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Quinn, Malcolm (2006) Practice-Led Research and the Engagement With Truth. In: Proceeds of Reflections on Creativity. Duncan of Jordanstone College, Dundee University. ISBN 1899837566 [Historical and Philosophical studies > Philosophy Creative Arts and Design > Visual Communication]

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Practice-led Research and the Engagement with Truth

Dr Malcolm Quinn

Abstract

This paper offers the thesis that practice-led research in art and design should propose changes to those relations of knowledge that currently ensure the integrity of practice and the neutrality and objectivity of theory. I assert that the 'common ground' of theory and practice can be located within a structure of identification that binds the practitioner to the analyst or theorist of practice. I offer an example of one theorist (Slavoj Žižek) who has instituted a game with this structure of identification of theorist and art object, a game that is necessarily limited by conditions for the 'practice of theory' in the humanities. A way beyond these limitations is suggested in a discussion of Lars von Trier's film *The Five Obstructions* (2004). This film makes a series of displacements of the integrity of practice within the forms of identification that structure the engagements of Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth.

Full Paper

The most positive thing that practice-led research can do is to work directly on the relations of knowledge that structure the practices of art and design. As I will go on to show, this kind of direct intervention in the relations of knowledge is precisely what Humanities-based 'Theory' has shown itself unable to accomplish, largely because it has no thorough and consistent way of understanding its own structures of identification. By 'identification' I mean such things as desire, passivity, narcissism and ambivalence. Theory seeks out identification outside itself, in social and cultural objects, and particularly in the objects of art, which are often held up as The Big Identifier, the ultimate bait. Artists are often quite happy playing their role within this division of labour, in which art is subsumed in its identifications and theory is taken up with their contextualization and rationalisation. It is this relationship that became institutionalised in art schools following the Coldstream reforms of the late sixties, in which a homunculus of the university, the art historian or theorist, was injected into the art school bloodstream in the hope of raising the intellectual game. It can be argued that all that Coldstream succeeded in doing was

reinforcing the distinction between the technicians and the analysts of desire. An editorial in *The Burlington Magazine* in 1962, commenting on the Coldstream reforms, offered the thesis that the appropriationist habits of talented artists made them particularly unsuitable for art historical instruction:

Every year there will be a handful of Francis Bacons among them [art students], to whom the contrast between early, and late, Poussin is always going to be a matter of total indifference ...but who will snatch whatever they require – it may be a still from an early film, or a Piero – anywhere out of the past in order to fill some gap in their own fantasy world.¹

The editorial concluded that the teaching of art history in art schools might be best seen as the inculcation of 'university-lite' transferable skills for those government-funded mediocrities whom, unlike the handful of putative Francis Bacons, would end up as teachers and administrators. This suggested that rather than raising standards in art schools, Coldstream's reforms would make it easier to lower the bar. The intellectualisation of art since the late sixties has thus resulted in an unhealthy stalemate between the assumption that art schools exist to deal with exceptional practices, and its corollary, the assumption that theory exists to bestow a universal culture of thinking on a number of self-sufficient divisions of practice in art schools. Practice-led research, however, holds out the possibility of treating theory and practice as a single set of knowledge relations and a single stream of identifications, which has implications that, one hopes, both practitioners and theorists will find irksome, gratuitous and particularly unwelcome. Students whose practice-led projects I am currently supervising are quite happy to work directly and without qualms with elements such as ambiguity, duration and belief as a means to investigate what produces knowledge within their own practice and that of others. For my part, I am currently leading a small AHRC-funded collaborative training programme in partnership with the Department of Psychology at Brunel University, on Psychoanalytic Models of Art and Performance. One of the aims of this programme is to use psychoanalysis to analyse the identifications of practice and theory from within, through a series of seminars focusing on elements of practice such as the act, time and the object, rather

¹ 'Art History in Art Schools', anonymous editorial, *The Burlington Magazine* no.716 Nov., 1962, p.451.

than using psychoanalytic theory to analyse a set of discrete artworks.

Insofar as psychoanalysis offers both the possibility of exploring mechanisms of identification within practice, and the possibility of reneging on its own patterns of identification in the name of applied psychoanalysis, it is apposite to use the psychoanalysis of art as an example of how to locate the 'missing identifications' of Theory and Anti-Theory. The example I have chosen is from Slavoj Žižek's book *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kiésłowski Between Theory and Post-Theory*.² In this text, Žižek pursues an ethical discourse on the degraded condition of contemporary cultural theory. While developing this line of thought, Žižek also seems to perpetrate an unobtrusive hoax, which radically undermines the rigorous relationship between psychoanalytic interpretation and its objects (films, literature, world events) that has characterised his own philosophico-psychoanalytic method. He sets up the hoax by affirming his disgust at his own interpretive position:

Some months before writing this, at an art round table, I was asked to comment on a painting I had seen there before for the first time. I did not have any idea about it, so I engaged in a total bluff, which went something like this: the frame of the painting in front of us is not its true frame, there is another, invisible frame implied by the structure of the painting, which frames our perception of the painting, and these two frames do not overlap—there is an invisible gap separating the two ...To my surprise, this brief intervention was a huge success, and many following participants referred to the dimension-in-between-the-two-frames, elevating it into a term.³

The decisive twist comes much later in the book, when Žižek inserts his own spoof of the 'dimension-in-between-the-two-frames', word for word, into an apparently serious discussion of paintings by Malevich, Hopper and Munch.⁴ It is also worth noting that Žižek has repeated (or more accurately 're-framed') this passage in his more recent book *The Parallax View*,⁵ which also refers in its introduction

² Žižek, S. *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kiésłowski Between Theory and Post-Theory*, London: BFI, 2001.

³ Žižek, S. *ibid.*, p.5-6.

⁴ Žižek, S. *ibid.*, p.130.

⁵ Žižek, S. *The Parallax View*, Cambridge-MA: MIT Press, 2006.

to 'cruel traps ...set here and there throughout the book'.⁶ With his riddle of the frames, Žižek captures both the problems of the theorist and those of the anti-theorist – while we warm the cockles of our hearts at the gullibility of those at the art round table, we are ourselves drawn deeper into the trap, as we accept the rhetoric of truth and enlightenment his anti-theoretical parable offers. Anti-theory nearly always offers a moment of moral re-armament and enlightenment, and sets us on our guard against the immoral machinations of the theorist, who is generally portrayed as a huckster or charlatan, trading in shoddy intellectual goods. An exchange of letters on the subject of continental philosophy in the *Guardian*⁷ in May 2006, which rehearsed the tired debate over Jacques Derrida's honorary degree at Cambridge, showed that anti-theoretical discourse in Britain, like campaigns against 'tenured radicals' in the USA, is still with us. Specific attacks on theory in academia have gained fresh impetus from their association with a more recent discourse against political 'spin'. Yet Žižek shows that the anti-theorist should be careful. The second occasion on which Žižek's device of the 'dimension-in-between-the-two-frames' appears in *The Fright of Real Tears*, locates both theorist and anti-theorist within the same space, in which there is a kind of barter or negotiation taking place over the quality of goods within a set of relations between producers and consumers, in a marketplace of ideas. For a moment at least, his hoax places Žižek himself in quite another space, clearly beyond the pale, in which he has voided the social contract between writer and reader that supports the exchange of knowledge. Scandalously, Žižek has gone to the roots of knowledge in instances of identification composed of desire, passivity, narcissism and ambivalence, and raised the tentative possibility that his entire *oeuvre* might be merely a cruel joke on the reader's wish for intellectual satisfaction. Žižek's hoax seems to be an anti-intellectual gesture, yet, if we accept his stated position on the problems of cultural theory, it also seems to be concerned with the ethical positioning of truth. Is truth a matter of intellectual contest, free debate, the wresting of one's opponents in the free exchange of knowledge? Or does truth appear within the separation or displacement of those moments of identification that glue social relations of knowledge together? In Žižek's story of the art round table and the deception that follows it, art is the bait that situates the theorist and the anti-theorist within their tug-of-war over truth – but art can also be that which promises to pull their mutual

⁶ Žižek, S. *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷ 'Blinded by a French Philosophical Fetish' *The Guardian*, 20 April 2006, p.35.

identifications apart. When the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu submitted one of his last reports on the impossible task of critique in his book *Pascalian Meditations*, he made a significant choice of an exit strategy from the charmed circle of academic life:

Being convinced that Pascal was right to say that “true philosophy makes light of philosophy”, I have often regretted that academic proprieties prevented me from taking this invitation literally: more than once I have wanted to fight the symbolic violence that is exercised, firstly on philosophers themselves, in the name of philosophy, with the weapons most commonly used to counteract the effects of that violence — irony, pastiche and parody. I envied the freedom of writers ...or of the artists who from Duchamp to Debatou, have, in their own artistic practice, constantly subverted the belief in art and artists.⁸

In *Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu also wonders whether his critical work is not ‘a little perverse’ in creating a schism between himself and his fellow academics:

When he simply does what he has to do, the sociologist breaks the enchanted circles of collective denial [of the social world by academics]. By working towards the ‘return of the repressed’, by trying to know and make known what the world of knowledge does not want to know, especially about itself, he takes the risk of appearing as the one who ‘gives the game away’— but to whom, except to those with whom, in so doing, he breaks ranks ...?⁹

Despite Bourdieu’s use of psychoanalytic language to indicate epistemological radicalism, one is entitled to ask whether Bourdieu gives ‘the game’ away at all, since a little perversion goes a long way towards confirming the manners and rules of intellectual freedom. As Duchamp’s hoax proves, a true ‘return of the repressed’ does not reflect an institution or a discourse as it is in terms of its internal and external dispositions and historical trajectory, but inversely, as a thing which it *cannot* be on those

⁸ Bourdieu, P. *Pascalian Meditations* (trans. Richard Nice), Cambridge: Polity Press 2000, p.2.

⁹ Bourdieu, P. *ibid.*, p.5.

terms. Thierry de Duve has argued that the purpose of Duchamp's gesture was 'the testing of the Independents' liberalism' by showing how a discourse on freedom prohibited its actual expression.¹⁰ The subsequent embarrassment over the urinal exposed the difference between the Independents' own historical critique of previous, less open submissions, and the implicit restrictions imposed by this historically founded notion of progress. The urinal is manifest as the future that has been forestalled by the supposedly forward looking and liberating historical reflection; it appears from within this historical notion of progress as its unconscious possibility — its failure, in fact, to be progressive. For Terry Eagleton, this trust in the critical power of historical reflection is the besetting sin of a theorist such as Frederic Jameson. In a recent review of Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future*¹¹ he claims that Jameson substitutes judgements on things for a practice of returning them to their historical contexts:

Grasping their historical significance, or even seeing them as historically inevitable, takes over from the self-righteous rhetoric of commending or condemning them. Or, indeed, assessing their truth, a word which Jameson has now ominously begun to put in scare quotes.¹²

For Eagleton, Jamesonian theory, 'this great bulldozer of literary style' that aims to level the intellectual landscape beneath it, has run into sand because of its single-minded dedication to the project of dissolving text into historical context, and its concomitant refusal to engage with an ethics of truth. However, Eagleton's own position has not shifted significantly from the 'anti-culturalist' polemic he offered in *The Idea of Culture*.¹³ In that text, he took the standard anti-theoretical line of campaigning against types of knowledge producers called 'cultural theorists', rather than addressing the conditions of knowledge production itself. One suspects therefore, that the kinds of 'truth' he would like to champion in his critique of Jameson might be the same list of iron circumstances of the world such as war, famine, poverty, disease and the displacement of

¹⁰ De Duve, T. *Kant After Duchamp*, Cambridge MA-London: The MIT Press, 1998, p.117.

¹¹ Eagleton, T. 'Making a Break' *London Review of Books*, vol.28, no.5 March 2006, pp.25-6.

¹² Eagleton, T. *ibid.*, p.26.

¹³ Eagleton, T. *The Idea of Culture* London: Blackwell, 2000. See also Quinn, M. 'The Legions of the Blind' in D. Beech and J. Roberts *The Philistine Controversy*, London: Verso 2002.

peoples¹⁴ that he lists in *The Idea of Culture*, and which he asserts that the elaborate fancies of cultural theory cannot reach.¹⁵ Eagleton's concern is with claims to truth, whereas one could say that, in *The Fright of Real Tears*, Žižek begins to play a game with the truth of our identifications, or to put this another way, the desires that are bound up with our positions within fields of knowledge, and our faith in 'end-state truth'. Ultimately, however, Žižek is himself cornered by the demands of cultural theory and the limits of applied psychoanalysis in the free market in ideas. In comparison with the sustained and corrosive attack on the contract between the writer and the reader offered by a book such as La Fontaine's *Songs of Maldoror*, or Sade's *One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*, his hoax is understated, and does nothing to trouble his reputation as a significant cultural theorist who may also be regarded as one of our most important anti-theorists. Only in *The Fright of Real Tears* does this balance of forces threaten to 'go critical'; most of the time, this pro- and anti-theoretical paradox fuels a textual performance that dramatises the current impasse of theory in the Humanities. This performance turns interpretation into a taunt that stretches credulity to breaking point (David Lynch is the key to understanding Kant; the war in the Balkans is structured like Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, etc.), whilst issuing intermittent demands for a revolutionary moment that might provide an emancipation from the failure of interpretation, and the dissipated energies of Jamesonian style theory.

So far, I have focused on two theoreticians of note, Žižek and Bourdieu, both of whom have something to say about the problems of theory. In pursuing this line of thought, both use art as an example, in very different ways. I have suggested that Žižek may be opening up the possibility of using practices of identification within relations of knowledge to disturb the unholy alliance of theory and anti-theory that drives his own textual performance and that of others. Žižek's view of art, however, is extremely simplistic,

¹⁴ Eagleton, T. *ibid.*, p.130.

¹⁵ Andrew Hemingway has taken issue with my characterisation of Terry Eagleton's view of cultural studies in his review of 'The Philistine Controversy' (see note 13 above) in *Historical Materialism* 13(3), 2005, pp.239-29. On p.257, Hemingway argues that 'Eagleton's target is not cultural studies as such, but a postmodern consumerist-liberal variant of the same.' However, in 'Eat it!' a piece in *The London Review of Books* 28 (11), 2006, pp.29-30, Eagleton does not distinguish between the academic and societal variations of culturalism, and demonstrates a specifically academic genealogy for the contemporary myth that 'Society is the new ground of being ...[and] culture is the foundation impossible to dig beneath.'

since he regards it as bait for those forms of desire, passivity, narcissism and ambivalence that structure our relationship to objects of knowledge. Bourdieu, on the other hand, knows a lot more about art, but has no interest in identification, and regards the radical practices of art as a potent but taboo alternative to his own reliance on rigorous methodologies of historical-critical reflection which, despite their rigor, are unable to accomplish the shift in relations of knowledge brought about by someone like Duchamp. In 1917, Duchamp had already shown that art could be a trap without simply being an aesthetic bait, in other words he had shown that relations of knowledge as desire can be distinguished from the desirable object of knowledge in the practice of art. Žižek's story of the 'art round table' shows us that humanities based theory is still unable to accomplish this kind of displacement in a definitive fashion, or with any kind of follow through.

As an example of how to 'follow through' in this way, I will refer in conclusion to Lars Von Trier's film *The Five Obstructions*,¹⁶ which is a series of violent displacements of the aesthetic integrity of one man's practice into the relations of knowledge and forms of identification that structure the discourse of two men, Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth. In *The Five Obstructions*, truth appears as a set of obstructions and constraints that arise from moments of identification and misrecognition; practice is reconstructed in the image of these identifications and misrecognitions. In the film, Von Trier casts himself in the role of the angel of death and the agent of causal and traumatic truth, he invites Leth to remake his short film *The Perfect Human*¹⁷ five times under specific conditions, which include using no edit greater than half a second of film, remaking the film in the most miserable place in the world, reconstructing *The Perfect Human* as a cartoon, and, most traumatic of all, the threat of remaking the film under conditions of perfect freedom. This is what the unity of theory and practice actually means; the mutually assured destruction of the relations that have ensured the integrity of practice and the neutrality and objectivity of theory and analysis. What accomplishes this destruction, paradoxically, is a fidelity to the truth of the identifications that bind the practice to its analysis in the most intimate and telling ways. While I would not

¹⁶ Von Trier, L. *The Five Obstructions*, 2004.

¹⁷ Leth, J. *The Perfect Human*, 1967.

claim that *The Five Obstructions* is a piece of practice-led research, what Von Trier's film does offer is a model of how to re-imagine the relationship between practice and the analysis of practice, that may be useful to those engaged in doctoral and post-doctoral research.

At the beginning of this paper, I referred to one of the roots of practice-led research in the Coldstream reforms of the late 1960s, with their ambition to introduce a universal, humanities-based, university-like and 'university-lite' knowledge, with which to unite the different cultures of practice within UK art schools. If practice-led research is to be identified (correctly in my view) as one of the outcomes of these reforms, it also exists, paradoxically, as a possible solution to the stalemate between universal theories and particular practices that the Coldstream reports instituted. In practice-led research, both practice and theory can assume a degree of particularity and specificity that places them within a structure of recognition, identification and mis-identification of the kind that Von Trier institutes in *The Five Obstructions*. In the early stages of their projects, researchers in art and design are often made keenly aware of how their own identification with particular kinds of ostensibly radical theory actually supports the integrity and cohesion of their practice, rather than disclosing its truth. If they then choose to do something about this state of affairs, they may begin to take note of the truth of their identifications and start to build them into their research. If this exercise is conducted as a simple exercise in self-reflexivity, it does not achieve very much, but a deeper investigation into the relationship between (for example) the framing of a research question and the simultaneous formation of a structure of identification and recognition, could yield many benefits. Unfortunately, the current conditions of knowledge in the humanities, and the specialisation of academic production within the marketplace of ideas, is not conducive to these forms of investigation. At the moment, however, practice-led research in art and design exists in a unique space between the demands of the art market and the marketplace of ideas, where researchers can treat theory and practice as elements within a skein of knowledge/identification, the investigation of which calls for its own methodologies and exemplary texts. In this paper, *The Five Obstructions* is offered as an exemplary text for this kind of investigation, while Žižek, Bourdieu, Eagleton and Jameson illustrate the terms of a problem in pursuing this type of research, as this presents itself within Humanities-based 'Theory'. Whether practice-led researchers in art and design can create, and then adequately translate, their own exemplary texts on the

knowledge/identification nexus for the benefit of researchers in the Humanities, remains to be seen.