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Review of Meike Bal and Bryan Gonzales, eds., The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation.

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Meike Bal and Bryan Gonzales, eds., *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. 394 pp. ISBN 0804730660.

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The majority of the essays in this volume are based upon papers given at the 1995 conference "The Practice of Cultural Analysis: A Workshop on Interdisciplinarity" at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA). As is characteristic of cultural studies collections, the essays discuss an eclectic array of texts--paintings, architecture, photographs, film, literature, stone fragments. They are held together by their theoretical and methodological self-consciousness, their blurring of the object/subject distinction, and their aggressive pushing against disciplinary, theoretical, methodological boundaries which usually separate literature from art from history from psychology from science.

The essays are divided into three parts of five to six essays. The first part, "Don't Look Now: Visual Memory in the Present," concentrates upon the interpretation of visual images ranging from images in science to paintings, film, photographs, architecture and sculpture. The essays begin with the philosopher of science Evelyn Keller's reflection upon how the objective gaze of the scientist fixes the object in such a way that it is permanently altered, even, Keller might suggest, murdered, in order to be observed. The first part also includes essays by Nanette Salomon on Vermeer's paintings of women, Thomas Elsaesser on the cinematography of Louis Lumière, Griselda Pollock on the paintings of Lee Krasner and her husband Jackson Pollock, and Carol Zemel on photographs of the Jewish *shtetl* or village that create cultural and national identity. It finishes with Stephan Bann's reflection upon how previous cultural critics (Marshall McLuhan, Umberto Eco, and Roland Barthes) have conceived of history as formulated by the self-conscious backward gaze recognizing a different *Weltanschauung* and thereby creating a new historic period.

The second part, "Close-ups and Mirrors: The Return of Close Reading, with a Difference," seems to reflect a return of the New Critical technique of close reading. In New Criticism the privileged text, usually defined as a written object, was isolated from its surrounding context, its historical period, and even its author so that the critic's readerly response to the text concentrated upon the rhythms, nuances, and echoes of the words. In New Criticism what the critic could often not explain with reference to the isolated text was often attributed to irony. In contrast, the "New Criticism" of cultural analysis defines texts broadly as more than chirographic products: it includes any products--painted, sewn, photographed, etc.--created by anyone, without reference to high or low culture. The New Criticism of cultural analysis recognizes fissuring lines of *difference* yet explains them not with an easy gesture to irony but by re-integrating the text with its social, historical, and political context. The central tenet of cultural analysis is that no text can be understood wrenched from its organic environment; the text must be juxtaposed to the primordial culture which generates and sustains it and to the culture of the critic who strives to understand the text.

In her introduction to this second grouping of essays, Bal defines "affective reading": it is "position[ing] the act of reading in the present, as self-reflexive, and as based on a 'deictic'

relationship between reader and text" (139). Bal's use of the term "deictic" demonstrates the way cultural studies borrows concepts from other fields. After acknowledging that Roland Barthes uses the term to underscore that interpretation is exposition, Bal turns to the classical scholar Gregory Nagy's discussion of the Greek verb from which "deictic" derives. Bal compresses Nagy's linguistically complex exploration of the Greek verb and reapplies it to her own methodological and theoretical agenda. It seems as though the theory of "affective reading" or interpretation of a text justifies the somewhat eclectic use of other disciplines in interpretive situations created by the critic. On the affirmative side, this revivified "New Criticism" emphasizes that the yawning chasm of history or philosophy or politics which separates any specific text and the critic can be temporarily bridged with sensitive attention to the details of the text and its context and acknowledgement of the critic's own prejudices and worldview. Deliberately, the essayists of this section delicately argue for the ephemeral nature of their interpretations, cautioning that interpretation is temporally bound as well.

In the first essay of this section, Helga Geyer-Ryan discusses how Venice is a cultural construction fraught with dislocated identity, gender anxiety, and the uncanny as evidenced in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. Geyer-Ryan's essay sets the parameters for the other essays which continue to explore how a renewed New Criticism unpacks unexpected interpretive conundrums in literary texts. Ernst van Alphen examines Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, Frank R. Ankersmit juxtaposes Edward Gibbon and Ovid, J. Cheryl Exum tries to interpret androygnous figures in Philip Hermogenes Calderon's painting "Ruth and Naomi" (1886) with reference to the Old Testament story, and Isabel Hoving discusses postcolonial work by Jamaica Kincaid, Alice Walker, and Grace Nichols. The last essay in this section, by Siegfried Zielinski, seems a rather odd inclusion, for he argues that the Net created by computer technology offers another medium for linguistic artistic expression. Zielinski seems to extend the other essays by asserting that the chirographic texts critics will analyze in the future will not even exist unless downloaded onto a computer screen, that the chirographic texts will only be potential until actuated by a computer user. Yet one must ask how this stance is any different from the traditional New Critic's assertion that a text in a book is only a potential until someone opens the book and begins to read.

The third part of *Cultural Analysis*, "Method Matters: Reflections on the Identity of Cultural Analysis," is a philosophical reflection by agents of cultural analysis upon what cultural analysis means as a discipline and what it means as a challenge to the conventional structure of the university and academic world. Those agents--Johannes Fabian, Louis Dupre, Theo de Boer, John Neubauer and Jon Cook--do not offer any programmatic methodology for cultural studies but instead underscore the intellectual flexibility and sensitivity with which a cultural analyst must approach any object qua object of the past in the present. Anthropologist Johannes Fabian's essay, "Culture and Critique," explores popular painting in Zaire not as an abstract category but one half of a vital dialogue between the people of Zaire and the exploitative, oppressive power hierarchy. In his essay, "Cultural Variety and Metaphysical Unity," Louis Dupré writes that "[c]ulture consists of the symbols that preserve and direct the life of a society" (255). Thus the text or object which the critic examines is a layered construct of signs. In some sense, the critic of cultural studies is most firmly grounded when she/he begins with her/his reaction to the sign(s) and then teases out the invisible cultural web which forms that response and positions that web against the sign to demonstrate how we can never get at a text in a historically neutral way. Cultural studies censors the methodology of conventional literary criticism, which refuses

to reflect upon its own situatedness in the present and thus refuses to participate in a dialogue between the ideologies of the present and the ideologies that produced the viewed object.

Cultural studies begins with the work of Raymond Williams (*Culture and Society: 1780-1950* [1958]), who argued that products of high culture and low culture are worthy of study and could produce validating meaning if scrutinized through a sympathetic theoretical lens. As a result of cultural studies' privileging objects which had been ignored traditionally by the established university and academic departments, cultural studies is perceived as championing the rights and dignity of the Other (female, gay, non-white, low culture, environmental, etc.) and as promulgating a political agenda of recognition and empowerment. For example, Isabel Hoving's article valorizes three female, non-white authors and Johannes Fabian's article protests the authoritarian Shaba regime in Zaire. Thus cultural studies becomes an interdisciplinary arena for liberal social and political activism in an academic community usually conceived of as a staunch citadel protecting the past's legacy of high culture. In other words, practitioners of cultural studies see themselves as integral participants in forming and swaying public opinion and political policy for the purpose of changing the world and not just preserving the status quo.

On the paper cover of this collection of essays (and also gracing the web site of the ASCA) is a photograph of a graffito. The graffito, which once marked a brick wall in the Biltstraat in Utrecht, the Netherlands, consists of four lines of Dutch and is an anonymous letter addressed to an intimately known second person. Bal discusses this graffito in her introduction to *The Practice of Cultural Analysis*. She deliberately exoticizes what might be conventionally termed vandalism and, by giving it an unfamiliar name, turns the graffito into a cultural artifact, validating its uniqueness. For Bal, the grafitto is an ideal vehicle for the praxis of cultural analysis because the essential anonymity of the author frees the critic (Bal) to interpret the grafitto without reference to the author or authorial intent. One of the essential hallmarks of cultural analysis is the emphasis upon the response of the critic to an object which becomes at the moment of its completion a historical/cultural artifact. Since Bal rhetorically attributes to the grafitto the tacit approval of the citizens of the city of Utrecht who did not deface or obscure the grafitto and the government of Utrecht which did not remove the grafitto for at least seven years (1980-87), she takes the grafitto as a cultural artifact or text emblematic of the ontological, epistemological underpinnings of the often despised contemporary culture. Thus the emphemeral grafitto becomes a static symbol of resistance against mass corporate culture even after its removal because Bal took a picture and wrote of it. In a sense, the removal of the object of Bal's gaze from its original location on a brick wall underscores the transitory nature of cultural analysis, which must renew itself constantly by returning again and again to the same object but upon each return would view that object from a different perspective. In her introduction, Bal uses the graffito as an exemplum of how a piece of the flotsam and jetsam of contemporary culture can be utilized to validate the practice of cultural analysis. She interprets the graffito as a self-reflexive commentary upon the embedded and transparent structures that simultaneously produce a letter and allow an observer to recognize the graffito as a letter. By its structure the grafitto is a letter, but Bal carefully notes that it is also a poem because of its internal rhyme and its incorporation of lines from a poem by the contemporary Dutch poet Ellen Warmond (3). She observes that the graffito is simultaneously a text consisting of words to be read and a painting consisting of white on brick, thus straddling two disciplines normally compartmentalized in the academy.

Bal's analysis of the grafitto highlights one of the philosophical fractures in cultural studies: does the meaning of a text derive ultimately from the text's own organizational structure of signs or from the reader who actively wrestles with text in the arena of the reader's own hermeneutic circle? Bal refuses to answer the question, and this very action sets up the dialogue of tense inconclusivity of the essays. No interpretation of a text is canonized or solidified. Options for interpretation are presented so that more questions can be asked.

The openness of the debate is particularly underscored by the doubleness of the introduction and the afterwords. The volume begins with two introductory essays. In the first and conventional one, Bal outlines the organization of the essays and their subjects and provides a definitional and theoretical framework. She must combat the hostile reader who might pick up the volume in an effort to understand this new interdisciplinary mode of analysis which undermines compartmentalized, nationally based disciplines (i.e., English, History) and threatens their very existence by making them appear unconnected social questions. She must convince the casual reader, too, that cultural studies is not a theoretical maelstrom of alienating jargon lauding the insignificant and the disempowered. She tries to appeal to both audiences by asking a deceptively simple question: "What, then, is its object?" (2). Although she does not directly answer the question, the answer seems to be that any text that provokes a question is an object worthy of exploration. Bal insists that "[c]ultural analysis stands for an approach, for an interdisciplinarity that is neither nondisciplinary, nor methodologically eclectic, nor indifferent; this approach is primarily analytic" (12). But analytic of what, if not the examination of the relationship between "the active presence of the object" (12) and the observing subject or the "me" of the critic?

The second introductory essay describes how a curious visual event of the 1995 conference was created by the artists Edwin Janssen and Janneke Lam. They agreed to exchange a series of non-verbal images before the conference. Janssen sent Lam an image and she responded with an image of her own. Although the essay does not specify how the exchange was achieved, presumably it was accomplished through the mail. In preparation for the conference, Janssen and Lam made slides of the images which they sent each other. The slides were projected sequentially upon a screen for the conference audience. The visual exchange divorced the images from their original context; they ceased to be products of their specific creator and became associative tokens of exchange between two unrelated persons. Lam observes that this experiment "leveled" the images because they all had the same value as repositories of cultural information, but the images also became more "revealing, intensive, intimate, delicate, fun" (22) for the artists. While I found this experiment intriguing, I was also disturbed by the juxtaposition between the casual narrative of this experiment with a slight nod in Freud's direction and Bal's theoretically informed and self-consciously positioned discourse defending cultural studies. This juxtaposition highlights the weakness and strength of cultural analysis: on the one hand, it produces a leveling that allows for indiscriminate elevation of icons of popular culture; on the other hand, such analysis offers a deliberately delicate enunciation and examination of theoretical positions and assumptions.

The creative capacity of cultural analysis is eloquently blazoned forth by Griselda Pollock's "Killing Men and Dying Women." The very ambiguity of Pollock's title itself foregrounds the multiplicity of the article. Pollock weaves together the biographies of Lee Krasner and Jackson

Pollock, their art, the creation of the icon Marilyn Monroe, the psychoanalysis of Freud and Luce Irigaray, and the gender theory of Julia Kristeva as she grapples with the question of whether women can resolve "the profound and impossible antagonism between the terms woman and artist..." (79). Can a woman be an artist when her gender's previous role was as dead inspiration, dead in the name of art, dead in the process of inspiring men to create art? Pollock insists that underneath the dominant cultural construct of the male artist creating an object distanced from himself is the subordinate cultural construct of the female artist creating an aesthetic object which is an expansion or extension of herself. Pollock steps back, however, from defining what the feminine extension is; she describes the painting as ". . .the space of the painter's actions, gestures, processes, meditations, responses, decisions, desires, ambitions, distress, a moment of what a phallicly ordered culture does not allow us to see, let alone name, and enjoy. . ." (100). Finally she insists that ". . . the language of even sympathetic formal analysis will kill" that recognition (100). Pollock's sudden and almost embarrassed drawing back from the final moment of definition seems like a swift drawing of a circle marking the sacred apart from the ordinary. She makes the created object a mythologized sign of culture which suddenly can not withstand further scrutiny. I would instead suggest that her sudden reticence derives from a hesitation to reveal too much of herself in her definition of woman's art and hence the lyrical apostrophe of the last sentence of the essay: "woman's body in the studio space creating, thinking, dancing with death" (101).

The volume ends with two afterwords: one by William Germano, the Vice President and Published Director of Routledge publishers in New York. Germano surveys the market forces that influence the establishment of a new field of academic study. He observes that interdisciplinarity endangers itself by defiantly crossing boundaries, which makes interdisciplinary studies difficult to categorize on the bookstore shelves. He tries to distinguish interdisciplinary studies from cultural studies and ends rather lamely, suggesting that interdisciplinary studies follow the pet interests of the critic and that cultural studies "harness[es] the big theory to interrogate the popular, the everyday, our working life of readymades" (333). In contradistinction to interdisciplinary studies, cultural studies justifies its existence as a separate field because it addresses a broad audience on subjects everyone has access to, such as graffiti.

The second afterward is by Jonathan Culler and seems to offer a corrective or, to phrase it more gently, a readjustment to Germano's essay, which laid out what he perceived as the difference between interdisciplinary studies and cultural studies. Culler wants to draw another fine line to separate cultural studies from cultural analysis. Culler suggests that cultural studies is the examination of outward evidence (cereal boxes, kissing, etc.) in order to "understand the mechanisms that produce meaning in social and cultural life" (342). He sees cultural studies as a return to the unfinished business of structuralism. Only in the last page and a half does Culler attempt a definition of cultural analysis. He insists for those enemies of cultural studies, those defenders of national language departments, that cultural analysis is not the evil interloper but is indeed an extension of the theoretical self of literary criticism. Like the best examples of literary analysis, cultural analysis constantly reflects upon its theoretical stances and assumptions vis-à-vis the text--unlike cultural studies which eschews theory. In fact cultural analysis is so theoretically aware, it goes literary analysis one better by "constantly risk[ing] paralysis by reflecting on itself" (346).

The double afterword of the volume transgresses expectations of an academic monograph, just as cultural studies defies the traditional rubrics of academic classification. This very transgression of boundaries within a monograph--whoever before has included an essay written by a publisher upon the economic viability of an academic field?--forces the reader to ponder the interrelationship of market to the initiation, continuation, and nourishment of other fields hitherto unquestioned and unchallenged.