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Cultural Phenomena Seen from the Perspective of Language Issues (Globalisation, Multiculturalism, Interculturalism and Transculturalism): Preliminary Reflections for Cultural Studies

ABSTRACT

In the wake of developing methods of cultural research, the language of cultural studies is undergoing evolution and enrichment as well. This phenomenon obviously applies to all evolving academic fields, but in the area of the humanities a particular impact, consisting of the (sometimes deliberate) creation of successive cultural spaces, is manifested. For example, the introduction of a new concept may result in the initiation of a trend in the description and categorisation of reality. This is what happened, for example, with the concept, now very fashionable, of gender, which refers to cultural phenomena (which does not necessarily mean, however, that it has a particular referent) that sometimes must be created (interpreted) anew. In other words, these phenomena do not simply exist, but rather are inferred from observations (literally: they would not exist without suitable interpretation). These are followed by further activities, such as the construction of a new axiology and ethics, a new philosophy of the individual (describing him or her in terms of so-called cultural gender), and, in the case of strong sociopolitical trends and activities, modification of law as well. These trends do not usually derive from the work of academics, but from political tendencies. This modest example demonstrates the creative power of concepts in disciplines such as sociology and cultural studies.

KEY WORDS

transculturalism, methodology of cultural studies, art

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Let us return to the main topic. This 'creative power', the power of perception, description, valorisation, and creation of the world, is incorporated in many concepts. We will focus on several which are connected partially through a common referent; they often *describe the same or similar cultural phenomena*. We speak here of words that *possess no clear semantic range* (this already concerns the philosophy of language) and yet they are used widely and willingly. We have in mind here the concepts of globalisation, multiculturalism, interculturalism and transculturalism.

The comments presented here derive from two sources. First, from an irritating indefiniteness. It would seem that at least the concepts of globalisation and multiculturalism have some clear meaning in the area of culture research. Contrary to appearances, this is not so. Any clear meaning they may have had has been systematically blurred, through the creation and introduction into culture studies of new concepts such as interculturalism, transculturalism, etc. It is much simpler to determine the relationship between two concepts than between four (or more), especially when they concern qualititative data and discretionary (interpretable) results from research. Moreover, the concepts of globalisation and multiculturalism are often used in market research and in studies on global standardisation, freedom of communication, capitalism (in the case of globalisation), and sociological research (in the case of multiculturalism). In these fields, they also possess clearer meanings, or constitute specific concepts, e.g. it is accepted that one speaks of the multiculturalism of the communities of London and Paris, no longer applying neologisms such as 'intercultural community'.

Another source of the observations presented here is the practice of teaching. The article may propose incomplete or debatable understandings of the analysed concepts, but this is the result of observation of the language practices of students. Thus, the article presents comments on language practice, not a theoretical study of concepts (linguistics). Intuitions concerning cultural research will also be presented with the help of illustrations. In concluding the article, I will refer to an example showing how the interpretation of a given phenomenon (in this case a work of art) changes through a modification in the concept applied to it.

It is also interesting how frequently these concepts appear in the literature on certain subjects or, simply, in academic articles. We can check this by looking at online databases such as JSTOR.[1] Thus, a search of the database on 1 February 2016 using the keyword 'globalisation' yielded 73,735 articles, concerning issues such as the scope of the concept of globalisation or a general

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[1] Cf. http://www.jstor.org/

description of the phenomenon in the context of society, global economy, international conflicts, education, and improvements in the quality of life. By running a search request on the terms 'globalisation' and 'culture', we obtain 44,063 articles, devoted mainly to the influence of the process of globalisation on local culture, war, and cultural identity. Many of these results refer to book reviews (as opposed to independent scientific articles). A search of the JSTOR database for 'multiculturalism' yields 45,760 results, most of which relate to issues of education (including higher education and, with exceptional frequency, musical education), of working in multicultural teams, and of so-called intercultural competence. 'Interculturalism' appears only 934 times, referring to issues of American contemporary theatre and music and of Indian dance; it is even associated with postmodernism and pluralism, and includes by far the most disparate references considering the small number of articles.[2] Interestingly, 'transculturalism' appears only 294 times, and it is difficult to speak of its established meaning or application; it seems that the authors associate it freely with pluralism, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism (it appears randomly and probably could be replaced by other concepts). Worthy of note are the articles 'Toward a Transcultural Philosophy' by J. Eduardo Perez Valera[3] (a methodological article which could serve as a reference for further research) and 'Transculture: A Broad Way between Globalism and Multiculturalism' by Mikhail Epstein.[4] The title of the latter article promises more extensive research than it actually contains. Epstein examines the work of the Japanese poet Araki Yasusada (a non-existent Japanese poet) against a background of armed conflict and the history of Hiroshima; he detects in transculturalism positive, creative and liberating qualities which have the power to free humankind from the cultural domination of the concepts of identity and opposition through the simultaneous development of cultures, and which enable the avoidance of globalisation's fatal cultural effects. This article might suggest a number of interesting observations, but its academic utility is limited, as it is concerned with poetry (here already, we find an application of the concept whose meaning we are seeking).

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[2] Worthy of note is a critical article, M. R. Jamer, *Critical Intercultural Dialogue*, "Polity" 1999, Vol. 31, No. 4, pp. 587–607.
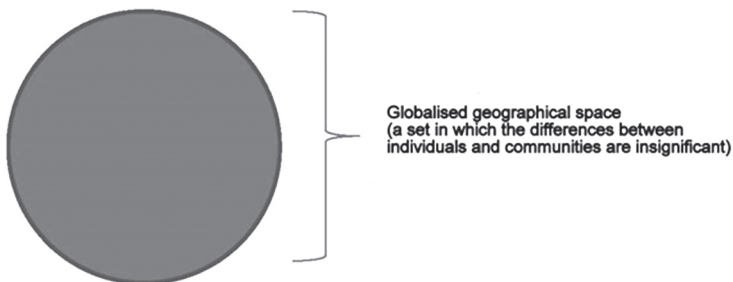
[3] Cf. J. E. Perez Valera, *Toward a Transcultural Philosophy*, "Monumenta Nipponica" 1972, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 39–64. His deliberations are continued in: idem, *Toward a Transcultural Philosophy [Continued]*, "Monumenta Nipponica" 1972, Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 175–189.

[4] Cf. M. Epstein, *Transculture: A Broad Way between Globalism and Multiculturalism*, "The American Journal of Economics and Sociology" 2009, Vol. 68, No. 1: *Between Global Violence and the Ethics of Peace: Philosophical Perspectives*, pp. 327–352.

THE CONCEPTS AND OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THEM

The concept of globalisation has entered everyday language and popular studies to a much greater extent than has been presented here. In cultural studies, however, this is true to a relatively limited extent. Its synonyms, among which are 'standardisation', 'universality', 'accessibility' (i.e., of products and services), and 'integration', reflect a trend that is, in a certain sense, the 'enemy' of cultural studies. Namely, they point to a phenomenon whereby various individuals, groups, currents of thought, and trends become subject to common visual identification, unit of currency, language, and means of communication that systematically obliterate all differences between people. This is a natural tendency, resulting not from coercion or pressure, but from the reversal of values: visual identity is more important than actual political convictions, than the possession of intellectual and spiritual knowledge or worldviews or ethnic and national origins. Globalisation is characterised by the disappearance of national states, identity, and diversity, but also by the disappearance of the traditional emotional relationships, both interpersonal and family, which sustain identity, and their replacement by modern communication technologies. Even if, in the global society, there are those with a clear component of individuality and the ability to think independently, creating themselves, their existence is a matter of indifference to the system, since in the context of the global market they function (like everyone else) merely as consumers of goods and services. This phenomenon can be presented in the form of an illustration:

Fig. 1. Globalisation

Globalised geographical space
(a set in which the differences between
individuals and communities are insignificant)

Source: Own work.

In Fig. 1, we see a space which we can treat as a geographical space (one might call it *geopolitical*, but this is an unnecessary detail, since even political differences are insignificant in globalisation). The set appears to be empty. Is it really? Of course not: within this space are entities that (at least at the beginning of the twentieth century) differ significantly from one another. Generational changes, however, are becoming more and more evident, and the tempo of the standardisation of people is clearly accelerating. Society is divided into two very unequal groups: those whose numbers are shrinking (people characterised by a strong identity and a sense of individuality), and the rest, people who differentiate themselves from one another by means of visual identification, e.g. via a new model of phone, who are incapable of contributing new values within the cultural sphere, who are devoid of creative abilities.

In the area covered by the processes of globalisation, therefore, there are differences, but the meaning of globalisation lies precisely in the fact that they are insignificant. Accordingly, they are not included in this set (Fig. 1).

Fig. 2. Multiculturalism

Source: Own work.

Multiculturalism is a concept and phenomenon in which there is an attempt to preserve cultural diversity and individuality. It is to some extent as if traditional societies were trying to connect with globalisation – fundamentally, multicultural communities are modern, and the proliferation of representatives of many cultures is caused by the process of economic emigration.

We lose culture in multicultural groupings, because culture is the domain of communities, not individuals. One can consider oneself a Catholic or a Jew, but Catholicism or Judaism imply social structures designed for the practice of religion. For example, a Catholic needs a priest to confess to, a Jew needs another adult Jew familiar with the halakhic requirements for marriage, etc. In general, religion assumes 'people need people' rather than 'every man for himself'; from the very beginning, we have never practiced religion alone.

Scattered cultural elements (individuals from different cultures), deprived of traditional social structures, are unable to maintain cultural continuity in its symbolic significance; as early as in the first generation, knowledge, identity and ceremony are transformed into the superficial and visual. Later generations sometimes return with difficulty to their roots and seek their identity, but from our point of view, they are neophytes, starting virtually from scratch. Another thing is the observation of the results of insistent, often governmentally sponsored, multicultural attempts to preserve local traditions. Instead of a true ludic or traditional culture, we get festivals and a caricature of tradition, symbolised by Polish highlander *ciupagi* (shepherd's axes) imported from China.

Fig. 3a. Interculturalism (1)
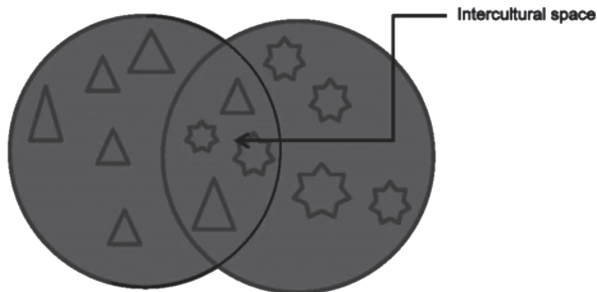
Source: Own work.

Fig. 3b. Interculturalism (2)
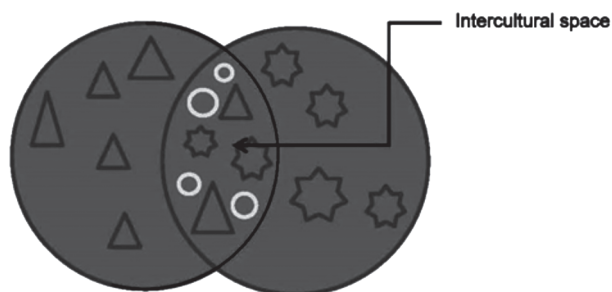
Source: Own work.

The concept of interculturalism is probably the youngest among those presented here; it is also the least frequently encountered in specialist literature. Nevertheless, among its very few applications, it is difficult to find a common denominator. On a blog about culture we find the following description:

> We speak of interculturalism when we are dealing with a society in which representatives of different cultures, nationalities, ethnic and religious groups live in the same area and maintain open and impartial contact. In an intercultural society, citizens consider other points of view and accept differences with respect and deliberation. They live together in a manner enabling the development of the process of healthy interests, tolerance and self-realisation: a process by which every member of the community can be addressed in a fair and equal manner.[5]

One might well ask where the author derived such information. This type of formulation offers nothing scientific; it consists of fantasy, idealisation, and creation of future worlds rather than scientific commentary on facts and phenomena. It is an adaptation of a concept (expanding its area of meaning) to a state of affairs that has never existed. Such a society exists only in the media.

Let us emphasise the importance of a certain methodological assumption: we communicate only what we share; we do not communicate what makes us

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[5] Cf. A. Mero, *Jaka jest różnica między pojęciami wielokulturowy a międzykulturowy*, [online] http://alexmeroblog.com/?p=3664 [accessed: 1 February 2016].

different. Of course, this is a very restrictive principle and we try to break it in practice, but it is worth returning to when we are confronted with an image of the garden of Eden where people of all faiths, creeds, nationalities, and worldviews go frolicking across the meadows, revelling in their coexistence.

Identity is easily confused with knowledge of the self. This is a huge mistake – identity is not consciousness of the self, but knowledge of one's affiliation with social, political, and religious structures. The more of these affiliations and the more complex the network of links between them, the richer our identity. Even the popular warnings against the loss of identity are unconnected, after all, with the fear of losing one's subjectivity. Subjectivity is not threatened. However, semantic chaos threatens identity as well as both the quality and quantity of the cultural components it builds and defines.

Identity depends on (among other things) the fact that we emphasise our affiliation with one and the same community and thereby deny affiliation to others. *Fear* of the fact that Christians consider only the Bible as sacred, and thereby deny the sanctity of the Koran (and vice versa) is an invention of modern multicultural policy. It is analogous to protesting against milk being white – recognition of the Bible as the only holy book is part of the very definition of Christianity. But there are many more such examples, involving more than religious traditions, showing that semantic chaos is being applied on all levels of human activity. To demonstrate this, let us go back to the concept of Christian/Judeo-Christian civilisation. Apart from religious tradition, which constitutes the basis of European ethics, we possess two additional elements which make up European identity: Roman law and the Aristotelian concept of truth. These three pillars, ethics, law, and logic (principles of thinking), form the foundations of European culture of which we are not conscious (they are, precisely, elements of our identity and not of our consciousness). Even those who today are so eager to reject them are unaware of their validity. Interestingly – in the margins of these brief remarks – it can be seen that in none of the concepts being discussed (multiculturalism, interculturalism, transculturalism) can there be found the idea of the equality of cultures. Only globalisation openly speaks of equality: all people are equal, because it doesn't matter who they are. This is not a question of scientifically proving the superiority of one culture over another, or causing conflicts, but of pointing out that, simply, we differ and moreover should want to differ from one another.

It should rather be considered that the phenomenon of interculturalism should not apply to the entire cultural sphere, but rather should refer to building 'bridges' by means of which cultural exchange can take place. Interculturalism, indicated in the illustration (3a and b) as the area common to the

two sets, does not spill over into the entire geopolitical space, but defines the phenomenon of intercultural communication within the range in which it can, in fact, occur, which is to say within the framework of the preservation of at least two separate cultures.

Fig. 4. Transculturism
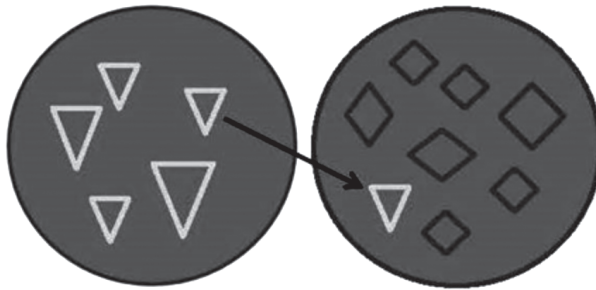
Source: Own work.

In the case of the concept of transculturalism, the important thing is the conscious transfer of selected elements and components of culture. A good example of this is the modern trend of World Music.[6] Here it is a question of a thorough examination of the cultural element transferred, so as to best preserve and most completely lodge it within one's own culture. Hence various technical and philosophical issues arise, related, for example, to the necessity of adapting arrangements, modifying and/or translating scales, etc.[7] These very specific questions and problems open up a huge field for important and necessary cultural studies.

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[6] Cf. P. Tendera, W. Rubiś, *Understanding Processuality in Music*, [in:] *New Music Concepts*, Treviso–Milano 2015.

[7] Cf. A. B. Bieber, *Arranging World Music for Instrumentalists*, "Music Educators Journal" 1999, Vol. 85, No. 5, pp. 17–20, 38.

FINAL REFLECTION – AN EXAMPLE
OF THE CONSEQUENCES FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

When we are confronted with a particular cultural phenomenon, we are confronted at the same time with the need to choose the right concepts to describe this phenomenon. It is not without significance – even if actual writing practice indicates otherwise – which of these concepts we use. We can write about globalising, multicultural, intercultural, or transcultural phenomena, or – to dig even deeper – metacultural (when we are seeking a common denominator and objective method) and subcultural (when we are dealing with two sets of cultural components, one of which is a subset of the other).

Let us recall an example in the field of contemporary art. We view works deriving from foreign cultural traditions, for instance, the work of Shirin Neshat (b. 1957 in Qazvin in Iran), a contemporary Iranian video artist now living in New York.[8] The works of this artist include a strong cultural component, as well as referring to the situation of women in Iran. The artist herself is of great help in understanding the meaning of these works, as she willingly talks about them and their message. However, in the context of the issues presented here, let us pose this question: are the works of Shirin Beshat 'global' (from the concept of globalisation), multicultural, intercultural, or, perhaps, transcultural?
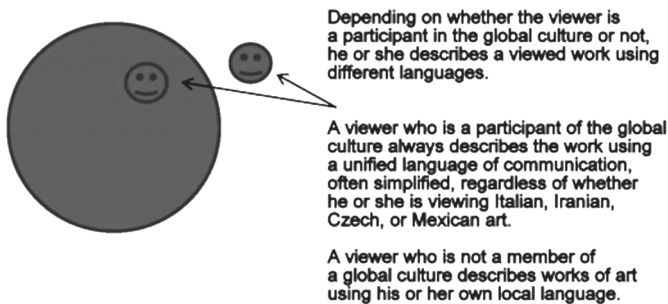
When we try to capture the art of the whole world using a global language, we lose the most important content of these works of art. Unfortunately, in order for world communication and standardisation to occur, such phenomena will occur more and more often. Thus it is also important that contemporary art is very often created from the outset as global art, i.e. there is no content placed in it which cannot be transferred into a global language, e.g. the language of Internet communication.

We encounter a similar situation when a viewer decides to describe a work of art as an example of multicultural work, with the difference that the space in which the work resides is filled with various cultural elements of disparate origins, so that works of art play the role of a piece in a puzzle or a fragment of a patchwork. In the case of global art, we have assembled a puzzle with identical pieces; in the case of the multicultural art puzzle, the pieces are likewise identical in shape (the assumption of multiculturalism is that representatives

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[8] Cf. S. Neshat, *Turbulent*, [online] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCAss-CuOGls [accessed: 13 February 2016] as well as *Women without smiles*, [online] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QL7hguy3YdM [accessed: 13 February 2016].

of all cultures can live together, that is, it doesn't matter who puts the puzzle together), though they differ in colour and hue.

Fig. 5. 'Global' art (globalisational art)

Depending on whether the viewer is a participant in the global culture or not, he or she describes a viewed work using different languages.

A viewer who is a participant of the global culture always describes the work using a unified language of communication, often simplified, regardless of whether he or she is viewing Italian, Iranian, Czech, or Mexican art.

A viewer who is not a member of a global culture describes works of art using his or her own local language.
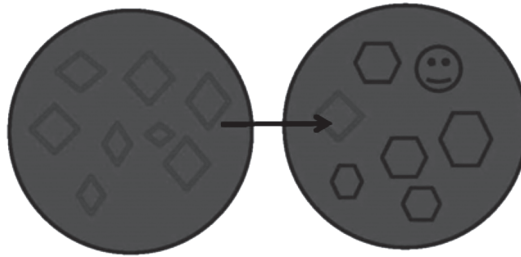
Source: Own work.

The situation becomes considerably more complicated when the opportunity arises to describe a work of art as an intercultural phenomenon. Here, the viewer may behave in very different ways. In Fig. 3a and b, we see that intercultural space is one in which areas and fragments of the sets of at least two cultures overlap. The effect of such an overlap is not clearly indicated. In the case of Fig. 3a, we see that the process of combining cultures does not destroy their components, but leaves them intact, in terms not only of form, but primarily of content (sense). However, since they exist in intercultural space, they must be readable for the participants of another culture. A fundamental question arises here: is the violation of a foreign/applied culture element by the absorbing culture possible? If not, and if the elements that make up the intercultural space cannot be maintained in their original form and content, there is the example of Fig. 3b: the appearance of new components of both cultures which are readable for both of them, but which have not preserved the form of either one or the other culture (although they will certainly derive from one of them). This situation is extremely conducive to the development

of a new language, but I do not think that this applies to the work of Shirin Neshat. The film remains an element of a foreign culture; we can identify with the main character only at the deepest level, as a kind of female archetype. As for cultural content, the strangeness and peculiar exoticism is clearly felt, and this boundary is unlikely to be crossed without the further application of e.g. Iranian elements.

Fig. 6. Transcultural art

Source: Own work.

Works of World Music are certainly examples of transcultural art.[9] The need to transfer exotic music in the most original form possible to a western base and western technology is evidenced by numerous professional publications in which we see great attention paid to every detail of each scrap of transmitted culture. This indicates that, in a sense, the transfer of individual elements sometimes yields better, more conservative results than transferring entire sets. Operations performed, for example, on one instrument in order to use it in the field of western culture make us aware of the scale of an obvious fact – namely, that by transferring one thing we draw its infinite historical, cultural and symbolic context along with it. What is important here, however, is precisely the scale of this phenomenon. I believe that the case of the work of Shirin Neshat, whose subject matter is specifically defined, is similar; the artist

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[9] Cf. D. A. Craig, *Transcendental World Music*, "Asian Music" 1971, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 4–5.

exerts great care to ensure that western audiences understand the meaning of her works and thus succeeds, I believe, in preserving their symbolic depth. This creates a transcultural narrative.

It is worth adding that when the viewer of a work of art finds him- or herself outside the area to which the work belongs, it may mean, unless we indicate its cultural background (which would give us as a result an intercultural or transcultural situation), that he or she is trying to take a metacultural perspective. This is the hypothetical situation towards which the efforts of cultural experts are heading, especially those involved in comparative studies. It is a question, specifically, of developing a method and attitude which, at most, may achieve a distanced position enabling the relatively objective description and comparison of the components of at least two cultures. It is difficult to resolve to what degree it is possible, if at all, to shed cultural burdens. I believe that the immediate future of cultural studies is transculturalism.

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