

## CHAPTER: MYTHS

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Prior to writing this piece, I was asked to conform to two ‘obstructions’: “1. Do not mention ‘the artist Barbara Visser’ – neither name nor profession. 2. Do not refer to actual works in the past tense – to a past context, space, situation or time.” Do I already violate the obstructions by quoting them? Furthermore, I was asked to write about ‘myths’ in relation to these works. I like a game, so I will try to play to its rules. In my case, these rules form a strong, interesting tension to the very subject matter, ‘myths’. You can read the two obstructions as a means to take apart the myth of a linear, causal relation between someone’s biography, intention, and publicised work. In that sense, the obstructions would be anti-mythological. But ironically, you can also see them as the ultimate mythologization: the person turns into a phantom – the ‘person who cannot be named’ usually is God – while his or her works become living beings, or rather: mythical beings.

Before we can continue exploring this schism between the mythical and the anti-mythical, we need to gain some clarity of the notoriously unclear notion it is based on. To start with, a myth is a cultural expression, or as Roland Barthes has described it, a type of speech. It can have almost any content, but the form or scheme of which establishes a particular set of connections between the appearance or identity of humans (including cultural artefacts and technology) and that which seemingly transcends them (the cosmos, nature, deities, ‘higher’ spheres and causes etc.). A myth is formed historically – as Claude Lévi-Strauss has stressed – by the interplay of all the ways in which it is narrated and passed on. It is a means to gratify the urge to gain access to some kind of truth or knowledge beyond ordinary, everyday life knowledge.

The critical impetus of exposing myths can be compared to Hans Christian Andersen’s story of the Emperor’s new clothes in which a naïve child exposes what all others were to cowardly to say or even think, the actual fact that the Emperor is naked. But what complicates the matter is that if one was to continue this 19<sup>th</sup> century story into the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup>, the point would be that the nudity fashion would catch on; that it would become popular to actively expose oneself as purified of myths and that the story would have to be reversed: the naïve – or would it already be cynical? – child would have to exclaim that the Emperor, counter to what is claimed, still wears something. This ‘striptease’ of the mythological, as Odo Marquard has aptly called it, inevitably turns into strip-poker: who exposes whom first of still ‘wearing’ myths? Who keeps aces up their mythology-sleeves?

Not to get lost here: this doesn’t mean to denounce enlightenment, as it often has been done, as the greatest myth. Rather, it means not only to expose how the *gesture* of demystifying can become mechanical, or manipulative, and thus fall back onto being mythical itself, but how – on the next meta-level – even this exposure of the exposure cannot escape the illusory: namely, the illusion that it was possible to cleanse the world of myths. The point is that enlightenment possibly works most effective when it’s less about denouncing than ‘organising’ myths, making it possible to experience them in competition and interference with one another, to read them differently or ‘subversively’ rather than allowing any of them to become ideologically dominating. In effect this

means to favour, as Odo Marquard has argued, the poly-mythical over the mono-mythical. Sounds like a hell of a mishmash relativism but the point is really to understand this concept of enlightenment as an active social and discursive 'navigation' amongst competing myths, ensuring that they remain in competition instead of a passive, indifferent tolerance towards all of them.

In art, hence, the schism between the mythical and the anti-mythical turns out to be really the schism between the mono-mythical and the poly-mythical. It is this schism where interesting art is situated; it sits on the fence between striving for and dismantling mythical hegemony. It is egotistic and self-negating, it clothes and strips, it interferes and retreats, praises and mocks, entertains and disturbs, fucks up and beautifies, often all in one go, while resisting the urge to identify itself merely with the role of either prosecutor or defender. Thus the history of art, to some extent parallel to the history of the Enlightenment, can be told as a struggle between the mono-mythical and the poly-mythical. What in the 20<sup>th</sup> century follows the old myth of the genius artist in touch with higher powers (whether through talent or madness) is that of the artist as hard worker, even manager. Lévi-Strauss compares the mythological way of thinking with the improvisational methods of the bricoleur, juxtaposing it with the supposedly systematic methodology of the engineer; Jacques Derrida in turn 'exposes' the engineer as a myth created by the bricoleur. The relation between bricoleur and engineer seems analogous to that between the classical modern Cubist or Surrealist on the one hand and Constructivists on the other, or, on the next meta-level, between Modernism in general and the first generation Conceptualists – with the ironic turn that the Conceptualists where 'engineers' of exposing myths, turning the 'strip-poker' of exposing the myths of Modernism into a systematic method, often neglecting their own debt to it. However, 'Romantic' Conceptualists such as Bas Jan Ader or 'Tropical' Conceptualists such as Lygia Clark were countering the all too easy denunciation of the image as kitsch, the act as faux-authentic, and the object as fetish, with the very means of conceptualism – in other words, favoured the poly-mythical over the supposedly anti-mythical strip-poker which is ultimately mono-mythical. Warhol would be another example of an artist whose attitude towards the bricoleur vs. engineer schism took the form of a kind of Russian nesting doll of mythical personas and images (Warhol as both hardworking and bored'n'lazy, genius and dilettante, sociable and semi-autistic, etc.).

Which finally brings us to... (oops I almost mentioned her name) and her work. It can be read as an intricate set of experiments exploring three distinct ways of 'navigating' myths, and a possible notion of truth that we inevitably need in order to do so. These three different ways, I would argue, correspond to the three different types of empirical knowledge as defined by Donald Davidson: knowledge about what's in my mind, in the world, and in other people's minds. The point for Davidson is that you can't have one without the other, that these three types of knowledge rely on each other to gain some kind of stability like the three legs of a tripod: that for example you only can know what you think by comparison, via communication, with what other people think, against the background of what's in the world – and that truth, as inaccessible as it may be, is the only 'intersubjective standard' that ultimately allows that comparison (a statement you

have to take with the pinch of salt that Davidson makes quite clear that it's easier to say what truth is not than what it is).

The 'knowledge about what's in my mind' corresponds to the kind of work that predominantly explores what could be called 'performing the myth'. *Philippa* consists of shots of an aristocratic Amsterdam 17<sup>th</sup> century house – called the van Loon house after the family who owned it from the 19<sup>th</sup> century on – with heavily decorated period rooms through which a woman wearing three kinds of lady-style attires (elaborate hairdos, high heels, expensive looking dresses) moves 'hysterically' – signalled by the slapstick, silent-movie type accelerated speed – using secret doors or sliding down the richly ornamented copper banister. She basically is three women at once – decadent, odd, idiosyncratic – who look for each other, or hide from each other, yet miss each other all the time, while a female voice keeps calling out for *Phiilliipa!*? Phillipa in that sense is a phantom, a ghost. According to press release descriptions of the piece, the protagonist is supposedly the 'real' Philippa van Loon, last descendent of the van Loon family who spent her childhood in the house. But we can't be sure that is actually the case, since according to the website of Museum van Loon, Thora Egidius, wife of Willem van Loon, until her death in 1945, was the last resident of the house. And we don't need to be sure. Because ultimately it feels like we are watching glimpses into the mind of a single woman who is stuck with different options of making sense for herself in terms of playing her social role. The labyrinthic house becomes both an allegory for the psyche – for its trap doors, hidden rooms, staircases, its phantoms and ghosts – and for the mythical identification of women with the domestic sphere that was accelerated, if not 'invented' by the new kind of capitalism so characteristic for the Dutch Golden Age. A monitor displaying the work is located in the rustic kitchen – the kitchen obviously being the most blatant site of that mythical identification – while ironically the protagonist roams the house anywhere but the kitchen. The mono-myth of the woman-as-domestic, in the mind of *Philippa*, turns into a poly-mythical farce.

'Knowledge about what's in the world' seems to correspond to the kind of works that at first look seem to simply 'represent' some ordinary aspect of the world. Starting with the title, the ten-minute video loop *Decorealism* creates the impression of focus on what could at first seem arbitrary aspects of everyday life – the decorum that supposedly is just a derivative side-aspect of the 'real thing'. We see a static total shot of a modernist cinema building, and entering the frame from the front, an old couple in grey Sunday best are slowly walking backwards towards it, as if the film was running backwards – yet in the background we see other passers-by (two teenagers entering the cinema, a person with a dog leaving it) going forwards. We realize the couple must have been instructed to move that way. What could be the establishing shot for a movie scene – extras instructed to provide realist background for what the actors are doing in the forefront – is twisted and made the 'actual thing' by a single inversion. Later on in the piece, we return to the cinema, shot from the same angle, and this time it's two women with prams who first stand still before a silly bell sound rings and they move slowly away, leaving the site, which ends the scene – the impression of extras being instructed is being emphasised. Another short scene of an equestrian on a large horse in front of a temple-like building is hilariously deadpan: the horse, like a donkey, obstinately resists desperate attempts to make it move (in a later return to the scene, another person tries to help, but to no avail). Often the short scenes – which are divided by unhurried fades to black – have the same

generic birds-in-the-park-soundtrack, otherwise they are almost no voices except for cryptic utterances that seem to stand for film set instructions. ‘Knowledge about the world’ comes in the disguise of the way it is manifested as media reality (film, TV etc.), as the ‘decorealist’ milieu for what goes on in our minds, or other people’s minds. The extras – turned main protagonists by the way their movements are stopped, inverted, instructed etc. – are enacting the struggle to make sense of the world and our place in it along the way.

‘Knowledge about what’s in other people’s minds’ finally corresponds to the works that predominantly deal with the impersonation of a character based on a real person. In regard to *Philippa*, we are sure what we see is an impersonation of three characters by the same person, while we have doubts about the claim that the person Philippa van Loon actually exists. It’s the other way round with pieces like *Interview with Duiker*, *Gimines*, *Lecture with Actress*, and *Lecture on Lecture with Actress*: here we may have doubts about who is actually providing the impersonation, yet we can be pretty sure that this impersonation does refer to an existing person (an architect, an actress, an artist). Otherwise, these pieces would be kind of pointless: because they would render irrelevant the question of what’s in the other person’s mind (the architect’s, the actress’s, the artist’s); in other words, this relative stability of reference to an authentic person highlights that despite of that stability we still have no direct access to what’s in that person’s mind. *Interview with Duiker* consists of what seems like a short, satellite-TV interview with the famous Dutch architect Johannes Duiker who designed the classical Modernist cinema in which the piece is shown: images, with typical technical transmission errors, of a Methuselah giving grumpy answers to a journalist’s questions; yet a little bit of research would easily reveal that Duiker already died in 1935. The point of the piece however is not just the funny fake, but the way it projects the question of how ‘original’ generations of producers in early Modernity, if they were still alive, might actually think about the way their work is perceived in the post-1960s world of late or Post-Modernity; in other words, it provokes you to imagine what would be ‘in other people’s minds’ if they hadn’t died.

*Gimines* is based on a participation in a Lithuanian sitcom of the same name (meaning ‘relatives’), in which appears the character of a Dutch artist named Barbora [sic] Visser (introduced as the wife of a Lithuanian surgeon living in the US). The point is of course that, while we can assume that for the predominant part of the TV audience, the question whether this character is based on a real character or not has no relevance whatsoever. However, presented in the art context, this ‘irrelevance’ bounces back ironically onto the image of the authentic artist, emphasising and highlighting the way her ‘performance’ as a person does not provide privileged access to what’s in her mind, lest her work. In *Lecture with Actress*, this mix-up comedy aspect is transferred into the plot itself: at a symposium on ‘reality as fiction’, the artist is played by an actress that looks and behaves quite differently from her. Because of the fact that she receives her lines through an earpiece and repeats them hesitantly and mechanically, the situation becomes slightly surreal, even more so as a video presentation of *Gimines* reveals the fact that the person who plays the character *Barbora Visser* and is supposedly the same person now present in the room looks completely different. We don’t know what’s in the actress’s mind, but we do get an idea of what is *not* in her mind: most of the things she mechanically says. Yet a large part of the audience seems continuing to accept that the

person they are listening to is the one they think it is. *Lecture on Lecture with Actress* turns the screw once more: it starts with a woman standing in front of a screen, introducing herself as “Barbara Visser”, telling the story of *Lecture with Actress*. It becomes increasingly impossible to untangle the conundrum, because you would have had to be familiar with these earlier works beforehand to distinguish who’s playing whom. In other words, our knowledge of ‘what’s in other people’s minds’ relies heavily on our knowledge of what’s in the world and of knowing what’s in our own mind.

*Actor and Liar* is even more so than *Lecture on Lecture with Actress* – a ‘meta-work’ in terms of providing, in its ‘explicit’ content, a discussion of the interrelation between Davidson’s triad of knowledge. Like *Philippa*, it delves into how we relate to what’s in our mind, but like *Decorealism* it does so predominantly by looking at manifestations in the world, while – like *Lecture with Actress* – pointing to the question of how a person’s behaviour relates to what’s supposedly in that person’s mind. *Actor and Liar* is a double back-to-back DVD projection on a suspended screen. It begins with a certain Mr. van Watermeulen on the one side, reading from a letter he wrote to a certain Mr. Neuman, who has been sent to prison for fraud – he sold pieces of the moon. In his letter Watermeulen argues that Neuman had obviously sold an idea, not an object – apparent due to the fact that someone buying a plot of land on the moon would evidently have no access to it – and thus did something which is a tradition of Conceptual Art: to hand over a certificate to confirm that an idea has been sold. Neuman – seen on the other side of the screen sitting in a prison cell, and played by the very same actor – listens attentively, before responding by saying, with slight sarcasm, that Mr. van Watermeulen should have been his lawyer, saving him from his prison sentence with that very argument. Watermeulen in turn says: “In the book *The Psychology of the Liar*, I read that the intention of lying is to convince another person of something the liar believes is false.” The interesting point here is that there is a distinction made between lying and believing something to be true or false: which includes the possibility that someone is stating something as supposedly true that he believes to be false, yet then actually turns out to be true. This points to the classic philosophical paradox of Epimenides of Knossos stating that “all Cretans are liars”. Epimenides, being a Cretan himself, either believes what he says is true – that all Cretans, including him when making that statement, lie – then he is precisely not lying when making that statement; or he believes what he says is false, then he’s lying but then the Cretans, including him, wouldn’t be liars. Both possibilities remain paradoxical, and the only ‘solution’ is to simply state that a sentence like this can be ‘neither true nor false’. In the case of the ‘liar’ selling pieces of the moon, we have a similar ambiguity. One could argue that he simply convinces others of what he believes is true; that it is possible to ‘own’, in some imaginative way, a piece of the moon through the transaction he offers. However, it’s not possible to make that argument without knowing how precisely the transaction took place and was argued: for example, if the context makes clear that a buyer was buying under assumptions and suggestions of an ‘actual’ ownership of juridical viability, which is clearly not the case, then the ‘liar’ is knowingly allowing that assumption to be an implication of that transaction, and then he

is in fact a liar (Davidson: 'Our speech acts reveal our underlying attitudes towards our sentences; *but often indirectly.*')<sup>1</sup>

It is this question of how much we know about the concrete context of a 'transaction' – or more generally of some form of communication – that is the defining line in terms of dealing with notions of the mythical, and the true. Admitting that we can never know *everything* about that concrete context (the precise relation between what in a given case was/is in my mind, in the world, and other people's minds) is to admit that the potential of 'unravelling myths' in terms of something being true or false exists, but we inevitably have to live with and 'negotiate' myths as we can never fully master that potential (unless we assume to be God, which would be the ultimate myth). As Donaldson puts it: "Realism, with its insistence on radically non-epistemic correspondence [i.e. the philosophical belief that truth is 'objective', completely independent of what is in people's minds], asks more of truth than we can understand; antirealism, with its limitation of truth to what can be ascertained [i.e. the philosophical belief that truth is 'subjective', completely dependent on what's in people's minds], unnecessarily deprives truth of its role as an intersubjective standard. If we want to speak the truth about truth, we should say no more than need be."<sup>2</sup>

Truth as an 'intersubjective standard' – rather than being either what radically cannot be ascertained or only that which can be ascertained – is a kind of navigational tool in-between, between the known and the unknown, between what I know and what I don't know about what's in my mind, in the world, and in other people's minds. That implies it's a 'tool' that is subject to revision and recalibration. Davidson's proposal to see truth as neither completely detached from communication and experienced reality nor only residing within the limits of what we can access via communication and experienced reality can also be read in regard to the mythical versus the anti-mythical: while we 'navigate' competing myths, we may assume that we test their truth-value, but must be aware that we can never have full access to all necessary data to ultimately determine it. 'We should say no more than need be' expresses that remaining uncertainty.

It's a beautiful irony that on the cover of Donald Davidson's book *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, the designer used a cropped portrait of the bald-headed philosopher wearing a turtleneck and put a kind of glowing aura around it, making him look like the leader of a Sci-Fi sect. This tension between the pragmatic tone of Davidson and the way he's presented as a freaky guru corresponds nicely to the works discussed in this essay: because they sit on the fence between embracing the humbleness of a statement like 'if we want to speak the truth about truth, we should say no more than need be' and pointing out at the same time that it is actually not that humble: that stressing the importance of not saying too much can easily make you sound like an oracle, or phantom. This should also make clear that these works are not an expression of a kind of trickster scepticism that simply asserts that we have no access to truth because everything could be a lie. Rather, by way of suggesting tensions between intentions and utterances, these

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Davidson, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, Oxford University Press 2001, p. 190 (my italics)

<sup>2</sup> Donald Davidson, *op. cit.*, p. 191

works navigate the line between what can be 'revealed' and what cannot, between the known and the unknown. The 'two obstructions' encourage the contributors of this volume to do this as well, making them a part of that endeavour.