



THE LIMITATIONS OF THEORY

A Response to Ulrich Reichardt's
"Theories of the Global, Global Literature,
and American Literature in a Globalizing Age"

As a former theorist myself, I know the difficulties of working on the conceptual and ideological aspects inherent in the use of such words as "the world" and "the global," and I appreciate Reichardt's effort at providing a model of a world caught up in globalizing processes. I also consider his distinction between world literature, global literature, and literature of globalization very useful, for it provides a guideline when approaching texts that focus on globalization and its consequences. I believe, however, that in different ways all literature is world-building and not only the texts that explicitly create imaginary or possible worlds.

Reichardt's association of the US with a future-directed time-arrow also provides an important perspective. In his contribution, he rightly calls attention to the future *telos* characterizing American culture, a *telos*, however, that ends up affecting the rest of the world (for the cultural roots of post-World War II active planning of World Futures in the US, see Williams). If I understand it correctly, his thesis is that American culture is an unavoidable mirror image and the carrier of social, political and artistic patterns capable of offering the rest of the world a preview of what will happen to them. The US, then, stands for a future-oriented present, while the rest of the world, lagging behind, will be made to catch up with it, gradually or abruptly in different locations. As a consequence, globalization seems to be the necessary future of a world built in the image of that quintessential *mise-en-abyme* which the United States of America offers to the world. And if America is the world's Manifest Destiny, then the world can

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be conceived, or imagined, as an amplified version of US America, produced by the globalizing processes it has been promoting for over a century.

Reichardt's German-centered theoretical construction, however, betrays its idealistic limit as well as its potential. For indeed, the red thread that runs through it, connecting German idealism and US culture *via* transcendentalist philosophy, is clearly detectable. The word "kosmos," in his text, links the German Alexander Von Humboldt to Walt Whitman's "A Passage to India" and to an image of the world as a unity produced by communication and transportation technology. Whitman's geography is over and under-wired with cables that smooth its asperities and connect peoples around the globe, wiping out barriers, borders and differences, to produce a future in which women and men are not only put in contact but also find cohesion, and perhaps perpetual peace.

Whitman's idealizing picture also offers the ground on which to build a critique not so much of his non-problematic and American-centered globalizing future but of the pacifying, optimistic version of economic and cultural globalization that carefully hides the agents and the role human agency plays in it while obliterating geographical, cultural, and economic differences and power struggles. If anything, it magnifies the gap existing between idealized and real worlds.

Perhaps it would help the debate if, before entering into more detail, we could reconsider the words "world" and "globalization" from a different, less idealistic angle. From my perspective, the world is not "a field of possibilities" that can only be grasped "as a sequence of observations." Before we are able to grasp it and its possibilities, we have to come to terms with it as the material reality we are born into. The world is both the biosphere that allows us to live as human animals and the semiosphere that nourishes us as social and thinking sentient beings (Lotman) and as agents interacting with one another and with the ecosphere. The world precedes us and forms us before we form or "project" an image of it. The word "world," then, stands for the totality that makes the individual experience of the world possible. While dependent on the cultural place we are rooted in, such an experience is built by a mind that can create or reconstruct a map of the whole

out of partial images accumulated and deployed along our biological and historical life (Damasio).

“Globalization,” on the other hand, can be abstracted to “a cognitive pattern” only at great cost. As a word that maps part of our experience of the world, it is a composite that refers not only to a state of things or to a spherical object (the globe) but to an overall process, or to a series of processes. It implies, as well, the existence of an agent or number of agents who start the process, anticipate or plan it with definite aims, and/or create the technology and the tools that make it possible. As a process, moreover, it includes a time-dimension. Speed, after all, is one of the disruptive factors of today’s globalization. Furthermore, with agents come not only world-views but also power-struggles.

It follows that if we agree with Reichardt that “globalization” means condensation of the world and intensification of the consciousness of the world as a whole, and if complexity theory offers the best model to conceptualize “globalization,” and the word “network” provides the most suitable metaphor for a focus on relation and a dynamic way of thinking, then, what this picture leaves out is the agent(s) and ways of globalization, and it thus hides conflict as well as consensus. For agents do not always produce “globalization” in a caring way.

We have not only systems but also both size and power asymmetry among them. Power asymmetry produces both connections and disconnections, as Fredric Jameson has shown (see “Notes on Globalization” quoted by Reichardt), and the constant friction between standardization, forced integration, and the fight for plurality and diversity of conceptions of the good (Mouffe).

To conclude, I would like to point out that theory thrives in abstraction. What happens when it is confronted with actual people or literary/cultural texts rather than with other theories? What happens when we move from the general to the particular? What happens when we put English as a global language side by side with the other languages? What happens when languages encroach one upon the other? What happens when within the same geo-political context myths and symbols, beliefs and lifestyles, brought together by colonialism and rapid globalization, conflict, as they are doing now in Europe, or in the US, either in a peace-

ful way, or through more violent and life-threatening modes? What if barriers and borders are re-built that had been canceled by the American-led economic construction of a globalization that discounted the conflict that hegemonic power systems, or states, inevitably create?

It's crucial also to consider these questions.

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