

OF SCIENCE AND SOULS¹

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The Future of the Humanities. This is the name of an ASSAF (Academy of Science in South Africa) panel on which I serve. Quite why scientists want non-scientists to write a report for a science academy on disciplines that are not sciences is a mystery. But it's a mystery worth investigating given the articles in the *Culture Machine* journal discussing the death of the university.

The Humanities are in trouble: declining enrolments in key disciplines, smaller departments closing, huge staff: student ratios in others, and parental suspicion. Students who are rejected from the sciences and commerce always end up in the leaky sink that the Humanities have become. Renegade physicist Derek Wang used to tell our Honours students when he co-taught Science as a Cultural Expression, 'beware of actors wearing white coats pretending to be doctors in TV ads'. Actors are not scientists and scientists are not actors. Adverts use rhetorical proofs and create an impression of evidence. Well, things have changed in the age of Reality TV. We now have the *The Doctors* TV programme that has turned health care into an entertaining and sexualised talk show, and TV dramas like *ER*, which depict surgical procedures wrongly about half the time. Just shows, one can't trust actors/doctors wearing white coats.

The Humanities are in need of life-saving surgery. We all know that the Humanities are the 'soul' of the University even as they are being killed off in the UK. We know this because the display banners that frame inaugural lectures in imposing theatres tell us this. This refrain often also occurs at faculty meetings, when the asymmetrical distribution of resources that favour the sciences is lamented. So, where does this leave science? Can science have a soul? We all know from TV that, unlike their disciplines, that lawyers and auditors lack souls, but science and scientists? Richard Dawkins talks about *The God Delusion*. Can he be correct when the academy itself arose in the Middle Ages out of European theological institutions? Is this the

soul that the Humanities are trying to resuscitate? Are the Humanities hovering in the night of the living dead, like a ghastly Hollywood B movie?

The ASSAF panel is battling to define exactly what the Humanities are. What about social sciences? The latter count things, the Humanities creatively describe them, looking for inner meaning. Like our lost souls the panel can't find an appropriate definition. 'Close readings', suggested one wag, who described the motley bunch of anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, educationists, literary scholars and me as 'general dealers'. Dig below the surface of this dealership and one finds amongst this bunch a lapsed botanist, a lapsed mathematician and a partly lapsed urban geographer. Conceptual hybridity characterises the Humanities, suggested a transdisciplinary apostle. A third located the genesis of the Humanities as the last gate in the defence of civilisation as we know it. Civilisation has, of course, been its own worst enemy for thousands of years. The barbarians are often in control.

So, what is a close reading? I deal with this phrase all the time as Chair of my School's Higher Degree Committee. For me, more social scientist than litterateur, this is a meaningless term, unless made specific. How, will the 'close reading' occur? What methods will be applied to assessing what? A really interesting comment emerged from one ASSAF meeting: the Humanities are about 'being human', and being human cannot be encapsulated in the relative crudity offered by numbers. Being human requires a soul – and a soul requires the study of meaning, how meaning is made, how meaning is interpreted and how meaning is acted on. In other words, what is the meaning of meaning? This takes us into the realm of semiotics, mathematics, physics and even metaphysics; indeed, all disciplines are concerned with making, explaining and applying meaning. This is what, as Wang told our students, is meant by his conclusion that science is a cultural expression. If so, then different cultures express different conceptions of science, even if the practice of science is the single constant.

I remember, as a once implacably positivist geography student, responding with derision to the mid-1950s argument that the practice of geography was partly intuitive, therefore, beyond the rigours of science. That which was scientific could be measured and was legitimate, that which could not be counted was consigned to the realm of 'the beyond'. The academy largely rejects that which is to be found in this unknowable realm, defined by philosopher

Immanuel Kant as the noumenal. Much of my work as a documentary film maker and cultural researcher, however, has tried to explain the unexplainable experiences I have experienced as an experiencing observer/participant. Do these occurrences fall into the realm of anthropology? Theology? Indigenous Knowledge Systems? Cosmology? How do these disciplines help us make meaning of the meaning that non-scientists (i.e., ordinary people) mean?

It seems that we have come full circle. The recognition of different ontologies, different frames of reference, different cosmologies in the era of postmodernism has recovered the legitimacy of that which is unexplainable, or still to be explained, if ever. Religion remains the blind spot of most disciplines (as in Dawkins's book), but – like the principle of resistance - it has always underpinned one of the key forces of history.

Corporatisation and bureaucracy always puts soul under pressure as the structure, not people, determines meaning. Structures are managed in specific ways which are meaningful to the managers, but those ways may lack a sense of what it means to be human. It's then up to the managers and those being managed to invest meaning in practice and to keep the values of participation and humanitarianism in close view (close readings may be required!). Structuration is also a cultural expression – if a soul-less one. Unlike the *X-Files* motto, the truth it not 'out there', it's in here.

Notes

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