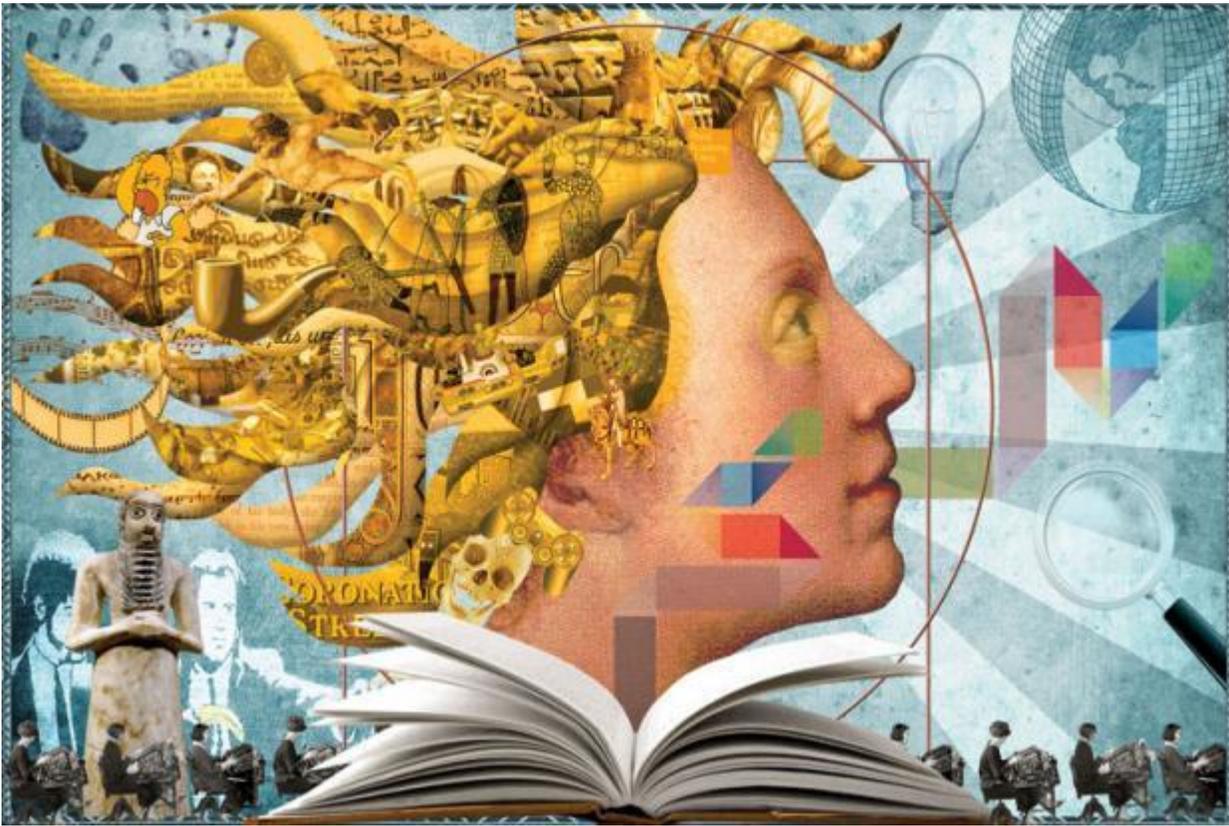


# Sarah Churchwell: why the Humanities matter

Ahead of the Being Human festival, the professor of American literature considers their importance



When we stopped being citizens and began to think of ourselves only as consumers, we relinquished thousands of years of human development

The renowned scientist E. O. Wilson recently described the humanities as “the natural history of culture, and our most private and precious heritage”. The humanities are the study of what makes us human, of what it means to be human. As they penetrate every aspect of existence, they can, and should, intersect with the natural and social sciences, but literature, history, art, music, languages, theatre, film – and yes, television and computer games – are the stories and ideas through which we express our humanity.

We understand ourselves and our world through the telling of stories. Visual dramas teach us sympathy, empathy, pity, encouraging us to break out of our solipsistic shells. They explore ethical issues, ask challenging questions, inform the way we view each other. Today we live in a culture more defined by images and stories than ever before. Given this, it is vital that we approach the media, advertising and marketing discourses that influence and often manipulate us with critical thinking. We need improved communication skills; no one is born with them, and just chatting with your family and friends does not teach the precision of language needed to negotiate and reframe our complicated world. In a global age, we need to understand other societies. Anyone who has ever studied a foreign language knows that different phrases can prompt new perspectives and open our eyes to cultural values; studying foreign languages also improves mastery of our own. This rule holds by analogy more generally: when we learn about other people, we also learn about ourselves.

The politicians and corporations telling us that the humanities do not matter are, by no coincidence, the same people who think of us only as workers and consumers, not as citizens or individuals, and who strip away our human rights, one by one. It is the wealthy who insist that we should seek only to work: we don't need the humanities, they tell us, all we need is to labour in a marketplace that will enrich them, not us.

If we agree that the humanities do not matter, or fail to challenge this assessment, we are colluding in the very practices that reduce our humanity, that impinge upon all the other ways in which we can enrich our lives, our abilities to express our creative individuality. Until we reconsider what it means to lead a truly satisfying life, what the ancient Greeks considered the “good life” – who are by no coincidence the people who invented the study of the humanities – we should not be surprised if we have the politicians and plutocrats we deserve. Why should any politician seek to challenge the source of his (rarely her) power?

The humanities conserve and safeguard those aspects of our being that intersect with the meanings of human existence beyond industry. A certain playwright was said to love humanity as a concept but to have less time for human beings. The same can be said of our so-called leaders, whose lofty rhetoric in support of humanity is belied by their contempt for the study of the humanities. That said, as the historian James Truslow Adams wrote some years ago, it is absurd to think that the powerful will abandon their power “to become spiritual leaders of a democracy that despises spiritual things”.

There is a story that may be apocryphal but is illustrative. Supposedly, Richard Dawkins was once visiting an art gallery in Florence, and as he left was heard to ask, “But what’s all this art *for*?” Regardless of whether Dawkins actually said it, this question articulates a widely held view among the instrumentalists and technocrats who decide our society’s priorities. Last year it was revealed that scientific studies had “proven” that reading made people more empathetic. At last, some book lovers cried, what we always knew has been proven: book lovers are better people! Anyone who has spent time in a literature department might challenge this jolly notion, but I agree with the critic Lee Siegel, who responded by defending his right to love books regardless of whether they “improved” him. Let me answer the question: what’s all this art for? It’s for us.

When we stopped being citizens and began to think of ourselves – or rather, each other – only as consumers, we relinquished thousands of years of human development. How can we sustain our civilisation if we don’t understand how it works? How can we interpret Magna Carta and defend our rights if no one reads Latin? How will we protect our own laws? How can we hope for transcendence in a secular age if we give up on beauty? Even in instrumentalist terms, the humanities represent 5,000 years of free research and development in what it means to be human. I think we should make use of that.

The humanities are where we locate our own lives, our own meanings; they embrace thinking, curiosity, creation, psychology, emotion. The humanities teach us not only what art is for, but what life might be for, what this strange existence might mean. What kind of humans would think that the humanities don’t matter? We need the advanced study of humanities so that we might, some day, become advanced humans.