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Peripheral Derivations Concerning the Interstitial

The Local as a Reactive Defense or Tactical Move

WHAT “INSCRIPTION” value should be assigned to the “local” within a landscape of globalized signs that transcends boundaries? Within a landscape that has replaced reliable symbols of belonging with de-territorialization’s ever-changing velocity?

The local can be expressed as a reactive fear to the breakup of major narratives related to duration, stability and coherence that once protected identities and homogeneous traditions by means of national separations. The local—*qua* defensive response to the globalization menace that would erase all borders—thus becomes the nostalgic refuge for originary culture’s purity, and should be shielded from contamination by signs that have been sullied by traffic in globalized capitalism. Another way of understanding the local posits it as no longer the natural derivation of origin territoriality, but rather as a “situated difference”¹: a difference whose tactical localization intervenes in the geographies of power (through institutions’ maps and urban circles that determine and manage the value of cultural diversity), thus displacing meaning between what *globalizes* (discourse chains assimilated by the world network) and what *micro-differentiates* (the layers and stratifications within irregular zones and different languages).

Techniques of artistic and cultural intervention in Latin America become local on the map of the global by rescuing historical/social textures

within its specificity of context(s). But they should also pay attention to margins and borders; to the dovetailing that occurs in zones of contact with the exterior, more than to the interior and its continuous lines, in order that local cultural forces can be disseminated through surface abrasions and frictions rather than being substantiated by the identity or property of “being Latin American.” South could be that vector of intersection and decentralization that prevents a particular locality (continent, territory or region; field of study or institution) from fusing in real terms with the unifying outlines of its place composition, even if such a place is named “periphery.” “South” is the in-between place that exhibits signs of its Latin American formation and historical/social membership, but at the same time generates ruptures so that the bifurcated and the deviant within its sub-local scenes can slip past deliberately integrationist discourses that establish a continent-wide reference.

Hybridity and Cultural Traditions

Intercultural globalization uses hybridity as a code word to designate the mixing and recycling of fragments from cultures and identities in circulation, translocalizing them via symbolic and communicative networks within the globalized economy.

The concept of “hybridity”² emerged to characterize the disjointed experience of a Latin America crisscrossed by processes of incrustation, superimposition and disassembly of materials that create friction between continental identity and belonging signifiers (autochthonous traditions and colonization memories) with a uprooting speed like those of metropolitan transnational capitalism’s flows. The theoretical benefit of the “hybrid” concept principally lies in its de-substantiating effect, since it serves to open previous rigid binaries (modernity/tradition, cosmopolitanism/regionalism, development/underdevelopment, first world/third world, etc.) to the fluidity of new systems of intercultural borrowing between fragmented and mobile identities. The hybridity concept insists, anti-essentially, that identities are the contingent result of articulatory practices that are undertaken and unmade through signifier transactions between discontinuous cultural repertoires.

The relationship between globalization and hybridity is subject to the problematics of “cultural” translations. Cultural translation is a game of de-inscriptions and re-inscriptions of meaning that are transferred

from one signifying chain to another, from one cultural matrix and identity to another via linguistic conversion processes.

The verticality of the North/South axis supposes the hierarchy of the center condemns the periphery to the mimetic effects of passive receptivity. Nevertheless, cultural translation processes always generate violent disconnections between, on the one hand, the hegemonic matrix for assigning meaning and on the other, the specific materiality of local contexts that rebel against univocality of its homogenizing capture in the language of metropolitan reference. These violent disconnections between the global and the local bear witness to the potential for rebellion *in situ* that rejects the uniform conversion of its signifiers to the hegemonic system for the translation of cultural value, unleashing wars of signification, identification and appropriation that mobilize antagonistic meanings within cultural texts against the authority of the center that sought to monopolize the privilege of the foundational, the original and the true.

James Clifford calls any translation that experiments with the irruptive and disruptive capacities of the materials to be translated and “imperfect translation.”³ A rhythm of the “South” should infuse the cultural texts of the of the Latin American periphery with harshness and dissonance, in order that some refractory fingerprint—negativity, excess, residue, impurity—can emerge from the relativist discourse of cultural assimilation. “Imperfect translations” tat emerge from different and distant contexts battle against the tendency to passively integrate difference into the cultural diversity market as if this were about “differentiated differences,” *i.e.*, differences iterated by metropolitan definitions that precede and condition them. The “South”’s tactical maneuvers underline the enunciative and performative potential of “differentiating differences” that challenge the system that classifies properties and attributes of what has been authoritatively named by the center as identity and difference.⁴ “South” is the defamiliarization force that tests the intelligibility of a well ordered conversion of identities and recognized differences, by sharpening translation conflicts between the metropolitan repertory of cultural otherness and local sub-identities that, by differing with the previously agreed upon with regard to Latin American representation, manifest themselves in rebellion to any simple identification with their region or identity of origin.

Intermediate localizations: the peripheral-interstitial

We know that new global forms of capitalist sovereignty trace a cartography of cultural/economic power in which that power is no longer deployed from a central location but rather through a multi-centered network. Diverse segmentations of transversal flows within this multi-centered network impede the “center” and the “periphery” from continuing to be considered as fixed localizations and opposed polarities, rigidly facing off because of lineal antagonisms. The center/periphery macro-opposition that emblematically guided the identity traditions of being “Latin America,” in its anticolonialist and anti-imperialist version, has de-simplified itself. But capitalist domination continues to generate power asymmetries that unequally distribute keys to access and participation of the local within networks for the accumulation and exchange of semiotic/cultural values within what circulates and is exchanged. Such asymmetries and inequalities create pockets of local resistance to the uniform saturation of the global and the homogeneous condensation of meanings that dominant axiomatics persecute. Today the “peripheral-Latin American” is an intermediate localization whose zones—unequal—do not all equally offer the same array of signs as they irradiate from the supremacy of the center.⁵ Interplay manifested in dependence and contradiction within the “intermediate” formulates a hybrid conceptuality that prevents the peripheral/Latin American from naturalizing itself as an originary difference. “South” is the line of ambiguity that moves the Latin American not to give up on contrasting its sub-local differences with the metropolitan general equivalencies machine that flattens out interculturalism and multiculturalism’s collage. At the same time it looks skeptically at a romanticization of these regional differences’ otherness by means of exoticization or the “folkloricization” of the primitive.

A. Appadurai says that he “understands the local as something relative and contextual instead of something spatial or a mere question of scale.”⁶ If the local is about relationships and contextuality, that is, if the local is *delimitation* and, at the same time, a *stretching of the limits*, it’s more about uncertain displacements between the center and its borders than a literal occupation of territory. Tensions between the global and the local—as unstable terms that cannot be reduced to the fixed nature of a binary opposition—express themselves through simultaneities and lag times, interactions and leaps forward, mixes and disconnections. The local designates the unresolved tension of a fluctuating in-between space that,

by emerging from discontinuities and variations within the global, never manages to affirm itself as an integral territoriality.

The interstitial nature of the Latin American uses the tactical obliquity of folding in and unfolding to carry the concrete/singular and the material/specific of every context pierced by cultural history in order to chip away at slick narratives of the universal (the abstract/general of value creation) and the global (the interconnectedness of exchange networks and networks for the conversion of the sign/commodity) by means of dividing and disrupting local chains of meaning. The peripheral/interstitial in the Latin American is the mode occupied by the local (the “South”) to carry out context disjunctions that sharpen globalization’s internal contradictions between homogeneity and heterogeneity; between leveling and re-stratification; between circulation speed and inscription marks; between historical de-materialization and corporeal agency; between machines of abstraction and intensive singularizations; between the emptying-out of meaning and the inability to capture what remains.

Context referentiality and identity politics

In the current globalization and multiculturalism landscape, the slogan of “diversity”—empowered by metropolitan cultural institutions—calls on marginalization, the subaltern and the periphery to turn to art in order to denounce conditions of extreme poverty and social oppression, to reconfigure identities and communities, to make historically buried memory visible, question hegemonies of sexual representation or even make public interventions related to demands on the part of citizens. Multiculturalism has shaped a growing process of “sociologization” and “anthropologization” in art that, in the Latin American case, hopes its practices bear witness to art’s direct engagement against historical violence and cultural exclusions through an increased contextual referentiality.

It’s true that the marginal and the subaltern have had the merit, because of feminist criticism and postcolonial theory, of revealing arbitrariness, censorship and exclusions imposed by the dominant/Western culture’s modernist canon and its aesthetic idealism based on the dogma of the self-sufficiency of form. Bringing the silences and erasures of difference deployed by that dominant/Western modernism to light has forced international art institutions to open their borders to non-canonical narratives, narratives of otherness, that the absolute value imperialism employed by the center would otherwise have sought to censor or exclude.

For the margins and the cultural periphery, it was vital to vindicate context and contexts in order to combat the universality of abstract value. Here *context* means locality of production, site of enunciation, debate situation, the social/historical particularity of a set of interests and the cultural battles that fix the situational and positional value of every discursive act in opposition to the homogenizing synthesis of the “center function”⁷ that tends to efface the singular and the distinctive.

But some Latin American artistic and cultural practices insist, naturalistically, on transcribing their subject and context identifications within the standardized registers of identity and representation politics promoted by cultural diversity’s international institutions. They are practices that document the testimonial weight of the periphery’s combative actions, directly and in real-time, in order that the center can ultimately extract from them the energy it needs to once again intensify a historicity of meaning that is precisely the one that is breaking up in these hypercapitalist times, characterized by the de-materialization of experience and the “immaterialism” of the image.

The limited nature of such identity and representation politics seems to offer the subaltern, piecemeal, the moral privilege of being a repository of a “truth” about poverty, violence and oppression; a superior truth based upon a realist identification with a context that is portrayed in its maximum “denotivity” that, as such, would exempt the periphery from reflecting on the discourses that trace the relationship between image and gaze; between life experience and narration; between reality and meaning; between cultural formation and the interrelatedness of spaces and times. Based on a naturalized supposition of authentic continuity between place, body and language, multiculturalism has reduced the question of identity and difference to the simple affirmation of a predetermined condition (being Latino, Chicano, Afro-something, etc...) that ought to be functional for the advances made in cultural battles against gender and race discrimination within the heart of metropolitan institutions. The classifying language for typified marginalities is based on a false lineal correspondence between “being,” “speaking as” and “speaking from” that lead subjects and contexts to the militant language of vindication related to the representation of an already-constructed identity, to be designated and assigned unequivocally. Multiculturalism’s identity politics, in order to facilitate the “recognition of a subject that *implies the representation of difference but does not question the conditions of representability in which such*

*a difference is configured*⁸, have had to censor the *internal dissent* of paradox and ambivalence that they keep in a state of incompleteness, suspension and oscillation; i.e., processes of cultural identification that don't fit into a script of belonging based on fixed categorizations⁹.

The “South concept/metaphor should exacerbate the heterogeneous plurality of the margins of dis-identification, whose zig-zag fractures the interiors of identity-consolidation blocks. Only in that way can the other and otherness—always questioning its own unstable formulation in the shifting interplay between identity, difference and otherness—critically disorganize the identity-content with which metropolitan discourse seeks to trap the subaltern periphery.

The inside/out of institutions

Just like any other social and political territory, cultural institutions (for example, metropolitan ones) are spaces that are crisscrossed by a multiplicity of varying and variable forces, that disorder and reorder power schemes as a function of the emergence of the new and the changed. Even the center's institutions are mobile stages where it is always possible to experience a critical performativity that can activate the struggles between what is constituted and what constitutes, between the sedentary and the reactive, between the legitimated and the non-unanimous: between identity-representations and language-dis-alignments. In particular, the confines of institutions, their limits, designate a strategic zone where cultural inclusion and exclusion systems operate. There, along the edges or in the confines of the institutional, where critics can exacerbate the tension between openings and closings, between totality and interruption, between centrality and dispersion. It is precisely along the limits of institutions that the discourse of cultural diversity where “conflicts of acceptability” between the metropolitan discourse that manufactures stereotypes of the other and the non-registration of alternative subjectivities within established identities.¹⁰

Theorist Paul Bové tells us that to “harness something of the strength of a ‘critical act of opposition,’ one should see it, above all, as an *act* and see it *in action*”¹¹, that is, as implicated in the institutional play whose rules it proposes to alter. This supposes that the critique of metropolitan institutions is always related to an interplay of discursive fluctuations between the inclusion framework and the other, mapped out in the name of cultural diversity and the heterogeneous (the dissimilar, the

antagonistic, etc.) for whom it's not enough just to be incorporated into this framework but rather fights to destabilize the limits of definition and belonging.

International value and power streams that reproduce the metropolitan do not possess absolute systematicity. They are dynamic constellations of forces in conflict that permanently reinterpret the tension between integration and disintegration. To the degree that institutional outlines weave new maneuvers for the assimilation of the dissimilar, peripheral criticism (the "South") should imagine changes in direction that will re-orient oppositional discourses at the same time it crosses the limits that seek to enclose the fugitive and control what's left over internally.

In any case, there is nothing entirely predetermined nor anything completely safe. Metropolitan institutions, which have learned to respond to the pressures of outlanders and the eccentric, always design new strategies for the re-delimitation of their borderlines for the integration of the diverse. Neither is it the case that peripheral networks, just by being marginal or subaltern to constituent powers, must necessarily articulate anti-hegemonic meaning. The territoriality of being "outside," "inside" or in between institutions can only become a micro-politics when it submits its local utterances to the unmaking of its own grammars of production, under the suspicion that any new shared structure can generate new affiliation or de-affiliation networks among interests that will modify the relationship between the consensual and the divergent, the majority and the minority. "South" is the de-stabilization vector for the things Latin American that cause the "margins" and "institutions" to incessantly shift position on maps that chart value and cultural power exchanges, with which peripheral critics become oppositional critics, in their actions and situations, experienced in the insecure and fluctuating nature of place and identity.

¹ For Appadurai, “a situated difference” is “a difference in relation to something local that took form in a particular place where it acquired certain meanings.” Arjun Appadurai, *La modernidad desbordada*, Trilce/Fondo de Cultura Económica, Montevideo/México, 2001, p. 28.

² The author discusses the concept in: Néstor García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas: estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*, México, Grijalbo, 19- 89.

³ James Clifford in “The Global Issue: a Symposium”, *Art in America*, July 1989. p. 87.

⁴ I refer back to Homi Bhabha, “El entre-medio de la cultura” in *Cuestiones de identidad cultural*, Compiladores: Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, Madrid, Amorrortu, 2003: “Hybridization strategies reveal a defamiliarization movement in the “authorized” and even authoritarian inscription of the cultural signifier...that makes the emergence of an interstitial agency possible that rejects binary representations of social antagonisms” through a negotiation “that is neither assimilation nor collaborations.” p. 103.

⁵ In particular, see the chapter entitled “Localización intermedia y regionalismo crítico” in: Alberto Moreiras, *Tercer espacio: literatura y duelo en América Latina*, ARCIS/Lom, Santiago, 1999.

⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *La modernidad desbordada. Dimensiones culturales de la globalización*, Montevideo, Trilce / Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2001. p. 187.

⁷ We say “center function” (following Derrida) instead of “center” to avoid topographical overdetermination. By not occupying a fixed space, and by even being a non-place (since media globalization means information streams and events to incessantly de-contextualize) the center function symbolically represents that instance that condenses the ability to organize “an infinite number of sign substitutions” and “place limits on the play of structure” in accord with preestablished rules. (Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1967. p. 408).

⁸ Leticia Inés Sabsay, “Deseo y discurso en el sujeto (feminista) de la performatividad” in *Pretérito imperfecto. Lecturas críticas del acontecer*. Compilers: Leonor Arfuch, Gisela Catanzaro, Buenos Aires, Prometeo, 2008. p. 193.

⁹ J. Rancière says: “The life of political subjectification depends on the difference between voice and body, and on the interval between identities... The place of a political subject is an interval or a gap. It means sticking together to the degree that we are the in-between, i.e., what lies between names, identities, cultures, etc.” Jacques Rancière, “Política, identificación y subjetivación” in *El reverso de la diferencia*, editor: Benjamín Arditi, Caracas, Nueva Sociedad, 200. p. 101.

¹⁰ Omar Calábrese, *La era neobarroca*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1989. p. 65

¹¹ Paul Bové, *En la estela de la teoría*, Valencia, Cátedra, 1992. p. 84.