

Mieke Bal

LEXICON FOR CULTURAL ANALYSIS

Introduction

Once upon a time, I tried to make myself useful by writing a guideline for the activity that is the subject of this lexicon. When thinking about how to ‘do’ cultural analysis, I first tried to write a short statement explaining what, for me, is most important in what I have called with that term, ‘cultural analysis.’ However, once I tried, I was unable to go on. It sounded all too apodictic, immoderately overbearing, and yet rather abstract, even vague. And also, in view of other attempts in this direction, it seemed redundant. One example is Tony Bennett and John Frow's *Handbook of Cultural Analysis*. This collective volume is ordered according to frameworks, partly overlapping with disciplines, and issues. Müller-Funk's handbook *Kulturtheorie* encompasses, without summaries and superficial overviews, the scope of cultural analysis and its history. It manages this through engagements with key figures in the development of the field, and through these critical presentations, broaches a great number of topics. A third example struck me as more enticing because its form acknowledges its limitations: a kind of lexicon. I looked to Martin Jay's *Cultural Semantics*, inspired by Raymond Williams' classic book *Keywords*.¹

The genre of a lexicon is a kind of game. It follows rules, and has an openly arbitrary aspect to it. Which entries do you include, which ones not? Surely, this is no attempt at covering everything relevant. I want to make its game aspect stand out. For each letter, there are one or two, sometimes more keywords. To avoid yet another programmatic prescription, the second keyword is sometimes a negative one, sometimes a specification of the first word, and sometimes a very different term. While some thoughts are accompanied by the references to their sources, most entries are followed by a single reference, as another contribution into the discussion or field the entry proposes. This reference is by no means uniquely important; its author is not *a priori* a, let alone, *the* authority on the topic. Like the entries, it is simply a beginning for further research; and it suggests that one can begin in a number of very different ways. Some references constitute the beginning of a debate, and others are examples of where such discussions might go; some are written by well-known authorities in the field, while others are recent contributions by young scholars. And I can't help referring to my own work, since those publications constitute concrete examples of what I suggest in the entry. In some cases I suggest a journal rather than a single publication. And while some references display the larger field of cultural studies, others come from specific disciplines that have contributed to the constitution of our field unawares. In this way I aim to undercut the authoritative status of this lexicon, opening divergent pathways instead. My hope is that readers will not be followers, which would diminish their intellectual autonomy, nor users, in that instrumentalist view of thought that has almost become predominant; but instead, that they begin their own further search, and above all, practice their own cultural analysis.

¹ Tony Bennett and John Frow (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Cultural Analysis*. London: SAGE Publications, 2008. Müller-Funk, Wolfgang: *Kulturtheorie. Einführung in Schlüsseltexte der Kulturwissenschaften*. 2nd ed. Tübingen: A. Francke 2010. See also see Müller-Funk, Wolfgang: *Die Kultur und ihre Narrative. Eine Einführung*. 2nd ed. Wien/New York: Springer 2008. Martin Jay, *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of our Time*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1998. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Croom Helm. Such handbooks also exist within particular fields, which they tend to transform into an interdisciplinary cultural-analysis one. The recent book *Key Terms in Material Religion* edited by S. Brent Plate, London: Bloomsbury, is an excellent example of this.

Nota Bene: A brief comment on academic integrity. In order to render the entries as concrete as possible, I have frequently inserted fragments from my own earlier work. None of these fragments have been published before as autonomous pieces, and none has been published in German. I have attempted to acknowledge their sources, as I do with all sources, in footnotes. This is to avoid the accusation of ‘self-plagiarism’ rather than to narcissistically foreground my own work at the expense of other work.

[...]

B is for *bold, brave, boisterous; and for baroque*

Indeed, as the preceding entry intimates, these qualifiers indicate properties of work in cultural analysis. To be effective in this domain, one cannot abide by traditional approaches. A certain adventurous attitude is necessary in order to overcome limitations that have been so ingrained in the practices of the humanities that one needs to shed near-unconscious presuppositions to move beyond what seems obvious. This is what the qualifier ‘bold’ is meant to suggest. Boldness requires one to be brave; to face a hostility of others who fail to be bold enough to abandon fixed principles, for example. This doesn't mean there are no limits. If the insight the analysis yields is banal, so crazy that no one will follow it, resisted by the object, or without any bearing on the object, the analysis is beside the point. For then, no dialogue ensues, neither between analyst or object, nor among analyst and other readers. But the same can be said for an analysis that obediently follows a pre-established protocol, subjecting the object to what is prestigiously called ‘methodology’ but is in fact lazy thinking. Instead, bold transgressions of disciplinary decorum may lead to boisterous debates that are productive, creative, and energizing.

Bold doesn't mean ‘anything goes’ but bravely daring to do justice to the experience of the work. Such boldness begins with anachronism, if only because it has so long been the great taboo of all cultural disciplines—and boisterous discussion is the result. To bind these qualifiers with the second term of this entry, I contend that anachronism is a baroque way of thinking. ‘Baroque’ is not simply a collection of motives--knot, labyrinth, fold, mirror, death--nor a historical period, but a way of thinking.

Art historian Irving Lavin once implied this when he stated that drapery, the icon of baroque art, was a device to create ‘the almost hallucinatory relationship between past and present that is a hallmark of the period.’ In contemporary art, it would not a priori be drapery that emblemizes ‘baroqueness.’ Nor can the diversity of contemporary art be done justice by singling out a (visual) motive. Instead, the ideas that lead to such a function of drapery as Lavin mentioned are shaped, elaborated, and even contested in an art that is baroque insofar as it ‘thinks’ ideas that we can call baroque.²

A self-conscious historical re-vision of the Baroque as a historical epoch in which a particular style took hold and a set of motifs and figures came to represent a particular aesthetic, will recognize that the ‘thing’ we ‘see’ as a remote historical object is molded within our present being. This is not to say that it did not exist in the past. But, to use a baroque conceptual metaphor, it only comes to life--or rather to light--, that is, to visibility for us through our point of view, which itself is moulded by *it*, folded *in* it. ‘It’ cannot exist outside of ‘us,’ so we become, to some extent, baroque people as a consequence.

A key term in baroque art, current historiography, and contemporary art alike, ‘point of view,’ makes this clear. This term is best known in the context of narrative, and it is in this context that I first reflected on it. We tell stories from a specific point of view. The point of view from which the elements of the plot or ‘fabula’ are presented is often of decisive

² Lavin, Irving: ‘Why Baroque?’ In *Going for Baroque: 18 Contemporary Artists Fascinated with the Baroque and Rococo*, edited by Lisa G. Corrin and Joaneath Spicer. Baltimore, MD: The Contemporary and The Walters 1995: 5.

importance for the meaning the reader will assign to the fabula. This concept plays a part in the most everyday situations. A conflict is best judged by allowing each party to give its own version of the events, its own story. Any treatment can be reduced to the point of view from which the image of the fabula and the (fictitious) world in which it takes place are constructed. In this context, narrative 'perspective' is a technical aspect, the attributing of the point of view to a specific agent. In art history, 'perspective' has a more restricted, technical meaning.³

During the Baroque, the awareness of 'point of view' led, for the first time in Western history, to something we now call self-reflection, a self-consciousness of the human individual. This, in turn, led to irony in the modern sense, an irony that does not typecast the incommensurable other, as in caricatures of types, but includes the self in the critical representation of another who is thereby commensurable. This represents a crucial transformation in the relation between the Western subject and the world around her. The primary characteristic of a baroque point of view is that the subject becomes vulnerable to the impact of the object.⁴

When self-reflection focuses on the making of representations itself, point of view seems to bite in its own tail: it becomes a point of view on 'point of view.' As moments of heightened self-reflexivity in the late twentieth century have suggested, however, such a predominant, perhaps even exclusive, focus on the making of art can easily become a narcissistic self-enclosure, a self-aggrandizing, myopic gaze. Hence, the very idea of self-reflection already suggests that point of view has something to do not only with subjectivity but also with scale.

Baroque point of view establishes a relationship between subject and object, and then goes back to the subject again, a subject that is changed by that movement. Scale is one element in this transformation. Subjectivity and the object become co-dependent, folded into one another, and this puts the subject at risk. The object whose surface is grazed by the subject of the point of view may require a visual engagement that can only be called microscopic and in relation to which the subject loses his or her mastery over it. This co-dependency is the baroque alternative for a historical attitude derived from the romantic response to classicism, which is based on mastery and reconstruction of the historical object combined with reflection on how the subject grasps it. A baroque historical view of the Baroque, on the other hand, abandons the firm distinction between subject and object. Such a position can offer a valuable epistemological position which goes beyond the two positions that are generally opposed--objectivism and subjectivism.⁵

[...]

E is for *ethics*, and for *exhibiting*

³ For a seminal account of the history of both the term and the pictorial practice, as well as of the different meanings of the idea of perspective. see Damisch, Hubert 1994 [1987] *The Origin of Perspective*. Translated by John Goodman. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. In narrative analysis, for a variety of reasons the term 'point of view' has been replaced by 'focalization.' For an extensive account of this, see my *Introduction to Narratology* (2007 [1985]), Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, part 2.

⁴ For Erwin Panofsky, this was the most characteristic feature of baroque art. 'What is Baroque?' In *Three Essays on Style*, ed. Irving Lavin, with a Memoir by William S. Heckscher, 17-90. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995. For the opposition between commensurable and incommensurable other, see Todorov, Tzvetan *Nous et les autres*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1991.

1991). Irony has far-reaching consequences for the way we theorize language and representation. See Felman (1983); Laffitte (1996).

⁵ Baroque point of view is elaborated by Deleuze, Gilles 1993 *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Foreword and translation by Tom Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Because ethics passes for a rather vague concept, and its relevance for cultural analysis for not obvious, let me present it through a somewhat elaborate concrete example. Who does not know the story of Jacob's son Joseph, seduced and then betrayed by the wife of his master Potiphar? Like many others, this story raises the issue of the bond between storytelling, ethics, and academic disciplines – in this case literary, visual, and theological analysis. If anything demonstrates the ethical dimension of cultural life, this story does. This is so because it embodies the kind of stories we tell about one another: gossip, slander, jokes, myths. All are representations that, by means of perpetuation and reiteration, establish or reconfirm ideas we have about other people. This judgmental implication makes those genres ethically problematic. Some of these stories become canonical, and it is that canonical status that makes it all the more urgent to look at what they actually do. The magic word *identity*, pointing to a feminist, queer, or multicultural approach, and in itself connoting a progressive, politically inflected perspective, relates the need to subvert the exclusivist and oppressive power of canonical stories to the recognition that it is wielded by a small group of people with an identical identity. The word 'identity' indicates that it is precisely the socio-political dominance of certain *kinds* of people over all others that the formation and maintenance of a canon facilitates.

There is a tight bond between artistic and religious canonicity. This bond serves an interest that I want to rethink: the interest in *representation* as a social-political tool. The need for this rethinking has become urgent because of the social phenomenon of world-wide migration, which has made the near-exclusive predominance in the Western world of Christian and Judaic traditions less obvious, and has imposed participation in the social organisation of, most visibly, Islamic traditions. Confront the biblical canonical story of *lying*: of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, with the equally canonical story, in the Quran, of the 'same' story. It is the well-known story of woman's sexual desire, and of a guilty lie, of a woman who propositions to her husband's favourite servant, and when he refuses, grabs his coat and accuses him of having attempted to rape her. This story of a lie has served the canonization of the hatred of and contempt for women, misogyny. Full of judgmentalism, this story is ethically problematic because it is damaging to groups of people.

Against a Kantian disinterestedness, Thomas Mann, on the eve of the unequalled crimes against humanity, poses an aesthetics of ethical non-indifference in his novelistic version of this story in *Josef und seine Brüder*. More on this under L. This selection focuses on the important difference between the two religious texts, the Bible and the Quran. In the Quran, the woman is not the only woman in the story. The woman, in the Quran, becomes subject to slander among her women friends, *in the City* (Sxii, 30). The scene is twice displaced, from men to women and from house to city. Significantly, the woman acquires a public status that enables her to act. And although according to the fabula she pulls the same trick on Joseph as in Genesis, the story receives an instructively different twist that prevents misogynist stabilisation. The women in the city assume that the woman is going crazy with love (Sxii, 30). She then acts, not to disqualify or harm Joseph, nor to deny her desire, but to gain literal *sym-path*y: co-suffering from desire. Here is the passage of the Quran (Sxii, 31):

When she heard
Of their malicious talk
She sent for them
And prepared a banquet
For them: she gave
Each of them a knife:
And she said (to Joseph),
'Come out before them.'
When they saw him,

They did extol him,
And (in their amazement)
Cut their hands: they said,
'God preserve us! No mortal
Is this! This is none other
Than a noble angel!'

Then she proceeds to confess to her friends that she did in fact seduce and trick him, and that he did 'firmly save himself guiltless' (32). Potiphar and the men in fact imprison Joseph for his own good, 'for a time' (35).

As far as Mann's text's literary status is concerned, first and most obviously, there is more to the historical position of Mann's text than meets the eye, especially in terms of ethnicity, hence, of one extremely important issue of identity. Moreover, this historical consideration – the novel's pre-Holocaust position – needs to be put in conjunction with my own, speaking from a post-Holocaust, but also global, moment of migration and cultural mixing. *Now*, this sharper pain, caused by the acid of the oranges, and its bloody visibility, appear more striking in terms of theorising identity through identification, as 'literary identity.' This is played out aesthetically on the level of the detail of representation, and ethically on the level of shifting the interpretation of the body, rubbing it against Christian conceptions.

Here, *literariness* is the tool for identity formation and the concomitant ethical compulsion to recognize and respect the otherness entailed. Second, religious canonicity is not premised on that formation, but allows, even facilitates it. Concerning the first point, the novelist adequately walks the fine line between ethical and aesthetical work by mediating on the level of the *imagination*. In creating an imaginary realm that readers and characters can share, the appeal to other subjects is here also an appeal to different readers.

This happens on the level of the event as well. The women friends feel *the pain* of their friend's desire when they feel it themselves at the moment they hurt. This common pain produces community – literal, bodily community. Common ground is produced through heteropathic identification – a form of identification where the subject, rather than absorbing the other's alterity to make her the same, extols it, idealises it, and goes out of herself to share it. This is the meaning of the plural as well as of 'city' in 'the ladies of the City.'

But the point is the importance of the conjunction of *pain* with *women* and *city* in this version. The recognition of women's *public* life is as important as their frail, threatened, but potentially salvaged solidarity on the basis of something so deceptively perceived as private, as desire. It is in this semantic space that the identity produced, on the imaginary level of literature, can be mobilised for a, perhaps, 'religious' identity.

This identity – to put it a bit flippantly, of women collectively, hence publicly, entitled to their desires even if it does not fit public morality – has no canonical status. But the texts that offer it as a possibility do: Mann's novel in a secularised world has literary canonicity; the Quran in its religious function has canonical status. If this right to desire is ethically 'good,' we must see that neither the literary nor the religious canonicity can be confined to ethical 'goodness' or 'badness.' Hence, not goodness or evil in themselves, for these are culturally and historically specific, but *ethical non-indifference* is involved in literary merit, as modern Western culture has construed it and on which it has based its canonisation process. Hence, *ethical non-indifference* contributes to potential *literary* canonicity. (on this concept, see also L) But as the example clearly demonstrates, the canonisation as either literary

masterpiece or religiously institutionalised scripture is not directly based on the particular *ethical merit* of the positions represented. What is ethically problematic, then, is indifference.⁶

An ethical perspective is especially important in cultural activities such as exhibiting. This special relevance comes from the apparent ‘objectivity’ of the act of showing things. Since the things are there for all to see, it is easy to assume that exhibiting is in itself less discursive than, for example, a text. However, the ethical issues involved become visible more easily if we consider what exhibiting and texts have in common, namely the way they solicit vision. Like speech and the speech acts it generates, vision can be performative and produce acts of vision. Not only looking itself has such a performative potential. *Showing*, the primary act of curating, is also specific in its impact on visitors of exhibitions. The visual discourse of curating is a combination of framing objects and speaking through those framed objects to addressees. In other words, curating is never simply a matter of showing appreciated art works or interesting artifacts. Instead, it is a discourse consisting of a range of performative speech acts that impact on visitors, enriching them, influencing their thought processes, and even possibly ‘harming’ them—they may be injurious. Because of their apparent but deceptive objectivity, curatorial acts can be exemplary for all cultural activity.⁷

F is for *framing*, and for *folds*

The term *framing* has become the successful rival of ‘context.’ *Context*, or rather, the self-evident, non-conceptual kind of data referred to as context, is often invoked for the interpretation of cultural artifacts such as artworks in order to uncover their meaning. In effect, though, its deployment serves to confuse *explaining* with *interpreting*, or origin with articulation. With this confusion, and in any endeavor of an interpretive, analytical nature, a whole range of presuppositions becomes important, whereby the term ‘context’ loses both its specificity and its grounding. The unavowed motivation for the interpretation – indeed, the analytical passion – becomes entangled in a conflation of origin, cause, and intention. These three forms of beginning, while betraying an ontological nostalgia, in turn import a confusion of metaphysics, logic, and psychology. This nostalgia is masochistic, since the first domain is largely irrelevant, the second is unattainable, and the third is unknowable. I contend that if the confusion and the passion are cleared away, the humanities scholar with interdisciplinary interests can pursue a much more exciting project, an analytical interpretation that avoids paraphrasis, projection, and paradigmatic confinement, and that opens up a practice of cultural analysis that endorses its function as cultural mediation.

The second argument in favour of *framing* becomes clear from the simple facts of language. Context is primarily a noun that refers to something static. It is a ‘thing,’ a collection of data whose factuality is no longer in doubt once its sources are deemed reliable. ‘Data’ means ‘given,’ as if context brings its own meanings. The need to interpret these data, mostly only acknowledged once the need arises, is too easily overlooked. The act of framing, however, produces an *event*. This verb form, as important as the noun that indicates its product, is primarily an *activity*. Hence, it is performed by an agent who is responsible, accountable, for his or her acts.⁸

Furthermore, in a regress that might, in principle at least, be infinite, the agent of framing is framed in turn. In this way, the attempt to account for one’s own acts of framing is doubled. First, one makes explicit what one brings to bear on the object of analysis: why, on

⁶ This example is the subject of my book *Loving Yusuf: Conceptual Travels from Present to Past*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 2008

⁷ On exhibiting, see Coombes, Annie / Phillips, Ruth (eds.): *Museum Transformations*. Malden/Oxford: Blackwell 2015.

⁸ This may be perceived as a burden by some – the scholar, after all, may become subject to what can be perceived as a form of policing – but I contend that this accountability is also liberating. Not to speak of the much more frightening, because ‘lawless,’ policing that goes on in the name of methodological obviousness, or dogma.

what grounds, and to what effect. Then one attempts to account for one's own position as an object of framing, for the 'laws' to which one submits. This double self-reflection, it seems, might help solve the problems of an unreconstructed contextualism as well as of a moralistic and naive self-reflexivity à la the Habermas of *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (1968).

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

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

What does it mean to use such (Leibnizian) terms as the 'fold,' launched by contemporary philosophy in its rethinking of the baroque, when considering the 'thought' proposed by art works? I would like to consider the ways in which the theoretical concept as proposed by Deleuze has a historical impact in contemporary art. I began to suggest this in the entry on anachronism, continued in under 'Baroque,' and pursue it further here. What I called above a 'baroque point of view' is, in fact, an engagement with the fold that brings the subject-object relation to an entanglement.⁹

Deleuze, whose prose is notoriously difficult, can be read as a baroque writer who entangles his readers in the folds of his syntax. Consider this description of point of view, for example. 'If the status of the object is profoundly changed, so also is that of the subject. We move from inflection or from variable curvature to vectors of curvature that go in the direction of concavity.' And he continues: '*Moving* from a *branching* of inflection, we distinguish a point that is no longer what runs along inflection, nor is it the point of inflection itself; it is the one in which the lines perpendicular to tangents *meet* in a state of variation. It is not exactly a point but a place, a position, a site, a 'linear focus,' a line *emanating* from lines. To the degree it represents variation or inflection, it can be called *point of view*.' (19; keywords emphasized)

Deleuze, to quote him one more time, explains, this time quite clearly, what this kind of perspectivism does to the status of the viewer in this relationship of mutual inflection: 'Such is the basis of perspectivism, which does not mean a dependence in respect to a pre-given or defined subject; to the contrary, a subject will be what comes to the point of view, or rather what remains in the point of view. That is why the transformation of the object refers to a *correlative* transformation of the subject . . .' The word 'correlative' is what I mean by a self-made term in a later entry: 'inter-ship.'

⁹ Deleuze, Gilles: *The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque*. Transl. Tom Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993.

‘History’ is conceived of as the history of the social world – the history of the present from whose vantage point the past is reconsidered, or ‘enfolded.’ Contemporary art that is baroque in this sense addresses politics in ways that refrain from representation and explore other means of being politically effective *qua* art. Several aspects of the fold demonstrate this political potential: the infinite regress and return of the fold, the bodiliness of matter, and the here-and-now of second-personhood. Contemporary art that foregrounds these aspects is, not coincidentally, frequently rather ‘architectural,’ like framing itself. It is art that holds a vision of buildings as enveloping, sheltering, and enfolding. Such art pursues a philosophical articulation of a social-political position. To consider art in this or any other respect is a form of *framing* it.

[...]

K is for *knowledge*, and for *knowledgeable*

It has been the unquestioned goal of research to achieve knowledge; in the humanities, that knowledge concerns the products of human culture. I don't intend to question that goal. However, cultural analysis as a specific approach can qualify the conception of knowledge that underlies it. First of all, cultural production is a process, and from that vantage point, the knowledge aimed at concerns that process, including, but not exclusively, the resulting products: the cultural artifacts. These are considered less in their splendid isolation than in the way they address the cultural moment from which they emerge, are functioning, and solicit interest. Artworks and other semiotic artifacts, in other words, like all cultural manifestations, respond as much as they are responded to.

To be knowledgeable in this view, then, is no longer being in the possession of a certain amount of knowledge, specialized or more broadly delimited. It is, rather, the quality of being conversant in the analysis of cultural processes. Knowledgeable cultural analysts know how to raise questions hitherto unasked; or to address inequalities taken for granted; to probe connections not yet seen among ‘high’ and ‘low’ or among national cultures and their ‘minorities’: questions, in other words, that are not already listed in the textbooks of disciplinary knowledge. This does not entail a dismissal of specialization, but an end to the definition of specialization through objects, categorized by nation, time, and style. Instead, one can be specialized in a semiotic mode, such as (in my case) narrative; or in a form of questioning the self-evidences of traditional assessments of knowledge. To be knowledgeable, thus, means one is not a know-it-all authority but a fundamentally modest researcher, always unknowing but eager to get there.¹⁰

Knowledge is not autonomous, not ‘pure’ of other domains. It has ethical, political, historical, narrative, linguistic, economic and disciplinary aspects, and much more. Nevertheless, we all cherish the freedom, relative and illusory as it is, to pursue knowledge without being hindered by knowledge-external considerations. Nor is knowledge ever achieved, completed. It is always in becoming. Cultural analysis with its specific, concept-based, interdisciplinary and self-reflexive methodology can contribute to opening up dimensions of knowledge that in other fields may remain under-illuminated. Let me just give one example, of piece of knowledge-in-becoming that, created long ago, still has a lot to offer today. I am referring to the contribution of a linguistic idea to understanding the connection between two concepts I have intensely worked with, focalization and the gaze.

At some point in time, linguistic inspiration came for me from a figure marginal to the structuralist movement, who never openly discussed visuality: French linguist Emile Benveniste. Despite later developments in linguistics that made some of his early

¹⁰ Knowledge is too controversial a concept to give a single reference. Given the importance of history in cultural analysis, starting with the discussion surrounding White might be an idea (see H). Here, I focus on practical issues of interdisciplinary, conceptual exchange.

formulations appear ‘obsolete,’ the importance of Benveniste’s work in the specific case of sorting out the partial overlap between concepts must be acknowledged. 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 focalisation here, Benveniste-inspired insights complete the rich, powerful, analytic potential of the two concepts.¹¹

Compared to Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze, to evoke a sequence of knowledgeable men, Benveniste is probably the least recognised of those French ‘masters of thought’ who had such a lasting impact on the humanities during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Acknowledging this influence is a matter of intellectual force and consistency - not to speak of ethics and historical awareness. 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. 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.¹²

As I mentioned in the entry D, reference – both a verb and a noun – is secondary to deixis, the ‘I-you’ interaction that constitutes a referential merry-go-round.¹³ Yet, it has not been one of Benveniste’s *concepts* that has had the decisive influence. Rather, it is one of his basic *ideas*: the idea that subjectivity, produced through the exchange between the ‘I’ and the ‘you,’ not ‘reference,’ is the essence of language. The implications of the primacy of the ‘I’/‘you’ interaction for theorising through concepts becomes clear when I bring this Benvenistian idea to bear on the two key concepts for visual analysis (including of literature). In the case of the concept of focalisation, I have proposed a way of reconfiguring it based on the Benvenistian idea, and that deviates from the use Gérard Genette put it to in 1972.¹⁴

Focalisation 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 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. For Genette, a narrative can be unfocalised, 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 disciplinarity between Genette’s literary interest and my own interest in cultural analysis.

When it came to distinguishing between the possible focalisers responsible for the description of Philéas Fogg in Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days*, the difference

¹¹ 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.

¹² For the concept of power/knowledge, which underlies my interest in intersubjectivity beyond a formalist methodology à la Popper, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s chapter ‘More on Power/Knowledge’ in 1993 *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, 25-52. New York: Routledge

¹³ 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).

¹⁴ Genette, Gérard 1980 [1972] *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin, with a foreword by Jonathan Culler. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press

between Genette's 'zero focalisation' and my insistence on the subject of focalisation 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 importantly, my version of focalisation created the possibility of analysing, rather than paraphrasing and broadly categorising, a text. 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. It decided not only the interpretation of the concept of focalisation that I would go on to elaborate, but also the importance within that concept of *framing*.

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, 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 focalisation 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 focalisor. In Verne's novel, *Passepartout*, bearer of the look, is the focalisor. 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 presents 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. Thus, the concept can be seen as a theoretical 'middle voice.'

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 focalisor 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 points to the special relationship between theory and practice in cultural analysis.

Throughout my work on the concepts of focalisation, subjectivity, and the gaze, I came to the realisation 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 autonomous. Theory and close analysis are the only testing grounds in a practice that involves both methodology and relevance. My contention is that in practising 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.

Instead of 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 generalised meaning that they fail to be helpful in actual analytic practice. This is where analysis comes in. As this example of a conceptual process demonstrates, knowledge, then, always provisional, always in becoming, is not something one can achieve. It is a collective, historical process. Being knowledgeable then, is not 'having' knowledge but being involved in collectively making knowledge happen.

[...]

S is for *serendipity*, and for *subjectivity*

Sometimes, luck is on the cultural analyst's side. Once, before ever having written anything about art, I went to the guard at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., and asked for a painting by Rembrandt that was not in the galleries. Thanks to the effective and generous help of curator Arthur Wheelock, the next morning I was taken to the workshop where the painting was in cleaning. Then, something happened that, I would claim, is of the order of research. When the cloth that covered the painting was suddenly removed, I actually *saw* Lucretia's head move. As indispensable as the experience and the imagination was, it was not until I was able to reason why I had that vision – to *see* the contours of it instead of spinning tales about it – that I could meaningfully write about the painting as such. Thus, the sensation of seeing became the primary moment of research.¹⁵

But the sensation never disappeared. And since then, every time I see that painting, including several times now that it is in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam for the Late Rembrandt exhibition I realize again how its 'agency' is located in that earring that hangs obliquely. That strange, incongruous tiny detail is a sign of movement in a still image. The consequence of seeing the movement is that as a viewer I am confronted with my own unease in witnessing Lucretia's plight. This is an encounter of two subjectivities – not of a subject (the analyst) and an object (the painting). I learned that the object can speak, and speak back, and hence, must be considered a subject in dialogue. This gives the notion of 'intersubjectivity' a new meaning. Was this research, or serendipity? True, it happened in an archive of sorts. It was not a particularly meticulous instance of research; yet, it could not have happened in the gallery, where no cloth would cover the painting and then be removed.

'Serendipity' is a strangely enigmatic word. When I looked it up, the synonyms seemed all wrong: chance, fate, destiny, karma, providence, luck, fortune, coincidence, accident, kismet (the will of Allah). All these synonyms, or rather, given how approximate they are, parasyonyms, imply a worldview, a religious or secular conviction, or an otherwise metaphysical vision. As tends to be the case with metaphysics and religion, they all imply that

¹⁵ For an extensive analysis of the painting based on this serendipitous moment, see my 1991 book *Reading 'Rembrandt': Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*. New York: Cambridge University Press

the subject – the artist or a member of the audience – is powerless, and has nothing to do with the occurrence.

When I looked up a definition, however, I got something much more precise, down-to-earth, and implicating subjectivity: ‘a natural gift for making useful discoveries by accident.’ The elements of this definition – ‘gift,’ ‘natural,’ ‘making,’ ‘useful,’ ‘discovery,’ and ‘accident’ – are all meaningful words, pregnant with relevance for an understanding of what happens in research when it suddenly yields unexpected results. A gift pertains to the subject but, as the word says, is ‘given’ to this subject: a talent, something that is not the result of personal merit, but nevertheless unique to that person who can ‘make useful’ that gift, even if it was discovered by accident. ‘Making’ implies a willful, purposeful action that, if used as a transitive verb, entails the new existence of an object, while as a copula it brings into existence a feature of the object. ‘Useful’ refers to something that is good beyond the self; a communal usefulness perhaps. This recalls the issue of the relevance of the questions. The gift as talent is ‘natural.’ The discovery itself is accidental. This qualifies the power of the gifted subject. At the same time, it qualifies that person as open to noticing things that appear to her.

In this way, the term describes the artwork one is considering as well as the encounter with it. If I am to make sense of such a word I need to put the two together. So, serendipity is something that happened by accident, but the analyst is the one who, according to his or her ‘natural’ talent, makes it useful. Putting these words together with the objects I study, I find myself drawn to a renewed exploration of a number of philosophical ideas that, I contend, an artwork may take on, examine as if they, too, were discoveries made by accident, and then given back to us in revised form: made concrete, transformed, aesthetic, and made useful. That is what cultural analysis can do.¹⁶

This event qualifies the status of the objects of study in cultural analysis. Usually, we call the close analysis of singular objects ‘case studies.’ A concept I find more useful to understand and benefit from the kind of encounter I just described is what French art historian Hubert Damisch famously termed ‘theoretical object.’ Instead of the term ‘case study,’ which has been overly inflected by exemplarity and comprehensiveness and which has also, paradoxically, been marred by generalization, I am more inclined to use the alternative, equally over-extended but more specific term ‘theoretical object.’ As Hubert Damisch explains it in an interview with Bois, a theoretical object

... obliges you to do theory but also furnishes you with the means of doing it. Thus, if you agree to accept it on theoretical terms, it will produce effects around itself ... [and] forces us to ask ourselves what theory is. It is posed in theoretical terms; it produces theory; and it necessitates a reflection on theory.¹⁷

In the dynamic between the works as objects, their viewers, and the time in which these come together, accompanied by the social buzz that surround both, a compelling collective thought process emerges. Damisch’ concept of the theoretical object sometimes seems to suggest these are objects around which theories have been produced. At other times, as in the interview quoted here, he attributes to the artwork the capacity to motivate, entice, and even compel thought. It is in the latter sense that I propose to endorse the concept. Thus we can empower the object and avoid the empirical demand of coverage of representative samples before drawing conclusions.

The discoveries cultural analysts make in their encounters with artifacts, these ‘happenings,’ are never objective, durable, tangible ‘things.’ Although the movement of Lucretia’s earring is still there last I checked, as long as viewers fail to see it, we can even

¹⁶ On subjectivity, see Silverman, Kaja 1983 *The Subject of Semiotics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹⁷ Bois, Yve-Alain et al. 1998 ‘A Conversation with Hubert Damisch.’ *October* 85 (Summer): 3-17 (8)

doubt its existence. Instead, the raw materials what we find, according to serendipity's 'accidents,' are fleeting, fugitive, momentary occurrences. *They hover between thing and event*. According to this statement, which alludes to Austin's comment on fire, they should be (speech) acts. This hovering of semi-eventness is the raw material out of which serendipity is made. The half-thing is what the artist or analyst discovers; the accident is the happening, the event. *The moving earring* – is it a thing, or an event?

Serendipitously, Belgian artist Ann Veronica Janssens discovered that air can be made into a thing, however fragile and porous. She looked at it and saw it change before her eyes. The air-made-thing posed its condition of total care, out of respect for its (non)substance, which is to fly away. It is air—captured in the slightest, lightest bit of matter that makes it possible to hold it. But if you do more than let it lie in your hand, with hand and slice of air barely touching and equally fragile; if you so much as touch it, it crumbles and vanishes. This fragility proposes an inflection of the notion of 'precious' traditionally pertaining to art. I am describing, here, her work called *Aerogel* from 2000. This work is based on the idea of the 'found object,' yet different from that Duchampian tradition. Indeed, *Aerogel* was encountered, like the displaced objects such as urinals or bicycle wheels, and thus participated in the shift from 'beautiful' to 'art.' Janssens' choice to rework bicycle wheels, as shedid for her exhibition in the Neue Gallerie in Berlin in 2002, incidentally, testifies to an affiliation with that tradition. But *Aerogel* was never even made as an object; it never was an object to begin with, so how could it be 'found'? In addition, it is an attempt to exhibit 'nothing.' As such, it gives new meaning to the idea of minimalism.¹⁸

Aerogel is the lightest material ever made by man. It weighs next to nothing, consisting of 99.5 to 99.9 percent of air. Its lightness affects all aspects of its existence. Translucent, it looks a bit like clouds or mist—but sees from outside. Almost weightless, it can carry up to 1500 times its own weight, and isolate down to minus 270 degrees Celsius. As an object or thing, its extreme porosity makes it utterly fragile; its tentative shape is arbitrary, and it can crumble at any moment. Materiality and objecthood are in fierce tension.

So far, I have described the material used in the building of airplanes. Now, let me describe it as an artwork. A piece of aerogel is slightly bluish or yellowish, recalling the light as it traverses the atmosphere. More than *recalling* natural light, it partakes of it; its coloring functions in exactly the same way. In this sense, it is identical to air. Aerogel is blue for the same reasons the sky is blue, thanks to the tiny particles of its material substance that scatter bluish light. But when light outside is seen through aerogel, the latter takes the colors of sunrise and sunset. While being part of it, it is also more radical than natural light. It is, then, simultaneously a synecdoche, a metaphor of, and an allusion to, something as simple, self-evident, and indispensable as air.¹⁹

As a theoretical object, *Aerogel* is radical in the multiple ways it challenges its own objecthood. Its edges are undefined. Since it is hard to be sure what we see, it challenges our visual self-confidence while enriching our visual experience. More radical than all these features is the fact that the thing we see has not been made by the artist. It is just sitting there in a glass case to protect its extremely fragile existence, because Janssens proposes (proposes) we look at it. She presents it for us to look at; that, and barely anything else, is the work of art.

Far from having made it, she has hardly touched it, for its fragility is daunting. Yet, that small objects works with a breath-taking beauty and offers a powerful experience of

¹⁸ On Duchamp and the tradition he inaugurated as well as the one out of which he emerged, see Thierry de Duve's seminal study 1996 *Kant after Duchamp*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. For a cautionary note against too generalizing a use of the term 'minimalism,' one that Janssens' work 'touches' without belonging to that movement, see Hernández-Navarro, Miguel Ángel 2010 *Robert Morris*. San Sebastián: Nerea.

¹⁹ A more extensive analysis of this and other works by Janssens, see my 2013 book *Endless Andness: The Politics of Abstraction According to Ann Veronica Janssens*. London: Bloomsbury.

vision, while making us „theorize’ vision in the same sweep. This minus-object, this unthing that lacks all features of solid matter such as form, color, fixed dimensions, and durability, is, in this sense, a classical *abstract* object. Being three-dimensional, it qualifies as a sculpture, yet it was nothing more than a random thing – until Janssens chose to put it on display. What is theorizes, to put it briefly, is the dubious nature of what we consider objects.

The phrase ‘hovering between thing and event’ has a history. As I mentioned above, it refers to what is perhaps the most successful concept of speech act theory, at least in the arts. It has been used to describe speech acts – better known under the term that indicates speech acts’ consequences: performativity. Thanks to this resonant phrase, fire has become a metaphor for a speech act. Like fire, something that is being said, in the everyday circulation of words among people, not only means something but does something: it brings about a consequence, if only the simple one that the interlocutor knows the meaning that she did not know before. But the comparison between speech acts and fire is not so innocent. It indicates the potentially huge consequence of the occurrence.

Fire can destroy, purify, facilitate cooking, warm us, and even kill us. This potential makes fire (and speech acts) sometimes innocent, small, and ephemeral, at other times dangerous, harmful, joyful, or otherwise consequential. As many speech act theorists have argued, you can declare war with words, marry someone, sacrifice someone, insult them and thus harm their identity; you can condemn a person, or an entire people, to death; and you can add a small, fugitive element to the everyday experience that builds up people’s lives. So far, I have mentioned speech act theory to enhance the way Janssens’ work with serendipity affects the viewer, particularly through enticing her into deictic looking. What this dubious object theorizes we can call the nature of art-acts. Just as Lucretia’s earring did.

[...]

U is for *unity*, and for *unique*

These are two features of ‘great art’ according to routine conceptions of what causes aesthetic effect. An artwork that is disunified is frequently criticized for it; even disattributed, taken away from the canon of the great artists. In discussions about the corpus of Rembrandt’s paintings, for example, a lack of unity of style makes experts decide that a work like *The Polish Rider* (1655) is only partially ‘a Rembrandt.’ The face may be up to the master’s style, but the boot of the man is not. In *Bathsheba at Her Bath* (1654) in the Louvre, the right leg of the sitting woman seems distorted. This limb, therefore, must have been a later addition. True, that leg looks strange. It is crossed over the left leg and thus turns toward the viewer. The foot, however, turns away, to the direction of the attendant, in turn standing in for the story’s other character, the voyeur David. I have felt there was something clever about this alleged distortion; clever in Rembrandt’s way, with a wink. I interpret it as a sign that the artist combines two genres of painting without seamlessly integrating them: narrative and display. Hence, the voyeuristic position is equally divided between the diegetic man on the roof spying, and the viewer in the gallery, equally voyeuristically looking at the naked woman who herself cannot look back.

In this interpretation, the painting is unique in its lack of unification that, in turn, unifies it as a critical painting. Rembrandt makes such visual puns in other works as well. Paradoxically, it is even possible to say that disunifying is the unifying feature of his work. But in doing so, he responds to cultural habits – for example, of exploiting mythical stories for the production of semi-pornographic representations. This responsive character of the works makes it impossible to call them unique. Instead, they are steeped in the culture from

which they emerge but to which they also, critically, respond. To call such works unique would deprive them of their cultural striking force and their communicative power.²⁰

Unity and uniqueness seem unrelated, but they are not. This is a good example where conceptual work on the concepts that help understand the artwork and analytical work in which the artifact is made to speak, can sustain and help each other. Underlying both these concepts is a deeply entrenched, and therefore barely noticeable individualism: the unity of the individual and their uniqueness guarantee absolute individuality. And the primacy of that individuality, in turn, characterizes the difficulty of political thinking without falling into partisanship and slogans. Political scientist Chantal Mouffe wrote in her presentation of the two antagonistic domains of politics and the political with reference to an area of real conflict in contemporary societies:

... the dominant tendency in liberal thought is characterized by a rationalist and individualist approach which forecloses acknowledging the nature of collective identities. This kind of liberalism is unable to adequately grasp the pluralistic nature of the social world, with the conflicts that pluralism entails; conflict for which no rational solution could ever exist.

Paradoxically, then, individualism, which takes multiplicity as its starting point, is unable to deal with the actual plural nature of the social world. The hypostasis of individual freedom is in fact a severe limitation of multiplicity. The repression of group identities in the name of the individual makes for an easy slide from individualism to consensus, or worse, dictatorship.²¹

The predominance of individualism had made it difficult to think beyond the binary opposition between particular and general. Between the Scylla of particularity and its underlying individualism, voyeurism, and anecdotal irrelevance, on the one hand, and the Charibdis of generality with its erasure of specificity on the other, I propose the term 'singularity.' I find that term most apt to responsibly account for the elements of multiplicity without either erasing or hyperbolically and defensively hypostatizing group identity. I understand singularity in a relation of opposition to generality in order to acknowledge and focus on the strictly irreducible differences between people and what happens to them. At the same time, this distinctiveness is not reducible to anecdotal information. Instead, the singular is that which maintains difference without turning it into the (generalizable) ground for group identity. Singularity allows for an active life of the political where particularity would be silenced and generality would turn out to be irrelevant.²²

Working with conflicts is necessary, not to eradicate them at the cost of plurality, but to turn enemies into adversaries, Mouffe contends. The former, the notion of enemy, draws sharp us/them distinctions that cast the 'them' into the role of enemy to be fiercely combated, so that there is no need to come to terms with the conflict; the latter, the notion of adversary, accepts such distinctions between groups but still acknowledge the legitimacy of the 'them' – the adversary, to be engaged in debate. Hence, the adversary is not a 'them' but a 'you' – another to be faced, with whom discussion and disagreement is possible and on whose

²⁰ For more on this painting, see my book on Rembrandt (note 75).

²¹ Mouffe, Chantal 2005. *On the Political*. New York and London: Routledge (10)

²² The concept of singularity is mostly discussed in philosophy. The distinction I am proposing here between particularity and singularity does not play a major role there, and the two are frequently used interchangeably. See for example, Badiou, Alain 2006 2006. *Metapolitics*. Trans. Jason Barker. London: Verso (e.g. 23). A more concrete discussion, although also lacking clarity on the key concept itself, is Attridge, Derek. 2004 *The Singularity of Literature*. London: Routledge. For a review, see Clark, Timothy 2004 'Singularity in Criticism.' *Cambridge Quarterly* 33: 395-398.

account the hope that 'mésentente' can one day be resolved is never quite given up. Here, we see the relevance, once more, of Benveniste's linguistic theory.

To return from theory back to art, I would like to invoke contemporary Indian artist Nalini Malani. Best known for her shadow plays, her 2012 work *In Search of Vanished Blood* is so unified that it is quite a job to catch the different bits and pieces in their connections. For connections there are. Here, I can only make a few remarks on the soundtrack that creates an acoustic environment for the transparent cylinders and the video projections. *In Search of Vanished Blood* begins with abstract sound, neither calming nor threatening. This is no illustrative music but, difficult as such a thing is to imagine, it is a sound narrative in its own right. It is hard to tell what it means; that seems to be its point. Sound we cannot give meaning becomes meaningful when we hear the words 'this is Cassandra speaking,' which Malani's voice speaks after over a minute.

The name Cassandra invokes the woman from Greek mythology whose prediction of imminent catastrophe could not be heard. The Cassandra myth, best known in the tragedy *Agamemnon* from Aeschylus' trilogy *Oresteia*, has been brought to bear on the present in Christa Wolf's 1983 novel *Cassandra*. In the well-worn spirit of blaming the victim and killing the messenger she was killed when she refused to shut up. 'In the heart of darkness,' replies or continues a distorted voice, pluralised by means of asynchronicity; a voice accompanied by its own shadow. The phrase 'in the heart of darkness' quotes the title of Joseph Conrad's 1899 novel, adding the spatial positioning 'in' that might be seen as saying 'Africa, including Conrad's - Kurtz' 'the horror! the horror' is here (in India, in this exhibition space in Kassel).'What the voice says, a bit difficult to understand, becomes grimmer.

Then the abstract sound takes over again, but now the visitor has the memory of those words to help her imagination make sense of the sounds, which continue to refuse to be illustrations. But after having heard the name Cassandra we know that both the difficulty of hearing and the need to understand are the point, and thus we make an effort. Unlike the myth of Cassandra, through Christa Wolf's rewriting that puts it back into the present, and unlike Conrad's book title of which the ambivalence towards issues of race is well-known, the words 'Under the sun of torture/To the capitals of the world /In the name of the victims' don't tell a story. They only set one up, and they add up. They set the stage, define the addressee, and specify the speaker. It is up to the visitors to take a place, choose their relationship to what is to come, for the story to be able to take place and give rest to the searcher who is the subject of this work. They are provided with the clues, the links, to connect what they see to the invisible invoked, with the help of their imagination. They are given all the tools to become part of the searching subject, join the search and increase the chance that a result may be found. In this work as in the Rembrandt discussed above, we can consider the lack of unity as the empty locus of unity.

[...]

Complete version (long)

Mieke Bal: *Lexikon der Kulturanalyse*. Aus dem Englischen von Brita Pohl. Wien, Berlin: Turia + Kant 2016.

Complete version (short)

Mieke Bal: *Lexicon for cultural analysis*. In: *Die Lust an der Kulturtheorie. Transdisziplinäre Interventionen für Wolfgang Müller-Funk*. Hgg. Anna Babka, Daniela Finzi, Clemens Ruthner. Wien, Berlin: Turia + Kant 2013, S. 49-81.