Megaprojects can be perceived as modern symbols of prestige, progress, and political power (Altshuler & Luberoff, 2003; Diaz Orueta & Fainstein, 2008; Löfgren, 2015; Pitsis et al., 2003; Schwartz, 1990). Löfgren (2015), for example, shows that the Øresund Bridge and tunnel was a symbol of creating a transnational region on the Danish–Swedish border. In another example, the Space Shuttle megaproject served as a symbol of the American dream in which manned space flights represented technological progress in the context of the power struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II (Schwartz, 1990). In the same way, the Sydney Harbor Sewage Tunnel megaproject was an important symbol of the Australian Olympic dream, showing that “down under” could organize the 2000 Olympics (Pitsis et al., 2003). In a final example, the Panama Canal is regarded in engineering terms as one of the Seven Wonders of the World, with its construction being symbolic of America’s power, its control of the region, and the reach of its navy (Smits & Van Marrewijk, 2012).

Megaprojects are non-routine temporary endeavors, requiring special authorization, funding, revenues, and regulatory actions (Davies & Mackenzie, 2014). Furthermore, they are typically controversial, proceeding slowly and involving different electoral and business cycles for which public-private cooperation is needed (Altshuler & Luberoff, 2003). Such projects have complex requirements in terms of the integration of activities and the management of technology, resources, and equipment, and are characterized by a long time frame and numerous interfaces among multiple contractors and third parties (Van Marrewijk et al., 2016). Although traditional conceptions of megaprojects still dominate much of contemporary project management literature (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006), the deviations, failures, and risks of many of these projects in terms of scope, cost, and time (Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, & Rothengatter, 2003) have diverted academic attention away from structural modes and toward issues of social interaction, sense-making, and culture (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Söderlund, 2004).

Megaprojects are here considered to be cultural phenomena (Kendra & Taplin, 2004). Drawing from anthropological literature (Alvesson, 2002; Smirich, 1983), project culture is perceived as a social construction that results from people ascribing meaning to their situation (Cicmil & Gaggiotia, 2014). Consequently, megaproject organizations are understood not to have a culture but as a culture (Van Marrewijk, 2015). Given the unique features of megaprojects as temporary, ephemeral, or disposable organizations...
Symbols are present everywhere in project cultures as they shape organizational life (Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Gagliardi, 1990; Nauta, 1991; Rafaeli & Pratt, 2006). For example, corporate flags, work clothing, office spaces, and equipment can be vehicles for symbolic meaning. Geertz (1973) uses the concept of symbol to denote any object, act, event, quality, or relationship that contains a conception—namely, the symbol’s meaning. He states that symbols are “tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longing, or beliefs” (Geertz, 1973, p. 91). Following this line of thinking, and as I have argued above, megaprojects can be understood as modern symbols of prestige, progress, and political power.

An important property of organizational symbols is their capacity for communicating meaning (Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Firth, 1973). Even when people share the same cultural context, they can have various social interpretations of a symbol, which makes the receiver important (Firth, 1973). Firth (1973) calls the distinct interpretation of a complex profound representation by receivers “multivocality.” Similarly, Turner (1967, 1973) calls the meaning derived from local interpretation “exegetical meaning.” A meaning can dominate other meanings and by so doing block different explanations, creating discrepancies and contradictions in meaning (Turner, 1967). This is the case with the symbolic interpretation of a red flag for “danger” or for “communism.” Exegetical meaning is an important concept in understanding the problematic execution of megaprojects (Flyvbjerg, 2014). The multivocality of symbolic interpretations by clients, agents, public and private stakeholders, citizens, and politicians can create serious challenges for a megaproject’s execution. For example, in the Panama Canal Expansion Project (PCEP), the Panamanian government understood the Canal Zone to be symbol of national independence, whereas the United States-based contractor perceived the Canal Zone as a symbol of former American presence, which caused serious power struggles (Van Marrewijk et al., 2016).

Exegetical meanings can thus shape social, cultural, and political situations and processes. Insight into the nature of exegetical meaning provides a better understanding of the problematic evolution of megaprojects.

The goal of this article is to understand which exegetical meanings a megaproject can encapsulate for involved stakeholders and how those meanings shape the megaproject’s process. The exegetical meanings of the public organizations—the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment, Rijkswaterstaat, ProRail, and Dutch Railways—all involved in the Dutch High-Speed Train (abbreviated as HST) megaproject, will be discussed. This €7.3 billion project was started in 1995 to connect the Netherlands to the European network of high-speed trains. Although the rail infrastructure was already completed in 2009, it never came into operation; it never ran any high-speed trains. The HST is a good example of an infrastructure megaproject that set out to provide a new type of urban space, in the same way as a new road (Harvey & Knox, 2015), a canal (Smits & Van Marrewijk, 2012), an airport (Dewey & Davis, 2013), a bridge (Löfgren, 2015), a railway line (Corvellec, 2001), or a subway infrastructure (Van den Ende, Van Marrewijk, & Boersma, 2015).

Central to this article are the two research questions: (1) Which exegetical meanings do the four public organizations attach to the HST, and (2) how have these meanings shaped the megaproject’s process? Data on this case have been collected at three intervals during a longitudinal study, which was carried out under supervision of the author between 2003 and 2015, using participant observation, interviews, and desk research, which allowed for an in-depth contextual and historical analysis. The findings show three exegetical meanings of the HST megaproject: as a radical innovative contract, as an intervention in the Dutch rail sector, and as a lynchpin of rail transport business. These positive interpretations were used by the public organizations for the legitimation of their own goals and interests; they were not stable but changed over time into a negative symbol of a failed megaproject. This article contributes to megaproject literature with an anthropological perspective on symbolism. Although symbolism plays an important role in shaping organizational life (Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Gagliardi, 1990; Rafaeli & Pratt, 2006), it has not been fully addressed in megaproject studies. Therefore, this article engages organizational and anthropological theory on symbols to provide insight into the symbolic understanding of megaprojects.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, I discuss the theoretical roots of symbols and examine how they translate to organization and project studies. Second, the methodology section explicates how the data were collected through a longitudinal qualitative study. Then, the findings section shows the distinct exegetical meanings of the HST and how these interpretations influenced the megaproject’s process. The discussion section argues that the involved public organizations used the symbolic representations of the HST megaproject for their own strategic agenda. Finally, the article concludes with the observation that organizational theories on symbols are valuable for a better understanding of the symbolic meaning and interpretations of infrastructure megaprojects.
Infrastructure Megaprojects as Symbols

Academic studies on organizational symbols draw heavily upon anthropological theories on culture and symbolism (Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Firth, 1973; Rafaeli & Pratt, 2006; Turner, 1967, 1973). As early as the 1930s, anthropologist Malinowski (1939) studied the formation of symbols in relation to the origins and formation of culture. He traced the origins of the formation of symbols to the very beginning of culture, rooted in the human need to cope with the gap between superficial statements of action and underlying meaning. Others (e.g., Firth, 1973; Geertz, 1973; Nauta, 1991; Tennekens, 1982), too, understood symbolic representation to be an essential function of human consciousness and fundamental to coordinated action, standardize techniques, and provide rules for our understanding of religion, technology, art, language, and science. An example of symbolic representation is the John Frum cargo cult movement just after the end of World War II. John Frum is often depicted as an American serviceman who would bring wealth and prosperity to inhabitants of the island of Vanuatu if they followed him and built fake airstrips and airplanes to symbolically encourage American military planes to land with their cargoes of supplies (Worsley, 1957). The activities of these cargo cult participants are no less real to them than they are for us when using our transport infrastructure. In this way, meaning is captured or stored in symbols and support the way one ought to behave in a group (Geertz, 1973). For an excellent overview of the long history of research on symbols, see Firth (1973). Geertz (1973) states that symbols can have the power to connect facts, such as a cross and its representation of Christianity at a fundamental level. Geertz (1973) calls this “synthesizing symbols” (p. 127). However, a basic problem in the study of symbols is the relationship between the symbol and its representation, as this contains the risk of cultural determinism (Firth, 1973). Cultural determinism is the belief that a symbol determines our interpretation of it. Therefore, Firth (1973) criticizes Turner’s (1967) use of the concept of “dominant” symbols, where one meaning can dominate other meanings and by so doing block different explanations. Firth (1973) states that too great a uniformity is assumed in the reaction of people to symbols and therefore he declines the idea of dominant symbols. Without denying the existence of dominant symbols, I would like to focus our attention instead on the complexity and context of the link between symbols and their interpretations (Rafaeli & Pratt, 2006; Tennekens, 1982). For example, a red flag that might be used to indicate a hole in the road becomes a political symbol of freedom when used on Parisian barricades in the 1960s or a symbol of totalitarianism when used in a North Korean military parade. Symbols, thus, allow for flexibility in individual handling and interpretation.

An important characteristic of symbols is that they are connected to their referents in cultural systems (Firth, 1973). Turner (1967) calls this the positional meaning of symbols. Culture is then seen as complex of symbols, which have an intrinsic double aspect: They are a model both of reality and for reality (Geertz, 1973). First, when we use a symbol as a model of reality, we are trying to bring a symbolic structure close to reality, such as the luxury car that symbolizes the wealth of the owner. Second, using a symbol as a model for reality helps us to understand how relationships should be organized, such as design plans for a bridge or tunnel. Turner (1967, 1973) calls this the positional meaning of a symbol, understood from its relationship to other symbols in a patterned totality.

The meaning of a symbol is not stable but can change over time. For example, Löfgren’s study (2015) of the symbolic interpretation of the Øresund Bridge and tunnel that connect Denmark to Sweden shows that the bridge was first a symbol of economic prosperity and growth and then became a symbol of a price barrier, bureaucratic barrier, and cultural barrier that blocked regional development. Finally, the bridge became a symbol of economic opportunism for Danes and Swedes who wanted to compare prices in shopping malls. Löfgren (2015) concludes that the meaning of the bridge has changed continually during its short history. In another example, the Panama Canal, once a symbol of America’s power, regional control, and two-ocean navy, has now become a symbol of economic growth for Panama and of status for the private firms involved (Smits & Van Marrewijk, 2012).

Another characteristic of symbols is their capacity for control; they can be manipulated in order to justify social order and power relations (Firth, 1973; Turner, 1967). Consequently, symbols can be used strategically in megaprojects for decision-making processes (Brown, 1994), for enacting transitions during a project life cycle (Van den Ende & Van Marrewijk, 2014), for the legitimation of power (Brown, 1994), and for power struggles among stakeholders (Clegg & Kreiner, 2013), to name a few examples. In this way, symbols can become powerful.

In summary, this theoretical debate helps us understand megaprojects as symbols that capture meaning, which can be multivocal, can change over time, and can be strategic in power struggles. This understanding focuses on megaprojects as social and cultural networks of people involved in the processes of organizing and meaning-making (Bresnen, Goussevskaya, & Swan, 2005).

Methodology

The data set used to answer the research questions in this paper was collected using longitudinal ethnographic field research (Pettigrew, 1990). Such an approach describes, interprets, and explains behavior, meaning, and cultural products through direct data collected by researchers who are physically present in the organization or other setting of study over a long period.
The Multivocality of Symbols

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instruments</th>
<th>Period I</th>
<th>Period II</th>
<th>Period III</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project</td>
<td>HST</td>
<td>HST</td>
<td>HST</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Research leader</td>
<td>Consultant/researcher</td>
<td>Researcher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant observation</td>
<td>150 days</td>
<td>15 days</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources used</td>
<td>Reports, internal documents, intranet</td>
<td>HST intranet, internal documents, newspapers</td>
<td>Parliamentary enquiry report, newspapers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Research instruments used in the three periods of study.

of time (Barley, 1990). The aim is to provide an interpretative understanding to come to a “verstehen” of the constructed social reality (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). The term verstehen refers to understanding the meaning of action from the actor’s point of view (Czarniawska, 1992).

The research group in this study consists of HST employees of four public stakeholder organizations who were studied in three different periods between 2003 and 2015 (see Table 1 for an overview of the research periods). Conducting longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork is not an easy task. Academics often have limited time for research and gaining the access necessary for such research can be difficult. Therefore, other stakeholders, such as potential users, local governments, and construction firms, were not included in the study. To partly overcome this limitation, a document analysis of newspaper articles on the HST in two leading Dutch newspapers (De Volkskrant and NRC Handelsblad) has been included in the study.

Data Collection

The most important period of data collection was from 2003 to 2005 during the construction of the HST line. Data, methods, and researchers were triangulated to improve the reliability of the research (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). The methodological triangulation used included biographical interviews, observation, participant observation, group interviews, and desk research. During this period, 85 interviews were held with employees of the four public organizations involved: the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment (abbreviated here as Ministry of I&E); Rijkswaterstaat, which manages road and water infrastructure; ProRail, which is responsible for rail infrastructure; and the passenger rail operator Dutch Railways.

During that two-year period, a team of four employees of the project’s knowledge management department, supervised by the author, asked the interviewees questions on topics regarding project goals, design, and culture. All interviews were conducted by two researchers—one taking notes and the other doing the interview, which is called researcher triangulation (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). Interviews were held in Dutch and typically lasted between one and a half and two and a half hours. All interviews were transcribed directly after they had taken place. Participant observation was carried out for 18 months during three days a week at the project’s headquarters, the regional offices, and the offices of the stakeholders. Finally, data triangulation was applied in terms of the sources consulted, including interviews, biographical interviews, observations, websites, public reports, management reports, internal reports, and public hearings.

During the second period (2007–2008), the author was involved as a consultant in the transfer of the new rail networks to the operator ProRail. In this period, 10 interviews were held with relevant stakeholders in the public organizations involved. During the third period (2014–2015), three interviews were held with former HST managers, and reports and parliamentary enquiries were studied. Important data came from three parliamentary enquiries related to the HST megaproject: the enquiry of the HST tender process (Survey-Committee-Construction, 2002), of the decision-making process used (Commission-Duijvensteijn, 2004), and of the tendering of the high-speed trains called Fyra (Parliamentary Commission, 2015).

Analyzing the Data

An initial exploration of the data set resulted in a time table and in the finding that the HST was initially a symbol of European integration. Turner’s (1967, 1973) exegetical meaning of a symbol was then used for analysis of the data set. The author went back to the data and reread all the interviews, reports, and newspaper articles in order to address the different exegetical meanings. From this reading, three exegetical meanings appeared: the HST as (1) a radical innovative contract, (2) an intervention in the Dutch rail sector, and (3) a lynchpin in the rail transport business. Then the analysis centered on how employees of the four public organizations used the megaproject’s symbolic meaning for their own reasons, also called “sublimes” (Flyvbjerg, 2014), to participate in the megaproject. This resulted in the understanding that the HST was being interpreted symbolically and used strategically for individual and organizational goals. Finally, the positional meaning (Turner, 1967) was analyzed to understand how the HST is related to the overall pattern of megaprojects as symbols.

The HST Megaproject: Four Sublimes

The HST megaproject was a symbol of European integration in the 1990s to be achieved by connecting Amsterdam to the European capitals of Brussels,
Paris, Berlin, and London with high-speed trains. The HST encompassed the optimistic dream of integrating Europe into one political-economic community where people could travel freely in high-speed trains without border controls. The ambition of the Dutch government was to connect Amsterdam to the European network of high-speed trains with a southern line to Paris, an eastern line to Berlin, and a northern line to Hamburg. These last two lines failed to obtain parliamentary approval (see Table 2 for a short overview of the HST megaproject history). Only the construction of the 125-kilometer line to the Belgium border, which was budgeted in 1995 at €3.4 billion, was approved.

The goal of the HST megaproject was to establish a line between Amsterdam and Paris on which high-speed trains could travel at a maximum speed of 300 kilometers per hour to shorten travel time and give people an alternative to car and air traffic, while also strengthening the economic positioning of the Netherlands (Dutch-Auditing-Institute, 2014). The Ministry of I&E initiated the megaproject and controlled its budget. The company Dutch Railways was privatized in 1995, with the Dutch government being the sole shareholder, while the infrastructure manager ProRail, as a department of the Ministry of I&E was responsible for the maintenance of the rail network. In the HST megaproject, ProRail was responsible for the initiation, decision-making, and operating phases. Another department of the Ministry of I&E, Rijkswaterstaat—normally responsible for the design, construction, management, and maintenance of road and water infrastructure—was now in charge of realizing the HST.

The findings of the study show that the HST megaproject was attractive to the four abovementioned public organizations for four reasons, corresponding to what Flyvbjerg (2014) called the four “sublimes.” First is the technological sublime, as project engineers of ProRail and Rijkswaterstaat love designing and constructing complex infrastructure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Events</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establishment of HST think tank</td>
<td>1973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political discussions on connection to European HST network</td>
<td>1979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement on HST network among the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Germany</td>
<td>1989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Termination of HST North project</td>
<td>1989</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preparations for HST East and South</td>
<td>August 1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan for the HST line made public in governmental decision</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final decision on HST trace made by government</td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tender for infrastructure of HST South</td>
<td>1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start of construction phase</td>
<td>May 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Termination of HST East project</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch Railways win public tender for franchising the HST line</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary enquiry on tendering of HST</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch Railways sign contract with AnsaldoBreda for Fyra trains</td>
<td>January 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery of rail foundation, bridges, and tunnels</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery of rail infrastructure, and problems with security system software</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening of tunnel</td>
<td>June 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final delivery of rail infrastructure five years later than initial projections</td>
<td>January 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start of operations</td>
<td>December 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry saves Dutch Railways with a reduction on concession costs</td>
<td>August 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary enquiry on construction of HST</td>
<td>April 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renegotiations between the government and Dutch Railways over cost of concession</td>
<td>December 2011</td>
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<tr>
<td>Start of Fyra high-speed train, five years later than planned</td>
<td>July 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problematic startup of Fyra trains and breakdown of trains in winter weather</td>
<td>January 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitive stop to Fyra production</td>
<td>June 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary enquiry on the HST</td>
<td>March 2015</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Timeline of events in the HST megaproject.
works, which is central to their professional identity (Florman, 1996). The HST megaproject was one of the largest infrastructure projects in the Netherlands. A great number of complex technological problems, so typical of megaprojects (Van Marrewijk, 2015), had to be solved during this project. To give a few examples, these problems included digging tunnels in unstable clay, building bridges over wide rivers with changing sand banks, and taking the new rail line through densely populated urban areas. The engineers of ProRail and Rijkswaterstaat hoped and expected that the HST rail would stand as future testimony to technological achievements in the same way that the transoceanic highway between Peru and Brazil did for road engineers (Harvey & Knox, 2015) and the Panama Canal did for its constructors (Smits & Van Marrewijk, 2012).

Second is the political sublime (Flyvbjerg, 2014), in which the Ministry of I&E manifests optimism in terms of the ideal of European unification. They want to connect the Netherlands to the European network of high-speed trains and wish to deregulate the Dutch rail sector, in line with European regulations. Another goal, not mentioned in the project plans but stated by interviewees, was to liberalize the Dutch rail sector by opening up the Dutch rail network to foreign competition. This anti-monopolistic thinking dominated the European political agenda in the 1990s (Parliamentary-Commission, 2015). Consequently, the Dutch government wanted to use innovative contracting of public-private partnership in the HST construction. Rijkswaterstaat used this to acquire more influence in the management of infrastructure megaprojects in the Netherlands.

The third is the economic sublime (Flyvbjerg, 2014), in which Dutch Railways perceived the HST line to be the lynchpin in their strategic positioning as an international high-speed operator. Here, the Ministry of I&E saw the Netherlands as a country that wanted to improve its transport infrastructure, which the construction industry, with its collusive practices during that period (Van den Heuvel, 2005), was eager to fulfill. The HST megaproject was the first public-private partnership (PPP) in the Dutch rail sector, and a project management organization was recruiting consultants for design and supervision, hiring contractors, and supervising and initiating operations.

The HST megaproject was split into three parts (Dutch-Auditing-Institute, 2014). The first part was the foundation of the rail network, consisting of the construction of tunnels, bridges, and dikes. This work was divided into seven contracts: five PPP contracts for the foundation, tunnels, and bridges; one for a seven-kilometer tunnel; and one to connect the HST to the existing rail network. Each contract was given to a separate construction consortium. The second part was the rail infrastructure, consisting of the rails, communication system, security system, and signaling system. This was financed and constructed by a market consortium consisting of investors, international banks, and private companies. The government pays the consortium a yearly fee to maintain and keep the HST rail running with an availability rate of 99.46% until 2031 (Parliamentary-Commission, 2015). The third part was the transport franchise, which gave High-Speed Alliance (HSA) the exclusive right to deliver train services. Because Dutch Railways own 95% of HSA, I have used the name Dutch Railways in this article. This splitting into three separate parts was intended to speed up the realization of the HST megaproject and to make possible the public tendering of the concession and the private financing of the rail infrastructure.

The fourth sublime is the aesthetic (Flyvbjerg, 2014), which is found in the design of iconic landscape elements in the HST project, such as a large bridge, a viaduct, and a tunnel. The iconic new bridge of two kilometers over the river Hollands Diep has Y-shaped pillars, which strengthen the image of the slim but strong bridge. The aesthetics of the bridge are amplified by the illumination of the pillars in the dark, with lights reflecting in the water. Another iconic element is the longest rail viaduct in Europe, which runs for an impressive six kilometers at a height of six meters. Finally, the preservation of an iconic polder landscape was one of the aesthetic sublimes of the megaproject. The project was debated at length in the Dutch parliament and in the press, as the typical polder landscape was directly affected by the new rail line. After conducting environmental impact, feasibility, and safety studies, and identifying alternatives, the Dutch parliament decided to drill a seven-kilometer tunnel to protect the polder landscape.

These four sublimes were the drivers for the four public organizations to participate in the HST megaproject. I now focus upon how the various sublimes are dealt with by symbolic representations from various stakeholders.

HST as Symbol: The Multivocality of Meanings

From the findings, three local interpretations of the HST were found: (1) HST as a radical innovative contract, (2) HST as an intervention in the Dutch rail sector, and (3) HST as a lynchpin of the rail transport business. These interpretations were not fixed and stable, but rather have changed over time, with some symbols becoming more dominant than others in certain periods. Below the local interpretations will be discussed.

HST as a Radical Innovative Contract
The first exegetical meaning of the HST megaproject is that it is an opportunity for introducing PPP as an innovative form of contracting. In the 1990s, the Ministry of I&E was heavily influenced by the philosophy of new public management, which advocated reducing the responsibilities of the public sector on the basis that market organizations
could do such tasks cheaper and better than public-sector organizations (Gruening, 2001). Therefore, the Ministry of I&E tendered the HST megaproject as an innovative PPP: “We decided to prepare for a public tendering of the concession and the construction of the rail infrastructure” (Interview with employee of the Ministry of I&E, November 2003). Here, the HST as a radical, innovative PPP is seen as a model for reality (Geertz, 1973), designed to change the Dutch construction sector, thereby contributing to the economic and political sublime. The HST megaproject symbolized something much larger than “just” a megaproject; rather, the Ministry of I&E understands the HST as a revolutionary change in project management practices: “With this project, we will show how the construction industry and the Ministry of I&E will work within the next 10 years” (Interview with former HST director, November 2003).

With this in mind, Rijkswaterstaat recruited enthusiastic, flexible, and innovative pioneers for the project management organization—people with alternative mind-sets, who could deal with ambiguity and chaos and were able to develop new ideas: “There was a constant change, and everything was overthrown. One has to be able to stand that. I needed people who were flexible” (Interview with former HST director, January 2004). These employees, who strongly identified themselves with the HST as a radical, innovative project, were known by interviewees as “Gideon’s gang.” Gideon’s gang is a biblical metaphor for a small group that opposes a very large group, but knows no fear and uses creative, innovative methods to reach its goals.

Rijkswaterstaat used the symbolic representation of the HST to show the success of innovative contracting, and especially how it could prevent the visual pollution of a high-speed rail line cutting through the protected area of typical Dutch polder landscape that encircles the cities of Amsterdam, Leiden, and Utrecht. The solution proposed was to tunnel under this landscape, at a projected cost of €380 million, not to ruin the aesthetic beauty of the region. Two tunnels were proposed in the tender document, but one consortium calculated, and later proved, that one wide tunnel with two tubes would be more cost-effective. This was widely perceived to be a success:

“The tunnel is a good example of how an innovative contract can result in major savings. This, of course, depends on the space a contract gives to realizing such an innovative concept and to what extent the contractor has an interest in innovation. A contractor only innovates if he can improve his market position.” (Interview with HST manager, November 2003)

Notwithstanding this positive example, over time the symbolic representation of HST as innovative contracting changed, as the tender procedures of all other contracts in the megaproject failed and, when finally brought into execution, underperformed (Commission-Duijvensteijn, 2004). The failed tender procedures in the megaproject triggered a parliamentary enquiry on “Irregularities in the Dutch Construction Industry” (Survey-Committee-Construction, 2002), which uncovered what later became known as the Dutch construction fraud scandal (Commission-Duijvensteijn, 2004; Sminia, 2011; Survey-Committee-Construction, 2002). The enquiry found many cases of illegal practices involving collusion and fraud. The report confirmed that the “entire sector was involved in fraud and other illegal practices” and that “management knew about it and authorities helped to perpetuate the system” (Van den Heuvel, 2005, p. 134). Many Dutch construction firms were given large fines, and managers were even imprisoned. It took public and private partners more than 10 years of reestablishing boundaries and negotiating competences in order to develop new collaborative practices (Veenswijk, Marrewijk, & Boersma, 2010).

Slowly, the HST turned into a symbol of failed public–private contracting. Some blamed the contractors for this:

“I think it is because the contractors did not see how they could earn more money with opportunities and optimizations. I had expected this to be totally different. In hindsight, I think that our expectations were colored by earlier experiences in the Oosterschelde megaproject [innovative construction of sea dike], but that is water; people are more innovative there.” (Interview with former HST director, December 2003)

Others stated that there was little room for the contractors to design their solutions: “HST was a logistical process to make rail production, with little room for innovation,” said one HST employee. Some interviewees also reflected upon the complexity that had been introduced by dividing the HST into three parts, thereby creating organizational boundaries that had to be spanned:

“Our model worsened the problems as nobody really felt responsible for the boundaries; all seemed to perceive the project in terms of their own responsibilities with little integral thinking.” (Interview with HST manager, November 2003)

The failed contracting of the HST stimulated the development of knowledge of how to manage PPP megaprojects in a Dutch context. According to respondents, many megaprojects initiated after 2005—for example, the Hanze rail line, the Delft rail tunnel, and the North–South metro line in Amsterdam—have benefited and learned from the knowledge developed in the HST megaproject and the Betuwe route (a freight train line from Rotterdam to Germany). One respondent talking about the Hanze project indicated:

“We have cleverly chosen the contract boundaries based upon the experiences of the HST and Betuweroute.” (Interview with project employee of the Hanze line, 2012).
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Others have learned to keep megaprojects out of the political domain because, in the case of the HST, national politics heavily influenced the execution. One respondent said:

“It was important to keep the Hanze line under the radar in order to prevent it from becoming a political project. Therefore, it remained a ‘normal’ megaproject in the shadow of HST.” (Interview with Hanze line employee, 2012)

Furthermore, the symbol of innovative contracting stimulated the involved public organizations to improve the training of public managers. This resulted in the creation of distinct knowledge platforms. Here, project managers working in the public domain are trained in negotiation, management skills, how to deal with ambiguity and social complexity, and how to obtain knowledge about innovative tendering and contracting. Both project managers and the Dutch parliament realized, after three parliamentary enquiries, that their capacity to really understand and critically question the decision making and execution of megaprojects was too limited. One of the key players from the Ministry of I&E stated: “Innovative contracting is gorgeous, but we first should have learned to play the game on a much smaller scale. Now it almost fell apart.” (Interview with Rijkswaterstaat manager, February 2004)

This resulted in extra research capacity in the Dutch parliament to support politicians in their decision-making processes and, thus, in the functioning of democracy. This was an unforeseen outcome of the HST megaproject.

HST as an Intervention in the Dutch Rail Sector

The second exegetical meaning found is the HST as an intervention to change the rail sector. Both the Ministry of I&E and Rijkswaterstaat perceived the HST to be an excellent opportunity to break the monopolistic position of both ProRail and Dutch Railways in the Dutch rail sector. Dutch Railways and ProRail, which were one organization until 2004, were very afraid that the line would be operated by one of their powerful competitors, such as the Deutsche Bahn or the French SNCF. For ProRail, the HST would be the largest rail construction project ever, while Dutch Railways wanted to exploit the HST line to prevent competition, particularly from international operators. Therefore, in the early stages of the project, Dutch Railways tried to prevent the public tendering of the HST rail line (Parliamentary-Commission, 2015). In doing this, Dutch Railways “searched for the borders of the unseemly and even sometimes crossed these” (Duursma & Verlaan, 2015, p. 4). Because Dutch Railways was unable to stop the public tendering from going ahead, it saw no option other than to make an offer the government could not refuse—twice as high as the bids of the competitors. However, all interviewees said that they immediately knew that the offer and expected turnover were unrealistic.

Both Rijkswaterstaat and the Ministry of I&E used the symbolic representation of the HST to exclude ProRail from the management of the project organization because they thought ProRail could not manage the innovative contracts and was actually part of the problem:

“I had to remove ProRail from the project. ProRail was too much connected to the Dutch Railways, and that power had to be broken because we wanted to bring the concession to the market.” (Interview with former project director, November 2003)

This quote emphasizes how the HST was regarded as a means of breaking the power of Dutch Railways. The power struggle was symbolized in a cartoon depicting Rijkswaterstaat as the national figure of Hansje Brinker, who used his finger to stop a hole in the dike to prevent the Netherlands from being flooded, now stirring a large pan of soup with his finger, indicating Rijkswaterstaat’s wish to influence large rail infrastructure megaprojects (University magazine Ad Valvas, 27 November 2003). Not surprisingly, the cooperation agreement did not work out well:

“There wasn’t a cooperative attitude (Interview with manager from the Ministry of I&E, September 2003): “There was a strong identification of employees with the project. Consequently, they [Rijkswaterstaat] were not open and developed an attitude that put others off. They went their own way.” (Interview with ProRail manager, December 2003)

ProRail argued that it had 100 years of experience in rail construction and that it was formally responsible for the construction and maintenance of rail infrastructure in the Netherlands. ProRail preferred to opt for a matrix model in which it would have greater authority; it wanted to design infrastructure and manage a part of the project itself:

“Our proposition was to give certain parts of the project to the different partners, and that these partners would be accountable to the project management.” (Interview with ProRail manager, January 2004)

Rijkswaterstaat and ProRail could not agree on how the activities should be organized, and ProRail was left with little or no authority in the project organization:

“We were lonely wolves in the wilderness. There was only one person with rail knowledge, and that was me.” (Interview with former ProRail manager, November 2003)

Conflicts over project control had arisen earlier between ProRail and Rijkswaterstaat, which is why detailed protocols for responsibilities, roles, and cooperation were designed for joint projects. In the HST megaproject, Rijkswaterstaat signed a cooperation agreement with ProRail, as expertise on constructing such a complex megaproject was needed:

“Given the size of the project, the complexity and the challenges for the organization of construction work and innovative technologies, it is necessary to use all the available knowledge.” (Internal document; cooperation agreement, 2000).
This painful exclusion of ProRail from the construction phase of the HST project was risky for the Ministry of I&E as ProRail would, after completion, be responsible for maintenance of the HST. There was a risk that ProRail would blame Rijkswaterstaat for bad rail construction. Indeed, in October 2015, the findings of a technical study, commissioned by ProRail, indicated that some of the concrete used in the HST project was of very poor quality. Respondents from ProRail criticized the Rijkswaterstaat approach of the HST project:

“We were not constructing a rail line, but dikes and tunnels. There was a dominant focus on the environment with many adaptations, and that is why [the rail] seems to be a roller coaster. There is only one good rail line and that is a straight line. (Interview with former ProRail manager, November 2003)

If no action is taken to improve or replace the concrete, this will result in the technical life span of the project being reduced from 100 years to only between 20 and 40 years (Gompel, 2015).

**HST as a Lynchpin of the Rail Transport Business**

The third exegetical meaning is the HST as an opportunity for strategic positioning. Dutch Railways interpreted the HST to be a rail line that is a lynchpin of the rail transport business. Dutch Railways wanted to become an important player in the European transportation sector and the connection to the European network of high-speed trains was something it had to have at all costs.

Dutch Railways used the symbolic representation in its struggle against the liberalization of the Dutch rail network. It presented the HST as the most important rail line in its rail network, and won the tender process for the line concession on the basis of an unrealistic business case. Consequently, Dutch Railways nearly went bankrupt at three different points of time: 2003, 2008, and 2010 (The Parliamentary Commission, 2015, p. 4). Each time, the Dutch government went back to the contract and renegotiated a much lower compensation for the HST transport concession, sometimes forgetting to explicitly inform the Dutch parliament (Duursma & Verlaan, 2015). Still, in 2007, Dutch Railways forecasted that it would be transporting 22 million passengers in 2010, around 16 million of whom would be national and 6 million international (AD newspaper, November 2007). Even in 2009, Dutch Railways was still optimistic about completing the high-speed train connection:

“It is spring 2029. I’m with my grandson on the Eurostar that is transporting us non-stop from Amsterdam to London. That is possible nowadays. Finally, he experiences what it is like to travel at a speed of 300 km/h on the HST. (Director of the HST program in HSL Highlights, no. 18, 2009)

By using the symbol of HST as a lynchpin of the rail transport business, Dutch Railways was able to continue developing the new high-speed train. Because it had an unprofitable business model, Dutch Railways tendered for a low-cost, high-speed train in a process in which the Italian firm AnsaldoBreda was the only one left to make a final bid (Duursma & Verlaan, 2015). It took AnsaldoBreda a long time to design the train, and after five years of delay, the first high-speed trains, named Fyra, were delivered. The word Fyra is the number four in Swedish and signifies the connection of the four HST cities: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Antwerp, and Brussels (Dutch-Auditing-Institute, 2014). Furthermore, the term Fyra has echoes of the Dutch word fier, which signifies self-confidence and pride. Unfortunately, the trains had many technical defects and proved to be unsuitable for the Dutch winter weather, which resulted in daily headlines in the Dutch media criticizing the Fyra. After a fierce struggle between AnsaldoBreda and Dutch Railways, the trains were sent back and the rest of the order was canceled, which meant there were then no high-speed trains. The line is now used only for regular trains with speeds up to 140 kilometers per hour and the French high-speed train. The Parliamentary Commission investigating the failure of the Fyra stated that it had been a disaster for Dutch train travelers (Parliamentary Commission, 2015).

Over time, the symbol of the HST as a lynchpin changed into the HST as a failing megaproject. This has to do directly with cost overruns and disappointing incomes. The income for the Dutch government declined as the expected revenues from Dutch Railways was first calculated to be €2 billion over a period of 15 years, but was lowered to €1.8 billion for a period of 18 years, and this dropped, after negotiations in 2011, to €1.1 billion (Duursma & Verlaan, 2015). Furthermore, Dutch Railways, in which the state is sole shareholder, had lost €772 million on the Fyra debacle by June 2015 (Parliamentary Commission, 2015). Normally, the Dutch government receives 35% of Dutch Railways’ profit each year in the form of a dividend. Since 2013, no dividend has been paid. Finally, the three parliamentary enquirers and the new problems with the rail construction brought and will continue to bring extra costs.

The failure to deliver a functioning high-speed train service can be measured in terms of time delays (five years) and budget overrun. The costs of the HST increased from €3.4 billion in 1995 to €7.3 billion in 2013 (Dutch-Auditing-Institute, 2014). The projected cost of maintaining and keeping the line in use has risen from an initial figure of €3.1 billion to €3.6 billion over the period from 2009 to 2031 (Dutch-Auditing-Institute, 2014). The failure also triggered frustration among rail passengers, and caused civil unrest over the failure of megaprojects. The Parliamentary Commission (2015) concluded that the expectations created by the HST megaproject in Dutch society were too high:

“The initial expected transport on the HST line has not been reached, because other interests have repeatedly prevailed over
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Dominant Exegetical Meaning</th>
<th>Organizations</th>
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<tr>
<td>1973–1998</td>
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<td>1999–2003</td>
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<td>Instrument to change the rail sector</td>
<td>Ministry</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003–2008</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Opportunity for strategic positioning</td>
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<td>2008–2013</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Opportunity for strategic positioning</td>
<td>Dutch Railways, ProRail</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013–2015</td>
<td>Failed megaproject</td>
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Table 3: Shifting exegetical meaning of the HST megaproject over time.

the implementation of transport for train travelers. For example, the Government insisted upon the financial return, and Dutch Railways were focused upon retaining their strategic position over the Dutch rail system. Therefore, not only have the interests of the train travelers been damaged, but also the financial investment in the HST, made by taxpayers, remains underutilized.

Besides the three described exegetical meanings, the HST as a failed project has become a dominant symbol in the Netherlands. Since December 2016, an intercity train (not a high-speed train) with a speed of 160 kilometers per hour (instead of 300 kilometers per hour) has been running 16 times daily to Brussels, and the promised travel time of 3 hours, 16 minutes has not been met. Furthermore, the promised direct connection to London has never been realized. Finally, the network remains sensitive for disruptions because of its complexity and software problems in the safety systems (NRC Handelsblad, 20 December 2016: E7). Perhaps if flying became impossible for some reason, the HST might turn out to be a good investment after all. Some people have still not given up hope that the financial investment made in the HST is only being temporarily underutilized (Parliamentary Commission, 2015).

In sum, we have seen that the exegetical meanings of the HST megaproject were not fixed and stable; they became obsolete, meaningless, or empty or were even completely replaced by other, more negative meanings. Using the concept of temporal bracketing (Langley, 1999), Table 3 shows how this process took place over time. The recent change in the dominant exegetical meaning of the HST as failure of railway liberalization had political consequences with enquiries and the Dutch government announced in 2016 the merger of Dutch Railways and ProRail to improve rail network operations.

Discussion

This article focused on the exegetical meanings of the HST megaproject by four public organizations and how these meanings have shaped the megaproject’s process. The findings demonstrate that a megaproject—in this case, the HST—has the capacity to express a political ambition. The HST initially symbolized European (political) integration and economic growth. These findings are in line with earlier studies of megaprojects—for example, the Øresund Bridge (Löfgren, 2015), the Panama Canal (Smits & Van Marrewijk, 2012), and the Transatlantic Highway (Harvey & Knox, 2015), all of which started as symbols of economic growth and national and regional integration. This gives us ground to observe the potential capacity of infrastructure megaprojects to fulfill political dreams (Harvey & Knox, 2015).

The findings demonstrate that the HST encapsulated three different exegetical meanings. The complex and profound representation of the HST provided managers of the four involved public organizations with opportunities to use these meanings for strategic purposes. The exegetical meanings became strategic instruments for the legitimation of positions and as an arena for power struggle, so typical in megaprojects (Clegg & Kreiner, 2013). The strategic use of symbols in organizations has been noted in earlier organizational studies (Gagliardi, 1990), but hasn’t been mentioned in project management studies, with only a few exceptions (Löfgren, 2015; Van den Ende & Van Marrewijk, 2014). The Ministry of I&E and Rijkswaterstaat used the symbol as an intervention in the railway and construction sectors, whereas Dutch Railways and ProRail used the symbol to try to strengthen their positions. In this way, the three exegetical meanings influenced the megaproject’s process, causing, together with other factors, time delays, cost overruns, power struggles, and the failure to run high-speed trains. This is in line with Harvey and Knox (2015), who emphasized that the construction of railways, bridges, and tunnels is intrinsically political.

In turn, the three exegetical meanings were influenced by the inherently political megaproject process and by changes in the context. The HST as radical intervention in the rail sector changed into “failed liberalization” as a result of power struggles between the Ministry and the Dutch Railways. Moreover, the positional meaning of the HST, the relation to other European integration projects on market liberalization, rail deregulation, and new public management (Gruening, 2001) changed. In 10 years’ time, the HST as a synthesizing or iconic symbol of political integration and economic growth turned into an iconic symbol of incapability, unrealistic ambitions, cost overrun, time delay, and civil resistance. These findings are in contrast to general observations that organizational symbols are fixed in perceptible forms (Geertz, 1973) and have considerable staying power (Alvesson & Berg, 1992). This case revealed that
the encapsulation of meaning to symbols is subject to change over time, which makes megaprojects so complex to manage successfully.

The failure to realize the high-speed train service seriously undermined the authority of the Dutch government in terms of its capacity to make decisions and realize large infrastructure megaprojects. Avoiding the pitfall of cultural determination (Firth, 1973), it can be concluded that infrastructure megaprojects symbolize both a dream of economic development and social transformation, and a disappointment of failed ambitions, incompetence, and waste of public funding. At first sight, these are opposite ends of a spectrum, but at the same time they are interrelated: One can only be disappointed if one’s expectations are too high, and, as we know, high hopes and expectations are deeply ingrained in political decision-making processes (Flyvbjerg et al., 2003), so it is not surprising that megaprojects have also become symbols of failure.

Conclusions
This article explored the symbolic representations of the HST megaproject, which initially started as a symbol of optimistic European integration, where people could travel freely in high-speed trains without border controls. Three exegetical meanings have been found of the HST as (1) radical innovative contract, (2) intervention in the Dutch rail sector, and (3) a lynchpin of the rail sector, and (3) a lynchpin of the rail transport business. The strategic use of these meanings by the four public organizations studied caused power struggles, serious delays, and cost overruns in the megaproject’s process while, in return, these meanings were changed by the intrinsically political project process.

This article contributes to the megaproject literature with an anthropological perspective on symbolism, based upon the work of Firth (1973) and Turner (1967, 1973). Such a perspective has been well developed in organizational studies (Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Gagliardi, 1990; Nauta, 1991; Rafaeli & Pratt, 2006) and opens opportunities for studying symbols in megaprojects. The organizational understanding of symbols in terms of their capacity to encapsulate different meanings for different groups allows project management scholars to conduct an historical analysis of megaprojects, which is frequently asked for in project management studies (e.g., Söderlund & Lenfle, 2013).

Furthermore, the article contributes the concept of exegetical meaning to the growing debate on the problematic evolvement of megaprojects (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Flyvbjerg, 2014; Söderlund, 2004; Van Marrewijk, 2015). Exegetical meanings have proven to encapsulate the complexity of megaprojects. The multivocality of symbolic interpretations and their strategic use by stakeholders hindered the HST megaproject’s successful execution. The strategic use of symbols hasn’t been discussed yet in megaproject studies, with the exception of a few studies (Löfgren, 2015; Van den Ende & Van Marrewijk, 2014).

The limitations of this study stem from the reinterpretation of the data sets, which have been developed over nearly 15 years with slightly different research questions. This issue has been addressed by going back and forth between the original data sets and the analysis (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). Furthermore, limitations are found in the focus of this study on the public organizations involved in the start, design, construction, and maintenance of the HST. Hence, exploring the symbolic representation by potential users of the high-speed train as well as the construction and engineering firms involved was beyond the scope of this study. This extension, however, would have unfolded a more complete picture of the different symbols attached to the HST project.

It is advisable for project managers to have a comprehensive understanding of how all the various stakeholders may interpret megaprojects in symbolic terms, as this may help them prevent fragmentation of project goals or disputes over which decisions (and directions) should be taken to reach the objectives of the project (Clegg & Kreiner, 2013). The work practices of stakeholder employees are rooted in different organizations and they convey distinct understanding and interpretations of a megaproject; this can cause issues in collaboration and role-taking during the execution of the project. Because the connection between a megaproject as a symbol and its interpretation is multivocal and subject to change, regular thematic workshops and rituals are needed to align the various stakeholders in a megaproject. This will help ensure that the right issues and topics are addressed during the execution of a megaproject.

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