Communising or Immunising (the) Humanities
Inventing New Pedagogic Forms

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This text is based on a lecture given at the University of Groningen within the conference *Arts and Humanities: Of(f) Course*. The conference was addressing the fact that both the arts and the humanities have lost their self-evidence in a world where 'bottom line' economic standards are becoming increasingly dominant.

Introduction

In this contribution we want to approach the issue of the humanities in relation to the growing discussion regarding the future of the university and especially regarding its public role. This discussion relates to tendencies of privatisation, economic globalisation and the appearance of the so-called entrepreneurial university, but also to the implications of the rapid developments in ICT and the learning sciences. In this discussion, functionalist (that is sociological) and idealistic (or philosophical) understandings of the university prevail. [1]

We would like to offer some elements of a different morphological approach (and we consider this to be primarily a pedagogical understanding of the university). Instead of understanding the university through its functions or as the institutionalisation of a transcendent or orientating idea of *Bildung*, a morphological approach firstly understands the university as an association or gathering that articulates a movement of public thought through unique *pedagogic forms*. In other words – and this is in fact the thesis we hope to elaborate – the university as university is the articulation of a movement that makes things public and gathers a public in such a way that it becomes a thinking public. The articulation resides in particular pedagogic arrangements that we call pedagogic forms, which have a particular (more "magical", than "mechanical") power to make something public. Hence, in this approach, the "public" role of the university does not refer to its functions, funding, accessibility or regulations, or to its commitment to "academic freedom" or an idea of *Bildung*, but to the characteristics of the gathering, and the time, space and matter that its forms enable. From this approach, we will address the issue of the humanities and will also briefly relate it to the so-called slow science movement, which questions the logic of a growth economy and the criterion of performativity which, as Lyotard argued a long time ago, has become almost self-evident: perform (faster, better), or disappear. However, we will not approach slowness as a goal in itself, but as the result of the type of time that takes shape within the university. Our thesis is that education could be approached as a practice or even as the art of making time (not the art of initiation or transmission). To elaborate this, we will draw on the original meaning of the Greek word *scholé* – of which, in many languages, the concept school is derived. In line with this thesis, we want to argue that except, and perhaps instead of, slowing down research, it is important to rethink university education in its present form and indicate

just how the humanities could play a role in this.

Examples

In order to provide some evidence of the value of this morphological approach we would like to start with some illustrative practices. Two actual examples of practices were provided and discussed at the conference and exhibition *Curating the European University* (February 2011) in Leuven. Department 21 was an experimental interdisciplinary workspace established and run by the students of the Royal College of Art in London. It was established in an empty space due to the relocation of one department and the fact that the new department had not yet moved in. Besides the twenty regular departments, the students were interested in organising a space where there would be time and place for interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary thinking, for new ways of relating, new activities, and to allow a new way of speaking, working and thinking to emerge. The students claimed it was not about deconstructing the university, but about transformation, and to enable new forms of teaching and design. As such, Department 21 sought to enable new modes of support among students and professors, new forms of peer learning and to reflect on the existing departmental structures and divisions between teaching and education. At the same time, it sought to gather students and professors around new forms of content and new subjects. We cannot go into further detail in this essay, but at least two issues are of importance here. First, thinking about the role and organisation of the university is not just a theoretical issue, but is related to very specific occasions, opportunities, and involves a specific organisation of space, time, interaction and content. What is interesting in the Department 21 example is that students were attempting to give shape to a new form, a concrete design and arrangement of space and time, where things can appear in a new way that stimulates new relationships and where studying and investigation can find their place.

Second, the example shows that the very university form contains something that disrupts the existing ordering of space and positions (such as institutions and disciplines) and can lead to the organisation of a public gathering. A second example is the University Allied for Essential Medicines movement. Students played a major role here as well. The movement was inaugurated at Yale University by students who forced the university and pharmaceutical companies to produce a generic HIV-AIDS medicine for the Sub-Saharan region. The movement is currently active in many countries. Its main goal is to show that universities also have a responsibility in the production and distribution of medicine. They also believe that it is part of the university's responsibility to reflect on the nature of pharmaceutical research. Medical licensing policies should be an integral part of that research, and global access to medicine should be a major concern. Their assumption is that innovations based on publicly funded research should be made available to all.

Above and beyond the two issues raised above, we would also like to present two additional issues. First, we would like to stress that there are alternative ways of thinking about the medical research's social impact. One way is to immediately frame the impact in economic terms or the immediate gains and returns (for both the university and society) and, indeed, to consider the university as an enterprise like any other. The second way is often applied as a defensive reaction in that it seeks to protect the university from society's demands for justification, and to embrace image of the ivory tower as a virtue and that academic freedom implies that the impact, relevance and consequences of its research are not the university's responsibility. In this example, however, the issue of impact is approached in an alternative manner. The argument is that the university should perform its research – and here we draw on Isabelle Stengers' work – *in the presence of everyone who may turn out to be victims of its activities*. It is about exposing researchers, as well as students, to the possible victims or what are often referred to as the necessary sacrifices in our competitive, war-like environment. What happens here is that students oblige the university *to think and make decisions in the presence* of the victims of the current

academic and economic war. In other words, confronting the university with the impact it has on society. Instead of the common tendency to think of the university's impact in terms of patents, the students and associated academics become spokespersons for those who have no voice in the current competitive environment of the academic-pharmaceutical industrial complex.

A second conclusion, related to the example of global access to medicine, is that it clearly indicates that being a professor or student cannot be reduced to a matter of holding a socially defined role or position, but always involves a *former* position. There is a clear public dimension involved in doing research, teaching and taking courses. Even when someone is working or studying behind the closed doors of a lecture hall or a laboratory, being a professor or student means thinking, experimenting and discussing *in the presence* of those very things and creatures (e. g., animals, people, etc.) that are often not represented. One becomes a university professor and student when one notices that one's abilities to reason and act are stymied upon hearing the question "Bethink that we might be mistaken" or "What are we busy doing?" and one cannot immediately provide a satisfactory response and is thus further thwarted. Hearing this question, as Isabelle Stengers notes, is like hearing the idiot (and thus it is probably also an idiotic thing to do) as both Deleuze and Dostoyevsky described it.

> In the ancient Greek sense, an idiot was someone who did not speak the Greek language and was therefore cut off from the civilized community…. But Deleuze's idiot … is the one who always slows the others down, who resists the consensual way in which the situation is presented and in which emergencies mobilize thought or action. This is not because the presentation would be false or because emergencies are believed to be lies, but because, "there is something more important". Don't ask him why; the idiot will neither reply nor discuss the issue. The idiot is a presence or, as Whitehead would have put it, produces an interstice. There is no point in asking him, "what is more important?" for he does not know. But his role is not to produce abysmal perplexity, not to create the famous Hegelian night when every cow is black. We know, knowledge there is, but the idiot demands that we slow down, that we don't consider ourselves authorized to believe that we possess the meaning of what we know (Stengers 2005, p. 994–995).

University research and teaching thus explicitly aims to confront the voices of those (things, viruses, animals, people …) who are not represented by the official modes of representation. These voices *slow down our thinking* capacities and our teaching and research activities, and, as such, constitute an interstice that questions our normal ways of acting and thinking. Being a student and professor thus implies thinking and acting in the presence of so-called "idiotic murmurings", announcing that there might be something more important, something that deserves our attention and our commitment to finding ways and strategies to force it to speak, that is, to make it public. In short, the example clarifies the notion that, at a university, research, teaching and studying are public activities.

Both of these examples may seem trivial or marginal, but we believe we must turn to these types of practices and movements in order to engage the public and properly inform them on the university's activities, practices and movements out of which the university evolves, not as some glorious or multifunctional organisation, but as a specific association that includes a very distinct pedagogic form.

We would also like to present a third example, or rather, a historical excursion.

Medieval University

Universities have been called the most important legacy of the Middle Ages. Their origin lies in a special gathering that ensured a particular kind of life that was detached from the

immediate demands of society and from the rules and regulations of the cathedral schools and monasteries from which they originally emerged. The model for this gathering was the medieval association called *universitas*, a term used to describe a variety of associations. Thus it was necessary to specify the kind of *universitas*: for instance, the *universitas magistrorum et scholarium* or the *universitas studii*. The *universitas studii* enjoyed an existence that was disconnected from both religious and civil authorities. But it is crucial to note that they were not associations of masters and apprentices, they were not simply engaged in initiation or preparation practices to become part of a particular social, cultural, vocational or religious group. The *universitas studii* claimed to be an association of professors and students, which set aside time for study, thus freeing the students and professors from social, religious or economic concerns and enabling them to engage with the text.. The university, emerged as a new form of *scholé*, of *public* study unlike the secluded monastery cell. Its residents included both masters and students for whom the search for truth and knowledge was not simply a private calling (as it had been in the monasteries), but a public activity. It is important to stress that the birth of the university as an association cannot be disconnected from a specific technology and spatial and temporal arrangement. Its core was a particular form of public lecture, which was related to the birth of the "book-text". As Ivan Illich elaborated in detail: the emergence of the book-text meant that written language was no longer considered the symbol of a cosmic and divine reality; it was no longer regarded as sacred, which meant a new relationship between text and reader. Written language was suddenly seen as the materialisation of abstractions and concepts, that is, of thoughts, and hence gradually became accessible and open to criticism and commentary.

Texts and thoughts are thus disconnected from the appropriated, regulated usages, and put in the middle, so to speak, (profanated) in order to provoke discussion and commentary. The text now discloses the world, and makes study and investigation possible. In other words, the university as an association included a particular form and technology to make thoughts public, and hence, it essentially was about gathering people as students and professors around a public thing, a *res publica calling a concerned public into being*. We cannot go into the fortunes of this medieval invention called university, but hopefully this short sketch clarifies that what was truly specific and unique with the coming into existence of universities was a kind of association that gives shape to a particular pedagogic form, a particular time and space of exposition and experimentation. An association of scholars and students means precisely the gathering of people who, in the event of the gathering, are (for the time of the gathering) not members (not yet or no longer members) of a professional, civic, religious or economic association or organisation (e.g., guilds, religious orders, civil services or administrations), people who do not gather around some defined production aim or under some defined rule, but around some "thing". This association, therefore, articulates a movement of de-identification – *we are not disciples, not pupils, not apprentices, not civil servants, not clergymen, not trainees, not human capital, but students and scholars*.

It has an essentially experimental dimension. Experimental in the sense that words, objects, practices, and knowledge are disconnected from their sacred and / or regular usage and disconnected from all sorts of appropriations, and begin "floating" and start provoking thinking, *in public (public thinking) and "in the presence" of these things which become common things, are communised or profanated*. As Agamben clarifies: "[p]ure, profane, freed from sacred names is that thing that is set free for the common use by people." (Agamben 2005, 96) Something becomes de-appropriated or disconnected from particular interests (of social groups, professions, markets, states...) and particular usages (in the sphere of production and reproduction, or in the sphere of religious practices). The profanation of the book, which we mentioned earlier as the inaugurating move of the medieval university (and the form of the public lecture) ; the profanation of reason (see Kant's distinction between private and public use of reason), which inaugurated the university of Enlightenment (and the seminar) and the profanation of culture and time (or

"authority", see '68 student movement), which inaugurated the "project-work" Form. This movement of de-identification and profanation is a dangerous movement for in its attempt to make public thinking possible it disturbs, questions or disrupts all kinds of stabilisations, fixations or crystallisations (such as "Nature", "Reason", "Culture", "Discipline", "Philosophy", "Freedom", "Science", "Excellence"). A movement has no real beginning or end, it has no specific cause nor a particular aim. It happens in the present, and articulates that present as a gap between past and future, between what is possible and what is actual (Hannah Arendt). This means that students and scholars are moving in a time of suspension (not of accumulation or re-production or investment), that is the particular "time of study and thought" or of *scholé* as heterochronia; a time that occurs and "takes / finds place" as, drawing upon Foucault, a particular heterotopia, as a kind of sanctuary that suspends the existing social distribution of spaces and division of places (see Department 21). It is a "place without place", a *lieu sans lieu*, a place that in a way escapes the usual order of places although it is still a concrete "place" or "location" with its own order, its own technologies, rituals, ways of speaking and its own discipline.

According to Foucault, it is a place where we are exposed, that is to say, "drawn out of ourselves". These pedagogic forms are neither a theatre nor a political arena but lecture halls, seminar rooms, ateliers, studios or workshops where much of the arrangement (space, time, discipline) has to do with allowing students to listen or discuss, write and draw and hence to become attentive to something. They are forms that give things the power to make us think, to turn a matter into a matter of concern or a public matter and we think that professors play an important role in giving things (a text, a virus, a landscape) this power. This is not a sociological type but a figure, which, contrary to conventional wisdom, does not pre-exist the event of the lecture itself (and doesn't exist if the event fails to happen). She is not an instructor operating in a learning environment and making the world of learning resources available to students in order to enable them to start their productive, and increasingly individualised and personalised, learning circles. To profess, from the Latin *profiteri* and *profero*, means to bring to light (to produce even), to make appear (maybe to call into existence), to render public, but also to delay, to bring to a standstill and to declare a commitment. For the professor, as well as the students who serve as an audience: the audience does not pre-exist the event, and therefore you could say that the lecture (when it works!) makes the audience "happen" (Readings). Student, as we know comes from *studere*: "dedicating oneself to", "devoting time and attention". People become an audience of students because they are slowed down by the provocation to think, that is, to become attached to an issue, and to question it and be questioned by it. As such, pedagogic forms include strategies of *commoning* or *com-munisation*, that is, strategies that enable us to share or take part in the *munus* of an issue (i. e., the burden or questioning that an issue poses for us). Collective experiments where one becomes a professor and student by partaking in the collective gathering around issues of concern. As an event (and, thus, in so far as it actually "works") it can inscribe itself in the lives of those attending it. Not in a spectacular way, but as a start of slow transformations.

Of course one should complement this history of the (re-) inventions of public pedagogic forms of the university with the history of their taming, the history of the neutralisation of the university, of tactics and strategies of *deformation*. There are overt, straightforward strategies for taming the university: politics ("the state") or religion ("the church"). But there are also less overt attempts to tame the university; granting it the status of an institution (oriented towards an idea, a common future, a glorious past, humanity) is one attempt, creating sacred faculties and celebrating scientific methodology are other attempts. If this morphological approach makes sense, we think it could help to look at current tendencies in a particular way, and perhaps to recognise university forms that remain invisible within a functionalist or idealistic framework. In conclusion, we want to come back explicitly to the movement of profanation that characterises the university and its pedagogic forms. In line with the (counter-) history to which we alluded to above, we could look at the humanities in a way that in fact they themselves contributed to the

taming and immunising of the public pedagogic forms. Indeed one could state that the '68 student movement profanated the sacred character of what should be transmitted (disciplined / authoritative knowledge and national culture – as it was instaured in the national *Bildungsuniversity*) and claimed the possibility of autonomous reading. And, contrary to the "official" "sacred history", one could read the role of the humanities played here precisely as a taming or immunising of this movement where "culture" was communised. The humanities, in collaboration with sociology, and more broadly the social sciences, started to demonstrate that no autonomous reading was possible and that every reading has to be contextualised, that we have to take into account social and cultural background and that it must be seen in a historical perspective. And this taming and immunisation is perhaps what we see even more today in relation to what could be called a new movement of profanation: the profanation of thinking and language, that is, thinking and speaking becoming disconnected from cultures, languages and their spatio-temporal fixations and contexts. What else does the so-called online student – often criticised or ridiculed by academics who embrace a cultural self-understanding – articulates then that everyone is able to think and speak.

Of course, this democracy in thought and language could be fearfully perceived as undermining the very foundations of the university. And this message is a specifically harsh one for those academics who want to explain exactly that and how we are all captured by language and culture. It seems as if the humanities are again about to tame this communisation by trying to refer the words and the things once more to their "proper" meaning in the context of identity politics or diversity discourses.

Isn't the message here: "stop thinking about the (im)possibility of thinking, stop talking about the (im)possibility of talking, but think and talk about something". Assuming a democracy in thought and language assumes that everyone is able to speak and think, and makes possible the experience of thinking and speaking, thought and language as the way to be collectively involved in a common issue. Indeed, maybe this profanation inaugurates the invention of, and experimentation with, new public pedagogic forms. Humanities, then, should no longer be about cultivating or socialising, but about communicating and communisation. They could contribute to the invention of new forms of public thought and public experimentation, new forms of association around common issues or new forms of making one attentive and giving "power". In this context, the humanities could contribute to fighting the actual formalisation and standardisation of university teaching. It is a fight that does not oppose them to the positive sciences or neurosciences, etc., but is a fight for the pedagogic form of the university (as well for the "positive sciences") as a form that "makes free time" (time of suspension and public thought, unproductive time that slows down), and against the strong tendency to turn study time and teaching time into immediate "productive time" (thus completely effacing *"scholè"*) – education being defined as "investment-time" and as being the efficient and effective, therefore always accelerating the production of learning outcomes and (student) satisfaction, as the maximising of learning gains. So, here we would plead for a shift in the discussion or the struggle, from a struggle that is often one that wants to claim that a particular "culture" is needed to be fully human or to become true democratic citizens, to a struggle that concentrates on the "forms" of teaching, study and research (where there is no divide between humanities and others – regarding the experimental ethos and the public form) (and, of course, the organisation and policy), against the fixation on outcomes that accelerates these processes and turns them into production processes.

ICT and university form

This brings us to a final issue. The examples of university forms, such as the lecture hall and the seminar room, in a way belong to a pre-digital age. Clearly, when we are looking for what causes the current acceleration in teaching, research and life in general, ICT and idea of permanent availability are often blamed. We don't want to follow that road. What

we want to stress instead is that the invention of the university cannot be disconnected from a very specific technological invention: the book-text, as Illich calls it. It is the book-text that made public thinking and public discussion possible. In that regard, today's digital technology, and especially the internet, could be regarded as a new technology, and clearly also with the potential to make something public and hence suspend all kinds of privatisation. Indeed, it is striking to see how the discussion about public and private, open and closed, common and not common dominates the current discussion. In a way, one could say that with the internet a specific *universitas* has taken shape. Yet, as Illich indicates, there is a difference between a textual technology and digital technology, or, between "the text" and "the screen". It probably doesn't make sense to project the typical pedagogic forms of the age of the book onto the digital age of the screen. But, the challenge seems to be how digital technologies can be used to make something public and to gather a public of students around something. This is a question about form and design, for neither books nor ICT in themselves constitute a *res publica*. Storing knowledge and information, and making it accessible, in itself is not about gathering students around a matter of concern. For us, then, the question is indeed how the university form can take shape by drawing on digital technologies. In other words, what does free time, free space and public thinking mean in a digital age and what (at the level of discipline and ethos) would help transform academics into professors (again) (embodied thought) and learners into students (embodied exposition). Moreover, there is no reason to make a distinction between the humanities and the others, as Friedrich Kittler stated: "For the second time in its eight centuries, the university is technically uniform, simply because all departments share one and the same hardware. As Heidegger said, early and humbly: precisely because the core of the Greek episteme, ontology or the logos of Being, has materialized in computing machines, European philosophy comes to its very end and thinking may begin again."

Arts and Humanities: Of(f) Course, organised by RUG, together with the research centre Arts in Society , 25–26 June 2013.

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Footnotes

1. The public lecture we gave at the University of Groningen on June 26, 2013 was an occasion to present some thoughts that we have elaborated more deeply and extensively in different texts, which are listed at the end and from which we have amply borrowed. We have omitted most of the references, as they were also absent from the actual presentation. But they can be easily traced using the bibliography at the end of the essay.

Tags

Autonomy, Commons