

Krisis

Journal for contemporary philosophy

The following texts were the basis for a dialogue between Josef Früchtel and Mieke Bal concerning cultural analysis and the role of philosophy. The debate took place during an ASCA (Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis) workshop in March 2008 in Amsterdam and was followed by a discussion with the audience.

JOSEF FRÜCHTEL

WHAT IS CULTURAL ANALYSIS? AND WHAT IS THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY?

Krisis, 2008, Issue 1

'What is' questions are suspicious in 'post-metaphysical' times. A question that starts with: 'What is ...?' aims at grasping the essence of what it is aiming at, and grasping the essence of something or even of everything is the essence of metaphysics. At least this is what Nietzsche, Heidegger and his French scholars have been telling us for more than a century. Let us take this simplification for granted, and not point at the performative self-contradiction in it (that you have to determine the essence of metaphysics to get rid of metaphysics as the thinking of essence). It might already be reassuring then to hint at one of the godfathers of post-metaphysical thinking, Gilles Deleuze, who (together with Felix Guattari) wrote a book with the title: *What Is Philosophy?* An interesting book, like all books by Deleuze (and Guattari), but this one above all because of the tone of soberness, irony and wild speculation that is so typical for Deleuze (and Guattari) in general, expresses "sovereign freedom" at its best.¹ We have to be sovereign, superior, independent, competent and confident enough to raise that old question again: 'What is ...?'

But there is also an objective reason (a reason of matter) for doubting that the question: 'What is cultural analysis?' makes sense. For cultural analysis, like 'cultural studies' and (the German) *Kulturwissenschaften*, emerged in the last forty years (in the 1960s in Birmingham, as 'new historicism' in the 1970s/80s on the US-American west coast and finally in the 1990s), challenging the well established disciplines and trying to express something new. Therefore they constitutively cannot be defined. A definition would confine this new way of thinking. Because it is anti-disciplinary it first makes its way into multi- or inter-disciplinarity, into a discipline 'in between'. Because it cannot express itself within the boundaries of a (single) discipline, it must take refuge in the combination of multiple disciplines.

Nevertheless the question: 'What is cultural analysis?' cannot be avoided for a simple historical reason: the refuge has become a resource, and the longer the new way of thinking shifts between certain disciplines, it itself becomes a new (kind of) discipline. The longer and the more successfully the new kind of thinking continues, the less the question can be avoided as to what it actually or in fact is. The question has meanwhile even become urgent. For a flipside of success consists in fashion. Like other concepts ('unconscious', 'cultural memory', 'trauma' etc.) 'cultural analysis' faces the danger of becoming a mere label and therefore a slogan for a community and an identification for a stratum of consumers. Mere practice cannot be enough. It would turn cultural analysis into a *Nike* project: 'Just do it!' Self-reflection is necessary more than ever: what, exactly, are we doing when we perform (something that is called) cultural analysis?

My critical remarks and questions circle round four axes: methodology and theory, philosophy, history, and politics. I will, however, focus on methodology and theory. I will, for contingent reasons, not talk about the *oblivion of history* in cultural analysis, or as Heidegger would put it: the 'oblivion of Being', and I will not talk about the idea of politics as "semiotic guerrilla"² or, as I would like to call it, *pop-politics*, 'pop' meaning 'rebellion as a mere attitude'.³ Instead I will focus on methodology and theory, and I do this for a systematic reason: answering the question what cultural analysis is or might be first of all depends on the concepts of

method and theory. And since philosophy is the expert of these concepts, cultural analysis indirectly also depends on philosophy.

The danger I was mentioning should not be surprising for those who are familiar with Mieke Bal's *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* because, right from the beginning, this book is concerned with *methodology*. Methodology is the "primary focus" of the book and the "major problem" of cultural analysis. The main question, in Mieke Bal's own drastic words, is: "how do you keep analysis from floundering into sheer partisanship, or from being perceived as floundering?"⁴ I perceive cultural analysis as very floundering. Maybe this is my fault? Maybe I am following the wrong intellectual standards? Maybe I am one of the die-hard theory guys Mieke Bal is attacking?

I assume that I am not that bad (and that I am not one of the usual Pharisees), and the best way to demonstrate this is in pointing out those principles I share with Mieke Bal. So, concerning methodology, I agree with the statement that methods are not "sitting in a toolbox waiting to be applied", as I agree with the statement that you "don't apply one method; you conduct a meeting between several ..."⁵ Often indeed a method is waiting just to be applied. The 'revolutionary', innovative act of research in the humanities often consists in applying a certain method to an object and within a research area it, i.e. that method, was not developed for. But this mostly implies changing the method at least a little bit. The heuristic principle of analogy is based on this ($a : b = c : d$, meaning: method 1 refers to its object as method 2 refers to its object; $m_1 : o_1 = m_2 : o_2$; in the language of German idealism: analogy is identity in difference).

But things become much more difficult if one has to conduct a meeting with several methods. To conduct in that context means 'to lead', 'to head', 'to master', 'to guide', 'to direct', 'to govern', to act as a conductor. What is needed here, is a *strong subject*, then, a head, a master who keeps the overview and balances the reasons for the one or the other method, or a combination of them, which in fact means developing a new method. (We do have nice artistic examples of what happens if an orchestra wants

to play music without a conductor: Karl Valentin's *Orchesterprobe* and Federico Fellini's *La prova orchestrale*, one from 1933, the other from 1978.)

At this point, so I want to claim, one is confronted with a typical *postmodern* result of a great deal of the contemporary practice of cultural analysis: a wild mixture of methods, theories, and concepts. This is 'postmodern' in the easygoing and worst sense of the word (and it is just a word, not a concept, because 'postmodernity' is like a ghost everyone is speaking of but no one has seen). Everything is combined with everything, 'anything goes'. Cole Porter's famous song from the 1930's was transported into the realm of theory during the 1970's. Paul Feyerabend and Deleuze are its well known transformers. Following Deleuze, "and" (the Latin *et*) substitutes "is" (*est*), thinking in relations and conjunctions substitutes thoughts of substance.⁶ The copula has to be unfolded in an endless series and network of copulation. From a historical and sociological perspective one can ask at least for a moment whether such a thesis is more than a theoretical mirror of the (image of) 'sexual emancipation' in the Western societies of the 1970's. But let us leave this aside. Let us just briefly remember that such an epistemology also has explicitly *political* implications: the (black) flag of anarchism is flaunted on the roofs of the humanities and ultimately of all sciences.

What happens here is a *refusal of thinking* in favour of an *arbitrariness of practice* or, as romanticists put it: in favour of *creative individuality*. The maxim is: 'Don't care about what other people say! Just do it – if it is good for you!' As we all (should) know, from time to time this indeed is an adequate maxim. But *generalizing* it would make it a principle true in any context, thus a classical metaphysical principle. And this, to put it carefully, is principally very difficult to argue in favour of, and it is the more so in the special case of cultural analysis, which in principle demonstrates a *horror metaphysicae*.

Of course *Travelling Concepts* does not claim this explicitly. But once you declare 'travelling' to be the key-concept without saying which ways one

could or even should go (the Greek word *méthodos* comes from *metá* and *hodós* and means ‘the way to something’, ‘to go into the matter’) the door is open to ‘anything goes’ and we should not be surprised by observing a ‘travel sickness’ that comes from the self-referentiality of travelling. And if you declare this having in mind an old and one-sided concept of theory, the meanwhile classical concept that sees theories in the tradition of logical empiricism as ‘hypothetico-deductive systems’⁷, you certainly go wrong. Theory does not equate theory. The theory of theory (of science) itself has developed so much during the second half of the 20th century that ‘theory’ must not play the role of a punching bag any longer.

Instead thinking implies taking the *meta-position* and to ask questions that traditionally belong to methodology, questions like: ‘If I use theory A, can I combine it with theory B in order to give an explanation of my subject-matter? And what happens if I add theory C? If I use theory A (or B or C), what does it imply? What are the premises? And what are the consequences? And what are the consequences if I use them all?’

Inasmuch as cultural analysis does not say anything about how to *conduct* a meeting between several methods, it fails to provide a crucial answer. Conducting a meeting between methods is more than ‘travelling’ between them. If travelling means “learning foreign languages”⁸, i.e. learning different methods, ways of thinking, the questions mentioned above still remain. And a further question arises, the one concerning adequacy. “This adequacy is not ‘realistic’; it is not a matter of truthful representation. Instead, a concept is adequate to the extent that it produces an effective organization of the phenomena ...”⁹ Effectiveness is the criteria of adequacy. But effectiveness in relation to what and to whom?

The lack of this kind of methodological reflection certainly stems from a notion of theory and method that is not so much criticised but denounced by recent French thinkers, who once attacked the old ‘masters of thought’ and meanwhile themselves have become representatives of that ambivalently adored species. And this kind of polemical critique stems from the fact that it fights an old-fashioned enemy, dressed in cos-

tumes from Greek antiquity and the 18th century, called ‘truth’, ‘reason’ and ‘rationality’, instead of being aware that these concepts have been enormously differentiated and extended throughout the philosophical debates of the 20th century. As Mieke Bal would probably say: these concepts were travelling enormously. But cultural analysts did not follow them. So they did not learn that, less than ever, reason speaks with one voice only. This is something you only can learn if you do not restrict yourself to a certain tradition of philosophy, the ‘postmodern legacy’ or the ‘French connection’. Concerning not the philosophical but political implications, I would like to add that even an anarchist has to know precisely how a bridge is constructed if he or she wants it to be blown up. So a theorist or analyst with an anarchistic self-understanding must have fundamental knowledge of those theories, methods, propositions and concepts he or she wants to de(con)struct.

Let us follow the thread of effectiveness as a criterion of adequacy, that is (why not call it by its correct general name?) of *truth* a little bit longer.

First, one has to emphasise that cultural analysis, as it is presented by Mieke Bal, seems to follow the ideal of a *better* understanding and not just the idea of a *different* understanding. I would call this a *hermeneutics of truth* in the sense of Gadamer (*Truth and Method* in reality is a book about truth *or* method, ‘real’ understanding or science), as opposed to a *relativism of interpretation* in the sense of Derrida (though Gadamer indefinitely belongs to that side as well).

Secondly, one has to ask now what allows us to distinguish between good and bad, better and worse interpretations. Sometimes Mieke plays with a *pragmatist* view. The ‘best’ then equates “most effective, reliable, useful”. But she puts a question-mark at the end of that.¹⁰ Effectivity and usefulness here refer either to the convictions and the (permanently preliminary) consensus of a community, or to the convictions of a creative subject: the pragmatist and (once again) the *romantic* view. But it is the concept of the *object* that receives a prominent place here. It is a central intention of cultural analysis “to understand the object better *on its* – the

object's – *own terms*.”¹¹ The unavoidable question then is: how can we know what the object's own terms really are? From German idealism to psychoanalysis and Critical Theory we do receive answers to that question. Like cultural analysis, they all regard the object as a kind of subject (the subject's 'other', something that cannot be thought without a subject). And they all are aware of the *moral* implications. Epistemology has to integrate morality. In that sense a cultural analyst can install the “constraint”, a kind of categorical imperative in performing theory, “never” just to theorize but “always to allow the object ‘to speak back’” and to have “respect” for it.¹² As mentioned already, the theories of Hegel, Freud (and Lacan) and Adorno do offer elaborate answers to the question of why theorists should behave morally and respectfully towards and, so to speak, face to face with their objects. But what is the answer of a cultural analyst? What could she or he answer to, once again, Deleuze, who once vulgarly and completely anti-hermeneutically stated: I imagine “taking an author from behind and making a child with him that might be his, but would nevertheless be monstrous”?¹³

I want to finish my critical questions and remarks concerning methodology and theory by referring to the status of the *concept*. It is a distinguished status because interdisciplinarity in the humanities “must seek its heuristic and methodological basis in *concepts* rather than *methods*.”¹⁴ Typical concepts of the last decades were ‘text’, ‘sign’, ‘gaze’, ‘trauma’, ‘subject’, ‘performative’. Cultural analysts ought to be trained in knowing the meaning of such concepts in different contexts, that is in different disciplines, be it art history, literary studies, psychoanalysis, philosophy etc. And they ought to be trained “to choose – and justify – one of the meanings.”¹⁵

This seems to be plausible but some doubts remain. First, I doubt a proposition claiming that interdisciplinarity *cannot* be based on methods. We have famous recent examples demonstrating that this is not true: the method of genealogy, deconstruction (conceptualized with the help of Jonathan Culler), ‘thick description’ and ‘close reading’. But maybe the wording “rather than” does not exclude methods. Then, secondly, the

proposition that it is *better* to follow (travelling) concepts than methods. But concerning this softer position I ask myself whether *Travelling Concepts* does not itself offer a method. Isn't “commitment” a bashful word for method? If cultural analysis is a “combined commitment”: “to theoretical perspective and concepts on the one hand and to close reading on the other”¹⁶, then it certainly has to be qualified as a method. And the more this will be pointed out the less cultural analysis will be in the danger and boredom of ‘anything goes’.

A third aspect of doubt arises. It has to do with the question of how we justify the concepts we choose. The “primary concern” of the *Travelling Concepts* approach is “not ‘correct’ but ‘meaningful’ use” of a concept.¹⁷ Again it makes a big difference to say that it is *not at all* or *not that much* important to know the (correct) meaning of a word. In the first case (romantic) *creativity* is back on stage. The theoretical maxim (the ‘method’) then is: ‘Do not care about correctness! It is an illusion. Care about yourself and be sure that the concept you are using has a meaning at all! Self-creation is the ideal of the humanities.’ Rorty, too, would acknowledge this with applause. But my objection here is that people who are not interested in the correct meaning (as a regulative ideal) of a concept cannot be creative either. If I do not know what Austin, as a theorist, has or could have in mind by using the concept ‘performative’; if I do not know what Kant, as a theorist, has or could have in mind by using the concept ‘transcendental’ I never will be able to ‘overcome’ that concept, not even to destruct let alone to deconstruct it. May be ‘overcoming’ is an old fashioned ideal but the destructive energy of “positive barbarism” (Walter Benjamin) and the deconstructive movements obviously are not. And they, too, are depending on correctness. Otherwise they simply would not work. So only the softer proposition remains: correct meaning is not *that much* important but in principle it is. Cultural analysis should not be afraid of a softer form of radicalism.

I would like to conclude my small paper with two remarks concerning the relationship of cultural analysis to philosophy. After what I have said already they will not be surprising.

First, the theoretical concept of cultural analysis is dominated by a certain concept of philosophy, i.e. by a tradition that leads from the French ‘postmodernists’ via Heidegger, Benjamin and Adorno (and Lacan because he is a philosopher as well, not so much a psychoanalyst) to Nietzsche. If you open a book written in the (dominant) spirit of cultural analysis in Amsterdam, you always come across the same names, the ‘usual suspects’. The traditions, for example, of hermeneutics, analytical philosophy (itself a differentiated one) and even pragmatism are not present at all. This is true even though ‘performativity’ (as a term of speech-act theory) resounds throughout the land; and it is striking in the case of pragmatism, which cultural analysis as it is presented by Mieke Bal is in need of as an epistemological background theory, without making it explicit.

Secondly, even the dominant philosophical tradition is not present in a self-reflective methodological way. This tradition is either simply *used* or used for *pragmatic* reasons without asking *systematic* questions concerning the premises and consequences of a theory. If, for example, Deleuze’s and Guattari’s statements about philosophy and the concept of the concept are used to demonstrate the relationship between philosophy and cultural analysis¹⁸, these statements are adopted without asking about the context that gives meaning to them, not the definitive but an essential meaning. In the case of Deleuze and Guattari it is the context of Spinoza and Nietzsche. Thus my critique concerning methodology and theory returns.

Clear and brief: whereas the first relationship to philosophy unfortunately is (too) *parochial*, the second is (too) *parasitic*. Of course there could be a defence of the figure of the parasite. Derrida could do it (‘supplement’ is the key concept then) and Michel Serres has done it.¹⁹ But such a defence in the end does not help anyone because it blurs the differences too much. Let us just say that being a parasite is, as probably everything else, a matter of degree, and that it is important for everyone to find the adequate degree. In its relationship to philosophy cultural analysis until now, to my mind, was not successful in finding that degree.

Josef Früchtel is professor in Philosophy of Art and Culture at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Amsterdam.

© This work is licensed under the Creative Commons License

(Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0).

See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/nl/deed.en> for more information.

¹ Cf. Gilles Deleuze/Felix Guattari (1991) *Qu’est-ce la philosophie?* Paris, p. 7 (“souveraine liberté”).

² Umberto Eco (1986) *Apokalyptiker und Integrierte. Zur kritischen Kritik der Massenkultur*. Frankfurt/M., p. 13.

³ Cf. Dick Pountain/David Robins (2000) *Cool Rules. Anatomy of an Attitude*, London, p. 19, 23.

⁴ Mieke Bal (2002) *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities. A Rough Guide*, University of Toronto Press, p. 7.

⁵ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, l.c., p. 4.

⁶ Cf. Gilles Deleuze (1980) *Dialogue* (together with Claire Parnet), transl. into German by Bernd Schwibs, Frankfurt/M., pp. 64.

⁷ Cf. Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, l.c., p. 8, 51.

⁸ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, l.c., p. 8.

⁹ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, l.c., p. 31-2.

¹⁰ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, l.c., p. 55, cf. also p. 17.

¹¹ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, l.c., p. 8.

¹² Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, l.c., p. 45.

¹³ Gilles Deleuze (1993) *Unterhandlungen 1972-1990*, transl. into German by Gustav Roßler, Frankfurt/M. (French or. 1990: *Pourparlers 1972-1990*), p. 15. – As a Lacanian Slavoj Žižek demonstrated (to my mind pretty successfully) how one can make that statement methodologically productive and take Deleuze as well 'from behind'. The history of philosophy then is seen psychoanalytically as a sublime manner of anal intercourse that gives birth to monsters, i.e. to theories interpreted in a Deleuzian way. Seen hermeneutically the history of philosophy simply is a sequence of productive misunderstandings; cf. (2003) *Organs Without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences*. London/New York: Routledge.

¹⁴ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, l.c., p. 5; cf. p. 28.

¹⁵ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, l.c., p. 27.

¹⁶ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, l.c., p. 45.

¹⁷ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, l.c., p. 17.

¹⁸ Cf. Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, l.c., pp. 52.

¹⁹ Cf. Michel Serres (1980), *Le parasite*, Paris.