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WHAT IS CULTURAL ANALYSIS? AND WHAT IS THE ROLE OF
PHILOSOPHY? AN ANSWER TO MURAT AYDEMIR

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Looking back at the debate between Mieke Bal and myself¹, I have sometimes questioned whether it was a good idea to let this debate take place. Because, above all, it was in my opinion, as Murat Aydemir also puts it, a ‘missed opportunity’ (p. 37).² He adds that it was also a ‘vital’ opportunity, and one may indeed say this (although it sounds pretty understated). But in answering the question of why this opportunity was missed, I would differ from Murat. The reasons lie in a different understanding of philosophy and in a different understanding of the psychology of the situation. Concerning the last point, a fundamental insight needs to be remembered, an insight that is very well known in theory, but which is typically forgotten in practice. It refers to the fact that as soon as an opponent within a debate is qualified as hostile (because, so the proponent thinks, the opponent is construing the words of the proponent as ‘hostile’³), argumentation ceases to make sense; enemies are not there to be conversed with, but to be destroyed. After all, this projective strategy supported the ‘vital’ character of the debate.

But, happily, this is not Murat’s point. He rather presumes a certain understanding of philosophy. To start with: it is true that I view cultural analysis as bad or parasitic philosophy. Cultural analysis here means the form in which it is presented by Mieke Bal in her book *Travelling Concepts*. It also means a dominant form I have made acquaintance with

during my past three years working at ASCA, a research institute of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Amsterdam. But the ‘redemption’, or more soberly the solution or, referring to the late Wittgenstein, the healing for that form of cultural analysis lies not ‘in either fully becoming philosophy or submitting to its authority’ (p. 37).

Redeeming someone or something would indeed imply a position of religious authority, epistemologically a position of truth as revelation. There are still representatives of that position in philosophy but, ironically enough, they are to be found in the Heideggerian legacy that is so influential in recent French philosophy, which in turn is so influential in the canon of dominant cultural analysis in Amsterdam. As a scholar of the Frankfurt School, I have learned to rely on the ‘unconstrained constraint’ of argumentation (Habermas) and an extended concept of rationality where experiences of epiphany and evidence build a part, but not the whole or the basis. And I have learned, after Hegel, that philosophy cannot fulfil its task any longer, in Hegel’s words: ‘grasping its time in thoughts’, without the help of the sciences and other ways of thinking (like art). So philosophy has ceased to be the highest authority within the academic and intellectual field. As Horkheimer put it in 1931, taking over the *Institut fuer Sozialforschung* in Frankfurt: Philosophy tries to give animating impulses (‘beseelende Impulse’) to the disciplines of research but lets herself impress and change (‘beeindrucken und verändern’) by these research studies as well.⁴ Therefore, my proposal for healing cultural analysis from what has gone wrong with it, is not to submit to philosophy, but to adopt classical philosophical virtues, namely methodological self-reflection and conceptual clarification. My paper is only about this. It is an invitation to cultural analysis to ask once again fundamental questions like: ‘What am I doing when I perform cultural analysis? On which (meta)level am I operating? Are my concepts *sufficiently* clear? How are they linked to each other (consistently, paradoxically, self-contradicting etc.)?’ That is all, or at least all I asked in my paper.

Having reshaped the relation between philosophy and the other research activities, it can come as no surprise that I also disagree with Murat’s description of the relationship between general propositions, being do-

miciled in philosophy, and examples, being domiciled in other disciplines. Again I would have to refer to Hegel, but also to Kant in his third *Critique*, and then to the hermeneutic tradition from Schleiermacher to Gadamer, for explicating that the status of examples is not marginal. Almost always, a particular case does not fully fit its universal species; almost always, examples are 'bad' in that sense. Therefore Hegel states that the (true) Universal *is* nothing but an antagonistic dynamics between a (universal) concept and a (particular) case. For the concept of cultural analysis this would mean that it has to be the result of a necessary development between the examples. But who would dare to do such a thing under post-Hegelian conditions? Adorno has tried, but he still relies on the thesis that there is an (albeit uncertain) dialectic between the Universal and the Particular. So the question remains: Who would dare to present a concept (of cultural analysis) by referring solely to examples? If we do not presuppose a *holistic* framework where the elements are (maybe even necessarily) connected to each other, the concept will change with every example we use. This would mean that in the end we would not have a concept of cultural analysis at all. Using it nevertheless would mean that we are following a fiction, a self-deception that seems to be necessary for us. Of course, even this position could be legitimated, and Nietzsche would be the best reference. But to date I have been unable to find someone within cultural analysis who frankly and clearly joins that position. And Mieke Bal does not either.

Once again: the debate is not about a hierarchy, at least not about the hierarchy of philosophy. I do not state that cultural analysts are only worthy of entering a discussion about cultural phenomena if they have read Kant, Hegel and Adorno (and others). That would be ridiculously arrogant. But I do expect them to be aware of their conceptual framework. Therefore, I do expect that they take account of any highly general propositions they are working with, propositions like: 'We should always allow the object to speak back.' If a cultural analyst is moving at that level of argumentation, he or she is at the level of philosophy.

Another example I gave in my text was Deleuze's relationship to Spinoza and Nietzsche. Of course, Murat is right in saying that Deleuze's texts on film, Proust and Francis Bacon can be interpreted in a relevant and

illuminating way without referring significantly to these philosophers. But most interpreters do not restrict themselves in that way. And then they talk about the concepts of life, time, consciousness, image etc. in the way of a seminar paper, taking everything that Deleuze is saying seriously and sometimes even literally, without being able to adopt a (critical) distance because they lack the philosophical background. This background, as I have to repeat from my first paper, does not deliver 'the definitive', but 'an essential' meaning. I cannot imagine that someone can write about Deleuze and film in an illuminating way without referring to the concepts I have mentioned above. To this end he or she needs philosophical knowledge.

Murat at one point offers a sympathetic piece of advice: 'Everybody should just relax'. Following my pragmatist inclinations, I would immediately be inclined to say: 'Yes!' Unfortunately, things are not as simple as Murat would have them: 'Philosophy is a discipline; cultural analysis is an interdisciplinary research practice' (p. 38). A problem arises if philosophers, for instance in the tradition of Critical Theory, regard what they are doing in itself as interdisciplinary. In my inaugural lecture at the University of Amsterdam I said: 'Philosophy is multilingual. It speaks more than one language and with more than one voice. It moves between the languages of common sense, first-person narrative, expository science, politics, morality, religion and art, to name just a few important examples. It can speak scientifically and poetically, politically and morally, autobiographically and prosaically. And I believe that it needs these languages and ways of thinking in order to balance itself out.' There is, as Murat rightly states, 'no common identity' (p. 38), but there are overlapping spheres, and exactly this explains the conflict, at least in part. No conflict without affinity, this is also true in our context.

But nevertheless, in general Murat's advice is absolutely right: 'Everybody just relax'. This is the mood that helps bring back an overheated debate to an earnest and pleasant discussion.

P.S.: I know that Murat would agree with me in saying that to a large extent we are in agreement concerning the relationship between philosophy and cultural analysis; we both believe that this relationship,

above all, cannot be one of hierarchy or opposition; that ‘postmodern’ (philosophical) thinking does not imply that all previous philosophical thinking is outdated (as the way of thinking of ‘dead white men’, for example); that radicalness, and above all self-declared radicalness, is not a value as such (but can become ‘chic’); that philosophy or literature are not the possession of philosophers or academics of Literary Studies (though, as I would like to add, they do have the prerogative of experts). The rest – still enough - is open to further discussion.

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¹ Josef Früchtl, ‘What Is Cultural Analysis? And What Is the Role of Philosophy?’, in: *Krisis. Journal for contemporary philosophy*, 2008 (1), p 53-58. <http://www.krisis.eu/content/2008-1/2008-1-07-frucht.pdf>

² Murat Aydemir, ‘A reaction to the Früchtl/Bal debate’, in: *Krisis. Journal for contemporary philosophy*, 2008 (2), p. 37-39. <http://www.krisis.eu/content/2008-2/2008-2-03-aydemir.pdf>

³ Mieke Bal, “‘You Do What You Have To Do’”. A Response To Josef Früchtl’, in: *Krisis. Journal for contemporary philosophy*, 2008 (1), p. 68. <http://www.krisis.eu/content/2008-1/2008-1-08-bal.pdf>

⁴ Max Horkheimer, ‘Die gegenwärtige Lage der Sozialphilosophie und die Aufgaben eines Instituts für Sozialforschung’, in: *ibid.*, *Sozialphilosophische Studien*, Frankfurt/M. 1972, p. 41.