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Thoughts on the "Global Turn" as a Disciplinary Future: Escaping Eurocentric Approaches

Reflexões sobre a “virada global” como um futuro disciplinar: escapando de abordagens eurocêntricas

Claire Farago*

ABSTRACT

With a special emphasis on regional studies, this article takes up the challenge to theorize about the complexities of cultural interaction without imposing ethnocentric categories such as those that historically defined the discipline of art history on Euro-American terms. One of the primary obstacles to rethinking the discipline of art history has been the segmentation of our archives by period style and national culture. How can we access this past (and present) without also passing on values that may no longer be tenable but are inherent in our classifying terms and structures? I review issues of shared concern across a wide expanse of methods and subjects under four categories: (1) the problem of universals and universalism; (2) working within a national culture model in a transcultural setting; (3) the epistemic and ontological ground of research; and (4) the ethics of scholarship. I advocate for a material-based, non-transcendental ontology capacious enough to appeal to many different interpretative aims at the center of transcultural approaches, such as what happens when values, beliefs, and information are not held in common. In such cases, interpretation focuses on the heterogeneity of the artwork itself.

KEY WORDS

Transcultural frameworks. Universalism. Connectivity. Formal analysis. Style.

RESUMO

Com ênfase especial nos estudos regionais, este artigo assume o desafio de teorizar sobre as complexidades da interação cultural sem impor categorias etnocêntricas como as que historicamente definiram a disciplina de História da Arte em termos euro-americanos. Um dos principais obstáculos para repensar a disciplina de História da Arte tem sido a segmentação de nossos arquivos por estilo de época e cultura nacional. Como podemos acessar esse passado (e presente) sem também transmitir valores que podem não ser mais sustentáveis, mas são inerentes a nossos termos e estruturas de

classificação? Eu reviso questões de interesse comum em uma ampla extensão de métodos e assuntos sob quatro categorias: (1) o problema dos universais e universalismo; (2) trabalhar dentro de um modelo de cultura nacional em um ambiente transcultural; (3) a base epistêmica e ontológica da pesquisa; e (4) a ética da bolsa de estudos. Eu defendo uma ontologia não transcendental baseada em material com capacidade suficiente para apelar a muitos objetivos interpretativos diferentes no centro das abordagens transculturais, como o que acontece quando valores, crenças e informações não são mantidos em comum. Nesses casos, a interpretação se concentra na heterogeneidade da própria obra de arte.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Estruturas transculturais. Universalismo. Conectividade. Análise formal. Estilo.

How can insights from regional and local studies be integrated into an inclusive international network of academic activities?¹ As co-editor of this special issue of *Modos*, I offer four circumambulations around the sacred stupa of art history: how (and why and whether) to transform art history organized in terms of national cultures and period style into a transcultural enterprise.

1. The Unresolved Problem of Universals and Universalism

There is, first of all, an ongoing communication problem in imagining what and how regional history should be brought to bear on the subject of global art, a slippery term that has been inconsistently defined (Juneja, 2011). For Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatra Chakravorty Spivak, and many others who take a de-colonial approach to the study of culture, “universalism” is the heritage of Enlightenment metaphysics that demands scrutiny and reconceptualization, while for James Elkins, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann,

Ulrich Pfisterer, Horst Bredekamp, and other Europeanist art historians who wish to integrate past and present in accounts of global art on the basis of Enlightenment ideas about universal human values, those same categories and goals still appear to be self-evident.

To take a leading example of how the hegemonic practices of the past get reproduced in the present, James Elkins, one of the most widely published organizers of the discourse on global art, in his introduction to *Art and Globalization* (2010), regards as “amnesiac” the discipline’s neglect of “‘premodern’ forms of regionalism and globalism in art history” (2010: 3)². Elkins advocates each artistic tradition’s use of core concepts. One problem with this approach is that not every tradition of artmaking is accompanied by a textual tradition, and another is that cultural traditions are dynamic and rarely if ever completely distinct or homogeneous. Elkins juxtaposes “cultures” in nineteenth-century terms as having parallel histories, terms that epitomize the charge of Eurocentrism, and he never questions “vision” as involving culturally and socially constituted processes that require historical investigation. His simplistic understanding of cultural relativism in these two fundamental respects has understandably drawn the ire of extra-European specialists for assuming that indigenous writings directly offer normative principles for a range of indigenous artistic practices: a socially and historically embedded understanding of any tradition of texts is a primary requirement for research regardless of field (Juneja, 2011: 279–80)³.

The challenge is to theorize about the complexities of cultural interaction without imposing ethnocentric categories such as those that historically defined the discipline of art history on Euro-American terms. If texts such as German historian Franz Kugler’s *Handbuch der Kunstgeschichte* (1841–42), the first autonomous history of world art based on empirical evidence, granted extra-European cultural products from the ancient Americas a form of aesthetic recognition, it is of a very patronizing kind. The idea of “art” is itself a modern concept that evolved over several

centuries, initially in western European writings. Concepts of modernity are entangled with stylistic "modernism" which is entangled with the decline of the academic system in western Europe, the coinage of "primitivism" at the "dawn of art" as part of a "universal" human trait. The current problem of universalism deserves more discussion at the systemic level in which the subject position of the critic in the institution is considered *within* the framework of the interpretation: I am part of the same historical continuum as my subject of study. If my vested position remains outside the framework of discussion, the most significant epistemological and ethical issues will remain unarticulated and unaddressed. The specter is invisible in the mirror, as Jacques Derrida put it (Derrida, 1993).

2. Working with a National Culture Model in a Transcultural Setting

In her Keynote Address to the 34th *Kunsthistorikertage*, Dresden, March 8-12, 2017, Monica Juneja, Chair of Global Art History at the University of Heidelberg, addressed the importance of considering national culture in an unequal world (Juneja, 2018). The challenge, according to Juneja, is that, while older metropolitan nations strive to establish cosmopolitan credentials by "offering to share space with latecomers who cling to the view that art bearing exclusive labels is one effective way of catching up with the present", their "enlightened" point of view is understood as patronizing by scholars working without the same resources (Juneja, 2018: 461)⁴.

Art historians need to find a modality of thinking the nation *within* a transcultural frame before it can be transcended (Juneja, 2018: 476). Attention to the circulation of goods and ideas – or we might, following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, better call them “assemblages” of heterogeneous bits and pieces – demands rethinking not only culture and “artworks,” but history itself. The study of regions historically defined by trade is producing

something very different from conceptions of geography configured in terms of modern ideas of property ownership and in terms of land masses such as continents and nation-states. Coastal regions, islands, navigable rivers, and other geographical features define important points of exchange in trading regions. But connectivity in the sense developed by Bruno Latour into "actor-network" theory, does not depend on spatial proximity at all – only the connections matter (Latour, 2005). Such a topological approach also avoids hierarchical distinctions such as Western versus non-Western art, or art versus artifact, and similar categories that have historically privileged certain types of cultural production and excluded many others.

Regardless of how art history's object domain is reconfigured, however, a radical reconceptualization of cultural space must accompany any serious discussion of how studies might be organized on the regional level. A de-territorialized model for organizing the discipline according to networks of interaction also has the advantage of producing numerous regional chronologies, rather than a single linear chronology tied to events in major urban art centers such as Paris, London, and New York. We might use Deleuze and Guattari's materialist epistemology that connects all "actants" into "assemblages" conceived as a rhizomatic structure without top or bottom, center or periphery, to develop a self-reflexive, historiographical art history that opens up a new, transcultural, pluralistic understanding of what has been effaced by concepts such as periodization and essentializing constructs of identity (Deleuze; Guattari, 1980)⁵. They present their work as an open system, a discussion rather than an authoritative tract, referring to their collaborations as "rhizome-books" composed of plateaus. A rhizome is a botanical term referring to a horizontal system (like crabgrass) that sends out roots and shoots from multiple nodes. Their primary target is the mode of thought that defines modernism: a "formalist abuse and reduction" in that it naturalizes hierarchic orders and gives priority to teleological narratives of origin. A rhizome has no beginning or end. The ecological model of regional

“connectivity” developed by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell in their account of the Mediterranean (*The Corrupting Sea*, 2000) argues that the stability of regions in the Mediterranean is sustained by systems of local exchange based on shared environmental, biological, and anthropological factors that maintain a delicate balance between separation and connection. Such a model of interconnectivity can be organized at different scales depending on the objectives of study. This approach is useful elsewhere because it connects local perspectives with regional and ultimately globally interconnected systems of production and exchange. Such a “pluritope” model of interchange involves more complex notions of causality because it proceeds in many directions, continuously changing and connecting objects with makers and users in dynamic networks extending over vast areas of space and time⁶.

3. The Epistemic and Ontological Ground of Research

Ultimately, the criticality of a transcultural approach depends on the ability to rethink the epistemic foundations of the discipline (Rampley, 2017; Rampley, 2013). The fundamental lesson for historians today is the responsibility to recognize the undigested projections of past generations in our present-day theoretical extensions of existing scholarship. I share not only Monica Juneja's caution and Matthew Rampley's skepticism about over-arching global models and uniform methodologies, but also their advocacy for "entangled" regional histories that are far more specific and less totalizing.

Currently, one of the main weaknesses of revisionist efforts to rethink disciplinary practices in a transcultural framework is the assumption that all art historians are already vested in such an initiative. The national paradigm remains the governing framework for a variety of conceptual

and pragmatic reasons that are likely to continue for many if not most researchers in small academic communities due to lack of funding, jobs, access to resources, linguistic barriers, and the existing structure of state and private institutions that support the arts (Rampley, 2012: 5). What compels scholars who function within the national culture paradigm to change their ways if the new approaches are simply choices on the revolving carousel of art historical possibilities?

Should scholars abandon long-established methods for classifying and interpreting their objects of study? More fundamental than transnational and transcultural approaches per se or the interpretation of complex objects that signify differently depending on their (coevally established) context is the initial activity that art historians undertake to describe their objects of study. The process of classifying is itself a challenging activity if one wants to target the essentializing categories and deterministic assumptions in a *status quo* approach to art history. Description is the first stage of any legitimate art historical investigation, and it provides the framework for further interpretation.

Formal analysis developed alongside experimental modernism and both formal analysis and modernism valorize "form" as the non-mimetic element of art. So do early discussions of extra-European art as part of a world art system. The concept of "form" also has a long history in theories of cognition that originate in ancient Greek philosophy as something immaterial and invisible that is received by the senses in the first stage of perception leading to cognition of the world, thought to be the same for all individuals. Beginning with the medieval Latin Perspectivists including Roger Bacon, following Arabic sources and their ancient Greek precedents, immaterial "forms" were thought to radiate in all directions from all objects and be received by all the senses. At present there is a disjunction (what Foucault calls an "epistemic break") in the meaning and use of the term "form" before and after its mid-nineteenth-century European reinvention

as a non-mimetic, visible element in all works of art, regardless of its cultural origins, that signifies individual and collective identity⁷. The historical concept of "form" deserves further study in a diachronic context because it imposes a European theory of cognition on the supposedly objective, scientific description of all works of art. Wölfflin and other neo-Kantian art historians participated in methodological debates of the day as to whether the evolution of the nervous system or a pre-conceived set of traits were responsible for sensations. Wölfflin, credited as the instigator of formalist analysis, sought out August Comte's terminology and notions of synchronic comparison and diachronic sequencing, including ideas borrowed from racial science, in his aspiration to write a history of art "without names"⁸. The fundamental question that Wölfflin and his associates addressed through their close study of the appearance of art objects was how to negotiate the terrain between empirical evidence and abstract laws governing cultural and national characterization, the existence of which they did not challenge. "Style," understood since the nineteenth century in this sense as non-mimetic "form" that is perceptible in works of art, presented the possibility of writing a universal history based on the "scientific" or empirical observation of cultural products. The history of art came into existence as an intellectual discipline largely as a result of these new methods, but late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century claims to objectivity are disputed today for applying European criteria to the classification of extra-European objects while ignoring the function and value of the cultural setting in which the work of art was made and used, and also the means by which those objects arrived to their current location in museum collections and elsewhere (Farago, 1995: 67-88; Farago, 2008: 1-36).

Style, form, and abstraction are also dominant considerations in assessing modernism and one of the main reasons that local and regional artists have been neglected in survey texts, research programs, and

exhibition venues based on a center-periphery model of influence flowing from privileged art centers elsewhere. From Johann Winckelmann's classical idea of the simplicity and grandeur of sculpture understood as an expression of the "Greek soul", to Aloïs Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin, Wilhelm Worringer, and others who developed descriptive vocabularies to investigate the structures of the human spirit, the formal features of "style" have been used to exclude artists individually and as part of a collective identity from canons of art. Whether we attribute the origins and development of this construct to Aristotle, Vasari, or to Kant or some other Idealist philosophers or the founding fathers of our discipline, or all of the above, the fundamental problem with this model for interpreting material evidence is that it assumes a priori what should be the outcome of empirical study. In 1963, E. H. Gombrich succinctly criticized the Wölfflinian idea of formal analysis as a "physiognomic fallacy," by which Gombrich meant the mistaken assumption that the mentality of the artist or the group to which he belonged could be directly ascertained from the formal structure of a work of art (Gombrich, 1963: 45-55).

The gist of Gombrich's argument is that the meanings we simply perceive in works of art are not historical and therefore not explanatory. Wölfflin was equally interested in periodicity. The intent of his famous phrase, "vision itself has its history," has been debated, but the problematic connections he drew between interiority and exteriority are clear in the original German, where "vision" refers to the process of perception and apprehension⁹. Wölfflin's adherence to German Idealism is audible when he speaks of the primary "representation" (*Vorstellung*), as denoting the continuous activity of mind (or spirit) encountering and interacting with the world of "things in themselves" (Summers, 2013: 49; Summers 1989: 372-406). A great deal has been written about Wölfflin's "history without names" and the sources of his thinking. In the present context, my point is simply that Wölfflin's arguments are a product of their time and the vocabulary of formal analysis is more than a heuristic device. Individual

style, national style and period style are co-constructed. The supposedly objective procedure of formal analysis serves as the first step for classifying objects based on the western metaphysical assumption that direct connections can be drawn between the forms of art and the mentality of their makers individually and collectively shaped through interaction with their environment, assumed to be stable. Unfortunately, the western metaphysical model of higher form shaping lower matter (in this case, the artist's or the nation's mentality are thought to be directly encoded in the formal or stylistic features of the work of art) actually frames every object *before interpretation begins* within a Eurocentric system for evaluating all works of art.

After decades of discussion, the numerous problems with claiming that "style" is capable of making other cultures directly available to historical analysis have been articulated clearly and at length within the discipline of art history. Few art historians today fail to grasp the sinister implications entailed in drawing direct connections between the forms of art and the mentality of individual artists or the "spirits" of whole "nations, races, and epochs" as Wölfflin famously described "the primary task of art history" (Wölfflin, 1929: 12)¹⁰. Yet many people inside and outside academia employ these physiognomic and psychological criteria without realizing that they prejudge the evidence by assigning traits to the formal features of works of art, projecting intentions onto them that are difficult to ascertain at all and should in any case be the outcome of interpretation instead of the starting point.

4. The Ethics of Scholarship

Scholarship is not just a matter of choosing a favorite horse on the revolving carousel of ideologies – it is a matter of the scholar's ethical responsibility to

society. Ideology is the political use of metaphysics in the domain of practice (Ryan, 1982: 118)¹¹. What I am proposing as a critical transcultural approach is anti-ideological. Since one of the primary obstacles to rethinking the discipline of art history has been the segmentation of our archives by period style and national culture, the prospect of thinking differently about identity is hindered by the sheer volume of studies that promote essentializing myths of cultural identity. How can we access this past (and present) without also passing on values that may no longer be tenable, inherent in our classifying terms and structures? If the highest form of respect is critical engagement with our inheritance, then critically re-reading key primary and secondary sources offers an important contribution from the past to the future. A productive inversion of institutional authority results from practicing an anti-canonical approach to canonical texts. It would also be shortsighted to lose a rich cultural heritage for writing about and making art deeply problematic as its configurations might have become in certain respects today.

Without an understanding of what makes this inherited discourse troubling, however, future generations will tend to reproduce the same problems in displaced form. The initial act of description needs to be rethought so that problematic western metaphysical assumptions do not interfere with or preclude the ability to account for the appearance of works of art – often broadly defined by the global turn to include anything manufactured by humans – that were not made within the same framework. With the specific task of avoiding the "essentialist" traps of nineteenth-century German Idealist philosophy in mind, David Summers has developed a new set of universal terms for describing any of the "spatial arts", a term intended to counter the culturally specific assumption that art is universally an object of perception. The category "spatial" is more capacious insofar as it admits multi-modal types of sensory production (Summers, 2003: 41).

Summers' vocabulary of terms avoids the circular argument of directly connecting exterior appearance with interior state of mind. His terms are useful for studying how historical traditions intersected and came into various kinds of contact. To state the project of Summers' *Real Spaces* in the semiotic terms that he adapts from the linguist C. S Peirce, his descriptive vocabulary stresses the index, which refers by its existential relation alone. Peirce named the empirical mode of drawing inferences experimentally to form explanatory hypotheses "abduction". The first stage of interpreting the object of study in Summers' "contingent" method for describing a work of art is likewise concerned with indexical inference, not symbolic interpretation (Summers, 2003: 27). The study of facture is fundamental because every artifact considered indexically is a material record of how it was made. In the mode of Michael Baxandall's "inferential criticism", all the descriptive terms approach the object of study to elicit the ways they are made and used, in Summers' case, with the body as a universal reference point (*Ibidem*). Summers came to these ideas through American Pragmatism, particularly the ideas of Richard Rorty, but they align well with the framework of philosophers concerned to root out the lingering traces of western metaphysics, notably Deleuze and Guattari, and Derrida, a topic beyond the scope of my present remarks. They also align well with the current great interest in materiality studies¹².

At the same time, what Summers calls his "post-formalist" descriptive terms do not frame works of art within discrete cultural units or subsume artifacts under taxonomic categories of influence, borrowing, and transfer. Attention to the description of the artifact using a materialist descriptive language shifts the discussion from what the meaning of a work is, to questions of how the work of art bears meaning in a relational way, in a particular time and place, for a particular audience. This material-based, non-transcendental ontology is capacious enough to appeal to many different kinds of interpretative aims. It also opens up many other considerations, such as what happens when values, beliefs, and information

are not held in common. What happens in such a case if we focus on the heterogeneity of the artwork itself, when different styles and even entirely different systems of signification come into contact and morph into something unprecedented?

As studies of gender first insisted, all perspectives are partial, strategic, and vested (including the essay you are currently reading). An effective inversion of institutional authority results from practicing an anti-canonical approach to canonical texts, but inversion alone does not get rid of the values or the value system itself. Transnational and transcultural approaches to planetary culture depend on accumulating many individual case studies for comparison to build a larger picture. These can and are being conducted on the level of individual authorship but adopting a collaborative approach to research could greatly enhance the speed and quality of research outcomes, while integrating the efforts of local scholars and regional studies into an international network of scholarly exchange without imposing an overarching conceptual framework or a uniform methodology.

Consider what is at stake in the big picture beyond academia. Conceiving of historical artifacts as the residues of events encourages an understanding of cultural commentary as a directly political act with the capacity to reshape the discursive ground on which cultural memory is shaped (Bennet, 2013). Gombrich, a German *emigré* who wrote about the "physiognomy fallacy" at the height of the Cold War, saw latent racist and xenophobic ideology in the epistemic foundations of art history where others with different personal histories might not be so alarmed. I may be especially sensitive to racist elements in our foundational texts (and elsewhere) because I write from the position of a first-generation, ethnically half-Jewish Hungarian immigrant to the United States and a second (and third) generation Holocaust survivor. The issues of identity, inclusion/exclusion, and essentialism that I have been discussing have also been the preoccupation of philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben (1993)

and Judith Butler (1997) who insist upon “acknowledging our complicity in the law that we oppose”: “there is in effect something that humans are and have to be, but this is not an essence or properly a thing: It is the simple fact of one’s own existence as possibility or potentiality” (Agamben apud Butler, 1997: 130-132). It is no longer only a matter of class, gender, race, or even just humanity. No Brazilian can be oblivious to the ongoing destruction of the Amazon rain forest, which affects the entire world's ecological system. Between 1900 and 2015, humans destroyed more than 80% of major mammal species populations on the planet¹³. Nor is our ethical responsibility a matter of politics in the narrow sense. How far does our responsibility as producers of knowledge extend? These fundamental questions deserve to be discussed and debated because the knowledge we produce has long-ranging effects far beyond the immediate contributions our studies are designed to make.

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Notes

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¹ This essay began as a much shorter response to Matthew Rampley, "Writing on Modernism in Central Europe: Method, Value and the Pragmatics of Scholarship", forthcoming in a special issue of the Czech journal, *Umění*, with the title, "A Very Different Kind of National Art History: Looking to the Future from the Past". My thanks to Pavla Machalíková, Steven Mansbach, and Matthew Rampley for that opportunity to think critically about the institutional situation of regional scholars working beyond the urban centers of the Euro-American axis. My efforts to promote exchanges on a local level among widely separated regions of the planet actually began with two earlier trips to Brazil, in 2012 and 2014, where I first met Flavia Galli Tatsch. My warmest thanks to Flavia for the invitation to co-edit this issue of *Modos*. Despite the hardships of the pandemic, working with her has been a joy and a great learning experience for me.

² Others who advocate the utility of nineteenth-century efforts to conceive of world art history include (Pfisterer, 2008: 69-89); (Kaufmann, 2015: 23-46); and (Bredekamp, 2021), on which see: (Vollgraff, 2021). My thanks to Bill Sherman for the references to Bredekamp and Vollgraff.

³ See also: (Mukherji, 2009: 91-96).

⁴ A position that the Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski articulated well as one of the few scholars from east-central Europe to receive extensive support from American institutions: (Piotrowski, 2001: 15-22); (Piotrowski, 2008: 378-83).

⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari present their work as an open system, a discussion rather than an authoritative tract, referring to their collaborations as "rhizome-books" composed of plateaus. A rhizome is a botanical term referring to a horizontal system (like crabgrass) that sends out roots

and shoots from multiple nodes (1980: 25). Their primary target is the mode of thought that defines modernism: a "formalist abuse and reduction" in that it naturalizes hierarchic orders and gives priority to teleologic narratives of origin. A rhizome has no beginning or end.

- 6 To cite the term introduced by Eva Hoffman (2007).
- 7 See: (Smith, 2015: 309); (Lindberg, 1976). These connections will be developed in my book, provisionally entitled *The Future of Cultural Memory in the Era of Climate Disruption*, forthcoming from Routledge Press, 2022.
- 8 August Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830-42), cited by Michel Frank and Daneil Adler (2012).
- 9 See (Wölfflin, [1915] 1929: 12): "Nicht alles zu allen Zeiten möglich. Das Sehen an sich hat seine Geschichte, und die Aufdeckung dieser 'optischen Schichten' muss als die elementarste Aufgabe der Kunstgeschichte betrachtet werden". For a more extensive analysis that reaches similar conclusions, see: (Summers, 2013: 43-220).
- 10 I cite the older translation of Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History. The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M. Hottinger, New York, Dover Publications, 1950, based on the seventh German edition (1929). See also, Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Early Modern Art*, trans. Jonathan Blower, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2015. Tristan Weddigen, "Approaching Wölfflin's Principles", same volume, pp. 47-70, argues, unconvincingly in my opinion, that Wölfflin has "a cyclical model of recurring modes of seeing that implicitly rejects the evolutionary and teleological models of history introduced in the Renaissance and established by Hegelianism and Darwinism" (pp. 49-50.)
- 11 My thanks to Donald Preziosi for calling this succinct definition to my attention.
- 12 For an introduction to the concept of materiality in a Deleuzian vein, see: (Bennett, 2010). For a brilliant analysis of the Summers' *Real Spaces*, see (O'Donnell, 2017).
- 13 Between 1900 and 2015, according to this survey of 177 mammal species conducted by Gerardo Ceballos at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, reported in <http://www.relativelyinteresting.com/36-extinct-animals-due-human-activity/>, accessed 30 May 2018. Human-induced loss of life is often termed the "Sixth Mass Extinction".

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