

The ‘Network Society’, Social Transformation, and the ‘Ecological Rift’

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Abstract

Manuel Castells’s incisive analysis of space and time in the so-called ‘network society’ has brought to light a stark contrast between those modes of space and time that are dominant today - what he calls the ‘space of flows’ and ‘timeless time’ - and older, traditional modes, namely ‘the space of places’ and ‘experiential (or sequential) time’, as well as a different, planetary time, called ‘glacial time’. In this paper I explore briefly the transition to the newly dominant temporal and spatial modes, as well as their relation to what John Bellamy Foster has dubbed ‘the ecological rift’ - the rapidly widening gulf between nature and human society. In the course of the argument, light may be cast on the role of humanities knowledge-production, and of knowledge production in general, in relation to social transformation, which seems to me to imply two kinds of social transformation. The first is the social transformation potentially and to a certain extent actually brought about by the kind of knowledge generated by the humanities (and one might add the social sciences), despite the tendency among practitioners of the humanities themselves, not to take them seriously. The second is the social transformation that occurs as a result of knowledge production generally, and more especially of a techno-scientific kind, which has, since the 1980s, laid the material foundation for the transformation of society through electronically mediated communication systems. All the evidence points to the fact that the latter kind of transformation, being situated at the ‘cutting edge’ of technological, economic, political and military power in the network society (which is itself the result of this transformation), is incomparably more effective in its transmutation of the very conditions of possibility of human society (space and time) than the transformation that could potentially emanate from humanities knowledge-practices. However, although the latter

are far less powerful in their immediately perceptible social effects, there is nevertheless no reason to throw in the towel, as it were, because events unfolding at the level of 'glacial time', and responsible for the accelerating manifestation of the 'ecological rift', are likely to generate or cultivate growing receptivity to humanities-knowledge on the part of social actors. The paper will address these closely related issues, with a view to affirming the enduring value of the knowledge generated by and archived in the humanities.

Keywords: art, capitalism, ecology, glacial time, literature, sequential time, social transformation, space of flows, space of places, timeless time

There is a new, yet to be realized form of development waiting to replace the development that has brought us to this sorry pass of destabilizing the very natural matrix that gave birth to the human species, and that is the transformative emergence of ecological intelligence (Anonymous).

The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis (Dante Alighieri).

Introduction

Manuel Castells¹ is not the only one who has demonstrated that a revolution in information technologies was responsible, in the late 20th century, for altering the material base of society, but in *The rise of the network society* (1996; 2010) he has done so with a combination of empirical evidence and theoretical acumen that is exemplary for the social sciences and humanities. One of the themes he explores there, is that the information revolution has created the foundation for global economies to become interdependent, in the process altering the relationship between economy, society, politics and

¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have also done so in their far-reaching trilogy, *Empire* (2001), *Multitude* (2005) and *Commonwealth* (2009).

culture. This is not all that has been altered, concomitantly with the emergence of the ‘network society’, however. Significantly, the very experience of space and time has been structurally altered in this social and economic milieu, in a manner that can be linked to the emerging information-technological changes. I would like to argue here that Castells’s account of such modified experiences, correlative to different, newly dominant modes of time and space (compared to earlier modes), foregrounds social transformations that bear on the question of social cohesion as well as that of the very future of human society in its relation to the natural environment.

This contrasts sharply with the kind of transformations that one might hope would follow from, or at least be made possible by, knowledge articulated and archived in and by the humanities and the social sciences. Such transformations, if they occur at all, are usually the result of interpretive engagements with texts of various kinds, or – in the case of the social sciences – of reflective interaction with social reality at various levels, including those of the family and a diverse array of other institutions. How should ‘transformation’ be understood here? Hans-Georg Gadamer’s (1982) hermeneutic approach is invaluable in this regard, while John Bellamy Foster *et al.* (2010) remind one not to expect too much of it, given a certain ‘crisis’ in the social sciences (and one might add, humanities; this is addressed below). To understand what Foster (*et al.*) means here, one has to place it in the context of the present planetary ecological crisis, but not before reconstructing the main contours of Castells’s ‘network society’, which has emerged over the last few decades in the course of a major technological transformation of the social world.

The Network Society, the ‘Space of Flows’ and ‘Timeless Time’

Although there are several examples of literary and cinematic artworks which can be read as aesthetic counterparts to Castells’s *The rise of the network society* (1996; 2010), I shall not here dwell at length on such a reading². In

² Elsewhere (Olivier 2013) I have tried to demonstrate the correlation between two literary artworks – Ishiguro’s *When we were orphans* and Gibson’s *Neuromancer* – and co-constitutive theories, including Castells’s on the ‘network society’.

the present context it is more relevant to focus on the novel structural dynamics of the 'network society', although one can note in passing that these, as uncovered in Castells's work, resonate with the way it was anticipated aesthetically in a literary work of science fiction more than a decade earlier, namely Gibson's *Neuromancer* of 1984 (for a sustained account of this, see Olivier 2013). Both texts worked to construct a force-field of sorts, within the projection of which a new 'distribution of the sensible' (in Rancière's phrase), that is, a transformation of the extant social world, was made possible. What are its salient features?

A brutal condensation of the relevant parts of Castells's text – the first of a trilogy – will have to do, given its enormity. First, what has driven this transformation has been a technological revolution, which Castells describes as follows (2010: Chapter 5, Introduction):

...the integration of various modes of communication into an interactive network...in other words, the formation of a hypertext and a meta-language which, for the first time in history, integrate into the same system the written, oral, and audio-visual modalities of human communication. The human spirit reunites its dimensions in a new interaction between the two sides of the brain, machines, and social contexts³.

As Castells observes, the emergence of the 'information superhighway' has modified the character of communication fundamentally. Nor has it left culture unaffected – through the mediating function of communication the new technological system, with its increasingly 'global reach, its integration of all communication media, and its potential interactivity is changing and will forever change our culture.' The development of interactive communication was the culmination of several decades of development of mass media, with television playing the central role in this process. Castells dwells at length (2010: Chapter 5, Sections 1 & 2) on the establishment of the mass media, their reciprocity with culture and society, as well as their

³ Leonard Shlain (1998) has explored the societal transformation brought about by the transition from (the valorization of) alphabet literacy (left-brain dominance) to the increasing (right-brain) dominance of the audio-visual image since the beginning of the 19th century.

diversification into decentralized ‘new media’ in the 1980s, from where they morphed into the 1990s phenomenon of the multi-media.

One cannot ignore the importance of the transition, clearly delineated by Castells, from a unidirectional television culture, with little room for diversified reception on audiences’ part, to a diversified, multi-choice reception culture. The direction of development was from relatively passive reception towards a more active role in recorded film- and programme-choice, and finally participation in media culture through the personal recording of ‘family events’ and ‘home movies’⁴. Nevertheless, ‘interactive communication’ between senders and receivers would only be actualised, Castells points out, beyond the development of computers, through the technology that enabled computers to ‘communicate’ with one another, that is, through the internet.

Castells’s account of these developments (2010: Chapter 5, Section 3) foregrounds the sheer speed with which the establishment and global expansion of the internet has occurred, compared to radio and television. The millions of computer networks which exist around the world today, he points out, accommodate the ‘whole spectrum of human communication, from politics to religion to sex and research – with e-commerce as the centerpiece of the contemporary Internet.’ If it is kept in mind that this multitude of qualitatively and functionally distinct networks were inter-connected to and by the internet by the end of the 20th century, after a mere 3 to 4 decades of development, it is an astonishing achievement⁵.

This astonishing volume of virtual communicational traffic, characterized by lack of overall organization, prodigious purposive and

⁴ As an aside, one should note that Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 457-458) have a different perspective on the participation of audiences in television programming and reception. They highlight the relation between consumers and the new informational or cybernetic machines, of which humans as consumers are said to be ‘constituent parts’ (p. 458), instead of being only users. For them, this amounts to a new kind of enslavement. John Thompson (1990), too, contributes to an understanding of the social consequences of the growth in electronically mediated communication in the context of its implications for the functioning of ideology in modern culture.

⁵ The internet has its roots in the US military project, ARPANET, which was developed in the 1960s.

membership diversification, as well as, largely, spontaneity, might lead one to expect increased attempts at limitation and control by various 'authorities' such as governments and corporations. Yet, with the exception of a few cases, it appears that, by and large, they favour the further expansion of these networks (Castells 2010: Chapter 5, Section 3). Nevertheless, one cannot ignore Hardt and Negri's (2001: 298-300) claim that the tension between the horizontal, 'democratic' aspect of the internet and its vertical, 'oligopolistic' aspect (concerning intermittent attempts at its control) is an irresolvable one⁶. There is another tension which is addressed in Castells' work. It concerns what he (2010: Preface to the 2010 Edition, IV) calls the 'transformation of space and time in the human experience', specifically where he distinguishes between 'the space of places' and 'the space of flows', on the one hand, and between ordinary, lifeworld time and 'timeless time', on the other.

The 'space of places' denotes the historically familiar sense of space as a material precondition of social interaction that proceeds in ordinary lifeworld time-sequence, and of architectural space-modulation into place. The 'space of flows', by contrast, marks a novel form of spatiality, characterized by simultaneity, regardless of physical distance, and is related to social interaction that has been fundamentally modified by advanced communication technologies. This form of space is intimately connected to what Castells calls 'timeless time', which emerges where experiential time sequences are blurred in contemporary practices such as 'flexi-work' and quasi-instantaneous financial transactions. For present purposes it is significant that Castells (2010: Preface to the 2010 Edition, IV) also points to evolutionary, planetary, or 'glacial time' – a concept connected with the ecological movement – which increasingly clashes with the demands of 'timeless time' in the network society. This is significant because in every case an originary human or 'natural', experience (of time and space) is juxtaposed with an experience which is not natural in this sense, but is technologically mediated.

Could be expected that, with the advent of the 'network society' new modes of spatiality and temporality would emerge? Because space has always

⁶ Related to this, there is the paralyzing communicational 'differend' (Lyotard) between the agencies of 'Empire', on the one hand, and the 'multitude' on the other, as far as the practices of democracy are concerned. See Hardt and Negri (2005), and Olivier (2007) in this regard.

been the ‘material support of simultaneity in social practice’, one might expect this to remain so today, which means that people occupying the same space in a city can communicate in the temporal here and now. However, this does not mean that the ‘space of places’ is still the dominant mode of space in the network society. It is well-known in social theory that ‘All major social changes are ultimately characterized by a *transformation of space and time in the human experience*’ (Castells 2010, Preface, IV; bold in original). It is therefore not surprising that there have been some fundamental changes in the spatial structure of cities. It is clear from Castells’s work that the changed (and still changing) structure of cities and their adjacent areas into *metropolitan regions* (Castells 2010, Preface, IV; Chapter 6, Section 4) is itself a function of the ‘space of flows’, introduced by communication technologies. One is increasingly witnessing the emergence of metropolitan *regions* that surpass mere metropolitan *areas* because they usually consist of several of such dense residential metropolitan areas, together with non-metropolitan areas such as open spaces and agricultural land, instead of the traditional city, with its identifiable urban centre, surrounded by mainly residential suburban areas. Moreover, they are multicentred, given various types of functional importance of different metropolitan nuclei, and vastly exceed traditional cities in population. Castells singles out the largest global metropolitan region as that which stretches from Hong Kong to Guangzhou – the South China metropolitan region with approximately 60 million inhabitants⁷. In his discussion of this metropolitan region Castells (2010: Chapter 6, Section 4) observes that ‘Mega-cities are the nodal points [of metropolitan regions], and the power centers of the new spatial form/process of the Information Age: the space of flows’.

Metropolitan regions like these are the urban embodiment of the network-character of this new type of society. They manifest what Castells’ (2010, Preface, IV) calls a:

... new form of spatiality [that I]...conceptualized as the *space of flows*: the material support of simultaneous social practices communicated at a distance. This involves the production, transmission

⁷ William Gibson anticipated this kind of mega-city region in the image of The Sprawl, in his pioneering science fiction novel of 1984, namely *Neuromancer* (1995), and its sequels, *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*.

and processing of flows of information. It also relies on the development of localities as nodes of these communication networks, and the connectivity of activities located in these nodes by fast transportation networks operated by information flows.

In his theorization of this novel, now dominant spatial mode Castells (2010: Chapter 6, Section 5) approaches space as '*crystallized time*'. From this perspective, '*space is the material support of time-sharing social practices*'. This does not only apply to the virtual spaces (or 'cyberspace') of the internet, but to the spatial mode that is dominant in the material (sub-) structure of mega-cities themselves. This is why Castells claims that this new kind of mega-city can be understood as a *process*, articulated through 'flows' of various kinds – 'flows of capital, flows of information, flows of technology, flows of organizational interaction, flows of images, sounds, and symbols'. Furthermore, 'Flows are not just one element of the social organization: they are the expression of processes *dominating* our economic, political, and symbolic life' (Castells 2010: Chapter 6, Section 5). Hence, he defines the novel, dominant spatial mode as follows:

The space of flows is the material organization of time-sharing social practices that work through flows. By flows I understand purposeful, repetitive, programmable sequences of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors in the economic, political, and symbolic structures of society. Dominant social practices are those which are embedded in dominant social structures. By dominant structures I understand those arrangements of organizations and institutions whose internal logic plays a strategic role in shaping social practices and social consciousness for society at large.

Castells proceeds to indicate that what one might call the logic of domination appears in the space of flows in a twofold manner: the elites establish 'their own society' (secluded communities, exclusively priced real estate, spatially restricted, networked, subcultural, decision-making interactions such as those in exclusive restaurants or airport lounges, and on the golf course), and they create a culturally distinctive 'lifestyle' intent on 'standardizing' and unifying the symbolic spatial environment of elites globally (e.g. international hotels

with similar room-design and decoration⁸).

The kind of space familiar to everyone, which still exists side-by-side with the space of flows, is the ‘space of places’, referred to earlier. Despite the dominance of the ‘space of flows’, (most) people still live in places. This dominance does not leave the ‘space of places’ unaffected, but alters its dynamics and existential meaning. This is apparent in the example of Tokyo, which successfully resisted the colonization-tendency of the space of flows when the people of the city rejected the corporate elite-sponsored World City Fair in 1995 (Castells 2010: Chapter 6, Section 7). Castells (Chapter 6, Section 7) defines ‘place’ as follows: ‘*A place is a locale whose form, function, and meaning are self-contained within the boundaries of physical contiguity*’. His discussion of the *quartier* of Belleville in Paris illustrates how ‘spaces of place’ function in providing people with a sense of (multicultural) community and rootedness. Its plural communities have, through interaction and a variety of spatial uses (such as ‘active street life’), historically constructed it as a meaningful place, effectively resisting intermittent threats such as that posed by the vanguard of the corporate elites, namely urban gentrification. Needless to stress, there are many similar examples, from all over the world, of place-space asserting itself in the face of the onslaught of the space of flows. Others are less successful, as in the case of Irvine, California, where globalization and concomitant localization interact in complex ways, so that Irvine is indeed still experienced as a place, but this has increasingly been assimilated to home-space, with flows-space incessantly encroaching on other places. Castells (2010: Chapter 6, Section 7) articulates the consequences of the impact of the increasing domination of the space of flows as follows, and this serves to illustrate the extent to which the information-technology revolution has transformed extant society:

Experience, by being related to places, becomes abstracted from power, and meaning is increasingly separated from knowledge. There follows a structural schizophrenia between two spatial logics that threatens to break down communication channels in society. The dominant tendency is toward a horizon of networked, ahistorical

⁸ Jason Reitman’s 2009 film, *Up in the Air*, thematizes the kind of life spent largely in the ‘space of flows’ – airports and standardized hotels – as well as the toll it takes of people who have no option but to live in this space.

space of flows, aiming at imposing its logic over scattered, segmented places, increasingly unrelated to each other, less and less able to share cultural codes⁹. Unless cultural, political, *and physical* bridges are deliberately built between these two forms of space, we may be heading toward a life in parallel universes whose times cannot meet because they are warped into different dimensions of a social hyperspace.

What Castells terms the 'timeless time' induced by the 'space of flows' is even more dehumanising than the latter. He contrasts it with the 'clock time' of the industrial era, and with experiential time, or the time of natural rhythms and familiar connections between past, present and future (Castells 2010: Chapter 7, Section 1). 'Timeless time' has always been inherent in capitalism as regulating ideal, of course, given the constant approximation of timelessness, or the overcoming of time-constraints, in the sense of minimizing the time-lapses between production, distribution, sales and consumption (see Harvey 1989: 141-172; as well as Deleuze and Guattari, 1983: 32-34). Since the creation of a world market of virtual, if not actual, instantaneity, when the markets of all countries were connected through a global computer-network in the 1980s, this sustained attempt to overcome the constraints of time (and space) has been intensified without interruption. What Castells calls a new 'time regime' (2010: Chapter 7, Introduction) is therefore connected, like the 'space of flows', to the new communication technologies, which can be seen as constantly striving, like capitalism, towards the optimal minimization of time-lapses.

Contemporary societies, according to Castells (2010: Chapter 7, Section 1), are still largely under the domination of 'clock time', which was developed along different, but related trajectories by industrial capitalism and communism, respectively. This mode of time-dominance which has been fundamental to industrial capitalism over the last century (2010: Chapter 7, Section 1) is being challenged today, just as the familiar 'space of places' is being eroded by the 'space of flows' of postmodernity. Castells puts it this way (2010: Chapter 7, Section 1):

⁹ Except in the sense of an overarching, globalizing set of supra-cultural codes, which tends towards, but does not quite achieve, cultural homogenization, given its complex, often hybridizing interactions with local cultures.

This linear, irreversible, measurable, predictable time is being shattered in the network society, in a movement of extraordinary historical significance. But we are not just witnessing a relativization of time according to social contexts or alternatively the return to time reversibility as if reality could become entirely captured in cyclical myths. The transformation is more profound: it is the mixing of tenses to create a forever universe, not self-expanding but self-maintaining, not cyclical but random, not recursive but incursive: timeless time, using technology to escape the contexts of its existence, and to appropriate selectively any value each context could offer to the ever-present...Compressing time to the limit is tantamount to make time sequence, and thus time, disappear...Capital's freedom from time and culture's escape from the clock are decisively facilitated by new information technologies, and embedded in the structure of the network society.

Castells's (2010: Chapter 7, Sections 1 to 9) traces the emergence of 'timelessness' or what Harvey calls (1989: 147, 240, 260-283) 'time-space compression' in, among other fields, capitalist transformations of financial investment and speculation, which depend upon the temporal acceleration of financial transactions to the nth degree for the optimalization of profits (frequently with devastating effects upon entire economies and the concrete lives of people; see in this regard also Žižek 2009: 67-68, on capital as the 'real' of capitalism), and in the increasing turn towards the reduction and flexibilization of work time, for various interrelated reasons (such as the increase in the workforce, including women's entry into the labour market, and the introduction of sophisticated technology), but always with one end in view, namely an increase in profitable production. Castells (2010: Chapter 7, Section 9) provides a succinct summary of the areas where he has traced the transformation of time: 'Split-second capital transactions, flex-time enterprises, variable life working time, the blurring of the life-cycle, the search for eternity through the denial of death, instant wars, and the culture of virtual time, are all fundamental phenomena, characteristic of the network society, which systematically mix tenses in their occurrence'.

'Virtual time' (Castells 2010: Chapter 7, Section 8), is important

here, given that 'the culture of real virtuality' displays two ways of transforming time: simultaneity and timelessness, which are perceptible in computer-mediated, interactive communication, in the intermingling of times in the media, and as temporal immediacy in global media transmissions. Hence, Castells proposes (2010: Chapter 7, Section 9):

... that *timeless time*, as I label the dominant temporality of our society, *occurs when the characteristics of a given context, namely, the informational paradigm and the network society, induce systemic perturbation in the sequential order of phenomena performed in that context*. This perturbation may take the form of compressing the occurrence of phenomena, aiming at instantaneity, or else by introducing random discontinuity in the sequence. Elimination of sequencing creates undifferentiated time, which is tantamount to eternity...*Timeless time belongs to the space of flows, while time discipline, biological time, and socially determined sequencing characterize places around the world, materially structuring and destructuring our segmented societies*. Space shapes time in our society, thus reversing an historical trend: flows induce timeless time, places are time-bounded.

Castells's ostensibly anachronistic use of the term 'eternity' clearly means the tendency inherent in the emergent temporal mode, to overcome the constraints of sequential, lifeworld-time as far as possible. Lest one should succumb to the impression of technological determinism here, he reminds one that social resistance to 'the logic of timelessness' also occurs, for the sake of regaining control over certain social interests. Among other things, this is noticeable in a concern for the relation between humanity and the natural environment. Referring to what, in the work of Lash and Urry, is called 'glacial time', or the 'long-term and evolutionary' temporality that connects humans with the prehistoric past and an unpredictable planetary future, he continues (2010: Chapter 7, Section 9): '...the opposition between the management of glacial time and the search for timelessness anchors in contradictory positions in the social structure the environmentalist movement and the powers that be in our society...'.

This admittedly brief reconstruction of Castells's analysis of space and time in the network society, whose structural dynamics are fundamen-

tally informed by electronically mediated communications, suggests, first, that natural-scientific knowledge and the technological innovations it makes possible are at the basis of the thoroughgoing transformation of global societies today. Like it or not, one cannot ignore it, because it affects the lives of everyone. Moreover, it raises the spectre of a confrontation with those who seek to recuperate and protect the humanity-preserving ‘space of places’, together with experiential time and ‘glacial time’, which marks the relation between humans and their life-supporting environment. There is a disconnect between the discursive practices operating in the domain of the ‘space of flows’ and its temporal counterpart, ‘timeless time’, on the one hand, and those discursive practices predicated on the ‘space of places’ and experiential time, embedded in the natural rhythms of life. In this regard Castells (2010: Chapter 7, Section 9) refers to:

...the conflictive differentiation of time, understood as the impact of opposed social interests on the sequencing of phenomena. Such differentiation concerns, on the one hand, the contrasting logic between timelessness, structured by the space of flows, and multiple, subordinate temporalities, associated with the space of places. On the other hand, the contradictory dynamics of society opposes the search for human eternity, through the annihilation of time in life, to the realization of cosmological eternity, through the respect of glacial time. Between subdued temporalities and evolutionary nature the network society rises on the edge of forever.

Castells’s work drives the point home, that the disjunction between the space of flows/timeless time, on the one hand, and the space of places/experiential time/‘glacial time’, on the other, is a manifestation of the consequences of one of the most far-reaching transformations of society in recent history, and one which the human sciences are in a position to address – even if they cannot undo the disjunction in question. Why far-reaching? Because everyone on the planet, social elites as well as working class people, is subject to a sustainable planetary ecosystem and biosphere, on which the disjunction between the ‘space of flows’/‘timeless time’, on the one hand, and ‘glacial time’, on the other, is bound to have a major impact, given the systematic technological distancing from the earth and from place-oriented

communities that accompanies the former¹⁰. The human sciences face the task of disseminating an informed awareness, if not a thorough understanding, of what is at stake here¹¹. Only such an awareness, accompanied by social and cultural practices predicated on the irreplaceable value of what Habermas (1987: 119-152), following Husserl, calls the 'lifeworld', can foster a sustained resistance to the momentum of the 'space of flows' towards totalization.

The Ecological Rift

'Anthropocene', the term coined just more than ten years ago by Paul Crutzen, a Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist (Foster *et al.* 2010: 12), denotes the new ecological period, following the end of the Holocene, when humans became the principal force driving changes in the planetary system. I say this because the Holocene ('New Whole'), or stable geological period of about 12 000 years between ice ages, came to an end around the Industrial Revolution of the late 1700s, which is exactly the time when humans moved into the position where they are capable of affecting life on earth as we know it. Unfortunately the Anthropocene may turn out, if scientists working in the area of the geo-sciences are correct in their assessment of what are now called 'planetary boundaries', to be a mere flicker in terms of geological time.

¹⁰ See in this regard Germain 2004, for an investigation into the technological drive to overcome human dependence on the earth.

¹¹ One of the most informative and persuasive sources in this regard is undoubtedly Thomas Princen's (2010) remarkably argued appeal to people across the world to 'tread softly' by learning to live ecologically and economically within their means, instead of 'overconsuming' (which belongs with the 'space of flows'). If there were to be an incremental turning to such a way of living, the conflict of interests referred to earlier could conceivably be dissolved. Paul Hawken, in *Blessed unrest* (2007) believes that we are already witnessing a vast global social movement, intent on getting beyond what is widely perceived to be a global crisis, taking shape, albeit 'under-the-radar'.

James Hansen, regarded as the leading climatologist in the US, explains the reason for this bleak prospect in his book, *Storms of My Grandchildren* (quoted in Foster *et al.* 2010: 11-12):

Planet Earth, creation, the world in which civilisation developed, the world with climate patterns that we know and stable shorelines, is in imminent peril. The urgency of the situation crystallised only in the past few years. We now have clear evidence of the crisis ... the startling conclusion is that continued exploitation of all fossil fuels on Earth threatens not only the other millions of species on the planet but also the survival of humanity itself — and the timetable is shorter than we thought.

In *The Ecological Rift – Capitalism’s War on the Earth* (2010: 13), John Bellamy Foster and his co-authors remind one that most people think of the ecological crisis today almost exclusively as climate change, which is prominent in the news because it poses virtually insurmountable problems for capitalism. In fact, however, climate change is but one of nine ‘planetary boundaries’ that have been scrutinised by natural scientists in recent years. These are decisive for sustaining a biosphere in which humans can exist securely. The other eight are chemical pollution, biodiversity loss, change in land use, global freshwater use, stratospheric ozone depletion, atmospheric aerosol loading, the phosphorus and nitrogen cycles, and ocean acidification. Although two of these – chemical pollution and atmospheric aerosol loading – still lack reliable physical measurements, distinct boundaries have been established for the other seven.

These planetary boundaries are subject to on-going global processes, and scientists at the Stockholm Resilience Centre have found that three of them have already crossed their respective boundaries, namely climate change, biodiversity loss and the nitrogen cycle, all of which can therefore be regarded as representing a ‘rift’. Although stratospheric ozone depletion threatened to become such a rift in the 1990s, it has been stabilising of late, but global freshwater use, ocean acidification and the phosphorus cycle are fast approaching rift status. Moreover, ocean acidification, climate change and stratospheric ozone loss are seen as ‘tipping points’, which would be capable of destabilising the earth system (when certain levels are reached) by introducing sweeping qualitative changes. The boundaries for the other four

processes are viewed, not so much as 'tipping points', but rather as points at which irreversible environmental degradation would set in.

When confronted by such stark, ominous-sounding statements in texts written by reputable scientists, one can easily feel overwhelmed, or sceptical, depending on one's knowledge of the way such scientific claims are established. To begin with, sceptics should be reminded that scientists worldwide are largely in agreement about these findings today, and secondly, that it is for good reason. While the precise sequential manifestation of irreversible environmental degradation cannot be delineated because of the complexity involved, however, there are a number of things that can, and have been, reasonably precisely ascertained through careful measurement and modelling. Johan Rockström and his associates in Stockholm (including Crutzen and Hanson) have established three values for each of the seven (measurable) 'boundary processes' referred to above, namely a pre-industrial value (or levels reached before the beginning of industrial capitalism), a boundary level value, and a current level status value (Foster *et al.* 2010: 13-14).

For example, the pre-industrial value of climate change was 280 parts per million (ppm) carbon dioxide atmospheric concentration. The boundary proposed for this is 350 ppm, beyond which it should not go if the tipping point of events such as catastrophic sea level rise were to be prevented. Its current status is already 390 ppm, which means it is well beyond the tipping point. The loss in biodiversity is measured by extinction rate, or the number of species lost per million species annually. The preindustrial, or 'natural' rate was 0.1-1 per million; the estimated boundary is 10 per million per year, and the current rate of species loss is above 100 per million annually (almost 1000 times the preindustrial 'natural' rate). The third process that has crossed its boundary level, the nitrogen cycle, concerns the number of tons (in millions) of nitrogen removed from the atmosphere for industrial use per year. Before the discovery of the Haber-Bosch process for such removal in the early 1900s, the amount taken from the atmosphere was 0 tons. The estimated annual boundary for avoiding irreversible deterioration of the planetary system is 35 million tons, and at present the amount removed per year is 121 tons (Foster *et al.* 2010: 15).

These are only the figures for the three boundary processes that are already at extreme levels – what one should keep in mind, is that all these processes, or rather, all their effects in nature, are interconnected in almost

incalculably complex ways, and scientists can only prognosticate to a certain degree what might result from the extreme conditions that already obtain. As Foster and his fellow authors state, however (p. 15),

In each of these extreme rifts, the stability of the earth system as we know it is being endangered. We are at red alert status. If business as usual continues, the world is headed within the next few decades for major tipping points along with irreversible environmental degradation, threatening much of humanity. Biodiversity loss at current and projected rates could result in the loss of upward of a third of all living species this century.

Add to this the well-known interconnectedness of living species in terms of food-dependence (the ‘food chain’), which has incalculable consequences when species are removed from this interlinked network of life, and it hardly takes a genius to understand that the world as we know it may undergo not-so-pleasant mutations in the not too distant future.

The Crisis in the Social Sciences (and the Humanities)

One might think that, faced with all the evidence amassed by natural scientists, only hinted at above, humanity would hasten to change its way of living as a matter of urgency. Surely, with the incontrovertible evidence facing one, the search for alternatives to an economic system that takes more out of the earth system than it can put back, must already be on, since it is clear that people must learn to live within the boundaries identified by these scientists – boundaries that other scientists can, and have, tested. The science is clear; the future is not. Or so one would think, on the supposition that humans are ‘rational’ creatures, who would squarely face the implications of the evidence referred to above.

Unfortunately, the very cluster of sciences that one might expect to enable one to take the matter further in the light of the alarming findings of the natural sciences, seems to be struck by inertia, or worse, by complicity with the very economic forces that are driving ecological degradation. Why don’t human scientists support their natural science colleagues in this regard? Foster *et al.* (2010: 18-19) explain:

Tragically, the more pressing the environmental problem has become and the more urgent the call for ecological revolution...the more quiescent social scientists seem to have become on the topic, searching for a kind of remediation of the problem, in which real change will not be required. Although thirty years ago it was common to find challenges to the capitalist exploitation of the environment emanating from social scientists who were then on the environmentalist fringe, today the main thrust of environmental social science has shifted to ecological modernization – a managerial approach that sees sustainable technology, sustainable consumption, and market-based solutions (indeed 'sustainable capitalism') as providing the answers...

Thus as natural scientists have become more concerned about the detrimental effects of the economic system on the environment, and correspondingly radicalized, asking more and more root questions, social scientists have increasingly turned to the existing economic system as the answer.

Foster *et al.* (2010: 20) then raise the obvious question, namely, why (even environmental) social scientists have become inactive, torpid and apathetic in the face of the looming ecological crisis. This compels him to scrutinize the 'persistent weaknesses that permeate social science' (p. 20), and to relate this to the present crisis. First, social (or more broadly, human) science has been handicapped by the *social* itself being unavoidably its object of investigation, and crucially, that this investigation, together with what is regarded as acceptable or unacceptable, 'tends to be filtered through the dominant institutions and structures of the prevailing hierarchical social order' (p. 20). Unavoidably, therefore, the human sciences are marked by uncritical sluggishness – it is a function of what Freud (2006: 130) called the 'death drive', which always tends to return to a previous position, or what Foster (p. 20) calls '...the system's commitment to stasis in its fundamental social-property relations'. Although social scientists sometimes manage to evade the censorship of the dominant culture to articulate critical ideas, according to Foster *et al.* (2010: 20) these are usually directed at 'marginal issues', with little effect on the core-structure of society. And where they dare to confront the power-nexus directly, social scientists' claims are denied the general validity they require to affect mainstream society, with the result that they

cannot unhinge dominant social and economic practices¹².

Foster *et al.* (2010: 20-23) devote a lengthy discussion to the reasons adduced by well-known scientist and social critic, J.D. Bernal (in the 1950s), for the veritable irrelevance or ‘backwardness’ of the social sciences, compared to the natural sciences in the 20th century. Bernal wasted no time in dismissing the most common reasons given for this weakness, namely: (1) that experimentation is (supposedly) impossible in social science, (2) that value judgments being involved in the human sciences is a serious inhibition, (3) that reflexivity in the human sciences (humans being subject and object simultaneously) predetermines scientific failure, (4) that the unmitigated complexity of human society militates against its scientific understanding, and (5) that society is always becoming or changing, thus precluding the discovery of ‘fixed laws’ (as in natural science). Instead, Bernal argued, these characteristics made the social (human) sciences ‘distinctive’, but in no way prevented them from advancing. The ‘underdevelopment’ of these sciences, he claimed (Foster 2010: 21),

... could be attributed almost entirely to the fact that they were seriously circumscribed by and often directly subservient to the established order of power, and specifically to the dominant social/property relations...Despite important advances and revolutionary developments, social science in ‘normal times’ has been more about maintaining/managing a given social order than encouraging the historical changes necessary to human society, where social capacities and challenges keep evolving...

Social science thus often enters a relatively dormant state once a new system of power is established. A new class-social order, once it surpasses its initial revolutionary stage and consolidates itself, demands nothing so much as ‘the bad conscience and evil intent of

¹² A pertinent example is Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and punish* (1995), with its trenchant critique of ‘panoptical’, ‘carceral’ society, where people are said to be ‘reduced’ to ‘docile bodies’, which failed to bring about any significant change in the dominant power regime.

apologetics' – since the main goal from then on is to maintain its position of power/hegemony¹³.

Bernal's explanation for the tendency of the human sciences to 'capitulate to the status quo', avoid 'alternative perspectives' and degenerate into 'harmless platitudes with disconnected empirical additions' (Foster 2010: 22) resonates with Jacques Lacan's (2007; see also Olivier 2009) theory of the four discourses – those of the master, the university, the hysteric and the analyst. According to Lacan, the master's discourse is the dominant discourse of any given historical era (in the Christian middle ages, that of the Church, in the modern era that of the nation state, and in postmodernity, the economic discourse of neoliberal capitalism), while the university discourse, which is predicated on the (illusory) systematic unity of all science, has historically served the master's discourse. The true discourse of science, however, is encountered in the questioning discourse of the hysteric, while the analyst's discourse mediates between hysterical questioning and new, but importantly now relativized, master's discourses (more or less corresponding to Kuhn's paradigmatically 'new' science). The pertinence of Lacan's schema for the present theme of the human sciences' effeteness is obvious: just as Bernal has identified the true obstacle to their historical scientific relevance as lurking in their neurotic subservience to the currently hegemonic order, Lacan has unmasked their tendency, to play the slave to the master¹⁴.

¹³ One is struck by the parallel, as described here, between the development of society, from 'normal' through 'revolution' to a 'new' social system, from then on supported by the human sciences (on the one hand), and Thomas Kuhn's (1970) description of the way in which natural science develops, from paradigmatically 'normal science' through 'revolution' to paradigmatically 'new' (normal) science, on the other.

¹⁴ Lacan was talking about *all* the sciences, of course, not just the social sciences, which, given the natural sciences' less direct linkages with society, one could interpret along Kuhnian lines as primarily a reference to the majority of 'normal' scientists' allegiance to the paradigmatically dominant, 'normal' science. Today, however, there are certain 'applied' branches of the natural sciences that undeniably serve the master, too, such as physics and chemistry departments at universities which are enlisted to further the development of military technology through their research.

The Humanities and Personal/ Social Transformation – Gadamer and Rancière

In light of Foster's timely reminder that the social sciences (and I would include the humanities here) tend to be hamstrung when it comes to taking action in the light of 'knowledge' of a certain kind, is there any well-founded indication that the humanities (or more broadly, the human sciences) can overcome this paralysis? If you are prepared to think creatively and laterally – transferring the knowledge gained in one field to another – the hermeneutics (interpretation-theory) of Gadamer proves to be fruitful. In brief, what I would like to argue, is that his work offers a model for the humanities as far as conceiving of the transformation of the subject, and therefore of society, is concerned.

In *Truth and method* (1982: 39-114) he recuperates the truth-capacity of works of art in the face of the subjectivism that has tended to suffocate it since the one-sided reception of Kant's relegation of art to the realm of taste, to put it somewhat drastically. To account for the universality of aesthetic judgement, Kant (1969) had to sacrifice the epistemic value of art, reserving this for what he called 'constitutive judgments' about things existing in the empirical world of experience. This did not deny art a valuable role concerning the experience of beauty and the sublime, but essentially these were located on the part of the subject. By contrast, both Heidegger (1975) and Gadamer offer striking arguments to rehabilitate art and rescue its ontological and epistemological credentials: art *does* impart to one knowledge of the nature of things.

Gadamer's (1982: 91-108) phenomenological analysis of art commences with the phenomenon of play, which is treated as a 'clue' to ontological explanation (of art, but also eventually of the thoroughly linguistic character of the human life-world), and is said to display a constitutive 'to-and-fro' movement within the defining parameters of playing according to internal rules. In the case of 'free play' these rules are not explicit, but manifest themselves when a player transgresses unsaid, implicit rules, the flouting of which causes the play or game to stagnate, as when, in the children's game, 'Cops and Robbers', a player refuses to 'die' when he or she is 'shot fair and square'.

While play instantiates a 'closed world', however, art, which exhibits a similar structural dynamic as play, 'lets down' one of its four walls, as it

were, to enable an audience, a reader, listener or viewer to enter the world constituted by the signifying structure comprising the work of art. In the case of drama, for example, 'The audience only completes what the play as such is' (Gadamer 1982: 98). Moreover, this insight, that art, '...by its nature, exists for someone', amounts to what Gadamer (1982: 99) describes as the 'transformation into structure' – the relative 'permanence', durability or 'repeatability' of art; not only music, dance, cinema and drama, but all art, from literature (which may be read repeatedly) to architecture (which may be inhabited as if it is 'performed' like a musical score; Harries 1980: 43).

The link between the truth-function and the transformative capacity of art becomes clearer where Gadamer (1982: 100) observes: 'Thus the transformation into a structure means that what existed previously no longer exists. But also that what now exists, what represents itself in the play of art, is what is lasting and true'. This is the first sense of transformation that is important here – the way that art transforms something which may be familiar from ordinary experience into something else, with heightened ontological valence. Think of the way that colour, which is ubiquitous, and hence taken for granted in quotidian experience (except for colour-blind people), assumes a transformed appearance in certain paintings, such as the series of paintings at the Yale Art Gallery in New Haven, (USA) by constructivist Josef Albers, which juxtaposes colours in comparatively novel configurations, with the effect of making colour conspicuous in its chromatic being, as if for the first time. Art transforms things 'back into true being' (Gadamer 1982: 101; see also Olivier 1987).

What is important to be noted here is that Gadamer has removed all traces of popular aesthetic subjectivism, according to which it is the *artist* who transforms the spectator via the work of art; instead, the emphasis is placed on the work of art itself, in which the things of experience are transformed, and in the receptive and interpretive engagement with which the listener is transformed in turn, in a second sense of 'transformation'. Gadamer (1982: 100) remarks:

... transformation means that something is suddenly and as a whole something else, that this other transformed thing that it has become is its true being, in comparison with which its earlier being is nothing. When we find someone transformed we mean precisely this, that he [or she] has become, as it were, another person.

I cannot think of a better example of this in (cinema-) art than that of the actress-character, Maya (Melina Mercouri) in Jules Dassin's film, *A Dream of Passion* (1978), who struggles to identify with the character of the ancient Greek sorceress, Medea, in the tragedy by that name, who kills her children. It is only when she grasps, through a series of conversations with an American child-murderess in a Greek gaol, that such an incomprehensibly abject act can only be understood as the mother's attempt to protect the children from a worse fate – in both cases, being raised by an unfaithful husband-father – that she is able to identify with her character in the play. This happens through the realization that, when she aborted a child years before, both to save her acting career from the burden of a child, and to protect the child from being subject to its vagaries, she was also guilty of murdering her own child. As a 'transformed woman' she is finally able to interpret the role of the eponymous Medea in Euripides's tragic drama. Correspondingly, it is not unusual for women (and even empathic men) who witness this film, to be 'transformed' by its 'transformation into structure' of the reality of being a mother who adheres to a set of values to which she also subjects her children. The sense of 'transformation' which stresses the fundamental, irrevocable change in a person when she or he subjects themselves to the 'transformed' world of the artwork, is apparent here. It instantiates what Gadamer (1982: 274) calls 'application', or the third stage in the interpretive process, beginning with implicit 'understanding', followed by explicit 'interpretation', and culminating in 'application', which '...always involves something like the application of the text to be understood to the present situation of the interpreter'. (Obviously 'text' here means any work of art, in as far as it comprises a configuration of signifiers that can be interpreted, whether in lexical, visual or auditory form).

One could add another, for South Africans more pertinent, instance of an artwork whose reception is likely to 'transform' members of an audience, namely Athol Fugard's (1984) drama, *Master Harold' and the boys*, where the friendship between Hally (Master Harold) and the two black men working in the tea room, Sam and Willie, is explored against the backdrop of the apartheid system. The image, recalled during a conversation, of Sam and Hally flying a kite (made by Sam) together, as well as the metaphor of ballroom dancing (which both Sam and Willie practice), with partners in perfect unison, embodies what Habermas calls an 'ideal speech situation' (Thomassen 2010: 10), and functions powerfully as a contrast to

the divisive force of apartheid. It is easy for members of the audience to identify with the situation as long as amiable relations exist between Hally and the two African men, but when things start going wrong, because of news that Hally's tyrannical father is returning home, and Hally projects his own (past and anticipated) pain on his two friends – insisting they call him 'Master Harold' – the identification process becomes problematical. The viewing (especially South African) subject initially experiences vicariously, through the act of identification with the characters, the joy and relief of ideologically undistorted relations, until this makes way for apartheid ideology crashing down on the characters, and the audience, through the 'command' by the 17-year old boy that he be addressed as 'Master' by the two grown men (ironically referred to as 'boys' in the apartheid context). The initial identification is therefore problematized, making way for an uneasy realization that the very person (Hally) with whom one identified (as a white South African), has shifted position, giving rise to various modes of self-reflection, depending on the viewer's own symbolic and experiential horizon of meaning. Whatever the result of the self-reflection, though, it is bound to be transformative, given the germ of hope implanted by the dramatic action, that race-relations need not suffer under racist ideology, but can indeed be modelled on the guiding metaphor of 'flying a kite' or dancing together.

As quasi-theoretical literary counterpart of these examples of personal transformation, the account of the traumatic impact of apartheid practices on an old shepherd's life, from Antjie Krog's *Country of my skull* (1999: 320-327), may serve to illustrate how reading a quasi-theoretical, documentary text may equally occasion a transformation of consciousness, and ultimately of ethical praxis, on the part of the reader. The old shepherd was testifying before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission that, years after the event, he still failed to comprehend the sense of an evidently traumatic visit to his home by members of the South African security forces, and expressed the desire that someone should end his life if a satisfactory explanation could not be provided for what was to him the inhuman behaviour of these security policemen. The case, movingly evoked by Krog's description, is sufficiently powerful to bring about a degree of critical reflection and introspection in readers which could potentially transform one's ethical and political praxis. Why? In reading and understanding the trauma inflicted on the old man, that is, the shattering of his life-worldly symbolic horizon by coercive and violent behaviour on the

part of security officers (emanating from an inhuman ideological-symbolic worldview, namely that of apartheid), the reading subject tends to identify with the old man's position. Importantly, this entails assuming the shepherd's axiological perspective, according to which human beings ought to treat one another universally in a human and humane manner, that is, with respect for the other's dignity, regardless of race or gender. Personal transformation (of consciousness, but also of political praxis), if it occurs, emanates from identifying with this perspective.

The different meanings of 'transformation' which figure here are captured well by Herbert Marcuse (1978: 8, 9) where he says: 'The aesthetic transformation is achieved through a reshaping of language, perception, and understanding so that they reveal the essence of reality in its appearance: the repressed potentialities of man [humanity] and nature. The work of art thus re-presents reality while accusing it'. Again: 'The truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality...to *define* what is *real*. In this rupture, which is the achievement of the aesthetic form, the fictitious world of art appears as true reality'. The experience of this on the part of an audience, Marcuse (1978: 36, 44) says further, (potentially) brings about 'a change of consciousness' – one that differs qualitatively from the 'administered consciousness' of the exploitative order (of capitalism). This resonates with Ian Parker's (2011) claim, that psychoanalysis could bring about a 'revolution of subjectivity' in the subject – which he conceives of as a process in the course of which the subject examines his or her own relation to power – and which may prepare the subject for a social revolution. Parker insists that the two kinds of revolution are not identical, however.

One may wonder in what way Gadamer's account of art's transformative capacity, via its play-structure, could function as a model for the humanities (and perforce also the social sciences), or to be more precise, for the kind of knowledge that is generated by and archived in the humanities. It does not really require a prodigious leap of understanding, however, to realize that the knowledge encountered in the humanities – from the study of literature and the other arts, through linguistics, philosophy, history, anthropology, theology, classical (culture, art and literature) studies, communication theory and others – may conceivably be thought of, on the model of art itself, as raising extant reality to a different niveau of being. In the case of the art-theoretical disciplines, this involves raising an already artistically transformed reality to a new level through interpretive or analytic

engagement, while, in the case of disciplines such as history, philosophy and linguistics, what is raised to the level of reflective comprehension is an aspect of human reality itself, whether in the guise of communicative or linguistic utterances, historical 'events', or phenomena such as beauty, death, love, power, anxiety and a host of others.

What makes the modelling of the humanities on art tenable, I believe, is precisely the fact that historical, theological, linguistic, communicational, literary-theoretical knowledge could potentially have the same transformative effects as art, first by transforming extant reality by ordering it according to discipline-specific discursive criteria, and secondly by enabling an epistemic or cognitive transformation on the part of someone who engages with a humanities-discipline on its own terms. I should stress that this is a modelling, however, and not a claim regarding the identity of the arts and the humanities (which comprise the study of, *inter alia*, the arts). Where they differ, is on the question of transforming *worldly* things into *fictional* entities with transformative ontological implications, on the one hand, and transforming either so-called '*factual*' states of affairs, or multi-layered 'events', or texts, interpretively into discipline-specific *discourses* – although an aestheticist argument could be constructed, to the effect that the latter discourses and the fictional artworks share a common aesthetic root, and that by implication, such scientific disciplines are no less fictional than works of art (see for example Megill 1985).

To clarify what is at stake here, one can turn to the work of Jacques Rancière, where a different deployment of the concept, 'aesthetic', is encountered – one which attributes to both theory (as found in the human sciences, for instance) and art (literature, cinema, architecture) a similar transformative capacity in relation to each other and to the world. Rancière (in Chapter 9 of *Dissensus*: 2011a), restates Schiller's assurance that the foundation of art and of life is to be found in the aesthetic in this way: '...there exists a specific sensory experience that holds the promise of both a new world of Art and a new life for individuals and the community, namely *the aesthetic*'. The key to understanding what he means lies in his resurrection of the etymological meaning of 'aesthetic', namely 'to perceive' (from ancient Greek, *aisthanesthai*) which implicates the sensory world, as his words suggest. For Rancière, the aesthetic is in fact the realm where art and the political come together, in the sense captured by what is probably the most familiar phrase from his work, namely 'the distribution of the sensible'.

Joseph Tanke (2011: 74-75) provides an illuminating account of its meaning in relation to the arts:

The distribution of the sensible is the system of divisions that assigns parts, supplies meanings, and defines the relationships between things in the common world. One such part belongs to art, with the larger distribution prescribing how the arts relate to other ways of doing and making. As such, the distribution of the sensible defines the nature of art, along with what it is capable of...the arts, even those thought far-removed from the political concerns of the day, can play a role in transforming the world. Art challenges what is sensible, thinkable, and hence possible, on the condition that it not surrender its identity as art.

This has to be seen in conjunction with Rancière's contention, that the arts, at any given time in their historical development, can only be grasped adequately as 're-partitioning the sensible' by placing them in a line of convergence with contemporary theories, the latter constituting the conditions of their comprehensibility, and *vice versa* (Rockhill 2011: 5). In Rancière's (2011: 31) words, 'The simple practices of the arts cannot be separated from the discourses that define the conditions under which they can be perceived as artistic practices'. Rancière therefore thinks in a historicizing manner, but without naïvely reducing artworks and literary texts to the empirical conditions of their production. This would make of them mere documents archiving historical developments. Instead, acknowledging their historical contingency while simultaneously affirming their specificity and the mutual implication of art and theory, explains their intelligibility, and, one may add, their discursive efficacy or purchase on social relations in space and time.

What one might label the 'horizontal' relation between artworks, on the one hand, and the contemporaneous philosophical-theoretical works discursively expressing their conditions of intelligibility, on the other, therefore enable one to make sense of such works of art and of literature, but also of the theoretical works in question, for Rancière. His own highly innovative philosophical work is a case in point, which has made a reappraisal of the relations between art and philosophy or theory possible.

He also recognizes another plane of historical significance, namely a

diagonal one that intersects with the horizontal plane and initiates what Rockhill (2011: 6-7) describes as a process of 'historical cross-fertilization' – what Rancière '...has elsewhere referred to as the complex intertwining of the horizontal and the diagonal dimensions of history'. This occurs when, for example, Aristotle's notion of art – which falls within what Rancière labels the 'representative regime of the arts' – demonstrably intersects with the literary texts and artworks, as well as the philosophical texts of a different historical era, in this way transmitting conceptual forces to the latter that unsettle or disrupt their intellectual, artistic and literary-historical specificity. As Rancière puts it (quoted in Rockhill 2011: 7):

Opening this dimension that cuts across so-called historical contexts is essential to grasping the war of writing...and its stakes in terms of the distribution of the sensible, the symbolic configuration of commonality.

The transformative social and political functioning of such cross-historical conceptual displacement and disturbance, as well as the relation between art and theory at a certain time, can therefore be articulated by what has been pointed out earlier, namely Rancière's notion of 'the distribution of the sensible', keeping in mind that this expression brings together art and politics via the aesthetic, which unites art and the 'sensible' (social and political) world.

Recall the significant transformation of the social world in the present era – the 'rise of the network society' (Castells) – discussed earlier, to which I have to add that Rancière employs another, related, concept which clarifies how such transformations are made possible, to wit 'dissensus', or rather, 'dis-sensus'. Not surprisingly, for Rancière (2007: 560), 'dissensus' is also an aesthetic issue. In the first place, it means disagreement or difference of opinion, but more importantly, it denotes a 'tear' or 'rupture' in the sensible world, in other words, a clash or conflict between one sensible order and another. If I understand him correctly, it appears that what Rancière has in mind here is a conflict between one distinct way of organizing or 'ordering' the world revealed to us by the senses, and another such ordering – a struggle between two 'sensible' orders in the additional sense of what is regarded as being commonsensical. This means that 'dis-sensus' drives a wedge between divergent ways of 'distributing the sensible', each appealing

to its respective adherents, that is, the people whose apprehension of the world is calibrated and attuned to a particular organization of the sensible. At the same time, the ‘dis-sensus’ that an artwork causes, and which is accommodated in correlative theoretical works, has a transformative effect on social and political relations. Think of the ‘dissensus’ introduced into the world – the artworld, but also the broader cultural and socio-political world – by Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), or by Shakespeare’s *Richard the Third* (circa 1592; 1997), on the one hand, and its philosophical counterpart, Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (1532; 2006), on the other. In the force-field created between these two texts, a new mode of understanding power-relations was opened up – one that introduced a radical moment of dissensus into the fabric of society by ‘re-partitioning the sensible’¹⁵.

The human sciences, working in conjunction with the arts, are capable, in other words, of bringing about a transformative ‘re-distribution of the sensible’ in extant social reality – one that could conceivably provide impetus to the already existing social movement (Hawken 2007) intent on counteracting the deleterious ecological effects of consumer/industrial capitalism in its contemporary guise, which includes the ‘space of flows’.

It is significant that Rancière (2007: 560) regards ‘dissensus’ as a matter of poetic invention, which, given its meaning of ‘interrupting’ the domain of the sensible, he understands as a dis-placement or rupture of existing ‘places and identities’ (2007: 560). This implies that dissensus is a political matter. Because art and literature are sites of ‘poetic invention’ *par excellence*, this means that art or literature, too, is a political matter. It is a distinct manner of parcelling out or ‘partitioning’, the sensible world, in conjunction with corresponding philosophical, theoretical, art- and literary-theoretical discourses, projecting the contours of possible worlds that may not even exist yet. These theoretical or human-scientific discourses lend art a quasi-transcendental dimension by providing a multi-dimensional hermeneutic key to its comprehensibility, describing the historical and epistemic conditions in light of which it is to be understood as art or literature. The work of Castells (1996; 2010), discussed earlier, is a

¹⁵ One could add two powerful cinematic works of art here – Cameron’s *Avatar* and Hillcoat’s *The Road* – both of which introduce ‘dis-sensus’ into the existing discourse of neo-liberal consumer capitalism, with potential transformative effects on audiences. See in this regard Olivier 2011.

particularly pertinent instance of such a human-scientific discursive grid that lends intelligibility to certain literary texts (see note 2), in this way contributing to a 're-partitioning of the sensible', or in less novel terms, to an understanding of a different kind of transformation of the contemporary social world, namely its technological transformation.

Conclusion

It is in the face of such a pervasive transformation of society that the human sciences and the arts are called upon to recuperate the human *lifeworld*, characterized as it is by the involvement of people in it as participants instead of onlookers, and by axiological integrity that may differ in qualitative specificity from one society, community or culture to another, but which shares a common structure. Habermas describes the lifeworld as follows (1987: 124):

... we can think of the lifeworld as represented by a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns. Then the idea of a 'context of relevance' that connects the elements of the [or a] situation with one another, and the situation with the lifeworld, need no longer be explained in the framework of a phenomenology and psychology of perception. Relevance structures can be conceived instead as interconnections of meaning holding between a communicative utterance, the immediate context, and its connotative horizon of meanings.

In other words, instead of conceiving of the lifeworld, as Husserl did, in terms of intentional structures of consciousness, since the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy and the human sciences generally, we have been free to articulate its defining features in linguistic terms instead (as Habermas suggests, above) – something which bestows upon the human sciences (and the arts) a recognition of their extraordinary power of linguistic-aesthetic intervention in it, corroborated by Rancière's notion of the (aesthetic) 'partitioning of the sensible'. One should not neglect this power.

As argued earlier regarding the work of Gadamer and Rancière, the human sciences (humanities and social sciences), together with what is arguably their life-blood, namely the arts, have the potential to initiate, cultivate, and disseminate the kind of knowledge and the kind of experiences

which are transformative in their own right, first regarding the lifeworld, but from there to other levels of society. We therefore (again) have two kinds of transformation here – one, the sweeping social transformation, engendered by the information and communication-technological revolution of the late 20th-century, described by Castells; and two, the transformation that resides, as sustained possibility, in the human sciences and the arts. Unless universities actualize the opportunities that present themselves in teaching and research – opportunities to transform people (their students) into knowledgeable ‘activists’ for the cause of preserving a recognizably human world (the lifeworld) against the encroachments of the newly dominant modes of space and time – the chances are that the circumference of this human lifeworld, with its familiar spatial and temporal parameters, will continue to shrink in the face of the ‘space of flows’ and ‘timeless time’.

There are many other aspects to a human world worthy of the name, of course, such as democratic values, non-racism and non-sexism. However, my guess is that, should the ‘space of flows’ become all-encompassing (in this way subjecting all these values to its imperatives), they would have to play second fiddle to priorities such as combatting the replacement of culture- and ecology-specific interests with those of a generalized, uprooted, ‘timeless’ global ‘non-culture’ of flows, which has already proved itself to be the mortal enemy of life itself.

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