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CULTURAL TRANSFER AND ACCELERATION

Spatial and Temporal Structures of Modernity

This is for Katica, who has mastered many cultures

How useful are aesthetic distinctions, aesthetic concepts in dealing with cultural transfer, in the attempt to analyze influences and induced development? The “media” approach, the approach starting with the means of transferring culture, introduces the connection between technology and changes in sensual perception. A reference to Walter Benjamin can’t be avoided, nor a reference to the impact of Marshall McLuhan. After that there is little common ground, but several more or less interesting directions, to name but a few: Jonathan Crary’s seminal research into the *Techniques of the Observer* for instance, or the work on literacy and orality and their interface determined by printing and later digital transmission done by Walter Ong, Eric Havelock Jack Goody, Vilem Flusser and many others. Important work was done under the heading of the “materiality of communication” and organized by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer brilliantly disregarding disciplinary boundaries. There is the maverick Regis Debray, there are all the gurus of visual culture, W. J. T. Mitchell, Norman Bryson, Michael Baxandall, Hans Belting, James Elkins - or all the important theories of the five of six senses, especially a possible history of the senses or in a speculative vein in the work of Michel Serres. Not to forget the great Friedrich Kittler who among other things corrected Marshall McLuhan on the matter of acceleration happening with the growth and expansion of media. Martin Kemp’s work on art, science and intuition is equally important. Jacques Ranciere introduced a strong reading of aesthetics as an ordering, and dividing of sensual experience. The following reflection pre-supposes these works.

The plurality of cultures was never really in doubt, there were always the different ones, the “others”: judged to be barbarian but, first of all, *different*. It was also always quite obvious that cultures are a product of an *in between*, hybrid, borrowing. Emulating: but the transmission, mediation, transfer often so successful that it could be forgotten. It is now almost generally accepted that there are different cultures with different rules and games, so that you have to know about the whole of a culture if you want, for instance, to understand a work of art or a device, a new technology. We know as well that things happen, cultures disappear or deteriorate, even if we do not accept the idea of an inevitable movement towards decline; we know we can change our cultural environment. Naturalizing or naturalization?, the process of representing the cultural and historical as natural, was the result of ideological discourses, a major force in the maintenance of hegemony. Man-made objects, man-made technology, become obsolete. Such a state effectively prevents naturalization; they cease to be “natural” and unavoidable and become random,

Foucault’s famous remarks about the “history of space” are used to make the point, partly because they come from someone so immersed in genealogy: “The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis and of cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world... The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed... One could perhaps say that certain ideological conflicts animating present-day polemics oppose the pious descendants of time and the determined inhabitants of space”.¹

Siegfried Zielinski’s *Deep Time of the Media* delves into the unexpected depths with a clear program, and in the foreword he writes: “An anemic and evolutionary model has come to dominate many studies in the so-called media. Trapped in progressive trajectories, their evidence so often retrieves a technological past already incorporated into the staging of the contemporary as the mere outcome of history. These awkward histories have reinforced teleologies that simplify historical research and attempt to expound an evolutionary model from much more than vague readings of either the available canon or its most obvious examples.”² He goes on speaking about “vague linearity” and a “flawed notion of the survivability of the fittest”. He is also well aware that the resurrection of dead media or the rediscovery of uncommon or singular apparatuses can be just farcical or “techno-retro-kitsch” if it is not a work of discovery – not of some innermost secret but of specific effects of practices: of a possible genealogy, not a grand narrative.

¹ Michel Foucault, *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 2: Aesthetics, ed. James D. Faubion, Penguin, London 2000, p. 175

² Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media*. Cambridge, Ma: The MIT Press 2008, VII

Let us look at an example. There is a general consensus that at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth Vienna was the place of remarkable achievements in a number of fields, in art, architecture, literature, philosophy, plus new entities like psychoanalysis. The obvious question is why there, what made it happen in that particular place?. Those kinds of questions can be addressed by constructing some kind of causality. The next question - our question – is: what happens when the results of this singularity, this event, are *transferred* and *transplanted*?

Comparative studies about, for instance, Vienna and Zagreb, clearly show a rather one-sided impact: writers, architects, painters, philosophers from Zagreb emulating, following or at least reacting to works and ideas appearing in Vienna.³ Still, both in Zagreb and other places in Central Europe, modernism introduced an explosion of creativity.

But what were the modernists doing? Not just following a successful model but feeling obliged to adopt the *modern*, the progressive way. There is in such acceptance an implicit but also an explicit understanding of history: it is moving somewhere, leaving behind obsolete, irrelevant works so you have to adapt, to be part of it.

There are other ways of reacting: for instance, *rejecting* the new in the name of established values, literally, being conservative. Or you might emulate something not because it is progressive and new, but because it proclaims to be decadent, a sign of the end of time.

In an interview from 2002, Carl E. Schorske, whose *Fin de siècle Vienna* was one of the books popularizing what one must be allowed to call the myth of Vienna⁴, answered questions about modernity and modernism.⁵ Modernity is for Schorske, and of course not only for him, a broad concept connected with revolutions, political and industrial, with technology and modernization as opposed to traditional and static societies. Modernism is a cultural phenomenon, especially concentrated in some specific places, like Vienna. Emerging modernism is obviously a change in cultural consciousness. The connection between the upheaval of modernization and modernism is not straightforward at all. To quote Schorske: "...modernism includes, in the arts for example, the tendency for enormous interiorization, de-socialization, a focus on the inner life of the psyche, on the life of instinct, of emotion. The latter brings with it a tendency toward irrationalism. Abstraction can of course be highly rationalistic... A historical order has been destroyed to reach a new, modern truth; a modern language has been created to express it..."⁶

³ An excellent overview of different fields is given in *Fin de siècle Zagreb-Beč*, ed. Damir Barbarić, Školska knjiga, Zagreb 1997

⁴ Carl E. Schorske, *Fin de siècle Vienna. Politics and Culture*, Knopf, New York 1985 (first in 1980, parts since 1961). Compare also the impact of Allan Janik's and Stephen Toulmin's *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1973.

⁵ *Ab Imperio*, 1, 2002, interviewer S. Glebov

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 19, 20

The rupture with tradition does not necessarily imply a new *interpretation* of history and society. Stephen Kern in his *Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*⁷, while complimenting Schorske's analysis, proposes a more unified approach from the two aspects of time and space. In a rather bold synthesis Kern explore the twofold development: on the one hand, the impact of Standard World Time or what we would call the awareness of globalization, of simultaneity and the reaction stressing the multiplicity of private time. Simplifying one could say Kern's position is a sort of a technological determinism but he does foreground the contribution of writers and artists.

So, space collapsed but what kind of time prevailed? The preliminary introduction of Foucault's era of space reminds us of a kind of a turnabout.

Going back to Kern's concern and putting it bluntly: is the impact of introducing a modernist work, a text, a building, a film, a picture to be compared with the introduction of the telephone, the telegraph, the automobile?

There are some simple criteria, like the number of people affected, but this is obviously smaller than the impact of new technology. With media the matter is entirely different. But it is obviously easier to write in a completely new way in a small country somewhere in Central Europe than it is to transform the infrastructure of such a country.

If nothing else, we are still much too reluctant to acknowledge the cultural capital. We can not ignore the shallow varieties: the really global spread of movies, music, TV series etc. The impact is not so clear: does it create illusions of a happy and prosperous life somewhere else? It does. But does it change the viewers and listeners? We are trying to analyze the proper transfer: Bollywood would be a proper example much beyond the scope of these reflections.

So back to *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. What do we say if we say it is an "enduring" legacy? Do we assume continuity, a continuity of ideas, emotions, an explanatory force we still feel? Eelco Runia teaches us about being *Moved by the Past*⁸. There is the regressive and there is the revolutionary mode. The regressive mode is either being stuck in nostalgia or a tendency to re-enact the past. The revolutionary is a decision to sever ties with the past, to burn our bridges.

But then, we do not have to be nostalgic to care about Freud or Wittgenstein. However, there is a lot of kitsch in recycling visual imaginary, the worst case probably being Klimt. A careful re-examination of the Viennese legacy dispels the unified picture. There is both continuity and discontinuity.

As to the newest theories of time and space: Avanesian⁹ is convinced that we cannot hold to the experiential sequence of past-present-future because we are more and more governed by the "future", that is, algorithms

⁷ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*, Harvard UP, 1983

⁸ Eelco Runia, *Moved by the Past. Discontinuity and Historical Mutation*, Columbia University Press, New York 2014

⁹ Armen Avanesian (Hg.) *Akzeleration*, Merve Verlag Berlin 2013

determining our actions: we must make an effort to control the economic forces using algorithms but can not change the force of development. Hartmut Rosa examines the temporal structures of modernity recommending a stand against acceleration¹⁰. We are really facing new space-time formations.

Or, is it futile to speculate in such a way as we are all the time embedded in an overwhelming *now* of competing cultural models, using all our force to retain some mastery?

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CULTURAL TRANSFER AND ACCELERATION SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL STRUCTURES OF MODERNITY

Both “acceleration” and the German “Beschleunigung” appear in recent years as key concepts in a number of studies, sometimes explicitly connected to the analysis of temporal structures of modernity, sometimes as a reaction to diverse theories of historical development, visions of future, etc.

This paper tries to explore the question of cultural transfer as the vehicle of acceleration, including the analysis of the *media* of transfer, representing technological changes. Of particular interest is the political impact of cultural transfer: cultural transfer appears both as planned and as spontaneous.

¹⁰ Hartmut Rosa, *Beschleunigung*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 2005

