
Couze Venn, *The Postcolonial Challenge. Towards Alternative Worlds* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), 219+viii pp.

Reviewed by **Enrica Picarelli**

What is postcolonialism today? How is emancipation to become operational in a world suffering from acute forms of violence and dispossession? These are some of the questions posed by Couze Venn in *The Postcolonial Challenge* in the light of an analysis of the state of the world today. Coming from a background in cultural studies, Venn has written extensively on the non-phenomenological character of identity, as evidenced in the post-psychoanalytic perspective informing his contribution to the volume entitled *De-Centering the Subject*.

In *The Postcolonial Challenge* he identifies new hegemonic “forms of colonization” in the mechanisms of economical and cultural productions. Global relations of power appear as visual representations making use of “tele-technologies” to shape identities according to a universal concept of being. This lays the ground for a postcolonial struggle over aesthetics demanding a new hermeneutics of the visual that engages with a politicized definition of identities. Through a ‘situated’ use of the arts, Venn employs a theory of creolization to advocate a change in the regime of visibility and identification characterizing Western representations of alterity.

The book is based on the assumption that globalization works to conform subjectivities to a universal *idea* of rationality and a fixed identity. Such is the theorization of a *subject* founded by modern Western thought as the “(ideally), rational, autonomous, self-sufficient, masculine and European agent of the history of humanity” (9). Colonialism has been the manifestation of this subject embodying universal rationality and temporality and conceived as the “privileged model”, against which other beings are declared lacking, ontologically hampered by the seeds of their own subjugation. Venn also underlines how this rationalist approach has leaked in later readings of identity-formation, as with Althusser’s concept of ideology and interpellation or Lacan’s mirror stage.

Both accounts are read by the author as still trapped within the limits of a mechanistic and rationalist vision of the subject as well as within the illusion of objectivity informing scientific discourse; Lacan’s mirror phase, for instance, suggests that subjectivity derives from a split within the subject that replicates the “I-versus-the-world” approach of colonialism. Rationalism locates subject formation in an imagined and symbolic dimension that

fails to take into account what Venn calls the “processual” and “indeterminate” dimensions of life deriving from situated positions. Contrary to phenomenology, Venn theorises instead a *philosophy of the lived* and a *political hermeneutics* that acknowledge the historically fraught character of life and knowledge, taking leave from traditional accounts of identity based on dualism.

Making rich use of a variety of studies from Silvermann to Vološinov, identity is defined by Venn as a *node* or *assemblage*: a space that is where body and society intermingle in a play of constant shiftings and re-adjustments that enact a “choreography” of symbiotic dependence – Merleau-Ponty’s “state of compossibility”. This “subject-in-process” is thus bound to the world as the world unfolds within his/herself; a space of open interaction – a layer – that equates existence to experience. Recalling Foucault, Venn points to the formative role of language in creating a space of sociality where identity is formed in discourse. Here self-consciousness emerges as narrative within the apprehension of time-as-process, defining a heterogeneous and discontinuous ontology of becoming.

This differential aspect of identity problematises traditional issues of belonging that in fact Venn reads as “strategies” rather than claims to absolute categories of existence. Hybridity, here the core feature of identity, destabilises notions of purity and integrity that rely on the concept of origin and stresses the formative function of displacement in the birth of cultures. Individual as well as collective or national identities are thus formed *in transfer*, in a play of uninterrupted recombinations. Such a varied critical overview offers a standpoint to the enactment of polyglot, subjective differentiation in the form of embodied and politicized art, offering new and alternative narrations of identity or counter-hegemonic readings of traditional “grand narratives” following in the path traced by Morrison’s new “politics of remembrance”. Venn is especially interested in the disrupting potentiality of tele-technologies in giving a situated account of how different “imagined blocks” of existence define new spaces of signification.

By acknowledging the relationship between corporate media and induced desires, the author advocates the elaboration of new narratives of being in visual arts that account for the unstable character of subjectivity and “reorganize the gaze in relation to the *desirable*”. This new “aesthetic dimension” of identity, built around propositions rather than pre-packaged ideas, becomes an “imaginative space ... able to keep as a trace the memory of other ways of being or transmit a history of resistance” (118), implicating the emancipatory thrust towards “justice and goodness” in contemporary aesthetics. Thus coupled, aesthetics and ethics become two sides of the political resistance to hegemonic representations of being, manufactured by Western “globalization from above”.

In elaborating concrete instances rather than referring to existing theoretical debates, Venn defines the embodied approach of his postcolonial project, a project that is in fact ultimately effective only when enacted through individual bodies and across the bulk of society. His main reference is to the best suited and most attractive medium of all – the arts of the visible – in a ceaseless and erratic encounter of differences and similarities.