

Culture and globalisation: international cultural challenges

Keynote speech by Barbara Loyer, at the Hôtel de Région Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, 9.30am, 24th October 2008

I will not attempt to respond here to the question of knowing whether globalisation is a good or bad thing for culture. Instead, I wish to propose a way of tackling the question. The first part of my talk will give a brief overview of what goes by the name of "globalisation", a group of phenomena and interactions on a global scale, by trying to show why thinking about cultural action must take it into account. The second part will focus on the territorial expression of globalisation in its cultural aspects.

1) Globalisation is firstly defined as a set of economic phenomena. We can see it with the major crisis of the international banking system; the interdependence of national economic systems is a glaring reality. This globalisation has accompanied the assertion of the United States' increasing power, and globalisation hence appears to be a rivalry between the most industrialised nations: the United States, the nations of Europe, but also India and China, because globalisation is not only a "Western" reality.

Culture is one of the elements of this global market. The Indian film industry is the most important after the United States¹. Its films are exported worldwide. We also think of Latin-American television series that are exported to a dozen countries where they're adapted to suit national tastes.

This cultural aspect of globalisation poses the problem of the relationship between culture and economic profitability: in 2006 Bouygues Telecom and Microsoft announced their collaboration concerning the progressive incorporation of Microsoft and Windows Media technologies into the musical entertainment options available on Bouygues Telecom cell phones. At what threshold would we pass from culture to a kind of entertainment whose final logic would be that of economic profitability of the agreed-upon investment?

In the philosophical debates of the 17th century, the spiritual man was religious. He castigated the aristocracy's entertainments as much as those of the common folk because they diverted human beings from metaphysical preoccupations. These entertainments of the elites are today nevertheless part of the culture that is readily compared to the dynamic sector of the global economy that is mass entertainment. Is producing or broadcasting Jean-Baptiste Lully the same cultural activity as producing or broadcasting a star of international show business?

Likewise, festivals today often attract audiences defined as "mass": museums, major exhibitions can no longer cope with the crowds, at least in Western Europe. One must reserve a ticket a long time in advance to visit certain sites like the Alhambra in Grenada. We therefore witness a democratisation of culture, which accompanies the growth of the intellectually educated middle classes, parallel to the economic phenomenon of the globalisation of certain cultural products.

The question of the distinction between an elite culture and a mass culture is asked on every continent and these terms should be reassessed according to globalisation. Could "elites" and "masses" not be replaced by "knowledge" and "consumption"? In fact, for a product to be massively consumed, which is to say appreciated by a very large public, the cultural references of this public must be used: Bollywood films are held in high esteem in Muslim countries because they respect some of these references. We therefore wonder if mass consumption, which we could call passive, would not favour a kind of ossification of superficial cultural referents; these would tend to divide people by erasing the internal diversities of large, simplified cultural groups.

But the problem of what should be called consumption is probably more complicated than it appears, and certainly should be reduced entirely to technology: the Internet also allows for the spread of varieties of protest against the recruitment of minds by the power of the market (parodies, non-profit information systems, and above all the extraordinarily free access to all kinds of culture). What are the thresholds that define a globalisation of culture in the economic meaning of the term?

¹ Le Monde 07.10.08

2) Globalisation is also a demographic phenomenon: the growth of international migrations.

Here again, it is not about a phenomenon that only stages a one-to-one encounter between a wealthy "West" and the rest of the world. The migrants of the South to the South are almost as many as those who migrate from the South to the North, and wealthy non-Western countries also exist. The phenomenon of cultural friction, of sharing and of introverted assertion of identities is worldwide.

Migrations are linked to several causes: the transport revolution, the disappearance of the USSR, the demographic deficit of western countries, growing gaps between the revenues of rich and poor countries, but also within countries, be they rich or poor.

The transport revolution enables the creation of consolidated migratory networks (an Afghan citizen who decides to emigrate is virtually sure, whether he goes to Dubai, Karachi, London, New Delhi, Sydney or Washington, to find a community of compatriots who will give him support). In addition, if one's papers are in order, the drop in transport prices allows one to come back and leave again. A large number of countries are now characterised by a culture of migration in which leaving for overseas has become the norm rather than the exception.

For Europe, immigration is the main factor of the EU's demographic growth: the migratory balance would be between 1.5 and 2 million people per year since 2002.

3) Lastly, globalisation is a technical phenomenon.

Everything that has been evoked until now is linked to the technical progress of telecommunications and computing. How can this technical element be integrated into the thinking on culture and globalisation? Should video games, because they only exist in a logic of mass consumption, be analysed in the same section as the other sectors of culture?

At the present time, technology probably makes the geographical limits of cultural groups evolve: Arab satellite television, for example, begins to make the Arabic language develop towards an idiom common to all of the viewers over a very vast space. While the Maghreb was characterised until now by the use of an Arabic language distinct from Middle Eastern Arabic (into which many words of French origin have slipped), this changes progressively under the homogenising influence of television. We would need to be able to assess this phenomenon. It would also be necessary to understand what elements of shared culture are transmitted by television on this scale through the bias of entertainment. Here again arises the question of the difference between culture and entertainment so as to contemplate the distinct agents of what is called culture.

The relationship between culture and television is subtle; Al Jazeera broadcasts in Arabic and English: what cultural references does it broadcast in English? Globalisation by migrations, associated with technical modernity, hence contributes to the development of the anchoring of cultural representations in regions: the link between what we like, or the cultural demand that we express, and the area where it can be found, is less clear than in the past. The diasporas have been multiplied, also leading to a territorial fragmentation of cultural rivalries.

Another example: the debates in France about the post-colonial question are heard and absorbed in Africa by the intellectual elites who listen to both local media and RFI (Radio France Internationale) or French television. In what way does this fit into the definition of modern cultures that are no longer only autochthonous? Mixed influences are as old as the world, but the extent of these intersecting influences is probably new, given the power of modern communication technologies, and it is in this way that they are a crucial element of globalisation; they have an influence on the contents of culture and cultural demand.

Finally, these technologies, associated once again with the migratory phenomenon, also allow evolutions not only of the receivers of works, but of cultural production itself: is not World music an effect of globalisation?

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THE CHALLENGES OF GLOBALISATION

The word “enjeu” is frequently used in French, but it is sometimes difficult to translate.

An “enjeu” is what we could lose or gain, and by extension, what could become of an action or situation.

It is real people who lose or win, in real territories. The challenges and issues must be thought about in their territorial context. The second part of reflection concerns knowing what territory we are speaking about when we deal with the question of the consequences of globalisation on culture and cultural policies.

Europe, for example, is a problematic territory, in the sense that it poses interesting problems. The same thing is not being said, for example, if we speak about the politics of European culture or the European politics of culture.

In the first expression, the objective is to reach a culture common to Europeans. The question arises of languages in which Europeans of different nations and languages could share their cultures and make their references converge. Should a policy of translating cultural works (like the multiple translations of EU documents) be followed, or could we shift to a policy of mass distribution of diverse passive bilingualisms? Europeans would learn to understand the languages neighbouring their own (Romance, Slavic, Germanic languages...), without there being an educational objective to make people reach a level of competence necessary to be able to speak them correctly. The convergence of readers, spectators and listeners capable of understanding diverse languages would doubtlessly have an impact on the economic markets of culture and the perceptions of Europe. But, although we are in the European year of intercultural dialogue, this is probably a utopian vision given that the relation between national languages and the learning of foreign languages remains traditional.

In the second expression, we're instead referring to a policy that should be undertaken to develop diversified cultural creations of Europe, in Europe and outside Europe, despite or thanks to cultural globalisation. It's a matter of targeting financing, of supporting businesses or productions for their potential to emerge in the panorama of the world cultural (cultural or entertainment?) market, particularly when confronted by productions in international languages. It is still a question of the economy of culture, but at a different level of analysis.

But how do we here compare Romania or Hungary with Spain, which is part of a linguistic group of more than 300 million inhabitants? Spanish is not only a linguistic group, it is also a cultural group. Moreover, this is the reason why this space becomes an economic issue of the first degree. It is the telecommunications company Telefónica that will digitise the works held in the Spanish national library (within the framework of the European TEL (The European Library) programme. The digitisation from now until 2012 concerns more than 15,000 manuscripts, 40,000 books from the 18th to 20th centuries, drawings, engravings and photographs, along with the main Spanish and Latin American newspapers conserved at the national library).

The French do not have the same concept when it comes to the French-speaking world: they always relate it back to France and are unfamiliar with the culture of other French-speaking countries. There is no awareness in France of the cultural challenges represented by the great international languages. The English, who should normally rest on their laurels, on the contrary invest a lot of money in spreading their language in Asia. As for Arabic, a fruitful intercultural dialogue would suppose that one would be interested in the culture disseminated today by Arabic, an important international language.

The territories of cultural action where readers, spectators and listeners are found: states, regions, cities.

1) Globalisation is associated with the spreading of the use of a cover-all concept: “identity”. The research into, defence, or illustration of the identity of a person or a group all too often resumes in a highly superficial way the function attributed to culture.

Hence, for example, for twenty years the concept of local power, linked to that of a subsidiary, has found itself accompanied more and more often by the concept of regional identity. Today regions become the privileged agents of cultural action. Cultural policy can find itself attributed, on the one hand, a social function: opening to the greatest number of citizens the paths to knowledge, by the bias of artistic apprenticeship and a supply of cultural events. The criteria of the differentiation of citizens is here their access or lack of access to culture outside of public initiatives. On the other hand, cultural initiative can also fill an identity role, by becoming the vector of political affirmation of a group that wishes to differentiate itself. Both forms are obviously not contradictory as such, except when they must become the object of financial disputes influencing budgets that are frequently limited.

The distance or the relationship between democracy and identity is one of the philosophical and geopolitical problems posed by the regionalisation of cultural policies. The paradigm of diversity must not be an obstacle to thinking about this difficult question.

2) The political territory of reference can also be the city. Globalisation has been accompanied by a phenomenon of massive urbanisation. Immigration counts for a third of urban growth in cities of the developed world. Is the function of cultural policy to speak to these multicultural populations? What cultures is Culture aimed at? Should it foment a culture, and does it contribute to consolidating nations, or regroupings of citizens who share something together?

3) The concept of nation sometimes seems obsolete because of globalisation. But it may be more pertinent, so as to remain near contemporary realities, to think that globalisation makes nations evolve without making them disappear. German literature is now nourished by writers of foreign origins. This has long been the case of French literature, but the new perception of a global world will doubtlessly be based differently with the commitment to the German nation. The nation, particularly when we speak of populations with multiple origins in large cities, is a central cultural reference influenced by the consequences of globalisation. The link between a European policy of culture (and of European culture) and national dynamics should probably not be ignored.

4) To say then that a nation is "hybridised" so as to do away with the question of the relationship between nation and culture is perhaps reductive. When, during a Parisian school fair, children sing the traditional French song "A la claire fontaine" accompanied by maracas, we're speaking of cultural hybridisation.

"Hybridisation" is another great "portmanteau" word that accompanies globalisation; hybridisation is neither good nor bad in the absolute. It is both loss and creation. It is a loss of traditional referents for all traditions, those of the immigrant and those of the host country. The strangers and their hosts are all subjected to this loss that they cannot control and we will find among them, hosts and strangers, people, young and old, who rejoice in this or suffer because of it.

Hybridisation is often acclaimed as a positive reality of globalisation by those who fear the growth of xenophobic political parties. But it is perhaps not a cultural value in of itself; it is neither good nor bad, but merely a very human phenomenon that we see operating in front of our eyes in a far more spectacular manner than fifty years ago.

Contemporary societies are rife with increasingly complex political and cultural rivalries and conflicts precisely because of this great upheaval that is globalisation. Should not a local cultural policy try to open the paths of knowledge of various cultural emotions, which not only bring joy, but are also a form of wisdom?

The national and international challenges must be analysed on different levels of analysis: Vast cultural groups, be they ancient, in construction or to be built, nation states, nations without states, regions, cities.

What matters is to differentiate the issues according to the spaces or territories to which we are referring.

A territory is never a simple reality. Neither is a culture, and this is even more true with globalisation.