

In defense of the classical tradition: How the humanities make a difference today

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If the humanities has a future as cultural criticism, and cultural criticism has a task at the present moment, it is no doubt to return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense.

Judith Butler¹

The question I have been grappling with since Donald Trump was shockingly and quite possibly illegally elected President of the United States is how to practice art history so that my scholarship has some kind of meaningful agency in the current political climate. Art History is my profession and my calling, but there might come a time when I have to abandon living my “normal life” because of other priorities. That is exactly the decision my parents were forced to make when they found themselves trapped in Nazi Hungary. Eventually they emigrated to a new life in the United States. What if they had been turned back at the border? As a member of the underground resistance during World War II, my father managed to evade death when many of his family, friends, and associates did not, but he certainly would have been imprisoned or executed for his role in the Independent Smallholders’ Party after the war, had he stayed any longer during the Soviet take-over of Hungary completed in 1949.

In the US, I am a first-generation immigrant. The precariousness of life under the current administration haunts me everywhere every day. It disrupts my sleep. It forces me to question my role in society. As you in Brazil know all too well, the media plays a big part in our very capacity to think because the media controls the reproduction of images and words.

¹ BUTLER, Judith. **Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence**. London-New York: Verso, 2004, p. 151.

Even the liberal mainstream press in the US, like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, fill up their front pages with whatever lies, decoys, stupidities, and outright illegalities are issuing daily from our scandal-ridden President and his unconscionable operatives. And it is increasingly difficult to sustain the institutions and laws of the state in many other democratic countries experiencing populist trends. The media entrances us with an unending spectacle of elected officials (and their brazenly unqualified appointees) lying and breaking laws. Hate crimes and hate speech are off the charts, especially in countries experiencing populist backlash to decades of progress on social justice. “Voices of dissent and opposition”, Judith Butler observes, “must find a way to intervene upon this desensitizing dream machine”².

Yet news cycle after news cycle, the never-ending affronts to reason, common sense, and basic human decency exhaust us³. And the worst part is that politics is just the sideshow: the dire threat is disastrous climate change. The man-made destruction of nature takes place – like the enactment of a racist immigration policy – largely outside the field of vision constructed by the media. What can we do to make the grave danger of the planetary extinction of life as we know it become publicly recognizable as reality?

Here I introduce a tale of two exceptional immigrants who tried to make a difference during an earlier constitutional crisis in the US. Distinguished poet laureate, playwright, statesman, university professor, and political activist, Archibald MacLeish was the son of a Scottish-born dry goods merchant. MacLeish worked out his social role in print in the course of the 1930s, deciding that public poetry and prose that commented directly on

² BUTLER, 2004, p 149.

³ They de-sensitize us to the constitutional crisis that began on January 20, 2017, the day Trump was inaugurated and refused to comply with the emoluments clause of the U.S. Constitution, Article 1, Section 9, Clause 8, which restricts members of the government from receiving gifts, emoluments, offices or titles from foreign states without the consent of the United States Congress. Also known as the Emoluments Clause, it was designed to shield the republican character of the United States against so-called “corrupting foreign influences”.

social and political issues could supply Americans with the clear vision he felt they lacked about their human potential and their national goals. Modernists criticized him for ignoring the separation of art and politics. MacLeish ignored *them* and argued for solidarity to overcome fascism and exercise the freedoms on which the United States was based. Elected President of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1953, MacLeish nonetheless failed to involve the Academy in confronting the anti-Communist hysteria of the time.

During the same years that MacLeish was a Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard standing up to McCarthyism, Hannah Arendt was writing in Cold War America with a very different memory of the past several decades⁴. Arendt escaped from the French Vichy government's concentration camp and entered the US on a stateless person's passport in 1941, was then active in the German-Jewish community, and became a naturalized US citizen in 1950. *The origins of totalitarianism*, published in 1951, was her first major book. Although it has made the bestseller lists since Trump's election, originally the book had a mixed reception, primarily because Arendt conceived of Communism and Nazism as two equally tyrannical movements that applied terror to subjugate mass populations. In *The origins of totalitarianism*, Arendt argued in terms that appear prophetic today, that human rights are universal and inalienable but their enforcement is difficult because there is no political authority higher than that of sovereign nations, as seen most clearly in the treatment of refugees and other stateless people isolated from civil rights. The two potential solutions, assimilation and repatriation, are both incapable of solving the crisis due to the sheer numbers of refugees and due to the nation's exercise of sovereignty through control over its national borders⁵.

⁴ McCarthyism is the practice of making accusations of subversion or treason without proper regard for evidence, in reference to US Senator Joseph McCarthy, in office 1947-1957. "The Cold War Home Front: McCarthyism", *AuthenticHistory.com*. AuthenticHistory.com, accessed 30 May 2018, at <https://www.historyonthenet.com/authentichistory/1946-1960/4-cwhomefront/1-mccarthyism/>.

⁵ ARENDT, Hannah. **The origins of totalitarianism**. Rev. ed. Orlando: Harcourt, 1968 (1951), pp. 290-302.

In the book that followed, *The human condition* (1958), often considered her most influential work, she pursued the roots of modern alienation from the world to ask what agency individuals *can* have in the social realm. The main outlines of Arendt's argument rest on a distinction between labor and work – again, with uncanny resonances today. She ties her argument to a critique of Marx and grounds it in ancient Greek philosophy. Labor corresponds to the biological process of the human body and provides for necessities. Labor is continuously consumed while, in contrast, work provides an enduring “artificial” world of things – the human condition of work is worldliness. Two senses of the human condition operate in tension in her text – the human ability to construct worldliness through the fabrication of artifice, and the consequences due to a plurality of human agents who are pursuing differing ends. Arendt laments that work has nearly disappeared from society in the current era of industrial capitalism: this disappearance is a major cause of alienation from the world.

Arendt was trained in philosophy and her views emerge from a political rather than an art historical or aesthetic tradition. Nonetheless, her political theory is rooted in the same Aristotelian texts as the western literature of art. Both are fundamentally indebted to Aristotle's discussion of nature and art as parallel processes consisting of intelligent action carried out for the sake of an end, involving “a true course of reasoning” (*Physics*, 199a10-15). In the Aristotelian commentary tradition spanning 2000 years, the production of art and the operation of virtue are closely aligned, based on Aristotle's account of reasoning. Art is a state of capacity to make, while moral action is about “what is to be done” with regard to “the things that are good or bad for man” (*Nicomachean ethics*, 1140a10 - 1140b6, 20-24). One set of actions produces works and the other results in acts. In the seventeenth century contemplating depictions of right action was thought capable of developing the beholder's moral character. It is no different today: the media shapes our view of the world and our view determines our values.

Aristotle's analogy between the products of nature and human art is the

cornerstone of the European humanist tradition exported worldwide since the sixteenth century, and the parallels between art and nature, and between making works and right action informs Arendt's discussion as well. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt discusses Plato's idea of the ideal state as the work of *homo faber* and contrasts it with her own view that action is fundamental to maintaining democracy, whereas understanding the state a static work of art is not. When "people act in concert", that is, when people "make and keep promises", they can retreat from harmful regimes⁶. However, action in the realm of human affairs suffers from haphazardness and possibly moral irresponsibility due to a plurality of agents – for that is the human condition. The most obvious salvation from the dangers of plurality is mon-archy practiced in many varieties from outright tyranny to benevolent despotism to those forms of democracy in which the many form a collective body so that the people are "many in one"⁷.

Yet the problem with all these forms of government (including democracy if it legislates universal consent) is that they banish citizens from the public realm while only the ruler attends to public affairs. The Platonic separation of knowing from doing, Arendt continues, is at the root of all theories of domination. This division is alien to the realm of action, *the validity of which is destroyed when knowing and doing part company* (whereas it is an everyday and necessary occurrence in the fabrication of works)⁸.

Humans have always been capable of destroying whatever was the product of human hands, Arendt observes, but today they have become capable of potentially destroying what humans did not make: the earth and earthly nature. She warns that humans will never be able to undo or even reliably control any of the processes they start through action because action, unlike fabrication, has no end. Arendt wrote during the height of the Cold

⁶ CANOVAN, Margaret. "Introduction". In: ARENDT, Hannah. **The human condition**. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 (1958), pp. xviii-xix.

⁷ ARENDT, 1998, pp. 220-221.

⁸ ARENDT, 1998, p. 225.

War, when nuclear disaster seemed an imminent threat (as it does again now): humans “have carried irreversibility and human unpredictability into the natural realm, where no remedy can be found to undo what has been done”⁹. Her grim observation has even greater urgency now when we are faced as never before with saving our shared home on planet Earth from premature and senseless destruction: nuclear holocaust and climate disaster have become competing threats.

When if not now should we make promises together and act in concert? In these precarious times, we all share the ethical responsibility as producers of knowledge to understand how our knowledge shapes society. By necessity, this has to be a collective endeavor. No one has the expertise to go it alone. In 1958, Hannah Arendt called out totalitarian movements because democracy lives only through its plurality and worldliness. It is no longer a matter of class, gender, race, or even just humanity. In the last century, humans have destroyed more than 80% of major mammal species populations, a new study finds¹⁰. Nor is our ethical responsibility a matter of politics in the narrow sense, as suggested by the common ground established between two academics of very different stripes, MacLeish, the Scottish immigrant’s son turned patrician-educated poet and statesman, and Arendt, highly educated stateless secular Jew turned political theorist.

What are the effects of the knowledge we produce as scholars? And how far does our responsibility as producers of knowledge extend? These fundamental questions deserve to be discussed and debated because the knowledge we produce has long-ranging effects far beyond the immediate

⁹ ARENDT, 1998, p. 238.

¹⁰ Between 1900 and 2015, according to a survey of 177 mammal species conducted by Gerardo Ceballos at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, reported in <http://www.relativelyinteresting.com/36-extinct-animals-due-human-activity/>, accessed 30 May 2018. Human-induced loss of animal life is often termed the “Sixth Mass Extinction”. For an excellent study of the ongoing effects of climate change driven by human greed, see MARQUES, Luiz. **Capitalism and environmental collapse**. Campinas: Editora da Unicamp, 2015 (Introduction).

contributions our studies are designed to make.

Global studies are the wave of the future but a worldly approach does not necessarily need to encompass the entire globe. One can write a far more limited history with an awareness of global connections and structural conditions. One promising way to engage with the domain of world art history is to focus on “ways of knowing”, that is to say, on processes that encompass all forms of cultural production. Every society passes on its cultural knowledge to the next generation. A course of study that foregrounds these processes would be able to present *on equal footing* cultural productions as diverse as indigenous traditions of dance and ceremony, where fidelity to tradition is often demanded, and contemporary art, which values originality, without directly equating one tradition with the other or reducing one to a form of the other.

When does “global matter”? Ultimately, we are all connected. Art history and other closely related disciplines such as anthropology and archaeology were professionalized in the nineteenth century. There is indeed an urgent need to study the many kinds of entanglements that emerge in local settings, and to study them comparatively and across existing disciplinary specializations. However, our inherited mono-cultural and oppositional categories (Europe and Asia, Christianity and Islam, West and Non-West, art and artifact, and so on) are bound up with the matrices of imperialism and colonialism and embroiled in the neo-colonialism that thrives in today’s world of transnational corporate capitalism. Moreover, as much as we scholars may differ in our expertise and approaches, we share stakes in similar kinds of issues entangled with climate change, such as massive diasporas aggravated by drought, ravaged resources, and war; changes in power structures that compromise democracy and promote fanaticism, terrorism, and war-mongering; the effects of global communications and zones of silence, as in who gets to speak, who doesn’t, who benefits, who doesn’t.

A transcultural framework of analysis is well-suited to this task, but it is important to bear in mind that processes of globalization newly identified by

transcultural approaches began long before the nineteenth or even the sixteenth century. Considering global connectivity in a longer historical context effectively de-centers the dominant role attributed to Europe since the era of colonialism¹¹. As a historian studying objects and texts of the past, the work that I produce is re-writing the history of the past in the present. This re-written history deserves to be at the table when we cut and share the global pie, to borrow an apt metaphor from the contemporary art curator and cultural critic, Gerardo Mosquera¹². To do otherwise is to exclude the historian as yet another voiceless, marginalized, dispossessed subject.

An entirely different history emerges when the dynamic itineraries of objects and the people who interact with them become the focus of study. Such a framework can be used to study the complex forms of material culture produced in heterogeneous societies where previously unrelated ways of making, knowing, and valuing become entangled in unequal relationships of power. A de-centered concept of cultural interrelationships can be very useful for understanding the complex processes that bind broader, waxing and waning networks of cultural exchange. Re-imagining lines of transmission that go in multiple directions, treating geographical and period boundaries as porous, heuristic categories, reading canonical works against the grain, and bringing to the fore important cultural artifacts marginalized by our inherited nineteenth-century categories, also leads to new considerations of “family resemblances” or gradations of interrelatedness at large scale. Could we imagine our shared investment in material culture as a basis for writing new narratives in which contacts among peoples everywhere are the focus and treated with the same concern? A network model of connectivity can also meaningfully account for products of global exchange that do not fit European categories such as

¹¹ See ABU-LUGHOD, Janet L. **Before European hegemony: The world system 1250-1350**. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

¹² MOSQUERA, Gerardo. “From”. In: ENWEZOR, Okwui et al. **Creolité and creolization**. Platform. 3, Documenta 11. Ostfildern-Ruit (Germany): Hatje Cantz, 2003, pp. 145-148, citing p. 145.

maker, patron, culture, or place of origin.

The give and take between cultures merits our attention, but the realities of political and economic domination cannot be ignored either. Since World War II, generations of critics like Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Césaire Aimé, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Jacques Derrida, Néstor García Canclini, Paulo Freire, and numerous others have charged that contemporary scholarship keeps itself pure by not taking certain kinds of contexts into account. I advocate continuing their legacy by making the history of our categories part of our subject of study, so that the values attached to these differences are exposed. To better understand how categories such as “art”, “artifact”, and “culture” are historically constructed, we must develop what feminist art historian Joan Kelly called a “double vision” by looking both “inside” and “outside” our inherited interpretive frameworks¹³.

In the currently divisive and xenophobic political climate in the United States and elsewhere, the extent of our responsibilities as academics and intellectuals to link history, theory, and criticism to contemporary social conditions is an urgent and painfully obvious question. Collaborative approaches that require institutional support and networks of exchange that share data *before* publication are increasingly used in the sciences when it comes to subjects like biodiversity and climate change that are highly time-sensitive. Since any synthetic account of cultural history depends on accumulating many individual case studies to build a larger picture, such a collaborative approach could greatly enhance the speed and quality of our research outcomes in the humanities by integrating regional studies in disciplines closely related to one another into an international network of scholarly connectivity.

The questions that deserve to be driving our research agendas include our

¹³ KELLY [Gadol], Joan. “The doubled vision of feminist theory. A postscript to the *Women and power* Conference”. In: **Women, history and theory: The essays of Joan Kelly**. Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp. 51-64.

intellectual responsibility to society. I am concerned with what we pass on to future generations. What kinds of political implications are there to the knowledge we produce? Our work can seem a-political when we produce it, but at the same time it excludes other work from taking place, or relegates that work to the margins. We as scholars have the shared responsibility to recognize how inherited paradigms structure our contemporary practices. Our precariousness, while appalling, is a potential source of strength: scholars have the capacity to change the discourse. We need to seek every opportunity to do so.

Submetido em: 30/05/2018

Aceito em: 12/06/2018

Publicado em: 15/06/2018