

Indiascapes. Images and Words from Globalised India - Introduction



Fig.1: Francesco Clemente, *In meiner Heimat III*, 2009, archival inkjet print, collection of the artist.

¹ 'Arte Contemporanea Donna Regina (MADRE, Naples, 29 May-12 October, 2009).

² Clemente's works are obviously inspired by the famous provocative maps of Alighiero Boetti, focused on in another important exhibition at the MADRE this year (21 February-11 May). Boetti was a mentor for the young Clemente; and their journey to Afghanistan in 1974, along the old legendary silk road, left a deep impact on both of them.

In meiner Heimat is the subtitle of a special section of *Shipwreck with the Spectator 1974-2004*, a recent exhibition devoted to Francesco Clemente and held in Naples, the artist's native city.¹ The section includes a series of ten maps conceived as the artist's exclusive contribution to the question of his geographic and cultural belonging that lies at the core of the retrospective.² The new works are elaborated as intriguing patchworks of ancient and different sorts of maps imbricated one upon another or smoothly gradating one into another. One of the most suggestive is endowed at the bottom with the double inscription of Varanasi in block capitals and assembles pieces of morphological representations of rivers and hills from different territories with fragmented urban strips of the cities of Naples, New York and Varanasi, thus creating a baffling hybrid cartography in between the Mediterranean area, the States and the Indian peninsula. The map is artfully constructed as multi-layered and composite, oscillating between abstraction and figuration and self-consciously playing with the geographical dislocation and artistic relocation of the 'imaginary homelands' that have marked Clemente's nomadic career, incessantly

moving to and fro between Naples, Rome, Madras and New York. The special bond that unites the artist with India is further strengthened by his illustrations for Salman Rushdie's short story, "In the South", a story written by the Indian migrant writer as his personal homage for his friend's retrospective.³

Even if the present issue of *Anglistica* focusing on the Indian subcontinent covers only partially the territorial extension of Clemente's maps, the palimpsestic, revisionary and fragmented features immediately perceptible through his artistic cartography may undoubtedly provide a privileged key of access for introducing the main questions raised by our subject. As Indian culture is playing an increasingly imposing role in shaping new globalised scenarios, dramatically contributing to a radical interrogation of its national, linguistic and geo-political ties, this issue tries to highlight a few of the possible outlines that emerge from the multifarious, variegated, complex cultural background offered by the Subcontinent, both in its domestic and diasporic dimensions. To draw with a few strokes a significant portrait of a reality so internally differentiated and multi-layered as the Indian contemporary panorama is an impossible task, so we didn't in the first place conceive this as an aim. From the beginning, our project was clearly limited by India's multiplicity and thus by the impossibility of any form of disciplinary systematization. Images and words from globalised India form a landscape in which narrative, history, myth, fiction, the entertainment industry, linguistics, politics and the arts stay side by side, each adding a piece to a tessellated, composite and obviously partial sketch.

"Indias of the mind" was the expression used by Salman Rushdie when he spoke of the imaginary homeland built in the memory of diasporic subjects.⁴ Since then he has insisted on the intrinsic capacity of culture to flow between national boundaries, trespassing borders and undermining the old narratives of the centre-periphery world order. Arjun Appadurai, in *Modernity at Large* (1996), has articulated this idea of cultural fluidity and movement with special reference to motifs, icons and mythologies which disentangle national cultures from the anchorage of territory setting them free-floating in the space of mass-mediated imagination and the electronic circulation of symbols and discursive practices.

Indiascapes, paraphrasing Appadurai, is the term we have chosen to represent this current assemblage of languages and perspectives which speak about Indian cultural richness, its complexity and ambiguity, trying to convey the strong appeal it is increasingly exercising upon the de-territorialized world-space of the imaginary. The object of this group of essays could thus be summarized as the disparate but convergent reflections upon the vernacular terms of the inscription of modernity on the globalised culture of the largest and most contradictory, maybe the most important for its geopolitical location, democracy in the world.

³ Rushdie had already contributed to the catalogue of Clemente's 2005 exhibition of self-portraits at the Gagosian Gallery in London with an exclusive brief essay on the history of Western portraiture.

⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991), 10.

Dialoguing with artists and intellectuals who operate daily on the very tissue of Indian culture, the emerging texture knits for example political analyses on the near past and the immediate future of post-secularist India with reflections upon the translational quality of multilingual cultural contexts and the politics of postcolonial translation. Visual arts are interrogated in their dealings with the idea of identity along the frontiers which separate national communities or differently re-locate the body in traditional forms of artistic expressions. The urban scenarios are looked at in their relation with fiction and the fabrication of social models is revealed as being shaped by the movie industry, while cinema in general is seen in its interplay with nostalgia, conservatism and the subliminal disparaging strategies of consumption and desire. Matrimonial politics is analysed in its hyper-traditional observance of stridharmic norms, caste bias or the insurmountable obstacles posed by horoscopes, together with the hyper-modern use and abuse of electronic media, showing how religious and ideological integralism is articulated, and at the same time resisted, also through the social networks operating on the Net. Hybridity and translation, code-switching and linguistic appropriation confirm their role as agencies of g/localization.

As usual, to organize a possible reading route, we have arranged a few sections. The first, devoted to “Discussion, Debate, Dissent”, customarily located towards the end of *Anglistica* volumes in the previous printed series, is anticipated in order to open our issue. The seminal quality of the contribution is able to topicalize a framework for the ensuing articles. Sunil Khilnani, the much appraised author of *The Idea of India* (2003) and one of the most brilliant and concerned exponents of the Indian academic intelligentsia, answers questions about the difficult relationship between plurality and the risks of religious, ethnic and social fragmentation, the strengths and the flaws of a still young and imperfect democracy, the role played by the subcontinent in “one of the most volatile regions of the world, surrounded by an arc of failing and authoritarian states”. Khilnani speaks about the contradictions of a State which, making plurality and the chosen practice of syncretism the bulwarks of its independence, has encouraged indulgence in the dream of a ‘fusion of horizons’, but where, at the same time, the daily intestinal outbreaks of communalist violence and, even more dramatically now, the escalation of attacks by national and international terrorisms, are feeding anxiety about the fate of secularism. Paradoxically, far from extinguishing sectarianism and division, in the form of caste, or religion, or ethnicity consciousness, democracy has rendered them more salient as political categories and more strongly institutionalized in civil society. If, on the one hand, one result is that the political scene is mobilized around the problem of social upgrading; on the other, it seems that the idea of individual rights, say of women or homosexuals or artists,

gets dramatically challenged by an increasingly rigid and restricted sense of public decorum in a country growingly maimed by fundamentalism and fanaticism. The ills of identity politics are thus highlighted by Khilnani who nonetheless confides in the Indian choice of an 'engaged universalism' locally defined and made significant in relation to the peculiarities of India's historical situation and social complexity. Indeed, the dangers posed by identitarian constraints provide a sort of circular framework for the whole volume by recurring in the final section devoted to the reviews (which we have decided to restrict to works one way or another connected to the Subcontinent), as the voice of the noble-prize winner Amartya Sen is heard, through Marie-Hélène Laforest's review, exposing the "miniaturization of human beings" along the mortifying lines of exclusivist ideological or religious affiliations.

The interrogation of national boundaries and the ever growing risk of identitarian violence also lie at the core of the feminist agenda of visual artists like Nalini Malani and Shilpa Gupta as discussed in the essay by Alessandra Marino in the section devoted to arts. In particular, the focus is upon the controversial Western Indian border with Pakistan which still represents an infected wound for both nations. In opposition to the official imposed demarcation that sustains ethnic and religious divisions, the works by the women artists involved in the *Aar-Paar* ("this side and that side") art project are conceived as political acts of reimagining the frontier as an open space hosting uncertain identities and haunted by mournful memories. Thus, the illusion of a monolithic national identity is dismantled and deconstructed through a re-narration of Partition which denounces the violence upon women's bodies underlying the traumatic creation of that border, while claiming new kinds of social bonds based on the intimacy of mourning. The crucial role played by imagination as a revisionary process of one's own social belonging comes to the forefront in the other essay of the arts section, by Annalisa Piccirillo, which moves to the world of contemporary mixed forms of theatre-dance as developed by the Anglo-Indian dancer Akram Khan. His innovative movement language, based on the 'confusion' of a classical dance form from South Asia, Kathak, endowed with a strong narrative impulse, and the open repertoire of Western contemporary dance is analyzed in the light of Bhabha's theorisation of the third space as the in-between space of interruptions and dislocations opening a possibility of cultural hybridity. The concept of confusion vindicated by the dancer as a distinctive character of his art is also related to the linguistic and cultural tear which represents a major theme of some contemporary Indian poetry facing the dilemma of the double linguistic heritage of British colonization. What emerges is a sense of endless fluctuation and restlessness, the expression of incessant transitions and oscillations in between different cultures, histories, art forms and body languages.

In the section on cinema, the tensions and contradictions attending the clash between tradition and modernization and its dramatic impact on women's life conditions are resumed through the cinematic versions of their strenuous battle for emancipation in the essays devoted to Bollywood by Alessandro Monti and to diasporic cinema by Esterino Adami. The first focuses on the conflict between unrestrained love and dharmic duty as this is thematized in popular Hindi cinema. Against the background of mythological traditional models and the ambiguities of contemporary marriage politics, Monti surveys a series of productions stretching from the Fifties to the present to underscore a normative chain of reactive punishment against sexual infringements, regularly attributed to feminine responsibility. Adami, for his part, dedicates his critical attention to a production which appears to stand in transit between contrasting viewpoints as "the migrant's frame of mind is split between eastern roots and western dislocation". In his reading of *Provoked* (2006), the film not only brings a charge against patriarchy but also "goes beyond the superficial translatability of cultures and explores the puzzlement and disorientation of 'weak' subjects in a multilingual context".

The vitality and extreme complexity of Indian cinema, as articulated both in the powerful 'exceeding' exuberance of Bollywood and in the different but no less problematic hybridity of its diasporic production, is also explored in the volume edited by Lidia Curti and Susanne Poole, *Schermi indiani, linguaggi planetari* (2008), reviewed in this issue by Bruna Mancini. Here, the dense stratification of different cultures and traditions in the corpus of Indian films literally embodies the real post-colonial 'in-between' space, reflecting the diversified and dramatically partitioned territory of the Subcontinent and questioning concepts of identity, gender-genre and subalternity.

Turning to television and comedy, the centrality of the diasporic experience is again resumed in the review section with relation to the phenomenal popularity of the *Goodness Gracious Me* TV series. As Giuseppe De Riso remarks in his comments on Giuseppe Balirano's study devoted to *The Perception of Diasporic Humour* (2007), the series has achieved wide-ranging acclaim due to its capacity to subvert Western and Eastern stereotypes and generate a mixed, Indo-Saxon form of narration helping South Asian immigrants in their "difficult relocation of home".

If the political and social analysis of the fractured and composite landscape of the Indian Subcontinent delineates the critical framework of this issue, its core is undeniably represented in the "Languages in Transit" section which highlights the crucial question of translation in the distinctive, unique case of the multi-lingual and multi-cultural scenario of the Indian nation, a scenario which has also been invested in recent years by a vertiginous expansion of the media and the Internet. The section opens

with an essay by Neelam Srivastava which sketches a historical overview of the most salient stages in the history of translation in South Asia, while pointing at the determinant role translation can play today in the formation of the literary canons of the major Indian languages (such as Bengali, English, Hindi, Malayalam, and Tamil) in terms of a comparative literature. From this perspective, translation is starting to emerge as a privileged field of research for the elaboration of a “possible ‘theory’ of South Asian literature” spanning its diverse language-literatures; and in particular ‘Indian English’ is being continuously re-defined as “a rapidly evolving literary idiom” subject to a continuous process of cross-pollinations and language-mixture. The Indian scholar further develops these issues, in relation to the importance of comparative investigation of the multi-lingual production of the subcontinent, in her review of *Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India* (2009), a volume edited by Nalini Iyer and Bonnie Zare. On the whole, this study represents a timely contribution to the current debate on the inter-relatedness between the study of Indian literature in English and literature in the *bhashas* (indigenous languages of the subcontinent) in order to suggest a more comprehensive “re-thinking of the canon of postcolonial South Asian writing” capable to overcome the monolingual (i.e. Anglophone) focus of postcolonial literary studies.

A specific case study of Indian English is discussed in the essay by Eleonora Federici devoted to matrimonial websites that offer a particularly fruitful terrain for the investigation of linguistic and cultural hybridity. Here the analysis of inter- or trans-cultural language practices provides material for the exploration of gendered discourse in India’s shifting cultural scene with relation to one of the most ancient norms of social life in the Subcontinent, that of arranged marriages. Even if it is undeniable that a series of constraints (like class, caste, profession, education, religion, and astrological constellation) still obtain, the easier and wider circulation provided by the ads on the Net has helped to gradually introduce significant changes in the institution of premarital negotiations, thus providing useful insights into the contemporary social fabric of Indian culture caught “in between tradition and Western influences”.

Moving to the Indian communities of immigrants dispersed all over the world, the essay by Giuseppe Balirano considers the crucial role that translation may play, both as a process and as a corpus of studies, for the analysis of Indian diasporic creativity. Under the strong influence of the transnational circuits of popular culture, contemporary narratives of diasporic subjects seem to translate the thorny dilemmas of ‘identities’ and ‘home’ into original forms of re-visitations and “complex processes of creolisation”, displaying a wide array of different media and idioms. To illustrate this phenomenon the paper focuses on a multimodal analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* (2003) and its homonymous filmic

translation by Mira Nair (2007), putting to the fore the transit from one medium to the other and their different strategies of cultural decolonisation and hybridization.

In the “writing society” section, Silvia Albertazzi investigates the complex interplay between fiction, politics and transnational identity a propos of the Rushdie affair. Twenty years after the fatwa the novelist is called again to represent an entire line of intellectuals compelled by the cause of free expression to reconsider the concept of authorial liberty. But he is also engaged by a world which has in the meantime become ‘frontierless’, thanks to mass-migration, economic globalisation, international terror. Comparing Rushdie’s last two novels with the filmic production of the Mexican director Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu, Albertazzi explores the ways in which an “entanglement of sites and stories” emerge from a restricted world where, in the wake of 9/11, all the great abstractions of politics nonetheless manage to find a place.

In the same section, the inextricable knot between imagination, media, and ideology surfaces again in the essay by Rossella Ciocca dedicated to the greatest metropolis of the Subcontinent. Looming large in India’s imaginary landscape, Mumbai is seen as the epitome of its contradictory urban modernity. Its emancipatory anonymity is pointed at both through the terrible conditions of life in its slums and its cinematic appeal as a city of dreams come true. Its attractions and the frantic rhythms of its affluent capitalistic transactions make of the city the outpost of the West and therefore also the target of integralist terror and violence.

The narrative section which closes the present issue once again shifts the focus to the Indian diasporic literary scene. Oriana Palusci discusses the contradictions and limitations inherent in the proliferation of hyphenated labels for migrant writers, as Jhumpa Lahiri’s collections of short stories have poignantly brought to the fore in terms of spiritual and cultural maladies. Her first- and second-generation characters are always caught in the risk of falling “between the cracks” of linguistic and cultural national borders, like the author herself”. One major merit of her fiction is her subtle deconstruction of commonplaces and stereotypes on multiculturalism through a crafty use of inter-textual references to the British and American literature that again confirm her willingness of belonging to a transnational context.

A deliberately farcical staging of intertextual abuse is instead at work in Salman Rushdie’s short story “Yorick” here investigated by C. Maria Laudando as a complex palimpsest of literary, linguistic and cultural traces that mimic two of the most exemplary works of the Western canon: *Hamlet* and *Tristram Shandy*. For all its ludicrous inversions, this text too shares the crucial questions of hyphenated identities and home: Rushdie’s reconstruction of a dubious genealogy of fools descended from Yorick

and a bride mischievously called Ophelia comprises the question of the migrant writer's second tradition within a hybrid parchment of spurious fragments and bastard characters, grotesquely revolving around the fissures and crevices of cultural displacement.

A radical revision of familial and literary relationships is also kept in the foreground at the very end of the review section through Manuela Coppola's commentary on the recent Italian translation of two hybrid texts by the Anglo-Indian lesbian poet, Suniti Namjoshi, *Istantanee di Caliban. Sycorax / Snapshots of Caliban* and *Sycorax* (2008). It seems indeed an apposite if incidental conclusion for an issue devoted both to a country which has the size and diversity of India and to the infinite proliferation of the diasporic "Indias of the mind" scattered all over the world, that the last word of our editorial should be left to such an evocative and powerful mélange of voices and noises, seeking to capture in a provisional series of fragments this strange, monstrous and ever-changing land of magical creatures.