

**BACK TO THE LIGHTNESS OF LIFE: LITERARY STORIES AND (IN)  
TRANSCULTURALITY**

**DE VOLTA À LEVEZA DA VIDA: ESTÓRIAS LITERÁRIAS E(M)  
TRANSCULTURALIDADE**

**DE REGRESO A LA LEVEDAD DE LA VIDA: HISTORIAS LITERARIAS Y (EN)  
TRANSCULTURALIDAD**



<https://doi.org/10.56238/sevened2026.008-100>

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**ABSTRACT**

We will present how narratives read in a manner detached from traditional literary criticism, within the context of humanization—particularly in the field of healthcare—constitute a proposal developed at the Humanities Laboratory (hereinafter referred to as Labhum), originating from the Center for the History and Philosophy of Health Sciences (Cehfi) of the Paulista School of Medicine (EPM) at the Federal University of São Paulo, and later extended to the Reading Laboratory (Lablei) in corporate contexts, an initiative that has opened transcultural possibilities for a broader understanding of hypermodernity. The case presented here involves the selection of two classics from literature and cinema, namely the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) by Oscar Wilde and the film *Blow-Up* (1967) by Michelangelo Antonioni, for discussion in one of the classes during the first semester of 2025. To this end, we start from the premise that hypermodern society and the frenetic pace of cyberspace demand an even greater awareness and heightened consciousness of our subjective and social existences and belongings. In parallel, we philosophically ground our study in the idea of transculturality—that is, different times, spaces, and ideas converging in processes of humanization such as those proposed by Labhum and Lablei.

**Keywords:** Hypermodernity. Transculturality. Portraits. Subjectivity. Humanization.

**RESUMO**

Apresentaremos como narrativas lidas de maneira descomprometida à crítica literária no contexto da humanização, particularmente, na área da saúde, proposta desenvolvida no Laboratório de Humanidades (de agora em diante aqui referido por Labhum) a partir do Centro de História e Filosofia de Ciências da Saúde (Cehfi) da Escola Paulista de Medicina (EPM) da Universidade Federal de São Paulo e estendido ao Laboratório de Leitura (Lablei)

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em contextos empresariais tem vindo a abrir possibilidades transculturais à compreensão mais ampla da hipermodernidade. O caso aqui exposto implica na escolha de dois clássicos da literatura e do cinema, nomeadamente, o romance *O Retrato de Dorian Gray* (1890 de Oscar Wilde e o filme *Blow-up* (1967) de Michelangelo Antonioni para discussão em uma das turmas do primeiro semestre de 2025. Para tanto, partimos da premissa de que a sociedade hipermoderna e o ritmo alucinado do ciberespaço requerem ainda mais consciência e maior conscientização das nossas existências e pertencas subjetivas e sociais. Paralelamente a isso, fundamentamos filosoficamente o nosso estudo na ideia de transculturalidade, ou seja, tempos, espaços e ideias diferentes que convergem em processos de humanização como o proposto pelos Labhum e Lablei.

**Palavras-chave:** Hipermodernidade. Transculturalidade. Retratos. Subjetividade. Humanização.

## RESUMEN

Presentaremos cómo narrativas leídas de manera desvinculada de la crítica literaria tradicional, en el contexto de la humanización—particularmente en el ámbito de la salud—constituyen una propuesta desarrollada en el Laboratorio de Humanidades (en adelante, Labhum), a partir del Centro de Historia y Filosofía de las Ciencias de la Salud (Cehfi) de la Escuela Paulista de Medicina (EPM) de la Universidad Federal de São Paulo, y posteriormente extendida al Laboratorio de Lectura (Lablei) en contextos empresariales, iniciativa que ha venido abriendo posibilidades transculturales para una comprensión más amplia de la hipermodernidad. El caso aquí expuesto implica la elección de dos clásicos de la literatura y del cine, a saber, la novela *El retrato de Dorian Gray* (1890), de Oscar Wilde, y la película *Blow-Up* (1967), de Michelangelo Antonioni, para su discusión en una de las clases del primer semestre de 2025. Para ello, partimos de la premisa de que la sociedad hipermoderna y el ritmo frenético del ciberespacio requieren una conciencia aún mayor y una intensificación de la reflexión sobre nuestras existencias y pertenencias subjetivas y sociales. De manera paralela, fundamentamos filosóficamente nuestro estudio en la idea de transculturalidad, es decir, en la convergencia de diferentes tiempos, espacios e ideas en procesos de humanización como los propuestos por Labhum y Lablei.

**Palabras clave:** Hipermodernidad. Transculturalidad. Retratos. Subjetividad. Humanización.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

By promoting reflection on humanization in the health area, the Humanities Laboratory, developed by the Center for History and Philosophy of Health Sciences of the Federal University of São Paulo (Bittar, Souza, Gallian, 2013; and Gallian, Lima, De Benedetto, Guzman, 2014) selected for one of its classes in the first semester of 2025 the novel *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, in dialogue with the film *Blow-Up*, as the core of their discussions within a group composed of undergraduate and graduate students in the area of health sciences.

Created in 2003 at CeHFi, Labhum is an intervention methodology that aims to foster humanization in health and humanistic training that ended up expanding in other environments outside the university, such as in the business environment in training its personnel, through reading, rereading and reflections on themes related to human existence and raised from classic works – and in these environments other than those of the University of São Paulo. Health Sciences is named Lablei. Inspired by the work *Literature as Medicine* (Gallian, 2017) which sees in the classics an active principle with a more powerful potential for humanization, by promoting in the reader the awakening to themes and reflections in their affective, intellectual and volitional dimensions, Labhum takes place in cycles – defined by narratives; each narrative or set of them, a cycle – whose application takes place in weekly two-hour meetings organized by a three-stage methodology, namely, *Reading Stories*, *Discussion Itineraries* and *Coexistence Stories*.

When defining Lablei, Ricardo Mituti (2022, p.5) explains that in the first stage, the "feelings perceived, affections aroused, memories that occurred, and questions that arose in this first reading of the title that is being worked on in the cycle in question" arise. The second stage is established from the extension of the narrative to be worked on and deals with collective reflections on the subjects and excerpts most relevant to the participants, having been raised by the coordinator of the activity previously, already in the first stage and even throughout the second. The third stage includes the subjective and individual perceptions of the experience carried out throughout the reading process and discussions carried out in the two previous stages.

In the case in question, the focus of the two narratives, literary and filmic, proved to be innovative on several levels. But, initially, we emphasize that the readings carried out beyond literary criticism allowed the participants to articulate the relationship between their own experiences as human beings working in the health area and the portraits that gradually emerged through the reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and in dialogue with *Blow-Up*. Immediate identification with the most striking traits of the main characters—namely, Dorian

Gray himself, Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton in the novel, and Thomas, the photographer played by David Hemmings in the film *Blow-Up* —led participants to relate these human types and their roles on the stage of human dynamics, regardless of any historical period or, in other words, in addition to any of them, thus allowing a cultural transposition of the aesthetic experience of the late nineteenth century, when the novel was published in two versions (1890 and 1891), along with the European experiences of the 1960s and early 1970s, to the year 2025, in the Brazilian and personal context of each individual at LabHum.

Another relevant aspect was the inter-artistic dialogue, that is, the convergence between the reading of Wilde's novel and Antonioni's film. In both, the notion of portrait as a metonym of human individuality, subjectivity and experience prevailed: it is in the portrait that the marks of life are found — the same marks that would have aged Dorian, were it not for the pact with the devil; it is in the portrait that the lines of expression are engraved, framing life itself or what one chooses to show of it, as in the case of the models who are the object of the photographer in the film — the driving force of the filmic narrative adapted from the short story *Las Babas del Diablo* (1959) by Julio Cortázar; it is in portraits that we place our best moments and memories, as much as the uses of images on social networks today. The portraits of the models, immortalized or discovered by the photographer — as in the case of the photograph that points to a crime — are maps of memory or, at least, routes back to identifications (Hall, 1998), as is the portrait painted by Basil, a vain attempt to eternalize the very subject of the painting, Dorian Gray and his impressive beauty. In all these cases, the search for essence in the midst of the transitory and what can be lasting involves a more or less humanized look — both from the reader and the spectator and from the health professional responsible for care and, at the same time, a full individual, with subjective and circular experiences.

The transposition of times and spaces/geographies highlights the classic character of both narratives (the novel and the film) in question, since transculturality goes beyond the boundaries of time and space, functioning as an ideal approach for comparativism and artistic and/or critical readings. In addition, it helps us to understand contemporaneity, since the characters, their traits, attitudes and behaviors find parallels, as observed in all the comments elaborated during the LabHum meetings and also in their developments, as we will partially see below.

In order for us to better understand this cross-cultural approach in practice, let us first contextualize the *hypermodern* zeitgeist, which has been the starting point for most participants to engage in LabHum activities.

The term "hypermodernity" was coined by the contemporary philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky (2005) to explain our post-modern human condition, insofar as the latter exalted progress and reason, justifying the accelerated pace in all (or almost all) human activities: people's time, our use of technology, consumerism and individualism, as stated by Zygmunt Bauman (2000). The latter finds a direct connection with what is central in both narratives dealt with here: the individual as a central figure in the (in)comprehension of humanism. Dorian Gray, as a metonym of aestheticism, materializes hedonism, as does the photographer Thomas in his egocentric activities. Aestheticism is best understood as artificialism, since it inverts many common sense issues, some of them even moral. In fact, aestheticism, for example, defines art as superior to nature and believes that nature copies the former. The same applies to the senses, which are considered superior to the intellect, or to that which is superficial, which is considered better than that which is desired to be deeper; feeling, superior to reason. Thus, masks are seen as more authentic than individuality itself, which is one of the reasons why portraits are so relevant during Decadentism and throughout the nineteenth century (Mutran, 2002).

Since social and subjective lives in hypermodernity are marked by the excessively digital rhythm of ephemeral experiences and intense change, which lead to the absence of deep personal bonds, creating (and, pardon the irony, endlessly recreating) the illusion of perfection in all that is human becomes central to some sense(s) of – or, perhaps, the lack of them? – belonging(s). After all, to be human is to make mistakes, to have flaws, not to be perfect. However, hypermodern societies have promoted the increase of practices that refer to "well-being" and that, in turn, proclaim individualism and individuality in their extreme. The explicit side effect of this is loneliness, the same one we see happening with the characters Dorian Gray and Thomas. The first, as a man who never ages, is unable to keep up with the new generations as part of them; the second, disconnected from everyone around him. Lipovetsky points to consumerism as hypermodernity's immediate (and unfortunate) response to the issue of loneliness. Unable to establish real human bonds, people resort to materialism, tying their being to having.

Thus, the converging factor between Wilde's novel, Antonioni's film and our contemporary everyday lives lies precisely in the hedonism of the portraits, photos, images and stories as they unfold, but also in the naïve aesthetic experience of one (or two) stage(s) of life – keeping in mind the seven stages of life described in Jacques' monologue in the play *Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare, "The whole world is a stage".<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this reveals our

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<sup>4</sup> All the world's a stage,/And all the men and women merely players;/They have their exits and their entrances;/And one man in his time plays many parts,/ His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,/

need for masks, especially in social media nowadays, the virtual space of ("perfect") existence, where "the true self" is displayed, in conformity with issues of individual "well-being": being free, loved, praised, recognized as a social being, among other universally recognized feelings of belonging.

Therefore, while Dorian and Thomas' aesthetic experience evolves particularly from hedonism and the need to express personal identities associated with the eternity of life, contemporary exposure on social media relates to this in that it involves masks, since they offer individuals senses of reality, despite being simulacra, capable of masking their participants with their "best" characteristics, at the same time that they allow them to respond to the hypermodern demands of extreme production, offering them meanings of belonging in societies dehumanized of errors, failures or mistakes, and promising eternal happiness – as is the case of the term "well-being", widely applied today, including to the Health Sciences.

At the heart of *Blow-Up* lies a deep questioning of perception and reality. The photographer believes he has inadvertently captured evidence of a murder in the background of a photo, but as he zooms in on the image, it becomes more abstract and inconclusive. This invites us to read history in epistemological terms about the boundaries between truth and perception or reality and simulacrum, since photographs are the medium – and, in the case of the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the portrait plays this role. In both cases, the photographs taken by Thomas in the film and Basil's painting of Dorian Gray in the novel, there seems to be an almost obsessive search for meaning, as well as an ultimate need for truth, always postponed by the "shadows" that displace the truth(s). Moreover, in our hypermodern digital age, how do images work to help us seek reality? Or, again, is reality just a series of moments of simulacrum in which the truth is revealed? Photographs, images and paintings are document and illusion.

Responding to these concerns or raising new questions as a result of them was also made possible by the cross-cultural comparative bias. The concept of transculturality has been widely used in various epistemological areas – from Health Sciences to Humanities. Starting from Translation Studies in dialogue with Sociology, we use transculturality in the

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Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms;/ And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel/ And shining morning face, creeping like snail/ Unwillingly to school. And then the lover, / Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad/ Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,/ Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,/ Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,/ Seeking the bubble reputation/ Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,/ In fair round belly with good capon lin'd,/ fith eyes severe and beard of formal cut,/ Full of wise saws and modern instances;/ And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts/ Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloons,/ With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;/ His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide/ For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,/ Turning again toward childish treble, pipes/ And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,/ That ends this strange eventful history,/ Is second childishness and mere oblivion;/ Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (W. Shakespeare. *As You Like It*. Act II Scene VII Line 139),

extension of the concept of transcreation proposed by Haroldo de Campos in his vast work as a methodological approach that aims at the perception of how cultures are read and reinterpreted in others. Just as a text originally in one language that comes into existence in another gains local meanings to do with its own understandings and dynamics, cultural manifestations and practices, when transposed to other environments, also gain new looks – colors and shades specific to the "culture of arrival", alluding here to the terms used in translation and called "source language" and "target language" for, specifically, the source and target languages (in which a text is translated). It is in this way that reading a Greek literary classic today matters as much as reading a contemporary one, if not more, since we have in question levels of cultural translation that allow us to broaden the horizons of human understanding, given the dynamics and human feelings that are permanently observable, with the difference of times and geographies. Therefore, dealing with Transculturality also made us move forward.

The connection between the idea of truth x simulacrum, expression and media, represented both by the reading of the novel and by the exhibition of the film, from the perspective of the subjectivity of each of the participants of Labhum, opened horizons for the awareness of our humanity, woven in interactions, bonds and relationships in our meetings, as well as in the daily practices of various health professionals.

As described in the Introduction of this text and proposed in Gallian's work, the methodology in three stages (*Reading Stories*, *Discussion Itineraries* and *Living Stories*) were used, which were constantly observed and reevaluated at each meeting by the two coordinators responsible for this Cycle and in dialogue with other colleagues from CeHFI.

At the end of the third stage, *Stories of Coexistence*, it was proposed to write texts that would account for these stories in a creative way and beyond. As the beginning of the next semester, the second of 2025, would open with the Unifesp Academic Congress, the main coordinator organized an exhibition of photographs in which students involved in this discipline could also participate, in addition to posting them on the CehFi blog. These opportunities to reveal the stories of coexistence were the culmination of the high point of the discoveries coming from Labhum and that, in the case of Lablei, also happen in other formats, however.

We present below some of the partial accounts of the participants at the end of the Labhum experience with the narratives of Wilde and Antonioni as the focus – their names

were replaced by fictitious ones, in order to preserve their identities. The choices of the excerpts concern several topics of interest to us, namely:

## **2 DIVERSITY OF PARTICIPANTS IN RELATION TO AGE, PROFESSIONAL AREA IN HEALTH SERVICES AND RELATIONSHIPS**

"It's exciting to explore this new reading with colleagues of different ages and professions, and to reinterpret art together." (Ana)

"... The superficial relationships developed by the protagonists make us question how all this happens today [...] and yet they manage to reveal their true essence to only a few people." (Antonietta)

"... as much as we don't like it, we need to admit that in a way we can be like them (the characters); we are a bit Dorian Gray, in other ways we are like Thomas in the film, and in some points we are in fact similar to Lord Henry, Sybill Vane, and even the girls photographed by Thomas. A little bit of each, depending on the occasion and those with whom we are interacting..." (Gabriela)

## **3 LITERARY AND FILMIC NARRATIVES IN DIALOGUE WITH CONTEMPORARY LIVES AND COMMUNICATION ON SOCIAL NETWORKS TODAY**

"In the book, I saw Harry as the embodiment of evil — a demon that captivates, a transgressor that fascinates, much like so many influencers today." (Ana)

"Every day we try to change the perception of what we don't like about our reality by posting photos that make our lives seem less ordinary than they are. Every day we look for ways to beat time and prolong our appearance of youth." (Bruna)

## **4 THE POWER OF IMAGES AND THEIR ROLE IN HELPING US REFLECT ON REALITY VS. FANTASY. ALSO, THE SEARCH FOR BEAUTY AS PLEASURE AND TRUTH AND THE USE OF IT AS A PROTECTIVE DISGUISE AGAINST HARSH REALITIES**

"In both works, the protagonist places more trust in the image than in the lived reality — revealing the power, and danger, of visual perception, while questioning the very notion of reality." (Lica)

"In the film we have an unscrupulous photographer, surrounded by young people who are not exactly naïve... A professional in search of the perfect click, art, truth, the meaning of life (...) the doubt: what is concrete and what is abstract? What is false and what is true?" (Ilan)

## **5 LABHUM AS RELIEF, A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT IN THE FACE OF THE HARSH REALITY OF RATIONAL DISCOURSE**

"I felt that I was entering a space of welcome and attentive listening, in which the focus was on collective reflection, the exchange of perceptions and the questioning of our own ways of seeing the world." (Rodrigo)

"I thought it was really great that the conversations transformed a lot of my early perceptions and certainly changed my retelling of the novel and the dialogue with the film this time around." (Ilan)

"My daily life is very scientific, rational, and always rushed. So, dedicating a few hours a week to group reflection, to understanding feelings, to humanizing ourselves, was an essential time for me, particularly with the focus on Wilde and Antonioni." (Marcela)

"... The whole atmosphere of reading the novel, discussing it in dialogue with the film, made me feel part of a collaborative, constructive and collective learning community." (Karla)

## 6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS:

We understand that the particularized experience of Labhum reported here was able to promote participatory and open discussions on various topics in dialogue with the plural community of students, who demonstrated real connections between the arts (literature and cinema) and their own experiences lived in our contemporaneity, as witnessed by the examples selected above.

In addition, the innovation proposed in the two types of narratives in different formats (literature and cinema) intensified the involvement of the participants, who crossed times and spaces, summoning them to the present day and to the Brazil of the Portuguese language in their experiences. Throughout the Discussion Itinerary, the students were able to summon several other cultural examples, not only literary, of their personal experiences – including those related to the day-to-day of their work in the areas of Health Sciences – which accounted for the transculturality woven throughout the readings and collective discussions.

Adaptations and translations of texts into other languages are always part of transculturality and are important to the extent that they bring different cuts to other realities. This also did not go unnoticed. On the contrary, the participants compared editions, paratexts and times of readings and rereadings that mattered in the planting of their own stories.

Remedies for the soul, these almost "classics" of contemporary times, signal that it is possible to think of narratives as starting points for the expansion of consciousness, as well as the awareness of who we are individually, from the socialization of ideas, softening the less light experiences of hypermodernity, distancing us from the chaos of the digital age, owing us away from speed and bringing us back to what matters: to the lightness of life, humanization.

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