

Myth and the Fate of Secularisation

Gianni Vattimo

Myth today

Philosophical thought about the presence of myth in the contemporary world cannot be founded upon an essential or metaphysical definition of myth. This is due in part to the fact that the dream of philosophy as a rigorous science has been definitively *ausgetraumt*. More specifically, though, it is due to the fact that the theme of myth itself appears to us today in an uncertain light.

No satisfactory theory of myth – one that would define its nature and its connection with other forms of relationship to the world – exists in contemporary philosophy. Nevertheless, the term and the concept of myth, even if not carefully defined, have wide currency in our culture today. At least since the appearance of Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, mass culture and its by-products generally have been analysed in terms of mythology; and the presence and place of myth in political thought have generally been conceived in terms of the now distant but still important work of Georges Sorel, *Reflexions sur la violence*, in which myth appears as the sole agent capable of moving the masses to action.

Even Claude Lévi-Strauss, who approaches myth from a specialised anthropological point of view, states in *Anthropologie structurale* that 'nothing resembles mythic thought today more than political ideology. In contemporary society the latter has in a certain sense replaced

the former'.★ Although Lévi-Strauss cannot be accused of making only

★ Lévi-Strauss, C., *Anthropologie Structurale*, Paris 1958, p. 231.

vague use of the term 'myth', a claim such as the one made here – that is, that political ideology has replaced mythic thought for us today – depends in the last analysis upon a rather stereotypical understanding of the term. Indeed, in the later *Mythologica*, when Lévi-Strauss applies a more precise and specific concept of myth to the question of its possible survival in the contemporary world, he makes reference instead to music and literature as the elements of experience in

which myth – in no matter how faded a form – endures today.★ The presence of myth in our culture, however, generally is not considered in terms of this rather technical and restricted understanding of the notion of

★ See especially the final chapter of *L'homme nu* (*Mythologica* IV), Paris 1971, and the 'Ouverture' of *Le cru et le cuit* (*Mythologica* 1), Paris 1964.

'myth'. Instead, it is usually dealt with in a much more general sense, where it is understood as any combination of the following: as the opposite of scientific thought; as the opposite of demonstrative or analytic thought; as narrative or as the fantastic; as a locus of affect; as having little or no pretence to objectivity; as having to do with religion, art, ritual, and magic; or, finally, as the target of scientific demythisation and disenchantment (in the sense of Weber's *Entzauberung* of the World). Rational knowledge about reality,

'wherever it seeks to constitute itself as a theoretical consideration and explanation of the world, finds itself in opposition not as much to immediate phenomenal reality as to the mythical transfiguration of that reality. Long before the world presents itself to consciousness as a complex of empirical "things" and empirical properties, it has already presented itself as a complex of mythical powers and actions.' ★

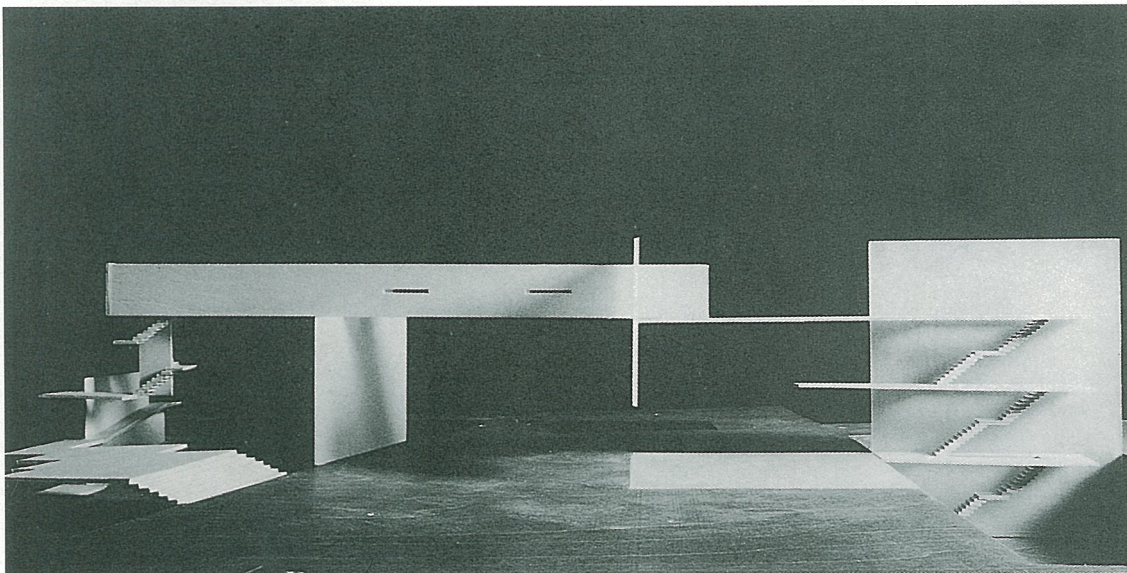
This quotation from Cassirer's classic work of 1923, which is perhaps the last great philosophical theory of myth in our century, contains an element that is implicit and fundamental in the modern theory of myth – that is, the idea that myth is a kind of 'prescientific' knowledge, at once ancient and immature, identifiable with the childhood or adolescence of the history of the human mind. Even Lévi-Strauss, who certainly does not have a crudely evolutionistic concept of human development from mythos to logos, and who in fact sees himself as radically antihistoricist, considers mythic thought as the 'past' of our culture (inasmuch as he tries to locate its contemporary surrogate in the guise of political ideology, or its residual traces in music and literature).

★ Cassirer, E., *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (1923), vol. 11, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1958.

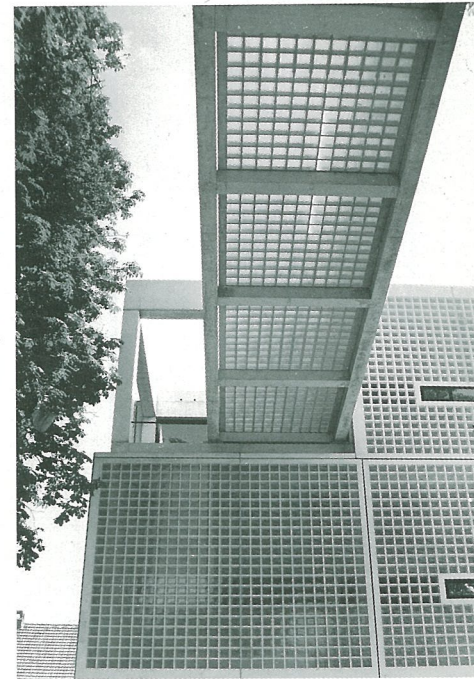
Yet the idea implicit in the respective positions of Cassirer and Lévi-Strauss – to say nothing of Weber – is one that today makes us feel uneasy. No one would now accept the thesis, for instance, that myth is the specific form of thought of the primitive mind alone, or that civilisation is a process of demythisation in which the mythic world view is gradually abandoned for the scientific one. At the root of this uneasiness is the fact that the modern philosophical theory of myth – right up until that of Cassirer – has always found its articulation within the framework of a metaphysical and evolutionistic idea of his-

tory. It is this very framework of a philosophy of history that can no longer be recuperated today. As a result, even a philosophical theory of myth can no longer be precisely defined, and the common use of the term 'myth' registers and expresses a theoretical confusion. On the one hand, the term continues to refer to a form of thought no longer current and often considered more primitive than our own, in any case to one characterised by a lesser degree of objectivity – or of technological efficacy – than that ascribed to scientific knowledge. On the other hand, the concept of myth as primitive thought appears unsustainable in the wake of the crisis of the evolutionistic metaphysics of history (along with the very idea of scientific rationality), as well as in the light of less theoretical motivations linked to recent and current political events. This confusion can be understood through a brief survey of the principal attitudes that most influence our thinking about myth – attitudes I will describe on the basis of certain 'ideal types'. These are not explicitly articulated at a theoretical or practical level, but are nonetheless present and representative of the cultural situation we find ourselves in. These 'ideal types' can be called *archaism*, *cultural relativism*, and *limited rationality*. All three are characterised by incoherence and self-contradiction chiefly the result of having left unresolved the problem of the philosophy of history, the source of every concept of myth. All three are borne of a rejection of the metaphysics of history that sustained the 'modern' theory of myth, yet fail to formulate their position in theoretically satisfactory terms because they lack a new philosophical concept of history: they have simply set the problem aside.

Gianni Vattimo



Tendencies of archaism in The Netherlands, Wiel Arets, Academy of Arts and Architecture, Maastricht, 1993



Archaism

I would describe archaism as an attitude that, to use a term Derrida employs to describe an analogous state of things, could be called 'apocalyptic'. It is typified by the widespread contemporary distrust of Western scientific and technological culture, seen as a way of life that violates and destroys man's authentic relationship with both himself and nature, and which is inextricably bound to the capitalist system of exploitation and its imperialistic tendencies. The early-twentieth-century avant-garde artists'

Archaism, cultural relativism and limited rationality do not state where they themselves stand as theoretical positions.

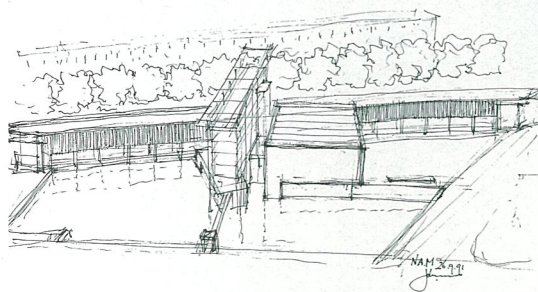
fascination with African masks can be understood as a sign of the prophetic function that art has often had, as is the case here, in regard to the general direction of a culture and of a society. What was, for the early-twentieth-century avant-garde, principally an interest in modes of representation of the real that were uncontaminated by the long tradition of inherited artistic languages and genres – freely combined, especially in Expressionism and Surrealism, with a programmatic polemic against bourgeois culture – has today become a widely held attitude. The bad conscience of the liberal intelligentsia toward the so-called Third World can certainly be found in its approach to myth as well. Without the backdrop pro-

vided by such a sweeping political perspective it would be impossible to explain either the popularity that cultural anthropology has enjoyed in the last decades as an intellectual fashion or indeed the spread of 'structuralism' (not just in anthropology) as a left-wing theoretical position during the years of its greatest diffusion at a mass level. At the basis of all this there was originally the idea that both a purely structural study of 'primitive' myths and cultures and a general reconsideration of man in nonhistoric terms (as exemplified by Lévi-Strauss's statement, in his polemic against Sartre, that 'we should study men as if they were ants') would destroy the Western myth of progress and its imperialistic and colonialistic implications. This was to be done in the name of a mode of thought that would recuperate the 'authentic' values of a relationship between man and nature unmediated by scientific objectivisation,

Archaism hopes to discover a possible way out of the errors and contradictions of current scientific and technological civilisation.

which was seen as strictly linked to the capitalist organisation of labour – as both the critical philosophy of the Frankfurt School and the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* had shown.?! Both this critique and a sense of bad conscience about imperialism and neo-colonialism have more recently been combined with ecological concerns about the devastating consequences that science, technology, capi-

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Tendencies of archaism in The Netherlands, Jo Coenen, Dutch Architectural Institute, Rotterdam, 1993



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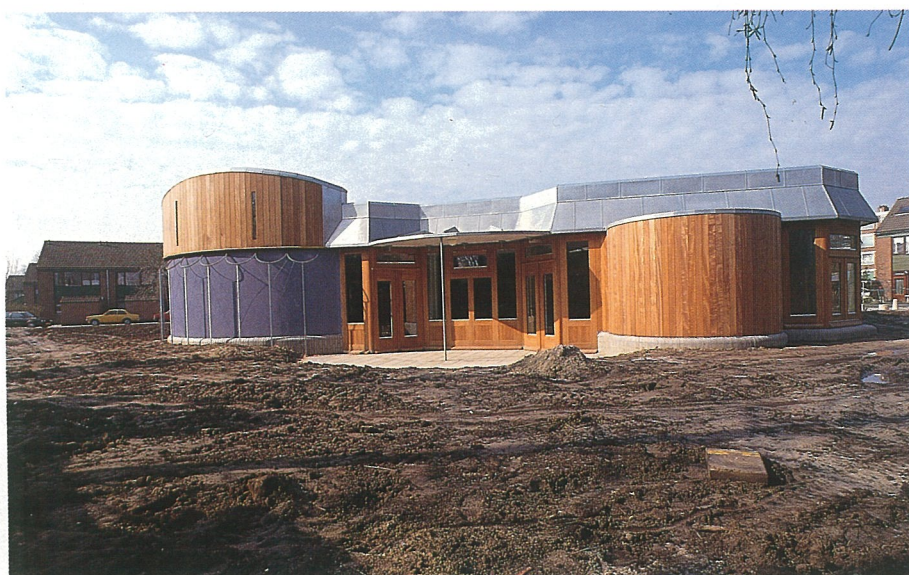
talist exploitation, and the arms race have had on both nature and the physical nature of man himself. Archaism is the sum of all these factors. In this perspective, myth appears not only as not being an essentially overcome phase of our cultural history but precisely as a more authentic form of knowledge, one that precedes the destructive mentality of objectivising, quantitative modern science, technology and capitalism. From a renewed contact with myth, archaism hopes to discover a possible way out of the errors and contradictions of current scientific and technological civilisation. This renewed contact with myth takes the form of either an analysis of the myths of 'other' cultures (those studied by anthropologists working among existing primitive peoples) or a reading of the ancient myths of our own Western tradition (as is the case for the Greek myths, re-examined with anthropological methods and mind-sets by philologists and historians of the structuralist school). Much of Nietzsche's and Heidegger's recent popularity in continental European culture seems to be related to these tendencies (even if based upon misinterpretations that I will not discuss here). Nietzsche's critique of Socratic thought and of decadence, as well as his concept of the nihilistic direction of Western culture, and Heidegger's *Seinsvergessenheit* (with all that it implies), are interpreted as appeals for the recovery of a premetaphysical (prelogical) attitude toward reality, which is largely identifiable with a return to myth. The critique of scientific and technological civilisation, as well as the renewed interest in archaic thought – both of which are found, in different forms, in Nietzsche and Heidegger – are taken as a point of departure for the recuperation of myth, even if neither Nietzsche nor, least of all, Heidegger justifies

?! Pushing this Frankfurter's train of thought into today's station, one could conceive capitalism as a source of archaism. Since consumption replaces production as the guiding principle, the myth of progress is bound to yield to myth of a different kind. Consequently, archaism might serve extremely well as the ideology of non-critical submission to the late-capitalist system, and to consumption-ideology. Suppose we're on the right track, would archaism be a reaction to the myth of progress, or rather a subtle continuation of the same? Like a kind of sophisticated tuning job disguised as its own negation?

an undertaking such as this. It would be difficult, however, to point to philosophical positions or cultural projects that explicitly propose a return to mythic knowledge.

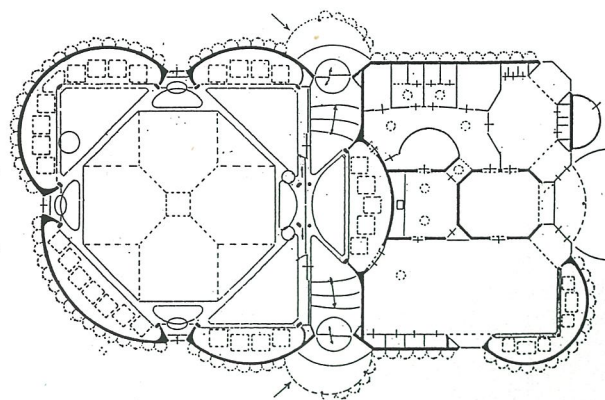
The single exception is, at present, the so-called New Right movement in France and Italy, which takes up the anticapitalist polemic of Fascism and Nazism and combines it with themes from the 1968 student revolt. As is the case for the two other 'ideal' approaches to myth that we will discuss shortly, though, archaism does not articulate a complete doctrinal position. This, as I have already suggested, is a consequence of the failure of archaism to propose an alternative to the crisis of metaphysical historicism of which it is itself a product. Thus it is destined to remain theoretically mute, or in any case not to define a precise position for itself.?! Archaism, when it does not turn to the restoration of traditional cultural values and consequently to right-wing politics, may also elaborate an 'utopian' critique of scientific and technological civilisation and capitalism (as is the case for some of the liberal European thought). Such a critique openly admits that it is not only pointless but politically dangerous and unacceptable to try to restore the 'traditional' values of European culture. At the same time, though, it appeals to mythic knowledge – uncontaminated by Western capitalist rationality – as the foundation for its rejection of modernity and its errors. In this critical perspective, currently popular in continental 'left-wing' circles, authors like Nietzsche and Heidegger are joined together with the more radical members of the Frankfurt School, such as Walter Benjamin and his intellectual precursor Rosenzweig. Yet here too –

?! Although probably theoretically mute, archaism is the talk of the town. In studios of architects, artist and movie makers alike, in meditation-centres and on holidays in Tuscany, you name it, archaism is the It-word. Even if the creed is an individual one, shouldn't we define archaism as a movement, even if it lacks statutes?



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Tendencies of archaism in The Netherlands, Aldo van Eyck, Molluccan Church, Deventer, 1993



often on the basis of rather arbitrary readings – myth is understood as the kind of thought that is closest to that original or sacred language theorised by Benjamin and supposed to be outside of the rational knowledge of Western science and philosophy.

Cultural relativism

The second approach that, in our present-day attitudes, conditions and qualifies the presence of myth is

Limited rationality describes that ensemble of cultural attitudes that treats mythic knowledge, understood as narrative, as a more adequate form of thought for certain fields of experience.

cultural relativism. According to this position, the fundamental principles and axioms that define rationality, the criteria of truth, ethics, and the experience of a historical humanity in general, are not the object of rational knowledge or demonstration insofar as the very possibility of demonstration invariably depends upon these same principles and axioms. Thomas Kuhn's theory of paradigms, for instance, at least in its original form, could be considered as representative of this approach (which has proven to be extremely popular in the epistemological debate of the last few years). Heideggerian hermeneutics often is taken to be a theory of this type, even if there are good reasons to think that this is

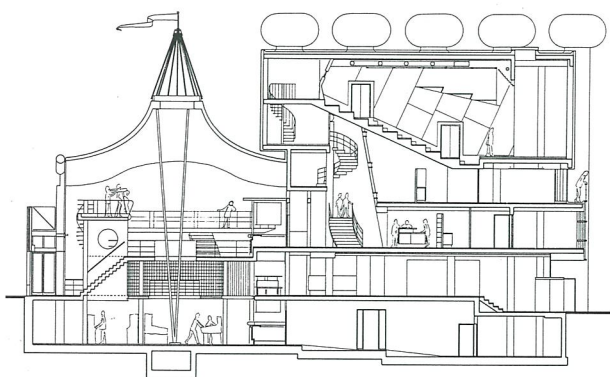
not necessarily the case. In cultural relativism any thought of an univocal rationality, thanks to which we could call certain forms of knowledge 'mythic', has been banished. Moreover, the idea that the first principles upon which a specific cultural universe constitutes itself are in fact not the object of rational and demonstrative knowledge opens the way to our seeing them also as the object of a kind of mythic knowledge. Even scientific rationality, long the guiding value for European culture, finally reveals itself to be a myth: not more than a shared belief on the basis of which our culture has been organised. Thus, as Odo Marquard has pointed out, the very idea that the history of Western reason is the history of a progressive abandonment of myth (or

★ See Marquardt, O., *Abschied vom Prinzipiellen*, Stuttgart 1981, p. 93.

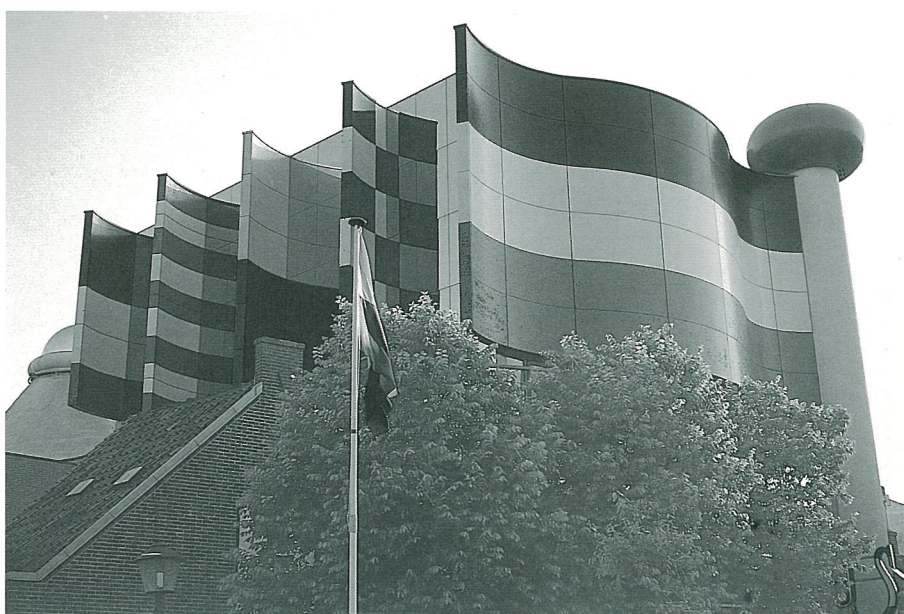
Cultural relativism ignores both (a) the effective context in which the thesis of the irreducible plurality of cultural worlds is put into place, and (b) the effective impossibility of isolating one cultural world from another.

Entmythologisierung) is itself a myth, a central belief that is neither proven nor provable. ★ As opposed to archaism, cultural relativism does not ascribe any sort of (mythical) superiority to mythical knowledge in regard to modern scientific knowledge. It only refuses to place these two modes of knowledge in opposition to each other, since both are founded on fundamental assumptions that

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Tendencies of façadism in The Netherlands, Sjoerd Soeters, Circus Theatre, Zandvoort, 1991



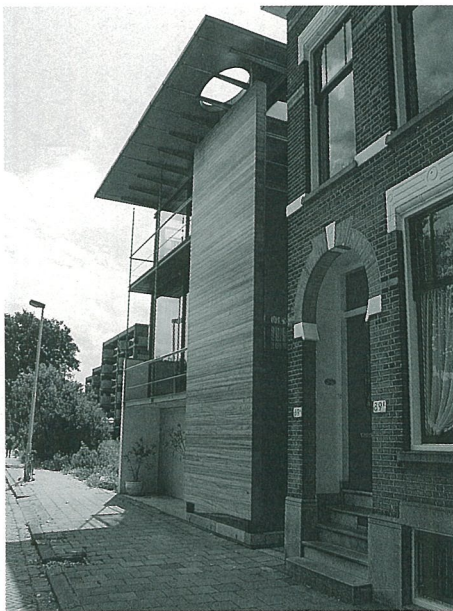
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share the characteristics of myth – that is, they are based on beliefs that form a part of lived experience and are not susceptible to scientific proof. These beliefs, which lie at the basis of every cultural universe, are not always called 'myths' (as Marquard chooses to call them).?! Nevertheless, cultural relativism's interest in myth is every bit as vital as that of archaism – not because it tries to uncover in myth a more authentic form of knowledge, but because in the study of the myths of other civilisations it seeks a more revealing method for studying our own, in the conviction that our civilisation too has a fundamentally mythic structure. Such a presupposition (even if never made explicit) can be shown to be present, for instance, in Roland Barthes's 'mythological' approach to mass culture. As in Marquard's use of the term, 'myth' in this case stands for a non-demonstrable and immediately lived knowledge. Thus its meaning is still, in the last analysis, highly conditioned by its strict opposition to the characteristics of scientific knowledge.

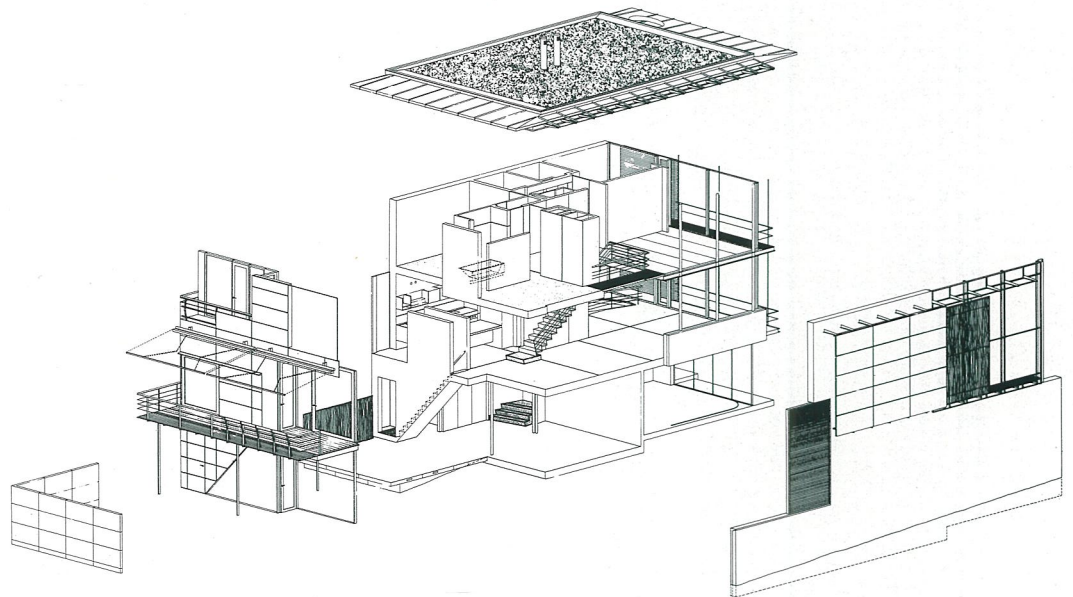
Limited rationality

The third contemporary attitude toward myth I call *tempered irrationalism* or the theory of limited rationality. Here the term myth instead is assigned to a specific meaning, one linked to the original etymological significance of the word – for 'myth' means 'narration'. In this form it sets itself in opposition to, or distinguishes itself from, scientific knowledge: it accomplishes this, however, not through a sim-

?! If this kind of thinking implies the equivalent of myth and axiomatic clarity, aren't we on the brink of obscurantism? Does this obscurantism involve Derrida's enunciation, 'there is nothing outside the text'? Maybe you envision an ethical moment that prevents this slide, but where?



Tendencies of façadism in The Netherlands, Mecanoo, Architects' House, Rotterdam, 1992



?! In Erfahrung und Armut Walter Benjamin describes modern times in which narration is virtually extinct. Recently, 'limited rationality' seems to imply the eminence of narration. Are we confronted with a kind of Benjaminian problem? Your examples speak clear language: they indicate far-reaching formalisation of narration. Clearly, Roland Barthes sanctions this condition by means of his theory on 'the death of the author', doesn't he?

?! Your concept of 'limited rationality' seems to have an analogical sympathy in architecture: for the figurative and ornamental. 'The story' is being told in the façade and by the façade, by the surface at large. (Pietro Derossi comes to mind. Allow us to recall your admiration.) Do you believe there could be a more abstract narrative? For instance, a story looming up from the montage, in the 'between'? As opposed to the operative monopoly of pre-programmed symbolism of psychoanalysis and mass media?

ple reversal of the latter's characteristics – such as demonstrativeness and objectivity – but through the working of a positive element of its own, *narrative structure*. Limited rationality describes that ensemble of cultural attitudes that treats mythic knowledge, understood as narrative, as a more adequate form of thought for certain fields of experience. Yet at the same time it does not challenge or explicitly call into question the validity of scientific or positive knowledge for other fields of experience. We can find examples of limited rationality in at least three disciplines:

1) In psychoanalysis, where psychic life tends to be considered as structured in terms of narration (both in its everyday functioning and in the therapeutic situation). In the case of Jungian psychoanalysis and its variants, this same psychic life is seen as necessarily expressing certain basic themes and archetypal myths, which in turn structure it not as abstract principles nor as an interplay of forces but as 'stories' that cannot be reduced to underlying structural patterns for which they would serve as mere surface manifestations (Hillman speaks of 'polytheism' in this same sense).

2) In contemporary theories of historiography, where the narrative hypostasis has shown itself to be increasingly important as a model. Narrative analysis not only reveals the rhetorical models on which historiography is constructed, but – above all else – also points, in revelation of the essential multiplicity of these very models, to a basis for negating the unity of history. It recognises the irreducible *plurality* of history itself, a history ever more difficult to distinguish from myth (insofar as it no longer reflects

the norms of reality).

3) In the sociology of the mass media, which has substituted Sorel's original application of the notion of myth to (revolutionary) mass movements with an analysis, in mythological terms, of the contents and images of the world produced and distributed by film, television, literature, and other mass-market media. **?!**

These various ways of thinking about myth – taken as a term that can be applied to numerous fields of experience – can be called theories of limited rationality for the following reason: all three have in common the idea (which goes back to Plato and Aristotle; see, for instance, *Timaeus 19d*) that certain fields of experience cannot be understood through the use of demonstrative reason or the scientific method, but require instead a kind of knowledge that can only be described as 'mythic'. **?!**

The limits of myth

As I said at the outset, the different attitudes (which generate markedly different positions in regard to myth, but which nonetheless all share an intensive interest in it) have resulted from the dissolution of the various metaphysical philosophies of history. Yet, at the same time, all three have failed to take the fact of that dissolution sufficiently into account. Precisely for this reason they cannot avoid the errors and contradictions that render them unsatisfactory from a theoretical standpoint. *Archaism* clearly does

not tackle the problem of history, insofar as it is powerless – when confronted with the modern world – to produce a viable position, that is anything other than a call for the restoration of ‘traditional’ culture (from, significantly enough, a ‘right-wing’ perspective). Right-wing traditionalism, representing the only apparent political program of archaism, reveals the latter’s theoretical weakness pushing to an extreme degree. That weakness consists in simply reversing the myth of progress into a myth of origins, which simply as such are supposed to be more authentically human; they are therefore supposedly worthy of serving as the goal of a political revolution or, at the very least, as the touchstone for a critique of modernity.

The idealisation of origins, though, is just as empty as the idealisation of the future for its own sake (which is what the secularised ideal of progress and development has always done, and continues to do). Furthermore, we have a relationship today with our origins only through the mediation of a process that is, in the last analysis, derived from those same origins. This process – the context in which origins are given to us – both separates us from them and connects us to them. Archaism would simply put aside the problem that this process presents, for if the condition of alienation and dehumanisation in which we find ourselves today is derived from our origins (as their *Wirkung*), why would anyone wish to return to those origins? Problems of this type – which are problems of the philosophy of history – are precisely what archaism tries to put aside without having really addressed. Yet these same problems are still urgently contemporary ones, even if metaphysical and evolutionistic philosophies of history

Tendencies of facadism in The Netherlands. Leo Heijdenrijk. ‘Ruins’, social housing, Amersfoort, 1992



have been definitively abandoned.

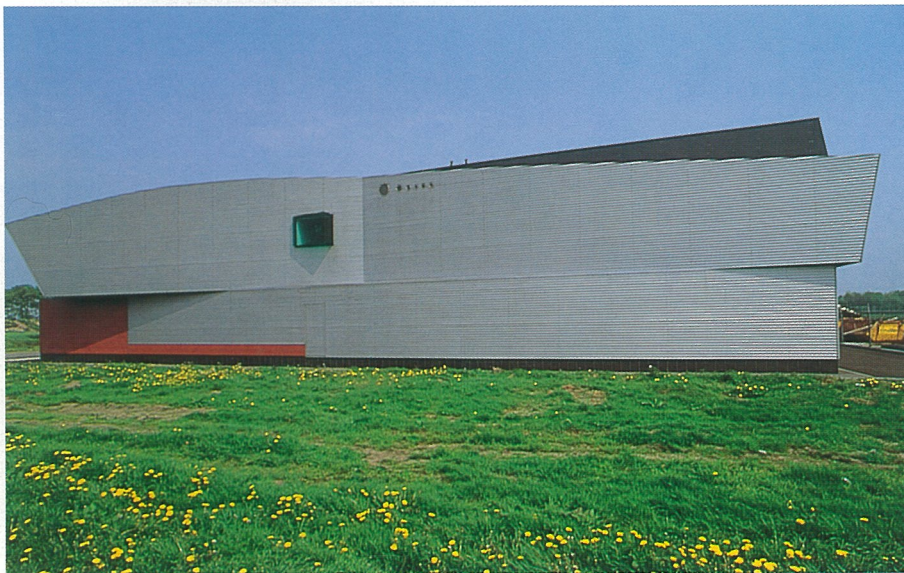
The same could be said for *cultural relativism*, except that in this case it is evident that the problem of historicity has been neither raised nor resolved, but merely ‘skipped’. Cultural relativism ignores both (a) the effective context in which the thesis of the irreducible plurality of cultural worlds is put into place, and (b) the effective impossibility of isolating one cultural world from another (and not only from our own universe). The problem that anthropologists working ‘in the field’ must often confront – what is the relationship between themselves, as representatives of a strong and often colonialist culture, and their native sources of information? – presents only one aspect of the broader hermeneutic dilemma with which cultural relativism does not deal. The study of ‘other’ cultures always occurs in a context in which the pretence that these ‘other’ cultures are (or can be) represented as distinct and separate objects of enquiry must appear as utterly false and impossible. They are instead like speakers in a dialogue; but, once we recognise this, the question must then be raised of the common horizon on which the dialogue itself takes place. Such a question, obviously, invalidates from the first any project – like that of cultural relativism – to represent ‘other’ cultures as isolated objects. This common horizon is the problem of the philosophy of history itself, and cannot be so easily done away with.

Finally, the theory of *limited rationality* also attempts to skirt the problem of its own historical position. Recall that limited rationality depends upon the idea, found in a number of different forms, that

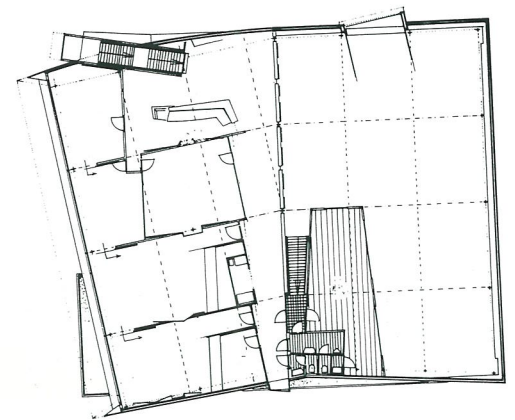
myth is a kind of narrative knowledge that is supposed to be suited to certain fields of experience (mass culture, psychic life, historiography). Limited rationality does not recognise, though, that it is founded on a tacit acceptance of the distinction between *Natur-* and *Geisteswissenschaften*. Yet this same distinction has become ever more problematic and tenuous in recent years. The notion that even exact science is a social enterprise has become widespread; the objectifying methods of the natural sciences are now seen as a moment within a social context, and this realisation thus returns us once again to the field of historical and social 'sciences'. It is an antihistorical illusion to think that the two fields – history, psychic life, and so on, on the one hand, and experimental science on the other – can possibly be kept apart. Both the hermeneutic developments of historicism, and the recent epistemological studies of the *Naturwissenschaften* (here I am thinking of Kuhn, Feyerabend, Lakatos, et al.), point toward a breaking down and an elimination of this distinction.

In varying degrees, and in different forms, then, the three contemporary attitudes toward myth – all of which deserve more consideration than can be given here – put aside much too quickly the problem of their *own* historical contextualisation. They do not state where they themselves stand as theoretical positions.?! Archaism proposes a return to origins and to mythic knowledge without asking what the 'intermediary' period (or meantime) between today's world and its beginnings might be. Cultural relativism speaks of separate and autonomous cultural universes, but does not say which of these universes is the domain of relativistic theory itself. Limited rationality does not have an explicit theory about the

?! You state: from the analytical point of view we need to deem these options inadequate, because they lack radical consideration of their own historical time and being. However, archaism and limited rationality seem to be praiseworthy because of an implied sense that there is a bottom line: direct action is possible. And shouldn't we leave it to the praxis to determine the long term feasibility of their notions, rather than establishing the theoretical shortcomings from the outside?



Tendencies of fascism in The Netherlands, Ben van Berkel, Store house, office space, Amersfoort, 1992



?! Great, just great! We are living in an era of elan vital, i.e. Möglichkeitssinne (Robert Musil), and you disqualify exactly that possibility.

possibility of distinguishing fields reserved for mythic knowledge from fields reserved for scientific rationality. The idealist or positivist version of the metaphysics of history had an answer for all of these problems: it conceived of history as a single progressive process of *Aufklärung* and emancipation of reason. The process of emancipation of reason, however, went far beyond the expectations of both idealism and positivism. A vast number of peoples and cultures spoke up on the world's stage, and it gradually became impossible to believe that history was an unitary process with a continuous development toward a *telos*. The coming true of the universality of history made universal history impossible.?! Even the idea that the historical process could conceive of itself as *Aufklärung* – as the liberation of reason from the shadows of mythic knowledge – lost its legitimacy, and demythisation was recognised as being itself a myth.

Myth and the Post-Modern

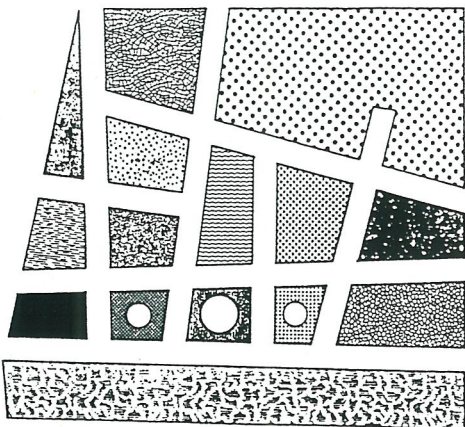
Since the discovery of the mythic nature of demythisation fails, then, to legitimise the three approaches to myth we have described, it follows that to demythise demythisation does not mean to restore the privileges of myth – if only because, among the myths whose validity we must recognise, there is the myth of reason and its progress in history. Demythisation, or the idea of history as a process of emancipation of reason, is not something that can be exorcised so easily. Nietzsche already demonstrated that,

when the value of truth itself is shown to be a belief founded on vital needs (and is therefore an 'error'), previous errors are not simply restored to their former position. As he says in *The Gay Science* (aphorism no. 54), to go on dreaming with the knowledge that you are dreaming is not the same thing as pure and simple dreaming. The same can be said for demythisation: if we want to be faithful to our historical experience, we must realise that our relationship with myth, once demythisation itself has been proven to be a myth, will not be restored to its original state, but will remain marked by this very experience. A theory of the presence of myth in contemporary culture must take this as its point of departure.?! Nietzsche's remark in *The Gay Science* is not just a philosophical paradox; it is the expression of one of

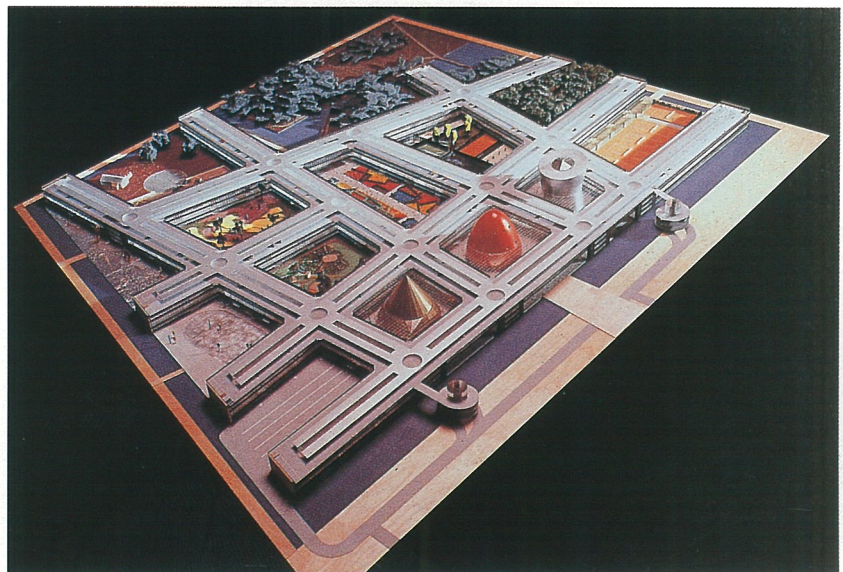
?! 'Maintenant je sais; je sais qu'on sais jamais?' (Jean Gabin)

When even demythisation is unmasked as myth, myth itself recovers its legitimacy, but only within the framework of a generalised, weakened experience of truth.

the fundamental aspects of the destiny of our culture, one that could also be called 'secularisation'. In this term we find the two elements of Nietzsche's paradox – to know that one is dreaming and yet to continue dreaming. The secularisation of the European spirit over the last few centuries is the result not only of the discovery and demystification of the 'errors' of religion, but also of the survival of those errors in different, and in a certain sense degraded, forms. A secularised culture is not a culture that has



Tendencies of fascism in The Netherlands, Willem Jan Neutelings and Frank Roodbeen, European Patent Office, competition entry, 1989



Myth and the Fate of Secularisation

simply left behind the religious contents of its tradition; it is one that continues to live them as traces, as models that are hidden and disfigured but nonetheless profoundly present.?! These ideas are seen clearly in the works of Max Weber. Modern capitalism does not create itself out of a rejection of the Christian medieval tradition, but instead becomes its 'transformed' application. Löwith's research on modern historicism leads in the same essential direction: the various metaphysics of history, up until Hegel, Marx, and Comte, are only 'interpretations' (deprived of the original theological context) of the Hebraic-Christian theology of history.★?! Not so much in Löwith as in Weber, though, or as in Tönnies's opposition between 'community' and 'society', we find that gain and loss are inseparably bound together in the process by which modernity (understood as industrial capitalism in Weber, or, in Tönnies, as a society no longer based on organic relations) detaches itself from its original religious foundations. Modernisation does not occur because tradition is abandoned, but rather because of the appearance of a sort of ironic interpretation of it, or distortion. Heidegger speaks, in a somewhat similar sense, of *Verwindung*.★ The latter preserves tradition but also, to a degree, deprives it of its content. Both Norbert Elias's argument about the history of European civilisation, and Rene Girard's thesis about violence and the sacred (and about Christianity as a process of desacralisation), appear to be quite close to this notion of secularisation.★

?! So, secularisation isn't the right word, since we keep detecting a metaphysical dimension. However, human consciousness might develop to the point that the myth becomes obsolete, might it not? Couldn't the pacification and mitigation of various polarities eventually create a condition in which Artificial Intelligence manages the world, ushering human kind into an endless era of ennui. Wouldn't that be the one and only real secularisation? The one already suggested by the term since its coining.

?! One might state that capitalism is absolutely indifferent to this tradition. Disregarding the metaphysical dimension, it elects and applies the profitable aspects only. Hence, capitalism could be declared the destroyer of fundamental (religious, metaphysical, even ideological) truths. So capitalism is not about presence or absence of religion or philosophical certainty of some kind; it lives of its created interchangeability of any value. Wouldn't it be more adequate to say that the disrooting nature of capitalism turned its historical roots in tradition into an irrelevancy, a neglectable quantity?

★ See Loewith, K., *Meaning in History*, Chicago 1949.
 ★ On the notion of *Verwindung*, see especially Heidegger, M., *Überwindung der Metaphysik, in Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Pfullingen 1954.
 ★ See especially Elias, N., *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (1937) vol. 1, 1969: vol. 11, 1980, Girard, R., *Des choses cacheés depuis la fondation du monde*, Paris 1978. It is hardly necessary to add that neither Elias nor, especially, Girard drew the same conclusions from their work that we try to draw here.

?! George Simmel links this phenomenon with the rise of mass society in the metropolis; and with the inherent blasé attitude needed for survival, along with the impact of money on the notion of quality. In your opinion, certain phenomena might change their appearance, however remaining intrinsically the same. But how does one reconcile this with the irreversible processes of urbanisation and quantification of existence, monetary units, i.e. dollars?

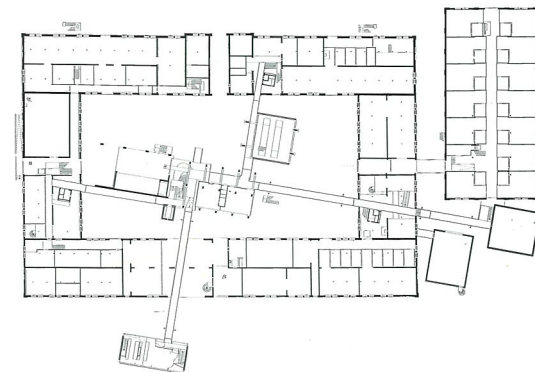
For Elias the modern process of civilisation develops when power and the use of force are concentrated first in the figure of the sovereign, then in the absolute state, and finally in the constitutional state. In the succession of these phases, the collective consciousness undergoes a radical transformation: the individual subject, in all social classes, internalises the 'good manners' of the courtier, who had been the first to renounce the use of force in favour of the sovereign. Passions are no longer as strong and open as they were in past periods. Although existence has lost some of its liveliness and colour, however, it has acquired a greater degree of security and formalisation. Here as well we see that progress is accompanied by a lesser degree of intensity of experience, or by a sort of emptying-out or dilution of experience.

?! Girard is concerned instead with civilisation in general. According to him, its path goes from the birth of the sacred – which exorcises universal human violence by concentrating it on the sacrificial victim, but nonetheless allows it to survive as the basis of all institutions – to its demystification by the Old Testament and Jesus Christ. Christ shows that the sacred is violence, and opens the way to a new human history that can be called 'secularised' (even if this goes against Girard's own terminology).

Modern European culture is tied to its own religious and mythical past, not only by a relationship of overcoming and emancipation, but also, inseparably, by a relationship of preservation-distortion-dilution. Progress has a sort of nostalgic nature, as classicism and romanticism have taught us. The meaning of this nostalgia becomes manifest only when the experience of demythisation is pursued as far as possi-



Tendencies of fascism in The Netherlands, Koen van Velsen, State Academy of Fine Arts, Amsterdam, 1992



?! Risking a deep sigh of yours: you give ample evidence of awareness pertaining to shortcomings of philosophical system construction. In order to uphold the system, the constructors need to delete many a valuable issue/aspects. On the other hand, wouldn't one say that a counsel's speech on 'weak thought' diminishes the incentives for strong action?

ble. When even demythisation is unmasked as myth, myth itself recovers its legitimacy, but only within the framework of a generalised, 'weakened' experience of truth. The presence of myth in contemporary culture does not stand in opposition to modernisation; it is instead a consequence of modernisation, and should be seen as modernisation's ultimate point of arrival, at least up until now. Moreover, the moment of the demythisation of demythisation can be considered the true and proper moment of transition from the modern to the post-modern. It is in Nietzsche that this transition takes place in its most explicit philosophical form. After Nietzsche, and after radical demythisation, the experience of truth simply can no longer be the same as before, for there is no longer any apodictic evidence of the kind in which thinkers, during the era of metaphysics, sought to find a *fundamentum absolutum et inconsumsum*. The Post-Modern subject, when it turns toward itself and searches its consciousness, is confronted not by the certainty of the Cartesian *cogito*, but by the *intermittences du coeur* described by Proust, the récits produced by the mass media, or the *mythologies* rediscovered by psychoanalysis.

It is precisely this experience that the 'return' of myth in our culture and in our language tries to capture, certainly not that of a mythical primitive culture uncontaminated by modernisation and rationalism. Only in this sense – through a weakening of the notion of truth – can myth be understood to point toward the overcoming of the opposition between rationalism and irrationalism, and to open a possible new direction for contemporary thought. **?!**