

[Review] Joe Moran (2010) Interdisciplinarity, 2nd edition

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BOOK RECEIVED AND REVIEWED

Interdisciplinarity (2nd Edition)

Joe Moran



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Paperback, 214 pages
Price: £12.99
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Series: The New Critical Idiom

Review Article by
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“Señor beard was to excuse an uneducated man's naïvety and ignorance, but was the strange reality described by quantum mechanics a description of the actual world, or was it simply a system that happened to work?” writes Ian McEwan in his latest novel, *Solar* (McEwan 65). It could equally, however, have been issued by one of the many figures surveyed in the second edition of Joe Moran's *Interdisciplinarity*, a book that charts the descent to, and subsequent attempts to resurface from, the depths of post-modern scepticism in the Humanities. A reference work about the university itself, with a somewhat Anglo-centric bias, Moran's initial premise is that the term discipline has remained caught in a state of flux between knowledge and power (2) while, following Geoffrey Bennington, its prefix “inter-” also holds a duality of connection and betweenness (14). It is, therefore, with complete self-awareness of the problems involved in a systematization of a space that wishes to transcend systematization that Moran's immanent overview begins with a historical perspective on the disciplines themselves. Before proceeding to engage with some of Moran's arguments, I will present an overview of the work which will demonstrate the elements of formalization that are deployed.

Moran's disciplinary categories start with English Literature which sought to carve itself as the space of undisciplined thought, embodied in the figure of F.R. Leavis in an Eliotic lineage. In Moran's view, English is seen as paradigmatic of interdisciplinary fields' aporetic attempts to decouple themselves from rigid boundaries of thought, yet to

simultaneously establish themselves in the university environment through rigid demarcation; in this case, the object of study being “the text”. While making reference to the New Criticism as the foremost American contribution to this facet, the primary focus upon the Oxbridge environment is, in one sense, historically accurate but, in another, symptomatic of a Stateside neglect that features throughout this work.

Moving next from English to Cultural Studies, Moran plots the rise of the 1960's campus universities (Sussex and East Anglia) alongside the work of the Birmingham CCCS through the figures of Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Michel de Certeau, Pierre Bourdieu and John Frow. Beginning as a corrective to English's lack of specificity, Moran sees, through Bourdieu and Frow, the movement towards a sociological model as one caught in a vicious feedback cycle of class privilege and cultural value. This shift of focus allows Moran to move seamlessly into a discussion of “Theory” centered around Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. Arguing that the categories of linguistics, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, feminism and queer theory transcend traditional boundaries, Moran rightly points to these thinkers as reflexively critical challengers. Yet, at times this section reads more as a reductive “introduction to Theory” and, in its quest to do too much, treads a fine line between focus on the topic of interdisciplinarity and attempting to do justice to the vast subject matter over which it glosses. While this is often a tricky feat to pull off, by subsuming Foucault under the insufficient heading of queer theory, Moran gains a concrete example of trans-disciplinary scholarship, but simultaneously subverts his own organizational structure, for Foucault was (as always) so much more.

The logical next point of Moran's book is to tackle postmodern historiography and the New Historicism, but it is also an area that encapsulates many of the structural problems of this work. Having read four of the five chapters by this point, the reader is left wondering what scope there is for an interdisciplinarity that is more than petty inter-Humanities bickering. While there is, indeed, an early mention of C.P. Snow's influential “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution” (28), the entirely valid questions of firstly whether interdisciplinarity remains a Humanities-driven (or -necessitated) enterprise and secondly what essential value the approach holds, haunt Moran's survey. That said, once Moran does get around to a science-humanities relations, the coverage of major figures from Francis Bacon, through Karl Popper to Thomas Kuhn, Jean-François Lyotard, Alan Sokal and Donna Haraway is, for an introductory volume, exemplary. Haraway is a particular high point of exposition in this work, wherein the teleology of interdisciplinarity is inverted; science is already interdisciplinary, a form of “situated knowledge” wherein it is “always part of other narratives and knowledges” (149).

From this structural overview, two points should now be clear. Firstly, Moran's work takes on a historical approach and, at the end of the day, amounts to a protracted literature survey. Secondly, Moran's work is at an introductory level; the arguments to be found here are not hugely original and they are buried among extensive paraphrasing of every major figure who has written on the field. This is not a criticism, merely a statement of caution. As a reference work for advanced undergraduates, postgraduates and those

new to the field, there are few finer first encounters than Moran's study. However, the work could at times have profited from more extensive critique of the doctrines presented, which does not always happen. A prime example of this is to be found in Moran's citation of Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* (151-152), in which he correctly links a geographic essentialism to a heightened affirmation of the self against alterity. What is not then picked up on, however, is that this has important resonances for interdisciplinarity itself. As Alan Liu puts it, there is a "home discipline" and an "exotic discipline," an Orientalism of disciplinary practice (Liu 181). Also emerging from this example is that Moran undertakes insufficient self-aware positioning of the topic of interdisciplinarity. In focusing on the history of the occidental university, interdisciplinarity becomes a debate that has only ever been staged in this privileged and formalized realm. This takes place even while exploring the thought of scholars such as Paul Feyerabend, whose advocacy of an "epistemic anarchism" – the height of unstructured thought and, therefore, one form of interdisciplinarity – is utterly opposed to the very structural project in which Moran is here engaged (140).

Moran's book ends, diverging from the first edition, with a survey of "interdisciplinarity today," which provides an updated appraisal of the critique of interdisciplinarity since 2002; the survival of the disciplines, containing some excellent material on the dangers of higher education commodification; and a case study of the interdisciplinary journal, *Victorian Studies*. Ultimately, though, Moran's conclusions from the first edition are relatively unscathed; "the very idea of interdisciplinarity can only be understood in a disciplinary context" (IX), "rumours of the death of the disciplines have been exaggerated" (174).

In reviewing under the shadow of Ian McEwan's *Solar*, Moran would perhaps point to Bourdieu and tell me that, under this framework, I would have already asserted my social strata; I fall into the "Samuel Beckett" against "Andrew Lloyd Weber" camp, on the side of "Ian McEwan" as opposed to "Dan Brown" (64). Yet, as Moran's study concludes, following Bill Readings, with the assertion that while the disciplines cannot be dispensed with, interdisciplinarity might provide "a way of living with the disciplines more critically," of being "permanently aware of the intellectual and institutional constraints" within which the disciplines operate, one cannot help but feel that the concept has been fairly treated in terms of epistemology, while receiving sub-par coverage of its power configuration (181). To go further: in reducing interdisciplinarity to an auto-critical entity, the disciplines remain the gatekeepers of all academic power. The university job market, prospective student recruitment and systems of accreditation all rely – at least in any conceivable sense within a traditional university structure – upon the regulatory power of the bounds drawn by the disciplines. While interdisciplinarity might encourage these disciplines to query their own practices, there is a hard limit imposed upon this by the economic and pragmatic superstructures that both control the disciplines, and also bestow them their power.

In this context, it may remain pleasant to think of disciplinarity as merely a system that happens to work, rather than a description of reality, but the social stratification in which the disciplines' canonizing capacity participates ends up performatively constituting that very reality; simultaneously describing and creating. Ending with such a

powerless representation of interdisciplinarity, one leaves Moran's work knowing that the enterprise is both fruitful – in terms of original thought, which is stressed throughout the work – yet doomed never to achieve its own goal or power-potential in a materialistic culture. Perhaps this is why Moran's work feels as though it could have ended with a reiteration of Stanley Fish's famous line, but in a voice now mediated by a Beckett-esque compulsion to try again, to fail better. In this structural motion of progress towards an unobtainable utopia, it becomes clear from Moran's work – in its mode of fruitful futility – why interdisciplinarity is so very hard to do, but, in its limited space of possibility, so very worthwhile to be doing.

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