

Commentary by Rubinoff during the 2011 Forum

RUBINOFF'S COMMENTARY FOLLOWING PRESENTATION OF 'Through the Lens of the Endgame'

On the question of whether acts of individual conscience exist within a social framework

"Can I explain how I see this? The acts are social, yes, but conscience is something else. I think that, very soon, we're going to find a continuum of genes, and I'll use the word "switched on," but really, scientifically it is termed "expressed". There will be a cluster of genes that will be identified as conscience. And so you're going to have a continuum of people with various combinations of that cluster of genes turned on. We may choose our leaders or the leaders themselves come forward based on that continuum, avoiding the pure psychopaths with none turned on.

My argument is that artists, by nature, have the most amount switched on, if not all of them. They're born with this level of conscience. Now, when you're born with certain genes turned on or turned off, it's a predilection towards these things.

This is an important part of what I think is missing from most of the humanities that I've read in the last 30 or 40 years. None of them deal with Darwin and Darwin's humanism. Part of that, I think was, as mentioned in other papers, the nationalization of science. Darwin was British. You don't hear the Germans talking about Darwin. He's not even mentioned. The French don't mention Darwin. The British kept that science going. Crick and Watson were British, so they kept Darwin's science going there. Now, the way that it's crept into our language is in social Darwinism and, naturally, there's a complete negation of that. I mean, no one really wanted that. I really sense that most of the Marxists really wanted to be Lamarckians. They really wanted to have a sense that you could actually alter people's genetic being through social interaction. That doesn't work.

Why I differentiate the two [social and individual conscience] so strongly is the elastic nature of morality. That is morality has a sliding scale. It moves wherever you want to go. If you declare war on Jews, then they're fair game. And so, if they're fair game, it seems to me that morality says you should kill them. So what happens with the sliding scale of morality is the way that it remains social. The acts of individual conscience, not the individual acts, but the acts of an individual's conscience strikes me much more of answering to something "higher and inside" — and that higher and inside is the way that I look at Darwin."

On the question of the sculpture work being a disclosure of art rather than imposition of the artists will

"... the mature conscience doesn't have that definition (imposition of will) here. A mature conscience is a fully conscious conscience."

"... to make a statement of existence itself is the first struggle against the absurdity of the full awareness of your own consciousness. That is, probably the most difficult thing is: why the hell

care? And so the statement of existence takes an enormous amount of will to move against that absurdity. And that, I find, is very, very important, because with full consciousness, you're also fully conscious of the absurdity of your act.

So it requires the will to exist, and that's what I'm talking about. You have the will of the artist to exist with the necessity of the artist to exist, which you feel very strongly inside yourself. It took me a long time to fuse those two things together.

So the concept of disclosure is in the statement of existence itself and the celebration of existence itself. And if you can celebrate your own existence, that's part of the part of giving. That's part of the map of the human soul. So now you're disclosing the map of the human soul. That is disclosure. So the act of will, then, at that particular time, is not a will of imposition, it's the ability to overcome the inertia — the essential inertia that comes with the recognition of absurdity."

On the maturity of conscience

..."Mature conscience, by my thinking, is full consciousness. And so that only comes with knowledge. So there's no way that, by this definition, a child can create a work of art. It's not possible to do. There's not enough information there to be able to have a mature conscience. So I am agreeing with you completely. [De Bouvoir's] maturity and her recognition in this time after the war is probably by her own maturity from what she knew and what she learned. So yes, you do grow into it.

The only way that I can see this, is that the attempt to become fully conscious means accounting for whatever knowledge you might have. Now obviously no one is going to know everything, but the sum of all human knowledge is what I see artists mapping. So as they map it and original art comes about, they become part of that knowledge itself, and so that's part of the act of making art.

On the influence of the art market

"Well, one of the things is, that [the art market] wasn't so bad in the 1950s. When the dealers themselves had to work in their dedication to art, they became dedicated to the artists. And when I was looking for that in New York, it was only a pretence by then. You weren't an artist anymore. You were a petty manufacturer, and you were on the list. And, like I said, "cause any trouble, and we've got 10,000 people who will take your place."

So, I don't agree with you. I don't know how important that art world was at that particular point because the Blaue Reiter artists showed in their own environment at that particular time. The Blaue Reiter chose the works themselves, they found their places to show, they had enough patronage to mount those shows, but there was no such thing as art dealers at that point. They must have come afterwards, not from modernism.

So, I can imagine the support system must have grown up from supporters of that art finally becoming dealers and collectors trading among each other, but not at the beginning. I think that the artists themselves had control over that first market, and I think that they carried on from 1874, probably right into 1914."

On the artists existence as a statement of defiance

"I look at the statement of existence itself as a statement of defiance. That is the statement of defiance, to survive being an artist and to get through it and get through a lifetime. To be doing it even after 30, 40, 50, 60 years. That's a statement of defiance, and that's a statement of your own existence. And I don't know now that you really expect anything beyond that. One of the most difficult decisions that I experience, and I couldn't overcome in myself, was teaching, because what could I teach people... 'Go out and drive a cab', 'Do whatever it takes to keep going because that's the only thing that there is really out there for you'? That's a terrible point of view, so I wouldn't teach. I just felt that it was almost criminal to teach. So, if people have [art] within them, it will emerge and does."

On the social component of a mature conscience

"Again, it's not just conscience, it's mature conscience. And by mature conscience, I mean full consciousness, the full ability of the weight of your consciousness. Now, that full ability of the weight of your conscience, that's the social side of that particular thing. That's the mature conscience part, but not conscience itself. It doesn't separate conscience itself.

So we're talking about art, now, as an act of will in accord with a mature conscience. It's that mature part that is the kicker in there, which is this question of can you act within the realm of what you know, conscientiously? So that's quite different because it does keep your conscience quite independent in terms of the way that your mind may be structured. But on the other hand, you have to incorporate the knowledge that you have in order to have that act. And so it's acting at the outer limits of your own knowledge. So that means that knowledge becomes very important. So as I have matured, I also think that the maturity of my conscience has matured.

So those decisions are about awareness, for example, of manipulation of the genome. To me, I don't consider it just immoral, I consider it irrational. And so many of these things, such as nuclear winter, are actually the result of irrational acts. It's somehow the Enlightenment having turned back on itself from rationality to irrationality. And in face of that irrationality, you might in calling for rationality, in turn, call that morality.

There are so many irrational acts in the 20th century that were rationalized. And that is one of the aspects of the age of agriculture that I really criticize, and have criticized for the last 25 years. It is the ability to rationalize in ways that you come to a contradiction that is actually something highly irrational."

On who decides what is original art

"That's a really good question because when I originally thought of that, I had a very strong purpose in its formulation, and that was that it would be self-measuring within the artist, that they themselves would know, and that they would be self-judgmental on that particular issue. And that's what I wanted — a self-judgmental definition of art. It was not a prescription, but rather something that the individual artist could use to measure themselves and their own honesty about

who they were and what they had accomplished, because I really believe that only the artist, internally, knows whether or not they've crossed that line into original art. This isn't about the viewer, this is about the internal workings of the artist, and I wanted a description or a way of communicating what the artist might do as a set of criteria to measure himself, herself. And yes, that really was the purpose for that definition."

RUBINOFF'S COMMENTARY FOLLOWING PRESENTATION OF
'Scientists and artists between war and peace:
the Blaue Reiter moment'

On the Lyotard and the question of the attack on the metanarrative

"I thought what I would do is begin with the influence of the University of Berlin. So this fits very, very much with what we're talking about. Now I don't know if people are aware of the Humboldt University of Berlin and the list of notables who are associated with it.

We've got von Bismarck, Bonhoeffer, who you mentioned, Max Born, the physicist, W.E. DuBois, African-American activist and scholar. Paul Erlich, physician, Nobel Prize Medicine 1908, his work was done on syphilis. Albert Einstein. Friedrich Engels. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, a very important philosopher. He was the first philosopher at the university when it was founded.

Herman Emil Fischer, founder of modern biochemistry, Nobel Prize 1902. Fritz Haber, the inventor of both modern chemical warfare and synthetic ammonia. Otto Hahn was a student of Fritz Haber's and won the Nobel Prize for chemistry in 1944. He is the person most responsible for finding fission, and that was done in I think, 1938.

Hegel, that's Hegel the philosopher. Heinrich Heine the poet, who also was actually a secretary to Rodin, interestingly enough. Werner Heisenberg, physicist, Nobel Prize for Physics in 1932. Wilhelm von Humboldt, politician, linguist, and he was the founder of the university. Karl Liebknecht, social politician and revolutionary. Herbert Marcuse, Karl Marx, Lisa Meitner. Lisa Meitner was a physicist who actually confirmed the fission experiment by Otto Hahn.

Felix Mendelssohn, that's the composer. Max Planck, the physicist, von Schilling, the philosopher. Schopenhauer, the philosopher, that's just a few. This is a very, very long list. These are the people who might otherwise be familiar to most of us.

And then there are 33 Nobel Prize winners, among them Max Planck, Heisenberg, Otto Hahn, as I said, Einstein, Haber. So that gives you an idea on the power of this place. This place, in science, was a genuine powerhouse. Now in trying to keep all of this material together and keep this narrative going, I tried to connect Newton to ballistics. So we're talking about the utilization of science for its destructive power and the conversion of science into that to destructive power. ...

That's the problem. I think Humboldt's [founder of the University of Berlin] purpose was to assure that there would be at least conversations with the scientists over the use and how, and the direction of where, their technology might go.

Now, I want to raise the University of Berlin and my reading of Lyotard and his attack on metanarratives. One question that I must ask is, what extant influence does Lyotard have on contemporary university culture, and as a result, on the culture as a whole? Now I'm raising this because of the metanarrative that Lyotard, a French philosopher, raises about the Humboldt University of Berlin.

As late as 2005, in his book Songs of Experience, Martin Jay gives Lyotard recognized credibility.

So to repeat, I must ask is what extant influence does Lyotard have on contemporary university culture and as a result, on the culture as a whole?

Certainly he has had little effect on the empirical sciences and mathematics, in my perception. What concerns me is the default position of resignation regarding the determination of the direction of the resultant technology. This appears to be the self-fulfilling result of the dismissal of metanarrative. It is not clear whether the dismissal of metanarrative follows Lyotard's dismissal of what he calls *the* metanarrative resulting from Humboldt's vision.¹

So in talking about the founding of the University of Berlin, it has been necessary to elucidate the philosophy that legitimated the foundation of the University of Berlin." This is Lyotard talking, and that philosophy was meant to be the development of contemporary knowledge.

As Lyotard states, many countries in the 19th and 20th century, adopted this university organization—this is the critical part—as a model for foundation or reform of their own system of higher education, beginning with the United States. I was lucky to have attended an undergraduate school that had been purposely created in 1958, with the spirit of knowledge as its center piece. By the spirit of knowledge, I mean spirit free of commodification.

It is not clear to me whether Lyotard is negatively critical or wistful about its loss. Perhaps he's both. My exposure to art was a fusion of art and knowledge free of commodification. The commodification of knowledge has since become dangerously close to complete as the underlying force of the information economy. So the question is what is the state of resistance to this completion?"

On living in a post-metanarrative moment

"So then we have isolated ourselves into smaller and smaller narratives and I think the argument of a much larger narrative has to come back. I have read that the abandonment of the metanarrative has led to abandonment of the concept of significant historical narratives themselves. As the rest of intellectual history begins to abandon metanarrative, then it abandons the ability to address these issues by people with a non-technical point of view.

My proposal of the concept of the end of the age of agriculture presupposes an even larger narrative than the 35,000 years of the history of art by artists. Ultimately, it's *The Origin of Species*: Darwin's three and a half billion year history of life on the planet. That's our history, and that is a huge metanarrative.

I think that it is important to discuss the serious disengagement from Darwin that I have perceived by the humanities. In 1953, Darwinian thinking went from theory to a full-fledged science from the proposal of DNA by Crick and Watson. I'm raising the question openly now as to why the humanities have not dealt with the humanistic side of Darwin. While science moves ahead, and moves towards possible alterations, within the next 50 or 100 years, of the human genome itself,

¹ See the following link for a good overview of Wilhelm von Humboldt and his ideas:
http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/archive/publications/ThinkersPdf/humbolde.PDF

this disengagement seems to me to confront us with an enormous problem.

This science and the ensuing genetic engineering have evolved into one of the most important arguments of human values facing the future. The disengagement of non-scientists and the stated abdication by abandonment of the metanarrative may prove even more destructive than thermo nuclear war."

RUBINOFF'S COMMENTARY FOLLOWING PRESENTATION OF
'Chromophilia: Der Blaue Reiter, Walter Benjamin and the Emancipation of Color

On Kandinsky's argument of aesthetic theory

"I'll have to admit that I have difficulty responding to this because this sits within an area where almost automatically people assume art and painting are interchangeable terms. In fact, in the Blaue Reiter Almanac we sculptors don't exist. There's a mention of Archipenko but in passing, by a writer I don't know.

But mainly I want to get to the question of theory and what Kandinsky himself thinks about artistic theory or aesthetic theory. So here's what he says.

'No such theory of principle can be immaterial. That which has no material existence cannot be subjected to a material classification. That which belongs to the spirit of the future can only be realized in feeling and to this feeling the talent of the artist is the only route.' That's nice. Except then he says, *'Theory is the lamp which sheds light on the petrified ideas of yesterday and of the more distant past.'* So this is a warning against aesthetic theory. And then he goes on pages later to deal with his theory of colour. So I find that to be either a mistranslation — or something very, very odd — but he just negates his own argument.

He goes on for pages and pages and pages on theory of colour, but he's already negated the idea that aesthetic theory should be considered in the first place.

But I have to admit that there's little that I can actually say about this as a sculptor because it does follow this prejudice that's inherent in the entire Blaue Reiter movement itself, against sculpture. And so your paper also follows along the same line of that particular thing. So when form is attacked, sculpture is attacked."

RUBINOFF'S COMMENTARY FOLLOWING PRESENTATION OF
'Reconfiguring the sacred: Artists, scientists and spiritualism before 1914'

On the dangers of residual tribalism

"Okay, one of the aspects, and I think I said it earlier in my presentation, is the primal scream against residual, tribal warfare. When I really became aware of this—and it really shocked me—was in 1979 when the Ayatollah came back into Iran. I thought tribalism was on the wane. That it was finally on its way out.

There was a sense in the 1960s and the '70s, that we were moving beyond tribalism..

So one of the aspects of ourselves regarding beyond the age of agriculture is to re-examine ourselves and our institutions as to what is residual tribalism, And among those things, I look at religion as metaphorical tribalism. The aspect of agriculture that was so significant was not that there wasn't tribalism before agriculture, but how strongly the age of agriculture reinforced it. And how that grew in magnitude from a tribe that might be 50 people, 75 or 100 people, to whole civilizations that saw themselves tribally...That is the dangerous residue. "

RUBINOFF'S COMMENTARY FOLLOWING PRESENTATION OF
'A language for humanity?' The Blaue Reiter, and the failed search for universality

On whether World War I might have improved art

"Those are fighting words and I'll say how those are fighting words. Interesting things happened afterward. It happened to Picasso, and this may happen to these young painters easier than it happens to sculptors. But I really see it in the work. As to the Bauhaus, I always had a lot of faith in the Bauhaus, but lately I don't because I think Gropius really regarded art as a craft, and it went back to being a craft once it went into the Bauhaus, which in turn turned the artist back into a petty functionary again. This is very serious. You can say no. But I see it in Kandinsky. Kandinsky starts to stylize his work. That late Kandinsky is very stylized. It just fits. It's like he's coasting on Kandinsky, and I find it very stylized and not nearly as raw or as good as it was before."

"... look at late Malevich. It starts becoming early Impressionism. That's a step backwards. Malevich disappears at that particular point. Okay. So, we already destroyed Kandinsky. Let's keep this going here. Picasso becomes a victim of the success of those Picassos, those late and middle Picassos in 1923 and 1924. They're just Picasso doing Picasso. It's like de Niro doing de Niro, and Jack Nicholson doing Jack Nicholson. You know, he becomes a victim of his own success and from that point on he's Picasso doing Picasso. Sorry. Just destroyed him as well. So, these are some of the people from that particular time. It doesn't happen to Brancusi. Brancusi does some of his greatest work after that time. Gabo does as well.

"... sculptors mature later because they don't sell. That's the reason why. They can't become a victim of their own success because that just is not in the cards. On the other hand, painters can, and Picasso had become so famous by that time — it's Picasso doing Picasso. I see so much of that work afterwards and it's like—snore. And I see that Matisse becomes Matisse—snore—and there's a lot of sleepers after that. And so when James says art improved, you're going to have to come up with a lot newer artists. Klee comes into his own. I agree. Klee easily comes into his own after the war.

On the perception of World War I and II as one war

"One thing that I have a perception of, and I think others do as well, is that it's a 31-years war. It begins in 1914. It runs to exhaustion. You've got so many millions dead on either side. It needs rest. The war doesn't end. It just simply requires new cannon fodder. It takes another 20 years to build it. So, if you said we need 20 years to keep this thing going, guess when you go to war again? Exactly. So, that's the way that I see it. What goes on is a respite in that time, and I agree with you, these things happen among artists, writers, and others. That transformation happens in the respite, but it is only a respite. It's a respite because that war never ended. It just didn't. You can't just explain Weimar or do any of those things and, unless you see it as a continuation of one into the other, this is just an excuse to stop for a while.

Whereas there's a vacuum that's left and then a lot of new work comes into that vacuum, and a lot of cynicism comes with it. We have to look at Dix and Gross and the Dada, and Hemmingway

and the group of American artists. The cynicism that grows in that particular period grows out of that war. So, I think it should never be thought of as not being continuous. I think that it's a continuous war that just takes a respite. So, James when you look at what goes on in that period, 1918 to 1939, you're really looking at art in an interwar respite, post-World War I period.

1918 was not a new beginning.