AROUND 1973: historicism, self-cause, popular culture

The Symposium: its concept

In June 2011 a group of scholars from Germany, Brazil, the USA and Switzerland met at Akademie Schloss Solitude, in Stuttgart, with one purpose in mind: to discuss, in its manifold aspects and from a multi-disciplinary perspective, the mood surrounding the year of 1973.

Why 1973, what made it so special? Even if it is not an easy task to claim (and let alone explain) the global relevance of any particular year in history, 1973 demands special attention. In the open field of historical events, as well as in artistic and intellectual practice, that year witnessed a big atmospheric change, whose relevance can be shown through the juxtaposition of two different layers of experience: artistic and intellectual practice, on the one hand, and the impact of historical events, on the other. The second one is probably easier to grasp: one needs only to think about the OPEC-led oil crisis, the global financial crisis (after the breakdown of the gold standard system of fixed exchange rates), the coup against Salvador Allende in Chile, the end of the Vietnam War (with its traumatic consequences for both sides), the outburst of the Yom Kippur War (with its lingering consequences for both sides...), and the Watergate scandal to understand why anxiety and uncertainty were suddenly and dramatically widespread. But the first one is much more...
difficult to observe: what exactly changed in the intellectual atmosphere around the year of 1973?

With this question in mind, Akademie Schloss Solitude invited a mixed group of leading and emerging scholars from the Humanities to discuss that year’s impact in contemporary history. As a means to focus the debate, four guiding topics were chosen:

1) The shift towards the popular: The early 1970s saw a profound requalification of popular culture, as the arts began to be acknowledged as practices developed within specific contexts. With artistic practices spreading throughout society, a renewed appreciation of otherness extended the social presence of art in ways hitherto unforeseen by art theory. 19th-century concepts of “art” lost their claims to universality as the intellectual framework that had grounded its legitimacy was critically scrutinized.

2) The breakdown of historicism: A new historical sensibility arose. Our notion of time itself began to change: whereas the modern conception of history had been oriented by the political concept of “revolution,” it was suddenly replaced by an awareness of the present as wider than the thin layer separating a past to be left behind, and a future towards which we should accelerate. The orientation to the future gave room to a stronger immersion in the present, reducing the relevance of long-term projects as the core activity of politics and economics.

3) Concepts of self-cause: There arose an understanding of newness and change as emerging processes, and not as the willing production of difference: not as the result of external action, but as an outcome of the self-production of the system in its interaction with the environment. Concepts of “self-cause” replaced external causation by the inner principles of causation that lead to the autopoiesis of self-organizing systems. Time was complexified as change was explained through conservation and randomness; natural events acquired a new sense of historicity.

4) The perception of a watershed moment: Within this overreaching epistemic change, 1973 stands out as the year when the post-war boom came to a standstill, the American control of international exchange came to a halt, the Yom Kippur War consolidated the Middle East quagmire that lasts to this day. Taken as a time-reference, intellectual “seismography” detected emerging transformations and changes both in history and intellectual life.

Let us briefly discuss each one of them.

**Use, function: The shift towards the popular**
In a later preface to his *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Peter Burke says that beginning in the 1970s the number of academic studies about popular culture had largely exceeded what had been published on the theme in the preceding three or four decades. Taken altogether, those studies put forward a re-qualification of reception and consumption as a productive (and not merely passive) activity, as well as shifted towards a functional approach to culture, that would place historiography and philology closer to anthropology than they had ever been before—as their intermeshing between “art” and “culture” imposed a permanent regard of the local variations of potentially general functions (those related to social practices, rites, and the networks of production: presentation and distribution). Different arts begin to be appreciated as practices developed within specific contexts: there is no more art “in general,” or one should say: there is a lot more to art than what the Enlightened-Romantic-Idealist idea of “art” (or “high art”) would make us think. The diminishing relevance of authorship and the growing understanding of art as part of ordinary daily life are signs of a progressive questioning of the notion of “work.”

A renewed appreciation of otherness makes us see that artistic functions extend throughout society in ways that had not been adequately understood by art theory. This shift towards the “popular” follows the breakdown of the claims to universal legitimacy of Modern (and especially Modernist) art of which Peter Bürger’s 1974, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* was a symptom, following also the presence and the influence that “popular” culture would achieve in society at large after World War II—and not only within its most clearly “popular” strata. As a value-oriented concept (as a socially-defined honorific attribute), “art” loses its claims to universality to become a local or partial form of production and, as the aesthetic paradigms and the intellectual framework that had grounded its claims to universal legitimacy begin to be historicized in the 1970s, scholars begin to develop analytical tools for the study of “popular” aesthetic practices according to their own immanent logics (not regarding the “popular” anymore as merely something other from “art”).

It is in this intellectual environment that Paul Zumthor makes his claim that medieval poetry is closer to musical and theatrical performance than to what we nowadays call “literature.” The twelfth-century *chansons de geste* would be more similar to contemporary
rap and Brazilian cordel than to actual “literature,” since they were meant to be performed: to be sung and played, but not read. Without establishing any distinction between author and interpreter, their relationship with the public had nothing of the intimacy created between a text and its reader. Collectively received, oral poetry relies on a sensorial kind of connection created by voices and bodies within a setting where nothing is conceivable if not as a sonorous part of a signifying group where colors, odors, mobile and immobile forms [...] all play together, in a complementary fashion, as the auditory part of a sensorial group where sight, smell, and touch all take part equally. This group stands out from the continuum of social existence, without [...] dissociating itself from it: the place of the performance is taken from the “territory” of the group, it depends on it every way and is thus received.²

Such propositions reveal the inappropriateness of the concepts derived from Modern literary practices to the analysis of medieval oral poetry, and by pointing out the historically-specific condition of concepts such as those of “authorship,” “creativity,” “self-referentiality of language,” “text,” and many others, Zumthor is able to provide a “popular” artistic practice with an adequate immanent conceptual and analytical framework—a necessity had not been felt by the preceding generations. The same stroke that turned “literature” into a historically contingent phenomenon, one which, according to Zumthor, did not necessarily have to emerge, might also be responsible for the eventual disappearance of it as a regular production.

The Breakdown of Historicism

There emerges in the early 1970s an unclear feeling that a shift in Modernity was taking place. Years before the concept of “Postmodernism” became popular, a new sensibility towards history began to develop, initially inscribed in scattered attempts to historicize concepts and presuppositions inherited from the late eighteenth century, exposing their historical origins as a means to investigate their specificity and limits of validity—an example of which would be the 1978 excavation of the German-Romantic origins of the concept of “literature” by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe (in L’absolu Littéraire). As their standing became uncertain, the Modern aesthetic and philosophical epistemes


begin to be described as historically-specific, having had their birth between 1780 and 1830, and perhaps already on their way to disappearing.

It is then even more radical to suggest that our own notion of time at that period in history was beginning to crumble. Reinhardt Koselleck’s historicization of our conceptions of history and our ideas of future brought about the perception that, just as art “in general” cannot be said to exist, there is no history “in general.” Perceptions of time—of the past, present, and future—and modes of narrating history change accordingly, which explains why the modern concept of “Revolution” caused the diversity of simultaneous histories to be synthesized in the large narratives of History:

The collective singular [...] made possible the attribution to history of the latent power of human events and suffering, a power that connected and motivated everything in accordance with a secret or evident plan to which one could feel responsible, or in whose name one could believe oneself to be acting. [...] Freedom took the place of freedoms, Justice that of rights and servitudes, Progress that of progressions and from the diversity of revolutions, “The Revolution” emerged.3

The “Revolution” lent its chronotope to history, to politics, as well as to literature and the arts. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the arts became compromised (through formal differentiation, theoretical labor and often political engagement) by the forward push of time propelled by the “revolutionary” time-frame and its many derivatives (“progress,” “evolution,” “renewal,” etc.). If Koselleck is capable of historicizing our two-hundred-year-old understanding of time, it is because, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht would put it, our present has suddenly become wider than merely the thin layer that used to separate the past (that is always being rapidly left behind) and the future (towards which societies are always accelerating). In the 1970s, the historicist chronotope was no longer invisible (it had already been previously perceived), and that came in part from the slow disappearance of utopia as a palpable political reference. After the downfall of the revolutionary momentum of 1968, and without any promised land to fight for, the former omnipresent future gave room to a stronger immersion in the present. Instead of a full replacement of present-day reality with something better and new (in a future yet to come), change began to be thought of as under the guise of context-dependent processes.

**Concepts of Self-Cause**


Such attention to contexts, along with the fading out of utopia as the guideline of political action, parallels the growing understanding of newness and change as emerging (and quite often improbable) processes, and not as the willing or voluntary production of difference. Change and newness begin to be understood not as the result of external action (of one body on another body, of a subject on his environment) but as that which depends on the self-production of the body, in its permanent interaction with the environment.

Beginning in the 1970s, several different versions of what can nowadays be referred to as the concept of self-cause began to formulated as an alternative to Newtonian principles of external causation. Self-cause implies that inner principles of causation emerge within any self-organizing system during its process of birth or establishment, leading to its autopoiesis. This does not apply to the way inert (or dead) matter behaves: a stone is not a self-organizing system, since it cannot actively regulate its interaction with its environment. This is quite different from what happens to a city or an economic or physical system, which must be capable of self-organization in order to preserve their structures without dissolving themselves into their environments. They simply cannot afford to be inert, and therefore must be able to spontaneously regulate their own patterns of reaction to external stimuli, without recurring to “agency” or “decision” (which implies having agency without an agent). When a system is pressed to change itself in order to survive, it preserves as much as possible its structures and elements. This will only happen if the system is flexible enough to adapt without losing its general identity—i.e. to change conservatively. Political and market economies have absorbed similar ideas into their theoretical frameworks.

Concepts of self-cause complexify time, bringing many patterns of temporality together to explain change through conservation and contingency. Change can happen rapidly or slowly, predictably or unexpectedly. “Time” and “emergence” soon become keywords in scientific descriptions (Ilya Prigogine belongs to this very horizon), and even prior to that Gilles Deleuze studies the emergence of sense and the self-differentiation of phenomena in a similar manner. Already in the late 1960s, Deleuze’s pairing of “difference” and “repetition” as two inner trends of differentiation pertaining to a being’s history and his definition of “sense” as an emergent (and therefore contingent and context-specific) rapport between language, objects, sensorial perception, and a consciousness in its own...
historicity altogether implied that, in his philosophy, change and causation did not proceed or depend on external action. Just as a body or a system is little able to control its own autopoiesis, is a mind incapable of fully discerning and controlling its own operations inside its environment (one should remember how close in time Deleuze is to Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela).

As this embryonic concept of self-cause intermingled with the loss of utopia as the referential time- and action-paradigm for political thought, Deleuze, together with Félix Guattari, later produces a concept of anti-systemic politics apart from the temporal framework provided by the modern concept of “Revolution”: in Anti-Oedipus and Rhizome politics does not have telos or “action” as its main paradigmatic reference. Immersed in daily life, politics does not refer primarily to ideas of the future anymore, but mainly to daily exchange—focusing more and more on the present.

To Feel a Watershed Moment

Still the question remains why the precise choice of 1973 as a benchmark. It is clear that all the epistemic changes mentioned did not restrict themselves to only one year. Quite to the contrary, these changes have spread themselves throughout the following decades, crystallizing in mature intellectual achievements at different points in time. But this does not erase the recurring presence of 1973 in history (and especially economic history) books; where it stands as the moment when the post-war boom came to a standstill (with a sharp transfer of power from the production to the financial sectors); when the US capability of controlling (and therefore shaping) international exchange came to a halt (making the world somewhat lose its “center of gravity”); when, for the first time, some Third World countries openly challenged the central Western countries (with the first oil crisis) while other Third World countries immerged in dictatorships and fratricidal wars (further widening the gap between the First and Third Worlds); when the Yom Kippur War consolidated the Middle East quagmire that lasts until today. 1973 is consistently used a time-reference, quite often appearing as the end of a so-called “1968–1973” period: the period between the explosion of radical claims for change and the full realization of the
ultimate failure of the global attempt of radically reshaping reality. But what does this tell us about artistic and intellectual change?

One can recall that Fredric Jameson placed that year as a central time reference for the rise of “Postmodernism,” a term whose very creation shows that intellectual sensibility had “caught” that something was different. To “catch” or to “sense” a process of change is by no means a minor thing: as Eric Hobsbawn would say about the early years of the twentieth century, from the tone of some pieces by Sigmund Freud and Max Weber, from the commotion caused by the Dreyfus affair or from the sinking of the Titanic one can still grasp the extent to which people felt that the Belle Époque was coming to an end—even before the World War I made it finally clear. The same thing can be claimed about the years that lead from the late 1960s to 1973: intellectual “seismography” can detect the spreading of the feeling that things were different. Written exactly in those years, Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow has as its main characters—the ones who give the plot its pace and direction—the Namibian Enzian, the German Nazi-officer Weissmann, the American Slothrop, and the Russian Tchitcherine. In 1945, as the American and the Russian lose faith in their long-held national myths, and as the African tries to come to terms with the ones who colonized the many tribes and created Modern Africa, they look for answers in an Europe that no longer provides them with a stabilizing center—it is no longer the Europe that for centuries had given the world its global shaping. Coming from the well-succeeded daughter and replacement of Europe in the next phase of the modern world-system (the USA), from the shameful “hidden side” of European splendor (colonial Africa), and from the daughter of European utopias that had exposed those utopias very failures (the USSR), these characters meet in a common cradle, only to find central Europe dissolving. But as the Pynchon reader knows well, he is locating the systemic crisis in 1945 that also characterizes the very world in which Gravity’s Rainbow was written: Enzian, Tchitcherine, Slothrop, and Weissmann synthesize Modern History by interweaving an African whose tribal identity had been destroyed by European colonization, a Russian in a crisis of confidence about the moral reliability of Communism and the Soviet State, an American that had lost his right to self-isolation in his own country and the right to self-delusion, and an agonizing once-venerable German officer. In 1973, wouldn’t those characters’ compulsive quest for meaning represent a world in accelerated transformation?
The seminar: contributions and debate

The Symposium was held in June 16 and 17, 2011, in the context of the Art, Science & Business program of Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, Germany. In his opening lecture (“1973: Financialization and the Conditions of ‘Postmodernity’”), Joseph Vogl, from the Humboldt University in Berlin, concisely explained the changes in the global financial structures that followed the breakdown of the Bretton Woods agreements (beginning in 1971), which would lead to what he called a “postmodern relation to the significant”. According to him, the new financial system that emerged around 1973, being “characterized by the risks of flexible exchange rates and the validity of unsecured fiat money”, led to a “regime of floating significant knowing no bounds and without the securing of a transcendental signifier”. While objectively describing the financial changes happening around 1973, such formulation produced a straight connection to the events leading to the most recent economic crisis, thus positing the relevance of the events of 1973 to our present time.

In the following morning, Pedro Dolabela Chagas, from UESB at Vitória da Conquista, Brazil, presented his view of the crises surrounding the field of literary critique around 1973. While the rapid societal and cultural change occurring since the late 1960s produced a feeling of loss that was tangible in literature, film and popular music, within academia the authority of the critic was eroding. Much pressure came from cultural politics and from the deconstruction of the epistemological foundations (inherited from the 19th-century) of critique. Chagas then analysed some propositions that responded positively to that uncertainty by untangling the deadlocks of the prevailing critical apparatus: more specifically, he discussed the works of Wolfgang Iser, Roland Barthes, Paul Zumthor and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. While never claiming to “solve” the crises they responded to, those authors opened the literary field to novelty, unpredictability and change.

The word was passed to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, from Stanford University, who relied on his personal memoirs to produce a vivid picture of the intellectual scenario in Germany around that time. From within the sense of immediacy offered by an active eye-witness of the period, he explained why the 1970s looked then “conservative” in comparison to the
“revolutionary” sixties. But in hindsight Gumbrecht also locates therein the birth to a profound change in our historical chronotope, leading from the “historical time” (i.e. the perception of time as an acceleration towards a future whose outlines we could choose and determine) to the “dilation of the present”  (a present that is more intensely lived in itself, diminishing the acceleration of time) that characterizes our current condition. This would be enough to make the early 1970s a turning point in recent history, but Gumbrecht curiously claimed that that was a turning point which did not identify itself as such, as it tended to read itself “negatively” (i.e. in its contrast to the utopias of the previous decade) and in its attempts to somehow preserve the many crumbling epistemological paradigms founded upon the chronotope of “historicism”.

After Gumbrecht, Christina Brandt, from the Ruhr University at Bochum, talked about “Clones and Genetic Engineering around 1973“. It was in that year that the groundbreaking work of Herbert Boyen and Stanley Cohen gave start to modern genetic engineering. In Brandt’s presentation, one specific outcome of that event was on target: the cloning research, which was seen in its cultural (and especially literary) representations from the late 1960s into the 1970s. Brandt showed how human clones were taken as metaphors of the possibilities open to human agency to shape the human future, from the more “utopian and eugenic visions” of the 1960s (when human cloning was still only a future possibility) to the discussion happening in the 1970s, when the “biotechnological era” suddenly became a reality. Brandt depicted a wide range of responses to that new situation, ranging from the ethical concerns geneticists very soon developed (as a way not to incur in the ill use of science that nuclear physics had been lead into in the previous decades) to the feeling of fear produced by that unprecedented power of the human shaping of nature.

Christina Brandt was followed by Olof Olsson, DJ and artist from Copenhagen. Olsson focused on the developments in recording technology that led to the emergence of disco music in the 1970s, while simultaneously relating it to the “spirit of the time”. He presented disco as the unforeseen result of a history of technological research that eventually stimulated the kind of musical experimentation that led to the rise of disco. Among many other things, he also claimed that disco gave birth to less predictable musical happenings, in contrast to the “perfectionism” of rock music.
After Olsson, Stephan Jansen and Saskia Richter, from Zeppelin University at Friedrichshafen, discussed the many managerial responses to the crises happening around 1973. The need for the fast development of organizational tools and theories was then harshly felt, leading to propositions that tried to merge management, economics and psychology into new patterns of orientation, explanation and rationalization of concrete phenomena. Jansen and Richter discussed in conceptual and historical depth the developments both in the theories of organization and of social movements: while Jansen exposed the set of concepts (those of “weak ties”, “loose coupling”, “redundancy”, “decentralization”, “non-transparency” and “second-order observation”) that opened new directions for management theory, Richter discussed some decisive works responding to that moment of crisis (by Ronald Inglehart, Niklas Luhmann, as well as The limits to growth – A report for the Club of Rome). She also discussed the action of Petra Kelly within the scope of the changes happening in social movements around 1973.

The last session, by Philip Ursprung from the ETH in Zurich, was about the novel Crash, by J. G. Ballard, and to the theme of the “crisis of representation”, so recurrent in the description of the intellectual ambience of the 1970s. Ursprung detached the historical description of the changes happening around that time from the concept of “post-modernity”, while at the same time preserving the diagnostic, already anticipated in the symposium by Joseph Vogl, of the interrelation between the fluctuation of financial value (separated as it was from any material correlate substance) and the crisis of representation in general. While the concept of the “postmodern” is insufficient to describe the ongoing changes (since it is too strictly mirrored to typified ideas of Modernity), the linkage between the new financial economy and the arts is visible – of which architecture stands as a remarkable demonstration. Having this in mind, Ursprung attempted at formulating an alternative interpretation of the historical and artistic changes happening around 1973 inspired by the emergence of a new literary representation of architecture in Ballard’s novel.

The present edition

The “Conexões” section of the present issue of Eutomia – Literatura e Linguística now presents the Brazilian and foreign readership the article version of the oral presentations
made during the Symposium “AROUND 1973: historicism, self-cause, popular culture”. With its cross-disciplinary approach to the Humanities, *Eutomia* is the perfect kind of publication to bring them to light. We hope you will have the same pleasure reading these articles as we had organizing and participating in that memorable seminar in 2011.

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