

Review Essay

Interculturality in Intellectual Practices: Art, Politics, Philosophy and Worldview

Antoon Van den Braembussche, Heinz Kimmerley and Nicole Note (Eds.), *Intercultural Aesthetics: A World Perspective*, Springer (Springer.com), 2009, pp. 217.

The editors of this volume inform that what they call *intercultural aesthetics* was formerly called *comparative aesthetics* and assert that this branch of knowledge is indispensable to enrich the nature and scope of current concepts of worldview. They quote Leo Apostel, a Belgian philosopher influential in the 20th century for defining a worldview: “A worldview is a coherent set of bodies of knowledge concerning all aspects of the world. This coherent set allows people to construct a global image of the world and to understand as many elements of their experience as possible. A worldview can in fact be perceived as a map that people use to orient and explain, and from which they evaluate and act, and put forward progresses and visions of the future” (p.1)

A century before, Wilhelm Dilthey spoke of “world views” (*Weltanschauungen*) as patterns of understanding (interpreting) life:

The human world exists for the poet in so far as he experiences human existence in himself and tries to understand as it confronts him from outside...in understanding he projects all his inner experience into other human beings, and yet at the same time the unfathomable alien depths of another great being or a powerful destiny lead him beyond the limits of his own; he understands and gives shape to what he would never be able to experience personally. (“Poetry and Experience” 278).

But Dilthey confines the patterns of understanding life strictly to the Western intellectual history. His Eurocentrism considers only three such patterns — positivism objective idealism and dualistic idealism. Apostel’s “world view”, on the other hand, is a “global image” beyond any geographical or political topology, that is triggered by the current process of globalization in almost all the areas of human activities beyond the confinements of race, gender, religion and language. But can culture be globalized this way losing its very foundations (of race, religion and language) on which it stands, and the criteria by which it is identified? It seems rather too ambitious and ethereal to be acknowledged as a cognizable proposal. Certain cultural items might be or ought to be globalized, but not culture as a whole, a proposal completely absurd and meaningless. What is absolutely necessary is the process of cultural reciprocation, the very slogan and foundation of comparative studies in the whole range of intellectual pursuit ignoring any *centre* or *centrism*, predominance of either the East or the West. This reciprocation will bring up an healthy understanding of different intellectual ideas and doctrines

without any aspiration for universalism, for, as Sussan Bassnett has correctly asserted, the very notion of universalism is an imperial or colonial “world view” to which cultural globalization falls a victim.

It is true, as the editors of this volume note, that one cannot ignore the increasing worldwide cross-fertilization and interpenetration of different cultures:

The traditional leitmotiv of cultures that are profoundly embedded in nationalism is increasingly being challenged by new modes of post-national or even cosmopolitan citizenship. This global tendency toward differentiation and heterogeneity seems to be driven by new notions, experiences and expressions of cultural identity. In this sense contemporary art could be considered worldwide as a laboratory for building and exploring new *hybrid world views*. (P-2)

This *hybrid worldview* is not simply a juxtaposition of parallels, but construction of an integrated, organic perspective not only in the field of aesthetics, but in all other areas of learning as well. The central issue is the abolition of cultural binaries – superior/inferior, white/black, Eastern/Western so on and so forth. But the absolute abolition of cultural barriers with a view to founding *one* culture is not only a utopia, but also a contradiction in terms that does not deconstruct culture but destroys the very idea of culture that presupposes the barriers of language, religion and race. It would be like reducing all the seven colours into only one: This vision of cultural reductionism is as fatal as the gradation of individual cultures. The editors write:

Therefore, this book was conceived as an incentive to develop a truly intercultural aesthetics, which looks at art and the aesthetic experience in a cross-cultural setting, making room not only for new conceptual articulations but also for a new awareness of the pre-conscious and pre-conceptual ways of world-making... Indeed, the prospect of inter-cultural aesthetics is also intimately linked with the *intercultural turn* in Western as well as in non-Western philosophy. (p.2)

But the editors are trapped in a contradiction that cross-culturality or interculturality is not formation of a *hybrid culture* because the phrase implies differences in individual cultures structured in historical and social environments that are peculiar to those cultures. Before an ambitious amalgamation of Abhinavagupta and Kant the editors/ authors ought to agree with David Fenner (2008 : qv) that the idea of the “aesthetic disinterest” or “aesthetic distance” emerges in the historical events of foundation of museums during the 16th-18th centuries. This decontextualization of art is absent in the history of classical India that originated the *rasa* theory and the ideas of *sādhārāṅkāra* that can be compared with Kant’s *senses communis* or *Einstimmung* or the “aesthetic disinterest” excepting only in terms of abstract philosophical perspectives. The scope and limits of transculturality or inter-culturality in aesthetics were attended to by the present reviewer in his paper read at the Bologna conference (2000). All such comparisons ought to be aimed at only reciprocation, but never at forming an hybrid aesthetic point of view. For example, the Sanskrit concept

of *adbhuta rasa* might be explained in terms of Kantian dichotomy of beauty and the sublime. But the ambitious critics must be warned that the concepts are never identical or even share an *equal* critical perspective. Besides, what I have repeatedly pointed out, Kantian notion of aesthetic experience/ attitude as *disinterested* is absolutely alien to the Indian view of *rasa* experience which is categorically distinguished from any sense of indifference. Abhinavagupta emphatically uses the expression *na tâ°asthyena* and states that the theatrical audience participates (*svâtrmânupraveûa*) in the performance: The *Bhagavadgîtâ* asserts that all *sâttvic* actions are performed with enthusiasm (*utsâha* or interest), and theatrical experience is a *sâttvic* activity-- as Mammata and Visvanâtha state, *rasa* can be relished only when consciousness is dominated by *sattva* component (*sattvodrekât*). The editors' observations on this point are therefore notably superficial. Similarly, Rosa Gomez, in her chapter in the book, fancifully interprets *sthâyîbhâva* as an archetypal emotion ignoring the fundamental idea that, according to Patañjali, followed by Abhinava, emotion is a function of *consciousness (citta-v'tti)*, whereas an archetype, according to Karl Jung, is a phenomenon of collective *unconscious* (obviously, excepting this superficial interpretation, the chapter by Gomez is only a rehash). On the other hand, there are some critics (one which referred to by Grazia Marchiano, p.14) who interpret *rasa* experience as savouring an emotion deeply : "whoever deeply savours an emotion feels that hardened clot of one's individuality dissolve." Savouring an emotion deeply explains no definite experience, the adverb used here being vague and uncritical. Precisely, *rasa* is an emotion *savoured* or relished (*âsvâda*) and there is no difference between savouring of deep level and that of surface level.

To put the point precisely, an emotion is not *savoured* in our ordinary experience, whereas it is *savoured* in theatrical experience. Several other superficial approaches to the *rasa* theory (such as Kathleen Higgian, *JAAC*, 65.1, 2007) and their correlation with the Western critical tradition rather weakens the ground for an intercultural proposal.

Henk Oosterling prefers the term *inter* to *trans* on philosophical grounds: "I prefer the qualification "intercultural" and will avoid 'transcultural'. The latter at least in one meaning of *trans*- suggests an overarching discourse that 'unites' in transcending West and East. I think processes of interculturalization are far more complex and layered. No identity but differences trigger these processes of adopting and adapting, of informing through transformative performance. (p-20). As a successful strategy of the interculturality he cites an example of the war strategy of Colonel Rotkoff who used the traditional Japanese 17 syllabic haiku style to express his feelings about the chosen war strategy. Rotkoff is a Jewish intellectual working for the American intelligence since 2002 in preparing the invasion in Iraq. The very process of his operation is intercultural, because a Jewish intellectual utilizes Japanized Chinese knowledge of meditative verse in exercising a successful war strategy proving that war is an art and its success depends on intercultural practices- temporal and spatial transformations that are presupposed in this process of cross-cultural adaptation and cultivation.

"As an *inter* a medium seems transparent and neutral". Thus the term *inter* semantically covers the function of *trans* in mediating between cultures. Derrida says, every translation is always an interpretation. But interculturality serving as a medium of transportation of cultures is never neutral, because, to return to the Indian tradition, in order that a relationship be *sattvic* it must be sincere and cordial founded on tolerance, patience and enthusiasm. Similarly, interpretation should also be free from neutrality. Oosterling remarks that the methodological and ontological analysis of the *inter* in postmodernist thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, Irigary, Deleuz, Lyotard and Nancy share the Nietzschean inspiration that art expresses differences in a non-discursive, experimental way enabling another communication. Thus art and aesthetic experience are the paradigms of interculturality. But in saying so when these thinkers refer to the origin of this interculturality in Japanese zen practices such as that of Dogen's *shotrogenzo*, traced particularly in Lyotard's analysis of Kant's sublime and his art-based proposal of an 'immaterialist materialism', they forget that the very root of Zen practices is the Indian Yogic meditation (Zen=Sanskrit *dhyâna*=meditation). Any way, Oosterling explores that the philosophers of difference (postmodernist) have gradually shifted their attention from the other to the in-between, i.e., from respecting radical difference to the sharing of an in-between space, an *inter*. This is most explicitly formulated in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy. But whomever one reads finally they end up connecting an 'artificial' *inter* with a life style that Foucault coined 'aesthetics of existence'." Thus the *inter* now abolishes the difference between the self and the other.

II

An important point in critical interaction and transaction is the conversion of critical idioms. For example, interpreting the Sanskrit poetic theories of *alañkâra* and *vakroti* as formalism and structuralism, or *dhvani/ rasa-dhvani* as ontological issues in terms as they are used in the Western critical tradition, might raise the question of validity and propriety. This method neither presupposes the critical domination of the Western tradition, nor does it aim simply at presenting the Sanskrit ideas for the non-Sanskrit, particularly, Western readers; nor is it also a critical adaptation. Even the method does not aim at *universalizing* the Western critical concepts and theories. Critics would object that this decontextualization of the millennium-old Sanskrit ideas by presenting them in the twentieth century- European critical idioms involves a serious anachronism — violation of the sociological principles of an individual culture. The objection sustained. But, then, interculturality appears only an hallucination or a utopia. On the other hand, interculturality is bound to be a decontextualization; it is different from transculturality in so far as no culture is transplanted on the other. This interculturality as a cultural transaction is inevitable for the survival and progress of intellectual relativity as is commercial transaction inevitable for the survival of human life itself.

Thus, presentation of the critical ideas of different cultures on a single platform spontaneously exhibits the requirements that are shared mutually by way of intellectual transaction. One might call this platform a global market of cultural ideas open for

voluntary *exchange* of commodities rather than coercive *imposition* of any dominating producer or salesman. Interculturality is a market for exchanging commodities where a skilful salesman is responsible for convincing the consumers or co-salesmen about the value of the commodity he deals in. Obviously, this exchange of commodities does not aim at universalizing the value of any commodity, although any such universalization is only a possibility depending upon the choice, need and taste of the consumers. Millennium-old commodities can very well cater to the need, choice and taste of the contemporary consumers eager to appropriate, adapt and assimilate them in their life-style, and, therefore, they can most reasonably be updated in their relevant perspectives.

III

Interculturality is, then, exchange or transaction of traditions without any interference with each other's identity. This reciprocation needs tolerance in understanding and sensibility in appreciation of the characteristic features of different individual cultures — an activity that might help reconstruct and reorient some of them as necessary for human relationship, not with any ambitious programme for universalization. There are certainly some characteristic features of a culture that cannot be assimilated into those of another, as, for example, Oosterling observes, Japanese *geido* cannot be integrated into Western aesthetics, nor can Japanese spirituality be traced in European continental philosophy. (p.35).

Robert Wilkinson writes on aspects of the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro drawing from it some *general lesson* (?). But his discussion projects that such generalization is impossible. Nishida's view of aesthetic experience as identical with the European Romantic aesthetics does not match the classical Indian view that distinguishes between the two. Similarly, Nishida does not agree with the Kantian difference between formal beauty and beauty that depends upon content: "In my view, there is no beauty without content", Nishida writes, "in the beautiful, there must be an internal life that can be expressed, and the expression of pure internal life is always felt as the beautiful." (p.71) Interculturality, therefore, does not aim at any generalization or universalization of aspects of individual cultures. Projection of differences (as Wilkinson does) is also a function of interculturality. The observer thereby clarifies the specificity of aspects that cannot be interculturally transacted, although a suggestion for rethinking and revision is always there.

But some of the essays collected in the volume do not reflect any points for intercultural perspectives. There are of course some other essays that highlight a conceptual issue in its multidisciplinary perspective as treated in two different countries, for example, Evelyn Nicodemus's treatment of trauma experience in literature, visual arts, cultural studies in Australia and Netherlands. The volume thus appears a noble venture in presenting the ideals and objectives of intercultural studies in the areas of aesthetics and literary criticism.

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