

TRAVELLING CONCEPTS
IN THE HUMANITIES
A Rough Guide

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Green College Lectures
Green College, University of British Columbia



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London

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Toronto Buffalo London
Printed in Canada

ISBN 0-8020-3529-9 (cloth)
ISBN 0-8020-8410-9 (paper)



Printed on acid-free paper

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National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data

Bal, Mieke, 1946-

Travelling concepts in the humanities : a rough guide

(Green College lectures)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8020-3529-9 (bound). ISBN 0-8020-8410-9 (pbk.)

1. Humanities. 2. Interdisciplinary approach to knowledge.

I. Marx-Macdonald, Sherry II. Title III. Series: Green College lecture series.

AZ515 Z5B34 2002 001.3 C2002-900960-X

This book has been published with the help of a grant from Green College, University of British Columbia.

The University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial assistance to its publishing program of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial support for its publishing activities of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP).

To the participants of the ASCA Theory Seminar –
past, present, and future

1

Concept

concept

– something conceived in the mind; a thought, notion

– a general idea covering many similar things derived from study of particular

instances

Synonyms: see IDEA¹

Departure

Concepts are the tools of intersubjectivity: they facilitate discussion on the basis of a common language. Mostly, they are considered abstract representations of an object. But, like all representations, they are neither simple nor adequate in themselves. They distort, unfix, and inflect the object. To say something is an image, metaphor, story, or what have you – that is, to use concepts to label something – is not a very useful act. Nor can the language of equation – ‘is’ – hide the interpretive choices being made. In fact, concepts are, or rather *do*, much more. If well thought through, they offer miniature theories, and in that guise, help in the analysis of objects, situations, states, and other theories.

But because they are key to intersubjective understanding, more than anything they need to be explicit, clear, and defined. In this way everyone can take them up and use them. This is not as easy as it sounds, because concepts are flexible: each is part of a framework, a systematic set of distinctions, *not* oppositions, that can sometimes be

bracketed or even ignored, but that can never be transgressed or contradicted without serious damage to the analysis at hand. Concepts, often precisely those words outsiders consider jargon, can be tremendously productive. If explicit, clear, and defined, they can help to articulate an understanding, convey an interpretation, check an imagination-run-wild, or enable a discussion, on the basis of common terms and in the awareness of absences and exclusions. Seen in this light, concepts are not simply labels easily replaced by more common words.

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

Concepts, in the first place, look like words. As Deleuze and Guattari noted in their introduction to *What Is Philosophy?*, some need etymological fancy, archaic resonance, or idiosyncratic folly to do their work; others require a Wittgensteinian family resemblance to their relatives; still others are the spitting image of ordinary words (1994: 3). ‘Meaning’ is a case of just such an ordinary word-concept that casually walks back and forth between semantics and intention. Because of this flexibility that makes semantics appear as intention, one of the points of the present book – and of chapter 7 in particular – is to convey the notion that the pervasive predominance of intentionalism – the conflation of meaning with the author’s or artist’s intention – with all its problems, is due to this unreflective conflation of words and concepts.

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

¹ This and all subsequent definitions of concepts at the beginning of chapters are selections from the entries in the *Longman Dictionary of the English Language* (1990).

But concepts can only do this work, the methodological work that disciplinary traditions used to do, on one condition: that they are kept under scrutiny through a confrontation with, not application to, the cultural objects being examined. For these objects themselves are amenable to change and apt to illuminate historical and cultural differences. The shift in methodology I am arguing for here is founded on a particular relationship between subject and object, one that is not predicated on a vertical and binary opposition between the two. Instead, the model for this relationship is interaction, as in 'interactivity.' It is because of this potential interactivity – not because of an obsession with 'proper' usage – that every academic field, but especially one like the humanities that has so little in the way of binding traditions, can gain from taking concepts seriously.

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

Between historical periods, the meaning and use of concepts change dramatically. Take *hybridity*, for example. How did this concept from biology – implying as its 'other' an authentic or pure specimen and presuming that hybridity leads to sterility – that was current in imperialist discourse with its racist overtones, come to indicate an idealized state of postcolonial diversity? Because it travelled. Originating in nineteenth-century biology, it was first used in a racist sense. Then it changed, moving through time, to Eastern Europe, where it encountered the literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Travelling west again, it eventually came to play a brief but starring role in postcolonial studies,

where it was taken to task for its disturbing implications, including the historical remnants of colonial epistemology.² Far from decaying such a long journey to a provisional dead end, I see how important such a concept is for the development and innovation of the very field that now rejects it. History – here the history of concepts and their successive networks – can be a dead weight if endorsed uncritically in the name of tradition. But it can also be an extremely powerful force that activates rather than stultifies interactive concepts.³ Finally, concepts function differently in geographically dispersed academic communities with their different traditions. This is as true for the choice and use of concepts as for their definitions and the traditions within the different disciplines, even the newer ones like cultural studies.

All of these forms of travel render concepts flexible. It is this changeability that becomes part of their usefulness for a new methodology that is neither stultifying and rigid nor arbitrary or 'sloppy.' This book aims to demonstrate that the travelling nature of concepts is an asset rather than a liability. In the present chapter, I will discuss some of the itineraries of that travel – between departure and arrival and back again. The case serving as an example is one many will recognize: it involves the partial overlap of concepts used today in different disciplines, concepts that tend to get muddled in a mixed setting. To help the move from a muddled multidisciplinary to a productive interdisciplinary, such cases of partial overlap are best dealt with head-on.

Travel between Words and Concepts

In the cultural disciplines, a variety of concepts are used to frame, articulate, and specify different analyses. The most confusing ones are the over-arching concepts we tend to use as if their meanings were as clear-cut and common as those of any word in any given language. Depending on the background in which the analyst was initially trained and the cultural genre to which the object belongs, each analysis tends to take for granted a certain use of concepts. Others may not agree with that use, or may even perceive it as not being specific

² Young (1990) opens with this point. For a recent in-depth criticism, see Spivak (1999). For a brief account, see Ashcroft et al. (1998: 118–21).

³ History and tradition, my long-term interlocutors in the kind of work this book accounts for, are the subject of reflection in my earlier book (1999a) and ch. 6 of the present volume.

enough to merit arguing about. Such confusion tends to increase with those concepts that are close to ordinary language. The concept of text will serve as a convincing example of this confusion.

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

Many fear that to speak of images as texts is to turn the image into a piece of language. But by shunning the linguistic analogy (as in many ways we should) we also engage resistance – to meaning, to analysis, and to close, detailed engagement with the object. That resistance we should, in turn, resist, or at least discuss. The concept of text helps rather than hinders such a discussion *precisely because it is controversial*. Hence its use should be encouraged, especially in areas where it is not self-evident, so that it can regain its analytical and theoretical force.⁴

But 'text' is perhaps already an example that leads too much. In its travels, it has become dirty, come to imply too much, to resist too much; hence it has become liable to deepen the divide between the enthusiasts and the sceptics. What about 'meaning', then? No academic discipline can function without a notion of this concept. In the humanities, it is a key word. Or a key concept, perhaps? Sometimes. Let me call it a 'word-concept'. This casual use, now as word, then as concept, has two major drawbacks. One drawback of its casual use as a word is the resulting reluctance to discuss 'meaning' as an academic

issue. The other is its over-extended use. More often than not, scholars and students speak of 'meaning' without even specifying whether they mean (*sic*) intention, origin, context, or semantic content. This is normal, inevitable. Just now I couldn't avoid using the verb 'to mean' because I was unable to choose between 'intending' and 'referring'. But this confusion is largely responsible for a major problem in all the humanities. For, as a result, students are trained to say that 'the meaning of a picture' is identical either to the artist's intention, or to what its constitutive motifs originally meant, or to the contemporary audience's understanding, or to the dictionary's synonym. My suggestion here is that students ought to be trained to choose – and justify – one of the meanings of 'meaning', and to make that choice a methodological starting point.

The concepts I discuss in this book belong, to varying degrees, to this category where ordinary and theoretical language overlap. Other concepts or sets of concepts that come to mind – which are not central to the case studies here – are history (and its relation to the present); identity and alterity; subject(ivity) and agency; hybridity and ethnicity; individual, singular, different; cognitive, scientific, and technological metaphors; medium, mode, genre, type; fact and objectivity; and last but not least, culture(s).⁵ But, as I mentioned in the introduction, the project here is not to provide an overview of key concepts in cultural analysis. Others have already done that. Instead, I offer case studies as examples of a practice in which concepts are elaborated in the context where they most frequently occur: through the analysis of an object; in other words, through case studies – through samples of my own practice of cultural analysis.⁶ The purpose of each chapter is not to define, discuss, or offer the history of the concept central to it. Rather, the case I try to make is for a flexible, close attention to what concepts can (help us) do. Hence, not they but the way I propose to handle them is the point. That way, I submit, is best captured by the metaphor of travel.

There is also a social aspect to the intersubjectivity that concepts create. That social aspect is my primary concern here. Concepts are, and always have been, important areas of debate. As such, they promote a measure of consensus. Not that absolute consensus is possible, or even

⁵ Alas, also the one I will leave alone here. For the concept of culture, a book-length study at least is needed. For just two recent examples, see Hartman (1997) and Spiwak (1999).

⁶ On the practice of cultural analysis, see Bal, ed. (1999).

⁴ For these aspects of the word-concept 'text', see Coggin and Neef (2001).

desirable, but agreement on the fact that – provisionally, tentatively, and testingly – a concept is best deployed in a specific meaning and because the results can then be discussed is indispensable if we are to get out of turf-policing defensiveness. This book grew out of the conviction that in this sense concepts and the debates around them have greatly increased in importance with the advent of interdisciplinary study. The mission of concepts is vital if the social climate in the academy is to be maintained and improved, if disputes are to promote rather than preclude the production of knowledge and insight (as, alas, happens all too often). It is around concepts that I see cultural analysis achieving a consensus comparable to the paradigmatic consistency that has kept the traditional disciplines vital – albeit, simultaneously, dogmatic.⁷ Rejecting dogmatism without sacrificing consistency is a way of improving the human *ambiance* while increasing the intellectual yield. For this reason I consider the discussion of concepts an alternative methodological base for ‘cultural studies’ or ‘analysis.’ My first point, then, is to plead for the centrality of conceptual reflection – for the following reasons.⁸

Concepts are never simply descriptive; they are also programmatic and normative. Hence, their use has specific effects. Nor are they stable; they are related to a tradition. But their use never has simple continuity. For ‘tradition,’ closer to a word that moves about, is not the same as (Kuhnian) ‘paradigm,’ itself a concept threatened with word-status when used too casually. ‘Tradition’ appeals to ‘the way we always did things,’ as a value. ‘Paradigm’ makes explicit the theses and methods that have acquired axiomatic status, so that they can be used without being constantly challenged. This rigidity is strategic and reflected. But ‘tradition’ does not question its tenets; hence, those tenets become dogmatic. Traditions change slowly, paradigms suddenly; the former without their inhabitants knowing it, the latter against their resistance.

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

8 These reasons form a counterpart to the first paragraph of this chapter.

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

Travel between Science and Culture

Let me, then, plot the first route of our travel. Work with concepts is by no means confined to the cultural field. Although the use of concepts in the natural sciences differs from their use in the humanities, we can still learn something from their travels in and among the sciences. In the preface to her book *D'une science à l'autre*, devoted to the interdisciplinary mobility of concepts travelling between the sciences, Isabelle Stengers helpfully states the purpose of probing travelling concepts. She announces that her book seeks to explore the ways the sciences can avoid the Scylla of a false purity and disinterestedness, and the Charybdis of arbitrariness and loss of interest, both often said to threaten after the traditional ideals have been unmasked as empty pretensions. As a remedy for the pain of the loss of innocence – and the loss of neutrality and disinterestedness – her book, she continues, offers concepts. Not as a glossary, but as theoretical issues, hotly debated and apt to be misunderstood and to help the sciences along. Concepts as issues of debate. In our culture, the sciences are taken more seriously than the humanities. This deserves some attention, for that difference may not be engraved in stone.

The sciences are taken seriously in at least one of two distinct senses. The first is *de jure*, ‘by right,’ or ‘by law’: ‘scientific’ is what obeys the rules of scientific procedure. Concepts have a key place in the assessment of the ‘lawfulness’ of the sciences. Concepts are legitimate as long as they avoid the status of ‘mere metaphor’ or ideology, and as long as

they follow the rules of scientificity in terms of demarcation of and application to an object domain. Here the epistemology is normative. Mainstream scholarship in the humanities works implicitly with a consensual endorsement of this normativity. A humanities' light shed on this normativity is in order, for this normativity has a problem of temporal logic. The legalistic normativity proclaims beforehand what is in need of explanation and analysis. In this sense, it embodies the rhetorical figure of *proteron hysteron*: it is literally pre-posterous, putting first what in fact comes later, in terms of both temporality and causality. This figure obscures the precise relationship between time and causality. Thus untangled, the problem can be reframed productively as narratological: its founding figure is *analepsis*, the narration of what comes later, before what comes earlier. As a consequence, causality is rendered opaque, if not suspended.

The second way science is taken seriously is *de facto*, 'in fact', or 'in reality': here, by contrast, 'scientific' is what is recognized as such within the social-cultural field of scientific practice. A very practical example is the institution of peer review for grant applications. In this conception, the norms of what is acceptable move, are unstable, elaborated by the same actors whose status as scientists depends on judgments about what is scientific. Here, again, narratology can clarify the issue. The epistemological problem is of a different narratological logic. It is primarily actantial not temporal.⁹ The primary epistemological problem is the actantial conflation, the double role of the social actors – the practising scientists – as both subject and object of the evaluation. Numerous others follow.

Scientific communities often try to disavow the fundamental interestness of all the actors in the outcome of the evaluation by giving priority to normative epistemology. To do this, they (must) disavow the problem that inheres in it by attributing a kind of atemporal permanence to the criteria, in the guise of universalism. But it is precisely the rhetoric of universalism, which flies in the face of everything we know about the history of science, that suggests that the *de jure* argument is, 'in fact', as the expression goes, a *de facto* argument. For the interest in disinterestness becomes blatant in the process, thus shifting

the debate irresistibly from legitimate to factual truth, from law to practice, from temporal to actantial logic. For the second epistemological problem – the actantial one, based on the illusion of a universal validity of norms – is prohibitive only so long as norms such as neutrality and disinterestness, including the criteria by which these are established, are inscribed in stone – or, in interest.¹⁰

This is where concepts demonstrate their key role in the methodological discussion. They help demonstrate that this neutrality is an actual rhetorical strategy rather than just a theoretical possibility. Lack of interest is, in fact, deadly for scientific inquiry, as it also is for humanistic, or any other, inquiry. Reflection on the nature and effectivity of concepts makes this particularly obvious, because, above all, the role of concepts is *to focus interest*. As Stengers writes, the primary definition of scientific concepts is to *not* leave one indifferent, 'to implicate and impose taking a stand' (11). Once the fiction of neutrality has been cleared away, judgments still need to be made. The only remaining domain of analysis that allows us to make judgments on concepts as keys to scientificity is the social-cultural field of scientific practice. Legal, normative epistemology can only be subordinated to that practice, and, as the history of science amply demonstrates, its rules are constantly changing.

To understand the role of concepts in a practice of science whose priority over normative epistemology has now been argued, the following features of scientific concepts must be examined. According to Stengers, concepts imply an operation that involves the redefining of categories and meanings in both the phenomenal and social fields. *De facto*, concepts organize a group of phenomena, define the relevant questions to be addressed to them, and determine the meanings that can be given to observations regarding the phenomena. *De jure* – I would insist on the subordination of the second part of this problematic to the first – adequacy must be granted, hence, recognized. A concept must be recognized as adequate. This adequacy is not 'realistic'; it is not a matter of truthful representation. Instead, a concept is adequate to the extent that it produces the effective organization of the phenomenon.

¹⁰ The ambiguity of 'interest', here, is purposefully left hanging. Money is often a (side) issue in the academic dynamic. Not only grants come to mind here, but also the financial earthquakes of dis- and reattributions of old master paintings, and the less obvious financial consequences of critical attention paid to a constant litany of artists who are somewhat arbitrarily included in the canon, along with their anonymous counterparts.

⁹ The narratological concept 'actantial' refers to positions in a fixed structure of roles that can be filled by different 'actors'. See my *Narratology* (1997b: 196–206). The concept was the structuralist elaboration, by the French linguist A.J. Greimas, of a model contrived by the Russian folklorist V. Propp in the 1930s (1966).

ena rather than offering a mere projection of the ideas and presuppositions of its advocates (11). The point of discussion in the practice of science is, of course, to minimize the risk of taking the latter – projection – for the former – production. A certain degree of predominance of *standpoint epistemology* is therefore inevitable.¹¹ Among the criteria that tend to be applied are, for example, the requirement that the concept give a sense of providing ‘authentic access to phenomena’ (Stengers 11), that the new organization be compelling, and that it yield new and relevant information. Obviously, all of these criteria are of a relatively subjective nature, gauging by the interest that the concept and its yield solicit. Hence, they solicit, at least partly and provisionally, a standpoint-epistemological position.

Stengers devotes a good part of her introduction to the notion that ‘nomadic’ concepts have the power of ‘propagation,’ a word she uses to avoid conflating it with its negative element, ‘propaganda.’¹² The propagation of a concept that emerges in one field, in another field that changes its meaning and whose meaning it, in turn, changes, constitutes the primary feature of a concept, both as asset and liability, or risk. It is only through a constant reassessment of the power of a concept to organize phenomena in a new and relevant way that its continued productivity can be evaluated. This reorganization might be much more visible in the natural sciences than in the cultural fields. But, even within a single culture artefact, the reorganization of phenomena, aspects, and elements, such as words or motifs, actors, and events, through a concept brought to bear on that artefact, can be innovative as well as conducive to insights relevant beyond the artefact itself. For, in the reorganization it facilitates, a concept generates the production of meaning.

Here, we reach a point where the natural sciences and the cultural disciplines share a crucial methodological concern. Stengers explains this standard by identifying two meanings of ‘propagation’: diffusion, which dilutes and ends up neutralizing the phenomena, as in the propagation of heat; and epidemic propagation, where each new particle becomes an originating agent of a propagation that does not weaken in

the process (18). ‘Diffusion’ is the result of an unwarranted and casual ‘application’ of concepts. Application, in this case, entails using concepts as labels that neither explain nor specify, but only name. Such labelling goes on when a concept emerges as fashionable, without the search for new meaning that ought to accompany its deployment taking place. I recall vividly the sudden frequency of the word ‘uncanny,’ for example, and, also, quite upsettingly, a certain abuse of the word ‘trauma.’

I say ‘word’ here instead of ‘concept’ because, in these cases, the dilution deprives the concept of its conceptualizing force: of its capacity to distinguish and thereby to make understandable in its specificity; hence, to ‘theorize’ the object, which would thus further knowledge, insight, and understanding. ‘Trauma,’ for example, is used casually to refer to all sad experiences, whereas the concept in fact theorizes a distinctive psychic effect caused by happenings so life-shattering that the subject assaulted by them is, precisely, unable to process them *qua* experience. ‘Trauma’ as concept, therefore, offers a theory that the casual use of the word obliterates.¹³

‘Propagation,’ in the sense of contamination – and despite its negative connotations and, indeed, the fear that such a metaphor solicits – keeps the meaning of the concept constant in its precision, so that instead of diluting, it functions as a strong, well-delimiting searchlight. These two conceptual metaphors from the sciences, ‘diffusion’ and ‘propagation,’ clarify the tangled problem of the application of concepts, also for the humanities.

A final defining element of a concept is the *foundational* capacity inherent in its discovery. Enabling both a description of and experimentation with the phenomena, which in turn allow actual intervention, a new concept founds an object consisting of clearly defined categories (Stengers 29). In the humanities, the foundational capacity comes with a new articulation, entailing new emphases and a new ordering of the phenomena within the complex objects constituting the cultural field. In a somewhat grandiose interpretation, one could say that a good concept founds a scientific discipline or field. Thus, to anticipate the subsequent specialized discussions in this book, one might claim that the articulation of the concept of narrativity within the humanities and the social sciences founded the discipline of narra-

11 For a review of various epistemologies, including a critique of standpoint epistemology, see Alcoff and Potter (1993).

12 Averse to the currently fashionable romanticizing of nomadism, for its trivialization of the plight of homelessness and expatriate existence, I prefer to use the metaphor of ‘travel,’ thereby gaining in voluntariness what I lose in the sense of (mobile) habitat.

13 For a theoretical discussion of trauma, see van der Hart and van de Kolk in Caruth, ed. (1995), and van Alphen (1997).

tology. This is an inter-discipline precisely because it defines an object, a discursive modality, which is active in many different fields.

Concepts play a crucial part in the traffic between disciplines because of two consequences of their power to propagate, found, and define an object domain: they capture, in a conflation of epistemology and scientific practice, the scientificity of the methodology they ground,¹⁴ and, moving in the opposite direction, they 'harden' the science in question by determining and restricting what counts as scientific. This can bring false comfort to those distressed by the kind of pedagogical situations described in my introduction. For, in such situations, the work in need of doing was precisely that of unhardening the concept, of de-naturalizing the self-evidence that each disciplinary group had unreflectively adopted. Discussions of an interdisciplinary nature lead neither to an 'anything goes' attitude nor to an undecided ability or aporia. Instead, hardening and unhardening alternate and shift.

If interdisciplinary discussions sometimes become parochial and fussy, this is not so surprising. Such a situation is best dealt with through explicit discussion. Each participant is answerable both to his or her own disciplinary community back home and to the 'foreigners' in the country s/he visits in whose language s/he is not yet fluent. Even if a participant has already been trained in an interdisciplinary field, that field will not cover all the ground covered by all the other fields involved whose members participate in the discussion. This double answerability is a good – albeit demanding – situation.

At this juncture I wish to insist that the self-protection of the mono-disciplines is not all negative. As long as self-protection keeps its boundaries permeable, I would even consider it indispensable, both for the individual disciplines and for the endeavour of interdisciplinarity. A certain protectiveness is useful against dilution, through which universal fuzziness threatens to undermine the very means by which the concept serves analysis. The travels I outline in this book must be considered in terms of 'propagation', not 'diffusion'. The latter, however, the more common practice, is often presented under the banner of *multi-disciplinarity*. The metaphor of travel can help to clarify the difference between *interdisciplinarity* and *multidisciplinarity*, and to show why that difference matters.

¹⁴ The word 'capture', if not its meaning, comes from Stengers (30).

Travel between Disciplines: Looking and Language

Let me now give an example of a situation in which the propagation of a concept is potentially productive but also potentially diluting. The example consists of a cluster of neighbouring concepts: 'gaze', 'focalization', and 'iconicity'. These concepts are different but affiliated. They are often conflated, with disastrous results, or, alternatively, kept separate, with impoverishing results. The following reportage describes the travels through which they have gone. In this travel journal, I will give my view of what happened with these concepts in the cultural field, and move back and forth between that general development and my own intellectual itinerary.

The 'gaze' is a key concept in visual studies, one I find it important to fuss about if fuzziness is to be avoided. It is widely used in fields whose members participate in cultural studies. Norman Bryson's analysis of the life of this concept, first in art history, then in feminist and gender studies, amply demonstrates why it is worth reflecting on.¹⁵ He rightly insists that feminism has had a decisive impact on visual studies; film studies would be nowhere near where it is today without it. In turn, film studies, especially in its extended form, which includes television and the new media, is a key area in cultural studies. The itinerary Bryson sketches is largely informed by the centrality of the concept of the gaze in all the participating disciplines. If we realize that film studies, at least in the United States, grew out of English departments, the time- and space-map becomes decidedly interesting.

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

¹⁵ See Bryson's introduction to *Looking In: The Art of Viewing*. This text, in fact, was one of the reasons I became more acutely aware of the importance of concepts. Some of the thoughts in the present chapter are developments of my remarks in the After-dissertation of the 'gaze' in Lacanian theory.

a specific version of it.¹⁶ The Lacanian 'gaze' is, most succinctly, the visual order (equivalent to the symbolic order, or the visual part of that order) in which the subject is 'caught'. In this sense it is an indispensable concept through which to understand all cultural domains, including text-based ones.¹⁷ The 'gaze' is the world looking (back) at the subject.

In its more common use – perhaps between word and concept – the 'gaze' is the 'look' that the subject casts on other people and other things. Feminism initiated the scrutiny of the gaze's objectifying thrust, especially in film studies, where the specific Lacanian sense remains important. Cultural critics, including anthropologists, have recently been interested in the use of photography in historical and ethnographic research. More broadly, the meaning-producing effects of images, including textual-rhetorical ones, have been recognized. In this type of analysis, the 'gaze' is also obviously central.¹⁸ The objectification and the disempowering exoticization of 'others' further flesh out the issues of power inequity that the concept helps lay bare. Indeed, the affiliated concepts of the other and alterity have been scrutinized for their own collusion with the imperialist forces that 'hold' the 'gaze' in this photographic and cinematic material. Enabling the analysis of non-canonical objects, such as snapshots, the concept is also helpful in allowing the boundaries between elite and larger culture to be overcome. Between all these usages, an examination of the concept itself is appropriate. Not to police it, or to prescribe a purified use for it, but to gauge its possibilities, and to either delimit or link the objects on which it has been brought to bear.

So far, in its development in the academic community, the concept of the gaze has demonstrated its flexibility and inclination to social criticism. But, for the issue of interdisciplinary methodology, it also has a more hands-on kind of relevance. For it has an affiliation with – although is not identical to – the concept of focalization in narrative theory. This is where my own involvement came in. In my early work, I struggled to adjust that concept. In fact, in narrative theory, the concept of focalization, although clearly visual in background, has been

deployed to overcome visual strictures and the subsequent metaphorical floundering of concepts such as 'perspective' and 'point of view'.¹⁹

It is precisely because the concept of focalization is *not* identical to that of the 'gaze' or the 'look' (although it has some unclear yet persistent affiliation with both these visual concepts) that it can help to clarify a vexed issue in the relationship between looking and language, between art history and literary studies. The common question for all three of these concepts is what the look of a represented (narrated or depicted) figure does to the imagination of the reader or to the look of the viewer. Let me briefly outline what is at stake here, as an example of the gain in precision and reach that concepts can offer through, not in spite of, their travel, on condition that multidisciplinary 'diffusing' yields to interdisciplinary 'propagation'.¹⁹

'Focalization' was the object of my first academic passion when, in the 1970s, I became a narratologist. Retrospectively, my interest in developing a more workable concept to replace what literary scholars call 'perspective' or 'point of view' was rooted in a sense of the cultural importance of vision, even in the most language-based of arts. But vision must not be understood exclusively in the technical-visual sense. In the slightly metaphorical but indispensable sense of imaginary – akin but not identical to imagination – vision tends to involve both actual looking and interpreting, including in literary reading. And, while this is a reason to recommend the verb 'reading' for the analysis of visual images, it is also a reason *not* to cast the visual out of the concept of focalization. The danger of dilution here must be carefully balanced against the impoverishment caused by an excess of conceptual essentialism.

The term 'focalization' also helped in overcoming the limitations of the linguistically inspired tools inherited from structuralism. These were based on the structure of the sentence and failed to help me account for what happens between characters in narrative, figures in image, and the readers of both. The great emphasis on conveyable and generalizable content in structuralist semantics hampered my attempts to understand how such contents were conveyed – to what effects and ends – through what can be termed 'subjectivity networks'.²⁰ The hypothesis that says readers *errivision*, that is, create, images from tex-

16 See Bryson (1983) for a distinction between the 'gaze' and the 'glance' as two versions of the 'look'. For slight amendments, see Bal (1991a).

17 Ernst van Alphen's analysis of Charlotte Delbo's writings is suggestively titled 'Caught by Images' (2002).

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

19 To my embarrassment, I must fall back on my own academic history for this case.

20 For an elaboration of subjectivity networks, I must refer to my book *On Story-Telling* (1991b).

tual stimuli cuts right through semantic theory, grammar, and rhetoric, to foreground the presence and crucial importance of *images* in reading.²¹ At one point, when I managed to solve a long-standing problem of biblical philology 'simply' by envisioning, instead of deciphering, the text, I savoured the great pleasure and excitement that come with 'discovery.'²² Let me call the provisional result of this first phase of the concept-in-use dynamic 'the gaze-as-focalizer.'

The second phase goes in the opposite direction. Take 'Rembrandt,' for example. The name stands for a *text* – 'Rembrandt' as the cultural ensemble of images, dis- and re-attributed according to an expansive or purifying cultural mood – and for the discourses about the real and imaginary figure indicated by the name. The images called 'Rembrandt' are notoriously disinterested in linear perspective but also highly narrative. Moreover, many of these images are replete with issues relevant for a gender perspective – such as the nude, scenes related to rape, and myth-based history paintings in which women are being framed. For these reasons combined, 'focalization' imposes itself as an operative concept. In contrast, 'perspective' can only spell disaster. But, while narrativity may be medium-independent, the transfer of a specific concept from narrative theory – in this case, 'focalization,' which is mostly deployed in the analysis of verbal narratives – to visual texts requires the probing of its realm, its productivity, and its potential for 'propagation' versus the risk of 'dilution.'²³

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

In my own work, the examination of the concept of focalization for use in the analysis of visual images was all the more urgent because the new area of visual imagery appears to carry traces of the same word by which the concept is known. This was a moment of truth: is focalization in narratology 'only a metaphor' borrowed from the visual? If so, does its deployment in visual analysis fall back on its literal meaning? If the latter is the case, the travel involved has failed to enrich the traveller.

Again, to make a long story short, the concept of focalization helps to articulate the look precisely through its movement. After travelling, first from the visual domain to narratology, then to the more specific analysis of visual images, focalization, having arrived at its new destination, visual analysis, has received a meaning that overlaps neither with the old visual one – focusing with a lens – nor with the new narratological one – the cluster of perception and interpretation that guides the attention through the narrative. It now indicates neither a *location* of the gaze on the picture plane, nor a *subject* of it, such as either the figure or the viewer. Instead, what becomes visible is the *movement* of the look. In that movement, the look encounters the limitations imposed by the gaze, the visual order. For the gaze dictates the limits of the figures' respective positions as holder of the objectifying and colonizing look, and disempowered object of that look. The tension between the focalizer's movement and these limitations is the true object of analysis. For it is here that structural, formal aspects of the object become meaningful, dynamic, and culturally operative: through the time-bound, changing effect of the culture that frames them.

This is an instance of a concept travelling from one discipline to another and back again. The itinerary is to be termed *inter-disciplinary* in this specific sense. To call it 'transdisciplinary' would be to presuppose its immutable rigidity, a travelling without changing: to call it 'multidisciplinary' would be to subject the fields of the two disciplines to a common analytic tool. Neither option is viable. Instead, a negotiation, a transformation, a reassessment is needed at each stage. Thanks to its narratological background, the concept of focalization imported a mobility into the visual domain that usefully and productively complemented the potential to structure envisioning that had been carried over from visual to narrative in the first phase.²⁴

21 A key text remains W.J.T. Mitchell's opening chapter 'What is an Image?' in *Iconology* (1985). The word 'envision' yields a tentative concept in Schwenger (1999).

22 This happened several times in my work on the Book of Judges (Bal 1988a).

23 Again, I must refer the reader here to the discussion in my book on the subject (1991a, ch. 4).

24 I did not even have to fall back on such notoriously fuzzy and deceptive concepts as *implied viewer*, to be coined by analogy to an implied author that is tenaciously problematic.

Travel between Concept and Object

All this sounds awfully abstract. In fact, this work on the twin concepts of gaze and focalization is entirely indebted to concrete studies that I and others have performed on specific objects, studies in which the concepts travelled between theory and the object on which they were set loose. To flesh it out a bit more, without going into the kind of detailed concreteness the following chapters offer, let me point out one particular element of the concept of focalization's travel that will help us to grasp it better. It is its 'time-travel,' its voyage through a non-linear history, which is part and parcel of conceptual mobility. In other words, the concept's history as I have lived through it at an earlier stage of my academic life. One reason why the mobility of concepts – their travelling through space, time, and disciplines – is important relates to the usefulness of understanding the affiliations, legacies, and partial recalls that play a part in their development and deployment. I have suggested this already through the example of hybridity. When developing the concept of focalization, but also at a later point in time, when studying issues around the gaze, a relationship with linguistics became necessary. Literary studies cannot do without it. For it is a feature of the object of literary studies to be linguistic.

At some point in time, linguistic inspiration came to me from a figure marginal to the structuralist movement who never openly discussed visuality: Emile Benveniste. Despite later developments in linguistics that made some of his early formulations appear 'obsolete,' the importance of Benveniste's work in the specific case of sorting out the partial overlap between concepts must be acknowledged.²⁵ His linguistic theory lends itself to interdisciplinary crossover in ways that inform the creation of new concepts and insights. In my discussion of the gaze and focalization here, Benveniste-inspired insights complete the rich, powerful, analytic potential of the two concepts. Compared to Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze, to evoke a sequence of wise men, Benveniste is probably the least recognized of those French 'masters of thought' who had such a lasting impact on the humanities during the last quarter of the twentieth cen-

tury. Acknowledging this influence is a matter of intellectual force and consistency. His work is crucial not only to understanding what Lacan did with Freud's legacy, to appreciating Derrida's deconstruction of logocentrism (the content bias), and to seeing the point of Foucault's definitions of episteme and power/knowledge.²⁶ His work is also key to understanding developments in analytical philosophy as they have filtered through into the study of literature and the arts in the concept of performance. Anticipating chapter 5, I will briefly outline how the popular concept of performativity and the more idiosyncratic concept of focalization come together in a further specification of the gaze/look combination.

As is well known, reference – both a verb and a noun – is secondary to deixis, the 'I-you' interaction that constitutes a referential merry-go-round.²⁷ Yet, it has not been one of Benveniste's concepts that has had the decisive influence. Rather, it is one of his basic *idées*: the idea that subjectivity, produced through the exchange between the 'I' and the 'you,' not 'reference,' is the essence of language. I will continue with the example of the previous section and draw on the debate around focalization, in which I, too, have been engaged. I invoke this debate here to demonstrate the implications of the primacy of the 'I/'you' interaction for theorizing through concepts. In the case of the concept of focalization, I have proposed a way of reconfiguring it that I see, retrospectively, as based on the Benvenistian idea, and that deviates from the use Gérard Genette put it to in 1972 (Eng. 1980).

Focalization is the relation between the subject and object of perception. The importance of the concept for me was that in it I found a tool to connect content – visual and narrative, such as images in movement – with communication. It enabled me to account for the subject-constituting element in discourse to which Benveniste's language theory had pointed me. It is a mistake to assume that the concept of focalization as I have advocated it can be seen as an amalgam of Genette's use and mine, as is often done in literary studies; they are in fact utterly incompatible.

²⁵ For this concept, which underlies my interest in intersubjectivity beyond a formalist methodology à la Popper, see Spivak's chapter 'More on Power/Knowledge' in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*.

²⁶ Benveniste's writing is utterly clear and illuminating. It has been collected in English in Benveniste (1971). Kaja Silverman is one of the few scholars who has taken Benveniste's legacy seriously. See her *Subject of Semiotics* (1983) and my review of it, reprinted in *On Meaning-Making* (1994a).

²⁵ I put 'obsolete' in relativizing quotation marks because it is an extremely problematic notion. Relying on fashion and the judgment of 'old-fashioned,' the notion fails to account for what remains vital of a complex idea, *some* but not *all* of which has proved untenable.

I did not know this myself when I first wrote about it. It was when writing a critical assessment of their differences and their respective methodological and political frames that I understood for the first time the formidable implications of what my seemingly slight amendments had entailed. They appear to be just fussing in the margins about a term, a piece of jargon. But the tiny (in the formal sense) differences were related to such issues as the blind acceptance of ideological power structures versus the critical analysis of them. There has been an ongoing dispute about this since then, on which I will be brief here. For Genette, a narrative can be unfocalized, thus 'neutral.' For me, this is not possible, and pretending that it is only mystifies the inevitable ideological thrust of the text. It seems worth noting that this difference, even within a single literary text, already indicates a fundamental difference of disciplinary interest between Genette's literary interest and my own interest in cultural analysis.

When it came to distinguishing between the possible focalizers responsible for the description of Philéas Fogg in Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*, the difference between Genette's 'zero focalization' and my insistence on the 'subject of focalization' turns out to relate to the possibility of overcoming the firm subject/object opposition. This difference laid bare the obliteration and facilitated the insertion of political issues, such as class, within formal or structural analysis. Perhaps most important, my version of focalization created the possibility of analysing, rather than paraphrasing and broadly categorizing, a text.²⁸ It seems to be a trifle, fussing over a small passage. But, in fact, this insight was entirely contingent upon the endorsement of the performative notion of meaning production in and through subjectivity, which Benveniste had initiated, without ever fussing over the concept of performativity. It decided not only the interpretation of the concept of focalization that I would go on to elaborate, but also the importance within that concept of what I have come to see as *framing*. Framing will be discussed, and its productivity demonstrated, in chapter 4. The point here is that Benveniste's undermining of the priority of reference in favour of deixis has implications that reach beyond the limits of his own chosen discipline, into the wider domains of

social interaction and cultural practice, the various fields to which the humanities are devoted. If the distribution of subject positions between the (linguistic) first and second person constitutes the basis of meaning production as I and many others believe to be the case, there is no linguistic support for any form of inequity, suppression, or predominance of any one category of subjects in representation.

Undermining the subject/object opposition promoted by reference, Benveniste, in the same sweep, undermines individual authority, as well as its many models in cultural texts. To examine the inequities and authorities that undeniably structure these texts, the basis of those positions and that distribution is to be sought neither in meaning as the product of reference nor in authorial intention. Instead, meaning is produced by the pressures of the 'I' and the 'you,' who keep changing places with regard to the meanings that are liable to emerge. These pressures, far from emanating from the subjects whose linguistic position posits them as, precisely, *void of meaning*, outside of the situation of communication, instead come to them, *fill* them with meaning. This filling comes to them from the outside, from the cultural frame the pressure of which enables them to interact in the first place.

The close affiliation that remains between focalization and the gaze is thus relevant *because*, and not in spite, of the latter's ambiguity – the difference, that is, between the Lacanian gaze and the more ordinary use, synonymous with the Lacanian look. The concept of the gaze helps to assess the ideological charge of a subject-position such as the focalizer. In Verne's novel, Passepartout, bearer of the look, is the focalizer. He is the servant, and he is impressed by Philéas Fogg, his master, because he cannot withdraw from the pressure of social structure, the gaze; the description renders precisely that. Thus, the concept helps to understand how structure – Philéas' subject position – betrays ideology – class confinement – without making the subject individually responsible for it.

This is also the way the gaze-as-look and the Lacanian gaze as the visual side of the cultural, symbolic order can come together. If the Lacanian gaze produces the frame that makes meaning production possible, the unstable holder of the look, the focalizer who is now 'I,' then 'you,' must negotiate his or her position within its confines. The subject of semiosis thus lives in a dynamic situation that is neither totally subordinated to the gaze, as a somewhat paranoid interpretation of Lacan would have it, nor free to dictate meaning as the master of reference, which the subject has often been construed to be. This

²⁸ This latter difference, incidentally, also defines the difference between literary analysis and typology, perhaps a useful analogue to the difference between cultural analysis and cultural studies. Genette replied to my suggestions (1983) in a manner that I found extremely unhelpful. For this discussion, see Bal (1991b).

brings me to a final aspect of the travel of concepts in relation to objects, namely their constant commute between theory and analysis.

Throughout my work on the concepts of focalization, subjectivity, and the gaze, I came to realize, first, that analysis can never be the application of a theoretical apparatus, as I had been trained to assume. Theory is as mobile, subject to change, and embedded in historically and culturally diverse contexts as the objects on which it can be brought to bear. This is why theory – any specific theory surrounded by the protective belt of non-doubt and, hence, given dogmatic status – is in itself unfit to serve as a methodological guideline in analytical practice. Yet, and second, theory is also indispensable. Third, however, it never operates alone; it is not 'loose.' The key question that makes the case for cultural analysis, then, is the following: are theory and close analysis not the *only* testing grounds in a practice that involves both methodology and relevance? My contention is that in resisting detailed analysis from a theoretical perspective, one is led to resist sweeping statements and partisanship as well as reductive classification for the sake of alleged objectivity.

Avoiding these fatal ills, which cling to both cultural studies and traditional disciplines alike, a close analysis, informed but not overruled by theory, in which concepts are the primary testing ground, works against confusing methodological tradition with dogma. It would appear that to challenge concepts that seem either obviously right or too dubious to keep using as they are, in order to revise instead of reject them, is a most responsible activity for theorists. Interestingly, concepts that don't seem to budge under the challenge may well be more problematical than those that do. Some concepts are so much taken for granted and have such generalized meaning that they fail to be helpful in actual analytic practice. This is where the issue of analysis comes in.

The three priorities of methodology implied so far – cultural processes over objects, intersubjectivity over objectivity, and concepts over theories – come together in the practice of what I have proposed to call 'cultural analysis.' As a professional theorist, it is my belief that in the field entailing the study of culture, theory can be meaningful only when it is deployed in close interaction with the objects of study to which it pertains, that is, when the objects are considered and treated as 'second persons.' It is here the methodological issues raised around concepts can be arbitrated on a basis that is neither dogmatic nor free-floating. Concepts tested in close, detailed analysis can establish a

much-needed intersubjectivity, not only between the analyst and the audience but also between the analyst and the 'object.' It is in order to drive this point home that I suggest reconfiguring and reconceiving 'cultural studies' as 'cultural analysis.'

What does analysis have to do with it, and how does – here, linguistic – theory come into it? Any academic practice lives by constraints yet also needs freedom to be innovative. Negotiating the two is delicate. The rule I have adhered to, that I hold my students to, and that has been the most productive constraint I have experienced in my own practice, is to never just theorize but always to allow the object 'to speak back.' Making sweeping statements about objects, or citing them as examples, renders them dumb. Detailed analysis – where no quotation can serve as an illustration but where it will always be scrutinized in depth and detail, with a suspension of certainties – resists reduction. Even though, obviously, objects cannot speak, they can be treated with enough respect for their irreducible complexity and unyielding muteness – but not mystery – to allow them to check the thrust of an interpretation, and to divert and complicate it. This holds for objects of culture in the broadest sense, not just for objects that we call art. Thus, the objects we analyse enrich both interpretation and theory. This is how theory can change from a rigid master discourse into a live cultural object in its own right.²⁹ This is how we can learn from the objects that constitute our area of study. And this is why I consider them subjects.³⁰

The logical consequence of this combined commitment – to theoretical perspective and concepts on the one hand and to close reading on the other – is a continuous changing of the concepts. This is yet another way in which they travel: not just between disciplines, places, and times, but also within their own conceptualization. Here, they travel,

²⁹ This is, by now, a well-known consequence of the deconstructionist questioning of artistic 'essence.' It is by no means generally accepted, however, as George Steiner demonstrates. See Korsten (1998) for a critical analysis of Steiner's position. On the status of theory as cultural text, see Culler (1994).

³⁰ As I have written many times – perhaps most explicitly in the Introduction to *Reading Rembrandt* – the maker of an object cannot speak for it. The author's intentions, if accessible at all, do not offer direct access to meaning. In the light of what we know about the unconscious, even an alert, intellectual, and loquacious artist cannot fully know her own intentions. But nor can the maker or the analyst who claims to speak for the maker speak for the object in another sense, the sense closer to the anthropological tradition. The object is the subject's 'other' and its otherness is irreducible. Of course, in this sense the analyst can never adequately represent the object either: she can neither speak about it nor speak for it. See ch. 7 for an elaboration of this position.

under the guidance of the objects they encounter. Such internal transformation can be demonstrated by the emerging concept of visual poetics, implying both a specification of focalization and a transformation, along the lines of the interdisciplinary travel between literary and visual analysis, and between concept and object. The term 'visual poetics' is not a concept but an approach in which affiliated concepts such as focalization, the gaze, and framing accrue, to become a little more than just concepts: in fact, the skeleton of a theory.

Travel between Concepts

For precisely this reason, it can be helpful to build bridges between the traditional disciplines and cultural analysis. Let me take Proust's *Recherche* as an uncontested example. It was, after all, the central object through which narratology was developed in the structuralist era. It was Genette's *case*. In my attempt to sketch a visual poetics, it thus seems only fair to take up where the main proponent of the current of structuralist narratology left off.³¹

Two misconceptions about such a 'visual poetics' circulate, doing great damage both to it and to the interdisciplinary study of culture in general. First, in spite of the lofty associations that the word 'poetics' may evoke for some, there is no connection whatsoever between visuality and 'high art', painting, or any other recognized visual genre. Nor is there any connection with language as a meaningful sign-system. Second, such a 'poetics' asks for a discussion within a semiotic framework that is best begun by stating that the term 'iconic', so often applied to the visual in yet another misconception, cannot be adduced for 'reading' objects either. This issue helps clarify how concepts travel back and forth between each other.³²

Just as focalization cannot simply be projected from narrative onto visual images, so iconicity cannot be equated with visuality. Yet iconic-

ity invariably shows up in inquiries on the contributions of the visual domain to the literary, which appears to be its systemic counterpart. To be sure, there are well-known cases of iconicity in onomatopoeia, in visual poetry such as Apollinaire's, and in novels where a blank page hides either a crime (Robbe-Grillet's *Le voyeur*) or an immeasurable duration of sleep (Duras' *L'après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas*). But the concept is of little help when it comes to accounting for the invasion, by one sense or medium – vision, for example – of the realm of another, such as language. The thrust of semiotics is precisely to offer a media-independent perspective, not to pin down each medium to just one of its concepts. The distribution of Peircean concepts among the media kills their critical potential. If iconicity equals the visual, and symbollicity equals the literary, there is absolutely nothing to be gained from such translations.³³

By contrast, I am interested in examining to what extent and in what ways the senses' *encounter* with the concepts can take place at the crossroad between the media – here, language – and in assessing the importance of the other medium *qua* other. This is where the example of Proust, many theorists' favourite, comes in. Proust's text is almost too good to be true as a playing field for such an inquiry. Rich in visual evocations, it is not particularly rich in icons. And the icons it does contain are often auditive rather than visual. But it is replete with visual 'takes', as well as with reflections on what it means to look. Moreover, while it is one of the Western world's literary masterpieces, I would argue that this work deploys insights from popular culture to elaborate its poetics. Last but not least, with its intricate play with focalization, it invokes vision 'on the street', while talking about visual art in annoyingly elitist and non-visual terms.

Of all these misunderstandings, the conflation of iconicity with visuality is perhaps the most damaging. The famous passage where Peirce defines the three categories of signs according to their *ground* – close but not identical to, because broader and less rigid than, *code* – has suffered, like various canonical examples of literary theory, from over-citing and under-reading. Yet it deserves to be quoted to remind us that there is no special affiliation between iconicity and visuality:

An icon is a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object had no existence; such as a lead pencil

³³ In ch. 2, translation will be deployed otherwise.

³¹ Genette (1972) proposed the concept of focalization, which he derived from Henry James, through a detailed analysis of Proust. But neither Genette nor James elaborated on the consequences of that concept for an encounter between literature and visual images. With Proust as his case, however, Genette should have known better.

³² The use of 'iconic' for /visual/ is very widespread, even among avowed semioticians. See, for example, Louis Marin, who, in spite of his brilliance, is remarkably confused about iconicity (1983) and sometimes disappoints because of it (e.g. 1988). His posthumous volume (1993) is less focused on the ill-guided attempt to equate looking with speech acts, and much more profound on visual discourse as a result.

streak as representing a geometrical line. An *index* is a sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant. Such, for instance, is a piece of mould with a bullet-hole in it as a sign of a shot; for without the shot there would have been no hole; but there is a hole there, whether anybody has the sense to attribute it to a shot or not. A symbol is a sign which would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant. Such is any utterance of speech which signifies what it does only by virtue of its being understood to have that signification.³⁴

In the case of the icon, it is the sign itself that possesses its ground, and far from leading to the kind of realism that informs the equation of icon with image, the definition, based as it is on resemblance, stipulates that the object – the signified or the meaning rather than the referent – does not need to be anything at all ('even though its object had no existence').

What defines the 'streak' as an icon is the fact that we give it a different name: a line. To give another example: the signature is an icon because it is self-enclosed; it owes its ontological status to nothing but itself. It is an effective sign because it enables one to *lie*, as Eco's famous definition has it (1976: 10). It is an example of the index ('a piece of mould with a bullet-hole in it as a sign of a shot; for without the shot there would have been no hole') that makes lawyers pore over a signature with a magnifying glass to assess its visual resemblance to the 'authentic' signature, the guarantee of the existential origin in the body of the person it signifies. According to Peirce, no *interpretant* is necessary for the sign to exist (although one is necessary for the sign to work as a sign).

Is iconicity bound up with resemblance, analogy, conformity? Peirce doesn't say. But it is a sign that possesses a quality of its meaning. In the case of a visual meaning, this can lead to resemblance if, and only if, that quality is predominantly visual, even if the sign as a whole is not.³⁵ The example Peirce gives is neither more nor less visual than the example of the index. But, without the existence of the object, one has

34 Peirce, in Innis (1984: 9–10; emphasis in text).

35 See Eco's relevant critique of the motivated signs – icon and index – (1976), which defines resemblance more on the basis of ontology than I think is warranted for Peirce.

no other standard than a *presumed* resemblance – one which is neither ontological nor total, and which does not overrule difference.

The important element in the definition of the icon is primarily its negativity, for it suspends the ontology of the object. The 'icon' is constructed or conceived by the reader, the decipherer of signs that we all are in our capacity as *homo semioticus*. In other words, what makes the notion of iconicity important for reading is not the fact that it leads to some pre-established, 'real' model, but that it produces *fiction*. It does so by both subjectivizing – à la Benveniste – and culturally framing – à la cultural studies – the object iconically signified. We would be unable to make the 'streak' signify anything if we didn't live in a cultural environment where geometry and handwriting circulate and are based on lines.³⁶

Hence, the second important feature of the icon thus conceived is that it can only emerge from an underlying symbolicity. It is as a trace that the pencil leaves the 'streak' behind when it is guided by the hand that projects it. The overlap of the categories is inherent in their definitions. It is in this sense that Peirce's basic concepts can be useful to an analysis of literary visuality – of visual poetics – but only if it is reinterpreted through Benveniste's subjectivization of discourse.

Let me now draw a provisional conclusion, one that affects the status of concepts in cultural analysis. I contend that thinking about visual poetics fares better if it avoids taking definition and delimitation as its starting point. But, to avoid alienating practitioners of the various disciplines of the humanities, let me add that such a poetics works best if its primary starting point – but not outcome – remains the undeniable boundary that separates visual from linguistic utterances. The attempts to produce inter-media texts prove it, and the existence of essentially mixed-media texts such as cinema and video in no way contradicts this. Moreover, although one cannot deny the visual aspect of textuality in general – the visual act of reading – textuality still cannot be grasped at a glance. Nor is the glance self-evident as a way of apprehending the image.

The look remains the basis for the distinction between primarily spatial and primarily temporal objects, even though neither dimension can exist without the other. The difference, however, is not an ontological one. It is meaningful to activate the look only in the use of objects. Unread, a novel remains a mute object; unread, an image remains an

36 For a theorizing account of this aspect of iconicity, see Neef (2000).

equally mute object. Both need time and subjectivity to become semiotically active. Hence, the question of the visual within the literary – of a visual poetics – is best *not* answered by definition and delimitation, but by a mode of classification that turns difference into opposition and family resemblance into hierarchical polarization. The question is not *if* literary texts can have a visual dimension, but *how* the visual writes itself, and how a literary writer can deploy visuality in his artistic project. An analysis that invokes semiotic concepts not to define but to overcome stultifying definitions, and that follows the intertwinements of the three modes of meaning-making that are never 'pure,' can contribute to a richer understanding of a poetics that is irreducible to a linguistic structure, even if it is, also, irreducibly linguistic.

Travel within the Classroom

In accordance with the above, then, I will refrain from defining my three travelling concepts, and leave it to each reader to see what she can do with the gaze, focalization, and iconicity, separately or together. Let me stop at this point, to look back a little. How would I now set up a class or a seminar session devoted to the question central to this chapter: what is a concept, and what can it do? Hesitating, as I do, to give the impression that this rough guide is meant to be prescriptive rather than descriptive, or suggestive of a teaching practice, let me nevertheless take the risk by ending this chapter with a suggestion for teaching. The status of this suggestion, I insist, is to open up rather than to close off what *might* be a class. Let's say the first part of this session would consist of the discussion presented so far. The bulk of the discussion would centre on the three affiliated, yet different, concepts located on the border of the territory of the visual. The considerations that came first in this chapter would be brought in as the need arises.

The second half of the session would consist of stepping back and considering what concepts are and do, much as a class about a particular theory would end by thinking about theory in general. I would start, then, with a confrontation. After travelling the path sketched above, the concept cluster consisting of visuality, image, the gaze, focalization, and iconicity would be held up against the introductory chapter of Deleuze and Guattari's *What Is Philosophy?* From that text I would draw the following 'beginnings,' or suggestions, for how to think concepts.

Concepts are

- signed and dated (hence, have a history)
- words (archaisms, neologisms, shot through with almost crazy etymological exercises, sketching a philosophical 'taste')
- syntactic (of a language within a language)
- constantly changing
- not given but created.

These features would be linked to the issues of visuality already discussed.

Returning to Deleuze and Guattari's suggestions, a second round of confrontation would then seem to be called for. Here, the general questions would serve less to characterize the concepts than to reassess what we have been doing to and with them. There are no simple concepts, Deleuze and Guattari say. This explains the multiplicity of their aspects and possible uses. The point of these aspects and uses continues to be to articulate, cut, and crosscut an understanding of an object *qua* cultural process. In this sense, a concept-in-use is like first-/second-person exchange. At the same time, concepts are connected to problems; otherwise they are meaningless. Using concepts just to characterize or label an object means falling back into a practice of typology whose point is limited as well as limiting.

Meanwhile, the concepts used here, like all others, are always in a process of becoming, a process that involves developing relations with other concepts situated on the same plane (this might be an opportunity to explain the structuralist tenet about the homogeneity of planes).³⁷ Every concept relates back to other concepts, hence, the discussion of visuality ends up in a cluster of concepts. Yet its components are inseparable within the concept itself. As a result, a concept can be seen as a point of coincidence, a condensation, an accumulation of its own components. Hence, a concept is both absolute (ontologically) and relative (pedagogically). And, while it is syntactic, according to Deleuze and Guattari, a concept is not discursive, for it does not link propositions together (22). This may be precisely why concepts maintain the flexibility that a full-fledged theory, discursively elaborated,

³⁷ Jonathan Culler's book on Saussure (1986) is one of the finest examples of explaining structuralism through a concrete case study, in this case Saussure's theory of language.

must lose. To understand, then, what our itinerary has consisted of, I would invoke the philosophers' statement that concepts are centres of vibrations, each in itself and every one in relation to all the others (23); concepts resonate rather than cohere.

By the end of the session, though, the general exhilaration about the openness of academic activity might be in need of some remedial caution. Again, Deleuze and Guattari's text is helpful. In a shorthand formulation whose usefulness parallels its common-sense recognizability, the authors characterize disciplinary tendencies when they write that from discourse, or sentences, philosophy extracts *concepts*, science extracts *prospects*, and art extracts *percepts and affects*. As the title of their book already intimated, this attributes to philosophy the task and privilege of devising and designing concepts. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari begin (2) by stating that '[p]hilosophy is the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts.'

The idiom in which their characterization of the three disciplinary domains is couched may be a bit problematic, because of the positive connotations of 'extracting' and the rather rigid division of labour involved. But the point is that specialization is implicitly presented as collaboration. And this collaborative element prevents specialization from being foreclosed, which it so often is. I would, therefore, consider this formulation of 'what is philosophy' to hold for the humanities as a whole. What is here described as 'science' could also be seen as a long-term motivation for academic work. And 'art' can be reconfigured as 'practice': From this rewriting of their suggestive sentence, an attractive program for the humanities emerges. It is with such a program in mind that I end this chapter, with a survey of the theoretical implications of each of the concepts discussed in this book. The chapters grope towards sketching a totally partial and personal – but at least *concrete* – version of such a program.

Deleuze and Guattari reveal a fondness for metaphors, whose 'imaging' potential they continuously exploit. For the purposes of this book, which aims to present teaching as creative, this fondness is attractive. I will exploit it as fully as I can, mainly by putting a strong emphasis on metaphor and image on as many levels as possible. After discussing the concept of metaphor itself in terms of image in chapter 2, I practise it – by establishing a metaphorical relationship between cultural practice and theory/analysis in chapter 3, a relationship which, in turn, is reversed in chapter 4. Then, in chapter 5, I practise metaphor by 'untangling' two affiliated and often confused concepts – 'performativity'

and 'performance' – only to wilfully confuse them again, in an integrative conception of metaphor. With this I am referring to metaphor as integrative, as producing a roadmap or rhizome, a landscape or stage, unlike the monistic conception that considers the figure as a vehicle only. A conception of metaphor as image that, as the second chapter argues, can stand for a conception of language, translation, and history.

The productive potential of concepts as imaging and imaginative metaphors is further developed in the last three chapters. There, the theatrical nature of academic work comes more and more clearly to the fore. The ground for this particular image is laid in chapter 3, through the concept of *mise-en-scène*, borrowed from, precisely, theatre. This inclination to think theatrically converges with the poststructuralist, postmodernist resistance to the illusions of 'natural' and 'true' and 'authentic,' which have accrued to standards of scholarship dominated by that key concept of deception, 'objectivity.' But the alternative to that deception is not the abandonment of methodological 'rigour' (a detestable word that I use somewhat the way 'witch' was used in early feminism and 'queer' in gay thinking). In this sense the art work that will be my interlocutor in chapter 5 is theatrical. Pushing the theatrical metaphor further, into the object-domain, chapter 6, on 'tradition,' is *about* a particular tradition of a profoundly theatrical nature, yet one that cannot be disentangled from 'real life.'

Theatricality is also my tool for unsettling the dogmatic primacy, in the cultural disciplines, of 'intention.' Heedless of Barthes and Foucault, who tried so laudatorily to undermine the authority of 'authority,' routine research in the cultural disciplines continues to consider authorial intention the only possible check on interpretation-gone-wild. Giving up that anchor would indeed unmoor interpretation and deprive it of its standards. Having militated for a long time against this notion, which I consider to be both mistaken and damaging, I now present the argument, in chapter 7, by staging the debate I have so often longed to have. But perhaps, given the theatrical nature of academic debate, I do not occupy the position I advocate. Instead, perhaps, I propose allowing the concept of intention, with its long history that makes it almost cataphoretic, to linger on stage where tradition and anti-intentionalism are still in combat.

Finally, the theatrical metaphor returns, when, in the last chapter, I take seriously, literally, and concretely, the personifying metaphor that our philosophers invoke as a figure for philosophy itself. Here, my

sample seminar comes close to wondering where all this travel can possibly end up, and what position remains for a student of cultural analysis who endorses the many ambiguities and uncertainties I am promoting. Perhaps it is time to decide who these students are, and what a (future) teacher is. Deleuze and Guattari invoke a conceptual persona (*personnage conceptuel*) from Greek philosophy: the teacher. In the face of *that* tradition, I end on a figure of the teacher that is both a traditionalist and a theatrical gesture.

In philosophy, this figure is usually the lover. In her book *What Can She Know? Feminist Epistemology and the Construction of Knowledge*, Lorraine Code takes this tradition and turns it around. For Code, the concept-metaphor that best embodies her ideal is the friend, not the lover. Moreover, the conceptual persona of the friend – the model of friendship – is not embedded in a definition of philosophy but of knowledge. This definition is necessarily one that takes knowledge as provisional. If the authority of the author/artist, as well as that of the teacher, is unfixed, then the place it vacates can be occupied by *theory*. Paul de Man defined theory long ago as ‘a controlled reflection on the formation of method’ (1982: 4). The teacher, then, no longer holds the authority to dictate the method; her task is only to facilitate a reflection that is ongoing and interactive. Knowledge is knowing that reflection cannot be terminated. Moreover, to use Shoshana Felman’s phrase, knowledge is not to learn something *about* but to learn something *from*. Knowledge, not as a substance or content ‘out there’ waiting to be appropriated but as the ‘how-to’ aspect that the subtitle of the present book indicates, bears on such learning *from* the practice of interdisciplinary cultural analysis.

Within the framework of the present book, and of Felman’s description of teaching as facilitating the *condition* of knowledge (1982: 31), Code’s apparently small shift from lover to friend is, at least provisionally, a way out of the philosophy/humanities misfit. Friendship is a paradigm for knowledge-production, the traditional task of the humanities, but then production as interminable process, not as preference to a product. Code lists the following features of friendship, as opposed to the lover’s passion, as productive analogies for knowledge production:

- such knowledge is not achieved at once, rather it develops
- it is open to interpretation at different levels
- it admits degrees

- it changes
- subject and object positions in the process of knowledge construction are reversible
- it is a never-accomplished constant process
- the ‘more-or-lessness’ of this knowledge affirms the need to reserve and revise judgment (1991: 37–8).

This list helps to distinguish between philosophy in the narrow sense, as a discipline or potential inter-discipline, and the humanities as a more general field, ‘rhizomically’ organized according to a dynamic interdisciplinary *practice*.

Philosophy creates, analyses, and offers concepts. Analysis, in pursuing its goal – which is to articulate the ‘best’ (most effective, reliable, useful?) way to ‘do’, perform, the pursuit of knowledge – puts them together with potential objects that we wish to get to know. Disciplines ‘use’ them, ‘apply’ and deploy them, in interaction with an object, in their pursuit of specialized knowledge. But, in the best of situations, this division of tasks does not imply a rigid division of people or groups of people along the lines of disciplines or departments. For such a division deprives all participants of the key to a genuine practice of *cultural analysis*: a *sensitivity to the provisional nature of concepts*. Without claiming to know it all, each participant learns to move about, travel, between these areas of activity. In our travel in this book, we will constantly negotiate these differences. We will select one path and bracket others, but eliminate none. This is the basis of interdisciplinary work.