

# Who Controls the Confusion? About Milk by Marit Shalem

by Rick Dolphijn

## 1. Sur/Realism

Milk, the installation and 34-part documentary by Dutch artist Marit Shalem, explores the themes of cows and machines, milk powder and substantial financial transactions. This work reminds one of the book *The Milk of Dreams* (2017/2013), a children's book by British/Mexican artist Leonora Carrington (1927-2011). Carrington's surrealist booklet introduces fantastical animal characters who embark on extraordinary adventures, ultimately revealing the root of various problems and what truly matters.

Carrington's book served as a significant inspiration for the 2022 Venice Biennale, also titled *The Milk of Dreams*. The title encapsulates the essence of Surrealism, which thrives on imagination, blending horror and reassurance, and therapeutically explores the subconscious. This reflects Freud's concept of how manifest dreams reveal themselves through latent dream thoughts.

Surrealism is not about depicting the unreal; in fact, it highlights what is real, drawing special attention to aspects of reality we often overlook. It challenges us to confront everything human and beyond, presenting all possible perspectives on reality. As early as 1955, Fernand Alquié observed: 'We can say that all surrealist art aims to paint a more complete and accurate picture of humanity... The image, with all its weight, seeks to become true and show us how people dream of changing the world.' (1969/1955, 163)

In Carrington's work, her animal characters reveal many aspects of her life: her love for Max Ernst, their escape through Europe during World War II, her time in a psychiatric hospital, and her eventual move to Mexico where she would spend most of her life. Through her enchanting stories, life and its complexities are revealed. The obvious and the hidden are always deeply interconnected.

In Shalem's work, particularly in *Milk*, this reality and its realization warrant a longer explanation. Marit Shalem has previously explored absurdist and surrealist video animation, creating productions where various stories and ideas overlapped. These narratives resonated with each other, competing for attention and evolving through improvisation and surprise. In this resonance, much like a Moiré pattern, the real stories emerged. The productions seemed to be 'milked from dreams,' blending into an untouched, sweet nectar we all desire. They nourish our bodies and minds with something real yet unforeseen and unprecedented. What truly matters often isn't easily recognized and sometimes requires chance to reveal itself. Not every reality can or will express itself without being questioned.

In productions like *Broom Groom*, Shalem uses three transparent screens to present images, texts and speakers that weave stories together, creating a choreography in search of human connection. In *Works on White*, everything

unfolds 'in whiteness,' within the invisible confusion and omnipresence of whiteness, and its associations with purity, the pure, and power (such as white colonial discourse). Whiteness is ever-present, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Unlike her earlier work, *Milk* presents itself as a documentary. But like *Works on White*, *Broom Groom* (and *Milk of Dreams*), *Milk* reveals the same dream or reality – both manifest and latent – in all its confusion, surprise, diversity, opacity and whiteness.

As with *Carrington*, the protagonists are fantastic animal figures, both incredibly beautiful and monstrous, and entirely shaped by human influence. Freed from the ideals of *Big Money*, these female animal characters sometimes produce up to 14.000 litres of milk a year for us. In contrast, a century ago cows only produced 2.500 litres of milk annually. Organizations in the Netherlands euphemistically refer to this 'achievement' as 'top sport.'

Perhaps akin to the top-class sport envisioned by the East German Olympic Committee, characterized by compulsion, an unhealthy lifestyle in every respect, and an insatiable thirst for more success. Most perplexingly, it demonstrates how the pursuit of happiness persists. *Milk* rarely depicts these animal figures in meadows; instead, it places them in their preferred enlightening environment – sandwiched between shiny, 'redeeming' machines that extract milk two or three times a day, process it and frequently turn it into powder. Ultimately, this industrial conversion of liquid milk into milk powder is the heart of the story.

## 2. Milk powder

Although animal characters and their habitats often appear in the picture, the true protagonist of *Milk* is, unsurprisingly, human. The dreams and desires shaping the story are exclusively human. The cow, needless to say, has nothing to do with this. The focus is on one man in particular: Henri Nestlé (1814-1890), the eleventh of fourteen children from a reasonably well-to-do German family, who had a knack for business. Starting in the rapeseed trade, he later dabbled in liqueur, absinthe, mineral water and lemonade, before turning to milk.

Although Nestlé never had children himself, he recognized that cow's milk powder would be a commercially promising product, especially as an alternative to breast milk. This insight made him very wealthy and helped Nestlé become the world's largest food group. Powdered milk, with its long shelf life and ease of transport, coupled with the idea that milk is essential for life (even though humans are unique among animals in consuming milk beyond infancy), first conquered the West. Over time, partly due to colonial and post-colonial influences, it spread to more and more communities around the world.

Today, nearly all claims that drinking cow's milk is beneficial or even necessary for humans have been scientifically debunked or at least heavily criticized. Additionally, there is growing discomfort in some Western countries about the practice of separating newborn calves from their mothers to maximize milk yield for human

consumption. While our high consumption of cow's milk faces increasing scrutiny in the West, the global demand for milk powder from companies like Nestlé is growing unprecedentedly. The surge is partly due to scandals involving Chinese milk powder producers. However, the strong reputation of milk powder from companies like Nestlé primarily results from a long-standing marketing campaign, new urban myths, and age-old colonial ideals. Advertisements for baby milk still feature white men in white coats worldwide, proclaiming the benefits of drinking cow's milk – with great success.

'Whiteness,' the search for 'the humanity of dignity,' and the colonial legacy are all themes that have received considerable attention in Shalem's previous work. However, in *Milk* these themes are even more prominently presented through the lens of capitalism – a reality that appears fantastical, but is terrible for 99% of those involved. It's a confusing narrative that unfolds like a mad story... perhaps only benefiting the Nestlé family.

### 3. Who is the Parasite here?

When we think of 'power,' such as the power of money (like that of the Nestlé family), we often envision a sovereign master who, because of this power, can afford any kind of behavior, while a slave must execute all the master's orders, willingly or not. This persistent view shapes not only our understanding of the world, but also how we interpret authors who actually explain that power works very differently. For instance, Karl Marx's extensive and nuanced body of work is often read or interpreted in a one-sided and even incorrect manner by many socialist parties around the world.

When Marx discusses organized religion, a very significant power structure (especially around 1850), he does not argue that religion is 'the opiate for the people' – implying that those in power use religion to control the proletariat, like a Roman emperor. Instead, he says religion is 'the opiate of the people.' The people follow religious rules, not because the church imposes them, but because they desire to do so out of full conviction and love for God. The priest guides them and offers support, but ultimately benefits the most – as the representative of God on earth – without being overtly recognized. So, how does power operate in this context?

The recently deceased French philosopher Michel Serres wrote a wonderful little book called *Parasite* in the 1980s. It is an analysis of the fantastic, wonderful, and surreal animal stories (fables) of Jean de La Fontaine, published in 1668 and 1679. Although Serres does not discuss Marx, his analysis perfectly illustrates Marx's thoughts on power, capitalism, and confusion.

Serres analyzes La Fontaine's fables with a focus not on the master and the slave, but on the host and the parasite. In French, the word parasite also refers to noise and, quite literally, to being 'displaced' or 'not situated.' Primarily, Serres is interested in how the concept of the parasite is used in life sciences to analyze

particular behaviors. Parasitology is a unique branch of life sciences because it does not focus on specific organisms or life forms, but exclusively on relationships. It examines the host that gives limitlessly, 'loving' every guest without restraint, and the parasite that takes limitlessly, and proliferates.

Crucial in this relationship is that the parasite is not recognized as a parasite by the host. This is because, typically, the parasite is much smaller and weaker than the host, preferably even invisible. Recognizing the parasite means its end. With the removal of the noise, the host will hear better; with the removal of the confusion, reality will present itself to the host without interference. Only then will the host notice how much the parasite disrupted its relationships and what has been withheld from it. However, failing to recognize the parasite will lead to the host's demise. The parasite will continue to thrive as long as the host loves it, ultimately leading to the host's death.

La Fontaine's fables tell of the rat in town that does its best to remain unrecognized. Until it is discovered, the rat indulges in all the delicacies it is lovingly served. It even invites friends, who in turn parasitize on its hospitality. Eventually, the host recognizes the parasite. According to Serres, this is significant because the parasite's only enemy is another who wants to take over the role of parasite.

#### 4. Milking out

Our fantasy animal, the cow, shaped entirely by human intervention, produces insane amounts of milk, engages in 'top sport,' and longs for the moment when the shiny machines relieve her of all the milk. She is undeniably the hostess. She gives out of love, primarily intended for her young, but when they are swiftly taken away after birth, she ends up giving to all the people who occupy this place. She gives out of love and will continue to do so until death. The people drinking milk are, of course, parasites. The cow does not recognize them as such, but we all know very well that the cow's milk was never meant for us.

But that is only the beginning of the confusion. The real noise is capitalism, personified in our case by Henri Nestlé, but essentially representing the whole industry that has formed around it. This is an industry of milk producers who have collectively created a wonderfully confusing narrative about health, nature, scientific facts, and what is good for children and adults. And we have all come to believe in it.

Global industrial groups like Nestlé are obviously trying not to be recognized as parasites by billions of consumers. However, the confusion is so complex and widespread that they have little to worry about for now. As Serres pointed out, the only real enemies are fellow parasites; corporations like Unilever, Procter & Gamble and numerous Chinese companies that can produce even cheaper milk powder (and perhaps make the fantasy animals give even more milk). This is the confusion that Milk demonstrates. This history is a study in parasitology. Who is in control? Capital? Entrepreneurs like Nestlé? Meanwhile, the confusion is so great

that even the earth itself, due to climate change, seems to be part of the noise. It is a surreal history turned into surreal reality. Milk shows us, with the utmost care, the surreal that is real and calls special attention to everything real that we no longer notice.

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