Guidelines

by Mieke Bal

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ASCA

Located at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Amsterdam, the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis brings together scholars active in literature, philosophy, visual culture, religious studies, film and media studies, argumentation theory and science dynamics. Specialists in their own respective fields, they share a commitment to working within an interdisciplinary framework and to maintaining a close connection with contemporary cultural and political debates in the society at large and with the cultural institutions outside of the narrow confines of the academic world. Within ASCA they have joined forces to provide a stimulating environment for scholars, professionals, and graduate students both from the Netherlands and abroad. The institute supervises internally and externally funded PhD projects, offers regular seminar and hosts yearly workshops and conferences.

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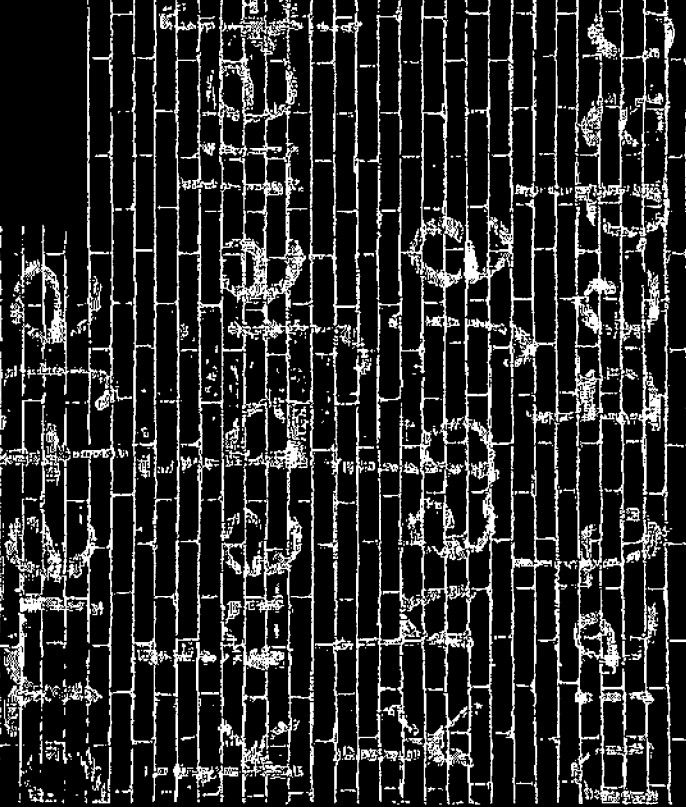
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Guidelines for Writing a PhD Thesis within ASCA

Mieke Bal

Contents

Introduction

This brochure was written for PhD candidates in cultural analysis. It addresses these candidates directly, hence the "you" form in which it is written. It provides mostly practical information and suggestions meant to help you – its addressee – to successfully complete the long and sometimes lonely process of writing a thesis in the area, broadly defined, of cultural analysis. Culture, here, encompasses "any production and organization of words and gestures, images and sounds, none of which can stand on its own and none of which claim any ontological, epistemological or axiological primacy *per se*". This formulation, proposed by Hent de Vries in the first ASCA Yearbook (1996: 4), is complemented, on the next page, with the statement of principle on which ASCA research is based:

> ... it can be maintained that every single word or gesture, image or sound, should be considered, neither as an atom or monad nor as a microcosm and mirror of the world, but as a world of possible associations and interpretations, of semantic effects and of unexpected appropriations. In that sense, and in contradistinction to the view held by the ancients, *there can only be the study* [...] *of the singular*. Put otherwise: the singular is the true universal. And *vice versa*. (1996: 5; emphasis in text)

The attention to the detail of the object of analysis, whose necessity this brief stipulates, is situated, de Vries continues, in the "present" of analysis. And that present provides the theoretical frameworks and the lived cultural position from which any analysis takes place.

This brochure contains detailed guidelines and examples of potential problems you may encounter. We recommend you read it not only at the beginning of your intellectual journey, but also at moments of hesitation and difficulty. While the suggestions made are obviously derived from just one advisor's practice of PhD advising, and thus limited, they can easily be transposed to other situations. To keep this brochure up-to-date and increase its usefulness, we invite all its users to make candid remarks on its contents at any time. These can be sent by email to asca@hum.uva.nl.

1. Practical matters

To write a PhD thesis[1] requires discipline. It is a project you will be busy with for four long years. Without some detailed suggestions on how to structure your work, it may be difficult to get started on such a major undertaking. It is therefore useful for all parties concerned to agree on a few rules from the outset. These rules are not meant to be patronizing, but to support you, help your thesis along, and, ultimately, assist in the realization of the goal of all concerned: the completion of your PhD.

Most ASCA advisors supervise a large number of PhD candidates. While they do so with great pleasure, this supervision also involves considerable time and effort. They would like nothing better than to give each PhD candidate the feeling that they are their sole and only charge, but this feeling can only be generated if everyone concerned adheres to the rules set out in this brochure.

Reporting back to your supervisor

When your advisor doesn't hear from you for a long time, s/he is likely to begin worrying. To avoid this, make sure you report to him or her on the progress of your work (preferably, but not necessarily, in writing) once every six weeks. If you have arranged with your supervisor that a written text will be submitted on a specific date, that piece of writing can take the place of a progress report. Meeting or reporting at six-week intervals will give your work a certain rhythm and help you structure your time.

Making an appointment

When you have submitted a text or feel the need for a tutorial, e-mail or call your advisor for an appointment. At the beginning of the process, you will agree with your advisor on the best way to contact her or him (e.g. e-mail, the best time or number to call). When you make contact, don't expect an appointment earlier than within a fortnight. If your advisor has to read a new text you have drafted, you may have to wait even longer. It is useful to arrange this time period clearly so that both parties feel bound to it. Make good use of the time between your call and the appointment. For example, do some reading that you may not yet have found time for, set up your next chapter or

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[1] Regarding the terminology "thesis" and "dissertation", the following distinction should be made. "Dissertation" is the term most often used for the PhD paper in the USA, and for the Master's paper in Britain. "Thesis" can be used in all cases, but must be qualified. For example, "PhD thesis", "Master's thesis", "final thesis" (Source: Nederlandse Hoger Onderwijs Termen in het Engels. Nuffic: The Hague 1994: 118). In accordance with my choice to use British spelling and punctuation throughout this document, I have used the term "PhD thesis."

prepare for the appointment by reflecting on the questions you wish to pose.

Handing in written work

Your advisor will want to have your written text well in advance of the meeting. This is extremely important. Deadlines are difficult to keep, but they must adhered to faithfully. In the first place, deadlines should be an iron rule for yourself. They will help keep you in control of your work and progress at all times. Your advisor, on the other hand, may receive four or five fat envelopes in the mail on one day, all of which have to be read within a week, at a time when other urgent business is also scheduled. This can create impossible situations for both parties. Such situations can be avoided by adhering to your deadlines. Adhering to deadlines is also something you owe your fellow PhD candidates.

Supervisory meetings

The duration of the scheduled meeting is determined in advance. This time frame implies a need for a certain discipline during the meeting itself. Precious time is wasted, for example, when a PhD candidate tends to defend him- or herself rather than listening to criticism, or when s/he explains "what happened" instead of responding to a comment. Contingent upon the approach of the individual supervisor, a meeting may last between thirty minutes and a full hour, or one and two hours. If the meeting is longer, the concentration of all parties will fade. Punctuality is also of the utmost importance; if you arrive late, you will lose the time allotted to you.

Location of meetings

Meetings will normally be scheduled at the supervisor's office. This gives a formal frame and status to the occasion as well as aids concentration. However, another meeting place may be suggested at the supervisor's discretion. You, too, may suggest a more formal or public setting. It is important to make a clear distinction between an advisor/candidate meeting and a friendly encounter.

2. Potential problems

Writing a thesis is a difficult undertaking. Remember that your advisors are there to help you, and that your success is also important to them. Problems must be tackled immediately. If you don't know how to go about it, call your advisor. "No news is good news" does not apply in the case of PhD candidates. When your advisor hears nothing for a long time, s/he may assume something is seriously wrong, but feel reluctant to call you for fear of appearing patronizing. It is up to you to make contact, and to agree from the start to do so at regular intervals. This will protect you from your own reluctance to call when things aren't going well.

Time management
Four years may seem a long time, but in fact it is barely enough. Keep every appointment. Do exactly as you and your advisor have agreed. If something happens to prevent you from adhering to your plan, try to identify the reason right away and revise your plan accordingly. Inform your advisor immediately, but continue trying to solve the problem yourself.

There are many things that can keep you from getting on with your work, e.g. too many other activities, personal problems, writing blocks, the fear of writing when you feel you haven't read enough. All of these problems are common and can be solved. But they must not be left to go away on their own. They won't!

PhD candidates often commit themselves to too many activities (such as writing articles and giving lectures) for fear that their career may falter after their defence. Nothing, however, is more fatal to your career than ending four years of research without having completed your thesis.

Make sure not to over-commit yourself. If you are an "aio" or PhD fellow appointed for 32 hours, don't even think of scheduling 10 hours-worth of seminars. Seminars and other meetings take up much more time than you realize. Note the time you spend on your various activities and you will be surprised. Whatever you do, don't panic; just schedule your time differently.

Daily schedule
Writing a thesis is a lonely job. No one forces you to get up early each morning and begin writing. It is therefore highly advisable that you follow a daily schedule. Make sure to include periods of rest and relaxation in your plan. Don't be overly ambitious. It is unrealistic to schedule more than 30 hours of actual research and writing time in a single week. But do try to keep to this schedule.

Don't run errands during work time, but do allow time for running errands in your schedule. If you work at home, you are still at work. Tell family members and friends when you are (not) available for drop-ins, coffee breaks and telephone calls. Switch your answering machine on during working hours. The point is to make it absolutely clear, to yourself and others, when you are unavailable. Do your e-mail at the end of the day, not first thing in the morning. It eats productive work time, fills your head when you need to clear it and diverts your attention.

Working style
It is not advisable to spend too long on preparatory reading. Avoid reading for general information before you start writing. Read selected texts related to a specific, small part of your work. Read no more and no less than you really need for the task at hand. And read no more thoroughly than is absolutely necessary for your goal. Don't worry if you feel your theoretical grounding is flawed. It is not likely to be present at the start of your project; it will evolve as the writing process unfolds. You will only really find out what you need as you go along.

The insecurity you feel is normal; it is part and parcel of the process. If you get stuck in your writing, skip a paragraph, take a different angle or alter your approach slightly. Perhaps you have taken on too much, or perhaps your claims are too difficult to prove. Whatever you do, don't mull over a problem for days on end.

And if you really get stuck? Here is a solution that has worked for many. Try explaining to a friend what it is you want to say. Invite her/him to ask questions. If s/he doesn't understand your answers, something is wrong. Keep explaining, until your friend does understand. This is the best method for solving a problem or shaping a vague intuition into an incisive argument. If you really want to be thorough, tape the conversation. You might be surprised by some of the things you hear yourself say: very useful thoughts can result from such dialogue situations. Try it; it works!

Interdisciplinarity
Much of the research carried out within a framework like ASCA's is located at the crossroads between various disciplines. PhD candidates may have the impression that they first need to learn the methodology of several different disciplines. This would, of course, entail a great deal of time. Although rampant eclecticism and naïve amateurism are to be avoided, interdisciplinarity is not the accumulation of the complete set of skills, procedures and competences of another discipline. Rather, it is the borrowing of a question, a methodological perspective, an object or a particular field of study, from another discipline, and the integrating of this into your own work or subject area.

It is possible, for example, to apply questions of rhetoric or methods of textual analysis to photographs. To do this effectively and responsibly, you need to know what happens in a photograph, a non-verbal text. You need to know how it differs from verbal texts but also from painting, drawing or film. You also need to know basic principles of image analysis. But what you don't need is to follow a course in, say, "the history of photography".

Another example: if you are a Westerner and you want to make a statement about the cultural functions of Chinese narratives, you need to consult cultural anthropology in order to formulate the right framework for your question, and also to check your formulation with someone well placed to know. You need to acquire knowledge of and insight into Chinese narrative theory, and to read a good number of Chinese stories. But what you don't need is to become a Sinologist or ethnographer of Chinese culture.

Similarly, if you are interested in the narrative structure of philosophical argumentation and you are a philosopher, you need to become acquainted with basic principles of narratology. But what you don't need is to study the history of literature. On the other hand, if you are a literary scholar trained in narratology and pursuing this same question, you need to understand the philosophical writer whose work you are studying, something of his background and predecessors, and how philosophers ask and formulate their questions. But what you don't need is to study the entire history of philosophy.

With interdisciplinary subjects, you don't become an art historian, anthropologist or philosopher. Your aim is to be an interdisciplinary cultural analyst, or semiotician. It is for this goal that you need the extra knowledge and expertise.

These are examples only. Depending on your background, your home discipline and your overall objective, the scope and direction of your interdisciplinary work will vary, as will the procedures you use to extend your reflection across disciplines. It is also possible – in fact, this is frequently the case – that you will remain within your primary discipline and become, to use a somewhat paradoxical phrase, an interdisciplinary art historian, film scholar or philosopher. This means you will select your objects of analysis from within the object domain of a single or mono-discipline, but that your approach, based on the broad definition of culture quoted in the Introduction to these Guidelines, will treat these objects not as, say, films only, but as objects embedded in the cultural frameworks within which they function, taking into account their social effects and tracing the way they constitute cultural interpretations.

Problems with advisors
Yes, this happens, and it shouldn't be taboo to talk about it. Even if we all hope such problems don't arise, we still need to be open to the possibility that they sometimes do.

Depending on your project, you will work with one or more advisors. Problems may occur when different advisors take different approaches. It is thus crucial to establish a clear division of tasks from the outset, preferably during the first meeting with your advisors and the manager of ASCA. For example, if one of your advisors comes from the social sciences, say anthropology, and works with an entirely different approach to that of your first advisor, a philosopher, a clear division of the work of advising will be needed.

If one of the advisors expresses discontent with the way you move between the two disciplines and approaches, you should immediately ring the alarm bell. You could, for example, arrange a meeting between yourself and the two advisors from whom you are getting conflicting messages, to establish where the problem lies and who is primarily responsible for which part or aspect of the work. The more explicit the discussion, the clearer the situation will be, and, hence, the better the result. If an advisor is dissatisfied, s/he may rightly point out that you make claims on her field of expertise that your analysis does not substantiate. Likewise, the advisor may wrongly assume that your entire project must satisfy the requirements of a mono-disciplinary work within her discipline. Advisors, too, need to learn how interdisciplinarity works.

Some problems pertain to the different approaches of the advisors. One advisor may have a strictly empirical approach that does not automatically mesh with the semiotic-analytical approach of the other advisor. But, then, nor should the latter approach do battle with empirical facts (although, when are facts ever 100% proven?). Often, the problem is not the facts themselves, but their (relative) relevance. When such opposing views arise, problems are bound to occur. They are solvable, but they don't go away by themselves.

Conflicts of this kind can be resolved by clearly assigning responsibilities. For example, the first advisor may direct the research by giving regular "assignments", while the other advisor may act as a second reader, ensuring accuracy and "quality control" within his/her areas of expertise, whether these be prominent or secondary in your work. In cases where extra expertise is required for a particular aspect, however, a second reader may act as a first advisor with regard to that specific area of research. It is essential to ensure there are clear agreements known to, and accepted by, all the advisors involved.

A relatively simple example will help to clarify how it can work. Imagine that your object of analysis is the biblical imagination in seventeenth-century reformed churches in Amsterdam: sermons,

paintings, illustrated Bibles, as well as engravings and paintings circulating in lay society but possibly related to churches. You have chosen an art specialist as your primary advisor, but the images examined cannot be understood without a thorough knowledge of these biblical texts to which they respond. Hence, for an analysis of these texts, you need a specialist in biblical exegesis. After you have written your analyses, you will submit them to a specialist in this area for approval. But her advising does not stop there, and she remains a second reader for the remainder of the thesis.

Later, however, when you are in the midst of analysing the actual paintings and sculptures, you – or your primary advisor – may realize you need more insight into the situation of the reformed church at the time, into its relationship to politics and its attitudes to biblical interpretation, allegory and preaching. At this point, you need a theologian specialized in the history of Christianity. This person is brought in only where his specific expertise is needed. As you near the end of your thesis, you will want to ensure that all three experts can approve it as a whole, and more specifically, that they can approve the way you have reasoned the links between the three domains and the conclusions you have drawn concerning your primary question.

This should be easy. You just ask all three to read the thesis, each with special attention for their own field of expertise. But what if, say, the art historian does not accept your ideological analysis of a painting's function in a particular church because it ignores the explicitly stated conditions of the patron? You claim that the patron's stipulations must be bracketed because their relevance is limited and, moreover, because they are overruled by the actual use of the image as documented by the texts for the sermons. Here, the advisor may well be wrong, and the theologian and yourself may well be right. This can and must be discussed openly. The manager of ASCA can mediate if necessary. You don't have to solve such problems without help.

Phasing and spacing your work
It is normal to achieve far less in your first year than in all subsequent years. It makes sense, however, to start writing short pieces immediately, and to read relevant works as you write. In accordance with ASCA requirements, PhD candidates write a chapter outline and draft chapter in the first year. These two pieces together form a "pilot study", which has important diagnostic value. It shows your strengths and weaknesses and makes it easier to improve your skills and knowledge where needed. Most PhD candidates produce considerably more text in their second year. Candidates who support themselves independently are not *required* to produce such a pilot study but should try to do so anyway.

If you have written nothing after your first year, you are probably avoiding writing, or spending too much time on other

activities. You may be delaying the painful process of starting by using the self-deceptive argument that you need to read more. This means you are caught in the vicious circle of "the more you read, the more you need to read". Take heed of this warning: the problem must be solved within 18 months! If it isn't, by that time, all your reading will start to lose its once-apparent relevance because the arguments will no longer be fresh in your mind, and you will have to re-read everything.

Although often done, it is not a good idea to assume you can do research for three years, then write your thesis in one year. It may be possible in other disciplines, where, for example, experiments constitute the bulk of the research, or where collecting and analysing data is the main part of the study. But it is not feasible in studies requiring theoretical reflexivity or detailed analysis, or based on semiotic and/or philosophical analysis. Cultural analysis does not lend itself to such postponement. Here, the process of writing is part and parcel of the inquiry.

3. How to set up a thesis

Every thesis must have a central problem or question. This is what gave you the idea for your topic in the first place, and made you turn it into a project. Your desire to find answers to that central question is what continually motivates you to accomplish what you originally set out to do. Even if, as in most cases, the central problem appears clear at the beginning, it may shift or look different after you begin work. More often than not, the question is too broad, and will later be reduced to one of its sub-questions.

Each chapter will have its own central problem. Thinking about the relationship between the central problem and those of the individual chapters will help you keep the general thread of the entire project in mind. Don't consider it wrong – and certainly don't panic – if changes or adjustments occur. But nor should you let them just happen. By drafting, then adjusting, an outline, both (equally unproductive) reactions can be avoided.

The question

It is paradoxical to need a central question as you begin your thesis while, at the same time, that central question can only become fully clear as you nearly finish it. One helpful way of dealing with this problem is to work with an outline. Between rigidity and messiness, you must remain flexible in using the outline, and be willing to adjust it critically at any time.

The central question is also the starting point for your methodology. Question and method must be tightly linked. If they become disconnected, your work becomes either mechanical (when the method overrules the question), or circular, messy, rhetorical or even irrational (when the question overrules the method). Hence the importance, from the beginning, not to *fixate* on the method, but to have a good sense of both it and the link between your question and method. Only then will you be able to adapt your writing accordingly.

Where method is concerned, I recommend an even more radical approach. Contrary to what is commonly thought, it is not efficient to determine your methodology in great detail at the beginning of your project. It is far more useful to start with a detailed and thorough analysis of a single text (or image), framed by a fairly general question, and to identify the questions that arise from that analysis. This is the whole purpose of the pilot study: to show in concrete detail how to analyse an object, the kind of answers certain questions can generate and how best to do justice to that object.

While working, you should always keep in mind the dialectical relationship between detailed analyses and general, theoretical and historical questions. Inventiveness and the bold stroke, which give expression to both your point of view and your imagination, are every bit as important as being careful, constructing arguments and working according to a method. Ridding yourself of preconceived notions at the right moment is as useful and productive as clinging to assumptions when all evidence seems to point in a different direction. But this only works as long as you do both in full awareness, and as long as you assess the consequences and remain willing to reconsider your earlier decisions and choices. In this respect, there will be a large gap between what you are doing now and what you will finally set down on paper (on this last point, see also the chapter on "Writing").

In cultural analysis, it is crucial to combine theoretical questions and perspectives with detailed analysis. This will allow your reader to discover the main idea of your entire text. Without detailed analysis, your theoretical questions will remain vague. They may even sound banal. Without theoretical questions, your analyses may sound flat or merely descriptive, superficial and predictable. While orienting the way you look at the objects, the central problem can only be fully and specifically defined once the answers themselves begin to emerge, that is, towards the end. It is difficult to live with such uncertainties, but it is also important to not be too rigid while outlining, planning and applying your working method. Otherwise, you run the danger of discovering what you already knew, and of projecting this knowledge onto your research material, thus preventing yourself from gaining new insights. The key to avoiding all this is what I call, below, an openness to allowing the object to "speak back".

While organizing your thesis into chapters, remember that chapters need to be manageable, for both you and your readers. It is easier to manage short chapters on single aspects of a work than long, complex ones. So why not write many short chapters rather than a few bulky ones? Include one "case" in each – this may be one text, one passage or one set of texts or images. The question asked of the object(s) and the procedure for answering it should be as simple as possible. Only simple questions yield complex answers. Complex questions tend to produce muddy answers or block any answering at all.

To give you a more concrete idea of suitable and unsuitable questions, i.e. of questions that are "workable", answerable, relevant and productive, as opposed to questions that lead nowhere or yield only banalities, contradictions or sweeping statements, a few examples are given below. Remember that these examples, based on only one person's practice of PhD advising over a period of ten years, have been selected for their structure, not their specific content, and because they typify the kind of PhD projects ASCA specializes in.

Examples of unsuitable questions, and ideas on how to revise them

- Questions of collecting data
How many books of poetry were written/translated/published by women during a given period?

Such a question might be included as a side issue in cultural analysis, but it is generally more suitable within the social sciences. As a main question for a PhD thesis in cultural analysis, however, it commands a different approach from what ASCA advisors consider their specialties. So, instead of putting such a quantitative, empirical question at the centre, you can do one of two things. Either you can examine a body of texts that has already been collected, or you can analyse samples of what you *assume* to be a meaningful corpus. In the former case, someone has already done the collecting, probably on the basis of hypotheses you want to critically examine in order to keep an open mind to the corpus presented. In the latter case, you deploy your detailed analyses so as to formulate hypotheses that can help others, e.g. social scientists, to collect a fuller corpus on the basis of (a critical revision of) your hypotheses. You can examine what such texts have in common or how they differ despite their common features, or you can carry out a few exemplary analyses of a few texts from the larger corpus.

Analysis of an extant collection of data is a meaningful and feasible activity. For example, what image of the black urban population in New York is represented in political documentaries from the beginning of this century? The question that can meaningfully orient such a project can be derived from a combination of questions: for instance, what kind of issues can political material document? What is the lifestyle of the urban population? What views of public health are inscribed in such documents? How can images (photographs) represent such views? How does such visual material relate to accompanying captions or texts? What kinds of viewers are addressed in such pictures and are destined to function directly within politics, both at the time the pictures were made and today? What ideological preconceptions are inscribed in photographic forms? These questions may yield a general question. For example, is it possible to use such documents as the basis for historical inquiry, and if so, what is the best way to proceed to frame one's conclusions? And, to what extent and in which context are these results reliable? In this case, the analysis of a specific body of images is integrated within a larger question of methodology. The collecting of data is not the general question.

By decomposing a main question into its sub-questions in this way, it will become clear whether the main question is too all-encompassing for a single PhD project. Moreover, as is the case here, one may discover that some of the sub-questions have already been

examined by others. But looking only for sources with similar themes – black urban populations – will not be helpful because this theme will have been addressed primarily by social scientists or historians, not by cultural analysts. Instead, you will have to look in completely different directions, e.g. at other work on the question of photography and documentary.

Fortunately for this imaginary candidate, one of ASCA's past PhDs offers a solution. Ellen Tops graduated in 2001 on a topic thematically far removed but methodologically very close to the hypothetical question posed here. Her thesis, *Foto's met gezag. Een semiotisch perspectief op priesterbeelden 1930-1990*, consists of a careful, detailed examination of the way photographs – through content and form, context and combination, publication and conservation – are a source of information for the cultural historian. Since the bulk of her thesis is devoted to the analysis of photographs in dialogue with questions of method, it belongs to the domain of cultural analysis, even if it deserves a prominent place in the arsenal of methodological concerns of cultural history.

For our hypothetical PhD candidate with an interest in black urban populations at a specific time in history, Tops' thesis provides all manner of useful insights, among which examples of how to analyse photographs and suggestions for ways of deducting historical information from such analyses. Depending on the way our hypothetical project develops, it could result in a thesis that fits the profile of cultural analysis or, alternatively, cultural history. The limits between the two fields, although recognizable in practice, are and must remain permeable.

- Broad historical-survey questions
How did the novel develop during the eighteenth century?
Such a question pertains more directly to cultural history, but it may also shape the background for a more specific project comprising a smaller body of texts that you wish to place historically, in a work of cultural analysis. Historical awareness is indispensable for all research in the Humanities. Clearly, every text is historically specific and must therefore be framed and situated, not so much in relation to wars and changes of political regimes as in terms of social and cultural change. But it is also indispensable to your analysis that you position yourself – your position as analyst – historically. This latter aspect (the starting point in, and return to, the present) is a characteristic feature of cultural analysis.

Positioning yourself historically implies that you cannot consider yourself an objective observer capable of providing neutral descriptions. Analysis and description are subject to a selection of elements, aspects and points of view, and such selections are motivated by criteria in turn framed by your historical position. You

pay more attention to some aspects than to others as a result of your background, interests, even passions. But not being aware of or paying attention to such motivations makes your work less, not more, "objective", in the sense of reliable and academically tenable.

As the primary question of a project, formulated a bit simplistically here for didactic purposes, this question regarding the development of the novel in a particular period is more cultural-historical than semiotic/text-analytical. An analytical, and perhaps semiotic, perspective will help to complicate it. Such a question is not answered by giving a survey of published novels and an analysis of the genre. Rather, it is answered through the analysis of a small but significant number of novels and the way they functioned (this number must be relatively small if one wishes to gain complex and subtle insights).

As a cultural analyst, you would not accept earlier lists of what are considered significant novels, because you would need to know on what basis such lists were compiled. In the present context, the question of the so-called "canon" cannot be avoided. You may wish to examine canonical novels in order to understand how canons work, e.g. on what basis they absorb or exclude works. Alternatively, in an altogether different project, you may compose your own list of non-canonized novels. In this case, how do you go about finding these?

To stay with the case of black urban populations, you might, for example, search the archives for novels that were hotly debated in the press at the time but that later disappeared from sight. The question "why did they disappear?" is linked to other questions such as "why were they so hotly debated at first?" and "what social issues made them unwelcome in the mainstream canon?". These questions require both archival research (cultural history) and empirical research (social sciences), but they remain support questions for the primary question, which is derived from but not identical to the cultural-history question of the broad, historical survey. From the history of the novel, you will have moved to the analysis of its non- or para-history.

- Questions of cause or origin
What caused the naturalistic novel to flourish during the second half of the nineteenth century?

Such a question presupposes a deterministic view of literature. But since literature is not a mechanically produced object, this question cannot be answered. What can be done is to sketch a framework within which it becomes conceivable that such a blossoming might occur.

On the one hand, causal relations are important to understanding change, even to making change happen. On the other hand, causal relations in the area of culture are ungraspably complex. A well thought-through "dialectical" approach is a minimal condition. But a reorientation of the question is even more advisable. In addition

to being unanswerable by definition, the question of origin suffers from another frequent problem: over-ambition. A PhD candidate does not have the accumulated intellectual background to approach such broad questions, even speculatively. Moreover, speculation, though indispensable, is far from being the most promising method in cultural analysis.

One version of the causality question – in fact, the most "naturalized" one – is the question of "author intention". Much research in literary and art history is an attempt to reconstruct the "origin" of the artwork in terms of what the artist "really intended". This question is fraught with difficulties. There are at least three reasons why it cannot be answered.

First, documentation is often scarce, or altogether lacking, especially where historical material is concerned. Second, even if the author were alive and willing to write out what she or he meant, we know since Freud that "man is not master in his own house".[2] Third, even in the case of a totally extrovert and limpid author, the reception of the artwork, which happens in history, is not in his/her control (for more on this, see Bal 2002: ch. 7).

Many students of artworks are reluctant to let go of the author. If nothing else, they are often understandably eager to ensure they at least don't blatantly contradict what the author "meant". It therefore makes sense to consider the author as his/her own first reader, that is, to take the author's statements as a (perhaps privileged) document of reception. But this is very different from considering the author's statements as "the truth" about his work.

There is another way of working with the impossibility of accounting for authorship yet the desire to do just that. This is to make the theme of "the author" itself the object of analysis. ASCA-member Thomas Elsaesser provides a wonderful example of this in his book *New German Cinema: A History* (1989). In chapter three, devoted to the author and given the programmatic title "The Author in the Film: Self-Expression as Self-Representation", Elsaesser raises the question of the author *by way of the film texts*. This strategy not only liberates the analysis from the authority of the author over the text given over to the public. It also helps us understand why there is such a strong *cultural* investment in authorship. The question is thus shifted from the individualist question of the romantic artist-as-genius to three slightly troubling questions: why it is, in our post-romantic times, that we still appear to be so hung-up with that image of the artist, how do artworks feed that image and what might the implications of that image be?

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[2] This is Freud's metaphor for the insight that the subject is split and cannot be aware of that part of the mind called, for good reason, the unconscious.

new concept of subjectivity, or whether, on a more modest scale, you can make your initial case for the exclusionist nature of universalizing philosophy stick, remains to be seen. But at least you now have a workable, recognizable project in cultural analysis.

Incidentally, this is a project that lends itself to collaboration. The conclusions will be strengthened if they can be corroborated by another PhD, in which a similar corpus collected in a different community is analysed. Many PhD projects that are too broad at the beginning can thus be subdivided into more, and probably subsequent, projects.

- Essentialist questions
Which properties characterize writings by women?

This group of problematic questions is related to the previous one. It, too, makes presuppositions. In this case, it is assumed all women have something in common (which they may or may not) and that what they have in common determines how they write (which is highly unlikely). Not only is writing an individual activity; it is also often practiced on the basis of a desire to probe one's individuality. Moreover, writing is framed by much more than just one feature. And, last but not least, women are not only defined by their biological features; even social femininity is not all there is to a person who is female. All these objections are subject to debate, of course, and theses will be (and have been) written on the question of women's specific ways of writing. What I am trying to allege here is how this question is wrongly headed for cultural analysis. Something as complex and controversial as the question of femininity and its influence on cultural products made by women cannot be taken *as a starting point or basis for analysis.*

Similar problems apply to projects based on homosexuality, masculinity and ethnic identity. Although all these cultural issues are immensely important and no PhD candidate should be prevented from taking them on, the best way to approach them is to take the potentially essentialist question not as an a priori, but as part of the main question.

The danger of such essentialist questions is that they generate a certain blindness to difference, social context, historical change and your own projections in the interpretations. They thus fall into exactly the same traps that have led to the current relative scarcity of research in these areas of culture.

A degree of "strategic essentialism", however, is a different matter altogether. Such a strategy makes you study what it is that texts by women, gays or ethnic minorities, dating from a particular period, have in common. After identifying these aspects, you can proceed to compare them with the features of texts by (straight, white) men, and to identify the differences. In other words, such a

- Ideological-political questions
How can we end racism in philosophy?

To suggest you avoid such a question is not to demean its importance. But such a question cannot serve as a guideline for academic inquiry. If it matters to you, keep in it mind, but resist the temptation of an easy answer based on activism. Instead, remain convinced that *understanding* the issue of racism in culture will, eventually, help to change the situation. Examine racist and antiracist strategies in, for example, texts or images, on the level of rhetoric, narration, representation, argumentation or language. A question pertaining to the critique of ideology is altogether different from one that projects an ideological position. This difference will become increasingly clear in the course of your investigation. The former makes the text more complex and provides new insights; the latter leads to simplification, and confirmation of what you already know.

If you are, for example, constantly irritated by the absence, in accounts of subjectivity, of the possibly specific subjectivities of black migrant women, you undeniably have a point. But when the question is phrased in this way, any philosopher can send you packing. S/he will simply say the accounts are structural, universal and/or theoretical, and that they neither privilege nor exclude particular subjects. You know, or feel, this cannot be true, but given the argumentations and phrasings in philosophical texts, it is difficult to counter the argument.

How, then, can you turn that irritation into a workable PhD project? Let me say first that it is possible. There are several entrances into this knot of political and philosophical issues. First, you can investigate the alleged universal claims of accounts of subjectivity. Probe the examples and formulations to see if the universality can be upheld. You can also confront such claims with accounts that don't claim universality. Then you can clear the way for a different kind of theory of subjectivity. This can be found, for example, in more narrative, less static analyses (e.g. Paul Ricoeur, a philosopher and literary scholar with credentials in both fields). Since narrative is both a concept with universalist claims (all cultures and all people tell stories) and necessarily – and logically – anchored in specific cultural situations (stories are told *by someone to someone*), you have a reasonable, academically acknowledged ground for complaint.

Instead of repeating your complaint, however, you can now work towards a solution. Even when your starting point is negative (a complaint), it is much more satisfying to have a positive question to work on, as would now be the case. As a cultural analyst, it is in your best interest to collect a small, representative corpus of narratives pertaining to the articulation of conceptions of subjectivity or self-articulation. I owe the project Joy Smith launched in 2002. Whether or not your conclusions from the analysis will help you to rearticulate a philosophically relevant

strategic decision is always provisional and partial, and will always be critically assessed in retrospect. Essentialism blinds, and again induces you to find what you already knew, or thought you knew.

- Negative questions
What is wrong with theories of narrative in visual art, or music, philosophy or argumentation for that matter?
A critical perspective on the scholarly tradition in which you work is indispensable, but the so-called "trashing" of others' work can easily become no more than a futile exercise in trying to demonstrate your own superiority. Unless it helps you to articulate proposals for improvement, it is only minimally relevant. When pondering how much energy to spend on criticizing others, keep this in mind: only something with a certain value is worth the effort of criticism. After all, serious criticism is also a form of valuation. Limit your criticism to the framework you cannot do without. Be sure to seek a good, productive balance between criticism and the construction of alternatives. And foreground why you bother with this opponent in the first place, i.e. what remains valuable in her contribution.

Examples of suitable questions, also subject to change

Ideally, a promising project has a good balance between detailed analyses carried out from a theoretical perspective (which constantly changes under the influence of the analytical process), and a theoretical and historical framework. The balance between theory and analysis may vary. The following are a few examples, taken from the practice of ASCA advising (mainly my own, I must confess), of how a general question was developed. The first three examples are all anchored in narratology (the theory of narrative), but each practices this (mono-?)discipline in a radically different way.

- A theoretical question of narratology.
What is a character and how can one analyse it?
[Marjet Berendsen, *Reading Character in Jane Austen's Emma*, Assen: Van Gorcum 1991]
This thesis was firmly situated within literary studies, a single discipline within which narratology is a supporting theory. The initial, potentially essentialist, question, "What is a character?", quickly became a semiotic question. "Which textual elements produce a 'character-effect?'" This theoretical question subsumed a number of sub-questions such as "In which sense is reading character based on specific codes, and what are those codes?", "What is the relation between characters and problems of representation?", "Which time-bound conventions underlie the representation of characters?", "To what extent are

characters devices pertaining to realism?", and "What is the relation between a character and the fabula in which it acts?" These more detailed questions were themselves specified further. The latter, for example, yielded questions such as "What kind of acts does a character perform?", "How does each kind of act embody an affirmation of, or challenge to, the established order? in its own time, or now?", "How does a character speak? Is there a tension between its idiom and idiosyncrasies and those of others? of the narrator?"

Here, the theoretical question was elaborated through the analysis of one particular character, in a case study, in which the interpretations of the PhD candidate alternated with interpretations from extant scholarship on the novel. This type of question does not yield a singular argumentative line or "thesis" in which each premise leads to a conclusion which then produces the next premise. It thus produces a continuous process of specification, and the end-result takes on the shape of an overview of aspects. So, while this thesis was based on a single case study, its findings can serve as a guide for the analysis of other novels.

- A theoretical question with narratology
What is the contribution of narrative to argumentation?
(Frans-Willem Korsten, *The Wisdom Brokers: Narrative's Interaction with Arguments in Cultural Critical Texts.* Amsterdam: ASCA Press 1998)
In this case, the mono-disciplinary field of narratology was brought to bear on another field, the (inter-)discipline of argumentation theory. The title of the thesis says it all: narrative was brought into *interaction* with arguments. The first problem tackled was the delimitation of the strands of narrative within the primarily argumentative texts. The final part of the title delimits the corpus, hence, the claims. Korsten found popular texts critical of culture (between armchair philosophy and serious analysis by public intellectuals) worthy of critical attention. These texts carry a lot of authority but are not accountable to academic standards. Their authors have cultural credit whether the texts they publish deserve it or not. Hence, a critical examination of how these texts argue is an excellent topic for a project in argumentation theory, especially within the paradigm of "pragma-dialectical" analysis, which is an integration of normative and descriptive argumentation theory (Van Eemeren, et al., 2002).

But Korsten's own background in literary studies had predisposed him to being primarily interested in the narrative side of things. In the texts in question, he discovered a pattern that his familiarity with narratological issues helped him identify. In these texts, he writes in the summary (221), on an apparently basic level, a narrative reconstruction was given of a particular situation, and an

argumentation proposed for why that situation was desirable or undesirable. Korsten found that the complex way in which the narratives and the arguments were interwoven belied the apparent simplicity and transparency of their interrelationship. This discrepancy between apparent simplicity (these texts were, after all, written for a general public) and the actual complexity of the layered texts left space for a variety of relations, some of which facilitated manipulation and contradiction.

The distinction Korsten made between the two different language games opened the texts of the corpus for critical analysis. In order to perform such an analysis, he needed to develop a methodology that combined – without confusing – the two theoretical frameworks involved. Narratology and pragma-dialectic theory became partners, not substitutes for each other. The chapters of the thesis explored not only different texts, a variety needed to substantiate his claims; they also probed those texts from different theoretical vantage points. The use of narrative to position the speaking subject, the projection of large-scale argumentative structures by means of narrative extrapolations and the apparent versus the effective hierarchy of narrative and argumentative elements of a text are just a few examples of these different vantage points. In this project, the collaboration between the two disciplines became increasingly complex. Fortunately, it was covered by advisors from the two disciplines.

- Narratology "applied" to a cinematic corpus
Which conceptions of the subject underlie recent blockbuster films?
(Sasha Vojkovic, *Fathers, Sons, and Other Ghost: Subjectivity in the New Hollywood Cinema*. Amsterdam: ASCA Press 2001)
Here, the corpus pertained to one discipline, and the methodology, at least initially, to another. The purpose was to re-theorize cinematic constructions of subjectivity with the help of a hitherto under-explored narratological theory. The motivation, somewhat similar to Korsten's, came from the insight that blockbuster films reach a large public and contribute to specific constructions of subjectivity that have a significant cultural impact. Narratology was chosen because these films owe their success to being narratively gripping.

After performing an extremely detailed analysis of one film, Vojkovic realized that the specific issues that motivated her had to do with particular subject positions, such as parental and child roles. This specialized interest called for study in both psychoanalytic theory and philosophy. These issues, in turn, are so tightly bound with gender that one of the case studies was oriented in that direction. At this point, it became clear that the neat division between corpus and method was untenable. Cinema, Vojkovic knew, was not merely another medium

for representation, but has its own arsenal of strategies that make those representations convincing and hence, rhetorically effective.

This thesis, in the end, is grounded in an almost seamless blend of cinema theory, narratology, philosophy and psychoanalysis. But the four disciplines were not simply mixed. Whereas narratology structured the way Vojkovic theorized subjectivity as visualized in film, film theory helped her make these analyses visually convincing. The philosophical reflections on visuality, starting from the indispensable reflections on Plato's allegory of the cave, supplemented and specified the psychoanalytically-bent reflections on parent/child relationships and gender.

This project demonstrates a paradox inherent to interdisciplinarity. In her continued openness towards her initially chosen method, the candidate went back and forth between narratology and cinema theory, with the latter becoming increasingly important. But, rather than leading to a rejection of narratology, Vojkovic's return to cinema theory allowed her to argue the shortcomings of those theories *within* cinema theory that are narratively oriented yet that neglect the structural elements of (formerly) literary narratology and limit themselves to cognitive aspects, at the expense of the affective aspects of cinema clearly so important in popular film.

- A question of cultural history
How are the notions of child, childishness, childhood, culturally constructed?
(George Dimock, *Constructions of Childhood*, University of Rochester, unpublished, 1993)
Initially, this PhD candidate departed from a clear and strong commitment, even from anger, about the abuse of so-called "childish innocence". He was outraged by the exploitation of children as a labour force and by their sexual abuse and battering, all practices apparently excused by the idealization that accompanies, as its other side, the objectification of children. The topic was too vast, and the candidate was initially almost hampered by his own commitment. He focused more on the practices than on the constructions of images, whereas the latter in fact constituted his academic subject. The solution that imposed itself was to divide the topic into case studies. Cases were constructed on the basis of social and cultural historical areas, not on the basis of a body of works. By making representation central, the candidate was able to focus on semiotics.

The first chapter analysed Lewis Carroll's photographs of small girls, of which Dimock – himself a photographer – was able to demonstrate the erotically exploitative nature. A chapter on child labour followed. Here, he analysed photographs made from the vantage point of a socially committed photographer, but based on

factual distortion and condescendant patronizing visions. An analysis of Freud's case histories of Dora and The Wolfman subsequently established connections between specific metaphoric networks (archaeology, contagion, seduction). The representations of children in language thus demonstrated conflicts within the influential "seduction theory". Another chapter was devoted to the arguments of the "pro-life" (anti-abortion) movement, connecting these arguments with century-old traditions of anatomical drawings, in line with Aristotle's attempts to deny women's role in procreation. Finally, a chapter was devoted to the fantasy of the "wild child" in the tradition of Rousseau's Emile and Kaspar Hauser.

The case studies enabled Dimock to discover many more aspects and complexities of the initial question than had seemed possible at first. Each chapter has a sharply delineated yet complex focus: an ideology concerning children is explored through representations that work to conceal that ideology; connections with older traditions become clear, as do the ways these connections contribute to "naturalizing" the ideology; contradictions are demonstrated.

The initial commitment that motivated Dimock's choice of topic never diminished, but the integration of his keen attention to specific representations and to larger theoretical and historical arguments enriched his vision immensely, nuanced it, and thus made it more effective. It is this transformation of a straightforward cultural-history project into the probing of aspects of the problematic through case studies that changed the project into a work of cultural analysis.

- A "situated" question
(Piers Michael Smith, Colonial Obscene: Reading Cultural Texts on Borneo, Ex-centrically. Amsterdam: unpublished, 1997)
This project is very unorthodox, yet it came off extremely successfully and was awarded a cum laude. Smith did not have an a priori object. He wished to break away from any disciplinary allegiance and construct his object on a completely different basis. He chose a geographical location, then selected a number of cultural documents whose only common feature was that they were set in, and were about, the Indonesian island of Borneo.

This situated, but not otherwise coherent, selection of objects needed, of course, to be justified. How else could Smith select a method of analysis, raise questions and reach valid conclusions? His corpus consisted of a literary short story, a piece of travel writing, a documentary film, geographical maps, a book on primatology (apes) and an anthropological study. Together they spanned some one hundred years within and after the colonial era. Here, as can be expected, lay the ground for his question.

The central question concerned representation in and through the history of colonization and de-colonization. The main task was a detailed reading of the objects, within the framework of their respective place in history as well as of their cultural disciplines. The sub-questions were related to the various objects. A map, for example, cannot be read as if it were a series of photographs, or a piece of fiction. Hence, each chapter or case study needed a different method. But these methods still had to be interconnected for the conclusions to work. The common element of methodology was "ec-centricity" – the determined effort to swerve towards the marginal, to be alert to contradictions, strange metaphors or repressed silences. In one object, the colour yellow (the yellow umbrella that showed up at specific moments in the documentary film) became the sign of ec-centricity. In another, it was the metaphoric network connecting subject positions, travel and animal life. In yet another, it was preoccupations with illness. In the end, these variegated signs joined together in their movement away from the overt preoccupation of the work.

Owing to the initial lack of method, the candidate had to force himself to be methodologically busy at all times. As a result, his thesis became the model of an inventive yet responsible, and innovative yet solid, methodology of cultural analysis.

- A bi-disciplinary project
How to arrange an encounter around an object on which the two "discussants" have never met?
(Marie-Aude Baronian, Image, Mémoire et Transmission. Sur la (non-) représentation et l'héritage du génocide arménien. Amsterdam: in progress. This project is being written in French.)
The starting point of this project was a so-called "empirical object", namely the denial of the Armenian genocide (1915-1922). Even though the question of genocide can be discussed and analysed from different angles (e.g. the historical, psychoanalytical or juridical), this research investigates it especially from two specific perspectives and their resulting discourses: the philosophical and the cinematic. During the twentieth century, disciplines such as philosophy and film studies have constantly been confronted with urgent (conceptual, aesthetic) issues linked to tragic events, particularly à propos of the Holocaust.

A significant problem in this project is the persistent denial of the Armenian genocide. How does one study a silence? Faced with this denial, Baronian's project tries to create a space in which the legacy of this event can be thought through and represented, as well as included in the various philosophical reflections on, among other things, denial, memory, testimony and representation. Further, the research concentrates on the concept of image and how it can become a "prosthesis" for memory; to this end, the cinematographic work of

filmmakers and visual artists of the Armenian diaspora is being studied.

The study will propose a re-questioning and re-definition of concepts that are not only polysemic as such, but that are increasingly included in all kinds of disciplines for all kinds of purposes. The aim of this conceptual analysis is to propose "other" understandings of these recurrent concepts, which are applicable not only to the Armenian catastrophe but also to other comparable questions. This reflexive part of the thesis is anchored in philosophy but goes beyond that discipline, and, moreover, will be integrated with a close reading of filmic, visual objects. The goal is to give a precise insight into the main terms, as well as to create a useful balance between what Deleuze calls "concepts" (philosophy) and "affects" (art forms).

The bi-disciplinary nature of the project is reflected in the choice of two main figures, or interlocutors, each inhabiting one of the discourses at stake: the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas and the filmmaker Atom Egoyan. Even though this combination can, at first sight, appear absurd because the two figures seem to have nothing at all in common, a major thrust of the dissertation is to argue that both have engaged extensively with similar issues. Even if Lévinas has never touched on the Armenian question or explicitly addressed the question of memory and representation, his work still seems to be a meaningful, relevant "tool" to "think" the event properly and to stress the different difficulties (ethical and aesthetic) it implies. Egoyan's work, which, in contrast, does address the genocide directly or (mostly) indirectly, offers a reflexive and reflective portrait of the multiple aspects of the inherited genocide and the (im)possibility of representing them. Hence, each discipline remains recognizably distinct but mutually supports the other's discourse.

- A discipline reconsidered
(Maaike Bleeker, *The Locus of Looking: Dissecting Visuality in the Theatre*. Amsterdam: 2002)

I warned earlier against over-ambitious projects. This caution is not meant to discourage ambition. It is just a way of cautioning you not to bite off more than you can chew. The example of Maaike Bleeker justifies the opposite recommendation: don't be afraid of ambitious projects – but make sure you can manage them.

Bleeker's discipline was, is, and always will be, theatre, an art form for which she has a passion that she acts out both in practice (as a dramaturge) and theory (as a cultural analyst). By taking theatre as an intermedial art form, which it obviously is, Bleeker integrates such diverse areas as philosophy of science, art history, philosophy and literary theory, to develop a conception of how one element common to all theatrical productions – visuality – sits in that multimedia performance. "Integrate" is the operative term here. She never just

"applies" theories to theatre that are basically alien to it. She really works through the "other" theories and analyses where it is helpful, examining how these theories operate in relation to theatre, and, conversely, how the practice of theatre re-orients or re-focuses the other theories.

Bleeker had the advantage of *not* having a training in, say, art history. As a result of this "lack", she did not take for granted what most art historians do, regarding the significance of Michael Fried's theory of theatricality for visual art. It may be because – rather than in spite – of her initial unfamiliarity with visual theory, but I have never seen an art historian engage Michael Fried's concept of theatricality so deeply, constructively and yet critically as Bleeker does – and I am talking about the most quoted, "applied", followed and used living art historian today.

The Albertian paradigm, according to which art is a window on the world, is another of the cliché topics in contemporary art history and cultural studies. It is difficult to present this problematic view without simply trashing it. But Bleeker manages to in a refreshingly new way and with due modesty, discussing it for its relevance to theatre.

Her thesis is also a profoundly disciplinary study. This may sound paradoxical, but it isn't. The candidate never abandons her chosen field and topic. Her deployments of other disciplines are always focused and geared towards illuminating that object. I am not as familiar with theatre studies as I would like to be, but I do know it is a somewhat problematic area due to the ongoing tension between the written text and the actual performance. The former is both key and redundant, the latter elusive. It is my intuition that Bleeker's study offers a genuine and significant contribution to a field that needs it, a contribution that stands firmly on a par with work of much more advanced scholars. I attribute this to her willingness to engage the discipline with the object – the set of analysed performances – and to reframe both from an interdisciplinary perspective. Hers is an example of an interdisciplinary work that is nevertheless disciplinary.

- Finally, an even more drastic move, from a very modest and traditional genre to a pioneering topic, in an example of *the move from monograph to cultural analysis*
(Sonja Neef, *Kalligramme. Zur Medialität einer Schrift, anhand von Paul van Ostaijens De feesten van angst en pijn*. Amsterdam: ASCA Press 2000)

The initial idea here was to write a study of a book of poetry. The book had strong visual features, their clearest manifestations found in the handwriting, use of colour and page layout. But in the poems as linguistic units, the stories evoked and the metaphors deployed also

appealed to media other than language, such as film and music, as well as to diverse sensorial experiences such as sex, noise and pain.

Neef's search for the proper methodology turned her, like Smith, into a methodologist. Not content with the application of the right method in the right place (musicology for music, cinema theory for filmic aspects, art theory for colours), Neef wanted to go beyond the usual reflections on and transformations of the available methods grouped under the heading of semiotics. The primary object quickly became less the poem and its various aspects, and more the transitions and transformations between the media.

The true object, then, became intermediality. But, in loyalty to the object, the focus of this analysis of intermediality remained literature. How can literature be multimedia? And hence, why and how must literary study itself be interdisciplinary? These were the questions that became the theoretical framework and focus of the analysis. This framework, then, facilitated an analysis that could do justice to the selected stack of sheets of coloured and scribbled words. The sheets became the mediators between language and silence, silent film and cubist painting, and cynicism and mysticism, all elements that characterized the chosen work historically as part of the avant-garde, but only to the extent that their paradoxes and sometimes violent contradictions were done justice to.

This handful of examples taken from a great number of theses demonstrates how a clear problematic becomes visible only when the contours of an answer begin to emerge – towards the end. Living with such uncertainties is difficult, but it is very important not to rigidify your plans. If you do, you will only find confirmation of what you already know, and project apparent problems on material not reducible to them. The slogan, then, is: allow the material to "speak back". What that phrase means will become clear below.

4. Content: some pitfalls

The content of your thesis is, of course, not known at the outset of your project. Little can be said therefore about content in general. There are, however, a few hints that may help you to avoid the most common problems. I only raise those problems that are usually overlooked.

Coherence

The greatest phobia for beginning PhD candidates is also one of the greatest methodological clichés: the taboo of contradiction. Confronting contradiction can often be unbearable. The appearance of a contradiction raises great anxiety, but it shouldn't. On the one hand, plain contradiction is, of course, unacceptable. It is always possible that you are simply wrong, and that a later insight contradicts an earlier hypothesis. In that case, you should revise or abandon the hypothesis.

But there is a fine line between contradiction and apparent contradiction, tensions in logic that are commonly called "paradoxes". What seems to be a contradiction may, in fact, help you be very productive. It can be tremendously useful, for example, in helping you to face, rather than reason away, what strikes you as contradictory. Some contradictions only seem so; in reality, they can direct your attention towards a problem you had previously overlooked, and that will continue to go unnoticed if you step over it too quickly.

Contradictions may simply be differences. Don't try to force your material into coherence just for the sake of it. Let differences stand as they are, study them carefully and work with them. By trying to make your work coherent, you may exclude good ideas just because they don't fit into your outline. It is dangerous to apply a set of norms to a text because chances are you will only see what you want to see. This is a case of "you against your object"; instead of illuminating your object for a better understanding of it, you may subordinate it, thus making its complexities invisible. Between you and the object, letting the object "win" means that you win – in terms of the quality of your thesis.

Any text you analyse within cultural analysis is, by definition, diverse, paradoxical and full of conflicting messages. The text's conflict, however, is not necessarily a conflict for your argument. Barbara Johnson calls this internal tension within a text "the difference within". These are often the most interesting parts of the text. Such conclusions as "this character has an Oedipus complex" or "this image appealed to the working class's false consciousness" are not very interesting. Both statements reduce the text to document- or

propaganda-status and thus blur their differences from other texts. It would be more useful to show that, thanks to the oedipal structure, the character in question is torn between an obsession with one or the other parent or parental figure, or that the image both idealizes and belittles the worker. These ambivalences might at first strike you as incoherent. The watchword, then, is to look again before repressing your insight or refuting a text.

An interpretation is only cultural analysis, however, when you look at "signs" as "effect" when you investigate how this effect is achieved and if there are other effects that also play a role. For a cultural analyst, these effects are not purely individual. They are, precisely, cultural – where "culture" is the meeting ground of a variety of people.

Realism

Text and image are not a direct copy of reality. They are representations. But they are also more than that. They are "arguments", affectively potent agencies and sensorial performances. Their status as representation means they always contain an element of fiction, a vision and complexity, even if the image is just a newspaper photograph. And, while most PhD candidates already know this, the temptation of realism – the so-called "realistic fallacy" – remains strong.

The moment you find yourself talking about the unconscious feelings of a character, you are falling into the trap of the realistic fallacy. Always remember that your research material has a particular shape to it and that this shape has an impact on its content. Never forget that both text and image contain rhetorical strategies, narrative procedures, visual language, intertextual relations with other texts and iconographic borrowings.

This is not to deny a relation between text and social reality; this obviously exists. But avoiding easy realism is a way to reach a more pertinent connection between text and image on the one hand, and between the reality of which they are always not only a representation but also a part on the other. This connection may be polemical, responsive, accepting, condoning or militant. But it will also always be, in one way or another, dialogical. That dialogue, whether friendly or polemical, a negotiation of sorts, is part of the text's way of being in culture, and hence, of being cultural.

Polemics, ripping-off and name-dropping

There are three (potential) serious pitfalls in your relationship to other scholarship in your field. First, don't waste your time doing battle with so-called "enemies". They may not be worth the effort, and they will distract you from the contribution you seek to make. Feminists, for example, often have problems with Freud, frequently well-founded

ones. But you have to ask yourself whether maintaining this enemy-image is really productive. If you subscribe to a psychoanalytical approach because it helps you articulate and understand things, then it won't do to fight the inventor of this theory. In such cases, where your sources are ambivalent, the best attitude to take is to ask yourself what you can use for your own work, and to leave the ideas you cannot accept aside. You don't have to emphasize yet again that penis envy is a projection, unless, of course, it makes logical sense within your argument. Always remind yourself that you argue persuasively only when you can tackle your opponent at his own game, when you can match his/her level of argumentation. This often takes more energy than it is worth. (For more on this issue, see Bal 1992.)

Second, and this is the other side (and sometimes, the same side!) of excessive or pointless polemicizing: don't submit to authority. Remember: you are not rewriting your great predecessor's project. Don't regurgitate someone else's ideas page after page. Just be sure to credit his/her inspiration, general methodology or specific interpretations, i.e. to take what you find useful and add it to your own ideas. But always keep in mind how what you are doing is different from what has already been done. Be sure to cite an authority you agree with properly, but you may also want to add a supplementary argument of your own, or a particularly apt example that underlines and strengthens the general point you wish to emphasize. On the one hand, then, it won't do to simply imitate or paraphrase what someone else has already written; nothing new will come of it. On the other hand, a quotation from an authority in your field, even if you don't agree with him/her, may well lead you to develop your own productive line of argument. Don't try to be an orthodox Freudian or Marxian, or anything else for that matter, but do position yourself clearly.

Third, avoid the activity commonly known as "ripping-off". It is a mild and often unintended form of plagiarism. Obviously you wouldn't simply copy someone else's prose; you would quote it and cite the source. But if you don't make a habit of noting where you read an interesting idea, you may absorb it without even being aware of it. After a while, you honestly think it was your own idea. This happens more frequently than it should (even between advisors and students!) and the only remedy is to keep meticulous records about where you find your thoughts. There is nothing shameful about acknowledging where you found an idea; on the contrary. Proper acknowledgement gives your text a relevant context.

A balanced and nuanced policy of quotation and citation is your way of building your intellectual network. It is one of the many benefits a good thesis has to offer its readers. The list of names quoted can give a clear idea of where you stand, or it can make you look like an obedient disciple of a great (or dubious) master. If you cite Marx on every page, you may appear as intellectually weak as those who avoid

5. Writing

Writing can be excruciatingly difficult, and it can be a joy. For most people it is both. Psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas once formulated a reason why these two affects alternate in the process of writing. In his book *The Shadow of the Other*, he wrote: "I often find that although I am working on an idea without knowing exactly what it is I think, I am engaged in thinking an idea struggling to have me think it" (1987: 10). Bollas is speaking here of thought. Later on the same page, he refers to such struggling thoughts as "the unthought known", a phrase he used in the subtitle of his book (*Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*). He might just as well have been speaking about writing.

In my experience, writing is the struggle with ideas eager to have you think them, but not yet quite thought-out. It is this struggle that makes your work lively, dynamic and full of surprises. The unthought known in your mind pertains to the question, "When do you start writing?". Again, contrary to popular opinion, writing does not take place in the last phase of the project, when all points and arguments have been carefully thought out. Writing and thinking are closely connected. Only when you write something down do you actually realize what you were thinking when you were trying to think something through. The process of writing helps you to order, deepen and round off your thoughts, even to "get" them.

This implies that you should begin writing immediately. Personally, I recommend the following. Write a coherent piece of prose (take an existing article as your example), in which you analyse a short text, an argument, a film or a picture. Take about one month to complete this. Don't expect to finish it in less time, or you may end up discouraged or frustrated. One month allows you the time to identify very clearly what problems might exist – but only if you don't expect perfection. Just do what you can within that time-frame.

This first text will serve as the starting point for your first discussion with your advisor. It will be the subject of mutual "diagnosis". Your advisor will identify and discuss both your strengths and weaknesses. Strengths must be acknowledged, but not at the expense of ignoring weaknesses. This experience of early writing and discussion with your advisor will also help you to shed any fear of criticism that you may have. It should be a positive, even exhilarating, process: you will learn that you are capable of a lot, and that, in turn, will make you eager to continue. You and your advisor will proceed along these lines, working from task to task, until, one day, your thesis is finished.

his name even where it is clearly relevant. If you only cite Derrida and Lacan but none of the many other studies written in their wake, you may appear to be authority-driven. If you cite big names all the time without doing much with the ideas, you might be accused of name-dropping and snobbism.

You learn writing by doing it. With time, you will become better, faster and more efficient, and your pleasure will increase. But this will only happen if there is a certain continuity in your approach. Write something every working day, even if it is only half a page. Writing has two dimensions: it helps you to overcome your limitations, develop your thoughts further, order your work and discover what cannot be captured in words. But it is also another way of communicating. It is therefore important to note the following aspects.

Outline

It is essential to plan your project and to work on the basis of that plan. Spend a few days reading and rereading the text-to-be-analysed. Note all your ideas. Then try to order them in a plan, written up in the form of an outline. An analysis of 15 to 20 pages usually requires a one- to two-page outline. Such an outline forces you to order your ideas logically. For example, there is a beginning (the question, the steps to be followed and the anticipated answers), a middle (the development of the announced steps) and an end (a systematic referral back to the beginning). To refer back is not to reiterate. Even if no definitive conclusions can yet be drawn, your temporary conclusions open the door to a new inquiry. What answers did you find to the questions posed? Did you do everything you set out to do? Which questions were unanswerable? Did any new questions arise? How does the result relate to your overall central problem? All this must be part of your outline, even if you constantly adjust it to suit the evolving situation. Not everything has to be solved, but everything must be present in the outline.

Let me sketch an ideal procedure (French scholars are better trained in this than their Dutch or American counterparts). You start developing your outline by writing one line for each section, then you flesh out each section. In the end, your outline will have a line for each paragraph. The outline thus grows along with your text. It is there to help you start writing, to keep you writing, to remind you of all the different angles you want to cover and to ensure you check whether you have covered them. It is not imperative to adhere blindly to your initial plan: most likely you won't. But it does serve to pinpoint where your approach changed, and allow you to adjust your outline accordingly.

If you want to learn from your own experience, it makes sense to keep the first and last versions of your outline; comparing these versions will give you a good idea of how you work, and help you draw up a more realistic and detailed plan the next time around. Sometimes your outline is so ambitious that it reveals a problem: e.g. your chapter is becoming too long. In that case, just divide it into a few shorter chapters, then continue. Make sure your outline doesn't become a straightjacket: constructing an outline and letting go of it are

equally important procedures. The point is to know what you set out to do, and to keep track of what you actually accomplish. This will help you ensure that your writing does not run off with your line of argument, and become messy, repetitive, vague or even banal.

Making the text readable

Your text will be offered to readers; be kind to them. Think of it in these terms: it is a privilege to be allowed to write and claim a lot of time from a lot of people, but you must earn that privilege. If you want to convince your readers of your ideas, treat them well. You can do this by striving for clarity, relevance and a good balance between length and information, and between new ideas and those your readers can already be expected to know.

Clarity is a primary concern here. It is not the same as simplicity. A friend of mine once wrote to me about a draft I had submitted to him for criticism: "Il ne s'agit pas de clarifier du confus (ton cas, alors, serait désepéré) mais de développer du concis" (it is not a matter of clarifying confused ideas – your case would be hopeless – but of developing conciseness). The best guarantee for clarity is your plan. Conciseness is a matter of patience.

Structure your arguments. Each unit, i.e. the text as a whole but also each sentence and each paragraph, has a beginning, which invites the readers to start, and an end, in which you make good your promise. Always announce what you will do and why, as well as what you have done and what, as a consequence, you are about to do. Each idea must be presented and shown to be relevant, each argument made explicit. And all of this, of course, without redundancy, wordiness, pedantry or platitude.

Argumentation

ASCA offers a course in argumentation designed especially for those busy writing a thesis. It is highly recommended you take it. Here is a preview of some of the things you might learn there. Write your arguments first, then your conclusion. Expressions such as "after all" and "namely" are symptoms of an inverse argumentation. Such inversions easily occur: you think something, you write it down, then you realize you have to justify it; the argumentation thus follows the thought. If you catch yourself doing this, be alarmed, because this is a symptom of inversed reasoning. It will make it more difficult for your readers to absorb the argumentation. Turn the argumentation around. The obligation to give arguments in order to "deserve" conclusions is very helpful, also for yourself: it is a way of checking if your reasoning is correct. Sometimes you may have skipped a step. Think about the necessary intermediary moves and you will have come a long way. Avoid "of course", "naturally" and "obviously". Sometimes you will feel compelled to write something that everybody knows, but

consider first whether it deserves to be said. If it does, is it really so obvious, or are you, perhaps, avoiding arguing the idea because maybe it isn't so obvious at all? Such phrases tend to sound pedantic and intimidating. What about if a reader isn't familiar with what you present as obvious?

Avoid arguing through questions (as I did in the previous paragraph). Real questions tend to blur the clarity of your argument, and rhetorical questions are manipulative. Just say what you want to say, and argue it when necessary. If you really want to propose the idea as a question, then say: "We might wonder if ..." But be sure to answer the question in the end.

(George Lakoff and Mark Johnson advocate the following rules for argumentation (1980: 88–89; freely rendered):

- content: make sure you have enough to say and enough evidence to support your argument, and say the right things in order to make your point.
- progress: develop your argument from premise to conclusion.
- structure: rational arguments require logical connections among the various parts.
- strength: the argument must be able to withstand objections. This depends on the weight of the evidence and the tightness of the logical connections.
- basicness: some claims are more important than others. Maintain and defend the most important ones since subsequent claims will be based upon them.
- obviousness: when something is less obvious – less easy to accept – put more effort into arguing it.
- directness: the force of an argument can depend on the straightforwardness of the line from premise to conclusion.
- clarity: what you claim and the connections between those claims must be clear.

All of the above hints should be kept in mind.

Paragraphs

A division into paragraphs structures your work and makes it accessible. Create paragraphs of about half or one third of a page. Always use the enter key to move to the next line, then the tab key to indent the paragraph. That way, you can check at a glance whether a text has enough structure. There must be semantic structure too. The beginning of one paragraph must follow logically on the end of the previous one. Equally, the end of a paragraph must clearly indicate what step has been taken and the main idea of that paragraph.

Paragraphs start out with a justification of their existence and end with the necessity for the following paragraph. Always check whether the transitions make sense. When you switch from one subject to another, be sure the connection between the two is clear. If

you are discussing someone indicated with a proper name, repeat the name the first time it is mentioned in a new paragraph.

Sentences

With the advent of word-processing, the temptation to use long sentences has become a serious hazard. What happens is that you start out by writing a simple sentence, then you have second thoughts, then, despite some interim ideas that present themselves as counter-arguments, you continue the sentence, until – after quite a few sub-clauses – you finally put a full stop at the end, even though other nuances are still competing for your attention, but then, you want to do justice to complexity, so ... Can you read this sentence in one go? My suggestion is to rewrite it in a series of separate sentences. Try it. I am sure you will see what I am driving at.

Overly long sentences are also a hindrance to accessibility. A good rule of thumb is that one sentence should contain one idea. If there are more ideas, split the sentence. If you tend to put ideas between brackets, or dashes, consider writing a whole new sentence. Reconsider each sentence after writing it to see if it can be split. If it can, remember to ensure that the connection between the sentences is clear and explicit. This is the purpose of conjunctions.

Style

Write in as direct a style as possible. Avoid indirect formulations, such as the passive voice, double negatives and nominalizations of verbs. Such formulations cloud the issue. Avoid unnecessary subordinations, and use a minimum of words. A sentence like "The fact is that nobody can say for sure" should be replaced with "Nobody knows for sure". Don't say "The question is whether"; just say why it doesn't work or isn't true. Avoid vague statements such as "These problems have to do with the Gulf War". Do you mean "These problems were caused by the Gulf War"? Then you need to argue how and why. Or, do you mean "These problems, among others, were the cause of the Gulf War"? In that case, the sentence begs the question of the relative importance of that particular fact as a cause.

What if you try and don't succeed? A vague statement that you cannot turn into a clear argument must be deleted. Avoid phrases such as "This has to do with", "as it were", "in a manner of speaking", "so to speak". If you wish to establish a connection, don't write "this makes me think of..."; no one is interested in your personal associations. The connection is only relevant if you can specify it.

Avoid keeping too many options open as you write, but do put your arguments in perspective. If your writing is overly relativistic, your reader will suspect you don't know what it is you want to say. Be as reader-friendly as possible: neither over- nor underestimate your readers. The amount of pre-knowledge you can expect depends on the

nature of your project. If your work is interdisciplinary, don't write "Introduction to" texts; this could be perceived as condescendant. But nor should you assume that everything you know is common knowledge. This is why interdisciplinary writing is an art in itself; you must explain everything without appearing to do so.

Avoid wordiness. Be concise when you can, without speaking in enigmas. A direct style dictates you should write "I" when you mean "I". Don't use "we" or "one"; they are both unclear. Only use "we" when it is absolutely clear which group you mean. Using "we" as a kind of indirect speaking voice has become old-fashioned, and sounds pompous. "We" as a kind of intimacy easily becomes dishonest; it creates a community of people who agree with you before such a community exists. On the other hand, you are writing to create that community. But you will only manage to do so if your readers allow it.

Don't hesitate to use "I". It helps you to check whether you can really defend what you are writing. But state what you want to assert without prefacing every statement with "I think". And "I feel that" won't do at all; your reader is not interested in your feelings, or in what you believe. Only those things that you are able to substantiate with arguments and data or details of your object are worth mentioning. What is important, though, is for your reader to be able to follow you when you formulate why you feel what you feel, or why you believe what you believe.

Exclusive language and essentialism

"We" is not only vague and self-effacing; it can also appear to exclude certain readers. For example, strictly speaking, it may indicate only men, feminists, academics, whites or middle class people. Ask yourself whether you are indeed excluding groups of readers. Don't write "We have been silent long enough about our experiences with incest" when you really mean "Victims of incest have been silent about their experiences for long enough. Moreover, this topic has been ignored by society and not been part of a public discourse". These are two related but different issues. Unpacking them helps your analysis.

Avoid essentialist terminology. Don't write "woman" but "women". But you must also ask yourself who belongs to this group; the sooner you define that, the more your work will benefit. Avoid essentialist expressions like "always", "everywhere", "universal" or "essentially", as well as syntactic structures that posit eternal truths. Instead, use personal pronouns that indicate whom you mean. Don't write "he" when you write about "he or she". If you don't like using "he or she", you can alternate "he" or "she", or use the convention "s/he". Another possible solution to this language-bound dilemma is to indicate at the beginning of a chapter that you will use "he" or "she" and that each includes both genders. The problem with this solution is that "he",

even when clearly qualified, tends to be interpreted in the conventional, exclusive sense.

Metaphors

Using metaphors is unavoidable. Properly chosen metaphors can inform the reader and offer subtlety or unexpected combinations of signs and meanings, while formulating without metaphors can lead to a much more wordy text. But only use metaphors that truly enhance your text; choose them carefully. You must be aware of the consequences when you use a metaphor, i.e. what is the extra information provided and how can it be integrated? The following pitfalls tend to arise:

- metaphors can run away with your text, thus becoming a long string. In the end, the reader can become so immersed in the metaphor that it ceases to illuminate the topic.

- metaphors can lead you to skip a phase in your argument. Examples, short narratives and metaphors are often misused as arguments. But they are not arguments, and should not be used as such.

- metaphors are often clichés that irritate and add nothing. Clichés can often lead to skipping an argument through their appeal to so-called "common sense".

- metaphors tend to be informed by your personal persuasions. While they may occasionally be helpful, in the end they become "preachy" and moralistic.

- irony more often than not doesn't come across in written texts.

- word plays are often ineffective and boring. Use them sparingly and only when they are truly witty.

In this brochure, I have used the metaphor "the object speaks back". I don't mean to assert that texts, images and films can take you to task when they "feel" you are distorting what they "intend to say". They cannot. They are mute things, and you are a live subject; they were made in the past, and you speak in the present. Clearly, this manner of speaking is metaphoric.

I will now explain the use of this metaphor here, first according to its general usefulness, then in terms of its possible pitfalls. The metaphor "the object speaks back" indicates that there is a way in which objects can resist projections and wrong interpretations. My message is that it is in your interest to understand and heed these resistances. I consider the message so important that I risk using this metaphor.

But to avoid having my metaphor become a long string, I use it only incidentally. Rather than alleging it instead of an argument, I use it to strengthen an argument I wish to make. The argument is that objects are not quite mute if you allow them to "speak". The metaphor,

therefore, asks how you can let an object speak when it does not have a voice. I owe that question an answer. The short, provisional answer is that the close analysis of passages will be difficult if the object is not easily accommodated in its role as illustration. I will explain this further under "quotations".

Another possible pitfall in using this metaphor is that it sounds rather like a cliché. It sounds like you might have heard it before. But this is not because it falls back on a common-sense metaphor. Rather, it resonates with the polemical metaphor frequently used today, "the empire strikes back". It is to that metaphor that I am alluding. But because the verb "to speak back" has been replaced in my metaphor with "to strike back", the political overtones have been substituted with a nuance that leaves the content of the speech-act open. The object can thus affirm or contradict, or protest or acknowledge what you want it to "say", through the quotation you allege.

There is no irony in my metaphor. I mean it as it sounds: the object is given a kind of voice, or at least the equivalent of one. And it fits my personal view of cultural objects. I would not have been able to use it if I did not consider it important that cultural objects be "emancipated" from their subordination to mechanistic theory. In this sense, this metaphor has an anti-positivist resonance to it.

Technical terms

Only use those technical terms that you really need, that you have defined and that you use within the framework of that definition. Italicize a term the first time you use it only, preferably where you define it. Make an index of your concepts so that readers can find them and their definitions again when needed. Unnecessary jargon makes your text sound pedantic and intimidates your reader, often resulting in irritation with both text and author. The appropriate use of technical terms, however, creates clarity and efficiency. When you explain a term, give an immediate reference (in footnotes).

An example of a term that needs to be introduced and defined is *focalization*. This term is easily misunderstood. It comes from narrative theory, where it denotes the subject position from which the occurrences and items in the fabula (a term to be defined) are perceived and subsequently presented. There are three reasons why it needs to be defined: first, because the phenomenon it covers is worth looking at; second, because there are other terms available that do not serve the purpose as adequately (e.g. the term "perspective" confuses the subject and object of perception, while "narrator" confuses the subject of speech with the subject of perception); and third, because its visual resonance may lead to misunderstandings about its precise meaning. When using the term, narrative theory avoids pronouncing on the kind of sensorial perception involved, and thus pronounces on the synaesthetic nature of all perception.

It is also meaningful, even important, to define well-known words that can easily be misunderstood. A good example is the word "trauma". Whereas it is easy to say that losing your key was traumatic (the night you had to go back home to your parents because you couldn't get into your new room), in a scholarly discussion of trauma such a usage would be vague and ultimately abusive. "Trauma" needs a definition precise enough to cover only those occurrences that we intuitively perceive as traumatic (such as genocide, rape or life-threatening accidents). Terms or concepts serve to distinguish as much as define.

Emphasis

Use italics only for foreign words or technical terms that you want to emphasize. To highlight something within a text, don't put it in italics; rephrase it. Use italics, underlining and exclamation marks as well as other graphic markers sparingly; they make your text look impertinent and self-imposing. Don't try to effect an emotional response in your reader in this way. The reader will decide for him/herself whether or not s/he wants to be surprised or incensed. Avoid "very" as both an adjective and adverb; it usually adds nothing and is often even grammatically incorrect. It counts as sloppy for native speakers and pedantic for non-native speakers.

Quotations

Quotations constitute an important element of scholarly texts, such as theses, and need to be treated as such. There are two ways to do this. Quotations of one or two lines can be integrated within the text, in which case they are enclosed in double inverted commas. Consistently use double inverted commas; single inverted commas are used for a quote within a quote. Quotations of more than two lines should be set off from the text and blocked. When you block a quote, use the indent key and omit inverted commas. You can leave a white space before and after the quotation, or not, as you choose. Don't diminish the space between lines or reduce the font. This creates problems with lay-out at the end. Note the following examples:

- Quotations of less than two lines (included within your text between double inverted commas):

As Van Luxemburg wrote, "Ana's pedestal has become a prison". Therefore it makes no sense ...

- Longer quotations, in block form (skip a line, indent, skip another line; omit double inverted commas). If, for example, in your analysis of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, you want to quote Catherine Lord's

association between this modernist novel and Shakespeare's *Othello*, you write:

> *Orlando* is not the first text in Western culture that problematizes the meaning of "he" or "she". As film theorist and literary critic Catherine Lord writes:

> > This stirring up and conflation of contiguously related elements such as text and texture, finds a precedent in *Othello*. The protagonist's treatment of his wife and his handkerchief disturb the stable relationships of alterity in Othello's cosmos. (1999: 83)

> Whereas Lord develops the relationship between text and texture through the Shakespearean metaphor of the handkerchief, I wish to draw attention to the meaninglessness of writing the personal pronoun in the third person.

In just a few sentences, you have introduced Lord, recalled Shakespeare through her, drawn attention to the need for historical awareness in any analysis of cultural texts and distinguished your line of argumentation from Lord's. Meanwhile, by presenting Lord's argumentation, you have drawn attention to the plurality of possible interpretations without losing sight of your own. (For more on quotations, see the chapter on "Sources".)

Lay-out
The decimal numbering system formerly common for titles and sub-headings, especially in the social sciences and linguistics, is boring for your reader. It does, however, help to structure your work. Give your paper a title that adequately covers the content. Each section should have its own title. Make a balanced division between sections. Your table of contents should indicate the precise information of your project, even serve as a summary. Italicize, or use bold or a larger typeface in the title, but make a choice and stick to it consistently. Enter one line before each new heading. You may decide to enter two lines before a chapter title, then one before the next chapter. The general point is that the title should be closer to the text that it defines than to the previous unit. Enter one line before, but not after, subtitles.
The first paragraph of a chapter or section is not marked with a tab. Regarding punctuation, be consistent in the order of inverted commas and full stops. If you follow the British convention, when quoting a phrase put inverted commas first, then the full stop.[3] For the

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[3] British and American punctuation (and spelling) differ considerably (consult *The Chicago Manual of Style* for details).

printer to distinguish between dashes indicating a reflection and a hyphenated word, you should use dashes with a space on either side for reflections – like these – and hyphens without a space on either side for hyphenation (as in "double-barrelled"). In English, hyphenate words only if they together form a qualifier; for example "the seventeenth century", but "seventeenth-century art".

6. Sources

Quotations are an important part of your text. Using them properly will help you to organize your work and strengthen your arguments. Furthermore, the use of quotations and other sources will indicate the framework of your (inter-)discipline.

As mentioned earlier, it is perfectly acceptable to use other people's ideas, but you must document your sources. Too few indications of sources make your text vague and your framework unclear. Furthermore, you could be accused of lack of knowledge or plagiarism (ripping-off). To become convincing as a writer, you must be clear about what is yours and what is borrowed. Be honest and straightforward about your sources, both direct and indirect. Use direct sources as much as possible, but if you can't for some reason, indicate this. If, for example, you talk about Derrida via Culler, let your reader know that you used Culler on Derrida. Don't make it sound as if Derrida were the author of a particular idea if indeed it was Culler who expressed that idea about Derrida. For example: Derrida 1980: 30, as quoted in Culler 1983: 184. If you want to quote Derrida himself, i.e. not via Culler, you must find the reference in Derrida's work.

Concepts
Always indicate the author of a particular concept. The concept of *heteroglossia*, for example, was coined by Bakhtin, introduced in the West by Kristeva and first seen by you in an article by Diaz-Diocaretz in the journal *Lover*. The entire history of the concept must be made evident. You indicate this in a footnote. Here, you would write a footnote as follows (except for the names, all the data in this imaginary footnote are made up!):

> Diaz-Diocaretz defines heteroglossia as "..." (1987: 22-23). Her definition is based on Julia Kristeva (1978), where the French critic provides an account of Bakhtin's introduction of the term.

The first name of an author is usually included the first time he is mentioned. Second and subsequent mentions use only the surname. Adding a phrase like "the French critic" may also serve to briefly introduce the newly named writer. A footnote may thus provide not only the necessary definition of a term, but also, for those who wish to know more about the concept, a brief genealogy. Moreover, if your readers have never heard of Kristeva, they can now situate this writer. For the above note, I presupposed that Diaz-Diocaretz was

introduced in the main text, and that Bakhtin had been introduced earlier.

How to balance the quantity of sources cited? Citing too many sources within the body of your text will sound pedantic and intimidating. Relegate them to footnotes. Avoid bracketed strings of sources. It is perfectly acceptable to write: "The term 'heteroglossia' is helpful in understanding the recycling we notice in Flaubert's prose. (Diaz-Diocaretz 1987: 22-23)", but don't write "Aristotle's ideas on mimesis have a long history of reception (Dupont-Roc and Lalot 1985; Berger 1999; Alfredo 1965; Bremer 1987; De Jong 1998)". Such strings of citations make your text unreadable and should be included in a footnote. In the latter case, however, there is another problem: It is pointless to cite five out of thousands of possible sources. Only cite those authors whose ideas on Aristotle's mimesis differ significantly, e.g. one who interprets the concept as "imitation" and another who sees it as "representation" (a distinction you would add and comment on in a footnote).

Be sure to use concepts and ideas according to their meaning as defined in the source. If you don't, you must indicate how you have changed the definition. Don't hesitate to do this; there is no reason to become enslaved by a definition. Instead, appropriate and integrate new ideas into your own framework. But, at the same time, don't try to give your own ideas a special status by appropriating an established concept with an idiosyncratic definition. For example, Gérard Genette (1973: 233) introduced the term *metadiegetic* to account for embedded discourse in narrative. This definition is rather idiosyncratic; it does not square with the usual meaning of the prefix "meta-", which means "commentary on", as in "metalanguage" (as language on language). If you need to describe the phenomenon and only know Genette's discussion of it, you can write something like this:

> Gérard Genette discusses effects of such embeddings in his narrative theory (1973: 233) and calls it "meta-discourse". Since this use of the prefix meta- can easily be misunderstood to mean discourse *about*, instead of *embedded within*, discourse, I propose to refer to the phenomenon he analyzes as "hypo-discourse".

In this way you account for your source, explain the concept, emend the term and trace the genealogy of the kind of thought at issue in structuralist narratology. All this information can be packed into two sentences.

Quotations
It is important to seek a balance between too many and too few quotations. A good rule of thumb is to oblige yourself to "earn" each

quotation: it must be meaningful and integrated into your argument. The following hints may be helpful.

Remember that a quotation cannot replace an argument. It has to be integrated into your work and thus appropriated. Analyse it and comment on it. If you do so, you will discover both the argument you wanted to use in the quotation and much more. This is where my metaphor "the object speaks back" comes in. You are making an argument and you wish to illustrate it. But since texts or images are never just there to confirm what you have to say about them, they are not quite going to do the job for you.

This is perfectly fine. You can begin by analysing those aspects of the passage or image that do confirm your argument. But, as you can never take that confirmation for granted, you must make it explicit. While doing so, you will come across aspects that seem to go in different directions, are more specific or even contradict the confirmation. Don't shy away from making these variations explicit. It will allow you to "let the text speak", and to emancipate it from all the disadvantages that using it in a utilitarian fashion entails. Furthermore, your thinking will develop. It is in analysing quotations that you are closest to your object, and hence, most likely to learn, complicate your argument and get new ideas; the object "speaks back", you enter into a dialogue with it. This empowers the object – but also yourself.

Avoid strings of quotations. Cultural analysis is not an empirical science. Three quotations illustrating the same idea are no more convincing than one. Three are too few to serve as "evidence", and too many to stand as an example with its own idiosyncrasies. Each quotation has to introduce something new. Don't use quotations that repeat each other. If you do, you reduce the sum of your quotations to a cliché. It also looks manipulative: using many like-sounding quotations over-emphasizes your claim to being "right". Moreover, it obliterates differences between the quotations.

The length of quotations must be in direct proportion to their importance within your thesis. The tendency to quote at length reflects a lack of control over what you have to say. It is symptomatic of their wrong use: you have become hostage to your own quotations. In addition, whereas your reader is reading the text because she wants to understand your argument, she ends up losing track of precisely that. In all cases, a lengthy quotation must be a reward for your own thought process: analyse the quotation, write it up in a short text, perhaps introducing it, then include it, and finally, indicate why it is particularly relevant to your work.

Accuracy in quotations is evidence of good scholarship; mistakes are evidence of sloppiness. It is easy to make mistakes when copying quotations, as it is boring work and one is easily distracted. So be careful when copying them: every detail, including full stops and commas, must be as in the original. If you want to skip a passage in

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the quotation because it is irrelevant, you indicate this with three dots for a single word and four dots for more than one word; in both cases the dots are framed by square brackets: [...].

Quotation is a potential enrichment of your text. It will work well if you stick to the basic rule: always analyse, don't illustrate only and take images as seriously as passages of texts. Use primary sources where possible, and comment on your motivation if you quote a secondary source.

Footnotes[4]

Word-processing has also made the creation of footnotes easier. Footnotes are meant to support your work. You can use them to develop the primary arguments laid out in the main text, for additional details, background information, sources and short comments on quotations. But word-processing has also created another possibility: that of writing a parallel work in footnotes. This is to be avoided.

Don't contradict your thesis by writing a second text in the footnotes; you should make nuances in your arguments in the main text. It won't do to contradict yourself and undermine your primary claims. It therefore only makes sense to write extensive footnotes when they support your primary text. Footnotes are often used to shorten the main text. Large segments of text are relegated to them. Initially, this is helpful to yourself; it enables you to be more concise without losing sight of the complexity of your argument. But, in the final version, just think of how the main text works without those long para-texts. Delete mercilessly if you don't really need them, or save such segments in a different document for potential use in another article.

Don't put full bibliographical references in footnotes. These should be included in the bibliography. Nor should you make a separate footnote just for a reference. Short references can be included in the main text. The reader is best served if he can move easily between the primary text and the footnotes. Be reader-friendly in this respect as well. Since footnote numbers interrupt your reader's concentration, it makes sense to place them at the end of the sentence or, wherever possible, the end of the paragraph.

Word-processing allows you to write your footnotes immediately. You don't have to wait until the end of the project, be it a chapter or your entire thesis. Take advantage of this opportunity! At a later date, you will have forgotten what you intended to say. If you know what you want to say but are hesitant to formulate it straight away, note some keywords to remind you of your thoughts.

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[4] I always recommend footnotes over endnotes as they make the text more reader-friendly. Be prepared to make endnotes (also made easy in Word), though, as publishers sometimes require them.

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7. Bibliography

Each thesis includes a bibliography in which the "works consulted" and sometimes "suggestions for further reading" are documented. Once your thesis is ready, you assemble this bibliography in alphabetical order. Don't divide it into sections according to categories, although it may be useful to keep literary and critical texts separate when your thesis deals with literature. But don't use the terms "primary" and "secondary"; this creates a hierarchy. Include only those texts that you actually mentioned in your thesis, no others. If you analyse films, make a separate "filmography". Again, this list should include all films mentioned, but only those. More and more frequently, theses also include electronic sources such as websites. The same rule applies.

In all references, be precise and comprehensive. Some styles include only the place of publication and not the publisher or the full page-span of the articles. I recommend you choose the most comprehensive format. By way of example, the following list includes references to all the texts mentioned in this brochure. There is only one article. Note the difference between book and article references. Article titles are put in quotation marks, followed by the name of the publication – either a book or journal – in italics. In the case of journals, the year and issue number are added; for edited volumes, the name of the editor. Always add the page-span. Where there are three authors or less, all are mentioned. Where there are more than three, only the name of the first author is mentioned, followed by "et al.".

A sample bibliography:

Bal, Mieke
1992 "Narratology and the Rhetoric of Trashing". *Comparative Literature* 44 (3): 293-306
2002 *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press

Baronian, Marie-Aude
In preparation. Image, Mémoire et Transmission. Sur la (non-) représentation et l'héritage du génocide arménien. Amsterdam: ASCA

Berendsen, Marjet
1991 *Reading Character in Jane Austen's* Emma. Assen: Van Gorcum

Bleeker, Maaike
2002 *The Locus of Looking: Dissecting Visuality in the Theatre.* Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam (unpublished)

Dimock, George
1993 *Constructions of Childhood*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester (unpublished)

Eemeren, Frans van, Rob Grootendorst and Francisca Snoek Henkemans
2002 *Argumentation: Analysis, Evaluation, Presentation*. Mahhaw, NJ, and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers

Elsaesser, Thomas
1989 *New German Cinema: A History.* London: McMillan/The British Film Institute

Korsten, Frans-Willem
1998 *The Wisdom Brokers: Narrative's Interaction with Arguments in Cultural Critical Texts.* Amsterdam: ASCA Press

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson
1980 *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Lord, Catherine
1999 *The Intimacy of Influence: Narrative and Theoretical Fictions in the Work of George Eliot, Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson.* Amsterdam: ASCA Press

Neef, Sonja
2000 *Kalligramme. Zur Medialität einer Schrift, anhand von Paul van Ostaijens* De feesten van angst en pijn. Amsterdam: ASCA Press

NUFFIC
1994 *Nederlandse Hoger Onderwijs Termen in het Engels*. Nuffic: The Hague

Smith, Piers Michael
1997 *Colonial Obscene: Reading Cultural Texts on Borneo, Ex-centrically.* Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam (unpublished)

Tops, Ellen
2001 *Foto's met gezag. Een semiotisch perspectief op priesterbeelden 1930-1990.* Nijmegen: Vantilt

(The) University of Chicago Press
1993 *The Chicago Manual of Style The Essential Guide for Writers, Editors, and Publishers*, 14th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Vojkovic, Sasha
2001 *Fathers, Sons, and Other Ghosts: Subjectivity in the New Hollywood Cinema.* Amsterdam: ASCA Press

Vries, Hent de
1996 "Cultural Analysis: On Theorizing the Present". *BRIEF: Issues in Cultural Analysis,* ed. Mieke Bal, et al., 3-6. Kampen: Kok Faros

The bibliography is your most important instrument for subsequent scholarship. Moreover, as mentioned before, it provides readers with insight into your intellectual network, frames of reference, even your intellectual style.

8. Finishing

A year will pass between completion of the chapters of your thesis and your public defence. Only when you have finished all the chapters will you write your introduction. To do this, you must first read the latest theory and criticism on your topic. You will then reread your chapters to make final revisions and refresh your memory on the development of your argument. This is also the moment to check for repetition and contradictions.

Paradoxically, you can only write the introduction after you have written the rest of your thesis. Once you have written the introduction, you will go through each chapter again to check that it makes sense. (It helps to keep a list while writing your chapters, indicating the issues you want to see mentioned in the introduction.) Then you write the conclusion. Writing the introduction and the conclusion will take you another six months.

Once they are completed, it is time to submit the application form requesting your defence. For details, consult the PhD brochure of the university, where all the rules and regulations are set out. You will then focus on finalizing your thesis for the printer. Most theses are printed according to a camera-ready system, which means there mustn't be a single error anywhere in the text. Every typo, comma and indent must be checked and corrected. This will take you another month or two. You must also get in touch with a publisher as soon as you near the end of writing your introduction. But don't do this prematurely; you might risk rejection, and most theses improve dramatically in the final stage. Consult your advisor on these matters.

Once your thesis is print-ready, your advisor will read it, to decide whether approval is possible. A second or third advisor may also read it. Your advisor may approve the thesis on condition that a number of small changes are made while you await the return of the application form from the central administration.

When the advisors (called "promotors" in the Dutch system) have approved the manuscript, the first promotor will submit a form setting up the thesis committee. The committee members will be selected by the promotor in consultation with the candidate, and finally, by the promotor and the dean of the faculty, the latter who is ultimately responsible for its formation. After about two weeks, the application form will be returned, at which time all the committee members will receive a copy of the manuscript. Make sure there are enough copies for distribution at this point. Once the manuscript has been sent to the committee members, a date for your defence can be arranged with the university usher (called the "pedel" in the Netherlands). The thesis committee makes only a general "yes" or "no"

decision on the defensibility of the thesis. This decision is made within six weeks of the thesis having been received (eight weeks if it is received just before the summer break).

Other details regarding this procedure can be found in the brochure "Rules and Regulations for the Attainment of a Doctorate", available from Kees Ostendorf at: Academische zaken, Room 129, Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam, Spuistraat 210, 1012 VT Amsterdam, tel. +31 20 525 3054, fax +31 20 5255 3305, email: C.F.J.Ostendorf@uva.nl.

The graffiti or wall writing on the cover of ASCA publications represents a letter or 'brief' in Dutch. The form of the text is an icon for the form of letters, with an address, 'Dear so-and-so', followed by the 'body' of the letter. The word that has the shape of the address is self-referential. The word 'briefje' means 'note', small letter, but it rhymes with 'Liefje', a more usual address, meaning 'Dearest' or 'Sweetie'. This fits in with the beginning of the text itself that says: 'I love you'. The discourse of the love-letter then shifts to that of epistemic philosophy when it continues: 'I did not make you up'. The statement of non-fiction is inherently contradicted by the address that changes a real person, the anonymous writer's beloved, into a self-referential description of the note.

This tension questions the distinction between fiction and reality the note/graffiti thematizes. It also inscribes academic reflection at the heart of an expression of contemporary, 'popular' culture. Moreover, the body of the text is identical to the ending of a poem, 'Je bent' ('You are'), by Dutch poet Ellen Warmond. Thus the interdiscursive complexity of the text, connecting it to academic inquiry as well as, through this reference, to 'high literature', doubles up with intertextual citation, specifically to women's literature of the 1950's.

The graffiti is publicly accessible, semantically dense, pragmatically intriguing, visually appealing and insistent, and philosophically profound. Yet it stubbornly remains a transient thing that could disappear any moment. Thus, this accidentally found 'text-image' has come to stand for the ASCA program in more ways than one.