“Image is the subjectivity”

An interview with Mieke Bal about cultural and visual analysis[1]

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Understanding cultural analysis is impossible without engaging with Mieke Bal’s academic and artistic contributions. From her early theoretical works such as *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1985), she has been interested in the power of images in literature in terms of *focalization*, and in the last decades, she has proposed *visuality* as the object of cultural analysis.

The Twenty-Second International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities[3] at Sapienza University in Rome (June 26–28, 2024) was the opportunity to talk with this renowned Dutch theorist, who has worked in several fields including critical semiotics, anthropology, narratology, psychoanalysis, feminist theory, relations between verbal and visual arts, intercultural theory, critique of capitalism, methodology of interdisciplinary approaches, museology, French and English nineteenth-century literature, both Hebrew Bible and Coran, seventeenth-century art or popular culture. As if her academic achievements weren’t enough, nowadays, she is also an accomplished artist interested in video art—particularly installations and filmmaking—to analyse social issues such as migration, “madness”, history of thought, or rampant capitalism and romantic love as lures, considering creative curating and cultural heritage for the present.

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3 This conference by the New Directions in the Humanities Research Network, as part of the Common Ground Research Networks, is annually held since 2003.

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Analysing this impressive background, the "act of looking" as focalization has been a constant in your career. Why have you been so interested in this relationship between the seen and the seer?

Mieke Bal (M.B.): The concept of focalization is between the narrator, who speaks, and what is happening within the story—the *fabula*. In between, there is a mediation, but it often goes unnoticed. The narrator simply states "this", and you accept it as truth. But there is always a mediation of someone, either the narrator outside or someone in the story who sees and mediates. For me, that third layer between them – the actors and the narrator – has always been important because that's where things get subjectivized, where things become less transparent, less obvious.

What interests me is the mediation itself because that's where subjectivity comes into play. Without it being said explicitly, subjective, it reflects what people think and see. Of course, it is not only seeing: you can also have focalization by hearing or other senses. But the point is that in-between there is a mediation, which makes the story subjective and gives a perspective on it: a vision. It's not the seeing in the literal sense, but the vision that inflects what's happening in a certain way. And that has always been my interest in narratology, and that's where I started.

And so, at some point, also there is another reason: I easily get bored if I know how to do something. So, once I know how to do it like analysing, I went in another direction, becoming interested in images. But it's not necessarily the image itself, it's the imagination that turns into *imaging*, turns into making something that you can perceive, that you can see, that you can hear.

Mieke Bal y Sneider Saavedra

In your career, there is a relationship between those first ideas about focalization and the more recent way you have taken as an artist, in which you experience that process of imaging by video art. What might be the relationship between these two fields you have worked in?

M.B.: I don't see them as separate fields. They are interdisciplinary, between art history, which is usually very dogmatic about how to look at images and literature, and art making or "figuring", to use Lyotard's concept. If you bring them together, something interesting emerges. And if you don't particularly focus on one dogma, in the discipline, but bring them together in a conversation, it becomes lively.

That's why recently, in my latest book, I developed the concept of *imaging*. As you know, you have the story, you know the actors who drive the narrative forward. Everything is somehow already in your imagination. But

how to make that into something that other people can also perceive? That is *imaging.* For me, making video art has been just a way of making it more accessible to the imagination of other people.

And not just to know "this" is what is represented. I don't like the word "representation" because of the way it suggests that the "thing" or "event" is already there and then you present it. I would like to use "presentation", rather than representation. People can perceive it in their minds or whatever. And I think that is important. That's where the interdisciplinarity between those two fields comes together.

Continuing this way, what are the relationships between cultural analysis and visual analysis? What are their places among the humanities?

M.B.: Cultural analysis is wider and broader. Visual analysis concerns one part of that. The visual part is the seeing. But you can look and you don't see. I wouldn't say cultural analysis is entirely different from visual analysis; rather, visual analysis is a subset of cultural analysis. Ultimately, the focus is on the *analysis* itself, whether cultural or visual. The reason I developed cultural analysis as a concept and a method is that I wanted to get rid of this sort of strictly political road. Without methods, the approach of cultural studies has become important at some point, but it has become a pretext for administrators to cancel departments and, you know, to save money because then all the courses can be open to other disciplines. But the point for me is that the analysis means that you relate to something (an object, an artifact, a ritual, or something that happens) and you look at it in detail. And for me, that detailed look is quite important. It is because I wanted to get rid of the sort of generalizing tendency of cultural studies.

Like "close reading"?

m.b.: Yeah, close reading for me is crucial because you don't overrule the object by saying this is my approach. I look at the objects and then you cite them right where you put an image called illustration. There is no way I would ever call it "illustration", because that is as if it's the object. It illustrates what I have thought. But no. I always tell my students: "Allow the object to speak back!". You have an argument. Then you come up with an example. And then, instead of going on as if the example has affirmed or confirmed what you have thought, you say: "OK, let's look again if this says what I said". Practically never exactly. It is always a little, you know: some things, yes; some things, no. The objects must get a chance to speak back in the sense that they can contradict the interpretation that you have proposed. This is why I don't want to use the word "illustration" for the examples because the object has the right to speak back.

One of my academic mottos is: "The object speaks back". You must give it a chance to do that. If not, you're overruling it. You're erasing it. You erase its specificity. What is important in the object is precisely those moments that are not quite about what you said. Those are not reasons to panic or to ignore. Those are the moments when you learn. Hence, "the trade of the teacher", to cite the title of a book of interviews, is all about that: you learn when you see that what you have argued isn't quite acceptable. There are other things in that object and that is very important. So, for me, that is the analysis, both cultural and visual.

Considering this interdisciplinary project of cultural analysis in which you have proposed the idea of "traveling concepts" across the specialized scholarship of humanistic disciplines, what do you understand for "humanities"?

M.B.: In certain cultures, like in German, they use the expression "the sciences of the mind" and the word "humanities" is the bucket where all the disciplinary fields that are not strictly a scientific fit, in the sense of physics or chemistry, go. So, for me, the humanities are all those sciences and fields that concern cultural situations, objects,

and histories that do not strictly obey the rules of science in the narrow sense. In this context, I think it's important to recognize that "humanities" is not an ideal term. That is because they didn't know another one. They just call it humanities, human sciences. I think it is a sort of a leftover category when you eliminate all the straight sciences with all the rules. Then you have a whole spectrum of fields that also change, expand, and narrow. Art history, for example, I wouldn't call, but I do call it "art in history".

Once I gave a lecture on Rembrandt at Columbia University in New York, and the professor said "You should be an honorary art historian" because he knows I am not. And I said: "Well, I'm very honored but no, thank you. I don't want to be an honorary or an ordinary art historian". Because that limits what I can do, that means that you have to go into that chronology and say "this has been influenced by that". And you try to reconstruct this. I don't want to be a part of that. You don't reconstruct history. You make it again, and you see how history is in the present. It's here. I mean, the emerald is there.

Right now, here in Rome there is a work by an Indian artist, Nalini Malani, in MAXXI – the National Museum of 21st Century Arts. There you see an image, a self-portrait of Rembrandt peeing, the man peeing. You see the urine coming out of his penis. That's an incredible image and no art historian would know what to do with it. Because that's sort of perverse, it's dirty itself. But it's one of the masters of world art, so how do you dare to complain about it! I think that's an example of how art history sometimes, not always (there are really good people doing that), but sometimes art history tries to overrule the art and to put the art in a box and say "This is this, this is that".

Man Peeing by Nalini Malani

I think that there is this tendency in humanities to obey rules. But the rules are just to have something to hold on to, some sort of guidance. And that's also the case in literature. The literary theory also has these rules; and narratology rules "This is this" or "This is that". As soon as it becomes an instruction for use, I reject it. I want art and literature to be alive and the past is part of that life today, which is why Cassandra4 answers at the end: "the future is now".

4 Protagonist of the essay film or theoretical fiction *It's about time!* by Mieke Bal, presented in her opening lecture.

For this reason, I've always had a real interest in anthropology, because there the rules are much more open. It is not self-rule-oriented because you cannot put people in a box. You can put texts and images in the box, but not people. And so, I always like the anthropological perspective. I've had a lot of fun with an anthropologist, Johannes Fabian, who is incredible, and he's now old and retired. But he has been a good friend for a while, and I've learned a lot from his work that I could use for my literary or visual analysis: my cultural analysis. I strongly believe anthropology is an important field. It is not part of the humanities, it is a social science. But who tells me what it is? Why would it be this and not that? If we have the word human in humanities, in the name, so anthropology is about humans; it is a synonym.

Now I understand why you don't define culture in the narrow sense...

M. B.: I don't define it in general. I don't like to define it because I don't believe in that. I think culture, as I see it, is where we live, what we do, what we see, what we connect; the social aspect, the media aspect, and all sorts of aspects to what we call "culture". That is why there are differences in different places, regions, countries, and continents, because in each place the connections are different, and you cannot put that together so easily and define it. I don't like to describe it anyway because of the fixation. So, I don't define culture, I just live in that, I look at it, I consider it, and I talk about it. That is culture.

This significance of images in whole human history has a peculiar way of appearing nowadays with mass media, social networks, and the use of new technologies for communication. How could cultural analysis help us to be aware of the power of these acts of looking as acts of interpretation? What can people do against the effects of propaganda and ideologies?

M. B.: I would say there is no cultural expression or feeling without ideology. That ideology is part of humanity. We have ideas and that leads to ideology. It becomes ideology when you impose it and say "This is the truth". In fact, it is only one interpretation. And I think what we can do, for example, is make students aware of the subjectivity and empower them to speak back, because not only the objects speak back, but also the students.

The student is not that sort of body that is taking notes while the teacher is monologuing. I've never wanted that, so after a few minutes, I always ask: "What do you think?" And in the beginning, the answer could be like: "I think?". And I insist: "Do you agree or not? And what do you agree with?". And that's how they learn to argue. I think the only way to resist propaganda (propaganda is imposing truths without argument, just "this is how it is") is by teaching students to speak back and to argue and to say: "Well, I can see your point here, but not quite". You don't have to be rude: "I go along with some of the things you say, and with some of it I don't". Therefore, we reject the imposition of ideology in mass culture and the social networks that are not so social.

This is the why I don't accept art that becomes propaganda: it is no longer art. That is not art, it's propaganda. And that is not the same thing. So, then you go back to MAXXI, you see the man peeing. What does that mean? What is it doing? Think about it. Instead of just saying "Oh, dirty!" Just think about it. And then the idea of humanities comes up because it's a human need and there is no way around it. And even the greatest artist has to pee, and so it becomes a totally different issue. I think that is when art has something to say. And not just to be followed. And I completely believe in that importance.

In my opening lecture at this conference, I quickly cited Flaubert who was one of the greatest writers in the world history of literature. And one of the greatest jerks with women, who was horrible with and about women. But he wrote a novel that is fiercely feminist. How is that possible? Because he doesn't just follow and copy what he

sees. He is fighting and arguing, and that's how he comes to these incredible insights and images of a woman who is victimized by her time and by her culture, and above her, she is a victim of her culture and a jerk like Flaubert, who is awful with women. We see it. He makes an *imaging* of it. I think that is an example of a great artist. Not a great man, but a great artist.

In that way, when you consider images as acts of seeing, it's not only about the action of seeing itself, it's about the creation of your life in your mind. You start having habits about what you see, what you are, what you live, what kind of a world this is.

M. B.: Right! You have the intellectual and artistic imaginary baggage. You have ideas, you have other people you talk to. You're never alone. In that sense, seeing is a creation. It's not seeing what is there. You see what is there and then you start to think, and you make something of it and then it becomes this *imaging*, turning it into something different for each person in each moment. And that is really important: to consider seeing in that way and not as an absolute perception. Seeing is not just perception. I also like to distinguish looking from seeing. Looking is searching what you perceive. But then you have an idea and you see something. That is the next step: interpreting and giving it sense.

So, if the humanities have a mission, it is to teach how looking leads to seeing. If you give yourself input in that process and if you allow yourself to come back to what you have seen before and what you thought was right, and now you see it a little differently to be sensitive to differences. This is totally crucial. And I think that is why the humanities have something beyond the sciences, something more flexible, something more, let's say, democratic in the sense that every single cultural person can participate with their own vision. For teachers, it is very important to make students aware of that process and empower them to participate and to come up with ideas, conclusions, and interpretations instead of following what the truth should be.

"The truth" we discuss here is the definition, the ideal as one only way. However, everybody has a singular truth: the way she or he sees the world, her or his vision.

M. B.: It's not like anything you think is good because you are in contact with other people, with teachers, with books, with objects. And that contact is always flexible. So, it is never defined. The fact that there is a painting in a museum doesn't define it. It's just a way of making it available to the public to respond to. So, people in a museum are participants. They have an empowerment. They can speak back. They must make the object speak back, between the teacher and the students. The students must speak back. I have never been comfortable with students being silent. "Hey, come on, do something! Think!"

It reminds me of your book *The Trade of the Teacher*, in which you talk about the didactic triangle of teacher, student and teaching object. Could you tell us more about your role as a teacher?

M. B.: For me, the teaching situation is about learning. Another of my mottos is "If you don't learn from your students, you are a bad teacher". You learn from your students as much as they learn from you. And there is no way that the fact that I have more than thirty years of experience and have read more books is an excuse to impose my view. So, if they say: "but you have all this experience, you can judge", the answer is "No, because you're young and you have new experiences that I don't know. So, please, let me know".

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For me, the teacher's trade is really about this. It has always been very important, that there is an equality in power, not in knowledge. Of course, there are differences, but the power is not that the teacher has the power to destroy the silence or humiliate students. They are not allowed to do that, so the students can speak back. They must. If they don't, they are bad students. And the teacher is bad. I've always learned from students. Of course, they are twenty years younger and so they have experiences that I had never had.

Now let us focus on your concept of "preposterous history" and, in this way, the "engagement of contemporary culture with the past". What is the relationship between images and time?

M. B.: There are several relationships. First of all, the image takes time to be seen: it is time involved in participating in that cultural process of watching images. That is a temporal thing and that's why it is always important that visitors have the time to see. I made this plea when I started to curate an exhibition at the Munch Museum in Oslo. I wanted people to sit down, because they really need time in front of the paintings to really process them. Otherwise, people just walk around, take a picture, take a picture of the caption, and then move on. And that is not participation in the process of art. At first, the staff didn't agree: "You mean chairs? No way! No way! What do you mean?" Why not? "They can take a chair and smash the painting", was the answer, because they've had a sort of an institutional trauma that paintings have been destroyed and damaged and stolen. I said: "Is that the problem? I understand. Let's make benches that you cannot just lift up". So, in 5 minutes, the whole issue was solved. They never said "you don't need to sit". I said they need to sit because they need to give the works time, because this was the artist's legacy.

This is my first answer to your question about time. They need to have time. That is a different way of seeing art. For example, at the opening, I was in the room, of course in the galleries and I saw it is not only for older people who are too old to stand. I saw a 14-year-old teenager sit in front of a painting. And she was staring at it. And I was looking at her and I thought "Wow, she takes the time!". That's why I do it.

People sitting and talking while watching painting

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So, this is the thing about time that is so important, and this other thing, because you also asked about "preposterous history", is the tendency to cut the past off from the present. This is the reconstruction of what happened, which we can never know. But I say the past is *in* the present. You cannot see Caravaggio, or whatever, you cannot see the art if you don't see it from the present.

Indeed, in your lecture, It's about time! in the Twenty-second International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities here at Sapienza University, you propose: "Listening is about time, and time is more powerful than chronology", which I consider a virus. Could you delve into these interesting ideas?

M. B.: The title of my lecture is *It's about time* and that presentation is about time. I'm going to talk about time in the sense that this is my object. But it's about time with an exclamation mark: *It's about time!* We must do something: urgency. And those are two very different senses of time. And I thought the actress who plays Cassandra was so convincing. She says "It's about time that something happens". We have to do something. The activist side of that is very important. That's the exclamation mark that changes the meaning of this phrase. It's about time! It's the importance of urgency that comes up. You can talk about time in all sorts of ways, and one of the things that I try to bring up is that time is also rhythm, like breathing, you know, but there is also the time of cultures, as we call them; this historical perspective. Also, an issue of time. So, there are lots of senses in which time matters. But you cannot say here it's time. Look at this time. No, never. It's not visible.

Your books Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the image-word opposition and The mottled screen: reading Proust visually are examples of the interdisciplinary based on your idea of traveling concepts in humanities, in this case, between art and literature. From the point of view of cultural analysis, what is the relationship between these two ways of creation?

M. B.: I think that they are indispensable in both cases, to each other. You cannot present a story without visual images because every word in the text is, in a sense, an image. They have their own sound, time, their own contexts, frames, functions. So, they are different media, but not separate media. Both are creations. Or as I call it now: "imaging of thoughts". And this is why I call this book from 2022 *Image-thinking*. Image-thinking as thinking through images, thinking with images. The thinking and the making are not separate.

This is why I started to make videos. I just had to be close to the people I was studying, thinking about. I wanted to study a Muslim family. I cannot study a family, I can interact with them. And this is where the friendship came up. I'm still friends with them twenty years later because friendship was the basis of connecting. This incredible scene is in my first film. There is this marriage of an illegal immigrant. He married a woman who was born in France but also came from Tunisia and was lovely, fantastic, and we made the film about the marriage, and they were sitting the day before the real wedding. They were sitting and singing wedding songs, and the father of the bride was sitting there with, on one side, his neighbour, on another side, his younger daughter. At some point, the daughter takes her mother's headscarf and puts it on her father's head. So, the father is disguised as a woman. In the filming, he looked straight into the camera, and smiled. And his smile was not by an approving person saying that he saw the point and that it was funny. And the neighbour takes it off angrily. Because he is a man, he could

not have a headscarf. That's a whole discussion. That's an essay in a sense between these different perspectives. I think that's wonderful that you can show that in a film, just standing there with your camera on.

The father with burka, from Mille et un jours

To conclude this interview in that way, as the video artist you are, please tell us why you consider artmaking itself as a cultural analysis. In this way, could criticism or any theoretical approach in humanities become creative writing or artwork?

M. B.: It has to be done. So, it doesn't go by itself, but absolutely whatever you imagine that you study something, becomes a new artwork in a way. Of course, it's not always clear and not everybody has to tell. I cannot draw at all, for example. So, I would never try that. I cannot. But I can imagine things and make an image that tells something theoretical. And that is, for example, this whole thing about focalization. That says something about the essential subjectivity of narration. There is no objectivation possible. It is always subjective because there's always that focalization in between, and for me, that is the way in which theorizing can become an image through this concept of imaging. It becomes an image, and that image is the subjectivity. And you see that in some of my films, like *Madame B*, which is based on Flaubert's novel, you see it happen: you see it turn from one to another, like the mother of Charles, the husband, is very aggressive against her daughter-in-law, Emma, and she follows her in a store and she is spying on her. You see what in the novel it's just in a sentence she says. And then she says: "I will do this". But in the film, you see it happen. And that is incredible. So, in that sense, imagining, interpreting is already making another work, almost done.