

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БАЊОЈ ЛУЦИ  
ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

# ФИЛОЛОГ

ЧАСОПИС ЗА ЈЕЗИК, КЊИЖЕВНОСТ И КУЛТУРУ



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# INTERDISCIPLINARITY: WORKING WITH CONCEPTS

**Abstract:** *My two intellectual passions are interdisciplinarity and methodological rigour. The former is motivated by my interest in social-cultural reality, where disciplinary boundaries seem irrelevant. The latter comes from my desire, as a teacher, to empower students to do their own analytical work. Hence, the interest in ‘travelling’ concepts as tools for interdisciplinary analysis. Below, I give a few arguments in favour of concepts over (disciplinary) methods, and then I sum up a few examples of useful concepts in the Humanities.*

**Key words:** *concepts, interdisciplinarity, analysis, objects, travel, methodology, humanities, art.*

## CONCEPT

- something conceived in the mind; a thought, notion

- a general idea covering many similar things derived from study of particular instances  
Synonyms: see *IDEA*<sup>1</sup>

When the question concerns methodology, my answer, from an interdisciplinary perspective, is to use concepts rather than methods, and bring them to bear on the object, or artefact, in order to ‘listen to it’ and understand it better, on its own term. 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 interpre-

tive 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.

But concepts are neither fixed nor unambiguous. Concepts, in the first place,

<sup>1</sup> This and all subsequent definitions of concepts are selections from the entries in the Longman Dictionary of the English Language (1991). This paper is an abstract and spin-off from my book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (2002).

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 (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, I claim 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 realisation should be balm to the heart of those who hate jargon. Nor are they 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, 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 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.' 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 practices, past and present, of scholarship. Disciplinary traditions didn't 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 idealised state of postcolonial diversity? Because it travelled. Originating in nineteenth-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>2</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. 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.' I contend that the travelling nature of concepts is an asset rather than a liability. Below, I will briefly discuss a few examples of travelling concepts.

### ***Text: Between Words and Concepts***

In the cultural disciplines, a variety of concepts are used to frame, articulate, and specify different analyses. The most confusing ones are the over-arching 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, generalised 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 make 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

<sup>2</sup> Young (1991) opens with this point. For an in-depth criticism, see Spivak (1999). For a brief account, see Ashcroft et al. (1998: 118–21).

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>3</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, inevitable. Just now I couldn't 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.

There is also a social aspect to the intersubjectivity that concepts create. That social aspect is my primary concern here. Concepts are, and always have been, important areas of debate. As such, they pro-

mote a measure of consensus. Not that absolute consensus is possible, or even desirable, but agreement on the fact that – provisionally, tentatively, and testingly – a concept is best deployed in a specific meaning because the results can then be discussed, is indispensable if we are to get out of turf-policing defensiveness.

Concepts and the debates around them have greatly increased in importance with the advent of interdisciplinary study. The mission of concepts is vital if the social climate in the academy is to be maintained and improved, if disputes are to promote rather than preclude the production of knowledge and insight (as, alas, happens all too often). It is around concepts that I see cultural analysis achieving a consensus comparable to the paradigmatic consistency that has kept the traditional disciplines vital – albeit, simultaneously, dogmatic.<sup>4</sup>

Rejecting dogmatism without sacrificing consistency is a way of improving the human *ambiance* while increasing the intellectual yield. For this reason I consider the discussion of concepts an alternative methodological base for 'cultural studies' or 'analysis.' My first point, then, is to plea for the centrality of conceptual reflection – for the following reasons.

Concepts are never simply descriptive; they are also programmatic and normative. Hence, their use has specific effects. Nor are they stable; they are related

<sup>3</sup> For these aspects of the word-concept 'text,' see Goggin and Neef (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Publications such as, famously, Raymond Williams' *Keywords*, and more recently, Martin Jay's rewriting of that book, in *Key Words of Our Time*, testify to the link between enhanced conceptual awareness and increasing interdisciplinarity as emerging from a cultural studies perspective. Another interesting piece of evidence for the need of this reflection is the successful volume edited by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (1995). This book, explicitly designed for literary studies, has an entry on performance that appears to take one meaning of this concept so much for granted – the one that led to the art practice called 'performance art' – that it becomes the only meaning raised, much in the way my fictional students each bring in their self-evident notion of 'subject.'

to a tradition. But their use never has simple continuity. For 'tradition,' closer to a word that moves about, is not the same as (Kuhnian) 'paradigm,' itself a concept threatened with word-status when used too casually. (Kuhn 1962; 1986) 'Tradition' appeals to 'the way we always did things,' as a value. 'Paradigm' makes explicit the theses and methods that have acquired axiomatic status so that they can be used without being constantly challenged. This rigidity is strategic and reflected. But 'tradition' does not question its tenets; hence, those tenets become dogmatic. Traditions change slowly, paradigms suddenly; the former without its inhabitants knowing it, the latter against their resistance. It is the same difference as between subliminal change and revolution.

Concepts are also never simple. Their various aspects can be unpacked, the ramifications, traditions, and histories conflated in their current usages can be separated out and evaluated piece by piece. Concepts are hardly ever used in exactly the same sense. Hence their usages can be debated and referred back to the different traditions and schools from which they emerged, thus allowing an assessment of the validity of their implications. This would greatly help the discussion between participating disciplines. Concepts are not just tools. They raise the underlying issues of instrumentalism, realism, and nominalism, and the possibility of interaction between the analyst and the object. Precisely because they travel between ordinary words and condensed theories, concepts can trigger and facilitate reflection and debate on all levels of methodology in the humanities. Below, just a few examples.

### ***Looking At Confusion: Gaze, Focalisation, Iconicity***

The first example consists of a cluster of neighbouring concepts: the 'gaze,' 'focalisation,' and 'iconicity.' These concepts are different but affiliated. They are often

conflated, with disastrous results, or, alternatively, kept separate, with impoverishing results. I will give my view of what happened with these concepts in the cultural field, and move back and forth between that general development and my own intellectual itinerary.

The 'gaze' is a key concept in visual studies, one I find it important to fuss about if fuzziness is to be avoided. It is widely used in fields whose members participate in cultural studies. Norman Bryson's analysis of the life of this concept, first in art history, then in feminist and gender studies, amply demonstrates why it is worth reflecting on. He rightly insists that feminism has had a decisive impact on visual studies; film studies would be nowhere near where it is today without it. In turn, film studies, especially in its extended form, which includes television and the new media, is a key area in cultural studies. The itinerary Bryson sketches is largely informed by the centrality of the concept of the gaze in all the participating disciplines.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of the gaze has a variety of backgrounds. It is sometimes used as an equivalent of the 'look,' indicating the position of the subject doing the looking. As such, it points to a position, real or represented. It is also used in distinction from the 'look,' as a fixed and fixating, colonising, mode of looking – a look that objectifies, appropriates, disempowers, and even, possibly, violates. In its Lacanian sense (Silverman 1996), it is most certainly very different from – if not opposed to – its more common usage as the equivalent of the 'look' or a specific version of it. The Lacanian 'gaze' is, most succinctly, the vi-

<sup>5</sup> See Bryson's introduction to *Looking In: The Art of Viewing*. This text, in fact, was one of the reasons that I became more acutely aware of the importance of concepts. Some of the thoughts here are developments of my remarks in the Afterword of that volume. Silverman (1996) offers an excellent, indeed, indispensable, discussion of the 'gaze' in Lacanian theory.

sual order (equivalent to the symbolic order, or the visual part of that order) in which the subject is 'caught.' In this sense it is an indispensable concept through which to understand all cultural domains, including text-based ones. The 'gaze' is the world looking (back) at the subject.<sup>6</sup>

In its more common use – perhaps between word and concept – the 'gaze' is the 'look' that the subject casts on other people, and other things. Feminism initiated the scrutiny of the gaze's objectifying thrust, especially in film studies, where the specific Lacanian sense remains important (Silverman 1996). Cultural critics, including anthropologists, are interested in the use of photography in historical and ethnographic research. More broadly, the meaning-producing effects of images, including textual-rhetorical ones, has been recognised. In this type of analysis, the 'gaze' is also obviously central.<sup>7</sup>

The objectification and the disempowering exotisation of 'others' further flesh out the issues of power inequity that the concept helps to lay bare. Indeed, the affiliated concepts of the other and alterity have been scrutinised for their own collusion with the imperialist forces that 'hold' the 'gaze' in this photographic and cinematic material. Enabling the analysis of non-canonical objects, such as snapshots, the concept is also helpful in allowing the boundaries between elite and larger culture to be overcome. Between all these usages, an examination of the concept itself is appropriate. Not to police it, or to prescribe a purified use for it, but to gauge its possibilities, and to either delimit or link the objects on which it has been brought to bear.

So far, in its development in the cultural community, the concept of the gaze has demonstrated its flexibility and incli-

nation to social criticism. But, for the issue of interdisciplinary methodology, it also has a more hands-on kind of relevance. For it has an affiliation with – although is not identical to – the concept of focalisation in narrative theory. In my early work, I struggled to adjust that concept. In fact, in narrative theory, the concept of focalisation, although clearly visual in background, has been deployed to overcome visual strictures and the subsequent metaphorical floundering of concepts such as 'perspective' and 'point of view.'

It is precisely because the concept of focalisation is *not* identical to that of the 'gaze' or the 'look' that it can help to clarify a vexed issue in the relationship between looking and language, between art history and literary studies. The common question for all three of these concepts is what the look of a represented (narrated or depicted) figure does to the imagination of the reader or the look of the viewer. Let me briefly outline what is at stake here, as an example of the gain in precision and reach that concepts can offer through, not in spite of, their travel, on condition that multidisciplinary 'diffusing' yields to interdisciplinary 'propagation.'

'Focalisation': retrospectively, my interest in developing a more workable concept to replace what literary scholars call 'perspective' or 'point of view' was rooted in a sense of the cultural importance of vision, even in the most language-based of the arts. But vision must not be understood exclusively in the technical-visual sense. In the slightly metaphorical but indispensable sense of imaginary – akin but not identical to imagination – vision tends to involve both actual looking and interpreting, including in literary reading. And, while this is a reason to recommend the verb 'reading' for the analysis of visual images, it is also a reason *not* to cast the visual out of the concept of focalisation.

The term 'focalisation' also helped overcome the limitations of the linguisti-

6 Ernst van Alphen's analysis of Charlotte Delbo's writings is suggestively titled 'Caught by Images' (in 2005).

7 See, for example, Hirsch (1997, 1999).

cally inspired tools inherited from structuralism. These were based on the structure of the sentence and failed to help me account for what happens between characters in narrative, figures in image, and the readers of both. The great emphasis on conveyable and generalisable content in structuralist semantics hampered my attempts to understand how such contents were conveyed – to what effects and ends – through what can be termed ‘subjectivity networks.’ The hypothesis that says readers *envision*, that is, create, images from textual stimuli, cuts right through semantic theory, grammar, and rhetoric, to foreground the presence and crucial importance of *images* in reading. At one point, when I managed to solve a long-standing problem of biblical philology ‘simply’ by envisioning, instead of deciphering, the text, I savoured the great pleasure and excitement that come with ‘discovery.’ Let me call the provisional result of this first phase of the concept-in-use dynamic, the gaze-as-focalisor.

The second phase goes in the opposite direction. Take ‘Rembrandt,’ for example. The name stands for a *text* – ‘Rembrandt’ as the cultural ensemble of images, dis- and re-attributed according to an expansive or purifying cultural mood – and for the discourses about the real and imaginary figure indicated by the name. The images called ‘Rembrandt’ are notoriously disinterested in linear perspective but also highly narrative. Moreover, many of these images are replete with issues relevant for a gender perspective – such as the nude, scenes related to rape, and myth-based history paintings in which women are being framed. For these reasons combined, ‘focalisation’ imposes itself as an operative concept. In contrast, ‘perspective’ can only spell disaster. But, while narrativity may be medium-independent, the transfer of a specific concept from narrative theory – in this case, ‘focalisation,’ which is mostly deployed in the analysis of verbal narratives

– to visual texts, requires the probing of its realm, its productivity, and its potential for ‘propagation’ versus the risk of ‘dilution.’

This probing is all the more important because of the double ambiguity that threatens here. Firstly, ‘focalisation’ is a narrative inflection of imagining, interpreting, and perception that *can*, but need not, be visual ‘imaging.’ To conflate ‘focalisation’ with the ‘gaze’ would be to return to square one, thus undoing the work of differentiation between two different modes of semiotic expression. Secondly, and conversely, the projection of narrativity on visual images is an analytic move that has great potential but is also highly specific. To put it simply: not all images are narrative, any more than all narrative acts of focalisation are visual. Yet narratives and images have *envisioning* as their common form of reception. The differences and the common elements are equally important.

Again, to make a long story short, the concept of focalisation helps to articulate the look precisely through its movement. After travelling, first from the visual domain to narratology, then to the more specific analysis of visual images, focalisation, having arrived at its new destination, visual analysis, has received a meaning that overlaps neither with the old visual one – focusing with a lens – nor with the new narratological one – the cluster of perception and interpretation that guides the attention through the narrative. It now indicates neither a *location* of the gaze on the picture plane, nor a *subject* of it, such as either the figure or the viewer. Instead, what becomes visible is the *movement* of the look. In that movement, the look encounters the limitations imposed by the gaze, the visual order. For the gaze dictates the limits of the figures’ respective positions as holder of the objectifying and colonising look, and the disempowered object of that look. The tension between the focalisor’s movement and these limitations is the true object of analysis. For it is



here that structural, formal aspects of the object become meaningful, dynamic, and culturally operative: through the time-bound, changing effect of the culture that frames them.<sup>8</sup>

***A More Adequate Alternative:  
Framing***

*frame (n):*

- *something composed of parts fitted together and joined*

- *a structure composed of constructional members (e.g. girders or beams) that gives shape or strength (e.g. to a building)*

- *an open case or structure made for admitting, enclosing, or supporting something*

- *a limiting, typical, or appropriate set of circumstances; an event that forms the background for the action of a novel or play*

- *(infl) a frame-up*

As is well known, the concept of *framing* has been productively put to use in cultural analysis as an alternative to the older concept of context.<sup>9</sup> The change has not been one of terminology but of implications. And these are major. I am not sure they have always been fully endorsed, even by those who deploy the new concept together with its Derridean overtones. But my focus here is not to rehearse at length the arguments in favour of *framing* over *context*. Rather it is to argue for a specific use of each concept individually, that is,

8 I have written extensively about focalisation (2008) and about 'Rembrandt' (1991)

9 One of the most influential formulations of this concept, usefully succinct, is Jonathan Culler's 'Author's Preface' to his volume *Framing the Sign* (1988). As one of my students remarked with disappointment, the preface is great but the essays hardly use the concept at all. This, I pointed out, is not true. They barely name it, hence, they don't use it in the sense of citing it, but the practice of it is pervasive throughout the essays. This absence of the term in the presence of the activity is perhaps what characterises 'framing' most importantly.

for a specific kind of cultural analysis as a form of material practice. To this end, I will debate neither the new concept's philosophical meanings nor its more or less loyal usages. Instead, I will briefly summarise three arguments in favour of its use over context as a way of framing my own discussion of *framing*.

The first argument pertains to *context*. *Context*, or rather, the self-evident, non-conceptual kind of data referred to as context, is often invoked for the interpretation of cultural artefacts such as art works, in order to uncover their meaning. In effect, though, its deployment serves to confuse *explaining* with *interpreting*, or, as Thomas Pavel once described it, origin with articulation (1984).<sup>10</sup>

This confusion is a leftover from the positivist era in the humanities, when the humanistic disciplines attempted to update themselves by emulating the sciences, mostly social. The ambition to explain, not merely interpret, was inherent in that emulation. With this confusion, and in any endeavour of an interpretive, analytical nature, a whole range of presuppositions becomes important, whereby the term 'context' loses both its specificity and its grounding. The perspective becomes unacknowledgedly deterministic. The unavowed motivation for the interpretation – indeed, the analytical passion – becomes entangled in a conflation of origin, cause, and intention.

These three forms of beginning, while betraying an ontological nostalgia, in turn import a confusion of metaphysics, logic, and psychology. This nostalgia is masochistic, since the first, metaphysics, is largely irrelevant, the second is unattainable, and the third is unknowable. I will not speculate on why this masochism persists, why it

10 Pavel was talking more specifically about psychoanalytic interpretation. I find it quite significant that those who look down on psychoanalysis for precisely this reason, don't see how other, more 'positive,' 'verifiable' methods induce the same confusion.

is even passionately defended, or why the status of its leading questions remains undiscussably dogmatic. But I will contend that if the confusion and the passion are cleared away, the humanist with interdisciplinary interests can pursue a much more exciting project, an analytical interpretation that avoids paraphrasis, projection, and paradigmatic confinement, and that opens up a practice of cultural analysis that endorses its function as cultural mediation.<sup>11</sup>

The second argument in favour of *framing* becomes clear from the simple facts of language. Context is primarily a noun that refers to something static. It is a 'thing,' a collection of data whose factuality is no longer in doubt once its sources are deemed reliable. 'Data' means 'given,' as if context brings its own meanings. The need to interpret these data, mostly only acknowledged once the need arises, is too easily overlooked. The act of framing, however, produces an event. This verb form, as important as the noun that indicates its product, is primarily an activity. Hence, it is performed by an agent who is responsible, accountable, for his or her acts.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, in a regress that might, in principle at least, be infinite, the agent of framing is framed in turn. In this way, the attempt to account for one's own acts of framing is doubled. First, one makes explicit what one brings to bear on the object of analysis: why, on what grounds, and to what effect. Then one attempts to account for one's own position as an object of framing, for the 'laws' to which one submits. This double self-reflection, it seems, might

help solve the problems of an unreconstructed contextualism as well as of a moralistic and naive self-reflexivity à la early Habermas (1972).

The third argument in favour of framing is the involvement of *time* in interpretation and analysis. 'Framing' as a verb form points to process. Process both requires time and fills time. It is a factor of *sequence* and *duration*. And where there is duration, change occurs: differences emerge over time. This is where history, inevitably and importantly, participates in any act of interpretation or analysis. One way of taking this simple fact through to its consequences is to enforce a reversed perspective on historical thinking, starting with and in the present. This is one distinction between cultural analysis and history, but a distinction, obviously, that does not free the one from entanglement with the other.

An important consequence of framing having its roots in time is the unstable position of knowledge itself. This might seem to lead to an epistemic aporia, since knowledge itself loses its fixed grounding. But a full endorsement of this instability can also produce a different kind of grounding, a grounding of a practical kind. Thus the case I present framing through, in *Travelling Concepts*, allegorically, begins and ends with a material practice. That practice, in turn, reaches out to cultural analysis, claiming to participate fully in the academic practices whose object it would otherwise, powerlessly, remain. There, the object, an image *mise en scène*, is put under pressure; its meaning is multiplied, its material existence is set up as troubled. In other words, my object is *framed*. What does that entail?

Framing, as a concept, has become so 'in' since Derrida's discussion of Kant's *Third Critique* in *La vérité en peinture*, that it seems useful to avoid philosophical partisanship, in the disciplinary as well as deconstructivist sense (1987). I will do this by

11 A specific form of beginning – the position of the author and the role of authorial intention – is the subject of a separate case study in ch. 7 of *Travelling Concepts*.

12 This may be perceived as a burden by some – the scholar, after all, may become subject to what can be perceived as a form of policing – but I will argue that this accountability is also liberating. Not to speak of the much more frightening, because 'lawless,' policing that goes on in the name of methodological obviousness, or dogma.

first invoking that treasure-house of common speak: the dictionary. Suspending philosophy, then, I will provisionally turn this concept into a word again. Before it can become a workable concept – a tool for cultural analysis rather than a philosophical issue – the life of the word in language matters. Longman's variety of definitions quoted at the beginning of this paper, for example, present themselves here as the technical or abstract underworld, the underpinnings, the machinery that holds the *mise-en-scène* in place. If *mise-en-scène* is what we see, framing is what happens before the spectacle is presented.

The deployment of this word as a concept asks for a relationship with the particular analytical practices called 'disciplines.' This is why philosophy, the discipline that develops concepts, is sometimes called an inter-discipline. It is also why philosophy was one of the points on the map in the first case study, just as history – the history of art – is in this one. A concept, moreover, bears on an object, a cultural 'thing': a text, an image, a sculpture, a piece of music, a film; or, as is the case here, a collection of things framed to form an exhibition. The verb form 'framing' – provisionally distinguished from the noun 'frame' – solicits the question of its object.

But, as a verb, it also predicates that object, not in the abstract void of theoretical reflection, but in time, space, aspect; it *frames* it. Thus, all by itself, even on the level of the word alone, 'framing' questions the object-status of the objects studied in the cultural disciplines. This questioning results in a repositioning of the object as alive, in ways that have to do with the 'social life of things' rather than with a metaphysical hypostasising of objects or a rhetorical strategy of personification.<sup>13</sup> It also results in the status of image – rather than text – as the most characteristic, indeed, paradigmatic, kind of cultural object, pro-

vided we continue to see it as living its life in the present and the ways we frame it as provisional.

For a productive, fundamentally interdisciplinary deployment of *framing*, even within a domain – art – usually perceived as a monodiscipline, I must connect this discussion to some of my earlier work. In *Double Exposures*, I considered the *life of objects* in their *present tense*, and how they come to produce meaning. That work is usually classified as museum studies although it might just as well have been called semantics, anthropology, or, to use my own favourite term, cultural analysis. On no account, though, can it be unproblematically assimilated into art history, for it challenged rather than endorsed the historical that defines that discipline, foregrounding, instead, the slippery but crucial 'now-time' of art objects seen as (Benjaminian) *images*. But it did solicit art history. As a discipline, the latter was invited to reconsider its key terms and methods as being porously continuous with the other disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields that host my work. This invitation on my part fitted into my ongoing argument on the nature of interdisciplinarity, as non-indifferent to disciplinarity.<sup>14</sup>

But, as I observed later, an interaction and experience with the practice that was the object of study was lacking in *Double Exposures*. This was unfortunate, because the possible convergence of academic and practical agency constitutes a great challenge. The second 'discipline,' if that word may be applied in this context, that my interdisciplinarity solicits, is, then, not academic but practical 'art history.' Positing that the study of practices in art museums pertains to two disciplines, not to one – that is, separating art history from its 'natural' affiliation with museums – constituted the primary severance that made the case studies in my earlier book *inter-disci-*

<sup>13</sup> The phrase 'the social life of things' refers to the volume edited by Arjun Appadurai (1986).

<sup>14</sup> On the specific importance of non-indifference, see my book *Loving Yusuf*.

plinary. The relationship between analysis and practice – first opened up, then negotiated – constitutes the area where *framing* might emerge as a concept that helps to define the parameters of interdisciplinarity in a radical sense.

The standard response to academic critiques of museums is that a museum is a place of praxis confined by material constraints. The practical nature of museum work is summarised by the fact that, as I have often been told, *a show is not a book*. This is the reason why, in *Double Exposures*, I construed *shows*, not art works, as my object of analysis. Shows, seen again as actions described by the verb ‘to show,’ and *taking place* in a specific timeplace; transient, fugitive, but culturally active, existing as dormant things until brought to life by visitors. Shows, in this sense, are instances of *mise-en-scène*. Hence, it is in this way – as a practice, as *mise-en-scène* – that we do, or should, construct museums and the exhibitions taking place in them as objects of examination. Except that I do not accept the opposition to theory – or, more generally, academic analysis – implicit in this allegation of praxis. Let us take a closer look at *mise-en-scène*, then.

***From Practice to Theory:***

***Mise-en-scene***

*mise-en-scène*

- *the arrangement of actors, props, and scenery on a stage in a theatrical production*

- *the environment or setting in which something takes place*

The following example of a travelling concept presents a trip from practice to theory. Let’s suppose, for a moment, that *mise-en-scène* is this: the materialisation of a text – word and score – in a form accessible for public, collective reception; a mediation between a play and the multiple public, each individual in it; an artistic organisation of the space in which the play is

set; an arranging of a limited and delimited section of real time and space. As a result of all this arranging, a differently delimited section of fictional time and space can accommodate the fictional activities of the actors, performing their roles to build a plot.<sup>15</sup>

The subject of this activity – the (stage) director – makes a work of art. Her tools: time, space, light. Her activities: the projection of dramatic and musical writing into a particular *chronotopos*; co-ordination; the highlighting of some meanings over others; a keying of text and score in between performers and public. Sometimes ‘totalising’; always, to use a term I prefer, *mise-en-pièce(s)*. I am just plucking this from dictionaries of theatre terms.<sup>16</sup> Or, to speak with Hans-Thiess Lehmann, a mediation from *logos* to landscape.<sup>17</sup> The activity of *mise-en-scène* makes for a revolutionary intervention, turning words that lead to the formation of abstract meanings caught in a centripetal cultural tragedy, into a spectacle receptive to the turmoil of liberated meanings, variously attached to concrete, visible, and audible phenomena and signs. What can the point of a concept like *mise-en-scène* be for cultural analysis?

Borrowed from theatre, *mise-en-scène* indicates the overall artistic activity whose results will shelter and foster the performance, which, by definition, is unique. But if performance is to be taken seriously, it is best considered in its intertwinement with performativity (see below). The choice of *mise-en-scène* as a concept worth probing here is not random. In its mobility and in the change over time that it includes, *mise-*

<sup>15</sup> On *mise-en-scène* and other aspects of the theatre I have learned more than I can acknowledge from a fabulous book by Maaïke Bleeker (2008a) and a related article (2008b).

<sup>16</sup> Mostly from Pavis (1998: 361–68).

<sup>17</sup> Lehmann (1997). I prefer to leave undecided – indeed, insist on the undecidability of – the distinction between phenomenology and semiotics implied in this formulation, which is mine, not Lehmann’s.

*en-scène* fits nicely, as a metaphor for travel.

Indeed, it is easy to grasp how it travels. Thus, rather than standing for a disingenuous, inauthentic subjectivity that parades as authentic, theatricality is the subject's production, its *staging*. In this sense the concept of *mise-en-scène* sets the stage for the performance of performativity, and, in turn, for the staging of subjectivity. For, far from being a worldly activity that adds a margin of pleasure to 'serious' life, the theatricality that *mise-en-scène* entails is perhaps the most profound manifestation of the cultural life that exists between private and public, or between individual and collective subjectivity. At least, this is what I attempt to argue through the interdisciplinary deployment of this working concept. A working concept is thus set to work.

Without trying to define *mise-en-scène*, I depart from the premise that it is what the people practising it make of it. Thus, the elements mentioned above suffice to circumscribe it, and to fill it with practical and semiotic meaning. *Mise-en-scène* is a working concept – a concept to work with and a concept that works – neither fixed and theorised nor slippery as a word. My purpose is to look at how such a working concept can serve a *cultural* analysis by making more specific, more material, and more practical sense of objects in their social life. The resulting insights mediate between cultural practice, the specific object of cultural analysis, and a cultural theory that enables students to make tentative generalisations. They allow the generalisations to be made, importantly, without impoverishing the cultural reality on which they are based.

This methodological need to preserve the rich complexity of an object seen as dynamic practice in a gesture of generalising, reflects, is an image of, the subject that recurs throughout these case studies. For, at the centre or core of the discussion is, once

again, the status, position, and self-realisation of the subject.

***The advantages of Merging:  
Performance and Performativity***

*performance*

- the execution of an action; something accomplished; a deed, feat

- the fulfilment of a claim, promise, etc.

- a presentation to an audience of a (character in a) play, a piece of music, etc.

*performative*

- an expression that serves to effect a transaction or that constitutes the performance of the specified act by virtue of its utterance

In the Spring of 2000, during a stay in Paris that allowed me more time than usual to stroll around the pleasant areas of that city and visit galleries, I saw an installation by Irish artist James Coleman titled *Photograph*. It consisted of a slide presentation lasting nineteen minutes, and was accompanied by a young woman's voice declaiming poetic text. The show took place in the dark. The images filled the entire wall. No benches or chairs were available. Yet I was nailed to the ground. It was one of those rare but significant moments when I felt completely engaged, drawn in, exhilarated and 'taken over' by a work of contemporary art.

The slides were superbly composed colour photographs of schoolchildren of adolescent age. Most were set inside a school building, some were outside on the playground. Inside, the children were involved in some kind of rehearsal, of a play or dance. Outside, one girl appeared to be washing a white wall. Most showed one or two children, in bust-length portraits. In some, you could see a group in the background. Meanwhile, the voice continued to declaim lines that bore no obvious relationship to the images. Although, sometimes I hesitated: perhaps they did, after all?

I don't quite know what it was that riveted me, but I felt unable to leave the dark room. It wasn't knowledge. Nor was it a sense of standing opposite an object of study. I knew nothing of this artist's work, nor was I knowledgeable enough to understand the implications of the use of the medium of a slide installation in an age of electronic media. I think, initially, it was the deeply touching contrast between the ordinariness of the photographed situations and the extraordinary brilliance of the images that kept me in the gallery. It seemed that an important cultural statement was being made, a position proposed that made 'art' seem incredibly important. Each time the nineteen minutes was over, I told myself: 'One more time.'

Soon afterwards, I became sensitised, because of the repeated seeing, to the theatricality of the children's poses in relation to the narrative setting. That setting was a rehearsal for a performance. Theatre and riveting beauty: might they have an intrinsic relationship to each other? And was that the installation's 'message'? This was when my academic identity kicked in, and I began to think about what it means to 'perform' a play or dance in an age of the theoretical over-extension of the concept of the *performative*.

Supposedly, the schoolchildren were rehearsing for a one-time event, as school performances tend to be. What were they doing in these still photographs, eternalised in poses with such a profoundly rehearsed look about them? Performance, for me, was just a word, performativity a theoretical concept. Performance – the unique execution of a work – is of a different order than performativity, an aspect of a word that *does* what it says. Hence, performance is *not* to performativity what matter is to materiality, the concrete to the abstract, or the object term to the theoretical term. Although derived from the same verb, 'to perform,' as soon as they become concepts the two words are no longer con-

nected. So, I thought, let's not confuse them.

But keeping them apart isn't easy either, as my own attempts proved. Performance – playing a role, dancing, singing, executing a piece of music – is unthinkable without memory. How can one play a part, a role, without memorising the part or score, without rehearsing the gestures, the mimic, and the diction that fit the role, make it available for understanding? Even improvisation requires memorisation of the structure that sustains it. Performance connects the past of the writing to the present of the experience of the work. So why, then, is performance art considered a break with predictability and put forward as unique in its performativity? Moreover, if memory itself is, by definition, a re-enactment, and in that sense, performative, the two are connected, after all. So, what's the difference?

Performativity, at least in Austin's conception of it, is allegedly the unique occurrence of an act in the here-and-now. In speech-act theory, it is the moment when known words detach themselves from both their sleep in dictionaries and people's linguistic competence, to be launched as weapons or seductions, exercising their weight, striking force, and charm in the present only, between singular subjects. Here, memory would only stand in the way of the success of performing, to be swatted away like a fly. But, as we have learned since then, performativity misses its effectivity if the act is not cushioned in a culture that remembers what that act can do. In the face of Coleman's installation, I sensed a great difference between the two terms. As soon as I tried to put my finger on it, it melted. So how to avoid both confusion and the 'binary terror' that overstretches difference?<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> 'Binary terror' is the term Rebecca Schneider uses to theorise the many ways performance art made the body explicit (1997:12–42).

Both concepts have already been extensively generalised, deprived of their theoretical neatness, and brought to bear on a great variety of cultural practices. Jonathan Culler traces the travel of the concept of the performative, from philosophy in the fifties, through literature in the eighties, to gender studies in the nineties, and back to philosophy today (2000). During this journey, performativity – of a rather special *category* of words allowing special utterances that ‘do’ rather than state things – became, first, generalised, to stand for an *aspect* of any utterance: that aspect of an utterance as act. Generalising further on the basis of the *iterability* on which all language-use depends, not performativity but its ‘standard’ other – constativity – became a special case of generalised performativity.

But, generalisation, itself a useful way of unfixing rigid categories by stretching their boundaries, calls for new orderings. The next step – already in Austin’s founding text – was to analyse the always potentially performative utterances into aspects. This move, from categorisation to analysis of each item, is representative of the move from a scientific to an analytic approach to culture. In the case of performativity, the analytical use of the concept facilitated a shift in focus, from the illocutionary act of performing speaking, to the perlocutionary act of achieving the speech act, of securing its effect. This shift makes it possible to extend the domain of the performative from language, one category of cultural phenomena, to all sorts of events that happen, because someone does them, in the cultural domain.

The decisive move in this double shift (from category to analytical concept and from agency to effect) has been Derrida’s insistence on the citationality that enables and surrounds each speech act. Austin explicitly excluded literature from the analysis because literary speech acts are not ‘serious.’ Derrida, on the other hand, by shift-

ing the focus from the speaker’s intention to the social conventions that guarantee the very possibility of performing speech acts, made the iterability or citationality of any language-use the standard, thereby subordinating individual intention to social convention.<sup>19</sup>

From an originating, founding act performed by a willing, intentional subject, performativity becomes the instance of an endless process of repetition; a repetition involving similarity and difference, and therefore relativising and enabling social change and subjects’ interventions, in other words, agency.

But, back to words. Although the ‘natural’ noun to indicate the occurrence of performativity is *performance*, this noun has developed into a concept in an entirely different context. The home of the word *performance* is not philosophy of language, but aesthetics. Most commonly, a performance is the execution of a range of ‘artistic making and doing’ (Alperson 1998: 464). As a word, we use it frequently. We talk about performances – of a concert, or an opera or play – for which we buy a ticket, and we praise or criticise a performance by an actor or musician. The travel this concept has undertaken is from a criticism of cultural events in non-academic reviews to a specialised art form that foregrounded the incidental, non-iterable, one-time event over the durable work of art: performance art.

In this respect, a striking omission of performativity is in Lentricchia and McLaughlin’s volume *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (1995). Although literary studies as a discipline has contributed greatly to thinking about ‘performativity’ (the term originates from the philosophy of literature’s medium, language), this volume devotes a whole essay to performance, but nothing to performativity. That essay (Sayre 1995) moves from a common-sense definition of

<sup>19</sup> See Austin (1975), Derrida (1988), and Butler (1990, 1993). For a political inflection, Bulter (1997).

performance as word along the lines I have followed above, to a discussion of performance art, of its bond with theatricality, and ends on the benefits of the concept of *performance* to, essentially, poetry, when it is read aloud. A great deal of the essay is devoted to voice.<sup>20</sup>

Conversely, most publications on performativity, of which there are many, say nothing about performance. In fact, performance became an interdisciplinary academic area of analysis at the very moment when the distinction began to lose its neatness, a neatness that was achieved, mainly, through mutual exclusion.<sup>21</sup>

But the combined discussion of both tends to remain limited to an unreflected interchange. Culler mentions performance briefly when he evokes the misunderstanding in the reception of Butler's performative theory of gender, which took that theory as implying a theatrical performance (Culler 2000: 59). Critics were outraged by the idea that gender is something you can easily shed. Butler addressed that misconception emphatically in her next book (1993) and explained the difference between gender in terms of performance and performativity. The difference, significantly, hinges on the crux Culler so effectively identified in the shift achieved by Derrida, from intention and singularity to convention and iterability. This shift undermines the individualistic, voluntaristic assumptions of intentionalism. Austin's insistence on intention and seriousness as the conditions of the collapse of speech and action in speech-act theory maintains these assumptions.

<sup>20</sup> To actual, speaking voice, not to the metaphorical use of the concept of voice in grammar. On issues pertaining to the latter usage as well as the narratological category of 'voice,' see Bal (2001).

<sup>21</sup> The journal *Performance Studies* betokens this moment. Primarily devoted to performance, it often publishes papers in which performativity is also discussed. See Bleeker's influential work (2008).

The very separation of the two concepts of *performance* and *performativity* performs, so to speak, a reconfirmation of intention – and this at the expense of 'giving voice.' But, whereas performativity has at least been a key to breaking open the dogma of intentionalism because of its need to incorporate citationality, performance, on the other hand, while stuck in the aesthetic of judgements of beauty, has not travelled far enough to meet its sibling, and to join the efforts to undermine the individualist ideology that subtends both concepts.

The image can be imagined as present as historical translation, *mise en scène*, framed, and performed. The performance as such is endowed with performative power because the viewer, struck by that power, is compelled to perform through and with the performers. This artificial, contrived performativity that compels participation in the performance is the source of a renewed authenticity, put forward as beautiful in a culture replete with false claims to an authenticity based on myths of origin, and tired of 'beauty.' This is why performance and performativity, although not to be conflated, are best seen in collaboration.

The last time I saw *Photograph*, which was the very last showing before the installation was dismantled, I knew that for me, it was going to leave the present, and become part of the past. That time I found it excruciatingly fast, nightmarish almost; it refused to stop for me. This is when I realised that memory is the greatest cheater of all. For, as I was finally endorsing my task of performing it, it performed me, dragging me along, in the pace of a time I could neither stop nor follow. This was the work's *heterochrony of the other*.<sup>22</sup>

That, I think now, is the definition of subjectivity that *Photograph* proposes. To make the 'argument' for it, it just performs

<sup>22</sup> For the term 'heterochrony,' see Bal in Bal & Hernandez (2008)



it. And its performativity hits home. Home, after a travel to the past and back, to the 'other' and back, so that time and subjectivity are mixed up by means of the messy mix of performance and performativity. For memory needs them both. Perhaps, then, performance is a translation of performativity; it makes the latter audible, effective, a translation that is a metaphor of the kind no cultural practice can do without.

My insistence on theatricality in cultural analysis has been foregrounded and thematised through a work that I selected to perform as theoretical object. Indeed, from the vantage point of Coleman's installation, the images that come to us through metaphorical translations, or through the translations of metaphors, become specifically and poignantly theatrical. Such theatricality is poignantly engaging because of the impossibility it entails of deciding between a dystopic and a utopian view of the theatrical collapse of performativity into performance. It is this undecidability that Coleman's work not only demonstrates and endorses, but also sacrifices and transcends – in order to give voice.

Giving voice to the silenced children is *Photograph's* ostensive performative performance. Two opposed connotations of romantic discourse are the players on this last theoretical stage. One concerns performance as performativity, the other, performativity as performance.

The first connotation concerns an obsession with subjectivity. The children need it, are entitled to it, and are all but denied it, as the hope (utopian) and the rejects (catastrophic) of elite culture. In response to this connotation, *Photograph* mobilises the staging of subjectivity as a way of building and giving agency. It does this by foregrounding, in all the ways I have presented, the *performativity of performance*. But this connotation of romantic poetry is not allowed to be a form of inten-

tionalism and mastery, as the other, more traditional connotation would have it. There is no romantic genius anywhere to be seen. The rehearsal scenes foreground this aspect of the *performance aspect of performativity*. Rehearsal, repetition, not the glamorous performance, is the tool that undermines the romantic claim to artistic greatness. For, the *mise-en-scène* of rehearsal says, performance is not, cannot be, unique. It consists of repeating a score that it can never approximate. Simulacrum as form, then, becomes the performativity of simulacrum.

To foreground agency, the artist must relinquish it. This is how the twin concepts discussed here, having travelled back and forth, settle for remaining Siamese twins. One and two, stuck together at the hip but not merged. Sacrifice is involved whereby I maintain – after all – my insistence, that sacrifice, not marriage or seduction, is the most theoretically interesting example of speech act. But, through my travel between a school in northern Dublin – the stage of the narrative – and an art gallery in Paris – the stage of my performance of performativity – sacrifice has given up its immutable anchoring in power and scapegoating. Against the sacrifice of children in struggles of competition, sacrifice can consist – more gratifyingly, for the pleasure it gives; more justly, for the distribution of agency it allows; and more enrichingly, for the heteropathic experiences it facilitates – of *yielding*.

Some public, cultural theatres are more inviting than others to perform such acts of sacrifice as emblematic speech act. But the arts are not the privileged theatre for experimenting and experiencing the pleasure of such acts. For the home, the academic forum, and the classroom will be the places where forms of yielding become possible – with the help of travelling concepts. Performativity and its performance aspect operate – or should I say, perform – together.

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## INTERDISCIPLINARNOST: UPOTREBA KONCEPATA

### Rezime

Dvije intelektualne strasti koje slijedim su interdisciplinarnost i metodološka strogost. Prva je motivisana interesovanjem za društveno-kulturnu stvarnost, gdje granice između disciplina postaju nevažne. Druga proističe iz moje želje da, u ulozi predavačice, ohrabrim studente u izradi vlastitih analiza. Iz navedenog proizlazi i moje interesovanje za koncepte „putovanja“ kao sredstva interdisciplinarne analize. U radu sam predstavila nekoliko argumenata u korist koncepata umjesto metoda koje se primjenjuju u disciplinama, sažimajući nekoliko primjera korisnih koncepata u okviru humanističkih nauka.

M.G.Bal@uva.nl