

## **Forms of the Formless: What Thinking Looks Like.**

*Mieke Bal*

One day not long ago, I woke up with the urge to make a film about thinking. In view of the current madness of the world, I had been pondering what has happened to thinking, which seems replaced by screaming, or worse. Affirmations we must endorse are thrown into our faces; no doubt is allowed. This has enticed me to explore imaginatively what thinking is and how it is done – how it needs doubt, interruption, and social interaction to flourish. And so I did.

The film belongs to the hybrid genre of “theoretical fiction,” made of “imaginative imaging,” and the deployment of anachronism as a way of conveying the relevance of the past for the present. A temporal detour leading to an ellipse. The film is “about”, or rather, *figures* thought-in-action, presented socially through conversations and physically through walks as moments of solitary thinking. An example is Descartes', the philosopher, long walk through the dunes incongruous cut to footage of the inside of minerals sutures the walking to the thinking and imagining. The image of the minerals is a fragment from an artwork, 'Things Among Things' (2015) by Italian artist Giovanni Giaretta. Art making is not done alone either.

If thought has a form, it is elliptical, but in the *two* senses of the word. It is full of ellipses: constantly interrupted, when reality roars its head, so that the blanks between moments or scraps of thought become like the deletions in a citation. But in spite of such interruptions, the thought process continues, because thinking is part of living. The social dimension of thinking as a process turns the impossible straight lines of thought into curved, wavy, and three-dimensional contours, even volumes. Much, much richer! The curves and waves invite everyone standing on the curved lines of the ellipse to hop on board and travel along with the thinker. Among the stops on the way that cause the ellipsis marked by the dots of deletion, the most important ones are encounters with other people. With the result that ellipsis and ellipse merged into one. For these encounters turn any attempt to think up a straight line into an ellipse. As a form: a circle with irregular distances between the centre and the lines.

On these lines, other people call the running thought to a halt, to chat for a bit, respond, comment, discuss. The thinker drawing his lines cannot ignore those breaks, and is bound to turn corners, and the thought becomes something beautiful: as confused, and confusing, as José Maldonado's 2007 work *Hora + Hora*. This work gave me a clearer sense of the thought process of the world's Number One thinker, despised for his alleged straightness. The encounter between Maldonado's work and my preoccupation with Descartes as a model for un-modelled forms of thinking, made me aware of how art works, and how the work of thinking becomes art. I considered Descartes' writing, accounting for his thought, as *curved*; and philosopher Kyoo Lee has called it "blind, mad, dreamy and bad" in the subtitle of her book about *Reading Descartes Otherwise*.

While doing his thinking elliptically, curving along, Descartes made yet another curve. He also shone as an expert in what we would now call "mental illness", when he comforted his friend Elisabeth who was suffering from about of it. Where did that skill come from? My guess is, to curve and make the point that Eve Sedgwick formulated a propos of homosexuality in one of her brilliant axioms: "it takes one to know one". An important weapon against gay bashing! Here this means that Descartes could recognize the psychic problems of Elisabeth because he suffered from similar problems. In my most outrageous anachronism, I credit him with the invention of psychoanalysis, but in a post-Freudian version. Not a thought came out of his head onto paper that had not been developed on the curved lines of the ellipse when the interruptions, or the dots of ellipsis, made straight continuation impossible. Like art, thought is social. We all make it together.

(Mieke Bal, jan-2017)