

## Surfaces



# CONCLUSION SUMMARY OF ICHD MEETING, APRIL 1994

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Article abstract

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## CONCLUSION

### SUMMARY OF ICHD MEETING, APRIL 1994

#### International Conference on Humanistic Discourses

## ABSTRACT

*This document offers a conclusion to the papers and discussions that constituted the first meeting of the International Conference for Humanistic Discourse. These remarks review a number of the notions central to the project, including humanistic discourse, otherness, and translatability.*

## RÉSUMÉ

Ce document fait la synthèse des textes et des discussions qui ont constitué la première rencontre de l'<<International Conference for Humanistic Discourse>>. Il fait ressortir l'importance, pour ce projet, de certaines notions-clé, telles le discours humaniste, l'altérité et la <<traduisibilité>>.

Our papers and discussions seem to have gravitated around a series of dialectical relations between oppositions, in each case seeking a productive tension, but not a resolution, between the two terms. So we have resisted claiming a third term behind and controlling any of the oppositions as we have moved from one set to the next, with a considerable overlap between and among them.

First, in dealing with the phrase "humanistic discourses," we have recognized a dispersal of its meanings into the many possible terms we are gathering together for our purposes, even while we have kept the phrase as that gathering point for our deliberations. So we hope for a productive tension between our having *a* subject as our center and our having it disperse into multiple subjects.

This became all the more obvious through the inherent resistance of the humanistic discourses to any form of conceptualization. Instead, they reveal a dual inscription by both privileging the human and subverting prominent

patterns into which the human becomes frozen. In the same way, they defied any essentialization of the critical attitude and yet appeared to be interventionist in nature. Whenever humanistic discourses come under attack these days, the question arises as to what kind of humanism is actually being targeted. The brand of humanism that lends itself so easily to charges we are familiar with, is after all a nineteenth-century invention and does by no means cover all the ramifications and functions pertaining to a humanistic orientation that informs the discourse.

Second, we have traced a productive opposition between a concept of humanistic discourses (especially what we have been terming "literature") that is thoroughly *inside* the control of history and one that is, if only in part, *outside* the control of history. More than once we have opposed the "singular" to the "exemplary": we have talked about the potential "new start," the "singularity," of the literary text, but only while that text, as singular, turns exemplary in the role it plays in culture. More than once we have suggested that in its interpretive complications it is singular in its resistance to its surrounding discourse formations, and yet it teaches us a delicacy and care in our reading such resistance in other texts by following its more obviously persuasive example. This dialectic between the determining of texts by a discursive moment and the freedom of texts from it has been a major feature of our sessions.

Therefore each act of writing and reading proves to be a new start that has repercussions insofar as it is bound to change both the meaning and significance of the context into which the writing intervenes and out of which the reading arises. Thus an alterity emerges that can be understood neither in terms of the known nor in terms of the opposite to the known. Such an alterity tends to bring out the reverse side of what is moving into focus and can be conceived as a counter-concept to ideology.

Third, many of our concerns were summed up by Jacques Derrida's concession, in the give-and-take of our discussion, to the "universalism" of philosophy, but only as that universalism was crucially qualified and kept on the defensive by the need *not* to give up what he termed the "idioms" (in the several senses of that word). Again our need to have both, despite implications of mutual negation between them, outlined the dialectical character of the desiderata that frame our project.

This is a dialectic, however, that remains basically open-ended, making double-edged what it brings together. Philosophy claims to be the agency for defining humankind in all its multifarious activities. Yet such definitions cannot be traced back to any underlying blueprint nor to origins out of which they may have arisen. Thus philosophy's claim to universality is hedged in by what appears to be unfathomable, which makes any claim to universality precarious.

This opposition led to a fourth, perhaps another version of the relations between the universal and the idiom. But this opposition consumed perhaps more of our time than any of them: the reflection of the current struggle to give full space to the "other" in the face of the usual dominance (in discourse as in social relations) of the "same." (By wandering into an enriching

excursion into tourism, we demonstrated how far-reaching this issue can be made to be.) The rhetoric of "otherness" filled our sessions, probably out of an awareness of the current mood of academe as well as the special mission of our group in seeking bridges between Western and East Asian cultures. Yet it has been important for us to remind ourselves of yet a further "otherness," lest we be trapped in an essentialism of the "other": to remind ourselves that the dialectic does not stop with the "other." The "other" also has *its* "other," and the least avoidable "other" of the "other" is the "same." On the one side, then, we have the claims of "sameness," so threatening in its dominance to the dispersals we encourage -- in reading as in socio-political relations -- and yet so necessary to our endeavors to make some sense of life and discourse; and on the other (and these days the more to be protected) side, the claims of "otherness," so desperately to be cherished in the diversity of our world and yet threatening chaos if totally unchecked by the challenge of "sameness." It is perhaps on the precarious (we dare not say impossible) balance to be struck by these claims that the chances of any success in our enterprise may depend.

At the same time we became aware to what extent 'otherness' has been elevated to the signature of the nineties just as 'society' and 'language' were universalized signatures of post-war decades. Umbrella concepts of this kind have the advantage of providing a seemingly all-embracing frame of reference to which the academy at least is very readily prepared to subscribe. The danger lurking in such overarching notions is, however, that they allow for a rather diversified range of ideas to be accommodated under such an umbrella, not least as these overriding frames are in themselves so ill-defined.

All these lead to the fifth and final opposition, which more than any other comes to the heart of our project: the dialectical relations that control the co-existing need both for translation (of cultures as of the language of texts) and for our recognition of the inevitable persistence of the untranslatable. We must find a productive tension between these irreconcilables, both of which exert their control and will be controlling our efforts. Surely we will feel their force in our meetings next year. The most promising /pp. 7-8/ suggestion was the insistence that it is precisely the inevitable presence of the untranslatable at every moment that makes the project of [translation](#) possible and necessary, as a project whose failure is built into its justification. If we can make operational sense of this proposition in the next two years, we will have come a long way. A related, more performative version of this issue was framed in the question arising out of Wolfgang Iser's paper and comments: who is the more transformed in the act of translating, the translated or the translator?

Our future meetings are bound to have an interesting focus insofar as it can be assumed that a cross-cultural translatability may be different from the kind to be observed in the arts. As Murray Krieger's paper has shown, all forms of poetry are translations. However, what makes such a 'literary discourse' different from any cross-cultural interpenetration is the fact that poetry not only translates something basically non-verbal into language, but also points up the emerging untranslatability which it inscribes into its very acts of transposing something into another register. In searching for the

nature of these transformations, we will have to look carefully around us, and listen closely, in the meetings to come.

There were some underlying notions, shared though perhaps not explicitly verbalized in the discussion, that guided the debate concerning humanistic discourses.

Irrespective of the manifold historical connotations that humanistic discourses drag in their wake, we tended to focus on the function they perform. As long as they are forms of criticism they reveal shifting frames of reference which are basically heuristic and shaped by what is to be opened up or by the ends being served. They also function as the source of symbol systems that allow us to chart the history of the arts as well as the life of a culture. Due to these functions humanistic discourses have become a cultural institution of multiple services. Furthermore, they allow us to scrutinize the workings of the human imagination, all forms of translation, transposition and transference, as well as the interface between cultures, between self and other, between groundlessness and claims to universality. Finally, humanistic discourses are vulnerable as well as versatile. Their vulnerability is due to their being a form of humanism; their versatility is due to their being an unprecedented form of bricolage that may outstrip all connotations of humanism without abandoning a human concern.

June 7, 1994

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