The Role of Humanities in Overcoming the Debate of Mind over Matter or Culture And Civilization

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Abstract: Based on the dichotomy of the two cultures – sciences and humanities – approached by CP Snow and, subsequently dealt with by Aldous Huxley who attempted to heal the division, as well as more recently elaborated on by Martha Nussbaum – renown contemporary intellectual and philosopher, my essay aims to provide a substantiated perspective to a highly topical matter nowadays, when the unprecedented development of technology, paradoxically generating a civilization of illiteracy, urgently needs, more than ever, and calls our attention to the vital importance of cultural empathy, cultural intelligence, hence the role of humanities – art, culture, literature – for the progress of societies and the advancement of humanity, as well as acting as a counterpart to the "civilization of the spectacle" or the "civilization of illiteracy". The role of individual and collective memory as reflected in history and literature, essential for the survival of humankind, will also be part of the analysis endorsed by thorough documentation and endorsement of the main thesis.

Key words: culture – civilization, humanities – sciences, memory, art, literature, survival

Citation suggestion: Burdușel, Eva-Nicoleta. "The Role of Humanities in Overcoming the Debate of Mind over Matter or Culture And Civilization". *Transilvania*, no. 12 (2025): 80-83.
https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2025.12.11.

Further to previous scholarly preoccupations, evinced in a series of essays and papers formerly published as book chapters or papers in scientific journals, the present study sets the goal of balancing the role, function, mission and power of culture and civilization, particularly now at a time when the rising surge of technology with its subsequent impact worldwide makes us even more aware of the need to connect rather than increase the divide between the two culture, or the dichotomy between sciences and humanities as theorized by C.P. Snow and Aldous Huxley mid-twentieth century and more recently, Martha Nussbaum, the influential philosopher and renown contemporary scholar with a leading voice in the defense of all the virtues cultivated by literature, such as: narrative imagination, empathy, creativity, morality.

The broad cultural impact of the thesis reflects a continuing interest in alleviating the alleged conflict between literary intellectuals and scientists, as epitomized by C. P. Snow in his topical 1959 Rede lecture on the nature of intellectual life apparently split into two polar groups – separated by a "gulf of mutual incomprehension" sometimes touched with a tone of "hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding." (CP Snow, 4) The idea was reinforced by Aldous Huxley – in a series of lectures delivered at Santa Barbara in 1959, subsequently collected in an auspicious volume, entitled *The Human Situation*: "science, art and philosophy are three ways of making sense of the world we live in" (Huxley, 183) accompanied by the urge formulated at the end of an extended essay, *Literature and Science:* "let us advance together, men of letters and men of science, further and further into the ever expanding regions of the unknown." (Huxley, 102)

Five decades later, the legendary dispute between the novelist – C P Snow – and the literary critic F. R. Leavis – was wryly approached by the reputed scholar, Stefan Collini in his 2013 contribution to the Guardian. There is also a common denominator between the writings of Stefan Collini and Martha Nussbaum, with reference to the role of universities in the aforementioned debate, meant to raise awareness about the tangible and intangible values of culture and civilization, calling attention to the dialogical approach: "words are not a kind of decorative wrapping paper in which meaning is delivered … concepts colonize our minds and we become used to thinking about ourselves and our world in their terms, our actions are only identifiable as this action rather than that action in terms of the language in which we describe them." (Collini, *Speaking of Universities*, 3) His second volume, *What Are Universities for?* pleads for the humanities parallel with decrying the heightened emphasis on the pragmatic perspective, reflecting the dichotomy between culture and civilization. The propensity for a dialogue between humanities and sciences, or culture and civilization proved to be a continuous preoccupation rather than

an isolated intellectual endeavour, testified by revisiting the relevance of the two cultures at different ages and from various vantage points, illustrated by the same Stefan Collini who resumed his witty and wry comments in dialogue with Howard Burton, creating the propitious framework for an engaging analysis of culture and civilization, both retrospectively and accompanied by a contemporary perspective (Collini, *The Two Cultures Revisited*).

At this stage or the study it is worth mentioning other types of conflicting interaction in literary or cultural studies, mainly between tradition and modernity where the alleged break with the past is more likely revisiting the tradition with new methods, enabled by daring artistic and creative means, set in a novel and challenging intellectual and cultural context, marked by shifting paradigms. Therefore, what most often is conceptualized as temporary conflict in literary or cultural studies may be better considered as continuing connection, according to the wave metaphor of social transformation. Moreover, culture and civilization are the two most complex concepts, in the history of ideas, that have undergone numberless definitions by reputed scholars, where the most significant role is the endurance through ages and across territories, testified by the ability to provide for and ensure the survival of humanity, particularly through the power of the written word. While civilization may be associated with progress and advancement – most often an instrument of dominance and weapon of conquest, culture is the soul and vitality of a nation prone to bridging the gap between polarities.

One of the most conspicuous kinds of polarity, associated equally with crisis or dominance, is triggered by the "mental maps" or "mental framing" – the concept of multiperspectivity theorized by Robert Straddling who set forth the term mainly with reference to the understanding and teaching of history, in view of overcoming self-centredness and biased positioning imbued with notions of power contextualized by the world-system analysis, where the division between core and periphery clearly impacts our understanding of culture and civilization, further reflected in the distinction between space-biased and time-biased societies or high-context and low-context cultures. Multiuperspectivity – also regarded as a process, strategy or predisposition – represents the ability and willingness to look at a situation from different vantage points (Straddling, 13-14). Mention should be made here that multiperspectivity, as an essential tool in history or media studies, encouraging a plurality of perspectives for reasons of objectivity and equity, echoes the concept of polyphony in literary studies, encouraging a diversity of voices, a plurality of ideas which vividly engage in a debate for the scholarly delight and enlightenment of the reader.

Since the centre cannot hold without the inspiring and enlivening influence of periphery or semi-periphery, mutatis mutandis, culture and civilization are tightly connected and interdependent, hence any discrepancy in their parallel evolution will have an impact on the development of society and the nature of humankind. Contemporary world seems to undergo a certain kind of cultural crisis, as individuals and societies are not merely immersed in but increasingly overwhelmed by the lures and distractions of civilization and technology, amply elaborated by scholars such as Neil Postman – renown American social critic and theoretician of education and communication – who warned about the ominous world depicted in Orwell`s and Huxley`s dystopias, with potential negative consequences upon the span of attention or the active engagement with and participation to cultural activities, mainly entailed by excessive technologization captivating the mind and depleting the soul: "Culture and civilization cannot advance by means of material and technical progress alone ... as they have much deeper roots, of moral and spiritual kind" hence the contemporary crisis rendering the world an almost apocalyptic nature has been triggered by the fracture of the inherent unity between mind and matter (Bernea, 33-49).

Postman authored a book entitled *Amusing Ourselves to Death. Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* equally connected to Marshall McLuhan`s theory that "the medium is the message" as well as to the idea of entertainment and distraction that keep people too busy to have any resources – time, attention – to develop their narrative imagination, as defined by Martha Nussbaum, and further contribute to the cultural arena. Intellectuals, by definition and mission as lighthouse to society, tend to be rather reluctant to engage in some "boisterous forms of social life" – recalling Aldous Huxley`s life pattern – and shunning away from the "civilization of entertainment" as wittingly and subtly defined by Mario Vargas Llosa in his notable and homonymous study on the recent and deploring phenomenon of declining cultural values, the insatiable lure of distraction accompanied by a relation by-deputy with art where explanation and interpretation seem to replace direct experience and interaction with cultural values, oftentimes substituted by other means of entertainment, favoring diversity and uniformity, engaging with the masses pleased to be immersed in an ocean of images. "What do we mean by civilization of the spectacle? The civilization of a world in which pride of place, in terms of scale of values, is given to entertainment, and where having a good time, escaping boredom, is the universal passion" (Varga Llosa, *Notes*, 23-26).

Hence, culture is downplayed by more accessible forms akin to the spectacle, and the image is far more appealing than the word, quite similar to the passive fascination of cinematography, where the jester seems to have the upperhand over more scholarly or cultured forms of art, thus recalling the phrase of 'screen world' - coined by Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy (Vargas Llosa, *Civilization*, 41-51). This changing paradigm had also been epitomized by David Lodge in his memoir *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* a relevant and elaborate plea for the more traditional

forms of intellectual endeavours, warning about the rapid changes brought about by technological innovation with an impact on writers` activity and creativity, as well as the role of the book as commodity and carrier of culture. Furthermore, in the same regime of relevance, just a few years earlier Mario Vargas Llosa also noted that his book – *The Civilization of the Spectacle* – "is an attempt to express a feeling of concern, a anguish of sorts, on seeing what we understood by 'culture' in the 1950s, `60s, `70s ... to describe the transformation and examine the effects of the vagaries of what we call culture today on different aspects of human activity ... encouraging people to think about whether the hegemonic role entertainment and distraction have assumed in our time have also caused them to become central to cultural life." (Llosa interview Gilles Lipovetsky) Equally significant istheory set forth in the book authored by Mihai Nadin, *The Civilization of Illiteracy,* opposing the alarming scientific advancement of technology to the invaluable asset of culture and the power of memory: "The civilization we are entering is no promised land ... The literate heritage might not be perfect, but it protects from the often disquieting changes that we all ... experience. In the palace of the printed books, we were promised not only eternal truth and beauty, but also prosperity. Well, prosperity is here, even if not equally distributed, but truth and beauty are increasingly elusive ... the visual has already surpassed the written, though not alwasy for the better" (Nadin, vii-viii).

Furthermore, Nadin`s thesis seems to be taken over by Benjamin Labatut in his unsettling and unconventional story about a disquieting version of the world, confessed in the title *When We Cease to Understand the World,* elaborating on the overarching theme that it is utterly difficult and almost impossible even for scientists to understand our world and, even less, the complexity of the human being. The book concludes with an alarming thought that overabundance may be self-destructive. There is remedy, though, in culture, epitomized by books as a symbol of sruvival out of the electronic temptation, resistance to personal vanity, the lure of fame and turn the attention away from all that glitters to the enduring essence and vitality, deeply aware that the surging technology has completely drained the vividness of the spirit. Furthermore, the cure lies in reading - enabling a genuine adventure of the mind - an activity in complete opposition to the high-speed pace of contemporary life. Books are a pathway to freedom, recalling - to a certain extent - the symbol of the library as defined by Orhan Pamuk in his Nobel Prize acceptance lecture, as well as a repository of memory and an instrument to forestall the overwhleming impact of the digital age and increase the power of the present moment. Reading is an intellectual endeavour quite similar to travelling (Robert Kaplan, 27, 57-58, 80).

We may also distinguish between two approaches to master the world: either by technological innovation, i.e. civilization or by means of understanding the world, i.e. culture, including travels as a method of exploration, expansion and growth, parallel with the ambivalent philosophy of ruling the world: the Eastern "rational adjustment to the world" versus the Western "rational mastery of the world". (Niall Ferguson, 27-33) In a somewhat similar tone, Marcus Solomon pleaded, in a scholarly essay, on the ten fundamental needs for an integrate education, endorsing the balance between mind and matter, culture and civilization, humanities and sciences, testified by: from the meaning of life, quest for identity accompanied by otherness and connected by kindness, enriched by the search for culture, ultimately leading to a transcendent view of life. The world may be understood from a transdisciplinary vantage point, idea also expressed by Wolfgang Pauli, 1948 Nobel laureate for physics, who set forth and pleaded for an endeavour to bridge the gap between the sciences and humanities, which entailed fragmentation of the human mind.

Niall Ferguson`s verdict is very much in keeping with the aforementioned thesis set forth in the present study - advocating for a balanced approach to culture and civilization, the story and the machine, mind and matter - summed up as follows: "What makes a civilization real to its inhabitants, in the end, is not just the smooth edifices at its centre, nor even the smooth functioning of the institutions they house. At its core, a civilization is the texts that are taught in its schools, learned by its students and recollected in times of tribulation." (Niall Ferguson, 324)

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