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Globalization

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Globalisation

Globalisation, in itself, is not a new phenomenon. Exchanges and interactions in the field of aesthetics have taken place on a large and multifarious scale which has been recognisably 'worldwide' ever since the advent of transcontinental human migration. The term globalisation has nonetheless become synonymous with the intensification and speeding up of mutual influences on a new order of intensity. This is identified in the popular imagination with profound changes to everyday life hastened by the penetration of modern technologies of travel, trade, communication and the exchange of information, which seems to have dissolved boundaries of all kinds. Certainly, we have seen the evolution of widespread global 'movements' or interactions, and unprecedented tensions between cultural homogenisation and heterogenisation. Responding to such changes, aesthetic practices have become a cardinal means to deny as much as proclaim cultural differences and values, to resist (neo)colonialism, subvert racisms and stereotypes, reinvent 'traditions', and to emphasise specificities in the face of generalising representations. For example, an exhibition by 'artists of native ancestry' at the National Gallery of Canada called for specific objects made by First Nations peoples to be treated as valuable 'cultural knowledge', demanding 'acknowledgement of a difference that the colonial relationship had failed to recognise' (Townsend-Gault 1992).

The homogenising potential of global flows is in tension with the way that those flows are actually appropriated and inscribed within a given locality. Assertive localisations by consumers can create a sense that products and services 'belong' locally, even when they are manufactured and ubiquitously supplied by multinational commercial organisations.

Local projects assembled in the search for 'fixed' points of orientation have emerged, intended to counter growing feelings of insecurity and crisis brought on by the speed and disruption of global change. In each case, such tensions between the local and global have focused attention on the uses of aesthetics for taking 'ownership' of objects that move rapidly through space and time. As such, aesthetics have become part of the struggle to respond to the cataclysm of global movement. Groups differentiated by ethnicity may turn toward homogenising forms of representation in order to declare cultural sovereignty, as occurred in the international movement of 'indigenous peoples'. For instance, the struggle for rights among the San (Bushmen) of Southern Africa reflected the globalisation of an essentialist idea of culture, which was instrumentalised in a local context of disorder and corruption (Sylvain 2005).

Space. Such global-local divisions are inseparable from wider contestations over space itself. Globalising processes may fuel competition among communities in their increasingly vigorous efforts to build reservoirs of aesthetic practice in order to claim an allegedly deserved position within an 'imaginative geography' of absolute centres and peripheries. This activity rests on a sense of place as something that is bounded and unchanging: a notion fundamentally incompatible with a globalised world which severs the expansion of place-specific roots, eliminates boundaries and fundamentally recasts spatial relations. Hence, globalisation prompts feelings of marginalisation and insecurity that are seldom confined to the historically 'dispossessed' or 'subaltern'; they also arise in relatively affluent 'majority' ethnic and cultural communities with metropolitan lives. The sense of being decentred by globalising processes is widely shared. Even so, it repays to differentiate between what motivates the 'resistance identity' (Castells 1997) that ensues in response to

fears of global change and the apparently growing proximity of 'strangers', or the material needs that become articulated to strategies for securing income, political rights and (inter)national recognition. For some communities these ways of enhancing aspects of cultural identity are set deliberately at odds with dominant forms, a way to resist social stigma, displacement or exclusion. For others, the use of traditional symbols, historical narratives and concepts of rootedness and dwelling may become part of a more cynical attempt to suppress alternative identities. What this says about the implications of aesthetics in globalising processes is true across the board: aesthetics are integral to defining the right to be in a given space while discriminating over who is deemed to belong.

Place. The entanglement of aesthetics in the transformation of space by globalisation is a process with particular consequences for ideas about place. The commissioning of aesthetic practices in the desire to imbue places with meaning may be a reactionary response to the perceived vulnerability of place itself within the contemporary globalising world. This is because systems of capital accumulation have become progressively mobile and able to attach themselves to a widening choice of locations, reducing places to nothing more than sites of 'fixed capital embedded in the land' (Harvey 1996: 295), or 'stages of intensity, traces of movement, speed and circulation' (Thrift 1996). The onus has then fallen on aesthetic practices to embed and fix such movement by participating in place-making and the competitive ways that places differentiate themselves.

Through globalisation spheres of aesthetic difference no longer overlap and cross-fertilise politely (if ever they did); nonetheless the polarizations and divisions in this 'space of flows' have sparked signs of wonder. The cultural geographer Doreen Massey has pinpointed a 'global sense of place' in the attempt to show up aesthetic dimensions of place that rest less

on aspects of local distinctiveness than of the 'meeting and weaving together' of different social relations (Massey, 1994). Far from threatening its inherent specificities, the ceaseless, agitated, random and quotidian global relations that connect a given place to other people, times and locations are what constitute its aesthetic identity. This reading adds to the sense of why aesthetics has become a common court of appeal against globalisation while at the same time being integral to its evolving, relational structure.

There are plenty of examples wherein cultural uniqueness is exaggerated in order to satisfy the desire for discrete and local community in the face of globalising change. Yet when such reifications come to be accepted they lose the quality of actual contestations and become the currency for consensual exchange – at which point they provide only the semblance of harmonious order, but one that is deemed to be necessary for the advanced capitalist 'carnival of hetero-culture' that configures the contemporary, globalised metropolis (see Paul Gilroy 2004). Seen in this way, an intensified politics of cultural identity is inseparable from the needs of the global marketplace and the wide embrace of 'multiculturalism' in public policy, corporate and bureaucratic discourse. Assertions of aesthetic difference corroborate an ongoing shift from 'pedagogic' to 'performative' models of democracy (Chakrabarty 2002), offering ingredients for the 'hybrid causation' of globalization, as much as the style in which that process of change is imagined.

Ethics. Decolonization and the mass migration of peoples from the 'global South' have brought under uncomfortable scrutiny the political economy and history of intellectual advances in aesthetic theory, raising a case to answer. The debate on 'writing culture' during the 1980s and 1990s focused awareness of the role of globalisation in representing and 'translating' others. If globalisation has not entirely closed up the 'gap' to be translated

(figured historically by geographical distance and a lack of communications), it has at least contradicted the notion of a disinterested space of reflection. This has challenged the status quo that existed during modernity when knowledge about aesthetics was gathered and kept for a few chief benefactors.

Successful resistance to that historical pattern, in favour of greater global equality, seems to rest on the more complex project of redistributing aesthetic knowledge and reconceptualizing a global purpose for aesthetic practices themselves. Various propositions heralding from creative practitioners – ranging from writers to media artists – and aesthetic theorists belong to this ethical move. Under the somewhat jargonistic banner of ‘counterdiscursive cosmopolitanism’ (Byrne and Schoene 2013) are decisive efforts for progressive, ‘global’ ways of seeing and communal responsibility which are intended to challenge the individualist lifestyle choices and consumerist philosophies of Western neo-liberalism. America’s systematic ‘transform[ation of] the *kosmos* into their [own] *polis*’ (Pollock, 2002: 25) has triggered the need to retrieve cosmopolitan aspirations for global community, after they became in some quarters a euphemism for Americanisation. Such a ‘counterdiscourse’ is distinctive for being in marked disagreement with the implementation of multicultural policies, the separate management of cultural heritage, the compartmentalisation of global societies, and the widespread particularisation, inequities, competition and fragmentation associated with globalisation. It is a proposal that hinges on certain key terms: critical and creative practices should remain ‘inoperative’ (ateleological, impartial and without any definite purpose other than perpetuating human conviviality; see Nancy 1991); ‘relational’ (distinct from postmodern relativity in valuing processes of transformation over states or degrees of hybridity; pursuing individual postures of

'grievability' over loss and trauma as the basis for global community; Butler 2009); and 'glocal' (commingling the global with the local through rootedness, originality and specificity, such as in notions of relational agency that emphasise 'being-in-common' and radical 'response-ability': see Meskimmon, 2011). This approach strives to suggest that the dominant terminologies of globalisation cannot be reconciled with a serious ethics of social transformation, despite efforts to combat segregation and animosity in favour of 'being-with' cultural relations. Globalisation can offer only a totalising view since 'the globe is not the world' (Cheah 2008).

The globe and the world. In this controversial territory, it is easy to see why the analysis of aesthetics has largely remained preoccupied with the polarisation between global heterogeneity and homogeneity. At the first pole are those attempts to divine whether globalization perpetuates histories and aesthetic particularities in the form of 'multiple modernities', such as declarations of multiplicity that in the discipline of art history have energized the claims for a 'global contemporary art' and a 'global art world'. Here diverse spaces and aesthetic practices scattered around the world are categorized together. Despite their spatial distance each is thought to share 'contemporaneity' and 'coevalness' through common market forces, museums and art audiences.

In turn, such a claim for a 'new globalism or universalism which levels out differences as well as the fractures of old colonial hegemonies' has been sharply refuted. To describe such a process as benign (since it leaves differences intact) is to overlook that 'plurality' on a global scale is always subject to hierarchies and unilateral decisions about where to draw the dividing lines. This is part of a wider allegation that homogenizing, expansionist and near-imperial forces are at work in the promotion of 'global' aesthetics: the terms for a license to

repeat and extend older historical patterns of power and privilege, for instance when exhibitions of 'contemporary African art' serve as a register of Western (or more narrowly national, such as French) ideas of Africa (Wendl 2006). Disagreement on this issue is so deep as to suggest that cultural commentary should settle more modestly for marshaling the differences between the 'radical particularism' and 'radical generalisation' thrown up by globalization, and to try to balance their interactions by treating 'all elements in the mix as antinomies' (Smith, Enwezor and Condee 2008).

The challenge of how to work philosophically through generalization has galvanized theoretical attention in the search for exchanges and settlements between particular experiences of globalization. But while their differences remain unresolved, a 'gains and losses' approach to globalization has yielded only limited results for the study of aesthetics. For some thinkers, all such interests are inherently inadequate for a more global theorisation of aesthetics, given that they are premised on models of historical and cultural contextualism and contingency which by definition elude more general, 'global' thinking. In art history, for instance, a considerable project of geographical 'mapping' has emerged which pursues a 'global perspective' on art-making as a common human habit across time and space. At its more accessible and deceptively simple, this is manifest in various compendia of knowledge (see John Onians' highly illustrated book by sixty-eight contributing specialists whose global span of attention ranges from the year 40,000 BC to the present day; Onians 2004). But such 'mapping' has a more serious starting point, with the rejection of cultural politics and temporal-spatial contextualism in favour of more strictly bioevolutionary and neuropsychological concerns. This 'world art studies' seeks to re-open the possibility that art may be liberated from the strictures of 'a European

development that has not been duplicated anywhere else' (Kelly 1999: xi), and to broaden and redefine aesthetics as a general field of reflection, regardless of geographical and historical specificity. Broadly, such a move is designed as a corrective to the political and spatial narrowness that was common to art scholarship for much of its history. Its distinction lies in neither depending nor building on models of historical *conjunction* (or 'conjunction': Foucault 2003), the multiculturalist critique of 'world art history' (Carrier 2008), the postcolonialist critique of 'culturological essentialism' (Davis 2011), or 'intercultural comparison' and 'interculturalization' (van Damme 2008: 23-61).

However much a 'world'-oriented study of aesthetics has chosen to operate apparently independently of these fields, such as through the prism of Euclidean geometry, or by an 'environmental turn', it has met continually with the pressure for 'global theorisation' to face the intellectual and social challenges raised by contemporary globalisation. There is a persistent expectation that rather than bracket them from view, philosophical aesthetics may be precisely the venue for studying the impact of globalising processes on the vocabulary of academic disciplines, and the growing role of non-Western and 'indigenous' intellectual and aesthetic traditions in shaping professional scholarship. The tendency to replace 'talk about value, context and interest with talk about optimal response, conditioned behaviour, and evolutionary advantage' (Elkins 2008: 107-118), suggests new opportunities, but also obstacles, such as when aesthetic analysis relies on an understanding of its object of study which is so wide-ranging as to seem incompatible with most discussion in the academy. Certainly attention to cultural context may seem unnecessary for advancing theoretical work on aesthetics that addresses a global scale. Even so, the growth and future

of such endeavours will remain a matter of institutional and disciplinary contingency for as long as the case to 'globalise' knowledge is tackled under the circumstances of globalisation.

Status and value. Indeed, those communities of scholars who are 'going global' (reasserting claims for the global relevance of their theoretical territory) or developing a methodological 'worlding' of aesthetic objects (such as in the sense of the 'mapping' that I have mentioned) are implicitly negotiating the intersection of globalisation and intellectual life. What grounds their experience is the political economy of knowledge, an academic environment where value is assigned in unequal ways to a range of possible 'global' or 'world' topics and problems. Different values are attached to different geographical regions, according to a time-space logic that declares 'leading' centres and 'backward' peripheries, giving the impression that some regions are 'lagging behind' in comparison with others (Wainwright 2011). That these definitions of status correlate to the macro economy of multinational capital is striking: second only to a Euro-American geography, institutional attention has gravitated to the BRIC countries, Brazil, Russia, India and China. For those scholars who invest their time in studying aesthetics supposedly outside such spaces of global flow they may find that their choices can preclude recognition by and participation in the professional 'mainstream' of philosophical aesthetics.

Tackling this problem of the interconnections between so-called 'margin' and 'mainstream' might be the key to reassessing how knowledge of aesthetics can be reached on a global scale. One suggestion is that the conventional 'centres' of aesthetic interest ought to be regarded as islands of activity and socio-historical sites within a larger global system which always includes more 'marginal' points of focus. This more maritime or 'archipelagic' approach may come to treat cities or whole continents themselves as islands with an

inescapable, littoral connectivity; located within multidirectional vectors of movement in ‘a branching, rhizomatic, relational set of itineraries and spaces’ (Stephens 2013: 26).

Emphasising a profound relationship between the territorial or continental and the oceanic (Deleuze 2004: 9) may be a way to recognise the desire for the identification of roots and rootedness with specific places, but it accords greater significance to the routes through and between them. In this re-evaluation we can do away with dilemmas over whether aesthetics in the globalised world are qualified by ‘particularism’ or ‘universalism’ through showing that globalisation engenders aesthetic, embodied experiences which are quite capable of testing the basic categories of philosophical thought. This analysis promises an appreciation of how the politico-economic category of globalisation – expressed typically in terms of homogenising cultural flows – is linked intimately with aesthetic specificities.

I have touched on the changes brought by globalisation to the academy’s intellectual agenda for aesthetics. Yet there is also the reciprocal impact of aesthetic theory on the wider world of aesthetic practice. In the case of the art world, it remains unclear whether such theory has resulted in its homogenisation or pluralisation, the contraction or expansion of its scope, and broader or narrower participation, or how the gap between critical discourses on globalisation and those on aesthetics may be filled. Some may question whether philosophical aesthetics should indeed have any bearing outside the academy among adjacent communities of practitioners, institutions, markets and other circuits of aesthetic production. The resilient ambiguity over what globalisation means for aesthetics has allowed the mediation of the otherwise vital ‘difference’ that global processes bring. Difference has come to be commoditised under the trope of ‘diversity’ in a way that empties it of all potential. So while there is an evidently increasing enthusiasm for ‘the global’ as a

theme for scholarship, without the corresponding critical lexicon and conceptual support there is a risk simply of 'including' globalisation in the study of aesthetics without much consequence.

At least among art historians, 'world art' has been the operative term in the academy for framing the issue of globalisation for aesthetics, in a sincere effort to identify what is fundamentally shared among supposedly incommensurable aesthetic experiences drawn from around the world. For all its declarations of intellectual distance, however, it has left unchallenged a general conclusion drawn by scholars of aesthetics and globalisation, whether they are in postcolonial studies, critical theory, anthropology, history and cultural geography. It is summed up neatly by the Cuban critic Gerardo Mosquera, writing that: 'Art is very linked to cultural specificity, but possesses a polysemic ambiguity, open to very diverse readings. ... [While] the diversification of artistic circuits clashes with the difficulties of intercultural evaluation.' (1992: 40). Held in common among these disciplines is their founding notion of an immutable, general-particular divide for aesthetics. Casting the problem of globalisation in those terms seems to have stalled a more precise understanding of how continents, islands, oceans, littorals, routes of passage, and so on, are conditions if not worlds of possibilities in a formative aesthetic geography of globalisation. It is these passages between global spaces which ultimately suggest why globalisation should be a central issue for philosophical aesthetics.

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