The Paradox of Postcolonialism: The Chains of Contingency
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Humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination.

Michel Foucault

Not so long ago, whilst the last bricks of the Berlin Wall were symbolically being chipped and demolished, Francis Fukuyama declared the glorious advent of Western Democracy, mostly known under the – undoubtedly modest – utterance: ‘The End of History.’ It did not take long for Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri to get back to this statement: ‘Empire is materialising before our very eyes […] Empire is the political subject that effectively regulates [these] global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world.’ In other words, ‘The Empire strikes Back.’ Although arguable, Hardt and Negri had a point when denying the idea of a universal reciprocity – globalisation’s main meme. As Michel Foucault articulated in the opening quote of this paper, a procession of political, economic and cultural dominations might be worth considering, unless one is willing to perceive the world in a point of perfect equanimity - after all, globalisation could be approached as the flattening of the globe. Indeed, if the notion of ‘universal reciprocity’ implies a universal status quo, Foucault argues that the systems of rules that might seem increasingly to have replaced military sovereignty – also named rules of democracy, so to speak – are in fact vehicles for domination. To take a less theoretical approach to the French philosopher’s writing, one can easily apply this idea in relation to everyday society, where active systems of interpretation and judgement are overtly present, from the glossy magazine re-defining why the so-called ‘alternative’ fashion trend is worth considering, to the political relations of cultural domination maintained between France and Algeria.

In this procession, the directions that cultural narratives have taken are emblematic of the views of dominant perspectives, which have shifted and re-emerged following the logic stated by Foucault. Looking at how art history has been articulated in the West – bearing in mind that the latter is a western concept – demands an analysis on how this system of hierarchies have been organised and re-interpreted throughout the years. Because of its poststructuralist methodology and critical ethos, Postcolonial theory has offered a way to reflect upon relations of cultural domination and subordination. In return, looking at how Western-centred art history has been shaped provides an enlightening paradigm on the systems behind the construction of sovereignty and dominant discourses.

This article aims to trace both the practical and theoretical limits of postcolonialism through the lenses of contemporary art production in order to expose the condition of contingency in which the non-Western – call it the subaltern – postcolonial artist is still placed. By ‘condition of contingency’, I mean the socio-economic constructs behind the production and reading of artworks that tie the artist to a

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4 Expression from *The Empire Strikes Back,* dir. by George Lucas (20th Century Fox, 1980).
state of dependence, limiting him to set actions and interpretations. Via this cultural approach, I intend to establish a representative example that would identify general assumptions and outline the main implications on how discourses shaping the socio and political ‘Other’ are constructed.

This theoretical analysis unfolds from 1936, the date of publication of Alfred Barr’s chart of modernism, until the early 2000s. This paper fails, however, to tackle more recent approaches, for doing so would require an account of recent socio-economic changes at global scale.

The first section will discuss post-modern thinking on which academic postcolonialism has drawn to lay down its critical claims and conclusions. The second section intends, however, to highlight the need to alert postcolonial studies to its complicities with the still hierarchic capitalist word system, which affect its critique.6 Last but not least, I will focus on presumed facts of origins that still shape western readings of non-western art. Following these facts, the artist, which is defined as ‘Other’ – or in more current terms; the ‘exotic’ – is kept chained to a system of western-centred cultural references within a seemingly intangible - and yet effective - sphere.

I. On postcolonialism

The developments that led the once-geographically colonised subaltern to be incorporated within a larger, so-called ‘equitable’ narrative are not only manifested within the cultural sphere but are also an intrinsic part of the expansion of both cultural institutions and a capitalist driven art market. Indeed, whilst these institutions of the West have shown during the past fifty years an increasing interest in the non-western artist, one could ask where such an interest originates. The latter might testify of an increasing concern with equality, or maybe, the forms of identity struggles have changed in their shapes and expression.

Let us recapitulate: European Modernity provided the West with an exclusive role in the production of avant-garde art. Whilst the European creator was introduced as an active subject of history, his autonomous ‘Self’ was dependent on the ‘Other’, the primitive, presented as passive object of transformation. This binary system of inclusion-exclusion is visible in 1936 Alfred’s H. Barr Junior diagram made at the occasion of the exhibition ‘Cubism and Abstract Art’ (MoMA, New York). The latter illustrates the developments of modern art through a western centred and Hegelian vision of history, where non-Western influences are presented as passive, timeless and external frames of reference in which Western artists assimilated image references (IMAGE 1).

The definition of Postcolonialism as given by Bart Moore-Gilbert analyses and questions cultural forms that challenge relations of subordination and domination.8 It draws from post-structuralist methods of analysis that reveal the constructs, dynamics and actors of dominant narratives. The next two frames of analysis, Foucault’s post-structuralism and Said’s Orientalism, are the cornerstones of postcolonialism. Both expose rhetorics of domination disarticulating the system of hierarchies and advocate alogic of counter-centrism. Ideally, the application of postcolonial thought to the sphere of the visual arts should thus entail the possibility of a critical and fairly equitable reading of the cultural production of all nations. The growing literature and rising popularity of postcolonialism might be explained by such ideals.

Firstly, the binary systems for understanding identity derive from Enlightenment ideas defining it as a Western phenomenon. Hegel’s oppositional model of the master/slave dialectic can be seen as model for what, from the nineteen sixties onwards, was to be called ‘identity politics’.9 This organisation of identity

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8 See B. Moore-Gilbert; also, the ‘Introduction’ in Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*.  
consequently led to larger binary structures of belief where the self (European and North American) and the other (from ex-European colonies and/or outside the industrialising process) would maintain a similar oppositional relation. A system that has been questioned by ‘post-structuralists’: what was given as universal, as the binary structure embracing identity, was shown to depend upon historical contingencies. Foucault’s project was to uncover ‘the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think’. He used the term ‘genealogy’ to describe the analytical method used to articulate the notion of history as a constructed expression rather than as an authoritative and universal entity. Grand narratives, such as modernism, were critically re-articulated, allowing the uncovering of the conditions that made western-based authoritative discourses to be seen, accepted, and thought of as they were.

Secondly, Edwards Said’s *Orientalism* starts with the premise that the post-colonial age is one of continued imperial structures. He sought to expose the link between culture and imperialism, to reveal culture as imperialism, for the former plays an essential role in keeping the later intact. An essential argument is that the relationship between both is invisible, as opposed to geographic and physical domination during colonialism, and yet renders cultural domination effective. The term *Orientalism* denotes the Western construct of an idea of the exotic oriental subject; the Other. Said offers to contrapuntally read Western literature produced on the post-colonial subject, a method that aims to offer a counter-narrative that penetrates beneath the surface of individual texts in order to articulate the ubiquitous presence of western cultural imperialism. The dissolution of the occidental system of discursive representation as well as of its imaginary constraints shall thus allow the emergence of enunciations outside western categories.

The issue that needs to be raised is based on the risk of both of the methods when they are taken as tools destined to re-phrase historical self-justifications, rather than a path towards the understanding of cultural preconceptions; thus consolidating and re-articulating an actualised version of *Orientalism* rather than criticising it. It is worth noting the fact that Said himself raised this contradiction in *Orientalism*: ‘I have found myself writing the history of a strange, secret sharer of Western anti-Semitism’.

II. Colonialism re-visited and the space in-between

The theoretical postcolonial lenses seem blind to the fact that ‘late-modernist values, aesthetic-judgements, and assumptions about quality’ - as James Elkins stated – still describe contemporary art at the global scale: ‘The art of all nations continues to be interpreted using the toolbox of 20th century Western European and North American art-history: structuralism, formalism, style analysis, iconography, biography’. Elkins’ critical approach manifests that an interest towards the ‘Other’ that, genuine as it might appear, is processed through the very same tools that have shaped Western thought. He denigrates in this way post-colonial theory as an applicable lens through which to approach non-western cultures. This is not just a representative case of art-history drama, far from it; the reading of cultural production is in fact reflective of how one might approach the individual as independent being.

This point can be further developed through Olu Oguibe’s interpretation of Zaire native painter Chéri Samba. According to the former, the latter ‘satiates(s) the inebriate desires of Western patrons for a cataclysmic narrative of the postcolonial condition’. So is Samba’s work recognised in the West because he tells what the Occidental subject wants to hear? Is his imagery purposefully easily adaptable to the

12 Ibid, 90.

Western art historical toolbox? Oguibe sees in the painter’s images a cliché of postcolonial society directly aligned with those to be found in Western media. ‘Defense Populaire’ (1998) can be taken as visual example of this imagery (IMAGE 2). The work embraces both ideas of struggle in the socio-political sphere within the country as well as it offers an authentication of the cliché of postcolonial debasement. Samba plays the role of the ‘Other’. His imagery is shaped for the occidental subject, ready to be consumed through the latter’s lenses formed by pre-conceived historical assumptions. The advantage of this reading is that the painting offers the adequate visual elements to lay bare and have thus the potential to lead to further speculations. This idea can be detailed firstly, by what the spectator sees: the somehow parodic assumption – also articulated in nineteenth century literature - that presents the African subject as barbarian, or, in any case not ‘as advanced’ as the Western individual’. 

Similarly, ‘Defense Populaire’ offers a scenario characterised by cartoon-like elements; round faces and the naked breast female character are some examples. The military dressed individual, set in bitter torture so as to unveil the conflict between the army mutiny and the people of Congo since its independence in 1960. Secondly, how the reading of Congolese politics is here generated: whilst the French title might call to Congo’s colonial past, the work situates the scene in context of strife exclusively related to the internal struggle. Indeed there are not white faces in his depiction. That being said, this exemption does not mean that this imagery alienates altogether the situation of the western viewer. Quite the opposite, this is intrinsically related to the discourse of the post-colonial, for the situation of struggle surrounding the Democratic Republic of Congo presents a welcoming scene vis-à-vis interventionist policies. The western eye remains external and the ‘other’ chained to her condition of struggle.

One might ask whether Samba didn’t intend to operate within the Western frame of expectations in order to build a constructive critique. However, Samba’s participation as narrator in a documentary film on Zairean painters and directed by Belgian film-maker Dirk Dumon suggests otherwise. Indeed, the film offers a scenario centred in a Zaire in crisis, where disorder and spectacle form a constructed stage of action.

Secondly, what happens if one moves to the other side of the spectrum? When the western man attempts to see what his pre-conceived idea of the post-colonial subject should be; virtueless, corrupted and, ultimately, absurd? The encounter narrated by Oguibe between Ivorian painter Bakari Ouattara with critic Thomas McEvilley articulates this idea. The latter emphasises the impossibility of the artist of free enunciation for the interview was regulated by McEvilley’s insistence on a specific set of questions focused on the artist’s provenance and habits rather than on his art.

And so McEvilley drives his conversation with Ouattara towards realization of his preferred narrative, with questions not intended to reveal the artists as a subject, but rather to display him as an object, an object of exoticist fascination. The fact that this conversation took place in 1995 potentially leads to the conclusion that McEvilley strongly embodied the continuation of cultural otherness. And yet he does so through novel strategies. There is no exclusion of the subaltern artist from the main cultural scene, for he is physically taken inside. Ouattara’s works were indeed exhibited in western institutions and events (Milan and Kassel’s Documenta are a few examples), and he was himself being interviewed by a western art critic, which are tokens of this logic of inclusion. However, the Ivorian artist is also being parcelled to suit the West’s artificial ideas and taste, and thus fit within a frame of preference. The subaltern might not be outside, but he is not inside either: he is in an in-between space.

Here comes the major paradox. The idea of a

16 Ibid., pp. 18-32.
common ‘other’, which postcolonialism aimed to dissolve in the first place, risks becoming reified due to the vagueness of the concept. Indeed, when relations between domination and subordination -which have shaped the history of Modern European colonialism and Imperialism- are not analysed and specified, they will continue to be apparent in the present area of neocolonialism. Franz Fanon articulated this danger through the idea of a common black culture in ‘The Wretched of the Earth’.Uniting “black entities” might have been necessary in a first instance in order to attack – and from the outside - the dominant. And yet, if black culture comes exclusively and undifferentiated recognised as such, it will lead to a ‘blind alley’ where no individual freedom comes to be recognised.\(^{21}\) The binary functionary opposition between the western subject and the other is thus revised and extended, barely hidden and justified by the postcolonial assumption of equality. The subaltern has been geographically liberated, yes, so he has been given a voice, but one that postulates and eternalises him as the post-colonial subject, or, as Fanon would have it in the case of the African entity; as a ‘black mirage’. What results are neo-colonial, rejuvenated and justified structures of power where the subaltern has not been rejected but domesticated.

III. The chains of contingency

The case of ‘African’ Art, (or rather, art made by artists whose origins are African) questions whether one might ask if all of these artists realise demonstrations of blackness through their practise. In that case, all of them are to be positioned within the sphere of ‘black art’, without arguing whether blackness wouldn’t in fact represent an obstacle ‘for those seeking change’.\(^{22}\) The so-called black artist is thus chained to the sphere of blackness for which he is being recognised, remaining contingent to a set of representational and recognition habits when it comes from external identification.

This positioning of both the maker’s identity and cultural objects within specific already-made spheres does not apply to only the African example. In fact, this is just an example among many classifications. Frida Kahlo reads as ‘Mexican’ via the decorum of her dresses, Ai Wei Wei as ‘Chinese’ for the cultural visual references that are purposefully read in his work (which is arguable, since what he speaks is the very occidental visual language of conceptualism, and yet critics seem to fancy to guarantee the Chinese-ness of his pieces). It seems however that the dynamics leading this process are in fact part of a larger socio-political spectrum. One that - as I mentioned above - is manifested through the lenses of visual creation as well as in the way through which the product and its maker are received and classified. Surely more relevant, the art product is introduced within the sphere of a specific and pre-established otherness. It is in fact socialised through a process where perception has been replaced by already-made conceptions.\(^{23}\) Inevitably, it follows that so is the identity of the author. And yet, black culture might be an illusion, a socially constructed one. In ‘Black Skin, White Mask’ (1952) Fanon offers a way to understand this representational and interpretative limitation. What he shows is that ‘blackness’ results from a constructed narrative that organises knowledge and conducts biased interpretations. ‘It is’, Fanon said, ‘a definitive structuring of the self and the world […] Below the corporeal schema I had sketched a historico-racial schema’.\(^{24}\) To Fanon, the black subject doesn’t define himself as much as he is being defined by the white subject via anecdotes and stories: call it historicity.\(^{25}\) The former is imprisoned within a sphere shaped by the later throughout the years. The black skin is not, per se, what imprisons the subject, it is the historicity that uses as reference the black body and which is based on an entire ensemble of constructed narratives, that demarcates this rift. Consequently, whatever comes from the minds of these subjects will be read through the same lenses. This may be crucial in the way one understands or approaches an artwork. I believe, however,

\(^{21}\) F. Fanon, \textit{The Wretched of the Earth} (New York, 1963), p. 173.

\(^{22}\) Questions raised in Darby English, \textit{How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness} (Cambridge, MA, 2009).

\(^{23}\) Ibid.


\(^{25}\) Ibid., p. 84.
that the visual examples here described serve rather to unveil the necessity to understand the systems that shape our approach to difference. A system that, as Fanon described through his own experience operates in the most basic of human approaches. More importantly, a system that is presented only as a fact, as a ready-to-consume message, as unquestionable knowledge that thus operates within larger socio-political systems.

On another hand, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak pointed out that postcolonial studies needs to be aware of its potential complicities with the capitalist world system that it seeks to critique. The domestication process described in the first part implies a process in which the culture good is taken from the margins in order to be re-absorbed. It does not necessarily do so by benevolent humanistic impulses or open-minded curiosity (which does not imply that they do not exist). Rather, I would argue that what is at stake is a process of adaptation destined to firstly commodify what has been segregated in the ‘space in-between’, and then to insert within the logic of mass-market consumption such cultural products.

The cultural difference, as seen through the example of the interview led by McEvilley, can be maximised revealing unequal relations of power. At the same time, cultural differences are measured in terms of exoticism. The latter should not be approached as an inherent value of the object but as something constructed and given to it. The relevance of this point lies in the fact that the product of the subaltern creator is converted into spectacle, and not necessarily a critical one. The exotic attributed quality of the work disguises any construct of power behind. In this sense cultural exoticism derives from the commodified discourse of cultural marginality. This system can be resumed as follows: there is a dialectic and constantly adapting process of ‘exoticisation’ – the object is estranged from its context and at the same time rendered familiar through its circulation in the market- that forms an essential part in the processes of cultural otherness and difference. Indeed, cultural differences are not only manufactured but also disseminated and consumed. From there one could argue a theory on the postcoloniality of the universal market.28

So what are the conditions of the postcolonial artist? Postcolonial methodology aims to re-trace her steps so that to lay bare that the latter, as ‘other’, has been situated within an outside space. And yet, the lenses offered by such methodology can also be used to re-formulate and assert actualised systems of division. In all this I hardly believe that the postcolonial artist has much of a choice but that he is rather in a situation of contingency.29 From the view of the artist, the way he shapes his art has consequences; his gestures are the key to success, but according to specific paradigms. Simply put, his success -as previously exemplified by the case of Samba- depends on how he or she externalises his or her identity 

vis a vis the clientele. From the view of the ‘clientele’, the latter’s expectations and most important, conclusions, need to be intrinsically related to the constructed narrative forming the vision of the postcolonial. And the sphere in which the artist, her artwork and the observers are situated is not unique to the artistic realm but one in tandem with larger structures that follow the exact same dichotomous – me and the other - and hierarchical logic.

The art world is certainly dependant and in constant dialogue with the socio political and – unavoidably – economic spheres. In this sense, the way in which the social ‘Other’ is approached in, say, political terms, is in fact aligned, not to say in tandem, with the way in which the cultural product of the ‘Other’ is read. To further develop this idea, one can admit that the art object can even serve as a tool for differentiation since it offers a tangible object that can be read in a self-justifying and asserting fashion. Returning to the case of Cheri Samba, who was introduced within the Western exhibition structure at the occasion of ‘Magiciens de la Terre’ (Pompidou centre, Paris, 1989), although his works do not claim a

27 Ibid., p. 20.
28 Ibid., p. 10
29 Oguibe, The Culture Game, p. 18.
Western flavour, they were made for the Western eye. Samba himself stated: ‘There is only one solution, which is to be accepted in France. It is true that an artist who is accepted in France will undoubtedly be accepted everywhere in the world’\(^{30}\). So the reader could ask himself, does this recognition only apply to the artist/ the art world? I believe it can be brought down to the everyday basis. Although Samba may have been given a voice, it is a voice that is in reality chained. The expectations of the individual ‘Other’ are contingent to the acceptance from the dominant voice whilst the acceptance of his work is contingent on how the latter is read and how he exposes himself. This consequential chain shapes not only cultural but human relations at large. Thinking in terms of conflict, what I named ‘chains’ relates to a dominant logic; the identity image of a group of individuals is contingent on a set of readings that shape the approach - and consequently, the behaviour - of those who approach it. In sum, this identity is contingent on the artist’s geographic, political and especially third-world origin. Indeed I posit that this identity is chained to these referents. This dichotomous and hierarchical logic establishes a divide that, because of its visual nature, seems more apparent in the fine arts sphere, but applies in fact to the recognition of an identity per se. That is what I previously named under the expression ‘larger structures’.

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The only valid tribute to a thought such as Nietzsche’s is precisely to use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest.\(^{31}\)

Foucault’s remark illustrates the core of post-structuralist theory where a narrative is taken and made speak. Both of the terms ‘groan’ and ‘protest’ might indicate a radical and subversive action departing from Western philosophical thoughts, assimilations and assumptions. And yet, as this paper has tried to suggest, the factual development of the western cultural discourse \textit{vis-à-vis} the other firmly maintains a step of superiority. It does so by defining the cultural work under the definition of an object as well as by maintaining the later and the corresponding artist within a conceptual specific sphere. The way in which the art of the postcolonial artist is read is contingent to the social construct embracing the postcolonial subject. Such a construct can be defined as a narrative formed by past historicities as well as presently maintained assumptions linked to the exotic origin of the artist. The re-formulated construct is furthermore asserted by the capitalist aim to marketise the ‘other’ art as exotic object valuable for its representation of the foreign native. The others are reduced to a group of stereotypes and, if postcolonial theory managed to question the value given to such stereotypes, it seems also essential to bear in mind that the very same postcolonial methodology has been apt to reformulate an actualised neocolonial rhetoric. As result, as Spivak would have it, the subaltern cannot speak. What could be proposed is to return to Fanon’s initial analysis on the formation of a segregational space in between, for there are these very same intangible segregational dynamics that I believe that have been in constant repetition throughout the last centuries.

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\(^{30}\) [my translation] Samba, 1983.

IMAGES


Image 2. Cheri Samba, *Défense Populaire*, 1998, acrylic on canvas, 80×100 cm.