

Preface

The humanities remind us where we have been and help us envision where we are going. Emphasizing critical perspective and imaginative response, the humanities—including the study of languages, literature, history, film, civics, philosophy, religion, and the arts—foster creativity, appreciation of our commonalities and our differences, and knowledge of all kinds. The social sciences reveal patterns in our lives, over time and in the present moment. Employing the observational and experimental methods of the natural sciences, the social sciences—including anthropology, economics, political science and government, sociology, and psychology—examine and predict behavioral and organizational processes. (Broadhead et al. 2013: 9)

A spectre is haunting Europe: the spectre of Numanities.

OK, not necessarily. But if you write a manifesto, you cannot help thinking about *that other* manifesto. Maybe that spectre *will* haunt Europe, at some point, but first there are many things that need to happen. To begin with, Numanities should become a spectre, in that particular sense that Marx and Engels meant.

More seriously, and more realistically, the present monograph was written to introduce a few proposals for a reformation of the humanities, in a way that comprises both a critical analysis to their current situation (by many called a “crisis”), and a full evaluation (rediscovery?) of their potentials. “Two things result from this fact” (as *that other manifesto* put it, too):

- (1) This book presents the platform of Numanities in a systematic (though still embryonic) sense to the academic community. There have been journal articles, lectures, congress presentations, and in fact whole congresses (the International Congress of Numanities that takes place every year at Kaunas University of Technology), but a scientific monograph is still the most solid and effective way to launch a new theoretical program.
- (2) This book kicks off the whole Springer book series in Numanities, with a first, “propaedeutic” I shall say, text that will hopefully set a bit of a template and trace a few patterns on the contents of the books that will follow.

The text, generally speaking, is divided into two main parts, plus accessories. The first part, corresponding to the second chapter, is a presentation of the actual

program of Numanities, a manifesto in seven points, through which I attempt to lay the first tiles of what will hopefully be a long path, full of additions, refinements and corrections to these early reflections. The second part, corresponding to the third chapter, contains two case-studies which, drawing from my personal experience as a researcher (and I shall comment on the partiality of this choice), intend to show Numanities “in action”, so to speak. Accessories include a “background” summary of the current crisis of the humanities, corresponding to the first chapter, and an appendix (which, strictly speaking, should have been another case-study) that illustrates the pre-history and the early history of Numanities, in relation to the main context it was generated within, i.e., the International Semiotics Institute.

Stylistically speaking, I wrote these pages following two specific genres of intellectual discourse: the pamphlet and, most of all, the manifesto. I think it is pretty important to specify this, in order to set the right expectations of the readers, and also—once again—to promote humanistic practices at their best.

On the one hand, indeed, the readers should know that the book assumes the typical programmatic and thought-provoking tones of these two (not so popular anymore) literary genres. This monograph is a manifesto because—let alone its title—it intends to offer a statement of purposes for this new forum called Numanities. Likewise, it is a pamphlet (albeit one that is too long for the usual standards) because it contains a lively tone that occasionally verge into the polemical one (here or there reminding us also of that particular, politically oriented, sub-genre called the libelle). I hope the readers will understand that such tones are, so to speak, part of the game, and that what I want is to put as much food for thought as I can on the table of this forum, in relation to my own competences, which are obviously limited, and far from being representative of the whole spectrum that—in my hopes—Numanities could and should reach. I will occasionally provide examples of research and scholars that—to my mind—are good opportunities to redefine the paradigm of humanities, and I will occasionally do it in a rather critical manner. However, I will not do it with the intention to “attack” them (and definitely not at personal level), but only as tools to make my point. Moreover, the people I will mention are already aware of my critical remarks, which have already emerged in previous congresses, publications and private conversations. The intention is to activate a chemical reaction (the debate on how the humanities could overcome their crisis) of the type that needs a high temperature (the polemical tone) in order to work out. So, I hope the readers keep this in mind while approaching this book (and do not think that I am this “angry young man” of the humanities—in fact, not that young either), and I hope that the colleagues mentioned forgive me for using one more time their cases as examples of my own arguments. I sincerely apologize in advance to these two groups if I do not succeed in conveying my benevolent intentions.

Another reason for engaging in these two genres lies in the fact that they both represent, in different periods of time, a form of intellectual practice where the humanities gave (and received) their best. My favorite example remains that of the manifesto of Futurism (the general one, that is—Futurism has produced an impressive amount of manifestos about nearly every topic). Let us forget for a second the (relatively true) allegations with Fascism and in general violence that

this artistic movement produced and developed in time (“We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot...”): I am interested in emphasizing the attention that surrounded its birth and early steps. Filippo Marinetti finalized this eccentric manifesto on February 5, 1909, and on the same day the document made the headlines of Bologna’s *Gazzetta dell’Emilia* newspaper. During the next ten days the news spread all over Italy, and Napoli’s *Il Pungolo*, Mantova’s *Gazzetta di Mantova*, Verona’s *Arena*, Trieste’s *Il Piccolo* and Roma’s *Il Giorno*, in this chronological order, covered the event. Finally, and most famously, on February 20 the manifesto was published in the main French newspaper *Le Figaro*. I used the word “event” to describe this media coverage, not just because Futurism later turned out to be one of the most important artistic movements of the whole century, but exactly because we are invited to stop and reflect on how central the arts and humanities must have been in early twentieth-century society, if the birth of an unknown artistic movement, promoted by a relatively unknown poet (Marinetti’s first literary works were certainly more controversial than successful), managed to make the headlines of nonetheless than seven different newspapers, including some very important ones of national diffusion.

It is something I always mention to my students, whenever I have artists among them (and it happens pretty often, as the main subjects I teach are of the musico-logical and filmological type). “Can you imagine a similar situation nowadays?—I ask them—Let’s say you decide today to start a new artistic movement—and I know that some of you are indeed involved in innovative forms of artistic expression. You sit down around a table, with a coffee or a tea, you establish a bunch of rules you commit yourselves to follow, and finally you write down a manifesto. Now, imagine you send this document to a national newspaper. Do you think they would even bother to reply to your email—let alone publish your document?” Students usually laugh at this point, and in that laughter there is the whole concentration of the crisis of the humanities in nowadays’ society: a reaction so symptomatic of the loss of social relevance that artistic and humanistic practices experience today, that my students do not even consider anger or sadness as a response, but straightaway amusement. Paraphrasing that old joke about Berlin and Vienna during the Great War, humanities went from a situation that was serious but not desperate, to one that is now desperate but not serious.

However, to write a manifesto today is not only a nostalgic homage to the “glorious past” (also because artists and intellectuals still write them: the genre is less fashionable but far from dead). I rather consider it a nod to the fact that creativity, intellectual effort and “humanism” are not untied to a certain programmatic and pragmatic mentality. And, plus, they can also have the guts to speak with conviction, determination and clarity. Maybe, there is still some room for these qualities in the humanities, especially if we manage to complete them with a significant dose of humility, in order to avoid the risk that they develop into arrogance. By saying, as one does in a manifesto, “we intend to take the x, the y and the z action”, we manage to achieve clarity (we do x, y and z, not quasi-x, meta-y and post-z), and at the same time to avoid arrogance (we will not pretend to be able to do also a, b and c).

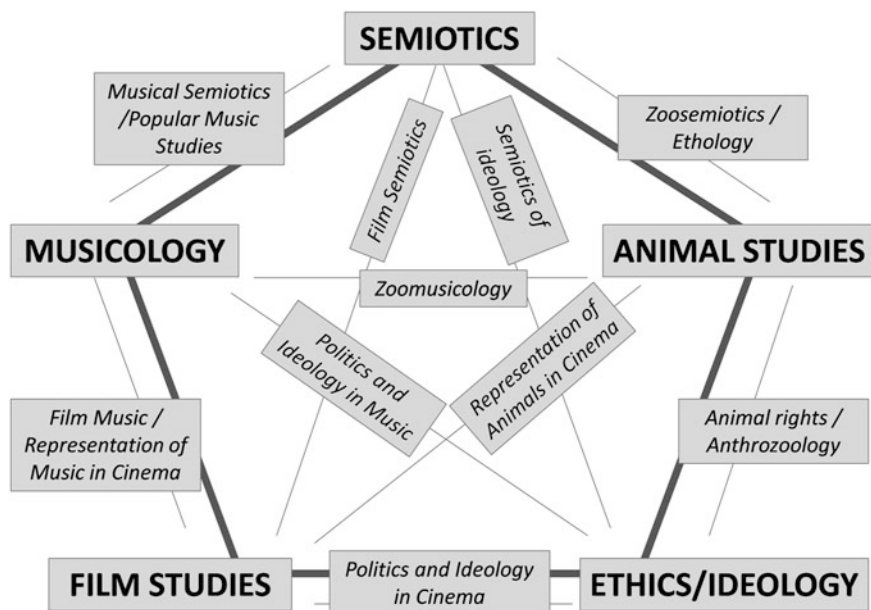


Fig. 1 Dario Martinelli's research map

As I have already hinted, a specific note should certainly be provided in relation to the methodological and the theoretical articulation of the two (or three, counting the appendix) case-studies proposed here. To say the least, the reader will find the latter rather partial and subjective, far from being representative of the whole spectrum that this book, on the contrary, seems to promise. What will soon be clear is that the vast majority of the case-studies are taken from fields like semiotics, musicology, animal studies and film studies.

The reason for this is quite simple: I did not want to present myself as a different scholar than who I really am. My research network is possibly a bit more varied than the average (not that this is necessarily an asset), yet at the same time extremely limited in comparison to the extensive size of the humanities as a whole. In Fig. 1 I even went as far as to map my fields of interest, in their position and interaction within my research path. I cannot really say if I have too many interests or too few: I have experienced both feelings in different situations. But one thing is for sure: whenever I remind myself of that old joke according to which there are two kinds of scholars, those who get so specific that they end up knowing everything about nothing, and those who get so general that they end up knowing nothing about everything, I know I lean more on the latter edge.

For any of the 15 fields and sub-fields represented in Fig. 1, I have taught courses and published essays (and in some cases monographs too). At a superficial level, one could say that my research path is very interdisciplinary, but the truth is, this applies only to a few of the cases mapped. I know I am being interdisciplinary

when I deal with subjects like zoomusicology or zoosemiotics, and I definitely know I am not when I combine, say, musicology with film studies. Interdisciplinarity, as I will discuss later, is a word that everybody likes to attach to what they do nowadays, but it is becoming an abused concept, challenged by several forms of trivialization (as well as its related, but not similar, concepts of trans-, multi- and crossdisciplinarity).

That cinema and music can interact at a scholarly level is perfectly normal, and does not require a transfiguration of any of the two subjects, nor the flexibility to meet on a neutral field where a genuine symbiosis can occur: two cousins meeting for dinner are not exactly engaging in an intercultural experience, now, are they?

Back to my point, no matter how varied and occasionally interdisciplinary my personal research path can be, there is no doubt that, in the context of the present book, repeated mentions to areas such as semiotics, music, films or non-human animals may leave the reader with a few reservations on the (apparently limited) horizons of this whole enterprise. Even though that may be the case, it is important for me to mention that my approach to this problem has been of a different sort, and very much on the side of intellectual honesty. I did not want to speak about subjects I do not consider myself an expert in: I rather wanted to apply the paradigm of Numanities to what I do, hoping/expecting that whoever sympathizes with this program, will do the same with his/her own research path.

In fact, since we are touching the topic of my competences, it may be useful to emphasize the great “P-word” missing from my research map, that is, philosophy. There is very little philosophy in this book, all considered, especially if we intend this discipline as the practice of arguing one’s cases by thoroughly going through the great philosophers of the past (particularly Hegel and Kant: for some reason, they are never missed). Of course, I like to think that philosophy is a wider form of reasoning than this, and that therefore there *are* significant philosophical arguments here. However, speaking strictly, this monograph has no classical philosophical approach. To make matters worse, the few philosophical arguments proposed here are never intended as a means to turn Numanities into a paradigm belonging to any particular philosophical school. When I mention passages of the likes of Marx or Dilthey, in the course of the text, it is not because I intend to make Numanities a “marxist” or a “diltheyan” theory: it is simply because those particular passages (and *not* the whole work of those philosophers) are particularly useful at that particular point.

Arts and Humanities in Progress

A Manifesto of Numanities

Martinelli, D.

2016, XIV, 254 p. 20 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-45552-5