

## **Conference Report on "Peripheral Modernities". II Lisbon Summer School for the Study of Culture**

The Lisbon Consortium.

Faculdade de Ciências Humanas, Universidade Católica Portuguesa  
MUDE (Fashion and Design Museum), Faculdade de Ciências Humanas/UCP, Maritime Station of Alcântara, Orient Museum, Lisbon, Portugal, July 8 – 15, 2012.

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## Conference Report on "Peripheral Modernities". II Lisbon Summer School for the Study of Culture

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The II Lisbon Summer School, structured by the theme "Peripheral Modernities", offered a highly interesting cultural studies program in the heart of Lisbon. It was hosted by the Lisbon Consortium under the direction of ISABEL CAPELOA GIL. In the call for papers, the conference's organizers sought theoretical and empirical works "from all fields of the humanities and the social sciences that consider modernity or modernism as other, diverse, fluid, translocal, plural, polycentric and alternative". Over thirty international doctoral students presented and discussed their research projects, worked together in two master classes and listened to eleven keynote lectures held by professors from ten different countries. Accordingly, presentations covered a wide range of topics and disciplinary backgrounds including art, musicology, literary studies, history, sociology and cultural studies.

Here are some highlights of this very rich program:

### Peripheral Discourses

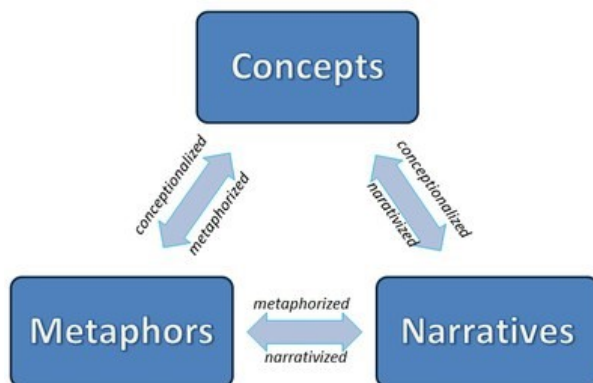
The first keynote lecture was held by ROBERTO VECCHI (University of Bologna) on the "Periphery as a Work: Eccentric Modernities and Luso-tropical Rearrangements". Luso-tropicalism, a term introduced by sociologist Gilberto Freyre, refers to the notion that Portugal was a more humane colonizer than other European nations. According to Vecchi, it is epistemologically fake, and his talk negated the notion of a regime of uniqueness. Vecchi's

talk applied theoretical concepts to Brazilian, Portuguese and African cultures as it covered (1) a general framework for considering a peripheral conceptual axis, (2) the notion of multiple dimensions, which entails not merely dealing with the periphery as a form, and (3) an epistemological analysis of the production of peripheries. Addressing the case of Portugal, Vecchi argued for using, or reusing, postcolonial discourse. According to Vecchi, the world works and produces multiple temporalities with the periphery as a multiplied space. Open dimensions of prospects and limits illustrate multiple meanings of the term 'culture'. These meanings are an ideological battlefield. Vecchi described the Portuguese modern periphery as a mixture of competing facts that encompass complex identities of the Atlantic and Europe. Here, Vecchi also addressed what he called the "semiperiphery." The sociological definition of the semiperiphery implies a particular modernity, such as that which occurred at the end of Portuguese colonization in 1975. Modernist techniques began to move to colonized spaces that formed their own, particular modernities. Vecchi also discussed a double colonialism concerning Brazil, which involved the transformation of space at different points in time and different places throughout history: a double re-territorialization, for example, inscribes Africa as a new Brazil. Semantic effects follow, such as the shifting of the general to the particular. This highly insightful, complex talk covered a lot of territory, both theoretical and geographical.

Shifting from European-Atlantic peripheries to those of the United States, one of the first presentations was by PhD-candidate ELIZABETH KOVACH (University of Giessen) entitled "Modern Misery: Alternatives to American Modernity and Modernism in Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*". In her depiction of poverty in 1920s America, Tillie Olsen provides an alternative perspective to American modernity and modernism, one in which dominant paradigms of modernity – progress, self-definition, rationalism – are thrown into question. Olsen herself was poor and uneducated when she wrote the novel at age nineteen. Her characters, members of a coal-mining family, follow a declining trajectory, and their powerlessness even limits the autonomy of their thoughts. Kovach depicted *Yonnondio* as hybrid text that fuses modernist stream of consciousness with stark realism. The novel is at once poetic and programmatic. Kovach also presented the novel as a narrative equivalent to Walker Evans's depression-era photos, of which she shared examples. Kovach argued that *Yonnondio* re-inscribes themes of modernity and forms of modernism into a text that negates, redefines and hybridizes them. She drew upon Homi Bhabha's notion of postcolonial "contramodernity" and Paul Gilroy's similar concept of "countercultures of modernity" to show how *Yonnondio* fits into this theoretical scheme in its depiction of white American poverty. The presentation concluded with a viewing of Tobias Zielony's contemporary photos of Trona, California, a former mining town that has been devastated by current financial conditions. This led to a closing discussion about the project of modernity and how issues of poverty are just as urgent within its discourse as they were almost a century prior. As conference participants then moved between lectures and paper sessions, the conference's key terms, "modernity" and "periphery", travelled with them, shifting in meaning among topics and disciplines...

## The Modern Question

In their master class "Travelling Concepts, Metaphors and Narratives for the Study of Culture: Coming to Terms with Peripheries, Modernities and other Key Concepts", VERA NÜNNING (University of Heidelberg) and ANSGAR NÜNNING (University of Giessen) shared their expertise on the tools of academic discourse. The workshop commenced with a discussion of key questions, including: What happens when concepts, metaphors and narratives travel across (disciplinary and national) boundaries? What is the relationship between concepts, metaphors and narratives in the interdisciplinary contact zone? An introductory lecture then included the presentation of a diagram in which concepts, metaphors and narratives each occupied a corner of a triangle:



Two-way arrows between each of the terms indicated the flux they undergo. Concepts tend to become metaphors when they move from one discipline to the next, metaphors become narrativized, narratives are conceptualized, and so forth. The term 'crisis', for example, is metaphorical within the field of medicine yet has been conceptualized within the fields of economics and mathematics. Ansgar Nünning traced the origins of the notion of 'travelling concepts', mentioning Edward Said's essay "Travelling

Theory" (1983) related to the history of science, James Clifford's "Notes on Travel and Theory" (1989), and Mieke Bal's *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (2002). More recent contributions have been Birgit Neumann and Frederik Tygstrup's *Travelling Concepts in English Studies* (2009) and Sibylle Baumbach, Beatrice Michaelis and Ansgar Nünning's *Travelling Concepts, Metaphors and Narratives. Literary and Cultural Studies in an Age of Interdisciplinary Research* (2012). Workshop participants pinpointed key terms circulating within their own research projects and discussed both the pitfalls and promises of travelling concepts: imprecision, reduction of meaning, misunderstanding, mythmaking and Euro- or America-centrism on the one hand, and innovation, pluralization, inter- and transdisciplinarity, chance, demystification, collaboration, heuristic value, and the generation of new research fields on the other hand. Vera Nünning led a lively discussion of the Lisbon Summer School's key topics – namely, 'peripheries' and 'modernities'. Participants discussed the implications of these traveling concepts within the study of culture and reconstructed the journeys of these and other travelled concepts, metaphors and narratives.

Equipped with new insights into the conference's concepts, participants explored 'the modern question' by attending various paper sessions. These included PhD-candidate LEANOR SÁ's (Catholic University of Lisbon) presentation on "Early Crime Identification Photography (in Portugal): a Mark in Modernity and its Obsessions with Taxonomy, Visual Culture and

Surveillance". She discussed the use of photography in indentifying criminals, a practice with a long and fascinating history that began in the 1850s at the Préfecture de Police de Paris. French police officer Alphonse Bertillon used photography to develop an index of physical features that were purportedly tied to criminality. This index was used internationally by the 1890s and exemplified a widespread surveillance of the periphery via an obsession with the visual, taxonomy and social control. From today's perspective, one can say that these portraits of criminals catalogue marginalized populations. By sharing a wealth of images and historical information about this chapter in modern history, Sá presented an archive of modernity that exposed an anxiety surrounding the modern project.

### Peripheral Modernisms and Modern (Con)tensions

The program proceeded under the headings 'peripheral modernisms' and 'modern contensions', which included discussions of both aesthetic and societal modernisms. Keynote lecturer XIAOMEI CHEN (University of California Davis) presented "Staging Chinese Communist Revolution in Post Socialist China", an amazing mix of film, history and performance analysis. She described the 1964 music and dance epic



The East is Red of the Maoist period as well as performance pieces staged during the Chinese revolution and within the period of capitalism's restoration. The East is Red epic can be seen as a notebook of party history, a lasting piece of political theater that constructed a notion of origin and teleology. It also provided a platform for artists to collaborate with the ruling ideology. Claimed as a "sister epic" to The East is Red, the song of the Chinese revolution challenged its predecessor's narrative of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) history with new research on party history. Chen showed video clips of mass dancing scenes and mass posing scenes choreographed to represent the 80-year Chinese revolution. The power and danger of performing arts and its potential to both collaborate with and challenge the status quo were manifested in the evolutionary stories of the 'red' classics in question.

Moving from mainstream performing arts to the marginal, ADIEL PORTUGALI (University of Tel Aviv) presented a combination of theoretical thoughts and musical examples related to "Marginal Sounds: The Story of Jazz in China". To illustrate his research, he asked three questions: (1) Why Jazz? (2) Why marginal? (3) Why does it matter? He then illustrated core/periphery dynamics of jazz in China. In the early 1920s, jazz entered the scene in Shanghai with Victor Sasson. In 1976, jazz reappeared in China and has come to be known as 'yellow jazz'. The fundamental qualities of jazz (improvisation, rhythms, no lyrics) are universal. But 'yellow jazz' crosses particular ethno-musical borders and identities. Jazz gets no attention from academia, media or authorities in China. Jazz culture is mainly manifested

as anonymous and peripheral. Portugali also explored the idea of landscapes as soundscapes, noting the differences between jazz in Peking and Shanghai.



Continuing with a different kind of Chinese modernism, PhD-candidate BEATRIZ PUERTAS HERNANDÉS (Catholic University of Lisbon) presented her project "Embodying Modernities in China since the Early Twentieth Century: the Lure of Tradition, the Lure of Progress". She analyzed 1920s and 30s images – often those used in advertisements and calendars – of Chinese women in the public sphere. These images reveal both the lure of tradition and the lure

of progress. Women's bodies symbolized a space of social change. They also represented Shanghai, which was a kind of center for the far-east 'periphery'. The subjects of these images were often women of the social periphery, i.e. not high-class models but rather actresses and prostitutes. Hernandés concluded with her thesis that these kinds of images contain a hybridism of artistic styles that straddle often contradictory ideas.

The highly feminized, commercial imagery shown by Hernandés came into stark contrast with the abstract structures shown by PhD student SANJA HORVATINCIC (University of Zadar) in a talk entitled "The Peculiar Case of Spomeniks. Monumental Commemorative Sculpture in Former Yugoslavia between Invisibility and Popularity". She introduced the term of 'spomenik' as officially known as an "architectural or sculptural work dedicated to the memory of meritorious people and important historical events" built during Tito's regime. She shared images of spomeniks, which are colossal, other-worldly sculptural forms. She defined them as visualizations of both victims and perpetrators. Horvatincic's research analyzes contemporary internet and blog commentaries dedicated to spomeniks. She suggests that spomeniks place the position of the power on the periphery, because they are often found in the middle of nowhere, in fields and forests, which makes their appearance often unexpected and disturbing. Horvatincic posits that a lack of public interest, political will and intellectual interest in spomeniks indicates an avoidance of dealing with the former regime.

Among several talks focused on aesthetic modernisms, GCSC PhD-candidate JENNIFER CH. MÜLLER (University of Giessen) shifted gears by inciting a discussion about the state of higher education in terms of 'modernity' and 'periphery'. Her talk, entitled "The Bologna Process between German Tradition and Transnational Modernity" traced the travelling concept of 'Bildung' at different points in Germany's history by elaborating three key moments of transformation: (1) the



founding of the first comprehensive university in Prussia around 1800 (classicism), (2) the university after 1945 in Germany (critical theory), (3) the university in today's Federal Republic of Germany since the Bologna Process's commencement in 1999. Referring to Immanuel Kant and Wilhelm von Humboldt, she explained classical concepts of 'Bildung' under the spearhead of enlightenment at the university. She shed light on the link between the nation and educational policy. Higher education was seen as an entity that fulfilled an important, consolidating role within the German nation state. Critical theory pleads for 'Bildung' to facilitate political and democratic awareness necessary for resisting authoritarian tendencies. Müller then described the turning point in higher education that the Bologna Process brought about, which involved overcoming national boundaries. She noted that, given the fact that the German term of 'Bildung' is not completely translatable into other languages, it is not astonishing that this concept remains bound to the national boundaries of the German nation state. Müller discussed the transformation of Germany's higher education into a system focused primarily on profitability and employability. She ultimately concluded that the current German university represents a mix of the traditional – and, thereby, peripheral – German, nation-oriented concept of 'Bildung' as well as transnational modernity. German educational tradition has become a peripheral modernity.

## Modern Projects



The last day of lectures included WOLFGANG HALLET's (University of Giessen) presentation on "The Invention of the Modern Western City in Graphic Fiction". He introduced the city as a creative, mental image, elaborating his hypothesis by discussing (1) the city, modernity and modernism, (2) the grid, (3) the figures in the grid and (4) modernist peripheries. Hallet understands images as narratives or moments within narratives. He presented the woodcut images of Frans Masereel's *The City* and Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo* in *Slumberland* comic strip, which both deal with human experience and existence within new urban landscapes at the beginning of 20th century. One can observe continual juxtapositions between the individual and the geometric superstructure of the city. Referring to Michel Foucault's notion of the 'panopticon' and Walter Benjamin's notion of the 'flaneur', Hallet discussed the grid as a kind of colonization technique in which the city becomes a text, structure and map. The impulse for a totalizing view not only relates to power but also to the subject's desire for self-reflective contemplation of his/her placement and significance within the space of the city. Hallet turned to the present by discussing *In the Shadow of No Towers* by Art Spiegelman. Spiegelman's art constructs the periphery into an urban centre. With each example, one can observe the visual negotiation of centre and periphery.

## Claiming the Modern in Multiple Ways

The II Lisbon Summer School provided participants with the opportunity to discuss their research with international peers from a variety of subject backgrounds. Professors were a constant source of productive feedback for the students. Within the inspiring atmosphere of a breathtaking city, the Lisbon Consortium not only offered an impressive academic program but also countless cultural experiences that included a performance by legendary director Robert Wilson, a visit to the spectacular studio of contemporary artist Joana Vasconcelos, a private tour of the Oriental Museum and much more. The conference embodied the disparate, varied nature of modernity and modernism in a variety of ways: in the internationality of participants, in the range of topics covered, in the places participants visited and connections (theoretical and professional) that were made. It was, therefore, highly successful in achieving its aim of addressing, as the call for papers states, "the multiple ways in which the modern has been claimed".