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Psychologization or the discontents of psychoanalysis

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Psychologization or the discontents of psychoanalysis

Abstract

This article explores the possibility of a debate between psychoanalysis and the human sciences and, in particular, between psychoanalysis and psychology. Psychoanalysis's particular view on subjectivity values fiction (*truth having the structure of fiction*) as a constitutive dimension of personal and social reality. In contrast, the mainstream psy-sciences threaten to remain caught in the attempt to unmask things as they really are (eg, hard neurobiological reality), thus risking losing the subjective dimension as such. Drawing on examples of phenomena of psychologization (in reality TV and in contemporary discourses of parent and child education) the author spells out the different, but eventually and necessarily intertwined, responses of psychoanalysis and psychology to modernity and modern subjectivity.

Introduction: Fiction as Fiction

Discussing literature and psychoanalysis, the philosopher De Kesel pleads for a presence for psychoanalysis in the cultural and scientific fields.¹ He argues that it is high time to debate the grounding principles of the human sciences – and what exactly these are. He goes on that we are not far from the point where what we might understand as *reality* will be replaced by image culture, leaving no space whatsoever for approaches valuing the discursive dimension of human reality. De Kesel contends that we should strive to understand *reality* beyond the field of images, and, at the risk of sounding strange, he makes a plea for the recognition of *fiction as fiction*, a recognition that is taken seriously, he argues, only in the fields of psychoanalysis and literature. Such a recognition does

¹ M. De Kesel, "Delphi revisited: Over literatuur en psychoanalyse," in *Over de schreef - Psychoanalyse & Literatuur*, ed. J. Houppermans (Amsterdam: Dutch University Press, 2005).

not occur in the field of psychology or in any of the myriad ways that psychology has extended itself into everyday life (which I refer to here as *psychologization*).

The theoretical and practical field related to the psychological is not confined to particular sites of professional intervention but traverses the social itself.² Precisely because of the ubiquity of what Ingleby and others refer to as the “psy-factor” and “psy-matters” in terrains such as education, professional matters, and even politics, the cultural, scientific and political stakes of any debate on the principles that ground psychology and those which ground psychoanalysis are very high. Before I discuss what might be the terms of such a debate, unraveling the notion of *fiction as fiction* will help to elucidate the epistemological claims of psychoanalysis and those of the human sciences. Three central psychoanalytic principles guide us through this paper and help us to answer what is perhaps the most crucial question of the debate: is such a debate even possible? As I discuss each psychoanalytic principle, I contrast it with the kinds of knowledge claims found in the psy-sciences and disseminated more broadly throughout the contemporary social world. My examples of the latter are drawn from reality-TV as well as from contemporary discourses of parent and child education.

The first psychoanalytic principle to be explored is that *truth has the structure of fiction*. It is clear that both literature and psychoanalysis consider fiction as a substantial and constitutional dimension of human and social reality. In Lacanian psychoanalysis language is attributed a central role in the experience both of the self and of reality, and here fiction necessarily enters the field. As Jacques-Alain Miller puts it, central to the psychoanalytic perspective is that the mere fact that one speaks always already transforms *what is* into a fiction.³ Speaking as such means that reality is necessarily discursive and, thus, necessarily fictional. Therefore, Lacan’s well-known axiom that the “truth has the structure of fiction”⁴ should not be misconstrued as suggesting that beneath the discursive layer the actual state of affairs or some bedrock of the real could be laid bare. In this respect Alenka Zupančič writes that it is exactly the trope of ‘fiction-within-fiction’ (the story within the story) which exposes “the moment where fiction is faced with its own exterior at its interior.”⁵

So fiction as fiction means that it is only within the interior of fiction itself that something of the (always exterior) truth is given form. Think of Levi-Strauss’s analysis,

² See: D. Ingleby, "The ambivalence of psychoanalysis."

³ J. A. Miller, "A contribution of the schizophrenic to the psychoanalytic clinic," *Symptom* 2(2002), <http://www.lacan.com/contributionf.htm>.

⁴ J. Lacan, *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*, ed. J. A. Miller, trans. D. Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), 12.

⁵ A. Zupančič, "A perfect place to die: Theatre in Hitchcock’s films," in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan but Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*, ed. S. Žižek (London: Verso, 1992), 82.

discussed by Žižek, of how in the Winnebago tribe the spatial disposition of the buildings of the village is experienced differently by the tribe's two subgroups.⁶ Both groups perceive the village as a circle but, whereas for one subgroup there is within this circle another circle of central houses, the other subgroup describes the ground-plan in terms of a dividing line splitting the village down the middle. Žižek stresses that Levi- Strauss's example should in no way entice us into cultural relativism, a stance that would boil down to viewing the two 'relatively' different accounts as distortions of an objective and actual layout of the buildings. Rather, what is in play here is a hidden; traumatic kernel,' as Žižek puts it, a social antagonism that points to the structural impossibility of the community's maintaining itself as a harmonious unity. This social antagonism distorts the tribe members' view of the actual arrangement of the houses.⁷ Thus, the differences in the perception of the village ground-plan is the truth of the social antagonism, which cannot but constitute itself through fictional articulations.

We come now to the second psychoanalytic principle contained in *fiction as fiction: reflexivity*. Psychoanalysis as such is alien to the simple *reflective* scheme of 'look at yourself; this is the reality behind your illusions'. Concerning the Winnebago village, a psychoanalytic stance does not envisage a reflective confrontation of the villagers with their mythical distortions of the actual ground plan. In contrast, the psychoanalytical principle is *reflexivity*, as it testifies to an essential asymmetry, exemplified here in the social antagonism contained in the two architectural accounts of the villagers. Psychoanalysis envisions the paradoxical reflexive movement itself. Or, as De Kesel argues concerning literature, if a novel or a poem can fundamentally touch us, it is because it can show us who we are, not directly, but in a sphinxlike enigmatic question.⁸ While reflection presupposes a unified agent looking at itself as the (neuro)psychological being it is said to be, reflexivity returns us to ourselves as an enigma. The inward -looking subject always at some point suddenly meets his own gaze. For Lacan, as Felman argues, Freud's inaugural step was precisely to move away from the classical psychological and philosophical epistemology of self-identity: psychoanalysis's unprecedented mode of reflexivity necessarily incorporates a passage through the Other, not as a reflection of the self but as a radical difference from the self.⁹ The subject, passing through the Other, "returns to itself without quite being able to rejoin itself."¹⁰ Reflexivity is untotalizable, producing a

⁶ S. Žižek, *The Parallax View*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25–26.

⁸ M. De Kesel, "Delphi revisited: Over literatuur en psychoanalyse."

⁹ S. Felman, "The Originality of Jacques Lacan," *Poetics Today* 2, no. 1b (1980).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

fundamental ignorance of the subject.¹¹ This brings us to the next psychoanalytic principle, as it is exactly this ignorance, this lack, that is constitutive of subjectivity.

The third central principle can be inferred from De Kesel's argument that the task of psychoanalysis is to reintroduce the conception of subjectivity precisely by opposing knowledge to the dimension of truth: truth as "the blind ground upon which knowledge rests."¹² De Kesel claims that, whenever today's naive scientism unconditionally claims the solidity of established knowledge, the subject is banished. The psychoanalytic principle of *fiction as fiction*, in contrast, values the place and the momentum of the crack within the firmness of knowledge. Just consider the importance of the lapsus (slip of the tongue), the dream and the symptom: they are for psychoanalysis the very places where the subject appears. Thus, this subjective space/moment is always also a non-space/moment. The subject cannot but claim subjectivity from a blind point beyond its subjectivity, beyond all possible reflective knowledge of itself. By referring to Oedipus, De Kesel illustrates this 'blind ground upon which knowledge rests' as constitutive of subjectivity. Oedipus is the tragic figure for whom knowledge (the prediction that he will kill his father and sleep with his mother) functions exactly as a blind spot. Oedipus becomes the *subject* – the bearer – of this knowledge only when it explodes in his face as a horrible truth. That is the moment Oedipus understands that, by trying to outrun his fate, he has realised it. For psychoanalysis, there is an intricate bond among knowledge, blindness and truth:

In the end, the blind spot is our 'bearer', our 'subject'. Psychoanalytic theory wants to be a knowledge that acknowledges that blindness without wanting to erase it, a knowledge that in a conscious way is built on the irreducibility of this blind *un-knowledge*.¹³

If these are the principles of a psychoanalytic view of subjectivity, the question we must grapple with is, will the proposed debate between psychoanalysis and the human sciences not falter on psychoanalysis' particular view of truth and knowledge? Where psychology supposes an axis of knowledge–nonknowledge, psychoanalysis' peculiar stance is to situate subjectivity on the axis knowledge– *unknowledge*. Thus, where dominant contemporary views on human nature claim the hard knowledge of, for example, the neurobiological substrate, considering this knowledge useful and even emancipatory, the three psychoanalytic principles subvert this claim or at least put it into question.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² M. De Kesel, "Delphi revisited: Over literatuur en psychoanalyse," 76, my translation.

¹³ Ibid., 76, my translation.

Starting from the principle of a blind *unknowledge*, the fundamental critique on the psychosciences might be that they are not up to the task of taking subjectivity seriously.

To clarify, let me spell out the different, but eventually and necessarily intertwined, responses of psychoanalysis and psychology to modernity and modern subjectivity. Modernity is characterized by a structural shift in the place of knowledge, in the way human beings experience the truth of the world, of others and of themselves. One can argue that the massive objectivations of the modern sciences decisively changed subjectivity as human beings and their lifeworld came almost completely if not totally under the jurisdiction of Academia. No longer grounded in mythology or religion, the riddle of subjectivity became the question of, in the words of Giorgio Agamben, what does it mean to be subject to desubjectivation?¹⁴ Put differently, what does it mean to be a human being in a world of forces, synaptic exchanges and evolutionary patterns? Psychology, whose ambition is to be the keystone of the project of the modern sciences, is one attempt to deal with modern subjectivity. Psychoanalysis is another one. Or is it not?

The following sections scrutinize the three psychoanalytic principles in light of what De Kesel calls the rise of image culture within the cultural and scientific fields.¹⁵ Each section is guided by two phenomena by which psychology thoroughly permeates everyday life. The first is the phenomenon of psychotainment. Although De Kesel puts forward literature as a site where subjectivity is at stake,¹⁶ Reality TV as *psycho-television* seems a more contemporary locus of the fictionalization and staging of postmodern man's psychology and subjectivity. The second set of examples comes from discourses about parenting and education, not only important topics on Reality TV, but, in general, crucial fields to be considered in the proposed debate. These two examples do not merely concern the cultural application of the psy-sciences. Psychologization is far from just being the unhappy overflow of the psy-sciences into the social. Indeed, the examples reveal the very epistemic paradoxes of the psy-sciences, and, more crucially, they lay bare the ontological deadlocks constitutive of modern subjectivity as such. That the psy-complex – defined by Ingleby as an ensemble of agencies traversing the family, school, work place and thus the social itself¹⁷ – plays a leading role in the folding of science into the cultural sphere (as in a Moebius band), should prompt psychoanalysis to initiate the almost absent debate.

¹⁴ G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* (New York: Zone books, 2002), 142.

¹⁵ M. De Kesel, "Delphi revisited: Over literatuur en psychoanalyse."

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ D. Ingleby, "The ambivalence of psychoanalysis," 43.

De Kesel argues that where the psychoanalytic stance of *fiction as fiction* is rejected, image culture takes over, for if fiction is denied its central role in the constitution of subjectivity, the image instead is regarded as the place of the truth.¹⁸ In other words, it is precisely where one claims to go beyond discursive construction to the 'bare facts' that one will encounter the manifestations of the imaginary and the fantasmatic. Or, to put it in terms of the Lacanian trinity,¹⁹ when one attempts to bypass the Symbolic to reach the unmediated Real, one will necessarily succumb to the mirages of the Imaginary. *Psychotainment* shows on television are a telling example of how the denial of *fiction as fiction* opens up the field of the imaginary. Take, for example, programmes on educational problems where therapists are linked to parents with a radio device so as to provide support and advice in *real time*. Shows like *Little Angels* (BBC3 in the UK) and *Schatjes* (EO in the Netherlands) present us with therapists who, while following the parent-child interactions on a little monitor, correct inadequate parental behaviour by whispering the right lines in the parent's ear. Supporters of educational television say that these programmes successfully provide parents with "specific information and an accurate model that would enable them to put suggested strategies into practice."²⁰

This kind of empowerment of the parent role should be taken very literally. When there is a *role* to play, this can only mean that there is a *script*, one that is laid down in the scientific knowledge of the psy-theories. Here we are very close to a fictionalization, if not a virtualization, of reality. It is important to see that this format is employed not only for educational television but also for many mainstream psycho-educational and therapeutic practices. The therapist here is the prompter and director, acting on behalf of 'science'; the therapist provides us with 'effective strategies' and 'accurate models' to ensure that we have our lines right. For Sanders *et al*, who champion parenting television, the mass media are the *via regia* to making as many parents as possible acquainted with "a general understanding of social learning theories."²¹ Sanders and colleagues furthermore contend that, for mass media parenting programmes to be effective, they have to get parents "to adopt a self-regulatory process that involve[s] self-monitoring."²²

¹⁸ M. De Kesel, "Delphi revisited: Over literatuur en psychoanalyse."

¹⁹ J. Lacan, "Le séminaire Livre XXII: R.S.I., 1974-1975," *Ornicar*, no. 2, 3, 4 & 5 (1975).

²⁰ M. R. Sanders, D. T. Montgomery, and M. L. Brechman-Toussaint, "The mass media and the prevention of child behavior problems: the evaluation of a television series to promote positive outcomes for parents and their children," *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines* 41, no. 7 (2000): 940.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 945.

²² *Ibid.*, 940.

If psychoanalysis wants to debate the assumptions of the psy-complex regarding subjectivity, it will have to contend with the far-reaching tendencies of psychologization. It will have to confront the way the omnipresent psy-sciences suffocate the dimension of *fiction as fiction* by suffusing social reality not only with signifiers but, above all, with discursive schemes assigning subject positions and scripting the interactions. Indeed, despite the claim for academic diversity, the theories and strategies of today's psy-complex are informed by an increasingly narrow range of models (foremost being cognitive-behavioural, neurobiological and evolutionary thinking). As Hendrick remarks, there is a fundamental mismatch between the new, and potentially liberating, academic approaches to conceptions of childhood – for example, the promotion of democratisation in the family and participation in education – and the actual practices of children's lives and relevant government policies.²³ Regarding these policies, consider, for instance, the professionalization of many of the care-professions,²⁴ which brings with it a heightened presence of psy-theories, not only in the curricula but also in everyday praxis. Psychologization thus also seems to be an official policy. In Flanders, for example, the government explicitly promotes the Triple P-method,²⁵ a typical CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) approach, as the key method for parenting support programmes. Official policy holds that every urbanized area should have its Triple P 'parenting support shop' (sic). In this way the psy-apparatus seems to have become just as omnipresent as the ecclesiastical apparatus was in the past,²⁶ and, although it may lack its central papal authority, it is nonetheless powered by a strongly uniform psychologising discourse.

The similarities between the psy-apparatus and the once omnipresent church might also be seen from another perspective. Is there not a parallel between the low estimation put on earthly life by Christian doctrine and human sciences' battle against what we might call *random* life? Just as Freud criticized religion for devaluing earthly life in favour of pious life and, above all, the afterlife,²⁷ so too does the psy-complex attempt to get rid of plain and unsophisticated earthly life. For example, the Flemish minister of

²³ H. Hendrick, "Optimism and Hope versus Anxiety and Narcissism: Some Thoughts on Children's Welfare Yesterday and Today," *History of Education* 36, no. 6 (2007): 747.

²⁴ E.g. early childcare; see: J. Peeters, *The construction of a new profession: A European perspective on professionalism in Early Childhood Education and Care* (Amsterdam: SWP Publishers, 2008).

²⁵ M. R. Sanders, "Triple P-Positive Parenting Program: Towards an empirically validated multilevel parenting and family support strategy for the prevention of behavior and emotional problems in children," *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* 2, no. 2 (1999).

²⁶ J. De Vos, "Psychologisation: Psychoanalysis' (Double) Political Appointment with History, The Accoyer Amendment Revisited."

²⁷ S. Freud, "Civilization and its discontents," in *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud: vol. XXI*, ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, [1930a]1955), 84.

education once pleaded for better sex education; he contended that the fact that there are still girls who blush when the subject is brought up in class means that there are still taboos to be tackled.²⁸ To blush with shame warrants an educational if not therapeutic intervention. Mainstream psychology's aim is to get rid of every antagonism. The subjective reasons why someone would blush – which could be expressed only in a discursive and thus fictional account – are promptly set aside to promote an imaginary ideal image of sexual maturity. Similarly we find today a strange uneasiness or even disdain for any awkwardness, triteness or everyday clumsiness about bullying, multiculturalism, gender problems and the like. The manifold psycho-pedagogical programmes in schools and elsewhere virulently want to abolish the redundant subjective element and its fictional idiosyncrasies. Teachers are, for example, prompted to use the educational *mourning box* when a pupil is confronted with the death of a relative.²⁹ No more awkward, random reactions, only those allowed by the *mourning box* code.

To summarize, mainstream psychology threatens to script, virtualise and hence suffocate subjectivity, and this is what unites today's psychotainment with today's actual psycho-social practices. However, if we want to defend the notion of *truth structured as fiction*, must we not still go one step further and acknowledge that psychoanalysis too plays its part in feeding image culture, that is has its own version of psychotainment, which has (or has had) an equally important influence on constructing subjectivities? Yes, perhaps, but the dramatic imagery of Freudian psychoanalysis (*grand hysteria*, incest, castration) is still quite different from contemporary psychology's promotion of a *flattened self*,³⁰ defined by its molecular forces, behavioural patterns and evolutionary logics. Is, then, the stake of the debate the choice between, on one hand, the rather shallow image culture of the mainstream psy-sciences as it is exemplified in Reality TV and, on the other hand, the flamboyant imagery of psychoanalysis?

Put differently, the choice is one between psychotainment, and Hitchcock, to take a paradigmatic example of *psychoanalytic psychotainment*. One can claim, however, that the alternatives are not equivalent. Hitchcock's very obvious Freudian world is far removed from Reality TV's construction of reality using textbook psychology scripts. Hitchcock can be said to remain within the structure of *fiction as fiction*: he fictionalizes psychoanalytic imagery, and in this movement he does more than just illustrate psychoanalysis. Hitchcock's characters are not illustrations of psychoanalytic theory; they are always

²⁸ L. Jonckheere, "Problemen bij de 'implementatie' van het decreet betreffende de Integrale Kwaliteitszorg in de Verzorgings- en Welzijnsvoorzieningen," *Verslag van de Conversatie van de Kring voor Psychoanalyse van de New Lacanian School*(2004), <http://www.forumpsy.org/be/conversatie.resume.htm>.

²⁹ E. Verliefde et al., *A World Full of Comfort: A Play Set for Children from 5 to 12 for Working on Losses* (Leuven: CEGO, 2006).

³⁰ N. Rose, "Psychology as a Social Science," 460.

subjectivized at some odd point, a point *jenseits* or beyond Freud. Žižek calls this the Hitchcockian *sinthom(e)*:

[T]he birds do not 'signify,' they do not 'symbolize' blocked sexual relations, the 'possessive' mother, and so on; they are, rather, the making present in the real, the objectivization, the incarnation of the fact that, on the symbolizing level, something 'has not worked out', in short, the objectivization-positivization of a failed symbolization.³¹

This so-called Hitchcockian stain is that certain something in the cinematic *écriture* and thus *outside* the script that creates the typical Hitchcock suspense. These are moments when the flow of the psychology of the characters or the plot in general is disrupted so as to let the dimension of subjectivity in. Fiction is thus as such an important field of praxis of psychoanalysis – informing psychoanalysis and being informed by psychoanalysis – influencing importantly the shaping of subjectivities. But where psychoanalysis operationalizes fiction *as fiction*, it finds itself on ground very different from that of the mainstream psy-sciences.

Reflexivity Versus the (Meta)Reflectivity of the Psy-sciences

The next psychoanalytic principle we have to situate within the cultural and scientific field is reflexivity. As we look at today's *really existing* sociopsychological practices, it is clear that not reflexivity but reflectivity is the dominant paradigm. Reflectivity departs from an unproblematized symmetry between, on one hand, a totalizable and unified individual, and, on the other, an equally unified and clear-cut reality of the social or the self on which to reflect. When De Kesel critiques today's naive scientism, which unconditionally claims the solidity of established knowledge, he also questions scientism's claim that it can attain a full and undistorted reflective picture of the social world and human beings.³² Again, Reality TV showcases this claim in an intensified form: just consider the slogan, *the human condition laid bare* of Zone Reality (a UK TV channel showing only reality programming) or the promotional catch-phrase of Reality TV in Flanders's *life as it is*.

How paradoxical this hunger for authentic life is becomes rapidly clear in mainstream conceptions of authenticity. For example, when Wright writes that "a sense of

³¹ S. Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*: 104.

³² M. De Kesel, "Delphi revisited: Over literatuur en psychoanalyse."

authenticity is one of our deepest psychological needs,"³³ she unwittingly testifies to the tautological character of reflectivity and its quest for authenticity, as she operationalizes *authenticity* as one of our most *authentic* needs. As Žižek says of those who preach the rediscovery of our true Self, their very style of repeating like an automaton the learned phrases contradicts their message.³⁴ This paradoxical injunction of self-reflection invokes religious imagery: the psy-expert who summons us to get in touch with our real feelings and our genuine selves seems to evoke the same feelings of super-ego guilt as those evoked by the priest. Consider also how Pupavac, speaking of Princess Diana's death, describes how therapeutic forms have taken the place of religious ceremonies as the predominant mode of performing cultural rites.³⁵ But here it is important not to miss the shift in reflectivity: it is clear that the participants in such psychologised rites are directly familiar with the body of knowledge in play. Interviewing a participant would generate the same signifiers and analysis proclaimed in the media by the psy-experts.

A closer look at the epistemology of self-reflection and its illusory principle of symmetry between the reflecting self and the self reflected on might help us to understand why religious imagery imposes itself so readily in these late-modern phenomena of psychologization. Let us depart from Vande Veire's analysis of how the Christian paradigm still pervades the Western media.³⁶ Drawing on Derrida, Vande Veire argues that religion is centred on the sacred, the absolute and the unassailable. In pagan cults sacrifices are demanded so as to secure this inaccessible sacredness of life. The sacrifice is the price one has to pay to gain access to the sacred, through a kind of ritualized profanation of the sacred. In Christianity, however, divine life no longer needs sacrifices: God has already made the ultimate sacrifice, which renders all human sacrifices irrelevant. Through his son, God has redeemed humanity. Although Christian civilisation needs no further sacrifices, Christians can restrict themselves to the regular invocation of Christ's sacrifice and spread the good news.

According to Vande Veire, this is the fundamental paradigm of Western culture. He analyses how the Christian paradigm, for example, thoroughly determines the daily TV-news. TV news anchor-persons represent redeemed humanity. They are calm, reasonable and sensible. In short, they represent the ideal witness of world events. From this redeemed position, they seem to be able to oversee the whole world; a fragmented and

³³ K. Wright, "Dare to be yourself," *Psychology Today Magazine*, no. May/June (2008), <http://psychologytoday.com/articles/pto-20080420-000001.xml>.

³⁴ S. Žižek, *The art of the ridiculous sublime: on David Lynch's Lost highway*.

³⁵ V. Pupavac, "Psychosocial interventions and the demoralization of humanitarianism," *Journal of Biosocial Science* 36, no. 04 (2004).

³⁶ F. Vande Veire, *Neem en eet, dit is je lichaam*.

dispersed world is brought to unity in the gaze of the TV news. The anchor-person, as it were, totalizes reality. In this way the spectator, identifying with the news anchor-person, also becomes an external witness of the world, empathizing and sympathizing with the whole of humanity. Dismayed, yet reserved, the news anchor-person and the viewer together reflect on how a part of humanity still has not understood the message of peace and reconciliation; they understand that the mission has not yet ended.

Here it is not difficult to transpose Vande Veire's analysis of reflectivity in the media to an analysis of the psy-complex. The psy-practitioner resembles the newscaster in his role as the sober, reserved but committed outsider, the one who bears liberating knowledge and yet is free from his own symptoms. The readymade role for both the newscaster and the psy-expert is that of the somehow detached, lucid and authentic person who is fully present with himself or herself. Furthermore, from their privileged external position, both newscaster and psy-expert claim to provide a total assessment of the world. Television presents the illusion of covering events completely, whereas psychology claims to fathom human beings in all their aspects. Psychology and the mass media are the heirs both of God's omniscient eye and of Bentham's Panopticon, providing the experience of unity and affinity with oneself and the world.

As we turn to the educational and parenting sphere, this omniscient reflective stance is clearly demonstrated in claims such as the one on the official website of Triple P, the CBT-educational method mentioned earlier:

We have the knowledge and evidence base to prove that Triple P works for many different families, in many different circumstances, with many different problems, in many different places!... Triple P ... helps solve current parenting problems and prevents future problems before they arise.³⁷

Not surprisingly, Triple P was the direct theoretical resource for British commercial television broadcaster ITV's parenting programme *Driving Mum and Dad Mad*.

It is important to recognize that psychotainment is not the result of an all-devouring media machine; nor is it a product of the unfortunate popularization and marketing of psychology. Rather, its popularity suggests that the paradigms of psychology occupy a central place in late-modern experience and that these paradigms are to be understood within the epistemology of reflectivity. The most crucial point here is, then, to grasp how in reflectivity the necessary passage through a corpus of knowledge – in Lacanian terms, through the Other – is structurally obfuscated. If a medium is a *representation apparatus*,³⁸ then psychology is one of today's most important media. It is this fact, that

³⁷ "Triple P," www.triplep.net

³⁸ F. Vande Veire, *Neem en eet, dit is je lichaam*.

psychology is a mediator rather than a science of behaviour, that must remain concealed. Notwithstanding that psy-knowledge plays a central role in making contemporary life intelligible and malleable, the decisive mediation of this corpus of knowledge is not acknowledged, as it is believed that the hard bedrock of the real is laid bare. Just consider how, for a medium obsessed with the *reality behind the illusion*, the psy-discourse becomes the central framework for revealing *the man behind the politician, the man behind the pop-star, the man behind the journalist*, and, finally, *the man behind the psychologist*. Here, however, mainstream psychology's reflectivity cannot but lead to paradoxes and tautologies. The aforementioned Wright, for example, writes, "Self-awareness encompasses an inventory of issues from the sublime to the profane, from knowing what food you like to how likely you are to quit smoking to whether you're feeling anxious or sad."³⁹

The supposedly unmediated authenticity turns out to be *knowledge*-mediated. The authentic person is supposed to be able to monitor his or her preferences, inclinations and feelings. Prompted to turn the psychological gaze upon ourselves, we are all called on to become our own psychologists.

But am I going too fast? Am I not neglecting how in contemporary praxis the place of knowledge is acknowledged and reflectivity has been traded in for a kind of meta-reflectivity? To return to the TV-news, consider, for example, how during a press conference the camera will often show other cameras and journalists at work, creating the illusion that the postmodern press actually lays bare and deconstructs its own production process. Similarly, the postmodern relativistic stance is realized in mainstream psychologists' claim not to be in possession of the whole truth, their laying bare of their method and their prompting clients to be their own experts. Often this *be-your-own-expert* stance results in paradoxical double-bind situations, as, for example, on the Triple P website, where you can read "kids don't come with an instruction manual" and "parenting now comes with an instruction manual."⁴⁰ Or: *of course you are the expert, but we psychologists are the experts in letting you know*.

In this way, both the media's and psychology's claim that they deconstruct their own discourse and position might actually be the ultimate fictionalizing of reality. In the faux deconstruction, the expert only masks his power and authority. The process of unveiling, therefore, does not alter anything. It does not liberate people but reconfirms their mediated, psychologized position as the almost redeemed spectators of the world and of themselves. Or, put differently: the reflective move does not empower since it reinforces the hegemonic discursive schemes and signifiers. The deconstructionist twist

³⁹ K. Wright, "Dare to be yourself".

⁴⁰ "Triple P".

thus only reaffirms the media and psychology in their function of making postmodern man experience himself, his environment and his historical moment as positive and significant. Stepping out of the medium is the medium itself.

On the other hand, if psychoanalysis pleads for the Freudian shift from reflectivity to reflexivity, then it is essential that, in the passage from the self to the self, what is returned to the self from the Other is, paradoxically, as Felman puts it, “the ignorance or the forgetfulness of its own message.”⁴¹ To grasp this notion, Vande Veire’s understanding of the media is enlightening. He writes that the media detracts from understanding by systematically simulating its own understanding of what it represents. Vande Veire stresses that, in this way, the media do not deprive us of an original way of understanding or authentic emotion for which we could long for nostalgically. Rather, by presenting us with an understandable world, they sever us from the basic human experience of ultimate and fundamental incomprehensibility; that which cannot be experienced as such and is beyond emotion.⁴² In the same way, mainstream psychology’s promise of complete understanding of oneself and of reconciliation with oneself, others and the world, not only suffocates each attempt to understand life in this complex, globalised world, but, foremost, it disavows the fundamental and structural failure of understanding. Is it, then, not inevitable that De Kesel’s call for a debate risks falling on deaf ears? But before deciding whether or not the debate is possible, let us turn to the third psychoanalytic principle: the structural link between the subject and ignorance, the idea of truth as “the blind ground upon which knowledge rests.”⁴³

The Blind Ground of Subjectivity and De-psychologisation

Mainstream psy-science’s denial of the fundamental and structural failure to be able to achieve self-understanding lays bare a central paradox in the contemporary processes of psychologization. The aim to unmask (and celebrate) *the human being and life as it is* risks making both humans and life disappear. Contemporary psychology is about genes, neurotransmitters and behaviour induced by cognitive or evolutionary patterns; it is psychology without the psyche. When that biogenetic paradigm is amended with cognitivebehavioural explanatory mechanisms – supposedly belonging to the realm of the psychological – it is only with the proviso that hard science eventually will disclose an

⁴¹ S. Felman, "The Originality of Jacques Lacan," 51.

⁴² F. Vande Veire, *Neem en eet, dit is je lichaam*: 224.

⁴³ M. De Kesel, "Delphi revisited: Over literatuur en psychoanalyse," 76, my translation.

underlying biogenetic cause for functioning. But, even where the biogenetic paradigm is explicitly rejected in the attempt to salvage psychological man beyond the biological substrate, the risk of falling back into a depsychologizing of subjectivity is imminent. Žižek, for example, writes that the psychologization of social life – the psychological manuals, the Oprah Winfrey style of public confession, politicians disclosing their emotionality – is but “the mask ... of its exact opposite, of the growing disintegration of the proper “psychological” dimension of authentic self-experience.”⁴⁴ For Žižek, psychologization makes humans into automatons, puppets repeating a prerecorded message, in other words, depsychologized humans. The paradox is that both biological determinism and its counterpart’s attempts to rehumanize man result in a depsychologization. So, although Rose speaks about “the waning of psychology” and the birth of the “neurochemical self”⁴⁵ it is important to see that this depsychologizing and desubjectivizing stance was always already an integral part of psychology.

The social impact of a psychology stripped bare of the mental factor should not be underestimated. For example, the so-called *attainment targets* in the field of education (defining what knowledge and skills a pupil should have at a given age), have an important psycho-social slant. Assessing such targets in Flanders, Roelands and Druine write, “The school is expected to pursue an optimal care system which gives every child maximum opportunity of a full and wellbalanced development of their personality.”⁴⁶ The attainment targets are saturated with psy-terminology; they refer to social skills, assertivity, the ability to speak about emotions (target three- to six-year-olds), and the ability to be respectful and tolerant.⁴⁷ Using these normative psychological models, current education is based on the premise that *life* can be taught. The major consequence is, paradoxically, that all the weight shifts from life itself to theoretical instruction. Pupils are regarded as students of psychology. Take, for instance, the Box Full of Feelings, where educational material encourages children to “analyze the posters and discover how emotions are expressed through mimic and posture.”⁴⁸ Does one not end up here with a Class Full of Little Psychologists? Žižek’s depsychologized automaton⁴⁹ is realised through a schooling in psychology. This educational stance parallels the fact that contemporary psychotherapy is often reduced to a supplement to medication and becomes little more than *psycho-education*, literally, education in the theories of psychology.

⁴⁴ S. Žižek, *The art of the ridiculous sublime: on David Lynch's Lost highway*: 32.

⁴⁵ N. Rose, "Psychology as a Social Science," 460.

⁴⁶ J. Roelands and N. Druine, "Belgium," 79.

⁴⁷ See: J. De Vos, "From Panopticon to Pan-psychologisation."

⁴⁸ M. Kog, J. Moons, and L. Depondt, *A box full of feelings. A playset for children from 3 to 8*.

⁴⁹ S. Žižek, *The art of the ridiculous sublime: on David Lynch's Lost highway*.

The most clear-cut case of the kind of depsychologized psychology that turns to psycho-education is found in the syndrome called ADHD. Even though ADHD is considered to be a medical disorder, it is in no way medically diagnosable. The widespread critique of ADHD as a social construct⁵⁰ notwithstanding, ADHD remains a very powerful fiction clearly capable of becoming reality. ADHD owes its prominent position to its being grounded in a strong educational discourse. Since the 1980s, when it was 'voted into existence' as a category of the DSM,⁵¹ massive information and education campaigns to inform the public have been successfully implemented by governmental and other agencies. It is logical that parents and adults in caring relationships with a child have to be educated on the subject of ADHD, for the DSM-diagnosis of ADHD is based on third-party accounts. Also the aforementioned progressive professionalization of the care-professions encouraged early-childcare workers, nurses, welfare officers and others to become acquainted with a specific way of focusing on the *behaviour* of children and to thus recognize ADHD-related disorders. Even on the level of treatment, the same educational, de-psychologizing discourse is present:

Education and advice should be the base of any treatment. One should interview parents, child and – ideally – the teacher or nurse, about their health beliefs and causal and control attributions; and inform them all about hyperkinetic disorders – especially symptoms, aetiology, clinical course, prognosis and treatment. y Children who are old enough should be educated about self-observation and self-management.⁵²

So, next to the first-line medical treatment, everyone including the child is subjected to theory administered by the psy-practitioner (with the first and most important lesson that ADHD is a disorder with no psychic determination whatsoever). ADHD illustrates how the scientism of the human sciences and the unconditional claim, to which De Kesel points, for the solidity of its established knowledge⁵³ penetrates not only academic discourse but also the whole of society. The knowledge of the mainstream psy-sciences, supposed to be emancipating and empowering, is spread through schools, parental courses, HRM-departments in companies, governmental campaigns and the media. It is important to recognize that, in this respect, it is irrelevant whether or not the widely spread theoretical insights of the psy-sciences are correct. What is crucial is that in contemporary culture any attempt at understanding oneself and the world is diverted to a (de)psychologizing gaze. This totalizing grip of scientism denies any blind spot in the

⁵⁰ See for example S. Timimi and N. Radcliffe, "The Rise and Rise of ADHD."

⁵¹ Ibid., 64.

⁵² E. Taylor et al., "European clinical guidelines for hyperkinetic disorder—first upgrade," 13.

⁵³ M. De Kesel, "Delphi revisited: Over literatuur en psychoanalyse."

imposed self-reflection and condemns the postmodern subject to the sterile and desubjectivised position of the pupil in psychology.

But – and here we come to the crux of the matter – if psychologization processes generate a depsychologised subject, a zero-level of subjectivity, the radical and troubling conclusion cannot but be that in this way the mainstream psy-sciences actually realize the very proposition of psychoanalysis. For the psychologised subject is the embodiment of the ignorance or the forgetfulness constitutive of subjectivity. Thus, the (de)psychologised subject is the blind ground of the subject of psychoanalysis. But, does this not seriously question whether psychoanalysis can be the protagonist that, assessing how serious the situation is, urgently invites the human sciences to a debate?

Conclusions: A Debate Beyond the Symbiosis

While scrutinizing De Kesel's call for a debate on the epistemological assumptions of the psy-sciences and psychoanalytic principles, we found in every case that each holds an opposite position. To remain within this antagonistic scheme is to be faced with the following problem: how can the alleged *misunderstandings* of mainstream psychology be preferred over the *truth* of psychoanalysis? In other words, the problem would be presented as one of understanding that in academia, psy-praxis and the broader culture, psychoanalysis seems to have lost ground to problematical neurobiological, cognitive-behavioural and social constructivist approaches. Psychoanalysis claims to be the sole viable alternative to deterministic approaches to subjectivity, but the imagery with which its claims are made is the prophet preaching in the desert in vain or a tried and condemned Socrates uttering his last public defence for a few last adherents.

Perhaps we have to understand this image of psychoanalysis as *the last man standing* in yet another way. Maybe psychoanalysis finds itself surrounded by only a few faithful because we are dealing here with a Jekyll-and-Hyde constellation. Just as Dr. Jekyll will never meet Mr. Hyde, the psychoanalyst cannot but find himself alone in the debate. The expected other is not so much the external enemy but, rather, the psychoanalyst's own uncanny double. If, as Erica Burman suggests, psychoanalysis has, in the course of history, become the repressed other of psychology,⁵⁴ then the only way to understand the nature of that repression is to question what psychology is for psychoanalysis. This question needs to be understood historically. Psychoanalysis is without doubt the first

⁵⁴ E. Burman, *Deconstructing developmental psychology* (London: Routledge, 1994).

serious attempt to grasp the psychological subject spawned by modernity.⁵⁵ This attempt, however, must fail, not because of the idiosyncrasies of Freud or of psychoanalysis, but because the project of modernity itself is paradoxical.

The Cartesian subject, the subject of modernity, is constituted on the paradox of reflexivity. Descartes's *cogito* engendered the never-ending sequence of *to know that one knows that one knows*. Cartesianism could in this way never fulfil the promise of an ontological grounding of modern subjectivity. While Descartes and his followers still relied on God as the keystone of subjectivity (eg, Malebranche's occasionalism), a decisive step in the history of Western academia was to discard Cartesian dualism and to consider the Cartesian soul, the *cogito*, as being part of *res extensa*, part of the material world. Man thus became *Machine Man*.⁵⁶ It can be claimed that from then on every attempt to find an agent or subject inside man could lead only to a repetition of reductionisms and determinisms.

It is exactly this deadlock of modern subjectivity that Freudian theory tried to conceptualize in such concepts as the bedrock of castration, the death drive, polymorphous sexuality, and so on. However, one can argue that what is decisive for modernity is the disappearance of the juxtaposition of, on one hand, the truth of the Delphi oracle (mythical and divine) and, on the other, the riddle of the Sphinx, which teases out human knowledge and theory. In modernity the gap between truth and knowledge, which is what produces the classical subjectivity of the Oedipus figure, moves to other grounds. In the Freudian understanding of modern subjectivity, truth is no longer situated in the mythical and religious realms, but rather in the sphere of the subjective and the psychological. Truth here becomes, to use De Kesel's phrase, the Freudian *skandalons*.⁵⁷ René Girard already used the Greek word *skandalon* (an obstacle that one cannot avoid) to understand Freud's conceptualisation of desire: linked to a particular obstacle, desire always return to what it collides with.⁵⁸ Consider, for example, the Freudian understanding of repetition and compulsion. These *skandalons* not only point to the problematic status of the modern subject, which always escapes and defies itself and never reaches full being; they also prevent psychoanalysis – as one of the crucial theories of modernity – from reaching full being, from becoming a science or, more precisely, from becoming psychology. Moreover, it is this structural failure of psychoanalysis that be-

⁵⁵ J. De Vos, "Psychologisation: Psychoanalysis' (Double) Political Appointment with History, The Accoyer Amendment Revisited."

⁵⁶ J. O. La Mettrie, *Machine man and other writings*.

⁵⁷ M. De Kesel, "Delphi revisited: Over literatuur en psychoanalyse."

⁵⁸ R. Girard, "Psychoanalysis and Sacrifice. A Conversation of Sergio Benvenuto with René Girard," *JEP European Journal of Psychoanalysis* 14, no. winter-spring (2002).

came modern psychology's project to 'fix', as the latter engaged in revising and neutralizing the psychoanalytic *skandalons*.

Thus, it is only through the development of the post-Freudian psy-sciences that the full weight of the Freudian elaboration of modern subjectivity comes to light. Or, to put it bluntly, the truth that necessarily escapes psychoanalysis can return only in the misunderstandings of psychology. That is what the repression in the history of the psy-sciences is about. The positivization of mainstream psy-science shows the force of the psychoanalytic view of a fundamental negativity in subjectivity. Hence it is only through psychology that psychoanalysis can understand the history of its own impact on modern subjectivity and modern society. It is only from here that a critical approach to the psy-sciences can escape the deadlock of the search for an authenticity beyond psychology. The problem of reflexivity, the Cartesian *to know that one knows*, lies in the supposition that the primal *knowing* would have sense on its own, while the whole point of reflexivity is that this primal *knowing* is but a mythical, logical construction. There is no unmediated or natural way of knowing prior to reflexive knowing. So we should not be lured into a search to find out what is really behind the mystifying veils of the psy-sciences and believe that such a search is what psychoanalysis is about. The question, instead, concerns why and how psychology gradually replaced psychoanalysis as *a regime of truth*, claiming sure knowledge of man and society. The question here does not concern the hidden truth behind the mystifications of psychology; the issue is, rather, that psychoanalysis, the first real account of modern subjectivity, cannot but be presented by way of the psychological sciences, a presentation through which psychoanalysis is deformed and alienated, losing again and again its mysterious core, its hidden and fascinating *agalma*.

The debate should thus be about the vicissitudes and the deadlocks of the various theorizations of modern subjectivity. But it is to be feared that in today's delimited academic and cultural domain such a debate will not be possible, as it can be expected that there will not be much space made in psychology departments for the nonpsychological *zero-level of subjectivity* of psychoanalysis. It is just this structural deadlock in the debate that eventually leads us to disciplines other than the psy-sciences, disciplines more capable of taking up the position of psychoanalysis' double (eg, arts, ethics and politics, as these are also unmistakably touched by the inevitable overflow of psychoanalysis). This is also De Kesel's stance: the move to the field of literature and the sciences of literature.⁵⁹ But, if I am allowed this final shift, maybe academia might not be the best place for this debate, as the nonsubjectivizable, the nonpsychological – as structurally beyond the reach of the discourses of science – is also the *beyond* of academia. It is here

⁵⁹ M. De Kesel, "Delphi revisited: Over literatuur en psychoanalyse."

that the terrain of ideology imposes itself as an appropriate domain for psychoanalysis to engage in the discussion of grounding principles. For, we have to ask if in the phenomena of psychologization we see the remainders of psychoanalysis surface, that is, to use Ian Parker's words, as "everyday life bloated by media makeover and self-help nostrums,"⁶⁰ why is it that we find ourselves there in the middle of, again in Parker's words, "sticky ideology"?⁶¹

In other words, psychologization as ideological element serves particular political agendas and is part and parcel not just of mainstream psychology but of psychoanalysis as well. This means that ideology is not just what is added in the presumed watering down and distortion of psychoanalysis; it must have been always already there. For, if we were to attempt the reverse operation and undo the ways psychoanalysis has been distorted, we would find the core of ideology once again. That is, when we *regress* or try to read the symptoms, or lift the veils of repression, we find ourselves back in Freud's turn-of-the-century Vienna, that is, we find ourselves dealing with emergent forms of subjectivity related to the birth of a bourgeoisie struggling to do away with the heritage of the Ancien Regime – and at the same time adopting some of the old feudal forms of social relationships.⁶² Thus, the ideological entanglements of psychologization do not bring us anything new. It is the return of the repressed, which is to be understood in Lacanian terms: the message returns inverted; the emancipatory potential of psychoanalysis (eg, Freud hoped his theory would enlighten human kind) eventually becomes in psychologisation a "pervasive sticky ideology."

But it is important to see that, even when one chooses the path of ideology and tries to do justice to the inevitable political aspect of the theorization of subjectivity, one does not escape the psy-discourse. The use of psychoanalytic technical terms, such as *regression* or *repression*, is not only deliberative, it is also compulsory: there are no other signifiers to do the job. If it can be said that psychology proceeds through psychologization, perhaps psychoanalysis cannot escape psychologization either. In this way psychoanalysis is not the business of depsychologization; psychoanalysis is the discipline that takes psychologization as seriously as possible. Hence, clinically speaking, analysts psychologising their situations are not to be met with the nostalgic wish for a time when patients were naive in respect to psychological/psychoanalytical knowledge. The psychologising is actually the symptom at play; it is the transference at work. Thus when ADHD, PTSS, CFS or other abbreviations end up in the office of a psychoanalyst, they are finally at the right address. Psychologization is a question within transference to psychoanalysis: in psychologization psychoanalysis receives its own message in an

⁶⁰ I. Parker, *Lacanian psychoanalysis. Revolutions in subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2010), 7.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 7.

inverted form. And that message concerns the modern subject, the subject of the Enlightenment, the subject of the sciences, precisely in its status of what is left over from the objectivations of science.

Psychoanalysis does not aim at a depsychologization as such; rather, it envisions the subject as existing between psychologization and depsychologization. To unearth or, better, to lay bare what is at the very surface, namely, the subject as the surplus of reflexivity, is the ethical task of psychoanalysis. It is only there, in the opened up space beyond academia, in the field of ideology, that the symbiosis, the deadly *folie à deux* of psychoanalysis and psychology can be broken and the other doubles of psychoanalysis – arts, literature, ethics, politics – can be engaged.