

Transcultural Modernisms Model House Research Group

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Understanding Transculturalism

Monica Juneja and Christian Kravagna in Conversation

Christian Kravagna: In German-speaking countries, even within academic circles, we are often told that philosopher Wolfgang Welsch was the one to introduce the term “transculturality” in the 1990s. This supports the idea that it is a very new concept within cultural discourse. However, as we are both well aware, the term “transculturation” has been in use at least since 1940 through the work of Fernando Ortiz, and since around the 1920s, theories of transculturality have also played a key role in attempts to overcome the concept of “race” and notions of culture based on nation/ethnicity. What are your historic-theoretical points of reference for addressing transculturality? Could it be that all that is left for German-speaking scholars is to simply acknowledge its delayed arrival (and, on top of that, that a German philosopher has been accredited with introducing the term)? Or would you say that, within this discursive context, there were other precursors of the current approach to transculturality?

Monica Juneja: Though it might seem a truism, it must be observed that transculturation or the transcultural as an analytic approach inevitably builds on the groundwork of theoretical approaches of the past few decades, often indirectly—the linguistic-cum-cultural turn, gender studies, postcolonial studies—whose insights it responds to, refines and takes in different directions. The term itself, “transculturation” does indeed go back to the anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in his study of the sugar and tobacco cultures in colonial and postcolonial Cuba. While Ortiz saw this as a unidirectional process that entailed an initial loss followed by the emergence of something new, the transcultural in its present usage has become a concept and a perspective that is multidirectional and multi-valent. In Ortiz’s understanding—and this was an important observation—the explanatory potential of transculturation went beyond that of acculturation, in that it helped reconceptualize processes of adaptation as transformation. Furthermore, his analysis directs our attention to the nexus between objects and practices. In recent years, the transcultural has become a buzzword of sorts, used by a range of scholars in different, not always consistent ways and framed by diverse disciplinary contexts; this calls for a certain critical distance. At times the term is loosely used to stand for “cross-cultural” or “intercultural” in other contexts to denote a sensitivity to differences and the competences required within a multicultural society (e.g., in the case of fields designated as “transcultural” nursing or psychiatry); in German historical writing of the late twentieth century it was used as an adjective to qualify civilizational entities beyond the frontiers of Europe (“transkulturell vergleichende Geschichtswissenschaft”) – here too, it is important to critically question the historical underpinnings of these taxonomic entities in the first place.

The definition proffered by Wolfgang Welsch has been generally regarded as a major theoretical landmark in that Welsch deployed transculturality as a heuristic device to critique the conceptualization of culture ascribed to Herder and the Enlightenment—i.e., a view of culture as a closed, internally cohesive, and linguistically homogeneous sphere—which, according to Welsch, is “untenable” today as it is no longer commensurate with the experience of modern societies. “Transculturality,” he writes, “is a consequence of the inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures.” This makes it a more appropriate concept in his view than intercultural or multicultural, both of which sustain a hermetic and fixed idea of culture instead of transcending it. Finally, Welsch considers the traditional Herderian view of culture as “normatively dangerous,” and hence the transcultural—equated automatically with the cosmopolitan or the syncretic—is seen as a political and ethical corrective to ethnocentrism and xenophobia.

While the perspective of the Heidelberg Cluster “Asia and Europe in a Global Context” shares Welsch’s critique of a bounded notion of culture, it departs from Welsch’s position in some significant ways. To begin with, Welsch’s critique of existing notions of culture as obsolete is premised on the assumption that border crossings and cultural mixing are unique attributes of modernity. This is an approach which he shares with other cultural anthropologists who seek to spotlight the radical break that contemporary globalization has effected with the past by obscuring earlier historical forms of mobility and connectedness that have been characteristic of cultures over centuries, pre-dating the advent of modern communication and global capital. Secondly, Welsch conceives of transculturality as stasis, as a characterization of culture, and of the multiple identities of those who inhabit it. His analytical model does not address issues of processuality. And finally, his normative approach, which sees transculturality simply as an ethical corrective and postulates an opposition between “folklore” or “rhetoric” and the “real” syncretic substance of cultures, stands in the way of historicizing ethnocentric notions of culture as ideological constructs, which are equally embedded within and products of transcultural processes and exist in a constant state of tension with alternative positions, fueling virulent conflicts. I will return to this point while answering your last question.

Our understanding, while it draws upon insights of previous scholarship, views transculturation as denoting a process of transformation that unfolds through extended contacts and relationships between cultures. The concept can be used to refer both to a concrete object of investigation as well as an analytical method. The discursive category of “culture,” as it emerged in the social sciences in tandem with the modern nation,

was premised on the notion that life worlds of identifiable groups were ethnically bound, internally cohesive and linguistically homogeneous spheres. Culture, applied as a conceptual category to societies, past and present, invariably existed in tension with unruly and contradictory trends generated by mobility and extended contacts that have characterized regions and societies over centuries. The terms “transculture/transculturality” are an explicit critique of this notion, for the prefix “trans-” enables emancipation from the concept. Transculturality is about spatial mobility, circulation or flows, an insight drawn from studies of globalization, but is neither synonymous with nor reducible to these. It focuses on processes through which forms emerge in local contexts within circuits of exchange. Contact, interaction, and entanglement make the transcultural a field constituted relationally, so that asymmetry, as one attribute of relationships (together with categories such as difference, non-equivalence, dissonance), is an element that makes up this field. This attention to uncovering the dynamics of those formations both in the past and the present constituted through regimes of circulation and exchange distinguishes our understanding from that of Welsch—our research projects go back to antiquity and extend into the present. In other words, our research aims to investigate the multiple ways in which difference is negotiated within contacts and encounters, through selective appropriation, mediation, translation, re-historicizing and rereading of signs, alternatively through non-communication, rejection or resistance—or through a succession/coexistence of any of these. Exploring the possible range of transactions built into these dynamics works as a safeguard against polar conceptions of identity and alterity, equally against dichotomies between complete absorption and resistance, which characterize certain kinds of postcolonial scholarship, or more recent studies of cultural difference such as Hans Belting’s *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science* (2011), which, while seeking to write a connected history of perspectival vision, ends up dealing with Asia bringing in a form of cultural essentialism through the backdoor.

CK: In my research on the early history of theories of transculturality, I mainly focused on the “Black Atlantic.” Here, the beginnings of Transcultural Studies can be traced back to the early twentieth century. I have hardly done any work on Asia. In which contexts can early ideas of Transcultural Studies be found there?

MJ: Theoretical approaches in different areas of study are embedded in and shaped by historical processes and identity formations of the concerned actors. Individuals and communities living in the diaspora, often in contexts marked by racism and other asymmetries of power, provided some of the earliest impulses for transcending existing disciplinary

frameworks to theorize histories of slavery and a shared past that could not be contained within the boundaries of the present-day nation states. In a number of Asian contexts, on the other hand, disciplinary formations in the humanities—such as history and art history—were shaped by anti-colonial nationalism so that disciplines came to be closely tied to identity formations around the nation: the nation was thus the unit of analysis; a narrative of its unique achievements, past and present, explained purely from within, was transmitted through disciplines and institutions—the university, the museum, and the heritage industry. All these left little space for transcultural frameworks. While Postcolonial Studies—in the Indian context Subaltern Studies—brought in fresh and critical voices, which questioned the narratives of national solidarity by shifting the focus to the margins and repressed voices, their framework continued to be determined by the territorial frontiers of the nation state. More recently, historians have written about “connected” or “entangled histories,” or have framed their subjects of study as being connected by bodies of water—the Indian Ocean, the South Pacific; anthropologists now focus on diasporas, mobility, and porous boundaries; art history, on the other hand, has by and large remained assiduously tied to a paradigm that precludes insights into cultural dynamics and entanglements, which question narratives of cultural purity and originality. Institutional structures prevailing in Western universities have maintained the boundaries between the area studies and the “mainstream,” which has been a major hurdle to investigations adopting a transcultural approach. It is therefore not surprising that the critical edge of perspectives such as the Black Atlantic is rare in an Asian context. More recently, however, writings on globalization, migration, and modern media—mainly authored by scholars of Asia located in the West—have hailed a world without boundaries, marked by global flows (Appadurai), which, in a sense, involve a rejection of localized bounded cultures, thereby providing an initial impulse to transcultural studies—as has been done in the first phase of our Cluster. Yet here too, our research has brought us to a point where transcultural studies can refine the analysis of flows by looking more closely and critically at the dialectic between the dissolution of certain boundaries and the reaffirmation of other kinds of difference, of how de-territorialization is invariably followed by re-territorialization. Moreover the challenge now is to find a language to theorize the complex morphology of flows, to supplement macro-perspectives by descending into the thicket of localities—urban and rural, past and present, central and at the margins—in which the dynamics of actual encounters involving a host of actors become more clearly evident and meaningful.

CK: In the “Europe and Asia Cluster,” there are researchers from different regions and different traditions of thought working in collaboration. This implies

a setting that already entails a process of negotiating concepts and terms. Are there different conceptions of transculturality within the Cluster and if so, do you consider them to be based on something other than differences in region and/or traditions of thought? Is there an “internal” debate on the term and its meaning within the Cluster? Or is there a kind of general approach to transculturality that is agreed upon for this project? Within the Cluster, what disciplines are considered to be forerunners or innovators for transcultural thought?

MJ: While it is true that the Cluster brings together researchers with different regional specializations—European and Asian studies—their primary concern in seeking a common platform is to be able to overcome the hermetic isolation of their disciplines, which have left their mark on the local material they study. The result is a large, grey area of unasked questions and unstudied links; an equally large range of anomalies that refuse to fit into the existing explanatory patterns; and, most irritatingly, a vicious circle where the angle and selection dictated by a “nation state default mode,” which itself has not been subjected to scrutiny, leads to results that, in turn, fortify the unproven assumptions on the basis of which they had been gained in the first place. Transculturality thus becomes a heuristic tool, an analytical mode rather than a theoretical given: its explanatory potential needs to be elaborated and substantiated by empirical research. The focus of our research is not on the existence of the transcultural per se but on its dynamics—which then requires linguistic and cultural competences across departments and regional specializations. Each of these necessarily implies certain disciplinary understandings, practices, and canons, which then have to stand the test of critical rereadings and fresh questions. Our Cluster has not sought to set up a separate new framework of Transcultural Studies outside of existing fields, rather to draw upon the competences of these fields as an indispensable asset for a transcultural approach. Having said this, however, there is a constant need to negotiate inner differences—one example has been the different ways in which disciplines—anthropology, Indology, or art history—define the concept of culture. An “avant-garde,” if we so wish to term it, can be identified less in terms of a discipline per se, but rather can be found in areas of scholarship and subjects, which individual scholars or groups have defined innovatively and boldly across disciplines—studies of migration and diasporas across time, of transregional literary public spheres, studies of cosmic kingship in pre- and early modern Eurasian regions, or studies of slavery, to name a few.

CK: My own research has shown that there is a remarkable relationship between transculturality and transdisciplinarity (Fernando Ortiz uses literary parables; Édouard Glissant is a poet and theoretician; Melville Herskovits

draws on the artistic protagonists of the New Negro Movement). Have you made similar observations?

MJ: Yes, indeed, a transcultural framework requires the synergetic interaction of disciplines. As an art historian, I am drawn to certain conceptualizations of literary phenomena that highlight the tension between national belonging and the need to make the world your canvas. The study of migrant objects also involves grappling with their translation into different media—image, text, political treatise, or myth.

CK: There are several different concepts of culture as a process of amalgamation and translation (syncretism, creolization, hybridity), which were initially created to address certain regional and historical situations (the Antilles in Glissant, Cuba in Ortiz, Brazil in Arthur Ramos and Gilberto Freyre, etc.), all of which had close ties with colonialism. In recent years, these situated terms have been “globalized” and many of the authors who played a key role in the development of transcultural thought have commented on this process. For instance, Édouard Glissant has stated that “the whole world is becoming creolized”; and Stuart Hall has also made similar statements. Do you think we can now speak of a kind of globalization of the transcultural? If so, would this also mean discounting the link between transculturality and “contra-modernity” (Homi K. Bhabha) or “counter-culture of modernity” (Paul Gilroy)? In other words: is it important to distinguish between different conceptualizations of transculturality and their use?

MJ: Transcultural Studies owes its formative impulses to concepts such as “hybridity” or “creolization,” which, at the time they were formulated, sensitized us to border crossings and cultural mixing. Together with their “globalization,” these concepts have, however, suffered dilution from inflationary usage. The explanatory power of hybridity, for instance, remains limited by the presupposition, implicit in the term’s indelible biologist overtones, of “pure” cultures, which then somehow blend or merge into a “hybrid” that is treated as a state beyond enunciation or articulation. This and other terms, such as creolization or *métissage*, often end up as theoretical straightjackets into which experiences of global relationships can be accommodated without further investigation of the processes and agents involved—and thus at the cost of the precision necessary for grasping their specificity and dynamics. In that sense, I would argue against the conflation of transcultural with these terms. A transcultural perspective, premised as it is on an understanding of culture that is in a condition of being made and remade, does not take historical units and boundaries as given, but rather constitutes them as a subject of investigation, as products of spatial and cultural displacements. Units of investigation are constituted neither mechanically following the territorial-cum-

political logic of modern nation states nor according to civilizational or cultural categories drawn up by the universal histories of the nineteenth century, but are continually defined as participants in and as contingent upon the historical relationships in which they are implicated. As such, transculturality is not just another metaphor or umbrella term for "cultural flows," "hybridity," or any cognate deployed to capture exchanges that transgress cultural, linguistic, and material boundaries. As understood here, it rather operates on a different register and highlights the procedural character of a broad variety of phenomena, including flows, entanglements, and other forms of circulation, and confronts us with the challenge of finding a precise language to capture the morphology of the relationships built into these phenomena.

CK: The correlation between transculturality in modern architecture and decolonization is one of the central themes in our research project *Model House—Mapping Transcultural Modernisms*. During the era of decolonization, the West exported models of modernist architecture to the colonies, where they underwent processes of transcultural appropriation and transformation. In part, the same thing happened in the early reception of Transcultural Studies within the Euro-American context (e.g., Ortiz, Glissant). They are involved in political projects. Based on your research, do you also see this connection between transculturality and decolonization?

MJ: Decolonization is per se a transcultural project, however, viewing it through this lens allows you to transcend binaries of different kinds: those in which culture is seen as flowing from high metropolitan centers to absorptive colonial peripheries, where colonies are evacuated of agency through asymmetries of power; or even in cases where colonies have recast and reconfigured models exported to them, the matrix remains the colonizer-colony binary. A transcultural view allows you to locate these processes in a global context that transcends this opposition and views cultural phenomena as multi-sited interactions. One example of this approach is Partha Mitter's study of modernism in South Asia, which he plots on a global scale that looks beyond the bipolar model of colonial agency that introduced modernist art as part of its civilizing mission and the nationalist Indian response to it. I have worked on the architectural history of the central governmental complex of New Delhi after it was declared the new capital of India in 1912. This work showed that classicizing architecture was very much part of a multi-pronged transcultural relationship that connects European capital cities with others, such as Washington DC, Pretoria, and Canberra. In these cases, architects from the European continent migrated to Chicago, and then Peking, creating a classicizing mold for capital cities. This phenomenon can be fully grasped when a model is transplanted to and translated within

multiple sites. Its location within a different matrix, and the close examination of the complex local negotiations involved, allow us to understand and theorize the proliferation of multiple translations.

CK: During a discussion at the International Congress of Art Historians in Nuremberg, art historian Horst Bredekamp called for an end of postcolonialism. Only when postcolonialism (and the “guilty conscience” it instills in “us”) is finally a thing of the past, will we be able to approach research on global art history in an unfraught manner. Although radically phrased, Bredekamp is not alone in his opinion. Parul Mukherji has critically noted that more and more congresses (also in English-speaking contexts) are tending towards a transcultural paradigm in place of postcolonial perspectives. The critical issue regarding this trend is the loss of the political. So, would this mean that transculturality is just an academically sanctioned version of postcolonial critique?

MJ: While I share the view that the practice of disciplines is an ethical undertaking, ethics is not something that can be reduced to ascribing “blame” or “guilt” in absolute terms to individual scholars. In this sense, postcolonial perspectives are more about a methodological critique of existing disciplinary practices being complicit with asymmetries of power rather than about imputing responsibility to individual scholars of succeeding generations for acts of colonial violence and appropriation. Viewed in this light, Horst Bredekamp’s stance looks at the issue from a perspective of political correctness that reduces academic pursuits to a matter of good and evil. And transcultural practice certainly has a lot to do with ethics—indeed, by questioning the underpinnings of disciplinary formations, taxonomies, and research protocols, it takes us into the heart of an ethical question—about our role as producers of knowledge and how this knowledge has shaped institutions. To take the example of art history: the discipline has ended up separating individual objects, has reorganized them into genres, hierarchies, and neat chronological sequences; it uses the category of style as a convenient tool for coordination and stabilizing endless mobility and metamorphoses of objects and forms. The idea of stylistic development implies a scheme that is not only artificially maintained by attending to a geographic location as self-contained; more than that, the idea itself is inevitably like a biological, evolutionary construct applied to culture, where it does not belong and where it operates by creating centers and peripheries and by suppressing human agency and the circulation of material objects. Reminding ourselves that the discipline itself as a product of history is the first ethical responsibility we share.

A contentious issue of the present—which I think Bredekamp is referring to but which has also evoked discussions elsewhere—is the question of

objects appropriated in different historical contexts of the past from cultures across the world, which now are present in the displays of Western museums. What are the ethical issues involved here? Does the circumstance that the British Museum hardly possesses any objects of “British” art make it less of a “national” museum and rather a “universal” museum, as James Cuno has termed it? Here, too, we need to make a distinction between the institutional processes of creating a museum and the stories the objects themselves narrate. The institution itself is an enterprise implicated in nation-building—nationalist sentiment, however, is not stable and unchanging over time but historically formed. Museums of the nineteenth century were formed by contexts of the nation and empire—in this sense, the British Museum does not need to possess “British” objects to qualify as “national”; its collection is about and part of the nation’s history of collecting through different means from across the globe—and the transactions involved here—archaeological enterprises, gifting, warfare, and the art market—need to be made transparent. In today’s context, nations cultivate a self-image that is not identical with that of the nineteenth or early twentieth century: so, if reunified Germany seeks to bring together its collections of non-European art in a museum of the world, housed behind the restored façade of an erstwhile Prussian castle, this is also a nationalist enterprise of the present, to claim a cosmopolitan character for the nation, which would come as a corrective to the past. However, the objects themselves tell their own stories, which resist efforts to contain them in established narratives: for instance, how does the presence of non-European objects in the heart of the metropolis make us rethink master narratives about “Western” heritage, here, for instance, housed in museums that are a stone’s throw away from the Humboldt Forum? Critical stances are not a monopoly of postcolonial writing alone—and transcultural perspectives will stand the test of acceptability only by living up to ethical imperatives of criticality and bringing to light fresh histories and understandings of culture, which disciplinary practices of the past have ended up suppressing.

CK: “Asymmetry” is a key concept within the Cluster’s research program. Does this focus on asymmetries (of vectors, of power relations), as supplements to “flows,” serve as a methodological tool to circumvent what I would call “happy transculturalism” which has become increasingly popular (particularly in art history)? (Though German-speaking art history barely knew what to do with the transcultural paradigm only a few years ago, it currently appears to be perfectly content with perceiving anything and everything as transcultural.)

MJ: Among the many “loose” usages of the notion of the transcultural is the romanticizing belief that we inhabit a world where difference is

harmoniously dissolved, where connectivity and mobility imply a fortunate cosmopolitanism and emancipatory potential. In fact, this belief underlies Welsch's definition of transculturality as an important ethical corrective to ethnocentrism, wherein he dismisses all assertions of difference or rejections of cosmopolitan identities as "folklore" or "rhetoric" as distinct from the "real," syncretic substance of cultures, one "which favors co-existence rather than combat." Yet no serious scholarship can work with this opposition between "substance" and "rhetoric"—the latter is not inseparable from a transcultural relationship. A closer look at transregional circulation and communication invariably brings forth a vast amount of material making assertions of difference—cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious, which become central to the construction of identities. There is no dearth of examples from across the globe to show that a shared language created through the experience of migration and exchange, the very intensity of entanglement, precipitates a concern with the generation of difference. In fact, the language of sharing itself, taken as given, can occlude the contestations and the means, at times violent, through which groups negotiated their differences. The strength of a transcultural method that examines the varied and often contradictory processes of relationality would lie in analyzing the workings of such rhetoric, its translation into social and cultural practice, and the modes of resistance against it, rather than dismiss it as politically reprehensible. To take a concrete example: warfare presents us with the paradox of bringing together men (and in specific historical contexts entire families) of different ethnicities, religious faiths, and linguistic identities (often fighting across these lines), thereby promoting, in the long run, the practice of cosmopolitan exchange and at the same time of producing discourses of irreconcilable alterity, articulated through innumerable textual and visual representations, and practices such as iconoclasm or looting. Another example: in today's world of contemporary art where cultures are said to share a common, unbounded notion of art that cuts across national and cultural divisions, we encounter a new divide between those who enjoy access to authoritative knowledge about art, share the values of autonomy and transgression ascribed to it, and those who do not. This boundary cuts through a transnational and connected art world: it is often produced by fissured constellations within the locality and can generate conflict, controversy, and censorship, which in turn become global issues. The Danish cartoon controversy, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, the assaults on the Indian artist M. F. Husain, or the forced detention of Ai Weiwei are all examples of conflagrations that have erupted within fractured public spheres where today's global vocabularies about autonomous, interventionist art do not find a uniform resonance. Here, a transcultural view goes a long way in helping us grapple with the complexity of global phenomena that generate their own forms of exclusion and violence. Asym-

metries are therefore one among a whole complex of relationalities that a transcultural perspective takes upon itself to investigate.