

PHILOSOPHY IN CULTURAL THEORY

PETER OSBORNE



PHILOSOPHY IN CULTURAL THEORY

What is the place of philosophy in cultural theory today? What might come of a confrontation between philosophy and cultural studies?

Despite its interest in theory, cultural studies in both Britain and the USA distanced itself from philosophy during the 1970s and 1980s. However, in the past decade this hostility has begun to give way under pressure from the globalization of cultural forms and the consequent need to draw on philosophical resources to deal with questions about universality and difference, totalization and abstraction. *Philosophy in Cultural Theory* offers a philosophical critique of cultural theory today.

Peter Osborne makes critical interventions into the central philosophical debates motivating contemporary cultural analyses: interdisciplinarity and the status of pragmatism; the relationship between sign and image; the technological basis of cultural form; the theoretical importance of translation; the temporality and politics of modernism; the conceptuality of art; and the place of fantasy in human affairs. Drawing on the legacy of Walter Benjamin and the *Communist Manifesto*, he establishes a new transdisciplinary perspective on the experience of modernity as cultural-historical form.

Philosophy in Cultural Theory will appeal to all students of philosophy, cultural studies and art theory, and to readers interested in the shifting role of interdisciplinary studies.

Peter Osborne is Professor of Modern European Philosophy at Middlesex University, London. He is an editor of the journal *Radical Philosophy* and author of *The Politics of Time* (1995).

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PREFACE

What might come from a confrontation between philosophy and cultural studies? The question has an air of theatricality about it, of a stage-managed meeting between the estranged parties of a lingering dispute, unsure if they are still enemies or might, one day, become friends.

Academic work is increasingly subject to the administration of disciplinary boundaries. Ironically, given its almost geological history in the West, for periods of which it was more or less synonymous with culture itself, philosophy has benefited from this reprise of disciplinarity. It has spent the best part of its recent institutional life honing the arguments for its existence as an autonomous discipline and for a privileged but rarefied place in the hierarchy of knowledges. Whether this hardening of boundaries has been such a good thing for intellectual life more generally, and its ability to foster theoretical comprehension of the historical present, in particular, is less clear. In the division of academic labour, philosophy for the most part occupies the barren heights of an absolute yet formal universality (frequently, nowadays, of a computational kind), while the new discipline of cultural studies gobbles up the present as lived experience, with a relentless drive to contemporaneity.

In so far as philosophical thought informs the new discipline, it is largely through rogue elements of the modern European or 'continental' tradition; displaced fragments, patched together in creative *bricolages* to suit the needs of the moment. In so far as the present impinges on the mainstream of the disciplinary practice of philosophy, on the other hand, it does so mainly through the technological trope of 'applied' ideas (ethicists as experts), at considerable remove from the textured structures of meaning and contradictory ideological forces that are the staples of cultural analysis. The revival of liberal political philosophy, through its engagement with issues of nationalism and multiculturalism, and the marginalized presence of a feminist critique of the philosophical tradition, are the exceptions that draw attention to the rule. However infuriating they might find the epistemological polemic of a renegade like Rorty, philosophers turned out from the mould of the 'cognitive science' side of the post-analytical

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tradition can hardly complain about the breadth of his influence, when they are themselves so patently ill-equipped to address the concerns of the humanities and social sciences. Yet philosophy has both its origins and its enduring non-denominational appeal in the idea of self-knowledge – a history of which the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, grandfather to cultural studies in Britain, was keenly aware.

My previous book, *The Politics of Time*, was lucky enough to be reviewed in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* in Britain, twice: once in a section devoted to books in cultural studies, and again in one on philosophy. In the first instance, despite considerable sympathy for its project (an immanent critique of the philosophies of time and history innervating theories of modernity), it was judged, unfortunately, to remain ‘within the limits of philosophy’. Later, subject to the gaze of a fellow philosopher, it appeared as a species of ‘cultural commentary’.¹ It was consoling at the time to consider this antinomic rejection a dialectical success. On reflection, however, it became clear that a more direct approach to the mutual antagonism between the two fields was required. The essays that make up this book are the first fruit of such an approach. Each has its origins in a particular occasion – a lecture, a paper, notes for a panel discussion – but all have been revised, reworked or substantially expanded for publication here. Together they represent a linked series of interventions from a particular philosophical perspective (and perspective on philosophy) into some of the central debates in cultural theory – or at least, cultural theory in cultural studies. A word of warning, though, about the apparent homogeneities of the two fields.

Despite the relative unity of each field, constituted by their mutual antagonism, the problematics between which the book seeks to stage a confrontation are neither simple wholes nor can they be considered as empirically given: neither ‘philosophy’ nor ‘cultural theory’ can be confident of its self-identity. Their unities must be constructed – historically and differentially – rather than received. Second, their genealogies are closely related. In the European tradition, philosophy and cultural theory are as often to be found inside one another – philosophy in cultural theory, cultural theory in philosophy – as they are without. After all, for a certain German tradition, philosophy simply *is* the ideal reflexive form of modern culture as a whole. From this point of view, in its most essential determination, philosophy already is (or should be) cultural critique. Yet this philosophical ideal remains just that, an ideal, outside of an engagement with the totality of cultural objects and practices in the present – an engagement that philosophers have singly failed to undertake, restricting themselves in the main to an Arnoldian conception of culture as ‘the best that has been thought and said in the world . . . the study of perfection’. This necessarily excludes vast bodies of significant practice and experience within Western capitalist societies and, given the ethnocentric

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formation of judgements of the 'best', has, historically, excluded whole non-Western cultures too.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, philosophy must itself be understood, at one level, as a cultural form. Just as reflection upon its own formation has long been one of cultural studies' favourite tropes, so the formation – or at least, the reproduction – of philosophy as a disciplinary practice also falls within the domain of cultural analysis. This is by no means a merely sociological issue. Rather, it affects the meaning and legitimate range of application of philosophical concepts themselves. The more one inquires into the philosophical meaning of concepts in cultural theory, the more the cultural-historical status of philosophical concepts themselves appears as a correspondingly critical and equally neglected issue. This is never more so than in the extension of the problematics of Western theory to non-Western contexts, a transformative process which reacts back on our understanding of these problematics in their application to the West, and forms the avant-garde of critical self-consciousness in cultural theory today.

The essays in this book practise a philosophical critique of cultural theory as reflective judgement: reflecting upon concepts in cultural theory from the standpoint of their philosophical significance, extending their meanings beyond their original contexts; reflecting back upon the procedures and protocols of philosophy from the standpoint of such concepts, transforming the self-understanding of philosophical concepts in turn.² Such a practice is at once systematic in orientation and particular in content, seeking universality within the claims of particulars, building up a transdisciplinary problematic via a shifting constellation of terms.

Certain themes predominate: the forms of universality characteristic of general concepts in cultural theory; the relationship of pragmatism to metaphysics; technology and cultural form; the temporality and politics of modernism; conceptuality and *aesthesis*; the constitutive role of fantasy in human life – topics I take to be at the philosophical heart of cultural theory today. A particular author – Walter Benjamin – sets the theoretical course, with his concern for the conjointly historical, metaphysical and political experience of cultural form. But the aim is to practise philosophy as critical reflection, rather than to expound an established position independently of its engagement with current problems and competing perspectives.

Chapter One establishes the programmatic perspective on the fundamental affinity between a certain post-Hegelian philosophical tradition and the project of cultural studies from within which subsequent chapters explore particular problems or topics. The central issue in this chapter turns upon the anti- or post-philosophical thrust of the pragmatism of contemporary cultural theory, and the possibilities of an alternative, metaphysical pragmatist tradition, stemming from C.S. Peirce and the later

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Nietzsche, which finds its main cultural-theoretical representatives in Walter Benjamin and Gilles Deleuze. The concern with a metaphysical pragmatism continues in Chapter Two in a critique of the Saussurean semiotics which provides the mainstream of cultural studies with its theory of meaning. This critique is pursued, first, via a reconsideration of Peirce's trichotomy of types of sign (icon, index, symbol) and, second, through an extended discussion of the historical ontology of the photograph, in which attention to technologies of imaging leads to a reformulation of the relationship between indexicality and iconicity. This reformulation is further elaborated via Peirce's theory of interpretants, in which his semiotics is integrated into his pragmatism via a naturalist pragmatics. The unmediated naturalism of Peirce's concept of habit is contrasted with the historical mediation, in Benjamin's work, between habit and the technological dimension of cultural form. The chapter concludes with a consideration of Deleuze's alternative appropriation of Peirce.

Chapter Three picks up on the issue of the form of universality characteristic of general concepts in cultural theory (with which the first chapter concludes) and explores it, first, via a translational model of theoretical generality, and second, with reference to the global generalization of the concept of modernism. Modernism, it is argued, is best conceived as a quasi-transcendental practical historical schema of universal but highly abstract significance. Its more concrete meanings and particular forms must be defined conjuncturally – independently of hegemonic historical models – by virtue of their temporal-political dynamics alone. Chapter Four returns to the *Ur-text* of modernism as a political form, Marx's and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*, and re-examines it from the standpoint of its literary, cultural-historical form. Taking issue with the one-dimensional modernism of Berman's reading of the *Manifesto* as a celebration of capitalism, it locates the distinctive temporal-political impulse of the text in its combination of the technique of historical montage with social scientific argument within the overarching performative unity and radically futural address of the manifesto as a rhetorical form.

Chapter Five pursues this dual theme of cultural-historical form and the de-historicizing moment of the political temporality of modernism – its wilful, abstract futurity – into the context of art criticism; specifically, the restrictions of Clement Greenberg's conception of modernist painting. Setting out from a discussion of the changing relationship between history and memory, it charts the contradictory potential of the de-historicizing function of aestheticization. Conceptual art was the first movement in the visual arts to attempt systematically to eliminate the aesthetic from artistic significance. In doing so, it enlisted the help of philosophy both to redefine the idea of the art work and to legitimate its new artistic strategies. Chapter Six analyses this unique conjunction in two ways: by

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deploying Bourdieu's conception of the field of cultural production to delineate the peculiar double-coding of philosophy as at once productive artistic material and legitimating discourse; and by offering an immanent analysis of the use of philosophical arguments in the critical writings and artistic self-conception of three major conceptual artists – Sol Lewitt, Joseph Kosuth, and the British group, Art & Language. Philosophy appears here simultaneously as ideal rational practice and itself a cultural-historical form.

Finally, Chapter Seven returns once again to the question of the forms of universality of general concepts in cultural theory, by raising the question of the ontological status of the concepts of psychoanalytical theory, in both their application within the analytical process and their use in cultural analysis. Taking as its object the metapsychological writings of the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche, unparalleled in their philosophical sophistication, it reconstructs the dynamic of ontological generalization and theoretical self-limitation inherent in the transposition of concepts from one context of application to another. In its development of a communicational and translational paradigm of human relations, centred on the primacy of the opacity of the other, Laplanche's psychoanalytical theory also invokes the broader theme of the metaphysical basis of pragmatics. Ultimately, it is here, in the convergence of the thematics of post-Hegelian philosophy (history, politics, metaphysics) and cultural studies (signification, practice, power) onto the concept of *experience* that the underlying unity of the book lies.

* * * * *

Chapter One, from which the book germinated, began life as an inaugural lecture for a Professorship in Modern European Philosophy at Middlesex University in March 1999. Chapter Two grew, exponentially, from a paper written for the plenary panel, 'Uses of Benjamin', at the VIth Congress of the Brazilian Association for Comparative Literature (ABRALIC) in Florianopolis, August 1998. The original paper appears in a Portuguese translation in A.L. Andrade, M.L. de Barros Camarago, R. Antelo (eds.), *Leituras do Ciclo*, abralic/editora Grifos, Ilha de Santa Catarina, 1999. I am grateful to Raul Antelo for the invitation. An initial version of Chapter Three was presented to the conference 'Spectres of the West and the Politics of Translation' organized by *Traces* journal and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, June 1999. I would like to thank Naoki Sakai for the invitation and the other participants in the conference for their comments on that text. The published version also appears in *Traces: A Multilingual Journal of Cultural Theory* no. 1 (2000).

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The second and third sections of this chapter draw on a presentation to a panel on 'Modernism and National Culture' at the Mellon Sawyer Seminar on Cities and Nations, at the International Center for Advanced Studies, New York University, in November 1998. I am grateful to Harry Harootunian for the invitation and the participants in the seminar for their discussion of that draft. Chapter Four derives from talks to the conferences 'The Criticism of the Future', School of English, University of Kent, July 1997 and 'Social Emancipation: 150 Years After *The Communist Manifesto*', Cuban Academy of Social Sciences, Havana, February 1998. An earlier version appeared in *Socialist Register 1998: The Communist Manifesto Now*, edited by Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, Merlin Press, Rendlesham, 1998. Chapter Five was presented as a plenary paper to the 30th Congress of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) in Rennes, August, 1996. Thanks to Jean-Marc Poinot for the invitation. It first appeared in *Quelles Mémoires Pour L'Art Contemporain? Actes Du XXXe Congrès de l'Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art*, Presses Universitaire de Rennes, Rennes, 1997. Chapter Six had its distant origins in talks to the conferences 'Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?' at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, March 1996, and 'Healthy Alienation: Conceptual Art and Young British Art', Tate Gallery, London, June 1996. Its current, very different form was the result of a commission by Jon Bird and Michael Newman for their collection *Rethinking Conceptual Art*, Reaktion Books, London, 1999, to whom thanks are due for permission to use the material here. A preliminary version of Chapter Seven was presented to the conference 'Jean Laplanche: Explorations' at the Institute for Contemporary Arts, London, December 1999. I am indebted to Jean Laplanche for his response, which provoked the additional material included here.

Thanks to Howard Caygill for his comments, insightful as ever, on the initial proposal for the book. Special thanks for close readings of particular chapters are due to Francis Mulhern (who first suggested these essays might make a book), John Kraniauskas (who listened to or read them all in their original versions, and whose encouragement helped shape their final forms), Stella Sandford, John Fletcher and Lynne Segal, whose insistence that intellectual work make connections to broader cultural and political issues has been a model of critical practice, and upon whose support I depended throughout.

The MA in Modern European Philosophy and the MA in Visual Culture at Middlesex University provided the contrasting teaching contexts in which many of the ideas in the book were first expounded. I am grateful to the Center for the Critical Analysis of Contemporary Culture, Rutgers University, New Jersey, for providing me with a Research Fellowship in 1997–8 – and much to think about, especially about pragmatism – on its programme on 'The Aesthetic'. Thanks, in particular, for such a stimu-

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lating year to George Levine, Carolyn Williams, Elin Diamond and Xudong Zhang. This book is in many ways a by-product of that experience. The Middlesex University Research Committee NFFR fund provided me with the leave necessary to prepare the manuscript for publication.

In addition, I am grateful for kind permission by Nobuyoshi Araki and Araki Ltd for the use of his photograph as the cover image for this book.

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PHILOSOPHY IN CULTURAL THEORY

What is the place of philosophy in cultural theory? The question appears straightforward, so straightforward in fact – so straightforwardly cartographical – as not actually to be a philosophical question at all. For what could be more routine, in principle at least, than surveying a particular field (cultural theory) for the signs of a particular kind of discourse (philosophy) in order to plot the path of its presence? But this is not my concern here, this mapping of the different philosophies at work in different forms of cultural theory, in different nationally specific institutional locations. Rather, my interest is at once more general, more specific, and more critical.

It is more general insofar as I am primarily concerned with the status and form of philosophical discourse *per se* within the field of cultural study, rather than with the reception of particular philosophies, less still particular philosophers; although the two cannot be wholly separated. It is more specific insofar as I am concerned with the theoretical trajectory of cultural studies in Britain and North America, from its origins in the post-imperial crisis of national identity in Britain in the 1950s to the transnational aspirations of its more recent ‘globalized’ and internationally appropriated forms. Finally, what I have to say is, hopefully, more critical than a mere typology, in the broad Kantian sense of criticism, to the extent that it is concerned with the reflective demarcation of a field of legitimacy. In this case, what is the legitimate, appropriate and most productive role for specifically philosophical modes of thought in cultural theory today?

What role *could* and *should* philosophical thought play in cultural theory, were things to be as they might? This is another way of asking: how ought cultural theory to be (philosophically) today? Such a question is as much about cultural theory as it is about philosophy. To recognize this is to open out the original question – the role of philosophy in cultural theory – onto a much broader history: the troubled history of modern philosophy’s relations with its non-philosophical others, its constitution by these relations, and consequently its not infrequently tortuous relations to itself. For in its Anglo-American development, cultural studies appears

as one of philosophy's most stridently *non*-philosophical – indeed, proudly 'post-philosophical' – others. What is to be gained from an encounter between philosophy and so purportedly post-philosophical a field?

This chapter has five parts: a section on philosophy and non-philosophy – that is, on philosophical autonomy and disciplinarity; an account of theory in the constitution of cultural studies; a brief discussion of pragmatism; further remarks on the relationship between 'use' and 'truth'; and a concluding section on those features of cultural theory – totalization, generality and abstraction – that point towards a philosophical interpretation of its most general concepts. In each instance, I offer a snapshot of a broad, occasionally sweeping view: a condensation, a simplification, a vignette. This series of stills carries with it an argument of its own.

Philosophy and non-philosophy

It is a defining characteristic of Western philosophy since Kant that it has been preoccupied by the need to justify itself as a distinct and self-sufficient form of intellectual activity or 'discipline', while nonetheless retaining a connection to the forms of universality characteristic of its more expansive, intellectually promiscuous past, in which 'philosophy' was synonymous with theoretical knowledge in general – the terminological distinction between philosophy and the sciences being the product of the late eighteenth century, no earlier. This process of self-justification has been an anxious, contradictory and crisis-ridden affair, lurching wildly between bloated self-importance and annihilating self-depreciation, in which, as the last century progressed, professional philosophy was often reduced to narrowing down its justification to exist to its unique ability to demonstrate that it has, in fact, no right to exist, at least as previously practised and understood in the modern period: that is, as a discipline of the universality of autonomous reason. (I take this as a broad working definition of modern philosophy: the discipline of the universality of autonomous reason, which is also therefore necessarily a form of self-discipline, a discipline of the rational self.) Philosophy's sole consolation in such cases has been that this demonstration must be ongoing, must continue piecemeal, *ad infinitum*, philosophical utterance by philosophical utterance, if it is not to become self-refutingly generalized: a definitive result of the universality of autonomous reason.¹ In such instances, philosophy lives on only negatively, yet nonetheless secure in the piecemeal character of its scepticism about itself. Such is the affinity between the late Wittgenstein and a certain practice of deconstruction, for example, marked out by Rorty, who acts here, as elsewhere, as a point of indifference between the two traditions. Thus, over the last fifty years, the stripped down, shiny new, early-century professionalisms of analytical philosophy and Husserlian phenomenology – the Anglo-American and 'continental' versions of philosophy as an independent