Transculturalism

Transculturalism transcends all particular cultures and invents a new common culture that is not meant to be a new universalism. A critical stance becomes necessary because central and peripheral elements need to be weighed against each other.

The concept of the transcultural was coined in 1940 by the South American scholar Fernando Ortiz in his book *Cuban Counterpoint*. Ortiz was inspired by José Marti's article "Our America" (1891), which puts forward the idea of métissage (the intercultural mixing of peoples) as a new identitarian concept. Ortiz writes:

> I am of the opinion that the word *transculturation* better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word *acculturation* really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation. In addition it carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called neoculturation. (Ortiz 102-103)

The transcultural situation that Ortiz found so typical for Cuba has by now spread over all continents and determines the existential situation of many individuals. Philosopher Mikhail Epstein writes that

> today more and more individuals find themselves 'outside' of their native cultures and their ethnic, racial, sexual, ideological, and other limitations. Transculture is an open system of all symbolic alternatives to existing cultures and their established sign systems. As a transcultural being, I can ascribe to any ethnic or confessional tradition and decide the degree to which I make it my own. Transculture is a mode of being, located at the crossroads of cultures. (Epstein 2005)

1.1. Multiculturalism

Transculturalism is different from multiculturalism. Whereas the latter conserves distinct elements of each culture and can therefore easily lead to ghettoization the former believes that the contact of the self with the other should lead to the construction of multiple identities. According to *Epstein*

> transculture does not add yet another culture to the existing array; it is rather a transcendence into a 'meta-

cultural beyond' in the same sense in which culture is a 'meta-physical beyond' in relation to nature. If culture positions itself outside nature, then transculture is a new globally emerging sphere in which humans position themselves outside their primary, 'inborn,' naturalized cultures. (Epstein 2005)

1.2. Micro and Macro Levels

Transculturality can appear on macro and on micro levels. In the modern, globalized world, entire cultures tend to interact and create new transcultural patterns. Even places of everyday life are, in the words of Andy Bennett, "highly pluralistic and contested, and are constantly being defined and redefined through processes of relocation and cultural hybridization" (Bennett 2005: 4). This concerns the transcultural on the macro-level. At the same time, individuals adopt increasingly transcultural identities, and most of the time they do so *not* because of the conscious choices they have made, but because of general biographical events to which they have been submitted. Here the *individuals* become transcultural, which concerns the micro-level.

1.3. Fusion, Mosaic, Network

In the trans-culture, proper regional cultures will be rearticulated or seen under a new light because transculturation changes the focus. The rearticulation of heterogeneous elements signifies a renovation of cultures inasmuch as different elements are supposed to reinforce each other's values. Transcultural architecture, for example, does not lead to an affirmation of clichés about each culture but rather to a sophisticated synthesis or to a hybridity that can make sense in its own terms. In other words, ideally, each culture does not only survive within the transcultural expression, but it manages to be at its best within the newly established transcultural context. The transcultural is thus not merely a compromise, but a juxtaposition imbedded in an overarching structure able to establish logically sound lines of communication between diverse elements.

A Hindu temple from the late seventeenth century in Goa showing European influences is transcultural. A glass tower with an Islamic arch as an entrance or some "clip-on regionalism" meant to make it contextually relevant is not. A decaying urban landscape that has been revitalized by new immigrants through the introduction of new cultural ambiances and economic networks is transcultural. A residence in an East Asian style Dubai (FIG. 1) that the owner believed to look like a "Japanese temple" is not. In the above negative cases, the combination of cultures did not result in the creation of a new culture but, on the contrary, everything cultural seems to have died during

the process of intercultural combination. The initially cultural elements have been transformed into commodities.

In the worst case, the combination is driven by commercialism. Then the semiotic significance of the buildings might still be important and make them an interesting subject of study, as Charles Jencks has pointed out about Las Vegas (Jencks: 2002: 57). However, from the beginning to the end of the transformative process, the perception of those elements never reached beneath the surface of images. As a result, the process could not mobilize the power of memory, myths and identities that are naturally enclosed to those cultures. Unfortunately, the postmodern trivial manipulation of signs and references, though often justified through high-flying intellectual discourses, most often follows the latter pattern.

In the above positive cases, a new culture could arise because a lengthy process of intercultural negotiations was able to create a new context within which the old could survive *as a culture*. This does not mean that the old survived here literally and unaltered. A certain cultural loss is inevitable in transculturalism. The important point is that transculturation must result in a new element that *is* culture thereby compensating for the loss suffered by the initial cultures.

Fig. 1 Fake Japanese temple (private residence) in Dubai.

The conclusion is that transculturality does not lead to uniformity through progressive processes of cultural fusion. On the contrary, the transcultural process maintains and *produces* diversity as it creates complicated structures able to hold together various elements. The "mosaic"

model is appropriate as a metaphor for transcultural transcendence insofar as it differs from the "fusion" metaphor, which uses the liquid element to indicate a process through which the self and the other become indistinct. Constant fusion will indeed lead to universalism. Therefore the mosaic model is useful. It is also useful because it overcomes the idea of the multicultural juxtaposition. Guy Scarpetta writes in his book, *Impurity,* that in today's world "each person is a mosaic" (1989: 26). In the mosaic, elements remain distinct but are coordinated by an overarching aesthetic structure that is not universalistic but dependent on the parts.

At the same time, the mosaic model can be found problematic. There are actually two ways in which a mosaic can be thought of: in a transcultural and in a multicultural way and it is necessary to distinguish both. In the multicultural mosaic, each element remains distinct without communicating with other elements. This is why on the macro-level, multiculturalism can easily lead to ghettoization. The transcultural mosaic, on the other hand, combines the individual and the general in a paradoxical way without simply subsuming the individual under the general. While, in my opinion, a transcultural mosaic is workable, some thinkers declare any mosaic model inappropriate for transculturalism. Wolfgang Welsch, for example, refuses the mosaic and suggests instead the metaphor of the "network" for the description of transcultural situations when writing:

> transcultural webs are woven with different threads, and in different manners. Therefore, on the level of transculturality, a high degree of cultural manifoldness results again (…). It's just that now the differences no longer come about through a juxtaposition of clearly delineated cultures (like in a mosaic), but result between transcultural networks, which have some things in common while differing in others, showing overlaps and distinctions at the same time. (Welsch: 206)

The network metaphor brings us close to another model that has been used for the study of transculturalism: the rhizome as it has been developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (cf. Hernández 2005: xv-xix). The notion of the rhizome perfectly well illustrates the way in which different cultures can maintain their separate identities although they exist in a permanent relation with each other. In their book, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari introduce the notion of structureless plateaus or rhizomes in which acts of territorialization and deterritorialization as well as of organization and rupture form a place that is stratified but without precise limits. The rhizome is made of lines without being shaped by profound, metaphysical structures. It remains undetermined by evolutionary linearity, hierarchy or geometrical orientations, but is entirely made

of processes of variation and expansion. Rhizomes have no beginning and no end but begin in the middle and rely neither on transcendental laws (roots) nor on abstract models of unity. The authors write: "Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees. There is a rupture in the rhizome whenever segmentary lines explode into a line of flight, but the line of flight is part of the rhizome" (1980: 16; Engl.: 9).[1]

Transculturalism can be a matter of critical thought but it can also come about without any critical effort. The above mentioned Hindu temple in Goa with European influences or the decaying urban landscape that has been revitalized by new immigrants are examples of a transculturalism where no critical thinking effort had been invested. The transcultural can evolve naturally or artificially.

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein

(extracts from *Limits and Opportunities of Critical Regionalism*, Ashgate 2015)

In 1998, the UNESCO Chair in Transcultural Philosophy of Peace has been established at the Moscow State University.

Further Reading:

Andy Bennett. *Culture and Everyday Life* (London: Sage, 2005).

Ellen Berry, Mikhail Epstein. Transcultural Experiments: Russian and American Models of Creative Communication (London: St. Martin's/Palgrave Press 1999).

Mikhail Epstein: "On Transculture," Re-placing Cultures: A Dialogue Among Disciplines Vol. 7 No. 5 April/May 2005.

Mikhail Epstein, After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture (Amherts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), pg. 298.

Mikhail Epstein: "On Transculture" The Academic Exchange 7. 5 (2005).

Wolfgang Welsch. 1999. "Transculturality – the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today," in M. Featherstone, and S. Lash (eds.), *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*. London: Sage, 194-213.

[1] "Tout rhizome comprend des signes de segmentarité d'après lesquelles il est stratifié, territorialisé, organisé, signifié, attribué, etc. mais aussi des lignes déterritorialisation par lesquelles il fuit sans cesse. Il y a rupture dans le rhizome chaque fois que des lignes segmentaires explosent dans une ligne de fuite, mais la ligne de fuite fait partie du rhizome" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 16).