

# Culture and Globalization, or, The Humanities in Ruins

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I M R E S Z E M A N

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It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist. The forfeiture of what could be done spontaneously or unproblematically has not been compensated for by the open infinitude of new possibilities that reflection confronts. In many regards, expansion appears as contraction. The sea of the formerly inconceivable, on which around 1910 revolutionary art movements set out, did not bestow the promised happiness of adventure. Instead, the process that was unleashed consumed the categories in the name of that for which it was undertaken.

—Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

The nation understands itself as its own theme park, and that resolves the question of what it means to live in Italy: it is to have been Italian once.

—Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins*

AS THE RANGE AND NUMBER OF BOOKS AND ARTICLES EXPLORING CULTURE IN the era of globalization should indicate, the concept of culture has undergone a significant change at the end of the twentieth and in the early twenty-first centuries—a shift that has necessitated new ways of thinking and writing about culture.<sup>1</sup> This is not only, or even primarily, due to the impact on culture of those forces now inextricably associated with globalization: the unprecedented intensification and extensification of electronically-mediated culture on a world-wide scale; the effects of the growth of finance capitalism, that is, of obsessive speculation on capital itself in place of the attention once paid to the products of industry; a political shift from nation-state based sovereignty to a diffusion of sovereignty into international organizations, trade conventions, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and transnational corporations; and so on. While these forces, individually and collectively, *have* changed culture and cultures, what is more significant is the conceptual impact of these (thus far largely) empirical developments. Early work on globalization tended to claim that it constituted something like a genuine historical and epistemic break: on the other side of 1989 (the beginning of the end of the Soviet Empire), everything is supposedly different. It has now become more common to see through the rhetoric of newness that surrounds globalization, and to insist on the development of these forces in the *longue durée*. As with the economy and politics, so too with culture: rather than creating anything genuinely “new” in the sphere of culture, globalization has produced the conditions that might permit us to rethink culture in a larger historical frame, a process that would allow us to see that the concept of culture has *always been other* than what it claimed to be.

But if globalization has raised this possibility, its actualization has been repeatedly blocked by the operations of culture itself. The typical discussions that emerge around culture in reference to globalization—the already tired talk of cultural mixing-and-matching, or the equally unoriginal worry about the threats (and possibilities) posed to this or that culture by (American) mass culture—merely continue the old game of culture in a new guise. What is original about globalization for culture is *not*, it seems to me, to be found in the sudden impact of cultures upon one another. Rather, it is that globalization has made it impossible to maintain any of the fictions that

have continued to circulate around the Western concept of culture. This can be seen most acutely, I think, in the current crisis facing the humanities, which is why any exploration of culture and globalization must ask the question of what globalization means for the humanities today and for the future. But before we can address this question, we need to consider the ways in which the concept of culture has typically circulated in and alongside globalization discourses, in order to understand what is missing in most explorations of culture in the era of globalization.

#### CULTURE AND SPACE

Discussions of globalization and culture have typically focused on the way in which both physical and immaterial *speed*—the movements of goods and people, as well as money and electronic signals—has reconfigured the *space* of culture. In the study of national literatures or histories, languages or cultural traditions, or any form of what used to be referred to as “area studies,” culture has long been intimately related to geography. Even though it has also always been clear that culture must be understood as fluid and unbounded, as something able to travel and exert its force across boundaries, culture has nevertheless been understood primarily as something that exists in fixed, determinate spaces, whether this is the space of the nation and the region, villages, groups, or subcultures. Since at least the nineteenth century, and in conjunction with the solidification of the nation as a political form, there have been repeated attempts to define and differentiate national culture and character (from Johann Gottfried Herder to Hippolyte Taine, from Fred Morley to Fred Lewis Pattee).<sup>2</sup> Though the shaky logic of national culture has been repeatedly challenged, these theoretical linkages between culture and geography have persisted as a powerful conceptual commonplace, appearing as the subject of an annual deluge of nonfiction books investigating the national character (for example) of the United States and Canada, as well as forming the basis of countless travel narratives and the animating substance of journalistic reportage. In the wake of 9/11, what Theodor Adorno (1998b) referred to as “the detestable jargon of war that speaks of the Russian, the American, surely also of the

German” (205), has experienced a notable resurgence in the form of a populist, Orientalist discourse of the “clash of civilizations” between the West and Islam, which has further reinforced the idea of absolute cultural divides between peoples, based on what Taine (1965) referred to as “race, moment and milieu.”<sup>3</sup>

Even though these recent anti-Islamicist discourses suggest that less has changed than one may have thought, the speed associated with globalization has been connected (for better and worse) to the obliteration of the spaces in which culture was once thought to “naturally” or “normally” dwell, as well as to the destruction of the borders that were once imagined as marking cultures off from each other. In the era of globalization, cultural boundaries are imagined as having become porous, indefinite, and indeterminate: the “local” intersects with the global (and vice versa), and culture becomes unsettled, uprooted, hybrid, mixed, and impure. Globalization is the moment of mass migration, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism; if the nation was once imagined as a community through the aid of newspapers and novels, the ubiquity of new forms of mass culture has led to new, transnational regimes of the imagination. With respect to culture, discourses of globalization are thus often focused on border zones, and on the complex negotiations that take place as these borders are explored, reimagined, and reasserted in a world of increasing, if unequal, cultural interaction. Much of the analysis of borders has focused rightly on the implications of these power differentials (differentials of scale as well as speed) on the form that these cultural interactions take. As problematic as the discourse of cultural imperialism has been, discussions of the globalization of culture in both academic and public spheres nevertheless continue to imagine the conjunction of these terms as a narrative about “Americanization,” or of the threat posed by Western cultural products to cultural autonomy of non-Western, still-modernizing communities and regions.<sup>4</sup> A direct line can be drawn from one of the first major works on cultural imperialism, Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart’s *How to Read Donald Duck* (1975), to the authors of the recently published *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, who claim that “the key to the link between classical imperialism and contemporary globalization in the twentieth century has been the role

of the United States,” which is responsible for initiating “those features of social life and social relations that today may be considered to characterize the global: mass production, mass communication and mass consumption” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffen 1998, 112-13).

What is interesting is that while there have been repeated claims that globalization produces new conditions for culture—new and unprecedented forms of cultural intermingling and interconnection that, in Canada at least, is celebrated as the coming-into-being of a paradoxically ethnicized post-ethnic state—culture is *still* imagined in virtually all of these formulations as connected to geography in a more or less Romantic fashion. After all, globalization can only pose a threat to cultural autonomy if cultures are conceptualized as being necessarily (for purposes of individual and collective self-identity) autonomous in the first place. The reason why it is possible for discourses of cultural mixing (as in multiculturalism) and radical cultural otherness (as in the swooping and uncritical return of Eurocentrism in the current war on terrorism) to exist side-by-side in globalization is that, to a large degree, the former presumes the latter: hybridity necessitates conceiving of cultures as monadic to begin with, whether historically or conceptually, or both. While culture is thought to have entered a new situation in globalization, it seems to me that the concept of culture itself *hasn't* undergone a similar change or shift. The conceptual boundaries within which culture is able to move remain those first delimited by Herder and Taine centuries earlier. Globalization has forced theorists to think seriously about the implications of the dislocation or deterritorialization of culture, and to try to think about culture after its ties to blood, belonging, and soil have been severed. But it seems that most attempts to conceptualize what globalization means for culture have only gone halfway: once disembedded from geography, the function and meaning of culture needs to be redefined in a radical way if the concept is to continue to have any meaning at all. That this hasn't happened has more to do with institutional and disciplinary inertia than with the continued applicability or utility of the Western idea of culture to the conditions of the global present. Or rather, since the shifting meaning of “culture” has charted “within its semantic unfolding humanity's own historic shift from rural to urban existence, pig-farming to Picasso”

(Eagleton 2000, 1), the lack of a shift now needs to be probed and assessed to determine what culture still signifies.

#### CULTURE AND TIME

The contradictions that emerge from the persistence of an older concept of culture in the investigation of the conditions of its dissolution can be seen in the conflicting views that have been expressed—often at the same time—about the temporality of globalization. One of the important (and importantly contested) assumptions of the typical narrative of globalization and culture is that globalization constitutes an historical rupture, a break with the past that inaugurates a new era of cultural relations. This rupture is usually *not* imagined as something completely new, that is, as a whole new *episteme* that marks the end of modernity and the birth of something else. Rather, preexisting tendencies and processes (economic, political, social, etc.) are thought to have simultaneously undergone an epochal intensification. Globalization is imagined, in other words, as that moment on a graph of a logarithmic equation where the line suddenly spikes skyward; it is the moment when this spike occurs everywhere at the same time, if with greater or lesser degrees of intensity. For these reasons, globalization has been employed primarily as a periodizing term, the name for a particular moment in history, though it has by extension also been used to describe the set of processes that have produced, or that are contained in, this moment. These narratives of historical rupture have been accompanied by critiques that have taken the form not of an outright rejection of this periodizing hypothesis, but of attempts to downplay both the intensity and extensivity of globalization through references to historical precedents and the *longue durée*. Such deflationary counternarratives have been articulated in the fields of economics, studies of migration and the interaction of social communities, global politics, and even communication technologies.<sup>5</sup> With respect to culture, these critiques point out that culture and cultural forms have long traveled outside of their “natural” boundaries; that is, that the interaction and hybridization of culture associated with globalization is part of a longer process. As Christopher Clausen (1999) has put it, the process of

breaking down boundaries between cultures “sometimes misidentified with the electronic age—began long before computers were invented, and whether we label it globalization, modernity, assimilation, cultural imperialism, the technological revolution, or the inexorable logic of capitalism, no culture is immune to it” (234).

The debates over the appropriate historical frame of globalization have significance for the concepts and theories that are employed to make sense of the contemporary world. Theories that envision a historical rupture occurring with Bretton Woods, the Vietnam War, or the end of the Soviet Bloc (and there are, of course, other possibilities) trumpet the need for new concepts, and the reconfiguration or reevaluation of older ones. On the other hand, those that place globalization within a longer history tend to see older theories and concepts as still having utility. With respect to discussions of culture and globalization, *both* of these scenarios have been played out, though along different axes of analysis. In the first instance, new models for the *circulation* of culture have been proposed in order to make sense of the apparently discontinuous spread and impact of contemporary culture, the most well-known being the vocabulary of scapes, flows, and cascades developed by Arjun Appadurai in an effort to understand the “complex, overlapping, disjunctive order” of the new global cultural economy (32). Even in this case, however, what seems to be untouched by any of the transformations produced by globalization *is our understanding of the concept of culture itself*. For Appadurai, culture now moves differently, and its new mode of circulation produces new kinds of cultural effects (e.g., “localized” outbreaks of ethnic violence whose root cause lies in the financial support funneled to extremists by extra-local or extra-national migrant communities). Yet even here, culture continues to play the role that it has long performed, acting as the primary site where individual and collective identities are shaped and formed; if anything, his insistence on the new role played by the “imagination” in the global order reinforces a Romantic view of culture, even if he also argues that it is important to “capture the impact of deterritorialization on the imaginative resources of lived, local experience” (52).

To summarize: On the one hand, globalization names a new condition for culture that is related to the sudden dissolution of culture’s boundaries

and its increased global motility. And yet, the culture that is suddenly mobile and deterritorialized is still imagined largely in its old guise of human expressivity as something strangely (and yet familiarly) unaffected by the hurly-burly of empirical social transformations, or as its opposite: the debased culture of mass culture, now imagined as disastrously writ large over the face of the entire globe, subsuming everything in its path. Yet neither of these concepts of culture seem to adequately express the conditions under which culture is produced and circulated today (much less how culture functions), what this category means or describes, and how it relates to or mediates social life more generally—or even *if* its role is one of mediation any longer.

#### THE HUMANITIES AND THE “CULTURAL TURN”

Perhaps counterintuitively, this is confirmed by the *increasing* significance of culture in discussions of globalization, and indeed in the social sciences more generally (as witnessed in the innumerable discussions of the “cultural turn” that has placed culture back on the agenda of the social sciences). While the discourse of globalization began in the early 1990s as people focused primarily on economic and political change, culture has since become more and more important in thinking about the meaning and consequences of globalization. There are countless examples that one could draw upon. In perhaps the final suturing of the torn halves of base and superstructure, Fredric Jameson and Lawrence Grossberg have both described globalization as the moment in which the economic and the cultural fold into one another, becoming both empirically and heuristically inseparable (Grossberg 1999; Jameson 1998). On the other side of the political spectrum, Samuel Huntington’s thesis on the “clash of civilizations” affirms in its own way the centrality of culture to an analysis of the new global situation. And what John Tomlinson (1999) has usefully described as the “complex connectivity” of globalization is expressed in and through culture in a way that places the register of culture at the center of discussions of globalization. Tomlinson suggests that the complex connectivity of glob-



alization has confused the division of human life into the familiar categories of the social sciences: the economic, the social, the political, the technological, etc. As the point of articulation of all these categories—the site or spaces of “meaning construction [that] informs individual and collective actions” (24)—culture is now championed as the key register within which globalization is both experienced and understood.

Such an interest in culture might suggest that the way is open for the humanities—the traditional site of the study of culture in the university—to reassert their importance. Yet the very opposite seems to have taken place. This is due in part to changes in both the ideology and social function of the university over the past few decades: a transformation of the university from secular clerisy to corporation that has been traced out by Bill Readings, Masao Miyoshi, Mary Poovey, and others. Over the past several decades, the humanities have endured funding cuts, a decline in student enrollment and interest, and an increasing functionalization of the curriculum, along with a gradual transformation of its labor pool into part-time and contract workers. These attacks on the humanities are not simply the result of disinterested, philistine politicians who don’t understand the importance of the humanities (though such readings are hard to resist and not without some degree of validity), nor the fault of humanities professors, who haven’t asserted themselves enough in the public sphere to bring needed attention to the crucial role their work plays in social life. As surprising as this statement might seem to those engaged in cultural work today, the nation-state *isn’t* opposed to culture. All one needs to do is to look at recent policy documents to see that it talks about culture incessantly, and does so in the most Romantic terms possible. To take just one example, the executive summary of the February 1999 report of the (Canadian) Cultural Industries Sectoral Advisory Group on International Trade begins: “Culture is the heart of a nation. As countries become more economically integrated, nations need strong domestic cultures and cultural expression to maintain their sovereignty and sense of identity. . . . Cultural industries shape our society, develop our understanding of one another and give us a sense of pride in who we are as a nation” (1). While this might sound like discourse that could have emerged from an old-school humanities department, the reality is that the

model or vision of culture produced in and by the humanities bears little relationship to the one championed by those globalization theorists for whom culture has become everything, or by the state for whom “culture is a nation’s heart,” or indeed by multinational media conglomerates beset by the crisis of a lack of cultural “content” to circulate through the communication networks that encircle the globe. The humanities have become marginalized as a result of their inability to continue to grasp the concept that they have committed themselves to understanding: the concept of culture *has* shifted, even if this has yet to be properly registered by the humanities, or by intellectuals more generally.

How can this be? Over the past 40 years, the legitimacy of the concept of culture that continues to underwrite the humanities has been under concerted attack—and not from without, but from *within* the humanities itself. Postcolonial studies has drawn attention not only to the blind spots of the Western academy in considering the culture and cultural production of other peoples, but also to the fundamental role played by culture in imperialism and colonialism. In the Western academy, the development of cultural studies has drawn attention to other blind spots, not the least of which has been the way in which “culture” has been used to exercise and legitimate political domination. For example, in his discussion of the historical context of Matthew Arnold’s seminal articulation of the relationship of culture to society, Raymond Williams makes clear the links between the assertion of “excellence and humane values” and Arnold’s opposition to the “anarchy” of public demonstrations and protests over the extension of the franchise in Britain. In a similar way, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and Terry Eagleton (1990) have exposed the ruse of the aesthetic, showing how aesthetic value names a relation of power rather than the special properties of specific objects (like literary texts or artworks) or dispositions of the subject. For both writers, the university was the site at which one learned appropriate modes of aesthetic distinction and cultural interpretation. This is one of the reasons why, as Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey (1981) argue, the very concept of “literature is inseparable from an academic or schooling practice that defines the conditions for both the consumption and production of literature” (46).

Perhaps most importantly, in their crucial analysis of the coincident development of both culture and the state beginning in the late-eighteenth century as “sites of reconciliation for a civic and political society that is seen to be riven by conflict and contradiction” (1), David Lloyd and Paul Thomas (1998) point to the ideological role that culture was to play in the West: “Culture . . . is not confined in its objects to the artistic, or, more narrowly, the literary, but aims rather at the harmonious cultivation of all the capacities of the human subject at a time when it was already apparent that the division of intellectual and manual labor was increasingly formative of specialized or partial individuals” (2).

This conjunction of state to citizen through the medium of culture was the product of a specific moment in history, a moment that we are now past. In the waning of the importance of the nation-state in the operations of global capitalism (and it has waned, even if the state played a crucial role in instigating and instituting the anti-statist regime of globalization), there becomes less of a need for a social institution geared towards the production of a national narrative, or of a discourse that mediates the relationship between the populace and the state. It is this decline of the university, and of the humanities in particular, that Bill Readings (1996) outlines in *The University in Ruins*. He writes that “since the nation-state is no longer the primary instance of the reproduction of global capitals, ‘culture’—as the symbolic and political counterpart to the project of integration pursued by the nation-state—has lost its purchase. The nation-state and the modern notion of culture arose together, and they are, I argue, ceasing to be essential to an increasingly transnational global economy” (12). Even as the ideology of the humanities gets spread over an increasingly larger sphere of concern (as suggested, for example, in Appadurai’s appeal to the imagination), the function that this ideology was supposed to serve has disappeared, along with the institutions that produced it. It’s no wonder that the concept of culture is now open to all kinds of other uses, but also that there is so much confusion over its uses, as older definitions and sensibilities collide with new realities that they are unable to make sense of by means of it.

## THE HUMANITIES IN RUINS

Potentially, the crumbling of the socio-historical conditions that have produced the need for this particular ideology of culture—an ideology that has long masked the operations of social power in meta-narratives of progress, humanity, and Enlightenment—opens the way for a new, less mystified understanding of culture. At the very least, it opens the way up for methodologies that have always stressed the need to see cultural objects in networks or systems of power to assume a more prominent place in the humanities and in definitions of its role and function. One way of positioning this shift is to suggest that the *analysis* of culture—that is, of what occurs in the name of culture, of what forms of power and knowledge pass through those objects, practices, and experiences that we describe as “cultural”—might replace (*e*)*valuation* as the dominant way of thinking of culture (though one needs to be careful about an opposition that might suggest that it is possible to drain “value” or politics out of cultural interpretation in a meaningful, non-ideological way; this is not the intent of this distinction here.) The specter of value that has long provided the ground of humanities scholarship could give way finally to the examination of the modes and forms of the productivity of culture; globalization might be what brings culture back down to earth from the heavens, insisting on the immanence of what has long imagined itself as transcendent. From this perspective, what might be most significant about globalization—as concept and as empirical reality—is less the rapidity of the circulation of culture within it, or the intensified intersection of cultures with one another, than the fact that this circulation (and the historical circumstances that enable it) makes it difficult, if not impossible, to imagine any longer that the function of culture and of the humanities is to express and defend the “best that has been thought and known.” For what the emphasis on the mobility of culture insists upon is not just that this is a new condition of culture, but that culture has always been uprooted and hybrid. That is, culture *has never been what we believed it to be*; it has always had a different function than the guardians of the humanities would have liked to have assigned to it.

What has mitigated this radical rethinking of the concept of culture, and thus of a new role for the humanities even in the face of radical critiques of

its ideological uses, is yet another aspect of globalization and its relationship to culture. If it has remained possible for the humanities to continue to imagine their role as being “the harmonious cultivation of all the capacities of the human subject,” and of the university to maintain (at least in official pronouncements) its “grand narrative . . . centered on the production of a liberal, reasoning subject” (Readings 1996, 9), it is because in the humanities, global culture is widely conceived of as commodity culture, a form of culture conceived as constituting an attack on modern subjectivity itself. Instead of asking deep questions about the politics of the humanities and of the ideology of culture that sustains it, the combination of fears about commodity culture, along with a new fear of its dislocation of anything and everything once outside of it on a global scale, has allowed the humanities to assume a role with which it is imminently comfortable: the defender of truth and beauty against a philistinism or barbarism that, having become global, is now more dangerous than ever. It comes as no surprise that it is precisely at this point that there has been a return of a more or less classical discourse on “beauty,” as reflected by books such as Elaine Scarry’s *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999), Wendy Steiner’s *Venus in Exile* (2001), and James Elkins’s *Pictures and Tears: People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* (2001). But the return of this discourse, and of other books that attempt to reassert value in the face of commodity culture, must be seen as a further symptom of the ruin of humanities, rather than a valiant reclamation of its fundamental task: to express what is best and greatest about (an always unhistoricized) human Being.

Such recourse to Arnoldian or Romantic notions of culture in response to globalization is not only to be found in, for instance, the defense of literature or the fine arts against the encroachment of a predominantly visual consumer culture. It is possible to find it as well in forms of apparently more political or politicized discourse, in which what is opposed to mass culture are those aspects of the subject and state that only high culture makes possible (or so it’s asserted). With respect to the subject, this concerns the possibility of reason or critical thinking, which in turn is related to the possibilities of citizenship and civic virtues—a common enough connection of subject to state, from Kant to Habermas. The humanities thus come to

stand as guardians of critique itself, defenders against a barbarism characterized not by industrial culture and profit (as it was for Arnold), but by an interest in mass culture (expressed paradigmatically in the form of that evil called television.) For example, Mark Crispin Miller, a former professor of English who has since become one of the most virulent critics of contemporary media, offers the following account of the decline of critical thinking:

By the mid-Seventies, however, there was one demographic group now 'totally into it' [television] for the first time: America's undergraduates, who watched much more and knew much less than any of the student cohorts that had preceded them. So it seemed, at least, to those of us now teaching. No longer, certainly, could you assume that your lit classes would recognize, say, Donne's Holy Sonnet XIII, or the Houyhnhnms, or the first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*, or any of the other fragments that have once been common knowledge among English majors. (1988, 8)

For Miller, the problem has as much to do with the decline of *reading* as with the lack of knowledge of English literary history:

Spectatorial "experience" is passive, mesmeric, indiscriminating, and therefore not conducive to the refinement of the critical faculties: logic and imagination, linguistic precision, historical awareness, and a capacity for long, intense absorption. These—and not the abilities to compute, apply or memorize—are the true desiderata of any higher education, and it is critical thinking that can best realize them. (6)

Such arguments are common enough. What is more interesting than whether they have any critical bite or not is the way in which a certain vision of the critical faculties, itself a product of history rather than nature, is reified as the one and only mode of real critique. With images of the classical moment of the bourgeois public sphere dancing in their heads, the present can't help but seem like a wasteland to critics who measure the twenty-first century by a whitewashed version of the nineteenth. What such critiques fail to do, of course, is to offer an account of just what function cul-

ture performs *now*. Instead, they oppose contemporary culture with their own (already problematic) vision of culture, which they take as truth in much the same way as, in a different context, György Lukács insisted on the political virtues of the realist novel in comparison to its decadent modernist counterparts. Bertolt Brecht's response to Lukács is appropriate in this case, too: it's not the good old days that we should be fascinated with, but rather the bad new ones, and in these bad new days, new forms of culture must necessarily replace the old ones.

HUMANITIES WITHOUT VALUE,  
CULTURE BEYOND CULTURE

The bad new days need not be so bad as they are usually thought to be (or maybe the right way to say this is that the present is always bad for those who have to live it.) The typical link between globalization and culture tends to obscure, first, the degree to which globalization has disturbed the concept of culture, and second, its impact on the humanities. Globalization has left the humanities in ruins, conceptually and materially. But there are two ways to think about these ruins. One is to see them as a sign of the lamentable end of forces and modes of being essential to democratic life and genuine individual experience; another is to see globalization as opening up the possibility for thinking about contemporary experience and culture in a more complex way than this defensive reassertion of the modern subject and state suggests—that is, as paving the way for a new form of critical humanities that is able to think about culture from perspectives adequate to the age. I have tried to argue thus far (however sketchily) for the limits of the former and the necessity of the latter.

What form would this new critical humanities take? And what role would the concept of culture play within it? Can the humanities do without the array of concepts that it has long associated with culture—concepts such as “genius,” “imagination,” “creativity,” “beauty,” and “value”? In what way would such a practice continue to be the humanities? (And why is it still necessary to address these same old questions?) It is admittedly more difficult to answer these questions than it is to identify the problematic cir-

culatation of an older vision of the humanities in the new circumstances of globalization. But at least the outlines of a critical humanities are, I think, easily grasped. There are no absolute beginnings: a humanities that takes seriously the analysis of its historical and ideological genesis will still have to draw on this history to make sense of the ways in which historical developments have reconstituted the grounds of its own practice. The humanities would continue to be defined as a practice that explores culture, but one that takes as a central principle of its practice the notion that culture is constituted in entirely different ways at specific moments in time. Strangely, contemporary literary history (for instance) has been better at achieving this than have studies of the contemporary moment itself. There are clear models for such a practice, including Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1968), which begins with a challenge to the categories of "genius, eternal value and mystery" (218) in the arts, and Pierre Bourdieu's analysis in *The Rules of Art* (1996) of the emergence of the cultural sphere in its modern sense in nineteenth-century France. By destabilizing the grounds of the humanities, globalization opens up the possibility of *generalizing* these kinds of critical practices, of moving them from the periphery to the core of the humanities' self-identity.

There is a great deal more that could be said here, but let me end by pointing to some of the theoretical grounds for this new humanities. In order to take advantage of the opening that globalization provides for a new conception of culture, I would like to highlight four interrelated dimensions along which the humanities have to reconsider their theoretical orientations and interpretive practices.

First, those involved in the study of culture need to think seriously about the problem of "affirmative culture," which arises out of the tendency to focus on objects (specific literary and cultural texts, cultural producers, genres, etc.) rather than cultural processes. Affirmative culture is a concept developed by Herbert Marcuse (1988), who described it as the product of a process

in which the spiritual world is lifted out of its social context, making culture a (false) collective noun and attributing (false) universality to it. This . . .



concept of culture, clearly seen in expressions such as “national culture,” “Germanic culture” or “Roman culture,” plays off the spiritual world against the material world by holding up culture as the realm of authentic values and self-contained ends in opposition to the world of social utility and means. Through the use of this concept, culture is distinguished from civilization and sociologically and valuationally removed from the social process. (94–95)

It is not only traditional forms of humanistic study that affirm culture in this way: cultural studies, too, has a tendency to oppose culture to the world of utility in the same manner. This is why the distinction between analysis and evaluation that I made earlier can't be taken as a solution to our current impasse, but should be seen as an identification of two positions that in the end are equally unsatisfactory. While proclaiming to study the “everyday,” the life of the popular and the mass, cultural studies nevertheless imbues the cultural commodities that it studies with a more traditional “cultural” character through its very insistence on the authenticity of nontraditional cultural forms. As Readings perceptively points out, “cultural studies does not propose culture as a regulatory ideal for research and teaching, so much as seek to preserve the structure of an argument from redemption through culture, while recognizing the inability of culture to function any longer as such an idea” (17). Furthermore, by accepting commodity culture *as* culture, and by consequently affirming the spiritual dimension of this culture as a site of meaning and significance, cultural studies circulates in a perpetual present in which the reality of present-day culture amounts to no more and no less than *all* that culture is and can be. The cultural past, dominated by what cultural studies considers to be the lumbering dinosaurs of bourgeois high culture, is closed off from it—but so is the future, since the present of culture is taken as fate. A critical humanities will have to sidestep both traditional humanities study and cultural studies by focusing not on authenticity, but on the social process in and through which cultural objects are produced, circulated, and consumed.

Second, a critical humanities that wants to understand the contemporary function of culture needs to take commodities and consumerism seriously—not as deviations of some true idea of culture, and not primarily as a

normative issue (shopping as bad, destructive, etc.), but as a significant transformation in the concept of culture that has had implications that we don't yet completely understand. It has become a critical commonplace to lament consumerism and commodity culture; indeed, it often seems that much of the energy of the humanities emerges out of this lament and the frequently made opposition between (for instance) reading and watching. But such laments fail to interrogate the culture of consumer culture, being satisfied instead with the presumption that consumerism is either without culture, or its very opposite.

Taking consumerism seriously doesn't imply the negation of a politics of consumerism or consumption—of the kind outlined by (for example) Juliet Schor (2000), who has explored the consequences of (among other things) the growing “aspirational gap” in U.S. society. It remains important to draw attention to the ways in which contemporary mass culture constitutes a concerted form of “public pedagogy”—a pedagogy of hopes, desires, beliefs, and identities—that now outweighs anything that might be taught in schools or homes. Henry Giroux in particular has articulated this point tirelessly in his work on education and mass culture. However, when these critiques devolve into demands for the reassertion of the now lost public sphere, or place hope in re-formation of collectivities of an older kind, the contemporary terrain of culture is dangerously misread. Analyses of consumerism almost always get confused with the normative claims they also want to advance: a clear understanding of how consumer culture operates, for instance, is almost always blurred by the wish that things could be different than they are. It has become nigh impossible to suggest, for instance, that consumerism is itself political—not, in other words, the “other” of civic possibilities and virtues, but an example of their mutation into a radically different form. For all its problems, Néstor Garcia Canclini's claim in *Consumers and Citizens* (2001) that “consumption is good for thinking” has the effect of shaking up our preestablished sense of what consumerism is about. “To consume,” he writes, “is to participate in an arena of competing claims for what society produces and the ways of using it” (39). Instead of imaging consumers and citizens as existing in an inverse relationship to one another, Garcia Canclini suggests that we investigate consumption as a site

“where a good part of economic, sociopolitical, and psychological rationality is organized in all societies” (5). Whether or not Garcia Canclini is right in his sense of how consumption operates, an understanding of culture in the era of globalization cannot avoid seeing consumption as a site of rationality and of cultural experience that, whatever one thinks of it, has a constitutive role to play in contemporary culture.

Third, even after all of the explorations of the ideologies of the humanities, there remains a need for a more thorough investigation of the historical narratives that have legitimized the standard view of culture in the humanities. This is especially true of the narratives that established the modern sense of the mission of the humanities. One such narrative concerns the opposition of modernism to mass culture, an opposition that has elevated the monuments of modernism into exemplary expressions of a critique of the existing world within the realm of art and literature. The narrative that links modernism to revolution has transformed much of the writing on modernism into an elegy over lost political possibilities. This narrative has been challenged recently in Miriam Hansen’s writings on “popular-reflexivity” of early cinema, and Susan Buck-Morss’s explorations of the unexpected links between Soviet and American twentieth-century popular culture (Hansen 1999; Morss 2001). Perhaps most forcefully, Malcolm Bull (2001) has argued that while modernism may have been against *modernity*, it was never against *capitalism*, which is evidenced in part by the seamless assimilation of modernist culture into museums and literary canons.

Bull claims that “modernists were not partisans resisting the present and pressing on eternity, they were negotiating the equally tricky but rather more mundane path between the two cultures of capitalism”—classicism and commodity culture. Rather, “working between two antithetical cultures meant that resistance to the one almost always involved some degree of complicity with the other” (102). But his argument goes beyond the not-uncommon assertion of modernism’s incomplete rejection of either classicism or commodity culture. Bull suggests that modernism has to be seen as belated, as working a divide between one culture of capitalism and another that by the beginning of the twentieth century had already been crossed over once and for all:

For most people, the culture of modernity has been the culture of commodities; or, to put it more bluntly, ‘postmodernism’ was the culture of modernity all along. This is true not just for the huge numbers of people in the twentieth century whose first experience of anything other than folk traditions has been American-style TV; but also for their predecessors who moved straight from agrarian communities to the world of the newspaper and the wireless. . . . Only for those steeped in the classical tradition did postmodernism require new forms of attention. (100)

Such re-narrativizations can help to dissipate what have become unproductive conjunctions between art and culture. It’s not that Bull’s arguments eliminate the political productivity or engagement of certain forms of modernist cultural production. Rather, by showing us a modernism that is always already contaminated by its historical situation, he helps us to avoid lamenting the irretrievable loss of this moment of supposed purity, which in turn prompts us to look at the politics of culture in our moment as one that not only needs not, but cannot be free of ideological contagion.

Finally, humanities scholars need to reconsider the history of recent theory as reactions to historically specific circumstances that may no longer hold today. When Hardt and Negri describe both postcolonial and postmodern theory as *symptoms* of the end of modern sovereignty—as kinds of critique that can only emerge once modern sovereignty is no longer the framework for control and domination—they do so not in order to deny the utility and importance of many of their formulations. They are pointing, rather, to the way in which any theory expresses incompletely the moment that it is trying to analyze, relying on concepts and narratives that no longer, or incompletely, relate to empirical circumstances. The progressivist narrative in which we have tended to view theory, in which one theory builds on another and we slowly get closer and closer to the truth, tends to obfuscate the historicity of theory itself. Of course, the historicity of concepts is a central element of contemporary theory, such that no one who engages in the theory would understand what they do as a project involving truth. Still, in the actual practice of theory, this fact is more often than not lost, and theory becomes yet another narrative of modernity (which means, for instance, that

there are more- and less-developed theoretical regions in the world, that theory can be imported from one country to another in the manner of high technology, or even that there can be strategies of import-substitution in the theoretical field).

In making these statements about what the humanities needs to do to reinvent itself in the context of globalization, I don't mean to advocate any particular methodology or interpretive practice. I merely want to suggest this: if the role of the humanities is to explore and to understand the circulation of forms of symbolic and cultural production, if its task is to bring to the surface of social consciousness normally latent processes that take place in these forms—and to do so in a critical fashion, rejecting the commonplaces of the day—it needs to direct itself to the ways in which the profound transformation in circulation of culture that we have called globalization *has also been* accompanied by a profound transformation in culture itself. While there has been a great deal of attention paid to the new conditions for the circulation of culture, there is little movement to reimagine the concept of culture as such. This is not a demand for that most precious of commodities—a whole new theory of culture—but a suggestion that one way forward is to reassert or reaffirm those theories that have long drawn attention to the shape of our ideologies of culture, while also giving up on the identity of the humanities as the guardian of the good against commodity culture and commodity aesthetics.

And this is more difficult than it might seem. Pierre Bourdieu made it part of his life's work to deny the importance of the aesthetic, focusing, for example in *The Rules of Art*, on a “scientific analysis of the social conditions of the production and reception of a work of art” (xix) while never once addressing the question of value. However, in the attack that he launched on neoliberalism over the last part of his life, an attack based on the pernicious influence of the logic of neoliberalism over all social spheres, Bourdieu reverted to a vocabulary in which he defended (for example) the production of the great works of European literature, claiming that such masterpieces could only continue to be produced if the fields of cultural production were allowed to remain semi-autonomous (1998; 1996, 339–44). The spread of the logic of neoliberalism across society (measurable, for instance, in the wide-

spread application of the vocabulary of market efficiency in the operation of non-market sectors) demands a response. But is an appeal to aesthetic value an appropriate one? Such an appeal is at best a contradictory one, and one that cannot be seen to really oppose the cultural conservatism that makes up (in its own contradictory way) the dynamism of neoliberalism. What would be better would be a challenge that did not make recourse to the aesthetic at all, but that made an argument within the logic of contemporary culture; but since such a logic has yet to be mapped out, it is not surprising that the critics like Bourdieu remain stuck with a concept of culture that is no longer our own.



#### N O T E S

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1. See Chambers, *Culture after Humanism* (2001) and Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (1999) as just two examples of a large genre of books and articles in this field.
2. Morley and Pattee offered early and influential definitions of the fields of English and American literature. Morley described the connection between English literature and the English nation in 1873 in the following terms: "The literature of this country has for its most distinctive mark the religious sense of duty. It represents a people striving through successive generations to find out the right and do it, to root out the wrong and labor ever onward for the love of God. If this be really the strong spirit of her people, to show that it is so is to tell how England won, and how alone she can expect to keep, her foremost place among nations." The first professor of American literature, Fred Lewis Pattee, began his introductory text on the subject with a description of the relationship between literature and the nation that by the end of the century had become all but indisputable: "The literature of a nation is the entire body of literary productions that has emanated from the people of the nation during its history, preserved by the arts of writing and printing. It is the embodiment of the best thoughts and fancies of a people." Morley and Pattee, cited in Clausen (1994, 64 and 65 respectively).

3. Adorno (1998b) suggests that such nationalist thinking “obeys a reifying consciousness that is no longer really capable of experience. It confines itself within precisely those stereotypes that thinking should dissolve” (205). This is apt description of the work of many pundits on 9/11, including Samuel Huntington, writer Robert Kaplan, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, and *Toronto Globe and Mail* columnist Margaret Wente.
4. For a critique of the concept of cultural imperialism, see Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism* (1991).
5. On economics, see Hirst and Thompson (1999), Burtless et al. (1998), and Therborn (2001). On the long history of global migration and intercultural communities, see Bernal (1989) and McNeill (1998). For a discussion of transformations in political modernity, see Hardt and Negri (2000) and Taylor (1999). Finally, Mattelart (2000) has emphasized recently the long-term development of that most important figure in the narrative of globalization: communications technologies. All of these works are, of course, examples drawn from a formidable body of texts and debates concerning claims about globalization’s originality.

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