From Integrated to Interstitial Studies

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To do something interdisciplinary it’s not enough to choose a subject (a theme) and gather round it two or three sciences. Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new object that belongs to no one.

Roland Barthes, The Rustle of Language (1986, 26)

Interdisciplinarity as Integrated Studies

When academic scholarship extends beyond the parameters of a single discipline, it tends to follow one of four trajectories: (i) multidisciplinarity—drawing upon a range of disciplines to apply them individually; (ii) interdisciplinarity—engaging the disciplines in collaborative forms of inquiry; (iii) crossdisciplinarity—employing the disciplines to illuminate aspects of one another; or (iv) transdisciplinarity—transgressing and undermining disciplinary boundaries (Pollock 2004). This essay introduces a fifth term and proposes a sixth. The fifth term, “integrated studies,” emerged with the establishment of Athabasca University (AU)’s first master of arts degree in 2001: the MA—Integrated Studies. By avoiding all reference to previous variants of disciplinarity (multi-, inter-, cross-,
the integrated studies approach seeks to bring various avenues of inquiry together in such a way that they constitute new interpretive frameworks and new objects of knowledge. In this respect, the integrated model aspires to Barthes’s propagative vision of interdisciplinarity. It has certainly proven a popular mode of inquiry with students, facilitating the production of numerous student projects, but it has failed to generate a truly original object of knowledge, even from among the ranks of the most inspired and capable students. In this respect, the integrated studies model, even though it has moved many students closer to Barthes’s vision, has inspired none to realize it. Although innovative and inspiring in its own right, the integrated studies approach is simply unsuited to producing “a new object that belongs to no one.” The remainder of this essay is devoted to explaining why, exactly, this is the case and how this impasse can be remedied.

the genesis of the MA–integrated studies

Since its inception in 1970, AU’s mandate has been to remove the barriers that limit educational opportunities. To this end, a policy of open access is employed to minimize academic barriers, and provision at-a-distance is used to reduce geographic and economic barriers. Academic excellence is prized, but AU’s unique student demographic (74 percent of AU graduates are the first in their family to earn a degree), requires that equal emphasis be placed upon academic success. Open access, provision at-a-distance, and dedication to facilitating student success have come to define AU, and the very same principles informed the launch of its first and later graduate offerings. In 1994, an executive masters in business education (MBA) and a masters in distance education (MDE) paved the way for other graduate programs, including a master’s degree in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. (For the vast majority of AU students, their degree is terminal, so programming leans toward the pragmatic rather than preparation for advanced studies, and this has undoubtedly contributed to the success of AU’s undergraduate and graduate programs. That said, the graduate programming is flexible enough that it can be made sufficiently challenging to support students who wish
to pursue advanced degrees, evidenced by the fact that a number are now pursuing PhDs at some of Canada’s premier universities.) Following two years of discussion and debate, the decision was made to launch a masters in integrated studies (MA-IS), for logistical as well as curricular reasons: AU graduate programs exist on a cost recovery basis, so a potential for growth over time was essential, and since other universities were closing single-discipline master’s programs owing to shrinking enrolments, a degree that integrated the disciplines rather than placed them in competition made greater sense; furthermore, an integration of scholarly domains solved the problem of how AU, a small institution with insufficient faculty to support MAs in every discipline (fewer than 140 full-time faculty at the time), could provide students with an opportunity to pursue an MA in the liberal arts and social sciences. To ensure a range of curricular choices, only nine of the degree’s thirty-three credits are mandatory: two core courses (one theory-based, one method-based) and a final capstone project. Program development was organic, allowing faculty with a desire to teach at the graduate level to propose courses, within some curricular constraints (courses had to involve more than one disciplinary approach and had to promote a critically reflective attitude in students). As the complement of courses grew, affinities became apparent and several arenas of inquiry emerged: adult education, community studies, cultural studies, educational studies, equity studies, global change, historical studies, information studies, and work, organization, and leadership. The program opened in 2001, and students were required to declare at least one of these arenas of inquiry—initially designated specializations—as a focus area. More recently, a specialization in literary studies was added. Students are required to complete at least four courses in their designated focus area. A further, less structured focus area, Independent Track, is available to students with sufficient prior preparation, allowing them to create their own arena of inquiry, in consultation with and under the guidance of a faculty supervisor. The model proved both programmatically and economically viable, and extremely popular with students—so much so that enrolments mushroomed from 27 in 2001 to over 1200 in 2008.
INTEGRATED STUDIES IN CONTEXT

Somewhat ironically, the MA–Integrated Studies proved a victim of its own success. Rapid growth and high enrolments placed increasing stress on its organic model of development and integrative notion of interdisciplinarity, compromising its sustainability: pastoral and academic counselling, teaching, and supervising large numbers of students meant faculty had little time to reflect on how well the program was meeting its prescribed goals. In 2007, faced with an impending external review, it was time for a thorough reassessment of the program’s premises, processes, and purpose: hence the hosting of the 2008 symposium that served as the basis for this collection of essays on interdisciplinarity. The goal was to widen the scope of the program’s reassessment process to include the larger, international debate on the nature and practice of interdisciplinarity studies, allowing the program’s “integrated” model of inquiry to be situated in relation to new and emergent models of interdisciplinarity, affording an opportunity for the program not only to benefit from but also to contribute to the international dialogue on the theory and practice of interdisciplinarity. The symposium had three central aims: (i) to consolidate reflection upon and reassessment of the integrated studies approach to interdisciplinary teaching and research; (ii) to initiate a substantive dialogue among AU faculty and members of the national/international interdisciplinary community; and (iii) to make a contribution to the national/international debate on the theory and practice of interdisciplinarity in the form of a volume of essays that captured the debate’s current state, identified future trajectories, and served as a resource for practitioners, researchers, and students of interdisciplinarity. To that end, the symposium brought together leading interdisciplinary researchers and practitioners to debate the nature and scope of interdisciplinary studies in the twenty-first century, providing participants and observers an opportunity to explore and debate a range of topics of central importance to the practice of interdisciplinary teaching and research. This essay outlines one of the contributions to that debate: a call for a new model of interdisciplinary inquiry that expands the parameters of disciplinary thinking but retains its promise and purpose to further the pursuit of knowledge and distinguish opinion from truth. In this respect, interstitial studies, or at
least the model proposed herein, differs markedly from postmodern and post-structuralist “solutions” that throw the proverbial baby, the scientific world view, out with the bathwater, “scientism.”

FROM INTEGRATED TO INTERSTITIAL STUDIES

During the planning stages of AU’s MA–Integrated Studies, the descriptors multi-, inter-, cross-, and transdisciplinary were explicitly rejected, in an effort to avoid the simple adoption of another set of predetermined practices, the “discipline” of multidisciplinarity or transdisciplinarity, for instance. In choosing the term “integrated,” AU sought to acknowledge the interrelated complexities of the given, of an increasingly globalized world of interacting, evolving, and proliferating phenomena. Recognizing the given, as such, requires study not only through single-, multi-, inter-, cross-, and transdisciplinary lenses, but also with a view to its functionality as a field of activity/experience. The integrated studies model was intended to facilitate this end, and it clearly enjoyed successes in this area, but the greater challenge lies in how to build upon and further those successes. Reflection suggests that the task of constituting new modes of inquiry and new objects of knowledge demands that the given’s complexities be not only acknowledged but also radically reassessed. Heinz Insu Fenkl, former director of SUNY New Paltz’s Interstitial Studies Institute, takes the first steps toward such a reassessment in his essay “Towards a Theory of the Interstitial” (2003).

It was the publication of Fenkl’s first book, Memories of My Ghost Brother, that first alerted him to the ubiquitous presence of scientism, to “the power of binary oppositions in the world of publishing.” Fenkl, an author and associate professor of English and Asian studies, recounts the either/or logic that resulted in his book, which straddled the genres of “memoir” and “novel,” being assigned to the latter category. The publisher’s reasoning was unequivocal: the empirical evidence indicated that “memoirs by people who were not already famous did not sell well,” and since the book “had to be one thing or another . . . they made it a novel.” Fenkl later realized his publisher’s deference to scientism was “a general reflection of the way people think in western cultures” and that
such thinking holds sway far beyond the confines of the publishing industry, extending even into the realm of literary theory, even though it “is inadequate for dealing with an entire class of works” (Fenkl 2003). Fenkł labels this class of works “the Interstitial,” and sets out to reveal how these objects emerge into and recede from the reader’s consciousness, transforming the reader in the process. Fenkł realizes his insights into interstitial literary works have broader application, but their truly radical potential seems to escape him, and by choosing to limit the evidence he musters in support of his observations to anecdotes drawn from the realm of writing, he further reduces their critical impact. The implications of the interstitial, in fact, extend far beyond the realm of writing and, if generalized and fully substantiated, provide the basis for a revolutionary mode of scholarly inquiry—interstitial studies.

THE (UN)NATURAL ORDER

Fenkł (2003) begins his reflections on the interstitial by recounting how “the word ‘interstice’ comes from the Latin roots *inter* (between) and *sister* (to stand). Literally, it means to ‘stand between’ or ‘stand in the middle.’” The interstitial, Fenkł notes, differs from other states of betweenness such as “liminality” and “hybridity” because the “inter” of the liminal and hybrid refers to a *transitory* state, whereas that of the interstitial signifies a *prevailing* state. The distinction is important, especially if Fenkł’s findings are to be extrapolated, because while liminality and hybridity argue for an alternative perspective on the existing world view (interpretive framework), the interstitial presses for its complete reconceptualization: “An interstitial work does not require reintegration—it already has its own being in a willfully transgressive or noncategorical way” (emphasis added). Interstitial objects, by refusing *either* to be one thing or another, alert us to the fact that we are inescapably implicated in our choice of world view, and that world views are ineluctably value-based as opposed to fact-based, something Jorge Luis Borges demonstrates with alacrity in his brief essay, “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” (1942).

Borges reveals that, in an attempt to construct a universal language along the lines first envisaged by René Descartes, John Wilkins (1614–1672),
founder of the Royal Society and Bishop of Chester, first divided the universe into forty categories, subdivided those categories based on differences, and then further subdivided them into species, assigning “to each class a monosyllable of two letters; to each difference, a consonant; to each species, a vowel.” What Wilkins overlooks, however, is “a problem that is impossible or at least difficult to postpone: the value of the forty genera which are the basis of the language” (emphasis added). Why, for example, does Wilkins choose such categories as “stones,” “metals,” and “viviparous oblong fish”? To demonstrate Wilkins’s implication in his choice of categories and subdivisions, Borges contrasts the bishop’s schema with that of a mythical Chinese encyclopaedia:

These ambiguities, redundancies and deficiencies remind us of those which doctor Franz Kuhn attributes to a certain Chinese encyclopaedia entitled “Celestial Empire of Benevolent Knowledge.” In its remote pages it is written that the animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) Tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.9

That the realm of “animals” could be categorized in this manner rather than according to the Linnaean system (kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, and species) draws our attention to the fact that taxonomies are a reflection of what the inquirer judges important, or values, as opposed to some invariable, natural order. For Borges, “it is clear that there is no classification of the Universe not being arbitrary and full of conjectures, and that the reason for this is very simple: we do not know what thing the universe is.” Of course, as Borges notes: “The impossibility of penetrating the divine pattern of the universe cannot stop us from planning human patterns, even though we are conscious they are not definitive.” Questions of conscious awareness aside, the scientific world view has proven of great value to natural scientists, but its application in politics, economics, and ethics limits and constrains inquiry in these domains to what science values: objectivity, measurability, and...
predictability. The challenge, then, since we can never know “what thing the universe is” but are compelled to create “human patterns” in accord with our interests, formulations that structure and shape our perceptions of the universe, is to find an alternative scholarly mode of inquiry that furthers our understanding of the universe without denying our implication in our choice of world view, the subjective underpinnings of our formulations. This pursuit, to avoid the pitfall of scientism, must accommodate more than just the empirically and/or logically demonstrable, what we can know directly; it must also include what we can know only indirectly—the interstitial. More importantly, it is to acknowledge that the defining characteristic of whatever we know is necessarily unknown to us.

In a now (in)famous US Department of Defense news briefing, delivered 12 February 2002, Donald Rumsfeld, then Secretary of Defense, flirts with this relation between the known and unknown but fails to push it to its logical conclusion:

Reports that say that something hasn’t happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don’t know we don’t know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.10

What Rumsfeld leaves unsaid, but the interstitial makes clear, is that, in addition to being cognizant of (i) what we know (“known knowns”), (ii) what we don’t know (“known unknowns”), and (iii) what we don’t know we don’t know (“unknown unknowns”), we can (and must if we’re to avoid the trap of scientism) become cognizant of (iv) knowledge that is unknown to us (“unknown knowns”). This is imperative because the “unknown knowns” comprise our own implication in our formulations: “the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values” (Žižek 2004).11 In other words, for what we know to be more than mere conjecture, we must remain ignorant of the lens (values/interests)
we use to bring determinacy to the indeterminate. This entails becoming (a) fully cognizant of, and (b) completely embracing the interstitial. Fenkl’s observations of the interstitial move us closer to the first requirement but lack the evidentiary and persuasive force to bring about the latter. An account of the interstitial, to displace scientism, must be at least as compelling, explain scientism’s failings, and offer a non-prescriptive path to the extension of knowledge and pursuit of truth. The demands and scope of this task are beyond Fenkl, as the inclusion of “toward” in the title of his essay suggests, but his observations do, indeed, provide the mise en scène for a solution.

THE INTERSTITIAL

What intrigues Fenkl about an interstitial mode of inquiry, and what should be of tantamount interest to educators, is its potential to transform the inquirer: “What the Interstitial does, actually, is transform the reader’s consciousness. . . . In transforming the perceptions of the reader, interstitial works make the reader (or listener, or viewer) more perceptive and more attentive; in doing so, they make the reader’s world larger, more interesting, more meaningful, and perhaps even more comprehensible” (Fenkl 2003). A desire to foster a transformation of this nature certainly inspired AU’s choice of an integrated model of interdisciplinarity, but the results, although encouraging, have proven limited, demonstrating the need for an interdisciplinary mode of inquiry with a greater transformative potential. Fenkl likens the transformational effect of the interstitial, a “phenomenon of illumination and (re)discovery,” to “the moment of ‘epiphany’ in a story,” when “the reader’s consciousness of the story is transformed,” and notes that “while all this happens in the reader’s ‘present,’ the more important effect is that the reader’s memory of the ‘past’ of the story is significantly altered.” He compares this “epiphanic moment” to the sudden and gradual processes of enlightenment practised by the Rinzai and Sōtō schools of Zen, respectively. But this anecdotal account falls short of an explanation, much as his description of marginal works that evolve into full-fledged genres (William Gibson’s Neuromancer and the genre of cyberpunk, for instance) falls short of explaining how...
interstitial objects create “a retroactive historical trajectory” that erases them from consciousness. If we turn to the work of Jacques Lacan and his commentators, however, we find, grounded in an extensive conceptual framework, an explicit account of why an encounter with the interstitial transforms consciousness, and how its objects coalesce on the periphery of consciousness only to (re)posit their origin and return to its shadows. In this respect, Lacan’s work stands as an exemplar of an interstitial mode of inquiry.

LACAN’S THOUGHT

Lacan’s reconceptualization of the given is the antithesis of all previous systems of thought, and provides a compelling account of not only the existing world view (the formal/symbolic and effectual/cultured of scientism), but also of the interstitial (affectual/instinctual). Reformulated as the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real, respectively, this ternary structure serves as the hub of Lacan’s thought. Concepts at the heart of scientism and the Western tradition (the subject, knowledge, consciousness, and truth) are retained but radically reconfigured in keeping with the intricately knotted topography of Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real. The effects are jarring, but only a rupture of this magnitude holds the promise of a break from scientism, as Audre Lorde astutely notes: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (1984, 112). Lacan, in fact, devoted his career to dismantling the master’s house, building upon the work of his intellectual progenitor, Sigmund Freud, and introducing changes, revisions, and modifications as his thinking progressed. He remained singular, however, in his insistence that his oeuvre not be distilled into a system that lends itself to mechanical and indiscriminate application:

If it is true that what I teach represents a body of thought, I will not leave behind me any of those handles, which will enable you to append a suffix in the form of an “-ism.” In other words, none of the terms that I have made use of here one after the other—none of which, I am glad
to see from your confusion, has yet managed to impress itself on you as the essential term, whether it be the symbolic, the signifier or desire—none of the terms will in the end enable any one of you to turn into an intellectual cricket on my account. ([1986] 1992, 251–52)

Far from unintentional, Lacan’s enigmatic and oftentimes vexing style is, according to Richard Boothby, “calculated to frustrate facile understanding”:

His aim in part is to replicate for his readers and listeners something of the essential opacity and disconnectedness of the analytic experience. Often what is required of the reader in the encounter with Lacan’s dense and recalcitrant discourse, as with that of the discourse of the patient in analysis, is less an effort to clarify and systematize than a sort of unknowing mindfulness. We are called upon less to close over the gaps and discontinuities in the discourse than to remain attentive to its very lack of coherence, allowing its breaches and disalignments to become the jumping-off points for new movements of thought. (1991, 15–16)

LACAN’S RECONCEPTUALIZATIONS

Issues of composition notwithstanding, Lacan proposes a revolutionary conception of knowledge and learning: “Proceeding not through linear progression but through breakthroughs, leaps, discontinuities, regressions and deferred action, the analytic learning process puts in question the traditional pedagogical belief in intellectual perfectibility, the progressist view of learning as a simple one-way road from ignorance to knowledge” (Felmann 1987, 76). Knowledge is desanctified and mobilized, as that which cannot be exchanged, transmitted, or “acquired (or possessed) once and for all: each case, each text, has its own specific, singular symbolic functioning and requires a different interpretation” (Felmann 1987, 81). Truth, likewise, is preserved, but its meaning inverted from necessity to contingency, from certainty to misrecognition. The concept of “subject,” too, is retained, but reconceptualized in keeping with
the ternary structure of Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary as the foundation of truth.

THE DECENTRED SUBJECT

Building upon Freud’s discovery of the unconscious, Lacan rejects scientism’s conception of the subject, its “fundamental master signifier—that of an ‘I’ that is identical to itself and transcendental” (Bracher 1988, 40)—and posits the subject as irredeemably decentred, declaring of his own subjectivity that “what is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been in the process of becoming” (Lacan, quoted in Macey 1988, 105; emphasis added). For Lacan, as for a number of his contemporaries, the subject is a product neither of intro- nor retro- but of extro-spection, of a looking outside and forward:

As a being-in-the-world, man has a project, that is, a sense of the future, something he wants to do. Thus, he projects his life from the point he is at into the future. Heidegger originated the very important existentialist concept of the “project.” I am here physically, but I project myself into the future, and I conceive of what I want to do. It is on the basis of what I want to do that I can experience difficulties and obstacles. Sartre developed this point at length: things are not obstacles in and of themselves, they are only obstacles if you want something. It is because you want something to happen further along that retroactively things are experienced as obstacles. (Miller 1988, 10)

THE FUTURE ANTERIOR

For Lacan, the subject is a being-in-process, not something that was or is. Bruce Fink, for instance, notes how Lacan “never pinpoints the subject’s chronological appearance: he or she is always either about to arrive—is on the verge of arriving—or will have already arrived by some later moment
in time” (Fink 1995, 63). Thus, when Lacan speaks of the subject, he uses either the imperfect tense (which tends to be ambiguous in French) or the future anterior (also known as the future perfect). Lacan, however, as Nestor Braunstein points out, tends to favour “the anterior future of the verb: what will have been” (1988, 53). Unfortunately (or, perhaps intentionally), Lacan’s future anterior constructions often obscure their meaning, so much so, according to David Macey, that “the opacity of the terminology masks the relative ease with which this temporality can be applied” (1988, 105). By way of illustration, Macey offers the following anecdote:

Freud writes to Fleiss and expresses the hope or phantasy that “some-day” a marble tablet will be mounted on the wall of the house where he discovered the secret of dreams, he identifies with the great man he will have been. The history of his recollection of that hope or desire is neither the history of what he has been nor that of what he is, but the history of what he will have been when his discovery will have been publicly acknowledged. (1988, 106; emphasis added)

THE CONCRETE UNIVERSAL

This unsettling temporality explains perfectly the paradoxical nature and path of interstitial objects: they are either on the verge of arriving (hovering on the periphery of consciousness) or they have already arrived (having always been present), their glaring presence obscuring all traces of their instantiation. This is exactly how Gibson’s Neuromancer, a novel without a genre, actualized not only its own being as an exemplar of the genre of cyberpunk, but also that of earlier novels that failed to actualize theirs. The transition from potential/contingent (what will have been) to actual/necessary (what has always been) involves two coterminous events: (i) a reconfiguration of the subject’s world view (Symbolic) to accommodate the interstitial object, and (ii) the establishment of a new chain of meaning that situates the object as the culmination of a series of previous instances; each determines the other’s success and requires the interstitial object to function as both a type (genus) and instance (species)
of itself—as a concrete universal. But the interstitial’s transformation of consciousness erases all trace of the subject’s implication in the process, creating the impression that its “discovery” was inevitable. This is the process that allows *Neuromancer* to appear as a *later* instance of the very genre it creates, the dialectical dance of particular and universal that strips necessity of the mantle of truth and places it squarely on the shoulders of contingency, standing the “law” of cause and effect on its head in the process.

**THE SUBJECT AND TRUTH**

From Lacan, we learn that truth is neither a function of language (the Symbolic) nor nature (the Imaginary) but of the subject that submits to the world view (signifying network) *it will have been* integrated into. For, as Slavoj Žižek notes, “meaning is not discovered, excavated from the hidden depth of the past, but constructed retroactively—the analysis produces the truth; that is the signifying frame which gives the symptoms their symbolic place and meaning” (1997, 56). It is the process of inquiry, then, the transformation of the inquirer’s consciousness (the analysis) that determines, rather than discovers, the “cause” of the circumstances (symptoms) under scrutiny. Žižek’s point is that “as soon as we enter the symbolic order, the past is always present in the form of historical tradition and the meaning of these traces is not given; it changes continually with the transformations of the signifier’s network”; consequently, “every historical rupture, every advent of a new master-signifier, changes retroactively the meaning of all tradition, restructures the narration of the past, makes it readable in another, new way” (1997, 57; emphasis added). This enigmatic temporality of the subject should not, however, be conflated with its demise or “death,” for Lacan is neither a postmodernist nor a post-structuralist, since he abandons neither the subject nor meaning. Žižek, in fact, targets such misconceptions in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*: “Against the distorted picture of Lacan as belonging to the field of ‘post-structuralism,’ the book articulates his radical break with ‘post-structuralism’; against the distorted picture of Lacan’s obscurantism, it locates him in the lineage of rationalism” (1997, 7).
With respect to meaning, Jacques-Alain Miller notes how Lacan “stressed the importance of seeking the laws of meaning. He didn’t consider meaning to be some kind of dainty thing floating in the air here and there which alights on something, gives it a meaning, and then disappears.” For Lacan, “the fact that meaning is grounded in the subject—the fact that meaning is not a thing—does not imply that there are no laws of meaning.” The subject is central to Lacan’s work, but Lacan, like Heidegger, “defines the existence of man not as interiority, an inner something like ideas or feelings, but rather as a constant projecting outside” (1988, 10–12). It is because Lacan grounds meaning in the subject that truth, as the subject, is a function neither of what was nor of what is, but of what will have been, hence Zizek’s paradoxical but characteristically Lacanian response to the question:

From where does the repressed return? . . . From the future. Symptoms are meaningless traces, their meaning is not discovered, excavated from the hidden depth of the past, but constructed retroactively—the analysis produces the truth; that is, the signifying frame that gives the symptoms their symbolic place and meaning. (1997, 55–56; emphasis added)

**Truth as Redemption**

This redemptive conception of truth is not unlike that sketched out by Benjamin in his unfinished *Passagen-Werk*. In her ovarian study of Benjamin, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Susan Buck-Morss notes how Benjamin resolves a lacuna in Marx (how, exactly, the transition to socialism would take place, which subsequently conjured the spectre of economic determinism) by attributing the transition to changes in the superstructure, as opposed to the economic base, to “a separate (and relatively autonomous) dialectical process, ‘no less noticeable . . . than in the economy,’ but proceeding ‘far more slowly.’ It is this dialectic that makes possible the transition to a socialist society” (Buck-Morss 1989, 124). Not only does this dialectic unfold in a space highly reminiscent of the unconscious, Zizek’s “signifying frame” (“it plays itself out between the collective imagination and the
productive potential of the new nature that human beings have brought into being, but do not yet consciously comprehend”), it is also “developed not by burying the dead past, but by revitalizing it” (124). It was clear to Benjamin that “if future history is not determined and thus its forms are still unknown, if consciousness cannot transcend the horizons of its sociohistorical context, then where else but to the dead past can imagination turn to conceptualize a world that is ‘not-yet’?” This redemptive inversion, moreover, “satisfies a utopian wish: the desire (manifested in the religious myth of awakening the dead) ‘to make (past) suffering into something incomplete, to make good an unfulfilled past that has been irrevocably lost” (124). Thus:

The socialist transformation of the superstructure, which begins within capitalism under the impact of industrial technology, includes redeeming the past, in a process that is tenuous, undetermined, and largely unconscious. As a result of the distortions of capitalist social relations, the progressive and regressive moments of this process are not easily discerned. One of the tasks that Benjamin believed to be his own in the Passagen-Werk was to make both tendencies of the process visible retrospectively. (124; emphasis added)

Benjamin’s redemption of the past, wherein for instance, all previous attempts at revolution (1789, 1830, 1848, 1871, 1917) may be redeemed by a subsequent successful revolutionary act, should not be conflated with the more commonplace notion that the victors get to write history. Benjamin, as Lacan, recognizes that redemption involves much more than simply constructing a supplementary account of what occurred previously. Even when a single account suppresses all others, as is often the case when totalitarian regimes accede to power and a single, “official” version of history emerges, the past is not redeemed. Redemption involves replacing the very ground, the fantasy space, the signifying network, or screen upon which the various accounts are foregrounded and compete for supremacy. This is the truly ideological space, the ground that determines the very terms upon which competition can take place, the very parameters of meaning. It entails much more than a simple shift in perspective.

382  DEREK BRITON
At first glance, the adoption of a new world view or symbolic order appears to differ little from the adoption of a new perspective. But the shift from one signifying frame to another involves something far more radical than a simple change of perspective. Take, for instance, the infamous “shower scene” from the once-popular television series Dallas. In the opening scene of a new season, the meaning of the whole previous season was “rewritten” as nothing more than a figment of the imagination, a dream, of one of the central characters. This ingenuous inversion, which involved a simple change of perspective, proved not only unsatisfying but also unconvincing to most viewers, since it left far too many issues unresolved. But let us suppose the whole previous season had been written with the idea of later depicting it as a dream. There would certainly have been fewer inconsistencies, perhaps none, in fact. The inversion, nonetheless, would have remained unsatisfying and unconvincing to many. Why? Because such a guileless inversion does nothing more than add another perspective to those that already exist, to those created by viewers themselves and representatives of the popular media. To be truly convincing, to be truly persuasive, a new reading must do much more than simply offer an alternative account. This is what distinguishes a shift in perspective from a shift in the signifying framework, and explains why those works of cyberpunk that “preceded” Gibson’s Neuromancer remained as particular instances of novels without a genre (alternative perspectives) until the genre of cyberpunk emerged with Neuromancer to redeem them as precursors to a new present. A rather telling comment accompanies a Wikipedia listing of cyberpunk novels: “These works could be labeled cyberpunk’s ‘precursors,’ but a causal connection is not always clear” (emphasis added).

A shift in the signifying framework only occurs when one perspective, one interpretation among many, begins to function as the only possible interpretation—when, for example, one species among many begins to function as its own genus, when a Particular assumes the role of the Universal. Once that interpretation is adopted, every perspective that preceded it is reinterpreted, recoloured, as an instance in a chain of inevitable events leading up to that interpretation’s ineluctable emergence.
perfect example of this retroactive effect is the manner in which capitalism, once it was firmly established, reinterpreted all previous modes of production as moments in its own process of development:

In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it. (Marx [1857–58] 1973, 106–7)

Marx, according to Žižek, understood the retroactive effect of meaning fully, looking not to the historical origins of capitalism for its truth but to its fully developed form. Thus Žižek remarks “of the famous proposition from Marx’s Grundrisse according to which ‘the anatomy of man offers us a key to the anatomy of monkey’” that “we should not forget for a single moment that we do not ‘derive man from monkey’: all we effectively do is reconstruct the process backwards, from the standpoint of the finished result” (2008, 209). Michel Foucault falls prey to this very trap when he tries to trace the origins of modern sexuality to some event in the past; this is why he is forced to the very origins of Western society in ancient Greece, where the cause still eludes him. The paradox Foucault fails to come to terms with is that meaning is a function of past events being incorporated into a signifying network at a later date—of what will have been—not of something inherent in the context or nature of past events themselves.

FROM CONTINGENCY TO TRUTH

The psychoanalytic term for the condition that makes the emergence of a new world view possible is “transference,” and even an understanding of how the process works is no protection against its effect—les non-dupes errent. An analysand, for instance, who succeeds in catching his or her analyst in an inconsistency, who is in-the-know, so to speak, does nothing more than prove that transference has already taken place; otherwise he
Žižek suggests that the theologian Pascal exhibits at least an implicit understanding of transference when he bids those unable to accede to his rational proof of God to overcome their reluctant passions by submitting themselves to blind ritual, to simply act as if they believe: “Pascal’s final answer, then, is: leave rational argumentation and submit yourself simply to ideological ritual, stupefy yourself by repeating the meaningless gestures, act as if you already believe, and the belief will come by itself” (1997, 39).

This Pascalian method of conversion can be witnessed in millions of recovery groups around the world. Just as Pascal’s reluctant converts to Catholicism were urged to overcome their reluctant passions by confessing their impotence and inability to believe, so too are neophyte recovering substance abusers bid to admit their powerlessness over alcohol or drugs and to place their trust in a “higher power”—something other than their own reason (often the group or an individual sponsor for atheists and agnostics). Simply by not drinking or using, attending meetings, and following the lead of recovered abusers, struggling substance abusers find themselves, suddenly, believing not only what they could not believe but also that their newfound belief is something they believed even before they believed it! “What distinguishes this Pascalian ‘custom’ from insipid behaviorist wisdom (‘the content of your belief is conditioned by your factual behavior’) is the paradoxical status of a belief before belief: by following a custom, the subject believes without knowing it, so that the final conversion is merely a formal act by means of which we recognize what we have already believed in” (Žižek 1997, 40).

This is exactly why an integrated model of interdisciplinarity, no matter how critically engaged with the given, is not up to the task of creating new interpretive frameworks and new objects of knowledge without abandoning meaning and the promise of truth. Only an interstitial mode of inquiry such as that proposed by Lacan is up to that task. This is why it is necessary to replace AU’s integrated model of interdisciplinarity with an interstitial mode. An interstitial mode of inquiry redirects the inquirer’s gaze from the lure of the given to the grounds for its very possibility, identifying the subject as the location and origin of truth, as opposed to nature or ideas—realism or idealism, in all their variants. Only
an interstitial mode of inquiry has the potential to truly transform the inquirer by alerting her or him to how knowledge is created through the pursuit of truth. It is imperative that students of interdisciplinarity appreciate their own role in producing the knowledge they seek, and that their pursuit of truth open new pathways to knowledge rather than reinforce preconceived convictions. This is an unending task, for whatever world view eventually displaces scientism will attempt to maintain its own order by masking the grounds of its own possibility; such is the nature and force of the Symbolic. This is why Žižek concludes:

The duty of the critical intellectual—if, in today’s “postmodern” universe, this syntagm has any meaning left—is precisely to occupy all the time, even when the new order (the “new harmony”) stabilizes itself and again renders invisible the hole as such, the place of this hole, i.e., to maintain a distance toward every reigning Master Signifier. (1993, 2)

Lacan invested much time and effort into learning how best to bring others to this realization, but recounting that process is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this essay.

NOTES

1 Julie Thompson Klein proposes a very similar tripartite taxonomy: (i) “Multidisciplinary approaches juxtapose disciplines, adding breadth and available knowledge, information, and methods”; (ii) “Interdisciplinary designs go further . . . subjects and disciplines become tools for studying a theme, a problem, a question, or an idea”; and (iii) “with ‘transdisciplinary’ approaches . . . disciplinary and subject boundaries are blurred and connections magnified in a new organizational framework that . . . transcend[s] the narrow scope of disciplinary worldviews through an overarching synthesis” (2006, 13–14).

2 In her essay in this volume, Julie Thompson Klein describes this critically reflective attitude in terms of a new rhetoric of interdisciplinarity that emerged toward the end of the twentieth century: “The new rhetoric in humanities signalled the evolution of a form of ‘critical interdisciplinarity’ that countered ‘instrumental’ goals aligned with ‘strategic,’ ‘pragmatic,’ and ‘opportunistic’ motivations. Instrumental goals are prominent in economic, technological, and scientific problem solving, especially in science-based areas of international economic competition such as computers, biotechnology,
manufacturing, and industry. In this instance, interdisciplinarity serves the needs of the market and national priorities without regard for questions of epistemology or institutional structure. In contrast, 'critical interdisciplinarity' interrogates the existing structure of knowledge and education, raising questions of value and purpose that are silent in instrumental forms lacking reflexivity.”

In brief, the scientific world view holds that the world comprises insentient and sentient objects, that the existence of the former can be validated by the latter through passive observation and the exercise of analytic reason, that the actions of said objects conform to universal laws, and that the veracity of claims regarding those actions be judged in terms of their predictability and falsifiability. This world view continues to facilitate remarkable advances in the realm of science but has permeated and come to dominate Western thought to such an extent that “scientism” has become a synonym for thinking, whether scientific, economic, political, or moral. It is typically scientism that postmodernists and post-structuralists abhor, but the scientific world view bears the brunt of their vitriol.

“Scientism’ means science’s belief in itself: that is, the conviction that we can no longer understand science as one form of knowledge, but rather must identify knowledge with science”: Jürgen Habermas ([1968] 1981, 4).

As Michael Welton notes in “Master of Arts–Integrated Studies Self-Assessment” (2006), part of an internal program review commissioned in 2005: “The MAIS program makes indelible impressions on its participants, even though it leaves a few of them exhausted at the end! Several students have found MAIS to be life changing. One student expressed this sentiment dramatically: ‘I realized that I was a different person after I finished MAIS; exhausted but looking through many new lens [sic] than four years previous. I thought differently, considered the world differently, approached problems differently; I was a much more critical thinker. I wasn’t ready to stop . . . I wanted to learn more . . . and missed the program for a long while after I graduated.’ Another student thought that MAIS had ‘changed me—it’s mainly about the kind of person I am—I’m on a self-improvement project lifelong and I found that what I learned I incorporated into my life (praxis)—the “being” piece. Leadership was a big one for me as was transformatory organizing—helping people locate their power, find their voice—bringing out the leader in others.’

“Some students identified specific dimensions of the life-changing experience. One commented: ‘It has confirmed in me that this is my orientation in life and that it is a respectful, considerate and intelligent one.’”

Regarding literary theory, Fenkl (2003) comments: “I had been familiar with various (now popular) theoretical approaches to texts, which examine their ‘liminality’ or ‘hybridity,’ often applying terms with the prefixes ‘inter’ or ‘trans’ (‘intertextuality’ and ‘transnationality’ to give two examples), but these approaches all rely on an implicit notion of dichotomy combined with the idea of moving from one state to another or combining (intersecting) one thing with another.”
It’s challenging for Westerners to think outside the either/or “box,” so Warren Senders, in his essay “Music and Categories,” draws on a “lightbulb” joke to illustrate the paradoxical nature of such (interstitial) objects: “Remember the Zen Buddhist lightbulb joke? The punchline (not particularly funny, but pretty accurate) goes: ‘Three. One to screw it in, one to not screw it in, and one to neither screw it in or not screw it in.’”

See http://www.crockford.com/wrrrlld/wilkins.html. Subsequent quotations of Borges are from this translation of the essay.

This is the section of Borges’s essay on Wilkins’s universal language that Michel Foucault famously quotes, without attribution, in The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences ([1966] 1994, xv). To reinforce his point on the arbitrary nature of taxonomies, Borges further notes: “The Bibliographic Institute of Brussels exerts chaos too: it has divided the universe into 1000 subdivisions, from which number 262 is the pope; number 282 the Roman Catholic Church; 263, the Day of the Lord; 268 Sunday schools; 298, mormonism; and number 294, brahmanism, buddhism, shintoism and taoism.”


“If Rumsfeld thinks that the main dangers in the confrontation with Iraq were the ‘unknown unknowns,’ that is, the threats from Saddam whose nature we cannot even suspect, then the Abu Ghraib scandal shows that the main dangers lie in the “unknown knowns”—the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values”: Slavoj Žižek (2004).

Welton notes in “Master of Arts–Integrated Studies Self-Assessment”: “The MAIS experience does work for many: their outlooks appear to expand, they don’t take so much for granted in their everyday lives, they often become more acutely aware of injustice in the world” (3–4).

As Fenkl (2003) observes: “Interstitial works are also self-negating. That is, if they become successful to the degree that they engender imitations or tributes to themselves, or, if they spark a movement which results in like-minded works, then they are no longer truly interstitial, having spawned their own genre, subgenre, or even form. . . . They may emerge, like William Gibson’s Neuromancer, as something sui generis (ironically within a genre) but then their very success creates a category—cyberpunk—that becomes its own genre and retroactively, in the midst of controversy, quickly manifests a historical trajectory that precedes Neuromancer itself.”

“A term introduced by Hegel to correct the traditional view that a universal is abstract through referring to the common nature of a kind of entity by abstraction. Hegel held that a universal is concrete rather than an abstract form. A true universal is not a mere sum of features common to several things, but is self-particularizing or self-specifying”: “Concrete Universal,” Blackwell Reference Online, http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/.
Žižek, following Fredric Jameson, labels interstitial objects “vanishing mediators” because they mediate “the transition between two opposed concepts and thereafter disappear. . . . Zizek sees in this process evidence of Hegel’s ‘negation of the negation,’ the third moment of the dialectic. The first negation is the mutation of the content within and in the name of the old form. The second negation is the obsolescence of the form itself. In this way, something becomes the opposite of itself, paradoxically, by seeming to strengthen itself”: “Slavoj Žižek—Key Ideas,” http://www.lacan.com/zizekchro1.htm. The article draws on Tony Myers, Slavoj Žižek (London: Routledge, 2003).

WORKS CITED