

poetry (Milne), novels (Robinson, Blaman), films (*Sophie's Choice*), and philosophers (Buber) as sources for building up a description of the meaning of such an experience. (Nowadays he could also call upon the rich fields of cultural studies and sociology of everyday life: see Lefebvre 2008; Jacobsen 2009.) In his investigation of the theme, van Manen also inverts it and describes the lived experience of parenting as one of “a long goodbye.” This theme captures the experience of the increasing distance between parent and child, the distance that inevitably grows as the child becomes more independent. This exact theme will be one of the lead sources of novelty in case 13, in the next chapter.

A rich ground for the deepening of themes can also be found in history. American historian Theodore Zeldin, for one, has written a history of ideas about many concepts that could arise as themes within frame creation projects (Zeldin 1994). For instance, in reflecting on an interview with a cleaning lady, he compares her feeling of dependence on her employers to the practice, in seventeenth-century Russia, of poor people selling themselves as slaves. The advantage they gained was that their new master was obliged to look after and feed them—in abdicating many rights, they freed themselves from responsibilities that were too hard to bear. His thoughtful exploration of the notion of (in)dependence creates an entirely new perspective on the interview and on the choices we all make in our lives. This example highlights an important feature of themes: themes always hang in the balance, they are neither good nor bad; and in the context of the problem situation, they do not belong to the problem or the solution. They just *are*. And they are universal, in the sense that they belong to the existential condition of all human beings. They are deeply personal on a concrete, human level and can be revealed through art—the theme of individual responsibility for life choices is exquisitely reflected in classic novels, such as the nineteenth-century *Oblomov* by Ivan Goncharov, as well as in contemporary novels, such as *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis. Themes are truly timeless.

The systematic, deliberate, and multistep approach to theme analysis that the philosophers display is in stark contrast to design practice: although theme analysis is a crucial part of expert design practice, it is a largely informal process within design. Designers talk about “getting close” to the situation, they talk about the importance of “richness” in the problem area, and they stress the significance of getting “firsthand experience” of the problem situation to build “empathy.” And yet they are quite vague about why they go to such lengths. Once they get into the problem situation, they seem to have no deliberate or