Culturalisation at an Australian–Swedish Crossroads

By Johan Fornäs & Martin Fredriksson

There is a widespread understanding that processes of *culturalisation* and *globalisation* characterise the present era. Although they are often imagined as separate phenomena, these two discourses are deeply interrelated. On the one hand, culture – in any of its many forms – seems to expand and acquire an increasingly central role in political, economic, and social life. The discourses of aestheticisation, mediatisation, creative or experience industries, and knowledge societies put cultural aspects into the focus of regional planning, sustainable growth, and concerns for democracy and social cohesion in a late modern world. Culturalisation is a general term for all such claims, summing up a cluster of processes, discourses, and practices, transforming the position and meaning of culture in society at large. This trend has fuelled the emergence, growth, and transnational spread of interdisciplinary cultural studies, offering useful interfaces for scholars who, from different backgrounds, study the changing societal roles of cultural practices.

Culture has tended to be discussed within national contexts where international aspects have been limited to acknowledging dominant nations' cultural influence over less powerful ones. But the growing networks of transport, trade, travel, tourism, migration, and communication have redefined the relations between the local and the global. Discourses of diversity, hybridity, and transnational flows have made it increasingly futile to confine oneself to local or national understandings of culture. The process of globalisation captures this cluster of ideas, with its economic and political as well as social and aesthetic dimensions increasingly enmeshed with the aforementioned process of culturalisation.

These two processes (and their corresponding complex discourses) feed upon each other. Intensified transnational encounters make interpretations of media texts and cultural representations an urgent task in politics, business, and everyday life. The increased foregrounding of culture in social life is often experienced as a global trend that calls for local accommodation. Globalisation may be seen as one facet and force of culturalisation, at the same time as culturalisation may be interpreted as one of the main forms of globalisation. Still, surprisingly, much research remains anchored to only one of these dimensions, neglecting to explore and analyse their dynamic interaction and exchange.

The intersection of culturalisation and globalisation has formed the basis for a four-year collaboration project between the Institute for Culture and Society (ICS, formerly the Centre for Cultural Research) at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) in Australia and the Department of Culture Studies (Tema Q) at Linköping University (LiU) in Sweden: two departments that share a common interest in the

transformations of culture in a global era. ICS addresses the cultural challenges and contradictions of a world that is increasingly globalised, heterogeneous, and technologically mediated. It approaches culture as a vital dimension of social, political, and economic life, seeking to build the cultural intelligence needed for a complex and changing world and researching cultural diversity. Tema Q is an interdisciplinary research unit at Linköping University dedicated to studying a wide range of areas that in different ways connect to the concept and conse-quences of culturalisation, such as cultural politics, media practices, representa-tion and cultural production, institutions of cultural heritage, and the uses of his-tory.

The exchange programme, running from 2008 to 2012, was initiated by Advanced Cultural Studies of Sweden (ACSIS) – a national network of cultural studies based at Tema Q – and funded by the Swedish Foundation for Interna-tional Cooperation in Research and Higher Education (STINT). It enabled a num-ber of joint workshops and PhD courses exploring the interfaces between cultur-alisation and globalisation in four focal areas:

A. Comparative studies of *cultural policy and cultural production* at local, regional, national, and supranational levels, focusing on the interfaces between culture, politics, and economics. There are global trends for cultural factors to become more central in regional planning, trade, and the labour market, as well as in cultural production in the arts and the cultural industries, while official cultural politics still tends to be dic-tated on state level. This relates to the much-debated questions of how interdisciplinary work in the humanities and cultural research may find a new and stronger role in twenty-first-century societies.

B. Another research area compares the meanings and usages of heritage in the Swedish and Australian contexts, including *uses of history and museums*. Historical references are central to collective identity for-mations, and museums, monuments, and other practices for (re)con-structing history play a key role in shaping both culturalised and globalised understandings of each society. The institutionalised role of museums and exhibitions in the creation of collective memory – both national and transnational – is a key subject for contemporary cultural research.

C. A third area concerns *tourism, mobility, space*. Tourism has a prominent globalising function and is also often seen as a key aspect of the expanding 'experience' or creative industries. This part of the project has dealt with how different forms of global mobility affect the cultural and social meaning of space and place.

D. A fourth and related area concerns other forms of *media and popular culture*, such as shopping, sport, music, and youth cultures. These tend

to construct transcontinental links but also to develop in locally specific ways – for example through different forms of fandom and style.

Articles

The project 'Culturalisation and Globalisation' has brought two interdisciplinary centres for advanced cultural research in different hemispheres together to explore these perspectives on contemporary cultural processes and conditions. This work has, among other things, resulted in a number of articles that have either been presented at workshops or otherwise influenced by the exchange of ideas and experiences that the project has enabled. One set of such articles, focusing mainly on issues of globalisation, is to be published in the Australian edition of *Global Media Journal* (GMJ, www.commarts.uws.edu.au/gmjau). In parallel, *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* is proud to present here another combination of articles, with cultural perspectives and processes of culturalisation as the main common theme.

A shared trait in these articles is that they all, in different ways, explore the relationship between particular cultural expressions and a general cultural order. This reflects much of the classical tension between Matthew Arnold's definition of culture as 'the best that has been thought and said' (1869/2006) and Raymond William's anthropological definition of culture as 'a whole way of life' (1981). This is a distinction that becomes more and more acute as processes of culturalisation push towards the latter by dispersing the concept of culture across a wide range of societal spheres while various mechanisms and institutions of cultural validation desperately seek to maintain or re-establish a cultural canon.

The concept of culture has a complex history, from its roots in a general understanding of human cultivation which can be described as an ontological concept of culture which increasingly divided existence into nature and culture, and was thus parallel to the sister concept of civilisation.[1] The nineteenth century gave rise to its bifurcation in Arnold's aesthetic concept of culture on the one hand, with the fine arts at its core, and, on the other, the anthropological or sociological concept of culture as a life form as the main alternative. The former was seen as a universal achievement of humanity globally, though with the Western world as the vanguard, while the latter was pluralised in a variety of 'cultures' coexisting glocally, each forming a full lifeworld of the people inhabiting it. Aesthetic culture thus tended to be universal but forming a separate sector of society, thus making culture distinct from civilisation, while anthropological cultures were instead differentiated globally but each including its members fully.

From the 1960s, a fourth main way of understanding culture has been developed by hermeneuticians, semioticians, social anthropologists, and cultural sociologists. This new hermeneutic concept of culture focuses on meaning-making or signifying practice, and it has had enormous influence on cultural studies and

cultural research as a highly productive founding concept adopted by, among others, Paul Ricoeur, Clifford Geertz, Stuart Hall, and Raymond Williams.[2] It manages to link the previous four concepts to each other and offer them a more tenable foundation in that, for instance, the aesthetic field can be seen as a haven for challenging and expanding signifying practices, while anthropological life forms are bound together by shared meanings.

This also means that culturalisation need not be interpreted in either an ontological, aesthetic or anthropological way – as an expansion of culture over nature; as the increasing importance of arts, entertainment, fiction, and design – or as a new emphasis on identity politics. On a deeper level, it may be seen as a growing and more reflexive understanding of how profoundly human existence is bound to practices of signification, meaning-making, and interpreting things, selves, others, and social relations.

The articles presented here, emanating from the collaboration between Australian and Swedish cultural researchers, in various ways reflect upon such processes, capturing some of the complex interactions between different levels, meanings, and concepts of culture. Not least, they all testify to the fruitfulness of a cultural perspective in trying to come to grips with the role of culture in the contemporary world.

The section opens with *Erling Bjurström's* article 'Whose Canon? Culturalisation versus Democratisation'. This is a study of the cultural construction of taste in the past and its effect on present debates. It looks at how the formations of cultural canons and the very idea of a high culture relate to the position of art in modern culture. Bjurström's article touches on the very core of cultural change since it studies how the attribution of aesthetic value to a limited body of consecrated works connects to the wider anthropological meaning of culture as a set of social norms and values. Firmly grounded in the aesthetic and philosophical history of creativity, it also relates the recent debates on publicly commissioned cultural canons to a longer intellectual tradition. Bjurström discusses how a 'cultural turn' took place in the eighteenth century, when art was disembedded from everyday life and transformed from a craft among others to an expression of an extraordinary creative imagination while culture became a new ground for collective national identities. At the other end of this process, he also demonstrates how the 'discourse on canons' recently has 'shifted its focus from processes of inclusion to those of exclusion' as the predominant understanding of culture has changed from a means to cultivate the people through a top-down dispersion of fine arts to a supposedly democratic arena for identity politics where the different factions of the people can claim their rights to be represented.

Bodil Axelsson's article 'History in Popular Magazines: Negotiating Masculinities, the Low of the Popular and the High of History' is a study of how the past is reproduced and recontextualised in the present. It analyses how the Swedish history magazine *Populär historia* integrates history into a landscape of late modern

consumerism where historical events are articulated as kaleidoscopic fragments of the past that are connected to different forms of consumptions. In that way, Axelsson shows how the historical narratives and images that previously served a similar role as the romantic notion of culture in the construction of national identities are disembedded from their nationalist past and re-embedded in a late modern consumptionscape where history is commodified and used to sell other media and tourist experiences. This is an example of how the past is being culturalised, not only in the sense that it is interpreted in relation to current cultural values and norms, but also because it becomes caught up in processes and conflicts that have an increasing influence on culture as culture invades other social spheres in late modernity. Consequently, Axelsson shows how these historical imaginaries are articulated in a field of cultural tensions between masculinity and femininity, high and low culture, fact and fiction, and education and entertainment.

Hilary Hongjin He's article '"Chineseness-es" outside Mainland China: Macao and Taiwan through Post-1997 Hong Kong Cinema' reflects on how place, space, and global relations are reflected through cultural practices. It focuses on a number of films made in Hong Kong and Macau after Hong Kong was transferred from the United Kingdom to China in 1997. If Axelsson discusses how historical images are disembedded from a context of nation-building, He can be said to depict a reverse shift where cultural commodities are drawn into a context of Chinese nation-building post 1997. The article deals with how film and popular culture embody different cultural and political identities that coexist within the vast and heterogeneous People's Republic of China, and conflicts between those identities are enacted in fictional narratives. In He's article, the connection between culture and politics comes to the fore. She shows how those two spheres are caught up in a mutual process of culturalisation and politicisation that becomes evident in how the political and constitutional reorganisation of Hong Kong and Macau in relation to mainland China affect the production and reception of popular cinema.

Hart Cohen's article 'Database Documentary: From *Authorship* to *Authoring* in Re-mediated/Remixed Documentary' studies the highly contemporary phenomenon of database documentaries. Cohen's purpose is twofold: on the one hand, the article serves as an empirical and theoretical introduction to how this new interactive documentary format – where the audience can navigate freely within an archive of mixed media content – is constituted within a contemporary media landscape. On the other hand, Cohen's article not only opens up a new and fascinating field of research, it also contributes to a deeper understanding of the genre of database documentary by relating it to the media landscape of the past decade, and particularly to the history of documentary film. The discussion about how database documentaries challenge fundamental cinematic concepts of authorship and creativity also touches on how the current changes in technology and media production are pushing towards a more key transformation of core values in the

cultural imaginary laid down over the last decades. In this sense, Cohen's text forms a good end point to this thematic section as it shows how some of the ideas of creativity and authorship discussed in Bjurström's article are renegotiated in a contemporary media context.

These four articles cut across a wide geographical, historical, and topical area, going from the seventeenth-century history of aesthetics and philosophy, via the uses of history in twentieth-century publishing and geopolitical aspects of Hong Kong film-making, to the relationship between new media and old cultural concepts. Taken together, these articles can be said to represent different dimensions of culturalisation in the age of globalisation. If He describes the cultural formulation of geographical and political space, then Axelsson's article explores the cultural construction of the past. Bjurström's and Cohen's texts, in their turn, discuss the formulation and reformulation of fundamental cultural concepts, such as aesthetics, creativity, and authorship.

Seven articles from the four-year exchange between Tema Q and CCR are simultaneously published in the Australian edition of *Global Media Journal*, volume 6, issue 1 (www.commarts.uws.edu.au/gmjau): *Johan Fornäs*, 'European Identification: Symbolic Mediations of Unity and Diversity'; *Ann Werner*, 'Emotions in Music Culture: Articulations of Love in Girls' Listening and Producing'; *George McClean*, 'SBS's Multilingual Dilemma: Global Media, "Community Languages" and Cultural Citizenship'; *Glen Fuller*, '"V8s' 'til '98": The V8 Engine, Australian Nationalism and Automobility'; *Martin Fredriksson*, 'Spaces of Piracy'; *Hart Cohen*, 'New Media and Populism'; and *David Rowe & Stephanie Alice Baker*, 'Live Sites in an Age of Media Reproduction: Mega Events and Transcontinental Experience in Public Space'.

These texts further expand the scope of the Swedish–Australian interaction, adding analyses slightly more focused on the theme of globalisation. Together, these two theme sections with, in all, eleven articles, published in collaboration between cultural researchers in opposite corners of the world (at Linköping University in Sweden and the University of Western Sydney in Australia), testify to the power of culture to make sense across the globe.

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Notes

[1]   The following arguments largely derive from the Swedish book *Kultur* (2012), written by Johan Fornäs as a problematizing history and analysis of the concept of culture.
[2]   Ricoeur (1965/1970), Geertz (1973), Hall (1997), and Williams (1981).

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