

Flows of Images and Media. Annual Conference 2009 of the Cluster of Excellence „Asia and Europe in a Global Context“

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The conference 'Flows of Images and Media' was the first in a series of four Annual Conferences organised by the Cluster of Excellence „Asia and Europe in a Global Context“ at the Ruprecht-Karls-University in Heidelberg. While the overall research agenda of the cluster revolves around the dynamics of shifting, asymmetrical flows between the cultures of Asia and Europe in a global context, this first Annual Conference brought together scholars from the Social Sciences and Humanities to investigate the concept of 'Transculturation', which, according to the definition by Nicholas Mirzoeff, „highlights those places where the carefully defined borders of identity become confused and overlapping, a task that requires new histories, new ideas and new means of representation“.¹ Considering the ever increasing variety of shifting, globally available images and their role as cultural mediators between Asia and Europe, the conference organizers, Christiane Brosius and Roland Wenzlhuemer, emphasised the need to ask new questions when discussing transcultural flows. The resulting new approach will need to develop new or modify existing concepts, such as 'origin', 'original' and 'originality', or 'authenticity', 'value', 'taste' and 'distinction'. The ethno- and euro-centricity inherent to many such concepts enforces conventional categories of distinction between indigeneity and hybridity, high and low art, or religious and secular domains. Against this background of problematic concepts, the papers of the conference addressed various forms of visuality. One major focus was the migration of image itineraries in terms of speed and quality, as well as

across times and borders, because such migratory movements cause transcultural shifts and ruptures in global media-scapes (Panel 1). Presentations discussed the agency or non-agency of technologies in transnational flows, and addressed the double role of media in these processes, either as carrier of or as the very content of such flows (Panel 2).

The broad spectrum of talks was arranged around two keynote lectures delivered by Sarat Maharaj and Nicholas Mirzoeff. In his opening lecture „Pandemonium Asia: Shifts and Surges in the Flow of Images, Media and Info-Data“ SARAT MAHARAJ (London/Lund) addressed the nature of globally disseminated flows of visualities in their undetermined directions. Our contemporary „post-spectacle era“ is, according to Maharaj, characterised by „retinal ubiquity“, „everywhere-ness“ or a „twitter gaze“, created by modern technologies like mobile- and i-phones, twitter or digital cameras. Nowadays, flows of images and media cannot be explained in an exclusively linear or laminar way, because they are turbulent and entangled: they assume the characteristic of „digital liquidity“. In order to „unpack today's 'image-info-data-media flows', the issues of disequilibrium, mistranslation and transformation“ become of particular importance. Additionally, Maharaj suggested that the transcultural translation of 'the other' needs to be re-thought, since 'the other' is no longer to be found at the edge of the former empire, but in our midst.

This kind of historical shift in the perception of 'the other' caused by global flows of various visualities and media was discerned as a central theme by several other speakers, e.g. by CATHERINE YEH (Boston), who explored the first entertainment newspaper published in Shanghai during late 19th and early 20th centuries. The newspaper coped with cultural asymmetries between China and the West by presenting the outside world as a source of amusement to the Chinese urban reader and by introducing a modern globalized concept of paradise.

TIMON SCREECH (London) also investigated the transnational flow of visual icono-

¹Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader*. Second fully revised edition, London 2002 (Original publication 1997), p. 477.

graphy when he elaborated on the migration of elements from the imagery surrounding the Turkish-Christian „Battle of Lepanto“ (1571), an event which served as an icon for the battle against an alleged ‘other’. Screech traced some reinterpreted and re-contextualised elements from the European iconography of this important historical event and showed how they found their way into a Japanese folding screen, which was produced around 1600.

A more recent image journey and a striking example of the controversial cultural impacts that transculturally shifting visualities may have stood at the centre of the presentation given by CHRISTIANE BROSIUS (Heidelberg), who discussed the reception and re-contextualisation of Valentine’s Day imagery in India. Using the circulation of „glocalised“ romantic love cards and their appropriation by Indian urban middle classes, Brosius showed how new transnational public spheres emerged, where new forms of declarations of love have become possible; she also demonstrated how these new spheres caused local socio-political problems, such as the public burning of Valentine’s Day cards by Hindu nationalists and the counter-action by the Facebook-campaign ‘Pink Chaddie’.

SUSANNE ENDERWITZ (Heidelberg) analysed the comic books „The 99“, named after the 99 names of Allah, to explain the transcultural phenomenon of Islamic iconoclasm inherent to these comics. „The 99“ challenge the prevalence of American Supermen, while simultaneously propagating a hybrid amalgam of universal values.

PATRICIA UBEROI (New Delhi) analysed V. Shantaram’s successful movie „Immortal Journey of Dr. Kotnis“ (1946) and its Chinese remake „Nightmare in Red China“ (1955). Uberoi discussed the movie as a specific instance in the globalised migration of visualities and emphasised its strong impact on the cinematic identity-construction of Chineseness vis-à-vis Indian self-hood in times of troubled relations between India and China.

EVA AMBOS (Heidelberg) demonstrated how present Sinhalese healing rituals are shifting, because the Sri Lankan media and government transformed the content and visual performance of these rituals so as to aid the reconfiguration of Sinhalese national identi-

ty. The dances that are central to these traditionally enacted healing rituals now predominantly serve as demonstrations of national heritage and as a marker of cultural distinction for the Sinhalese self.

SUN LIYING (Heidelberg) illustrated a process of transculturation in her analysis of the way in which images of nude Western women were reinterpreted in China in the mid 1920s. The publication of Western nudes in the Chinese pictorial „Beiyang huabao“ from 1926 onwards had a decisive impact on the perception of nude images by presenting them as high-art. The depicted women became popular icons and represented Western civilization to much of the pictorial’s audience.

Two lectures focused on the transcultural nature of cosmopolitan imagery: MADELEINE HERREN-OESCH (Heidelberg) undertook a historical analysis of notions of cosmopolitanism and their changes: After the First World War, a variety of international diplomatic institutions emerged in places such as Geneva and with it a group of border-crossing cosmopolitans. On the basis of official lists of their personal belongings Herren-Oesch showed how these diplomats’ cultural and national background became less important in defining their identity than material and symbolic signifiers shared by their group.

In her presentation on „Visual Flows and the Art of Cosmopolitanism“ ALEXANDRA CHANG (New York) focused on three contemporary artists of Asian background: Ma Jun, David Diao and Tomokazu Matsuyama. She explored the aesthetic overlaps in their works which not only conflate Western and Asian imagery, but help to create a transcultural space of an ‘elsewhere community’ in order to reconfirm the artists’ ‘home’.

Other speakers dealt with religious and secular transcultural iconoclasm in different historical periods. EVA ZHANG (Heidelberg) spoke on the efforts by Christian missionaries in China and Japan to convert the „pagan“ Asians by merging depictions of Guanyin, the Chinese bodhisattva of compassion and Virgin Mary. Zhang exposed the different layers of meaning ascribed to these icons as well as the processes of reinterpreting religious imagery that took place during the early modern Christian missions in Asia.

ALEXANDER HENN (Arizona) discussed the „iconoclash“ of religious images, more precisely the pictorial embodiment of Catholic and Hindu saints and deities in wayside shrines in Goa since the 19th century. Particularly the depiction of the goddesses represented in these shrines are in constant flux and mirror the cultural, social as well as the physical mobility not only of religious ideas and practices, but also of people in urban environments.

SUMATHI RAMASWAMY (Durham) illustrated the virtual journey of the Statue of Liberty from New York via China to New Delhi, where this icon of democracy transformed into a new goddess for the Indian Dalits (the untouchable caste in India). By drawing on Michael Taussig's concept of „mimesis and alterity“, Ramaswamy investigated the history of „Miss Liberty“ by revealing the transcultural image chain as well as the myriad attributions produced around this figure.

MONICA JUNEJA (Heidelberg) was one of the speakers who raised methodological questions of transculturality. She traced the entanglements of visual regimes and inter-pictorial references across European and Asian cultures in North Indian pictorials from the 16th century, which depict a 13th century Persian literary work about Plato and Aristotle. Juneja focussed on the process of transculturality and how iconographic elements, once transferred to other cultures, become sites of semantic negotiations.

Another contribution that addressed methodology came from HANS HARDER (Heidelberg), who analysed the „Mudgarandcharit“, a half historical, half satirical Hindi text with elements of science fiction written by Ramavater Sharma in early 20th century India. Harder suggested approaching 'transculturality' as a process where cultural flows are packed into frames. Accordingly, he discussed Indian writing as an example of knowledge production flowing from Europe to India and, more specifically, of a transcultural historical panopticum.

By drawing on the concept of „cinophilia“, AJAY SINHA (South Hadley) explored the temporal, rather than the spatial entanglements of transnational media flows. By discussing an Indian contemporary artist, Push-

pamala, in relation to Siegfried Kracauer's concepts of susceptibility and complicity, Sinha disclosed the intertextual and intervisual ties of her works and, moreover, the mimetic relations between images and bodies.

In his evening lecture „The Flow and The Flood: Mediation, Migration, Circulation and Climate Change“ NICHOLAS MIRZOEFF (New York) referred to the connections between transcultural images and global imagery. He claimed that modernity and the „biopolitical mediation of the 'natural'“, or the circulation of goods as the negotiation of resources, is inextricably connected with the process of climate change. This is why, Mirzoeff argues, the global imagination revolves around climate scenarios, in which the projected future emerges from the experiences of the past and present.

Two lectures addressed the question of how technologies and media shape the content of messages: In her diachronic approach to intercontinental telegraphy in South Asia, AMELIA BONEA (Heidelberg) investigated the possibilities and limitations of this medium in nineteenth-century colonial India. Bonea investigated how the new technology of the telegraph influenced the nature of messages as well as the communications of the agents who used it.

MIO WAKITA (Heidelberg) discussed the making of Japanese femininity in Meiji Souvenir photography and demonstrated how photography, as a visual medium of modernity, was adapted in Japan by generating a new visual semantics of images. In her case study of Meiji photographic practices in the late 19th century Wakita traced the asymmetries in the concept of photography and the contested meanings of photographic texts in Japan and Europe.

The Annual Conference 'Flows of Images and Media' ended with a lively, innovative and productive plenary discussion about the methodological and analytical ground shared by the many participants from their various disciplines. The papers presented at the conference not only underlined, but also answered the urgency of studying 'transculturality'. The participants concluded that transculturality needs in-depth investigation not only of visual flows and asymmetries as such,

but also of their substance and their various meanings in different cultural contexts. In our „post-spectacular times“ (Maharaj), visualities act as mediators, while people become agents behind and within these transcultural flows of agents, objects and processes made visible by media and images. Yet flows are hard to trace: they are not linear, but complex and entwined. Still, the concept provides scholars with a methodological tool that helps grasp the fluid and complex nature of entangled societies in a global context.

Conference overview:

Opening Lecture:

Sarat Maharaj (London/Lund): Pandemonium Asia: Shifts and Surges in the Flow of Images, Media and Info-Data

Panel One: Approaching the Field of Visuality and Media

Monica Juneja (Heidelberg): Plato Plays Music to the Animals: Interpictorial Practice as a Dimension of Transcultural Visuality

Christiane Brosius (Heidelberg): Love in the Age of Valentine and Pink Underwear: Negotiating Romantic Love and the Asymmetries of Transcultural Image and Media Flows

Madeleine Herren-Oesch (Heidelberg): The Cosmopolitans' Visual Illusions. Conceptual Transculturality in Global History

Patricia Uberoi (New Delhi): Inter-Asian Circuits: Popular Prints and their Circuits in China and India

Alexandra Chang (New York): Visual Flows and the Art of Cosmopolitanism: Ma Jun, David Diao and Tomokazu Matsuyama

Panel Two: Heavenly Bodies

Timon Screech (London): The Battle of Lepanto as a Flowing Image

Hans Harder (Heidelberg): Transcultural Mock History from India? Ramavatar Sharma's Puzzling Mudgaranandcharit (1912-13)

Catherine Yeh (Boston): Guides to Paradise: Entertainment Newspapers, Visual Wander and the Invention of Leisure

Susanne Enderwitz (Heidelberg): The 99': Is-

lamic Superheroes?

Keynote Lecture:

Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York): The Flow and The Flood: Mediation, Migration, Circulation and Climate Change

Panel Three: Circulating Icons

Alexander Henn (Arizona): Iconic Encounters: Images and Shrines in Goa

Eva Zhang (Heidelberg): Kannon – Guanyin – Virgin Mary: Early Modern Discourses on Alterity, Religion and Images

Sumathi Ramaswamy (Durham): The Work of Goddesses in the Age of Technological Reproduction

Eva Ambos (Heidelberg): The Changing Image of Sinhalese Healing Rituals: Performing Identity in New Public Spheres

Panel Four: Floating Technoscapes

Ajay Sinha (South Hadley): Haunted Relationships and Cinephilic Imagination in India?

Amelia Bonea (Heidelberg): The Telegraph as Medium and Mediator in Nineteenth-Century Colonial India

Sun Liying (Heidelberg): An Exotic Self? Flows of Western Nude Images in the Peiyang Pictorial News (1926-1933)

Mio Wakita (Heidelberg/Tokyo): Photography in Meiji Japan and the Making of the Icons of „National Femininity“: Re-Examining Female Images in Meiji Souvenir Photography

Closing Statements and Final Discussion

Sarat Maharaj (London/Lund)

Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York)

Christiane Brosius (Heidelberg)

Nic Leonhardt (Heidelberg)

Roland Wenzlhuemer (Heidelberg)

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