

BEYOND THE RUINS OF THE UNIVERSITY

Benjamin Cope

Только в клетках говорят попугаи,
А в лесу они язык забывают.
(Из фильма *Еще Раз Про Любовь*)

This is not an objective article.

On 5th August 2005, against a backdrop of industrial dereliction and a foreground of a group of thugs with monumental biceps, in a deserted corner of the square of the back courtyard of the EHU I saw the frail figure of a person for whom I have enormous respect and affection (did my respect and affection precede these events or did the events forge the pathos?) shaking with tears.

Remarkably when I met up with these same friends later the mood had transformed into a community of joyful, risk-taking drunkenness.

It is also a fragmented article as it struggles to put together events that resist a coherent explanatory framework.

One day, someone from one ministry comes and you are told the university has to leave its premises. The next day, someone from the Ministry of Education comes and says you can no longer function as a university because you have nowhere to teach. The interest is clearly in what lies outside this flawless, but limited logic.

Out of one window, a friend films the ceremony to close the building of the EHU; out of another, someone else is filming. "He's the EHU KGB agent." You mean that while I was dancing on the table with students to recreate Bakhtinian carnival or the psycho-folk group Nagual were playing over my attempts at a lecture on surrealism, there was a KGB man walking up and down the corridor keeping an eye and ear on what we were doing?

Access to the ceremony marking the end of the EHU was controlled by a group of sinister looking men whose only mark of identity was the size of their muscles. It was evident to all present that these people were functionaries of the state, but presumably, should there be any trouble, this fact would not be provable on camera. The lack of the visible markings of uniform communicated the absence of a transparent rational justification for the workings of the state. At the same time, the flagrant visibility of these people indicated a disregard for any need for real concealment: the simple rule of brute force would be sufficient.

“Why did you come to Belarus?” A question often asked, to which the variety of my answers is only matched by their inadequacy. There are reasons to be suspicious. Why is it, questions Slavoj Žižek, that in a world dominated by individualistic liberalism, catastrophe films, such as *The Perfect Storm*, remain so appealing?¹ One of the recurrent features of such films, Žižek suggests, is the creation of solidarity amongst the few who survive the cataclysm? The ideological undercurrent of such productions, Žižek argues, is a reinforcing of the idea that if you want to build a sense of community, in the current geo-political situation absolute devastation is the price to be paid and surely nobody would want that. The storms that have swept Belarus, from hundreds of years of war and occupation to the tragedy at Nemiga, have been so many and so imperfect that one is even left wondering, as Andrei Kudinenko does at the beginning of his 2004 film *Mysterium-Occupationis*, if there is a nation in all this historical debris. Was this the fetish that led me here: risking the devastation of community, but leaving home safe, secure and ideologically unchallenged somewhere over the sea? Perhaps this would explain why, somewhat disturbingly, the shutting of the EHU seems something like a fulfilment.

The fact that Belarusian nationhood is a question is not the same as challenging Belarus’ right to exist, as some in Warsaw or Moscow would seem to prefer simply because things would be conceptually easier that way. However, I would rather argue that questions are to be celebrated and explored.

The patterns of geography are above all affective. This morning a song by the band Guano Apes was played on the radio, which I realised will forever for me be associated with Minsk. I wonder what Guano Apes would make of this. For me too, prior to going there and in some ways becoming attached, Belarus did not really exist.

This is also not an intelligent article, in the sense that I do not master knowledge that I am seeking to transmit.

When Stephen Melville assigned a chapter from Bill Readings’ *The University in Ruins* for the ‘Visual and Culture Studies Reconsidered’ Summer School, even he can hardly have imagined that only a few of us would end up discussing it because the rest were meeting to debate the dismantling of the EHU.² However, it is clear that, exceptional though they are, the very existence of the EHU and its abrupt closure are closely intertwined with the challenges to the university as institution that are the motivation for Readings’ book.

For Readings, the university is a modernist project that is not to be distinguished from the rise of the nation state. Readings argues that the modern conception of the university emerges when it becomes unified under one all-encompassing idea, a moment he cites as occurring when Kant defines the university as being dedicated to and motivated by the dispassionate pursuit of reason. Reason both provides the rationale for the other disciplines and has its own faculty, ‘philosophy.’ Importantly for Readings, Kant goes on to pose the question of the relations between reason and the state, between knowledge and power, which find their resolution in the person of the rational subject capable of both reasonable thought and republican politics.

The next stage of the university's evolution that Readings charts is that the German Idealists take on Kant's ideas and give them a more explicitly political twist. Thus, for Readings, Humboldt's project for the founding of a university in Berlin is the highpoint of the model for the university for it is then that the role of the university becomes the production of culture. Culture in this sense is not to be distinguished from the community of the nation state: it is the process of negotiating between raw experience and the reasoning subject that will form the basis of the communicating community of the nation state. This new emphasis entails a change of focus away from philosophy in favour of the humanities, and in particular the study of literature. The role of the university is thus a double one: the production of the knowledge of culture (in research) and the inculcation of culture as a process of learning (in teaching).

On this basis, Reading's argues that the university is now undergoing a crisis which is indicative of the many different questions raised by the complex phenomena we often too glibly refer to as 'globalisation' or 'post-modernism.' What has happened and why? Looking at the structures of universities, one can witness a decrease in the stature of literary studies and a concomitant emergence of culture studies. This in large part is due to the technological revolution that is making the transmission of culture increasingly happen through visual media and also from sources outside any one particular nation. For universities, both in their administrative functions and their funding structures, this means that they are no longer so tightly dependent on the nation state, but are trying to rebrand themselves as corporate identities able to provide students, and themselves, with the equipment to deal with their new socio-economic reality.

It might have been hoped that this technological revolution would simply move the framework for community and communication away from the nation state to the world. However, the increasing efficiency of the transmission of information is provoking a whether we are actually able to communicate at all. There are so many sources from which I am flooded with information that there it is clear that I do not deal with all of these signals on the level of a reasoned response to an intelligible statement. What sort of a community do we live in where advertisers are constantly trying to fool me into believing I need to buy something? If a rational subject communicating in the national idiom is not a good model for a person dealing with the contemporary world, serious questions must arise as to what universities are seeking to produce. The question, "Why does the teacher think I need to know this?", becomes ever more difficult to answer. Thus, both socially, politically, theoretically and in the classroom, the rise in levels of communication has led to a crisis of community.

It is for these reasons that Readings is suspicious of the discourse of excellence that now engulfs universities. Does the term 'excellence' really mean anything or is it an empty signifier that can be employed almost anywhere, something like money. Is the increasing demand for excellence, therefore, anything more than the repetition of the conditions of economic efficiency on the university? Does teaching and thinking not contain something which counteracts the notion of economic exchange which is the

space where interaction between people or with thoughts might happen? It is therefore not just for egocentric reasons that Readings is worried by the subjugation of the teacher to the university administrator, or of the humanities to the social sciences. Rather it seems that in the search for a new universe for which it can be the institution, the university is attempting to subordinate itself to the exchange of capital, without taking into consideration the question of whether this predominance of capitalist exchange does not pose the problem of whether a whole of any sort is really possible. Perhaps it would be better to accept that the university is in ruins and that it might be this ruined state that creates the possibility for a contemporary community of critical thinkers.

Clearly the life, death and afterlife of the EHU can be read within the narrative of the changes that Readings sees occurring in Western universities. The EHU, as its name suggests, was not a project of creating a national culture. Funded by sources mostly from the U.S.A., the E.H.U. rather represented a deliberate attempt to deny the existence of the national culture and carry on as if it was possible to have a European-style education in Belarus. And in many ways it was, not least because the problems of the divorce between the university and the community around it are also those that haunt European institutions. According to Readings' schema, Lukashenko, on the other hand, would look like a good old fashioned Humboltian: the E.H.U. was shut because foreigners were trying to train a new elite (on this basis Oxford University with its Chancellor from New Zealand should also presumably be terminated), while we demand the right to train our own elite.

What Lukashenko does not realise, or chooses to ignore, is that this could be an extremely interesting challenge. The questions engulfing the Belarusian nation state are such that building a national culture, in the sense of constructing that which would permit the community of the nation to communicate, could lead to the construction of some extraordinary course programmes. Unfortunately, one suspects that Alexander Grigorevich's interest in this, despite his recent conversion to Belarusian nation building, is rather superficial and self-interested, as for example in his recent engagement in promoting the 2004 Belarusian beauty contest as a block of capitalist-conservative sexist nation building.³

Rather than engaging in nation building, the EHU opted for an approach that oscillated between stages 1 and 3 of Readings' analysis: somewhere between an impartial craving for the idea and a discourse of excellence. This can be seen in that (if we overlook the theology faculty, whose existence seemed, rather paradoxically, mostly pragmatic) the dominant faculty at EHU was philosophy. However, this faculty was divided into two halves between philosophy in a pure Heideggerian and hermeneutic sense and "Culture Studies", a branch which itself encompassed a major element of visual studies. This element of visual studies grew stronger and stronger and, having emerged from the belly of philosophy, "culturology" was in the end handed over to become part of the faculty of art history.

"Culture Studies" at the EHU, or "Culturology" as a more accurate translation would be, was something rather specific as it emerged in

opposition to the growth of “Culturology” in the post-Soviet Academia as a rather unpleasant, nationalistic myth-making machine. “Culture Studies” at EHU, on the other hand, made use of a wide range of thought, but especially the 20th Century Western thought often termed ‘theory’, to analyse the extraordinary array of cultural phenomena, and especially visual phenomena, now circulating in the globalised, multi-media post-Soviet space.

What was “Culture Studies” at EHU? Clearly it had much in common with philosophy, but was distinct from it perhaps in a way that marks ‘theory’ from philosophy. For whereas philosophy seems a goal in itself, the term ‘theory’ implies a second stage which will be putting it into practice. Indeed, there is definitely a sense in much ‘theory’ that staying at the stage of thought is insufficient and something more must be done, although exactly what is far from clear. In addition, at the EHU the passage of “Culture Studies” from philosophy to art history is also intriguing as it mirrors a growing tendency in philosophy, from Heidegger to the likes of Derrida and Deleuze, to see the work of art (or cinema or literature) as perhaps a more perfect expression of the complexities of thinking about existence than would be possible through the linguistic exposition of philosophy. Is it possible that these changes in the EHU faculty structure suggest a future organisation of the university where art or the arts will be dominant?⁴

However, the situation of this “Culture Studies” is more problematic. For in the first two stages of Readings’ analysis, both the dispassionate attachment to reason and the building of national culture, were, in large part at least, positive ideals that could autonomously be fulfilled within the university. Now, increasingly there is a feel that the university is inadequate to the variety and sheer quantity of quasi-artistic production going on around it. Rational, language dominated forms of interaction seem less and less adequate as ways to respond to pop culture and to the complexity of human experience that it has made more obvious. Why was it that some of the most fulfilling moments of the “Visual and Culture Studies Reconsidered” Summer School were when we were standing on the barricades together shouting our protests against the closure of the EHU or of the Winter School were when we were out filming the absurd realia of contemporary Minsk? From the passivity of sitting and listening to collective action there is a very different theoretical and physical relationship to knowledge and the world we are trying to investigate.

Equally I was struck at the EHU by a contrast between the way in writing students often revealed a parrot-like ability to recite learned material without understanding while the filmed material they created comprised a rich mix of personal experience and ideas. It was also the incorporation of action, emotion and personal experience into learning that was also a major feature of the “Gender Studies” programme, another programme at EHU that seemed both very real and dynamic. However, such a move away from the abstract situation of learning to a more active and emotional situation is a serious challenge to the classroom situation and to systems of academic grading. If we are entering into the realm of emotion and action, how can

I as teacher claim that my knowledge of such is any greater than that of a student?

I would argue that “Culture Studies”, and the questioning of the pedagogical situation that it entails, can helpfully be considered through the way the crisis of the community is linked to a crisis of work. The very idea of the local community was based around places of work, which in the information age are largely disappearing. As Sotzart would have us believe, Lenin and Stalin and the forms of collective production they aspired to were perhaps really defeated by Mickey Mouse and Spiderman. Jean-Luc Nancy, for example, announces the great contemporary challenge as thinking the community as inoperative, both in the sense that the community itself does not function and that its members also do not work; or perhaps that at the moment of creating the chance for a community its members would not be working.⁵ Similarly, for Oleg Aronson *Bohemia* is a strange non-working, non-community that somehow forms a community which might offer a model applicable to contemporary society.⁶ What does this mean for the classroom? What is working in a classroom situation, and when is someone thinking? Is thinking working? With reference to psychoanalysis, for example, Félix Guattari talks of the imbalance between work and payment.⁷ For in the analytic interaction, there are two types of work done: one by the patient, that of producing the psychic material to be analysed, going through the suffering and then making the associations which offer the key to diagnosis, and the other by the psychoanalyst who sits, listens and perhaps offers diagnosis. However, in terms of revenue, only one of these is recognised as work, with the concomitant suggestion that the work of the ‘patient’ is worthless. Perhaps a similar imbalance effects the classroom situation where increasingly students treat (and are encouraged to treat by university administrators) the classroom interaction as a situation for consumption, whereas the engagement of students in the process of producing a lesson can have as potent an impact as the input of the teacher. Perhaps if we are really serious about the academic community we need to rethink how we give value to work.

‘Podvig naroda bezsmerten’ – ‘EHU Budet Zhit’

In *The Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari, following the work of Jean Oury at the clinic at La Borde, draw a distinction between group fantasies and individual fantasies and their relationship to institutions.⁸ This distinction is based on the crucial role that Deleuze and Guattari see death drives as playing in the psychic life of the individual. For Deleuze and Guattari life and death intermingle in living: we constantly die in more ways than we can imagine, in the sense that we are constantly evolving into a person different from that which we were. If we are unable to desire death, change, we become in effect unable to desire.

This is at the heart of Deleuze and Guattari’s accusation against psychoanalysis: that when Freud and Lacan uncover the path through which the individual is created, they overlook the fact that within the structures they describe normalised neurosis is not the only answer. For psychoanalysis

argues that we posit an 'ego' of an unchanging, immortal "I" on top of the fluctuating, chaotic desires of the "unconscious". By looking in the mirror, fixating on your mother and learning how to talk, you become an "I" and fall into the symbolic where you can communicate and be adult. But where in all of this is the desire for either life or death: clearly, as Lacan says the real is somewhere else. We become fixated on an illusory, 'fixed-in-time' simulacra of who we are and sacrifice or repress all manner of real life experiences in order to preserve the image of ourselves.

This error stems from imagining that the desires for life and death, Freud's Eros and Thanatos, stand in opposition to each other: who knows if when we actually die, for instance by jumping out of a window, we do not live in more intense ways than when we seek to preserve life, or rather the life of the individual that we imagine ourselves to be? If death drives are incorporated as part of the psychic processes of living and changing, then desires become real and rather the "I" starts to disappear.

What role does the institution play from a psychic perspective? For Deleuze and Guattari the institution offers a subject of transcendence for the imaginary fantasies of the artificially constructed 'ego.' What is happening when we dream of being a renowned scholar or are even ready to sacrifice our lives for our country? Deleuze and Guattari argue that we are doing is positing a desire for immortality onto the institution and repressing death drives onto others, other nations or those outside the institution. This means that the institution comes to be the subject of the same repressions and perversions as are required to keep up the illusion of the coherence of the subject. A group, on the other hand, Deleuze and Guattari define as a collection of expressions of desires without a symbolic whole, where singular desires interact in an evolving way, and where one of the possibilities is that a collective death drive leads to the disbanding of the group. This incorporation of the death drive within the collective creates a level of potential for action which for Deleuze and Guattari the institution could never have.

In the light of this argument, it is remarkable that the death of the EHU has caused a variety of events, discussions and actions, a quantity of new projects, and an intensity of self-questioning about the role of the university and its connection to Belarusian society on a level quite different from that witnessed while the institution was able to function. Of course, the difficulties of the current situation in Belarus are such that the desire for the preservation of self and livelihood mean that institutions, such as the reincarnation of the EHU, are very much desired. But it is also possible that the current crisis offers a unique opportunity to explore the possibility of the group as an alternative for common action and thought. A fruitful vision of the many micro-actions that the end of the EHU has started might have something in common with the concept of 'multitudes' that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri develop as the only viable form of resistance to global capitalism.⁹

These propositions are somewhat ridiculous and idealistic, and do not take into account the prosaic needs of financial subsistence, grant application, etc., etc. I also have enormous sympathy for my friends and

colleagues in Belarus and do not wish to underestimate the sorts of appalling difficulties they have to fight against to be allowed to live and think, in ways which I am geographically, socio-economically privileged enough not to have to encounter. But perhaps these impediments do also create spaces for thinking and interaction that we ‘westerners’ do not know. I remember Gunter Grass recalling his East-German auntie telling him “Ach ja, Gunterchen, ich weiss dass im West ist besser, aber im Ost ist schoener.” For, at the same time, my propositions also describe some of the things that are already actually happening as a result of the closure of the EHU and open up directions for potential future action. I have great admiration for much that happened within the EHU: especially in its dedication to the theoretical exploration of “Culture Studies”, it was brave enough to pose serious questions of itself and its functioning in a way that I have not found in Warsaw. As institution it made possible much that was not institutional. Perhaps, by dying the institution has also formed something like groups and one day, indeed, the future will be multitudinous.

Notes

- ¹ Slavoj Žižek, ‘The Prospects of Radical Politics Today,’ *Democracy Unrealized. Documenta 11 Platform 1*, Hatje Cantz Publishers, pp. 67-86; also published in Polish in *Krytyka Polityczna* (no. 7/8, zima 2005).
- ² Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).
- ³ For an account of the ideological underpinnings behind this, see Almira Ousmanova’s conference paper, «Женщина-как-нация-как-товар».
- ⁴ Something in this vein is being attempted by The Consortium in London, a twin venture between Birkbeck College, University of London, The Tate Modern, the ICA and the Association of British Architects, which links theory and practice in courses defined by theme rather than by traditional subject discipline. See
- ⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée*, 2nd edn (Breteuil-sur-Iton: Christian Bourgois, 1990).
- ⁶ Олег Аронсон, *Богема: Опыт Сообщества (Наброски к философии асоциальности)* (Москва: Фонд «Прагматика Культуры», 2002).
- ⁷ Félix Guattari, ‘L’Argent dans l’échange analytique’, *La Révolution moléculaire* (Fontenay-sous-Bois: Recherches, 1977), pp. 136–139.
- ⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *L’Anti-Oedipe* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), pp. 73–76.
- ⁹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).