

BOOK REVIEW

The Humanities Still Matter.

Identity, Gender and Space in Twenty-First-Century Europe.

Rubén Jarazo-Álvarez and José Igor Prieto-Arranz (Eds.), Oxford: Peter Lang, 2020, pp.326

This collection of essays on the humanities and their crucial role in the recognition of the challenges facing contemporary Europe, co-edited by José Igor Prieto-Arranz and Rubén Jarazo-Álvarez, is an extraordinary piece of literature which champions the relevance of the knowledge which the humanities have brought and continue to bring to our society and culture. The volume not only points out how the position of the humanities and cultural studies has become weakened in recent years but also illustrates how far the findings gained from these fields is interwoven into a number of other concepts such as identity, gender, space. The book opens with an account of how recent movements within Spain and other European countries have led to the humanities being overlooked and undervalued in the job market. The humanities are losing popularity despite the fact that the field can provide answers to many of the problems which we are currently facing, and the book emphasises the need to promote contemporary academic discourse and to implement the humanities and their findings within the EU framework, a step which would be of enormous value for the development of contemporary Europe.

The declining state of the humanities has also been the focus of other academic studies from other countries than Spain, for example a recent article by Annamária Inzelt and László Csonka (2020) which investigates the impact of social science and humanities PhD programs on Hungarian graduates and on their own personal and social environments. The research revealed that the postgraduate education process and the degree itself have a more positive impact on the personal satisfaction and career prospects of individual graduates rather than on their future employers. Further investigations were then conducted in an attempt to explain and understand these impacts from different perspectives, such as the specific sector of employment, the level of mobility, or the actual level of the impact itself. Other authors who have investigated the declining prestige of humanities subjects have also noted similar supporting evidence for the phenomenon. José Igor Prieto-Arranz and Rubén Jarazo-Álvarez, the editors of the work under review, make a strong case suggesting that if humanities were to be perceived in the context of identity-explanations and shapers, this would possibly showcase the explanations and findings that would not otherwise be brought to our attention. More important still is the need to gather sufficient support to ensure that these findings can be carried into practice. The collection of chapters offers a comprehensive explanation of the crisis of humanities, with the editors advocating the powerful capacity of the field to lead us to a “better, more equitable world”.

The content of the book is subdivided into three main sections, each of which is divided further into individual chapters written by respected academics and researchers. This approach allows readers to gain an overview of different fields of expertise, all of which strongly demonstrate the power of the humanities to offer fruitful insights and potential solutions for the problems which contemporary society faces.

The first section introduces the crucial term of identity and the ways in which its issues within contemporary European society are reflected through several cultural genres. A chapter by Sabine Coelsch-Foisner discusses theatre and theatrical performances in the light of

intercultural dialogue, exploring the role of the text and its meaning in both performance and in its surrounding context, emphasising the importance of the latter. The author demonstrates that theatrical performances within contemporary Europe add to and enliven Europe's genuinely visionary qualities, and these arguments are supported with the concepts of "role responsibility" or "cultural responsibility" which have emerged from studies by Martha Klein. The following chapter by Elizabeth Woodward-Smith takes a look at the national conservatism currently prevailing on the British political scene, most notably reflected in the UK's withdrawal from the EU. The author analyses political cartoons and other representations and examines their impact on the EU-UK discussions in the context of the Euroscepticism which is currently spreading across the UK and the EU. The author offers a concise overview of the cultural nature of the situation in the context of current political difficulties involved in reaching an agreement on the country leaving the EU, the fraught discourse over national identity discourse, and, last but not least, politics in the age of Twitter and Instagram.

These themes are also relevant to the next chapter in which Eduardo de Gregorio-Godeo relies primarily on critical discourse analysis to connect the political discourse employed by the UKIP with its yearning for the British past. He also notes that western culture as a whole is undergoing considerable change and that British neo-nationalism is just a small part of this puzzle, also mentioning "Tweet politics" and alt-right movements within this context. Chapter four may be the first academic study of the novel *Sea of Memories* by Fiona Valpy with Jane Ekstam analysing the work from the perspective of a memorialising of the past which heightens the empathy of the reader, playing with his/her emotions. Of particular relevance in this study is the key term of "past-presencing", a concept which describes how we can understand, reflect and reconstruct meaning from the past. This chapter offers more than just literature analysis; it also touches on the philosophical presumption that the past is the key to living the present, and Ekstam's analysis brilliantly points out why this work of literature is relevant not only to a British female readership, but for all women and for humanity in general.

In the fifth chapter, David Clark reviews some recent works of crime fiction, including those by the authors Derek Fee and Catriona King, to explore concepts of criminal identity with the capacity of addressing other scenarios in which the acceptability (or otherwise) of specific issues can be perceived in a legal and cultural sense. The chapter also explains the unresolved historical divisions of Northern Irish society as reflected in the context of police forces and law enforcement. The first section of the book closes with Slávka Tomaščíková's insightful analysis of the construction of the meaning of food in contemporary media discourses. The author emphasizes the depiction of food as a cultural construct which conveys connections to place, tradition, a feeling of togetherness, and the past. Tomaščíková's study showcases food studies as a relevant field of study not only within the disciplines of health sciences and anthropology but also as a cultural element linked to the themes of identity and culture. Secondly, the chapter also underlines the contemporary strategies of looking back to the past as a new cultural sensibility.

The first part of this book, therefore, provides ample grounds for studying distinct cultural elements as parts of their domains, as such an approach can serve as the key to understanding not only the identity itself but also the social mission of cultural elements such as theatrical plays, crime fiction, food discourse or media discourse. By this point in the book, the reader will already be aware that, rather than being ignored, individual cultural elements are being evaluated and analysed in a manner which can contribute to changing society for the better and managing these changes in a more powerful, productive and authentic way.

The second section of the volume stands as a sequel to the first part and presents further insights into the depiction of identity through different cultural manifestations, focussing on research into different elements in terms of gender differences. The various chapters in this section offers the perception of feminism and gender studies as fluid and liberating movements.

Estella Tincknell opens the second section with a critical discussion of the representation of older Asian women in British cinema within the context of the history and patterns in depictions of older women on the Indian subcontinent. Tincknell takes into consideration both the gender of the subjects and other factors such as age and immigration status of these women in post-imperial Britain, explaining that comedic representations built upon contemporary neo-conservative movements have contributed to the declining status of older Asian women and of Asians in general. The interconnections between gender and age in cultural and media studies are very apparent and can be considered as an extremely relevant field of research. Two novels by Marian Keyes, *This Charming Man* (2008) and *The Brightest Star in the Sky* (2009), are also discussed by María del Mar Ramón-Torrijos in this section of the book with a focus on identifying condescending humour in representations of women in popular culture and “chick lit”. Ramón-Torrijos argues that these two novels display a more serious outlook in comparison to Keyes’ earlier works.

The ninth chapter by Natalia Magnes examines gender-neutral language in English and Russian social media in the era of #Metoo. She focuses on recent strategies which aim to make language more gender-neutral and its distinctive perception in both the Anglophone world and in Russia. Magnes’ study benefits from her precise attitude, even including EFL learners as an object of her research, and from her emphasis on a positive approach and interdisciplinarity among language, gender, and cultural studies which could result in considerable social improvements. José Manuel Estévez-Saá investigates a prominent “transnational novel of globalization”, *Home Fire* (2017) by Kamila Shamsie, in the final chapter of the second section, advocating strongly for the continued relevance of literature and literary research in twenty-first century society. Estévez-Saá sees literature as not only as an art form but also as a tool for politicians (in political sciences and sociology), a perception which brings the reader back to the first chapter of the book in which the concept of intercultural responsibility was analysed. In his analysis of Shamsie’s work, Estévez-Saá highlights the significance of transnational competence as a solution for cultural problems in culturally diverse societies.

In the third part of the book, the authors elaborate on the cultural connection to location itself, emphasising the fact that the concept of location/space has been somewhat neglected in the past through an excessive focus on historical, social, economic, political meanings at the expense of linguistic and cultural construction meanings. The concept of namings like “the city of love” or “the city that never sleeps” as offered as examples of the interconnection to the effect of language on the creation of strategies such as city-branding and their symbolic economies. A similar example can be also found in the case of *Marína* by Andrej Sládkovič, the world’s longest love poem, which was written in the small city of Banská Štiavnica in Slovakia. The work has a tremendous cultural meaning and a recent strategy of the town has used the poem to promote the city and improve its tourism potential, primarily targeting young couples. In the case of Banská Štiavnica, a tourism strategy which is constructed entirely on the symbolic constitution of the places where “this love was born” and on the town’s cultural heritage (Banská Štiavnica is recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site) is connected to the economy and well-being of the city and its inhabitants.

Before embarking upon the third and final section of the book, the reader may question whether the core concept of the humanities being in full retreat can be correct given their

connections to the tourism, city branding, or even economical strategies of cities. This dichotomy is addressed neatly in terms of the capacity of humanities subjects to clarify the meanings of such important phenomena which are otherwise cloaked behind the guise of secrecy for its perceivers on an everyday basis. This means the humanities can make a strong contribution to academic discussions in this field and to the understanding of such phenomena.

In the first chapter of the third section of this volume, the issue of country/city branding is explored by Armela Panajoti, with the author concluding that purely linguistic analysis is insufficient for use in, for instance, marketing activities. The representation of place adds to the effectiveness of communication, as is demonstrated by Panajoti as well as in the chapter by Mark E. Casey and another one by Antonio Bruyèl-Olmedo and Maria Juan-Garau which analyse places in Majorca. In the case of Majorca, social and capital status sets the pace of a place and its tourism. Continuing the discussion on sociolinguistics, Roberta Piazza employs oral history in her study of Holocaust narratives, more specifically her dialogues with a Jewish married couple who were witness to anti-Semitic persecution in Mussolini's Italy. She focuses on the differences in the perceptions and portrayals of these events due to the influences of the "construct of different selves". Once again, the concept of "past presenting" is proffered as an effective research tool within the humanities. Piazza also emphasises the different communication narratives employed by individual speakers and also notes the variations according to gender.

The only objection which could be made to this collection is the occasional reference to the humanities as standing in opposition to the more technically oriented studies or even of being in conflict with such disciplines. While there is some evidence that research funding is being diverted from humanities subjects in favour of more technologically oriented fields, this may in fact lead to some incidental benefits for the humanities; for example, the disruption caused the automation of job positions by technological means might support the creation of more creative job positions in the job market, careers which, as the book notes, are more suitable for graduates of humanities programs. Moreover, the future focus of human-centric technologies does not necessarily imply a tragic decline in the humanities but may instead bring about an increasing demand for the knowledge and understandings which the field can offer. Even if such a perception were not to prove valid, at the very least it might attract more students to enrol in humanities studies and thereby bring more fruitful results than the endless squabbling between advocates of the natural sciences and the humanities and the condescension which many hold in the humanities for the utilitarian attitude toward knowledge which they perceive in scientific spheres.

In general, this volume amasses a considerable amount of evidence to support the idea that the humanities can offer unique knowledge which is capable of explaining the meaning of such complex concepts as identity, gender representation and media discourses, with the chapters standing as literature which can lead to the emergence of such powerful results as political movements or ideologies. The book emphasises the strong position of humanities as being more than capable of facing current social, political, economic, or cultural issues in contemporary European society, and the arguments and discussions found throughout the book can be considered as an opportunity to address these challenges. This book is a celebration of the humanities and a call for action in the current educational and societal environment.

References:

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In SKASE Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies [online]. 2021, vol. 3, no. 2 [cit. 2021-12-20]. Available on webpage http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/SJLCS06/pdf_doc/05.pdf. ISSN 2644-5506.