

Two Paradigms of Contextualisation

1 Introduction

The topics of cultural studies are usually ambiguous and polymorphic. I therefore call cultural goods, actions, practices and institutions which constitute the cultural field "oscillating objects" due to their semantic and functional openness. A novel or a painting – to take just two examples from the arts – may simultaneously have various cultural, social, political and economic functions. They may exemplify a conception, they may be political statement, be used and misused for propaganda, or they may appear in a predominantly economic setting. Thus the embeddedness of cultural goods in several practical fields, anchorages of meaning, normative systems and in various groups of interests is *categorically unavoidable*. For this reason, contextualisation is an indispensable methodological strategy in avoiding reductionism or essentialism.

Yet, do we all mean the same by the term "contextualisation"? At first sight, many scholars agree that "context" refers to a system of frameworks, social values, commercial practices, collective interests and institutional powers that pre-structure the process of production, distribution, presentation and mediation of cultural goods and services. Looking more closely at the respective methodologies, we can clearly distinguish between (at least) two predominant paradigms:

- Post-structuralism, continental hermeneutics and some kinds of social phenomenology view culture as a discursive 'swarm'. For them, cultural goods are threads interwoven in a textual 'fabric'. Thus they define contextualism either as inter-textuality or as discourse analysis. I shall call this approach the "*text paradigm*" because the text metaphor – culture is textual – is pivotal.
- Others, especially theorists inspired by Marxism, pragmatism or Ludwig Wittgenstein's late philosophy view "context" as a practical background and form of life. Consequently, they stress the constitutive role of habits, conventions, rules and institutions. This approach is called the "*praxis paradigm*".

In this paper I shall contrast the two approaches and discuss some aspects of context analysis.

2 The text paradigm

Epistemology based on the so-called "linguistic turn" considers cultural goods and consequently artworks as basically semiotic entities constructed in particular social settings. Social settings are regarded to be structured by discourses, and the objects of cultural and sociological studies are conceived as discursive, too. Cultural goods and practices, of course, exist in various forms and media, such as music, literature, sculpture, or dance; yet, formally, they are regarded and treated as signs. This specific view is based on the argument that meaning, a priori, is a discursive event.

To consider a particular object or a performance as "text" means putting special emphasis on its signifying function, and implies a semiotic approach. Signs, however, are not isolated symbolic entities existing by themselves, they are rather elements integrated in sets of rules and grammars which determine their syntactic and semantic usage. For this reason, the textual approach maintains that all cultural goods

- are meaningful entities
- only appear in pre-structured frameworks, and
- are interwoven with other cultural goods and practices through reference, allusion, differentiation, opposition and negation.

Another central idea in the text paradigm is the nexus between a particular artwork (i.e. a sign) and some general symbolic order. Symbolic order is a system of cognitive structures determining behaviour patterns, individual perceptions, experiences and valuations. To explain the invention and reception of an artwork, we have to reveal their intrinsic relations with their respective preconditions, i.e. the structure and social function of the relevant discourses. For this purpose, researchers try to find textual inter-relations and affinities with general ideologies, dominant practices and configurations of social and political power in order to explain for instance how it was possible in the early 20th century to claim that a common everyday object could also be perceived and experienced as a work of art. In this sense, synchronic analysis of references and sign-operations has become established.

Jacques Derrida (1976: 158) defended the text paradigm, arguing that

"there is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text] (...) because we have access to their so-called 'real' existence only in the text and we have neither any means of altering this, nor any right to neglect the limitation".

Because of the assumption that the meaning of a cultural good is always textually constituted, and that texts are embedded in a system of inter-relations with other texts, intertextual analysis seems to be the only adequate method. For Derrida inter-text is the frame around the

work. The frame as a significant metaphor indicates factors helping to make an object visible and recognisable for the viewer. The frame, according to Derrida, does not indicate something "outside" the semiotic object, since it has a constitutive function for its being a meaningful entity and for its being seen and its usage in a such-and-such a way. Semiotic relations existing in the object offer us all the information and hints we need to understand how they create meaning. Thus, the traditional dichotomy between the inside and outside, subjectivity and objectivity, intentions and expressions, which has been crucial in western metaphysics, is explicitly rejected. Inter-textual relations as an intrinsic process consist of chains of innumerable iterations forming part of the "symbolic order", or one may call it "symbolic universe", or the "texte général" of a specific culture.

3 The praxis paradigm

Let's move on to the praxis paradigm. The late philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1994: §167) presents a pragmatic view on cultural and artistic topics when he writes:

"For how can it be explained what 'expressive playing' is? Certainly not by anything that accompanies the playing. What is needed for the explanation? One might say: a culture. – If someone is brought up in a particular culture, and then reacts to music in such-and-such a way, you can teach him the use of the phrase 'expressive playing'."

Here, contextualisation, in other words, reference to a cultural background, follows a specific purpose. By "culture" Wittgenstein does not mean a history of thought ("Geistesgeschichte"), but rather a practical framework structuring our cognition and actions. It is indeed the practice that gives things a sense. We perceive, understand and treat cultural goods in a certain way not because we grasp the same meaning but because of our shared cultural practices.

Wittgenstein's position, among others, marks an effort towards a practical turn in epistemology. Within this paradigm, cultural goods and more precisely artworks are not considered as entities of autopoietically operating signs, but rather as cultural articulations derived from specific cultural practices. The variety of cultural articulations gives us an indication of the diversity of cultural practices, or, paraphrasing Wittgenstein, of the variety of "practice games". Such "practice games" cannot be exclusively understood from a formalist point of view, since practices are not regarded as entirely discursive and linguistically formed. Acting in a practice field (playing guitar, dancing tango, planning art exhibitions or music festivals) presupposes a specific form of *practical* knowledge and competence intrinsic to the particular settings, rules, conventions and institutions that constitute a practice.

To sum up: The Wittgensteinian approach presupposes three assumptions:

- A practical framework constituted by conventions, rules and institutions prestructures our cognition and actions.
- Common understanding and valuation occurs because of shared cultural practices.
- Practical knowledge is intrinsic to a particular practice.

4 Critical Comparisons

Both the text paradigm and the praxis paradigm agree that the acts of production, conveying understanding and reception of a cultural good are structured by explicit and implicit rules and institutions. Furthermore, such actions and processes are not unique, or "private", because the ideal of an autonomous and spontaneously acting author (or viewer) is rejected by both positions. However, the interpretation of

- a framework and constitutive conditions of objects,
- the specific conception of rules and
- the underlying theory of epistemology are quite different in the two paradigms.

It is remarkable that the concept of "practice" is also used by followers of the text paradigm. For instance, Michel Foucault defines "practice" as a set of anonymous rules determined within a specific space-time constellation, which pre-structure the effects of propositions in a given social, economic and political field. So, in his view, practice is determined by discourses; it is discursive practice. Followers of the praxis paradigm indeed recognise the essential role of discourses in the formation of our judgements and actions, but they consider it unwarranted to attribute absolute status to textuality.

The underlying epistemology of practice is different. While poststructuralists consider discursive practices as mainly linguistically structured, the Wittgensteinian concept of practice is partly non-linguistic, that is to say, it has a fundamental practical dimension.¹ The practical dimension of action can be exemplified for instance in areas where sensual activities are essential – think of the dexterity of a professional piano player or of the visual-diagnostic competence of an experienced radiologist. Here we can find a form of knowledge which is neither discursive nor transferable to a symbolic formalism. It is a form of knowledge becoming effective only in action; it enables us to perform successfully. Its implicit and often tacit nature makes it rather elusive. The key conclusion from this insight is that contextual

¹ I think we may find here interesting similarities to the implicit concept of practice in Erving Goffman's and Howard Becker's oeuvre.

analysis should carefully observe concrete actions to discover the tacit sediments guiding action (see also Polanyi 1958).

5 A fundamental problem: extending the context of art

The common interpretation of context as "the condition in which something becomes possible" and subsequently the proclamation "context is everything, and everything is contextual" (see e.g. Grossberg 1999: 59f.) are not false, but they are not helpful at all.

- The recognition of the plurality of possible interpretations does not imply that *any interpretation is valid*.
- Further, the generalisation of contextualism evokes new problems, for instance the *boundlessness* of context. Not rejecting contextual analysis, one must think more precisely about its operationalisation.
- Finally, we have to clear the status of the relation of an object to its conditions. These conditions are a sort of specific guidelines, explaining the conception of the work, the choice of the means the way of realisation and finally its reception and social use (see also Baxandall 1987). It is questionable, however, whether these relations are *causal*.

Sceptics like Jacques Derrida (1988: 292-304) point out that context cannot be determined since every context has another context and so on. Any attempt to define a context therefore remains arbitrary and unfounded. Positions of this kind are plausible to a certain extent. They caution us against slapdash conceptions and dogmatic definitions. I do share this view, namely, that context is not given or empirically evident and that it is not definable from a theoretical point of view. It is for this reason, that I reject the conception of an original, historically and geographically pre-determined context.

In my opinion, contextualisation simply represents a heuristic construction generated in the course of a research project, which aims at steering processes of explanation and interpretation. Context, in this sense, is neither true nor false. A chain of particular decisions about how to design a context remains casuistic because it is based on selective highlighting of certain aspects. All these decisions before and during the research and interpretation process emerge from specific styles of thought, presuppositions, epistemic interests and other practical choices in considering the method of research to be applied, all of which cannot be totally grasped and critically reflected. Context therefore is determined by the ambiguity of observations, symbolic forms and interpretations as well as the perspectivity and intentionality of the chosen method. This insight urges the cultivation of epistemic modesty: in the realm of humanities, cultural studies and social sciences, objects and phenomena are socially

existing symbolic entities, which oscillate between various anchorages of meaning. Their contingency turns them into something like picture puzzle. There is no objective point of view although debates about a particular construction of context are meaningful. (For a further discussion see Zembylas 2004: 71-96.)

6 Conclusions

Without a specific context, things may mean anything or nothing. Contextuality as a basic modus of the constitution of "world" implies the rejection of any concept of autonomy as well as of any assertion of freely-operating autopoietic processes. A pragmatic approach to contextualisation should direct our attention to certain concrete intentional aspects: by whom, for whom, when, how and, lastly, for which purpose is an action, an object or an occurrence contextualised? After all we must contextualise particular contextual analyses in order to understand, how scholars construct a context.

Literature

- Baxandall, M. (1987), *Patterns of Intention. On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1976), *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1988), „Signatur, Ereignis, Kontext“. In Derrida, J., *Randgänge der Philosophie* (orig. *Marges de la philosophie*), Wien: Passagen.
- Grossberg, L. (1999), „Was sind Cultural Studies?“. In Hörning, K. and Winter, R. (eds.), *Widerspenstige Kulturen*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- Polanyi, M. (1958), *Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1994), *Zettel*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- Zembylas, T. (2004), *Kulturbetriebslehre. Grundlagen einer Inter-Disziplin*, Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag.