

Cultural Flow and Modern Art

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A term such as “cultural flow” tends to be used like a broad angle lens, which encompasses the movement of migrants or refugees across borders, or the network of the world-wide-web, or the uniform business practices of a multinational firm, as well as the spread of meanings and images. In fact with the appropriation of the word “culture” by sociologists and anthropologists the traditional artistic usage is almost always overlooked – yet looking at “cultural flow” through the far narrower focus of art can raise interesting questions, and perhaps offer useful models.

The first thing to note is that from the art-viewpoint Appadurai’s landscape metaphor seems misleading, because the parallelism of his labels implies that “ethnoscapes” and “technoscapes” are no different in kind than “mediascapes” or “ideoscapes”. By contrast, translated into the context of theatre, or painting, or music the human diaspora is simply a carrier, while the Internet is no more than a conduit. As such both are neutral elements: roughly equivalent to the raw/unmediated material or the technical means of expression for art. Of course Appadurai is concerned with all of his categories primarily as processes of transmission; and it is certainly true that the medium conditions the message, as McLuhan might have formulated it. However, the images and ideas incorporated in the latter kinds of “-scape” seem quite different in kind: these correspond to the artistic product – the message being carried.

The second consideration is that in terms of art, while these global flows may have accelerated, they are hardly a new phenomenon – instead they might be seen as fundamental, indeed instrumental in the whole history of art. To mention just a couple of

very well-known examples: it was the influence of a Greek epic, *The Iliad*, which inspired that defining interpretation of Roman civilization, *The Aeneid*; while by far the most significant event in the whole development of modern Western art was the rediscovery of Roman sculpture and literature in a cultural flow that gave its name to one of the key periods in European history: the Renaissance. Another example is the swift rise of naturalism in nineteenth-century literature, where novels and the stage adopted criteria from the sciences and Darwinian anthropology. And what this demonstrates is that – at least in art terms – cultural flows come as much from the past, or from other very different cultural areas, as from distant parts of the globe. It also suggests, I think correctly, that one of the distinguishing factors of Western culture is itself rupture: a continual and repeated break with tradition. So that one might reasonably ask to what extent Appadurai's "theory of rupture" is determined by this background and thus imposes a specifically Western world-view on contemporary global developments.

Of course, modernity has brought an ever-accelerating sequence of ruptures to all forms of art throughout the 20th century – indeed at least one critic has analyzed the whole modernist movement as having "Crisis" as its central term – and one need only think of Virginia Woolf famously announcing that "on or about December 1910, human character changed", which not only signals the extreme quality of such cultural shifts, but also the arrogant universalizing of Eurocentric egoism. Woolf might have been referring (as she was) simply to the end of the Victorian era, and looking out over a map of the world at that time with so much of its landmass colored the tasteful pink of the British Empire she might even be excused for asserting global significance to what was in fact a

purely local change, restricted initially not just to Europe, but to a single social class, and maybe a tiny subset of that: the Bloomsbury Group.

Not only would I date the initial thrust of modernism somewhat earlier than 1910, but also propose this characteristically twentieth-century movement as the intimate consequence of European imperialism, and as such linearly connected to the Victorianism it supposedly supersedes. The shift of vision represented by Whistler's painting comes from the impact of Japanese woodcuts that were brought to the West following Commodore Perry's arrival in the closed island culture, while W.B. Yeats' plays were a direct response to seeing performances by a Noh theatre actor Michio Ito (one of several Japanese performers to tour the West around the turn of the last century). An equally new way of seeing things was introduced by Gauguin, whose art changed radically through contact first with the Caribbean (in sculptures such as the 1889 "Black Venus") and then after 1890 through his immersion in the French colonies of Tahiti and the Marquesas in the South Pacific. Similarly it was exposure to African carvings, in particular to the heavily incised masks from the Congo or Nigeria that is at least in part responsible for the whole Cubist movement, incorporated as they are in the faces of the "Demoiselles d'Avignon" with which Picasso launched Cubism in 1907 and increasingly in the art of the German Expressionists. In short the history of modernist art – and by extension the concept of modernity, which that art both informs and reflects – is rooted in, indeed still dominated by repeated cross-cultural borrowings.

To return briefly to Virginia Woolf – her comment points to another aspect of "cultural flow". When she speaks of a new type of human character, she is describing the emergence of a specifically modern mode of perception and action: the crucial element is

all about consciousness. And this links to Appadurai's focus on subjectivity, although I suspect that for any artist the "*work of the imagination*" to which he refers would carry a rather different meaning.

The point is that all these artistic apostles of modernity were energized by the alien, and specifically the "archaic" or "primitive" qualities of Japanese, Melanesian or African culture. This is of course an outsider's misunderstanding. But it also exemplifies the way any cultural product or expression is altered in the process of adoption. In integrating any foreign image in our consciousness we automatically reinterpret it. When culture flows it cannot remain stable, which leads me to query Swidler's otherwise extremely attractive notion of culture as "tool kit".

Even where the practice being transferred remains identical (as, say, with the dances and costumes of the Caribbana Festival in Toronto) the context alone makes its signification very different from the same action or object in its original social setting. So is it not perhaps patronizing to assume, as sociologists sometimes do, that the spread of American images and the ideology these express inevitably leads to hegemonic homogeneity? Of course the flow is transformative on the receiving culture (as Appadurai points out) but the apparently dominant exporting culture also becomes something intrinsically different at the point of exchange, being modified by the pre-existent cultural assumptions of the "other".

An excellent example of this can be seen in the spread of the English language – surely one would think, the most crushing instance of McWorld globalization – yet in India, which is possibly home to more English speakers than the rest of the world put together, the language itself has been domesticated, made indigenous to the degree that

usage and meaning is very different to the mother tongue. And of course while asymmetrical, the exchange works in both directions, with the English spoken in the U.K. being notoriously replete with loanwords from Hindu.

Heidegger identified the distinguishing characteristic of the modern age as an awareness of relativism; and the concern with identity, diversity and global cultural flows is as such a quintessentially modernist issue. Certainly the sheer speed and reach of global connections that have emerged, particularly over the last fifty years, make this a topic of pressing concern. But the question itself is intrinsically a modernist one.