Forum

Interdisciplinarity: Popular and Problematic

To the Editor:

I was most intrigued to read Julie Stone Peters’s “Law, Literature, and the Vanishing Real: On the Future of an Interdisciplinary Illusion” (120 [2005]: 442–53). Peters is on to something, and you might want to solicit articles on the equally problematic interdisciplinarity of literature and science and literature and medicine. The recent popularity of interdisciplinarity seems to be a response to the increasing professionalization, microfocus, and jargonization of individual academic disciplines, analogous to the growth of comparative literature after the Second World War as a corrective to the narrowness of national literature departments.

The courses I taught were always interdisciplinary in nature, whatever the subject, and for many years I was on the Interdisciplinary Studies Committee at the City University of New York Graduate Center. On the graduate level I team-taught a course on city and utopia, once with a political scientist, once with an architectural historian. These experiences revealed another problem with interdisciplinary study: the graduate students, from a number of different departments, went into shock for the first half of each course because they could not understand what students from other disciplines were talking about. Every discipline had its own approaches and jargon, and there was no common ground on which problems could be discussed. Only toward the end of the course was there some tentative cross-communication among the students. The term papers were uniformly monodisciplinary and disappointing, ignoring the interdisciplinary perspectives the professors had been at pains to develop.

Burton Pike
Graduate Center, City University of New York
Rebuilding the Humanities

To the Editor:

I would like to thank Robert Scholes for his enlightening and courageous engagement with the state of the discipline in his 2004 Presidential Address, “The Humanities in a Posthumanist World” (120 [2005]: 724–33). Scholes’s careful evaluation of the important role that the humanities, including writing and rhetoric, offer the modern student is to be commended. The humanities “may not be able to make ourselves or those around us better human beings,” as Scholes points out, but they are capable of making us better than we were and as good as we may be given the political and economic circumstances in which we find ourselves. As much as I sincerely appreciate Scholes’s intellectual commitment to the “heart and mind” (733), I must, however, take strong exception to his characterization and seeming critique of philosophical pragmatism as it applies to the current debate on the humanities, and especially I must challenge the false dialectic that he creates between fundamentalism and pragmatism, as if these were competing theories, as if the entire body of humanistic study was not by its nature antifundamentalist.

As someone who studies American pragmatism and its relation to language, literature, and education, I am always struck by the way that writers variously choose to use the words pragmatic, pragmatist, and pragmatism. In its most general and colloquial use, pragmatic refers to a concern for the causal effects of any given action, without regard to fundamental ideals or fixed theories. Pragmatism does not, as Scholes’s address implies, mean merely intellectual relativism, and it certainly does not imply any sort of bad faith or deception on the part of the pragmatic agent, as it is so generally used in common parlance. Pragmatists do not simply throw up their hands and say that there is no meaning in the world. Far from it; pragmatism holds that meaning and belief are central elements of even our supposedly most objective functions and that, rather than merely assert that “anyone can indeed say anything” (730)—truly a spurious characterization of pragmatism—we must recognize the effects, large and small, that our beliefs make manifest in the world. Pragmatism is inherently a critical endeavor. Fundamentalism, on the other hand, is dogmatic, grounded in a particular historical context, and lacks all critical faculty, relying instead on a fixed set of unchanging principles that are beyond interpretation and that inevitably lead to social and technological paralysis.

If we were to contrast fundamentalism and pragmatism fairly—rather than submit them to Scholes’s false dialectic, as if some sort of mythical and convenient middle ground were the answer to all our problems—we would see that pragmatism relies on a set of principles and beliefs that are constantly subject to critique and change but that are held with no less passion, conviction, and appreciation than those that Scholes recommends we should embrace as teachers and scholars in the modern languages. Indeed, Scholes’s suggestion that pragmatism was at the forefront of opposition to deconstruction is strange, seeing that the two methods have so much in common. The main difference, one that Scholes doesn’t mention, between pragmatism and deconstruction and between pragmatism and the general critical methodology of most literary work in the last twenty years is the degree to which it values action over critique, and this is, after all, at the heart of the debate about the value of the humanities in an academe dominated by the sciences. In the sciences, which for good reason we humanists so deeply envy, students and scientists actively look for solutions to problems, seeking out what works and discarding what does not. Students, as we know, learn from positive examples, and when we in the humanities ceaselessly emphasize the negative, the “merely” critical rather than the “usefully” critical, instead of focusing on the positive aspects of our discipline, instead of continually pressing the boundaries of the possible, we are in danger of devolving into a kind of self-indulgent and narcissistic self-reflection that loses sight of our audience, including the students sitting before us in our classrooms who are wondering why they’re there. This kind of hand-wringing and self-doubt, and not pragmatism, is the greatest danger that faces the humanities.

That said, it seems that Scholes is perhaps more of a pragmatist than he may realize. After all, arguing that we must reaffirm the “uses” of our work (William James, as we know, famously spoke about the “cash value” of our ideas) and, even more tellingly, that we must not use the “methods of our
opponents” (something Richard Rorty has made clear in his defense of neopragmatism, arguing that we must change the terms of the argument) is a pragmatist form of engagement and good advice for how to deal with our predicament.

James D. Hoff
Graduate Center, City University of New York

To the Editor:

Robert Scholes’s elegant and resourceful Presidential Address, “The Humanities in a Post-humanist World,” provided a hardheaded picture of the difficult times faced by the humanities. But its remedial conclusion, “going back” to the “roots” of language studies (732), fell sadly short of the one thing needful: science. Summarizing George Steiner’s despairing essay in Salmagundi, with its painful contrast of the soft humanities with the hard sciences, Scholes quotes Steiner’s remark that, unlike the sciences, in the humanities “[a]nyone can say anything” (qtd. on 725). But instead of benefiting from Steiner’s explosive message, Scholes just moves on.

Reading Scholes’s address, one would hardly know that the intellectual universe has been turned upside down over the past twenty-five years by Darwinian evolution’s “modern synthesis” and the latest developments in the cognitive neurosciences. Like the head-buried proponents of intelligent design, academics in the humanities don’t want to know that literary texts, far from being autotelic or merely a part of cultural history, are—like everything else produced by organisms—the products of biological history, which means the history of the body and its materially constituted brain. This brain is not a free-floating, self-determining, autonomous spook, with “roots” in language and the “trivium” (732), but a gradually evolved custodian of the body that abetted the struggle for survival—and the production of offspring—against competing forces.

Indeed, language itself is a recently acquired capacity. Had human beings evolved somewhat differently, had genetic and environmental factors been slightly other than they were, had human beings been endowed with only three fingers instead of five, with differently formed vocal equipment, with batlike echolocation, with canine olfactory sensitivity, with different electrochemical transmissions and greater or lesser sensitivity of the neurons, with the visual acuity of hawks or a different heart rate, a different metabolism, a different configuration of the brain—had any of these alternative paths been taken (or a million others), language and all our arts would be radically different from what they are today. The composition of our blood, our involuntary emotions, our limited ability to focus on more than a small handful of things at once, our need for certain nutrients, the right air quality, a nurturing caregiver—all these factors (and a million others) lie behind the meters and sonics of poetry, the subject matters of novels, the layout and sense qualities of paintings, the scale of architecture, the compositional balances of photography, the failure of twelvetone music. And most crucial of all, these factors lie behind the universal characteristics of human beings of all cultures (as Donald Brown has amply demonstrated in Human Universals), however diverse their expression. The study of literature without an ever-conscious awareness of its biological contingencies is akin to the fantasizings of creationism.

Humanists who presume to deal with the arts—or the world—in the twenty-first century, not simply repeating exhausted truisms from years of tedious inbreeding, should be facing up to E. O. Wilson, Steven Pinker, Daniel Dennett, Joseph Carroll, Ellen Dissanayake, Richard Dawkins, Gerald Edelman, Jared Diamond, and similar thinkers, who rarely can afford merely to “say anything.” It will take a lot more than a return to the same old roots to yank the humanities out of their dogmatic slumbers in time to rescue the sinking ship. When what we need to understand is how the machinery works, how it relates to our evolved nature, and what the arts and humanities have to do with it all, raising the ship’s tattered pennant a foot higher won’t do the trick.

Harold Fromm
University of Arizona

Reply:

I thank James D. Hoff and Harold Fromm for their thoughtful responses to my talk, to which I will respond below.
First, pragmatism. I think there are many versions of pragmatism, or ways of thinking that call themselves pragmatic. If, as James Hoff suggests, I am a pragmatist, I would put myself closer to Charles Peirce than to William James. But the real issue, I think, is whether neopragmatism, as embodied in the writing of Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish, and others, allows for the possibility of persuasion based on an appeal to principles. That is, do we believe what we believe only because we were born (or interpellated, if you like) into some interpretive community (or ideological system) or because we have reasonable grounds for connecting our beliefs to the world?

Is it enough, for example, to say of slavery that it doesn’t work, or do we need to say that it is, in some way, wrong? Our social and political structures are based on principles, and my fear is that, for fundamentalists, the principles need no interpretation and that, for pragmatists, there are no principles. James Hoff says that pragmatism “relies on a set of principles and beliefs that are constantly subject to critique and change but that are held with no less passion, conviction, and appreciation” than those I might profess myself.

Well, that does sound like pragmatism to me: principles that are not really principles. If, by principle, we mean something like this definition from the OED—a fundamental source from which something proceeds; a primary element, force, or law which produces or determines particular results; the ultimate basis upon which the existence of something depends; cause, in the widest sense”—then I would suggest that they ought to be held not with passion but with reason and that they ought not to be subject to change. They may need to be interpreted to suit new situations, but they are indeed fundamental. And that is why I would situate the humanities between fundamentalism, which denies the need for interpretation, and pragmatism, which denies any fixed belief in the first place.

As to the lesser issue of whether neopragmatists opposed deconstruction, I could be wrong about this, but I seem to remember arguments against theory in general coming from critics who claimed to be pragmatists. And, of course, I had my own reservations about deconstructive thought. But the question of whether deconstruction has fixed principles is indeed an interesting one—and well beyond the scope of this discussion.

Turning to Harold Fromm’s comments, I cannot accept his argument as I understand it. What does it imply, for instance, to say that language is a “recently acquired capacity”? Did culture, as we understand it, precede or follow language? And does the precedence matter? Yes, we were natural for eons before we were cultural—before we were human, even—but so what? We are cultural now, and culture is the domain of the humanities. To the extent that culture is, to use Harold Fromm’s terminology, a machine, it is that machine we must understand, and language is the engine driving that machine. The relation between signs and the world, between signs and the self, and the history of those relations—these are our domain.

I call that domain textuality, and I cite the old trivium as a way of organizing that domain for study in schools, meaning, specifically, the study of language as a system (the old grammar), the study of the relation between language and reasoning (the old logic), and the study of the relation between language and emotion (the old rhetoric). If we can resituate these at the center of our activities, we will not merely be raising a tattered ensign but rebuilding the ship itself while it is still floating. Not easy, but possible and necessary.

Robert Scholes
Brown University

The Chinese Renaissance and the Vernacular
To the Editor:

These notes are inspired by Gang Zhou’s highly apposite “The Chinese Renaissance: A Transcultural Reading” (120 [2005]: 783–95), in which Zhou refers to “Hu’s misrepresentation of the Renaissance narrative” (791). I hope I may be permitted to sharpen her criticism by foregrounding the baneful effect Hu Shi’s mistaken views had on the course of China’s literary history.

One major error is Hu Shi’s equating his concept of vernacular with Dante’s. The Italian poet’s definition of “vernacular” is specific and clear: “that which children learn from those around them, when they first begin to distinguish words,
or, more briefly, that which we acquire without any rules, by imitating our nurses.” In contrast to Dante’s contemporary spoken language, Hu Shi distinguished two traditional styles of written Chinese, the wenyan ‘literary language’ of the third century BC to 589 AD and the baihua ‘plain speech’ style, which goes back to the Tang dynasty (618–907). He advised writers to follow the style of Water Margin and Journey to the West, two so-called vernacular works of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), a suggestion equivalent to asking modern writers to eschew Arthurian English and write in Shakespearean English. And his fixation on written language is poles apart from Dante’s direct identification of the vernacular with actual spoken language, as is further borne out by Dante’s meticulous attention to the social, educational, and dialectical variations in the speech of the subjects in the Divine Comedy.

While it is true that Hu Shi made a portentous blunder in considering baihua a vernacular comparable to Italian, in his own writing he hewed to a style that was close to speech. But from his time right down to the present, the overwhelming preponderance of academic, journalistic, and general writing has been in a deeply entrenched ban bai ban wen ‘half vernacular, half literary’ style, which Patrick Hanan correctly designates as “mixed” and “intermediate” and in which classical and vernacular can be combined, even in the same sentence—in short, a truly hybrid style of writing that is readily fostered by the Chinese character script.

Hu Shi expressed surprise that after his call for writing reform the “vernacular” replaced the literary style as the “national language” within a matter of five short years. Zhou rightly chides Hu Shi for his failure to recognize the long time—measured in centuries—that it took for Italian to replace Latin in all spheres of life, especially the academic. The fact of the matter is that Hu Shi made the wrong comparison. The comparison is not writing in Italian versus writing in Chinese in the misnamed “vernacular” style. It should be Italian written in an alphabetic script versus Chinese also written in an alphabetic script.

When Hu Shi began championing vernacular writing, he had to contend with a rival group of reformers who sought a more sweeping change—one that would see Chinese characters replaced by an alphabetic script. Hu Shi responded, “I think that in the future we should use a phonetic script. However . . . we must first use a vernacular written language [wenzi] to replace the literary script.” But after the swift ascendancy of the hybrid style, made possible by his success in deflecting the course of China’s literary history, Hu Shi apparently gave no further thought to the alphabetic writing of Chinese.

Nor, owing to nationalistic and elitist influences, have most Chinese, despite the advocacy of such prominent figures as Mao Zedong; Lu Xun, China’s greatest writer of the twentieth century; Mao Dun, China’s foremost novelist and onetime minister of culture; and Wang Li and Lü Shuxiang, two of China’s leading linguists—and of a small group of Chinese and Western scholars, some of whom, bearing in mind the centuries-long transition from Latin to Italian, have a long-range view of the once bitterly contested problem of wenzi gaige ‘script reform.’ (Documentation for the above notes is available in my “The Chinese Renaissance: A Reassessment” [Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars 17.4 (1985): 52–63] and The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy [U of Hawaii P, 1984].)

John DeFrancis
University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa

Reply:

I am grateful to John DeFrancis for his comments on my essay about Hu Shi’s creative uses of the European Renaissance and promotion of a Chinese Renaissance. DeFrancis rightfully points out that when Hu Shi began his advocacy of the vernacular, he had to contend with a rival group of reformers who would have replaced Chinese characters with an alphabetic script. In other words, Hu Shi’s vernacular was only one of the solutions that Chinese intellectuals imagined for the linguistic and cultural challenges they faced at the time. One wonders what a Chinese Renaissance would have been, had the more radical approach won the battle.

I tend to argue in defense of Hu Shi in his considering baihua a vernacular system comparable to Italian. DeFrancis astutely points out that Hu Shi’s concept of vernacular is different from
Dante’s, as *baihua* and *wenyan* are varieties of a written language. But if we take into account the social tone of a language, Hu Shi’s comparison is not that farfetched. The key word here is *diglossia*, a term frequently used by social linguists. Charles Ferguson defines *diglossia* as the functional distinction between two language varieties, one called the high language and the other the low language, and he refers to premodern Europe and premodern China as two typical diglossic communities. In a clear linguistic labor division, Latin and *wenyan* function as high languages, and Italian and *baihua* function as low languages. While it is true that the best premodern Chinese fiction writers, in command of several language registers (classical Chinese, vernacular, and local dialect), frequently created an intermediate language by alternating or mixing the classical and the vernacular, those writers were clear about the social decorum demanded by the diglossic situation when operating in different linguistic registers. The existence of such an intermediate language certainly undermined the conventional linguistic hierarchy, but the real overthrow didn’t become possible until the May Fourth period, when *baihua* assumed its political importance as the national language and the language of the future.

My sense is that a comparison of *wenyan* versus *baihua* and Latin versus Italian can be meaningful and fruitful. Renaissance Europe and early-twentieth-century China both witnessed a breakdown of a long-lasting diglossic situation, which brought about tremendous linguistic turmoil and drastic changes in the linguistic hierarchy and in language attitudes. I have been working on a project that examines how writers in these two historical contexts navigate linguistic complexities, juggling different languages. While there has been an increasing awareness about multilingualism and heteroglossia in recent years, overall literary history is still written according to the die-hard monolingual model. Systematic research into those historical moments when literature has to be redefined as a result of language change and language competition is much needed.

Moreover, Hu Shi’s advocacy of the vernacular not only connects the Chinese Renaissance with the European Renaissance but also firmly places the Chinese Renaissance among other Renaissances being created and promoted in lands outside Europe. Since 2003, I have been coediting (with Brenda Schildgen and Sander Gilman) a volume of essays entitled *Other Renaissances*, which examines how the term *renaissance* was reinvented and reimagined in various non-European contexts. Many “Other Renaissances” (for instance, the Indian, Irish, Hebrew, Arab, and Maori Renaissances) that were called into being by non-Europeans (or by Europeans excluded from mainstream European culture) were centered on language revolution. We see in those historical moments the breakdown of conventional linguistic hierarchy and the transformation of a certain language. In other words, Hu Shi is certainly not the only one passionate about *renaissance* and about *vernacular*. The emergence of Other Renaissances and vernaculars played a significant role in many countries’ pursuit of modernization and national independence.

I thank DeFrancis for giving me the opportunity to clarify my thoughts on issues of *vernacular* and *renaissance*. Both terms offer a unique perspective to reframe our current understanding of world literature and world history.

*Gang Zhou*

Marina, CA

---

**How Free Is the War Photographer?**

**To the Editor:**

Judith Butler’s “Photography, War, Outrage” (120 [2005]: 822–27) rightly points to the sinister implications of the phenomenon of “embedded” journalists in the 2003 invasion of Iraq and implicitly gestures to the importance of this issue for scholars and teachers in the humanities who work around questions of representation and interpretation. However, I am concerned that one strand of Butler’s argument overstates the case for the journalists’ helplessness. Butler disagrees with Susan Sontag’s position that “the photograph cannot by itself provide an interpretation” (823), pointing out—correctly, in my view—that photographs are always interpretations, because what one chooses to show and how one chooses to show it will vary from one photographer to the next. But Butler simultaneously seems to assume that
when embedded reporters travel "only on certain trucks, [look] only at certain scenes, and [relay] home only images and narratives of certain kinds of action" (822) the meaning and interpretation of these reporters’ work is perforce predetermined. There is no acknowledgment that the subject matter alone of an image is not the only determinant of that image’s meaning—that one can present the same object from varying points of view. The embedded journalists may, for instance, be permitted only to photograph certain soldiers, but the way they photograph these soldiers (camera angle, distance of subject from the viewer, sharpness of image, positioning of subject, film speed, process of film developing, etc.) can drastically alter viewers’ perceptions of the subject (for example, a low angle may make subjects appear domineering, while a high angle may make them appear vulnerable). Perhaps it is key to keep in mind here that the word *perspective* encloses multiple meanings. When Butler defines “embedded reporting” as “the situation in which journalists agree to report only from the *perspective* established by military and governmental authorities” (822; my emphasis), she must be referring to the literal perspective of the reporters (what they will see, which way they will face). Journalists do not agree to report the ideological perspective of the military and government, and even if they do, such a commitment would be difficult to enforce by either the journalists or by those who have demanded such a commitment—as scholars who work with texts of all kinds know only too well, the vagaries of interpretation make it impossible for readers to reach a consensus on whether a supposed intention has been fulfilled, and in any case representations across the spectrum of media often escape their creator’s “intention.” In short, Butler doesn’t seem to allow for the possibility of embedded reporters reporting against the grain, as it were, and if they do not, of readers, viewers, and listeners actively interpreting the journalists’ texts against the grain. Scholars in many fields have shown how creators of music, images, and words who were and are subject to various explicit and implicit regimes of censorship have been able to manipulate tone and use rhetorical and literary devices like irony, understatement, overstatement, and metaphor to undermine attempts to predetermine the meanings of their representations. It may be possible to control what one sees and what one represents, and it may be possible to socialize people to see and represent a certain way, but it is impossible to completely control the unpredictabilities of thought, imagination, and desire, to completely control how one sees and how one represents what one sees. To believe that such complete control is possible not only would deny any agency for the embedded journalists and relieve them of any responsibility to use their embedded positions critically but would also deny readers agency and responsibility to read critically. In the end, Butler seems to ascribe to photography (both the process and the product) the same transparency that she critiques Sontag for insisting on.

*Ian Barnard*
California State University, Northridge

**Reply:**

I very much appreciate Ian Barnard’s response to my short essay “Photography, War, Outrage.” I especially welcome the chance to think more precisely about whether embedded reporting “predetermines” the meaning and interpretation of visual and narrative reporting of the war. The term *predetermine* occurs in Barnard’s summary of what I have written, but it does not appear in the essay itself. He is right to argue that the subject matter of an image is not the determinant of that image’s meaning, and I am, as it were, riding on the same truck with him on this point. He is surely also right to maintain that “the way” photographers shoot a scene, even within the parameters of embedded reporting, can vary. When he argues that I don’t allow for embedded reporters reporting “against the grain,” I find myself amused to be accused of not seeing that there are subversive ways to occupy and resignify the norm. So let me clarify two points that will, I hope, make clear in what this disagreement consists.

First, the questions that guide my inquiry into embedded reporting—as well as a separate piece on the Abu Ghraib digital images—are the following: how do the *norms* that govern which lives will be regarded as human lives and which will not enter into the frames through which discourse and
visual representation proceed, and how do these in turn delimit and orchestrate or foreclose ethical responsiveness to suffering that happens at a distance? I am not suggesting that these norms and frames determine our response, which would make our responses into behaviorist effects of a monstrously powerful visual culture. I am suggesting only that the ways these norms enter into visual frames and into larger circuits of communicability are vigorously regulated and contested precisely because it is assumed that images have the power to incite affect, outrage, and critical response. Indeed, the possibility of reacting with outrage and critical analysis to the photos furnished through embedded reporting is not in any way foreclosed by the photos themselves. Sontag’s analysis—or my own—could not take place if the photographs did not yield interpretations that are counter to the ones that are “intended” by the frame. In a sense, the very possibility of my essay rests on the presumption that I agree with Barnard that no image has the power to fully constrain its meaning or, as I would prefer, its interpretation. And, luckily, I never said that it did.

There is, however, a point on which I disagree: although reporters have reported against the grain from “embedded” positions, I think it would be a mistake to take this provisional ability to resist the powers of censorship as a sign that reporters are, therefore, free. Whatever subversive techniques they may employ—and here Barnard argues only that they can deploy them, but he does not tell us how often they have—still take place within a state-sanctioned scene in which perspective is highly regulated and constrained. If we focus on the interpretive freedoms of reporters within embedded reporting, then we end up applauding photographers for their fugitive exercise of freedom rather than condemning without qualification the enormously increased censorship at work in war reporting in recent years. Indeed, if we argue that the reporters are by definition free because they are able to stylize the reporting they do under conditions of constraint, we risk diminishing our sense of the radical unacceptability of the state’s abrogation of freedom of the press as well as broader rights to information. Whatever the freedom exercised within embedded reporting, it does not outweigh the prevailing unfreedom that has accustomed us not to receive—or to be entitled to—a thorough and uncensored set of pictures and stories of this war. The fugitive subversions of the heroic photographer cannot finally fulfill the legitimate demand that comprehensive evidence be made available for the public to judge whether, as is increasingly surmised, this war, apart from being illegitimate, has only increased human suffering beyond justifiable ends.

Judith Butler
University of California, Berkeley