

## LITERATURE AND THE ARTS IN THE BIOPOLITICS CURRICULUM

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Even though relatively young as a discipline (since 1985), the idea of Biopolitics has already flowered into an educational project, the International University for the Bio-Environment (I.U.B.E.). This university's statement of intent is the Bio-Syllabus, published in Athens in 1992, the elements of which have been introduced into higher education in various regions of the world. This presentation will consider what place in this syllabus ought to be occupied by "arts subjects," using the traditional definition.

The Bio-Syllabus has a synthesis of qualities which, makes it truly original and gives it special relevance to the new millennium. It is holistic, absorbing into its scope all traditional educational divisions, whether biological, industrial, chemical or diplomatic. It is comprehensive in its geographical range; its trustees, directors and founding members are genuinely representative of the planet's five continents. It is, above all, interdisciplinary. In its effort to break the modern habit of specialisation, it encourages connections between areas of knowledge, not usually thought of as linked, for example, engineering and ethics, or biodiversity and urban planning. This implies that no feeling of subject priority or superiority should exist. Finally, the Bio-Syllabus is innovative and experimental: it does not "pre-cook" its results and is ready to give the unconventional and the counter-intuitive solution a fair hearing. It follows that Biopolitics education can and should include the arts, the area where individual sensibility meshes with collective action. "All literature deals with bios," its founder-president has affirmed, making clear that she is committed to the principle that art should reflect humanity's awareness of the natural world. The tendency of the past three centuries has been to accept that art is entirely about the unique character of the human condition, and that the values attributed by the artist to nature are not inherent in nature. Biopolitics education aims to reverse this misconception.

As a generalisation, all human problems are problems of communication. How powerful an ambassador is the written and spoken imaginative work - as persuasion, description, story, poetic insight, or dramatic interplay. The writer, with his or her skill in the telling use of words, gives shape, colour and projection to the message that he or she - a latter-day shaman - finds in the "free beauty" of the biosphere. We do not only consider the printed material, but also, televised work. The message, if it is a good one, is not limited to a single generation. Literature can recover for humanity, the vital abstract sense of the biological cycle and the yearly seasons. It can focus attention on the bewildering, life-enhancing variety of animal and plant species. As myth, it can bring humanity together, globally and without strain, offering a common wisdom and sense of purpose. Myth is for all ages. One of the most beautiful and instructive celebrations of the natural and spiritual universe is the community puppet show of Indonesia known as wayang. Literature can interpret and make sense of the landscapes that we see or we create around us. Especially commendable is the interdisciplinary work of the Czech Institute of Landscape Ecology. Again, at the structural level, the form and dimensions of a poem, a film or a hymn, can evolve organically from natural phenomena.

As mythos has its part to play in the Bio-Syllabus, so has bio-history. History, as conventionally conceived, is the study of humankind's social, economic and political presence in the world, through the chronological recording of events and the attempt to assign them their causes. Nature also has her historians: tree rings are a living chart of the tree's life and a reliable witness to climatic shifts. Bio-history will be the record of humankind's engagement with the biosphere. Scanning both backwards and forwards in time, through case studies, projections and worst-possible scenarios, it will look at the bio-environment as a diachronic unity. Bio-history will be unashamedly deontological: using analogous situations, it will assess the acceptability or the unacceptability of acts impacting the biosphere and either recommend or condemn them. This opens up interfaces with law and philosophy.

Mstislav Rostropovitch, the great musical performer, brought a new idea into being. For example, the picture of Russian history as a change of tempo from adagio funebre to presto furioso. Music is the most ancient of humankind's dialogues with the natural world. We trap the resonant air in hollow pipes or on vibrating strings. We send out our voices: Imagine the Bistritsa Babi, a group of eight women from Bulgaria who sang into the wind and out across the roaring waves of the North Sea. The musical instrument is constructed more or less directly from nature, whether it is the reed that "voices" the saxophone or the skin of a drum. The intervals and structures of musical sound are latent in nature: Karl-Heinz Stockhausen in his libretto for *Aus den Sieben Tagen*, affirmed: "I do not make my music, but only relay the vibrations I receive." The materials are an inexhaustible resource: the vocal signals of birds, for instance, have been appropriated by musicians, from the first European lyric poet, the refugee Alkman, to Olivier Messiaen in his formidably complex *Catalogue des Oiseaux*. A whole bio-theatre could be constructed from the sensations and movement patterns of animals. In the past generation, we have moved very much closer to a bio-environmental and indeed polyethnic response to music. The Japanese composer, Toshi Ichiyanagi produces pieces such as the *Cloud Atlas* sequence and the set *Water Relativity, Wind Gradation, Piano Nature*. The New Age movement, another candidate for study in the Bio-Syllabus, having emerged from easy-listening jazz and to 1970's recorded rock, now synthesises a large range of sounds from nature, with an implied cultic programme. If we speak about music, we must also speak about dance. Let us note the outstanding success in repertory at London's Covent Garden of a ballet about biodiversity entitled, *Penguin Café Orchestra*. Let me refer to one of the many wise thoughts that

Mme. Elena Bonner gave us: "Music", she said, "appeals to something deeper than science."

In reference to the fine arts, architecture, the record of human success and failure in adapting the biosphere to a living space, is a test case for the biopolitics approach. Building is unavoidable; to have a roof over one's head is a basic human need. At the same time, it confronts humankind with nature and may involve a question of carrying-capacity. The Bio-Syllabus can be expected to be adventurous and pragmatic here, as elsewhere, deriving inspiration from bios and recovering harmony between communities and their constructed environments. In the same way as Frank Lloyd Wright, in his "prairie architecture," ignored history, and chose to express directly a site, a region, a combination of materials, so bio-architecture will break away from patterns, now depleted, and move towards new forms that mirror nature - based perhaps, on the termite hill or the structure of the biological cell wall. Painting, carving, textiles, photography, will follow the same path - not as separate "subjects" but in a fluid interaction. One conceivable inspiration might be the bronze group of two huge masses which the sculptor, Henry Moore, made in 1971 and placed on farmland adjoining his house. The site was a levelled gravel dump: Moore always admired sculpture that stood as the Acropolis in Athens does, against the skyline. Under his bronze, the sheep sheltered and rubbed themselves against it, and so it got its name: Sheep Piece, 1971.

I feel that photography, especially, has much to offer the Bio-Syllabus. Edward Weston, 70 years ago, made a statement which is truly biopolitical: "The camera should be used for a recording of life, for recording the very substance and quintessence of the thing itself." Thus we have social landscape photography, the document of the effects of urban environment on urban dwellers. Franco Fontana in Italy, Hiroshi Hamana in Japan, and the Swiss, Georg Gerster, have all found new abstract beauty in the rephrasing of fields, landscapes and buildings. It is reasonable to include film with photography, whether this is a great celebration of nature such as Aleksandr' Dovzhénko's *Zemlya* or a contemporary statement of concern, such as Kevin Costner's film *Dances With Wolves*.

It might be asked: Does the urgency of the technical environmental solutions leave time for aesthetics? Rome is burning and Nero plays his lyre? As a response, I should like to quote a founding member of Biopolitics, Professor D. Watts, explaining why in industrialised South Korea there is still 74% tree cover of the country's landmass. "Preservation of these forests," writes Watts, "lies deep within the Korean psyche." In other words, it is not and cannot be, just a question of technofixes. Cultural and creative attitudes, as well as philosophical and religious beliefs about the natural world, are the ground for environmental action. If we can clean up our garden, we shall still have to decide how to live in it and for it.

There may also exist a concern that the exploration of the arts, all too easily slips into exactly that complacent anthropocentrism which biopolitics is trying to reverse. How do we escape the post-romantic image of "the artist," with his or her individual quickness of eye, hand and brain? We also face another practical problem, which is to evaluate what is being done in the context of the International University for the Bio-Environment. Is evaluation necessary at all? If it is, should it be derived from existing systems? Or should its methods be something completely new? Does one evaluate the work of art, or the response to the work of art, judged by its good faith, perhaps, or its contribution to environmental harmony and respect, or its sensitivity to material resources? We are reminded of what John Cage said, about a piece of music, that "it doesn't make the air any heavier than it was before." We might also recall the art of the Japanese garden, founded on rearrangement rather than consumption. All these questions need to be ironed out in discussions about the design of the University.

Perhaps most difficult of all is to find those rare individuals - the ordinary person meets perhaps a dozen in a lifetime - who will breathe life into the bones of an idea. Here we are unbelievably fortunate, for we have been able to listen to Maestro Rostropovitch and Madame Bonner. Their vitality, their dukh, is the proper keynote for the area of the Bio-Syllabus which has to do with the arts.

### References

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