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Krisis

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MIEKE BAL

“YOU DO WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO”

A RESPONSE TO JOSEF FRÜCHTL

Krisis, 2008, Issue 1

If I answer my colleague Josef Früchtl’s paper the way I am about to do, it is first of all to honor his genuine attempt to begin a discussion on what lies at the heart of cultural analysis. I believe the emotions he expresses in his attack are sincere, and I take them seriously. It is also because I believe it is important to position cultural analysis clearly as a practice of *engaging objects* – that is, to honor the organizers and participants of this workshop in their vision and their work – which lies at the heart of cultural analysis. I find the program our young scholars have put together most engaging – to coin a phrase – and enriching. The program would be the best answer I could give to Josef. But since he insisted on what he called a discussion, I will answer him to the best of my abilities.

So, true to the principle of engaging objects in thinking, I must first engage an object as a partner in this debate – this image. It is the near-to-last image of a 52 minutes long, six-screen video installation exhibited from January 22 to March 30 2008 at the Musée du Jeu de Paume in Paris, and in May to be installed in Düsseldorf. The installation is the last work to date by Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila, internationally known for her triptych installation *The House*, exhibited at Documenta XI in 2002 of

which the image of a young women flying among treetops is emblematic, and for her subsequent work *The Hour of Prayer*, exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2005. The new work, *Where is Where*, (2008) the longest, and technically and visually the most complex, work the artist has made to date, is based on the way a Finnish poet, a woman in her 40s, imagines the history of the Algerian war.



Image of *Where is where* (2008) by Eija-Liisa Ahtila

Since she positions the Algerian war first of all as an issue for, even a *creation* of, the present, nothing seems more logical than beginning, in my brief account of this work, with its ending. This strategy is a form of zooming in on the here and now. I will relate my answers to Josef’s objections to my encounter with this image, from which I derived many of the ideas or, alternatively, which confirmed, complicated, and

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embodied some of these ideas. So, I start with the image where the last sentence is uttered in the last work titled *Where is Where?*

This positioning in the present is one answer to Josef's query on "how we can know what the object's own terms really are" (p. 56). This question is of key importance. It would be too easy, although not wrong, to refer to my previous books – *Reading Rembrandt*, *Quoting Caravaggio*, *The Mottled Screen* (on Proust) for an answer. This would actually be a good answer, since in these books and others, I always carefully establish the connection between what I see or read, and what I draw from that experience "in theory." In these publications, the elaborate descriptions of the works to which I connect, or from which I draw specific thoughts, serve to establish those terms. But this previous intellectual labor seems of no interest to my opponent. I have always argued what I argue again with Ahtila's installation: that the object itself does precisely that – its structural position of the war *in the poet's mind* is the work's most distinctive feature. This question of the object is central in Josef's text, and is, I agree, doubtlessly the most central question in the current debate. If philosophy is different from other forms of cultural analysis, it is because of this relationship to cultural objects. In fact, the difference seems to be to lie in the way philosophy – if I may rhetorically generalize and personify that discipline in the way Josef does this constantly with cultural analysis – does not take the object seriously on its own terms. I engage the image, the still from Ahtila's work, on four other of "its own terms."

First, produced for the occasion of this major exhibition, this work is both site-specific and time-specific, pertaining to the here and now, to Sarkozy's Paris 2008, where history is selectively either sentimentalized (the horrors perpetrated by other nations) or dismissed (when France did it). As history, in this work, is firmly positioned as *relevant* for the present – the Algerian war as an element of the current transnational state of Europe – I engage this cinematic installation's still as such: historically, in the present; geographically, in France.

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Second, this also answers a second point Josef briefly mentions ("oblivion of history", p. 54).

A third of the object's own terms is the fact that it gives the last word to the young boy who stands trial; hence, I engage this last word, acknowledging the importance of speech turns in communication.

Fourth, visually, since the artist has framed this last word in a close-up, I take that cinematic form as a starting point as well. I think it is fair to say that these four points are the ways the work solicits its viewer; that they are *its own terms*.

I am beginning to suggest how different disciplines play their part in this image – or, to reverse the reasoning, how the image engages different disciplines. The first issue engages linguistics. The English subtitle of the final sentence is "you do what you have to do." It is uttered by a young Algerian boy who has killed a friend, simply because the friend was European. The sentence is a quote from one of the case studies at the end of Franz Fanon's last book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Here, literary theory, specifically intertextuality, comes in. The image is an extreme close-up which, projected on the huge screen of the installation, is as imposing as it is impressive. This image-sentence is an invitation to gauge the aesthetic politics, or the political aesthetic, in the work of Eija-Liisa Ahtila.¹

The still – an "object" for this discussion, a fragment of a larger object in an analysis of the work as a whole – has a number of features I consider to provide a more detailed account of what Josef wants to know about what are "its own terms." Filmed in the *context*, set in Algeria, the face may have an "Arab effect." Context is as important to me as it is to my opponent. *Cinematographically*, the close-up creates an "affection-image" to use philosopher Gilles Deleuze's term. The affection-image is the one that suspends time.²

In a very useful book on Deleuze’s philosophy of cinema, Josef’s predecessor, philosopher Paola Marrati points at the crucial function of the affection-image – the closest to both the materiality of the image and to the materiality of subjectivity. She writes tersely: “Between a perception that is in certain ways troubling, and an action still hesitant, affection emerges”.³ This is why, according to Deleuze’s philosophical view of cinema, the affection-image is an image in the present, which also has the temporal density needed to make contact possible, or to establish an “inter-face,” both with other people such as viewers, and with other times. This is the affection image’s historical force. Its typical incarnation is the close-up. An image with an “Arab effect” that is an affection image and condenses time: the combination alone is worth dwelling on.⁴

So far, the “object’s own terms” offer thoughts about the relationship between art and the political. By invoking political art to learn something about the political in culture I also address Josef’s contemptuous mention of politics as “semiotic guerilla” and “pop-politics” (p. 53). These allusive terms seem pretty “pop” to me, so I’ll elaborate it a bit more. What the affection-image does is to provoke a confluence, even if conflicted, between subject and object, without cancelling out the *heterogeneity* between them and without falling into a deceptive harmony. Affect, in this conception, is a medium, not a message.⁵

The affective force of the image is enhanced by the acting style – visible even in this still. Consider this a fifth one of the object’s “own terms.” The young actor, Allaedin Allaedine, suspends all emotion. While in Fanon’s passionate anti-colonialist text the interview is a transcription of a psychiatric expertise, so that the psychiatrist implicitly interprets the lack, or suspension, of emotion as a particular disturbance – what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder – in Ahtila’s visual work, which addresses cinema as a cultural force, it signals avoidance of the pathetic. The work refrains from trying to move us through emotion into agreeing.

The language in which the sentence is uttered is Finnish. The sentence itself is Martiniquaise (at the time under French rule) if we go by the nationality of the quoted author, Frantz Fanon. But, it is also “French,” the language of the quoted text, *Les damnés de la terre*; Algerian too, by its place of utterance in the story; and American, finally, by translation, which resonates with its popular diffusion of political discourse, fictional cinema and literature, westerns and detectives. These are four different contexts or frames, so that herewith I bring up Josef’s point about the need to consider *context* – perhaps not the obligatory *Deleuze means Bergson means Spinoza* kind of context, (p. 57) but more diffuse, yet very influential cultural contexts, of discourses. From these discourses I now make the step to interpretation. I do this in full recognition and endorsement of “the object’s own terms.”

Between the English that resonates so strongly in “you do what you have to do” and the French of Fanon, “Maintenant, faites ce que vous voulez,” a wide gap opens. This gap alone is a testimony to the way the political is embedded in language. The English sentence appeals to a sense of *duty* to the nation; the French to free will, individual choice (“libre arbitre”). At the same time – and this is important – with diction and context taken into consideration, the sentence can also express *indifference*, for example, when accompanied by a shrug: do what you like. Tension thus emerges between the triangular elements of national interest, individualism, and indifference. The play of the actor and the close-up of the cinematographer conspire to leave this triangulation undecidedly suspended.

Let me rephrase this in an attempt to bind what I had just separated. My interpretation of the terms in which the object has couched this sentence is the following: indifference emerges when individualism is forged between free choice and conformism, the escape from responsibility, in the sense of duty. There lies the root of the indifference of the contemporary West.

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Simultaneously, in its usage here in Ahtila's work, the sentence thus overdetermined expresses protest against this ideological triangulation. Protest emerges from the use of grammatical tense and from the situation at a certain point in time. Linguistically, the imperative determines the mood of the sentence and so its tense and time are inevitably the present. It speaks of the responsibility of each and everyone, here-now, whether this responsibility is inspired by a belief in duty or free will.

There is another dimension to this temporality. Before the act of murder the two boys commit, there is a group of three interrogators in the Poet's workroom. One of them says:

Every act is weak when seen from a distance.

While every thought transcends the limits of time and space.

There is more talk about acts, and the importance to act, before the murder than after it. This suggests that in the transition from thought, which transcends time and space, to action that occurs in time and space, there is a hypothetical continuity – which the close-up embodies. This implies a view of the subject this artwork proposes. In this sense, *it is not only cinematographically and politically but also philosophically relevant*. This is my oblique answer to Josef's insinuations – never conceptually clarified – about “pragmatics” – a concept which refers both to a philosophical tradition and, as a word, to what he accuses me of: the engagement of practice. When we had this discussion at ASCA's workshop, he was upset that I answered him by way of an object, or rather, the cultural analysis of one. The difference between philosophy – at least, his kind of philosophy – and cultural analysis – as I see it – couldn't be more clear and obvious. Let me sum it up.

So far, through an encounter with this image-sentence, I have addressed the following points of Josef's complaint:

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1) I have made clear what the object's “own terms” are, and unless any of my readers fail to see these features, I think I can safely say that the object's terms are the following:

- *retrospectivity* or what I call a “preposterous” practice of history; this point addresses the discipline of history;
- the function of the *close-up* therein, an issue engaging cinema studies;
- the cultural resonance and relevance of the language spoken, hence, a literary analysis of sorts;
- the political relevance of this integration of visual and literary elements; and
- the philosophy of subjectivity the work proposes to make that political impact possible. These terms already demonstrate the need for interdisciplinarity.

2) In doing so, I have demonstrated something that goes beyond facile historical references, in order to allow the object to answer Josef's anxiety of history.

3) I have made a case for a politics of art that is much more complex than anything Josef can possibly mean by his dismissive “pop-politics”.

With these points in mind, I now turn to what I consider the most relevant remaining points of Josef's series of objections. Trying to structure a range of scattered remarks, these are the following:

- 1) the status of philosophy in relation to theory;
- 2) the point of theory in cultural analysis;

3) the status of interpretation and the place of “truth” or “right” – in other words, of standards, criteria therein;

4) the need for, and nature of, interdisciplinarity.

1) Not only do I understand much of my colleague’s frustration. I think he is actually right when he signals a shift in the place of philosophy in cultural analysis compared to the place of philosophy within the discipline of philosophy. The problem, however, is not the somewhat allusive sense of sloppy thinking he sees in the practice of cultural analysis, but the different status of philosophy in the practice of theory of the last few decades. Rather than considering philosophy as a *master* discourse, consisting of a body of *canonical* texts, cultural analysts have a much more flexible, mobile relation to philosophy. Philosophical texts are part of that large and, on principle, unbounded corpus of texts we call “theory.” This is not to say that philosophers are wrong in doing what they do. Instead, it is taking philosophy seriously *beyond* the confines of the discipline itself.

Here I address Josef’s very first point, that “what is” questions are “suspicious” or suspected of being metaphysical. Saying that theory is a practice is a short answer. Practice is not the same as pragmatism however. It is a paradoxical answer: it does answer the “what is” question while at the same time saying that that which it defines is not a thing but something we do. I don’t think there is anything wrong with, or contradictory in, such an answer. (Früchtl on p. 53) Doing something is not the same as “just doing” something, (contra Josef’s glib *Nike* comparison, which, I confess, I really don’t understand other than as an imitation of the discourse of advertisements). Jonathan Culler gave a more elaborate answer fifteen years ago. I consider Culler a most useful writer because he masters the skill of combining utter clarity with theoretical sophistication. He clarifies, but he does not simplify. In a short text Culler wrote:

I have called *theory* the nickname for an unbounded corpus of works that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in domains other than those to which they ostensibly belong because their analyses of language, mind, history, or culture offer novel and persuasive accounts of signification, make strange the familiar, and perhaps persuade readers to conceive of their own thinking and the institutions to which it relates in new ways.⁶

He goes on to argue that theory, because it is unbounded, and hence not limited to a canon that conceals the open-endedness of theory, may appear to be intimidating, but that it is precisely that intimidation that opens our minds; as he phrases it at the end of his short text,

The intimidation we feel when confronted with discourses we don’t know or understand is inseparable from the possibility of new understanding. (17)

Much of Josef’s frustration, I imagine, stems from the sense of unmooring, the loss of anchor, that this situation entails. In the practice of theory that has been current for so long now – too long to dismiss it as a *fashion*, a dismissal that inevitably sounds itself quite *old-fashioned* – philosophy is no longer a master-discourse, but just one partner in a discussion. Nor is a cultural object, to quote from Josef’s forthcoming book, “philosophy very cleverly disguised as literature” (287) (or film, or painting, or music). The relationship is not so philosophy-centric at all.

The authority philosophy used to have does no longer hold in an academic context in which relevant texts can come from anywhere. In other words, it is no longer what it used to be and may still be within the self-protective boundaries of its own disciplinary status: the master of rules of argumentation and concepts to be applied. That this shift causes something of a midlife crisis in philosophy is understandable, but as all midlife crises, they need to, and will, be overcome. Similarly, “theory” is

no longer methodology in the sense of strict rules of analytical behavior, because cultural objects themselves are no longer considered passive, dead things to which concepts can be applied according to rules. If the close-up I have shown you can be considered one of those cultural objects cultural analysis must engage, it is clearly not dead, and cannot be made passive.

Theory is no longer the same as methodology, because any text can enter into dialogue with, and confront, the object we seek to understand, an encounter in which the object's *specificity* can shine. The result is a heterogeneous corpus, where historical genealogies of the nature of the unargued, predictable and simplistic “In the case of Deleuze and Guattari it is the context of Spinoza and Nietzsche” (p. 57) no longer automatically make the only relevant connections. For a disciplinary philosopher this may indeed be confusing. But as Culler's final point clarifies, this confusion helps us open our minds to genuinely novel ideas.

And this brings me to the second point of my list, that of *the point of theory* in cultural analysis. As distinct from a certain philosophy – that which dismisses everything French as “the usual suspects” and hence, not “really” philosophy – theory in cultural analysis is not, at least not by definition, a “parochial” nor a “parasitical” practice, but one that resists the compartmentalization such slurs betray. Instead, theory engages objects – and yes, does so on these objects' own terms – as well as engages other discourses.

The slurs of parochialism and parasiticism come, I speculate, from a frustration that I can clarify with the help of the concepts Josef dismisses as “in danger of becoming *mere labels*” (emphasis added). First of all, to illustrate what I will have to say below about Josef's mode of reasoning, the phrase “mere labels” he parasitically took from my own caution in *Travelling Concepts*. He cites a few of these, quite symptomatically selected, namely “unconscious”, “cultural memory”, and trauma”. What these concepts have in common is that they do not come from *traditional*

philosophy. The first comes from psychoanalysis, the second from cultural history in its encounter with psychology, and the third from both psychoanalysis and anthropology, as well as history and medicine. Because they come from other disciplines than philosophy, Josef alleges they cannot be true concepts, because philosophy supposedly “owns” the concepts. This makes this philosopher clearly feel redundant, which is frustrating. But this redundancy is not inherent to philosophy, nor is the ownership of concepts. It is just a specialization, among others, and one which other disciplines gratefully borrow, and then, sometimes, contribute to. It is because of its tradition and history that philosophy seems unable to contribute much to the debates on these important concepts – important because they point to what lays at the heart of culture.

Let me be a bit more concrete about one of these “mere labels.” I remember when philosopher Susan Brison, after recovering from a horrendous, murderous attack that left her on the brink of death, wrote a courageous book on the philosophical relevance of trauma for our understanding of subjectivity – one of those concepts on which philosophy has a lot to say, but to which it cannot claim exclusivity. Brison's department, steeped as it was in a narrow analytical tradition, voted to deny her tenure because her book was not “really” philosophy. Her book, in contrast to most of her colleagues' publications, was successful, and was translated in many different languages. More importantly, it made a philosophical case for the relevance of her chosen topic. Wisely, the university reversed the department's vote.

Professor Brison contributed to one of those concepts Josef sees as a mere label, namely trauma; to the concepts of subjectivity and experience; and, perhaps most relevantly for our discussion, to the insight that philosophy can indeed participate in and contribute to cultural analysis in highly relevant ways. Unlike most, she managed to demonstrate the “point” of philosophy – its relevance beyond its own borders.

But what, you may wonder, do we consider relevant? The self-understanding of a survivor of extreme violence may seem an almost hyperbolic instance of relevance. This issue leads me to the third main point of Josef's critique I must address. This point concerns *criteria*, standards by which to judge what we do and the fact that cultural analysis does not follow Josef's rules. I have to say, I don't get any sense from his paper what these would be, and I am interested in hearing more on this – preferably something concrete and positive, instead of a litany of negatives. But that cultural analysis doesn't follow his (implicit) rules doesn't mean it knows no standards. The first rule is that, as its name has it, cultural analysis always engages objects – even if the objects are such familiar texts written by other philosophers, or such hard-to-grasp ones as social rituals, or such confusing ones as intertextual quotations. Because of this, interpretation is necessarily one of its activities. And as interpretations of any given object compete with one another, criteria are indispensable: for adequacy, relevance, effectivity, or, of course, but not only, for right and wrong.

Josef opposes in his discussion of criteria judgments of right versus wrong to judgments of a more relative nature, let's say, of what is “*the right*” interpretation to what is “the best” interpretation. My view of this issue is best explained as my resistance to binary thinking. Hence, it is to the either/or nature of Josef's presentation of this issue that I object. I would rather say that the two sets of criteria are bound up with each other, in the sense that a demonstrably wrong interpretation can hardly be “the best.” Conversely, the best interpretation according to adequacy, relevance and effectivity can still also be the right one in Josef's terms. But – and here we do part ways – irrelevance does harm to its value. I don't care for the criterion of correctness, but I do find a certain adequacy to the object important – such as I discussed earlier as being true to “the object's own terms” – and closer to any conception of truth than correctness according to rules of methodology. Not that, I repeat, Josef gives any hint as to what such rules might entail.

I began briefly engaging an object that I admire and love for the multiple ways it engages cultural, social, and political concerns that lay at the heart of contemporary transnational European culture. *The object itself* presented literature, psychiatry, politics, history, cinema, and multiple languages as relevant frames of reference, and as mediators to achieve that engagement. In other words, it ostensibly refuses to be locked up in an approach limited to a single discipline. When I said this during the discussion Josef could only be sarcastic, but I reiterate here that these are specific engagements with specific issues in specific disciplines. Each one of them is accountable to each of the disciplines within which it lodges its statements.

In order to understand this object, to engage it on its own terms, we *must* cross the boundaries and methodologies of any single discipline we have been trained to respect. The same holds for trauma, or cultural memory, or any other issue that is central, not marginal, and endures, not fashionably so, in the culture we live in, and with. That culture is not a patchwork of disciplinary traditions. Conversely, those traditions, including philosophy's, live by the culture within which the relevance of its issues can be recognized because of a mutuality of relevance.

This makes *interdisciplinarity* necessary, vital, and indispensable for cultural analysis. That means cultural analysis is not a branch of philosophy but, if any territorial mapping is necessary (I personally don't care for it) philosophy would be a branch of cultural analysis. Josef begins his discussion with this issue of interdisciplinarity, which he dismisses out of hand. But what is interdisciplinarity, and how does it differ from all those cognates he considers synonyms of it – multi-, anti-, or transdisciplinarity? The long answer is waiting for those of you who care to read *Travelling Concept in the Humanities* as a whole, or any other of my books of, say, post 1985. Clearly, Josef has not bothered to do so. In the chapter on “Intention” towards the end, I make explicitly clear why

interdisciplinarity *cannot* be anti-disciplinary. Had he read this, I assume he would have felt greatly reassured.⁷

Far from being a refuge, (p.53, 54) interdisciplinarity is hard work and entails a great vulnerability. It is like engaging objects: it engages other disciplines, on their own terms, but it does so *selectively*. That selective nature of the engagement cannot be avoided. Not only is it impossible to earn a complete degree in every discipline needed to engage the cultural object of our choice, but also, selection – in which, said Goethe, mastery is to be discerned – is already a crucial step in the analysis. For example, the film still I discussed compels me to consult analytical philosophy quite concretely because it contains an imperative verb form. It also enforces a consideration of historical time, since that verb form can only function in the present; it is, as linguists would say, deictic. Hence, just that one verb already requires encounters with ideas from three different disciplines. It barely seems worthwhile to go and study a complete curriculum in all three. Josef considers that selectivity either parochial – if it ends in the company of French and other “wrong” philosophers – or parasitic – if the company we choose is “right” but the entire genealogy, indeed, discipline is not mastered. I would reject a practice that is parochial – and I am afraid precisely such a parochialism sweats out of every pore of Josef’s text. Instead, I consider that selectivity, if practiced with discernment, the best mastery a cultural analyst can possibly achieve.

Yes, cultural analysis engages philosophy selectively, and asks of the selected ideas *relevance*, *adequacy*, and *effectivity* in its stated goal of engaging the cultural object on its own terms. All intellectual practice is selective, unless one is set on writing a complete encyclopedia of ideas. Without selection no thought is possible. Without relevance, no thought can be culturally deployed. Relevance concerns context, adequacy the object, and effectivity the public. And no, this is not contradictory, not parochial, and not parasitic. Nor is the resulting analysis “floundering”. All these words, by the way, could use some unpacking. The standard of

relevance may lead to engagements of philosophical texts and ideas that are disconcerting to some, because those texts are no longer masters of thought. But precisely for that reason these selective engagements by non-philosophers provide evidence that philosophy as a discipline remains necessary; and that cultural analysis cannot be anti-disciplinary. As I write explicitly in *Travelling Concepts*, the refusal of the knowledge developed within disciplines is an unthinking attitude of “anything goes” to which my book opposes something altogether different.

Form and content are one. I would not be the teacher I have always been if I didn’t say a few final words on the conditions of writing in an interdisciplinary context if our debates are to be productive. One is the kind of open-mindedness Culler sees as the *result* of unbounded theory, even including its intimidating effect on anxious people. Such open-mindedness avoids forms of manipulative bad writing and bad reasoning.

Josef’s text is a textbook example of how *not* to write in this context, and I must indicate a few symptoms of what I see as a certain philosophy’s unnecessary defensiveness.

1) Josef selects and cites – parasitically – loose phrases from my book. It would double the length of my reply if I were to do the work he should have done – contextualize, historicize, and otherwise *place* the vague, frequently indirect quotes. I can only recommend to read the single chapter from *Travelling Concepts* that has offended him so clearly, that he could not read on. The result is an incoherent attack – a kind of argumentative “anything goes.” To give just one example, this includes a frequent use of the phrase “of course.” “Of course” and synonyms create a false sense of consent, a group formation that the use of the pronoun “we” also entails. There is nothing philosophical about that use of a phrase.

2) A second symptom is that he manipulates by means of casual negations, of the order of “I will not point at the performative contradiction in it” (p. 53) or “let us leave this aside.” I can allege a philosophical argument against this practice. According to the analytical philosophy of language which Josef wrongly says to be absent in my writing, saying is doing; either you say something, or you don’t, but to say it and then say you won’t say it is doing something, namely, manipulative. It is not argumentation because it cannot be answered.

3) Thirdly, the constant mix of citations from my book and generalizations on cultural analysis – which he conflates with cultural studies, the Birmingham school, and *Geisteswissenschaften* to create a rather dated enemy image, is a cowardly move. This is used to give license to insults and slurs not otherwise acceptable. An example of this is – just after the “leaving aside” after mentioning it, of “the sexual emancipation” as analogue to a vague “such a thesis” – is the frankly paranoid phrase “(black) flag of *anarchy flaunted* on the roofs of the humanities” (p. 54, emphasis added) with “black” suggesting fascism; and, immediately following, “What happens here (I ask: where exactly?) is a refusal of thinking in favor of an *arbitrariness of practice*.” (emphasis in text). I don’t know what I did to excite him into so abandoning any academic or polite decorum.

4) The sexual innuendoes in Josef’s text belong to another category of symptomatic writing error. In a text of barely nine pages, there are three of those. I just mentioned the “sexual emancipation,” in ironic quotation marks, suggesting that this was a bad thing, and that I have somehow something to do with that, specifically. There is mention of “endless copulation.” Same point. But worse, because both homophobic and contradictory, is what is purportedly a quote from Deleuze, the totally irrelevant sentence “taking the author from behind and making a child with him that might be his, but would be nevertheless monstrous,” framed by an “I imagine” imputing some such to the cultural analyst. (p.

56) I can only say if you ever get so upset that you are tempted by such bad taste, don’t do it, because you weaken your case beyond repair. The quote, as I found out, does come from Deleuze, but from a passage in which that philosopher was ironically and self-reflexively looking back to the “eager young beaver” he once was. Taking irony, especially self-irony, out of context is one of the number one writing mistakes academics can make. It demonstrates bad faith – to Deleuze, and to me, and, worse, to cultural analysis, as if any of these parties could be conflated.

The explanation for such bad writing is clear when we consider the following excerpt.

The main question, in Mieke’s own drastic words, is: “how do you keep analysis from floundering into sheer partisanship, or from being perceived as floundering?” I perceive cultural analysis as very floundering. Maybe this is my fault? Maybe I am following the wrong intellectual standards? Maybe I am one of the die-hard theory guys Mieke is attacking?

There is much wrong here. Why my words are “drastic” is not clear. I am asking a question, signaling a risk I am going to address; hence, it is an aggressive misreading. The repeated rhetorical question in Josef’s passage does not offer an argumentation; it is to be avoided. I am not attacking anyone, least of all a traditional philosopher, but instead cautioning cultural studies against a risk, and therefore propose to transform that field into cultural analysis. So, logically and intellectually, Josef should be in agreement. Instead, he feels personally targeted. This is beyond my grasp. If his text here is any indication, he would not identify with the category of scholars in dialogue with whom I am writing *Travelling Concepts*. Yet he wouldn’t even qualify for the other, opposite category, of what he calls “die-hard theory guys” – what I call “theo-theorists,” the dogmatic methodologists. Between the two phrases there is a difference. I respect and take seriously the former “die-hard theory guys”, and take

distance from the latter. When theoretical standards become unquestionable dogmas, I am out of there. I find no indication that Josef “earned” his opposition to me by following a rigorous argumentative pattern that could convince anyone he is such a die-hard theorist. Construing my words as hostile and taking them personally instead of seeing that, if not the outcome, at least the starting point is a concern we share, he can only become intellectually disabled.


This is not to say that polemical discussion is a bad thing, on the contrary. This is why I have accepted to answer his attack in the first place. In my career, I have often been attacked. And I have always been rather eager to take advantage of critique. For example when, upon my arrival in Amsterdam my book *Reading Rembrandt* was honored with a double-spread thorough trashing job in *Folia*, the university paper, by my colleague in the art history department. After weeding out the sarcasms and unwarranted slurs, the one point I got out of it was that he found my approach a-historical. Stimulated by this I wrote *Quoting Caravaggio*, in which I developed the approach to history I have mentioned in the beginning of the present response. So, I will always be grateful to this colleague for having welcomed me with a virulent attack that stimulated me into writing another book. I never heard from him about that book-length answer. Nor does Josef seem to know of that book and the argument about history I offer there. I am sorry to say that Josef’s piece has not provided me with any useful criticism, except for one thing he probably did not intend.

I do find that Josef hugely over-estimates my book, as well as my influence on cultural analysis. I cannot speak for cultural analysis, any more than he can speak for philosophy. The reason for this is historical, and this disturbs me, for perhaps historical responsibility is what I most care about in cultural analysis. The conception of theory I start from in *Travelling Concepts* has been rather generally around for decades, as Culler’s short article also demonstrates. I can phrase this in terms of history, to which

Josef ever-so-briefly called me oblivious. Theory in Culler’s conception – not as methodology, not as mastery, and not as equivalent to philosophy; theory as inter- but *not* anti-disciplinary – has been a worldwide phenomenon for the last twenty to thirty years. My opponent, thus, by the very fact of his attack, demonstrates that he himself has not been in touch with history – the history of the present has passed him by, unnoticed. Perhaps he can get away with that within philosophy, although I doubt it. But most certainly, within cultural analysis such obliviousness to history is not done.

Instead of pretending to speak for an interdisciplinary field to which I hope to have contributed but which I do not “own” any more than Josef owns philosophy, I can only say that, in my honest opinion, my work in cultural analysis has been enjoyable to write because, in addition to liberating me from confines that seemed intellectually narrow and historically short-lived, it has invariably enriched me, satiated my curiosity, and brought me closer to cultural objects that, I found, had so much to say that I sought to enhance what they said. Perhaps that is all I have tried to do: enhance cultural thought.

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¹ I use the terms “the political” and “politics” specifically here. With “the political” I refer to the way societies live with, influence, or ignore in their way of organizing social relations, the “politics” that institutionalize such relations. The two can be in opposition to each other, as is the case for Ahtila’s oblique relationship to Sarkozy’s France. For a distinction similar to this one, see Chantal Mouffe, (2005) *On the Political*, New York: Routledge: 8-34.

² The most succinct formulation of these three types of “movement-images is in (1986) *Cinema I: Movement Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, Minneapolis: Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press: 66-70.

³ Paola Marrati, Gilles Deleuze (2003) *cinéma et philosophie*. Paris: PUF: 48.

⁴ Based on Marrati 2003: 46. See also on the affection-image Patricia Pisters (2003) *The Matrix of Visual Culture: Working with Deleuze in Film Theory*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press: 66-71. On temporality in the movement-image, see D.N. Rodowick (1997) *Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

⁵ Heterogeneity has been proposed by Jean-François Lyotard as a condition for the possibility of political art, from *Discours, Figure* on. (Paris: Klincksieck 1971). For the idea that affect can function as a medium, see Mark B.N. Hansen (2003) “Affect as Medium, or the digital-facial-image”. *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, (2): 205-28.

⁶ Culler in Mieke Bal and Inge E. Boer (eds.) (1994) *The Point of Theory: Practices of Cultural Analysis*. Amsterdam/New York : Amsterdam University Press/Continuum (13). Culler quotes from his own article “Literary Theory” 201-235 in Joseph Gibaldi (ed.) *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*. New York : The Modern Language Association (203).

⁷ As early as 1988 I published a book entirely devoted to the discipline/interdisciplinarity question. See *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre and Scholarship on Sisera’s Death*.

Trans. Matthew Gumpert. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1988; 2nd edition 1992. It is not a big book, and develops the argument step by step.