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# CRISES AND BREAKTHROUGHS, TURNS AND RENEWALS

To try to really understand our position in the world – and not just in the academic sense – we need not only to survey the situation around us, but also to carefully peer into the past. And so, let us at least attempt a cursory glance examining the last century-and-a-half of turbulent change in the field of the humanities.



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In the late nineteenth century, the entire world was clamoring the word “crisis.” In spite of the diagnosis posited by Polish poet Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer in a famous verse, the “man of the end of the century” was not actually “mute” – rather, he was looking quite hard for a way forward. Perhaps the best source on the directions being considered can be found in the correspondence between the Symbolist poet Vyacheslav Ivanov and the Pushkinist Mikhail Gershenzon. Confined to the very same sanatorium room on the outskirts of Moscow (the Bolshevik authorities looked after the health of all workers, even academics) in 1920 – three years after the revolution, two years after WWI, but with a civil war still raging – the two philosophers corresponded by letter, so as not to inconvenience one another. Their preserved epistolary discussion “between two corners of a room” reveals a twofold response to the question “What is to be done?” that had been posed by Tolstoy and by Lenin. The classically-educated Ivanov posited a return to Greco-Roman values; Gershenzon pursued the ideal of a third Renaissance, arguing that since the world was falling apart anyway, it should be pushed into the abyss so it could arise again like a Phoenix from the ashes.

## Renewal

Both diagnoses proved to be equally valid. Gershenzon rightly identified the changes in art and science wrought by the first European avantgarde, especially those with a futuristic and Dadaist slant. Ivanov, in turn, aptly captured the trends prefixed neo-, such as neo-classicism, neo-idealism and neo-Kantism. These two movements were not in conflict, being united by a faith in the ideas of “the new,” the notions of “renewal” and “breakthrough.”

These were key terms for the great antipositivist movement of the 1890s. “The new” was a regular fixture in newspaper headlines, almanacs, and ephemeral publications, accompanied by the terms “youth” and “revolution,” regardless of their artistic and ideological foundations. At stake was the emancipation of the *Geisteswissenschaften* (“sciences of the spirit”), as they were described at the time (today we talk about the humanities or, more broadly, culture). This emancipation would entail liberation from methodological

subordination to the natural sciences and attaining full autonomy by “rebuilding the foundations of the humanities” (as the Polish philosopher Bogdan Suchodolski entitled his 1928 treatise on the topic). But at stake was more than just the history of science.

The antipositivist movement was a response to social, economic, and political crises, to technocracy and consumerism, to a decline in thinking in terms of values and subjectivity, invoked in particular as the greatest value in life. It was not directed against natural science as a whole, but against its Darwinian version. The new physics, biology and non-Euclidian geometries were fueling the “rebuilding of foundations.” Whilst expounding futurism in 1919, Roman Jakobson cited the physicists Khvolson and Umov and noted works by Bogdanov (the founder of “tektology” and a self-taught immunologist and pathologist), Bakhtin invoked Heisenberg, and Mandelstam penned a poem on Lamarck’s philosophy of nature. The most widely admired scientist was Einstein, held up by Cassirer as an originator of the foundations of humanist methodology.

The „antipositivist breakthrough” lasted in the humanities until the end of the 1960s. This has since been followed by a long series of so-called “turns.”

Irrespective of the differing perspectives in terms of subject and methodology, these interactions between the humanities and natural sciences together revealed three fundamental epistemological principles: point of view, relationality, and perspectivism. It is notable that at MIT in the late 1950s, Jakobson and Niels Bohr together engaged in discussion on the relation of linguistics to the physical sciences and the requirements of relativistic invariance.

## The 1960s

In the humanities, the impact of the antipositivist “breakthrough” (or “paradigm shift”) lasted until the end of the 1960s. Then and in the decade that followed, trust broke down in linear scientific progress regulated by paradigm shifts, in the rationality in gaining and preserving knowledge, and in the transparency of the scientific language, free from context and extra-cognitive aims. Much as in the phase of the antipositivist breakthrough, the “philosophical disquietudes” in the “increasingly unsettled intellectual field” (as described by Clifford Geertz) were linked to events and upheaval



## ACADEMIA FOCUS ON Literary Studies

in the social and political sphere. The postmodernist breakthrough in art and science, described by Fredric Jameson as an artefact of late-stage capitalism, resonated with the war in Vietnam, with the student protests in Europe (in the Eastern European region further motivated by the invasion of Czechoslovakia by “friendly” troops), and with the flower-children movement. The “sweet 1960s,” dominated by Paul Feyerabend’s “anything goes” principle laid out in his book *Against Method*, had a rather bitter aftertaste.

The shifts that came next manifested themselves in a series of so-called “turns” – this term increasingly began to be used to describe the new order being established in the humanities and social sciences. This new order was consciously aimed against the hitherto dominant “paradigms,” “breakthroughs,” and “renewals,” against analytical categories being treated as descriptive, recognizing them instead as operational concepts that co-create the object of cognition and which themselves in turn are subject to change under the influence of the object. A radically different, post-modern landscape of humanities and social sciences, cultural sciences and nature sciences was emerging – a cross-cutting, transdisciplinary picture. Only the overarching cognitive principles developed in the early phase of the anti-positivist breakthrough remained unchanged: point of view, perspectivism (subjective and linguistic), and the relationality of cognition.

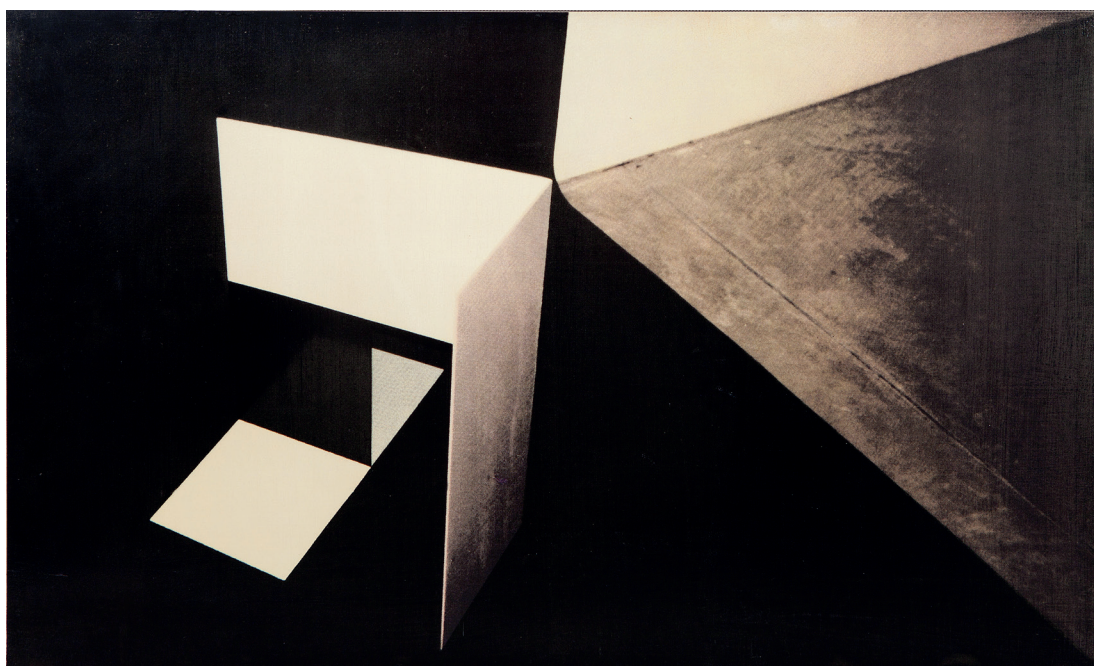
There are many indications that the first stimuli prompting a postmodern reorientation came from modern literary studies in the broadest sense. The historiographer Hayden White, the founder of the “narrative turn,” certainly drew upon these ideas.

Equally important inspiration came from analytical philosophy, a new interpretation of which, dubbed the “linguistic turn,” was proposed by Richard Rorty. The cornerstone proposals of both trends appeared at virtually the same time: Rorty’s anthology *The Linguistic Turn* in 1967, and White’s *Metahistory* in 1973. They had a significant impact on American cultural anthropology (ethnology), in which yet another, “interpretative” turn emerged. Moreover, all three phrases were inseparable from the soon-to-be proclaimed “rhetorical” and “discursive” turns. In all of them, the focus remained on the mechanisms of production of various cultural texts – the narrative schemas and linguistic figures activated in them, representing specific world-views and aimed at shaping awareness in a specific way. All of them also shared a belief in the causality of the text, in the textual construal no longer just of the object of cognition, but also of the cognizing mind.

“Turns” proclaimed in lieu of “breakthroughs” or “renewals” have since then gained a permanent place in the vocabulary of the history of the humanities. Subsequent ones, although they rejected the primacy of the text, have retained the pan-constructionist conviction. They emerged out of one another, often being difficult to clearly tease apart. This, incidentally, is one of the more momentous changes that the “turns” have ushered in, promoting work done within the cross-domain borderlands, along the frontiers, so to speak, in between areas and disciplines, between science and art, between theory and practice.

The plethora of briskly declared turns is difficult to organize chronologically, or even to enumerate: including the performative, post-colonial, feminist, masculinist, translational, spatial, and iconic (or pic-

**Rebecca H. Quaytman**  
*Replica of Kobra's Spatial*  
*Composition 2 (1928)*



REBECCA H. QUAYTMAN, COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART IN WARSAW

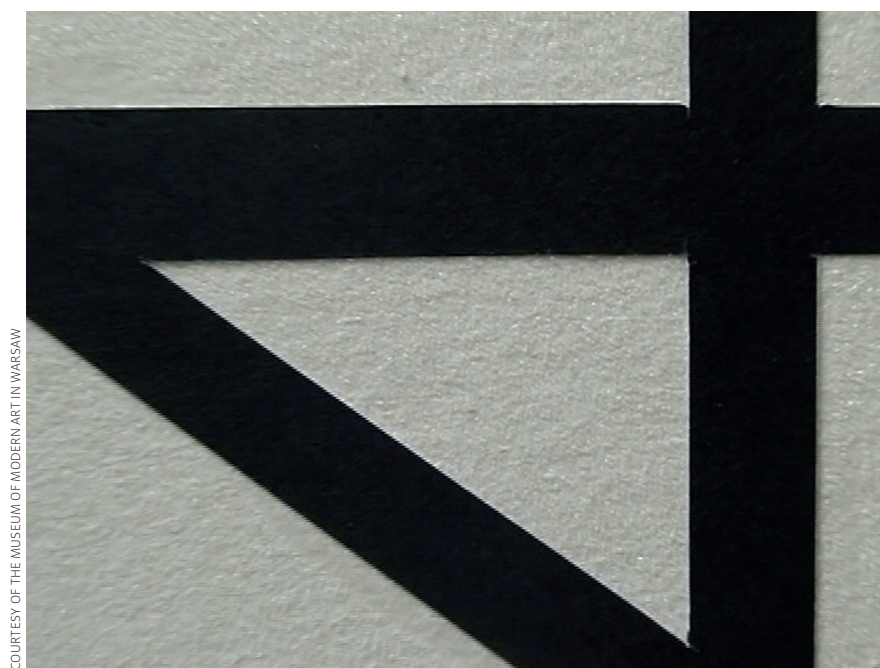
torial/visual) turn, the cognitivist, digital, post-secular, affective, regional, empirical, ethical, biographical, archival, forensic, and global turn, the turn towards identity, towards experience, towards new historicism, towards materiality, towards corporeality, the turn towards things, towards practice, etc. (the “rectal turn” being probably inappropriate to mention). The word “turn” has not always appeared in the names; “studies” has sometimes been used instead (as in urban studies, memory studies, heritage studies, climate studies, environment studies, disability studies, sound studies, etc.), or sometimes “criticism” (e.g. ecocriticism).

All these pivotal shifts have had their devoted supporters and also their staunch opponents, judging the whole commotion to be noting but fashionable nonsense and amateurism, inevitably threatening both interdisciplinarity and especially transdisciplinarity. There have also been skeptics, recognizing that the proclaimed “turns” are actually relapses to problems already taken up in the antipositivist breakthrough. Not without some justification. The turn towards experience evoked the memory of Dilthey’s category of *Erlebnis* (and also experience as conceptualized by Florian Znaniecki), the affective turn harked back to empathy and co-experience, heritage studies looked back to the erstwhile study of tradition (albeit conceived in a non-constructivist manner), and the turn towards theory/practice was astonishingly reminiscent of the collaboration between scholars and artists from the first decades of the twentieth century – when Russian poets and Pasternak had attended meetings of the Moscow Linguistic Circle, Eisenstein had introduced literary scholars to the techniques of film editing in St. Petersburg, and experts in poetics wrote novels, film and theater scripts. The interaction between the antipositivists with the new natural sciences has already been mentioned; to what has been hinted at, we can add that Jakobson developed his famous definition of “literariness” while studying two types of aphasia.

Novelty, as is well known, is a relative category, and it can always be said that everything has already been done before. The “new humanities” can therefore be treated as the “new old humanities.” However, this would mean overlooking the constellations created during the turns, which had been overlooked in the era of “breakthroughs.” From the interdisciplinary interaction there emerged, if not new objects of cognition, then new approaches to objects already known, albeit now viewed with “someone else’s eyes” – from the point of view of another discipline, another science and another method – and now named differently.

## Transfers

Indeed, the point of all the various turns has not been about simple transfers of otherness, or indiscriminate “othering.” The point was that the cultural text



COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART IN WARSAW

was recognized in them as a discursive node in which the affective and intellectual experiences, the textual events of writing and reading, the cognitive-adaptive practices directed at them, both scientific and colloquial, the new discursive events arising in these practices and the responses to them, were all intertwined – as an unclosed and undefinable process of simultaneous reproduction, processing and production of reality, naturalized as social. Text is “both the active and passive voice” of this process.

Perhaps the central term of the various turns, “text,” originally belonged to literary studies and linguistics. Indeed, the terminology of those fields has proved perhaps the most effective throughout all the turns. The notion of “narrative” has come into circulation in the analysis of scientific, painterly, even medical discourses. Specialized terms such as “reading,” “interpretation,” “understanding,” and “translation” have started to be used to name cognitive procedures in economics and genetics. The power of terminology that started out in disciplines dealing with literary (cultural) texts has proved to be overwhelming.

However, the era of “turns” is probably nearing its end. Since the end of the twentieth century, works using the words “after/post” and “beyond/trans” in their titles have increasingly been appearing. It is a normal process in science that intensively exploited research fields end up getting exhausted. Before a new one emerges, it is worth strongly emphasizing that the era of “turns” has restored the power of social influence to the humanities. Such phrases as “feminist,” “gender,” “postcolonial,” and “archival” have prompted societies to take action stretching far beyond the realm of academia. ■

**Mirosław Bałka**

*I Knew It Had 4 In It*

Further reading:

Bachmann-Medick D., *Cultural Turns: New Orientations in the Study of Culture*, De Gruyter 2016.

Bonnell V.E., Hunt L. (ed.), *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, Berkeley 1999.

Suchodolski B., *Przebudowa podstaw nauk humanistycznych [Rebuilding the Foundations of the Humanities]*, Lwów 1928.