

of International American Studies

Review Journal

**DECODING AMERICAN CULTURES
IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT**

special issue

DECODING/RECODING?

On Value Transfer and the *Obviews*

Obvious (adj.)

1580s, 'frequently met with,' from Latin *obvius* 'that is in the way, presenting itself readily, open, exposed, commonplace,' from *obviam* (adv.) 'in the way,' from *ob* 'against' (see *ob-*) + *viam*, accusative of *via* 'way' (see *via*). Meaning 'plain to see, evident' is first recorded 1630s. Related: *Obviously*; *obviousness*.¹

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Imagine yourself in a green chamber: a room, in which every single piece of furniture, the walls, the floors, and all other objects are of precisely the same shade of green. Armchairs, tables, television sets, pictures on the walls, window panes—even the shadows cast by (identically) green bulbs are of the same color as everything else inside. Your eyes are helpless. Devoid of any sense of certainty, you will clumsily grope about to avoid painful collisions with objects 'that are in the way.' Even though they materially exist, despite their opacity, the contents of the room are anything but *e-vident*: all your eyes can register is limitless *greenness*, as all-pervasive and as unsettling as the blackness of a photographic darkroom when the lights suddenly go off. 'Plain to see,' yet invisible: 'A'='A.' Absolute *identity* precludes *identification*. To perceive anything as *obvius*—*in the way*—we need it to be *obviews* first.

This essay is about the relation between the *obvius*, *obvious* and *obviews*: a relation which becomes evident in light of mechanisms responsible for the transfer of values between

1. See: <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=obvious>>.

donor- and acceptor-cultures. I am inclined to argue that American cultures do not need to be *decoded* in the global context—unless we choose to use the term ‘decoding’ as synonymous to ‘reading.’ Both in the intellectual and in the material spheres, elements of American cultures remain ‘plain to see’ in almost every aspect of life on our fair planet: beginning with tacos and Argentinian beef on restaurant menus world-wide, through Facebook-inspired ‘friendships,’ space-age technologies in our kitchens, multiculturalist tendencies in politics, or First Nations’ inspirations in modeling deep ecology—to rock-and-roll, credit cards and Diet Coke—American cultures **★us**. Always-already. What’s to decode then?

SEEING/DIFFERENCE

The fact that we often fail to see the markers of American cultures as obvious—and indispensable—components of who we are, and that, just as frequently, we choose to see them as as *obvius* when it fits us, may be attributed to a peculiar ‘ocular condition’ of ours. To explain this, I must take the liberty of inviting you to participation in two more *obviews* experiments.

Imagine an absurd situation: picture yourself as an aficionado of lonely Sunday walks in scrap-metal terminals. At the same time, imagine being an utter ignoramus in matters of technology. Then—see yourself walking between enormous heaps of distorted, disjointed, displaced metal objects whose purpose you neither know, nor are interested in:

Special Issue
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American Cultures
in the Global Context*

RIAS VOL. 6, SPRING-FALL Nº 1-2/2013



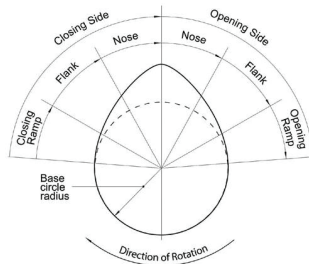
Even though you are technically *able* to fish out individual shapes, you enjoy your exotic solitude: the heaps of scrap seem to flow by as you walk. Suddenly, by the end of the walk, you run into an acquaintance, who happens to silently share your strange habit. Embarrassed with the sudden encounter, eager to hide your somewhat unusual inclination, you seek to explain the rationale of your being there: even though all you have registered is an endless heap of scrap, you are more than likely to rack your brains for *anything* that could *plausibly* be of use to you and that the scrap terminal might offer. You will perform *work of remembering* to avoid being labeled as a raving lunatic. You *remember*, or you *fantasize*.

The situation changes should you meet the very same acquaintance digging in the scrap half way through your walk. Upon seeing you, he (or she) triumphantly brags about his latest find: a brand-new camshaft, mint condition, that would cost several hundred dollars if bought in a store. You must hide your ignorance to share the spirit of the joyful celebration of victory (and by that camouflage your lunacy), you verbalize your wish to see the find. Not because you are terribly interested in it, of course, but to figure out what a camshaft *is* and thus to be able to join in a sensible conversation that would allow you to avoid hard questions as to why you are *there* on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. Suspecting little or nothing, the acquaintance is delighted to show you his prize:



Still, the blank stare betrays you: you *are* technologically illiterate. The acquaintance, however, enters into a sharing mode—and tells you all you never cared to know about camshafts. Whether you want it or not, you learn that the camshaft is a device translat-

ing circular movement into horizontal movement, that the cams installed on the rotating shaft move the tappets, which in turn open and close valves, and that the cam itself is an ingenious device, whose egg-shape makes the whole process possible:



Overwhelmed, you thank your enthusiastic companion, who happily returns to his work, glad to have found a kindred soul. Relieved, you continue toward the end of the terminal, yet, the formerly non-descript, homogenous scrap-metal yard has perceptibly changed. Much to your own surprise, wherever you look, you suddenly see camshafts of all shapes and sizes:



Special Issue
Decoding
American Cultures
in the Global Context

RIAS VOL. 6, SPRING-FALL Nº 1-2/2013

Amazed, you no longer watch your step. Awestruck by the plethora of camshafts in the yard, you trip, fall down, and hit your head against a particularly malicious camshaft. You lose your consciousness and, as a result, you suffer from a minor memory loss: only a few minutes of your memory vanish. Precisely, the minutes, during which you have had your eye-opening technological conversation.

A few minutes later you come to, and, rubbing your hurting head, you get up and keep on walking toward the end of the yard. Yet... looking to your left and right, all you see is the non-descript, homogeneous, scrap:



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Camshafts have vanished, along with the de-FINI-tion that you have received from your joyful do-it-yourself acquaintance. Much like the green room, the scrap yard hides *nothing*: there are no 'coded' contents within it. Still, without the *finis* of the *definition*, incapable of telling where one *ends* and another begins, you cannot tell the *difference* between one object and another. You no longer see objects as *separate*. They *blend*.

Curiously, if one thinks of the central metanarratives of the Judeo-Christian culture of the West, it is hard not to see the parallels:

{1:1} In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. {1:2} And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness [was] upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

{1:3} And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. {1:4} And God saw the light, that [it was] good: and God divided the light from the darkness. {1:5} And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

{1:6} And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. {1:7} And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which [were] under the firmament from the waters which [were] above the firmament: and it was so.

{1:8} And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.²

Clearly, the Book of Genesis describes the beginnings as the *beginnings of difference*: the earth is without form, void, in darkness, and all-too-liquid. And thus, like anything lacking de-*fini*-tion, it must remain unimaginable, until it is *divided/separated* from the firmament of the now capitalized Heaven. Only then, by the power of the imperative *logos*, does it begin to function as a perceivable, distinguishable entity. St. John's philosophical explanation to Genesis confirms this observation:

{1:1} In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. {1:2} The same was in the beginning with God. {1:3} All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. {1:4}³

Indeed: the memory loss causing the disappearance of the definition of the camshaft results in its non-existence—or, at least, its unthinkability. Still, in light of the Judeo-Christian givenness to logocentrism manifest in our ultimate confidence in the Word/word, unthinkability is tantamount to non-existence: after all, history, if not written down, is mere legend; agreements, if not officially signed, have no legal power; a PhD holder who has lost his or her diploma must seek to obtain a duplicate before he or she can be considered for a position. Marriages would be invalid without the formulaic performative act of speech, whereby someone pronounces two people man and wife. The removal of words legitimizing facts, in writing or in speech—*undoes* these facts. More generally, it seems justifiable to claim that If we cannot picture the de-*fini*-tional limits of an entity or a fact, we cannot *think* it. That, which does not *differ*, cannot be de-*fin*-ed, and therefore cannot be thought. If we cannot think it, its existence is null and void. *Unthinkable*, however, does not mean *coded*. The fact that we cannot *see*, does not automatically

Special Issue
*Decoding
American Cultures
in the Global Context*

RIAS VOL. 6, SPRING-FALL Nº 1-2/2013

2. The Book of Genesis, *The King James Version of the Holy Bible*, <<http://d23a3s5l1qjyz.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/King-James-Bible-KJV-Bible-PDF.pdf>> (access: 10 August 2013).

3. The Gospel According to St. John, *The King James Version of the Holy Bible*, <<http://d23a3s5l1qjyz.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/King-James-Bible-KJV-Bible-PDF.pdf>> (access: 10 August 2013).

mean it has been hidden from us, ciphered, that it is not blatantly 'in the way,' that it is not opaque. Even if I cannot *think it*, my failure to do so is not necessarily a result of *coding*: it may well be the effect of my optics: the optics that I unwittingly—or consciously—adopt.

COLUMBUS AND THE SHARK



When uninitiated readers look at the image above, (mis)led by preconceptions as to *how one should look* at images, they will probably see nothing but a rectangle of irregular greenness. Following interpretive norms driven home by the 'standard' foreground-background distinction, they will probably scan the surface of the image in a frustrated search for *something to see*. Failing to achieve this, they may skip over the inconvenience, or jump the shark, resorting to a more 'complex' hermeneutic procedure in order to explain the function of the image in this article to themselves and to others, who might denude their opthalmological impotence. A more *careful* reader, however, will suspect that the image may be *more* than a blatant allusion to the 'green room' experiment from the beginning of this text. They will perform *work*.⁴ They will read the footnote at the bottom of this page, seeking instructions. They will *learn to look*. The shift of the focal point *beyond* the image itself will eventually allow them to see what 'standard' procedures of image reading must inevitably render unavailable. Yet, once the readers see what is to be seen, they will realize that it is not *coding* that is responsible for the initial perceptive failure. Rather, it is what we ourselves *bring into the picture*.

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4. I have generated the image above using the Easy Stereogram Builder online, available at <<http://www.easystereogrambuilder.com>>.

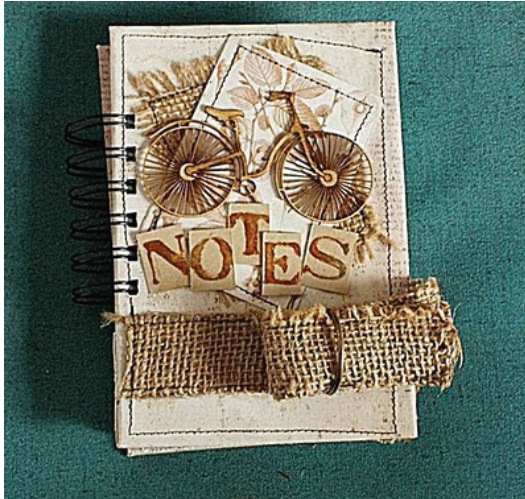
All of the experiments above bring us to the point when the issue of the dynamics between *relational epistemology* (responsible for our capacity of seeing) and *good will* (responsible for our readiness to mistrust optics) becomes central. The first case could be conveniently illustrated by an experience of 'falling into a language,' an experience shared by many of us, speakers of English as a *foreign* language, especially if our adventure with the language commenced in the context of cultural isolation from the West.

Born and raised in Poland under the communist rule, I started learning English rather late: I was as old as nineteen when I mastered a sufficient command of the language to have a relatively uncomplicated conversation. At the time, bearing in mind the severe limitations of travel and an almost complete lack of access to English-speaking media, few Poles would honestly believe in any pragmatic uses for English in Poland. Yet, as a gesture of disobedience toward the dominant regime, as a tool of resistance and a harbinger of a brighter future, learning English would be a *sine qua non* of proper education of children born to intellectual families. What is more important, subcutaneously, even the high school teens would feel that English equaled status: you would play hookey in any other class, but not English.

Yet, despite positive attitudes and keen interest in anything related to English, the limited value transfer between the English-speaking world and Poland at the time resulted in the fact that my generation would effectively form an almost English-free epistemic framework of reference. Value judgments aside, such a state of affairs carried certain consequences: above all, our 'falling into the language' would lead to much more spectacular discoveries than is the case with high school students today, for whom international travel is daily bread, who have been raised in houses with internet access and several hundred television channels in English to choose from, and for whom English has been a mandatory subject since preschool.

To my generation, *seeing the difference upon falling into language* was easy: I remember the sudden change of my musical tastes when I finally got to the point when I could understand the lyrics of songs performed by some of my formerly beloved rock'n'roll bands. My memory of the disappointment at the poetic quality of White Snake's 'Steal Away' is still vivid: devastated, I turned

to Pink Floyd, King Crimson and Alan Parson's Project for instant consolation. Moreover, even the simplest objects would sometimes manifest their nature as fascinating stereograms. For instance, this:



An object like any other... with one exception. Until my 'fall into language,' I would understand the word spelled out on the cover as *the name of the object*. Especially, that it has been grammaticalized in the Polish language as a noun: the word 'notes' has seven case forms, can be diminutized, or motivate word formation. Even today it functions as such: any Polish-English dictionary will define it as 'notebook,' 'jotter,' 'pocketbook,' or 'scratchpad.' Discovering that 'notes' is actually an English word, and that the notebooks in English speaking countries had the same word spelled out on their covers changed my world: I was plainly amazed at my discovery that the obvious 'notes' of mine was a 'book' to my English speaking counterparts, and that the word on the cover was a plural form of the word 'note,' thus denoting its *contents* rather than *itself*. With a mighty bang, the opposition between the object and its contents underwent a spectacular deconstruction: the world manifested itself to me as multidimensional and in constant freeplay: I may *prefer* to read it in English, I may *prefer* to read it in Polish, but I cannot deny the awareness of *both*. And unless we choose to insist that the 'code was cracked' when I fell into English, the multidimensionality of the wor(l)d thus uncovered was not a result of some sinister encryption: it became *obvious* to me when I embraced the new

language, which changed my optics, which, consequently, changed my *episteme* and effectively transformed my *doxa*.

When no alternative *episteme* challenges our *doxa*, we seem to have no other option but to take what we see at face value. The ethical question that surfaces, however, is whether our lack of awareness may be construed as a viable justification of violence we may unwittingly be inflicting on others and, consequently, on ourselves. Whether or not we subscribe to a certain politics of knowledge is ultimately our choice—and choosing to neglect the awareness that there might be alternatives to our own framework of reference is a function of will: *ill will*. When Columbus first encountered the Taínos, he brought into the picture his *will to conquer*, which effectively allowed him to read them thus:

All of them alike are of good-sized stature and carry themselves well. I saw some who had marks of wounds on their bodies and I made signs to them asking what they were; and they showed me how people from other islands nearby came there and tried to take them, and how they defended themselves; and I believed and believe that they come here from *tierrafirme* to take them captive. They should be good and intelligent servants, for I see that they say very quickly everything that is said to them; and I believe that they would become Christians very easily, for it seemed to me that they had no religion. Our Lord pleasing, at the time of my departure I will take six of them from here to Your Highnesses in order that they may learn to speak...⁵

Of course. Columbus *chooses* to neglect the fact that the language of gestures used by the Taínos might take some time to learn; he *chooses* to interpret these gestures as indicative of the proximity of the continent; he *chooses* to see in the natives 'good and intelligent servants' rather than the masters of their own land on rather slippery grounds of their capability to 'repeat what is said to them,' he *chooses* to see the *absence of religion* by neglecting the very likely possibility of interpreting ceremonies *unlike his own* as manifestations of a system of spiritual beliefs, which choice, conveniently, invites the obvious solution of filling in the gap with Christianity, and that further legitimizes the conquest. Eventually, he ousts the Taínos

5. Christopher Columbus, *Journal* (entry for Thursday, Oct. 11th 1492) <<http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/bdorsey1/41docs/01-col.html>> (access: 10 August 2013).

from the space of culture by denying their form of communication the status of a *language*: he has already made a decision to 'take six of them' back to Spain 'in order that they may learn to speak.'⁶ He *chooses* to adopt an optics best fit for his own political ends. Columbus *chooses not to* perform the work necessary to see what stares him in the face: to him, what he could see would be too *obvious* to be *obviews*.

Unsurprisingly, the ill will characterizing the whole of the colonial discourse will manifest itself all too often in the context of encounters, in which it is more than likely that an opthalmological change would allow one to see what one allegedly craves to see:

When the Spaniards discovered this land, their leader asked the Indians how it was called; as they did not understand him, they said *uic athan*, [or: *uuyik a t'aan*] which means 'what do you say' or 'what do you speak' that 'we don't understand you.' And then the Spaniard ordered it set down that it be called *Yucatan*.⁷

The Spanish commander insists on seeing 'a notes' even though he cannot but realize that 'the notes' would be a more appropriate grammatical choice in the context. The *genius loci* of Yucatan is that of the assumption *not to see* alternative grammars organizing the wor(l)d—a choice made in *ill will* and with a particular political agenda in mind. Yucatan obliterated that, which must now remain unnameable. Columbus *was able* to see the shark beyond the two dimensions of the greenish rectangle he faced. Unlike Bartolomé de las Casas, he *chose* not to.

DONOR CULTURES, ACCEPTOR CULTURES: VALUE TRANSFER

If the history of the Spanish conquest of America is a history of a violent donor and an unwilling acceptor of values, it only serves to illustrate a much more persistent phenomenon: what once could

6. See: Tadeusz Rachwał, 'Tłumacz porwany (O przekładzie w dyskursie kolonialnym),' in *Obyczajowość a przekład*, ed. Piotr Fast (Katowice: Śląsk, 1996). See also: Tadeusz Rachwał, 'O politycznych skutkach nieadekwatności przekładu, czyli dlaczego ugotowano kapitana Cooka,' in *Polityka a przekład*, ed. Piotr Fast (Katowice: Śląsk, 1996).

7. Antonio de Ciudad Real, quoted after Quetzil Castañeda (120).

be attributed to the ill will of the 'unseeing' conqueror who, following the Word, would 'be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth,' thus legitimizing optics which gave free rein to greed and power hunger, is not always as simple today. The more obvious cases have already been discussed in *RIAS* by numerous scholars, who would address the neocolonial wars of the past decades, the marginalization of the ethnic cultures of the Americas, or the centrality of the US in the context of American Studies. What is much less obvious is how the very idea of coding/decoding American cultures may in itself be a result of choosing not to see the *obviews* if what we could see might manifest itself as too *obvious* for our liking.

Let me begin the final part of this essay with a few naïve questions.

First: I am Polish and—as a Polish person—I am rather partial to potatoes, which, next to pork chops and cabbage, are fundamental to Polish cuisine. Does the fact that it has never crossed my mind to delve into the history of the potato and trace it back to Peru and Bolivia make it a 'coded' element of American culture? Have I 'decoded' it as such by making such an effort? Has the potato lost its status as an important component of the national culinary tradition of Poland *because* the vegetable was introduced to Europe in the 16th century? Does Polish culture by definition mean 'non-American'? What 'code' do I need to crack to 'decode' the potato as an element of American culture? Why do I choose an optics that allows me not to see it as 'coded' when it is tasty? Or is it that my taste has been subversively encrypted into me several centuries ago and I fail to see it?

Second: am I distrustful of communism as a result of the subversive presence of 'coded' Red Scare mental protocols, or is it because friends of mine would be vanished from their apartments during the Martial Law of the 1980s? Would my present-day left-of-center orientation be attributable to the power of the 'coded' episteme borne out of the American Culture Wars of the same period?

Third: is the fact that Michał Kłobukowski translates *The Color Purple* as *Kolor purpury* (*The Color Crimson*), completely missing the reference of *purple* as the color of hope, and renders the African American working class sociolect into distorted, purposefully

foreignized Polish to be ‘decoded’ as white American racism, or is it perhaps a result of his failure to go beyond his own cultural prejudices and learn the grammar of the sociolect in its cultural and historical complexity?⁸ How may I know whether the racist optics is an element of American cultural coding or whether it is a fruit of the unique evolutionary path of the Polish culture *before* the transatlantic relations of Poland became intensive enough to allow for value transfer?

Fourth: when I choose to support feminist organizations and minority movements in Poland, is it because an American PC ‘code’ is active, or is it because I would rather see everyone in my country breathe free air, which allows me to feel safer among less frustrated people? Does the fact that the right wing politicians world-wide choose to see feminism as an American import make it a ‘coded’ element of American culture, even though the phenomenon itself is as old as the hills?

The list of questions could, of course, continue. And, obviously, I can provide no definite answer to any of them, unless I *choose* to limit myself to either seeing ‘a notes’ or ‘the notes.’ I am, of course, disinclined to do so for two major reasons.

The first reason stems from my distrust with respect to any conceptual regimes taken for granted. Claiming that there *is* one global context in which American cultures could be ‘decoded’ rests upon the assumption that acceptor cultures and donor cultures are compatible enough for ‘codes’ to become invisibly interwoven into the texture of local metanarratives. Such an assumption is likely to lead to errors of judgment, whose consequences might be as serious as the Spanish conquest of America.

For example, when in November of 2008 in Katowice, Poland, Derick de Kerkhove held his debate dedicated to identity in the context of the globality of the new media, he would warn his listeners about the peril of the loss of subjectivity. Atomized in a multiplicity of nicknames, dissolved in the anonymity of the cyberspace, the human ‘self,’ de Kerkhove would suggest, would be increasingly

8. See: Krzysztof Knauer, ‘Między kompetencją lingwistyczną a kulturową. Tłumaczenie odmian angielskiego na podstawie przekładu powieści Alice Walker *The Color Purple*,’ in *Polityka a przekład*, ed. Piotr Fast (Katowice: Śląsk, 1996).

at risk. He would, however, recognize his own speech as an instance of 'coding' when I asked him whether his argument would still be valid if we chose to include Buddhist cultures in his Western vision of 'globality': if 'self' is illusory to some 600 million people, can we still talk of the 'global' peril of its dissolution? De Kerkhove revised his initial claim, arguing that, indeed, in philosophical terms his original proposition would be insubstantial in the context of Buddhism, but that the cultural practice of the internet-ready Buddhist East demonstrates progressing westernization. Of course: the Chinese or Thai Buddhists are not necessarily Buddhist monks, just as the European or American Christians are not necessarily Roman Catholic priests. The above notwithstanding, the representatives of the western cultures *fall into despair*, they do not *fly into despair*; they do not *fall into joy* when they are happy but are *elated* or *grow wings*, and they seat important guests to the right of the host—thus *living* the language that reflects the conceptual topography of heaven and hell and observe the protocol that emulates the biblical order of importance. Why should we assume that the Buddhist should function otherwise and forego the metanarrative basics of their daily routines due to the influx of new imports? Would the essential incompatibility of the Eastern and Western understanding of the 'self' not render the *Americanness* of those imports 'plain text'? The supposedly American 'code' of the culture of the Internet, pointed out by de Kerkhove's concern, manifests itself in its failure as a 'code': it is the Westerners choosing to accept an episteme of Yucatan and project the fear of the dangers that the new media pose to their own concept of self upon cultures, whose rudimentary assumptions might not offer any conceptual space, in which such a 'code' could become active. Again, optics, not 'coding.' Only in this case, the acceptor culture adapts itself to new imports on its own, and including or rejecting them at will, choosing or refusing to add yet another dimension to its own identity. The donor culture, however, continues to fail to see the shark, which—in essence—is a choice. A choice, for which it may be accountable if the value at stake is not 'digitized self,' but, for instance, the ideas of freedom, liberation or happiness. The incompatibility of these concepts denudes American cultural 'codes' as completely unencrypted messages, which all too often happen to be their own medium.

This leads me to the second reason to look for the shark in the greenish rectangle rather than jump it. Driven, like Derick de Kerckhove, by the academic zeal to 'protect' others against the possible violence of the viral infection of other cultures with a 'foreign DNA,' we may end up inflicting more damage than allowing cultures to regulate themselves. To explain this point, it seems helpful to fall back upon the observations made by Itamar Even-Zohar, who, discussing the processes of value transfer between cultures in the context of translation, enumerates three basic situations in which the 'import' receives a primary position in the receiving system (Hrushovski and Even-Zohar, 1978: 24):

- 1) when a polysystem has not yet fully developed;
- 2) when a literature is 'peripheral' or 'weak' or both;
- 3) when there are turning points, crises or 'literary vacuums.'

Each of these situations generates a context conducive to cultural transfer from a dominant donor culture, over-producing values and transplanting them into acceptor cultures, not yet 'saturated' with values produced locally. Even though Even-Zohar's observation concerns literary translation, I believe it may safely be expanded to include all other areas of cultural production, beginning with technology and finishing with law. Assuming the above, it is possible to argue that such a transfer, however, even though it always carries consequences, does not have to be forceful, nor does it have to be covert or sinister. For instance, the aggressive expansionism of American corporate culture dominating weaker economies does take its toll on traditional small business, yet—for most of the cases—such an import, along with the change in traditional work protocols, reorganization of traditional family life, revision of eating habits or dress code, brings in investments, new jobs, and an increase in a sense of stability in communities representing cultures recovering from economic crises, or cultures whose development had been arrested as a result of a war or long-term isolation. Usually, central and local governments alike would solicit such investments, aware of the consequences of the butterfly effect. Undoubtedly, a corporation is not a charity organization. It operates on the principle of desiring-machines: even though it 'consists of humans,' it is inhuman, and, if in danger, it may ruthlessly eliminate competition and impose its own rules without even attempting to 'encrypt' them,

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thereby maiming the operational capacity of the formerly existing orders or replacing them altogether with its own. But, it may also adapt itself to the local context and draw benefits from its own flexibility, while the local culture, transforming, evolves. At some point, the 'import' changes so far that in itself it would be foreign to the culture of its origin, while the acceptor culture has evolved to such a point, when it defines its own identity in a fashion in which the now-transformed 'import' is an *obvious* part of the local landscape. Apparently, Darwinism applies to desiring-machines, which begs the question of whether anything that has transformed itself in the local context initiating the evolution of this context may indeed be considered as an 'import,' and, if not, if it can be decoded as such, if the overall code/language/narrative has evolved?

By the same token, would the Polish blues, whose heyday coincided with the aura of hopelessness of the Polish 1980s, and which, since then, followed an altogether different developmental path than the blues in the United States, be considered an 'import'? An 'American imprint'? Even though originally it *used to be* foreign, today it is a unique cultural phenomenon in the scale of the world, and few musicians world-wide would fail to appreciate its special character. Moreover, as a consequence, the idea of what the blues is has evolved, inspiring international artists, including Americans, to continue redefining it. How then can the Polish blues culture be read in terms of 'decoding' American cultures, if it no longer is American, and in itself becomes an 'import' to America, carried over by American bluesmen who have had the experience of playing with their Polish colleagues? It is 'a notes' and 'the notes' at the same time, as long as we choose to adopt optics that will allow us to forego the inherited vision of cultural borders as defense lines, guarded by armed soldiers, and finally see the shark in the otherwise non-de-fin-able greenness of the rectangle.

Finally, to reduce the problem at stake to the most obvious examples, allow me to pose a few more 'unanswerable' questions: is the oeuvre of Isaac Bashevis Singer to be 'decoded' as a part of American culture in Israel? In Poland? Or perhaps as a part of the Polish culture in Israel? In America? Or maybe as a part of the Israeli culture in the US or in Poland? Did Emory Elliott include Gabriel García Márquez in *The Columbia History of the American Novel* because he mis-

understood the meaning of the word Columbia? Would NASA be able to construct space shuttles without Sir Isaac Newton? Is his physics to be 'decoded' as an element of English culture in the global context? Are we not jumping the shark by seeking to 'decode' what may never have been coded? Is the idea so *obvious* to us that we refuse to see mechanisms of culture as *obvious*?

AN OPTICAL COD(E/A): AVOIDING YUCATAN

'Eyes'
Kriben Pillay

I remember your eyes
when they spoke of me,
of my race, of my god
of the way I danced.
They were not your eyes,
but the eyes of years gone by,
shaped by sights of images
too big to see,
and left alone...
in the dark.
Those eyes, archaic,
of years gone by,
had to be plucked,
and in the unwanted sockets,
I put
mine in yours,
yours in mine.
I remember my eyes now,
when they spoke of you,
of your race, of your god,
of the way you danced.

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