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"The Marco Polo Syndrome:
Some Problems around Art
and Eurocentrism" from
Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985
(Blackwell Publishing) 2005

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The Marco Polo Syndrome

Some Problems around Art
and Eurocentrism

Gerardo Mosquera

The second Habana Biennial, in 1986, included an installation by the Cuban artist Flavio Garciandía entitled *El Síndrome de Marco Polo*. Various ambiguous images depicted the adventures of a popular character from the comics – a captain in the wars of independence in the 19th century and a symbol of Cubanness – during and after a trip to China. The work, drawing on forms of orientalist kitsch, humorously questioned the problems of intercultural communication. The character, like Marco Polo, was a pioneer in the experience of understanding the Other, but his chances of bridging two cultures were lost through the suspicion provoked from both sides, especially from his.

We had to wait until the end of the millennium to discover that we were suffering from the Marco Polo Syndrome. What is monstrous about this syndrome is that it perceives whatever is different as the carrier of life-threatening viruses rather than nutritional elements. And although it does not scare us as much as another prevalent syndrome, it has brought a lot of death to culture. Only now has an understanding of cultural pluralism and the usefulness of dialogue begun to spread to such an extent that the intercultural problematic has become a major issue.

The possibility of a more diversified consciousness has been opened up, while the question of ethnicity and nationality fills the new maps with many colours. Dominant Eurocentrism – the main symptom of the disease – is undergoing a critical treatment increasingly more effective in its power of persuasion. All these mutations have

From *Third Text* 21 (winter 1992/3): 35–41, translated from the Spanish by Jaime Flórez. Reproduced with kind permission of *Third Text*.

targeted art, presenting it with urgent and very complicated problems. Only some of them will be touched upon here.

The notion of Eurocentrism is very recent. In anthropology we find an acknowledgement of ethnocentrism in the 18th century,¹ and a consolidation of the idea of cultural relativism by Boas before the end of the 19th century. But, until recently, this idea had not significantly infiltrated the studies and interpretations of art and literature, centred as they were in criteria of values linked to the myth of the "universal". The discourses called postmodern, with their interest in alterity, have gradually introduced a more relativist attitude to the scene. A new consciousness of ethnicity is taking shape as a result of several contemporary processes, among them decolonisation, the greater space gained by the Third World in the international arena, the influence of ethnic groups from the margins in the great northern cities, the increase of information and improved facilities in travel and communication. Postmodernism itself, as Geeta Kapur suggests, could be regarded as a consequence and not as a description of a "realigned universe" through the praxis of societies previously completely marginalised.²

Eurocentrism is different to ethnocentrism. It refers not only to the ethnocentrism exercised by a specific culture, but to the often forgotten fact that the world-wide hegemony of that culture has imposed its ethnocentrism as a universal value, and has persuaded us of it for a long time.³

Here we leave the rather aseptic field of cultural relativism to come up against social problems and issues of power. The fact is that, from the Industrial Revolution, the global expansion of capitalism began to involve the whole world in an economic process which had Europe as its centre, and which, from then on, determined the course of the planet. Western metaculture established itself through colonisation, domination, and even the need to articulate it in order to confront the new situation within itself. Even so, Amílcar Cabral went as far as to say that imperialist domination "was not only a negative reality", and that "it gave new worlds to the world".⁴ Modernity, full of good intentions, contributed not a little to this planetary cultural revolution, although Adorno, Horkheimer and Huyssen have connected its negative aspect with imperialism.⁵

Ethnocentrism always suggests the naive vanity of a villager who, as José Martí said, assumes that "the whole world is his village", believing everything originated there even if it were imposed on him through conquest. Eurocentrism is the only ethnocentrism universalised through actual world-wide domination by a metaculture, and based on a traumatic transformation of the world through economic, social and political processes centred in one small part of it. As a result, many elements of this metaculture cease to be "ethnic" and become internationalised as intrinsic components of a world shaped by Western development. But if these components are irrefutable, so should be the need to end the lack of focus, limitation, boredom and injustice of planning the world like a one-way street.

The very fact of the rise of the idea of Eurocentrism demonstrates an awareness of the monocultural trap in which we have all found ourselves prisoners. I say "all" because Eurocentrism affects not only non-Western cultures but the West itself,

given the widespread impoverishment of perspective inherent to any monism. The tragedy is that the notion of Eurocentrism is also *Made in the West*, even though, as Desiderio Navarro has pointed out, it is starting to take shape, especially in Eastern Europe,⁶ at those peripheries exposed to closer contact with non-Western countries.⁷ Colonialism brought about a split whereby non-Western countries took on board the problems of their own cultures in the sphere of traditions isolated from the contemporary scene, at the same time as they adopted those of the West, without making a connection capable of transforming both of them to the benefit of their own interests and values in the existing global situation.⁸ This has started to change. Roughly, three moments can be summarised. Firstly, the cultures that we currently call traditional were "arrested" by Western expansion, which carried forward, according to its point of view, the great centrifugal development of art and science from the 18th century, generalising it as "universal". Secondly, the realisation by one fraction of thought in the Western world of the absurdity of this situation. "Not a single Ibn in the index to *Literary Theory!*" René Btiemble eloquently exclaimed, thereby disqualifying the classical work of Wellek and Warren.⁹ Thirdly, anti-Eurocentrism from non-Western positions has begun to be systematised.

This does not mean a return to a past prior to Western globalisation, but the construction of a contemporary culture – one capable of acting in today's reality – from a plurality of perspectives. This development is a matter of some urgency since we are running the risk that the West, apart from anything else, may also give the Third World a philosophy of intercultural exchange and a critique of Eurocentrism. Such an autocritique, despite its good intentions and its indisputable value, would perpetuate the distortion produced by its single perspective and existing circuits of power.

Postmodern interest in the Other has opened some space in the "high art" circuits for vernacular and non-Western cultures. But it has introduced a new thirst for exoticism, the carrier of either a passive or a second-class Eurocentrism which, instead of universalising its paradigms, conditions certain cultural productions from the periphery according to paradigms that are expected of it for consumption by the centres. Many artists, critics and Latin American curators seem to be quite willing to become "othered" for the West.

The problematic of Eurocentrism and the relations amongst different cultures is particularly complex in the contemporary visual arts, where the Marco Polo Syndrome embodies a double-edged sword. Art, in today's conception of a self-sufficient activity based on aesthetics, is also a product of Western culture exported to others. Its full definition is also very recent, no older than the end of the 18th century. The aesthetic tradition of other cultures, like that of the West in other periods, was a different kind of production, determined by religious, representational and commemorative functions, and so on. Today's art in these cultures is not the result of an evolution of traditional aesthetics: its very concept was received from the West through colonialism.

This generates contradictions and brings the evils of dependency on and mimicry of the centres. But it forms part of the postcolonial challenge, because our cultures should not lock themselves in isolating traditions if they want to take part in today's

dynamic and offer solutions to their own problems. Instead, what should be done is to make traditions work within the new epoch. The problem is not preserving them but vigorously adapting them. The question is how we may also *make* contemporary art from our own values, sensitivities and interests. The de-Eurocentralisation in art is not about returning to purity, but about adopting postcolonial "impurity" through which we might free ourselves and express our own thought.

A paradigmatic case of these complexities can be seen in the Cuban artist José Bedia. White and blue-eyed, this artist of popular origin practices the *palo monte*, an Afro-Cuban religious and cultural complex of Kongo origin. A graduate and ex-professor of the Instituto Superior de Arte de La Habana, Bedia is a sophisticated, well-informed Western artist with a wide range of resources at his command. But his conceptually oriented work, in its content rather than in its language, is mostly based on the cosmology of the Kongo still alive in Cuba, a result of his interest in a contemporary reflection on the problems of the human being derived from the Kongo's interpretation of the world. His work intelligently takes advantage of openings, resources and sensitivities from current art of the centres, to confront us with a different vision. This syncretism also occurs in his technique, effortlessly integrating technological, natural and cultural elements, drawing and photography, ritual and mass-cultural objects, all within the sobriety of an analytic discourse. He also appropriates "primitive" techniques, but not in order to reproduce their programmes: he creates elements with them that articulate his personal discourse and iconography. Bedia is making Western culture from non-Western sources, and therefore transforming it towards a de-Europeanisation of contemporary culture. But simultaneously we could say that he is making postmodern Kongo culture. Besides which, he opens himself up to so-called "primitive" cultures in what he has called a voluntary transculturalisation in reverse: from his "high art" education to a "primitive" one.¹⁰ Although this is an intellectual process, it is also interiorised in the artist, given the *mestizo* character of his own cultural background.

The Marco Polo Syndrome is a complex disease that often disguises its symptoms. The struggle against Eurocentrism should not burden art with a myth of authenticity which, paradoxically, may add to the discrimination that Third World visual art suffers in the international circuits. This myth precludes its appreciation as a living response to contradictions and postcolonial hybridities, and demands instead an "originality" defined according to tradition and old cultures corresponding to a situation long since passed. More plausible is to analyse how current art in a given country or region satisfies the aesthetic, cultural, social and communicative demands of the community from and for which it is made. Its response is mostly mixed, relational, appropriative – anyway, "inauthentic", and therefore more adequate to face today's reality.

One of the great Eurocentric prejudices in the critique and history of art is its complete undervaluing of this production as "derivative" of the West. Third World artists are constantly asked to display their identity, to be *fantastic*, to look like no one else or to look like Frida . . . The relatively high prices achieved by Latin American art at the great auctions have been assigned to painters who satisfy the expectations

of a more or less stereotyped Latin-Americanity, able to fulfil the new demand for exoticism at the centres. As a consequence, Rivera is valued well above Orozco, Remedios Varo more than Torres García, and Botero considerably more than Reverón.¹¹ In other cases all contemporary practice is discredited as spurious. Let's see the opinion of an eminent Africanist: "Authentic African art is that produced by a traditional artist for traditional purposes and according to traditional forms."¹²

In this view, Africa is tradition not the present. An anti-Eurocentrism like this freezes all African cultures, relegating them to a museum, without understanding that they are living organisms which need to respond actively to the reality of their time. If we have to fight relentlessly against colonialism, which castrates much contemporary art from the Third World, we should not do it through nostalgia for the mask and the pyramid.

Extreme relativism constitutes another danger. It is said that a village may be ignorant of what happens in the neighbouring village, but knows what happens in New York. Anyone who has ever travelled through Africa knows that it is often easier to go from one country to the next via Europe. One of the worst problems of the Southern Hemisphere is its lack of internal integration and horizontal communication, in contrast with its vertical – and subaltern – connection with the North. The cultures of the South, so diverse, confront common problems derived from the postcolonial situation, and this has determined structural similarities in the mosaic. "Speaking about the Third World and wrapping up in the same package Colombia, India and Turkey"¹³ is as rhetorical as ignoring what unites, or might unite them, in their confrontation with hegemonic power, even if it is just poverty.¹⁴ These cultures urgently need to know and think of each other, to exchange experiences, to embark on common projects. A radical conception of relativism should not exacerbate their isolation, separating them from our efforts to approach the Other and learn from him or her (even about things we don't like, as Venturi would say). If postmodernity places otherness in the foreground it does so through a process of infinite differentiation which eliminates even the necessity of choice.¹⁵ The strategy of the dominated moves towards integration through what unites them, and activates their difference "in the face of international postmodern dominance."¹⁶ The South-South "Robinsonism" benefits only the centres by entrenching North-South verticalism. If the translation of one culture into another in all its nuances is impossible, this should not preclude their capacity for mutual closeness, enrichment and solidarity. Jorge Luis Borges said that Quixote is still winning battles against his translators.¹⁷

The myth of universal value in art, and the establishment of a hierarchy of works based in their "universality", is one of the heritages of Eurocentrism that continues to survive, despite our becoming less naive with respect to the "universal", which has so frequently been a disguise for the "Western". But this should not disable our reception of artwork beyond the culture which made it; even if that response is "incorrect",¹⁸ it may still generate new meanings. Art is very linked to cultural specificity, but possesses a polysemic ambiguity, open to very diverse readings. We live in "a great time of hybrids", as a Mexican rock star sang,¹⁹ which offers an unconventional challenge by reinterpreting instead of rejecting dependency on the great circuits. In contemporary

experience, contextualisation, recycling, appropriation and re-semanticisation gain more and more power as a consequence of increased interaction among cultures.

The critique of Eurocentrism forms part of a new awareness towards the ethnic, the consolidation of which would sense, for the first time, the possibility of a global dialogue among cultures, capable of facilitating a cure for the syndrome. However, in the visual arts, little progress has been made in this direction. Contemporary, non-traditional production from the South finds few outlets. Excluded from the great centres and supposedly international circuits, its presence in exhibitions like "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art* or *Magiciens de la terre* is insignificant, despite the fact that it could have contributed a lot more, especially by deepening and problematising their perspectives.²⁰ The "contemporary artistic scene" is a very centralised system of *apartheid*.²¹ More than being Eurocentric it is Manhattan-centric. But, I insist, the barrier is not just South-North due to centre-periphery relations of power, but South-South, as a consequence of a postcolonial deformation.

Despite its deformed structure, the dictates from the centre and the imposition of their arrogant judgements of art, the diversification of artistic circuits clashes with the difficulties of intercultural evaluation already pointed out. Critics, curators and historians have a great responsibility in this sense. To paraphrase Harold Rosenberg, we should realise that the way towards an intercultural evaluation of the work of art is not just a question of seeing, but also of listening. Careful account should be taken of how artwork functions in its context, what values are recognised there, what sensibility it satisfies, what perspectives it opens, what it contributes . . . Only after such thorough understanding would we recognise the messages of interest that art can communicate to the viewers addressed by the exhibitions, and how it can contribute towards a general enrichment. Given that it has been demonstrated that the role of the viewer is fundamental in art and literature, this does not mean that one only sees from one's self and one's own circumstance, but also that reception is active and therefore capable of expanding.

The fundamental problem for exhibitions and texts with an intercultural meaning is communication. On the one hand to inform and contextualise; and on the other to orientate towards what interests new receivers. As mediators they must accept compromise, but need to make an effort to avoid centrisms and clichéd expectations. It is easy to say it, but in practice we are far from possessing exemplary solutions.

Apart from polyfocal, multiethnic decentralisation, one last problem is that the dismantling of Eurocentrism demands an equally pluralistic revision of Western culture. When Robert Farris Thompson assigned Fu-Kiau Bunseki, a traditional Kongo expert, to comment on the "Africanist" painting of Picasso,²² he was not simply making a gesture of deconstructing in reverse the appropriation of African sculpture by modernism, and making eloquent the ingenuity of his concerns with universality. He was also opening up a pluralistic methodological perspective. Not only in the sense of an erudite explanation of traditional Africa through others inspired by it. Bunseki's analyses deepen our appreciation of those works, and even of a Western point of view. Cubism revolutionised the visual culture of the West by appropriating formal resources from Africa. But these forms were not free-floating; they were

designed to support specific meanings which, on a more general level, can also function within the coded system of Picasso's paintings. Those forms belong to a cosmic vision whose perceptual foundations continue to be present in the new vision by which the Cubists transformed Western painting, even without their acknowledging the functions and meanings of their African models.

Intercultural involvement consists not only of accepting the Other in an attempt to understand him or her and to enrich myself with his or her diversity. It also implies that the Other does the same with me, problematising my self-awareness. The cure for the Marco Polo Syndrome entails overcoming centrisms with enlightenment from a myriad of different sources.

Notes

Translated from the Spanish by Jaime Flórez.

- 1 For instance, see Hunter, "Inaugural Disputation on the Varieties of Man", 1775, in T. Bendyshe (ed. and trans.), *The Anthropological Treatises of Johann Friedrich Blumenback* (London, 1863), pp. 357-94.
- 2 Geeta Kapur, "Tradición y Contemporaneidad en las Bellas Artes del Tercer Mundo", in Open Debate, "Tradición y Contemporaneidad en la Plástica del Tercer Mundo", 3rd Bienal de La Habana (1989), p. 12.
- 3 Gerardo Mosquera, *El diseño se definió en Octubre* (La Habana, 1989), pp. 31-3.
- 4 Amílcar Cabral, "O papel de cultura na luta pela independencia", in *Obras escolhidas de Amílcar Cabral*, vol. 1 (Lisbon, 1978), pp. 234, 235.
- 5 "Despite all its noble aspirations and achievements, we should acknowledge that the culture of modernity . . . has also been always (but not exclusively) a culture of interior and exterior imperialism." Andreas Huyssen, "Cartográfica de postmodernismo", in Josep Picó (ed.), *Modernidad y postmodernidad* (Madrid, 1988), p. 239.
- 6 In literary theory the first warnings appear with the Russian Zhirmunski (1924); in the *Tesis* of the Linguistic Circle of Prague; in the Russian Konrad (1957); in the French Etiemble (1958); in the Polish Swarczynska (1965); Ingarden and Ossowski (1966). Desiderio Navarro, "Un ejemplo de lucha contra el esquematismo eurocentrista en la ciencia literaria de la America Latina y Europa", *Casa de las Americas*, vol. XXI, no. 122 (La Habana, September-October 1980), pp. 83-5.
- 7 About the double condition of European borders, Western bastion and contact zone, see Leopoldo Zea, *América en la historia* (Mexico and Buenos Aires, 1957), pp. 118-54.
- 8 The processes of transculturation occurred above all in daily life and artistic-literary culture. Western discourse transformed very little within intellectual thought. It is connected with that cultural dichotomy, pointed out by Shuichi Kato, between a native ego and a Western superego, according to Dufrenne. Mikel Dufrenne et al., *Main Trends in Aesthetics and the Sciences of Art* (New York and London, 1979), pp. 37-8.
- 9 Rene Etiemble, *Essais de littérature (vraiment) général* (Paris, 1974), p. 9. The Marxists are in no better a position. For instance, the four volumes of Lukács, under the all-encompassing title *Aesthetics*, do not take a single non-Western work into account. And even worse, the Soviet manuals of literary theory ignored the Oriental literatures of their own country (Desiderio Navarro, "Un ejemplo de lucha", pp. 88-90); and socialist realism

in art and literature was imposed from Western canons. All these are evidence of the Russocentric politics towards other nationalities which, together with other factors, provoked the dismemberment of the union.

- 10 See his testimony in *Made in Habana: Contemporary Art from Cuba* (Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1988), p. 20.
- 11 A critical interpretation of Botero from this perspective can be read in Luis Camnitzer, "Boteros: falsos y auténticos", *Brecha* Montevideo, 16 August 1991, p. 20.
- 12 Joseph Cornet, "African Art and Authenticity", *African Arts*, vol. 9, no. 1 (Los Angeles, 1975), p. 55.
- 13 Nestor García Canclini, "Modernismo sin modernización?", *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, vol. LI, no. 3 (Mexico, July-September 1989), p. 170.
- 14 Mirko Lauer, "Notas sobre plastica, dentidad y pobreza en el tercer mundo", in *Debate Abierto . . .*, pp. 19-27.
- 15 Geeta Kapur, "Tradición y Contemporaneidad", p. 11.
- 16 Nelly Richard, "Latinoamerica y la postmodernidad", *Revista de critica cultural*, Santiago de Chile, vol. 2, no. 3 (April 1991), p. 15. What must be extended to include the whole south is the recognition of Latin America as a "zone of experience (be it called marginalization, dependency, subalternity, decentredness) common to all countries situated at the periphery of the Western dominated model of centred modernity".
- 17 Jorge Luis Borges, "La supersticiosa etica del lector", in his *Páginas escogidas* (La Habana, 1988), p. 105.
- 18 Boris Bernstein, "Algunas consideraciones en relación con el problema 'arte y etnos'", *Criterios*, nos. 5-13 (La Habana, January 1983-December 1984), pp. 266-7.
- 19 Gerardo Mosquera, "Speakeasy", *New Art Examiner*, vol. 17, no. 3 (Chicago, November 1989), pp. 13-14.
- 20 Rodrigo González changed his old Castilian aristocratic name into Rockdrigo, and became one of those who transformed rock into a vehicle of expression of marginal youth and lower classes in Mexico City, by using international rhythms for local ends.
- 21 Rasheed Araeen, "Our Bauhaus, Others' Mudhouse", *Third Text*, no. 6 (London, spring 1989), pp. 3-4; James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern", *Art in America* (April 1985, New York), pp. 164-77, included in *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge and London, 1988); Gerardo Mosquera, "'Primitivismo' y 'contemporaneidad' en jóvenes artistas cubanos", *La revista del sur*, Malmo, vol. 2, no. 3-4 (1985), pp. 52-5 and *Universidad de La Habana*, no. 227 (January-June 1986), pp. 133-9.
- 22 Robert Farris Thompson, "Breakshadow Art (Pasula Klini): Towards an African Reading of 'Modernist Primitivism'", in *Rediscovered Masterpieces of African Art* (Paris, 1988), pp. 65-73.