

Introduction

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Introduction

Cultures in Contact. In 2000, CNN launched a somewhat megalomaniacal television documentary recapitulating the global history of the past millennium: the *Millennium* series. In ten chapters it sweeps across ten centuries, five continents, and a vast variety of cultures and civilisations: the crew travelled to 28 countries in the course of a two-and-a-half year filming period. The immense quantity of information assimilated in the project is divided into nine fields, including *social contacts, religion, scientific thought, navigation, civilisation, social violence, imagination*, and last but not least, *cultures in contact*. Not only is the series an example of how an American version of global culture encountered various cultures of the world: it also indicates that the contact between cultures has come to be widely recognised as one of the primary factors in the unfolding of human life and history.

What the series can now take for granted as common knowledge has, at least since the national independence of most former colonies, been a regular item on the academic agenda in many fields of the humanities. The awareness of the problematic but also enriching nature of a culturally multifarious world has produced works like Dirk Hoerder's *Cultures in Contact* (2002), a book which writes the history of the world from the perspective of intercultural contact, and is similarly ambitious in scope to the television series. As globalisation forges ahead, the focus of academic interest has started to oscillate between the particularities of the local and regional contact between ethnic, national and social groups and the idea of a comprehensive global culture.

Under the pressure of globalisation, cultural varieties have shifted, or lost ground, become immobile in defending it, or adapted themselves successfully, often by permeating each other's boundaries. Similar developments have taken place between the cultures of academic disciplines. As a result both of economic pressure and new cognitive challenges like the culture turn, diverse disciplinary cultures have either withdrawn, sulking, into their own corners, or, breaking down rigid boundaries, have moved more closely to each other. This has given rise to a host of new specialities, on the one hand, while on the other, the

adoption of the same research objectives and methods in different fields has resulted in a much looser disciplinary specificity--discourse analysis may be one example. Even though specialisation has been fiercer than ever, a shared interest in *culture* seems to manifest itself in the humanities, as, to put it boldly, a “pan-disciplinary” academic culture.

Even the notion of culture, which has been used in such an uncritical fashion so far, has proved to be controversial, and this volume does not attempt to make any authoritative statement on it. Its aim is rather to create a contact zone in which various notions can meet and interact. As the call for papers on which this volume is based put it:

That cultures exist in and through contact has been axiomatic in our disciplines for some time. One of the purposes of the conference is to take stock of existing paradigms for the discussion of such contact [...] and to attempt an overview that will place them in juxtaposition and “contact,” rather than viewing them as self-contained approaches.

This volume presents a small selection of the papers read at the 2005 Basel conference on “Cultures in Contact,” organised by SAUTE (the Swiss Association of University Teachers of English), a conference which provided a picture of the direction in which the discipline(s) of English has/have recently been moving both with regard to the study of cultural contact and to disciplinary cultures. Unfortunately, for reasons definitely beyond the editors’ control, papers on linguistic topics are not as well represented as those from the areas of literary and cultural studies.

The first two contributions consider fundamental aspects of *Cultures in Contact*. Arif Dirlik, discussing the definition of *China*, proposes abandoning such traditional categories as *nation* and *civilisation* and reformulating cultural epistemologies from the point of view of contact zones. Roger D. Sell, using examples from English literature, reminds us of the humanities’ obligation to mediate between cultures.

More particular issues are presented by Robin Blyn and Danièle Klapproth. Blyn returns to the debate’s inception in anthropology and discusses the double bind involved in the implementation of cultural relativism, which inevitably re-creates a haunting universalist paradigm. Klapproth identifies culturally different techniques and objectives of Western versus Australian Aboriginal storytelling, offering an example of how ethno-linguistics navigates the cliffs of universalism.

In literary criticism the interest in instances of *cultures in contact* has been increasing constantly and has moved into areas that can no longer be subsumed under postcolonial studies, where such issues have traditionally been dealt with. Patrick H. Vincent illustrates the clash of literary and scientific cultures using the example of Henry David Thoreau and Louis Agassiz, *homme de lettres* and observer of nature versus a scientist with a static view of natural creation.

In the field of narrative, two contributions explore the representation of cultural contact in cinema; at the same time they epitomise the contact between two different academic perspectives, the literary critic's and the linguist's: Michael C. Prusse discusses three related accounts of cultural contact: E. M. Forster's *Passage to India*, David Lean's controversial film version of the novel, and Jhumpa Lahiri's implicit commentary on Forster in her short story *Interpreter of Maladies*. Lukas Bleichenbacher, on the other hand, analyses the use of foreign languages in Hollywood movies as a means of representing other cultures; and its possible effect on viewers.

Literature is moving from an interest in *cultures in contact* as a conflicting or empowering interpenetration of different ethnic and cultural groups to one transcending such a position, beyond hybridity and political utopia. From Mara Cambiagli's analysis it emerges, that the narrator in Brooke-Rose's autobiographical novel *Remake* is not polarised and caught up between two cultural identities but, much more, grapples with a culturally multiple personal history. And Susanne Pichler documents how the protagonist in Hanif Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia* relaxes control over his cultural identity while his cosmopolitan contemporaries engage in consumerist mimicry of ethnic and cultural roles. And finally, from the perspective of literary criticism, Hartwig Isernhagen maintains that satire can help not only to overcome the intercultural misunderstandings that often emerge in the vicinity of political correctness, but also to symbolise and thus control the often unspoken but pressing abhorrence of unacceptable cultural practices in cultures not one's own.

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