

chapter 4

Globalization, Postmodernism, and (Autonomous) Criticism

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One can refute Hegel (perhaps even St. Paul) but not the Song of Sixpence.

– Northrop Frye, *Conclusion to the Literary History of Canada*

WHAT POSSIBILITIES DOES GLOBALIZATION open up for literary studies and, more specifically, for our understanding of the politics of the literary today? To put this another way: Is it possible to still imagine a social function for literary studies in an era dominated by visual spectacle, the triumph of the private, and the apparent dissolution of the public sphere? Is there anything like a position of (relative) autonomy from which critics might reflect on the circumstances we have the misfortune to inhabit?

To speak of the opening up of new possibilities and even new political functions for literature and literary criticism might seem quixotic at best: a tilting against the windmills of a radically transformed society that no longer has much use for the written word – or for culture more generally, for that matter. But if we attend carefully to globalization and consider how the practices of literature and literary criticism figure into the contemporary social and political landscape, it seems to me that some unexpected political possibilities emerge. Although globalization signals the beginning of many new processes, those of us concerned with language, culture, and politics have often come to understand it only as the name for the end of things: the end of democracy, of unmediated experience, of the public sphere, of the experiment (warts and all) called the Enlightenment,

and, effectively, of poetry and literature, too. I want to argue that both literature and literary criticism have an essential political role to play in the era of globalization, even if they do so in transformed and difficult circumstances.

Integral to literary studies is the view that the “real” is always metaphorical in nature. All of our epistemologies, however secure and self-satisfied they might be in their ultimate veracity, are constituted by the appearance of the real in language: it is only by passing through metaphor that what is outside of language can become linguistic and thus intelligible at all. What better practice to challenge the self-certainties of the narratives of globalization – which function in part by denying their core metaphoricity – than literary theory and criticism? To grasp how and why the literary might provide the conditions for mutinous metaphors against the dominant ones articulated in the discourse of globalization, it is necessary first to describe (yet again) what globalization is (and is not) and how literature and the study of culture fits (or does not fit) into it. And so it is here that I begin.

Globalization Is Not Postmodernism

At the core of Karl Marx’s investigation of the operations of capitalism is a sometimes forgotten critique of scholarly methodology. The political economists of his time mistook the *dramatis personae* of the modern economy – owners and workers – as a priori ontological categories, rather than as social positions that come into existence only as the result of a specific course of historical development. This methodological failure describes, of course, a more general process of reification that takes place throughout much of contemporary social reality and at many levels: our own creations take on the character of natural, preordained reality in a way that obscures the quotidian character of their invention. Marx’s point goes beyond simply criticizing method, for one of the singular inventions of capitalism is the commodity form, which itself ceaselessly, on an ongoing and daily basis, *re-reifies* existing social relations. “The commodity,” Marx writes, “reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things” (Marx 1976, 165). The commodity, one might say, acts as an objective reifying force that extends beyond the ideologies of capitalists and capitalism: we *live* this reification, regardless of whether we believe the larger social script in which it is embedded.

It should come as no surprise that globalization plays an important role in this ongoing narrative of capitalist reification. Just as surely as political economy did for Marx, globalization hides reality from us, even as it proposes to explain it. Just how does it do so? At first blush, the promise of the term *globalization* is that it offers us a way to comprehend a set of massive changes (clustered around the economic and social impact of new communications technologies and the almost unfettered reign of capital across the earth) that have radically redefined contemporary experience. These changes cut across spheres of social experience *and* areas of scholarly analysis that were imagined previously to be separate (that is, the economic, the cultural, the social, the political, and so on). And, confusingly, *globalization* names at one and the same time both the empirical and theoretical novelty of the processes most commonly associated with it. It names both a new reality and the new concept (or set of concepts) needed to make some sense of this reality. It is not surprising that this double role has made it an inherently unstable and amorphous concept, one that is “used in so many different contexts, by so many different people, for so many different purposes that it is difficult to ascertain what is at stake in ... globalization, what function the term serves, and what effects it has for contemporary theory and politics” (Kellner 2006, 1). Immense debates about globalization – What is it and what phenomena should (and should not) be included within it? What is the “time” of globalization (did it begin with the fall of Communist Russia? the arrival of Columbus in the New World? the explosion of cross-regional trading in the eleventh century?)? What about the politics of globalization and the possibilities of alternate globalizations? – all draw attention to the fact that the empirical realities that the term *globalization* is meant to capture can potentially be arranged and rearranged in very different and even contradictory ways. In other words, although globalization is at one level real and has real effects, it is also decisively and importantly rhetorical, metaphoric, and even fictional; it is a reality given a narrative shape and logic, in a number of different and irreconcilable ways. But right away one can also see that as soon as the idea of concept as metaphor – concept as not the thing itself (how could it be otherwise?) but as necessarily a substitution meant to produce an identity – is introduced, the real begins to fade away. What we understand to be the reality of globalization is necessarily mediated by the apparatus of numerous concepts strung together in an effort to grasp the fundamental character of the contemporary.

This characterization of globalization – as an amorphous term for the present, as an analytically suggestive and yet confusing concept that binds epistemology and ontology together, as an impossible yet compelling idea that names the logic that organizes all experience, as a term that is potentially all things to all people and can be bent to multiple purposes – makes it sound like the successor to another concept that was intended to do similar kinds of work: postmodernism. Indeed, it is hard to avoid the idea that *globalization* carries out the periodizing task once assigned to *postmodernism* – naming the character and dynamics of the contemporary moment, if with far more attention paid to the material realities, struggles, and conflicts of contemporary reality on a worldwide scale. Globalization can thus appear to be a new and improved version of postmodernism, but one for which the issues of (for instance) the legacies of imperialisms past and present play a constitutive (instead of ancillary) role.

But as soon as this connection is ventured, it is clear that *globalization* is far from a replacement term for *postmodernism*. The differences between the two terms are instructive, especially with respect to the situation of literature and criticism at the present time. The postmodern was first and foremost an aesthetic category used to describe architectural styles, artistic movements, and literary strategies (Anderson 1998) before it became the name for the general epistemic or ontological condition of Western societies – the postmodern condition that Jean-Francois Lyotard detected in his review of Quebec’s educational system (Lyotard 1985). Criticisms of postmodernism focused on the adequacy of the term *postmodern* as an aesthetic descriptor (was postmodern fiction not really just more modernist fiction?), on its overreaching ambition at global applicability (was the *post* in *postmodernism* really the same as the one in *postcolonialism*?), or on the fact that there was far too little attention being paid to the historical “conditions of possibility” of the emergence of the aesthetic and experiential facets of the postmodern. In short, this lack of attention hid that postmodern style represented something more primary: the cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson 1991).

Whatever else one might want to say about globalization, it is clear that the term has little relation to aesthetics or, indeed, even to culture in the way that postmodernism does. It is meaningless to insist on a global style or global form in architecture, art, or literature. There is no globalist literature in the way that one could have argued that there was a postmodernist one, nor is there a globalist architecture as there was (and still is) a postmodern

one, even if there are global architects (such as Rem Koolhaas, Frank Gehry, or Zaha Hadid) and a global corporate vernacular in (say) airport or office tower design. This lack of relation to culture can be seen in the fact that we lack even an adjective for such a category – global literature being something very different from postmodern writing, without the immediate implications for form or style raised by the latter category. *World cinema* similarly names a moment rather than a style, though in this case, perhaps, one could argue that there has been a broad bifurcation of film into the cinema of the culture industry and the products of a new globally dispersed avant-garde (Hou Hsiao-hsien, Emir Kusturica, Agnès Varda, and so on); both can claim the title of world cinema, if for wildly different reasons. *World poetry* names not even a moment in this sense, but simply the poetry of the whole world, samples of which we might expect to find collected in an anthology or reader of the kind that is constructed to be attentive to the differences of nation, region, and locality. The aesthetic may not have disappeared. But the category *global* as a periodizing marker does not address it, as if the ideological struggles and claims once named by the aesthetic and pursued by various avant-gardes have for some reason been rendered moot and beside the point.

If postmodernism comes to our attention through various formal innovations that prompt us to consider symptomatically what is going on in the world to generate these forms, globalization seems to invert this relationship. It places emphasis on the restructuring of relations of politics and power, on the rescaling of economic production from the national to the transnational, on the lightspeed operations of finance capital, and on the societal impacts of the explosive spread of information technologies. With globalization, we thus seem to have suspended what was central to debates and discussions of postmodernism – the category of representation. Indeed, the contemporary reality named by globalization is meant to be immediately legible in the forces and relationships that are always already understood to be primary to it and to fundamentally constitute it (for example, transnational economics, bolstered by the changing character of the state). What the comparison between postmodernism and globalization highlights is that there is not only no unique formal relationship between contemporary cultural production and the cultural-political-social-economic dominant named by globalization but also less reason to look to culture to make sense of the shape and character of this dominant, which, apparently, can explain itself and which views culture as little more than a name for

just one of the many aspects of commodity production and exchange today. Put another way, on the one hand, globalization seems to have transformed culture into a mere entertainment that is significant only to the extent that it is exchangeable; on the other, it shifts the meaning of culture to refer to a set of archaic cultural practices that of necessity have little to say about the skylines of Shanghai's Pudong district or the favelas of Rio, other than to render an increasingly mute complaint about a world that has passed it by. If globalization is the postmodern come to self-recognition, it appears in the process to have transformed culture into mere epiphenomenon and to have rendered cultural criticism in turn into a practice now in search of an object. This state has become especially evident as one of cultural criticism's older political functions – making visible the signs and symptoms of the social as expressed in cultural forms – has been eclipsed by history itself.

This analysis might suggest that anxieties about the decline of (a certain vision of) culture in the era of globalization are in fact justified. But there is another crucial difference between globalization and postmodernism, which will begin to turn us back to the question of the activity of literature and literary criticism in relation to globalization – and to the production of metaphor in relation to globalization. Postmodernism was never a public concept in the way that globalization has turned out to be. The postmodern, appearing only occasionally in an article on the design of a new skyscraper or in sweeping dismissals of the perceived decadence of the contemporary humanities, never made anything more than a tentative leap from universities to the pages of broadsheets. It is a concept in decline, used these days mainly as a term for strange and incoherent phenomena or forms of social instability. By contrast, globalization is argued for by the World Bank, named in the business plans of Fortune 500 companies, and on the lips of politicians across the globe; it constitutes official state policy and is the object of activist dissent: the Zapatistas did not rise up against postmodernism, nor was it the preponderance of self-reflective, ironic literature in bookstores that brought anarchists into the streets of Genoa. There is clearly more at stake in the concept of globalization than there ever was with postmodernism. There is a politics that extends far beyond the establishment of aesthetic categories to the determination of the shape of the present and the future – including the role played by culture in this future. Even if both concepts function as periodizing terms for the present, globalization is about blood, soil, life, and death in ways that postmodernism could only ever pretend to be.

The public ambition of the concept of globalization makes it clear that there are two broad uses of this concept that need to be separated. Significantly, the confusion about the exact meaning and significance of globalization that has characterized much academic discussion has *not* in fact cropped up in the constitution of globalization's public persona. Far from it. The wide-ranging debate in the academy over the precise meaning of globalization might point to the fact that it is a concept open to re-narration and re-metaphorization, thereby keeping focus, too, on the unstable relationship between the realities the term names and its heuristic role in grappling with this reality. Like any concept, it is not equivalent to reality, but a way of producing some meaningful interpretive order out of the chaos of experience. Against this status, however, one must consider the function of the widespread public consensus that has developed on what globalization means. This is globalization in its most familiar garb: the name for a process that (in the last instance) is understood as economic at its core. Globalization understood in this way is about accelerated trade and finance on a global scale, with everything else measured in reference to these dimensions. Although one can have normative disagreements about the outcome and impact of these economic forces (Does it lift all boats, bringing prosperity to everyone? Does it merely restore the power of economic elites after a brief interval of Keynesianism?), what the public discourse on globalization insists on is, first, the basic immutable objectivity of these economic processes and, second, that these processes now lie at the core of human experience, whether one likes it or not.

It is in this way that the discourse of globalization carries out what has to be seen as its major function: to transform contingent social relations into immutable facts of history. It carries out this reifying function in a novel way. Unlike the categories of the political economists of Marx's time, globalization insists not on the permanence of social classes, but on the coming into being of *new* social relations, technologies, and economic relationships. The overall effect is the same, however. Old-style political economy reified capitalism by insisting that existing social relations would extend indefinitely and unalterably into the future based on their origins in the very nature of things. New-style globalization also makes a claim on the inevitability of capitalism and the persistence of the present into the future. However, its necessary imbrication with the new – globalization always being the name for something distinctly different from what came before it – means that it cannot so easily appeal to nature or ontology to insist on the unchanging character of the future. Rather, borrowing a

page from Marxism, globalization offers a narrative of the historical development of social forces over time – the slow (now accelerating) transformation of individuals and societies from the inchoate mess of competing and warring nationalisms to a full-fledged global-liberal-capitalist civilization. Thus Francis Fukuyama (1993) famously appropriates the movement of the Hegelian dialectic to capitalist ends. He argues that the lack of alternatives to capitalism signalled by the collapse of Communism coincided with the end of history: there will only be capitalism from now on and, of course, it will be everywhere on a global scale. The erasure of the distinction between globalization as a conceptual apparatus and as the name for a contemporary reality is hardly an accident – or at least no more so than the categories of classical political economy are. It is, rather, a political project through and through designed (in the terms that I have outlined here) to deliberately confuse the potential analytic functions of the concept of globalization with an affirmation of the unchanging reality of global capitalism as both what is and what will be. In changing circumstances that *have* opened up new realities and political possibilities, the public face of globalization aims not only to keep capitalism at the centre of things but also to clear the field of all possible challenges and objections.

Some clarification is in order. I have claimed that globalization is a political project, which suggests that some organizing force or set of actors or agents are behind the scenes, pulling the levers of state and economy to shape the world into a desired state. This claim would make globalization a strictly ideological concept, a knowing sleight of hand by which the grand inquisitors of Davos pull the wool over the world's eyes. It would be both naive and empirically incorrect to deny that actors in industry and the state have actively participated in the reconstitution of relations between state and capital on a global scale for their own benefit, with consequences that range from the release of public assets to the market at fire sale rates to the increasingly precarious state of global labour markets (Arrighi 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Harvey 2003, 2005). At the same time, there is a tendency by many critics to ascribe too much insight and control over the system of neoliberal globalization to specific individuals (CEOs, government leaders, and so on) or institutional elements (government agencies, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and so on). It is as if they suggest that these actors view globalization from the outside and with a clarity that allows for the perfect decision to be made in every case.

The politics of our global era do not permit an easy reliance on a vision of the social order in which change can be achieved by cutting off the head of the king. Globalization as an ideological discourse (in the way I have described it) appears within an already entrenched social and political system, which is the product of the dynamics and technics of modernity's structuring of the social order and the production of subjectivities. This modernity is one whose logics, it has to be added, extended across the ideological divide of the Cold War: modernization and Taylorization represented the future for the Soviets and the West alike. The fundamental drive of the system as a whole continues to lie in the core imperative of capitalism: the unlimited accumulation of capital by formally peaceful means (Budgen 2000, 151). As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue, the tension that exists within this social fantasy – endless accumulation without strife – has been dissipated historically through the availability of an outside to the system of capital, in which surpluses can be actualized to avoid the potential social trauma of overproduction (Hardt and Negri 2000, 221–39). The moment when capital finally finds itself victoriously spread across the globe – its extensivity confirming its supposed superiority as a social and economic system – is also a moment when its contradictions, inhumanity, and fundamental absurdity become increasingly evident, especially as processes of accumulation by dispossession accelerate (Harvey 2003, 137–82). As the collective known as Retort (2006, 8) points out, “Insofar as the spectacle of social order presents itself now as a constant image-flow of contentment, obedience, enterprise, and uniformity, it is, equally constantly, guaranteed by the exercise of state power. Necessarily so, since contentment, obedience, enterprise, and uniformity involve the suppression of their opposites, which the actual structure and texture of everyday life reproduce – and intensify – just as fast as the spectacle assures us they are things of the past.”

In this context, both ideology and state intervention become once again necessary to maintain order and stability. The public discourse of globalization engages in the effort to secure the existing social order at all costs, but not simply because of the obvious benefits it provides to some. There is a systemic effect at work, one that comes out of deep, intensive social commitments to order, expertise, technology, progress, consumption, and capital. Margaret Thatcher's turn to the ideas of Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and others was not strictly an ideological move: it is one occasioned by the need to resolve seemingly intractable economic problems

within the existing framework of liberal democracy. Although the championing of markets, private property, and entrepreneurial energies may have pushed the state towards the market and away from social welfare, commitments to these ideals were hardly external to the modern state to begin with. All power in this case is on the side of modernity. In the absence of compelling or convincing alternative political narratives, the social chaos engendered by neoliberalism powerfully confirms its necessity. Existing systems alone appear to have the capacity to manage the radical economic and social change that has produced the economic instability and social precariousness in which we all live.

Globalization and Literary Criticism

How does this account of globalization open up new possibilities for literature and literary criticism? Perhaps the major response to globalization within literary studies has been to redefine its practices in light of a world of transnational connections and communications. Globalization has often been interpreted as signalling the end of the nation-state and the parochialisms of national culture. Waking up to the limits of their own reliance on the nation as a key organizing principle, scholars in literary studies and poetics have come to insist on the need to take into account the global character of literary production, influence, and dissemination. Much of contemporary literary studies has focused correspondingly on the transfer and movement of culture: its shift from one place to another, its newfound mobility, and the challenges of its extraction, decontextualization, and recontextualization at new sites. At one level the encounter between criticism and globalization has simply required the extension or elaboration of existing discourses and concepts, such as diaspora, cosmopolitanism, the politics and poetics of the Other, and the language of postcolonial studies in general. For many critics, literary criticism was already moving towards globalization or was there in advance, as is suggested by accounts that stress the existence of global literary relations long before the present moment (Greenblatt 2001).

There have been other developments as well. Scholars once again pay serious attention to the politics of translation and the institutional politics of criticism, especially the global dominance of theory and cultural criticism by Western discourses (Spivak 2003; Kumar 2003). There have also been new sociologically inspired mapping projects that seek to explore

how literary and cultural forms developed and spread across the space of the globe (Casanova 2005; Moretti 1996). Finally, criticism has taken up an investigation of new literary works whose content, at least, criticizes and explores the tensions and traumas produced by globalization – a potentially huge set of works, given that globalization is often taken to be coincident with contemporary geopolitics. There have been rich critical discoveries in every one of these attempts to take up in literature and criticism the challenges – real or imagined – posed by globalization.

However productive and interesting such analyses are, there is nevertheless a way in which they are all too willing to take globalization at face value. They acquiesce to the character and priority of capital's own transnational logics and movements instead of questioning and assessing more carefully the narrative that underlies them. The critical agenda is thus set by the operations of globalization qua global capital. The need for criticism to concentrate its own energies on movement and border crossings, while not entirely misplaced, comes across as a rearguard manoeuvre to catch up with phenomena that have already taken place at some other more meaningful or important level. In this anxious attempt to claim the terrain of the global and the transnational for culture and criticism, the minimized role of culture within the narrative of globalization that emerges out of the comparison of globalization with postmodernism is troublingly reaffirmed, even if this affirmation is not the intent of these various and varied new approaches to culture in the era of globalization.

This is not to say that the approaches to globalization described above are without impact or value. It is simply to call attention to the fact that the project called globalization demands other responses that address directly its rhetorical and fictional character and, in particular, the ideological attempt to seal off the future through the assertion of a present that cannot be gainsaid. At one level such a response would simply be to remind us insistently of the fiction that is the public face of globalization. It calls attention to and exposes the endless employment of rhetoric in the struggle over the public's perception of the significance and meaning of the actions of businesses and governments, peoples and publics in shaping the present for the future and, indeed, in shaping what constitutes possibility itself. What better practice to do this than literary criticism, which is characterized by nothing other than its attention to the powerful uses (and abuses) of language in shaping and mediating our encounter with the world? The consistent anthropomorphisms applied to globalization –

which make globalization into a beast that penetrates markets, speeds up time, breaks boundaries, and changes the world seemingly independently of human involvement – is one of the key issues that criticism can bring to the fore.

This is just one possibility, and it is one that still seems to leave the literary in the dust of globalization by turning literature and literary criticism into a broader form of cultural criticism; its continued utility is justified only by its usefulness as a tool against ideology. The object of literary studies in this case would be the tropes and turns of language used explicitly to shape public perception: *axis of evil*; *weapons of mass destruction*; *democracy*; *progress*; and even *development*, *empowerment*, and the like (Cornwall and Brock 2005). The political possibilities of literature and criticism today are in any case larger and more general than these terms, if also perhaps less satisfactorily and explicitly definable and, unfortunately, more troubled and difficult. I have introduced two senses of globalization: one that remains open to debate and re-narrativization, even about so fundamental an issue as when globalization might be, and another that seems to know definitively when (now) and what (global trade) globalization is. Global in the second sense aims to undo and even eliminate the contradictions and confusions opened up by the first in order to reassert capitalism's ontological legitimacy. The political possibilities that globalization opens up for the literary can be grasped only by asking the question of why capitalism needs the new rhetoric of globalization at this time. Why does the lumbering beast of capital have to be re-described and given perhaps even greater autonomy than it possesses in its most metaphorically potent guise as the invisible hand? Do not the old categories of political economy continue to assert their mystificatory role in ways that they have for so long?

The negative answer to this last question is pointed to in the very instability of the concept of globalization. Its claim to articulate uniquely the new and the future leaves it open to endless doubts and questions that require its ideological dimensions to be affirmed over and over again (for two recent examples, see Tierney 2005; "The New World" 2005) – not least as a result of the suppression of opposites described above by Retort. Globalization is breathlessly confident, a master narrative that demands that all other concepts, ideas, and practices be redefined in relation to it. And yet the insistence of this narrative on the absolute priority of the economic also interrupts globalization's legitimacy at the very movement it imagines itself to be most forcefully asserting it.

Critical Imaginings

In the colonization of the globe by capital and the simultaneous geographic spread of communication technologies and cultural forms of all kinds, we might imagine that the reign of commodity fetishism, for instance, is affirmed as never before. But as capital reaches the limits of the globe, there is another story emerging that shakes its hold over the future. If the globalization of production has necessitated new narratives of the “good” of trade liberalization – the good of capital – it is because the complex, dispersed modes of contemporary production have not hidden away the social realities of production in the absent corners of the globe but has, instead, drawn ever more attention to the social relations embedded in commodities. In *Capital Marx* (1976, 165) famously writes that “so soon as [a table] steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas.” But what tables today dare to evolve out of their wooden brains grotesque ideas or to dance of their own free will? They must instead give an account of their productive parentage: From where did they come? How and by whom were they made? (by child labourers? by well-paid unionized workers?). For what purpose? Under what conditions? (in sweat shops? on industrial farms? in Third World tax havens?). And at what cost to that ultimate social limit – the environment? Although it is no less part of the system of exchange, the commodity today can no longer be depended on to buttress capitalism by shielding from view the social relations that create it. The response offered by the narrative of globalization is not to hide these social relations but to claim their inevitability and then provide a utopic, future-oriented claim about a coming global community in which the traumas of the present will be resolved in the fluid shuttling of freely traded goods around the world.

The utopia offered by the dominant narrative of globalization is one that has to be rejected, perhaps along with the concept itself, which has become so deeply associated with the current drive and desire of capital as to make it now almost impossible to wrest anything conceptually productive from it. The focus should instead be on the production of new concept-metaphors that might open up politically efficacious re-narrativizations of the present with the aim of creating new visions of the future. For all its ubiquity and hegemonic thrust, the instability of the concept of globalization presents an opportunity to do so; and so, far from being sidelined in

globalization, there is an opening for creative critical thinking of all kinds to intervene and generate alternatives. It is here that literary and cultural production and literary criticism have roles to play: not only to shock us into recognition of reality through ideological critique but also to spark the imagination so that we can see possibility in a world with apparently few escape hatches.

Why concept-*metaphor*? At its most basic level, metaphor involves the production of identity through substitution in a manner that opens up new and unexpected relationships and ideas. Metaphor is fundamental to literary language; it is what distinguishes it from mere reportage, non-fiction, or journalism. The phenomenological chaos that those concepts circulated between state and institutional social science are meant to tame or foreclose is the very medium of literary and cultural narrative – what they puzzle over and tarry with. Although elements of the discourse of globalization may employ metaphor, globalization is *anti*-metaphoric. Even as it appeals to innovation and creativity for its increasingly immaterial, informational economy, it nonetheless demands a resolution or adjournment of time to control and manage the newness thus brought into life. This is no doubt why, as I have argued earlier, that the aesthetic has disappeared from globalization; if culture shows up at all, it is in the guise of a commodity that contributes to economic vitality (as in Richard Florida’s “creative class”) or as a form whose main purpose is to ameliorate social problems through state cultural programs and national cultural policy (Yúdice 2003). Through metaphor, on the country, temporality is subjected to interrogation, and dead objects and concepts are brought back to life through the evocation of impossible identifications. It is in this way that newness comes into the world, and the presence is not all that remains.

For what is genuinely lacking today is the imaginative vocabulary and narrative resources needed not only to challenge the dominant narrative of globalization but also to articulate alternative modes of understanding those processes that have come to shape the present – and the future. This need is often imagined narrowly as a political lack, the absence of a big idea to take the place of state Socialism after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the colonization of the Western left by disastrous third way political approaches. The imaginative resources that are needed to shape a new future are, however, necessarily broader – or, at least, a new political vision is impossible without a revived poetics of social and cultural experience. This evocation of imagination in relation to poetics and the politics of globalization can be read in the wrong way: at best as an appeal to Arjun

Appadurai's still shaky use of *imagination* in his influential *Modernity at Large* (1996); at worst as a Romantic, idealist faith in the autonomous origin of ideas and their power to shape reality. What I have in mind is neither of these readings but rather Peter Hitchcock's use of imagination as process in his account of the promise of a theoretical manoeuvre that would be able to seize the conceptual openings that globalization has generated within capital itself. He writes that

while there are many ways to think of the globe there is yet no convincing sense of imagining difference globally. The question of persuasiveness is vital, because at this time the globalism most prevalent and the one that is busily being the most persuasive is global capitalism. To pose culture alone as a decisive blow to global modes of economic exploitation is idealist in the extreme ... Yet, because such exploitation depends upon a rationale, a rhetoric of globalism if you will, so culture may intervene in the codes of that imaginary, deploying imagination itself as a positive force for alternative modes of Being and being conscious in the world. (Hitchcock 2003, 1)

There is a great deal that can be said about the possibilities and limits of literature and literary criticism in reference to the imagination and persuasiveness. On the one hand, it is meaningless to assert that literature in general produces, through narrative and through metaphor, social visions other than the ones we work through in daily life. The kind of genre literature that makes up most of the market for literary texts reinforces the dynamics and logics of capitalism. Or does it? Even in this case, the need to reproduce the entire world in fictional form recreates, whether implicitly or explicitly, the tensions and contradictions between the experience of the world and the discourses meant to describe this experience. In other cases – from Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small World* to Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps*, from Paulo Lins' *City of God* to Peter Watts's Riffers trilogy (which explores a capitalism that persists into the future despite its intense contradictions) – the aim is precisely to give flesh to the abstractions of globalization and to highlight the contradictions of neoliberalism. The point here is to insist on the importance of these imaginings, drenched in the metaphoric, as a counterweight to those discourses of globalization that claim to have already put everything in its place, including literature and culture more generally. What is more difficult to assert and to argue

for is the significance or importance of this or that specific text, their persuasiveness, or their impact on imagination and the generation of alternative modes of being. In his exploration of the increasing use of culture as resource, George Yúdice writes that “the role of culture has expanded in an unprecedented way into the political and economic at the same time that conventional notions of culture largely have been emptied out” (2003, 9). If literary texts and critical approaches to them do not constitute a program to upend or overcome the deprivations and limits of globalization, at a minimum they engage in a refusal of the contemporary prohibition on metaphor and its imaginative possibilities.

Rather than give a determinate account of the how and why of the ways in which culture can intervene into the imaginary, I want to leave this sense of imagination open and suggestive and end by discussing briefly one more shift for aesthetics in general and literature in particular in relation to globalization. If we are to speak about the imaginary and its powers in the way Hitchcock does, we can do so today only in reference to an aesthetic that is very different from the one normally conceptualized. This is an aesthetic that no longer claims its potential political effect by being transcendent to the social but by being fully immanent to it. A half-century or more of literary and cultural criticism has insisted that culture be viewed as part of the social whole, generated out of and in response to its contradictions, its certainties as well as its uncertainties, an exemplar of the social division of labour and the use of symbolic forms to perpetuate class differences through the game of cultural distinction. For those invested in a literary or cultural politics premised on a vision of the autonomy of art and culture from social life, the demand to take into account the social character of the literary comes as a loss, as does the more general massification of culture, which seems to announce the draining of the energies of the poem, the novel, the artwork. Insofar as globalization has also been seen as announcing a “prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social real, to the point at which everything in our social life ... can be said to have become ‘cultural’” (Jameson 1998, 48), it, too, seems to suggest the general decline of the politics of culture. This is no doubt why globalization is construed as a threat to poetics: it is nothing less than mass culture writ large over the face of the globe.

But this is the wrong lesson to draw from the folding of the aesthetic into the social or the expansion of culture to encapsulate everything. In his assessment of the politics of the avant-garde, Peter Bürger identifies the

contradictory function of the concept of autonomy in the constitution of the aesthetic: it identifies the real separation of art from life but covers over the social and historical origins of this separation in capitalist society. The aim of the historical avant-garde – and perhaps I could venture to say all artistic movements since Kant – is to reject the deadened rationality of capitalist society through the creation of “a new life praxis from a basis in art” (Bürger 1985, 49). Bürger suggests that this happened by the middle of the twentieth century. Art was integrated into life through the false sublation of the culture industry rather than through the avant-garde. In the process he claims that what has been lost is the “free space within which alternatives to what exists become conceivable” (ibid., 54). Yet to see the sublation of art into life through mass culture as false or as a loss requires the affirmation of the problematic autonomy of art from life produced by social divisions that we should be glad to see dissolved. That these divisions have not been dissolved by the culture industry but have taken new forms is clear; but it should be equally clear that culture’s ability to conceive alternatives, far from being lost, has been diffused across the spectrum of cultural forms, which is why the imaginative capacity I am pointing to above can potentially come from anywhere. What an immanent aesthetic lacks that a transcendent one possesses in spades is that revolutionary spirit that animated nineteenth- and twentieth-century politics and culture, in which the right moment or perfect cultural object could – all on its own – shatter the ossified face of social reality. The writer or artist as vanguardist of the good and the true is definitively over. But to this we can only say: good riddance. We must welcome instead a politics and poetics that proceeds uncertainly, through half-measures and missteps, through intention and accident, through the dead nightmare of the residual and the conservative drag of hitherto existing reality on all change. And we must proceed in full view of the fact that nothing is accomplished easily or all at once or in absence of the collective energies of all of humanity and through the imaginative possibilities of literature, yes, but other cultural forms, too.

A Final Word

Repudiation of the present cultural morass presupposes sufficient involvement in it to feel itching in one’s finger tips, so to speak, but at the same time the strength, drawn from this involvement, to dismiss it.

– Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

So much for the function of culture at the present moment. But I cannot end without asking directly: what of the autonomy of the critic? The question of autonomy – the precise relationship of structure to agency (if, indeed, agency exists at all) in the field of culture – has been perhaps the central theme of literary and cultural criticism since 1968. Every major critic and theorist of the period, from Louis Althusser to Slavoj Žižek, has struggled to formulate how individual or collective agency functions in a period in which – for reasons of global scale as well as technological “advance” – human social life seems shaped and controlled in ever more extreme, invasive, and unstoppable ways. Thus, we have the development of ideas such as Michel Foucault’s biopower, Pierre Bourdieu’s *habitus*, and numerous others that offer narratives of a structure that generate the very forms of (imagined) agency that might then want to resist the system. It is a classic chicken-and-egg problem, if one encumbered with more abstruse vocabulary and the weight of the whole history of philosophy.

If individual subjects are produced by the structures in which they live (and how could it be otherwise?), the very ability of critical thought to grasp these structures – to paint a picture of the circumstances in which we find ourselves, clearly and explicitly as if from the “outside” – must necessarily come into question. At the end of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1998 [1944]), Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s savage and hugely influential account of the dead end of the Enlightenment in the parking lot of the cultural industries, the authors pause to reflect on the conditions that make their own critical vantage point possible. They claim that their critique can emerge only because they occupy an unusual position: the interstices between the end of classical German philosophy and the burgeoning of American mass culture. It is only because the former is radically incommensurate with the latter that Horkheimer and Adorno could “hate [both of them] properly” (Adorno 1974, 52) and, in so doing, introduce the mode of criticism that has come generally to be referred to as critical theory.

This is a very specific location, a critical vantage point created only as result of the trauma of the Second World War, which saw members of the Frankfurt School relocated to Los Angeles. But this structural misfit is perhaps more general than this example might suggest and may extend to *all* literary and cultural criticism. Antonio Gramsci made a useful distinction between two kinds of intellectuals: traditional and organic. Organic intellectuals are those who work with ideas and thus give capital “homogeneity and an awareness of its function not only in the economic but also in the

social and political fields” (1971, 5). For Gramsci, the exemplary organic intellectual for the contemporary age was the engineer; in our moment of finance capitalism and dreams of the creative class, academics and cultural workers – all those who might be referred to as content providers (O’Brien and Szeman 2003) – are, if not examples of model intellectuals, then certainly part of the mix of the idea men necessary for the functioning of the present.

At the same time, what distinguishes intellectuals in the humanities from their brethren in some other parts of the university (research scientists, engineers) is that they also occupy a position that is decidedly out of step with the times – a residual position that makes them both connected to and separate from the dominant ideas of the moment (Bourdieu’s [1984] memorable phrase for this class was “the dominated fraction of the dominant class”). To put this point in Gramscian terms, literary and cultural critics are also traditional intellectuals – with *traditional* being understood not as an evaluative term but as the name for a structural category that does not depend on the subject of analysis (Manet or multimedia, Flaubert or film). For Gramsci, traditional intellectuals are connected to one another across time. Since “traditional intellectuals experience through an *esprit de corps*’ their uninterrupted historical continuity and their special qualification, they put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group” (1971, 7); the lack of synchrony with the present, sometimes experienced by intellectuals as a frustration, is in fact a source of their analytic strength. It is this simultaneous connection to the present and filiation to the past that creates a position in which a degree of autonomous thought – a critical vantage point on the present – is made possible.

And it is perhaps at the moment of globalization that this vantage point emerges with especial force. As I suggested above, culture in globalization is simultaneously imagined to be everywhere and treated as inconsequential because of this very ubiquity. The attempt by the narrative of globalization to write cultural criticism out of the picture is a sign of the force and importance of this practice. Slavoj Žižek asks: “Does not the critique of ideology involve a privileged place, somehow exempted from the turmoils of social life, which enables some subject-agent to perceive the very hidden mechanism that regulates social visibility and non-visibility? Is not the claim that we can accede to this place the most obvious case of ideology?” (1994, 5). Put this way, it is essential to be vigilant about the simple belief that the critic stands above and outside of social life in a way that allows

her or him to understand the mechanisms that produce reality. But it would be equally ideological to acquiesce to a global narrative that has tried ceaselessly to transform this genuine and necessary critical suspicion of a pure critical autonomy into a belief that literary and cultural critics cannot do anything at all.