

undisciplined thinking_

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**Wilhelm Krull_ To Interpret, to Explain, or to
Provoke – How can the Humanities Realize their
Potential?**

undisciplined thinking_ is a research platform founded by Katrin Solhdju and Margarete Vöhringer. Inspired by Sigrid Weigel's work it explores the tensions between disciplined academic culture and the complex world surrounding us, and facilitates the publication of new, interdisciplinary analyses through the most hybrid forums of all – the internet.

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Anyone who wants to talk about the humanities as a whole must be aware of the fact that he or she has to deal with an incredibly wide cosmos consisting of numerous stars, several milky-ways, and a lot of different planets whose complexities can never be fully grasped and adequately described. With respect to my topic and its main reference point, the situation within our research universities, I would like to focus on three main functions, or domains of the humanities which – in order to keep things simple! – I will link to the following terms: to interpret, to explain, and to provoke.

‘To interpret’ or to understand (the German term is ‘verstehen’) became the central category of the humanities in the course of the 19th century, at least in the sense of the German term “Geisteswissenschaften”. According to Wilhelm Dilthey (as outlined in his book on “Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften”) to understand, or to interpret things is closely linked to self-reflection, to moving from the outside world towards the inner world, and thus clearly to distinguish the approach taken by the humanities from the empirical and lab-based ones of science and engineering. Closely connected to Dilthey’s concept is the so-called ‘memoria function’ of the humanities, the right to interpretation, and the art of cultivating a hospitable imagination that enables us to fully engage with multiple others in the world, and to push us to continually problematize the boundaries of our openness towards the other, historically or geographically biased as it may be. Interpretation allows us to read things “against the grain”. It almost always contains a speculative element, in particular with respect to what we cannot or do not know, what is hidden to us, and what needs to be added in order to provide opportunities for intellectual debates.

‘To explain’ or to empirically verify the subject matter to be studied has been at the forefront of some of the humanities and most of the social sciences almost throughout the entire 20th century. But for the humanities there were only a few disciplines that relied heavily on field work, surveys, lab-based research, etc. It is a relatively new feature that – at least in the Central European debate, the term “Geisteswissenschaften” has been replaced by “Kulturwissenschaften” (Cultural Studies) in order to indicate that their research approach is very different from the hermeneutic approaches traditionally taken in the philological disciplines. More recently, the digitization of the humanities (to which I will return later on) has triggered an enormous array of new approaches ranging from close collaborations between computer scientists and the humanities all the way through to joint projects with people whose background is in cognitive and neurosciences. These opportunities of making use of large quantities of data have already triggered the establishment of a new Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics located at Frankfurt am Main (and headed by Winfried Menninghaus).

'To provoke' or to irritate, perhaps even to disturb or disrupt traditional views may sound to some of you quite strange with respect to the role of the humanities. But I think it is essential that we become aware of this important remit, in particular when we try to responsibly shape our common future. It is essential that intellectuals with a firm basis in at least some domains of the humanities engage in critical reflection or proactive thinking (the German term is "vorbeugendes Nachdenken") in order to question common wisdom, and sometimes even to be a thorn in the flesh of all too common place reflections uttered in the media. One quite prominent example in the German context is the publication by Thomas Nagel entitled: "Geist und Kosmos – Warum die materialistisch-neodarwinistische Konzeption der Natur so gut wie sicher falsch ist" (Frankfurt am Main, 2013) which has already been named the most "hated academic book of the year". In this case protagonists of evolutionary biology are particularly challenged by a philosopher! These critical, thought-provoking contributions by humanistic scholars are quite often not welcomed by scientists and engineers. For instance in the context of our funding initiative "Key Issues for Academia and Society" I am often confronted with criticisms, e.g. from neuroscientists, when they jointly work on addressing questions concerning the way we remember things, or why we can rightly assume that there is something like a free will. Often they are not pleased with the approach taken by the humanistic scholars who make things more complex or even turn them upside down: "Things are as yet not getting easier when humanistic scholars come to the table" is a phrase often used.

Philological, historical, or philosophical approaches are frequently driven by close interactions between the subject and the object, the ones who try to understand and interpret, and the things to be interpreted. The philosopher Theodor Litt (in his book "Individuum und Gemeinschaft. Grundlegung der Kulturphilosophie. Leipzig and Berlin 1926.) particularly emphasized the importance of the will to be involved in shaping the future when it comes to analyzing the present and its historical preconditions. According to Litt, it is essential that the respective scholar approaches the objects of study in an unbiased, impartial, perhaps even objective manner, an approach "full of self-denial" – or in German: To adhere to the "entsagungsvolle Sachlichkeit ihres Strebens" (ibid., p. 413). The ability and the willingness to know more about the object of study needs to be closely associated with a firm basis in contemporary life. Otherwise we will end up with a lot of mindless and meaningless notes: "Das Leben, dessen das Subjekt hier kundig werden will – es muss in ihm selbst pulsieren, oder es wird nichts weiter herauskommen als seelenloser Notizenkram." (ibid., p. 413)

In view of the opportunities as well as the limits and limitations of humanistic studies, it is essential that we confront ourselves with the interpretive, explanatory, and provocative func-

tions in each case. Most of the questions we are confronted with in our globalized world cannot be solved without making use of inter-, or transdisciplinary approaches. These, of course, are difficult to plan, to resource, and they often cause a lot of headaches for university leaders as well as heads of funding institutions. Nevertheless, it is a necessity for all of us to try to provide preconditions for these ambitious endeavors to successfully cope with the complex realities of an increasingly multipolar and interconnected world at the beginning of the 21st Century.

Achieving groundbreaking insights is not just a matter of coincidence. It requires a research-friendly, high trust environment which also provides adequate room for transdisciplinary as well as transnational communication and cooperation. New ideas or insights often come about through seeing things differently. As if one were to see them in another light or with the eyes of someone else. Furthermore, it is important to find the right balance between a sufficient degree of diversity of disciplines and the most intense degree of communicative interaction among the scholars involved. If the institution is too small and homogeneous in orientation, then the potential for extradisciplinary stimulation will be missing. If the institution is too large and heterogeneous, then there are hardly any opportunities for personal contacts and content fertility. Narrow disciplinary focus often leads to monotony; all-encompassing breadth transforms such a degree of diversity into unproductive heterogeneity. In both extremes intellectual creativity is ultimately stymied, and along with it the generation of transformative knowledge. For a funder like the Volkswagen Foundation this implies that we more and more focus on supporting people in such creative environments for the medium-, to longterm. This is for instance reflected in the so-called 'Freigeist-Fellowships' We are ready to support those that come up with unusually promising ideas for their future research for up to eight years.

Thinking and working in terms of complex and possibly time-consuming endeavors is not favored by the current framework conditions for resource-allocation, at least not in Germany and other Central European countries. We all too often pursue a "we don't trust you, we know better, and we want results now" kind of approach which extinguishes small flames of creativity, and certainly prevents them from turning into strong fires of transformative research. No doubt, the implementation of evaluation processes and assessment exercises at regular intervals has brought about not only a wealth of information about the respective unit of analysis but also initiated a lot of learning processes as well as numerous improvements. For many a rector or president of a university the results of such state-, or country-wide comparisons have been serving as eye-openers concerning the qualitative positioning of the department or centre assessed. But if we look at the current situation of an almost ubiquitous

array of monitorings, reviews, assessments, and evaluations, we cannot help but recognize that these various instruments in one way or another have fallen victim to their own success.

The past two decades have seen unprecedented transformations of political, economic, and technological systems. Across the world, the accelerating conversion of information and communication technologies is shifting the balance towards an almost ubiquitous and universal availability of anything, anywhere, any time. The rapid enhancement of electronic communication is not only affecting more and more aspects of our daily life, but it also changes the very nature of teaching and research. Whilst students can now access lectures and seminars given in other universities and use electronic textbooks, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), etc., researchers can also make efficient use of digitization by entering into large-scale, “big data” empirical research work which hitherto nobody even dared to dream of. These processes not only affect research work in areas like the human genome project or high energy physics which have always demanded large data storage capacities, but more and more we can also observe a tendency towards the digitization of knowledge production in the humanities. This opens up new perspectives and research opportunities which so far have not been fully explored. With new statistical methods and visualization techniques at hand, the collaborative work processes of humanities scholars are no longer primarily focusing on the creation of new knowledge but rather also on knowledge design.

At a conference organized by the Volkswagen Foundation, Jeffrey T. Schnapp (Harvard) and several of his colleagues demonstrated the shift of emphasis from focusing on unique objects and biographical studies towards larger entities and patterns occurring in millions of objects. Some of this work is established on platforms such as CURARIUM or Harvard's Arboretum where by means of QR codes the viewer enters into a quite new world of knowledge: the purpose is no longer to pass on established knowledge about each object but rather to enable individuals to produce additional knowledge by themselves. (Cf. http://www.volkswagenstiftung.de/fileadmin/grafiken/veranstaltungen/2013/HK_Digital_Humanities/Summary_HK_DigHum_engl.pdf). According to Jeffrey T. Schnapp the digital approach ultimately is “about extending our cognitive faculties and social existences; new ways to analyze and experience the past in the present; new ways to work, think, share, and enjoy; new ways to make things, even tradition-bound things like scholarly books.” (Herrenhausen Lectures, Jeffrey T. Schnapp, Knowledge Design, VolkswagenStiftung, Hannover 2014, p.8)

Indeed, the humanities can help to prevent us from taking an all too narrow perspective on issues such as digitization and globalization. They can also prevent us from considering

these phenomena only in economic terms. Social and ethnic conflicts should not be overlooked. While on the one hand there is clearly a trend towards a worldwide acculturation and inter-linkages, we can, on the other hand, also observe a growing tendency to erect walls against other cultures, against anything that appears “alien” or “foreign”, an attitude which often turns into hatred and open hostility. If attitudes are to be developed which enable fruitful contacts with what is at first sight perceived as alien or foreign, and thus facilitate a better understanding of what seems to be strange or unfamiliar, intercultural encounters and the comprehensions they engender must be better understood. In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world the humanities have an important role to play. By opening up historical as well as cross-cultural perspectives they considerably enhance the reflexive capabilities of universities, research institutes, and the public at large.

Due to the fact that the political discourse in almost all countries is dominated by the demand for more applied research, impact, and innovation, it is about time for us to raise our voice in favour of curiosity-driven research, and to fight for more public funding for the humanities and social sciences. Furthermore, it is worth every effort to convince politicians, policy-makers, university presidents and research funders that for the future well-being of our research systems we have to work our way towards a high trust culture of creativity.