

COLONISATION/GLOBALISATION: AN ARGUMENT IN SUPPORT OF REGIONAL LITERATURES

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The 'argument' in support, or defence of, regional literatures that the title of this paper refers to is really a reading practice or methodology I've been working on for some time that begins in regional literatures—such as Australian literature—which I've come to call Cultural Reading.

The globalisation of culture has generated a fairly widely-based fear. Fredric Jameson, for example, linked similar phenomena with multinational capital and referred to it as 'a new and historically original penetration and colonization of Nature and the Unconscious' (80). It is a fear also associated with the invasiveness of databanks from which 'profiles' of citizens may be established and used by government agencies (and often other private interests) for 'targeting' which, as Jameson also suggested, is inextricably tied up with postmodern culture. For Australian literature, this widespread fear broadly takes two forms. There are those who see a wave of (predominantly) American popular culture poised to wipe out anything recognisably 'Australian', and those who see the total obliteration of Culture, almost in the way that the Leavises did before the Second World War.

This paper is concerned with a far more positive way of discussing globalised culture, but a point of real concern here, the real danger that perhaps ought to be kept in mind, is that as the 'wave' of globalised culture spreads, *high* cultural production may come to be understood as 'Culture' and this would mean that the cultural values and norms of England and Europe would become more pervasive within the cultural space of Australian society than ever before.

Our colonial experience has left us a legacy of institutional structures and policy and past practices which equip us poorly to respond effectively to globalised culture. But it's important to recognise that it is really only since the advent of computer text and satellite and computer communications that 'global' culture has even become a possibility—in any sense other than in terms of the older empire/colony conception. The major difference between the new and the old situations (and a source of immense hope, one may add) is that the Internet has no 'centre' or central ordering mechanism in the way of the old empire/colony cultural structure.

The main point of this paper is that through Cultural Reading, regional literatures can function positively within the environment of globalised culture. A little about Cultural Reading, and how it differs from conventional reading practices, is explained first, then globalised culture is discussed, within the context of Australian literary and cultural production, in two ways: what may be termed its negative affect (which is how it functions in similar ways to colonisation), and its positive affect, which concerns how it functions, or has the capacity to function, in a truly *trans*-cultural way.

Cultural Reading and Literary Production

Cultural Reading begins from the premise that there is reciprocity and continuity between 'literary' and *all* other forms of cultural production. Ultimately, culture is a massive complex and ever-changing constellation of themes, statements, images and raw human energy that takes the formation of a network of overlapping and intersecting texts and narratives which every society *continually* produces. 'Literary' works are very often recognisable as products of particular cultures, but more importantly, those cultures are recognisable as having been produced by texts like them. The culture of Australian society would not be what it is if, for example, *Voss* had never been produced, and it does not seem credible that any other society should have produced it.

Bakhtin's phrase 'world of signs' refers to this kind of socio-cultural relationship. Everyone lives simultaneously within two worlds: a bio-world and a 'world of signs'. Texts are readable chains of signs. They don't even have to be in writing to be 'readable'—as with the texts of 'art' works, for example. Even the Los Angeles freeway system can function as a readable text, as indeed do petroglyphs for non-writing cultures. Bakhtin also referred to re-evaluating and re-structuring the chains of signs as a 'social generative process'. Cultural Reading is also, ultimately, a process of this kind.

Within these extraordinary textual networks of cultures, 'literature' exists as a sub-set of texts which are mostly, or have traditionally been, in writing. And this is, most probably, the initial point of deep concern (in some quarters) between 'literature' and globalised culture (and international computer communications), because the advent of computer text (and the genre of the hypertext novel) suggests, quite obviously, that the sub-set of texts which has been traditionally known as 'literature' may no longer always be, or even be predominantly, in writing.

However, the overriding point, and a point of great importance to Cultural Reading and literary and cultural production generally, is that the text which we know as 'literary' doesn't *only* belong to the sub-set, 'literature'. It is also a *constitutive* part of the wider textual network (of culture); and, by extension, it must be also understood as part of globalised culture—in some way.

It is here, no doubt, that many reading practices find a fundamental difficulty in negotiating the new globalised conditions of culture (and literary and cultural production), because it has always been acceptable, in the past, to acknowledge that the literary text belonged to the rest of culture, but at the same time, to read it as if it did not. For example, we've always been able to read *The Twyborn Affair* as a 'literary work', or as a 'modern Australian novel', or even as a de facto biography of Patrick White. And we've very capably taken Lacan and Derrida and Barthes and many others to *The Twyborn Affair*. But this is the point: in *all* of this the novel is still only being read as a 'literary' text.

Cultural Reading, on the other hand does much more than this. For example, *The Twyborn Affair* was first published in the late 1970s. It is a novel concerned, most obviously, with ambiguity: an ambiguous self made ambiguous by the ambiguity of its place of being (in the world). It says rather a lot about reading practices in general that *The Twyborn Affair* is rarely thought of in terms of other contemporary *non-literary* works which are also ambiguous, such as those ambiguous landscape paintings of Brett Whiteley (e.g. *The Bush* [1974]) or Fred Williams (e.g. *Forest* [1974]) or even the later Lloyd Rees (e.g. *Moving Waters* [1974]), which appeared at about the time of *The Twyborn Affair*. However, works such as these are important to Cultural Reading which, from this point, scans the wider cultural landscape of Australian society of the late 1970s because it is everywhere characterised by ambiguity. Yet, is it really that strange that this should be so in the period which immediately followed the dismissal of the Whitlam government? Surely this single act rendered ambiguous the entire 'world of signs' of Australian society (to use Bakhtin's phrase).

The point is that these are *not* generally the sorts of issues and contexts that conventional reading practices bring to reading Australian literature because those reading practices tend to regard those texts as 'literary' and *not* primarily integral to the cultural production of

Australian society. Issues like politics and contemporary art works, however, are important to Cultural Reading because there, *all* forms of cultural production (including literary production) are recognised as *continuous* and recognised also to interact and intersect reciprocally with each other.

In terms of globalised culture, then, the major difference between many literary reading strategies and Cultural Reading is that conventional approaches can only offer a collection of Australian literary texts to the 'world' to be read (and judged?) in relation to the 'Great Works'. And this is little more than a continuance of the old empire/colony relationship, except now the certainty that British literary standards once offered to some quarters of Australian society has disappeared. Hence the fear (in those quarters especially) of the globalisation of culture.

Cultural Reading, on the other hand, offers the *entire* cultural text of Australian society to the 'world'. It does not simply offer *The Twyborn Affair*, or even all the Patrick White works. It offers *The Twyborn Affair* and the Patrick White discourse (which includes many political statements) and the Brett Whitely works, and the Fred Williams and Lloyd Rees works. In fact the entire tradition of landscape painting in Australia and the colonial political circumstances which made it so prominent in Australian cultural history, and many, many other cultural contexts come with *The Twyborn Affair*: because the novel is an integral part of that great textual web which we refer to as the 'culture' of Australian society.

The globalisation of culture is impossible to avoid, but it becomes a positive affect to regional literary production in Cultural Reading because it opens the way for readings which are truly *trans-cultural*. In this environment Cultural Reading does not seek the 'literary' texts of other societies, it seeks out the textual networks which those literary texts constitute and from which they have been constituted.

Inhibitions to Cultural Reading

However, the 'world of signs' of any society is a structured and hierarchised world, and the first necessary condition for Cultural Reading is that present cultural categories, such as 'literature', are suspended, at least heuristically, to permit the production of a *cultural* rather than simply a 'literary' text (as in the case above with *The Twyborn Affair* and contemporary Australian art works).

In Cultural Reading the text that we now refer to as 'literary' becomes simply an extraordinarily dense and imaginative cultural product: one produced by a particular society at a particular historical moment. (It is this that allows *The Twyborn Affair* to be so readily intertextualisable with, say, Fred Williams' *Waterfall Polyptych*.) However, cultural categories like 'art' and 'literature' are the most stable and deeply-entrenched and Cultural Reading, ultimately, amounts to re-mapping a society's entire cultural terrain, shifting the focus of that terrain in ways which tend *not* to coincide with policy which has produced the present mode of management of the cultural space.

In other words, one can expect resistance to Cultural Reading from established regimes (or powerful Interpretive Communities to use Stanley Fish's phrase). Also, it is so very much more 'comfortable' to adopt an essentialist, or even a 'nationalist' stance towards literary works, in an age where cultural production seems to become daily, almost visibly, more and more global.

However, the legitimacy of existing categories, such as 'art' and 'literature' does not stand up to close examination. What is it that really distinguishes a work as 'literary'? What qualities does it possess that no other types of texts possess? Ultimately, the difference between 'literary' texts and others which societies produce has little to do with things like 'literary quality' (which is supposed to inhabit works which are thought of as 'great'). 'Literary' texts are recognisable for their complex layering of text or texture. Texts like these cannot be reduced to a single or simple code. They tend to defy definitive interpretation, and by that I really mean that their contexts are inexhaustible. Moreover, they share incredibly complex textual relationships with those contexts. And, as interpretations for them are generated, contexts are not resolved, they proliferate. The texts of 'art' are like this too, and in

many ways, even more ambiguous.

The important change effected by Cultural Reading is that the potential of the text is opened through an alteration to its horizon of reader expectation. This facilitates the production of an enormous open-ended and volatile textual network which is the unique product of a particular set of social and political circumstances, to the extent that it may be similar in other societies, but is not replicated exactly by any other society.

It is, of course, this intertextual *network* which offers not simply (or even) a 'defence' against the worst fears of the globalisation of culture but, more importantly, it means that regional literatures can contribute to global culture: in ways which preserve their integrity and ways which also would suggest a deficiency in the production of the 'global' cultural text should it or any of its other constituent parts be omitted or occluded. The constituent parts of a global cultural text of this kind are, within the logic of Cultural Reading, the textual networks produced by different societies (in their differing conditions of production).

Any cultural artefact offers a point of entry to the cultural-textual network of a society. Archaeologists have known this for a long time. However, the texts of 'literature' and 'art' provide more than a simple point of entry to a society's culture. They provide something more like a freeway into it. Cultural Reading, following the freeway metaphor, pursues a path through the wider cultural terrain, or rather, it *creates* a path in its choices of side-turns and overpasses. The cultural-textual web or network which this produces is the contribution a society may make to a global cultural text. And because regional literatures are sub-sets of cultural-textual networks, they make a contribution too.

All that is required for Cultural Reading to produce a *global* cultural text is the establishment of points of entry of this kind into two (or more) cultural-textual networks. Cultural Reading then becomes *trans*-Cultural Reading which, most certainly, does *not* require texts in English or even in writing.

Trans-Cultural Reading

An important question arises here, one which has always, in the past, led Australian literary studies on a particular trajectory: as these textual affinities are *produced* in readings, would, say, an American scholar 'find' the same textual affinities for *The Twyborn Affair* as those 'found' earlier (given that the reading must be informed by the *reader's* socio-cultural background)?

The dominant response to this, in the past, has been to turn towards *standards* which are thought of as universal or which seem to be universally endorsed. For any particular reading this does not really matter but the more important point here is this: if one wished, for example, to situate any of Patrick White's works in a meaningful way, in relation to American, or any other society's, *cultural* production, this would also, today, engage questions concerning the globalisation of culture—and there are no standards (especially not 'literary' standards) for this.

One might begin by attempting to compare literature-with-literature but the effect of this would be to cut-off the sub-set of texts known as 'literature' from each society's wider cultural-textual network. Trans-Cultural Reading overcomes this difficulty by producing at least two textual/cultural webs: one for the particular White text linking it to its historical, political and aesthetic contexts (such as contemporary works), and another web for the other cultural context—perhaps of a historic period contemporary with the White text.

For example, to establish a cultural-textual relationship between *Voss* and, say, William Faulkner's novel *The Town*, which were both published in the same year (1957), thematic and other affinities can be established between *Voss* and the art works of contemporaries such as Albert Tucker (e.g. *Cratered Head* [1958]), Russell Drysdale (e.g. *Emus in a Landscape* [1950]) and Eric Smith (e.g. the 'Voss' series [1961]). And for *The Town*, affinities can be produced between the works of Jasper Johns (e.g. *Flag Above White with Collage* [1955]), Edward Hopper (e.g. *Portrait of Orleans* [1950]) and even Jackson Pollock (e.g. *Full Fathom Five* [1947]). In Trans-Cultural Reading textual webs of this kind are produced, until enough

intersections emerge to permit each of the 'literary' works to become meaningful within the cultural contexts of the other.

This may be exhaustive but to attempt anything less means that an *a priori* category, 'literature', would have to be posited (that is, in a universalistic sense). And in this case, White's work then would be understood *not* as a cultural product of Australian society (which emerged from a particular set of conditions of production and circulation), but as (merely) a work of 'literature' (in the sense of high cultural production). Obviously, this suggests that the capacity of *Voss* to say somethings *new* about Australian, as well as about another, culture will be severely diminished or even lost. A similar fate would be *The Town's* too. This alternative to Cultural Reading leads, ultimately, to endorsement of a category of 'high' culture.

A category of 'high' culture can do no more than preserve the values and norms of the Old World. It is a product of a present authority but one whose future (thankfully) is *not* guaranteed in globalised culture. For example, present authoritative structures seem already at a loss in the global environment. This is being confirmed, almost daily, in well-publicised security breaches at the Pentagon and the FBI, or even by the inability of schools, notwithstanding all the talk about 'filters', to restrict the circulation of pornography on their own networks.

Globalisation is already a fact of cultural existence in the Western world and, on balance, one must recognise it as a positive attribute to cultural production in a way quite different to older forms of cultural colonialism. Its presence and influence can only expand with further developments to satellite communications and internet systems. The logic of empire is 'top-down' and totalising whereas the logic of regionalism is 'grass-roots', rhizomic and heterogeneous. The internet itself provides a useful metaphor for globalised culture, one which distinguishes it from formations of cultural imperialism of the past. The internet has no 'centre', in the way of the cultural empire of Anglo-Europe. A 'global' cultural text of this centreless type is always incomplete and forever in the process of inscription and metamorphosis.

Culture, in an age of globalisation, can no longer be thought of in terms of a collection of monuments of the past. It must now be recognised as a dynamic and volatile *present* whose aspects are forever new and contesting: a swirling constellation of signs always available for re-interpreting and re-chaining—but also without a permanent 'centre'. This is already occurring at the level of the literary text (as with the advent of the Hypertext novel). But the more important point here is that the existing arrangements of the signs of entire *cultural* texts are on the threshold of the most radical re-chaining and re-interpretation, as is most obvious with the states of the old Soviet empire and in South Africa.

This re-formation may have the initial appearance of chaos but if, as I suspect, we are standing on the very edge of a new age, one which promises new formations of knowledge and new formations of being, the present appearance of chaos is merely a reflection of the levels of inertia and cultural stasis to which we have become accustomed. The globalisation of culture does not suggest an exchange of order for chaos but of a single and limited formation of order for an, as yet unexplored, range of possibilities.

The primary project of Cultural Reading is to achieve a transformation of this kind. It is a project which begins in regional literary and cultural production, and one whose destiny lies in the production of 'global' culture.

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