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Editorial 02/2016

To Be “More Alert and Less Deceived.” “To Marvel At All There Is to Be Marvelled At.”¹

BENJAMIN TALLIS

Editor-in-Chief, *New Perspectives*

In a recent conversation I was asked why *New Perspectives* aspires to be an ‘Interdisciplinary Journal of Central and East European Politics and International Relations’ and, as a follow up, what was the value of this interdisciplinarity for IR scholars when “no one cares what you publish in a critical geography journal [...] no one at the ISA² is going to pat you on the back and say ‘nice piece’ if you publish it outside of IR. No one cares.” That this was raised by one of the leading lights of International Political Sociology (IPS), a potential IR ‘master in the making’ is worrying, to say the least. And not just for us here at the journal.

In this issue of *New Perspectives*, I share the space normally allocated for the Editorial with Roland Bleiker, who provides us with a stunningly moving and still raw, yet rich and nuanced tribute to the brilliant Alex Danchev, who passed away in August, all too soon. Like Danchev’s entire oeuvre, his entire career, Bleiker’s piece provides an elegantly stinging response to the questions posed above and to what they represent in contemporary IR scholarship (although unlike those critical IR scholars who often imagine the grass is so much greener elsewhere, I don’t doubt that such attitudes have their correlates in other disciplines too).

INDISCIPLINARY POWER

I came late to academic IR. I arrived at ‘the discipline’ via Economics, Investment Banking, European Studies, practice in the politics-security-diplomacy nexus and dalliances (and some more serious endeavours) in the worlds of art and journalism. But I never really saw it as a discipline in the way that some people do, and thus a binding set of constraints – as to what we should and shouldn’t study – and how we should or shouldn’t do so – and thus a framework for policing, for disciplining our enquiries into the world. Finding IPS, the visual turn, the spatial turn and other minor revolutions, as well as being let out on licence among the geographers, historians and anthropologists, came as such a happy relief. Nor, however, did I see the discipline as effectively non-existent or worthless – as one hears too often and often too

disingenuously in critical circles. IR gave me the base, the foundation for what I could offer and, as I increasingly realised through the course of my interdisciplinary research and encounters with practitioners, policy makers and scholars from other disciplines, it gave me a lot.

Some of those who helped me realise this were those who were least bound by the traditional, proper or correct ways of doing IR (as conceived by both 'mainstream' and 'critical' scholars) but who were also respected by them. One of those was Roland Bleiker. Another was Alex Danchev. The combination of my relatively late discovery of IR (as an academic discipline) and longer-standing interests in visual art as well as in the poet Paul Celan drew me to them as I explored the range of possibilities that our discipline had to offer (see, e.g., Danchev, 2009; Bleiker, 2009³). Through teaching in Prague, however, I found new registers of the value and beauty of their work: value in helping to justify to sceptical university administrators *why* I was teaching *what* I was teaching in 'Theories of IR' and 'Human Security and Terrorism' courses; beauty in the reaction of students to their work and in the reflections it afforded me on my own research.

A small demonstration. *The Baader-Meinhof Complex* (2008) is a film that I have seen too many times. Privately and as a teaching aid it has been a repeated presence in my life since its release. In teaching it helps do a job in forcing us to look at and engage with political violence, and effectively so. But Alex Danchev's (2010) piece 'The Artist and the Terrorist, or the Paintable and the Unpaintable: Gerhard Richter and the Baader-Meinhof Group' helps us get so much further. While many students were comfortable consuming the film and others engaged critically with it, some – whether through interest in or unease with the way it represented violence and its politics – wanted or needed more. The space that Danchev gave them was a space of calm, of introspection and contemplation. As he says of Richter's works on the Baader Meinhof – and unlike in Edel's film – "no one screams." This calm not only provided a way in for those discomfited (productively or otherwise) by the glamourisation of violence or, rather, by Edel's unshrinking reproduction of the glamour that we ascribe to such violence, but extended the range of our discussions. "A small demonstration of what art has to say about terror and violence" as he modestly put it in the abstract.

In the gallery with Richter, no one screams, but Danchev's work is characterised by the fizzing sense of discovery, the exuberance of opening, but also of connecting. Intertext is everywhere. Talking Heads rub shoulders with Marc Bloch and AJP Taylor. Kafka joins Clapton, alongside Baader – "dread of night. Dread of not-night" (2010). Anselm Kiefer is joined by his muses, Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann, but they are never a crowd. Paul Klee's angel appears with refreshingly new wind in his wings (Danchev, 2016: 43–60). As Danchev, quoting Celan, notes, "the dead do not return alone. Art returns" (2010). As well as returning, however, it helps us break

new ground. Bleiker argues that as “art is not the language of habit” it “allows us to “move beyond dogma” and go beyond “the practices of instrumental reason that have come to be elevated to the prime – if not only – way of understanding politics” (2009: 12). These words would find a home in a Caspar David Friedrich landscape, among many other places. With such interdisciplinary perspectives, and neither a fatally nor fatalistically conceited view of our own ‘home’ discipline, we are thus, as Danchev put it, “more alert and less deceived” (2009: 4).⁴

It is, however, important not to be deceived in another way. Interdisciplinarity of the kind highlighted here in Danchev and Bleiker’s work – like all of the best interdisciplinary scholarship which is too seldom found in IR – is anything but an instrumental pursuit. It is not born of a desire to merely find new bottles for old wine but, rather, it is an open-ended exploration born of curiosity and wonder pursued “for the love of it” as Halvard Leira recently put it (2015a).

ALL THE BEAUTIES OF THE WORLD: HISTORY, SOCIOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY, LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE, AMONG OTHER THINGS...

This alertness and astuteness, this wakefulness, this magic, is not limited to the liminalities of IR and visual art or poetry. The encounter between History and IR is also fertile and fascinating ground – and an increasingly ploughed furrow for IR scholars (e.g. De Carvalho et al., 2011; Lawson, 2012; Leira, 2015b; Nexon, 2009). We have high hopes therefore for the cross-disciplinary uptake of Derek Sayer’s captivating review essay that is included in this issue and which is made freely available for download on our blog. Sayer opens with a telling quote from the dangerously skewed histories told by leading Brexiteers, which is indicative of the nonsensical realities that have taken (back) control of the supposedly unconquerable isle. Sayer skewers the delusions of adequacy that powered the the Brexit campaign, but also some of his own previous interpretations. He undermines his ‘great arch’ of English state formation (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985) by looking from the “landscape in constant erosion” that he found in Bohemia (1998).

In doing so, Sayer reflects not only on the histories of England and Bohemia, but on the use, or rather, the uselessness of History as such. However, he again rather undermines his own argument by sharing this piece with us, which not only allows us the pleasure of reading it, but also allows us to reflect on its ample relevance for better understanding the present moment (and many others) in international relations, as well as to consider the ways that we write our own histories of the present (e.g. Foucault, 1982; Garton Ash, 2000). While History may indeed be ‘a landscape in constant erosion’ it is still very much worth capturing while we can still capture it, as WG Sebald (2002) as well as Alex Danchev (2009) – and those who choose the covers for their books – may have agreed.

The other articles in this issue also speak very much to the present moment as well as to longer-standing concerns. Molly Krasnodębska goes beyond the standard dichotomy of values and interests in analysing EU policy toward Ukraine. Her insightful analysis of the motivations and approaches of Sweden and Poland – the two EU member states that did the most to found and sustain the EU’s Eastern Partnership (EaP) – draws on political philosophy to show how although they are both primarily driven by values, they have competing visions of what these values are. This led to contradictory approaches in the EU’s dealings with Ukraine but also says much about the tensions that hamstringing the EU’s approach to its Eastern neighbourhood in general, with tragic consequences. The recent revisions to the European Neighbourhood Policy as well as its creation of a newly ‘Global Strategy’, would do well to take these issues into consideration within their implementation.

Juha Vuori, like Danchev, Bleiker and Sayer, is a scholar who has often focused on visual concerns but is also a happily restless academic soul; here he turns back to his previous theoretical work on language to provide an innovative take on (nuclear) deterrence. Taking an ostensibly esoteric point arising from Speech Act Theory he drills down into a fascinating exploration of an intuitively compelling point. I cannot say “I hereby deter you” as only you know if you are deterred or not. He notes that instead we resort to declaring things (like nuclear weapons) to (supposedly) have deterrent effects. This may be seemingly within our capacity, but as Vuori compellingly argues, it implies political responsibilities which should open up such moves to scrutiny, accountability and contestation. Crucially this goes beyond most deterrence literature – which seeks to explain how and why deterrence does or doesn’t work and, rather, seeks to examine the responsibilities implied by turning things into deterrents. It would be hard to find a topic currently closer to the bone of Central and East European concerns about the new US administration. Indeed, JL Austin might raise a chuckle at knowing that he had been transported from those Cold War Saturday mornings in Oxford to staring down the barrel at the end of the world (Krishna, 2016).

From Vuori’s MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction) world to the *MAD Magazine*-like world of Louis Armand’s *The Combinations* (of which more later...), this issue of *New Perspectives* breaks new interdisciplinary ground and attempts to provoke new constellations of understanding through the complementarity and contradiction of the other works gathered here. It is a pleasure to announce here that we are now seeking cultural as well as academic contributions – and *combinations* of such that, as Alex Danchev wrote, “not only make us feel – or feel differently – [but make] us think, and think again. We go beyond ourselves, in Gadamer’s phrase, by penetrating deeper into the work: ‘That “something can be held in our hesitant stay”.’” (Danchev, 2009: 4).

Like Roland Bleiker’s tribute, this issue of *New Perspectives* as a whole thus provides a strong response to the questions posed at the beginning of this editorial. We aspire to the condition of Alex Danchev’s work: “there were no limits to his curios-

ity. In his own words, he wanted to ‘put the imagination to work in the service of historical, political and ethical enquiry’. But within – as well as beyond – service there is joy too, and wonder” (Bleiker, in this issue). Rather than instrumentally limiting ourselves to the perceived demands of careerism or discipline, we proceed in the spirit of seeking to be ‘more alert and less deceived’ but also ‘to marvel at all there is to be marvelled at.’ (Danchev, 2011).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The title for this editorial is taken from the Introductory essay in Alex Danchev’s luminous ‘On Art and War and Terror’ (2009) and from his (2011) piece in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* advocating attendance at an exhibition of the Belgian Surrealist René Magritte.
- ² The International Studies Association’s Annual Convention, the premier gathering of IR scholars now approaching its 58th edition (in Baltimore in February 2017) and expecting upwards of 6000 delegates, including several members of the *New Perspectives* team.
- ³ On Celan specifically, see Bleiker (2009: 94–111) and, more recently, Danchev (2016: 91–104).
- ⁴ See, for example: <http://hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/ed-ruscha-quote/#collection=ed-ruscha-quote>.

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