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### Working with Concepts

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## WORKING WITH CONCEPTS

*Interdisciplinarity in the humanities should seek its heuristic and methodological basis in concepts rather than in methods. Concepts are the tools of intersubjectivity: They facilitate discussion on the basis of a common language. But concepts are not fixed. They travel – between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods and between geographically dispersed academic communities. Between disciplines, their meaning, reach and operational value differ. These processes of differing need to be assessed before, during and after each ‘trip’. All of these forms of travel render concepts flexible. It is this changeability that becomes part of their usefulness for a new methodology that is neither stultifying and rigid nor arbitrary or ‘sloppy’. This paper aims to explore the value of such unsettled concepts for interdisciplinary work in the Humanities.*

**Keywords** travelling concepts; intersubjectivity; cultural analysis; interdisciplinarity

It is a commonplace in western culture that, to make your fortune, you have to travel. Hazardous, exciting and tiring, travel is needed if you are to achieve the goal of new experiences. Jonathan Culler (2000) wrote this in an article, which traces the fortunes of the concept of the performative, travels first back and forth between philosophy – where the concept was first used – and literature – where it solved major problems but at the same time challenged the limitations of the philosophical proposal – then back to philosophy, on to cultural studies, and back to philosophy again. His article stands out as a model for the kind of study of ‘concepts as travelling’ that I had in mind when I first contemplated the book I published in 2002, and from which these notes have been drawn.

The anthropologist’s work is more clearly cut out. To do anthropology, you have to choose a field, apply a method and construct an object (Augé, 1999: 1). The same holds for cultural analysis, on condition that a few words are changed to point out that the world of culture is not so easily mapped. The field of cultural analysis is not delimited because the traditional delimitations must be suspended; by selecting an object, you question a field. Nor are its methods sitting in a toolbox waiting to be applied; they, too, are part of the exploration. You do not apply one method; you conduct a meeting between several, a meeting in which the object participates so that, together, object and methods can become a new, not firmly delineated, field. This is where travel becomes the unstable ground of cultural analysis. Cultural analysis, like anthropology, does construct an object, albeit with a slightly different sense of what

that object is. At first sight, the object is simpler than anthropology's object: A text, a piece of music, a film, a painting. But, after returning from your travels, the object constructed turns out to no longer be the 'thing' that so fascinated you when you chose it. It has become a living creature, embedded in all the questions and considerations that the mud of your travel splattered onto it, and that surround it like a 'field'.

Culler's reference to the picaresque tradition inserts an element of fictionality into your travels. The travels proposed in my book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (2002) do, indeed, appear like armchair trips. Perhaps they just happen on a stage: In a classroom, in a study. In this sense, then, the fictional theatricality of *mise-en-scène* subtends the metaphor of travel, as a reminder of the basis of humanist study in that large, unmanageable field called 'culture'. I propose to make something productive out of this metaphor that interdisciplinarity in the humanities, necessary, exciting, serious, must seek its heuristic and methodological basis in concepts rather than in methods. My conviction that a concept-based methodology is crucial has grown out of my experience as a teacher. At the undergraduate level, the need for concepts has been obvious for a long time; my earlier book *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1997) was a first response to that need. Since then, I have been increasingly involved with the development, 'from scratch', of a great number of Ph.D. and postdoctoral projects that were not easy to place within any one discipline. The reduction of the number of fellowships and consequently, of class size, together with a developing interest in work that crosses disciplinary boundaries, has led to classes becoming less homogeneous. From the beginning I have experienced this change as exciting and productive – not the fellowship part, but the rest of it.

Inevitably, this new inter-discipline has suffered from the unforeseeable difficulties and hardships that every pioneering activity encounters. In defying disciplinary boundaries, it has had to contend with three problems, all of which jeopardise its ongoing intellectual vigour today. For the sake of clarity, allow me to put these rather strongly and without the required nuance.

First, while one of cultural studies' major innovations has been to pay attention to a different kind of object, as a new field averse to traditional approaches it has not been successful (enough) in developing a methodology to counter the exclusionary methods of the separate disciplines. More often than not, the methods have not changed. While the object – what you study – has changed, the method – how you do it – has not. But without the admittedly rigid methodologies of the disciplines, how do you keep analysis from floundering into sheer partisanship or being perceived as floundering? This is the major problem of content and practice that faces us today, which in turn creates more problems, especially in teaching situations.

Second, cultural studies has involuntarily 'helped' its opponents to deepen rather than to overcome the destructive divide between *les anciens* and *les modernes*, a binary structure as old as western culture itself. This is unfortunate, for this opposition tends to feed an Oedipally based psychosocial mechanism that is unhelpful when it comes to changing predominant power structures. The problem is primarily a social one, but in the current situation, where academic jobs are scarce and hierarchies returning, it entails a tendency to a monolithical appointments policy that, under the name of backlash, threatens everything that has been accomplished. Whereas an article like this or even my book-length study on travelling concepts (Bal, 2002) cannot change that

situation at all, a recognizably responsible practice based on reflection on the problem of method may help to pave the way for a more nuanced academic environment.

Third, the inevitable consequence of the inadequate methodology and the reinforced opposition combined is even more mundane, yet just as dangerous. At a time of economic crisis, the interdisciplinarity inherent to cultural studies has given university administrators a tool with which to enforce mergings and cancellations of departments that might turn out to be fatal for the broad grounding cultural studies needs.<sup>1</sup>

Why, then, is the idea of ‘cultural analysis’ helpful in seeking to remedy these three problems? By fundamentally changing the way we ‘think’ methodology within the different disciplines, it is possible to overcome the three major – indeed, potentially dangerous – drawbacks of cultural studies. Against the first and, in my view most important one, concepts can be brought in as an alternative for the idea of coverage. Within an interdisciplinary setting, coverage – of the classics, of all periods or ‘centuries’, of all major theories used within a field – is no longer an option. Nor is ‘sloppy scholarship’. If a different alternative can be articulated, then, the divide, which is the second drawback, can be lessened. The creation of a methodological common ground, all the more urgently needed as the self-evidence of coverage is challenged, is the only unified answer we can give to administrative attacks on staff. By solving the first two, the wind is taken out of the sails of administrators too eager to take advantage of the situation.

The analysis part of the name ‘cultural analysis’ is what is at stake here. In my view the counterpart of the concepts we work with is not the systematic theory from which they are taken, although that theory matters and cannot be neglected. Nor is it the history of the concept in its philosophical or theoretical development. And it is certainly not a ‘context’, whose status as text, itself in need of analysis, is largely ignored. The counterpart of any given concept is the cultural text or work or ‘thing’ that constitutes the object of analysis. No concept is meaningful for cultural analysis unless it helps us to understand the object better on its – the object’s – own terms. Here, another background, or root, of the current situation in the humanities comes to the fore.

I am referring to the practice of close reading, hermeneutics, *explication de texte*, that was a core component of my studies in the 1960s. The general term close reading from the hermeneutical tradition is still with us, but the practice of it, I am afraid, is not. This loss is due to practical changes, in particular, the reduction of programmes. But it is also due to the loss of innocence that came with the awareness that no text yields meaning outside of the social world and cultural make-up of the reader. Nevertheless, I have often had occasion to regret the loss of analytical skills that accompanied the disenchantment with the illusion that ‘the text speaks for itself’. True enough, a text does not speak for itself. We surround it, or frame it, before we let it speak at all. But rejecting close reading for that reason has been an unfortunate case of throwing out the baby with the bath water. For, in the tripartite relationship between student, frame and object, the latter must still have the last word.

Whereas this sustained attention to the object is the mission of analysis, it also qualifies the term ‘cultural analysis’. I will not define ‘culture’ in this contribution. It is well known that definitions of culture are inevitably programmatic. If ‘culture’ is defined as the thoughts and feelings, the moods and values of people, then ‘analysis’ is

bound to a phenomenologically oriented approach that shuns the social that is culture's other. If subjectivity is the focus, then social interaction remains out of its scope. And if it is the mind that comprises the cultural fabric, then all we can analyse is a collection of individualities. These traditional conceptions have been abandoned or adjusted, but they continue to share the impulse to define culture in the abstract and general sense.<sup>2</sup> This is the area of study the social sciences focus on. It would be presumptuous to pronounce on what 'culture' is, except perhaps to say that it can only be envisioned in a plural, changing and mobile existence.

The objects of study of the disciplines that comprise the humanities belong to culture but do not, together, constitute it. The qualifier 'cultural' takes the existence and importance of cultures for granted, but it does not predicate the 'analysis' on a particular conception of 'culture'. For, in distinction from, say, cultural anthropology, 'cultural analysis' does not study culture. 'Culture' is not its object. The qualifier cultural in 'cultural analysis' indicates, instead, a distinction from traditional disciplinary practice within the humanities, namely, that the analysis of the various objects gleaned from the cultural world for closer scrutiny are analysed in view of their existence in culture. This means they are not seen as isolated jewels, but as things always-already engaged, as interlocutors, within the larger culture from which they have emerged. It also means that 'analysis' looks to issues of cultural relevance and aims to articulate how the object contributes to cultural debates. Hence the emphasis on the object's existence in the present. It is not the artist or the author but the objects they make and 'give' to the public domain that are the 'speakers' in analytic discussion. Therefore, I wish to insist on the participation of the object in the production of meaning that 'analysis' constitutes.

I have a long-standing interest in the methodological potential of concepts to facilitate a non-innocent, non-autonomist practice of close reading. My interest in concepts as a tool for – at first mainly literary – analysis even determined my intuitive selection of narrative as my initial area of specialization. I was 'simply' a literary scholar at the time, based in French and soon after in Comparative Literature. Barely having arrived there, I moved on to Biblical Scholarship, then to Art History. But I never truly belonged to any of these disciplines. All along, I had one foot in women's studies and another in a field called 'narratology' that had no place in the academy. From early on, I considered the theory of narrative a relevant area of study precisely because it is not confined to any academic discipline. For narrative is a mode, not a genre. It is alive and active as a cultural force, not just as a kind of literature. It constitutes a major reservoir of the cultural baggage that enables us to make meaning out of a chaotic world and the incomprehensible events taking place in it. And, not to be forgotten, narrative can be used to manipulate. In short, it is a cultural force to be reckoned with. It was my fascination with narrative as a cultural force rather than as a literary genre that gave me the motivation at the time to work on narrative theory. But at some point I realized that the reason I saw narrative in this way had to do with the concept of narrative that I had unreflectively endorsed. It was through the diffuse, self-evident yet powerfully specific concept of narrative that I began to consider 'culture' in the first place.

'Narrative' is thus a transdisciplinary concept, while 'narratology', the systematic study of the phenomenon that concept names, has been developed within the disciplinary niche of literary studies. As a result of the move towards greater

interdisciplinarity, others have alleged narrative as important. One example is the narrativist movement in historiography. But as long as such movements remain efforts within one discipline, very few of its participants can take the time needed to study the theoretical work from another discipline, even if it provides them with a key concept. Narrativism has had little exposure to narratology. Simply borrowing a loose term here and there would not do the trick of interdisciplinarity. Conversely, the narratology that came to the attention of narrativists was so narrowly based on fiction that they saw little point in it for their historiographic project. This is a major setback for both.

It was this realization that set me thinking about concepts. Concepts not so much as firmly established univocal terms but as dynamic in themselves. While groping to define, provisionally and partly, what a particular concept may mean, we gain insight into what it can do. It is in the groping that the valuable work lies. This is why I have come to value concepts. The groping is a collective endeavour. Even those concepts that are tenuously established, suspended between questioning and certainty, hovering between ordinary word and theoretical tool, constitute the backbone of the interdisciplinary study of culture – primarily because of their potential intersubjectivity. Not because they mean the same thing for everyone, but because they do not.

Intersubjectivity is a concern that binds procedure with power and empowerment, with pedagogy and the transmittable nature of knowledge, and with inclusiveness and exclusion. Thus it connects heuristic with methodological grounding. The power of concepts to facilitate invention cannot be thought of without the intersubjectivity of which power is a factor. Intersubjectivity itself also happens to be a good example of a flexible kind of concept I find most helpful. Let me indicate briefly how the notion of intersubjectivity ends up in my project.

It came into currency in the humanities' part of the academy during the 1960s, when the humanities discovered the importance of methodology, beyond the discourse of criticism alone. At that time, the formative years of my academic life, a number of slogans from the philosophy of science became dogmatic guidelines for the humanities and the social sciences, which were eager to emulate their more self-evident scientific other, the natural sciences. Intersubjectivity was a key concept from 'falsification' Popper, who was Daddy Methodology. It embraced a programme of idealized consensus and non-ambiguity: Intersubjectively defined concepts and methods were to have exactly the same meaning for all those concerned. Meanwhile, Habermas, the Lefty, promoted self-reflection, a position that also leaves its traces in my approach to travelling concepts. By reflecting on why scholars raise certain questions, choose particular methods, and arrive at specific conclusions, the interests served by the scholar become part of the field of inquiry. 'Interests' is meant in the strong sense of Habermas's German word *Interesse*, meaning that you have a stake in the thing that interests you. Feyerabend, the Anarchist, relieved us of all worries, arguing that justification always post-dates discovery, and that the latter is as much a product of random circumstance as of methodical experiment. When that became a bit too conducive to sloppiness and methodological indifference, Kuhn made us reasonable again by proposing a social theory of scientific inquiry. His key term, 'paradigm', indicates a set of methodological presuppositions, procedures, and applications that are so taken for granted as to become habits, both unquestioned by those on the inside, and a subject of contempt, negligence, or even ignorance for

those on the outside.<sup>3</sup> In a sense, my book on travelling concepts (Bal, 2002) and all it stands for might also be seen in terms of a paradigm shift and, like some of my earlier work, it may receive adherence and rejection as a result. Intersubjectivity, it turned out, is limited – relative to groups, views, and consensus.

In the context of the attempts to make the humanities less philological and critical, and more scientific, humanists became interested in a methodology that stretched beyond their strict disciplinary concerns. They began to look to the philosophers of science mentioned above. Although most of us moved on from the illusions and the ill-conceived emulation, some elements of the discussions stuck. I personally took the concept of intersubjectivity with me and cherished it, not primarily for its promise of a clear-cut, unambiguous formulation of terms – which could at best be attempted but never achieved – but for its insistence on the democratic distribution of knowledge. Of course, Popper would turn in his grave if he saw me running with it. But to worry about that would be to fall for the argument of authority.

Instead, without abandoning disambiguation because of the impossibility of achieving it, the concept of intersubjectivity, I believe, can combine a concern for clarity with something more geared towards the social aspect of knowledge as foregrounded by Habermas. For me, it became a word again, one that I unpacked into ‘inter-’, as in interdisciplinarity, international, and intercultural, and ‘subjectivity’, as in Lacan, Althusser, or ‘person’. I then inflected the two elements into ‘narratology’, as in ‘interpersonal’. From there on, ‘inter-’ regained a place in my methodology, but without the authority of the master.

My interest was in developing concepts we could all agree on and use, or at the very least disagree on, in order to make what has become labelled ‘theory’ accessible to every participant in cultural analysis, both within and outside the academy. Concepts, I found over the years, are the sites of debate, awareness of difference, and tentative exchange. Agreeing does not mean agreeing on content, but agreeing on the basic rules of the game: If you use a concept at all, you use it in a particular way, so that you can meaningfully disagree on content. That use does not go without saying. Intersubjectivity in this sense remains the most important standard for teaching and writing. Whatever else it does, cultural studies owes it to its principles of anti-elitism, to its firm position against exclusion of everything that is non-canonical and everyone who is not mainstream, to take this standard seriously. In the bargain, between Popper and practice, considering intersubjectivity has made me understand the difference between a word and a concept.

This is not to say that concepts should be rigid. If a metaphor does exist that might be helpful in assessing the particular use of a concept, ‘elasticity’ might be it, because it suggests both an unbreakable stability and a near-unlimited extendibility. ‘Travel’ is meant to suggest these qualities as the basis for an intellectual adventure. It is this paradoxical status of concepts that helps us to live with and through the following dilemma: That only practice can pronounce on theoretical validity, yet without theoretical validity no practice can be evaluated. It is practice, therefore, that remains the focus of the ‘how-to’ character of our discussion of travelling concepts.

But what, then, is a concept? Concepts are the tools of intersubjectivity: They facilitate discussion on the basis of a common language. Mostly, they are considered abstract representations of an object. But, like all representations, they are neither simple nor adequate in themselves. They distort, unfix and inflect the object. To say

something is an image, metaphor, story, or what have you – that is, to use concepts to label something – is not a very useful act. Nor can the language of equation – ‘is’ – hide the interpretive choices made. In fact, concepts are, or rather do, much more. If well thought through, they offer miniature theories, and in that guise, help in the analysis of objects, situations, states and other theories.

But because they are key to intersubjective understanding, more than anything they need to be explicit, clear and defined. In this way everyone can take them up and use them. This is not as easy as it sounds, because concepts are flexible: Each is part of a framework, a systematic set of distinctions, not oppositions that can sometimes be bracketed or even ignored but that can never be transgressed or contradicted without serious damage to the analysis at hand. Concepts, often precisely those words outsiders consider jargon, can be tremendously productive. If explicit, clear, and defined, they can help to articulate an understanding, convey an interpretation, check an imagination run wild, and enable a discussion, on the basis of common terms and in the awareness of absences and exclusions. Seen in this light, concepts are not simply labels easily replaced by more common words.

So far, this is a standard view of the methodological status of concepts. But concepts are neither fixed nor unambiguous. Although I subscribe to the above principles, the remainder of this contribution discusses what happens in the margins of this standard view. In other words, it looks at the concept of concept itself, not as a clear-cut methodological legislation, but as a territory to be travelled, in a spirit of adventure.

Concepts, in the first place, look like words. As Deleuze and Guattari noted in their introduction to *What is Philosophy?*, some need etymological fancy, archaic resonance, or idiosyncratic folly to do their work; others require a Wittgensteinian family resemblance to their relatives; still others are the spitting image of ordinary words (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 3). ‘Meaning’ is a case of just such an ordinary word-concept that casually walks back and forth between semantics and intention. Because of this flexibility that makes semantics appear as intention, one of the points of the present essay – and of chapter seven in my study *Travelling Concepts* (2002) – is to convey the notion that the pervasive predominance of intentionalism – the conflation of meaning with the author’s or the artist’s intention – with all its problems, is due to this unreflective conflation of words and concepts.

To say that concepts can work as shorthand theories has several consequences. Concepts are not ordinary words, even if words are used to speak (of) them. This realization should be balm to the heart of those who hate jargon. Nor are concepts to be regarded as labels. Concepts (mis)used in this way lose their working force; they are subject to fashion and quickly become meaningless. But when deployed as I think they should be – and my book *Travelling Concepts* (2002) articulates, demonstrates and justifies how that might be – concepts can become a third partner in the otherwise totally unverifiable and symbiotic interaction between critic and object. This is most useful, especially when the critic has no disciplinary traditions to fall back on and the object no canonical or historical status.

But concepts can only do this work, the methodological work that disciplinary traditions used to do, on one condition: That they are kept under scrutiny through a confrontation with, not application to, the cultural objects being examined, for these objects themselves are amenable to change and apt to illuminate historical and cultural differences. The shift in methodology I am arguing for here is founded on a particular



relationship between subject and object, one that is not predicated on a vertical and binary opposition between the two. Instead, the model for this relationship is interaction, as in 'interactivity'. It is because of this potential interactivity – not because of an obsession with 'proper' usage – that every academic field, but especially one like the humanities that has so little in the way of binding traditions, can gain from taking concepts seriously.

But concepts are not fixed. They travel – between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods and between geographically dispersed academic communities. Between disciplines, their meaning, reach and operational value differ. These processes of differing need to be assessed before, during and after each 'trip'. Much of my work is devoted to such assessments. Between individual scholars, each user of a concept constantly wavers between unreflected assumptions and threatening misunderstandings in communication with others. The two forms of travel – group and individual – come together in past practices of scholarship. Disciplinary traditions did not really help resolve that ambiguity, although they certainly did help scholars to feel secure in their use of concepts, a security that can, of course, just as easily turn deceptive. As I see it, disciplinary traditionalism and rigid attitudes towards concepts tend to go hand in hand, together with the hostility to jargon, which, more often than not, is an anti-intellectual hostility to methodological rigour and a defence of a humanistic critical style.

Between historical periods, the meaning and use of concepts change dramatically. Take hybridity, for example. How did this concept from biology, implying as its 'other' an authentic or pure specimen and presuming that hybridity leads to sterility, that was current in imperialist discourse, with its racist overtones, come to indicate an idealized state of postcolonial diversity? Because it travelled. Originating in 19th-century biology, it was first used in a racist sense. Then it changed, moving through time, to Eastern Europe, where it encountered the literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Travelling West again, it eventually came to play a brief but starry role in postcolonial studies, where it was taken to task for its disturbing implications, including the historical remnants of colonial epistemology.<sup>4</sup>

Far from decrying such a long journey to a provisional dead end, I see how important such a concept is for the development and innovation of the very field that now rejects it. History – here the history of concepts and their successive networks – can be a dead weight if endorsed uncritically in the name of tradition. But it can also be an extremely powerful force that activates rather than stultifies interactive concepts.<sup>5</sup> Finally, concepts function differently in geographically dispersed academic communities with their different traditions. This is as true for the choice and use of concepts as for their definitions and the traditions within the different disciplines, even the newer ones like Cultural Studies.

All of these forms of travel render concepts flexible. It is this changeability that becomes part of their usefulness for a new methodology that is neither stultifying and rigid nor arbitrary or 'sloppy'. In my work I aim to demonstrate that the travelling nature of concepts is an asset rather than a liability. Despite the partial overlap of concepts used today in different disciplines, concepts that tend to get muddled in a mixed setting are the best starting point for a discussion of the use of concepts. To help the move from a muddled multidisciplinary to a productive interdisciplinarity, such cases of partial overlap are best dealt with head-on.

In the cultural disciplines, a variety of concepts are used to frame, articulate, and specify different analyses. The most confusing ones are the overarching concepts we tend to use, as if their meanings were as clear-cut and common as those of any word in any given language. Depending on the background in which the analyst was initially trained and the cultural genre to which the object belongs, each analysis tends to take for granted a certain use of concepts. Others may not agree with that use, or may even perceive it as not being specific enough to merit arguing about. Such confusion tends to increase with those concepts that are close to ordinary language. The concept of text will serve as a convincing example of this confusion.

A word from everyday language, self-evident in literary studies, metaphorically used in anthropology, generalized in semiotics, ambivalently circulating in art history and film studies, and shunned in musicology, the concept of text seems to ask for trouble. But it also invokes disputes and controversies that can be wonderfully stimulating if 'worked through'. If this working through fails to take place, the disputes and controversies can become sources of misunderstanding or, worse, enticements to ill-conceived partisanship, including discipline-based conservatism. There are, for example, many reasons for referring to images or films as 'texts'. Such references entail various assumptions, including the idea that images have, or produce, meaning, and that they promote such analytical activities as reading. To cut a long story short, the advantage of speaking of 'visual texts' is that it reminds the analyst that lines, motifs, colours and surfaces, like words, contribute to the production of meaning; hence, that form and meaning cannot be disentangled. Neither texts nor images yield their meanings immediately. They are not transparent, so that images, like texts, require the labour of reading.

Many fear that to speak of images as texts is to turn the image into a piece of language. But by shunning the linguistic analogy (as in many ways we should) we also engage resistance – to meaning, to analysis, and to close, detailed engagement with the object. That resistance we should, in turn, resist, or at least discuss. The concept of text helps rather than hinders such a discussion precisely because it is controversial. Hence its use should be encouraged, especially in areas where it is not self-evident, so that it can regain its analytical and theoretical force.<sup>6</sup>

But 'text' is perhaps already an example that leads too much. In its travels, it has become dirty, come to imply too much, to resist too much; hence it has become liable to deepen the divide between the enthusiasts and the sceptics. What about 'meaning', then? No academic discipline can function without a notion of this concept. In the humanities, it is a key word. Or a key concept, perhaps? Sometimes. Let me call it a 'word-concept'. This casual use, now as word, then as concept, has two major drawbacks. One drawback of its casual use as a word is the resulting reluctance to discuss 'meaning' as an academic issue. The other is its over-extended use. More often than not, scholars and students speak of 'meaning' without even specifying whether they mean (*sic*) intention, origin, context, or semantic content. This is normal and inevitable. Just now I could not avoid using the verb 'to mean' because I was unable to choose between 'intending' and 'referring'. But this confusion is largely responsible for a major problem in all the humanities. For, as a result, students are trained to say that 'the meaning of a picture' is identical either to the artist's intention, or to what its constitutive motifs originally meant, or to the contemporary audience's understanding, or to the dictionary's synonym. My suggestion here is that

students ought to be trained to choose – and justify – one of the meanings of ‘meaning’, and to make that choice a methodological starting point. Working with concepts – discussing them, bringing them to bear on objects, and considering what they help us see – is a democratic way of practising interdisciplinary analysis in the Humanities.

## Notes

- 1 This danger is real and potentially fatal for the humanities. I have had occasion to witness it while serving on evaluation committees of postgraduate programmes. This danger alone is enough to make us cautious about giving up discipline-based groupings too easily.
- 2 See Wuthnow et al., an early publication that uses the term ‘cultural analysis’ for a description of anthropological method.
- 3 Of Kuhn, in addition to his 1962 *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, I cherish his response to critics (Kuhn 1986).
- 4 Young (1990) opens with this point. For a recent in-depth criticism, see Spivak (1999). For a brief account, see Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin (1998: 118–21).
- 5 History and tradition, my long-term interlocutors in the kind of work of which the present article is an element, are the subject of reflection in my book on *Quoting Caravaggio* (Bal, 1999) and chapter six of my study on *Travelling Concepts* (Bal, 2002).
- 6 For these aspects of the word-concept ‘text’, see Goggin and Neef (2001).

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