21 October 2013: Travelling Concepts

From Rosie Lavan


Points raised in the discussion included:

- **What is travel?** The concept of travel is broader than interdisciplinary travel/travel between academic communities: concepts travel also e.g. across countries and cultures, and through time. Travel can enrich a concept: an obvious precedent here is Classical reception. The more a concept accrues the more useful it becomes. Bal’s travel metaphor was seen as useful by some because she speaks in terms of an itinerary: she’s not suggesting that travel must always be in the same direction, but that different stops can be made along the way with the same concept. We compared this to earlier discussion of Said’s ‘Traveling Theory’ in which a concept is not simply detachable but has to engage with its original contexts in order to take on new associations.

- Bal gives the example of **hybridity** which moved from biology through imperialist discourse and into postcolonial literary studies and this was much discussed in the session. Can the original meaning of the term “hybridity” be misread, because we understand the redefinition? Cf also intertextuality: Kristeva never acknowledges her debt to Bakhtin for the use (and misreading) of his term. You don’t need to be aware of the etymology of a word to use it— is it similar with concepts and their origins? But did the concept of e.g. hybridity actually change, or was it simply its application? Part of the postcolonial project has been to reclaim the ideological perspective in which we view concepts—that’s what’s changed.

- **Concept and methodology**: can you dissociate concept from methodology? We disagreed on this. Those that thought you could separate them argued that methodology seems more systematic and concept is freer because it can travel, it can pick up and leave behind different associations etc.

- **Concept or buzzword?** There was some scepticism about the difference between the two: you don’t have to do anything with the latter, whereas a concept with intellectual content implies that something can be done with it.

- **Concept as hermeneutic tool?** Does a concept help organise and make visible something certain?

- **Definitions**: some saw problems with Bal’s terms, e.g. why she has a problem with the use of the word “uncanny”. Isn’t it always a concept? And why doesn’t she define
“culture”—isn’t that just as problematic as “concept”? Can’t we understand concept as a larger semantic field?

- **Is Bal simply conceptualising what has always happened?**

- **NB the institutional application of what she’s talking about—and the value of her call for disciplinarity.**

- **Rigour**: her resistance to that term proved divisive. Some interpreted it as a hostility to academic pedantry/rigour as a mask for intellectual pedantry; others read it as a resistance to narrowly defined academic fields which deny room to creativity and speculation (for want of better words) in critical writing. Why can’t academics be creative? This raised questions about cultural theory—some arguing that it lacks rigour because it tries to be everything and nothing at once; others argued that that’s absolutely **not** what it does, that cultural theory is always focused on specific things, the material objects and media which make culture—be it TV, film, speech acts, literature etc. This in turn opened up questions about the difference between anthropology and cultural theory—and if we have the former why do we need the latter? Is anthropology more colonial—more inclined to look at a culture as a whole from outside that culture? While cultural theorists operate from inside a culture and are there for able to make more distinctions?

- **Alan Sokal’s Fashionable Nonsense (1997)** cited—with Sokal’s contention about the abuse of scientific concepts by philosophers and intellectuals.