Global art history: a view from the North

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Abstract
“Southern” perspectives on unequal development are undeniably much needed. Yet, Southern perspectives on art and culture sometimes construct a homogenising image of the West. As a result, they are prone to uphold and perhaps even reinforce the dichotomy between “the North” and “the South” rather than deconstruct it. Conversely, this article aims to pluralise the West by contributing to the discussion of differential perspectives on art and cultural identity within the West. I wish to suggest that a Northern perspective—or to be more specific, a semi-peripheral Nordic perspective—might provide scholars based in this region with a productive entry point into the study of the globalised art forms of today. By consciously and self-critically positioning ourselves in the semi-periphery of the global art world, we may be able to develop a kind of inside-outside perspective similar to the “stereo-scopic vision” that Salman Rushdie famously attributed to migrants. Seeing the Western art world from the inside as well as the outside invariably involves comparison and inter- or cross-cultural analysis. Thus, contemporary comparative approaches would need to build on a critical revision of the Eurocentric bias endemic in art history’s long tradition of cross-cultural comparison. Accordingly, the second aim of this article is to discuss the potential of comparative approaches and, in continuation thereof, what scholars in the Nordic semi-periphery could learn from the Southern perspectives of post- and decolonial studies.

Keywords: contemporary art; art history; cross-cultural analysis; comparativism; transculturality; postcolonialism; Nordic colonialism; semi-periphery; provincialism; globalisation

One important aspect of globalization is a process that could be described as the decentralization of the West .... The power of definition held by the West, which imagined itself as the centre of world affairs, is waning. Looking back, we are slowly beginning to understand that even in the past, the periphery anticipated developments that would later be of great significance to the centre.¹

Is there a single epistemology or perception of the world that unites all regions of the West and all Westerners? Of course not. Although they may share some features, the various ways of viewing

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the world from the West are characterised by significant regional, social, and, not least, historical differences. The title of this article inverts the title of Senegalese economist Samir Amin’s book *Global History: A View from the South.* It is beyond dispute that “Southern” perspectives on unequal development are necessary and much needed, also in the fields of culture and the arts where they have gradually become a part of the critical discourses since the 1990s. However, Southern and postcolonial perspectives on art and culture sometimes construct a monolithic and monocultural image of the West, which is pitted against the diversity and pluralism of the South. It is an image of White sameness with no space for issues of differences, peripheries, unequal developments, and a plurality of cultural identifications internal to the West and the so-called “Eurocentrism.”

As a result, such critical perspectives are prone to uphold, and perhaps even reinforce, classical dichotomies such as “the North” and “the South,” coloniser and colonised rather than deconstruct them. This applies especially to studies in contemporary “global art,” which have been profoundly influenced by postcolonial approaches and Southern perspectives. Emerging out of the writings of Indian “subaltern” theorists, postcolonial approaches have played an important part in devising a language and an operable set of concepts to describe the diversity of cultures and the intersecting and hybridising nature of cultural production. Even so, they have also remained fixated on notions of difference, dissidence, subalternity, and marginality, which “has had the bizarre effect of contributing to a Western tradition of othering the Rest.” As the anthropologist Aihwa Ong has observed, postcolonial approaches have tended to use colonialism in India as a model for understanding contemporary relations of domination, subjugation, and subjectivisation that are shaped by a geo-political situation in which many formerly colonised countries in Southeast Asia are themselves “emergent capitalist powerhouses” that would not regard their engagement with global capitalism and metropolitan powers as postcolonial but would “seek rather to emphasise and claim emergent power, equality and mutual respect on a global stage.”

Critique of the generalisations and limitations of postcolonial approaches has also been voiced in Europe itself. The Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski has made salient points with respect to the post-communist countries in Eastern Europe whose experiences of colonialism deviate significantly from the forms of colonialism analysed in the bulk of postcolonial studies. He explains the need for a more nuanced and historically differentiated understanding of Eurocentrism and European colonialism by calling attention to the great historical differences in European experiences of domination and colonialism:

> Most of the scholars, whether they come from the Global South (or the former Third World), or from the West, completely neglect inner European tensions, especially East-West relations. To them Europe is simply a homogeneous continent. For us East Europeans, however, this issue is a crucial one. There is not one Europe; so-called postcolonial Europe is only a part of the continent, actually the Western part, or even merely a section of it. [...] Were we [East Europeans] ever in the center, or Euro-Center? What does “Eurocentrism” mean in such a situation? It simply means ignoring European history, geography, politics and culture. This vocabulary has to be changed. [...] We have to name those who are responsible for colonization.

The question of what it means to see the world, particularly the art world, from the “Nordic periphery” is the fulcrum of this article. What does it entail to occupy a position, or a “place of enunciation,” in this periphery? The first part reflects on what it means to be located in the Nordic region, whereas the second links the view from the North to the need for a revised cross-cultural comparativism. I have chosen the indefinite article of “a position” deliberately to avoid reducing a plurality characterised by diversity and internal divisions to a single uniform position. Individuals and groups from the different Nordic countries do not share a common “Nordic” outlook or identical “Nordicness,” and the countries are not positioned equally in geo-political, socio-economic, and cultural terms. Nevertheless, the Nordic countries are all assigned a position on the margins of the global art world. It is this shared condition that underpins my generalisations regarding the view from the North and justifies that I lump together all the Nordic countries under a common regional denominator. In addition, the Nordic countries have traditionally been grouped together and are sometimes regarded
as a semi-European region. To quote Swedish art historian Charlotte Bydler’s introduction to Nordic art from 2014: “The Nordic countries form a region in Europe that often does not quite count as properly European. Few European art-historical features are found in the periods of which they are generally thought to be a part.”

The article thus picks up on the nascent discussion of differential perspectives internal to the Western art world. It seeks to develop and critically discuss the theoretical and historical framework of a semi- or peripheral analytical position, not to present a survey of contemporary art from the Nordic countries or to test the applicability of a semi peripheral perspective to globalised contemporary art form this or other regions in the world. These are topics and tasks in their own right and deserve thorough treatment elsewhere. I wish to suggest that a Northern perspective—or, to be more specific, a semi-peripheral Nordic perspective—might provide scholars based in this region with a productive entry point into the study of the globalised art forms of today. By strategically and self-critically positioning ourselves in the semi-periphery of the global art world, we may be able to develop a useful and appropriate double perspective, because Scandinavians are at one and the same time positioned as privileged Western insiders and marginalised outsiders to the cultural and art institutional strongholds of the West. In my understanding, the semi-peripheral perspective is thus comparable to the “stereoscopic vision” that Salman Rushdie famously attributed to migrants, because migrants are at the same time insiders and outsiders in society.

The view from the North can be designated in greater detail with reference to the concept of double consciousness as defined by the African-American sociologist and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois. Writing in the early 20th century, Du Bois suggested that African-American citizens developed a double sense of the self because they internalised the contempt White America had for them by looking at themselves through the eyes of others, while simultaneously seeing themselves and the world through their own eyes. I wish to be clear here: I do not wish to suggest that Scandinavian societies have been subjected to the same kind of historical injustice, colonial violence, and social inequality as Black communities in America. I merely wish to draw attention to the structural similarity with communities that have developed a negative self-perception by taking over the disparaging perception of those who hold the power of definition, in order to clarify how the Nordic art worlds have internalised the perception that they are “peripheral” and thus inferior by looking at themselves through the eyes of the normative centres.

As I can only claim to be well acquainted with the Danish art world (from which I will pick most of my examples), I should of course be careful with generalisations. After all, other Nordic countries may see themselves positioned differently in the global art world, and they have different relations to colonialism. Yet, I do find some support for my sweeping statements in a recent survey of Nordic contemporary art, published by Thames and Hudson in 2014, aimed at a global audience: Nordic contemporary: Art from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden effectively revives and promotes the idea of the Nordic periphery by grafting it on to contemporary art. In fact, the very publication of this survey, which includes among its short introductions to individual artists several single-page spreads on key curators, critics, collectors, and galleries in the Nordic art world and market, testifies to how Nordic art has been assimilated into a global economy. The lavishly illustrated survey opens with a foreword by its London-based editor Hossein Amirsadeghi and the aforementioned introduction by Charlotte Bydler.

It is part of series that includes volumes on art from the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America, and concentrates on “what are euphemistically termed ‘periphery’ nations or regions—a culturally pejorative term that these books attempt to remedy, given their global reach.” Despite this rhetorical disclaimer, Amirsadeghi chooses to offer the following outsider view of the Nordic nations under the headline “The Nordic Brand”:

“Ultima Thule,” or the “far North,” was how the ancients described these Nordic lands, seen as a forbidding part of the planet, remote and isolated. When all is said and done, such general world views have not changed that much since Virgil. A great deal is said about the Scandinavian model, but in fact little is known about it except for the region’s highly regarded social-welfare system, its rigorous democratic traditions and its intricate communal-welfare politics [...]. People outside the Nordic countries only know them
as very rich, very educated, very progressive and very cloistered.13

I cannot help wondering whether this well-intended act of “branding” really works to deconstruct the notion of a “remote and isolated” periphery with “cloistered” communities and art scenes, as Amirsadeghi’s disclaimer suggests, or it does the opposite: reinforce existing hierarchies by keeping “the ‘periphery’ nations and regions” reassuringly in place as the inferior art scenes of the “forbidding” outskirts of the global art world.

**PROVINCIALISM RECONSIDERED**

Now, how does the first aim of this article, to unpack the idea of a semi-peripheral Nordic position, relate to the latter, advocacy of comparativism? Mieke Bal’s concept of “migratory aesthetics” refers to a contemporary situation in which the intensified circulation of images, information, goods, and people has changed the very conditions of making and experiencing art.14 Although art works are always locally produced, much of what is shown in the global art world is culturally hybridised and translated to reach an international audience. Analysing these pervasive processes of transculturation is thus key to deepening our understanding of globalised art as well as the construction of locational identities. I wish to propose that comparative cultural analysis could provide us with flexible and much needed instruments to gain more insight into how transculturation transforms contemporary art and to address some of the issues raised by art as a cross-cultural phenomenon and by cross-cultural approaches to art.

However, comparative approaches from the North would need to build on a critical revision of the Eurocentric bias so deeply ingrained in art history’s long tradition of inter- and cross-cultural comparison. Scholars such as Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme, David Summers, Kobena Mercer, Stephen Leuthold, and Asra Akcan have already pioneered this revision.15 Broadly speaking, inter- and cross-cultural comparison is concerned with “the artistic influences that are exerted by one culture or tradition on another, or the mutual artistic cross-fertilisation that occurs between two or more such analytical entities.”16 In his contributions to the anthology *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches* from 2008, van Damme stresses the theoretically complicated and contested nature of intercultural comparison and the fact that it may assume diverse forms.17 As my focus is on the influences and connections that cut across national and regional borders, not those internal to local and national cultures, I prefer the term cross-cultural to the term intercultural. Moreover, in recent art history, the term cross-cultural often carries the same connotations as the term “transcultural” when used in recent literary studies to refer to “a genuinely transnational and transcultural perspective.”18

According to literary scholar Arianna Dagnino, transcultural literature is characterised by a strong engagement with the confluent nature of cultures and seeks to record “the re-shaping of national collective imaginaries in an effort to adjust to the cosmopolitan vision in a new age of transnational and supra-national economic, political, social and cultural processes.”19

For now, let us return to the question of position. It is not an easy task to carve out a critically reflexive position for oneself in the semi-periphery of a global art world dominated by discourses distinguishing only crudely between the binary opposites of “centres” and “peripheries.”20 It amounts to constructing a kind of third space that enables other positions to emerge. These tensional in-between positions are occupied by professionals who, on the one hand, have internalised the forms of knowledge and institutional structures of the Western art world and thus enjoy a privileged access, as well as a geographic proximity, to this world. On the other hand, they are at least vaguely aware of being situated within a structure of subordination, and they are familiar with the fact that the hegemonic discourses of the Western art centres are frequently at odds with the aberrant phenomena and divergent discourses of Nordic art scenes. Yet, despite the centres’ ignorance of the non-metropolitan peripheries, we find their hegemonic discourses eminently useful in understanding our regional or local art.

In *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Bengali historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has applied a critical postcolonial perspective to the mythical figure of Europe that is often taken to be the original site of modernity in many histories of the social and cultural modernisation of non-Western countries. He decentralises the enlightenment and modern legacies of
European thought—including concepts such as democracy, citizenship, modernity, the subject and the secular vision of the human—by arguing that they are not universal or universally applicable, but concepts of local origin. This does not mean that European thought is simply “culture specific” and therefore only belongs to the European cultures, Chakrabarty argues. European imperialism and postcolonial intercultural exchange have resulted in a Western body of thoughts becoming so integrated with intellectual traditions outside the West that it has become a global heritage.

It follows that Chakrabarty is not discarding European thought. His point is that “provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought—which is now everybody’s heritage and which affect us all—may be renewed from and for the margins.”

From Chakrabarty’s argument, one might infer that the normative discourses on art that have spread from a hegemonic metropolitan West are “both indispensable and inadequate” in helping us understand the particularities of local modernities. Chakrabarty’s critique of the mechanisms that have led Western as well as non-Western historians to routinely assign a marginal significance to the modernities of the former European colonies can thus help us gain a deeper understanding of “provincialism.” He diagnoses an experience that I will claim is also integral to European cultures and deeply ingrained outside of Europe’s leading “art nations” and the metropolitan hubs of Paris, Berlin, and London. In effect, from a globalisation perspective, Europe is a “province,” too. It is just the West that still has not realised its own decentralisation, argues sociologist Oliver Marchart:

The art field’s coordinate system—just like global power relations—is starting to shift, to turn. This does not mean that Venice or Kassel will lose their significance, but rather that they will clearly be seen as what they really are: an expression of a specific European provincialism long imbedded in a North Atlantic cultural defence alliance, which became obsolete when the Iron Curtain fell.

In the Western art world, “provincialism” is regarded as a sign of inferiority and otherness. It betrays a rear-guard position perceived to be lacking, and thus incomplete, compared to the vanguard and mainstream developments in the art metropoles. As the British art historian Leon Wainwright has pointed out in his study of transnational Caribbean art, art from the peripheries is often perceived as belated or “anachronistic”—a temporal misfit. Wainwright does not challenge the traditional binaries of centre and periphery, the North and the South, and consequently bypasses the semi-periphery. Nonetheless, many of his arguments are also relevant to the concept of the semi-periphery. He makes the crucial point that margins should not only be understood in spatial and geographic terms but also in temporal terms. Referring to the numerous artists from the Caribbean who have settled and unsuccessfully exhibited their works in the United Kingdom or the United States since World War II, Wainwright argues that the periphery is not so much a geographic location, a “place,” as a spatio-temporal device, which establishes a pattern of classification that is generative of historical narratives. As a temporal classification device, it distinguishes between art recognised as “contemporary,” and art from the margins, caught up in a process of “catching up” with “vanguard” developments elsewhere. Judging from the aforementioned volume Nordic contemporary, provincialism is still a classification device routinely used to frame Nordic art, even from the late 20th century. In her contribution to this book, “Nature in Nordic Contemporary Art,” the Finnish art historian Hanna Johansson correctly emphasises the conspicuous romanticism in the expressive abstract paintings of the 1980s by internationally acclaimed painters such as Olaf Christopher Jenssen (N) and Per Kirkeby (DK). Yet, symptomatically, she interprets this a sign of backwardness: “But when it came to an expanded field of art and new artistic forms, the situation was different. It took some years for them to catch up with international trends.”

REVISITING POSTCOLONIALISM

By way of a conclusion, I would like to stress two points regarding the preconditions of a semi-peripheral Nordic perspective. First, that it would require that we consider the complicated relationship between, on the one hand, the legacy of Nordic colonialism, and, on the other hand, the rich field of postcolonial and decolonial studies, which has already for some time contributed considerably to the revitalisation and decentralisation
of art history. As Chakrabarty’s notion of provincializing Europe exemplifies, the formation of a semi-peripheral Nordic position could productively draw on de- and postcolonial studies, as they could help us to think through what it means to be a scholar from the semi-periphery, and how that forms one's archive and ways of framing objects of study. At the same time, a reflective concept of the semi-periphery may open new inroads into the critical discourses on transculturality and hegemonic relationships as constitutive features of culture at large. As Dagnino points out, the explanatory power of “the dichotomic paradigm of postcolonialism” is waning in a historical situation where “the perceived 'monocultural' Western imperialism ... is being replaced by a plurality of centers of techno-economic power, cultural creativity and extended knowledge.”

Still, a selective borrowing of useful elements from de- and postcolonial traditions would place on us the obligation to consider how to reconcile de- and anti-colonial thinking with our own colonial legacies. We should not forget that, both within and outside Scandinavia, the colonial experience has until recently been constructed as marginal in relation to the formation of Nordic national identity and modernity. To clarify this issue a bit more, it is necessary to address briefly some aspects of Nordic colonial history. In recent years, postcolonial scholars, including the aforementioned Piotr Piotrowski, have questioned the applicability of, for instance, Subaltern Studies in Latin America and British and French postcolonial studies in other European contexts and called for more differentiation inside Europe, also with respect to Scandinavia. Danish postcolonial scholar Lars Jensen has convincingly argued that “[i]f Scandinavians can trace an Orientalism, or a Eurocentrism, back through the ages, it is nonetheless at least produced under different circumstances with less direct colonial involvement at stake than an Orientalism, or a Eurocentrism traced in Britain, France or Portugal.” Taking his lead from decolonial scholar Walter Mignolo, Jensen commits himself to a critical revision of the notion of modernity as a monolithic epistemology based on a singular Enlightenment driven tradition of thought in Europe. Jensen emphasises the need to ask where Scandinavian modernity is located between the first European Mediterranean modernity (whose colonial expansionism emerged out of Spanish/Portuguese/Italian Renaissance cosmology) and the second North-west European modernity (founded in French/English Enlightenment cosmology) since “it was peripheral to both.”

As regards overseas colonial possessions, Jensen explains that the Kingdoms of Denmark–Norway had more than Sweden, but they remained small in terms of population, albeit territorially sizeable with respect to Greenland. Even so, the issue of national modernity appears in a rather different light if it is linked to capitalism and colonial modernity. Denmark–Norway enjoyed a period of continuous prosperity in the second half of the 18th century, which ended with the British bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807. This affluence built not so much on the colonies of Denmark–Norway, but “more generally on its position within the larger global system of colonial exploitation, most notably the slave trade.” Denmark–Norway became the seventh largest slave-trading nation in the world and Copenhagen “a major European trade port for colonial goods.” Adding colonial history to previous national historical accounts thus signals, as Jensen explains, “a different way of understanding Scandinavia from the customary reading of the Scandinavian countries as minor powers on the outskirts of Europe, whose peripheral status exonerates them from the association with the violence perpetrated by the larger European driven colonial modernity.” Jensen rightly points out that Scandinavia has yet to scrutinise its own processes of reconciling with its indigenous populations, and that it would be rewarding to pursue the question of subaltern knowledge and representations of alterity produced among Greenlanders, Faeroese, and the Sami people in relation to colonial forms of domination within the Nordic countries. As Piotrowski has noted, one of the stumbling blocks to adapting postcolonial studies to work on European margins concerns the “very different status of the not-European Other vis-à-vis the Eastern European Other. The former occupies the position of the ‘far-off’ Other while the latter is certainly European, but marginalized, which is not the same.” Piotrowski’s reflections on the Eastern European Other are just as pertinent to the position of colonised and indigenous peoples in the Nordic region—the Sami in the northern parts of mainland Scandinavia are citizens of Norway, Sweden, or Finland, whereas the Greenlanders...
and the Faroese have semi-independent status as home ruling countries that are member states of the national community of Greenland, The Faroe Islands, and Denmark. In a postcolonial perspective, the “postcolonial Other” of the Nordic countries is thus perhaps best described as an Other within society itself.

Like the historians, art historians have yet to take the histories of tropical and Nordic colonies into consideration when exploring what it means to be positioned, differently and decentred, in the Nordic semi-periphery. In an art context, the critical interrogation of Nordic colonial history has been pioneered by the Danish curatorial team Kuratorisk Aktion (Frederikke Hansen and Tone O. Nielsen) in their inter-Nordic postcolonial exhibition project from 2006, *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism*. Although there has been increasing public debate on Danish colonialism in the 2010s, and artists such as Pia Arke (GL/DK), Jeannette Ehlers (DK), and Nanna Debois Buhl (DK) have engaged with Danish and Greenlandic colonial history, the issues of Danish colonialism and postcoloniality have not yet been incorporated into mainstream art-historical discourses. This is probably a side effect of the country’s national self-image: Denmark typically sees itself as the gentle colonial master compared to the major European colonial empires and tends to gloss over its colonial past to maintain good relations with the home ruling countries of Greenland and The Faroe Islands. As pointed out by Sara Olsvig, former member of the Danish Parliament for the Greenlandic party, Inuit Ataqatigiit, the history of Greenland is a mirror of many other postcolonial communities, for example, the Inuits in Canada and Alaska, and Greenlanders have thus already scrutinised “the darker sides” of Greenlandic history. Olsvig asserts that Greenlanders will not become victims if Denmark recognises its colonial history and the paternalistic mentality it still sustains in the national community of the three countries, as a lingering legacy of an oppressive colonial hierarchy. On the contrary, a Danish process of reconciliation may help both countries to get out of “the paternalistic spiral.” Artworks that intervene in and critically reflect on the violent histories of colonialism and the complexities of postcolonial identities, and writing on the often painful and thought-provoking perspectives opened up by such artworks, can contribute to the necessary collective and public reconciliation process, as it has already been demonstrated by, for example, the recent research into Sami art and the exhibition *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism*.

**REVISITING COMPARATIVISM**

My second point leads me back to the question of comparativism. Positioning oneself in the semi-periphery inevitably means positioning oneself in the space of cross-cultural comparison, which I guess is where many Nordic art historians have been all along, albeit unwittingly. This is so because studies of Nordic art often require that scholars address issues of hybridity and cultural translation, and examine the variegated ways in which difference and influence “is negotiated within contacts and encounters, through selective appropriation, mediation, translation, rehistoricising and re-reading of signs, alternatively through non-communication, rejection or resistance – or a succession/co-existence of any of these.” Hence, the “production of locality” in semi-peripheral art often comprises an amalgam of “indigenous” and “international” elements. To account for local peculiarities—for instance those found in Per Kirkeby’s early landscape painting *A Romantic Picture* (1965, Statens Museum for Kunst), which mix a North European romantic tradition with American pop art—one would have to compare how the appropriation of local and foreign sources has shaped the work, and consider how their amalgamation has determined the reception of the work.

Comparative cross-cultural analysis is also an indispensable tool when studying art from other cultures. A blind spot in the discussions about globalised contemporary art is the fact that most studies of works that relate to several cultural entities and frames of reference take some form of comparative perspective and involve cross-cultural comparison, although this often remains an implicit methodological premise of the argument. After all, a natural and intuitive way to understand and clarify a given culture’s specificity is to compare and contrast it with others, so perhaps comparative approaches have simply become so effectively naturalised in art discourses that few even think about they use them. As the transnational selection of artists that serves as the transcultural standard of curatorial work in the
“cosmopolitan” biennial industry increasingly determines and redefines the selection criteria underpinning scholarly work on contemporary art, the need for a reflective comparativism is growing. However, art-historical comparison has dubious historical and methodological roots in 20th century Eurocentric anthropology and evolutionary art history, and it has absorbed the cultural hierarchies and prejudices articulated by these disciplines. Art historians therefore have to face a double challenge. First, the inherited and naturalised forms of cross-cultural comparison must be subjected to a critical historiographical interrogation that goes as far as possible to free them of Eurocentric features. Next, comparativism has to be re-invented methodologically. It has to be updated with a contemporary methodological awareness of the situatedness of knowledge and of how a scholar’s historical, cultural, and professional place of enunciation structures knowledge production. In addition, comparativism must develop the same kind of critically reflected use of concepts and distinctions that prevails in other areas of art studies. Wilfried van Damme, Zijlmans, Mercer, Leuthold, Akcan, and others have sown the seeds and made the beginnings, but there is a lot of groundwork to do yet.

According to Zijlmans and van Damme, a revised comparativism could contribute to the study of art’s transcultural processes and to the development of adequate models of cross-cultural analysis. However, as Okwui Enwesor has noticed, it is necessary to pay attention to the risk of assimilation. It is not enough just to integrate modern movements, phenomena, and subjectivities from the South into the existing Western systems. The framing itself must be transformed, otherwise the systemic homogenisation will obscure the actual radicalism and cultural differences, for example, in the counter-hegemonic representation strategies that are bred outside the West and in marginalised groups in the West.

Considering the plurality found in art and visual culture studies today, a revision of comparativism is unlikely to lead to the panacea of a common ground. Rather, I envision an emerging plurality of critical positions and reflective approaches forming an agonistic arena for productive discussions on the methodological, theoretical, political, and ethical issues related to cross-cultural comparativism. Hopefully, they can help to break art history’s rather limiting historical ties to the notion of the nation, which has historically served as the discipline’s primary geographical and cultural point of orientation. Maybe comparativism could even become one of its contributions to the broader critique of monolithic geographic and cultural categories such as “nation,” “civilisation” and “the South” versus “the North,” whose sharp demarcations regularly obstruct an insight into how the geographies and movements of art, its agents, and institutions deviate from and defy them. Here, we should of course keep in mind that cross-cultural comparison is only one type of research within the larger field of cross-cultural and transnational studies in the arts.

CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS IN PRACTICE

Thus, the historiographical critique and the general principles, but what about cross-cultural analysis in practice? Among the scholars mentioned in this article, the most encompassing and broadly applicable proposal for a comparative methodology has been put forward by Wilfried van Damme, who has outlined a model for the analysis of cross-cultural and hybridised artistic phenomena derived from cultural anthropological approaches. The idea of the model is not that everything must be thoroughly examined but to focus on the aspects that are most important for the specific investigation. The interesting thing about van Damme’s approach is that it is not founded on hierarchical binary categories, such as Western versus non-Western art, avant-garde versus traditionalists, and so on, but on an analysis of cross-cultural exchange understood as a process of hybridisation. This is an approach that can spur close and critical attention to the appropriation and transformation of cultural forms, wherever they are incorporated into local contexts; to how those forms are reconfigured; and to how they are recirculated to undergo further transformation elsewhere and elsewhen.

Van Damme identifies three general factors or engines of change. Taken together, they embrace both the artefacts themselves and the actors and historical processes that generate them. The first factor is the preconditions of cross- and intercultural exchange, including the conditions of both availability and receptivity. Receptivity concerns the particular circumstances that enable the
integration of outside features, such as the climate of acceptance: Is there a desire or hostility to embrace foreign artistic or cultural elements? It is also about the readiness to incorporate them, as well as considerations of the character of the absorption, for example, whether it is voluntary, enforced, or a means of political dissension. Availability pertains to the economic, political and cultural structures and processes that make external artistic and cultural features available, such as trade routes and distribution systems, religious institutions, military/colonial interventions, and the media through which individuals in a given tradition or locality gain access to outside elements. The second factor is the agency of the individuals involved, including their motivation and their actions regarding both the incorporation and the dissemination of elements. As van Damme puts it, “processes of interculturalization in the arts fundamentally imply the agency of individuals or groups of individuals, being concerned not only with receiving and integrating, but potentially with diffusing or exporting artistic features.” The third factor is the resulting products or artworks, including the character of observable influences as well as the impact and role of the objects in question. As impact may be exerted on many different and potentially interlinked levels—for instance, the materials used, the techniques employed, or the style, motif, symbols, themes, and content of the objects concerned, as well as their use, function, and own effects—an examination of influences implies a thorough analysis.

Van Damme’s revisionist model is both flexible to think with and adaptable in relation to different local contexts, but it should in my opinion be complemented by an awareness of the methodological challenges that contemporary cross-cultural contact and global flows represent to traditional comparativist methodology. Thus, it is worth considering the recent critique of comparativism formulated by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai. His book Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation from 1996 differs from most economic and sociological theories of globalisation by committing itself to the study of globalisation’s cultural dimensions, and particularly the circulation of cultural material. In 2010, Appadurai followed up his globalisation theory with the article “How Histories Make Geographies: Circulation and Context in a Global Perspective,” in which he called for updated comparative methods tuned for a time when most tangible and intangible phenomena circulate. According to Appadurai, classical comparativism “in fields as diverse as comparative literature, linguistics and anthropology” built on the idea that the objects to be compared had come into existence in separate cultural spaces and were therefore uncontaminated by prior cross-cultural contact. The classical approach to comparison was thus structural and formal, concludes Appadurai. Conversely, a comparativism adjusted to the age of globalisation must also consider how objects and images circulate in global circuits; in other words, it must combine a “structural” comparative approach with a “historical” approach that can account for how cultural circuits are connected, and how circulation evolves over time. In Appadurai’s view, it is therefore the interconnectedness or “connectivity” of cultures, not separation that must be the point of departure for an adequately revised comparativism. Unfortunately, Appadurai does not give any methodological instructions on how to study the cross-cultural circulation of artefacts and forms, the ways they circulate, or the media and channels that carry them across physical and cultural boundaries. However, I would like to suggest that Wilfried van Damme offers just that: his focus on incorporation and dissemination as well as accessibility and receptivity to the foreign offers framings that allow of a comparative analysis sensitive to circulation and exchange, which opens up a more nuanced understanding of art’s cross-geographic relations.

To conclude, there is much to gain by choosing a self-reflective comparative approach attentive to how material and immaterial cultures are cross-fertilised and hybridised when they circulate. In addition, this approach would sync up art history with the transnational and transcultural theorisations conducted in the past two decades in comparative literature, (comparative) cultural studies, cultural anthropology, and philosophy. Like the semi-peripheral perspective, which is sensitive to the interdependency and interweave of cultures, comparative cultural analysis operates from an in-between position. It works from the interstices that unsettle the introverted concept of culture that underlies, among others, nationalism, racism, cultural essentialism and, on a larger geo-political scale, the dichotomy between the South and the North. As an analytical perspective,
the very process of comparison unsettles and reconfigures the inner-directed gaze because it makes connections across differences and borders. It thus works against the introverted notion of the “cloistered” countries of the “far North” reintroduced by Amirsadeghi and makes it easier to de-link artistic phenomena from their national-territorial-ethnic location. Combined with a semi-peripheral perspective, cross-cultural comparison may thus expand our understanding of the dynamics and complexities of the intertwining of centres and (semi-)peripheries while simultaneously sharpening our awareness of the multidirectionality of cultural flows.

Notes
1. Oliver Marchart, “The Globalization of Art and the ‘Biennials of Resistance’: A History of the Biennials from the Periphery,” World Art 4, no. 2 (2014): 263, 273.
2. Samir Amin, Global History: A View from the South (Cape Town: Pambazuka Press, 2011). I am grateful for the helpful comments by Editor-in-Chief Lars Gustaf Andersson and the two anonymous reviewers for Journal of Aesthetics & Culture. I would also like to express my thanks for the useful response from scholars from Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden at the Nordik 2015 Conference in Reykjavik.
3. Although there is a general tendency in art discourses to dichotomise the North and the South relationship, less polarising notions have been formulated, too, for example, by Australian cultural theorist Nikos Papastergiadis whose notion of the South this article adheres to: “The idea of the South has a long history. In the recent past, it has been revived as a possible frame for representing the cultural context of not just regions that are geographically located in the South, but also those that share a common postcolonial heritage . . . . While the discourses on the Third World, development and post-colonialism primarily articulated identity through a conceptual framework of belatedness and subordination, I would argue that the concept of the South not only asserts a more affirmative tone for cultural identifications, but it helps to suggest that the movement of ideas can be multidirectional as well as bi-polar. Even though the term South privileges regional location over socio-economic development and geo-political histories, it does not mark an absolute break from the historical conditions of inequality.” Nikos Papastergiadis, “What Is the South?,” Thesis Eleven, no. 100 (2010): 141–2.
4. Aihwa Ong, Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 34.
5. Ibid., 35.
6. Piotr Piotrowski, “Writing on Art after 1989,” in The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds, ed. Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel (Karlsruhe: ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, 2013), 204.
7. Ibid.
8. Bydler’s reference to “the Nordic countries” includes “Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, as well as Greenland, the Åland Islands and the Faroes—alternatively referred to as ‘Scandinavia’.”
9. Salman Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands,” in Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991, ed. Salman Rushdie (London: Granta Books, 1991), 19.
10. Nasar Meer, Key Concepts in Race and Ethnicity (London: Sage, 2014), 15–16, 125.
11. It would be beyond the scope of this article to cover the great variety of Scandinavian experiences with colonialism in the North as well as the South. For thorough discussions of the historical particularities of and differences between Scandinavian colonial pasts, see Magdalena Naum and Jonas M. Nordin, eds, Scandinavian Colonialism and the Rise of Modernity: Small Time Agents in a Global Arena (New York: Springer, 2013). In recent years, the colonial domination of the Sami, the indigenous population of the Northern areas of Finland, Norway, and Sweden, has received increasing scholarly attention, also in art history. For a discussion of the methodological and ethical issues related to the study of Sami contemporary art, see Svein Aamund, “The Role of the Scholar in Research into Indigenous Art,” in Diedet 3 (2014): 67–89. See also Hanna Horsberg Hansen et al., Beauty and Truth: Dialogues between Sami Art and Art Historical Research (Stamsund: Orkana Akademisk, 2014); and Tuija Hautala-Hirvioja, Riitta Kuusikko and Jan-Erik Lundström, eds., SAMI Contemporary (Rovaneimi: Rovameimen taide, 2013).
12. Hossein Amirsadeghi, “The Nordic Brand,” in Nordic Contemporary: Art from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, ed. Hossein Amirsadeghi (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 7.
13. Ibid., 6.
14. Micke Bal, “Lost in Space, Lost in the Library,” in Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices between Migration and Art-Making, ed. Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007): 23–36.
15. Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme, eds, World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008); David Summers, Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western
Modernism (London: Phaidon, 2003); Kobena Mercer, ed., Cosmopolitan Modernisms (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005); Discrepant Abstraction (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006); Pop Art and Vernacular Cultures (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007); Exiles, Diaspora & Strangers (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008); Steven M. Leuthold, Cross-Cultural Issues in Art: Frames for Understanding (New York: Routledge, 2011); and Esra Akcan, Architecture in Translation: Germany, Turkey and the Modern House (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

16. Wilfried van Damme, “Introducing World Art Studies,” in World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches, ed. Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008), 29.

17. Ibid.

18. Frank Schulze-Engler, “Introduction,” in Transcultural English Studies: Theories, Fictions, Realities, ed. Frank Schulze-Engler and Sissy Helft (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), xi–xvi. Quoted in: Arianna Dagnino, “Transcultural literature and Contemporary World Literature(s),” Comparative Literature and Culture 15, no. 5 (2013): 2.

19. Ibid., 3.

20. That the term semi-periphery is seldom used in the dominant art discourses on “multiple modernisms,” “centre versus periphery,” etc., does not mean that it is never used. In a Scandinavian context, Charlotte Bydler used the term in her sociologically and anthropologically oriented analysis of the institutional and economic structures of “the global art world,” especially as it pertains to contemporary art biennials. To examine the art world as an international labour market, the mechanisms and effects of which are most clearly seen in connection with the worldwide proliferation of biennials, Bydler turns to sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems theory for a macro-perspective which is rooted in historical sociology cum political economy. Like Wallerstein’s world-systems theory, Bydler operates with a hierarchical distinction between “cores,” “semi-peripheries,” and “peripheries” as different kinds of spheres of geo-political, economic, cultural, and institutional influence. See: Charlotte Bydler, The Global Art World Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2004), 33–6. Although this article does not aim to analyse the macro-structures of the art world, but instead to reflect on the always partial and situated nature of perspectives on art, and in a specifically Nordic context, it is worth underscoring Bydler’s observation that the boundaries of these spheres do not coincide with nation-state boundaries: “However, a glance at a few biennials demonstrates that there is no distinct US-European influence sender-sphere, or its counterpart, an African-Asian-Latin American receiving sphere within the art world-system. It makes more sense to talk about core areas, semi-peripheries and peripheries (plus external parts) that do not necessarily follow nation-state boundaries.” Ibid., 156. For Immanuel Wallerstein’s use of this terminology with reference to states, see for example, his book World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 28–30.

21. Dipesh Chakrabarty, Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 43.

22. Ibid., 4.

23. Ibid., 16.

24. Ibid., 6.

25. Marchart, “The Globalization of Art and the ‘Biennials of Resistance’”, 270.

26. Leon Wainwright, Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 9.

27. Ibid., 7.

28. Ibid., 5.

29. Hanna Johansson, “Nature in Nordic Contemporary Art: From the Environment to a Common, Shared World,” in Nordic Contemporary Art from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, ed. Hossein Amirsadeghi (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 21.

30. Dagnino, “Transcultural Literature and Contemporary World Literature(s),” 4.

31. Lars Jensen, “Scandinavia—A Peripheral Centre,” Kult 6—Special Issue: Epistemologies of Transformation: The Latin American Decolonial Option and its Ramifications, no. 6 (2009): 165–6.

32. Ibid., 166–7.

33. Ibid., 167. Larsen adds that once Scandinavian involvement in colonial exploitation became manifestly peripheral, financial anxiety set in: “This happened in Sweden (ca. 1720) and in Denmark–Norway (in the wake of the Napoleonic wars). Large-scale emigration in the second half of the nineteenth century was one consequence of Scandinavia’s loss of status, the loss of the remaining Danish tropical colonies another.” Ibid. He concludes that “Scandinavia has remained internationally marginal since then, with a few exceptions, the most notable of these is the Scandinavian contribution to the field of development aid.” Ibid., 177–8.

34. Ibid.

35. Piotrowski, “Writing on Art after 1989,” 205.

36. Frederikke Hansen and Tone O. Nielsen, eds., Rethinking Nordic Colonialism: A Postcolonial Exhibition Project in Five Acts (Helsinki: NIFCA, Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art, 2006).

37. Sara Olsvig, “Vi møder desværre stadig koloniherren/greder,” in Transcultural Literature and Contemporary World Literature(s), ed. Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008), 29.

38. See note 11 and 36.

39. Monica Juneja in an interview with Christian Kravagna, “Monica Juneja Interviewed by Christian Kravagna,” in Mapping Transcultural Modernism, ed.
Christian Kravangna (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 2. Quoted from Dagnino, “Transcultural Literature and Contemporary World Literature(s),” 2.

40. Arjun Appadurai, “How Histories Make Geographies: Circulation and Context in a Global Perspective,” Transcultural Studies 1, no. 1 (2010): 6, 9.

41. Such an unreflecting attitude seems doubtful to me, especially in a transnational or “global” context where all sorts of prejudice about other cultures can come into play—and not only when artists deliberately play on them by twisting cultural stereotypes or using other means of subversion. What one party sees as a “natural” comparison or “obvious” reference, other parties may perceive as a contentious expression of Eurocentrism or a prejudiced view. I have expanded on this issue in: “Tværkulturel analyse og den globaliserede kunsts metodiske udfordringer,” (“Cross-Cultural Analysis and the Methodological Challenges of Globalised Art”) in Terræn—Samtidskunst i Danmark 2000–2015 (Terrain: Contemporary Art in Denmark 2000–2015), ed. Martin Soberg et al., (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, forthcoming).

42. Wilfried van Damme, “Introduction: Intercultural Comparison and Art,” in World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches, ed. Wilfried van Damme and Kitty Zijlmans (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008), 294–7.

43. Drawing on Donna Haraway’s concepts of “situated knowledges” and “subjective objectivity,” and giving a literature review of studies in Danish modernist art, Karen Westphal Eriksen has argued that art historical analysis needs to state much clearer than has been tradition how it frames the subject matter and objects under scrutiny, both historically and geographically as well as theoretically. Karen Westphal Eriksen, *Grus i maskineriet—abstrakt og figurativt kunst i Danmark efter Anden Verdenskrig* (Jamming the Machinery: Abstract and Figurative Art in Denmark after World War II) (Københavns Universitet, 2014), 17–22. See also: Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” Feminist Studies 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99; and Paula L.M. Moya, “Who We Are and from Where We Speak,” Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World 1, no. 2 (2011): 79–94, http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/2md416qv (accessed April 7, 2015).

44. Stephen M. Leuthold pursues a similar line of thought when he suggests that comparative approaches and frames for understanding are the solution to the difficult methodological problems of cultural hegemony and how to integrate Western and non-Western art and aesthetics into a common field without giving priority to the theories and traditions of any particular culture. Leuthold, *Cross-Cultural Issues in Art*, 2.

45. Okwui Enwesor, “Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form,” Manifesta Journal, no. 2 (2004): 9, 22.

46. Wilfried van Damme, “Interculturalization in Art: Conceptualizing Processes and Products,” in World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches, ed. Wilfried van Damme and Kitty Zijlmans (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008): 375–84.

47. Paul Jay, “Beyond Discipline? Globalization and the Future of English,” Publications of the Modern Language Association of America 116, no. 1 (2001): 42.

48. Damme, “Interculturalization in Art,” 378.

49. Appadurai, “How Histories Make Geographies,” 8.

50. Ibid.

51. Dagnino, “Transcultural Literature and Contemporary World Literature(s),” 2.