



**Music, Art, Science and the
Decolonisation of History.
Roundtable on Sanjay Seth's
*Beyond Reason: Postcolonial Theory
and the Social Sciences* (2021)**

**Sanjay Seth, Mariana Pinto dos Santos, João
Pedro Cachopo, and Matheus Serva Pereira**

Práticas da História, n.º 18 (2024): 377-408

www.praticasdahistoria.pt

This journal is funded by National funds through FCT — Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under the projects UID/HIS/04666/2013, UID/HIS/04666/2019, UIDB/04666/2020, UIDP/04666/2020, UIDB/04209/2020, UIDP/04209/2020 and LA/P/0132/2020.

**Music, Art, Science and the
Decolonisation of History. Roundtable
on Sanjay Seth’s *Beyond Reason:
Postcolonial Theory and the Social
Sciences* (2021)**


Introduction

Matheus Serva Pereira*

To disseminate the stimulating discussion that took place in May 2023 as part of the Immaterial Festival in Évora, *Práticas da História* presents the debate from the conference “Music, Art, Science and the Decolonization of History”. The session was moderated by Luís Trindade (University of Coimbra) and featured a lecture by historian Sanjay Seth (Goldsmiths College, University of London). Following the lecture, interventions were made by musicologist João Pedro Cachopo (researcher at CESEM / NOVA FCSH – IN2PAST) and art historian Mariana Pinto dos Santos (researcher at IHA / NOVA FCSH – IN2PAST).

The public will find a series of reflections that Seth, prompted by Luís Trindade (IHC – NOVA FCSH / IN2PAST), shared based on his book *Beyond Reason: Postcolonial Theory and the Social Sciences*. His discussion focused on the codes of History and how the discipline can learn from art and music, and vice versa.

In his lecture, Seth highlights the various ways of understanding what can be investigated in each respective area, with Cachopo and

* Matheus Serva Pereira (matheusservapereira@edu.ulisboa.pt).  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6757-6088>. Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa, Av. Professor Aníbal de Bettencourt, 9, 1600-189, Lisbon, Portugal.

Santos engaging in dialogue during their interventions. These discussions revolve around conceptions of the past that establish parameters for evaluating time, what is alive or not, and what is part of the present or has potentially ceased to exist.

The consensus on the indispensable dialogue between the historiographical field and the artistic and musical worlds highlights the important path of diversifying the objects, methodologies, and research problems in History. The discussions presented here demonstrate how these three fields can — and should — continue to strengthen their ties.

Discussing these themes, especially the relationship between music and history, has not always been easy for historians. A well-known example of the challenging dialogue between History, Art, and Music is found in the book *Social History of Jazz*. The classic work by Eric Hobsbawm was originally published under the pseudonym Francis Newton. Hobsbawm's pseudonym, invented to be a journalist, intended to shield him from scrutiny and allowed him to pursue his study of jazz. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, producing a history of jazz seemed more legitimate for a journalist — someone dedicated to writing about the present — rather than for a historian, whose discipline traditionally focused on what was considered “dead” in the past.

As a framework for reflecting on the relationship between the codes of History and the various ways different disciplines and societies deal with the past, the oral interventions now published challenge the idea of the past as a distant foreign country made familiar through the exercise and parameters History constructs to legitimize its knowledge as a science of the past. What has already happened, what is happening, and what will happen are interwoven in the texts by Sanjay Seth, João Pedro Cachopo, and Mariana Pinto dos Santos. This allows for a kaleidoscopic view of the complex issues of historical knowledge, especially from the perspective of the disturbances caused by combining various historicities and temporalities.

Conference

Sanjay Seth*

I am grateful to Luís Trindade and José Neves for inviting me to speak at this event, and to the organisers of Festival Imaterial for their hospitality, and to Mariana Santos and João Cachopo for agreeing to respond to the comments I am about to deliver.

In writing about music history and art history in my book *Beyond Reason*, I delved into areas where I am a novice. I did so, however – such is my excuse – as a historian, asking, as I do in here, what music and art might have to teach history, and vice versa. In my book I suggest that the past is not lying around, like stones and apples, waiting to be recreated or represented by the historian, but has rather to be conceived of or constructed before it can be represented. Modern history-writing is enabled by certain presuppositions that define what ‘the past’ is. One of these presuppositions is that the past is conceived as ‘dead’. It has not always been so, as David Lowenthal observes, “During most of history men scarcely differentiated past from present, referring even to remote events...as though they were then occurring.”¹ And the historian of the Jewish people, Yosef Yerushalmi, writes that the rabbinic literature that was one of the primary means of remembering and transmitting the past of the Jewish peoples placed “all the ages... in an ever-fluid dialogue with one another,”² for it was a way of remembering and relating to the past that sought “not the historicity of the past, but its eternal contemporaneity.”³

In developing the claim that modern history constructs its object in part by seeing it as irretrievably dead and buried, I was aware that there are exceptions to this. Histories of art and music, for instance,

* Sanjay Seth (ss544@st-andrews.ac.uk).  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9021-1087>. School of International Relations, University of St Andrews, The Arts Faculty Building, The Scores, St Andrews KY16 9AX, United Kingdom.

1 David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), xvi.

2 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, 2nd ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 17.

3 Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 96.

insist that their object is different from other pasts because it continues to be part of the present. So I sought to enquire into these exceptions, with the intuition that the grounds on which these were thought to be exceptional would prove to be revealing for history, and perhaps also for music and art.

The artwork and the work of music are thought to be ‘autonomous’ –that is, they cannot be ‘reduced’ to simply being a ‘sign’ or ‘trace’ of the past in which they were made or composed. In his *Foundations of Music History*, Carl Dahlhaus writes, “Music of the past belongs to the present as music, not as documentary evidence...Music historiography...differs from its political counterpart in that musical works are primarily aesthetic objects and as such also represent an element of the present; only secondarily do they cast light on events and circumstances of the past.”⁴ The same claim is made for art: Hans Belting writes, “In the practice of art historiography...autonomy has been the very precondition for distinguishing art history from social history or cultural history of a general type.”⁵

This has at once been a premise of art and music history, and also the dilemma that has defined and plagued it. One of the most basic problems of music history, as Lydia Goehr describes it, is how to “reconcile the desire to treat musical works as purely musical entities with value and significance on their own, on the one hand, with the desire, on the other, to acknowledge that such works are shaped, and conditioned by their contexts...This opposition has been formulated in many ways, most commonly as the aesthetic versus the historical or as the musical versus the extra-musical.”⁶ The same problem shadows any history of art: as Michael Podro characterizes it, “Either the context-bound quality or the irreducibility of art may be elevated at the expense of the other. If a writer diminishes the sense of context in his

4 Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, trans. J.B. Robinson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 4.

5 Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, trans. by C. Saltzweid and M. Cohen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 117.

6 Lydia Goehr, “Writing Music History,” *History and Theory*, 31, no. 2 (May 1992): 185.

concern for the irreducibility or autonomy of art, he moves towards formalism. If he diminishes the sense of irreducibility in order to keep a firm hand on extra-artistic facts, he runs the risk of treating art as if it were the trace or symptom of these other facts.⁷

The history of art and music are, then, exceptions to my claim that one important element of the code of history is that the past is dead. But they are exceptions that confirm the rule. That there are specialized domains of history which are thought to be special or different because their object is historical and yet not so, that it is of the past and yet also of the present, only serves to underline the fact that the unmarked category of 'general' history – history *tout court*, as it were – constitutes its object as belonging wholly to the past, that which can be historicized without remainder, because it is well and truly dead.

But the practice of historicizing has a corrosive effect on all claims to autonomy from history, *including* those of art and music. In part this has been due to developments in practice, for art and music history are closely linked to the worlds of art and music production. As artists have questioned and challenged the ontological distinctiveness of art, and musicians have done so with music – Warhol's Brillo boxes, and John Cage's 4'33", may be taken as emblematic – this has inevitably had an effect on art and music historians. For once the ontological distinctiveness of art and music is challenged, the premise authorizing the treatment of art and music history as specialized forms of history, namely, that their object is distinctive because it is autonomous, is undermined. But this undermining has also been a consequence of the very process of historicizing art and music. Writing the history of music has led some historians to conclude that "The aesthetic premises that might sustain the writing of music history are themselves historical." It has been argued, for instance – most influentially by Lydia Goehr in *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* – that the idea of music as a 'work', existing in and for itself rather than subordinate to religious,

7 Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), xx.

pedagogical or other concerns, was a late eighteenth century development, which went hand in hand with the elevation of the composer and the score, the emergence of the professional orchestra and the concert hall, and copyright over music. This became a ‘regulative ideal’ which then governed the production and performance of musical works. In the repertoire of classical music which solidified in the nineteenth century, it was retrospectively and anachronistically projected backwards onto music which had not been governed by the work-concept; and this same anachronism has underpinned music history, which has treated music from the eighteenth century and before as if these too were ‘works’, that can and should be treated as autonomous aesthetic objects.⁸ The anachronism becomes more pronounced the further back in time we go; Leo Treitler writes, “medieval music culture, in which we locate the roots of our Western tradition, lacked all the conditions that have been for us the premises for the possibility of a history of music: a transmission founded on a written score, a work concept, the idea of musical structure, the idea that the musical work is autonomous.” And if “the ‘work’ concept [itself] has a history” then, concludes Treitler, “it cannot sensibly be taken as a premise for that history.”⁹

Something similar has happened in the history of art. Art historians have, of course, long been aware that for much of Western history art objects were not regarded as autonomous, but as bearers of religious messages, as items of prestige, and so on; and that their producers were not accorded the exalted status that (some) artists came to have from the nineteenth century, but instead were usually on a par with craftsmen, and often organized in guilds. But because the artwork had a material existence as an object –it could, for instance,

8 Before this time, she suggests, the question “‘what is music?’ asked for specification of music’s *extra-musical* function and significance. Music was predominantly understood as regulated by, and thus defined according to, what we would now think of as extra-musical ideals....Those who sought to describe the nature of music looked mostly at music’s ritualistic and pedagogical value. How could music successfully acquire an acceptable moral, political, or religious status that would render its production a valuable contribution to the good life?” – Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 122.

9 Leo Treitler, “History and Music,” in *History and Histories within the Human Sciences*, ed. Ralph Cohen and Michael S. Roth (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 171.

be wrenched out of its context and displayed in a gallery or museum— it could be and usually was assumed that ‘art’ was a universal, that there was some ontological essence to art that distinguished it from non-art, and thus that there was a constant-in-change that was the object of art history. However, such assumptions have been widely questioned in recent times. Hans Belting, for instance, has distinguished between ‘image’ and ‘art’, arguing that the ‘era of images’ in the West gave way to the ‘era of art’ following the Reformation, when reformed churches banished images from their bare walls, which now ended up in picture cabinets in private houses and eventually in galleries.¹⁰ In accounts such as these ‘art’ is a product of history, not the object that underpins (art) history; and it is therefore anachronistic to retrospectively label earlier objects as ‘art’.

My point for now is that the history of art and music have been premised on the claim that the domain of beauty or aesthetics is in some sense autonomous. But as the historicization of art and music has raised the possibility that making this claim entails reading a feature of the present into the past, we are left, to put it schematically, with two possibilities. Either art and music are ‘in fact’ autonomous and always have been, even if this was not discovered until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; or the autonomy of art and music is itself an historical artifact. Either the line from Baumgarten through Kant to Hegel to Habermas was a *discovery* of the aesthetic domain, hitherto ‘mingled’ and unfortunately subordinated to exiguous concerns; or the existence of an aesthetic domain, and the implications drawn from this, is a historical *creation*, and does not have universal validity. I suggest that the latter is the unavoidable conclusion.

But I do not want to leave it there, as a sort of victory of history over art and music, because these *are* in some important sense different from history tout court –even if that difference does not lie in claims to

¹⁰ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmond Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 458. In a similar vein, Jacques Rancière suggests that “art is a historical configuration that has existed in the Western world since the end of the eighteenth century” – Jacques Rancière, “Rethinking Modernity,” *Diacritics* 42, no. 3 (2014): 7.

‘autonomy’. They may still have something to teach us about history, beyond, as I have argued thus far, affirming that a defining premise and trait of modern history, unlike earlier and other forms of historicity, is that it treats the past as dead.

Another defining feature of modern historicity is that all forms of modern history-writing, whatever their immediate subject matter (a nation, a class, a practice etc), are in principle subsets of the history of their subject, humankind. This transition from “a plurality of specific histories to a general and singular history” in modern times was made possible, Reinhart Koselleck argues, by the emergence of a new subject, a ‘collective singular’: man or humanity.¹¹ Capitalism, conquest and colonialism were amongst the conditions of possibility of the emergence of this collective singular, for hitherto “differential temporalities and histories” now came, in Stuart Hall’s words, to be “irrevocably and violently yoked together.”¹² Thus unlike many other forms of representing the past, modern historiography presents itself as “a kind of transcendental category” in Koselleck’s description; or in Pierre Nora’s, as that which “belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority.”¹³ This is usually taken as a sign of its superiority to other forms of historicity –and this is despite the fact that the object ‘humanity’ only becomes available at a particular point in time, and the code which takes the past of this humanity as its object is itself not the product of all humanity, but only of a subset of it. (This is a point I will return to at the end of the presentation.)

In fact, I suggest, what modern history does –and here it is the same as all forms of historicity– is to create and reinforce an identity by narrativizing a ‘we’. It is not a superior form of re-presenting that past, but a different way of constituting and narrativizing a (different) ‘we’.

11 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 194.

12 Stuart Hall, “When Was ‘The Post-Colonial’? Thinking at the Limit,” in *The Postcolonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 252.

13 Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*,” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 9.

A debate in early music history and musicology helps us, I think, to see this. The Early Music movement, which became increasingly prominent (and commercially successful) from the 1950s, sought to promote Baroque, Renaissance and medieval music that would be played ‘authentically’, that is, as intended by the composer, using instruments of the period, and as it would have been heard by audiences of the time. Part of what propelled this movement was an investment in historicity, manifested both in the desire to retrieve ‘past’ music, and in the determination to avoid anachronism in the playing of that music. The idea of authenticity, however, soon came under challenge, on multiple grounds. It was pointed out that the evidence that would allow us to recreate how earlier music was performed was simply not available¹⁴; and that even if such knowledge were available to us, and early music was played as it would have been ‘in its own context’, contemporary performances of it could not possibly be authentic, given that they usually occurred “in the most anachronistic of all settings, the concert hall.”¹⁵ The debate increasingly turned, not simply on whether authenticity could be achieved, but rather on whether it was even desirable; that is, on the relation between knowledge of the history of music, and its contemporary performance. One of the most critical and effective voices was that of Richard Taruskin, a musicologist who was himself an accomplished conductor of early music. Historically informed performances of early music, argued Taruskin, wrongly assumed that avoiding anachronism was a guarantee of aesthetic value. In his opinion and that of some others, many early music performances had confused historical accuracy or ‘authenticity’ with good performance.

If historical accuracy did not guarantee good performance, then what was the proper relation between historical knowledge and performance, if any? According to Taruskin, when it came to performance,

14 Thus according to Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, “we still don’t know how medieval music was typically performed...We don’t know how it was composed...nor how carefully it was listened to, nor how it was understood as musical process.” – Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, *The Modern Invention of Medieval Music* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 260.

15 Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 93.

historical knowledge was a means to an end, not an end in itself. For instance, using old instruments had the effect of “open[ing] the mind and ear to new experiences,” thereby enabling the performer “to transcend his habitual, and therefore unconsidered, ways of hearing and thinking about the music.”¹⁶ It was important to be attentive to history, “but the object is not to duplicate the sounds of the past, for if that were our aim we would never know whether we had succeeded. What we are aiming at, rather, is the startling shock of newness, of immediacy...”¹⁷ Historically informed performances did not, and moreover should not, seek to recapture the musical past ‘as it really was’: “at their best and most successful historical reconstructionist performances are in no sense recreations of the past. They are quintessentially modern performances, modernist performances in fact, the product of an aesthetic wholly of our own era, no less time-bound than the performance styles they would supplant.”¹⁸

But in that case, in what sense were they ‘historical’ at all? The answer to this, according to Taruskin, was that ‘the past’ at issue was not the past in general, not the historical past that (in Nora’s description) “belongs to everyone and to no one”, but rather *tradition*, something that belonged to *someone*. The Western art-musical tradition had been passed on and developed by successive generations, and those who wished to continue it “must obtain it by great labour.”¹⁹ Historically informed music performance could be part of this “great labour”, a powerful means by which past music and the tradition that produced it were made a living part of our present. But according to this analysis, the Early Music movement had not grasped its own implications and possibilities, namely that what was at issue was not how to accurately

16 Richard Taruskin, “The Authenticity Movement Can Become a Positivist Purgatory, Literalistic and Dehumanizing,” *Early Music* 12, no. 1 (February 1984): 44.

17 Taruskin, “The Authenticity Movement,” 11. See similarly Laurence Dreyfus, “Early Music Defended against Its Devotees: A Theory of Historical Performance in the Twentieth Century,” *The Musical Quarterly* LXIX, no. 3 (Summer 1983), and John Butt, *Playing with History: Historical Approaches to Musical Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8.

18 Richard Taruskin, “On Letting the Music Speak for Itself: Some Reflections on Musicology and Performance,” *The Journal of Musicology* 1, no. 3 (July 1982): 346.

19 Taruskin, *Text and Act*, 79.

represent and reproduce a general past –‘everyman’s past’ as we might call it– but rather how to relate to and continue ‘our’ tradition. Historically informed music performance could contribute to this, but only if it was recognised that the purpose of such performances was not historical accuracy and the avoidance of anachronism, but rather an effort at making anachronism ‘work’ for us, by allowing us to encounter the musical tradition(s) that produced us with fresh ears, and to appropriate them according to our aesthetic: “Early Music is...to be this generation’s way of claiming Beethoven for its (our) own...it shocks us out of our comfortable genetic fallacies...[and] can play a major role in the endless process of renewal that keeps our cherished repertoire alive. *That* is tradition...”²⁰

Another musicologist, Robert Morgan, drew different conclusions, but he too argued that what was at issue was the continuation of tradition, rather than accurate reproduction. Performances of Bach in the nineteenth century were made to conform to the musical traditions of that century. From a historical point of view “such liberties may strike us as unforgivable perversions,” but from a musical point of view they indicated that “Bach’s music persisted as part of a flourishing tradition...renewing itself through new ideas and developments.”²¹ Such a healthy relationship with past music was untroubled by the sin of anachronism: “Within this framework one is not inclined to think about the past in a conscious way at all; one does not think of it primarily as the *past*, but as part of a living –and thus constantly changing– musical culture.”²²

What Taruskin, Morgan and some other participants in this debate came to see is that the injunction to avoid anachronism may be at odds with maintaining a living connection with a ‘tradition’. More reflective historians are also aware of this. Yerushalmi, whom I quoted earlier, recognises that when a modern historiography of the Jews emerged in the nineteenth century, it was not a deepening of or improvement upon the rabbinic traditions of remembering and transmitting a collective

20 Taruskin, *Text and Act*, 234 (emphasis in original).

21 Robert P. Morgan, “Tradition, Anxiety and the Musical Scene,” in *Authenticity and Early Music*, ed. Nicholas Kenyon (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 68.

22 Morgan, “Tradition, Anxiety and the Musical Scene,” 59 (emphasis in original).

past and a tradition, but rather a caesura, a “chasm that separates modern Jewish historiography from all the ways in which Jews once concerned themselves with their past.”²³ As a historian, Yerushalmi thus writes history, in his words, with “the ironic awareness that the very mode in which I delve into the Jewish past represents a decisive break with that past.”²⁴

Even for the most reflective historians, however, do not find it possible to press for a knowledge of the past that is untroubled by the prospect of anachronism. The specific, ontological character of music (or the performing arts more generally), which includes an inescapable gap between past/original text and present performance, is what makes it possible for Taruskin and Morgan to embrace anachronism. And yet –and it is one of the central arguments of my *Beyond Reason*– writing the history of peoples who had their own modes of historicity, ones which did not presuppose (as our modern mode does) that the past is dead, that the world is disenchanted, and that gods and spirits can play no role in history, is itself anachronistic. Perhaps historians have something to learn from art and music!

Commentator 1

Mariana Pinto dos Santos*

I am very happy to be able to participate in this debate with Sanjay, João and Luís, and I thank Luís and José Neves for inviting me. It was also a great opportunity to read Sanjay Seth’s latest book, which I enjoyed very much and for that I am grateful.

My comments are focused on Sanjay Seth’s talk at Festival Imaterial 2023, but also engage with his book published in 2021 by Oxford

* Mariana Pinto dos Santos (marianasantos@fcsb.unl.pt).  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7289-1875>. Instituto de História da Arte – NOVA FCSH, Colégio Almada Negreiros, Campus de Campolide da NOVA, 1099-032 Lisbon, Portugal.

²³ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 101.

²⁴ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 81.

University Press, *Beyond Reason: Postcolonial Theory and the Social Sciences*. I believe they are both part of an ongoing, and still necessary, critique of historicism. Still necessary, because historicism as a master narrative is not in the past, but it re-emerges and is still very much present in the way history is practiced and perceived.

In the beginning of your book, you refer to three currents that have challenged the “preconditions and suppositions that underline modern Western thought”, the first two we can roughly identify with structuralism and post-structuralism, and the third with post-colonial studies – a current in which we can situate your work as a historian. The first one shows the parochial nature of the a priori concepts that make a disciplinary tradition or “episteme” and that are taken as universal; the second shows the “historical contingency and arbitrariness” of the master narrative; the third has “provincialized knowledge” by contrasting Western and non-Western traditions. If these currents have shown that modern knowledge is parochial but has succeeded in become global, you nevertheless reject the ideas of some scholars who state that modern knowledge is not Western but a universal inheritance that was appropriated as exclusively European. You write that “the (dubious) benefit of according non-Western peoples credit for modern knowledge leaves unchallenged the presumption that this knowledge is universal and true, whence the issue of ‘credit’ arises.”²⁵ You seem also to consider that this claim has the danger of effacing difference between Western and non-Western traditions, and you defend that it is possible to “work within a knowledge tradition and yet denaturalize it” (p. 15) and you do not fail to recognize that that position may imply falling into contradictions. Although I agree we must acknowledge that we work from within this knowledge tradition and still can criticize it and expose its pretence domination, I cannot help asking you what do you think about the recent book (that has fascinated me) by anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow who have speculated on evidence that a lot of progressive ideas once (on equality, for instance) taken to be European, where in fact indigenous.²⁶

25 Sanjay Seth, *Beyond Reason: Postcolonial Theory and the Social Sciences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 11.

26 David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London: Allen Lane, 2021).

I will now move on to comment how you engage with my field of work, which is art history.

In your book, you state that history writing is a code, and the elements of that code, which you also refer to in your talk, are based in several presuppositions: “that the world is disenchanting; that the past is dead; that only humans are the producers of meanings and purposes, and this is what history disinters and represents; that ‘society’ provides the context for, and shapes, human actions.” You also refer that another code is that anachronism “is sin” and it should always be avoided in history-writing.

By thinking that one of the main codes of history-writing is the assumption that the past is dead, you find that the histories of art and music are the exception that confirm the rule because their object is “special”, “different”, in the sense that it is as much an object of the past, and subject to be historicized, as it is an object of the present, in the sense that it acts in the present –in a concert or in a record, for instance, in the case of music, in the museum in the case of art. It continues to be part of the present. Artists from the early avant-garde, or from the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s, might argue that the objects that are in a museum have a death certificate on them, but I understand that your point is that a beholder or the historian can engage with its object in the present, it can affect him or her, here and now. I will divide my comments in topics.

1. Art

My first question would be: which art are you talking about? I understand you leave aside literature which, I believe, could be a rather interesting topic to discuss history-writing and its relationship with fiction-writing. But even in the visual arts, it seems you are referring to a very Western canonical idea of art which corresponds to high art. That idea of art is also a very recent one and it comes with the making of our parochial-yet-global modern knowledge. Hans Belting, whom you also quote, states that “the modern notion of art was prepared by

the Renaissance but only with the Enlightenment and romanticism did it acquire the meaning we give it today and only with a major development of the concept of art could an art history emerge.²⁷

The currents you mentioned previously have also undermined the concepts in art history-writing, and I must add, in the case of art history, feminist art history and Marxist studies. That included questioning the absences in the master narrative of art history, either of art objects (so-called “minor” arts and crafts) and artists (women, artists from the periphery, non-Western artists, etc), and also to question the idea that art history is about identifying and describing objects, biographizing artists, establishing hierarchies between art forms and art objects by attributing to them different values (and with historical value comes economic value) or understanding art as a “reflexion” of society, or yet that art history should coincide with national art history and engage in national identity constructions (which often include problematic essentialist categories), to name a few practices in traditional art history.

And this connects with my second point.

2. *Autonomy*

You seem to relate the exceptionality of the art history object to the idea of autonomy of art, even though you recognize that it has been put to question by artists and art historians. The autonomy of art is a historical category *per se*. But, as far as I can understand, you mention the prevailing notion of autonomy as a reason for the art history object to be considered “alive”, and to have been treated as “alive” by art history, since art history has been written mainly under the premise of autonomy. Now, I must argue a bit in a different direction.

The idea of autonomy of art is recent, it is a Western idea, and it is developed alongside the creation of the discipline of art history itself and the museum, both developed in a colonial context and because of the colonial and territory expansion context. “The age of art history

²⁷ Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 60.

as an academic discipline coincides with the age of the museum”, says Hans Belting in *Art History after Modernism*²⁸. Recently, I had the occasion to visit the exhibition by British filmmaker and artist Isaac Julien, *What Freedom Is to Me* (Tate Britain, London, 2023). And in one of his film installations, *Lessons of the Hour – Frederick Douglass* (2019), he says that “the makers of race were the makers of art”. The invention of race goes along with the invention of art as an autonomous realm and the establishment of aesthetic categories with the pretence of being universal.

The valorisation of high art was also a late narrative, coinciding with the consolidation of modern disciplines, including history and art history. The discipline of art history values painting and sculpture as major arts taking classical antiquity as its model thanks to territorial occupations and archaeological excavations in the context of enlightenment rationalism. The autonomy of art had a shift in the twentieth century with the Western debates regarding the possibility of separating it from politics and from mass culture –that is, by trying to create an ahistorical, timeless, spaceless realm for art. Frequently, the autonomy of art is related with formalism in art history. The art historians Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall, whom you quote on a footnote in your book, have precisely argued that there is no pure form, it has always been conditioned by genre, materials, technique, content and function –artistic form is always historical, it is *in-the-world*.

In my art history practice, I have studied the construction of autonomy and I often try to dethrone art from that high place and to purge it from its constructed exceptionality, in fact, to return it to history. Therefore, as much as you need art history in your historian practice, I often need history in my art history practice.

Therefore, my argument is opposite to yours: if there is any difference in the art history object, and if it relates to the present in a way a historical document doesn’t (and I have doubts on that too), it is precisely because autonomy never existed, and because it has been contested by

²⁸ Belting, *Art History after Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 8.

art practice and by some art history practice too; it is because art it is part of life, politics, power, resistance and historical inequality.

3. The Object/Subject of Art History

My third point relates to the object/subject of art history. What is the object of art history? Considering all the changes art and culture went through in the West, but not only in the West, considering technical reproduction and mass culture, considering the study of the reception, or the dematerialization of the art object, the subject of art history is often not a work of art, but, for instance, the conditions of art practice, the history of institutions, the teaching of art, the lack of women in the narrative of art history (both artists and art historians). The subject of art history is often not an object, such as painting, or sculpture, or film. It is what makes possible painting, sculpture, film, but it is also how ideas about art circulate and are transformed by practices, how art objects and art ideas travel, through images, through stories told, letters written, emigration, exile, colonization, looting. Artist's themselves have tried to escape the classification of their work as a certain kind of object. Laurie Anderson, for instance, calls herself a multimedia artist as a strategy, she says, so she can escape to be recognized by the market and the art system as representative of an art form. Consequently, the object/subject of art history is not necessarily an artwork or an aesthetic object. Instead, it can be narratives, concepts, conditions for the making of art, and definitions of art itself.

4. Anachronism

Some authors have approached anachronism as something inherent to art history, something to be embraced by the art historian. Georges Didi-Huberman as other art historians (Belting and, for instance, Horst Bredekamp, Viktor Stoichita, W.J.T. Mitchell, Jonathan Crary, James Elkins) are part of the changing of focus on the way images impact on historical knowledge, precisely by considering they have a different way of working with perception, that makes the past emerge in the present. Georges Didi-Huberman calls the image the "eye of history". These

ideas rely on other authors' work, such as, for some, the work of the art historian from the beginning of the twentieth century Aby Warburg and the work of the philosopher and writer Walter Benjamin. Walter Benjamin reflected on this idea of how the past can emerge suddenly in the present through recollection, through objects –not only artworks, but products of the consumer society, mass culture industrialized objects from the recent past, publicity, old toys.

Benjamin's conception of history has a Nietzschean base: history renews the past –and that means to allow imperfection: recollection does not recover the past, it reconstructs it in the present and in that process something is forgotten. For Benjamin, the writing of history relates to experience. Walter Benjamin was criticizing historicism, as Nietzsche had done before by defending that history should be connected with life, with experience, and opposing to it historical materialism as a methodological approach that, instead of considering the past dead, it *experienced* the past in the present. Benjamin writes, rather pointedly, in his theses "On the Concept of History" that "historicism offers the 'eternal' image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called 'Once upon a time' in historicism's bordello. He [is ready] to blast open the continuum of history."

So, my point is that I missed Benjamin in your book, and the possibility he brings to think history as an entanglement of past and present, which can be conveyed by different objects, and not only artworks. Furthermore, Benjamin's concept of history is itself very much marked by Jewish religion (mixed with historical materialism) and you refer to Yosef Yerushalmi's point that the past of Jewish people continues to be part of the present. Benjamin used that to reframe what history-writing could be. So why not Benjamin?

Still thinking about anachronism, and how it works in art history, I recall an article written by my late colleague and friend Foteini Vlachou, on the anachronism inherent in the methodologies and concepts used in the practice of art history and how it determines the interpreta-

tion of artworks.²⁹ She discusses the choice of wording by scholars who studied George de la Tour's *Peasant Couple Eating* (1620/25), which often included the term "realist", but associated with the meaning it acquired in the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century. The use of this term, Vlachou argued, served to inscribe the painter in a progressive lineage towards modernism, preventing, she states, from seeing the satirical function of the painting and the social class differentiation it underlines (instead of exposing or denouncing it). Realism in the seventeenth century was a tool for comic effect. Her essay demonstrates that the anachronism subjacent to art history terminology can limit the interpretation. Anachronism is present in art history writing as much as in history writing, and traditionally it has been rejected too. However, if acknowledge anachronism we must consider its effects on interpretation.

5. *Translation*

You do mention Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" in a footnote, relating his ideas about translating with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's explanation that anthropology should perform a translation. That is a marvellous point you make in the book, and I strongly agree with the idea of writing history as a translation that acknowledges unsurpassable differences with the original text/object, as a way to go beyond the Western imposition of its modern tools of knowledge on non-Western people and places. I would like to add that Benjamin, in his essay "The Task of the Translator", talks about translation as the *afterlife* of a text. He writes: "In translations the original life of the original work is developed in a larger, amplified and always renewed way. For in its *afterlife* –which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living– the original undergoes a change. Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process. In the same way a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way

29 Foteini Vlachou, "The *Names of Things*: Terminology and the Practice of Art History," *Revista de História da Arte* 10 (2012): 227–239, https://run.unl.pt/bitstream/10362/16830/1/RHA_10_ART_11_FVlachou.pdf.

of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language.”³⁰


This can be transposed to history and art history writing and I believe there is a strong affinity between what Benjamin writes about translation with what you are proposing with your book. You propose this concept of translation as a methodological tool to prevent homogenisation and hierarchisation between different knowledges. I believe it is truly useful, because it puts the (art) historian in a humbler position –acknowledging difference and heterogeneity, not from a place of authority, but in equal terms with its subject and with other history-writing (or storytelling) practices.

Commentator 2

João Pedro Cachopo*

I appreciate the introduction and the kind invitation. I’m truly delighted to be a part of this conversation with Sanjay Seth, Mariana Pinto dos Santos and Luís Trindade. What truly piqued my interest in Sanjay’s presentation, which revisits the argument presented in the Chapter 3, “The Code of History”, from his book *Beyond Reason*, is its focus on a subject that holds great significance for me: the uses of the past –including the pasts of music, art and thought– in the present.

For the sake of clarity, and before I proceed to ask Sanjay a few questions, I would like to offer a concise recapitulation of his theoretical proposal, highlighting its key points for today’s discussion, presented in a set of five points. This will be the first part of my talk. In the second part, I will pose a few questions, touching on subjects such as the distinction between music and art; the role of technology, especially

* João Pedro Cachopo (jpcachopo@fcsh.unl.pt).  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4724-2723>. CESEM – NOVA FCSH, Av. Berna 26 C, 1069-061 Lisbon, Portugal.

³⁰ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” (1921), in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings, vol. 1, 1913–1926*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 256.

technologies of audiovisual reproduction; and finally, in the spirit of Nietzsche, the “advantages” and “disadvantages” of history for the present.

I therefore begin by summarizing what I understand to be Sanjay Seth’s proposal in five points. The first one concerns the idea that modern history tends to understand the past as dead. We may think and imagine the past. We may talk about the past. We may research the past. And yet the past, as we –modern subjects and modern history– tend to perceive it, is no longer a living part of our lives. There are traces of the past. We see them. We go to museums. We listen to debates. We are aware –and some of us rightly claim that we should be carefully aware– that the past informs the present. Still, there is a significant difference. The past is irrevocably gone. This is the understanding of the past that Sanjay recognizes as being the most common and the most established today. It’s also this understanding of the past, which codifies our relation towards it, that Sanjay aims to challenge.

Secondly, although this understanding of the past is the most common and established, there are exceptions to this rule. There are specific histories, according to Sanjay, in which this understanding of the past as dead, does not apply. Art and music are cited as examples. In these domains, we not only think about, discuss and study the past, but we also experience it in our present lives in tangible ways. For instance, we can listen to music from the twelfth century while driving to Évora or collect postcards featuring Renaissance or Romantic paintings. Nowadays, we can even use AI platforms to manipulate a Picasso or Vermeer to create new backgrounds for our laptops and smartphones. In essence, we engage with the histories of art and music in ways that are concrete and meaningful in our present lives.

Why is it that in certain domains, namely in art and music, the understanding of the past as dead does not apply, or at least must be complemented by considering its reappropriation in the present? This question leads us to the third point. Historically speaking –because there is always a genealogy to be explored– this is consequence of the fact that music and art have come to be understood as autonomous fields in modern Western societies. What brought about these changes?

Many factors were at play. A crucial factor was the emergence of the notion of the artwork and the musical work as self-contained entities that endure not only beyond the artist's life but also beyond the time in which they were created. Bach's passions or Rembrandt's self-portraits are still significant to us –not just as traces of the past, belonging to a general past like any other fragment of culture, but also as interlocutors in the present. Their experience is never fully exhausted, in the enjoyment and understanding they entail, by pointing to such belonging.

However, and this leads us to the fourth point, the concept of autonomy, which allows us to conceive of art and music as domains where the past is not dead, is in itself a historical construct. Sanjay emphasizes this point –in conversation with other authors, such as Hans Belting and Lydia Goehr. In what follows, since Mariana will explore the domain of the visual arts, I will concentrate on music. In the realm of music, as Lydia Goehr famously and convincingly argued, the notion of the musical artwork as a self-contained entity that survives the death of the composer and the passage of time is relatively recent. It can be traced back to the transition between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. It was during this period that composers began to think of their music in terms of the “work concept”.

Lydia Goehr summarized this idea in a simple yet provocative statement: “Bach did not intend to compose musical works.”³¹ Historians, critics and musicologists were perplexed by this statement. What does she mean? What about the *Goldberg Variations*, the *Brandenburg Concerts*, the *Cello Suites*? Aren't they musical works? They might indeed be considered such –that is to say, nothing forbids or invalidates such understanding– but that's not the essence of the argument. The point is not whether we can view Bach's music as a collection of musical works. The point is that Bach himself did not conceive of his music in that manner. He would think of what he did as a musician as “writing this particular piece for Magdalene” or “composing this kind music for this or

31 Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 8.

that occasion” or “writing a cantata or a passion”. However, he did not equate his activity as a composer with that of a creator of distinct musical works, stemming from a score that prescribes faithful performances and, even less so, outliving his own era to grant him immortality. That is why borrowing from his own music and reusing it in different compositions posed no issue for Bach or other composers of that time. No one would be more surprised by the revival of interest in Bach’s major choral works, famously catalysed by the 1829 and 1841 performances organized by Felix Mendelssohn, than the composer himself.

It goes without saying that recognizing the historical nature of the autonomy of art and music is far from being an original move at this stage. However, it is an important step in Sanjay’s argument, because it paves the way for what I consider to be the core of Sanjay proposal: the critique of a hyper-rationalist, Western-centered, teleological understanding of history, that nonetheless does not disregard the necessity of genealogy, which involves acknowledging historical mutations and cultural contingencies. This leads us to the fifth and arguably most pivotal point. While it is imperative to recognize that the autonomy of music and art is a mutable and contingent concept, not universally or necessarily applicable, we must also acknowledge that the uniqueness of our historical relationship with music and art does not solely rest on the notion of autonomy. It also relies on the notion of tradition, which assumes a connection between musical and artistic practices and their historical and social contexts. That notion of tradition is particularly important to Sanjay, because it sustains a relationship to the past that continues into the present.

This is the reason why, in Sanjay’s view, art and music may have something to teach history. Or, to be more precise, and shed as much light as possible on the very title of this conversation, this is why art and music, to the extent that they encourage us to approach the past in an engaged manner, may have something to teach the practices of history. And their primary lesson can be succinctly summarized as follows: the fear of anachronism and the pursuit of objectivity should not prevent us from interpreting and appropriating the past from the

perspective of the present (or even from the perspective of a culturally specific contemporary context).

This is how I would summarize Sanjay's proposal regarding his engagement with music and art, without delving into other aspects of his book. Against this backdrop, I would like to pose three questions to him, which I think and hope will provide an opportunity for him to clarify his positions in a fruitful way. The first question concerns the distinction between art and music. Sanjay presents art and music as exceptions to the "code of history" (the assumption that the past is dead). Therefore, he brings them together – music and art. But they are inherently different – a fact that Sanjay does not ignore but that begs further elaboration. The way in which one relates to the past of art differs from the way one relates to the past of music. To what extent do these differences hold relevance in your approach, and how do you account for them?

Let me illustrate this difference by comparing two objects. On the one hand, a postcard featuring a photograph of a painting by Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*. What is this object? It is a reproduction of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*. On the other hand, a CD featuring a recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. What is this object? A reproduction of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. While this description is not incorrect, it is nonetheless incomplete in ways that are pertinent in this context. In reality, the second object is not simply a reproduction of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. It is a reproduction of Glenn Gould's 1981 performance of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*.

This distinction is not a mere play on words. What is reproduced in the case of a painting or sculpture is a tangible object. This object, unless it has been destroyed, exists somewhere in the world at this moment. It can be damaged, stolen, exhibited, moved or restored. In contrast, what is reproduced in the case of music is an event, a performance. This event has already occurred. Music is immaterial. Regardless of the type of music, whether it's a studio recording of Bach's music or a live recording of a Sufi ritual in Turkey, music is ephemeral and intangible – or ineffable, as Vladimir Jankélévitch or musicologists such as Carolyn Abbate or Michael Gallope would prefer to say. Given

this distinction, how does the difference between music and art become relevant when examining their connection to the past? To further complicate matters, since other sonic objects share the immateriality of music, does the recognition of the difference between music and art not invite us, as Jonathan Sterne suggests in *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, to consider the proximity between musical and non-musical sonic objects?

My second question is not without relation to the first one and concerns the technologies of audiovisual reproduction. Our relationship with the past, not just the past in general but particularly the past of art and music, has undergone a profound transformation over the past century due to the emergence of technologies of reproduction, transmission and manipulation of sound and image. This transformation is undeniable, and its significance cannot be underestimated. If my first question focused on the distinction between art and music, my second question revisits the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, when phonography, photography and cinematography came into existence. The technical reproducibility of sound and image has fundamentally altered our connection to the past. How do you address this transformation in your work, and what political implications does it carry?

Once again, the notion of trace is crucial. Until the late nineteenth century, traces of the past, in the domains of art and music, were the actual artworks, the scores, the instruments or written testimonies. Since the early twentieth century, photographs, recordings and films have also become traces of the past. How does this influence our relationship to the past, not only in the domains of art and music, but also beyond them, encompassing broader implications of a cultural, social or ethical nature? Is there a political potential, as Walter Benjamin has claimed, in a relationship to the past enriched by technological reproducibility? The angel, if I may recall Benjamin's interpretation of Paul Klee's painting, would now acquire the capability to scrutinize the most invisible and inaudible details of the past with enhanced precision, yet it remains compelled toward the future. How do the political

and artistic implications of technological reproducibility intersect in your understanding of history?

Thirdly, I would like to introduce Nietzsche into our discussion. Considering other contributions by authors such as Benjamin, whom I've already mentioned, Didi-Huberman or Rancière would certainly be pertinent in this context. But I would like to conclude with Nietzsche, bearing in mind the essay "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" (the second untimely meditation). In this essay, Nietzsche writes:

We need history, certainly, but we need it for reasons different from those for which the idler in the garden of knowledge needs it, even though he may look nobly down on our rough and charmless needs and requirements. We need it, that is to say, for the sake of life and action.³²

My question is simple: assuming that we could approach this essay with a collective rather than an individual subject in mind –and Nietzsche himself mentions that these questions can be posed in relation to an individual, a people or a culture– could this, *mutatis mutandis*, be what you seek to achieve in your work? To appropriate the past for the sake of the present? At another point of this essay, Nietzsche also discusses the necessity of adopting an untimely attitude when studying the past –“that is to say, acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come.”³³ Does the perspective of a “time to come” hold significance in your work, and if so, in what ways?

Reply

Sanjay Seth

Rather than trying to respond to the multiple and penetrating questions and comments raised by Mariana and João Pedro, for reasons

³² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 59.

³³ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 60.

of space I will be selective in my response. I will first respond to the issues raised by each of them in turn, and conclude by responding to a question or challenge that they both pose.

Mariana references the claim made by Graeber and Wengrow that many progressive ideas, including the idea of equality, are not Western in origin (as is usually assumed), but sometimes emerged long before there was a 'modern West' that could claim to be the source of such virtues. She wonders where such claims sit in relation to my insistence that we should not engage in the game of 'who invented/discovered things first'. I agree with Mariana that as long as presumptions of non-Western 'lack' and inferiority continue to persist, there is a pressing need to refute them, where it is possible to do so. But the general strategy that marked non-Western thought for so long –to try to show that 'we had it too'– is what I am contesting. This response rested upon the presumption that certain practices and values were right and true, and thus it was necessary to show that those peoples maligned as backward or savage were not lacking in the values and practices deemed to be markers of civilisation and progress. But any 'victory' in this contest was at the same time –in my view– also a defeat, because it accepted the superiority of these values and practices as the precondition of entering into the game of 'who had them first'. But once we historicise these values and practices, the imperative to play that game disappears. For instance, we can acknowledge, without any embarrassment, that many non-Western peoples did not write history as a secular narrative that carefully avoided anachronism, once we recognise that this form of writing and relating to the past, one that emerged in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, is but one way of representing and relating to the past. The greatest contribution of postcolonial theory, in my view and practice of it, is that it created the intellectual space for raising such questions and thus also ending the game of 'me too'–for whereas once to question the presumptions that inform what I call 'modern Western knowledge' would have been denounced as relativism, irrationalism, 'post-modernism run mad', and so on, with the arrival of postcolonialism on the intellectual scene it became possible to raise such questions.

Mariana points to the many historians of art, and also artists, who shown that high or canonical art, the conception of art for which ‘autonomy’ is claimed, was made possible only by many exclusions, including ‘handicrafts’, and the productions of women and non-Western peoples. I am making precisely the same point –that the autonomy of art is a historical production, not a ‘fact’ that was discovered at a certain point in history. That I am able to make this point for art history (as also with music history), both areas in which I am not a specialist, is because I draw upon writings of critical art historians, thereby proving Mariana’s point. But I don’t think it is true that, as Mariana says, our arguments are at odds with one another. The difference, in my view, is that I insist that ‘exposing’ the constructed-ness of the high art tradition and the historicity of claims for autonomy does not –as with so many other ‘historical constructions’ parading as discoveries, as truths discovered– make these go away. This is in part a general phenomenon, for the presumption that the world is disenchanted, that nature and culture are two completely different domains, and that gods exist only in the minds of humans, actively underpin the institutions and practices of us moderns. They are not just intellectual positions that disappear when refuted; which is why I expect my critique of history, and the arguments of my book more generally, to remain a minority position. But this is *especially* so with those disciplines and practices which, like art, are closely tied to institutions and, most importantly, the market. The exhibition catalogue is an example –even when written by critical art historians and curators who are well aware of the constructedness of the high art tradition, and who may even draw attention to it in their text, the catalogue is nonetheless tied to ‘artworks’ in the traditional sense, displayed in a gallery.

Following a masterfully lucid summary of my argument and some of its implications, João Pedro asks some challenging questions. I treat art and music history as similar inasmuch as they are exceptions to the presumption informing history-writing, namely that the past is dead. But as João Pedro notes, notwithstanding this similarity, the way in which we understand and relate to the past of music is different from

how we relate to the past of art. I address this difference briefly in my presentation (and at somewhat greater length in chapter 4 of *Beyond Reason*). The main difference, in João Pedro's description, is that a CD recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* is not just a reproduction of Bach, but a reproduction (in this example) of Glenn Gould's 1981 performance of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. To make the same point in my own language, Gould's performance is a re-presentation, and not simply a representation, of Bach. It is a feature of music –and indeed of the performing arts more generally (theatre is another example)– that there is a 'gap' between the past or 'original' and the performance of it.

This is significant for the argument I develop. I show, in the context of debates around early music, that some of participants in this debate argued that anachronism was not only not something to abhor, but that it was *necessary* to appropriate a musical tradition for our own times and thus keep it alive. That step –enabled in part precisely because of the inescapable gap between the 'original' and the performance– is not easily available to historians, because avoidance of anachronism is at the heart of the discipline. It is also not available to them because, as I explain, modern history takes the entire human past –rather than traditions, which are always specific to one slice to humankind– as its putative subject matter. These are major differences between history tout court and the history of art and (especially) music, and it is why I concluded my presentation by suggesting that historians may benefit from examining, more than they have hitherto done, the work done by historians and practitioners of art and music.

João Pedro observes that in the last century technologies of reproduction and transmission of music have undergone a profound transformation, and asks how this might or should affect our relationship to the musical or sonic past. Here I have to confess, with embarrassment, that I have not read or thought about this deeply enough to respond, though I will now seek to read and think about this, for his observations and questions are important, and the failure to discuss them in *Beyond Reason* is an omission (one of many!).

Mariana and João Pedro both ask where these arguments regarding history lead me –specifically, and drawing upon Nietzsche and Benjamin, whether I think the writing of history should seek “to blast open the continuum of history” (Benjamin) and/or be at the service “of life and action” and “for the benefit of a time to come” (Nietzsche). Here there is a real difference between my own position and that of my interlocutors, though I think it is less a disagreement over substance than a difference arising out of the nature of the questions being asked. I will conclude by sketching wherein this difference lies.

I am neither for nor against anachronism; my point is rather that the code of history, despite being defined by its total rejection of anachronism, is itself anachronistic when applied to those pasts –such as those of European pre-moderns, and non-western peoples– who did not or do not share the presuppositions underlying the code of history. As a consequence, when we represent such pasts in the modern mode of historiography, we are not providing a true and correct understanding, which those whom we seek to represent did not and could not provide (because they did not realise that gods do not exist but are human creations; because they had not discovered that nature and culture are two different things but rather confused them; and so on). What we are doing instead is translating their past into our categories and forms of understanding. In *Beyond Reason* and in my previous book *Subject Lessons*, I suggest that where there is sufficient historical and cultural continuity, such anachronism can be ‘redeemed’. But in the case of the non-Western world, the advent of European modernity and its forms of knowledge marked a profound cesura, a sharp and almost total rupture. The many other modes of representing and relating to the past that once flourished in the Indian subcontinent, for example, still survive in quotidian life, but they have been pushed out of schools and universities and state bureaucracies where modern Western knowledge, including the modern way of representing the past, are almost completely hegemonic. In these circumstances, the pressing intellectual question –for me at any rate– is not whether to develop a historical materialism that engages with experience, or even to ask how a different

way of conceiving of history and its purposes may inaugurate or hasten a (better) time to come (both of these positions, let me note in passing, seek a *singular* form of relating to the past to replace the current one). It is rather how to remain attentive to the multitude of ways of relating to the past that once existed, and that have still not been completely erased. When, after citing Nietzsche on why and how ‘we’ need history, João asks me, “assuming that we could approach this essay with a collective rather than an individual subject in mind... could this, *mutatis mutandis*, be what you seek to achieve in your work?,” my answer is ‘no’, simply because I get stuck at the ‘we’, the collective subject that has or needs a history. My angle of vision, or the tenor of my enquiries (to playfully use language from art and music) is a different one; it is about what intellectual options are available to us when *many* ways of thinking about and relating to pastnesses (in the plural) have been replaced by a single one, that spuriously claims that there is a ‘we’ whose past can only be truthfully represented by modern history writing.

This does not mean that the more explicitly political questions that Mariana and João Pedro pose are not legitimate and pressing ones, for they very much are. Nor is it that questions regarding the relation between history-writing and emancipatory politics are not of interest to me. In concluding the second of two chapters devoted to history in *Beyond Reason*, I discuss the historical and political debate that ensued in India following the destruction of Babri Masjid in the town of Ayodhya in 1992. Many progressive historians sought to show the falsity of the right-wing Hindu claim that the destroyed mosque stood where once there was a millennia old Hindu temple. Sympathetic as I am to the politics underlying this demonstration, I conclude that historical ‘truths’ cannot anchor our political convictions, but that –if I may be forgiven for quoting myself– “What was at stake...was not the truth about the past, which could then serve to underwrite our political convictions in the present, but rather what sort of nation India was to be and, accordingly, how its past was to be understood.” This is not very far from what I take João Pedro and Mariana to be advocating, namely that history should be unabashedly at the service

of the present, and further, recognizing that there is no place outside of networks of power and privilege, history should not hesitate to choose sides. But even here, my point is less that the historian, or history more generally, *should* not fear giving voice to experience or taking sides, but rather that the presumptions and protocols that govern the production of historical writing are themselves not indisputable facts, but specific ways of construing our relation to the past. They are, if you like, ideological –they already take sides, even if not, or not always, in the political terms of Left and Right. But the answer or corrective to this lies not, it seems to me, in departures from these protocols in the name of experience, life, or revolution, but in diagnosing and criticising these presumptions, and examining their functions and effects. That, at any rate, is what I seek to do in *Beyond Reason*.

It only remains to say that I am extremely lucky, and therefore grateful, to have had interlocutors that pose such challenging questions, requiring me not only to clarify some of the arguments in my book, but push me to think beyond what is already contained in *Beyond Reason*.

Referência para citação:

Seth, Sanjay, Mariana Pinto dos Santos, João Pedro Cachopo, and Matheus Serva Pereira. “Music, Art, Science and the Decolonisation of History. Roundtable on Sanjay Seth’s *Beyond Reason: Postcolonial Theory and the Social Sciences* (2021)”. *Práticas da História, Journal on Theory, Historiography and Uses of the Past*, n.º 18 (2024): 377-408. <https://doi.org/10.48487/pdh.2024.n18.37857>.