Our Enlightened Barbarian Modernity and the Project of a Critical Theory of Culture

Josef Früchtl

The twentieth century has made us familiar with the idea that Enlightenment, Modernity and barbarism as a unity is by no means a contradiction in terms. In his lecture Früchtl wants to revisit this topic in an attempt to answer the following questions: (1) Which principle has facilitated this simultaneously repellent and attractive idea? (2) What fundamentally conceivable relationships exist between Enlightenment and barbarism? And, directly connected to this point which relationship should we be more aware of today than ever before? (3) What role is played by culture, particularly popular culture, and philosophy in this constellation?

Josef Früchtl (1954) is professor of Philosophy of Art and Culture at the University of Amsterdam and head of the Department of Philosophy at the same university.
Our Enlightened Barbarian Modernity and the Project of a Critical Theory of Culture
Our Enlightened Barbarian Modernity and the Project of a Critical Theory of Culture

*Inaugural Lecture*

delivered on the appointment to the Chair of Philosophy of Art and Culture at the University of Amsterdam on Friday 22 February 2008

by

Josef Früchtl
When the prospect of taking over the Chair of Philosophy of Art and Culture at the University of Amsterdam became reality, I reacted by doing what I always tend to do in a new situation (if there is enough time): read books. This time about Amsterdam and the Netherlands. I already had a picture of the country in my mind, of course, a montage of a variety of images, stories and snippets of information. For example, only one place came anywhere close to ‘swinging London’ for my generation in the early 1970s, and that was Amsterdam. And then the World Cup in Germany in 1974 and that phenomenal football team. But embarking on a new business venture means needing to know more.

It was the summer of 2004 and Geert Mak’s *De eeuw van mijn vader* had just been translated into German, so I decided to start by reading that, as well as *Een kleine geschiedenis van Amsterdam*. The latter contains some great little expressions, such as Amsterdam being ‘a little nation inside a larger one’. The same had been said of New York. Another phrase I was already familiar with was the happy exclamation: ‘De hemel zij geprezen dat ik in Amsterdam woon, en niet in Nederland’, from Harry Mulisch’s novel *De ontdekking van de hemel*. But *De eeuw van mijn vader* appealed to me even more. From the outset I was drawn to the method employed so well in this book, namely to illustrate a general point by exemplifying it in an individual context, to illustrate the history of an entire century by relating the story of a single family. Didacticians love this method, and so do dialecticians and artists. Geert Mak presents an interior view of the world history unfolded in *Age of Extremes* by Eric Hobsbawm a few years previously: a Dutch view, concentrated within family life. The 20th century begins as an ‘age of catastrophe’, then following the Second World War rises to become more of a ‘golden age’, before ending in a ‘landslide’, in permanent crisis. In 2005, the year I arrived in Amsterdam,
another book was published which dared to take on the entire 20th century, this
time a philosophical one: *Le siècle* by Alain Badiou. In this book, history is viewed
classically according to a principle which Badiou, like so many of his French col-
leagues before him, borrowed from the speculative psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan.
The name of this principle is ‘La passion du réel’. In this context, ‘real’ refers to
that which the ‘symbolic’, the order of symbols, is to identify, but which is sys-
tematically missed. It is akin to ‘real reality’ or, in metaphysical and theological
terms, the ‘absolute’. The ‘passion of the real’ thus means a passion and a suffer-
ing for the absolute, in other words for the categorical and tendentially violent
volition to realise that which is true in the here and now. According to Badiou,
this was the 20th century source of drive.

*De eeuw van mijn vader*, *The Age of Extremes* and *Le siècle* are three very different
books, yet all address the same topic: the barbarism of the 20th century, that ‘most
murderous’ of all the centuries we are familiar with today.1 What makes this
epochal evaluation so extraordinary is that the age it refers to is also one which,
following on from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, has been known
since the 19th century as ‘Modernity’. This means getting used to the demure idea
that Enlightenment, Modernity and barbarism as a unity is by no means a contra-
diction in terms. Quite the contrary, in fact: they seem to fit together very well.

I would now like to revisit this topic in an attempt to answer the following
questions: (1) Which principle has facilitated this simultaneously repellent and
attractive idea? Or, in terminology more typical of philosophy: what is the condi-
tion of the possibility of this idea? (2) Following this new-found principle, what
fundamentally conceivable relationships exist between Enlightenment and barbar-
ism? And, directly connected to this point: which relationship should we be more
aware of today than ever before? (3) What role is played by culture, and particu-
larly popular culture, in this constellation?

My point of departure in answering the first question will be Max Horkheimer
and Theodor W. Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. These authors envisage a dia-
lectic concept of barbarism uniting opposing entities which is only understandable
if taken in reference to the philosophical origins of Modernity, to that rapid devel-
opment of thought at the end of the 18th century consolidated in German Idealism
and in Romanticism. My chief witness to this will be Friedrich Schiller. My answer
to the second question will be brief as it draws its conclusions soberly and logically
from the first. If Modernity is characterised by a principle which is in itself contra-
OUR ENLIGHTENED BARBARIAN MODERNITY

dictory, then the relationship between Enlightenment and barbarism is characterised neither by a simple opposition, nor by a secret identity. Instead, it is agony, that endless battle between two elements of equal standing. Finally, in order to answer the third question I shall draw primarily upon popular and pop culture. As I shall endeavour to show, this type of culture provides in a successful guise a ‘new mythology’ which enables Modernity to work on its central problem, that of self-justification. In this task philosophy also has a part to play, however.

Prelude

_Aufklärung, enlightenment, les lumières, verlichting_ means bringing light into darkness, into the darkness of prejudice, superstition, authoritarian tradition, in fact the entire realm of unreasonable behaviour. The metaphor of light is used rationalistically, as well as politically. It has ceased to be the light of a divine or metaphysical epiphany and has become the light of reason, of argumentational powers principally available to all human beings, able to bring about progress and maybe even felicity. This is the self-comprehension of the Enlightenment in simple terms, which today we tend to regard as ideological and naïve.

Paintings from the Classicism period have provided us with some good examples of this naivety and ideology. And yet they, too, permit some interpretations which are not harmonious with the message they were intended to convey. One of these, _La Liberté ou la Mort_, was painted in 1794/95 by Jean-Baptiste Regnault following the bloodiest phase of the French Revolution. It shows three figures which allegorise the destiny of the Revolution. In the middle a hovering angel, arms extended, hands open, a flame above his head. Below him the Earth, Europe, France. To his right a woman, sitting with her legs crossed, _la République_, draped in the robes of Ancient times. Adorned with a coronet of stars, she too, like the angel, has her face turned towards the observer. In her left hand she reveals the symbol of equality, in her right a _bonnet rouge_. On a dark cloud to the left of the angel sits death, legs apart and in the guise popular since the Christian Middle Ages, namely as a skeleton dressed in black and holding a scythe.

This painting quite obviously draws its inspiration from European mythology, from the artistic narratives produced by Ancient Greece and Christianity. And this mythology is perpetuated in the name of Enlightenment, albeit with an uncertain
outcome since interpretations of pictures, at least aesthetic interpretations, cannot be decreed. Is the angel bearing the light of the Enlightenment? Is it actually an angel at all? Could this figure not also be Hermes, the divine messenger of Ancient Greek mythology? Would the flame then not symbolise transcendental, divine inspiration? Would that not in turn mean that substantiating reason is relying on something which it cannot substantiate? This interpretation manifolds if we associate the central figure of the painting with Icarus, someone who both literally and figuratively aimed too high. Is the painting a warning to the romantic idealists of the French Revolution wishing to spread the ideals of the Enlightenment across the whole world? This interpretation would also tally with the widespread arms of the light-bearer alluding not to an alternative – freedom or death – but to crucifixion, in other words the death of Christ. Freedom and death would then cease to be opposites, and the bonnet rouge would equate to a bleeding, guillotined head. The light-bearer – with the Latin name Lucifer – would then bring forth not only the light side of the Enlightenment, but also its dark side.

These associations are made in haste. No doubt art historians would have a great deal more to say about this painting. In our own epoch an extraordinary, I would say wonderful example of the interweaving of Modernity and barbarism, Enlightenment and myth, criticism and culture exists. I am referring to a film which entered the cinemas in 1968, a dramatic year in political terms as well, and immediately set new aesthetic standards:

The cinema is dark, the screen empty. The audience is made to wait. A classical overture to a performance: the audience sees nothing, but can hear something. Slightly dissonant, slowly slipping, telescoping, spherical sounds, deep orchestral notes, crescendoeing, becoming shriller and then slowly dying away. A little spooky. Music which could have stemmed from a modern recording studio. The tune changes the moment the trumpets start to play a theme which is now one of the most famous in music history. It is a clear, sombre announcement, the heralding of a majesty, the majesty which is the sun. With the first trumpet blast a picture appears on the screen, a close-up of a planet. Behind it a second, crescent-shaped planet slowly comes into view, after which – first small and then growing larger and larger – the sun emerges to the sound of the music, rising in cadences, becoming increasingly powerful, driven on by beating drums. As the music swells and the sun rises, the credits appear: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Presents – A Stanley Kubrick Pro-
duction – 2001: A Space Odyssey. With the title of the film, the music reaches its ‘radiant’ climax.

The use of the term ‘radiant’ is fully justified, with both the images and the literary source supporting the connotation; the sound of the music radiates as clearly as the brightness of the sun. In 1895/96 Richard Strauss wrote a symphony based on Friedrich Nietzsche’s Also sprach Zarathustra. The choice seems an obvious one considering that Nietzsche himself said that ‘maybe’ it could count as music. The book opens with a speech by Zarathustra to the rising sun as an allegory of bountiful happiness stemming from abundance. It was Plato who introduced the analogy of the sun and the good to Western thinking, and light has been metaphysically ennobled ever since. In this context Plato also described the destiny of the philosopher, who arduously ascends to view the light of truth, but who then, as a good citizen of the city-state, has to climb back down to the cave of everyday life, knowing that it is not the happiness of an individual or the advantages of a particular class which is important within the state, but the good of the whole. Down below in the cave, the people are ‘chained up’ in one direction (the wrong one), able to see only shadows of reality on the wall, prepared to kill anyone wishing to free them in the name of truth. Zarathustra, too, wants and needs to ‘descend’, to climb down to the masses and maybe even die in the process, for he is also convinced that happiness is nothing without other people to share it with. Happiness – even happiness – only makes sense within an intersubjective framework.

Nietzsche merges decline and ascension, death and new life in accordance with his metaphysical theory of eternal recurrence. Kubrick’s film and its closing scenes can be interpreted in the same way. But his interweavement of Modernity and barbarism, Enlightenment and myth, is abundantly clear. As the director himself concedes, 2001: A Space Odyssey is ‘a mythological documentary’. A paradigmatic scene links civilisation and barbarian prehistory in what is probably the most famous jump-cut in film history: the ape-man has learnt to use a bone as a weapon; this knowledge has given him power over his congeners. An early representative of the alpha-male, hollering and already almost upright in gait, he throws the pale bone into the air and as it rotates slowly through the sky it becomes, very surprisingly, a white spaceship in the blackness of space. Progress from the archaic weapon to space travel is shown in a cut.
Dialectic of Enlightenment

The fact that ‘no universal history leads from savages to humanity, but very well from the catapult to the atom bomb’ is, according to Adorno, accentuated by ‘Satanic laughter’.6 This one-sided progress pleases the Devil, the mythological incorporation of evil. But, generally speaking, philosophy does not have much time for such assertions. ‘Barbarism’ is not a philosophical concept. It is not included in the relevant dictionaries. And this is astonishing if we consider that a significant area of philosophy, namely that based on Hegel, Rousseau’s critique of culture and French moralism, expressively endeavoured ‘to grasp in thoughts’ its period.7 It is even true to say that, with the exception of Hannah Arendt’s famous work on the Banality of Evil, not one philosophical book of import has appeared on this topic in the English-speaking world.8 This is not merely astonishing, but quite reprehensible.

In the German-speaking world there is at least one book, namely Horkheimer and Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment. This book, published in 1947 with Querido in Amsterdam, was written in answer to a single, burdensome question, namely ‘why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism’.9 Horkheimer and Adorno had in mind the totalitarian state which asserted itself at the time of Fascism and in the Communism of the Soviets; the horror of the organised destruction of a political adversary who has been declared the enemy and, in the Fascist version, turned into a blank canvas for obscure racial hatred. Murder, committed millions of times over in the guise of ideology, then becomes normality. Horkheimer and Adorno’s answer is clear: this barbarism is not an ‘industrial accident’ during the course of Western history, but an immanent constituent, from the outset. This does not mean that Western history had inevitably to lead to a new period of barbarism; but it does not mean that this period was merely the result of a chain of unfortunate circumstances either. The barbaric culmination of civilisation can be found in its origins, namely as the element asserting itself over other, morally superior elements. Ultimately, culture itself is the barbarism which it professes to fight. The philosophy of history Horkheimer and Adorno are presenting stems from four major theories: Hegel’s dialectic, Marx’s critique of capitalism, Max Weber’s theory of rationality and Freud’s psychoanalysis. And underlying all of that we have Nietzsche, or in Horkheimer’s
At its core, critical theory, in the older sense of the term, is a fusion of these basic theoretical elements.

But now to the question of real interest to me here: in philosophical terms, what is the precondition for maintaining a dialectic, a relationship of tension between culture and barbarism? More precisely, following on from historically inclined Kant, as he was introduced by Foucault, I am interested in an ‘historical a priori’ expressed in an ‘episteme’, a basic form of thinking, a fundamental cognitive schema. Foucault himself described in his book *The Order of Things* a sequence from the episteme of similarity (the Renaissance) via that of representation (the Rationalism of the 17th and 18th centuries) to that of ‘the human being’ (Kant’s turning towards the philosophy of subjectivity) and predicted a posthumanist age at its conclusion. Going along with and going against Foucault, i.e. in a tried and tested manner, I would like to maintain that it is the episteme of subjectivity which makes the dialectic of culture and barbarism theory possible.

### Schiller and the paradigm of subjectivity

There is an excellent witness to the claim that the theory of an existing dialectic of culture and barbarism is thanks to the episteme or, in the words of Thomas Kuhn, the paradigm of subjectivity. To my knowledge he is the first to state unequivocally that culture and barbarism are not a pair of mutually exclusive opposites. And he does so at an unexpected time, namely towards the end of the 18th century, when the philosophical Enlightenment had already completed its work. ‘The age is enlightened, that means the knowledge has been found and made public’, Schiller writes in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* in 1795. But, so Schiller goes on to ask, ‘Why are we then still barbarians?’ The *Letters* therefore may be considered as ‘the founding document of a theory of modernity’. The honour of being called the first philosophical theorist of modernity is neither to Kant nor to Hegel but to Schiller. And it is striking that he was described as a fallen angel, a young man who inclines to rebellion and overconfidence.

For Schiller, culture appears to be the same thing as barbarism. This was undoubtedly incited by Rousseau’s discourses from 1750 and 1755, with which Rousseau, following on from Hobbes, triggered the second major scandal and the second major intellectual terrestrial shift in emerging Modernity. Schiller him-
self argues against an anthropological background, too, an 18th century dualistic anthropology, the genealogy of which is worthy of research. Accordingly, the human being can ‘be opposed in two different ways: either as a wild beast, when his feelings dominate his principles, or as a barbarian, when his principles destroy his feelings’. Schiller views these two sides – wild beast and barbarian, dominance of feelings or of principles – as realised not only in historical sequence, but also at the same time, namely his time. Here he speaks not as a philosopher of history, but as a sociologist of culture. The wild beast is represented by the ‘lower and manifold classes’; the barbaric, which he also describes as a state of ‘slackening’, is represented by the ‘civilised classes’, i.e. the ‘refined members of society’, led by the aristocracy. Their decline and slackening is more cause for outrage ‘because their raison d’être is culture itself’. This outrage is sustained by the fact that culture is recognised as a dimension higher than nature. The barbaric is a fundamental feature of culture, consisting in nothing other than the dominance of principles, the rigorosity of absolutely valid norms. Barbarism is (moral) reason.

So the historical shift of the concept of barbarism from an antonym of culture and reason to a synonym first boomed in the writings of Schiller. In this philosophical context he reads the riot act to none other than the great Kant of the categorical imperative. And in cultural sociological terms he attacks not only the aristocracy, but also the emerging bourgeoisie with its protestant culture of refusal, which he himself knows all too well and all too painfully, and which is later described in detail by Nietzsche and Max Weber.

Of course, the transcendental historical question asks about the underlying precondition for this manner of seeing and describing things. What enables barbarism to be viewed as a necessary product, as the internal pole opposing culture? The philosophical answer to this, in my opinion, has to cite the episteme of subjectivity. Subjectivity means a relationship in which a subject refers to itself as an object. Only when this circular relationship, this unity of opposites, is elevated to a fundamental way of thinking can opposites such as those of culture and barbarism be described as immanently self-producing and to this extent dialectic. In order to be able to say ‘I’, to be identical, the self has to be doubled, has to equate ‘I’ with ‘I’ by referring itself to itself, and that also means keeping itself separate from itself. This is the basic model underlying the way in which Modernity deals with opposites.
Enlightenment and barbarism – a systematic outline

Which relationship between Enlightenment and barbarism must we today be more aware of than ever, then? This relationship can fundamentally be seen in three different ways: Enlightenment equals non-barbarism or it equals barbarism or both.

The first response – Enlightenment and barbarism constitute an antithesis – is the most common. It is to be found in the philosophy of the 18th century, as well as the sociology of the 19th, in the works of Herbert Spencer and Auguste Comte, also *grosso modo* in the writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber. And it has deep historical roots in everyday occidental culture, which with Christianity and gnosticism introduced the dualism of light and darkness: good and evil as a division in our comprehension of being. Along exactly the same lines a present-day U.S.-American president responds to the question ‘Why do they hate us so?’ – they being Islamic fundamentalists or, to use the latest fighting jargon, ‘Islamofascists’ – with the pharisaic statement: ‘Because we are good. Because the terrorists hate our democracy and our values.’ Here a double simplification rules: a simplified self-image and a simplified image of others. What also rules is a yearning for war, drawing a clear dividing-line between friend and foe.

The second response – Enlightenment and barbarism in secret form a unit – assumes a *fundamental ambivalence*. Here barbarism is the *necessary* flipside of Enlightenment. There cannot be one without the other. What appears as progress is, in reality, a step backwards. Or, at least, progress is accompanied by an opposing movement which is equally strong. This stance was first advocated by Horkheimer and Adorno, later by Foucault and today by authors such as Zygmunt Bauman or Giorgio Agamben.

Like Foucault, Horkheimer and Adorno do not restrict themselves to this second response of Enlightenment and barbarism forming a unit, however, instead advocating the third response as well. The fundamental concept behind this third approach was established by Hegel and Freud. Accordingly, the Enlightenment has to enlighten itself about itself, must perform ‘self-reflection’. In so doing, it is able to recognise that barbarism is neither its simple, external counter-principle, nor its actual fundamental principle, but its internally antagonistic principle. The relationship between the two sides is then one of agony, of an eternal battle stemming from the fact that they can never ultimately be separated. Thus, an epoch is
enlightened to the extent to which it recognises that barbarism lurks within it like a virus, ready to spread at any moment, or even violently erupt. The so-called terrorist ‘sleepers’ which have assumed a place within Western communities are thus not something which we have had implanted from the outside. The horror which they evoke in our minds is far more a horror which Modernity has of itself, of its own (equally violent, repressive) history and above all of the contradictions of its own principles.22

Critical theory and ‘Sympathy for the Devil’

Horkheimer and Adorno attempted to demonstrate in all areas of society and culture their theory that barbarism is the flipside of Enlightenment and Modernity: to a greater or lesser degree latent, and always updatable. Their criticism of popular culture was particularly vehement. They coined the term ‘culture industry’ to express their opinion that popular literature, hit songs, jazz, pop music and films are ‘tailored for consumption by the masses […] and are manufactured more or less according to plan’.23 They saw this most clearly realised in the USA. The 20th century certainly could be called ‘the American Century’, not only in political, economic and militaristic terms, but also culturally. A century of U.S.-American dominance, today increasingly heralded as drawing to a close.24

Adorno employs simplifications, of course. Reading his texts closely, it is possible to detect several contradictory appraisals of the so-called culture industry, especially with regard to film.25 The fact that the name ‘Marx’ is only mentioned once in the Dialectic of Enlightenment, and then as the ‘Marx Brothers’,26 may certainly be taken as an ironic wink.

Today, however, we have not only departed from interpreting the culture industry chapter of the Dialectic of Enlightenment as monolithic theory: the concept of critical theory itself has changed. Jürgen Habermas has never tired of insisting that critical theory has to expose its normative foundations. He integrated the philosophy of linguistic analysis and pleaded more clearly for an extended concept of reason, in which the dimensions of both our self-comprehension and our comprehension of the world would ideally intermingle like the parts of a mobile.27 Taking this as their starting point, Albrecht Wellmer and Axel Honneth proceeded to more recent French philosophy, namely Foucault and Derrida, before returning to
leading impulses from earlier critical theory. Critical theory sees itself, then, as justification for a normative concept of extended rationality and as a critique of all the pathological strains of this rationality brought forth by Modernity within the lifeworld. It sees itself as a rationality theory with a formalistic touch, yet also as following the materialistic and phenomenological maxim ‘get to it!’ (Zu den Sachen!). Philosophy and social analysis, or philosophy and the theory of Modernity, belong together.  

I myself have tackled popular culture, and especially film, in a modest attempt to discover how the history of the self, that epistemic principle of Modernity, looks when related as a myth, not only at a philosophical level, but also at that of popular culture. The heroes (and occasionally heroines) of Westerns, thrillers and science fiction films then appear as representatives of a more general heroic figure: the self, subjectivity. I am interested in the myth because, like other concepts (such as being, the unconscious or history), the concept of the self fulfils a mythical function. And it does so particularly in Modernity. To the extent to which Modernity sees itself as an epoch generalising the attitude of self-justification, i.e. ceasing to set store by religious, sacred, traditional or paternalistic authorities and drawing its only validation from itself, from acts of justification – to the extent, then, to which Modernity views itself in this way, it also sees itself increasingly confronted with the problem of legitimation. One of the functions of myths, however, is to overcome metaphysical, sense-related problems in a symbolic, yet contradictory manner, as well as to act in a manner both socially integrating and legitimising.

Studying the mythological function of concepts therefore means – to use another term – studying images which in more than one sense ‘imprison’ us, fascinate us and capture us, as both Wittgenstein and Plato have put it. In so doing, they determine not only our everyday convictions, but also the majority of our philosophical ones.

Against this background, the general theory of interweaving Modernity and barbarism in the spirit of Adorno can without a doubt also and especially be demonstrated on the basis of popular culture. One excellent example, as we have already seen, is Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey. In the polemic language of former critical theory, the credits which appear at the beginning of the film to the majestic and sun-aggrandising Zarathustra music – MGM presents a Stanley Kubrick production – translate as follows: Hollywood, the ultimate label of cultural barbarism, pre-
JOSEF FRUCHTL

sents the work of a film-maker which will prove to be art, and that means true, self-reflecting Enlightenment. But there are also other examples, of course:

‘Please allow me to introduce myself / I’m a man of wealth and taste.’ The man of wealth and taste wishing to introduce himself to us has the plebby voice, arrogant attitude, fidgety mannerisms and pop-fashion styling of Mick Jagger, a voice also carried by the sound of rock music. To our parents’ ears in the 1960s there was only one word to describe it: barbaric. The man with Jagger’s voice is a sly old dog. He ‘was round when Jesus Christ / had his moment of doubt and pain’. He was there during the bloodbaths of the Russian Revolution and as an armoured general in the German blitzkrieg. He is to be found wherever good souls are to be stolen. Nothing is too scandalous or too infamous for him. He does not introduce himself. Instead he repeats the refrain several times, asking if we have guessed his name yet, if we know who he is: ‘Pleased to meet you / Hope you guess my name.’

Eventually he reveals his identity: ‘just call me lucifer’. Lucifer is the Latin name for a mythological figure linked throughout early Christianity with the devil, not least because he is described as the most handsome of all the angels. Lucifer is the angel bearing light, literally an enlightener. At the same time he is a devillish light-bearer, a devillishly handsome light-bearer. An enlightener with two faces.

‘Sympathy for the Devil’ negates pure enlightenment. Here, having sympathy for the devil primarily means having sympathy with the Rolling Stones, who in their heroic early years appeared to the staid petit-bourgeoisie as profanity incarnate. But sympathy with the devil is not just rock music advertising its own name: it also has a political and philosophical core. This is most clearly expressed in the line: ‘I shouted out, / “who killed the Kennedys?” / When after all / It was you and me.’ The devil, me, all of us – murderers. That is why the repeated question: ‘What’s my name?’ receives no answer and the song fades away rhythmically and almost melancholically in an endless loop of ‘Ooo, who / Ooo, who …’, the unanswered and unanswerable question as to the name for all things evil.

Philosophy and the power of images

At the end of Kubrick’s Space Odyssey the spaceship is pulled into a kind of Stargate, a metaphor for a new dimension in space and time. The only surviving astronaut
eventually finds himself inside an interior from the Louis XVI period, the age of Enlightenment and ever-ready guillotine. The astronaut watches himself age and die. The logic of the images suggests that he will be reincarnated. Once more, Kubrick’s tree of knowledge appears, a black, shiny metallic monolith, and then becomes a gate, through which we re-enter space. Once more, we hear the opening bars of Zarathustra, but this time we end up gazing not into the sun, but into the large, puzzling eyes of a foetus orbiting in space alongside the planets. It is a dancing ‘starchild’, created in the spirit of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, an image of eternal recurrence and at the same time of a man who exceeds beyond himself both vertically and horizontally, a superman and an overman.33

Many philosophers doubt whether Nietzsche can be counted among them. Nearly all have their doubts when, with varying degrees of horror, they contemplate Zarathustra. Arthur C. Danto’s attempt in the mid-1960s to promote Nietzsche as a philosopher, especially to the clique of linguistic analysts, was unsuccessful in this respect. But philosophy is multilingual. It speaks more than one language and with more than one voice.34 It moves between the languages of common sense, first-person narrative, expository science, politics, morality, religion and art, to name just a few important examples. It can speak scientifically and poetically, politically and morally, autobiographically and prosaically. And I believe that it needs these languages and ways of thinking in order to balance itself out.

It needs the language of logical and scientific analysis, for example, in order to introduce the necessary measure of clarity and certainty to our understanding of the world. For a philosophy interested in cultural theory (known in Amsterdam as cultural analysis) this is particularly important. From the circumstance that this type of theory is out of line with established disciplines it all-too quickly draws the conclusion that it may stylise itself complacently as a stronghold of lateral thinking. But even epistemological anarchists35 need to know what they are doing, otherwise they will be no more than amateurs, hobby thinkers and consumers in the global market of convictions. With theoretical self-reflection one knows what one is doing.

But philosophy is more than sober clarification: it is also of sorts ‘work on myth’.36 As has already been said, this means that it also continues to work on myths itself, concentrated and playful, serious and cheerful, sometimes with Hegel breathing down its neck, sometimes with Nietzsche.37 German Idealism and Ro-
manticism, Schelling, Hölderlin and Friedrich Schlegel, even young Hegel: all have subscribed to the necessity of a ‘new mythology’ reconciling thought with image, philosophy with religion, intellectuals with the masses. Great and wrong ideals, as one must say today. But what remains correct is that we need a mythology which never ceases to perform self-transformation and self-reflection, quasi internal self-enlightenment. Horkheimer and Adorno do show the dialectic of the myth, but they give it an overall slant which is negative. According to Adorno, it can only be reconciled in an aesthetic context. On the other hand, from theorists ranging from Ernst Cassirer to Hans Blumenberg and Foucault, one can learn to appreciate the myth as a productive attempt at interpretation, blocking some interpretations but facilitating others.

Sometimes politics borrows expressions from literature. A multilingual undertaking such as philosophy can, as I have already said, borrow from both. During his campaign for the presidential nomination in 1968, Bobby Kennedy liked to use a slightly altered quotation from George Bernard Shaw: ‘Some men see things as they are and say, why; I dream things that never were and say, why not?’ Philosophy also attempts to see things and describe them as they really are, questioning the reasons for this. But it also formulates speculative hypotheses, invents concepts, creates images, introduces metaphors and brings ideas into the world which allow us to see not only in a new way, but also new things. I do not have a convincing answer to the question ‘why not?’ For this reason I shall continue to pursue philosophy as a double strategy which, on closer inspection, is in fact a multiple strategy, namely speaking in a multitude of languages.

**Dankwoord**

‘Speaking in a multitude of languages’ – dat is een ervaring die je ook hier, in Amsterdam, kunt opdoen. Daarom wil ik tenminste mijn korte dankwoord graag in het Nederlands uitspreken.

Een benoeming tot hoogleraar is ook een daad van vertrouwen. De collega’s op de afdeling wijsbegeerte, de Facultaire Bestuursberaad, de decaan, het College van Bestuur – ze hebben allemaal vertrouwen in mij gesteld, vertouwen dat ik bij de UvA hoor. Mevrouw de Rector Magnificus, mevrouw de decaan, geachte colle-ga’s, ik dank u voor dat vertrouwen. ‘I’ll do my very best.’
Inmiddels werk ik al drie jaar bij de UvA. Dat ik me hier op mijn gemak voel, heeft er ook mee te maken dat de sfeer bij wijsbegeerte zo aangenaam is. Beste medewerkers, ik dank jullie dat jullie mij zo vriendelijk hebben opgenomen en dat jullie geduldig mijn Nederlands verdragen.

Er zijn natuurlijk veel mensen die belangrijk zijn geweest in mijn leven als wetenschapper en denkend mens, leraren – vaak leraressen – en hoogleraren. Ik wil graag Brigitte Scheer noemen, een hoogleraar met wie ik gedurende mijn periode aan de universiteit van Frankfurt veel heb samengewerkt. Het was ook een groot voorrecht om met Jürgen Habermas en alle jonge mensen om hem heen te kunnen werken, in een stimulerende discursieve sfeer. Soms denk ik dat het in Plato’s academie ook zo geweest moet zijn.

Veel zou ik ook over mijn oude vrienden kunnen zeggen. Inmiddels wonen ze verspreid over Duitsland. Enigen van hen zijn vandaag naar Amsterdam gekomen. De meesten zijn niet aan een universiteit verbonden als academicus, maar als je enkele biertjes met hen gaat drinken, kom je er al snel achter dat ze toch filosofen zijn.

En dan is er natuurlijk Natalie, ‘l’amore que viene via con me’.

Het zou mooi geweest zijn als mijn ouders deze plechtigheid vandaag hadden kunnen bijwonen. Mijn vader heeft mijn promotie nog meegemaakt. Mijn moeder is inmiddels 86 jaar oud. Ze zei dat ik haar groetjes aan u moest geven. Voor het overige is ze als altijd van mening dat filosofie ongezond is. Daarin is ze het met Wittgenstein eens, ook al kent ze hem niet.

Ik heb gezegd.
Notes

Translation into English by Sarah Kirkby.


17. Many passages in the Letters substantiate this. One of the most striking can be found in letter seven where Schiller forecasts that while humanity will be honoured in the person of the negro in some parts of the world, it will be violated in the person of the thinker in Europe. In February 1794 slavery is abolished in the French colonies while in the same year the chemist Antoine Lavoisier is executed (the judge being quoted with: ‘The republic does not need academics’) and the philosopher Condorcet, threatened by the guillotine, goes into hiding in Paris and finally commits suicide (cf. Henning Ritter, ‘Schillers Blick in den Abgrund’, in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, November 17, 2007).


24. Emmanuel Todd was the first to recognise this, cf. *Après L’Empire. Essai sur la décomposition du système américain*, Paris 2002.
26. Alfred Schmidt has sometimes drawn amused attention to this in his Frankfurt lectures; cf. Horkheimer/Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, loc. cit., p. 164. From the ironic circumstance that the Marx Brothers become the pro-consuls of Marxist theory it is possible to strike a spark beyond mere speculation and develop a legitimation of cinema, at least in its anarchic-comic guise, from the spirit of Horkheimer and especially Adorno; cf. also Martin Seel, ‘Adornos Apologie des Kinos’, in: Seubold/Baum (eds.), *Wieviel Spaß verträgt die Kultur?* loc. cit., pp. 127-144, esp. pp. 141.


