INCOMMUNICADO? CROSS-DISCIPLINARY DIALOGUE AND THE QUEST FOR THE HUMANITIES IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

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Abstract: The paper examines the state of interdisciplinarity within the humanities as it profiles itself at the current juncture in global times. Taking a broad theoretical view, I seek to observe here the intersections between the condition of the subject and the condition of globality, with a view to formulating a radical critique of the nature of this exchange. As framework of analysis, I make use of global theory, engaging among other the global learning environment in the hope to lay bare some of the mechanisms informing the structure of the new knowledge formations. Looking at digital literacy, overcommunication and information overload as defining traits of global knowledge, I stake a position that situates excess, disjuncture and miscommunication at the heart of global literacy. While skeptical of some of the emergent, 'online' cognitive niches and alliances, I make a case for the continuing indeed increasing relevance of the humanities in the age of social networks.

Keywords: humanities; cross-disciplinarity; post-disciplinary; globality; overcommunication; miscommunication; global theory; global literacy; cognitive niche; social networks; information overflow.

Desperate times call for limit theories, ours being no exception. Conceptualising the humanities against the backdrop of the general mood of apocalypticism that characterizes global times may prove a lesser task than any of the similar endeavors in recent culture history. In this day and age marred by every conceivable scenario of disaster from nuclear Armageddon to ecological shocks and economic breakdowns, that has seen the 'destructive capacity of hypermodernity' (Virilio) unfolding in full swing, thinking the precarious condition of the humanities, will perhaps appear 'inglorious', anachronistic even. In the face of the multiple imminent threats to civilization plaguing global society, the crisis of the humanities is redundant at best and only pays to interrogate as part of the general morass of the hypermodern project of capitalist globalization. Dazzling though they may be, in the grand scheme of it all, the Baudrillard or Žižek forms of cultural critique, castigating or appraising the aesthetics or 'textuality' of catastrophe, feel rather inconsequential, as mere exercises in semiotics. For, whereas media spectacles and media critical literacy are central to it, it is difficult to see the continuing relevance of self-referentiality and of processes of symbolization to the current scene of global humanities. On the one hand, the limitations are to do with the new horizons of trans- or cross-disciplinarity in post/9 11 context that call for rationales of the global cultural logic and hence for a more integrative framework of reference. On the other, the difficulty lies in the nature of the model. Accounting for the limits methodologically challenges scholars to adopt

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new analytical and descriptive categories that would not simply address but also explode the boundaries of the discipline.

John Brockman, editor, literary agent and a prominent figure of the avant-garde artworld, invited an unlikely exploration of the 'edge of world's knowledge' and the relation between the arts and cutting edge science, which has provided fresh ways of looking at the global humanities. Founder of the non-profit Edge Foundation, Inc. and of Edge.org, Brockman set out to gather the most brilliant minds on the planet, and challenged them to reflect on the 'scenarios that keep scientists awake at night', in so doing, addressing 'the edge question'. "Throughout history, Brockman observes, only a small number of people have done the serious thinking for everybody" (edge.org). A champion of multidisciplinarity, author of some 40 books, pop publicist, curator, film programmer and producer, Brockman saw himself as a 'mover and shaker' of culture that epitomized the condition of global postdisciplinarity. Working in a diversity of modes of experimentalism, he sought to be a catalyst to intellectual debate and created the Edge platform to pool knowledge across the disciplines. Bringing together representatives of a wealth of knowledge, from quantum physicists to genome researchers and a whole range of 'cyber elite', Edge.org instantiates Brockman's concept of 'Third Culture', i.e. a site of undivided, unpolarised knowledge, that redeems the 'dissociation of sensibility', between intellect and feeling, scientific and literary knowledge, once deplored by T.S. Eliot. Mindful of knowledge exchange in the digital era, Brockman detected the limitations of the notion of counterculture, and went on to coin the term 'intermedia' in an attempt to look beyond 'alarmist rhetoric', chronic uncertainty, and the 'triumph of the virtual' endemic to the global condition. He wrote: "I look to those who through their empirical work are changing the nature of ourselves and reality, whether they are scientists or not … people who are using technology and new communications ideologies to radically reboot the whole idea of human communication" (http://edge.org/conversation/ever-Brockman).

Utopian in their drive, Brockman's exploits strike one as erratic and lacking in coherent unity, illustrating in many respects the two dominants of the global "imaginary": deep-seated fragmentariness and easy interconnectedness, sectarianism and internationalism. For a theory of global knowledge to do justice to the new knowledge formations the global condition has engendered, it needs to take stock of the limitations of our current theoretical methodologies, universalism being one of them:

I use the term globalism specifically to refer to the contemporary discourse that indexically equates "global" and "globalization" with free market capitalism and its technologies, ideologies, institutions and products. Let me be clear on this point. Whereas global and globalization could be used simply to describe scale and universalist projects, respectively, without denoting a particular phenomenon or the project's success, they are increasingly being appropriated as terms to naturalize the spread of a particular economic-political-cultural complex. (Turino 53/4)

As Thomas Turino argues in the above, the tendency to legitimize globalization as a natural project, the logical consequence of late capitalism, and attribute all large scale phenomena a global purport, points to a discourse whose underlying ideological content is quite explicit. The very tendency to collapse globalization and globality and use the terms interchangeably, to denote inescapable economic and cultural processes, begs the question: what

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is at stake in the globalist discourse? Unpacking globalization and globalism is therefore the chief prerequisite for the reconsideration of theoretical assumptions about global knowledge:

It is not a coincidence that the discourse of globalism came into academic vogue in the United States during the 1990s, in step with the "defeat of communism" in the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (see Robertson 1990:16). During the cold war, Soviet/Chinese communism and American/ European/Japanese capitalism were the two leading contenders for creating trans-state social orders. With one contender severely weakened, the contemporary discourse of globalism emerged in the political, corporate, journalistic and academic spheres both as a victory song and, dialectically, to ideologically naturalize the increasing reach of cosmopolitan capitalism. (Turino 54)

The 'situated' character of globalism and Academia's vested interest in cultivating it, of which Turino raises awareness, calls into question the emancipatory potential of the contemporary humanities, its capacity for generating an ongoing debate around the manifestations of the global. For, not only has globalist discourse been nurtured by and adopted wholesale in academic circles, but it is embedded in the very structures of academic discursive practices. Talk of 'internationalism', 'connectivity', 'heterogenisation' and 'homogenisation', of 'deterritorialisation' and 'glocalisation' has indeed become an integral part of an inflected academic jargon, one that has so far done little to interrogate how these concepts have been universalized and naturalized in public discourse. Clearly a great deal of the ideas humanists and social scientists have helped proliferate within the globalist discourse are received ideas that fail for the larger part to engage the emergent cultural formations, the tensions and contradictions at work in the so-called 'globalization of culture'. These positions, the sum total of 'half-digested' truths about globality, conveniently take the global-local dichotomy for granted, embracing as ineluctable the reality of trans-national cultures, often under the banner of what is clearly misconstrued interdisciplinarity. This brings one to the condition of global interdisciplinarity, in itself subject to considerable misconceptions and false assumptions. Proponents of interdisciplinary knowledge as constitutive of the condition of globality commend interdisciplinarity as a welcome mode of communication in an otherwise divided disciplinary landscape, bridging the cultural divide in the contemporary world of learning. To say that 'communication' is an umbrella term may read like the understatement of the early twenty first century. A much abused concept, perhaps second only to "culture" in terms of proliferation in scholarly and public discourse, communication is in dire need of deconstruction and 'rescuing' from the heap of platitudinous attributes thrown upon it. In the age of social networks, the saturated, inflationary status of communication cannot be stressed enough. Not only have the all-inclusive descriptions and acceptations in which it has been employed emptied the semantic content of the term, but with the rise of social networks, communication yields best to negative descriptions, in terms of absence or excess. Indeed derivate notions such as 'overcommunication' and 'miscommunication' seem to encapsulate the global 'communicative scene' far better. In the era of instant communication, webinars and blogging, communication is, ironically increasingly dysfunctional or unavailable. Excess breeds either excess or absence. Internet addiction, one of the latest maladies of the digital age, leaves one autistically entrapped in and emotionally attached to all things online, one's mobile phone above all. A new pathology, 'nomophobia', or

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internet addiction disorder seems to have made the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric Association. Although no different in symptomatology than other types of anxiety, the neurotic fear of being out of mobile contact reach may appear innocuous, 'trendy' even, causing no alarm, except it affects a third of the global population. Along with it, describing the resulting *incommunicado* reality, a new word has entered English (or shall we say 'Globish') vocabulary: "puzzled," a coinage of "puzzled" and "pissed," denoting the frustration one experiences at one's interlocutor's dropping a live talk in order to engage in an endless mobile phone conversations, check his/her email or latest Facebook postings.

In an impactful, recent date study, American journalist and psychologist Daniel Goleman offers an insightful examination of the ways in which living in a 'virtually friendly,' saturated world affects our emotional and social intelligence, with particular emphasis on how it alters our capacity for focalisation and the quality of attention (2013). Goleman's theory is fully corroborated by the findings of web psychologists. The digitally 'born and bred' individual is an emotionally and psychologically impaired one, the site of brand new neuronal pathologies. As well as inducing addition, digital technology has dramatically altered our perception of time, rendering us pathologically restless and impatient. In the age of the "quarter-second rule," inevitably, we all suffer from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder:

Research on web users makes it clear that this is a general phenomenon. Back in 2006, a famous study of online retailing found that a large percentage of online shoppers would abandon a retailing site if its pages took four seconds or longer to load. In the years since then, the so-called Four Second Rule has been repealed and replaced by the Quarter of a Second Rule. Studies by companies like Google and Microsoft now find that it takes a delay of just 250 milliseconds in page loading for people to start abandoning a site. "Two hundred fifty milliseconds, either slower or faster, is close to the magic number now for competitive advantage on the Web," a top Microsoft engineer said in 2012. To put that into perspective, it takes about the same amount of time for you to blink an eye […]. As we experience faster flows of information online, we become, in other words, less patient people. But it's not just a network effect. The phenomenon is amplified by the constant buzz of Facebook, Twitter, texting, and social networking in general. Society's "activity rhythm" has never been so harried. Impatience is a contagion spread from gadget to gadget. (Carr, online article)

In a masterstroke of irony, the more reliant global individual is on technology, the more technology incapacitates him/her, rendering him/her incapable, cognitively as well as emotionally. Indeed, according to Goleman, in global times, humanity finds itself in danger of losing its very essence: the capacity to feel emotion, immersed as one is in one's own private iPad/iPhone. Today, Goleman notes, we are faced with an unprecedented stage in the history of humanity: as a new reality encroaches upon us, for the first time in the history of humankind, humans are more in touch with machines than with fellow beings. This says a great deal about the state of "communication' and the degree of 'interaction' today indeed, about its obverse side, i.e. utter disconnection.

To return to the ethos around global knowledge, here, too, one needs to distinguish among the various forms of disciplinary dialogue: interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinarity, pluridisciplinarity, transcidisplinarity, a distinction which is rarely aptly traced. In general, interdisciplinarity is taken to mean import of elements of knowledge from different fields, and is used by extension with reference to all types of knowledge interfacing. The nature of the

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exchange, as well as its distinct areas of applications, is under-researched. Thus, 'easy' global 'interdisciplinarians' often extrapolate research or methodology to confect a notion of interdisciplinary knowledge as a comprehensive, contiguous 'pool of ideas' conducive to enhanced creativity and innovation. Mostly, however it is multi- or pluridisciplinary modes of exchange which are extolled and envisaged rather than inter- or transdisciplinary ones. What these 'holistic' approaches fail to factor in is the theoretical frameworks and ideological assumptions underpinning transdisciplinary cognitive models. Key to the distinction, it seems to me, is the methodological component, or else, the degree to which knowledge across disciplines is offered multiple applications based on mutually informing methodologies. As well as this, a marked discrepancy is taking shape between what articulates itself as a discourse of interdisciplinarity --a project whereby a great deal of lip service is indiscriminately paid to borderline knowledge -- and the actual experience of interdisciplinarity as felt and practiced in academic departments. Ideologically laden, much like multiculturalism in its heyday, interdisciplinar*ism*, i.e. this discourse on interdisciplinarity whose rhetoric is quite transparent, empowers global knowledge with a potential for transculturation hardly seen at work. For whereas in general research and education contexts interdisciplinarity is generally applauded, in highbrow academic settings, where compartmentalization and specialization are still dominant, and where narrow specialism is still the over guiding, defining principle, interdisciplinary practices more often than not pass for 'exotic' undertakings at best, dilettantism at worst. As one of Brockman's interlocutors at Edge.org intimates:

We're living in a world in which no one can be an expert on everything; there's too much to know. So the idea of being very broad is no longer an appropriate model — everyone's going to have limitations. Somehow, we've set out these limitations. The ultimate one — the one society cannot put up with — is that you don't know the classics. Mortimer Adler, the head of the *Britannica* editorial board, says the same thing. We've argued a lot about the "great books." He's had a list of the great books printed; they're very interesting books, but the fact of the matter is that they leave out almost all of what we've learned in the last hundred years. (Roger Shanck, edge.org)

It is my strong belief that if humanities is to reset itself as a global discipline and move with the times, it will have to incorporate the various forms of cross-disciplinarity intrinsic to globality at a deeper level. Rather than creating false alliances, liaisons and determinations, it is more productive and attune to the state of knowledge in globality to acknowledge that the global 'knowledge worker' (the humanist being no exception), is, perforce a 'technological being', acting in a cross-disciplinary environment that depends on transdisciplinarity and cross-cultural interchange for its methods and grounding. One can of course regard this as an integral part of the 'global condition', so long as one is aware it is the result of new cultural formations, of a newly formed dynamics of unity and disunity of knowledge rather than the immediate, unadulterated expression of the 'natural' dialogue across the disciplines. Or else, as the champion of cultural disjuncture, social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai explains:

The central problem of today's global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization. A vast array of empirical facts could be brought

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to bear on the side of the 'homogenization' argument, and much of it has come from the left end of the spectrum of media studies. Most often, the homogenization argument subspeciates into either an argument about Americanization, or an argument about 'commoditization', and very often the two arguments are closely linked. What these arguments fail to consider is that at least as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenized in one or other way […] The new global cultural economy has to be understood as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centers and peripheries). […] The complexity of the current global economy has to do with certain fundamental disjunctures between culture and politics which we have barely begun to theorize. (Appadurai 3)

Insofar as it moves beyond disciplinary status, globalization profiles itself as an age of postdisciplinarity, in which disciplinary categories have been somewhat made redundant by the intrinsic cross-disciplinary texture of cognitive and epistemological structures. In many respects, global epistemological structures are best interrogated in terms of the postapocalyptic, postsecular paradigm ushered in by 9/11 and the return of the religious in intellectual discourse, be that in the form of culturally divergent, "partial faiths" (McClure 2007). To persist in a vision of undivided, 'prelapsarian' plural knowledge is, needless to add, not just utopian, but also counterproductive.

Among the post-Cold War 'isms', globalism is perhaps the site of most easy dualities, of either-or, binarist thinking, the kind the 'new Cold War', increasingly invoked these days in transatlantic circles, gave fresh impetus to. It is a site of numerous and at times stupendous polarities, of fragmentariness or convergence, homogeneity or heterogeneity, disjuncture or uniformity. To echo critical theorist Douglas Kellner, it is of the essence to distil and appropriate the limitations and contradictions inherent in global structures. And this is where concepts such as Homi K. Bhabha's 'third space' or John Brockman's 'third culture' can prove of invaluable assistance. In his study, "Globalization, Terrorism and Democracy," Kellner deconstructs a certain convenient, facile rhetoric of globalization, making a case for the need to construe the process as a site of contradictions:

[…] It is important to present globalization as a strange amalgam of both homogenizing forces of sameness and uniformity, and heterogeneity, difference, and hybridity, as well as a contradictory mixture of democratizing and anti-democratizing tendencies. On one hand, globalization unfolds a process of standardization in which a globalized mass culture circulates the globe creating unique appropriations and developments all over the world, thus proliferating hybridity, difference, and heterogeneity. Every local context involves its own appropriation and reworking of global products and signifiers, thus proliferating difference, otherness, diversity, and variety (Luke and Luke 2000). Grasping that globalization embodies these contradictory tendencies at once, that it can be a force of both homogenization and heterogeneity, is crucial to articulating the contradictions and avoiding one-sided and reductive conceptions. (Kellner in Denzin & Giardina: 56)

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Inevitably, the question arises: what are the prospects of new interdisciplinary scholarship, amid the current litanies of the 'collapse of knowledge', the 'crisis of the university', and the 'commercialization of higher education'? While any one answer would clearly not do, suffice it to embrace, better still celebrate, the limits of the global humanities, resisting 'master narratives' proclaiming easy internationalism and the 'global university' (a blatant construct in itself), and do so from a perspective informed by international comparative studies, hopefully avoiding in the process the danger of effacing divergence and difference.

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Sometime this year, a Facebook posting went viral. It read: "We don't have WI-FI. Talk to each other!" Apparently, this was a sign Tampere Tallipiha, a café in Finland, tired of its customers frequenting it simply to go online rather than enjoy the coffee, placed outside. Illustrative of the state of non-communication in the electronic age, it spoke to a community of multi-million Facebook users (it did at least, judging by the myriad "likes" it earned). *Mea culpa*, we "liked" it because it rang true. In response to Turino's (only half-rhetorical) question, I'd say, yes, we're definitely global!

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