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for the 50th Anniversary of
The University of Maribor 1975-2025

*Cultural Resistance on a 50th Anniversary:
In Hannah Arendt's Footsteps*

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Faculty of Arts, Maribor
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*Under conditions of tyranny, it is far easier to act
than to think.*

Hannah Arendt,
The Human Condition, 1958





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Life under Soviet Totalitarian Rule: Dmitri Shostakovich-a Follower or Rebel?

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Abstract

If the Soviet-Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich, who died 50 years ago this year, was only a household name in circles of classical music up until 2016, public attention, at least in the British Isles, has significantly changed with Julian Barnes' bestselling novel *The Noise of Time* (2016), which traces the composer's life in three very different, but at the same time very similar, parts of his life. This presentation will briefly outline Barnes' fictional account of the composer's life, but will largely focus on Shostakovich the man and the artist in the context of his relationship with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, particularly Joseph Stalin and his inner circle. This conflicting coexistence today divides critics in their evaluations of the composer's oeuvre: Was he a compliant composer or a rebel against the core principles of socialist realism? The former could be the logical conclusion to the contextual and musical analysis of his programmatic Eleventh and Twelfth Symphonies, which vividly thematize the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, respectively, or, of his Fifth Symphony, which was described by an anonymous commentator (probably close to party lines) after its triumphant 1937 premiere as "a Soviet artist's practical creative reply to just criticism." Shostakovich's other, rebellious side is what prompted this criticism, which was particularly connected to the Communist Party's reception of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (1934). Some scholars, such as James Conlon, view the notion of hidden messages and codes in his music as crucial elements of his art in these totalitarian times. By offering a concise overview of some of Shostakovich's most important works, this presentation aims to juxtapose the opposing views of the composer in order to demonstrate whether they genuinely and certainly fit into the socialist realist agenda or whether they, overtly or covertly, can be seen as an act of rebellion, of defying the norms and an artistic expression of ridicule towards a regime which oppresses the individual.

Keywords: Dmitri Shostakovich; music as protest or propaganda; totalitarianism

Short Bio

Jonatan Horvat is a Doctoral Research Assistant at the Department of American Studies of the University of Graz. His main research interests lie in the intermedial interplay between literature and the other arts, especially music, which includes the fields of adaptation studies, opera studies, ekphrasis and pop song analysis. Particularly, his research is focused on the development of 20th-21st century Anglo-American opera and adaptations of world literature by English/American composers, the cultural significance of British and American popular music from the 1960s onwards and the history of jazz. In his dissertation project, he attempts to investigate four Anglo-American operatic adaptations of Benjamin Britten by focusing on the questions of death and salvation and how these factors contribute to changing our general perception regarding the composer's operas. Additionally, he occasionally writes online music reviews, particularly of new popular music album releases.

The Myth of a Critical Intellectual: Vignettes from the 20th Century
Aleš Maver, PhD, Associate Professor,
Univerza v Mariboru, Filozofska fakulteta

Abstract

There is a widespread expectation among the general public that intellectuals, and perhaps university teachers in particular, will be among the first advocates of democratic patterns in society and opponents of any slide into undemocratic practices. Many public intellectuals did indeed follow the example of the seven professors from Göttingen who publicly addressed the King of Hanover in 1837 and lost their jobs as a consequence. However, the experience of the 20th century in this area is mixed. Not only do intellectuals fail to take the lead in supporting greater democracy in society, they often passively or even actively enable the establishment and/or preservation of authoritarian social models. I will give a few examples in this presentation. Above all, I will look for the reasons for their behaviour in two directions. The first, and probably the most fundamental, is the unease at the thought of jeopardizing their relatively comfortable personal and social position, which in the 20th century diverged from that of the average citizen even more. But it is no less characteristic that intellectuals have the unfortunate tendency to find it harder than the average citizen to admit that they have made a mistake, which has led many to persist in glorifying nonsense and defending obviously failed and undemocratic regimes.

Keywords: history of the university; critical intellectual; Hannah Arendt; Edvard Kocbek; undemocratic regimes

Short Bio

Aleš Maver (born 1978 in Maribor) has been associate professor of medieval history and lecturer in Latin at the History Department of the Faculty of Arts at Maribor University. He earned his PhD in History in 2010. His research fields include history of late antiquity and early middle ages, history of early Christianity, as well as Slovenian cultural and ecclesiastical history. He has published several scholarly monographs (some of them as co-author). His recent books include *Od klinopisa do Teodore (From Cuneiform to Theodora)*, *Ukrajina: Od igre prestolov do vojne za samostojnost (Ukraine: From Game of Thrones to Independence War)* and *Kako je misleči človek hodil skozi čas: Kratka svetovna zgodovina (How Homo Sapiens Travelled through Time: A Short World History)*. His main passions are elections and electoral systems, and he enjoys traveling by train, although he is a bit sick of the line between Maribor and Ljubljana.

The Discourse of Jewishness and Hatred: Hannah Arendt on Antisemitism

Boris Vežjak
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Abstract

The Origins of Totalitarianism opens with a long treatment of antisemitism, treating it not merely as incidental prejudice, but as a structural prelude to totalitarianism. Arendt's goal is not to provide a standard history of antisemitism; rather, she aims to demonstrate how modern antisemitism evolves into a political ideology, intertwines with imperialism and totalitarianism, and contributes to the erosion of Jewish status. In her view, modern antisemitism is intimately tied to the transformations of the modern state - the decline of monarchy and the rise of nationalism, imperialism, and mass politics. She rejects traditional explanations, such as nationalism, envy of Jewish power, scapegoating, or eternal antisemitism, and instead situates it in the context of modern imperialism and the crisis of the nation-state. According to her, antisemitism is not merely a prejudice but an ideological construction that made Jews a symbol of the "superfluous" population, serving as a precursor to totalitarian mobilization of mass societies. This analysis, while innovative and influential, remains limited to the historically specific context of 19th- and 20th-century Europe. In my presentation, I criticize Arendt's conception from the perspective of contemporary social dynamics: antisemitism has transformed from a specific hatred of Jews into a universal discursive format through which we censure and hate the Other. In this format, to take one example, migrants in Slovenia become the hated Other. They become this regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation as "new-age Jews," onto whom we sometimes project Nazi language and fantasies.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt; antisemitism; nationalism; hatred; migrants; Nazism

Short Bio

Boris Vežjak (PhD) is an associate professor of philosophy at the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Education in Maribor, Slovenia. His field of interest covers various topics, such as history of philosophy, theory of discourse, media analysis and theory of argumentation. He is the author of several books, commentaries and translations, such as *Plato: Charmides* (1994), *Plato: Philebus* (2000), *Plato: Parmenides* (2001), *The Relaxed Ideology of Slovenes: on Political Implications of the Philosopheme Relaxedness* (2007), *Mistakes and Fallacies in Argumentation: a Guide to Bad Argumentation in Quotidian Life* (2007, together with Janez Bregant), *The Twilight of Media Autonomy* (2009), *Paranoia, Manipulation and Rationality: on Psychopolitics of Conspiracy, Hatred and Humiliation of Reason* (2010), *Introduction to Socrates for Young People* (2011), *Ad Populum: Analyses of Social Discourse* (2012), (ed.) *Philosophical Imagination: Thought Experiments and Arguments in Antiquity* (2021), *The RTV Slovenia Landing: the Political Hijacking of Public Service Broadcaster in 2020-2023* (2023), *Pahor's Media Flirtation: a Handbook for Political Populists & Kings of Instagram with a Detailed Analysis of the Occasional President of the Republic* (2024) and *Logical and Informal Fallacies: Argumentation and Rhetoric Against the Person (Ad Hominem) in Practice* (2025).

Authoritarian Atwood: Implications for Academia in Gilead and Positron
Michelle Gadpaille, Professor
Department of English and American Studies
Faculty of Arts, Maribor

Abstract

As an author and a public intellectual following in the footsteps of Hannah Arendt, Margaret Atwood has consistently aired her social, political and environmental convictions. Some of her most trenchant critique of authoritarianism occurs in her novels: critique of theocratic totalitarianism in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), and of corporatist authoritarianism in *The Heart Goes Last* (2015). In both narratives, she reveals the social and political creep that enables dystopia to happen in fictional locations as well as on our own streets. However, in Atwood's non-fiction writing and particularly in her lectures as an invited speaker, she directly addresses a particular feature of that creep—infringement of freedom of speech in an academic environment. “Free speech, “she has said, “does not always equal comfortable speech” (*Social Science Space* 2017). I will seek to define what Atwood comprehends as freedom of speech, and how she envisages universities as spaces for free, critical debate. “Sometimes the truth will get you in trouble,” she avers (Dartmouth, Ethics Institute 2019), meanwhile herself evading such trouble by virtue of the privilege of cultural eminence.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood; authoritarianism; totalitarianism; freedom of speech

Short Bio

Michelle has written so much about Atwood that it is a wonder there is anything much left to say. From Scarborough Campus at the University of Toronto, to the Faculty of Arts in Maribor, she has pursued her academic goal of researching what fascinates her in Canadian literature and beyond. With studies in the short story, neo-colonial writing, 19th-century deathbed speech, nunnery Gothic, country speech and collaborative memory in Alice Munro, anti-slavery networks across the Atlantic, and the eating of dirt, Michelle moves where the research momentum takes her.

Totalitarianism and Prescience in Ursula Le Guin and Margaret Atwood

Tjaša Mohar
Faculty of Arts
University of Maribor

Abstract

This presentation examines the response of two prominent female authors to the threat of totalitarianism – either imaginary or real. In her 1975 novella *The New Atlantis*, Ursula Le Guin imagines a future America where a scarcity of natural resources as a consequence of climate change gives rise to a totalitarian governmental. The totalitarian political regime in Margaret Atwood's Gilead from *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), another dystopian version of the USA, is similarly oppressive, particularly for women. Although set in imaginary worlds, both literary works seem more prescient today than they did at the time of their publication. Le Guin died in 2018 but remained highly critical of Trump's first presidency until her death. And although Atwood long refused to call *The Handmaid's Tale* an apocalyptic novel, she returned to the violent patriarchy of Gilead in *The Testaments* (2019) after women's reproductive rights had become jeopardized in the USA. Today she says that we live "in the scariest of times," referring to Trump's plan to make Canada the 51st state. She has joined the "elbows-up" movement of Canadian resistance and is boycotting all products from the USA. She also reacted strongly to a recent attempt at banning books with sexual content in her own country, which was targeted in particular at LGBTQ+ authors, mirroring the trend in the USA; the list included classics such as *The Handmaid's Tale*. In response, Atwood wrote a short satirical story containing sharp criticism targeting Alberta's conservative government as well as capitalism, performative religion and individualism.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood; Ursula Le Guin; dystopian fiction; apocalyptic novel

Brief bio:

Tjaša Mohar is an Assistant Professor of English and American literature in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Maribor. She has published articles and book chapters on Canadian literature, the short story, the modern novel, and literary translation. Her recent research interests also include environmental literature and ecofeminism. She is the co-editor of a special issue of the *ELOPE* journal titled *Alice Munro: Precise, Paradoxical and Pret-ty Tricky* (2022) and the co-editor of the monograph *Words, Music and Propaganda*, published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2024). She is the representative for Slovenia at the Central European Association for Canadian Studies. She is also a member of the Poetics and Linguistics Association (PALA), the European Society of the Study of English (ESSE), and the European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (EACLALS). She is also a literary translator; among her recent translations are short story collections by Alice Munro and children's books.

Hannah Arendt and Future Language Teachers: Reflecting on roles and responsibilities
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Department of English and American Literature
Faculty of Arts, Maribor

Abstract

While Hannah Arendt directly addressed the education system in her seminal text “The Crisis in Education” (1954), some scholars have drawn pedagogical implications from her other works (for example, teaching strategies for addressing our post-truth society rooted in Arendt’s thinking on politics, truth and education). Arendt’s legacy is a potentially rich resource also for teacher trainers as they prepare pre-service professionals for the reality of the contemporary language classroom, which is now, of course, viewed as a space in which learning transcends the mere acquisition of grammar and lexis. The focus is also on equipping learners with the necessary skills and competences to navigate the modern world, with a variety of models available to teachers, such as intercultural competence, democratic citizenship and global skills. In this presentation, I explore how teacher trainers can utilise some of Arendt’s writing in their classrooms to prompt reflection among pre-service teachers on how they perceive their role as language – and “life” educators (in the ways described above) – and what they identify as necessary in preparing them to meet these responsibilities.

Keywords: pre-service teachers; Hannah Arendt; Language classroom

Short Bio

Kirsten Hempkin is Scottish but has spent most of her professional life at the Department of English and American Studies at the Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor. She has worked there for almost thirty years as a language instructor, and latterly, teacher trainer. Her research interests lie in language teaching methodology, specifically in developing materials related to intercultural competence and also in exploring the teacher in the language classroom, publishing papers on issues such as wellbeing and identity. Her non-research interests include the daily challenge of *The New York Times* word puzzles, trying to learn to crochet and watching Liverpool FC matches.

“Bohemian Rhapsody” at 50: Parody, Satire and Social Critique in and of Opera
Victor Kennedy PhD, JD, Dominion of Canada
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Abstract

Opera has been described as an art form for the elite, but throughout its history it has examined social stereotypes and prejudices. Fifty years ago, Queen released “Bohemian Rhapsody,” which, in interviews, Freddie Mercury described as a light-hearted parody of opera. Mercury’s lyrics, however, refer to tragic events and their effects on the emotional well-being and mental stability of the protagonist. Naomi André, in *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*, argues that these are the primary themes of the genre, and that recent developments in opera performance in the United States address the same themes as Mercury’s song: crime, social hierarchy, and sexual, ethnic, and racial roles and attitudes. In summary, opera, like other art forms, examines the moral and ethical beliefs of society. Members of the band, including Mercury, have refused to explain the meaning of the lyrics and the music. They say that would ruin the listener’s ability to imagine what they think the song means. This echoes I.A. Richards’ theory of the imagination in literature, which itself echoes Barthes’ theory of “the death of the author.” In modernist theory, the reader’s interpretation takes precedence over whatever the author is presumed to have meant, a presumption which we can never really know. Like the stories of most grand opera, the lyrics of “Bohemian Rhapsody” are enigmatic and impressionistic, reflecting Archibald MacLeish’s dictum, “A poem should not mean, but be.”

Keywords: “Bohemian Rhapsody”; parody; opera; social critique and satire

Brief Bio

Victor Kennedy is a retired English professor and lawyer who likes to go gadding about to present wacky papers about music and stuff at scientific conferences. His next favourite thing is encouraging young scholars to publish their writing and research. Victor is the founder of the Words and Music Conference series at the Faculty of Arts, author of numerous scholarly papers about music and literature, and author and editor of several scientific monographs on the same subject.

The Banality of Evil: Useful Explanatory Device or Cliché?
Friderik Klampfer
Prva gimnazija Maribor

Abstract

In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Hannah Arendt offered a new, both stunning and highly controversial account of the origins of great (political) evils. Perplexed by Adolf Eichmann's ordinary appearance and conduct, she felt compelled to conclude that evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, don't originate in the perpetrator's wickedness, base motives, pathology, or ideological conviction, but rather stem from certain shallowness, even complete absence of thinking, combined with the most mundane, ordinary motives and ambitions. Her proposal was met mainly with suspicion, even outrage, and was subjected to harsh criticism. The criticisms fall into two groups: a) that she left the concept of evil's banality mostly underexplored, and that, for that reason alone, its explanatory potential is hard, if not impossible, to assess; and b) that further empirical research into Eichmann's motives, reasoning, and character has shown it to be inadequate even as a plausible account of his own complicity in the Holocaust. So has this once promising explanatory device turned into its opposite, a popular but empty cliché? In this presentation, I take up this task by attempting to answer three questions: (i) what is it about great evils like the Holocaust and notorious evildoers like Adolf Eichmann that struck Arendt as banal?; (ii) if, as Arendt herself seems to suggest, the banality of evil resides in, or originates from, thoughtlessness, or one's inability to think, what is it that renders us unable to think and, consequently, to judge (right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, and so on) and how can one protect oneself against this kind of disabling influences? And, finally, (iii) can the banality-of-evil hypothesis be generalized to cover other, more mundane kinds of wrongdoings besides great political evils, such as (complicity in) both individual acts and systems of injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the like, and if so, can it help us better understand and/or explain the events that unfolded at the Faculty of Arts in Maribor in 2025?

Keywords: Hannah Arendt; banality of evil; Holocaust

Brief Bio

Friderik Klampfer taught ethics and political philosophy at the Department of Philosophy, University of Maribor, for more than three decades. After his contract was terminated under false pretences this spring, he became involved in philosophy teacher training at Prva gimnazija in Maribor. He has authored three books: an introduction to ethics, a collection of essays in bioethics, and a textbook in critical thinking (the last one in co-authorship), as well as several dozen journal articles and book chapters, covering a wide range of topics, from moral reasons and motivation, moral responsibility, war, terrorism, patriotism, euthanasia, animal rights, same-sex marriage, and capital punishment, to issues in moral epistemology and philosophical methodology. His hobbies include cycling, hiking, online counter-speech and -- mainly to annoy his wife -- support for Sunderland AFC.

Only crime and the criminal, it is true, confront us with the perplexity of radical evil, but only the hypocrite is really rotten to the core. (*On Revolution*, 1963)

There are no dangerous thoughts: thinking itself is dangerous. (*The Life of the Mind*, 1977/78)

The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil. (*The Life of the Mind*, 1977/78)

Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it. (*Men in Dark Times*, 1968)

