

The universality of the virtual absence of Critical Psychology in Flanders. Some personal remarks

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Abstract

Critical Psychology in Flanders can easily be considered as virtually absent. But what is the true bearing of that expression *virtually absent*? Does it mean, *almost absent but not yet fully absent*? Are there perhaps some critical germs to be discerned? However, instead of searching for those particular instances of some criticality in psy-Flanders, I will try to show in this paper that it is perhaps more interesting to move from the supposed *virtual absence* to the issue of *virtuality* as such and to argue that *absence* plays a central part in it. That is, I shall, starting from the particular Flemish situation, make a short survey into how psychology as such (in a universal way) can itself be said to be paradigmatically close to the virtual. The specific virtual absence of critical psychology in Flanders can thus be used to come to an understanding of the psy-complex in these late-modern times.¹

Keywords: Virtuality, psychologisation, neuroscience, psy-complex

Flanders's psychology: from psychologisation to academisation and back again

Let me set out from yet another level of particularity, and engage in a personal and anecdotic account of the situation in Flanders. For, as I started studying psychology in the second half of the eighties at Ghent University, I was welcomed together with 300 other students (this is 25 years ago, now each year 1000 new students enrol in psychology) by the Dean with the words “anyone here who expects psychology to help or even cure him or herself should better leave the auditorium.” No one left, of course, as it would be similar to summon a whole room (in most Western countries a small room suffices) of candidate-priests to leave if they thought becoming a priest would solve their religious or other doubts. Was the Dean of Psychology not performing a ritual, exhorting the students into the discourse of the university? It meant that we as students of psychology could enter *Academia* on the condition that we assumed the academic barrier between subjective truth (the particular) and scientific knowledge (the alleged universal transcending each particular). In itself there is nothing wrong with this, for without such an indictment there would be no academic discourse. However, it is especially in the psychology department that it becomes clear that this grounding gesture could be considered, in Freudian terms, a typical repression. Accepting the academic interpellation of the discipline of psychology means accepting that the critical question “why psychology?” (why one desires to study psychology) is structurally barred. However, does this not also entail that the truly intellectual questioning of psychology as an academic discipline risks to

¹ In the Hegelian logic ‘concrete universality’ is differentiated from ‘abstract universality’. In short and a bit simplified: the abstract universal always entails that at the concrete level things (the particulars) are not fully covered by the universal: there is always this minimal difference vis-à-vis the abstract general rule. The notion of concrete universal concerns precisely the so-called “constitutive exception”: the particular which itself opens, dialectically, the way for the universal.

be sidetracked? For, one can observe that in the average psychology department the critical stance is, at best, relegated to a minor academic question, to, for example, the history of psychology or other optional courses where the question is neutralised in different variants of sociology, ethnography or even psychology of psychology. Such approaches can be said to miss some of the central issues at stake where they fail to address the point where the snake chokes in its own tail. The rejection of the particularity of individual motives at play in the choice to study psychology entails the rejection of the questioning of the universal issues connected to the discipline of psychology and its position in the field of science.²

Of course, even 25 years ago I had courses in which my emotions and attitudes were put into question and in which self-reflection was considered a basic skill of the psychologists to be. However, is not the difficulty with these kinds of questionings that they can only be done within the narrow framework and coordinates of the psychological discourse and its abstract universalities? The drama of this *psychologising* pseudo-subjective discourse is that it represses its own truth, namely that psychology as a science is constituted by the very expulsion of the subjective, the neutralisation of the concrete and the truth of the particular. Or, in other words, the personalised and individualized signifiers of such reflective questionings constitute a straitjacket for the truth as they suffocate the question *qua* question. It is here that these typical forms of academic reflection ensure that any truly historical, social, political or even subjective critique of psychology is itself *psychologised* and smothered in abstract universals. The central problem is not that psychology is not able to take itself seriously, but rather, that it is not able to take the process of *psychologisation* seriously. Moreover, should we not understand psychologisation as the central paradigm of psychology? That is, in both its theory and praxis psychology induces the subject in the psychological discourse: *look at yourself, this is what you are* (research has shown..., brain scans reveal that...). As a result the subject understands itself, the others and the world departing from the signifiers of psychology.³

Let us hence take psychologisation seriously and do the exercise and... psychologise. Let us start with the obvious generalisation: those who study psychology do so in order to *connect* with themselves, the others and the world. The Freudian contention that the human is a stranger in his own house might be eventually what drives young people to the psychology department. It is remarkable how quickly these freshmen, often critical and socially engaged people wanting to change and alter things, in a rapid tempo lose their critical stance. For one can observe how their eager desire to understand and to know the human being gets rapidly bogged down in the petrified and established Academic knowledge of standard deviations, evidence based methods and brain scans. The critical potential of psychology students is quickly drained. The best of all people are drawn in a complacent *academism* as this must be the very way to quiet their own personal and particular nagging questions. To put it provocatively: the structural and shared blind spot at the side of the subjective is constitutive for the establishment of the discourse of psychology as a scientific discipline and praxis.

² If one would ask if questioning these universal issues concerning psychology necessarily pass over scrutinizing particular motives (personal or also particular social circumstances motivating an engagement with psychology), the answer should be yes. That is, however, in the understanding that these particular motives are of course determined in their form and content by the universal problematic connected to the discipline of psychology. Remember how Slavoj Žižek defines Hegelian concrete universality as “a process or a sequence of particular attempts that do not simply exemplify the neutral universal notion but struggle with it, give a specific twist to it - the universal is thus fully engaged in the process of its particular exemplification; that is to say, these particular cases in a way, decide the fate of the universal notion itself” (Žižek, 1999, p. 102).

³ See my forthcoming book: (De Vos, 2012).

However, must we also not, for a change, *sociologise* the way in which a critical stance in the psychology department is prone to an early death, supposing it was not a stillborn child to begin with? For, as it has been shown, in Flanders the departments of psychology and the psycho-social professions traditionally attract students mainly from middleclass and educated families (Wartenbergh et al., 2009). Are we hence not justified to say that this student cohort is logically and unwittingly drawn into the endorsing of the status-quo? There are moreover indications that the psychology departments in Flanders recruit largely from the traditional central or central-leftist catholic milieus, those milieus strongly connected to youth movements (such as the catholic youth movement “Chiro”) and the so called middle field (the socio-cultural organizations).⁴ If these circles cannot really be attributed much true critical and progressive potential, it seems clear that it rapidly melted away after the fall of the Berlin Wall in the nineties. This geo-political landslide can be said to have drawn the whole of the Flanders’ Left and centre-Left into the discourse of pragmatics and rationality, wedding conservatism and neo-liberalism. To give some empirical evidence for this: in Flanders the unions stood traditionally strong in the psycho-social institutions, uniting leftists, social democrats and Christian progressives. Since the nineties however, syndicalist membership and participation experienced a significant drawback in the broad psy and parapsy-sector.

But, are these psychologising, sociologising and historicizing explanations truly depicting the whole scene? Am I not romanticizing the fact that the critical factor became quasi absent in the psychology departments and, by extension, in the whole psy-sector? Am I not, as a post-68’er, being nostalgic or even envious towards a stance which perhaps never truly existed? For, as the home base of May 68 was the university, one could argue that the movement suffered from the major impediment that a critical stance is as such at odds with Academia. To make this point, let me refer to a quote of Pierre Bourdieu, who, even though he was without doubt an important critical and engaged scholar, once made a remark expressing his regret over not being an artist, and of having been held back by academic constrictions and its “symbolic violence”, whereas artists can enjoy the liberty of totally deconstructing art in itself via “irony, pastiche and parody”:

I envied the freedom of writers... or of the artist who, from Duchamp to Devatour, have, in their own artistic practice, constantly subverted the belief in art and artists (Bourdieu, 2000).

Besides the fact that one can discern a subtle smell of opportunism in this quote, of giving way on one’s desire, one can, to begin with, question the fact that today artists themselves can do a PhD in art, and are thus inevitably in one way or another *academified*. It thus seems high time to broaden the theme of psychologisation and connect it to *academization*. For, what does it mean for Bourdieuan scholars if, in the end, they have no one left to envy? This all-invading academisation seems to be the reason why Bourdieu concedes so rapidly here and dismisses the possibility of being both in Academia and subverting it. Or is it due to his well-known empiricism that he is drawn into this, maybe misplaced, loyalty to Academia? In my opinion Academia is urgently, if not in need of deconstruction, then surely in need of becoming the object of serious and uncompromising critiques (rather than being the mere target of “irony, pastiche and parody”). For, let us again sociologise here, scholars have this problem that they never truly emancipate from under the all-encompassing wings of their *alma mater*. The average professor has never truly left the confines of the school buildings:

⁴ There is not a lot of specific research done on the profile of students psychology in Flanders (which as such can be considered significant). I have found one study on the political positioning of psychology students in Flanders this would be predominantly leftist-catholic. (Debusscher, Derks, Elchardus, & Pelleriaux, 1998).

from the kindergarten over primary and secondary education to the university, he or she is enveloped by an academic *habitus*. This seems why scholars conceive of the whole world as the school playground in relation to which they can never lay off their educational and research habits and manners. Fully incorporated into Academia it appears impossible to take a critical stance vis-à-vis the issue of psychologisation or other forms of *academisation*: the average scholar is per definition unable to take a position outside of it.

However, the crucial question is of course if such a position is really possible in modernity. For, Academia is, to put it in Husserlian terms, “zwar restlos”⁵; almost without remainder. Even as a layman my whole life-world is touched upon one way or another by academic discourses. Hence, the ultimate lure might be to think that one can keep a distance, that one could occupy a place outside of the hegemonious discourse of Academia. In these late-modern times we observe a quasi total academisation, turning in the whole world into a classroom. Just consider how in these last decades *the learning discourse* managed to become omnipresent. Do you want to become parent? Take a parenting course. Problems with drugs? Enrol in a rehabilitation course. Sex problems? Consider a master-class. Are we here facing, as Johannes Beck puts it, the threatening prospect of life reconstituted as a series of learning modules (Beck, 1999)? We seem to be condemned to never grow up and remain forever under tutelage. But, besides this *life long learning discourse*, tantamount of course to the dynamics of globalisation and neo-liberal policies, maybe the structure of Academia is far deeper engraved in our life-world. For example, is one not, in the simple act of putting the kettle on, always aware that the water is heated to 100 degrees Celsius? Or, as we enjoy the first warm rays of the sun in the spring on our face, are we then not in the back of our head reminded of what we read in the newspaper: that light is supposed to trigger the serotonin hormone and hence influences our feeling of well-being? Although of course, one could downplay the lay man’s scientific approach of the world postulating that this is in the end only comes in top of a more straightforward, sub- or unconscious way of doing things and being in world. The question, however, is whether we should call the latter natural, unmediated or pre-scientific? It seems in contrast that in modernity our life-world as such is thoroughly and irreversibly transversed by the discourse of Academia. Our illusory claim of a position outside of it, in the end only testifies of our total immersion in the academified life-world and allows for nothing more than minor and impotent critiques. Remember how in the Vietnam-movie *Full Metal Jacket* it is the ironic and critical soldier with “meat is murder” written on his helmet who, in the end, turns out to be the ideal cog in the military machine (see Žižek, 1997, p. 21).

However, have we not too rapidly conflated psychologisation with academisation? For although the two issues are related, it is worthwhile to disentangle them in a genealogical way. Broadly defined academisation is the result of the advent of the modern sciences in modernity as these came to occupy the hegemonious place in the whole of the human practices. Dethroning religion as the cornerstone of human existence the sciences became the central mediator of the human’s presence with him or herself, the others and the world. This was a decisive shift: in modernity, the human is no longer primordially caught in the gaze of God, the ultimate Being knowing you from the inside out. Since the enlightenment, the human being looks upon itself through the gaze of the sciences: *80% of the population... as our behaviour is determined by our past as hunters-collectors... according to neurological research...* This knowledge is radically different from the unfathomable and unsharable knowledge of God; academic knowledge draws you irreversible into the ranks of the scientists. *Look at yourself, this is what you are* enforces you to identify with the academic

⁵ Edmund Husserl points to the all-inclusiveness of science, mastering the world “without anything left over [zwar restlos].” (Husserl, 1970, p. 22).

gaze. Academisation can hence be said the overarching principle of psychologization, the latter defined as the adoption of psychological signifiers and the psychological gaze. However, if each science cannot but engage in a similar –isation (one can speak of sociologisation or even of physicalisation whereby everything is looked upon through the lens of physics) psychologisation still is something which sticks out. Just consider that pop-physics does not penetrate in our everyday life the way psychology does: even if there exist glossies on the natural sciences, these cannot outweigh the omnipresence and the impact of the psy-glossies. To understand the central place of psychologisation it suffices to point out that psychology concerns the subject, and in the end, each science has to pass in one way or another over the subject. The genealogy of psychology is directly connected to this: as the objectivations of science posed the enigma of subjectivity (what is it to be a subject in a world which can be objectified almost without a remainder) a discipline as psychology was needed to provide the cornerstone of the sciences. This is why, in the Hegelian logic of the concrete universal, psychologisation can be said to be the exemplification of academisation, precisely as the subject is the constitutive exception grounding objectivity.

Here one should not miss the subtlety in the already mentioned wording of Husserl “zwar restlos”: of central importance is the “zwar”, the “*almost* without remainder”. Perhaps we should rephrase this: modern subjectivity, or the modern psyche are born precisely where Academia’s grip is *virtually* without remainder. As the discipline of psychology has the role of dealing with the problematic subject of the objectivations of the modern sciences, it does so by putting forward a *Homo Psychologicus*. That is, psychology connects the modern subject with itself, the others and the world by showing him the psychological being he or she is said to be: *according to psychology this is what you are*. Fleshing out this psychological homunculus, psychology creates a virtual self, the human as an avatar, *tele* from (in the sense of *far from*) itself.⁶ But of course, this virtuality is not new; it is connected to the human being dwelling in language. As Marc De Kesel argues, the subject as a speaking being is that which always eludes itself: the human speaking being was thus always “tele” from itself (De Kesel, 2010, p. 115). In modernity, and especially in late-modernity, however, this virtuality takes centre stage. Today’s cyberspace for example makes it possible, in a paradoxical way, to flesh out this virtual absence, by putting forward a digital self, giving it a place and a consistency that escapes us. Let us hence in the following section try to explore in which ways psychology and virtuality are connected to each other by returning to our initial question: how to understand that Critical Psychology in Flanders can be considered as virtually absent.

Flanders.be

The rather peculiar situation of the faculty of psychology of the Ghent University is that it hosts a psychoanalytic department. When I was a student in the late eighties that department took a critical if not a firm anti-psychological stance. Professor Julien Quackelbeen liked to confront his students with the line “quand j’entends le mot psychologie, j’entends siffler les chiens dans les bois” (when I hear the word psychology, I hear the dogs howling in the woods).⁷ As a psychoanalyst Quackelbeen would never accepted to call his teaching psychology and he never tired of criticizing the psy-disciplines and of pointing to its flaws and paradoxes. It is well known that psychoanalysis and psychology are strange bedfellows, but as a full exploration of this would lead us too far, let us contend with a short genealogical remark. While psychology tackled the enigma of modern subjectivity wanting to be a science as the others, psychoanalysis opted to explore that enigma *qua* enigma fully accepting that

⁶ One should avoid to flesh this point out and speak of a zero-level of subjectivity.

⁷ These are allegedly the words of a French comedian, but up to this moment I was not able to track the citation.

this positioned psychoanalysis outside the main frame of the sciences (De Vos, 2011). But, to return to the late eighties in Ghent, while Quakelbeen despite his professed anti-psychology could maintain his position in the psychology department the situation gradually changed. Starting in the nineties, the psychology department resolutely choose the path of empiricism, statistics and evidence based methods, followed by a full embrace of the neurological turn. Within this general climate, psychoanalysts in the post-Quakelbeen era had to seek a way to survive and had to adopt a different position toward psychology. So it happened that it was argued that psychoanalysis is able to deliver a sound and scientific contribution to psychology and hence empirical research and statistics entered the department of psychoanalysis in Ghent. An inquiry into the problematic, paradoxical and even alienating effects of this stance falls outside the scope of this paper. What is certain, however, is that one can observe that today many students who study psychoanalysis in the psychology department rather unproblematically, call themselves psychologists. While we, in the Quakelbeen era — whether we were telling ourselves stories or not— never really or never fully identified with being psychologists. Nonetheless, if today there is still any fruitful critical stance in the whole faculty, a broad societal critical stance or a critical approach to psychology itself, it can be found there in the department of psychoanalysis.⁸

However, if we want to take the discussion to another level, we might have to consider that the main problem for critical psychology and for critiques of psychology (and here we transcend the scope of Flanders) is that every psychologist would be willing to call him or herself critical. But the issue is of course what he or she is really critical off. At face value, almost every psychologist is critical of all stances that leave the human factor out of the picture and of stances that would compromise the person's well-being, its feelings, capabilities, skills etcetera. *Let us not forget the human or psychological factor* is the maxim of every psychologist. Just consider the idea of emotional intelligence (EQ) as it is believed to be a buffer safeguarding education from a “relentless technicisation and instrumentalisation” in our schools.⁹ However, it suffices to look at the actual practices using the EQ concept and it becomes quickly clear that it is precisely via this scientifically informed psychologising discourse on emotional intelligence that technicisation and instrumentalisation is realised. Just consider how the EQ approach introduces a very technical psychologising discourse using a de-subjectivizing instrumentarium of standardized tests, surveys and evidence-based psycho-educational methods.

To cut things short: if every psychologist is always already a critical psychologist, does this not above all mean that what every psychologist is critical about is the dimension of the psyche itself? Psychologists do not like the psyche, they never did, the psyche is the unwanted guest and the disturbing factor thwarting the objectivity of the psychological tests and the objective, evidence based, methods and strategies. The problem is that in modernity the psyche and the subject as its carrier can no longer be seen as positive entities which one can flesh out, rather, the enigma of subjectivity makes that the subject is, as said higher, always *tele* from itself. Psychology as such coincides with the attempt to mortify the virtuality of the psyche itself (as a ‘virtus’, a force, that calls for a dynamic and energetic understanding), drawing it within the safe domain of concrete actuality, betting on a causal-mechanistic, materialistic, demystified and de-subjectivised approach of the enigma of subjectivity.¹⁰ This is why the neurological turn was welcomed by psychologists without hesitation, as it could save them from dealing with the problematic subject and its psyche.

⁸ See the writings of Paul Verhaeghe and of Stijn Van Heule.

⁹ See for example Erica Burman's critical assessment of the EQ-discourse: (Burman, 2009, p. 137).

¹⁰ I owe this remark to Liesbet De Kock.

Moreover, must we not observe that these kinds of virtual psychology (psychology without the psyche) effect a virtualisation of the life-world via psychologisation processes, something which came to the fore precisely in these last decennia? When teenagers enter puberty they are, for example, taught the theories on the physical and psychological changes they might expect. This pulls the youngsters out of their life-world, allegedly offering them a lookout point from where to look down at themselves, turning their life into a virtual space, *tele* from themselves, a “Second Life” as it were.¹¹ It is important to understand that in the process of psychologisation the subject is convoked to look upon itself from (and hence convoked to join) the detached and neutral vantage point of the psy-scientist beyond all subjectivity and hence, beyond all psychology. Psychology and psychologisation not only seems to be brothers in arms (if not two sides of the same coin) but also psychology appears to be directly linked to a de-psychologisation.

To clarify the recent vicissitudes of the relation between (de)psychologisation and virtualization, let us turn back to Flanders and make three observations. As I graduated and entered the professional field in the nineties, first as a group worker and then as a psychologist, I was confronted with a few decisive changes in the psy-field. The first concerns a shift in politics and policies, the second is the advent of the already mentioned neurological turn and the third is about a double shift in the clinical itself (how clinical work is conceived and how clinical phenomena is assessed).

Let us start with the changes in the governmental politics and policies. The nineties were clearly the era in which the neo-liberal discourse entered the psycho-social institutions in Flanders. With the objective of budget control and clearly inspired by the pragmatist embrace of neo-liberalism of the so-called Third Way Politics,¹² a strict managerial model was imposed in the care and psy-institutions. In a short time the discourse of *efficiency* and *quality control* became omnipresent in hospitals, schools, kindergartens, mental health institutions etc. However, to be clear, this managerial model did not only concern budgetary and logistic aspects, but, also and foremost, it was enforced to streamline the care and the services provided by the psycho-social institution. A blurring of the psy-discourse and the entrepreneurial discourse was clearly at hand: a good manager was supposed to use psychology while in the psy-field phrases popped up as *manage your anger*, *work on yourself*, and more recently, *invest in your brain*. But more importantly, governmental policies decreed that the concept of *Total Quality Management* (TQM) stemming from the entrepreneurial world¹³ was to be used in the psychosocial institutions as these were obliged to write and to lay down an extensive *Quality Manual*. Far from receiving much resistance in the psychosocial world, this was widely welcomed in Flanders. The neoliberal entrepreneurial discourse seemed to furnish the psy and other similar professions with a new and firm foundation. The very practical and formalist approach gave grip and security where once disparity reigned in the theories and praxes.

In this way, the post-political declaration of the end of the big ideological stories seemed to return in the proclamation of the end of the big theories in psychology. For example, the clash

¹¹ As such there is nothing wrong with this offering of a meta-perspective, only one should clearly understand that this operation forecloses the first domain; that is, after the induction of the meta-perspective “life as it is” ceases to exist. This is what the psy-sciences traditionally neglect.

¹² Third Way Politics refers to the re-orientation of most European leftist parties after the fall of the Berlin Wall,

¹³ Of course, this TQM was itself already thoroughly psychologised as it incorporated the care for psychological and emotional aspects of the workforce.

between psychoanalysis and the humanist theories was allegedly transcended in the idea that an *evidence-based* praxis had no need of theory. This amounted to a naturalization of the human being: all mediating theory was thrown overboard in order to deal directly with the human being as he or she really is. The human became again a black box answering a few fairly straightforward and evidence-proven laws and principles. Things suddenly became amazingly simple, or so it seemed. One can argue that it is precisely here that psychology, in doing away with theory and choosing for a pragmatic, down-to-earth and naturalised vision of the human, definitely took the path of a *de-psychologising* psychologisation. The de-psychologisation as such is self-evident; psychologists and therapists suddenly left the psychological discourse behind and started to speak in terms of mission statements, goals to be reached, problem-solving skills, capabilities and roadmaps to achieve targets. However, in order to realize this down-to-earth, no-nonsense and naturalizing approach, a bit surprisingly, one had to engage in a specific psycho-educational and hence psychologising way of dealing with people. For, if the human is to be brought back to his alleged naturalness, this cannot but pass over a (disavowed) theoretical and didactic stance: the human has to be told and educated that he is merely a black box with its intricate but in the end totally chartable wiring. The new approach thus invariably passed over psycho-education: the subjects had to be shown, or better, *taught* the evidence: *as psychological research has proven...; brainscans have revealed...; 15 per cent of the male population...* In psychologisation the lay person is fed theory and summoned to adopt the expert gaze from where he or she is to look at him or herself, the other and the world. Those boys and girls diagnosed with ADHD for example, need to be educated and given a theoretical explanation: *what you need to know on ADHD is...* A widespread official governmental poster in Flanders reads: “Psychic problems? Read about it. Talk about it.”¹⁴ You first have to digest the theory before you can talk about it. In this way, you are not only taught the appropriate language and signifiers, you are also invited to adopt the position of student in psychology, reading and studying the –albeit popularized– state of the art theories on psychic problems. And to make sure: there is an official codex on what is considered the appropriate theory. After state religion we now have state psychology: the cognitive-behavioural parenting program *Triple P* and the *Neuro-Linguistic Programming model*¹⁵ are two instances of Flanders’ officially approved and endorsed theories. But of course, the most pregnant example is how Flanders’ official policies enforce the use of the DSM in the psycho-social institutions. That is, the DSM is the official means of communication of the psycho-social sector with the state. For, only by using the DSM-codes a psycho-social institution can get its per capita funding. In this way, the DSM seems to be a tool for realizing the biopolitical aim to bring life (via the suffering, the deviances and the oppositional stances) within the reach of calculable, manageable and fundable mechanisms of control. The fact that the DMS gradually evolved to the stifling of the psychic dimension is most tellingly; precisely in its claim to be above all theory and to be purely descriptive, it contributed in an important way to the rise of the hegemony of the neurological turn.¹⁶

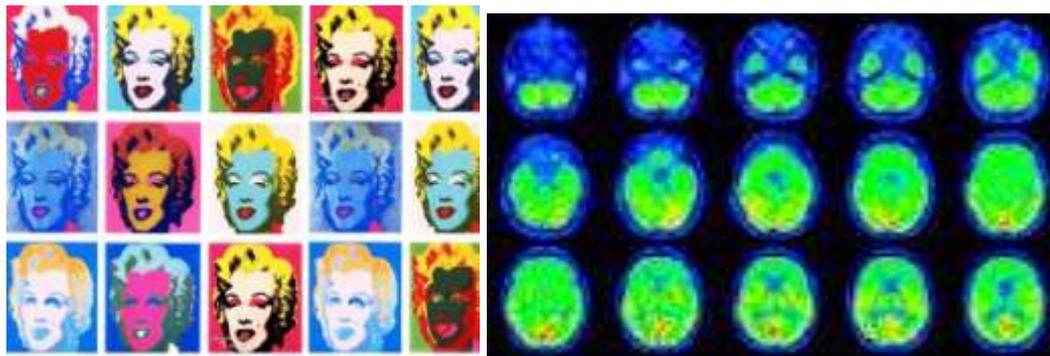
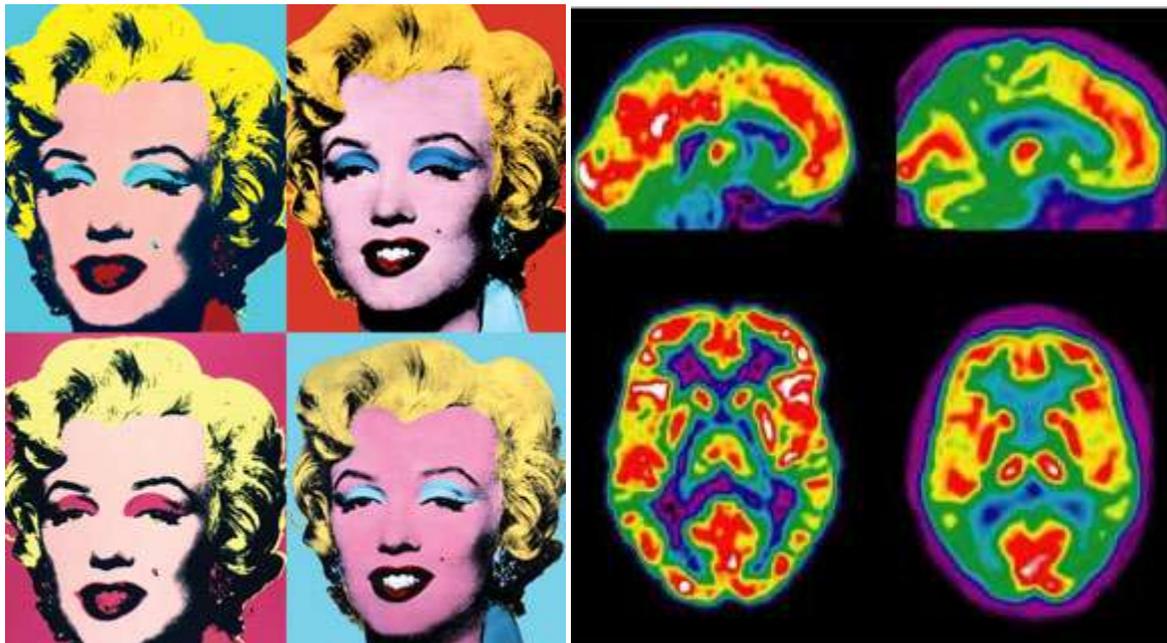
Here we come to the second shift which I observed entering the professional field in the nineties, namely the neurological turn. For our purposes here the crucial issue seems that this *neurologisation* has taken place for an important part in the field of media and culture. *It’s the brain you stupid!* might be called a central slogan in the nineties, reaching its full blown significance in the millennium. Moreover, looking at images of the brain as these became manifold in newspapers, glossies and other media; can we not speak of a genuine brain-

¹⁴ Similar to the base line “Learn, share, grow” on <http://psychcentral.com> .

¹⁵ See for example (Merlevede, 1999, p. 10).

¹⁶ Consider the gradually filtering out of psychoanalytic terminology in the DSM.

iconography? Is there not something in the typical brain imagery which reminds of Andy Warhol's Marilyn Monroe Prints, is the brain not the pop-idol of the last two decades?



When revising this paper after peer review I actually stumbled on an MRI scan photoshopped in Marilyn Andy Warhol style sent in to a “brain-art competition”. The comment of the neuroscientist who made them was: “I hope it shows that the inside of one's head is just as beautiful, if not more so, than the outside face we present to the world”¹⁷ The problem with this is that the neuroscientist thinks that the aesthetisation only comes in a second movement, whereas I would argue that in brain imaging the dynamics of aesthetics are always already involved. Just consider that a side view of the brain predominantly is depicted with a left orientation.¹⁸ Even if one would give neurological arguments for this –e.g. a left orientated brain shows us the dominant brain hemisphere— does the standard of left-facing brains in the popular press not attest that we are dealing with a true brain-iconography? It is only in this way that the obvious link between the Warhol's Monroe-technique and brain imaging makes sense. Warhol applies non-representational colours to representational forms to convey different sensations/moods. Similarly, in brain scans non-representational colours are used to map different aspects of the human on the brain-form. The non-representational colours of Pop Art do not depict the artist's inner sensation or mood; they refer to popular culture, and more importantly, to the printing techniques then used for mass production. Also in brain

¹⁷ <http://www.bna.org.uk/news/view.php?permalink=HMKHN6DS2L>

¹⁸ The results of a Google image search on “brain” on 17th Jan. 2012 was that of the first 100 side views, 80 brains faced left.

imaging colouring is considered as a mere technical and objective issue. But of course, it is precisely here that (often unacknowledged) decision making processes “colour” the alleged objectivity of brain-research. For, imaging technology *constructs* the brain: the use of colours, the resolution and the image enhancing techniques are ultimately, as Francisco Vidal writes, connected to “a chain of decisions about the processing of numeral data” (Vidal, 2009, p. 27). This technical aspect, the fact that imaging relies on techniques and procedures is precisely what Warhol illuminates starting from and engaging with pop culture and especially celebrity culture. By repeating Monroe’s image, he evokes her ubiquitous presence in the media, meanwhile revealing the technical machinations and constructions at work in the society of the spectacle. Does hence the similarities between the Monroe prints and today’s brain-iconography suggest that we should understand the brain as situated within celebrity culture? The brain is omnipresent on television, in the newspapers, in the glossies, on the internet. If the philosopher Daniel C. Dennett, in his attempt to conceive of consciousness as a dispersed brain process, was compelled to use the metaphors of “fame in the brain” and “cerebral celebrity” he unwittingly testified of the fact that indeed the brain has become a celebrity (Dennett, 1991).

But maybe we should not exaggerate the effects of the brain having become a celebrity. For, yesterday Marilyn Monroe, today Lady Gaga; on both the subjective and the social level, the audience can use such icons creatively to shape one’s existence. Recently in a documentary series on Flemish television on mental health,¹⁹ a young man in his early twenties testified of having ADHD. The eloquent always smiling student gave us a nice theoretical overview of his brain disorder. The interviewer was clearly impressed when the student explained that he owes his “people’s skills” (in English in the original!) to ADHD and that he knows to use them. He sure does, so it seemed! Is hence the whole mediatised ADHD-discourse not fairly innocent, giving discursive and cultural material to flesh out one’s identity? At least it is observed that in this series everybody spoke the same language, that is, neuropsychology. The interviewer, the interviewees, the experts up to the critics all shared that same lingo. However, at times it became clear that this is not just about one hegemonious discourse having replaced others and merely providing a central discursive framework catering for all tastes. In the documentary for example a teenager girl attested of suffering from ASD (Autism Spectrum disorder): not only she knew the drill and explained in theoretical terms what ASD is, she also praised her friends who, as they too know a lot on the disorder, treat her with kindness and understanding. After *everybody famous*, now also: *everybody psychologist!* But it gets a little poignant and painful as her mother talks about the emotional distance between her and the girl, also of course in the standard phrases of the ASD-theory. And if the interviewer inquires if the girl already had feelings of love, the latter answers with the standard textbook explanation that this is very complicated and that she cannot really understand those feelings. “It is not for me,” she added. Should we here, not at least, think about the possibility that both the mother and the girl risk to get stuck in the psychologised and neurologised discourse? Might it not be that because it is such a powerful and omnipresent discourse it can have far reaching effect on the lives of persons and on societies?

Here we come close to the third shift that I was confronted with in the nineties: the shift in the ‘clinical’ itself. This can be approached from two angles: from how clinical work is conceived, and from the assessment of clinical phenomena. Let me start with the first and make the observation that gradually quasi every party involved was drawn into a narrowed down psy-discourse. To begin with, working as a psychologist in a rather big institution for

¹⁹ <http://programmas.canvas.be/category/te-gek/te-gek-afleveringen-te-gek/>

special education, I was urged by the staff to start working with the DSM diagnostic categories in my clinical work. I was also asked to contribute to the writing of the already mentioned “quality manual”; as governmental agencies demanded a fully documented written piece sketching how the institution was to provide its *qualitative services*. Meanwhile, there seemed to be a growing demand for psychological diagnoses and therapy coming from the group workers, or more concise, from the intermediate level (those hierarchically directly above the group workers). These demands, moreover, came more and more in rather instrumental terms: as a psychologist I was asked to explain a particular and delimited problem and to provide a detailed practical solution. In short: the times that a psychologist in an institution could work more or less in splendid isolation (that is, if he managed to keep the director-psychiatrist satisfied) were definitively over. The interpellation to deliver the goods became louder and louder, both from the staff (*afficionados* of the quality discourse and would-be managers), and the intermediate level. Furthermore, with respect to the first-line group workers, one could observe that their discourse gradually shifted as well, as it became more and more influenced by the quality discourse. Educators became increasingly familiar with the psy-discourse and the connected discursive strategies, due to their own interest and curiosity, or due to the growing professionalization of educators. In Flanders the older generation of educators, amongst whom there were a lot without professional qualification,²⁰ was replaced by people that had received a specific training. Due to this growing professionalization, the psychological outlook was no longer the sole perspective of the expert from which educators were exempt: the psy-signifiers and the psy-discourse were increasingly considered as important tools for group workers themselves. Moreover, as I worked in the sector of youth care, I saw that also the parents became more and more immersed in the psy-language. Those parents most drawn into the psy-discourse joined the parents’ associations of disorders such as Gilles de la Tourette or ADHD. One could observe how these parents really clasped to these psychologising discourses in a sometimes rather sectarian style and reacted hostile when you did not go along with their framework. Finally, it became clear how all this had repercussions on the youngsters themselves and their outlook on problems. As a good deal of the youngsters adopted the psy-lingo I especially want to rethink here the well-known lack of a request for help. As such one can argue that with respect to the youngsters I worked with (juvenile delinquents and children and youngsters with “behavioural problems”) this absence of a question for help is quite self-evident, as they are more inclined to act rather than to verbalise. Of course there is a grain of truth in this, but on the other hand one should not forget the above described changes at the level of politics and the institutional policies. It could be argued that the psychologising quality discourse, as it got a firm grip on the staff, the intermediate level, the group workers and the parents, also engendered a rather compelling and even suffocating framework which left the youngsters with little or no subjective breathing space. For, it is precisely the combination of the managerial with the psychological discourse that has a totalizing, if not totalitarian, potential. Every aspect of institutional life is or can become the object of quality control and of psychologising scrutiny. Is it then not the case that such a totalitarian managerial-therapeutic grip, where everything you do or not do is translated into therapeutics, potentially mutes any question or even leads to violent outbursts of aggression? When everything is put on a *worksheet*, when *positive behaviour* can only be *reinforced*, when running away is seen as *loyalty* to the mother, or when unbearable behaviour implies a referral to the therapist, whose very silence may be a suffocating psy-terror, then non-participation and even a brutal

²⁰ Before being employed as a psychologist I worked as a group worker, none of my colleagues had had a specific training: there was a printer, an electrician, and a few people with just secondary education. In retrospect I think this was not a bad constellation.

passage-à-l'acte might be the sole and only escape from the all encompassing therapeutic yoke.

At this point, we must consider the perspective of the clinical phenomena themselves. If my description of the impact of the suffocating psy-discourse makes any sense, then we should perhaps rethink the current discussions on whether or not late-modernity has brought us new symptomatologies. As it has been observed by clinicians, the questions and the symptoms brought into the consultation room of the psy have decisively changed in the last decennia. The Flemish psychoanalyst Paul Verhaeghe for example contends that

... instead of phobias, we meet with panic disorders. Instead of conversion symptoms, we find somatization disorder. (...) yesterday's docile psychoneurotic patient who dreamt of forbidden sexual activities resulting in massive feelings of guilt that lead to phobic and obsessional symptoms, (...) has almost disappeared. Instead of that, we are confronted with the promiscuous, aggressive borderline patient who combines eating disorders with addictions and self mutilation (Verhaeghe, 2007, p. 7).

The temptation to resist here is to consider these new symptoms as unmediated, almost purely bodily manifestations of discontents, resulting from a kind of short-circuit in, to put in psychoanalytic term, the transference. For, do we not have to connect these new symptoms to, again, the totalitarisation of the psy-discourse? This would mean that the new symptoms are not taking place outside of the psy-discourse, they are not transcending it, there are *not not-discursive*. That is, if we take a closer look it is obvious that there are still signifiers in play, namely those of the psychologising discourses. Panic disorders, somatization disorders, eating disorders, addictions, and self-mutilation are for each involved party connected to the signifiers of the psy-discourse. The very fact of the multitude of abbreviations already points to the discursive structure (e.g. ADHD, ASD, CFS,²¹ PTSS²²...): the abbreviation works as a metaphorisation through which a dispersed and loose gathering of symptoms gets the weight of a fully established and scientifically proved disorder. Hence one cannot speak of unmediated, pure symptoms: the mediation and the signifiers in play are precisely those originating in the DSM, which is widely disseminated (with the governmental agencies as an important motor) via the popular press and on the internet. It is moreover precisely where the new symptomatology comes in psy-terminology, that it gets immune for our therapeutic zeal. At that point any theoretical-therapeutic interpretation runs into a deadlock: for the "patient" him or herself already knows these explanations! Are we thus not justified to speak of an "almost virtual" symptomatology, as it only is effective and only has reality on the level of a psychologized sphere and space: me, my avatar and its symptoms? Ending up here once again with virtuality, let us go deeper in it in order to understand why it is always involved in one way or another with psy-matters.

Let's get virtual

Following the UNESCO recommendation on the promotion of universal access to cyberspace, Flanders's action plan to reduce "the digital gap" launched the Internet for Everybody-campaign. It involved making available an *internet-for-all-kit*: a cheap PC or laptop with broadband internet, security software and a one day training in the course of 2006. Flanders wants you... on the internet! The accompanying awareness campaign was centred on the

²¹ Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

²² Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome

witty idea that there is a cure for your “peeceefobie” (PC phobia).²³ Is this direct connection of the virtual to the psychological not very significant? To show in which way this is the case, I have to dig a litter deeper into the virtual. Let us hereto start from a rather strange contemporary paradox. While the intellectual climate of today seeks to reduce all that is human to the material realm –*it’s not psychological, it is about genes and brainmatter you stupid!*—meanwhile, our lives are above all being mediated and taking place in a virtual, immaterial environment. The central question to be asked here is: what is the internet? Is it a new public forum, or even a new central public space, or is it something else, a parallel world perhaps? Let us approach this question via the sexual; I am after all a Freudian. From this perspective the first observation concerning the *it is about genes and brainmatter*-stance, is that it does away with Freudian sexuality as the central causal factor of psychopathology. In aetiology *cerebrality*²⁴ has replaced sexuality. Moreover, in this process sexuality itself is naturalised and reduced to brain processes. And here we observe a second strange paradox: while the mainstream psy rejects the Freudian centrality of the sexual, we can observe a sexualisation, for some even a pornification of society in the media and especially on the internet. Hence, let us bring the two paradoxes together and try to understand the fact that sex has left the central psy-stage to go virtual.

To explore the place of the sexuality in cyberspace, let us depart from the classic view on pornography as an “interspace bridging private fantasy and mass public disposition” (Uebel, 1999, p. para 3). Or as Michael Uebel writes regarding cyberporn:

Cyberporn, more aggressively than other contemporary mass-public languages (advertising, network news, Hollywood film), translates subjective desires and fantasies into objective, often unstable, “published dreams”. This translation into objectivity of the pornographic imaginary is a crucial aspect of its *productive* cultural function (Uebel, 1999, p. para 4).

So the idea is that you have on the one hand fantasy – the site of the private – and on the other pornography, which is a twilight zone, a sort of alternative social reality at the site of the public. In this view, pornography has entered the mainstream societal sphere through its proliferation, accessibility and omnipresence. However, is this scheme not flawed? For, most importantly, the partition between private/public might be somewhat more complex. As such the alleged private fantasy can be said to be already a knotting of the private to the public: the fantasy itself can be regarded already as an interface between the particular and the public. Or, to use some psychoanalytic language here, the *phantasm* always already creates an inner scene which then as a kind of a model, a paradigm, generates the space of the public. It is only with this specification, that the fantasy is always already public,²⁵ that we might understand the true bearings of the rise of the internet having brought us in a short time a techno-virtual life-world. This is my thesis: it is not that today the private is exported via the virtual and becomes public, I argue that the private is *folded* onto the public, the fold itself is the virtual. The world wide web is thus a fold of the fantasmatically created inner sphere onto the public, and vice versa.

To understand this, let us consider a particular change discernable in the field of education regarding the partition between the public and the private (see: De Vos, 2009). In the traditional bourgeois education of the so-called Fordist times, parenting was a private

²³ <http://www.belgium.be/peeceefobie/index.html>

²⁴ A term put forward by (Malabou, 2007).

²⁵ The private and the public are knotted together as on a Moebius strip.

practice. The public sphere was foremost the place where the results of education were supposed to become visible. This public field was thus a kind of a stage where the educators and educated became the actors playing according to rather strict conventions. In today's parenting, the distinction between public/private has not so much lost its meaning due to the private being increasingly invaded by the public (through, for example, the so called psy-complex) but, rather, through the public becoming flooded by the private in a very particular way. That is to say, through the public becoming a screen rather than a stage. In post-fordist times the actual practice of parenting is made visible to the gaze of everyone. This is where the private space comes to be folded over into the public. Just think how parents send photos and videos of their kids around or post them on websites or blogs. Is it not here that we can also situate reality TV as it is part of this pulling of intimacy out into the public? In reality TV this often leads to a proliferation of screens. Think of how in so-called *parenting TV* the Supernanny and the like never, or rarely, intervenes *en vivo*. Comments are made and advice is given while watching, together with the parent(s), a monitor showing footage (edited of course) shot by a whole battery of cameras.

But it is important to understand that human existence, as a cultural, linguistic and social issue, has always passed in one way or another over the virtual. As said higher with De Kesel, the subject as a speaking is always *tele* from itself, or put differently: it cannot be with itself in the same time or space. Just consider the manifold of religious and other constructions of an imaginary space/time (the pre-world, the after-world or the parallel world). It is only now, with advancing technology, that the virtual could become a main domain dominating the main domains of humanity. The virtual is then in general to be understood as a fold, a pivotal point, not where the subject (be it an individual or a social subject) goes from private to public, but where in the very transition of the private to the public subjectivity gets realized. Today, with advanced technology and with the socio-economic, cultural-political transitions of globalisation, the virtual has moved up centre stage. The fold of virtuality hence became the central focus of culture, economy, politics, education, and, not to forget, sexuality. This means, a bit paradoxically, that the internet as such is not virtual, as it is also not just a representational or publication platform; the internet is foremost about objectification, about presenting what is believed to be the real thing. And, as always with presentation, the necessary and inevitable representation is denied and obfuscated.

In the end, this is why virtuality and psychology/psychologization are inextricably linked to each other. "Psychology," said William Bricken (a virtual reality researcher), "is the physics of virtual reality", suggesting that psychology is the most important tool for building virtual realities (Bricken, 1991). If you want to build realistic virtual worlds you must understand mankind. We are tempted to alter this by stating that psychology is the physics of reality itself, turning it into a virtualised reality. The psy-discourses both give form and contain subjectivity (individual and social subjectivity) whilst claiming to bring us the real thing: *look this is what you are, just look at the brainscans and the gene charts*. Virtuality is about objectivation, or in the words of the French theorist Jean Baudrillard, "this real, this extra real":

There is too much of it, we fall into obscenity and pornography. As in pornography, a kind of zoom takes us too near the real, which never existed and only ever came into view *at a certain distance* (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 83).

Hence, concerning the hegemony of the psychologising discourses I would not hesitate to speak of, besides foodporn or disaster porn, of psychoporn and brainporn. This is the vulgar materialism of today's mainstream (neuro)psychology: it's the obscenity of the flesh, trying to

ward off the *skandalon* of the subject. I once met a random group of doctoral students in psychology (brought together for an administrative course that had nothing to do with psychology): when asked for the title of their doctoral dissertation it turned out that all of these 10 doctoral students used the signifier 'neuro'.

Does the virtual absence of critical psychology in Flanders not point to the fact that psychology is always already too critical, on the dimension of the subject and its psyche? When in Flanders I say or write that "there are too many psychologists amongst us" this usually rings a bell, as it reminds of the ecologist slogan well known in Flanders "there are too many pigs amongst us" (pointing to the problematic excess of manure due to overproduction of intensive pig farming). Hence, should I not argue from now on, there are too many critical psychologists amongst us?

However, it is clear that, observing the thorough psychologisation of subjectivity in today's hegemonic discourses in science, culture and politics, one is tempted to alter Marx's claim that the critique of religion is the departure point of all critiques. Today the critique of psychology and psychologisation forces itself upon us as the primal critique. The post-political agenda is realised for a good deal, so it seems via *soft politics*, dealing with harassment, sexual identity, diversity, mental health... legitimizing the implementation of policies not on the base of political or ideological choices, but on the base of the allegedly neutral and objective academic expert knowledge. If psychologists themselves consider psychology too important to leave it to the psychologists (hence their mission to enlist everyone in the discourse) maybe we should at least endorse the premise. That is, psychology and its structural dynamics of psychologisation should be a primordial terrain for contemporary ideology critique to understand the essential tenets of globalisation. But what the example of Flanders can show us, is that the way we should proceed departing from the firm assertion, we are *all* critical psychologists!

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