by Grosz as 'the crisis of reason'. Grosz points out that the reasons for this modus operandi remain less clear. In her view, the crisis of reason is “a consequence of the historical privileging of the purely conceptual or mental over the corporeal; that is, it is a consequence of the inability of Western knowledges to conceive their own processes of (material) production, processes that simultaneously rely on and disavow the role of the body” (Grosz, 1993, p. 187). Grosz further makes us aware that the body is always sexually specific, 'sexed'; yet this fact remained unacknowledged in Western traditional accounts of science.

The embodiedness and social situatedness of the producers of knowledge implies also that they are not any different from their research 'objects'. In addition to this, it is not individuals but scientific communities that create knowledge. This becomes most obvious in the fact that thought is legitimated only when supported by a social research community and the wider society. Lastly, the subject of knowledge is not unitary, but multiple, heterogenous and contradictory. As such, knowledge about the multiplicity of women's lives can only be generated by a multiplicity of subjects, not from the position of an 'essential woman'.

The question that this critique raises is therefore: Can there be such a thing as 'objective knowledge'? More, which tools can we employ to provide research that offers a “faithful account of a 'real' world” (Haraway, 1988, p.579), while being aware of our social, cultural and historical positioning? Two key authors in this debate are Harding (1993) and Haraway (1988), who have paved the way towards a line of research conscious of its embodiedness and location. To attain 'strong objectivity', Harding proposes the technique of 'strong reflexivity', by which she means that the “subject of knowledge be placed on the same critical, causal plane as the object of knowledge” (Harding, 1993, p.69). This entails that all steps in the research process, including the formulation of the problem, should be scrutinized

for their underlying cultural beliefs. Since knowledge is not universal, but expressive of a certain social and cultural positioning, scientific communities should be in exchange with especially marginally positioned knowledges.

Haraway (1988) also argues for a more democratic way of knowledge making. For her, we “need an earth wide network of connections, influencing the ability partially to translate knowledges among very different – and power-differentiated – communities.” Haraway also underlines a second crucial point, pertaining to the relevancy of questioning objectivity: “What money does in the exchange orders of capitalism, reductionism does in the powerful mental orders of global sciences. There is, finally, only one equation. That is the deadly fantasy that feminists and others have identified in some versions of objectivity, those in the service of hierarchical and positivist orderings of what can count as knowledge.” (Haraway, 1988, p.580). It is therefore not only a question of rendering a more truthful account of 'the real' for the sake of science, which is certainly not the case if only one universal opinion counts. At the center of the question 'can there be objectivity' is the danger of marginalizing forms of knowledge which are also part of reality, but which are suppressed for one reason or another. Democracy and different accounts of knowledge are thus inseparable; the decline of one necessarily entails the decline of the other.

To avoid a reductionist version of objectivity, Haraway (1988) proposes an embodied version of objectivity termed 'situated knowledges'. This notion relies strongly on the embodied nature of 'vision'. By claiming that all vision is embodied, a 'conquering gaze from nowhere' is avoided. “This is the gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation” (Haraway, 1988, p.581). To topple this idea of 'infinite vision' which Haraway calls 'a god trick', she argues for an objectivity that is informed by particular and specific embodiment; “only partial perspective promises objective vision ... Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see” (ibid., p.583). To be able to position 'oneself' and be accountable for research undertaken, it is necessary to recognize the split and contradictory nature of 'the self'. “Splitting, not being, is the privileged image for feminist epistemologies of scientific knowledge”; 'splitting' being “about heterogeneous multiplicities that are simultaneously salient and incapable of being squashed into isomorphic slots or cumulative lists. This geometry pertains within and among subjects. Subjectivity is multidimensional; so, therefore, is vision” (ibid., p.586). For Haraway, one's own subjectivity is not one, fixed or finished. The subject of knowledge is always constructed and multiplicitous. But it is precisely through this multiplicity that it is possible to “join with another, to see together without claiming to be another” (ibid., p.586).

Following the previous arguments, what is to be borne in mind for one's own research is that all knowledge that is generated is embodied knowledge. Therefore, research cannot claim to produce universal knowledge through a 'view from nowhere'; only a partial perspective is attainable. For Haraway, it is only by way of positioning ourselves, speaking from a particular location, that we are able to claim objectivity. This implies that the account is produced through this research, within this written document, is 'a partial perspective' and not so much the only, truthful account of the Grandhotel Cosmopolis or even the encounters

that take place there. However, this does not imply that this account is totally subjective and biased. As feminist theorists stress, such dualistic thinking should be overcome. It is not a question of 'totally objective' versus 'totally subjective' in the traditional sense. It is a question of trying to bring forward the best possible account of a given reality, while being aware of one's own partial perspective and its limitations.

For empirical research, 'reflexivity' is a strategy to account for the position of the researcher and hence for the situatedness of knowledge. England (1994, p. 82) defines reflexivity as the "self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious *analytical* scrutiny of the self as researcher" (emphasis original). It is thus a strategy for scrutinizing oneself in the position of the researcher. England also cautions that reflexivity is not a strategy that can overcome hierarchical relationships within research. All it can do is "make us more aware of symmetrical or exploitative relationships" (ibid, p.86). However, there is one striking problem with this strategy: How to do it in practice? Through her own research, Rose (1997) was made aware that in some definitions, reflexivity rests on two underlying assumptions: Firstly, that both the researcher's self is transparent and accessible via one's own consciousness. Secondly, that the power-relations the researcher is situated in are visible. In effect both the self and power-relations are rendered knowable. These two assumptions are however not given; neither the self nor the power-relations one is in are completely transparent. To assume as much would be to perform something similar as Haraway's 'god-trick', namely a 'goddess-trick': The idea that the reflective and analytical power of the researcher is universal and able to see 'from above' all the different entanglements of the self within the different power-relations. This does not mean that we should give up trying to situate knowledge reflexively. Rose (1997, p.315) stresses that we should not forget what the overall aim of situating knowledge was in the first place: "To produce non-overgeneralizing knowledges that learn from other kinds of knowledges". One possible strategy Rose points towards to produce non-overgeneralizing knowledges and to learn from other kinds of knowledge is to highlight, not to gloss over, the gaps that occur while doing and writing-up research. These gaps, the differences, tensions and conflicts, should not be seen as problems but as "spaces of conceptual and indeed political opportunities and negotiations" (Smith, 1996, p.165).

Unfortunately, there are not too many suggestions of how *to be* reflexive in actual research practice. The existing suggestions pertain to different stages of the research process. During research, one strategy for being reflexive is to employ the technique of autoethnography, which "involves interpreting people, places and events through the perspective of personal involvement" (Cloke et al, 2000, p.137). In addition, geographers have become increasingly aware of the emotions involved in the research process (see Davidson et al, 2007; Widdowfield, 2000). Reflexivity should not only be a part of fieldwork, but also part of the writing-up process. One way that through which reflexivity can be incorporated into writing is by the use of personal pronouns, underlining "the politics associated with the personal voice and [to] draw attention to assumptions embedded in research texts" (Hay, 2010, p.344).

A second crucial element of the research process is the positionality of the researcher in the field. Recognizing that research is a dialogical process, "in which the research situation is structured both by the researcher and the person being researched" (England, 1994, p.84),

results in two issues: Firstly, the input of the research subjects will most likely transform the research. Secondly, the researcher is now a visible and embodied part of the research setting. As such, research cannot be seen as complete “until it includes an understanding of the active role of the analyst’s *self* which is exercised throughout the research process” (ibid.). Research is thus directly affected by the researcher’s biography, since a researcher’s gender, age, ethnicity or sexual identity can position the researcher differently within the field. However, as Rose (1997) cautions, it is also impossible to know fully both the self and the context. Indeed, I can name several biographical characteristics and personality traits, but it remains difficult to determine if these have actually made a difference to the context compared to ‘if I had been otherwise’. For instance, I am white and female and a student. Surely people would have reacted differently if I had blue skin, were intersex and a sixty year old professor. But in which ways my characteristics have impacted my research is hard to tell. What I observed about myself was that when asked where I was from, I was keen to state ‘although I might be studying in a different country, I am from here’; implicitly signaling ‘I am one of you’. That I grew up in the area affected me in the way that I felt like ‘a native’ of the area and made me feel less an outsider from the start, along with a lot of background knowledge about the city in general. But again, although I have an advantage concerning my knowledge about Augsburg, a non-native researcher would perhaps find circumstances startling that I consider ‘normal’. In the end, I have to return to Rose’s argument that it is impossible to know the self and the context completely. While I still might have an idea about who I am, I have almost no insight into how I am really perceived by people living and working in the Grandhotel. Therefore, I have to conclude this section only with the recognition that my view is partial and that my *self* has and was affected by the social relations I entered in the Grandhotel.

Apart from my personal characteristics influencing the social relationships I researched, there is also the question of which position I took on within the field. This is traditionally framed as the issue of ‘insider’ versus ‘outsider’ position. Yet, many researchers have made claims for moving beyond this dualism. These claims are founded on changing views of how subjectivity and difference is constructed in the first place; arguments I have outlined in the theoretical chapter of this thesis. Since subjectivities and differences are not static, but mutually constructed and constantly changing, the idea that one is either ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ does not hold any longer. Instead, what is being articulated are alliances, solidarities, collaborations, common ground and in-between-ness (Pratt, 2009). As Katz (1994, p. 67) argues, a subject’s position is produced in ‘spaces of betweenness’, “a position that is neither inside nor outside”. Katz (ibid, p. 72) concludes:

“From such a standpoint it may be possible to frame questions that are at once of substantive and theoretical interest as well as of practical significance to those with whom we work. By operating within these multiple contexts all the time, we may begin to learn not to displace or separate so as to see and speak, but to see, be seen, speak, listen and be heard in the multiply determined fields that we are everywhere, always in. In this way we can build a politics of engagement and simultaneously practice committed scholarship.”

Emphasizing the multiple and fluid social relations we are positioned in instead of constructing static and dualistic subject positions could hence enable a different form of

scholarship that is dedicated to a cause, while retaining connections to the people whose issues we study. Carling et al (2013) provide an example of this argument for the field of migration research. They warn that a simple divide into insider or outsider status is “methodologically simplistic and runs the risk of reproducing essentialism” (ibid., p.3). In migration research, the topic of the research is often seen to determine the insider/outsider position, for instance ethno-national origin. The authors stress however that “ethno-national origin is simply one possible element of individual identity that should not be a priori privileged” (ibid). This argument also relates back to the discussion of difference in the theoretical part, which in turn brings us back to the recognition that our ontology affects our epistemology – our view of the world impacts how we get to know the world.

Finding and determining my own position within the Grandhotel was not as straightforward as the above argument is outlined. The insight that my position is a state of in-between-ness surfaced during field work. This indicates again that positions are not determined from the outset, but are fluent and multiple. From the beginning, I struggled with the traditional objective of being a ‘detached outsider’ within the Grandhotel. Several instances during my field work have influenced my positionality, as far as I can determine it; leaving me at the end in a position of in-between-ness, with a recognition of the multiplicity of my own self.

The following incidents I describe have strongly influenced how I perceived my own position in the Grandhotel. On the third day of my research, a middle-aged woman donated two bags of clothes. The bags were not immediately taken away and so remained in the café. As I stood there, observing the situation, a Hotelier approached me and asked: “So, what are you going to do with these bags?”. I replied that I didn’t know where they belong or who is responsible for donated items. The Hotelier replied, that these bags are also ‘my responsibility’ since I am also part of this project, just like everyone else – so I should take responsibility and find a place to put them. This situation made several issues very clear to me from the start: Firstly, I was seen and expected to be part of this project. Secondly, if I wanted to gain the respect of the Hoteliers, their trust and remain on friendly terms, just standing in the corner observing and asking a lot of questions would not be enough. It also shattered any remaining picture of the ‘unobtrusive and detached researcher’.

I was frequently reminded of the fact that I was seen and supposed to be part of the project throughout my fieldwork, coinciding strongly with a core aspect of the project: The idea of ‘the social sculpture’ as defined by Joseph Beuys. This implies that everyone is in some way part of it, be it as a volunteer, a guest or a tourist. This strong image further influenced my own positionality; even if I had wanted to see myself as detached from the project, I am doubtful if I could have, given the frequent assertions of Hoteliers during group discussions of everyone being a part of the social sculpture. When I used the expression of ‘in your project’, I was immediately interrupted by several members of the group: “This is also your project!”

Looking back on the fieldwork stage, I have been part of the Grandhotel in several ways, varying with the nature of the social relations I was placed in in a particular moment and setting. For the Hoteliers, I was part of the project, and after some time, a fellow Hotelier. Since I decided that ‘taking on responsibility’ for the project was inevitable for pursuing my research, I helped out when help was sought, I worked in the café and later on initiated and

organized monthly gatherings of academic and non-academic people interested in theorizing about the different topics surfacing within the Grandhotel. I also took part in weekly plenaries and various other events taking place in the Grandhotel. I was made aware of the fact that one of my central methods, participatory observation, and with it my presence in the building on at least five days a week enabled me to feel and be seen as part of the team, while demonstrating my commitment to the project.

Being part of a group necessarily entails emotions, which in the traditional view, are a hindrance to producing ‘objective, non-biased’ research. During an early presentation of my fieldwork results, I was critiqued of being ‘too emotionally attached’ to the project. What does this concern imply? For one, the concern pertained to the way I presented my research - apparently I was perceived to be ‘over-enthusiastic’ about the project and ‘not professional enough’ by some members of my audience. However, this again is only indicative of the traditional view we have of scholars: Detached, unemotional, value-neutral and above all: objective. Given the detailed arguments of the previous chapters, I hold the view that this is not only a rather old-fashioned view of researchers and research, but also fails to recognize the fact that researchers are human beings, with emotions and a partial perspective. Discussing emotions within research might also have important benefits: Firstly, it might enable the researcher to arrive at a better understanding of her/his own feelings and be easier to deal with. Secondly, other researchers might benefit from this discussion in that it might help avoid negative experiences during research (Widdowfield, 2000). This is not to say that a discussion of emotions necessarily has to be part of every account of qualitative research; for some, it might be irrelevant. For the case of the Grandhotel Cosmopolis, emotions are key and I have not been left unaffected by them. Considering the importance of emotions within this space, it is safe to assume that the research would have been impacted negatively had I not taken part the ‘circuit of emotions’ present.

There have been instances occurring during fieldwork which have confirmed my ethical values – that especially academics should contribute to fighting against dehumanizing, oppressive and xenophobic movements within our current societies. In mid-December 2013, I remember coming home to my parents feeling a mixture of anger, hopelessness and shock, due to a family living in the Grandhotel that was facing deportation. I voiced this overpowering feeling in a discussion with my father about European asylum politics. Angered by the outcome of the discussion, I noted in my research diary: *My father said – you have to distance yourself, otherwise you will break down. I should not let myself be emotionally so affected by one single family he said, otherwise I would not be able to do what was necessary. But this is exactly the process. We distance ourselves from the marginalized of the marginalized, to do what? What we think is right, what we think is best for our country? But what happens in the process? We dehumanize the other, we hide countless individuals behind the signifier of a category, which makes it easier to deal with bureaucracy, with the system. Is this the way the system works? Is this the way the system, the capitalistic, the bureaucratic, the system of the law, the system of the father, upholds itself, recreates itself?”(13.12.2013)*

Although the claims I have made that night in this emotional downpour can rightfully be contested, one insight remains: By reflecting on these feelings of anger and hopelessness, I got closer to understanding what it must be like for the volunteers who have been fighting

against the deportations of the families they had established personal relationships with. It provided me with a shared emotional understanding of these situations, which are a frequent and recurring experiences within the Grandhotel. Eventually, reflecting on my emotions has thus brought me closer to a more nuanced and insightful account of reality, not further away from it.

3.3 Ethics

Without a doubt, social science research is trying to contribute knowledge that will ‘make the world a better place’. Despite this honourable goal, researchers are required to pay attention to the ways in which different methods of inquiries affect the people they study. Ethics can be defined as “the moral conduct of researchers and their responsibilities and obligations to those involved in the research” (Hay, 2010, p. 375). Ethical requirements demand researchers to place the well-being of their research subjects before the generation of data, no matter how much the data would contribute to our research (for a fieldwork example, see Kobayashi, 2001).

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) have made an important contribution towards establishing criteria of ethical guidelines in ethnographic research practice, which have been adopted within human geography. In the following, I will elaborate on each of these criteria individually in connection with my own research.

Informed consent: By this is meant that “people must consent to being researched in an unconstrained way, making their decision on the basis of comprehensive and accurate information about it; and that they should be free to withdraw at any time” (ibid, p.210). As noted by the authors, this is not always attainable in research practice, particularly in participatory observation. While the people observed may have been informed, they may in some situations forget that what they say or do may be taken down as data. However, it would also be disruptive if researchers continuously issued a warning similar to the police: “Anything you say or do may be taken down and used as data” (Bell, 1977, p.59).

During my fieldwork, I used several different techniques of informing people about my research. I got into contact with members of the Grandhotel via E-mail with the overt inquiry if it was possible to write my master’s thesis about the project. In addition, I sent along a short description of the research. In the first weeks of fieldwork, I used the project’s E-mail address, to send a description of the research to all subscribers of the list, covering most of the active members. Next to this, I openly responded to queries about my role in the project and about my thesis during my time there. Regarding my interviewees, especially the ‘guests with asylum’, I explicitly stated my position and goal, as well what the topic of the interview would be (and not be, see below). I have thus refrained from including statements of people who have not been informed explicitly, which include the official administrators working at the Grandhotel. These statements will remain under closure until consent has been acquired.

Privacy: Researchers should refrain from disclosing information acquired during the fieldwork that is considered confidential or secret. Again, this definition is in practice not as clear-cut as it may seem. Especially in the context of issues about asylum seekers, migration and political projects, it is vital – sometimes even in the literal sense of the word – not to

disclose information that could harm the subjects that people research. For this reason, I have decided that the descriptions I include of my interview partners should not in any case lead to their identification, whether they are a volunteer or a 'guest with asylum'. Therefore, all names in this research are pseudonyms.

Harm: Not only as a human being, but also as a researcher should one avoid bringing about harm or negative consequences to our fellow research subjects. While it was extremely unlikely for me to bring about physical harm to the people I researched, two particular issues were pertinent in the Grandhotel that I have tried to pay attention to. The first issue pertained to interviewing 'guests with asylum', as well as volunteers with a migrational background. This is the issue of the reasons why these people left their countries in the first place, or experiences during their flight. As I learned during my research, these issues were often traumatizing experiences and therefore could potentially lead the interviewee to 'relive' these processes. Further, these issues were not directly relevant to my topic and thus I refrained from asking questions in this direction 'out of pure interest'. A second issue which could potentially induce harm is closely related to the discussion of privacy. Some of my interviewees informed me about their background and that any information that led to their identification could be life threatening. As stated before, I thus have refrained from any detailed descriptions of personal or biographical characteristics of these interviewees.

Exploitation: Respondents should not be seen as a mere 'well' of information, which can be exploited, while giving nothing in return. While research may lead to amelioration of the circumstances of particular social groups, the individual interviewed is not necessarily included in this group. What is thus the gain of the informant for offering insights and time? This has been a particularly difficult question for me to answer during my fieldwork. For one, the chances of 'getting published' as a master's student are relatively small. This then constitutes an even more exploitative situation than for an established academic, since I could then be accused of 'getting my degree on my informants' backs'. Secondly, given calls for 'validity' and 'value-neutrality', any general or uncritical endorsement of the project's benefits, thus lobbying for the project, could be interpreted as biased and 'invalid' research. This question of how to 'give something back' to the project, while aiming to produce committed and rigorous research has been a particularly tricky issue to solve. I will return to this question in the section of knowledge construction. Not without difficulty, I found it somewhat easier to 'give back' to some of the 'guests with asylum' during my fieldwork. I did this through providing basic help whenever I was approached, for instance translating letters or providing information, accompanying parents and their child to a nearby hospital. Still, my contribution seems marginal opposed to the time, insights and hospitality they have provided me with. Reflecting back on my fieldwork, it is largely for this reason that I delayed interviewing guests with asylum until the very end of my fieldwork. Not only did I feel like an intruder to their privacy, but I strongly felt like I could not give anything back. And above all, the topic of my research seemed at times marginally relevant to their immediate needs.

3.4 Research Questions

I. *Situated Perspectives*

*What are **key elements** of the Grandhotel Cosmopolis according to national news media and the volunteers?*

II. *Encounters*

***How** are encounters between asylum seekers and volunteers initiated in the Grandhotel Cosmopolis ?*

*What are the **reasons** and **strategies** for avoiding encounters between volunteers and asylum seekers?*

*What are the **effects** of the encounters on both parties?*

III. *Spaces for Encounter*

***Where** do encounters between asylum seekers and volunteers take place in the Grandhotel Cosmopolis?*

*How does the **nature of these spaces** provided by the Grandhotel **affect the encounters** taking place there?*

3.5 Research Design and Empirical Approach

The design of this research is conceived as a case study approach. In general, case studies aim at simultaneously understanding “the concrete and practical aspects of a phenomenon or place” (Hay, 2010, p.95), while developing theory. This research is founded on the case study of the Grandhotel Cosmopolis in Augsburg as a unique way of hosting asylum seekers within a conservative political context. The specific combination of hotel and asylum seekers center was unique in Germany at the time and has subsequently inspired many citizens in other cities to follow a similar approach.

In line with Haraway’s (1988) claim of the situatedness of perspectives and knowledge, the first section of the empirical findings will give an outline of two additional perspectives on the Grandhotel Cosmopolis. The perspective of the national news media was analysed by undertaking a short content analysis of all national news items produced up to the point of research (Dixon, 2010). National news items were selected due to their amount of readers, in contrast to regional or city-wide news publications. The perspective of the volunteers was portrayed by drawing on interview data.

To analyse encounters and spaces of encounter between asylum seekers and volunteers, I chose the methods of participatory observation, semi-structured interviews and

focus groups. The triangulation of these methods not only suits the research context, but also strengthens the credibility of the research findings. From mid-November 2013 until the end of March 2014, I gathered data within the Grandhotel as a participatory observer. As described in the section on positionality, I positioned and was positioned as a volunteer within the setting. As such, I was in the role of an open and active observer and was present within the Grandhotel on a near-daily basis, that is, five to six days a week over a period of five months. Due to the range of activities I was performing, including working in the café or organizing academic discussion groups, I was present during differing times of the day, ranging from the early morning to open the café to late at night due to music events, discussion groups or casual gatherings in the bar. Although I did not live there, as some of the volunteers do, I did spend several nights in the hotel and hostel areas of the building to get a more complete picture of the setting.

As outlined before, my role as an active participant in the Grandhotel was required to gain the trust of the other group members and to show my general support of the project. By taking on this role, I was able to gain a more detailed, insider perspective on what was happening. Given the high amount of journalists and students inquiring about interviewing asylum seekers, it is doubtful whether I would have been given the chance at all to interview some of these people. More, being an active, participatory member of the group, I got to establish a personal relationship with the people I interviewed before the actual interview, which holds for both volunteers and asylum seekers. Thereby, a certain basis of trust was established, which led to richer interview data. Due to the high amount of activities and people in the building, a continuous presence was also necessary to keep up with the latest events or problems. Indeed, a sustained presence in the building was the only way to be in touch with the rapidly changing state of events, since this kind of information can only be accessed by talking to various members of the group present in the building – information that is gained in-between, on the go, in the midst of things, while not being disclosed to ‘outside’ members. Participatory observation was also advantageous for noting fleeting encounters, particularly in the stairway.

In addition to participatory observation, I conducted a total of 23 semi-structured interviews, varying in length between twenty minutes to two hours, on the topic of encounters within the Grandhotel. Interviews not only helped confirm findings through participatory observation, but also provided me with a range of insights and experiences on the topic. Given the heterogeneity of the group in terms of age or background, this method could trigger detailed and critical reflections, while offering a safe space for reflecting on personal experiences. Further, interviews are also a more flexible than focus groups in terms of time, since interviews can be arranged individually. This point was particularly salient for the context of the Grandhotel, because time schedules and availability of the volunteers vary considerably and are also subject to pressing everyday events or needs.

The 23 interviews were digitally recorded with a mobile phone and later transcribed manually. 17 of the 23 interviews I conducted were with volunteers, and the remaining six with asylum seekers living within the Grandhotel. However, this distinction is not as clear as it seems; one of the volunteers has also come to Augsburg seeking asylum three years ago. One of her tasks is now working as a translator within the house and as such, she could also provide relevant insights into the feelings and everyday life of asylum seekers living in the

Grandhotel. The relative imbalance in the number of interviews is due to several factors: Firstly, the scarcity of available translators for the Russian-speaking asylum seekers. Secondly, even when interviews were arranged with a translator, daily concerns and needs often were or had to be given priority above the scheduled interviews. Thirdly and most importantly, my concern with research ethics impacted the number of interviews conducted with asylum seekers. Due to the high number of journalists and students who already sought to interview ‘guests with asylum’ in the past, I felt uncomfortable knocking on doors asking for an interview on a topic which did not seem to cover or answer the pressing, everyday needs of the asylum seekers. As I learned during my fieldwork, some ‘guests with asylum’ were half-jokingly admitting that they were already ‘experts’ in giving interviews. Not wanting to position myself among the long line of nosy or annoying reporters trying to seek out dramatic accounts, I only started to conduct my interviews near the end of my fieldwork, when I felt I was trusted and known among at least some of the asylum seekers. Three out of six interviews with asylum seekers were conducted with a translator, who was working as a volunteer in the Grandhotel. On the one hand, this benefited the openness of the interviewee; on the other hand, the translator often also gave his personal opinion about the situation of the interviewee. Whether or not this increased or decreased the truthfulness of the account, I am unable to determine. Two interviews with asylum seekers were conducted in English and one in German; advantageous since these can be taken as verbatim phrasings and are not mediated by a translator. The accounts of the asylum seekers were enriched by other interview data conducted with translators of the Grandhotel, who had established deep, personal relationships with people and could provide additional insights to issues of everyday life.

Third, I conducted two focus groups to find answers pertaining to the issue of encounters and spaces of encounter. For both focus groups, I invited participants personally and via E-mail about two weeks ahead of time. Originally, I planned groups in which both volunteers and asylum seekers took part. However, inviting asylum seekers to participate in the discussions proved to be difficult. Not only was the topic and aim of the discussion difficult to explain without the help of a translator at hand, but also the posters with translations I hung up on the doors to the private hallways of the asylum parts of the building were immediately taken down by the janitor working for the state administration – evidencing the circumstance that volunteers are not allowed to place any documents and invitations on the doors or on the official notification boards used by the state administration. This difficulty in communicating the event, as well as the somewhat abstract theme of ‘encounters in the Grandhotel’, led to the circumstance that only volunteers participated in the focus group. Eventually, this made communication easier, which then benefitted the range of topics discussed and opinions exchanged. While the topic of the first focus group concentrated more on the participants’ experiences and interactions with asylum seekers within the house, the second focus group’s topic evolved from the first discussion and related more to the question of spaces for encounter within the Grandhotel.

Both focus groups lasted about two hours, were conducted in ‘public’ spaces of the Grandhotel and were fully recorded and later transcribed. The first session was held outside, which impacted the quality of the recording to some extent, but enabled ‘passers-by’ to join the discussion and share insights, leading to a total of 12 participants. The second focus group

took place in the café and had a total of 8 participants. Both groups were heterogeneous in age, occupational background and length of involvement with the Grandhotel. This meant ages from early twenty to near sixty; occupational backgrounds ranging from student to graffiti artists to computer specialists; and from short term involvement to engagement from the start of the project. Still, participation in the focus groups was highly dependent on the time schedule of the volunteers and daily circumstances. While ‘professional’ academics can offer a reward for participation, students are dependent on the goodwill and free time of the participants, being able to offer no more than cookies and gratefulness in return.

All people present in the focus group session were able to voice their opinion at some point or another; nevertheless, some participants spoke more than others. The fact that the participants knew each other did however contribute towards a higher degree of openness and trust in the discussion, enabling participants to openly disagree or share more private sentiments. Both discussions evidenced a flowing conversation and engaged participants; as a researcher, I acted as a moderator and interrupted only when the discussion was too far from the central topic. During the discussions, the participants were invited to write down key terms on big sheets of paper relating to the issues discussed. This strategy was a simpler version of the method of ‘participatory diagramming’ (Kesby, 2000) and was employed to elicit central aspects of the debate and overcome potential silences. Yet, the engaged discussions of both focus groups did not allow for any pause for writing down terms and seemed to be only of marginal interest to the participants.

4. VACATION FROM THE EGO - EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

4.1 Comparing Perspectives and Challenging Representation

4.1.1 *The Perspective of the News Media*

This thesis portrays three differing perspectives on the Grandhotel: The main perspective is the account that I have gained through participatory observation, interviews and focus groups. Within this chapter, I will give space to two additional perspectives, namely an analysis of how the Grandhotel is represented in national news reporting and an analysis of the volunteers’ perspective. The following paragraphs will provide an analysis of the titles of the news items, as well as an exploration of recurring themes within the latter. Thereby, elements of the articles can be drawn out which give some indications to answer the aforementioned questions.

The titles of the news items offer initial indications for what the authors view as central to the Grandhotel. Four of the eight titles refer to the circumstance that there is a “Grandhotel” for refugees or that refugees will be living in a “Grandhotel”: “*Grandhotel für Fluechtlinge – a Grandhotel for refugees*” (Mayr, 2013b); „*Fluechtlinge ins Grandhotel – Refugees in Grandhotel*“ (Haack, 2013); „*Ein Grandhotel fuer Fluechtlinge – A Grandhotel for refugees*“ (Sagener, 2013). While another offers the idea that a luxurious version of asylum is available to refugees: “*Asyl de luxe*“ (Schophoff, 2014).

Three other titles place their emphasis on the idea of a somewhat ‘different’ hotel or tourist experience: “*Hotel Kunterbunt*” (Ehrmann, 2013); “*Urlaub im Asylbewerberheim – Vacation in an asylum centre*”(Schnabl, 2013); “*Urlaub in Utopia – vacation in utopia*”(Hampl, 2013). These titles suggest that an extra-ordinary touristic experience is provided. Under close examination, the titles point towards different aspects: ‘Kunterbunt’ in the first title translates as ‘multi-colored’ and ‘varied’, but also ‘jumbled’ and thus produces the image of a slightly chaotic hotel with heterogeneous guests. The image of the hotel is left out of the second title, which translates as ‘holiday in an asylum seekers centre’. Although this might catch the eyes of readers, it misrepresents the space of the Grandhotel to be exclusively an asylum seekers center – suggesting citizens and tourists to be ‘un-usual’ guests in this place. The last title portrays the Grandhotel as a utopian place, its subtitle claims that “if you spend some time there, you’ll come back with a special souvenir: Optimism”. Only one title refers to the one of the main aims of the project, namely, to change current societal conditions, foremost asylum politics: “*Neuland in der Fluechlingspolitik – new ways in refugee politics*”(Mayr,2012).

In conclusion, the titles suggest that the mixing of asylum seekers and tourists is an unusual, if not utopian combination. Indeed, the existence of asylum seekers in a ‘Grandhotel’ is seen as so unusual, that the first three titles are read as an oxymoron. This contradiction would not appear if the word refugee in the titles was replaced by the words humans, guests or people. The fact that these titles appear as an oxymoron is already a measure of the level of spatial exclusion refugees and asylum seekers are facing within Germany. What is left out of the picture is thus the question why the hosting of people with the common need for shelter, albeit for differing reasons, is seen as a contradiction. But not only is the mixing of these two groups unusual; the titles also point towards the fact that the mixing of their spaces is in itself out-of-the-ordinary. While ‘Hotel Kunterbunt’ does not make any reference to the spaces reserved for asylum seekers, ‘Urlaub im Asylbewerberheim’ omits the existence of the space of the hotel. That the combination of these different spaces is unusual is thus captured within the notion of ‘Urlaub in Utopia’ – a ‘utopian space’.

The circumstance that the mixing of the spaces of the hotel and the space of the asylum center is seen as so unusual is evidence of the exclusion of certain people or publics from certain spaces. The mixing of these spaces represents a direct counter move toward common spatial practices regulated by the state and by law, defining who belongs and who does not. The news titles give a first indication that the mixing of these spaces is uncommon. More, the fact that it appears as unusual to host refugees in a hotel speaks further to the level of exclusion and stigmatization this public is facing.

A close reading of the national news items reveals five aims that are seen as central to the Grandhotel: **A Space for Encounter:** Several articles portray the Grandhotel as a space for encounter (“*Begegnungsstätte*”). Three articles also refer to the ‘Grandhotels’ of the turn of the twentieth century, which were “meeting points for travelers and locals from all over the world” (TAZ, 3.1.2013). The idea of the hotel as a space of ‘meeting up’ “*implies that we should welcome refugees like guests*” (FAZ, 26.8.2013). The articles have thus taken up the image that also served the creators of the Grandhotel Cosmopolis as an inspiration and consequentially, the ‘asylum seeker’ is read as ‘traveler’.

Political art: Several articles also make reference to the political nature of the Grandhotel. It is suggested to be a political signal, a “*reaction to the problematic accommodation of refugees in large-scale asylum seekers centers*” (Mayr, 2012). One frequently depicted element of political art are the world clocks next to the reception, which do not display the time in cities such as London or New York, but in Lampedusa, Gaza, Dhadhaab, Manila and Port-au-Prince.

Integration: The third often described goal is ‘integration’, which is reportedly achieved via the “*cultural aspect*” of the Grandhotel, preventing potential downgrading of the area. “*Ideally, refugees are integrated into the community of the house and the neighbourhood*” (Haack, 2013). The reportage in ‘Die Zeit’ (Schophoff, 2014) provides a description of the successful mingling of people with various backgrounds in the café of the Grandhotel, concluding that “*for one moment, it seems as if it doesn’t matter who is a refugee and who is a Hotelier. In the Grandhotel Cosmopolis they are a truly cosmopolitan community.*”

Social Experiment: The articles also communicate the idea that the Grandhotel is a ‘social experiment’, a ‘model project’, working towards ‘societal change’. This aspect is closely related to the ‘utopian’ aspect of the Grandhotel, while the TAZ (Schnabl, 2013) calls it a “*living fantasy of the future*” (“*gelebte Zukunftsfantasie*”). This aspect is particularly interesting: Whereas the idea of the ‘model project’ is more connected to the possibility of copying what is happening there in other places, the notion of ‘utopia’ or ‘living fantasy of the future’ places what is happening into the future, somewhat denigrating the reality of the situation.

Humanity: ‘Menschlichkeit’/ Acting humanely is a further aim depicted within the articles. Quoting initiators of the project, the goal is to demonstrate that “*a different contact to refugees is possible*”. The article concludes that the Grandhotel “*does something with its visitors. One starts to think about how it would be, if one needed a temporary home. (...) And instead of miniature shampoos, one takes ideas home and a bit of optimism*” (Hampel, 2013).

The articles also adopt several terms native to the Grandhotel. These terms are ‘Hotelier’, ‘social sculpture’ and ‘guests “with” and “without” asylum’. The reason for the creation of these new terms is given in the reportage of ‘Die Zeit’ (Schophoff, 2014): To dispose of old terms is the beginning of societal change. The fact that the news items adopt these terms is a crucial aspect of changing challenging dominant representations of asylum seekers. While the terms ‘refugee’ or ‘asylum seeker’ are not dropped, introducing the alternative terms of the Grandhotel may initiate a process of thinking of asylum seekers as ‘guests’ or ‘travelers’; images that have more positive connotations than the image of the ‘Asylum Seeker’. What the articles however fail to represent correctly, is that ‘Hoteliers’ are not only the volunteers, but everyone partaking in the project, thus also asylum seekers living and volunteering in the Grandhotel.

The analysis of the news items indicates what national news media sees as novel to the project. Firstly, this is the mixing of bodies that are typically assigned to different spaces in one space, the Grandhotel. Not only is the presence of asylum seekers in a hotel viewed as uncommon, but in the same vein, the presence of tourists in an asylum center is seen as worthy of reporting. The presence of particular bodies in spaces not typically assigned to

them is thus seen as unusual and is evidence to the level of the spatial exclusion of certain publics from different places, including the presence of citizens in asylum centers.

Not only is the mixing of these groups seen as unusual, but the mixing of their spaces is as well. So much so, that the Grandhotel is depicted as a ‘utopian’ space, a space that differs from current reality. Contrary to statements that ‘the urban’ offers various spaces for encounters with difference, as debates on multiculturalism and conviviality suggest, the news items display that particular groups are exempted from these opportunities of encounter. More, that some bodies are not expected to mix with others, meaning, that particular encounters are averted from the beginning. This thesis is hence also a depiction of undesired personal encounters between asylum seekers and citizens. Future research on encounters should thus not only focus on the encounters that are occurring, but also on those, that are normally prevented or seen as unusual.

4.1.2 *The Perspective of the Volunteers*

Next to the perspective of the media on what the Grandhotel is about, there is also a second perspective on the Grandhotel: Their own. That is, how is the Grandhotel seen by the volunteers? To answer this question, I have analyzed material the Grandhotel issued themselves, such as papers and web content, next to the interviews I have recorded. At the beginning of the project in September 2011, three artist-activists devised a concept for a ‘Social Sculpture in the heart of Augsburg’. In this concept, the key ideas of what the Grandhotel is and should be were outlined. At its core lies the creation of a space that resembles the ‘classic’ Grandhotels of the turn of the 20th century: *“Those institutions did not only stand for an accommodation with certain standards, but were places of style, offering spaces for socio-cultural encounter between international guests and residents. ... In this way, these spaces were multicultural and important spaces for encounter, with the flair and glamour of the ‘big wide world’ in which the residents could take part as well. The word ‘Grandhotel’ is for us an example of the positive lifestyle and quality of life lost in post-industrialization”*. The image of the ‘Grandhotel’ of the 20th century as a space of multicultural encounter for guests and residents lies thus at the heart of the concept. Nevertheless, the integration of an ‘asylum center’ into the hotel departs from this picture – in order to offer an alternative interpretation of an institution often assumed to be a burden or a source of disturbances. More, *“spatial proximity (between different user groups) should be understood as an opportunity and a reason for human interaction and community.”*

An important goal of the Grandhotel as stressed by its members is to establish a ‘culture of welcoming’. In a press statement from July 2013, the Grandhotel declared that this ‘culture of welcoming’ was the foundation for the success of the Grandhotel: *“The Grandhotel Cosmopolis is only then going to be a success, if a culture of welcoming is established in society, which turns the Grandhotel into a valued space for the citizens of the city. A space can only give a warm ‘welcome’ to its guests, when the people inhabiting it feel comfortable there. For the Grandhotel, that pertains especially to its immediate neighbors. If its visitors feel at home in the cosmos Grandhotel and can experience it, then this will benefit all hotel guests, because personal encounters can help overcome prejudice and fears. That is*

something we experienced ourselves in the first days.” In this sense, the Grandhotel aims to be a place of welcoming all guests, whether they are residents of the neighborhood, tourists or asylum seekers. They stress that all guests should feel comfortable and at ease in this space, in order to enable encounters. That way, the Grandhotel seeks to be “*an accepted space for encounter*”, in which everyone can feel ‘at home’.

In the interviews, the volunteers were also asked to give their opinion on what the Grandhotel is about. Their answers can roughly be grouped into four interrelated themes, which resonate in part with the topics portrayed in the news items, but also go beyond these. The first theme concerning the aims of the Grandhotel is to be a **space for encounter and exchange**. As mentioned in the press statement before, the Grandhotel is aiming to be a space for different people to encounter each other in an “*uncomplicated manner*” and generate social and cultural exchange: “*Definitely a space for encounter and a space where cultures can grow together, where at least the foundation for that is laid. Where you can meet people and recognize yourself in them (Maria).*” Rather than cultural assimilation, the Grandhotel is seen as a space where cultures develop, learn from each other and ‘grow together’. At the same time, the volunteer also stated that it is possible to recognize oneself in the people one encounters in this space. The Grandhotel is thus about more than ‘integration’; it is a space where different people and cultures can learn from each other and over time, develop new forms.

An elderly volunteer saw the Grandhotel as a ‘mixing machine’: “*I thought, it’s like a mixing machine. You know, where things are mixed together. You throw in artists, normal guests, and the cement... well, the children are the cement, the substance that holds everything together and mix things around. ... I think that’s pretty unique, such a mixing machine. Normally, you have a machine that says, you belong in this corner, and we are here and you are there. And then it doesn’t mix. And here you have a mixing machine and that’s really interesting for me.*” Being seen as a space for encounter is in close connection with its image as an ‘open’ space, that is, open to the diversity of people and cultures. The volunteers saw it to be a space enabling cultures to grow together, live together and work together. This was emphasized by Fariba, a volunteer and former asylum seeker: “*I think the Grandhotel wants people to do everything together, live together, be together. I think that is their goal. There is no boss who says, do this, everything is done together, no matter what or where.*”

A second theme that characterizes the Grandhotel which emerged during the interviews was related to its role as a **space for creativity**. More than just relating to the aspect of producing art in the conventional understanding, the Grandhotel was seen as a space for having ideas: “*In the Grandhotel I have for the first time the feeling that other people share my crazy ideas. ... I find it unbelievably stimulating to have so many ideas here, and to just say something stupid and all of a sudden five people come and say, ah we can do it this or that way. I love that. That you can be who you want to be, and that everyone takes you seriously in that manner. No matter what you say, whether that is right or wrong, I don’t think that exists here anyhow. Rather, what is feasible and what is not. ... And I think that is the Grandhotel for me: A space where I can have crazy ideas. (Miranda)*”

Miranda’s statement is indicative of the creativity that underlies the project as a whole: A project that has been named utopian and a ‘crazy idea’ – until people put it into action. As Paul, one of the founders of the Grandhotel, pointed out: “*I like setting things up,*

while hearing from different sides that it's not possible, how should that work and then demonstrating these people that it's all a barrier in your mind. That you constantly say to yourself, that can't work. And of course it won't work then. But when you say, there are no boundaries, there are only possibilities and all you need to do is find them, creatively, ... then you can achieve everything." In this sense, the Grandhotel is also constituted by a particular approach to 'doing'; an approach that is built on creativity and feasibility, rather than notions of right or wrong, possible or impossible. The Grandhotel itself once was a 'crazy' or unconventional idea, until barriers of the mind were removed and ways sought to put that idea into action.

The third theme characterizing the Grandhotel based on the interviews is its societal impact. This relates to different aspects of the project. Firstly, the Grandhotel was seen as a project that fostered **engagement and participation** of local citizens. According to short-term volunteer Jenny, one of the main aims of the Grandhotel is *"to signal, independent from the question of refugees, how participation can be lived in society, independent from political parties, to activate a successful way of living together, but also for a successful personal life"*. Participation is thus a building block for finding a way of 'living together', or 'conviviality' and links back to Lefebvre's (1996) ideas on a city's inhabitants 'right to the city'.

In addition to fostering participation and engagement, the Grandhotel was also mentioned to be a **space for learning to take on responsibility** for one's own actions and for a community. Jonas, a volunteer in his early thirties, recounted how he felt enriched by the multiple possibilities for contributing to the Grandhotel, which enabled him to work independently and in a self-organized manner. In this way, he said the Grandhotel could be seen as a possibility to experience a 'modern community organization' with a political background.

Overall, the Grandhotel was seen to **raise awareness** for the current situation asylum seekers are experiencing in Germany at the moment and to simultaneously offer a **creative alternative** for what a different asylum accommodation could look like:

"A different politics for refugees is I think the most important aim. And a different awareness in society, starting with our neighbours, but also in the city and in the country as a whole, a different awareness of people who are from somewhere else. And a greater openness and that migration is not seen as a problem but that the opportunities are seen as well." (Michael)

Taking these societal effects together, the Grandhotel was seen by some volunteers as a **'utopian space'**: *"It's a space, where it is possible to develop utopias, or, that was a utopia and is now creating a different reality. I think that's what you can call it: A place that creates a new reality and draws people, that also believe in a new reality and that it becomes reality through that (Maria)"*. As a place that was seen once as a utopia and now is reality, the Grandhotel was also taken to be a space of hope: *"The practical evidence of hope (Jonas)"*. Jonas also explained why he saw the Grandhotel as such an evidence of hope: *"I have experienced a lot of negative things in my life, I have also offended authorities, but this really gives me hope that I can not only think about everything theoretically what a better world*

looks like, but that it's actually quite easy to take part in something like it, that really gives me hope."

These ideas of hope and utopia are strongly connected to an overarching aim and foundation of the Grandhotel: The belief in and practice of 'humanity' (germ.: **Menschlichkeit**). *"For me, personally, the basic approach, also in the cultural field, is humanity, and the display of what humanity could be, not is, but could be. Because I think that is something that is constantly developing, that just goes on and on. ... So I think the project is also about how you treat refugees, how you treat people that are from somewhere else and are traumatized. But also with the possibilities you have of dealing with bureaucracy under this theme of humanity, because those are people as well (Paul)".* For Paul, the aim of 'humanity' or 'humane treatment' is not only connected to refugees, but is a general question that pertains to all sectors of society, hence also to people working in more bureaucratic functions. Given the Grandhotel's unique constellation of sharing the house with a state bureaucratic administrative unit, the question of how to accommodate different viewpoints and dealing with the other side is extremely pertinent.

The aim of treating people in a humane manner and enacting common principles of 'humanity' thus applies to all people in need or facing an existential situation. For Harald, a volunteer in his mid-forties, the Grandhotel was also a space of refuge. He recalls: *"For me, personally, the Grandhotel was also some kind of rescue and place of refuge, because back then, when I came here, I didn't have accommodation, in the last weeks and months I slept here and there, I didn't know how my life would go on and then felt something like a feeling of home here. I'd like to mention in this context, that the Christmas I celebrated here was the first one for many many years where I did not feel uncomfortable. ... I can't really recall what we did exactly, but I remember this feeling, it was quiet, I felt at peace, I felt at home somewhere."* For Harald, the Grandhotel was a place that took him in when he was lacking orientation in his own life and offered him a place to stay. This had profound effects on him, as will be outlined in chapter 4.5. The Grandhotel is thus not only aiming to treat asylum seekers humanely, but trying to apply the principles of humanity to every person in the hotel facing an existential situation.

4.2 Encountering the Asylum Seeker ... whom?!

4.2.1 Sparks fly or they don't: Defining encounters

The empirical findings reflect the distinction between the 'superficial, fleeting encounter' on the one hand and the 'close, sustained encounter' on the other hand. The findings also confirm the difference between the chance encounter, which is often a fleeting encounter, and the sustained encounter, which is more or less consciously constructed (Matejskova & Leitner, 2011). Both types of encounters could be found in all microspaces of the Grandhotel; yet some spaces, such as the staircase, tended to produce more chance encounters, while other spaces, like the restaurant, were more often the setting of constructed encounters.

During the second focus group discussion, a debate about the definition of an encounter emerged. One participant, Michael, proposed the following view of an encounter:

Michael: "Why don't you let an encounter be something lively, where I don't have to define what that is. That we don't let an encounter be pre-defined by some intellectual or social needs. Can't an encounter be something unpredictable, something voluntary, something open? Because when I predefine what an encounter is, then I'll be unhappy if it ends up being something different than what I imagined it to be."

Sophie: "But then you don't need a Grandhotel"

Michael: "No, that's exactly when you need the Grandhotel. But I don't have to predefine what should be the outcome of an encounter. What I can do, is offer a space where people encounter each other and what happens there does not have to be predictable, because it can or is allowed to be something lively, something, that has to do with the liveliness of the people that encounter each other. And then sparks fly or they don't, that's how it works, isn't it? [...] But I also think that attitude is important. The rooms can be the whatever, what is more important is with which kind of attitude you move through these rooms."

Michael's reflection on the encounter is indicative of the larger approach of the Grandhotel in their provision of spaces for encounter. To him, an encounter is something that should not or cannot be predetermined; instead, an encounter is something open and unpredictable. To him, the only thing that can be done is offer spaces that provide the potential for people to encounter each other. This openness and unpredictability of an encounter is reflected in Leitner's (2012, p.830) definition: "*The encounter holds open the possibility of not only inscribing but also disorienting us from the habits, prejudices and stereotypes toward the Other, creating the possibility of change and transformation.*" To her, an encounter can thus "*both inscribe and shift existing boundaries between individuals and collectives*". This definition of an encounter as characterized by openness and unpredictability can thus be contrasted with the attempt to define conditions that lead to so-called 'meaningful' encounters (Valentine, 2008).

Defining an encounter as open and unpredictable echoes Ahmed's definition of an encounter as involving the element of 'surprise'. In contrast to Ahmed's definition however, Michael does not mention that an encounter to him necessarily needs to involve conflict. Rather, he emphasizes an encounter to be something 'lively', which is premised on the 'liveliness' of the people. This distinction enables an encounter to include a range of emotions and does not preclude either conflict, as does Valentine's 'meaningful' encounter, or joy, as in Ahmed's definition. The emotional outcome of an encounter is thus not predetermined in this definition and mirrors studies on conviviality which now include conflict as a form of interaction into their definition of the notion of conviviality (Nowicka & Vertovec, 2013).

An additional aspect this definition highlights is that there is no knowing subject defining a particular encounter as 'meaningful' or not. Rather, providing the space and opportunity for encounter is seen as necessary or 'meaningful'. In this sense, a 'voluntary, open' encounter gives people the choice to encounter, providing them in this sense with more agency than the conventional notion of encounter does. While encounters cannot always be

predicted, individuals can still choose to enter certain spaces that make encounters more likely; reflecting thus a certain degree of power over the encounter itself.

While the definitions employed in the debate on geographies of encounter, in particular the idea of the ‘meaningful encounter’ thus reflect normative expectations, in the sense that positive, or prejudice-reducing encounters are the desired outcome, a reformulated definition of an encounter as primarily open, voluntary and unpredictable allows for a range of emotions and outcomes and hence loses the normative stance reflected in the academic debate. Michael’s definition of an encounter reflects a shift from focusing on the outcome to focusing on the process of encountering, highlighting the importance of the spaces to encounter. In moving away from a normative definition by positioning encounters as meaningful in themselves, scholarship could then evade the production of knowledge that contributes to the control of ‘unwelcome’ encounters among different societal groups. It also represents a move away from finding the ideal conditions for ‘meaningful’ encounters and focuses instead on spaces that enable or disable encounters of various kinds and on the laws and regulations precluding them.

4.2.2 The Production of Encounters.

Common Activities

The debate on encounters has paid relatively little attention to the elements of the specific encounter that initiated contact. More specifically, this refers to the way two or more people got into contact with each other. While the debate has referred to the sheer proximity of public spaces such as buses or cafés (see Laurier & Philo, 2006, 2013; Wilson, 2011), the empirical findings of within the Grandhotel suggest that there may be a more ways of how contact is initiated between two people. The inattention of the debate could possibly be a result of its focus on the outcome of encounters, rather than on the process of encountering, as the previous section has highlighted.

Still, Matejskova and Leitner (2011) in their analysis of migrant integration projects in Berlin have pointed to the importance of shared activities such as work for offering repeated opportunities to build close relationships. Likewise, Amin (2013) has emphasized the importance of workspaces for creating encounters. The encounters described by volunteers and asylum seekers in the Grandhotel offer further indications of how encounters can be initiated. These can roughly be divided into three different types based on the way they came about. One of the most commonly described forms of encounter that volunteers recounted were encounters produced through a **common activity**. These activities were sometimes arranged by third parties or actively sought by the people involved.

One particular activity that enabled many encounters between asylum seekers and volunteers was making music. An encounter that was enabled through music was between Renate, an elderly female volunteer who had at that point been involved in the project for almost a year. To celebrate the official opening of the hotel rooms, the local philharmonic orchestra played a concert in the stairway – a “Treppenhauskonzert” (see figure 2). During this concert, Renate got into contact with Sara, a Chechen girl. Renate describes that the

contact she had with the family was very warm, but it was also difficult, since they did not speak a common language.

“I had contact to a child, Sara, she really wanted to learn how to play the cello. That really touched me so much, that I tried to find a cello for her to practice on. I managed to borrow a children’s cello, I tried to give her lessons. But organizing these lessons was difficult. I tried to get into contact with the family, but communication was almost impossible. But I think we had a very important encounter, I met her family in their rooms, that was something that was important to Sara, it took a lot of time for me, because I was supposed to sit there and eat and be there. We tried to communicate with everything... with time and eating and the children. And we made drawings and I learned a lot about her family that I wouldn’t have otherwise.” (Renate)



Figure 2 A 'stairway concert' (Gastl, 2014)

Reflecting on her role, she said she felt that she was a kind of grandmother, ‘Babushka’, for the Chechen children: *“Sometimes I brought colored pencils and instantly a group of children came. And that was really wonderful.”*

Music was a connecting factor recounted by volunteers and asylum

seekers during the interviews. Volunteers spoke of making music together

with Farzih and Parviz, two local musicians and members of the project that initially had been asylum seekers and now have been granted refugee status. For instance, Harald said that music for him was a form of communication that was good for getting to know each other, since it requires no words to be spoken: *“Everyone knows Farzih, Parviz is also relatively well known, but they would be different people to me had I not made music with them. Not that that was so many times, that was just two or three sessions, but you just get to know each other that way, that is my experience. And you get to know yourself”*.

On the side of the asylum seekers, making music and going to concerts within the house was also named frequently during interviews. Some asylum seekers said that they liked going to house concerts, that that was fun for them. This is a fact that I observed during my fieldwork; during most concerts, families and children living in the house were present at the concerts and mingled with visitors from the outside. Hamid also said that whenever Parviz makes Afghan music in the house, mostly in the café, he comes down to the café and likes to listen and dance. On one of these occasions, I was part of a crowd listening to an afghan-american combo, which consisted of Parviz playing the harmonia and a musician from the

US playing the banjo. This was a musical encounter in itself. Among the diverse group of listeners were Hamid and friends of him, myself, other volunteers and visitors; Hamid started to dance, while Pariz sang. This musical encounter is just one of the many that occur in the Grandhotel. It is evidence to the important role of music within in this space. It draws different people – volunteers, asylum seekers and tourists - together and enables them to communicate in a non-verbal way.

Some of the other activities that were mentioned as a way to encounter asylum seekers living in the house were cooking for the daily helpers, the activities offered by the artists or groups within the house, such as sewing or carving, as well as cleaning up together. For Harald, common activities enable people to ‘get out of their head’, a way to distract from everyday problems and to be in closer contact with the other person and ourselves:

“Everyone wants to do something, that is my experience in life, everyone has the need to do something, do something with your hands or be part of some whole...My experience is, that doing things together is a good way of getting to know each other. Because you can tell each other all kinds of stuff, but when you make something together, then you’ll get to know each other even better. [...] Because you are in direct contact; when you’re able to talk well, then you can present yourself well, and who can prove what you’re talking about... You often don’t even know yourself what you’re talking about, if that coincides with who you really are. But when you do something together, you get to know each other and you learn to be responsive to somebody... and learn where our personal boundaries are and can mirror ourselves through our common activities.” (Harald)

Being engaged in a common activity was also mentioned by some asylum seekers. Hamid, a father in his thirties, worked as an electrician when he was still living in Afghanistan. During my time of fieldwork, Hamid worked together with Werner in the house maintaining the electricity and the internet. When asked about the difference, between his arrival and now, Hamid replied that

“when I was here the first time, I felt like a stranger. But now, Werner comes and says, the internet doesn’t work, please repair it, and I go, I know what to do, I know everyone and I feel like this is my family here, not like a stranger. And that is a big difference between the first day and now. Because now, I know everyone, and I know what to do when the electricity goes out. And when it goes out, they just have to tell me where to go and it makes me happy to fix it, because now I know how it works”. (Hamid)

Nouri, a teenager from Iran, also started working in the bar and helping during events. Asking how that came about and whether someone had asked him to do that, Nouri replied that he said he wanted to take part. During my time of fieldwork, I also observed several asylum seekers helping and taking part in several activities offered by the house. One of the most frequent mentioned by the asylum seekers was Darja, a former cook from Chechenia, preparing meals for the volunteers.

Children

Another way of how encounters between asylum seekers and volunteers came about was through the **children** of asylum seekers. These were seen to act as a connecting link between the volunteers and the parents (see figure 3). Volunteers recounted that the children were very important especially in the beginning, after the arrival of the first asylum seekers. They said that when the parents saw the volunteers playing with the children, they were able to build trust in the volunteers. Through the children, volunteers were able to get to know the parents and be invited into the family, as has already been evidenced in the encounter between Renate and Sara portrayed above.

Another example of such contact between parents and volunteers is the case of Konrad, an elderly volunteer close to sixty years of age. Being a former kindergarten teacher, he now offers to take children to the playground several times a week. After bringing the children back, he sometimes gets invited for tea by the mother of an Afghan family: *“With the mother of the Afghans, when she’s able to grab me [jokingly], she invites me for tea, or when we’re back [from the playground] her boy comes downstairs and brings me a piece of cake – to say thank you, you’ve spent time with my child.”*

During the interviews, several volunteers recalled being invited into the rooms of a family through spending time with their children, or by being invited by the children themselves. In a similar way, Birgit told that she sometimes picks Irina up: *“Sometimes I go upstairs to pick Irina up, then I knock on the door and ask if she wants to come down [to the café], and her mother and father are there and then you say, hello, and they say, come, sit down, eat something.”*

Next to common activities, children are thus the second crucial factor for producing encounters between parents and volunteers. While scholars have thus found that spatial



Figure 3 Children in the Café/Bar

proximity is not enough to produce encounters, they have rarely focused on the connecting elements that do enable encounters when different individuals are in spatial proximity. Children are one such factor; they act as a medium through which different ‘grown-ups’ are brought into contact by engaging in friendly relations with a child. Often lacking the inhibitions or previous negative experiences of adults, children were seen to disrupt habitual forms of behavior of their parents and the

volunteers. These latter findings closely resemble Wilson's (2013) work on the playground as a site for multicultural encounter and learning.

Help

Next to children and common activities, volunteers often related to the aspect of being asked for **help** in the asylum seekers daily needs such as translating letters or accompanying children or adults to the doctor or to the immigration office. This aspect of help pertains to all volunteers and leads to different intensities of contact. While the group of volunteers that is mainly concerned with helping asylum seekers gain asylum has developed very close relationships with them, other volunteers are also asked for help during their presence in the hotel. This type of contact is mostly spontaneous, since it is not pre-arranged. While this is an often occurring form of contact, this does not always result in close contact. Benjamin recalls: *"Mostly it's about help, mutual help, what is good, but I don't really get to know these people that well. What I also think though, is that that's also good. Because some of these people really have bad lives..."*. For Benjamin, it is not that bad that he does not get to know some of the asylum seekers that well, since the stories he has heard about their lives are quite disturbing to him. Thus, while relationships of help enable very close relationships in the case of the group of volunteers concerned with helping asylum seekers in their asylum application, helping asylum seekers in their daily needs has rarely been accounted to lead to close personal contact.

Having people available for help in daily needs was also mentioned by asylum seekers as being an important difference to other asylum centers. In fact, for Hamid it was said to be one of the most beneficial differences: *"There are many differences, but the most important one is for me, that when I get mail or I need someone, someone is there immediately, so I can solve my problem. But in other asylum centers, nobody is there. And I don't think of this as an asylum center, I think of this as my flat, I am living in my own flat, I don't think of this as an asylum center"*. Having people around him that offered help makes Hamid think of the Grandhotel not as an asylum center, but as a home. This conveys that he feels at ease where he lives and displays the importance of having help available, even if it does not always lead to close relationships.

However, the seeking of help also constitutes an unequal relationship between the helper and the helped, as the second focus group revealed:

Simone: "I think we should stop saying, we need to help the refugees, that's again this 'refugee' thing. I think we should instead ask them for help. I know that of myself, that that gives me strength, when I know I can help somewhere."

Sophie: "I think it's the same for them. When you go upstairs and knock on a door and say, you need help-"

Simone: "Yes, to reverse it, I think that's the crucial point. That's important."

Sophie: “Because it is you who needs help. Because in reality, you actually need help, because your studio is empty!”

Lisa: “Right. That signals a certain idea of worth to the other, this feeling that he’s (sic) helpful and not this, you-are-a-burden-thing, you have to leave. You always signal that when you tell someone, I’d like to help you somehow, that just makes someone look small.”

The observation of the volunteers that offering help to someone ‘makes the other look small’ and that the provision of help gives strength resembles the statement Hamid made about the joy he experiences in being able to help fix the Internet in the house and how it enabled him to feel more at home in the Grandhotel. He also compared it to his experience of other asylum centers and how boring life can be there:

Interviewer: “So, you’re saying that it’s a big problem, that you don’t have anything to do? That all you can do is sit in your room all the time?”

Hamid: “Yes, it’s really a problem, because when you have to stare at the walls the whole day and you can’t do anything...and here sometimes they ask if you can help, and it’s just fun.”

While the provision of help by volunteers was a crucial factor for some of the asylum seekers living in the house, the discussion in the focus group also pointed to the fact that this implies a relationship of inequality between the helper and the helped. By contrast, being able to offer help can lend strength and bring joy to the helper, as described by Hamid. Still, some asylum seekers living in the house do not or less frequently turn to the volunteers for help, as Manuel recalled during the first focus group. Therefore, he got to know some individuals and families better than others.

Overall, encounters between asylum seekers and volunteers were frequently initiated through the provision of common activities, through children and through seeking or providing help. Not all of these forms of connection led to equally close encounters. An analysis of the encounters volunteers described points to the fact that it is engaging in common activities, as well as establishing contact with the children and their parents that close encounters were enabled. Encounters that were initiated via these ways often led to opportunities for learning on both sides, as described in chapter 4.5.

The provision of help by the volunteers was seen as a very important factor by some asylum seekers; a factor that distinguished the Grandhotel from other asylum centers. However, while encounters are initiated through the seeking and provision of help, this form of initiating contact was seen as less helpful for establishing personal relationships by most interviewees. More, this form was seen to establish an unequal power-relationship between the helper and the helped and was seen to reinforce group boundaries, as evidenced in the focus group discussion. Asking for help among the asylum seekers was portrayed as a good counter strategy and was a joyful experience for some asylum seekers. These findings hence confirm the earlier observations by Matejskova & Leitner (2011) and Amin (2013) that describe common activities, as well as children (Wilson, 2013) as potential initiators of contact. More, these findings also confirm that spatial proximity is not enough to initiate

contact, as Valentine (2008) observed. Rather, future analyses need to pay attention to the different initiators of contact between people in spatial proximity to each other.

4.3 Spaces for Encounter and their Intersections

A key topic within the debate on geographies of encounter is the particular ‘space of encounter’, also referred to as ‘contact zones’ or ‘sites of encounter’. Given the diversity of encounters, ranging from fleeting to close, it is impossible to see spaces of encounter as a singularity. That is, there is not one ‘ideal’ space that allows for the one, ‘meaningful’ encounter. Rather, as the following data will demonstrate, encounters are deeply interwoven with the particularities of the spaces in which they occur. While the debate has referred to these sites in more general terms, such as ‘schools’, ‘buses’ or ‘cafés’, such generalizations hide the particularity of these spaces and henceforth what might be the actual qualities that enable encounters. Just like the Asylum Seeker is a representation, while the individual is particular, geographers should keep in mind that spaces too only exist in their particularity with a common denominator in language.

4.3.1 Spaces of Co-presence

The spaces of encounter within the Grandhotel can be divided into two categories which parallel the findings of Matejskova and Leitner (2011) and Amin (2013) among others. These categories are not mutually exclusive and only represent a rough, rather than a strict division. Nevertheless, categorization in this case helps highlight the differential workings of the spaces. The first category termed ‘**spaces of co-presence**’ and refers to the circumstance that these spaces usually provide for spontaneous, unforeseen encounters that are not pre-determined in any way. Three spaces for chance encounters within the Grandhotel have emerged from the data. These three are the staircase, the café/bar and the laundry room. They only have the possibility for chance encounter in common and cannot be seen as comparable in any other way, due to their different position, layout, size and function.

The staircase

The staircase is deemed to be the most important space in the house by some volunteers. It is accessible to volunteers and guests ‘with’ and ‘without’ asylum alike. It reaches from the basement to the attic and connects the floors of asylum seekers with the floors of the hotel rooms, which are situated above the former (see figure 1). Hence, all people living or working in the Grandhotel have to pass through this space to reach another part of the building. Since the elevator is only used for the transport of goods or suitcases and is not available for everyone to use, there are few ways of avoiding the staircase, turning it into space for encounters between volunteers, asylum seekers and tourists.

While ‘normality’ of the contact to asylum seekers was one of the possible effects of encounters, the staircase provides one of the most crucial spatial settings for this to happen.

In Miranda's view, the staircase is a 'neutral space', a space that does not belong to either one or other group:

"In that moment where we walk up the staircase, and somebody approaches me and has sweets in his hand, and he offers it to me and I say thank you, and I can pat the children on their heads without them having to go into my territory or I in theirs. ... Everyone meets there, you talk to each other, talk about problems. Such spaces we don't have enough in the house, such neutral spaces, where you can sit together just like in the bar but without an audience. Where you just meet. You don't necessarily have to sit down together. But just meet." (Miranda)

Miranda also expresses the value of these neutral spaces and emphasizes their importance for 'just meeting'. Contrary to the idea of so-called 'public spaces', a 'neutral space' does not have 'an audience' like the café/bar. The staircase is thus neither entirely public nor entirely private – it is available to a closed group of users.

Next to Miranda, Paul also claims the staircase to be *"the highlight of the house"*. Paul, an artist and cultural activist, is one of the initiators of the project and works as the central coordinator of the volunteers. As such, five days a week he works in the bureau which is on the first floor of the building. He bases this observation on his daily experience:

"When I come in, go up the stairs, then I meet someone. I don't necessarily have to start a long conversation with that someone. But just, good morning, hello. And with some, how are you? If I have time and am up for it. And that was it. But that is the first step towards normality. What I mean is normality that our guests aren't used to. Just being greeted in a friendly manner, being asked how they are doing, they aren't used to that. And this normality of encounter in my view is immensely important. Because that has something to do with feeling comfortable where you are. I feel comfortable, I don't feel pressured by too many questions, I feel like I'm treated normally ... just as if I were meeting somebody else. And I think that this normality is incredibly important for the house, and that's happening in the staircase." (Paul)

Paul also tried to imagine what it would be like for him, if he were in a different country, not knowing the surroundings, not knowing the language, sitting in a room in an asylum center:

"Then I have to go to some administrative office, and I have to go down the stairs and somebody is walking towards me and greets me in a friendly way, I don't know who that is, but he is greeting me cordially. What does that do to me? [...] And I think that people feel accepted that way, because everyone in the whole house greets you and then, perhaps, even if you are traumatised or don't know the language, that might help you approach someone. Whether that is cooking together or [...] I just think that this normality could lead to other things." (Paul)

In Paul's opinion, the staircase is therefore a space that enables 'normal', cordial relations between the different inhabitants of the house. When greeted in a friendly manner, asylum

seekers might feel accepted and more comfortable in the Grandhotel. The staircase is a space that enables such short-term, passing interaction; it is a space meant for passing through, not for lingering long. As such, long conversations or lengthy questioning are not expected, but nevertheless contact can be made. To Paul, the normality of contact that is produced in this space might be conducive to longer contact in the form of shared activities and the building of trust. Paul's view was confirmed by Hamid, a guest with asylum living on the first floor of the Grandhotel: *"I'm on the stairs and I ask, how are you, and so forth. And then we talk."*

Miranda's and Paul's view on the staircase as a 'neutral ground', that does not specifically belong to one group or another resonates strongly with Amin's (2013) notion of 'common ground'. Just as in Amin's observation, the staircase resembles a 'common ground' *"for a gathering of equals, a meeting ground and a shared turf"* (Amin, 2013, p.18). In contrast to other urban spaces associated with encounters, such as a street, a park or a café, the staircase of the Grandhotel is frequented by a large, but relatively closed group of people. While some of the hotel guests might vary from day to day, there are also many volunteers, like Miranda, who work there on a daily basis over several months or longer. It is thus a question of future research how open a 'common ground' can be in order to function as a 'meeting ground' of equals.

As a consequence of establishing cordial relations, the staircase is also a space where asylum seekers look and ask for help. Being a space where many people cross through, there is a good chance of meeting someone that can help translate a letter or *"carry up the laundry basket"* as Benjamin recalls. The stairway as a space of encountering asylum seekers and being asked for help coincides with observations made during fieldwork. During that time, I have observed many conversations occurring in the stairway between volunteers and guests with asylum. Many times I was also invited for tea or asked for help when passing through the hallway.

The staircase in some instances is also turned into an event space and used as a playground by the children or for concerts. In that way, it is opened to the public and when used for events, attracts a high amount of guests from inside and outside the house. The nature of this space is then transformed to a certain extent, since it is now a space for people to linger and listen to music, rather than merely pass through. In Renate's case depicted above, she established contact with Sara at a concert performed in the staircase. A similar instance was depicted by Miranda, who during a focus group discussion, talked about how an overtone choir practiced in the stairway: *"We didn't have a room, so they just sat in the stairway with their people. Then they started making that sound- brrr, the children got curious then. The leader of the choir then told them, you can join in if you want, they said no. But fifteen minutes later, the choir was quiet and you could hear the children in the house going brrr..."*

The encounter of the children with the choir exhibits that encounters within this space do not necessarily have to be only passing. By changing the activity, the staircase transformed into a space not only for contact, but also for learning. In addition, in the case of the children, while they did not join the choir, they did exhibit an interest and eventually started to sing themselves. While a superficial look at this encounter might suggest that the encounter failed, since the children did not join, a closer look reveals that it did have an effect on the children and that they needed time to overcome inhibitions to contact.

The café/ bar

The café/ bar (see figures 3 and 4) is the second space functioning as a space of co-presence. Located on the ground level, it is the first room that is entered when passing through the main entrance. Open for daily guests, it is also the busiest room of all. Volunteers claimed this to be an important space for contact. For them, it can be a space of working together with a guest with asylum, as was the case for Felix, who worked with Elvir, an asylum seeker from Mazedonia volunteering regularly in the bar.



Figure 4 A regular day in the café/bar (Gastl, 2014)

However, not all asylum seekers visit the café to an equal degree. Working as a translator for Russian, Lukas observes that “*bar and lobby, that is the nicest place to be, because we meet up there, just about everybody meets up here. When I’m working at the bar, a lot of people come and want something from me and that is*

good cause I want to see them here. I want, that they’re really part of us. And that they’re not ashamed to come down here.” When asked about the reasons for their absence, Lukas answered that he saw the main reasons for this in the language barrier and the presence of guests from the outside: “*It’s like, when you’re downstairs at the bar, although you live here, you’re immediately in public. And many aren’t able to have a conversation. And that’s why they don’t go to the Lobby/Bar, because there’s this language barrier. I must say, I’ve been here now for two months, but I still don’t know all the families. I’ve seen a lot of them, I greet them, but I still don’t know their first and last names, because I don’t have any contact with them.*” The language barrier as a factor preventing encounters will be taken up in chapter 4.4.

Hence, while the café was generally seen as a good place to meet people, it does not constitute a meeting space for all people living within the house. As a space recognised to be more ‘in public’, that is, open to visitors and café guests, it may require confidence, language skills or an acquaintance for some asylum seekers to feel comfortable entering this space. The café as a space of co-presence thus demonstrates that while it may appear to be a meeting ground for heterogeneous publics, it is not equally accessible to all people. The question of

who does not enter this space and for which reasons is therefore just as or even more important than who is perceived to meet there.

The laundry room

The third space enabling ‘chance encounters’ is the laundry room (see figure 5) in the basement of the house. The room is used by volunteers and asylum seekers alike, as the washing machines for the hotel, as well as for the asylum seekers are located there. According to Paul, “because we wash our things there, you run into someone spontaneously there, then you start talking or some kind of conversation starts that seems to be quite funny sometimes”. This space however is not used equally by all parties. Volunteers who seldom clean the hotel rooms were seen there less frequently, just like family fathers who leave it to their wives to do the laundry. Nevertheless, as Lukas observed, there are some women that are only seen while doing the laundry.



Figure 5 An encounter in the laundry room (ground level, left window). Café/Bar on first level. (Gastl, 2014)

As such, the laundry room holds potential value for getting into contact with asylum seekers, particularly mothers, who are seen less frequently at events or in other spaces of the house. This finding indicates that investigations into potential spaces of co-presence should also take more ‘unlikely’ places into account. Like the laundry room in the

Grandhotel, these could be spaces that pertain to satisfying requirements of daily life. More, the space of the laundry room was a space through which to gain access to people hard to encounter in any other space. Access to potentially marginalized groups could thus be gained through an analysis focusing on spaces fulfilling daily requirements.

4.3.2 Spaces of Collaboration

The second category of spaces of encounter is ‘**spaces of collaboration**’. This category refers to spaces which are not primarily spaces for chance encounters, such as the staircase or the laundry room. Rather, they are spaces that are turned into a space for encounter by the

provision or organization of a common activity. These spaces can therefore be seen as having the possibility or capacity of ‘hosting’ an event or activity.

There are several kinds of spaces of collaboration existing in the Grandhotel. While the Grandhotel in general could be framed as such a space, a closer look reveals differing microspaces existing in the house that vary in their capacity of providing for encounters. Some of these spaces for collaboration are *created* for this purpose; others, such as the staircase can be turned into a space for collaborative encounter. It is the first group that will constitute the object of analysis in this chapter.

As described in chapter 4.2.2, making music was frequently mentioned as a collaborative activity occurring in the house. This happened mostly in the **café/bar** and in the **restaurant** located in the basement of the building. While it had not yet been in use as a restaurant open to public during the time of fieldwork, it nevertheless was used as an event space for numerous concerts and celebrations, such as the Persian New Year celebration. A common sight at such music events were children living in the house. Drawn by their curiosity, they were seen to be amongst the first people present at the concerts, observing musicians, playing with the instruments and asking questions. Due to their presence, parents usually came downstairs to see what their children were up to or also came to enjoy the music. Some encounters between parents and other guests at these events came about via getting into contact with the children.

Different activities were offered in the studios of the artists of the house. However, not all **artists’ studios** were open for walk-in guests. Others were not frequented very often due to other occupations of artists. Two exceptions were the studios of Michael, located on the ground floor, and next to him, the ‘Garnhotel’ which translates literally into ‘thread hotel’. Both these studios were open for visitors and for collaborative encounters. Michael, building architectural models in his studio, recounted how he offered some male asylum seekers to show them how to carve wood. With some of the former asylum seekers and now volunteers, he worked together over a longer period of time, which affected him in several ways, as explained in chapter 4.5. The ‘Garnhotel’ is run by female volunteers in the mid-fifties and is more of a sewing workshop, than an artist’s studio. Next to sewing items for the Grandhotel, they are open for visitors from within and outside the house as a place to learn how to sew and repair clothes.

A third space of collaboration in the house is the **‘seminar room’**. It is located on the first floor of the building, close to the rooms of asylum seekers and accessible via the second small stairway. It is a large room, with bookshelves filled with books on the side of the room. The floor is covered with carpets and on the sides are sofas and chairs. It is often used as a space for the weekly meetings of volunteers or other group gatherings such as birthday celebrations, or weekly meetings of political or environmental groups. In addition, it is used by the group ‘Going beyond my borders’, run by an artist originally from Israel and volunteering in the project for almost two years at the time of research. This group consists of several volunteers, German guests and asylum seekers from the house, as well as from other asylum centres. The main goal of the group is to engage via different forms of non-verbal communication, such as art, music or dance and through this, get to know each other on a deeper level. For this group, the seminar room is the preferred meeting space of the house, since it is secluded from the more open areas like the café, has enough space to enable

physical activities such as dancing and is comfortable enough to walk barefoot due to the number of carpets on the floor. The possibility for this diverse group of people to encounter each other in a physical and non-verbal way is thus partly enabled by layout and structure of the seminar room, creating a distinct kind of encounter.

These spaces of collaboration all provide different activities through which to encounter and get to know each other. Their different qualities and location in the house enable different forms of collaboration and exchange to take place. For instance, large music events are best placed in the restaurant in the basement, due to its size, location and the possibility of keeping sound from affecting neighbours. Group meetings, on the other hand, are best placed in the seminar room, which is smaller than the restaurant space and offers the necessary infrastructure for hosting group discussions of all sorts. These spaces of collaboration are thus shaped by and for the activities taking place in them and through this specification, offer differing forms of collaborative encounters. Their difference to spaces of co-presence is that the activities occurring in these spaces are pre-arranged and announced to the asylum seekers living in the house mostly via personal invitation and to outside visitors via social media, newspapers and posters.

An analysis of the different activities offered to the asylum seekers living in the house reveals however that these do not always seem to match the needs or requests of members of this group. The focus groups revealed an apparent mismatch between the expectations and perceptions of asylum seekers needs' on the one hand and the requests of asylum seekers on the other. For instance, during both focus groups, the relative 'emptiness' and lack of contact in the sewing room was discussed:

"Well, I can only speak for the Garnhotel, that sadly, we don't have a lot of contact [to the asylum seekers of the house]. ... In the last three weeks, a man was there with his son, we were asked to shorten his trousers. That's not really the idea, that we do that, but of course we'll do it. But the idea is that they do that themselves. But it was very intense and very nice, because his German was very good. We thought though that people would come more often". (Simone)

During the second focus group, the volunteers thought about different strategies of making the sewing room more popular amongst the people living in the house:

"I don't know, should I go knock on the doors, or use a megaphone or knock and say, hey, we are here, do you want to come downstairs? The best thing would be if we had concrete ideas about what we'll be doing today, why don't you join us, we could make something, t-shirts maybe, something together, so that the people come downstairs. When they come downstairs together, maybe they will like it and then come down alone another time". (Simone)

These excerpts reveal that while some volunteers perceive the idea of offering a collaborative activity and space in the form of the sewing room as potentially beneficial, the reality is that it is not frequented by a lot of asylum seekers living in the house. It remains unclear if this is due to a lack of efficient communication or a lack of interest on the side of the asylum seekers. It does, however, display that offering a collaborative activity targeted at a certain

group or members of this group based on one's own perception of their needs is not always a successful strategy.

During the second focus group discussion, the participants realized that they did not know exactly what the interests of the asylum seekers are that are living in the house:

Sophie: "It would be really great to know what really interests them."

Simone: "Well, I think, you said, eating, cooking, with Muslim families always, and if they are from rural areas, everyone has a garden there."

Sophie: "That's what all of them said, a garden would be a highlight. Give everyone one square meter."

Lisa: "But also festivities, that's also really nice, when you grill outside, where neighbours can come as well."

Sophie: "What some of them also wanted, what totally surprised me, I'd never thought about that, is a Chechen dance group."

Simone: "Dance group?"

Sophie: "Of course. Of course. But we never think about that. We go to a club. But that didn't work out, they did not have enough men. They wanted a room and a ghettoblaster. ... Now they sign up with [name of a cheap fitness company]. Well, what do you do the whole day, you just sit in that little room up there and can't move."

This situation represents several difficulties. Firstly, to actually meet the needs of people that have different cultural backgrounds and experiences. In order to actually meet these needs, volunteers needed to recognize their own situated perspective, indicated by the volunteers' surprise of the idea to form a Chechen dance group. Secondly, to organize activities in coordination 'with' the people involved, not just 'for' the people involved. The aim problem is thus, as Sophie framed it earlier in the discussion: "*How can you meet the people where they are, that you don't come here and just impose some activities on them that they have to adjust to?*". Thus, a central difficulty in organizing collaborative activities was how to meet the needs of the members of this group, without predefining what was best for them.

The difficulty of 'meeting asylum seekers where they are' also surfaced during an interview with a family father from Iran. When asked, if there was anything else he missed doing, such as a favourite hobby, he responded:

Karim: [o] "You know, really, waiting is hard. You don't know, what's going to happen, you don't know, what should you do, you don't know your future. It's hard. For me, when I was eighteen years old, I started the [high level educational training]. I was working, every day, I was at my job, so here, waiting is really hard. Nothing to do as wait wait wait. It's hard. I realize, I start work, it will be better for us, if you stay at home all the time you will be sick."

Interviewer: "That's why we are thinking about what would help you in this time of waiting to kill time, to get your mind off things, so you don't have to sit and wait all the time."

Karim: [o] “Yes, we try, we study [German] in the afternoon, we have some homework to do. We cook, sometimes we visit people of the Grandhotel, sometimes we come to Bar, sometimes they have music here.”

Interviewer: “So you say that does help?”

Karim: [o] “Yes, for sure, helping us, other Heims, they don’t have these things, and they are really sad, they have many problem with their Heim, but thank God, we are here. First, when we came here, we didn’t know this place, we didn’t know the people who are here. But here, is good also for my sons, they have many young people here, they can talk to them, have a conversation, they can find some friends, same age, it is good also for them.” (Karim)

This interview excerpt displays the difficulty of imagining the life of asylum seekers. Still, the interviewee did mention that certain activities provided by the Grandhotel, such as going to the Café/Bar and listening to music does help to fill the long days of waiting. But it also emphasizes that while these activities may help, they cannot replace the wish to start working again, as Semra, an asylum seeker from Mazedonia explains:

“[o] For me, my dream is, I want to stay here, because finally, my daughter is going to school, school is going so super, so now, I want a job, that’s my dream. I don’t need anything more, I have freedom in Germany. I sleep super here. I don’t have problem now, that is my dream. ... I had everything in Mazedonia, but I lost everything, now I want just sleeping super, nothing more. My children is going to school, maybe E. is going to kindergarten, I want this one job, my dream is super.” (Semra)

While the collaborative activities the Grandhotel is offering may ease the burden of waiting, the focus group and interview excerpts reveal the different focus and background of members of both groups. As a consequence, some activities were based on the perceived, rather than the actual needs of asylum seekers. The difficulty of recognizing the situatedness of one’s own perspective made it hard to provide for activities that pertained more to the asylum seekers wishes, such as garden space or a dance group. The excerpts further demonstrate the struggle to fulfil the main wishes and needs of asylum seekers, of ‘meeting them where they are’, such as helping them to stay in Germany or to find work.

4.3.3 Spaces of Exclusion

In contrast to the spaces of co-presence and spaces of collaboration, there were also spaces in the Grandhotel where relatively few encounters occurred. These spaces relate to analyses of segregated spaces and ‘spaces of exclusion’ (Sibley, 1995, 1998). One such space of ‘non-encounter’ or ‘exclusion’ are the private corridors of the asylum seekers. Originally, the first draft of the ‘concept for a social sculpture in the heart of Augsburg’ planned for a ‘total mix’ of the rooms of asylum seekers, hotel guests and artists. This idea could not be realized, since it was prohibited by insurance regulations and the state administration. In order to be

recognized as a state-run asylum seekers centre, the halls of the asylum seekers had to be as similar to a regular asylum accommodation as possible. From the viewpoint of the state, the Grandhotel is thus seen as just another asylum accommodation with the name 'GU 15'. The halls of the asylum seekers thus constitute one of the most secluded and regulated spaces of the house.

Marked with 'private' signs, these spaces have been mentioned by volunteers to be sites they would not feel comfortable entering. As Fabian explained during the first focus group, "*you might walk through there, but you try not to, because it's their private space. You can't encounter each other at eye level there.*" During the second focus group, the participants talked about the possibilities for increasing the interaction between volunteers and asylum seekers. Entering the spaces of the asylum seekers to knock on their doors was however not an option for Fabian:

Sophie: "But how often do you go there and knock on the door of a family and ask how they're doing?"

Fabian: "I can't do that. I can't just go to someone and ask, do you need help. Or likewise, hey, I'm drawing a picture, do you want to help me? Because it's just artificial. For me, it's almost painful if I'm not on eyelevel with someone. So, for instance, with the children, I've had one or two encounters with Rose, where I know, ok, if I want to see her, I'll go to her room and tell her, hey, we are doing this and that, don't you want to join, just like with a friend. And to anybody else that would feel a bit weird."

As the previous exert displays, Fariba feels uncomfortable entering spaces declared as private and would only do so if he was friends with someone living there. In addition, he felt as though he would not meet asylum seekers on eye level if he entered their private spaces. Other volunteers also mentioned that they would not knock on an asylum seekers door at random. This indicates that an a personal connection with an asylum seeker has to be established for volunteers to enter the halls of asylum seekers. Therefore, chance encounters are not very likely to happen in the private halls of asylum seekers.

While the corridors might be seen as segregated spaces or private enclaves, the distinct separation of these spaces also provided asylum seekers with a certain degree of privacy, which also prevents tourists, hotel guests and most journalists from entering. The need for privacy and security is particularly important for political refugees, as the following interview excerpt reveals:

Karim: [o] "But they should not send me the same as other here, everybody can come here and go, this is one of our problem here. All the time, I told them [my sons], when you are at your room, you should lock the door, because we in stress. I know how much dangerous are them. I know. But maybe here, they say, oh nothing is going to happen, you should be relaxed..."

Nouri: “A journalist came and he said, I want to talk to you. And I said, I can’t. And he said, why not? I said, I have a problem, I can’t talk. And he said, you are safe here. And I said, you don’t understand. You can’t grasp that.”

In this sense, the distinct separation of the asylum seekers rooms acted as a form of protection and security, rather than exclusion. Marking the corridors as private provided some asylum seekers with more security from unwanted visitors of the outside. However, this did not prevent all unwanted encounters, such as the encounter with the journalist. In this case, the encounter was not only unwanted, but could have potentially been dangerous for the asylum seekers had the journalist revealed information that could have led to the identification of the person.

Spaces of seclusion can hence also be spaces of privacy and security, as the halls of the asylum seekers in the Grandhotel demonstrate. Political debates marking ‘parallel lives’ and ‘segregation’ as ‘bad’ are thus problematic. The case of the Grandhotel demonstrates that the ‘state enforced’ segregation within the building did not lead asylum seekers to lead ‘parallel lives’ as the chapters on spaces of encounter illuminates. Although a situation of ‘total mix’ would have provided more opportunities for encounter, it would also have been harder to grant some asylum seekers their requested privacy and security.

4.4 Barriers, Conflicts and Limitations of Encounters

4.4.1 Personal Barriers

While encounters with difference can be purposely avoided by individuals (see Valentine, 2008), little has been said about factors preventing encounters the individual has little or no control over. The empirical research in the Grandhotel has highlighted some factors that influence whether or not an encounter takes place. These factors can be either more person related or external as a result of an outside force. To generate an understanding on what makes an encounter ‘meaningful’ to a person, I argue that it is then also pertinent to analyse the factors that prevent the production of closeness within an encounter. That is, what are the potential barriers to create closeness or understanding within an encounter? Which encounters are prevented and by whom or what? In the following, I will outline several **personal** and **external factors** that acted as barriers to encounter or to closeness within an encounter in the Grandhotel.

Language

One of the most frequently named personal factors named as a hindrance to encountering ‘different’ others was **language**. While the role of language does not have a prominent role in the debate on encounters with difference, it was a significant factor for the volunteers and asylum seekers living in the Grandhotel. Although asylum seekers in Augsburg are able to take German lessons, the inability to communicate and to be understood in a common language is seen as a hindrance to conversations and to seeking out and having contact with ‘different’ others. While contact between asylum seekers and volunteers in the Grandhotel

was initiated through conversing in English, by using a limited range of German vocabulary and by using gestures, the ‘language barrier’, as it was described by some volunteers, was seen to prevent deeper, more personal exchanges. As Benjamin explains, *“the communication with each other, this language barrier...well, you can talk with hands and feet, when you don’t speak any English at all, but it’s not really such a personal exchange. It ends up being help, mutual help, which is great too, but you don’t really get to know these people that well”*. What this quote emphasizes is that while some contact and conversation is possible, the inability of conversing fluently in a common language is seen by Benjamin to prevent him from getting to know asylum seekers better, from having an exchange on a ‘personal level’. This was also expressed by a family from Afghanistan, who lived in the Grandhotel at that time. When asked about what they learned about the volunteers during their stay, they answered that they did not really learn anything new and that not knowing the language was the main hindrance for learning something and for getting into contact with people. Only in the presence of a translator they saw themselves able to have a deeper conversation with volunteers.

In a similar vein, Manuel, a student and short-term volunteer, remembered sharing a table in the café/bar with an asylum seeker. Due to the inability to communicate however, no real contact could be established: *“...it’s difficult with the language. Because, I was also sitting in the bar once and we were two people at the table, and then a guest with asylum came to sit with us, but we couldn’t really communicate. Then there were a few minutes of silence and then he left again of course, after five minutes”*.

Both volunteers and asylum seekers were seen to have inhibitions towards communicating with members of the other party. Harald talked about a situation in which he felt a kind of ‘blockage’ during a conversation with a couple, which he attributed to his own insecurity: *“I felt this blockage. Perhaps it also has to do with my own insecurity, because these are situations I’m not used to. But it’s also this language thing... also my English-, I’m understood, but it isn’t that great. But there are also people, with whom I can’t talk to in German, nor in English, how do I do it? Yes, you can also make yourself understood without words, that works when you allow yourself to engage with that and when you’re aware of that. The other thing is a kind of inhibition I felt within me towards asylum seekers. How can I get into contact, what has happened to them... I’m really just at the beginning with that. [...] But a significant part of my communication problems is my own insecurity.”*

This insecurity in conversing was also seen by one of the volunteers working as a translator for Russian as one of the main reasons why some asylum seekers do not come into the bar very often. He explained their absence through his own experience as a former refugee from Kazakhstan: *“That [the language barrier] is a really big barrier I think. When I came, in 1993, I didn’t speak a word, that’s why I know this difficulty, this language barrier. [...] Unfortunately, people are created that way that they are afraid of making mistakes while talking to someone, from all kinds of reasons... because they’re afraid they’ll be laughed at or... This language barrier, if that didn’t exist, communication would be a lot more intensive, then we would be much more of an alliance. This language barrier, it prevents some people from uttering their wishes or to talk about their dreams, but that’s always the case”*.

In the first focus group discussion, one volunteer who originally came from Israel and had been working in the project for over two years saw the inability to communicate or to

share a common language as a factor preventing participation and generating a feeling of exclusion. “[original] I believe that it’s also the inability to participate. Mittagessen [lunch] for me is the feeling that I am outside. At this table I’m the only one that doesn’t really understand German, but they [asylum seekers] are the majority in the house and they still-, we don’t see them, they don’t come to eat. This feeling that you are outsider is not so nice.”

Next to the importance of language for enabling participation and contact, being able to communicate in a language is seen to be crucial for expressing problems and daily needs. Parviz, a volunteer of the Grandhotel and former asylum seeker from Afghanistan, remembers how he had difficulties getting new beddings for his room when he first arrived in Germany. For him, when you don’t speak a language, it is harder to raise awareness to one’s own needs or problems. “When you know the language, you’re able to do what you want, but when you don’t know it, it’s difficult. [...] When I learned the language, nobody can do something bad to me, then I can ask, why is this so? And then they have to change it for me.” What Pariz thus emphasizes, is that not only is language crucial for contact and participation, but that it can also be an empowering factor for changing one’s own conditions while living in an asylum center. This point matches findings of interviews with asylum seekers, who frequently mentioned the importance of the availability of help.

While initial contact is thus established through simpler forms of communication, the ‘language barrier’ is seen to prevent deeper, more personal contacts from being established between asylum seekers and volunteers. Communicating is also connected with feelings of blockage or insecurity on the side of the volunteers and is seen to be a reason why some asylum seekers seem to avoid the café/bar. While encounters in the Grandhotel are thus initiated and take place via a number of different ways, more personal exchanges are often prevented through the inability to communicate in a common language and due to feelings of insecurity. These findings highlight the importance of investigating factors besides prejudice that inhibit or influence encounters.

Alternative languages

Members of the Grandhotel also talked about strategies to overcome the so-called ‘language barrier’. This was achieved through using an ‘alternative language’, namely non-verbal communication. The participants of the first focus group session emphasized the importance of non-verbal communication for the Grandhotel:

Interviewer: “How deep can you get into contact when you don’t have a common language?”

Ariel: “Deep, as deep as... in a different way. When you go dive into the ocean, or when you go to dive under the earth, it’s a different consistency. But it’s deep.”

Simone: “But not with everybody I guess. It depends on the person.”

Ariel: It does not depend on the level of communication in the verbal way and it also does not depend only on the non-verbal communication. It depends on something that is in-between in the language now. You speak in German and I understand twenty percent. But I see so many

languages here, because you are only in the German language. You all know it, when we go travel, [towards other participants] why he is sitting backwards, why he is painting, if you look in the eyes, there are many languages that are here but normally we don't use them."

The ability to communicate in a non-verbal way was seen to reside in some volunteers more than in others. Josef, an artist and founding member of the Grandhotel, was seen to be very at ease and not ashamed at communicating with his whole body. Hence, communicating non-verbally is seen to require a certain openness of the person. Ariel also holds that every person is potentially able to communicate non-verbally, but that this is connected with overcoming a discomfort: *"(original) Each one of us has it, but we don't use it because we are ashamed and it's strange and it's not comfortable. And each one of us needs to find his own language that he has, alternative language that he has with the people, but this needs confidence, it needs a power"*. Talking about one of the asylum seekers living in the house, Ariel tried to emphasize this point: *"(original) Because if Andrei is sitting here now and you want to hear him, and he cannot understand like me more or less, if we include him, if we do something that is alternative Sprache [language], there is more insight, then he can give the hand, then he can be the first."*

Using non-verbal communication is thus seen to be central for establishing contact and participation in the Grandhotel. Communicating non-verbally allows for people to be and feel included. More, it allows them to 'be the first', that is, to be the one initiating contact or offering help. Fariba, a volunteer and former asylum seeker originally from Afghanistan, recalled such a non-verbal exchange, which took place on the day the first asylum seekers arrived in the Grandhotel and became one of her most memorable experiences:

Fariba: "On that day, everyone cooked together, everyone together like guests and hosts. Grandhotel like a host, the others as guests, we all ate together. When I first came [to Germany] it wasn't like that, an asylum seekers' center is totally different. I was here in Augsburg three days without food; I had to wait for the janitor to come. I came Friday afternoon and Saturday and Sunday there was no janitor until Monday. [...] I will never forget that day. Everyone was so relieved, so happy. I can't forget their faces."

Interviewer: "What did you feel then?"

Fariba: "I had a very good feeling that day. I thought I'm not in Germany or with strangers. Because when you're a stranger, you're language isn't the same, you're culture is not the same, you can't be comfortable. But when with these people, I'm here, my language is not the same, I can't speak German that well, but we all understood each other. That was a wonderful feeling. No matter what language, for instance Chechen people also didn't speak German, but you felt-, because there was a little smile and you say please and thank you, you don't need language when you say something, body language can say it. That is so wonderful."

Patriarchal structures

Next to language, **patriarchal structures** were also a factor that was seen to prevent encounters. As mentioned by Lukas, a volunteer and translator of Russian, he observed that some female asylum seekers were never seen in the café/bar. During the first focus group, he recounted that some women were strongly reprimanded when they were seen to participate in activities of the Grandhotel or to go the café/bar. Further, there were some women that were hardly seen at all; a circumstance that my fieldwork at the Grandhotel confirmed.

Interviewer: “So you are saying, that some men prevent women from coming downstairs and talking to us?”

Lukas: Yes, that’s right. But not only that, but they prevent them from going anywhere at all. When there is music or something, they say, you stay here and watch the children. That’s it. There are women that you have never seen, that are living in this house. They have been here for half a year, but you’ve never seen them.”

Katerina: “Well, maybe sometimes in the laundry room. There, I often see women that I never see anywhere else. But they are in the laundry room.”

Lukas: “Yes, that’s right. When they do the wash. But you don’t see them otherwise.”

The circumstance that the volunteer mentioned that she indeed saw them in one particular place, namely, the laundry room, emphasizes the importance of observing which spaces are used by whom and hence which spaces enable volunteers to get into contact with different groups of people. Sharing certain basic spaces in the house, like the stairway and the laundry room, thus helps to establish initial (eye) contact with people who are not to be seen in other spaces of the house.

Emotional distress

A third internal factor that acted as a barrier to an encounter was **emotional distress** caused by previous encounters with asylum seekers. Renate, an elderly volunteer, explained that she went ‘over her own borders’ during the contact with the Chechen girl Sara. The distress was particularly caused by not knowing what would happen to the family in the future. *“I decided that, when I’m here, then I’ll give the child what I can, but I just can’t keep on worrying about the fate of all families here. That robs me of so much strength, and it doesn’t necessarily lead anywhere.”* When asked if she had found a way to distance herself from these dire circumstances, she reported that she was actually thankful for getting a cold, since this forced her to take time off because she was unable to set her own boundaries.

Talking about Parviz, a volunteer and refugee from Afghanistan, Renate mentioned how she reached the boundaries of her own emotional capabilities for understanding what he’d been through: *“And I think you can’t penetrate that deep into the psyche of someone who has gone through so much ordeal, of someone who has been in asylum centers for so*

long, without work, without family relations, fearing all the time for the wellbeing of his family. Sympathizing with someone who has been through all of that is very draining. Also this hopelessness... I've experienced that some people experience the end of what they are able to cope with... they have an attitude of 'nobody can help me anymore' or 'your country doesn't want me'. And it's true in a way. You are also part of that country and that can lead to some tension". What Renate expresses is that in her experience, both parties reach their own boundaries of what they are able to cope with. Renate had to find ways to distance herself from having too much contact with some of the families, since the histories of these families made her worry about their future. Renate also expressed how the asylum seekers she worked with also were at the edge of their emotional capabilities, creating tension between both parties because of the circumstance that 'her' country did not want 'them' to be there.

Paul, one of the founders of the Grandhotel, similarly expressed a feeling of despair and sadness when confronted with the fates of many families living in the Grandhotel. Paul made clear that in his daily work, he did not want to be directly confronted with the fates of the refugees, since he saw himself as too emotional. Rather, he saw his place in trying to care about the daily necessities of the house instead of being concerned with asylum law. Unlike Renate, he explained that he did not want to distance himself from these emotional experiences. *"I don't do it on purpose, because I don't want to. I don't want to distance myself. I know that from previous work I've done, this distancing, and that isn't good for me. That is not good for people, and not for the other person. [...] I don't want to get into a situation, in which I have to do something, so that I have to distance myself so much that I can't look at myself in the mirror when I come home. I don't want that, so I have to make a decision for myself."*

What the previous statements have expressed, is that some volunteers employ strategies during their daily work in the Grandhotel that help them avoid being directly concerned with the particular background and cases of the asylum seekers. While they do not avoid contact in general, they try to avoid work that involves studying the asylum seeker's cases. Being confronted with the fates of the individuals and families living in the Grandhotel brings volunteers to the edge of what they emotionally can cope with. Likewise, it is hard for asylum seekers to talk about what they have gone through, as Fariba explains: *"It's not easy to talk about a bad experience. For example myself, I had to give an interview for television once, and I said, I'm sorry, I can't talk about that, I don't want to think about that again, that is so difficult. When I talk about that, those experiences come up in me again, and I have to think about all that again and it stays with me for two or three days and to forget about that again isn't easy."* Contrary to the opinion of some media reports, the Grandhotel is not a place for citizens to walk in and get instant access to the stories and experiences of asylum seekers. While some volunteers learned about the histories of the family, this was knowledge that was gained through trust and long-term relationships with the individual in question. Emotional boundaries of sympathizing with or narrating an experience highlight the borders of encounters between asylum seekers and volunteers and exhibit the clash of different worlds.

4.4.2 External Factors

Among the external factors influencing encounters was the local department of the state administration in Swabian Bavaria, the so-called **‘Regierung von Schwaben’ (RvS)**. This aspect surfaced very clearly during the first focus group discussion. Mike had been working at the Grandhotel for about two years and was working with the group of volunteers that was trying to help asylum seekers with their cases. For him, one of the most important factors for creating encounters was to get to know asylum seekers right from the beginning of their stay in the hotel. Yet, according to him, this was not happening anymore and that they did not know when new people moved in: *“That’s the point. I don’t know. And so in July, when the people arrived here, I was with most of them in the Ausländerbehörde (foreign affairs office) or made pictures with them and since then I know them and they know me. And so a few weeks ago there was a person here and he asked me a few things about the Ausländerbehörde and I asked, ‘why are you here, why are you asking me?’. And then, after about half an hour talk, he said I’m living here. And I was surprised. And this is for me- this is really bad that the people come into the house but we don’t know.”* Mike added that he only got to know some of the people when they needed help, but if this was not the case, he did not really get to know them.

During this discussion, what surfaced is that some volunteers expressed that they did not have an overview over where new people had moved in. This circumstance was attributed to the RvS, who apparently did not want to hand out lists of new people to the Grandhotel. The volunteers saw the reasons for this in the fact that the RvS did not want to give them this information, because *“they don’t like us”*. Mike thus concluded that he saw the actions of the RvS as the main factor preventing encounters. He added that the officials working for the RvS tell the asylum seekers that they are the only party responsible for them, and not the volunteers working for the Grandhotel and that they are hence *“sowing distrust”*.

Miranda, who had been working as a volunteer for about half a year at that time, also stressed Miranda’s point: *“I think, that they are not only not supporting the project, but that they are actively working against it. Those people [asylum seekers] live with us in one house and we can’t even use the notice boards to leave any kind of messages [of the RvS, hanging in the hallway of the asylum seekers]. We live in one house and there aren’t even emergency hotlines they can call. [...] There is no emergency number of the RvS on those notice boards, because that’s not wanted. There is also no number of us in there, because that’s not wanted. So it’s desired that they stay in their rooms and don’t ever come out of there.”* Miranda hence emphasized the volunteers’ perception that the RvS does not support the project, but that they are actively working against it. The notice boards of the RvS within the hallways of the asylum seekers can be seen as an example of this non-communication and non-collaboration. To the volunteers, it thus appears as if the RvS is attempting to undermine their efforts of communicating with and having contact to the asylum seekers living in the house.

For Miranda, the actions of the RvS are symptomatic for actions taken on a larger scale: *“That goes further even. The official administrations are all against us. Whether that is the RvS or the office for foreign affairs, they’re all the same. But we were always the ones holding out our hand, saying, hey, we have an idea, we’d like to work together with you. And then they took it and chopped it off.”* Miranda’s statement is indicative of the disappointment

that surfaced during many discussions about the RvS. While the volunteers agree that they have also made mistakes regarding the way they talked to the officials, they also held that they were the party that was always willing to collaborate with the officials. During the focus group, Miranda also gave an opinion of why the RvS were willing to agree to the idea of the Grandhotel in the first place:

Miranda: "I think that the initial idea was, let those crazies try out their idea, it won't work anyway. But when they saw that it did work, that the people were really grateful and made contact with us, in that moment they said, whoa, this is getting out of control, we'd better start doing something, then they really had-"

Simone: They are afraid.

Miranda: "Yes, they are afraid."

Simone: "They are afraid, that other people can do something the official administrations can't."

Miranda: "I think it's something else. I think they have different goals than we do. Because of their goals, they can't do anything else than trying to make their [asylum seekers'] stay as short as possible, so that they don't start feeling at home here. ... Feeling comfortable is bad."

Some of the asylum seekers also held that the Grandhotel volunteers and official administrations had different goals. As Parviz, a former asylum seeker and volunteer at the Grandhotel explained: *"Grandhotel has the plan to treat people well here and to let them have a good life. But the foreign affairs office and everywhere, they make everything difficult, so that you say, I don't want to stay here, I want to leave Germany. That is their intention."* Parviz also had observed how the official workers of the RvS tried to discourage asylum seekers from getting into contact with the volunteers:

Parviz: "The boss and the janitor say, you're not allowed to have contact to the people of the Grandhotel. That's why they're afraid of the Grandhotel. You shouldn't say, this is Grandhotel, you should say this is an asylum seeker's center, not Grandhotel. They are afraid of the name 'Grandhotel!'"

Interviewer: "Yes, for them it's GUI5. But do you really think they are afraid of the Grandhotel?"

Parviz: "Yes, if they weren't, why would they say those things? I think, they're afraid of the Grandhotel. But they can't do anything, against the Grandhotel, they can't do anything. He [Hamid] had a problem with the walls, they were wet all the time and his child [got ill]. Then I brought a reporter here, ..., and he wrote a lot and talked to the boss, why is this that way, and he [Hamid] got into a lot of problems because of this with the boss and the janitor, why did you tell other people, why didn't you ask us? He answered that he asked a couple of

times, but nobody responded, so that's why I had to tell the reporter about my situation, that my child is ill because of this. And he got into problems with the boss because of that. They are afraid. They say, if we don't do our job that well, they will tell the media of the Grandhotel about it, then they'll do something against us, that can't be good."

Parviz explanation sheds more light on the perspective of the asylum seekers living in the house. As noted during other discussions with asylum seekers and volunteers, the RvS is seen to create distrust between the volunteers and asylum seekers, telling asylum seekers not to get into contact with the volunteers or reporters. In addition, as noted during fieldwork, the RvS gave false information to the asylum seekers about the internet in the house. Although all rooms of the asylum seekers have been equipped with LAN-cables by the volunteers to enable asylum seekers access to the internet in their rooms, the usage of these access points had been prohibited by the official administration. However, as surfaced during a discussion with volunteers and asylum seekers, the RvS officials told asylum seekers in the Grandhotel that the volunteers would not let them have access to the internet via their Wi-Fi network.

While this is true to the extent that the Wi-Fi system would crash with too many people accessing it, the RvS officials withheld the information that they did not allow the asylum seekers using the installed LAN access points in their room. By giving this information, they created distrust between some asylum seekers and volunteers, which surfaced during the group discussion. This incidence is one among many recorded during fieldwork and indicates that the RvS can be seen as a factor negatively impacting the occurrence of encounters by prohibiting them and by creating mistrust between asylum seekers and volunteers.

4.5 Beyond prejudice – the effects of encounters.

While theory on the geographies of encounter mostly investigates the effects on prejudice, the questions underlying this thesis were more tailored to the overall effects encounters had on volunteers and asylum seekers. The encounters initiated through common activities, children or the act of helping had varying effects on both sides. Rather than a division into beneficial and non-beneficial effects, I will make a distinction in the sense of emotional registers. This section will deal with effects that induced senses of joy.

Volunteers frequently mentioned that encountering different people in the Grandhotel was a **joyful experience** and that working together was **fun**. Michael, an elderly artist in his fifties who has a studio in the Grandhotel, recalled how he worked together with Ahmed, an Afghan refugee and artist who was volunteering in the Grandhotel from very early on. He reports that it was a fun experience for both of them: *"I worked a lot with Ahmed, Ahmed in the beginning was very interested in building architectural models and so we worked together on one project which was a lot of fun for us both"*. Birgit, a young volunteer who has recently graduated from high school, spends a lot of time with the children of some asylum seekers living in the Grandhotel:

“It’s just really cool to have so many children around. ... It’s extremely exhausting, but also extremely cool, because it brings life into the house... you can have a lot of fun that way. In that moment when you fool around and make jokes with a five year old child, that’s just so funny, because you turn five again as well and that is extremely cool. Those are wonderful moments, because nothing is important, it’s just fun, and that’s why you do it and then it’s cool and then there are unicorns and there’s just everything that doesn’t normally exist. And this light heartedness and ease, that’s just really healthy in between things.”(Birgit)

Volunteers also recounted how they built very **personal relationships** with asylum seekers living in the Grandhotel. Lukas, a volunteer in his thirties mainly working as a Russian translator for the Chechen refugees, had worked in a ‘normal’ asylum center before. Having that experience, he is able to differentiate between the Grandhotel and other asylum centers and what different effects they had on him:

“The Grandhotel is completely different from a regular asylum center. I saw really horrible conditions, I saw people, I saw asylum centers where the people... that is not life for me, that is just existence. The people that are under arrest and can’t leave the center or when the language barrier is so big and no help comes from the outside, these people are really on their own. I have already worked with refugees, but it has never been this close for me. That was always, somehow, the life of others. And I contributed somehow, but I never had personal contact with those people. Here, it’s completely different, here I have personal contact, here I see these people as my family” (Lukas)

Birgit also expressed that she cares deeply about the people living in the Grandhotel. Being at the Grandhotel since the first asylum seekers moved in, she sees the differences between the first days and the present moment:

“I mean, the people that come into this house, you really care deeply for them. You meet them, you speak with hands and feet, you see that they somehow meld with this house, are part of this organism. And what has changed during that time... on the first day, we only spoke with hands and feet and now, months later the children are able to translate for their parents, that’s just so amazing to observe, that’s so beautiful to see, because you think, that brings joy to my heart. And then, when they have to leave, what can you say, that’s just shit.” (Birgit)

The **familial atmosphere** in the Grandhotel was also mentioned by some asylum seekers living there. This is the case not only for Hamid, as displayed in the previous chapter, but also for Semra, an asylum seeker from Mazedonia, living there with her family. When asked about the differences between the Grandhotel and other asylum accommodation lived in, she answered (Interview in English):

Semra: “Different in the Grandhotel, because in the Grandhotel have so many people. People- I feel, ich habe Freunden [I have peace], I don’t know. I feel good in the Grandhotel. Like my house. This is different. Nürnberg, I have appartement, but no have people.”

Interviewer: "What about the other people who live here? Do you get along?"

Semra: "Ja, ja, ja. I don't have problem from nobody in the Grandhotel. From asyl people, I don't have problem for nobody. I think so, in the Grandhotel, only people in the Grandhotel is exactly one family. Like family, because only people in the Grandhotel is one helping. I don't know, so, every people in the Grandhotel is super. And asyl people. Talking for asyl people."

Another interview with a family from Afghanistan also mentioned seeing the Grandhotel as a family. They reported that when they came to the Grandhotel, they felt good, because there it felt like family to them and they were happy to be in the Grandhotel. This was also related to the circumstance that people helped each other there. Fariba, an artist and former asylum seeker nearly forty years of age from Afghanistan, also shared this feeling of family:

"For me the Grandhotel is a big family and big- we do everything together...cooking... it's such an interesting project, I haven't seen anything like it in Germany, people doing work all together." (Fariba)

At a later point, Fariba describes how she felt when she first arrived in Augsburg and how volunteering in the Grandhotel helped her **feel more at home**:

Fariba: "Earlier, I was alone in Augsburg, before I went to the Grandhotel. Then, when I came here, it totally changed for me. Because I come from a large family and I have always lived with my family. And it was really difficult for me to live here all by myself, and in the Grandhotel, since I work here, I'm not home alone anymore. ... I want to be active, I always want to be active. Being alone, I can't do that. I can't. I get depressed. [Being in the Grandhotel] That was really wonderful for me."

Interviewer: "But do people differentiate here between natives and foreigners?"

Fariba: "When I'm here [at the Grandhotel], I don't think, I'm a foreigner."

Drawing these insights together, both volunteers and asylum seekers shared a feeling of family in the Grandhotel. For some asylum seekers, this is especially tied to the provision of help, but also being able to contribute and working together, as in the case of H* and F*.

The practice of working together was not only reported to be fun, but also helped volunteers and asylum seekers to **learn from each other**. This includes several aspects. Firstly, volunteers mentioned that they saw encounters as an opportunity for cultural exchange. This aspect was important to Renate, because it *"uplifts you and brings joy, and when we're all together here and we're dancing or there is a party, then that is really wonderful, it really makes sense. And I don't have to travel to these countries, it comes here"*. Renate also adds, however, that not only the joyful aspects, but also the sad aspects are brought to the Grandhotel: *"But also the serious sides of life. When I think of Farzih, from*

Afghanistan, he can transport his sorrows in his music, with an unbelievable voice, what is really moving, but can also seem a bit alien to us.”

This interest in other cultures was not only expressed by older volunteers, but also by Felix, a volunteer in his early twenties, who expressed that before he came to the Grandhotel, he did not have a lot of contact with asylum seekers before. Other volunteers have also expressed that their interest in foreign cultures was triggered through meeting different people in the Grandhotel. For Michael, this aspect is connected to getting to know a different perspective than his own, learning new ways of doing and new viewpoints: *“I like to get a different perspective than my own. Like vacation from your own ego. ...For me, that is part of being creative, to experience a kind of productive uncertainty, where you think, ah, you can also do it differently...”*. At a later point in the interview, Michael illustrated this aspect of learning:

“I also cooked together with the woman from Kurdistan, I’ve forgotten her name, but we also could not understand each other at all. But we cooked rice together and we had a lot of fun, and it took very long until I understood what she wanted and what she needed and that she needs oil, because she wants to brown the rice in oil and then pours the water on it. But then I thought, ah, that’s something I already know that from making Risotto. [...] It was very cordial, we had fun. I didn’t really learn anything that I didn’t already know, except- being patient and tolerant and not to take everything that seriously and precisely.... You see all the time that you can also do it differently...as they say in the Threepenny Opera, you can also do it differently, but that will work too.” (Michael)

This situation that Michael depicted not only demonstrates the aspect of encountering each other through a common activity, and that this encounter, while not necessarily teaching him a new way of cooking, enabled him to learn to be patient and open and tolerant to other ways of doing things. Correspondingly, when invited for tea by the Afghan mother, Konrad had a different insight into religious practices. In the mother’s room, Afghan television was on and he observed a preacher who started to cry: *“And I thought, I saw that coming, this is going to escalate, what will happen, do you have to turn him off? And I asked Ahmed [the translator], what has happened, why is he crying? And he said that he is just demonstrating his personal truth, so you can say, he is truthful, that is who he is, he is demonstrating his belief. Until he cries or screams – I’ve never seen that before.”* Konrad was thus able to take part in a religious aspect of daily life, while having the opportunity to see the meaning behind it, rather than interpreting it solely from a Western perspective.

The opportunity for mutual learning was also important to Fariba, a refugee and volunteer from Afghanistan. She emphasized that especially the common activities helped her make contact with German people and learn about their culture and customs:

“But in Grandhotel I saw it, people working all together. If someone has a problem, then everyone helps. I want to have contact with these people. [...] I am a stranger here, I’m a foreigner. I want to have contact with these people and I want to get to know them better and this new culture and everything, because Germany for me is new, its culture, its language, everything. And I want to learn everything because I’m here and I want to live here. That’s

really important, when somebody is here, they have to know something about this place.”
(Fariba)

Learning from others about different cultures was also considered important by a father of two sons from Iran. The interview made clear that in previous encounters with German people, he experienced a relative ignorance regarding cultural and geographical aspects of Iran. He was rather shocked by this, since it suggests an underlying sentiment of ‘not having anything’, of being an ‘underdeveloped’ country in comparison with Western Europe:

“Some people, they ask, do you have mountain in your country? Do you have snow in your country? Do you have flower in your country?! What do they think? In Iran, do you have elevator in your country? I don’t now, they think we don’t have anything, nothing in your country, maybe no mountain, no snow no nothing, but when we show them our cities, and then, oooh! I think two weeks ago, a friend of our church, she came to us, she said, ok, Bavarian TV showed a 45 minutes about Iran, very nice cities, very nice! I said, yes, it’s nice, isn’t it?!...No, when they study Geography, they should study about our lands!” (Karim)

The fragment hence depicts the experience of the father that most of the people he encountered in Germany were unaware of the beauty of his country and that he was startled by the fact that people knew so little about it. Encounters thus not only kindled interest in some volunteers to learn more about the asylum seekers countries of origin, but also gave asylum seekers the opportunity to educate people about different parts of the world. I encountered another example of this kind when taking part in the celebration of the Persian New Year, celebrated in March. The event was held in the restaurant of the Grandhotel, and several families living in the house were present, along with friends of theirs, as well as volunteers and other guests. Persian food was served, the elements of the Persian New Year were explained and Persian music played. While at first only ‘Persian’ men were dancing, ‘German’ women and men started dancing and eventually mingling with the former. Events like these are exemplary of the cultural exchange taking place in the Grandhotel, providing for encounters that enable people to get into contact with different cultures and opportunities to learn.

An aspect that volunteers also related to was learning about different cultures of hospitality. Volunteers appeared surprised about the level of hospitality that some asylum seekers showed. This pertained strongly to invitations of families into their rooms, in which tea and cake was offered, or to other invitations such as birthday celebrations. Being invited to take part in such events had a strong impact on some volunteers, as the following excerpts of the interviews with Michael and Birgit demonstrate:

“What really touched me was a little improvised dinner with Darja [a Chechan woman], with ten or twenty people, after we’ve written that petition, and that was- they can do things we can’t or what’s really nice, what we could learn from, this culture of hospitality. That uncomplicated moment, to just put that table there, and the salads and things she made, everything so delicious, and that atmosphere and dancing and so forth. I really liked that. And when Parviz and Farzig sang together shortly before the soup was ready. That’s

something I'll never forget. Those are really wonderful moments. Those are moments, where I think, now I know why I've lived.” (Michael)

“And especially that kindness and openness that you experience when you get to know each other, like, when you are invited to Darja for dinner, as an example, that's so cool, because, perhaps you don't speak the same language and perhaps the overall situation is really bad, but in that moment, that's not that important, because you are together and you're happy you're together and you get wonderful food. And in that moment, they care for us and that is really, that is really exciting and cool... and even in such bad situations, that those values are really too important to lose.” (Birgit).

These excerpts demonstrate the aspect of mutual learning, a point that is often brought out by members of the Grandhotel. Contrary to what is usually represented as ‘the Asylum Seeker’, the volunteers emphasize the value of learning about different cultures and different perspectives on life. Especially the aspect of being hosted by asylum seekers in the house had particular impact on the volunteers. Particularly Chechen practices of hospitality surprised the volunteers. What occurred frequently, when volunteers were guests at the tables of Chechen families, is that the guests were asked to eat first, and only after the guests had eaten, the host would eat. Some volunteers reported that it took them considerable effort to convince the hosts of eating together with them. What Birgit's excerpt makes clear, is that she was particularly impressed by the fact that she was cared for despite the difficult situation the family was in.

Not only did volunteers learn about different cultural practices, but they reported also to have gotten more **insight into the difficult situations asylum seekers** were in and that they had not been aware of how harsh asylum politics were at that moment. These insights were reported especially by three younger volunteers their early twenties. When asked what those insights did with them, one volunteer answered that as a consequence, he got “*a totally negative impression of our state*”. Another short-term volunteer and student of tourism, made clear that although she went to political events and was informed about the conditions, she tended to suppress these thoughts after a while. But in the Grandhotel “*it really seeps into your consciousness... Here it is present in a different way, it is daily life.*” For her, the presence of the Grandhotel and the daily contact with people who have experienced hardship in their past makes their lives and circumstances appear more real than any documentary or news item about them. This effect of continued and more effective awareness was also expressed by Birgit:

“It got closer because now I know people who are in such a situation. And here especially, here, you don't make a distinction between refugee and non-refugee, that's terrible in itself. They are all human beings and our friends, therefore... they're in a fucking bad situation, that we should change and that we want to change, but it is definitely closer now... you become more aware of the fact that that is something that should be changed. ... Because when I read about xyz in the newspaper, and that is then the only contact I have with that topic, well, the next headline will be there soon and the old one is forgotten. But this way, you're confronted with it on a daily basis and even if you're not confronted with it on a daily

basis, you've had this encounter and you keep that and then it is and will stay closer to you."
(Birgit)

Being confronted with the situations asylum seekers were facing also led volunteers to **reflect on their own life**. Many of the volunteers I interviewed replied that learning about the lives of asylum seekers taught them to be grateful of their own life. Benjamin, a local graffiti artist serving social service hours in the Grandhotel, answered he learned *"to be thankful for how well off I am. And how crazy the world can be, that you have to leave your home country. But also, that life always goes on. That's what I've learned. Life does not show respect"*. Similarly, Michael gained a different perspective on his own life: *"To not always take minor conflicts or hurts of your daily life too seriously... to see your daily life from a point of measurement not as absolute but to see that those are luxury problems compared to those that you have when you're facing an existential situation like deportation."*

Harald also expressed that not only he was prompted to reflect, but that he was also able to change certain things in his own life. Having left his previous home, Harald at that time was living in the Grandhotel in exchange for providing help. He added: *"This is a place, where, when you let yourself sink in, at least for me personally, you can really change a lot for and in yourself. I think that is through the many encounters you have here. And as I said, encounters to me are like a mirror and you are exposed to that 24 hours a day if you want. That is really a strong contrast to the life I led outside, before that."* For Harald, the encounters he had in the Grandhotel thus provoked him to reflect and change his own life. The Grandhotel is hence not only a place that seeks to change the lives of asylum seekers towards the better, but, via encounters, is also beneficial to its volunteers by helping them reflect on and even change parts of their own life.

Next to learning about others and about oneself, volunteers also responded that the frequent encounters with asylum seekers helped them to **reduce initial inhibitions**, feel more comfortable with the encounters and see them as normal part of daily life. For M, this also meant reducing what is called 'Berührungängste' in German, and which could literally be translated as 'fear of touch'. In daily language, the term is used to refer to situations when the outcome of contact with certain people is feared or uncertain. For Miranda, this was however not because she was afraid of asylum seekers, as she explains: *"In the first moment, of course, I was afraid of contact [Berührungängste], even me, not because I was afraid of them, but because I was afraid of doing something that did not show them enough respect, where I would hurt them."* What has also changed for Miranda and has helped her feel more confident in encounters with asylum seekers is that she found a way of communicating more easily: *"I'm less afraid now to use my hands, no matter what language they speak. ... Now I know, hey, they'll understand, and if not, then that's bad luck. And now I've acquired this normality, and that's how it [my behaviour] has changed."*

Losing initial inhibitions of contact was also mentioned by Birgit. For her, this was because *"you get into contact with everyone instantly here, you just talk to the people you encounter."* Just like Miranda, Birgit was also concerned about her own behaviour being hurtful: *"I always thought, oh, I don't want to say anything wrong or do something that might be misunderstood, I think everyone knows that. But that is actually no problem, as long as you meet on one level. ... I think that now, I don't overthink the situation, I just think, you*

just have to fall into or dive into an encounter without thinking too much about it. Just be yourself and let the other person be himself and then just communicate in one way or another without spending too much time thinking about nonsense". She added, that even if something is done differently in a culture, that could be learned and that not all things have to be clear and known from the beginning.

While cultural differences did create misunderstandings between some volunteers and asylum seekers, this was something that could be clarified in some encounters. Konrad recalled a situation in which he tried to thank the Afghan mother he had tea with by trying to kiss her hand: *"I tried to kiss her hand to show my admiration and that was, ohh, no, when that happened, at first that was-, but now we've overcome that. That was a mistake of course, you don't do that, but I didn't know that. Mistakes just happen."* While miscommunication and cultural differences do occur frequently, they also enabled both parties to learn about their respective cultural differences. For Konrad, it was also important to have been given sufficient time and subsequent contact with the Afghan mother to overcome the misunderstanding.

For Maria, a long-time volunteer in late thirties, the normality acquired by frequent encounters will eventually lead to the forming of a stronger society. She relates this to the ability to learn from each other. When asked about what encounters could effect, she replied: *"I'd say just more normal relations or connections. And I also think this will lead to a stronger society. Because everyone can learn from each other. And you can do that when you're in an inter-cultural environment. Because everyone has different viewpoints and thinks differently and feels and sees different things and I just think you can learn from that. It might be a bit uncomfortable in the beginning, but if you let yourself be part of that, it's truly invaluable".*

What is striking about Marias comment is that she sees a sense of normality in relations between people of different cultural background as a prerequisite to learning from each other. In addition, she also includes that this does not come without difficulties, but that it requires the individual to overcome some initial inhibitions or barriers. Her statement resonates with earlier arguments on the potential of encounters as a means to engage with situated positionalities, and, while involving agonistic relations, could lead to more democratic societies (Fraser, 1997; Mouffe, 2005; Young, 2000).

The Grandhotel is often portrayed as a project for the 'integration' of asylum seekers into society, as the media analyses revealed. Maria's statement above sheds a different light on conventional understandings of integration, which view it as a process converging towards an endpoint, at which the minority and majority populations cannot be distinguished any longer (Nagel & Staeheli, 2009). The Grandhotel's emphasis on the creation of a 'concrete utopia' precludes any understandings working towards an endpoint. Since the project is not working towards a specific goal, but places the emphasis on creation, participation and learning, it moves away from a static and toward a dynamic understanding of societal relations. Hence, it symbolizes the continuous re-creation of societal relations and the formation of a different, pluralistic society, rather than the preservation of a homogenous, static society.

5. CONCLUSION

This thesis has aimed to contribute to debates on ‘encounters with difference’ both through theoretical and empirical inquiry. Theoretically, it opened up both the notion of ‘the encounter’, as well as ‘difference’, to move beyond conventional understandings and shed new light on the nature and direction of the debate. I have argued that an unquestioned appropriation of conventional understandings of ‘difference’ within the debate on geographies of encounter runs the risk of keeping hierarchical conceptions of difference in its place. In such an understanding, difference is connected with inferiority and Otherness. Drawing on feminists and critical theorists such as Braidotti, Grosz and Deleuze, I posit that difference should be seen ‘in-itself’, meaning that representations of groups do not coincide with the actual individual. Rather, difference and particularity of individuals is all there is. From this standpoint, a truly ‘meaningful’ encounter is constituted through the destabilization of stereotypical representations within an encounter and by making visible the particularity of every-body.

Rescuing difference from a purely negative appropriation and reading it instead, as Grosz proposes, as ‘the force of life’ changed the nature of my inquiry into encounters. This reading is neither a pure celebration of encounters, nor their dismissal. Geographies of encounter have focused primarily on the production of so-called ‘meaningful’ encounters. However, a number of studies have now found that encounters are mediated by personal experiences as well political and economic structures that preclude the determination of any straightforward outcomes. My empirical research brought forward a definition that has the potential to evade this gap by focusing less on the outcome and more on the processual nature of encounters. As such, I propose to see encounters as a ‘meeting-up’ that cannot be predetermined and instead, is something open and unpredictable. The empirical research also highlights that more important than the production of a ‘meaningful’ outcome is the provision of opportunities for diverse groups of people to encounter.

Building on the finding that proximity is not enough to enable contact, my empirical research investigated factors that connected different individuals within spaces of the Grandhotel Cosmopolis. The encounters between asylum seekers and volunteers that took place there were initiated through several ways. First, through common activities, such as making and listening to music. An advantage of this form of contact was its perceived ability to distract people from the problems of their daily life, while enabling a form of more ‘direct’ contact than through conversation alone. Second, children were seen to act as a medium that connected different adults through making contact with both groups. Third, seeking and providing help initiated contact between different individuals. Without the possibility to reciprocate however, this form could confirm potential hierarchies between the ‘helper’ and the ‘helped’ and was seen to reinforce group boundaries. Although the availability of help was a crucial factor that was said to distinguish the Grandhotel from other asylum centers, contact initiated this way was often said to remain ‘superficial’. These findings hence not only point to the importance of investigating different initiators of contact, but also indicate that not all of these forms lead to equally close encounters.

Geographical work on encounters has frequently employed notions of the ‘contact zone’ or ‘spaces of encounter’ in which different social groups get into contact. These spaces

are said to be located in ‘public’ spaces, such as parks or buses, semi-publics such as workspaces or schools, or private spaces such as the home. My thesis tried to move beyond these designations through incorporating and reflecting on current discussions of ‘public’ and ‘private’. Rather than positioning spaces or zones of encounter ‘in’ the public or ‘in’ the private realm, I argue that spaces for encounter are public spaces, that is, spaces for heterogeneous publics to encounter each other. While geographical work has brought out how different social groups face each other in a range of urban sites, this work has focused only on specific differences, such as ethnicity or race, while largely neglecting other marginalized social groups such as asylum seekers or homeless people. The case of the Grandhotel Cosmopolis presents an exception to this situation, since it constitutes a space in which individuals that usually face high levels of state-induced segregation are provided with a space to encounter and engage with citizens of the city.

In my empirical research in the Grandhotel Cosmopolis, I also differentiated between the different microspaces within the hotel. While the Grandhotel thus might be described as a space for encounter, its microspaces display varying capacities for producing encounters. These microspaces could be divided into spaces of co-presence, providing for spontaneous, unforeseen encounters, and spaces of collaboration, enabling encounters through a common activity. While the geographical debate claims, that the ‘fleeting encounters’ occurring in spaces of co-presence do not have any significant effect on prejudice, my empirical research indicates that these spaces might nevertheless be meaningful, since they enable ‘normal, cordial’ relations to be established. Still, the spaces in the Grandhotel have to be distinguished from other urban spaces of co-presence in their reduced openness to visitors from the outside and in their perception as a form of ‘common ground’, that is, not directly being one or others’ ‘territory’.

Spaces of collaboration within the Grandhotel also varied in their capacities for encounter. The possibilities to encounter different others in these spaces was shown to depend on whether or not the activities provided reflected common interests. While making or listening to music was seen as an effective way to get in contact, other spaces, such as the sewing room, were not frequented as often. This finding underscores the situated perspective of volunteers on the needs and wishes of the asylum seekers living in the hotel. More, while the different activities provided in spaces of collaboration were said to help get through difficult days of waiting, these activities cannot replace or fulfil the desires of asylum seekers to ‘lead a normal life’ and find work.

The state-induced spatial segregation of asylum seekers within the Grandhotel also enabled reflections on debates of forced spatial exclusion. Earlier findings found that voluntary spatial segregation should not be seen as detrimental to society, since spatial enclaves can also offer protection to minority groups. The case of the Grandhotel demonstrates, that while a ‘total mix’ of artist studios, hotel guests and asylum seekers rooms was prevented by the state administration, this forced spatial segregation provided asylum seekers with a sense of privacy and a higher level of protection. In consideration of political refugees, this was preferable to a higher mix of spaces, which, while leading to more encounters, would also decrease the level of security and privacy of these individuals. Encounters were nevertheless enabled due to the connection of these private spaces with spaces of co-presence, such as a staircase.

The empirical work also highlighted different factors that influenced or even prevented encounters from occurring. Language constituted one such barrier; a factor mentioned by both volunteers and asylum seekers as preventing more intimate encounters. In addition, patriarchal structures were observed in the case of some families, due to which women were said to have been prevented from entering certain public spaces or from engaging in common activities. Nevertheless, some women were seen in spaces of co-presence, such as the staircase or in the laundry room, highlighting the importance of these spaces for connecting with these individuals. Another factor preventing encounters was the emotional distress some volunteers experienced by being exposed to the hardship of asylum seekers and their often hopeless situations. These factors illuminate that even when different individuals are spatially proximate and willing to encounter, factors beyond their control might still prevent intimate encounters from occurring.

Given these limitations, the encounters enabled through the Grandhotel had profound effects on individuals of both groups. While geographical work has focused primarily on the reduction of prejudice and stereotypes, this thesis has tried to illuminate other effects encounters give life to. Contrary to the often negative connotations associated with ‘learning to live with difference’, encounters with asylum seekers in the Grandhotel were often associated with building personal relationships and having fun together – despite the often dire circumstances asylum seekers were facing. Personal encounters made asylum seekers feel more at home in the Grandhotel, while both groups expressed sentiments of family. Volunteers also mentioned losing inhibitions to contact, prompted by insecurities about the ‘right way’ to behave. Mirroring earlier findings, the encounters enabled learning experiences for both groups; reminding volunteers not only of the harsh political situations asylum seekers are facing, but also providing a new perspective on their own life.

Reflecting on the overall role of the Grandhotel, it can thus be described as a space for multiple publics to encounter each other. One of the most profound consequences of these encounters is their potential to motivate individuals to fight for political change, given the insights individuals gained from encounters with asylum seekers. The Grandhotel Cosmopolis is thus a space inspiring a new politics of asylum, not only, but also through the encounters with difference it allows for. Rather than being fixed on the outcome, this space reminds different publics of the importance of encounters as a means of communicating across situated knowledges and perspectives.

Scholars thus face two potential modes of inquiry into encounters with difference: One is a mode focused primarily on the outcome of encounters and implicitly contributes to building the ideal of a homogenous society by placing the mark of difference solely on certain Others. The line of this investigation then revolves around the diversity of pseudo public spaces, while obscuring the encounters these spaces prevent. The second mode of inquiry that is forwarded by this research is to conceive of encounters as an open and unpredictable process. By so doing, it robs the ‘knowing’ academic subject of assigning meaning only to certain encounters, while postulating the importance of the voluntary and open encounter in spaces for different publics as a potential way toward a more democratic and pluralistic society.

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