

SIGN OF THE TIMES

*An Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

1. Sign of the times?

The title of this collection of essays, “Sign of the Times”, has a distinctly 1980s feel to it. Not only because of the eponymous Prince song that captured the bleak situation at the end of 1980s, but also because the reference to signs and semiotics seems about as cutting-edge today as psychoanalysis, or psychoanalytic criticism, would appear to be... In those now far-away 1980s, both semiotics and psychoanalysis were still considered pilot sciences for the humanities in France and everywhere else French Theory reigned. Freud and Lacan were considered essential reading for scholars throughout the humanities: as Google’s Ngram viewer neatly demonstrates, the absolute peak of Freud citations in English books can be found between 1980 and 2000.<sup>2</sup> However, already in his inaugural *Leçon* at Collège de France in 1977, Roland Barthes warned his readers that it would be unwise to hedge one’s bets on psychoanalysis in the stock market of theories. This advice seems even more sound thirty years later.

Even in France — with Argentina one of the last bulwarks of psychoanalysis —

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1. This issue is inspired by a reflection that started at the conference “Sign of the Times, Psychoanalytic Literary Cultural Criticism in Changing Paradigms” held in Leuven in 2008, organized by Dirk de Geest, Tomas Geyskens, Anneleen Masschelein, Paul Moyaert and Philippe Van Haute. We want to thank all the participants to this conference for their stimulating contributions as well as FWO Vlaanderen and the Research Unit Literature and Culture of the KULeuven for their generous support.

2. The quantitative approach of looking for the frequency of cultural key words in part of the huge Google books database, called culturonomics, reveals that “Gallileo, Darwin, and Einstein may be well-known scientists, but Freud is more deeply ingrained in our collective subconscious”. Jean-Baptiste Michel *et al.*, “Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books”, *Science* 331 (2011). In a fact the graph reveals a tipping point in citations in around 2000. Unfortunately, the viewer doesn’t show beyond the year 2000. See: <http://ngrams.googlelabs.com/> [accessed December 18, 2011]

where psychoanalysis has been deeply embedded in the university for many decades, there seems to be a renewed zeal to ensure that psychoanalysis is not only forgotten but even banned.<sup>3</sup> For several decades now, psychiatry has turned its back on the talking cure in nearly all countries. Pharmacology and cognitive therapy are regarded as more effective and certainly cheaper ways to deal with mental health crises in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the DSM, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, is going strong. The globalized, post-colonial (or differently colonial) world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seems profoundly anti-Oedipal to say the least. Deleuze and Guattari's doubts whether psychoanalysis, grounded in the ideal of the stable bourgeois family, is the best model to analyze the problems of subjectivity in a post-industrial, digital, hyper-capitalist society with new family structures, organizations of labor and power structures have proved to be far more than a provocation of Lacanian dominance. The "new" sciences of the brain — neuroscience, cognitive psychology and evolutionary biology — have taken over the baton from psychoanalysis as polyvalent backup research even in fields of cultural study, like trauma studies, film studies, affect theory and narratology.

As a sign of the times, then, is or was psychoanalysis a quintessential twentieth-century phenomenon that is now merely of historical or sociological interest? Will it be forgotten entirely in the course of this century<sup>4</sup> — or will it merely "fade from faddists' minds", as Philip Rieff predicted in 1959, and the great mind of Freud and other great psychoanalytic thinkers survive on its own, without the back-up of the institution?<sup>5</sup> Is psychoanalysis a flexible discourse, adapting itself in times of changing paradigms and morphing into other forms, reappearing in different guises and different domains? Are the psychoanalytic texts and questions to be

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3. In the first decade of this century in France a number of scathing assessments of Freud and of psychoanalysis, often by former Freudians, have appeared with titles that leave little to the imagination: Jean Bénestean, *Mensonges freudiennes. Histoire d'une désinformation séculaire* (Paris: Mardaga, 2010); Catherine Meyer, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, Jean Cottreaux, Didier Pleux, and Jacques Van Rillaer, eds. *Livre noir de la psychoanalyse: Vivre, penser et aller mieux sans Freud* (Paris: Edition des Arènes, 2010); Michel Onfray, *La crépuscule d'un idole* (Paris: Fayard, 2010), and *Apostille au crépuscule. Pour une psychanalyse non-freudienne*. (Paris: Fayard, 2010).

4. As Sarah Winters summarizes the question in 1999: "If a general disenchantment with psychoanalytic assumptions about the mind and the self were to set in, would we really be left with "nothing in its place?" Or would a plethora of rival ideas and practices rush in to challenge the sway of "depth psychology," to substitute some other conceptual framework for the seemingly irreplaceable premise that we are determined *psychologically* — by an "inner," individualized, sexualized, and gendered life story?" Sarah Winters, *Freud and the Institution of Psychoanalytic Knowledge* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) 2.

5. Philip Rieff, "Freud Will Fade Only from Faddists' Minds", *The Feeling Intellect: Selected Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 65-67. The text appeared first in *The San Francisco Sunday Chronicle* on June 21, 1959. A similar concern for what will be left of Freud in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is also what is at stake in Peter Brooks and Alex Wolowski, eds. *Whose Freud? The Place of Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000).

considered as a unified body of discourse, or are they as fragmented as psychoanalysis as an institution, and is it more fruitful to concentrate on how individual texts fare in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? This implies that psychoanalytic knowledge may be redistributed differently in new networks, and fresh connections and positions may be fostered. But then again, will we not irredeemably lose the intricate connection between individual and society, between praxis and theory, between creative thinking (and writing) and ethics that made psychoanalysis so uniquely attractive for such a long time?

In rediscovering a body of knowledge one often sees shifts in attention. Central tenets become controversial or simply less important: the Oedipus complex is one such case.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, things that were previously in the background or deemed outdated can be rediscovered and revalued, for instance Freud's *Project* (Entwurf) phrased in neurological terms that belatedly seem to herald contemporary neurological research and may allow a reconnection with neurology. Recently, *Totem and Taboo*, long considered a Freudian fiction in the negative sense of the word, is being rediscovered by visual theorists interested in anthropological notions like the fetish and the idol such as W.J.T. Mitchell, and Jung has been rehabilitated as the missing link between Freud and Deleuze and Guattari.<sup>7</sup> When the uncanny became an important aesthetical concept in the 1970-1980s, it seemingly remained attached to Freud, but it was in fact disconnected from the psychoanalytic framework. This led to the reappraisal of Freud's essay on the uncanny, from a relatively marginal text within the psychoanalytic canon, to a central position within cultural theory.<sup>8</sup>

Without a crystal ball it is hard to predict whether the renewed attention to the unconscious and processes of unconscious thinking and free association that one finds in the work of Christopher Bollas will allow us to discover new ways of creative thinking, and whether the turn of psychoanalysts to literature and fiction is more than a coincidence. What will happen to the meticulously documented body of psychoanalytic therapeutic experience over many years in a new context of mental health research? Does the emphasis on ethics within Lacanian psychoanalysis actually support a new moral and political thinking that seems well on its way in the second decade of the century? Will the work of Freud, Lacan and others thinkers like Klein, Bion, Winnicott, Green, Laplanche and Pontalis, and Anzieu survive as part of Western philosophy or theory? And, last but not least, is neuropsychology a viable road to testing and confirming psychoanalytic intuitions or hypotheses and can psychoanalysis be considered as a precursor to the science of the brain? The texts gathered here by no means claim to answer these questions, nor do they systematically explore all possible directions that contemporary

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6. See Paul Verhaeghe. *New Studies of Old Villains. A Radical Reconsideration of the Oedipus-complex* (New York: The Other Press, 2009)

7. Christian Kerslake, *Deleuze and the Unconscious* (New York and London: Continuum, 2007).

8. Anneleen Masschelein, *The Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009)

psychoanalysis is about to take. But in their examinations of some psychoanalytic texts, ideas and practices, they do set out, each in their own way, to ensure the beginning of psychoanalysis's after-life.

## 2. Psychoanalysis in the margins

It is too big a story to sketch in a few pages the historical development of the psychoanalytic movement in England, the United States, France and Latin America, to name just those areas where psychoanalysis was not merely an important movement within the practice of mental health but also regarded as a scientific discipline and closely tied up with political practice. Quite recently, a number of books not only look at the rise of psychoanalysis, but at its crisis.<sup>9</sup> An interesting case in point is Paul E. Stepansky's *Psychoanalysis at the Margins* (2009). Stepansky is a historian of ideas and formerly the chief editor of *The Analytic Press*, a small psychoanalytic publisher in Hillsdale, NJ. Stepansky attributed the demise that led to the closure of his press in 2006 not so much to the changes in the publishing landscape, where journals have become more important than books for mental health professionals and academics, or to the rise of the internet. Rather, it is the result of the internal crises and fragmentation, or as he calls it "fractionalization," of psychoanalysis itself that gradually hollowed out the once extremely large readership of psychoanalytic books. In this way, the story of the Analytic Press and of psychoanalytic publishing in the US, serves as a frame for a greater picture of the rise and fall of psychoanalysis in the United States.

The key word to understand this story, Stepansky suggests, is "marginalization". Other sociologists have introduced this term in the context of psychoanalysis, for instance McLaughlin, who examines the case of Erich Fromm.<sup>10</sup> Whereas McLaughlin relies on Fromm's social position and his personality traits to understand why Fromm, once a best-selling author, has been so dramatically forgotten, Stepansky attributed the marginalization of psychoanalysis first and foremost to "fractionalism." The division of psychoanalysis in different fractions that became politically and institutionally opposed and isolated, led to the fragmentation of psychoanalytic knowledge in different "incommensurable" theories that can no longer be compared or judged and ultimately resulted in the loss of scientific credibility and dominance. According to Stepansky (who relies on Thomas Kuhn), this tendency runs opposite to the evolution of "normal" scientific paradigms that evolve towards unification by the adoption of common standards that make it possible to evaluate and falsify scientific data and build up a reliable, accepted body of scientific knowledge and protocol. Furthermore, the absence of instruments to adequately measure and provide objective and accurate psychoanalytic data that can be compared and

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9. A list can be found in Paul Stepansky, *Psychoanalysis at the Margins* (New York: The Other Press, 2009) 3 n3.

10. Neil McLaughlin, "How to Become a Forgotten Intellectual. Intellectual Movements and the Rise and Fall of Erich Fromm," *Sociological Forum* 13 (1998) 215-246.

discussed, further contributed to the marginalization of psychoanalysis which is in Stepansky's account exiled to the margins of science, more specifically of medicine and psychiatry, and ultimately degraded to the status of pseudo-science.

Stepansky's extremely detailed account relies heavily on the comparison of the history of psychoanalysis and that of psychiatry and medical science. After the Second World War, psychoanalysis occupied a dominant position both within American psychiatry as well as in the popular discourse on medical health. This resulted in huge sales of psychoanalytic literature and in turn contributed to the absorption of the psychoanalytic vocabulary by the English language. In this way, psychoanalysis and the psychoanalytic "thought style", as Winters calls it, became crucial to the mid-twentieth century understanding of the self and subjectivity.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the psychoanalytic movement was being torn apart by incessant struggles for power between different schools and by the concomitant fractionalist tendency to evade communication. As a result, the search for common ground fell back, leading to the gradual loss of authority of psychoanalytic theory. Books and articles tended to address themselves to their own fraction, as a result, the readership fell back and ultimately, the smaller psychoanalytic presses, once very powerful instruments in the institutionalization and domination of psychoanalysis were endangered and became extinct. As Stepansky demonstrates, the wide range of psychoanalytic journals is not a sign of the professionalization of psychoanalysis, but rather a sign of fractionalization. The recent tendency of a journal like *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* to adopt a pluralist stance cannot mend the harm that has been done. Its "linguistically muddled and epistemologically confused" pluralism (Stepansky, 108) is nothing but a pseudo-scientific laissez-faire attitude, not a genuine willingness to adopt the common standard necessary for the safeguarding of scientificity of a theory.

In Stepansky's view, the answer to the current crisis and indeed the only way to ensure its survival is a unification of psychoanalytic theory, possibly by fostering connections with neurological findings, and the adoption of common concepts and procedure by all psychoanalytic schools and fractions. In the absence of this theoretical unity – about which Stepansky seems rather pessimistic – psychoanalysis's best bet is to settle for the margins of scientific practice, where other paramedical disciplines like osteopathy, chiropraxis and homeopathy have managed to survive, by fostering a renewed link with community work. The inaugural text of our issue, an interview with Paul Verhaeghe, Professor and Chair of the Department of Psychoanalysis at the University in Ghent, Belgium, directly feeds into this issue but from a different position. That such department resides under a Faculty of Psychology is probably fairly unique in a European and Anglo-Saxon context. Verhaeghe points out the difficulties related to the desire to maintain psychoanaly-

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11. Winter borrows the notion of thought style from Ludwik Fleck and defines the psychoanalytic thought style as "a powerful *method of psychological reduction*." Sarah Winter, *Freud and the Institutionalization of Knowledge* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) 11-12. See also Adam Curtis's revealing documentary, *The Century of the Self* (BBC 2002).

sis's position in a faculty driven by the desire for scientificity. At the same time, he also offers important arguments why it is ultimately better for psychoanalysis to maintain its roots in clinical practice and not to find a place in other faculties and departments such as philosophy, art history or literature.

Apart from the question of psychoanalysis's position *within* the university, there is the one of its place *at* the university. This is the old problem of the transmission of psychoanalysis as a specific practice, which is not the same as the familiar tension between theory and practice, as Lacan's distinction between two discourses, the analytic and the university discourse, makes clear. While most analysts will not deny the importance of academic transfer of knowledge about psychoanalysis – even if only for the broadness of its appeal and the distinction of the university – they will insist that it all begins and ends with analytic experience.<sup>12</sup> This experience cannot be reduced to or attained by textbook knowledge. To some, it is the necessary supplement to what a university education can offer, but for many analysts it is truly independent of any academic goal. To this last position can be added that the goal of the analytic cure is not in the first place a therapy for “illnesses” diagnosed with the DSM at hand. Moreover, duration and cost can vary strongly and its ethics has nothing to do with what is conceived as “good,” but is instead concerned with an “unadapted” or unrehabilitated desire.<sup>13</sup> All these premises add to the marginalization of psychoanalysis, which is not merely quantitatively speaking a minority.

And yet, this “marginality” does not exclude the way psychoanalytically inspired authors are among those who are able to put the contemporary discontents into words and allow the reader to gain new perspectives. Of course, here one should refer to Slavoj Žižek's unique combination of German idealism and Lacanian psychoanalysis used as a tool to analyze contemporary culture and its impasses, but one can also think of important contemporary essayists like Darian Leader and Adam Phillips.<sup>14</sup> The concern and direct involvement with contemporary culture and political problems shines through in the work of the two preeminent contemporary psychoanalysts interviewed in this issue, Paul Verhaeghe and Christopher Bollas, no matter how different their perspectives may seem. It is striking, however, that they both refuse the position of master and are as weary of the “Schools” of psychoanalysis as they are of schools of science.

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12. Those familiar with the work of Lacan must have noticed how often he refers to “the analytic experience”, even when it is not immediately clear for the clinically oriented reader what that has to do with, for instance, a reflection on Gottlob Frege's concept of number.

13. Philippe Van Haute, *Against Adaptation. Lacan's 'Subversion of the Subject.' A Close reading* (New York: The Other Press, 2001).

14. One can think for instance of Darian Leader, *The New Black. Mourning, Depression and Melancholia* (London: Penguin, 2008) or Adam Phillips, *On Balance* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010).

The contemporary position of the analyst, then, is that of the outsider. Neither in the splendid isolation of the university, nor the imaginary objectivity and purity of the laboratory; but also neither in the private seclusion of the bourgeois analyst's office, nor the secret society of a psychoanalytic school, the psychoanalyst finds him or herself alone in the midst of the messy, noisy incomprehensibility of everyday life. Beyond right and wrong, beyond good and evil — and therefore vulnerable to mistakes and misunderstanding — the psychoanalyst appears as one who does not give up trying to create signs for the Real not so much in order to create meaning or to understand but to live a meaningful life.

### 3. Psychoanalysis, pedagogy and schools revisited

Between the two interviews framing this issue, the articles that constitute the main bulk of text undertake the study of psychoanalysis from a fresh position. One thing they have in common is that “sign of the time” is interpreted in a double sense. On the one hand, they look back on historical moments in the use of psychoanalytic theory in the humanities, on the other hand, these moments somehow bear on the present situation, even if this relation is not always spelt out. Like Paul Verhaeghe, Natalie Loveless addresses psychoanalysis's position at the university, but from a very different faculty and perspective. In her careful reading of Jane Gallop's *Anecdotal Theory*, Loveless looks back at a period in American academia governed by theory wars, activism and political correctness. Using Gallop, one of the first to introduce Lacan in the field of literary theory, Loveless revisits the Lacanian conception of transference as love as a basis for a teaching and reading practice that is based on the seemingly insignificant, the anecdote. Rather than leading us astray, the anecdote, by leading us to what we do not want to know, has the capability of transforming both students and teachers in a fundamentally different teaching experience.

The master-student relation is also at stake in Jean-Michel Rabaté's compelling tale of the “Strasbourg School,” a School which is in fact three, or rather none at all. Rabaté, who is himself a glorious hybrid — a French professor of English as well as a member of the American Academy of Science, a specialist of modernism as well as Lacan — is excellently placed to examine the difficult relation of Lacan and two of his readers, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, who were students when they published their groundbreaking *The Title of the Letter* (1973), which was received by Lacan as a Derridian attack. Ostensibly a familiar story of strife, of young versus old, of periphery versus centre, Rabaté soon turns the tables and unsettles the very logic of Schools and rivalry. In a subtle and elegant reading, Rabaté shows how, in their meticulous reading, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe do not merely expose Lacan, but also reveal him as a majestic Bataillan hero, an atheological heir of Antigone. Likewise, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe are revealed as two highly individual, multifaceted thinkers that far exceed any unifying, reductive view in terms of school or theory.

Kris Pint revisits Jung's relevance for literary theory, through Deleuze. Going back to the origins of Jung's "geographical Unconscious," Pint unearthes the notion of "temenos", a kind of sacred place in which the presence of the gods could be felt. In Jung's theory of the psyche it designates a kind of play area, an imaginary field of virtualities that calls for an "active imagination". This is a creative type of interaction with texts, found in the work of authors such as Roland Barthes in his later works and, more recently, in the witty psychoanalytic criticism of Pierre Bayard. Both are authors of a genre — creative nonfiction or fictocriticism, many terms are in the air for this style of writing — that is becoming in the Deleuzian sense. Neither critical, nor novelistic; both theoretical and essayistic, this kind of writing exceeds categorization and promotes active, creative reading. This, Pint suggests, may be how psychoanalysis should be read and done in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: as an untimely force that need not be rescued or rehabilitated, any more than it needs to be forgotten or abolished. Rather, it should be used and abused, played with and taken seriously, in order to keep it alive.

#### 4. New perspectives on *la comédie humaine*

This kind of respectful disobedience with regard to psychoanalysis is exemplarily found in Stéphane Lojkin's fascinating reading of scenes and operative devices in literature and psychoanalysis. Although Lojkin is well versed in the work of Lacan, he is interested in a specific aspect of Lacan's thinking, namely his perspective on the image and the scopic regime. Lojkin's theory of operative devices is a complex hybrid that aims at the gap between word and image where a very specific type of meaning is produced. Focussing on scenes and seemingly insignificant details in Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, Lojkin meticulously shows how the imaginary superimposition of spaces in a novel reveals something that cannot be made sense of in any other way. Although this focus on operative devices is not psychoanalytic, Lojkin is not afraid to admit and examine the ways in which his theory is tributary to Lacan. Going back to and translating the operative device back into Lacanian terminology, Lojkin superimposes an extra layer onto his own perspective and is able to pinpoint how the apparently meaningless scenes and details that constitute Flaubert's narrative technique reveal the layered dimension of the symbolic as well as the underlying revolt that operates from these layers.

Nadia Sels takes a rather different path, namely the German neo-Kantian philosophers Ernst Cassirer and Hans Blumenberg, to argue how, a few years after Lévi-Strauss's death, there is still a lot of unexamined territory in the relation of psychoanalysis and mythology. On the one hand, psychoanalysis is privileged in the study of myth, because in spite of appearances and clichés that abound, psychoanalysts (Freud and Lacan, but also Rank and Jung) have in fact avoided the reduction of myth to allegory in the sense of a fixed process of translation. Instead, they managed to reveal myth as a productive process, that continues to generate new meanings, new translations, thereby touching on the foundations of language



and thinking. On the other hand, Sels also shows why psychoanalysis can be inspired by the study of myths. As a creative reformulation of unanswerable questions, myths are a vital part of society. Likewise, psychoanalysis as a myth in the margin of science not only has an important critical function vis-à-vis the dominant ideology, but also a crucial function in safeguarding the creative imagination.

The last essay of this issue by Natalija Bonic traces the relation of psychoanalysis and comedy in Alenka Zupančič's *The Odd One In* and spells out its subversive potential. Bonic highlights the fundamental difference between comedy and tragedy as conceptions of the human condition. Comedy has a transformative power not because it elevates us, but because it confronts us with our humanity: it grounds us firmly in reality, in the baseness of life in the Bataillon sense. It changes our perspective on a visceral, physical level. This is why comedy may be as good a model, if not better, for psychoanalysis than tragedy. Psychoanalysis does not aim at revelation and epiphany, because the human condition cannot be changed. However, looking at it in a different way does not simply make suffering more bearable, but shows how, like the sacred and the profane, joy and suffering are profoundly intertwined. Moreover, the communal aspect of both comedy and tragedy as living practices, may serve as a model for the role of psychoanalysis in society.

The aspect of comedy is also crucial to the writing of Christopher Bollas. A highly respected as well as best-selling author in contemporary psychoanalysis, Christopher Bollas is a fascinating and exceptional figure. His thinking is very rich and evocative, but resists solidification in a theory or even a fixed set of concepts. Although like most British analysts, Bollas is first and foremost involved in psychoanalytic thinking through clinical practice, he is also a creative thinker and writer in more ways than one. In this interview, the focus is not primarily on Bollas's theoretical and clinical works but on his creative practice. Like many other psychoanalysts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Bollas is not only keenly interested in literature and the arts from a critical perspective, but he has (re)turned to writing fiction. Of course, the relation between psychoanalysis and the arts has been long established – one can think of surrealism, Hollywood cinema and psychological literature – and is still there, think of the popular TV series *In Treatment* or Cronenberg's *A Dangerous Method*, to name but two recent examples. However, what is at stake in Bollas's fiction is not a popularization of psychoanalysis via literature, but a revitalization of psychoanalytic thinking through fiction. In the interview, Bollas talks not only about his writing habits and practice; as in his work he is deeply concerned with contemporary society and the role of psychoanalysis today. Like Verhaeghe and the other authors in this issue, Bollas indicates how psychoanalysis is not just a way of life, but can offer a road to a *lively* life, a creative life.

One of the recurring signs of the time in this issue is that of the margin, of a form of disobedience and counterforce against ideals of efficiency, health, balance, scientificity. Psychoanalysis is not an easy path, it is slippery. It prefers the roads not taken, the side-tracks, the outmoded and seemingly outdated, but it does so not out of conservatism, but as a form of revitalization, as a challenge. We leave it to the

reader to judge whether psychoanalysis's retreat in the sidelines offers new and useful insights for our culture and for specific areas of study, like philosophy, film, literature, myths and pedagogy and whether it allows us to read the signs of our time in a meaningful way.