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Contents / Obsah

Editorial: the Journal's Coming of Age	5
1. Studies and Essays / Studie a eseje	
EWA DOMAŃSKA – Affirmative Humanities	9
RADMILA ŠVAŘÍČKOVÁ SLABÁKOVÁ – Remembering Emotions in Ego-Documents. A Few Insights from Cognitive Psychology and Neuroscience	27
RICHARD MÜLLER – “Mediality”: Some Fundamental Questions on the Theory and History of Media	49
CLAIRE MADL – Publishers' Advertising Strategies to Widen and Diversify Readership. The Example of Bohemia	69
JIŘÍ HUTEČKA – „New“ Military History of the First World War. Achievements and Limits	99
2. Discussions and Disputes / Diskuse a rozepře	
Interview with Professor William O'Reilly (University of Cambridge, Trinity Hall)	127
3. Reviews and Reflections / Recenze a reflexe	
TOR EGIL FØRLAND , Values, Objectivity, and Explanation in Historiography (Eugen Zelenák)	141
EWA DOMAŃSKA , Nekros. Wprowadzenie do ontologii martwego ciała / Nekros. An Introduction to the Ontology of the Dead Body (Olga Cielemecka)	147

ZOLTÁN BIEDERMANN, ANNE GERRITSEN, GIORGIO RIELLO (eds.), Global Gifts. The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia (Veronika Čapská)	153
PETR WOHLMUTH, Krev, čest a hrůza. Historická antropologie pevnostní války na příkladu britských deníků z obléhání pevnosti Bergen op Zoom z roku 1747 / Blood, Honour and Horror. Representations of Siege Warfare in British Journals During the Siege at Bergen op Zoom in 1747 (Jiří Hutečka)	158
TARA ZAHRA, The Great Departure. Mass Migration from Eastern Europe and the Making of the Free World (Filip Herza)	163
Notice to Contributors / Upozornění pro přispěvatele	167

AFFIRMATIVE HUMANITIES

Ewa Domańska

The explorations presented in the article provide a brief outline of the larger affirmative humanities project. Following Rosi Braidotti's ideas of affirmative ethics and politics, I propose an understanding of affirmative humanities as a way of moving away from a postmodernist interest in apocalypse, catastrophes, extinction, trauma, suffering, voids, silence and exclusion. I consider affirmative humanities to be a project that is future oriented, envisioning the future in more positive ways (which is not to say naive and unrealistic ways), while aiming to empower the subject (human and non-human, individual as well as collective) and looking for alternative forms of community.

Key words: art, affirmative humanities, affirmative method, affirmative critique, potential history

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There is no posthumanism without postmodernism. The designation “post” primarily suggests a change in context brought about by real events, such as those manifested in the reorientation of research interests and the theoretical frameworks that set out the themes and approaches explored in humanities research. The rough period from 1996 to 1998 can be considered a time when postmodernism, understood as a set of tendencies that set the tone of discussions in the humanities in the 1980s and 1990s (poststructuralism, deconstruction, textualism, narrativism, culturalism and psychoanalysis), reached its peak.¹ This

1 The end of postmodernism has already been proclaimed, for example at the 1991 conference in Stuttgart, ‘End of Postmodernism: New Directions’. See the resulting publication: *The End of Postmodernism: New Directions: Proceedings of the First Stuttgart Seminar in Cultural Studies, 04.08.–18.08. 1991*, (ed.) HEIDE ZIEGLER, Stuttgart 1993. There was also a conference in

does not, of course, mean that these trends are no longer relevant. They are, however, no longer at the centre of discussions taking place in the context of avant-garde tendencies which, as was also the case with postmodernism, might not dominate the humanities, yet they do constitute its “frontline”, responsible for stimulating the reconfiguration of research questions, theories and approaches.²

After postmodernism

The attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, and Jean Baudrillard’s comments in the aftermath, are often considered a symbolic end to the postmodern trend.³ One of postmodernism’s leading representatives, Baudrillard, who claimed that we live in a world of simulacra and hyperreality lacking any relation to the real, wrote at the time: “With the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, we might even be said to have before us the absolute event, the ‘mother’ of all events, the pure event uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place.”⁴ The decline of postmodernism can also be attributed to the declining ranks of its representatives (i.e. those in so-called French theory) who had defined it and whose concepts were developed in the particular atmosphere

1997 in Chicago titled ‘After Postmodernism’ (the papers are available at [www.focusing.org/apm.htm#Online Papers](http://www.focusing.org/apm.htm#Online%20Papers) – accessed May 28, 2018). See also *Encounters: Philosophy of History After Postmodernism*, (ed.) EWA DOMAŃSKA, Charlottesville – London 1998.

- 2 I have presented the reconfigurations evident in the avant-garde tendencies in the contemporary humanities in my review article, *Wiedza o przeszłości – perspektywy na przyszłość* [Knowledge of the Past – Perspectives on the Future], *Kwartalnik Historyczny* 120/2013, pp. 221–274. The findings presented in that essay are the result of an investigation conducted between 2010 and 2012 in the course of which around 1200 issues of 300 academic journals representing various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences were examined.
- 3 As Alison Gibbons recently claimed “Critics – such as Christian Moraru, Josh Toth, Neil Brooks, Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen – repeatedly point to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the new millennium, the 9/11 attacks, the so-called “War on Terror” and the wars in the Middle East, the financial crisis and the ensuing global revolutions. Taken together, these events signify the failure and unevenness of global capitalism as an enterprise, leading to an ensuing disillusionment with the project of neo-liberal postmodernity and the recent political splintering into extreme Left and extreme Right. The cumulative effect of these events – and the accompanying hyper-anxiety brought about by twenty-four hour news – has made the Western world feel like a more precarious and volatile place, in which we can no longer be nonchalant about our safety or our future.” ALISON GIBBONS, *Postmodernism is Dead. What Comes Next?*, TLS online (The Times Literary Supplement), June 12/2017, www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/postmodernism-dead-comes-next/, accessed January 24, 2018.
- 4 JEAN BAUDRILLARD, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem For The Twin Towers*, New York 2002, pp. 3–4.

of 1968. Bourdieu died in 2002, Deleuze in 1995, Lyotard in 1998, Derrida in 2004 and Baudrillard in 2007.

Since the end of the 1960s, the humanities have been through several turns. However, during the past decade, the nature of these turns has changed as they have occurred with increasing frequency. Recently, for example, we have been able to read about the planetary or cosmic and geological turns, the turn towards complexity and the relational turn, the forensic turn, the cognitive turn and the neurobiological turn, which is also linked to the affective turn. Ultimately, I would argue that all of the concepts applied today in the humanities and social sciences that begin with the prefixes bio-, eco-, geo-, necro-, neuro-, techno- and zoo- are indicators of ideas connected to the emergence of a new paradigm. The greatest commotion and interest has been aroused by the species turn, i.e. the turn towards the non-human, towards animals, plants and things, and also by the geological turn, which is linked to discussions on the subject of the Anthropocene and climate change. Of course, it is not the first time that interest in animals, plants, things, the environment and the climate have been among the central trends in research in the humanities and social sciences. In recent years, however, these have tended to be explored from the perspective of various versions of posthumanism that have radicalised these trends and given them a new dimension, thus adding some important strands to theoretical debates in the humanities (the agency of things, the theory of companion species, new vitalism, new materialism, flat ontologies, affect theory, speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, etc.). It is thus not a matter of introducing new fields of research or revitalising older ones, since, as the most iconic figure of the posthumanities Cary Wolfe has argued, “one can engage in a humanist or a posthumanist practice of a discipline, and that fact is crucial to what a discipline can contribute to the field”.⁵

In terms of the discussion presented in this essay, it seems that the following interconnected turns are particularly important: the postsecular, the conservative and the postcritical. This question is of significant interest because it was the critical attitude alongside various manifestations of critical theories that stimulated humanities theory after 1968. Scholars belonging to those previous generations pursued critical analysis of the world, particularly of various systems of power, its strategies and its means of subordinating the subject. One of the leading figures in postmodernism, Hal Foster, now mourns the end of the critical era and bemoans the rise of a new conservative age for example. Known for his classic

5 CARY WOLFE, *What is Posthumanism?*, Minneapolis 2010, p. 123.

postmodern work *The Return of the Real*, Foster wrote in one of the last issues of the journal *October* (Winter 2012): “Critical theory took a serious beating during the culture wars of the 1980s and the 1990s, and the 2000s were only worse. Under George W. Bush, the demand for affirmation was all but total, and today there is little space for critique even in the universities and the museums. Bullied by conservative commentators, most academics no longer stress the importance of critical thinking for an engaged citizenry, and most curators, dependent on corporate sponsors, no longer promote the critical debate once deemed essential to the public reception of advanced art. (...) Yet what are the options on offer? Celebrating beauty? Affirming affect? Hoping for a ‘redistribution of the sensible’? Trusting in ‘the general intellect’? The post-critical condition is supposed to release us from our straitjackets (historical, theoretical, and political), yet for the most part it has abetted a relativism that has little to do with pluralism.”⁶

Hal Foster represents a particular generation of intellectuals, one that will almost certainly not remain forever locked within the postmodern critical tension, but will also come to recognise that under current political conditions, the changes taking place in the humanities (including the shift away from a trauma-centred approach and from a fixation on critique of the present) are undesirable. Foster perceives symptoms of neo-modernism in these reconfigurations and compares the current conditions to the 1920s. He ends his article by expressing great concern that “it is a bad time to go post-critical”.⁷ Given the rebirth of imperialism (and the formation of new modes of it), the return of “atavistic racism” (Michael Wieviorka’s term), the designs of biopower and the growing tendency towards state control of citizens, it is not difficult to agree with him.

Looking to the future and thinking “in spite of the times”

What kind of humanities do we need today? When considering this question we should place it in the context of the fundamental changes that have been affecting the humanities over the past ten years – namely: the formation of a new paradigm that is variously described as bio-, eco- and/or posthumanities or non-anthropocentric and post-European (or non-Western) humanities, while making this question relevant to the issues affecting the contemporary world that are now not only of a global but also planetary nature (genocide, terrorism, migration, global capitalism, crisis of democracy, biopolitics, poverty, genetic

6 HAL FOSTER, *Post-Critical*, October 139/2012, p. 3.

7 H. FOSTER, *Post-Critical*, p. 8.

engineering, environmental pollution, climate change and natural disasters). Observing these changes and phenomena generates a tendency to take on a future-oriented perspective and an urge to create visions of potential scenarios of the future that offer alternatives to the current dystopia of global capitalism, with the humanities able to offer support for such visions.

Currently, then, it is above all the future, rather than only the present (and the tentative objectives linked to it), which provides a reference point in the building of knowledge of the past. Rosi Braidotti claims that we should create potential futures and think “in spite of the times”.⁸ Accepting this “looking to the future” and thinking “in spite of the times” as both a task and a challenge for the humanities today, I am working towards a project of affirmative humanities. Despite this article and also the book I am currently working on bearing the title “affirmative humanities”, I have no intention of declaring the onset of a post-critical epoch, even if I do believe that we are facing the culmination of a certain kind of criticism and critical theory that was characteristic of a mode of postmodernism related to German and French critical theory. This does not mean, though, that theory will cease to serve a critical function. As Braidotti writes, what should also be considered is the “affirmative power of critical theory” and the fact that “critical theory is about strategies of affirmation”.⁹ I also have no intention of proclaiming political slogans of solidarity, *à la* Bush, or hope, *à la* Obama, although in my thinking I would rather move away from a politics of fear, which is something that I consider simply reactionary. Instead, I direct my intellectual efforts towards a search for approaches and concepts that will enable the ideas of the subject and community to be empowered while at the same time transcending postmodern negativity. My current interests and approaches thus reflect the reconfigurations taking place in the humanities today. Braidotti describes them as a paradigmatic shift away from the Freudian-Hegelian framework towards a Spinozist one, so away from psychoanalytical hermeneutics towards various neo-materialist approaches. In her view, this shift means that we will dedicate more attention to questions of empowerment and critiques of negativity.¹⁰

It is of great significance that the project of an affirmative humanities is being outlined in what is known as the postsecular era, which (again) links the ques-

8 This is a phrase taken from Adrienne Rich that was then used in the title of an article by ROSI BRAIDOTTI, *In Spite of the Times. The Postsecular Turn in Feminism*, Theory, Culture & Society 25/2008, no. 6, pp. 1–24.

9 R. BRAIDOTTI, *In Spite of the Times*, pp. 2, 16.

10 R. BRAIDOTTI, *In Spite of the Times*, p. 12.

tion of the construction of subjectivity and community with faith and beliefs, while reconsidering the place of religion in the public sphere and the relations between religion and scholarship, as well as discussing non-institutional forms of religiosity, various forms of spirituality and also ethics together with the discourse of virtue. This does not mean, however, that there is a single (or correct) path or direction in this respect, although it is beyond doubt that we are currently experiencing a “conservative turn” (which should not be considered identical to a “right-wing turn”). When I speak of postsecularism in this essay, rather than thinking of ideas seeking the preservation of an unchanging human nature and the sanctity of life or fears of a biotechnological revolution, as Fukuyama has done, I have in mind the possibility of building a kind of knowledge which would follow the idea of epistemic justice¹¹ and treat Western-type scholarship and indigenous ways of knowing (native knowledges) according to identical principles, as well as re-introducing to historical reflections certain concepts and approaches used in religious and spiritual thinking. Here, I would also see the potential for fundamental changes both in our understanding of knowledge itself, critiquing science and scholarship as its privileged forms, and in the objectives and modes of its creation. Such knowledge is set against a background of a certain form of spirituality.

Towards an affirmative humanities

The idea of an affirmative humanities entered my work, in a sense, “from below”, as a conclusion to my research on case studies of specific victims of the Gulag and the Holocaust. That study also considered the possibility of the victims’ theoretical empowerment and questions relating to the attribution of agency.¹² My investigations were accompanied by conclusions resulting from an analysis of the condition of contemporary humanities and social sciences. Braidotti’s texts were an important source of inspiration, since for many years she has called for a move beyond interests in melancholy, mourning and negativity, instead promoting the

11 Cf. BOAVENTURE DE SOUSA SANTOS, *Epistemologies of the South. Justice Against Epistemicide*, Boulder 2014.

12 See EWA DOMAŃSKA, *Musulman: świadectwo i figura [The Muselmann: Testimony and Figure]*, in: *W sprawie Agambena. Konteksty krytyki*, (eds.) Łukasz Musiał, Mikołaj Ratajczak, Krystian Szadkowski, Arkadiusz Żychlinski, Poznań 2010, p. 233–260; EWA DOMAŃSKA, *Hermeneutyka przejścia. Wspomnienia z Rosji Jana Żarno [Hermeneutics of Passage. Jan Żarno’s Russian Memoirs]*, in: Ewa Domańska, *Historie niekonwencjonalne. Refleksja o przeszłości w nowej humanistyce*, Poznań 2006, pp. 131–160.

idea of “affirmative empowerment” and an ethics of affirmation. It should also be stressed that her proposed approach to politics and ethics “is not about the avoidance of pain, but rather about transcending the resignation and passivity that ensue from being hurt, lost and dispossessed”.¹³ She thus writes: “We live in a state of constant fear and in expectation of the imminent accident. In this global context, what used to be the high-energy political activism of the Left has been replaced by collective mourning and melancholia. A great deal, if not most, of contemporary social and political theory stresses vulnerability, precarity and mortality. As far as I am concerned, our political sensibility has taken a forensic shift: the astounding success of Giorgio Agamben’s ‘bare life’ (1998), with its emphasis on destitution and genocidal destruction and the revival of interest in Carl Schmitt’s homicidal politics of friends and foes are strong expressions of the contemporary obsession with political violence, wounds, pain and suffering.

I do not want to suggest that the politics of mourning and the political economy of melancholia are intrinsically reactive or necessarily negative. (...) My argument is rather that the politics of melancholia has become so dominant in our culture that it ends up functioning like a self-fulfilling prophecy, which leaves very small margins for alternative approaches. I want to argue therefore for the need to experiment with other ethical relations as a way of producing an ethics of affirmation.

I want to take consequently a very different direction and argue the case for affirmation, inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s neo-vitalism, but also indebted to Nietzsche and Spinoza. The focus in this line of thought is on the politics of life itself as a relentlessly generative force. The key terms in this affirmative politics are relations, endurance and radical immanence; the result is the notion of ethical sustainability. References to the non-human, inhuman or post-human play a very central role in this new ethical equation that rests on a fundamental dislocation of anthropocentric premises about agency.”¹⁴

I coined the term “affirmative humanities” since I was inspired by Braidotti’s ideas of affirmative politics and ethics.¹⁵ However, I am not attempting to fully adapt her work for the purposes of my investigation here. Whereas Braidotti positions her thought primarily in relation to the context of feminist visions

13 ROSI BRAIDOTTI, *Powers of Affirmation. Response to Lisa Baraitser, Patrick Hanafin and Clare Hemmings*, *Subjectivity* 3/2010, pp. 140–148, 145.

14 R. BRAIDOTTI, *Powers of Affirmation*, p. 142.

15 See ROSI BRAIDOTTI, *Affirmation, Pain and Empowerment*, *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies* 14/2008.

of technoculture (albeit within the framework of a nature-culture continuum), I have a greater affinity for visions of realistic (eco-)utopias that draw on inspirations from non-European epistemologies (indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing), whose value Braidotti overlooks. Whereas she opposes essentialism, I am interested in neo-essentialist ideas as a necessary part of thought about society and the individual, with these ideas referring to an alternative conception of the idea of roots that consequently enables effective defence and regeneration.¹⁶ Whereas Braidotti is attached to the idea of the relational, nomadic and diffuse subject, I am interested in a strong subject and the potential of stabilising and unifying the subject (which, of course, does not mean a return to traditional ideas of a homogeneous and unchanging subjectivity).

Despite these differences, I wish to contribute to efforts to transcend negativity and disseminate notions of empowerment with the aim of constructing a space for alternative visions of the future. I propose an understanding of affirmative humanities as a departure from the postmodern interest in catastrophes, the apocalypse, (the) extinction of (the) species, trauma, victimhood, suffering, emptiness, silence and exclusion.¹⁷ I should stress, however, that I do not propose that such themes should be avoided completely. Quite the opposite – I believe that affirmative humanities is a project conceived in spite of the negativity of the times in which we live. It is orientated towards the future and is strategic, while imagining the future in a more positive light than the apocalyptic visions of species extinction, cosmic catastrophes, further spectacular terrorist attacks, genocides and growing poverty. This does not mean, though, that it is an unrealistic and infantile project. In a world full of violence and conflicts, with ever more examples of mass murder and genocides, as well as growing state control of citizens, investigation of the above-mentioned phenomena remains essential. However, it is also possible to investigate the oppressive actions of power by asking different research questions and applying theories other than those that have resulted in expressions of the impossibility of action by the subject and community, while also proclaiming depressing theories, such as the view that

16 I am referring here to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's idea of a strategic essentialism.

17 Brian Massumi argues that the defining feature of the postmodern age is the fear associated with living in the shadow of various catastrophes. In his view, this fear has become part of our everyday experience and is an integral part of consumer capitalism. BRIAN MASSUMI, *Everywhere You Want to Be. Introduction to Fear*, in: Brian Massumi, *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, Minneapolis 1993. See also ZYGMUNT BAUMAN, *Liquid Fear*, Cambridge 2006; PAUL VIRILIO, *The Administration of Fear*, Cambridge 2012.

“not even climate change will kill off capitalism”.¹⁸ An affirmative humanities is guided by the principle that, to cite Chris Maser, “you can’t move away from a negative; you can only move towards a positive”.¹⁹

An affirmative humanities is not about affirming and protecting a traditional concept of life.²⁰ Instead, it is about support, empowerment, stimulating development, and constructing space for creating individual and collective identity/subjectivity; about creating potentiality (*potentia*) for actions contributing to designing futures within a framework of “sustainable development”. This is based on the principle that in the face of real threats we cannot afford to privilege an often disempowering negativity and sense of helplessness when confronted with the uncontrolled processes taking place in the contemporary world. In place of a reactionary politics of fear, I instead offer a progressive politics of support.²¹

This idea is also directed towards the empowerment of the subject and the community (comprising human and non-human persons). The concept of agency, together with an appropriate understanding of it, is crucial here. In this project, the subject is conceived as an agent who possesses the potential to act and effect change. This agent can be human, but could equally be an animal, plant or object. What is important, however, is that this subject is no longer infantilised and stripped of his/her/its agency (the concept of the victim usually implies the passivity of the subject). Instead, then, of victimising the subject, I prefer to speak of his/her/its vitality – that is, similarly to Braidotti’s understanding, its potential to transform and transcend negativity, its potential for regeneration (following negative experiences).

Let us outline here the central traits of an affirmative humanities. They are: the particular postsecular and post-humanities context of the project; transcendence of postmodern negativity and the concomitant focus on catastrophe, emptiness, apocalypse, trauma, mourning, melancholy and passive victims; the turn

18 RAZMIG KEUCHEYAN, *Not Even Climate Change Will Kill off Capitalism*, The Guardian, Thursday 6 March 2014, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/06/not-even-climate-change-will-kill-off-capitalism, accessed May 29, 2018.

19 CHRIS MASER, *The Redesigned Forest*, San Pedro 1988, p. 113.

20 It is a matter here of *life itself* (*zoe*), as well as synthetic life and necrolife, in all of its various manifestations and forms, which appear at various levels (from molecular-level life through to macro-organisms and complex technologies), as well as research into relations that support and enrich these. In this sense, the affirmative humanities project is neo-vitalistic and conceives of life not as a living existence but instead as the potential for change and transformation.

21 Cf. SARAH S. AMSLER, *Bringing Hope to ‘Crisis’*. *Crisis Thinking, Ethical Action and Social Change*, in: *Future Ethics. Climate Change and Apocalyptic Imagination*, (ed.) Stefan Skrimshire, New York – London 2010.

away from the egocentric human individual towards community understood as a collectivity of human and non-human persons; positive empowerment of the subject (both individual and collective); conceiving of the subject as agentic (by applying the ideas of a non-anthropocentric, diffuse agency and also non-intentional agency); vitalising the subject (outlining the potential for psychological and physical self-regeneration and applying the ideas of neo-vitalism); its post-anthropocentric conception of life as a dynamic force of becoming; its use of relational epistemology (i.e. an interest in the relations between the human, non-human and post-human, as well as an emphasis on co-dependency and mutual conditioning).

Affirmative humanities proposes a specific project for a humanities understood as knowledge of co-existence in conflict (aiming to form a part of an inclusive knowledge about the past, of which the humanities, alongside the life sciences and various indigenous ways of knowing, are part²²) that is future-oriented and works to neutralise both anthropocentrism as well as eurocentrism, which, until now, have been the dominant modes of constructing knowledge about the world and humanity.

The affirmative method

What I have outlined above has inspired my search for a relevant hermeneutic method that would enable a focus on the positive aspects of a work (text, image, object) while also concentrating on those elements of “historical sources” that could open up interpretations of previously overlooked possibilities. The affirmative method proposed by Elizabeth Grosz in her book *Time Travels* is one manifestation of such an approach. Grosz presents a particular mode for critical reading of texts. Rather than exploring them to find various forms of insufficiency, such as incoherence, contradiction, logical errors and weakness of argumentation (which might be associated with negative critique and a male way of reading that often causes self-defensive behaviour among women),²³ Grosz suggests reading benevolently with a focus on the work’s positive aspects and key concepts, unlocking its previously overlooked potential. As Grosz wrote: “I have tried to de-

22 I do not rule out the possibility that in future such inclusive knowledge might be created by non-human actors, for example animals and artificial knowledge generators systems. CONCEPCIÓN CORTÉS ZULUETA, *Nonhuman Animal Testimonies. A Natural History in the First Person?*, in: *The Historical Animal*, (ed.) Susan Nance, Syracuse 2015.

23 MAUREEN MCNEIL, *Post-Millennial Feminist Theory. Encounters with Humanism, Materialism, Critique, Nature, Biology and Darwin*, *Journal for Cultural Research* 14/2010, pp. 432–433.

velop an affirmative method, a mode of assenting to rather than dissenting from those 'primary' texts – whether by Darwin, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, Irigaray, Deleuze or feminist commentators writing on these primary figures; one can write most generously and with the most inspiration working on those texts one loves the most intensely, which have had the most direct impact on one. The rest, those one deems too problematic, can be left aside.²⁴

Some scholars find Grosz's affirmative approach to textual criticism problematic and uncritical, although I do not wish to move in this direction.²⁵ I do not advocate abandoning a critical approach in favour of an uncritical affirmative reading, but rather call for positive critical textual analysis that, in the case of research on various aspects of the past, would be accompanied by other methods, including source criticism, observation, field research, interviews and questionnaires, and/or case studies.

Affirmative critique

The Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski posed in his text *Europe on the Crossroads, or an Affirmative Critique* the following question: "what kind of critique can we make in order to reveal and to defend the idea of Europe in terms of the postcolonial, post-totalitarian, and maybe also post-democratic processes? Let me also ask what kind of a vision of the future, if any, can be raised from the critique of the post-1989 crises?"²⁶

In exploring these questions through the idea of an affirmative humanities that has been proposed here, Piotrowski proposed the concept of *affirmative*

- 24 ELIZABETH GROSZ, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*, Durham 2005, p. 3. I am grateful to Olga Cielemeńska who drew my attention to this important element in the construction of a project of affirmative humanities. She applied the affirmative method in her PhD thesis titled *Między ludzkim a nieludzkim. Etyka Giorgia Agambena i jej antropologiczne podstawy [Between the Human and Non-Human. Giorgio Agamben's Ethics and its Anthropological Foundations]*, Warsaw 2015.
- 25 IRIS VAN DER TUIN, *A Different Starting Point, a Different Metaphysics. Reading Bergson and Barad Diffractionally*, Hypatia 26/2011, p. 23.
- 26 The text of the lecture submitted by its author on 3 October 2014 was altered during its presentation, which was also recorded and placed online. In this version Piotrowski posed a somewhat different question: 'what kind of critique can we make in order to defend some European ideas such as democracy and human rights?' PIOTR PIOTROWSKI, *Europe on the Crossroads, or an Affirmative Critique*, Manuscript (in possession of the author) of a lecture presented at Sofia University on 13 November 2014. Video of the lecture, www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RSkwYBtImE, accessed May 29, 2018.

critique. His ideas are not completely aligned to the ideas that either Braidotti or I have proposed. He stressed: “My concept, however, does not go to create a sort of a new paradigm of the humanities understood in the context of post-humanism and post-anthropocentric discourse. (...) It is not only less ambitious (...) but also has different goals. It does not propose a model of future studies, rather a prospect of a possible basis for a utopia, actually a global utopia, i.e. not only a critique is the issue, a sort of a negative issue, but also a positive value system that can show a positive approach to the future.”²⁷

Sadly, further debate with him on this subject proved impossible, as Piotr Piotrowski died in May 2015. Nevertheless, the objectives of affirmative humanities and affirmative critique are essentially related. It is thus worth treating the ideas of affirmative critique, as I do here, as an aspect of affirmative humanities, which, as I show in this text, also dreams of utopia. In contrast to Piotrowski, however, I am not tempted to speak of a global utopia, but rather a local version. The utopia that I speak of in relation to affirmative humanities is a realistic utopia – it is responsible and local, while also being based in real opportunities for realization within a particular milieu in the “here and now”. I thus propose that utopia should not be sought in some form of imaginary non-place but rather in the potentiality of the “here and now”. I fully agree with Piotrowski, however, that it is above all a case here of laying foundations for more positive visions of the future.

Piotrowski, however, was very deeply rooted in European culture, which is something I take a significantly more sceptical attitude towards. He defended a particular understanding of Eurocentrism, writing further on in his paper that: “Europe has different faces and different foundations; let me say once more – negative and positive. Colonialism, oppression, racism, imperialism, exploitation, hegemony, even extermination, are on the negative site. Taking into account this side of a critique of eurocentrism made by postcolonial scholars (and not only) is quite understandable. There is, however, the other side of Europe: above-mentioned equality, solidarity, freedom, democracy, human rights, emancipation, all those values connected with the Enlightenment tradition, workers uprising, and the ethos of *Intelligentsia*.”

Piotrowski thus saw potential in the construction of utopia upon the foundations of Enlightenment ideals, whereas I prefer to speak of the necessity of building new ideas that lay the foundations for utopias that would be based on European values as well as those developed outside Europe (together with concepts drawn from various indigenous knowledges). It should not be forgotten

27 P. PIOTROWSKI, *Europe on the Crossroads*.

that Europe betrayed the values upon which it based the post-Enlightenment order, since these values now inhabit the space sometimes termed “the dark side of modernity”. I will mention here only briefly that one idea that could potentially provide the foundation of new utopias is the African idea of interpersonal relations called *ubuntu*, while another is an idea cultivated by the Andean people, particularly in Bolivia and Ecuador, namely *buen vivir*. These constitute the basis of a new political paradigm and alternative principles of community, built upon the coexistence of humans and nature. They are critical of destructive neoliberalism and ideas of progress based on technological progress as the measure of positive change. As an alternative to the Western model of “a better life” I propose the autochthonous ideal of “good living” (which in the Quechua language is *sumak kawsay*), which is based on mutuality, coexistence with nature, harmony and social responsibility. A critical approach reveals the Latin-American populism that is built into this idea, while also engendering reflection on the call to reject progress. Nevertheless, the real presence of *buen vivir* in the public sphere is through its inscription in the preamble to the 2008 Ecuadorian constitution and thus indicates the potential for a realistic utopia.²⁸

If, however, we were to opt to follow Piotrowski and defend European Enlightenment traditions, then we would discover that he had placed his hope in contemporary art, which, as he argued, creates a social ‘horizon of expectations’ in the public sphere (both Piotrowski and I are keen to use concepts drawn from Reinhart Koselleck). Inspired by Piotrowski’s ideas, I thus ask how can contemporary art projects prove capable of constructing new scenarios of the future – and thus in what ways is art the future of history?²⁹

I have found a manifestation of “affirmative humanities” in the idea of potential history proposed by the Israeli scholar and artist Ariella Azoulay. Following Susan Sontag, who claimed that “each work of art gives us a form or paradigm or model of knowing something, an epistemology”,³⁰ I would ask whether “po-

28 THOMAS FATHEUER, *Buen Vivir – A brief introduction to Latin America’s new concepts for the good life and the rights of nature*, Berlin 2011, www.boell.de/en/2014/01/06/buen-vivir-short-introduction, accessed July 12, 2015; PABLO ALONSO GONZÁLEZ, ALFREDO MACÍAS VÁZQUEZ, *An Ontological Turn in the Debate on Buen Vivir – Sumak Kawsay in Ecuador: Ideology, Knowledge and the Common*, *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 10/2015, pp. 1–20.

29 EWA DOMAŃSKA, *Sztuka jako przyszłość historii / Art as the Future of History*, in: *Historia w sztuce/History in Art*, (ed.) Marie Anna Potocka, Kraków 2011, pp. 74–85.

30 SUSAN SONTAG, *The Aesthetics of Silence*, in: Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*, New York 1969, pp. 31–32.

tential history” could create a model for studying the past as well as desired future which can be useful to the historian? Does the epistemology inscribed in this project propose innovative and interesting categories of research, uncovering some repressed, forgotten, or unknown aspects of the past/present/future complex? I treat “thinking with” Azoulay’s project as an affirmative exercise that allows us to think about social values (conviviality, critical hope, hospitality, social trust), as methods of historical inquiry that are oriented toward the future and permit us to build alternative visions of a community-to-come (Jacques Derrida’s *l’avenir*).

Potential history

Investigating the question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Azoulay proposed the creation of a citizens’ archive (a photographic “archive of potential history”), which would reject the division imposed between 1947 and 1950 and would instead aim to extract such images from the difficult past and offer such stories that would counter official interpretations, thus indicating the potential for Arab-Israeli coexistence.³¹ Such history thus possesses traits of a Foucauldian counter-history in the sense of revealing the victors’ history that legitimizes dominant power and which operates in opposition to the insurrectional history of the vanquished. This affinity is also evident in the fact that this is a future-oriented history of critical hope and promise. As Foucault writes, the task of such counter-history is “to disinter something that has been hidden, and which has been hidden not only because it has been neglected, but because it has been carefully, deliberately, and wickedly misrepresented”.³² Potential history is not, however, identical to counter-history. In Azoulay’s understanding of it, which I intend to follow here, potential history is not vindictive. Instead, it is about accounting for the past and offering forgiveness. Its aim is thus reconciliatory, while its main task is to prise out of the past unrealised potentials, with this being a condition for creating a different future.

What the dominant authorities have deliberately misrepresented and distorted in creating a convenient image of a permanent Arab-Jewish conflict, permanent threat and war, should, according to Azoulay, be brought to life and

31 ARIELLA AZOULAY, *Potential History. Thinking through Violence*, *Critical Inquiry* 39/2013, No 3.

32 MICHEL FOUCAULT, *Lecture 4 (28 January 1976)*, in: Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, London 2003, p. 72.

treated as the key to our contemporary actions. She presents photographs from the 1940s illustrating the co-existence and cooperation of Arabs and Jews, thus showing that which has been “forgotten” in the conflict-inducing bellicose discourse of the authorities, who aim to create a convenient order for themselves. It is not her intention to idealise the reality of that time, before the partition. Instead, she seeks to show that the history of these complex relations was not condemned to catastrophe from the outset and that it could have been different. Azoulay suggests transitioning “from history as it has been shaped by the dominant perspective of the sovereign nationstate to a potential history insistent on restoring, inventing and imagining other forms of being together that existed at any moment in history without ever being exhausted by the national perspective imposed by the sovereign power”.³³ Such imaginative acts are thus an essential part of research conducted within the framework of potential history, as it draws attention to the role of the imagination in knowledge-making and the legitimacy of shaping the imagination of young practitioners of historical knowledge.

Azoulay’s project on Israeli-Palestinian relations can be considered important for thinking about conflicts in other locations and it could even offer a means for working through conflicts as such. In this sense, potential history is part of the shift in focus evident in the humanities and social sciences today away from research into conflicts towards research on collaboration, co-existence, good neighbourly relations and friendship. It is no longer conflict (war and conquest) but also (and perhaps above all) cooperation and the co-existence based on the cooperation of various ethnic, cultural and religious groups (without of course denying any problems), that becomes a key factor now driving the historical process.³⁴

33 ARIELLA AZOULAY, *There Is No Such Thing As a National Archive*, in: *The Archive as Project*, (ed.) Krzysztof Pijarski, Warsaw 2011, p. 200.

34 Azoulay’s project is relevant to recent discussions on “national indifference” that highlight pragmatic reasons for people’s identification with a certain nation. It offers an important alternative to theories of modernisation that dominate the historiography of nation and nationalism while questioning national identity as an overdetermined factor of identification. See TARA ZAHRA, *Kidnapped Souls. National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948*, Ithaca 2008; TARA ZAHRA, *Imagined Noncommunities. National Indifference as a Category of Analysis*, *Slavic Review* 69/2010, pp. 93–119; PIETER M. JUDSON, *Guardians of the Nation. Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria*, Cambridge 2006; PIETER JUDSON, *Nationalism and Indifference*, in: *Habsburg Neu Denken. Vielfalt und Ambivalenz in Zentraleuropa*. 30 Kulturwissenschaftliche Stichworte, (eds.) Johannes Feichtinger, Heidemarie Uhl, Vienna 2016, pp. 148–155; JEREMY KING, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans. A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848–1948*, Princeton 2002.

Research conducted within the framework of potential history explores unrealised potential in the past in an attempt to show which conditions should be created in order to allow people to become accustomed to each other and how they could coexist, even in conditions of conflict.³⁵ Such research also stresses investigation of successful initiatives which have contributed to and continue to contribute to the construction of economic, social and cultural endeavours that link various nations, ethnic and/or religious groups. In such a context, rescue history, which explores “the past as the storehouse of human possibility” (to use Susan Buck-Morss’ phrase),³⁶ becomes a kind of laboratory which shows the conditions of such coexistence and cohabitation in the world. It is not a case of privileging naïve ideas of reconciliation and consensus, but more about considering how historical knowledge depicting the conditions of the co-existence of people, nations, communities and social groups in the past can assist in building knowledge of coexistence.³⁷

Conclusion: in search of knowledge on how to live together (in conflicts)

Work in the humanities since the late 1990s has revealed the emergence of diverse tendencies and approaches, with this shift resulting in what is sometimes termed non-anthropocentric and post-European humanities, or post-humanities. My task, however, is not to outline further turns, avant-garde tendencies or the abundance of concepts that anticipate the future by applying the post-prefix (post-human, post-secular, post-European, post-white, post-gender, etc.), but instead to mark the slow emergence, evident for several years now, of an integrated knowledge (combining humanities, life and Earth sciences and also indigenous ways of knowing), which would be capable of bearing the weight of the problems of the contemporary world. Consequently, there are now evident

35 Cf. KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH, *Cosmopolitanism. Ethics in a World of Strangers*, New York – London 2006, pp. 86; 155–174.

36 *Solidarność w historii – ludzie i idee. Susan Buck-Morss w rozmowie z Katarzyną Bojarską*, [*Comm(ou)nism of the idea – Solidarity in the face of History. Susan Buck-Morss in Conversation with Katarzyna Bojarska*], *Teksty Drugie* 5/2014.

37 BRUNO LATOUR, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford 2005, pp. 254, 259, 262.

attempts in academia to propose an alternative theory of knowledge and to form a new meta-language.³⁸

From this perspective, much research contributes to the formation of a humanities that is future-oriented and affirmative; a humanities that speaks of critical hope, social trust, neighbourhood, hospitality, friendship, love and (realistic), responsible utopias,³⁹ while rebuilding a sense of security in the world and supporting inter-human and inter-species bonds, trust and respect towards other human beings and life forms, as well as supporting the ideal of communal life understood in terms of categories of human collectives and non-human subjects (or persons). Such a humanities thus seeks an inclusive vision of collectivity that is convivial in relation to various life forms. (In this sense, this project transcends anthropocentrism and Western ideals of narcissistic individualism.) I would again stress that it is not a case here of creating an infantile, naïve and idyllic vision of a humanities that would isolate itself from debates on ongoing socio-political problems, among other things, but rather an attempt to transcend negativity by offering an alternative set of analytical categories that would outline interpretative frameworks capable of opening up diverse and unpredictable visions of the future.

I thus have in mind here a certain intellectual utopia, which is also a responsible and realistic utopia that does not proclaim the “salvation of the world” but rather indicates specific actions that stand a chance of being realised in *local* initiatives and is manifested in *individual* attitudes. It is thus an expression of concern for the future rather than of infantile optimism. In a humanities that co-creates the future, historical theories of conflict are neutralised by theories of coexistence, collaboration and cooperation, while the concept of trauma that has been dominant until now, laying the foundations for the creation of individual

38 See MARKUS MOLZ, MARK G. EDWARDS, *Research Across Boundaries*, Integral Review 9/2013, no. 2, pp. 1–11 (Special edition – International Symposium: Research across Boundaries).

39 See JONATHAN LEAR, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, Harvard 2008. More on the subject of critical hope *Hope and Feminist Theory*, (eds.) REBECCA COLEMAN, DEBRA FERREDAY, 2011. See also PIOTR SZTOMPKA, *Trust. A Sociological Theory*, Cambridge 1999. Interest in the question of hospitality and friendship revived thanks to the works of Jacques Derrida. See JACQUES DERRIDA, *The Politics of Friendship*, Paris 1997; JACQUES DERRIDA, *De l'hospitalité*, Paris 1997; Anne Defourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to Respond, *Of Hospitality*, Stanford 2000. The subject of love as a political concept of transformative potential has been considered by MICHAEL HARDT, ANTONIO NEGRI, *Commonwealth*, Cambridge 2009; LUC BOLTANSKI, *Love and Justice as Competences*, Cambridge 2012.

and collective identities, is balanced out by taking into account empathy. In this utopia it is not a matter of privileging naïve ideas of reconciliation and consensus, but rather a case of focusing on positive phenomena (while continuing research into negative phenomena), which could indicate ways of living together in conflict.⁴⁰

Translated by Paul Vickers

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