

Tell me, O Muse

are the opening words of Homer's *Odyssey*. With these words, Homer calls upon the muse—the goddess of the arts—to blow divine inspiration into him with her godly breath, so that he may recount the tale of Odysseus' voyage. Besides being a **wish for inspiration**, these words signify the beginning of a **long tradition**. A tradition in which stories have been told, rewritten, and understood, over and over.

We imagine Homer peering into the flames, while the people huddled around him wait impatiently. How will he start off the **first story**? What should he preserve, and what should he discard, from Odysseus' journey? Who will enact the gods, who the hero, and who the villain? Which words will he speak, and with which tone? In long, weighty sentences, or in those that are slow and dragging? Sentences that are so dense and laden in meaning – in that fashion only spoken by poets – those that confuse you and get you all tangled up, like this one? Or this way: short and simple. How Homer, standing at the fire, ended up deciding how to tell his story, influenced how the classics were **told, retold, revised, and understood**, for centuries. It's no surprise that Homer asked the muse for help in this endeavour.

This year, DRIFT embarks on an Odyssean journey to the influence of stories on our experience of the world. We examine the ways in which myths and stories, but also history, language, art, and the sciences **mediate** the human experience of the world. To that end we address those first words, *tell me, oh Muse*, to every muse who may want to listen, so that the muses of science, philosophy, historiography, music, and dance will accompany us during DRIFT. Hence, we sing:

Tell us, O Muse! Inspire us, lovely muse. Let your breath transport us. Teach us how to rewrite the limits of our reality! Let us build, teach us how to create!

Philosophical background

Cassirer was the first to speak of myths as **symbolic forms**, meaningful or symbolic systems that structure the world and the human experience of this world. Cassirer viewed man as a *symbolic animal* whose relationship to the world is always mediated – be it through language, art, religion, science, or the arts. According to this view, the world is not regarded as an objective given, but as a whole constructed by people. Man continually exists in relation to a **medium** that connects him/her to the world, unable to observe an unmediated 'reality' that resides outside of the *symbolic forms*.

Language

is one of the most prominent examples of a meaningful system. Accordingly, it's also one of the most discussed and debated mediums. Can we ever ascribe an unambiguous meaning to matters if the relationships between meaning and signifier are always shifting (a **deconstructivist question**)? Or are definitions dependent on the whole of our convictions (a **logical-analytical question**)? Can language express our desires in words or is there always a feeling lost in translation (a **psychoanalytical question**)? The language we use may mediate our world, but is hard to enclose in rigid structures because of its ambiguity. The question remains if our experience is restricted or broadened by our attempt to grasp it with words.

Paul Ricoeur observes a possibility for broadening. According to Ricoeur we should understand our personal identity as a **narrative identity**, as an 'I' that is able to testify to its own existence. By understanding our life as a story we can make ideas such as **time and space** understandable. Just like in a story, we present the events of our life chronologically, through which time - an abstract philosophical concept - is granted meaning. Judith Butler also emphasizes the formative character of language with the **performativity** of gender and sex. According to Butler, identity is consolidated by **speech acts**. What changes when we consider ourselves as narrators of our own (life) story? And if the self is constituted by performative speech acts, can we then also consciously choose to tell (and thus enact) ourselves differently?

Art

is another example of a symbolic system. However, the mediating character of art was a reason for distrust in Ancient Greece. Plato rejected the arts because they were a mere imitation (**mimes**) of the world, which itself is already an image of the world of Forms. Contemporary cultural critics refute the idea that the artwork always represents something. Susan Sontag argues that we shouldn't search for a meaning 'behind' the artwork, and should instead focus on **the form**, on the work of art in itself, and the impact it has on our thoughts and feelings. The artwork is thus granted intrinsic meaning through its form, instead of through its content. Erwin Panofsky describes how perspective can likewise be considered as a symbolic form, determined by the time and culture the artwork is made in. Is the relationship man-artwork-world necessarily linear, or rather circular? And what happens when we look at the artwork on its own, outside of this relationship?

Religion

is conceived of as parallel to language, art, and history by Cassirer, as a way to organise human experience and construct it through symbolism. In his view religious beliefs function as constructs that offer social and psychological cohesion — this doesn't make them 'fictional'. Religion can extend a structure with which man can relate to **existential and spiritual questions** and is a 'direct expression' that feels uniquely close to human experience, Cassirer describes.

Science

is not some type of 'fiction' by placing it in this category and does not (necessarily) imply a science relativism. Science was essential to Cassirer's understanding of symbolic forms - he considered it to (possibly) be the highest and most characteristic achievement of human culture. In his work - and others' - we find an awareness of the historical character of science and the ways in which it interacts with other cultural forms. Modern science thus has a **cultural significance** and is an expression of a certain 'cultural spirit'. Science creates this symbolic representation of reality as to understand it, and thus forms the reality again.

Not only scientists, but humanity generally, experience themselves and a world that is formed by science. Our understanding of what we do and are is strongly shaped by scientific theories and observations (think of the theory of evolution). Furthermore, the 'products' of science, such as medicine, preservatives, and technologies, also mediate our experience of the world. Additionally, our knowledge of the world is shaped by concrete scientific practices, such as the use of **visualisation technologies** — think of the microscope, models, diagrams — or the use of **conceptual frameworks** — such as 'specie', 'atom', 'possibility', 'causality' — which are drawn from our experience and then form what our experience is. In that sense, a **paradigm shift** is not only a shift in some abstract concept of 'science' but a complete transformation of our perception of reality.

The body

is a last (although not symbolic) form that mediates the relationship between man and world. According to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, man is a **body-subject** or an **embodied subjectivity** situated in the world. A human's situatedness (trans)forms their experience of that world. Contemporary phenomenology emphasizes the idea that bodies that exist outside of the **somatic norm** - such as 'ill' bodies or disabled bodies - have a different perspective on the world. How does the body that we are form our perspective on the world?

The politics of stories

lies in the manner in which stories are told and passed on. There's a choice lurking in there: which stories will be repeated, which are muffled? The narrative through which we understand the world is formed through stories. **History**, which recapitulates what has happened, stands between man and world as a medium. We can save human actions from oblivion and grant meaning to the present by telling stories. This is everything but objective. **Postcolonialism** reappropriates the past and reveals how warped dominant historiography has been. Retellings of the **dominant narrative** are indispensable to exposing **structural injustice**. How can we handle the past correctly, retell history, and keep in mind our missteps?

In conclusion

Stories can enrich as well as restrict; they construct our identity, shape our socio-political structures, and influence our experience. DRIFT aims to elucidate this influence by giving the stage to diverging voices and perspectives. You will find different mediums at the festival, that each mediate our relationship to the world in a unique fashion. DRIFT turns to shifting boundaries, not only of imagination but also of thought generally.