

The following text is a reaction to the debate between Josef Früchtel and Mieke Bal concerning cultural analysis and the role of philosophy. The original texts by Josef Früchtel and Mieke Bal were published in Krisis, 2008, Issue 1.

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A REACTION TO THE FRÜCHTTEL/BAL DEBATE

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In retrospect, I can only view the debate between Joseph Früchtel and Mieke Bal, which was organized in the context of the ASCA international workshop on *Engaging Objects* (March 2008), and whose opening statements were published in the previous issue of *Krisis*, as a vital yet missed opportunity. The opportunity was to re-engage with the relationship between cultural analysis and the humanities disciplines it relies on (philosophy among others), while yet not being fully bound by them; the opportunity was missed, I believe, because both Bal and Früchtel were intent on phrasing that relationship in terms of hierarchy exclusively. At one juncture, Bal argued that philosophy is a ‘branch’ or ‘variant’ of cultural analysis. For his part, Früchtel made clear he views cultural analysis as bad philosophy at best, a partial, derivative, ill-informed, or parasitic philosophy, whose only road to redemption lies in either fully becoming philosophy or submitting to its authority; becoming, in effect, applied philosophy.

Früchtel’s position became most clear at two emphatic moments in the heated exchange. The first one took place after Bal responded to Früchtel’s list of propositions with the help of a detailed analysis of a single screenshot of Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s video installation *Where is where* (2008). Früchtel made clear he regarded that response not even as a bad answer, but as no answer at all: ‘just an example’, he said.

This suggests that his participation in the debate on the possibilities and drawbacks of interdisciplinarity in today’s humanities demands a philosophical mode of argumentation from the start: the exchange of general propositions. Other disciplines, it seems, can thus only contribute examples, cases, whose particularity have no bearing on the generalizing thrust of propositional argumentation. The setup has the convenient benefit of insuring philosophers the last word in any academic discussion.

The second moment occurred when the philosopher exclaimed with suitable pathos that he had read Kant, Hegel and Adorno. I’m not sure these were exactly the names he mentioned, but I’m quite sure they don’t really matter anyway. For the statement is remarkably redundant; after all, one would expect a professor of philosophy to have a passing familiarity with the canonical texts of his field. The redundancy signals another implication, hinging on the authority of the cultural capital invoked: I have read x, y, and z, so I am right, and you are not. In that way, a familiarity with the canon of a specific discipline is turned into the entry pass, the right to speak, in an academic and intellectual debate that concerns the humanities entire. Unfazed, Bal answered, ‘I have never read Hegel’ – and that was precisely the right answer.

What I want to argue, unsurprisingly, is that the hierarchical framing of the debate, from both sides, is entirely unproductive. In Bal’s case, I impute the inclination to her lifelong struggle with the concatenation of disciplinary habits and ideological attitudes that conspire to render works of art in our culture politically moot. In Früchtel’s case, the tendency suggests to me a dread-filled tribulation about the place of philosophy in the contemporary humanities, in which it has shed, cannot but shed, its position as meta- or supra-discipline. (In the interest of full disclosure, I should specify that Bal was my promoter, that I work closely with her, and consider her a great scholar and friend.)

In any case, we’d do better to accept that philosophy and cultural analysis are different, and that that difference is no problem whatso-

ever. Everybody should just relax. Philosophy is a discipline; cultural analysis is an interdisciplinary research practice. Some philosophers situate their research within, close to, or in dialogue with cultural analysis, while others are entirely comfortable within the discipline. Some of the scholars coming from other disciplines who are attracted to cultural analysis draw extensively on philosophy's archive in relation to their chosen objects of study while others do not. Hence, there is no common identity between the two that allows for a hierarchy in either way, nor even a privileged or special relationship.

Like all other disciplines, philosophy has an historical and institutional form, which primarily consists of an archive of objects, authors, concepts, and the perceived lineages and relationships between them. Because that archive is kept in the present, it changes to reflect contemporary research. But it is pre-arranged nonetheless: some elements in it are canonical, other things don't belong at all. This ordering allows for scholarly expertise: it's possible to master the archive, or at least parts of it, or at least be recognized in the field as mastering parts of it.

Disciplinary archives are indispensable: it's where the known resides. But they are also potentially limiting, threatening to reduce what can be known to what's already known. Much research starts with questioning the ordering of the archive; as much research ends with more or less sophisticated gestures of filing: *this goes there*. As James Clifford has reminded us, archives and other collections follow the axiom of Western modernity that authenticates identity – of subjects, cultures, as well as disciplines – as a form of possession. A collection of objects, a discipline, threatens to reify ownership as knowledge: this thing belongs in that archive, on that shelf.

In that regard, Früchtel's insistence that the essential context of Deleuze comprises Spinoza and Nietzsche is telling ('What is Cultural Analysis?' 57). From a certain disciplinary perspective, Deleuze certainly belongs on that shelf; from another, that placement enacts a glaring mutual domestication – of Deleuze through philosophy

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no less than of philosophy through Deleuze. Reading Deleuze on film, on Proust, on Francis Bacon, one can easily think of other connections that are equally, if not more, relevant and illuminating. The archive cannot exhaust or contain philosophy's pertinence.

An interdisciplinary research practice, cultural analysis lacks an established archive. I admit that interdisciplinarity has become a somewhat tired, contaminated idea. In the final year report of the former dean of the Amsterdam humanities faculty, it was the word that was easily used most, denoting little more, under cover of yesterday's academic fashion, than the neo-liberal flexibilization of the work force. In the spirit of Roland Barthes, the interdisciplinarity that matters acknowledges, while refusing to take for granted, the ownership of specific objects by respective disciplines, but suspends the possessive relationship between discipline and object that Clifford warned us about.

Therefore, cultural analysis takes recourse to various archives, philosophy's and others, forging new relationships between elements in them in the attempt to account for an object that, for the sake of analysis, is permitted not to belong, or not belong completely, or not belong easily. It tries to invent a new archive for each of the objects, canonical or marginal, new or long established, that it encounters. Admittedly, my formulation is idealistic; in practice, scholars who 'do' cultural analysis are of course as limited by their hang-ups, biases, laziness, and phobic avoidances as other academics are, and equally deserving of criticism in that respect. That doesn't mean that the ideal cannot modestly function to prevent or at least delay the sophisticated filing that so much research in the humanities enacts.

Since cultural analysis has no archive of its own, it's also impossible to be an expert in it. It does not allow for the progressive mastery that can only be measured in terms of the existing order of an archive. Cultural analysis does not so much offer more knowledge, but different knowledge, undercutting the expertise, professorial and technocratic, that contemporary society demands from the

academy. Disciplinary experts know a lot; interdisciplinary researchers ‘unknow’ to know anew.

Already in the early 1970s, the late anthropologist Clifford Geertz used the term ‘cultural analysis’ for his research practice, more famously known as ‘thick description.’ Geertz’s anthropology does not study cultural wholes but focuses on small and material instances, which he calls ‘flecks’ or ‘specks’. Thick description, he writes in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), is based on ‘exceedingly extended acquaintances with extremely small matters’. Geertz approaches his objects as densely textured: they don’t reflect contextual givens but condense multiple frames of reference, discursive, social, aesthetic, economic, political, and so on. Neither do they always respond congenially to the theories imposed on them, on occasion knocking off the capitals from the master concepts of the human and social sciences—such as Power, Work, and Beauty – forcing them to ‘hover low’ rather than soar in unhindered abstraction.

The overdetermined object of culture resists full ‘possession’ by contextual and conceptual articulation; that’s why it can never be ‘just an example’. Objects problematize rather than illustrate. Therefore, coherence is not an adequate criterion for the evaluation of the work of cultural analysis. ‘[T]here is nothing so coherent’, Geertz quips, ‘as a paranoid’s delusion or a swindler’s story’. Or, one might add, as the well-maintained disciplinary archive that supports scholarly mastery and expertise.

Früchtel’s invitation for debate is well-heeded and timely. Yet his repeated call for rigor and standards boils down, I fear, to a self-interested recourse to the disciplinary order of philosophy, as well as for the reinstatement of that discipline as the encompassing frame for the humanities; for the tired old queen of the sciences to regain her throne. If cultural analysis, as interdisciplinary research practice, has to find its reason, its rigor or coherence, in the discipline of philosophy, then the only interdisciplinarity that would survive is the meta- or supra-disciplinarity that the latter party can supposedly

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grant. Crucially, in this respect, Früchtel offers nothing towards an interdisciplinary methodology that would exceed philosophy: the alternative is simply between the expertise of philosophy or anarchism (‘What is Cultural Analysis?’ 54).

Additionally, Früchtel repeatedly faults cultural analysis for its reliance on research as unwieldy practice, associating that aspect with Nike commercialism and romantic individualism: ‘Just do it!’ (53-4) But, to turn the tables, what else than the historical practices of philosophers in their socio-historical contexts grounds and legitimizes philosophy’s existence as a discipline? Unless, of course, Früchtel earnestly believes that that discipline is reason’s home or realization on earth. Perched at the highest possible level of academic reflection, philosophy thus comfortably avoids the self-reflection, the sustained scrutiny of its priorities, interests, habits, limitations, complicities, exclusions, and hierarchies, that a genuine interdisciplinarity would enforce.

Granted, sloppy work is surely being done under the heading of cultural studies or cultural analysis; that’s no less the case for philosophy or, for that matter, comparative literature. Ultimately, the issue is as political as it is epistemological. The archive of a discipline turns necessary what is historically contingent, and assumes and produces the continuity – and hence, identity – of a cultural tradition, from the pre-Socratics to contemporary philosophers. Cultural analysis cannot do without that archive, as it cannot do without others; but neither can it ever fully obey their logic.

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