

***(Ecce Homo)*. A radical reframing of the problem of value in arts & culture**

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*Ecce Homo* by Anthony Van Dyck, 1625-6, oil on canvas

## **Abstract**

This paper considers the problem of value in arts and culture from a radically experiential perspective, locating it in our personal responsiveness to singular cultural encounters. It draws on Hannah Arendt's essay "Thinking and Some Moral Considerations" to describe what "thinking as such" involves, then casts evaluation as a job of thought, contrasting it with two other assessment processes, "appraisal" and "appreciation", to which it is only contingently related. The paper distinguishes between conceptual thinking and categorical logic, the former key to an open-ended evaluative dialogue by way of an "experience-concept-experience reflection cycle", the latter a tool of socio-political control actioned via administrative definitions and criteria. The conclusion describes the sorts of questions that an authentic act of evaluation in arts and culture entails, taking the play *4:48 Psychosis* by British playwright Sarah Kane as an example. Throughout the paper, the quest for meaning in cultural experience is seen as integral to the accrual of any value whatsoever.

## **Keywords**

arts, culture, value, experience, meaning, thinking, Arendt

## Introduction

“There are no dangerous thoughts; thinking itself is dangerous.” Hannah Arendt

The genre of visual art *Ecce Homo* is usually translated as “behold the man”, or from the original ancient Greek phrase *idou ho Anthropos*, “look, a human being”. Arising in the eighth and ninth centuries CE, in the Byzantine empire, it is associated with paintings of Jesus being presented, after his torture at the hands of Roman legionaries, to a Jewish crowd, who violently reject him (Drury 1999). Jesus is shown stripped, bound, and bleeding: in short, vulnerable. The words “ecce homo” are Pontius Pilate’s, who thereby seeks to reinforce Jesus’s non-divine status. During the medieval and Renaissance periods, the genre evolved into a metaphorical depiction of universal suffering that addresses viewers in direct fashion and demands their direct engagement in return. The nature of the demand is a simple one: feel something for another human being in pain.



*Ecce Homo* Sculpture by Joanna Sokolowska



“I am Here” Sun Yuan and Peng Yu. *Ecce Homo: the Human Images in Contemporary Art* exhibition

*Ecce Homo* paintings take their place alongside related Christian imagery like Pensive Christ, Man of Sorrows and, of course, the Pieta. Such a volume of commentary has been written about Passion cycle iconography it seems redundant to add a few passing remarks.<sup>1</sup> But my interest in

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<sup>1</sup> For example see Davidson 1975, Moreno 1981, Schwartz 2005 and Klis 2007.

the *Ecce Homo* genre is here a specific one, relating to its core presumption that to be human is to respond to the sight of another human. It would not be difficult to fit these paintings into a study of the sociology of emotions, as key heuristics in Norbert Elias's civilizing process, for example (Elias 2000). An agonised Jesus is presented in Diderotian tableau: an outward, theatricalised depiction of an inner, emotional truth. The setting can have realistic elements: an angry crowd, a city background, a dickering judge, a tortured body. The mood, however, is invariably one of rest and reflection, the portrayal of suffering purged of narrative tension. All that is to be done, has been done. Whatever will happen next is something else again, a different part of the story. The *Ecce Homo* image emerges from the relentless flow of action before and after it, a moment of spiritual arrest that expands to fill the viewer's whole consciousness. No wonder Nietzsche chose these words for the title of his last essay, a celebration of vulnerability as the crux and apex of authentic humanity (1967). For Nietzsche, suffering is not the lamentable result of the absence of god-like powers, something we need to deplore and overcome. It constitutes the principal requirement for meaningful existence in the world of appearances. To suffer is to live, and to feel for another in pain is to acknowledge a condition of life itself. "Look, a human being", is the title of a painting. Equally, it applies to those who choose to see it.



*Ecce Homo.* Antonio Ciseri, 1871

Simple, stark and elemental, the *Ecce Homo* genre involves the viewer in a process of unavoidable co-identification. I am the Other, and the Other is me. Because nothing more need be asked for, no religious or moral endorsement, no political or social analysis, these images offer entry into the broader theme of this paper: how we evaluate our arts and cultural experiences. An important point to grasp about *Ecce Homo* paintings is that they offer an encounter that is

perplexing in the Socratic, aporetic, sense. When we take our leave of them, we cannot be said to have gained in cognitive skill or well-being, or added to the social fund of knowledge. Very probably no benefit to the economy has occurred, and to argue for an increase in social cohesion is to step beyond the implications of the genre, because perhaps the opposite has happened – indeed, in the past *Ecce Homo* paintings have been accused of being divisive and anti-Semitic (Sabella, review of Cohen, 2011). Singular artworks act upon our senses in ways that kink the means we use to generally assess them, providing experiences so particular they weigh our methods down, like a boulder on a trampoline. Our evaluations are wrapped around the encounter, as it were, which exerts a gravitational pull felt as a demand for the declaration of a subject position. Even as we observe externally, we are changed internally. We are human after all, and to be human is to respond.

It is this naturally-occurring responsiveness that I believe must be given greater role in the evaluation of art and culture. These subject positions, hailed into being by singular encounters, are more than individual reactions to what is better gauged in more aggregate, social scientific ways. The retreat into metrical measures of intangible experience, of which art and culture furnish many examples, represents a catastrophic failure to grasp what is actually at stake in the evaluation process, which is not this or that number or ranking or index, but no less than our entire *sense of value*. Every cultural encounter has the potential not simply to “add value” to our lives, whatever that strange supplemental step might be said to involve, but to upend it. Evaluation is a dangerous activity, that puts what we know both about artworks and about ourselves to the hazard.



*Ecce Homo* by Evelyn Bencicova, photograph series

Reframing the evaluation of arts and culture in this way lifts it out of the rut of methodological fetishism where the social sciences, especially economics, currently have it, and returns it to broader philosophical consideration.<sup>2</sup> We need not abandon social scientific approaches entirely, which provide important disciplinary diversity. But we must shake off the crabbed hand of an unreflecting positivism that asserts a thin and reedy rule over aspects of our lives it is manifestly unfit to assay. There are some questions that sit between private and public domains and cut across them in confounding ways. They present partly as matters of thought, the realm of philosophy and the humanities, partly as matters of action, the realm of the social sciences. Our arts and cultural experiences belong in this interstitial space, where paradigms and paradigmatic assumptions collide, and our attempts to master the phenomena we find there do not resolve into a final order. Hannah Arendt would call the mental activity proper to this area “thinking”, and the upshot of such activity “resultless”, by which she means that it leads to no stable, non-controversial conclusion, answer or score that lets us know that the quandary we find ourselves in, which we choose to call “a problem” for reasons of our own, has a “solution” in the way we might fondly hope. The problem of value in arts and culture is one that always and forever stays a problem. It goes away only when we go away, because it is stitched into our existence with the silver thread of our own human responsiveness.<sup>3</sup>

Arendt is an important figure for those interested in encounters in the private-public realm that in her own phrase, “leave nothing tangible behind... and can be satisfied only by thinking, and the thoughts which [we] had yesterday will satisfy this need today only to the extent that [we] can think them anew” (Arendt 2003: 163). For historians, there are echoes here of R G Collingwood’s *Idea of History* (1956), a belief that human thought is the red thread making the past a cohesive sequence of interpretable action and not just “stuff” that happens to be over. Similarly, with Arendt the quest for meaning, restless and prospective, overrides the desire for knowledge, which can be satisfied by an end-point, a result. Seeing the evaluation of arts and culture as a job of thinking rather than an output of data, our encounters become more elusive and unstable, perhaps less satisfactory. We may find – almost certainly will find, in fact – that we have less to say about them; or at least, that there is less we can blithely assert without

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<sup>2</sup> For further remarks on methodological fetishism in the problem of culture’s value, see Meyrick & Barnett, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> While I draw mainly here on the essay “Thinking and Some Moral Considerations”, Arendt explores similar ideas in her other writings, particularly “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy” (Arendt 2003: 18-49), and “Politics and Understanding” (Arendt 1994: ??).

equivocation. In one of her later essays, “Thinking and Moral Considerations”, published shortly before her death in 1971, Arendt wrote:

Thinking’s chief characteristic is that it interrupts all doing, all ordinary activities no matter what they happen to be... When I am thinking, I move outside the world of appearances, even if my thought deals with ordinary sense-given objects and not with... the old domain of metaphysical thought... [This] may indicate why thinking, the quest for meaning – rather than the scientist’s thirst for knowledge for its own sake – can be felt to be “unnatural”, as though men, when they begin to think, engage in some activity contrary to the human condition. Thinking as such..., every reflection that does not serve knowledge and is not guided by practical purposes... is, as Heidegger once remarked, “out of order”... The business of thinking is like the veil of Penelope: it undoes every morning what it had finished the night before. (165-6)

The mention of Heidegger, Arendt’s one-time lover and teacher, is not coincidental. His writings are central to her attempt to give the Kantian strain in Western philosophy a worldliness that can account for the epic violence, administrative detachment and moral decay of the twentieth century – an infernal trifecta well-captured in her phrase “the banality of evil” (Arendt 1951). A similar endeavour can be seen in Frankfurt School Marxism, a desire to square the Enlightenment tradition with the unprecedented social facts of murderous world war, totalitarian ideology, and the horrors of the gas chamber. Herbert Marcuse was Heidegger’s pupil too, and saw in his existential philosophy a way of transcending an inadequate positivism by endowing the sphere of social and political action with greater capacity for human agency; for *Dasein* (becoming), and historical self-determination.<sup>4</sup> For both Arendt, the liberal political scientist, and for Marcuse, the humanist Marxist, thinking emerges as a *primum mobilium* in the world of appearances, but has a disjunctive, even uncanny relationship to it. Thus, a paradox: that thought *in* this world, is not thought *of* this world, but occupies its own invisible stratum of preoccupation with its own insistences and concerns. These are, literally, in another dimension

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<sup>4</sup> For fascinating insight into Marcuse’s relationship with Heidegger see, “Herbert Marcuse and Martin Heidegger: An Exchange of Letters” (1991) in *New German Critique*, and in the same issue an accompanying article by Richard Wolin, “Introduction to Herbert Marcuse and Martin Heidegger: An Exchange of Letters”. Wolin writes “what Marcuse valorized above all about Heidegger’s early philosophy was its potential contribution to the “active side” of dialectics in a way that paralleled the contribution made by German idealism to historical materialism in the previous century. If the “crisis of historical materialism”... had been precipitated by the triumph of Marxism’s “objectivistic” self-understanding, would not a new infusion of historically adequate idealist categories aid greatly in the resuscitation of a senescent Marxist theory?” (21).

to “solutions” to “problems” and the horses-for-courses application of knowledge Marcuse dubbed “instrumental rationality” (1964).

Two questions arise about the other kind of rationality, the thinking kind. First, what is its nature, and how are we to place it, in all its resultless-ness, in our lives? Second, what are the implications for the public domain, where answers and end points, of one kind or another, must be achieved? In the language of Arendt, what is the relationship between thinking as such – unstable, provisional, coeval with a certain kind of consciousness – and judgement – the decisive act that flows out of thinking, but has no smooth, observable connection to it, and lies on the other side of an existential abyss that individuals cross at their peril, if they are so unwary as to start thinking in the first place?



*Nuclear ecce homo* by Galo Ocampo

### **Evaluation as a job of “thinking as such”**

These questions crop up repeatedly in Arendt’s essays around her best-known books, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). In “Thinking and Moral Considerations” she turns to Socrates to explore what “thinking as such” entails, and its links to action and decisions. Perhaps the first thing to observe about thinking, as Arendt understands it, is that it has no special object or purpose, that everything is permitted to it, even as nothing is particular to it. It engages in all manner of questioning, in no given order, and constantly shifts the ground of its interrogation. Arendt asks, “how can anything relevant for the world we live in arise out of resultless an enterprise? An answer, if at all, can come only from the thinking



activity, the performance itself, which means that we have to trace experiences rather than doctrines” (167). The last observation is profound. It distinguishes thinking from anything like expert knowledge. There is only one qualification needed for thinkers: to think. They do not have to be specially educated, or intelligent, or skilled. Anyone can do it, though few people do, and in that tragic irony can be found the historical events that drove Arendt from being a philosopher concerned with the private domain to a political scientist concerned with the public one.

How does thinking provide this remarkable, if often unwelcome, negative service? Arendt’s description assists not only with the problem of value in arts and culture, but with a primary tool of social and political action in the modern era: categorical logic. She does not produce, in the Weberian manner, a critique of bureaucracy and administrative power; but she prepares the ground for what this would involve. It is a signal contribution to understanding not *what* we think – most of which would not qualify in Arendt’s eyes as “thought” at all – but *how* we think, what mechanisms and elisions we deploy to think we think, when in fact we are swapping the unquestioned rules and beliefs of one doctrinal package for the equally unquestioned rules and beliefs of another.

To follow the operation of categorical logic, we first need to comprehend the higher-order intellectual entity of which the category is the second-order, socio-political precipitation: the concept. Concepts and categories are constructions in language, but there are important differences between them. In this section, I address concepts. In the next, I address categories and categorical logic. The key device for both is the abstract noun, taken either from the list of everyday proper nouns or from the list of descriptive adjectives, then de-concretized and set to work, within syntactical structures, as the subject of a sentence. “An excellent painting”, thus becomes “excellence in painting”, the abstract noun treated as immanent to a super-sensory realm where may be identified, via thought, important notions or qualities that appear in the sensory one as their examples or instances. These abstract nouns have a complicated relationship to lived experience, as Arendt explains by reference to the Socratic dialogues:

The topics of these early dialogues deal with very simple, everyday concepts, such as arise whenever people open their mouths and begin to talk. The introduction usually runs as follows: To be sure, there are happy people, just deeds, courageous men, beautiful things to see and admire, everybody knows about them; the trouble starts

with our usage of nouns, presumably derived from those adjectives which we apply to particular cases as they *appear* us (we *see* a happy man, *perceive* the courageous deed or the just decision), that is, with such words as “happiness”, “courage”, “justice” etc. which we now call concepts and which Solon called the “non-appearing measure” (*aphanes metron*) “most difficult for the mind to comprehend, but nevertheless holding the limit of all things”... These words, used to group together seen and manifest qualities and occurrences but nevertheless relating to something unseen, are part and parcel of our everyday speech, and still we can give no account of them; when we define them, they get slippery; when we talk about their meaning, nothing stays put anymore, everything begins to move. (171)

The trouble with concepts is that, arising from everyday experience, they claim a meaning beyond the material realm. This claim is derived from the fact that we intuit in words like “justice”, “truth”, “beauty”, “courage” and so on, more than nominalist convenience – handy verbal tags for grouping like instances with like – but a higher intellectual order that asks us to see the relationship between concept and instance as that between the universal rule and the particular example. However, the only way we can test our conclusions about our “non-appearing measures” is by observing the world in which we live, where examples are all we will find. This quickly takes us into *aporia*, as Arendt points out:

In order to be pious, I must know what piety is. Pious are the things that please the gods; but are they pious because they please the gods or do they please the gods because they are pious? None of the *logoi*, the arguments, ever stays put; they move about, because Socrates, asking questions to which he does *not* know the answers, sets them in motion. And once the statements have come full circle, it is usually Socrates who cheerfully proposes to start all over again and inquire what justice or piety or knowledge or happiness are. (170-1)

The process of relentlessly asking fundamental questions about experience to raise to consciousness the concepts we use to order it, then feeding the answers back to deepen understanding of those concepts and generate more questions about experience is what Arendt calls “thinking”. She sees it as an active, infinite loop, one destructive of the ponderous informational accumulation currently considered “knowledge”. Thinking is not an ethical activity *per se*, though it does have moral implications; nor is it an epistemological one, though it

is governed by the rules of rational argument, such as non-contradiction, self-identity, relevance, and so on. If it has a typical target it is conventionally-accepted ideas, and if it has a typical *modus operandi*, it is to solicit definitions of concepts, then undermine them by exposing them to the complexity of lived experience. This never gets less perplexing – one reason there can never be “experts” in it – and sharing our dilemmas, confusions and uncertainties is an abiding feature of all thought-related talk. What comes out of this process is unpredictable, and in part depends on how long we can stand to immerse ourselves in it. For Arendt, as for the Athenians inveigled into conversation with Socrates, thinking is something that has to be *endured*.

Seeing the evaluation of arts and cultural experiences as a job of thinking – and so admitting that most of what we now do when assessing them now has little connection to their real place in our lives – radically changes their role and status. Evaluation is always dialogic, and this is true even when only one person is engaged in it. Arendt sees difference and otherness as integral to human consciousness, what she calls “the two-in-one” (184)<sup>5</sup>, and what Plato in *Theaetetus* names the silent dialogue of the self (Waterfield 1967). We are not sets of static market preferences, but complex, ever-evolving internal conversations. Within our endless, resultless, aporetic, self-talk, arts and culture are more than artefacts and activities to be liked, disliked, scored or ranked. They are interlocutors contributing to an experience-concept-experience reflection cycle that is the thoughtful person’s engagement with the world of appearances. It is not necessary to define arts and culture for our self-talk to commence. This might provide an interesting question to *explore*, but the delimitation of what encounters can or should be called “artistic” or “cultural” is not something that needs to happen *prior* to thinking (though it is a requirement of categorical logic when mobilised for social and political ends).

As interlocutors in a conversation concerned with meaning in our lives, the evaluation of arts and culture is resolutely “subjective”, if we understand by this reference to concepts that do not map neatly onto the material realm, and whose questioning is unlikely to produce settled agreement as to their application. Yet, when we share our internal dialogue with other people, when we extend our self-talk and think together, arts and culture become matters of public debate. The validity of this debate will have little to do with quantitative measures of its scope. The fact that a book is read by thousands of people or a film seen by millions, says nothing about their value. To assess this, we would need to look at the conversation happening around the numbers and, what is more, participate in it ourselves. For the meaning of culture to be addressed publicly, it

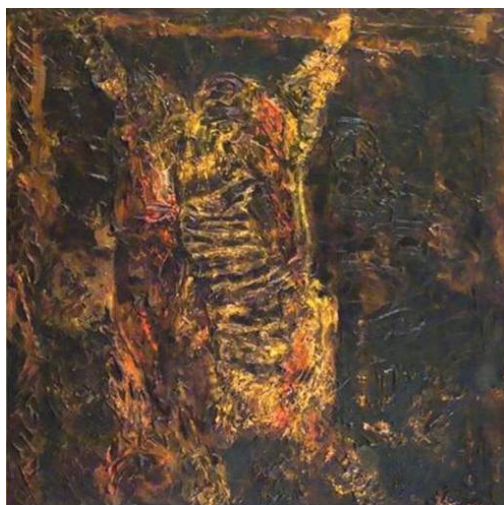
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<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of this concept and its application to policy memory, see Meyrick and Barnett, 2017.

must first be felt personally. There is no other way to start a properly-constituted evaluative dialogue about arts and culture than by speaking of their place in our life. This may be challenged, in Socratic fashion. The resulting discussion will not be an attempt to replace one set of opinions with another “better supported by the evidence”. It will be an intersubjective exchange aimed at deeper understanding of cultural experience for the society in which we live. Human responsiveness is not the fly in the ointment in pursuit of the ideal of objective value, something to be flattened out by statistical normalisation or dominant theme analysis. It is the entry point for meaning, and thus for the accrual of any value in arts and culture whatsoever.

Hence the choice of *Ecce Homo* paintings as the model of the cultural encounter, since the interlocutory exchange is so straightforward. If we can look at a picture of another human being in pain and feel something, then we begin a conversation that will reverberate through us for the rest of our lives, a permanent enrichment of our two-in-one consciousness, and a meaningful point of address in public debate thereafter.

*Ecce Homo, mémoire de Rembrandt* by Gérard Ricard



*Ecce: Homo III* by Jorge Torres



### **From concepts to categories**

Proposing evaluation as a job of thinking maps it onto these features: non-instrumental, open-ended, inclusive, experience-focused, definition-wary, endless. It can be set against, as its opposite, *value* – targeted, limited, scalable, quantifiable, fungible, comparable. Evaluation is a dialogue that takes in, but is different from, computing the value of a given cultural artefact or activity, and the mental traits required in the latter are different from the ones thinking as such demands. Evaluation is motivated by a desire to question; value by a need for answers;

evaluation by an acceptance of perplexity; value by a compulsion for consensus; evaluation by a privileging of experience above theories and paradigms; value by the promotion of theories and paradigms above the scumbled and chaotic material realm, a drive to domesticate experience to fit abstract ideas about it. Evaluation is a process, something we engage in. Value is a result, something we *produce*.

The challenges that arise from recasting the problem of value in arts and culture in this way are admittedly significant. Not only does the approach not provide a quick fix for pluralist democracies seeking to non-controversially define the public good and distribute scarce resources, it makes these issues more complicated and vexed. How they avoid thinking while meeting the immediate goals of social and political action, or do the minimum thinking required, is one way of classifying different state formations. There are traditional societies, for example, where thought is replaced by custom, and authoritarian ones where it is replaced by charismatic personality. In modern, neo-liberal states, it is managed by taking from the higher order represented by conceptual thinking a little of its intellectual illumination, but in such a way that the cognitive disturbance that accompanies it is minimized. This is done by turning the concept into a device for administrative power: the policy category. Policy categories are concepts shorn of their philosophical grandeur, moral depth and, of course, destabilizing charge. They are second-order precipitations carved from the world of thought then deposited, via abstract nouns, in the material realm and treated as if they had originated there, as if they were somehow things *in* the world. Thus, to name a few obvious examples, “artist”, “employee”, “refugee”, “citizen” and “taxpayer”, are all immaterial concepts bodied forth, via administrative definitions and criteria, into the material one. An interesting observation is that this type of instrumental behaviour is actually *further* from our lived experience than thinking as such because, from a Socratic perspective, thinking should precede action and inform it with the unruly insights it throws up. If this does not happen, if we treat policy categories as things in the world rather than intellectual precipitations, then thought absents itself, and is replaced by compliance. For Arendt, there is a fateful link between not thinking and the Holocaust, which many Germans went along with not because they were wicked, but because they were not sufficiently aware of the implications of the categorical logic involved. This is the crucial difference between concepts and categories. Concepts come with challenges as to their meaning, and ask to be questioned. Categories come with conditions for their application, and insist on compliance. Criticism of the meaning of policy categories is typically met with a negative (political) rather than an engaged (intellectual) response.

By way of expanding these remarks further, I will address two potential criticisms. First, even if it is accepted that evaluation resembles the existential sketch drawn here, how is this to be realised in a practical way? It is common to hear, when discussing the problem of value in arts and culture, that current assessment methods are a pragmatic solution to an unbudgeable political situation and that “talking the language of government” (Pick 2001: 11) is the only option for those concerned to secure their role and status in the public domain. Second, should arts and culture be excepted from other experiences of a thought-provoking kind and treated in a special way? If so, what justification can be advanced for this that isn’t elitist, self-interested, or spurious – what Socrates would call “a wind egg” (Waterfield 1967)?

The first question is a misapprehension. Evaluation as a job of thinking exists in uncanny relationship to the concerns of the material realm, and this is no more to be decried than the fact that the latter is governed by the laws of entropy and the speed of light. Experience provokes thinking, and thoughts complicate experience. The issue we face when evaluating is not domesticating this unruly cycle to pragmatic, consensual ends, but harnessing its disruptiveness to deepen our singular encounters; to deepen our *sense of value* in arts and culture, not perfect their expression in categorical logic. Out of this will come something of greater worth than utilitarian cost/benefit analysis: better judgement. As Arendt explains,

‘The purging element in thinking... has a liberating effect on another human faculty, the faculty of judgement which one may call, with some justification, the most political of man’s mental abilities. It is the faculty to judge *particulars* without subsuming them under those general rules which can be taught and learned until they grown into habits that can be replaced by other habits and rules... If thinking, the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue, actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its by-product, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realises thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances. (189)

The real question we should be asking is *where*, in our society, does thinking about arts and culture now occur, and how are these conversations related to the official assessment processes that bear responsibility for making decisions about them? Our judgements are only effective to the extent that the accompanying evaluative dialogue is open, engaged, and grounded, governed

by the primary goal of resultless investigation, which is to keep asking questions until such time as these morph into other questions or death intervenes. The focus of my own research team, Laboratory Adelaide, for example, is currently on three areas: expert peer review; arts board representation; and cultural criticism. In grant decision-making structures, corporate governance behaviours, and arts coverage in the media, we find – or not – the talk needed to thoughtfully equip social and political action, and link judgements to the experience-concept-experience reflection cycle.

At the moment, we do the opposite – privilege informational accumulation and metrics that abjure engagement with the human responsiveness necessary to fathoming culture’s meaning in (and for) the public domain. In respect of what is needed to keep our addiction to decontextualized numerical data and technocratic buzzwords in bounds, to ensure these are



*L'oeuvre Ecce Homo* by Etienne Martin

harnessed to purposeful inquiry, we are ignorant even about how ignorant we are. Ask a simple question on the state of arts journalism, or the principles of peer review, or the role of boards in artistic programming – and I have asked these questions of cultural experts and non-experts alike – and you get a mash of anecdote, gut feeling, and off-the-cuff opinion. Not that these issues are easy to assay. Nor are spreadsheets of concert ticket sales, or theatre patrons who indicated “7” on their event satisfaction surveys without interest. Such facts and figures are contingently useful in arts and culture, as they are in other areas of social life. But by themselves

and in themselves, they say nothing about the *value* of our cultural experiences because they remain, in the Kantian sense, *stupid* until we co-opt them to a reflective intelligence.

The evaluation of arts and culture can be distinguished it from two other processes with which it is often conflated: *appraisal* and *appreciation*. These words label assessment approaches that avoid the cognitive disturbance the reflection cycle otherwise invokes. In *appraisal*, addressing the question “what is culture worth?”, we find assessment against a uniform measure for the purpose of a comparative result, that is a result only to the extent that it *is* comparative, thus facilitating a system of exchange. In *appreciation*, addressing the question “where does culture

come from?” we find assessment in respect of an artworld, of a school of cultural activity, for the purpose of historical and technical erudition, thus facilitating critical authority. As modes of social and political action, appraisal and appreciation reinforce each other. If we want to price Van Dyck’s *Ecce Homo*, for example, we must discover when and where it was painted, how much was painted by Van Dyck, how much by his apprentices, and so on. This kind of data assists in knowing how other paintings are priced, while knowing a system of comparative prices allows us to ascertain the provenance of particular paintings. There is no necessary personal encounter here, no demanded subject position, and thus no thinking, only the informational accumulation Arendt would call “doctrines” and I would identify as species of categorical logic. Questions of appraisal and appreciation are not inimical to thought, but thought is inimical to them, as it is certain it will, in deflationary Socratic manner, white-ant every assumption on which their accepted operation is based. For it is “in thinking’s nature to... unfreeze as it were, what language, the medium of thinking, has frozen into thought... [It] inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, [and] measurements for good and evil” (Arendt 175).

The second question, about the status of arts and cultural experience, and whether this is special in nature or degree, is also erroneous. It crops up because appraisal and appreciation are both fixated on the notion of equivalence, though from opposite perspectives. In the case of appraisal, it is a matter of substitution – of questions about whether art is “replaceable” by another artefact or activity, or a sum of money, the basis of contingency value methodology, where consumers are asked questions about the prospective pricing of intangible goods and services. In the case of appreciation, it is a pursuit of “authenticity”, of provenance and the chronology of ownership. While interested in the singular features of artworks, appreciation addresses these formally, rather than meaningfully. We can be faced with two identical paintings, but information that one is a “real” Van Dyke and the other a copy will change the standing of both in the eyes of the expert critic. In appraisal, equivalence is forced, in appreciation it is constrained. Both operations may be contingently relevant to evaluation, but they are not the essence of it, since a



*Ecce Homo 2 Photography by Serge Sunne*



singular encounter soliciting thoughtful dialogue does not necessarily occur. If arts and culture are special, it is because we make them special. Their place in our lives is determined not by the status of their external attributes, but by a relationship of meaning we must work to discover and agree if we perceive it is worth doing so. Evaluation does not lie outside the hazards of history and social structure but, as a job of thought, it sucks them into the demands of our singular cultural encounters and the experience-concept-experience reflection cycle. Whether the arts and culture in question are a medieval madrigal or a modern bouncy castle, a poem by Dorothy Porter or a battle rap flip, a fresco by Titian or a stencil by Blek le Rat; whether these are enjoyed casually, studiously, ironically, or subversively; provided they are productive of thought, they have a claim be taken seriously in our assessment processes.

### **Evaluating *4:48 Psychosis***

I will finish with a brief demonstration of what an authentic act of evaluating cultural experience entails, as opposed to the informational accumulation of appraisal and appreciation we currently favour. As my example encounter and dialogic interlocutor I choose a play text, since stage drama is what I respond to most deeply as a human being. The work in question is *4:48 Psychosis* by British playwright Sarah Kane (Kane & Grieg, 2001), who wrote it in the months before she committed suicide, in February, 1999. Even to call it ‘a play’ is to beg a question that might begin the experience-concept-experience reflection cycle, since *4:48 Psychosis* presents no narrative as such, no characters as such, no dialogue as such, no action, no stage directions, and no setting. There is no indication of the number of actors required, or how the words should be assigned to such as might be used. Some parts of the play text are presented as continuous speech; others as conversational exchanges; others as columns or clouds of numbers. Repetition is a frequent device, as is poetic allusion, the lone verbal image, the single exclamatory line, and italics and capital letters to suggest an increase in performance volume or energy. But there is no regular pattern to these. The only obvious feature of the text is that the time of 4:48 a.m. itself makes a number of appearances, sometimes ominously,



*At 4:48*  
*when depression visits*  
*I shall hang myself*  
*to the sound of my lover's breathing. (p.4)*

sometimes hopefully,

- *At 4:48*  
*when sanity visits*  
*for one hour and twelve minutes I am in my right mind.*  
*When it has passed I shall be gone again,*  
*a fragmented puppet, a grotesque fool. (p.20)*

In respect of its genre, *4:48 Psychosis* eludes every category that might be advanced to define it. Like the poems of Paul Celan or the paintings of Mark Rothko, it is a work carrying a terrifying charge of personal feeling from the author. *4:48 Psychosis* is a play about suicidal depression because the playwright who wrote it was suicidally depressed, and her anguish, anger, and despair are evident in every word of its 32 pages. If there is a theatrical equivalent to *Ecce Homo* portraiture, it is *4:48 Psychosis*, a live performance presentation of unadorned human suffering.

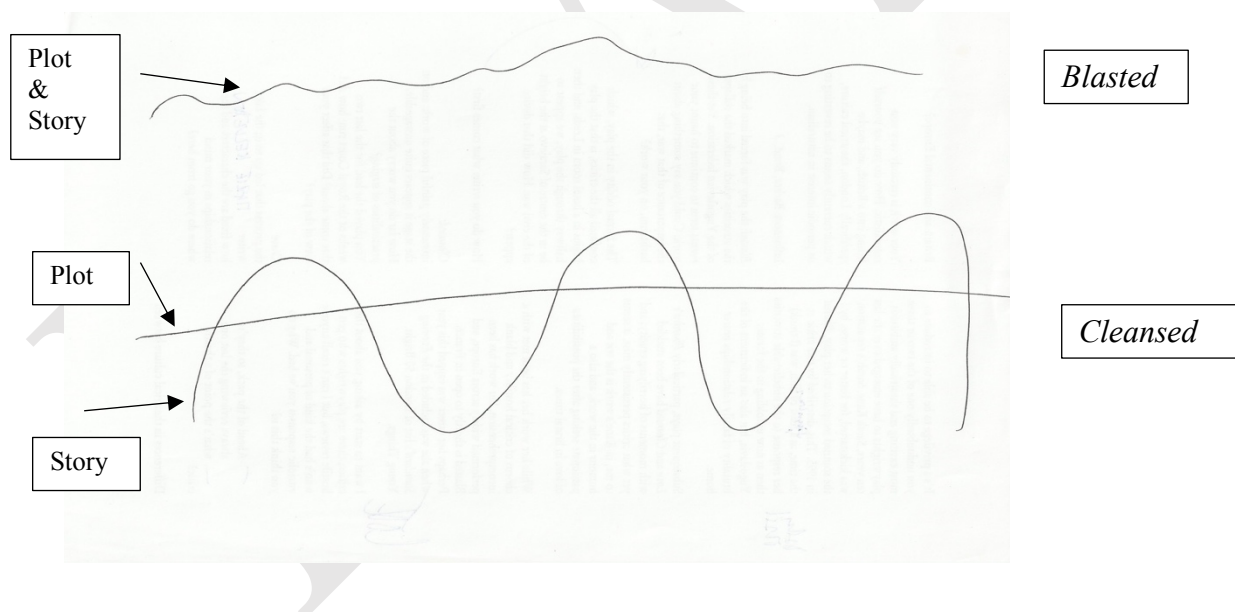
My response to Kane's disturbing drama begins with the insight that, as a theatre director, while I find her writing compelling, I would probably fail to stage it successfully. Her plays remain out of reach of my imaginative reach, so that an encounter with *4:48 Psychosis* brings with it a flavour of prospective failure, of sharp, personal limit. I have never staged one of her plays, and were I to do so now, it would lack the most important aspect of theatre production from my point of view – a living relationship between director and playwright. This sense of inadequacy and deficit is compounded by my timing in reading the play on the day I resigned from Flinders as Professor of Creative Arts, after a two year-long struggle against a deleterious restructure that saw some of my closest colleagues leave the University, and the Creative Arts disciplines significantly diminish.

These feelings would have no place in a social science approach to the value of a cultural encounter, or, at best, would constitute a form of anecdotal evidence, a brick of datum. For evaluation as a job of thought, by contrast, they are crucial to discovering and agreeing the play's

place in our lives. The key question to be addressed is “what does *4:48 Psychosis* mean?”, preceded by another, more basic one, “what does *4:48 Psychosis* mean to me?”. It is impossible to leave out my personal response to the play when evaluating it, since the rationale and axis of its unfolding depend on soliciting exactly this. Questions as to value are subjacent to questions as to meaning. This does not collapse evaluation into relativism, but prompts my participation in a social dialogue that thrashes through, as best it can, the issues at stake when I, or someone like me, or indeed anyone, encounters the play *4:48 Psychosis*, or a play like *4:48 Psychosis*, or indeed any play.

The processes of appreciation and appraisal may be of ancillary importance in this, depending on the context. As an experienced literary manager and artistic counsel, I have been involved in both types of discussions many times. Appreciating Kane’s work involves knowing its history, particularly its past reception. *Blasted* (Kane & Grieg 2001), her first play, produced in 1996, created a scandal, and was the most calumnified play in the British press since the premiere of Ibsen’s *Ghosts* in 1891 (for discussion see Saunders 2002). It was also highly influential, and Kane is often seen as the harbinger of a wave of so-called ‘in-yer-face’ dramatists who appeared in the UK towards the end of the last millennium, and includes Mark Ravenhill, David Greig, Martin Crimp, and Rebecca Prichard (for discussion see Sierz 2001). There are formal similarities between the work of these playwrights that can be discussed in a data-fied way. This can then be mapped onto an appraisal of *4:48 Psychosis* in respect of the financial costs and returns of staging it. These depend on how many actors are cast, whether the actors are “brochurable” (i.e. stars), the type of venue, its location, its seating capacity, the time of year, the style of design and, most crucially, the theatre season it is presented in. Kane’s third play *Cleansed* (Kane & Grieg 2001) was staged in 1998 at the Royal Court Theatre, whose program is known for new and risky drama. It did moderately well financially within this context. It was produced again in 2016 by the UK National Theatre, a company whose imprimatur typically elevates a drama’s status. The play was a controversial box-office success, prompting walks-out at some of its threshold scenes but selling well in the single-ticket market (as opposed to the subscription market, which the Royal Court probably relied on to avoid financial loss). Controversy can be a blessing from the point of view of appraisal. A work that offends may do better than one with broad appeal. Then again, it may have helped that Kane died by her own hand. The mystique of suicide can be used to discretely flavour a marketing campaign, changing-up Kane’s reputation from despised outlier to neglected genius – a common enough flip in the theatre, where the difference between popular rejection and acceptance can be one review or a single revival.

The point is this kind of talk, which can be sophisticated and intelligent, does not require engagement with the play, nor any kind of response as to its meaning or purpose. For this, other sorts of questions must be asked, and these can roam anywhere. Thus, when I read *4:48 Psychosis*, I think about Kane herself. How old was she when she died? Where did she live? Do I know anyone who knew her? Actually, I do, the academic and playwright Dan Rebellato, at Royal Holloway University of London. Dan wrote his first book on post-1945 British theatre (Rebellato 1999) at the same time I wrote mine on post-1945 Australian drama (Meyrick 2002), and we got to know each other as a result. In 1998, three months before she suicided, he invited Kane to talk to his students, and made the last known recording of her speaking. She said she was writing a play about “the collapse of boundaries... between self and world that is characteristic of psychosis and... trying to find a form for a play that will express that experience”.<sup>6</sup> In discussion with the students, she drew two diagrams that showed the relationship between “plot” and “story” in the plays *Blasted* and *Cleansed*:

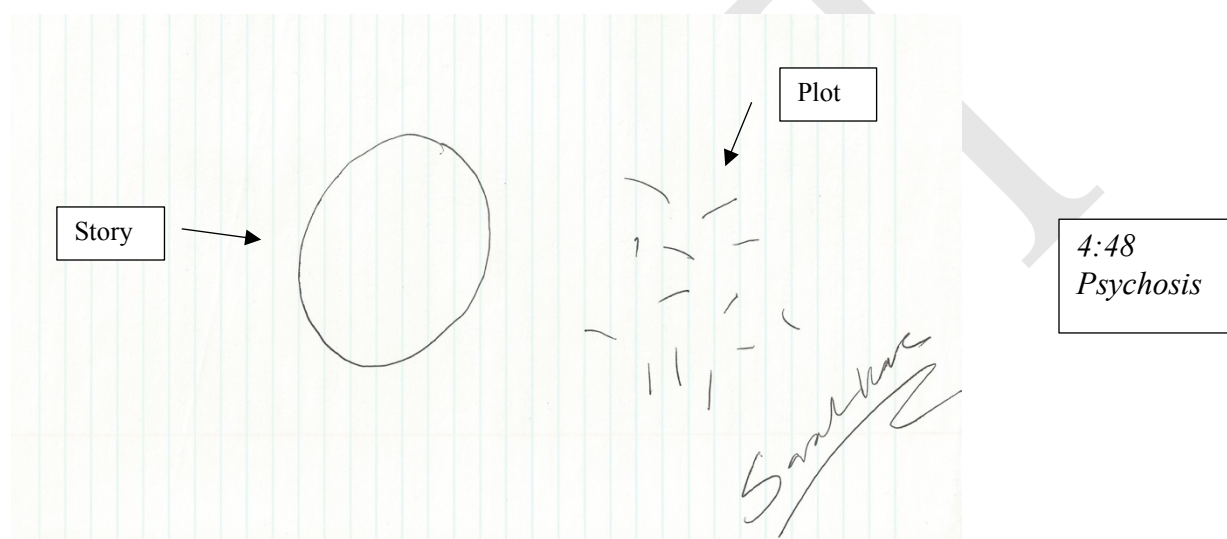


For Kane, “plot” is the explicit information provided in a play text, while “story” is the fuller meaning unfolding in its live performance interpretation and reception. The single line for *Blasted* indicates that, to her mind, its plot is coterminous with its story, that everything the play means is expressed in its dialogue, action and images. For *Cleansed*, by contrast, the second line, dipping up and down, represents the story elements that must be supplied by the audience, and

<sup>6</sup> The following, including the diagrams from <http://www.danrebellato.co.uk/sarah-kane-interview/> (last accessed 11 February, 2019)

made to intersect with the plot line, supplied by Kane. In other words, we, as spectators, have to work to co-create the meaning of the piece. In these remarks, Kane shows herself to be an accomplished dramaturge and director – which she was – recognising that what matters in a play is not what gets said and shown, but what gets understood.

After talking to his students, Kane went to Dan's office and drew a third diagram representing the relationship between "plot" and "story" in *4:48 Psychosis*, although the play was not yet in the public realm, and Dan had little idea of its import at this time:



The circle is *4:48 Psychosis*' "story" and the dots are its "plot". There is no linear connection between them, and the audience must interpret what the play says and shows without an authorial guide save of the most elliptical kind. Information and meaning stand at disjunctive remove, yet they are still positioned together, so that though no links between them are explicitly drawn, we actively look for them in our own selves, and in this quest create them. Dan comments that Kane "was quite pleased with the clarity of her diagram, I think. I took it from her and said jokingly, 'I'm keeping this'. She laughed and signed it in the corner, explaining, "it'll be worth more when I'm dead".

I choose *4:48 Psychosis* as an example of an act of evaluation because grappling with the question "what does the play mean to me" obviously cannot be avoided, and the talk that results is necessarily endless and aporetic, and can discipline, but never contain, judgements about the drama's worth. Evaluation is a process of extended openness, or vulnerability, to experience. It

expresses itself as a dialogue within the self, and between selves, and while it has no set direction, content, form or limit, it clusters around the quest for meaning. Vulnerability is the core affect of this quest, just as thoughtfulness is its major intellectual expression. Evaluation involves us as whole people, using all our capacities and senses, including our moral sense, which means that arts and culture are not only matters of good and bad, but also right and wrong. They have intellectual and ethical majesty, and the judgements that arise from our evaluative dialogues – our decisions pertaining to ‘this not that’, and ‘that not this’ – are significant and fateful. Evaluating arts and culture is not a matter of calculating preferences, but of fathoming consequences. “Thoughtful evaluation” is a redundancy. Thinking isn’t necessary to enjoying arts and culture, but it is essential to the experience-concept-experience reflection cycle, and taking a judgement as to their worth into the public domain.

For the evaluation of *4:48 Psychosis*, I ask these questions, which cluster around the quest for meaning, and I look to the experience of the play as the source of the most relevant information in answering them:

What is Sarah Kane trying to say?

What do I hear in her disjointed but vivid words?

What thoughts and feelings do they invoke in me, and which ones can I publicly acknowledge, and respond to in the thoughts and feelings of others?

What is the moment in my life in which I encounter the play, and which aspects of it am I vulnerable to as a result?

Where does the play take me?

What else comes to mind?

Who joins me in my dialogue about the play? What do they think?

What judgements am I required to make about the play by order of the world of appearances in which I exist right now?

These are questions directly pertaining to the problem of value in arts and culture, and they are central and unavoidable. If we define them out of our official assessment processes, then we fail in our duty to resultless thinking, fail our lived experience, and fail the demands of our singular cultural encounters, whose uncanny power calls to us from the immaterial realm – and demands we answer back.



Sarah Kane, 1971 – 1999



*Ecce Homo*, Honoré Daumier, ca 1851.

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