

A bridge not a goal: Addressing communications and philosophy

Elizabeth M. Grierson

RMIT University

ABSTRACT

This paper acts as an introduction to the individual presentations in this collection and to their discourses of new possibilities for the humanities. The theme of communications and philosophy is a way of bringing together diverse reflections on disciplinary practices and their potential interrelations in a global world of radical pluralism. What I am seeking is the formation of a critical pedagogy of difference, which may find purchase in learning environments in the academy, but also has applications to wider domains of the life-world with its political and personal exigencies, violences, needs, necessities, and possibilities. A key focus is the work of twentieth century continental philosophers and their textual encounters in the spaces between literature and philosophy, and ways of siting the as-yet-unseen in writing, experience and discourse. Nietzsche's thrust of questioning the idealism of progressive humanity is crucial to this discussion. Ultimately I am inviting a way of weaving threads of difference in a texture of communication to elicit a more critical awareness and response to the task of living in a global world of difference as a task for the new humanities.

Introduction

The madman. – *Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place and cried incessantly: 'I seek God! I seek God!' – As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? Emigrated? – Thus they yelled and laughed. (Nietzsche, 1974: 181) Man ... is a bridge not a goal. (Nietzsche, 1977: 239)*

"What are the modes of existence of this discourse?" asks Foucault (1977: 138); and then he shows that "discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this *more* that renders them irreducible to the language (*langue*) and to speech. It is this 'more' that we must reveal and describe" (Foucault, 1994: 49). What I am seeking in this collection is a way of finding the "*more*" in texts and discourses to do with philosophy and communications. This does not presuppose that all the texts will be deconstructive or performative; but they will be inviting ways to think about philosophy and communications – and being human in a world of communication – to take us to more critical awareness of the role of the humanities in the academy and in our lives.



A new humanities

In the previous issue of *ACCESS* Michael Peters engaged with Derrida's intellectual landscape on the humanities endeavouring "to steer us away from its easy ideological fabrications that ultimately support only a very tawdry and temporary cultural image of ourselves in one particular historical period" (Peters, 2007: 5). Presenting Derrida's programmatic tasks for a new humanities, Peters explains that, "the humanities must also contextualise itself, escaping its local origins and trajectories, and broaden its account to take in the radical pluralism existing as part of a new globalism..." (2007: 8). In a recent newspaper article, "Meaning of life cannot be ignored", Anthony Kronman (2007) argues that the humanities have become directionless and they are now placed in the shadow of the sciences, both natural and social. His plea is for a reinvigoration of the importance of the humanities as a place to ask the questions of life's meaning, without dogmatic convictions but with critical argument and reflection. If the humanities does not do this, then who will?

My aim is to work through the humanities to seek a form of address that can take us to a new and more radical site of communications as a future economy of exchange. In such a future we might have the space to think and act with more attunement to the philosophical questions of life. With the rise of new fundamentalisms and the casting of moral and ethical questions into the quagmire of political dogma and religious wars there is some urgency to the need for a new humanities where ethical questions and ways of relating will be made apparent. In bringing together critical perspectives on communication, culture and knowledge, I am not aiming to divorce philosophical discourses from quotidian experience but to bring philosophy and experience into closer proximity. There may be a kind of revealing of the ordinary bounds and limits of communication via these philosophical shifts, not as a way of memorialising philosophy as a disciplinary process, but of opening philosophy – and communications – to the everyday world of relating, discussing, thinking, questioning, living, being and experiencing.

The communicating subject

From the legacy of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Levinas comes the questioning of the sovereign subject in the works of Derrida. This does not mean that Derrida dismantled the subject; rather he sought its legacy and its voice as he harnessed his wisdom around the concept of multiplicity and deferral of authorial intent. The sovereign subject as the sole voice and arbiter of knowledge in discourses of philosophy, literature, art and education can thus be put to the test through reading the philosophical attitudes and arguments of the continental philosophers. Derrida faced the problem of philosophy's form, structure and language drawing attention to what he calls "the fictions" of philosophy in the normalising discourses upon which its foundations were laid (see Derrida, 1995).

The normalising conditions of discourse demand our attention in the humanities. Michel Foucault asks, "At any historical moment, what kinds of conditions come into play in determining that a particular subject is the legitimate executor of a certain kind of knowledge?" (cited in Faubion, 1998: xiv). In the search for understanding the formations of communication and the communicating subject in and through discourses of philosophy, the concept of "discourse" follows Michel Foucault's (1994: 49) definition of discourses "as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak". Foucault explains that he does not look underneath for some hidden truth of the subject; what he does is "try to grasp discourse in its manifest existence, as a practice that obeys certain rules – of formation, existence, co-existence – and systems of functioning. It is this practice, in its consistency and almost in its materiality, that I describe" (Foucault, 1989: 46).

Foucault's attention to the conditions through which a subject or object of knowledge comes to be the way it is, displaces the idea of a transcendental subject penetrating and informing a field of knowledge as a progressive force-field. The author becomes the subject of discourse rather than its agent, and the authority and sole authorship of an act or event of communication is put in to

doubt. Through the voice of one the other speaks, unity is disrupted as multivocality circulates and one voice defaults to another and another. In seeking to understand this we might see and respect the “other” for its difference as a condition of community, even on a global and political level.

Textual encounters as “a bridge not a goal”

The genealogy of my interest in discourses of communications and philosophy is in the work of twentieth century continental philosophers with their ways of reading texts across the grain and thereby dismantling the weight of foundational projects of analytical philosophy, and importantly for their displacements of Hegelian dialectics. Through their acts of writing they dislodge the privileging of the logical proposition of Western philosophy’s canonical language as a way of thinking and being. Writings of Frederic Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous, for example, reveal and communicate conditions of being in a world of difference by writing with and through difference as a genre or style. Their textual encounters with lineages of spoken and unspoken questions engage readers through a communicative force of language that is not literature, but neither is it philosophy in the traditional canonical sense of the discipline’s textual structures. Somewhere between philosophy and literature new styles and genres of textual address communicate as they unravel the semantic rules of communication allowing new possibilities for discourse to arise.

Derrida’s call for putting philosophy to work embodies renewed attention to questions of ethics, politics, law, justice, rights, responsibilities, gender, culture, communication, humanities, knowledge and the academy. These concerns can be woven through the texts and questions exposed by globalised socio-political conditions, and can rattle the silences to activate omissions. In the radical plurality of globalisation the speaking position of the subject situates a multiplicity of voice to the extent that we might follow Foucault (1977) in asking, who is speaking? And in this question the subject communicates beyond “the limits of our hearing” (Nietzsche, 1974: 206). This might take us beyond the limits of assumed presence in the indexical marks of agency and slip between questions where certainties may be displaced.

In seeking to go beyond certainties, in *The Gay Science* (1974) Nietzsche addresses the relationship of communication to consciousness, surmising “that *consciousness has developed only under the pressure of the need for communication*” (italics in original), and determining that “Consciousness is really only a net of communication between human beings” (1974: 298). It is in the *between* state that communication becomes a necessity and, through the human desire for constructing meaning, communication produces systems, practices, cultures, myths, institutions, beliefs, knowledge and the human subject with all its mythic proportions. Via a series of gestures, signs and systems, “the development of language and the development of consciousness (*not* of reason but merely of the way reason enters consciousness) go hand in hand... [and] language serves as a bridge between human beings but also a mien, a pressure, a gesture”, writes Nietzsche (1974: 299). The argument is that consciousness is constructed in the processes of communication in the “social or herd nature ... required by social or herd utility” (1974: 299). In this view it is the herd perspective that is the numbing average, the norm of our lives at the level of consciousness. There could be no progression of the human spirit of “mankind” in such a state. Reading against the perspective of German idealism, and particularly Hegel, “Nietzsche felt that an ‘overarching consciousness of mankind’ would be more destructive than ennobling” (Safranski, 2002: 168). Nietzsche’s concern is that even if individuals think they can set goals they cannot move beyond the goal-less herd state, thus the ideal of progress cannot be realised in practice. It remains an ideal only and leads us into a numbing state of self-preservation. Safranski draws from *Human, All Too Human*, to explain this point when he writes, “As a result ... the ‘solace and support’ ... one might find in an idea of progress would collapse. Whoever looks beyond the fence of mere self-preservation cannot help discovering the ‘character of squandering’ in the social arena” (2002: 168). Concerning a human sense of knowing, Nietzsche concludes that “we simply lack any organ for knowledge, for ‘truth’: we

'know' (or believe or imagine) just as much as may be *useful* in the interests of the human herd, the species ..." (1974: 300).

This utility aspect of contemporary life has become a deity, a key driver of institutional practices with their transfer of knowledge as capital. Thus the discourse of progress is exercised by the social-whole through the economy at personal and global levels. It is here that rethinking the foundational systems of logic in the traditional discourses of analytical philosophy, and engaging a workable philosophical attitude as a way of being, might elicit alternative ways of knowing and living in present and future knowledge cultures. For example, what might it mean to 'be human' in the exigencies of economic means-end cultures of hyper consumption, commercialisation and corporatisation? Where lie the spaces for other tolerations of being or does the social-commons determine or demand a way of conforming to the consuming and "squandering" herd as the way of utility? Is there another way? What of the relationality of communication and of being with the other? How is otherness viewed in the political conditions of our times? If communication is "to be with" via the sharing or revealing of something in, of or through the other, then there is an implicit need for the recognition of what commonality and difference might mean in being-with the other. This may put the events of communication into the space of a question of ethics, a space of the unknown, where the human being as a conscious self is facing the abyss. But at the edge of the abyss we might recognise that "man ... is a bridge not a goal" (Nietzsche, 1977: 239) and see that the form of address of "man" may be construed as a process not a progress, a beginning not an end point, a relating between rather than a direct equation of communication and consciousness, addressor and addressee, means and end.

The collection

These challenging thoughts were my starting point in calling this collection together. I sought to publish writings that could bring philosophy into our world-view "as a bridge not a goal" and could argue for ways of living and addressing life's exigencies philosophically as we engage with the terrain of experience as well as the terrain of philosophy in the humanities and the academy. Seeking to identify how discourses of philosophy might operate in the everyday world of communicating, experiencing or learning, the writers in this collection interrogate questions and conflicts over the status of philosophy, religion, communication. They engage with elements of philosophy and philosophers in new ways by applying the task of a questioning attitude to present conditions. Contributing writers work through diverse positions of twentieth century continental philosophers including Simone de Beauvoir, Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Alain Badiou, Jacques Derrida and Michel Serres as they investigate some of the ways communication and philosophy are constructed, construed and understood in a contemporary world.

In *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophy as a way of life* James Marshall shows how the philosophical writings of Simone de Beauvoir offer much to the debates about being human and communicating in a world of experience. Marshall addresses the way the canon of philosophy has positioned de Beauvoir's work as a philosopher and a woman and he rightly repositions her in respect of her view of philosophy as lived experience, and her original contribution to existential ethics. For de Beauvoir there was a relationship between actual experience and texts through which experience is communicated. Thus, she wrote literature, philosophy, autobiographies, biographies, histories and diaries, as well as writing articles for academic journals, magazines and the press. Working on the philosophical premises of logic, de Beauvoir considered that there was a logical relationship between an experience and propositions about that experience. Marshall works through de Beauvoir's writings and relationships to provide the reader with a thorough understanding of the contribution this philosopher has made to our understanding of philosophy and experience, narrative, and the reconstruction of meaning of self and the world. Simone de Beauvoir shows that the real world is where philosophical questions must be posed and answered. In this she contributes to our ways of considering what it might mean to communicate philosophically through textual and

experiential encounters in one's life and in the relations of self and Other. Following a thorough exposition of Simone de Beauvoir, Marshall offers a challenge to the reader when he says, "I cannot *prescribe* studying de Beauvoir to others, but I would suggest that they might step into the 'waters' themselves – if they believe themselves to be free."

In *Communication as a Limit-Experience* Linda Daley works through the writings of Georges Bataille whose idea of communication stresses a dissipation of meaning rather than a clarifying, functional force. In Bataille's view sender-receiver exchanges of semantic content wither in the face of communication's chatter. Far removed from any existential views Bataille follows the legacy of Nietzsche in his aphoristic writings and unexpected juxtapositions of genre and style. The question of responding to the exigencies of the moment when society's metanarratives have lost their purchase is one that leads Bataille to ponder the problematics of being-with in the world of otherness. Daley takes the reader through the writings of Bataille and his relations to Nietzschean thought in her quest to bring understanding to the conditions of being human and the way that understanding is exercised through the humanities. Bataille's rejection of rationalist proclamations reveals a loss of agency in communication. Contrary to being the primary actor he states he is "acted upon" through writing and he escapes from himself as his text escapes from him in the writing process. Further to this, the texts of others speak through his voice, particularly the legacy of Blanchot. Thus there is no singularity to the voice that communicates, no unity to textual encounters and exchange; there is always a deflection of voice as authorship in the act of communicating. In this Bataille is contesting the project of Cartesian rationalism and the power of language in the claims to agency of a thinking subject. Ultimately Daley examines the relations between communication and community as she shows how communication is a process of a murmuring plurality of voice.

A third paper to engage closely with philosophical texts is by Linda Williams. Her focus is the writings of Michel Serres and his concern for the ascendancy of science over the humanities. In *Between Hermes, Gaia and Apollo 8: Michel Serres and the philosophy of science as communication*, Linda Williams discusses how Michel Serres presents a picture of contemporary thought that has something of a planetary dimension to its breadth and depth. His work takes the reader across a wide terrain of chaos theories, science and thermodynamics, complexity and theories of technology. Williams' concern is to examine his ontological model of intersections and complexity to throw light on the complex forces shaping our communications, transfers and exchange at a time of urgent planetary needs. As a means to comprehend this model Serres envisages the figure of Hermes, winged god of communication, as a trope of the task of philosophy. Williams engages with Serres' way of envisaging the role and significance of Hermes as a "figuration of modern social, economic and libidinal relations, and deity of the conduits of knowledge that produce those relations" and shows that his Hermes calls into question the ascendancy of techno-science and the folly of institutional boundaries between sciences and humanities. Thus he is exposing the need to rethink philosophy in the face of global crises. Calling across the boundaries of human and non-human worlds is the Greek figure of Gaia as a voice of the future, requiring an understanding of science beyond its own fields, and here Serres engages the prophecies of Gaia as a way to bring world crises to attention. Finally, Williams addresses Serres' arguments in *The Natural Contract* to show how Serres moves from philosophy to science to art and mythology. Working through Serres' metaphorical figures, she seeks to assess Serres' contemporary relevance by excavating his view that the key task of philosophy is that of communication.

From philosophy as communication to multiple potentials for communicative force in the events of practice, *Pedagogy Against the State: Some remarks upon events of learning* works through the writings of Alain Badiou. Dennis Atkinson considers the hermeneutics of practice and explores the appearance of the subject in the *events* of practice showing this is where the "truth procedure" eventuates in the communicative encounters of pedagogy. Here Atkinson is suggesting a pedagogy that takes the learner beyond the state of the known into new ontological possibilities. Such learning and teaching is not focused on what is already known or considered to be a requirement

through the categorical imperative; rather it is opening towards the potential of the “unknown of becoming”. To demonstrate this position Atkinson cites the case of a child learner in art education. This provides the context for actual practice as a learning event. His aim is to show that if educators are to engage learners with the notion of risk-taking then they must move beyond the specific requirements of learning outcomes and quantifiable results, and more particularly beyond assumed and assimilated knowledge. The dominant and normalised modes of being and knowing dictate the conditions of value whereby those outside of the known may be deemed “not to be” or “not to know”. With this recognition there is the need to open new pedagogical states to allow new learning communities and identities to occur. It is the opening to “that which is not yet” that Badiou advocates. Then, argues Atkinson, “being” moves to “becoming” in the creative acts of communicating and learning.

A further contribution to considerations of pedagogy and the search for a rethinking of the assumed conditions of practice comes from Peter Horsfield. His particular attention is the teaching of religion in media studies and communication studies. In *Researching Media and Religion in a School of Communication Studies* Horsfield addresses a field that is demanding increased attention: that of religion and its place in contemporary cultural clashes and political persuasions. Increasingly religion is a mediated phenomenon and the character of these mediations demands critical engagement argues Horsfield. Yet the politics of religion have been largely overlooked within the media industries and in media studies during the latter twentieth century when religion was a diminishing concern in social and political frameworks. Horsfield shows how the roots of religion were eroded in the rise of secularisation, scientific rationalism and the proliferation and global dominance of technology, and even today in a post 9/11 world there is a paucity of critical attention to mediations of religion in media-driven cultures where the cultural study of media and religion remains under theorised. Religious fundamentalism has become a dominant signifier for global unrest in the world-media with religion cast as a site of agency for major political tensions, upheavals and violence. Horsfield references Derrida’s claim that religion never disappeared; rather it is the return of a repressed condition that is cast onto a centre stage. “Between *awakening* and *return* there is the outbreak of visibility” and here an “accumulation of force ... an overflowing of extraordinary power” (Derrida, 2001: 76) explodes in conviction upon a global public. Thus the return of religion as a personal and public condition can no longer be avoided and neither can the nature of its mediations. For media studies to continue to ignore the media constructions of religion and to separate media from religious studies is to leave social and political communications unconsidered.

When Nietzsche wrote, “man... is a bridge not a goal” (1977: 239) he was questioning the common denominator of the herd-state of prevailing conceptions of knowledge and belief in the state of “being human”. In collating these articles the aim is to render a critical method and a bridging perspective to our ways of thinking about communications in today’s world of the events of globalisation and the need to acknowledge a radical plurality in knowledge and culture. The writers collectively produce a critical pedagogy that questions how philosophy might take us beyond prevailing conceptions of knowledge and inform our communications-to-come. At the interfaces of the philosophical in-between there is the gesture or style that calls forth something other than a means-end, sender-receiver, utility mode of communication. And it is there that we might discover new ways to communicate and address pressing issues of personal, political and environmental concern as we contribute to the production of a new humanities.

References

- Derrida, J. (1995). Is There a Philosophical Language? In E. Weber (Ed.), *Points ... Interviews, 1974–1994* (P. Kamuf & others, Trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Derrida, J. (2001). Above All, No Journalists. In H. de Vries & S. Weber (Eds.), *Religion and Media* (pp. 56–93). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Faubion, J.D. (Ed.). (1998). *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, method, and epistemology*. (R. Hurley et al., Trans.). Vol. 2 *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*. Rabinow, P., Series Editor. New York: The New Press.
- Foucault, M. (1977). What is an Author? In D.F. Bouchard (Ed.), *Michel Foucault: Language, counter-memory, practice: Selected essays and interviews* (1996) (pp. 113–138). Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1989). *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1966–84* (J. Johnston, Trans.). (S. Lotringer (Ed.), Semiotext(e)) New York: Columbia University.
- Foucault, M. (1994). *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (A. Sheridan Smith, Trans.). London: Tavistock Publications. [French 1963].
- Kronman, A. (2007, Wednesday, November 28). Meaning of Life Cannot be Ignored. *The Australian*, p. 32–33.
- Nietzsche, F. (1974). *The Gay Science: With a prelude in rhymes and an appendix of songs* (Walter Kaufmann, Trans.). New York: Vintage Books.
- Nietzsche, F. (1977). *A Nietzsche Reader* (R.J. Hollingdale, Trans.). Middlesex & New York: Penguin Books.
- Peters, M. (2007). The Humanities in Deconstruction: Raising the question of the post-colonial university. *ACCESS: Critical Perspectives on Communication, Cultural & Policy Studies*, 26(1), 1–11.
- Safranski, R. (2002). *Nietzsche. A philosophical biography* (S. Frisch, Trans.). London: Granta Books.