

# Re-anthropologising Lyotard's and Kant's concept of *consensus communis* for the sake of intercultural philosophy

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## **Introduction/Summary**

The central focus of the conference for which the present paper was prepared, is the concept of *sensus communis* as proposed by Kant<sup>2</sup> and as recently elaborated by Lyotard.<sup>3</sup> Conceived within the context of a study group on intercultural philosophy, the suggestion is that this concept can be of importance for the further systematic exploration of this rapidly opening new field. The present paper examines the ground for this expectation, and finds it infertile. From a point of view of the social construction of beauty within a specific context which is limited in both time and space (the late 18th century Königsberg upper middle classes, the postmodern Paris art scene), we recognise the defective epistemological status of many of Kant's and Lyotard's assertions about beauty as exalting, overwhelming, and non-human - the point of departure for the concept of *sensus communis*. The de-anthropologising which Lyotard advocates, is argued to be the theory's undoing. We are brought to revise their argument on the universal human condition (source of sociability and intercultural convergence) in the direction of an argument on socio-cultural multiplicity and ethnic divisiveness based on the very factor (the experience of beauty) invoked by Kant and Lyotard. An interesting convergence between Kant and Lyotard on the one hand, mainstream social science thought on the other (Durkheim, Turner) unexpectedly turns up: both lines of thought look for a factor which both transcends the human condition and constitutes that condition at the same time. Yet, apparently, we have scarcely advanced towards a solution of the philosophical and social problems posed by interculturality, apart perhaps from defining the alternatives in this domain a bit more sharply.

## An aesthetic framework

In his 1992 text on *sensus communis*, Lyotard proceeds, in Kant's trail, from one statement about what evidently is the case, to the next. But in fact these statements are far from self-evident outside the strong and hermetic edifice which Kant's critical project has built.

Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, of which Lyotard 1992 is a close reading and a partial re-interpretation around the concept of the *sensus communis*, was not only a very influential contribution to aesthetics, but also an early contribution to this specialist field as established by A.G. Baumgarten in the mid-18th century.<sup>4</sup> This author was a major inspiration of Kant's in *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. Although Kant's contribution has been monumental, it was very much a product of its time and age, and cannot be considered as sacrosanct. It reflects (and criticises) a particular view of art and society which was current in Königsberg or, more in general, in West European society at the time.<sup>5</sup> Kant was far from a prisoner of established societal views. He courageously advocated unpopular philosophical and political views. Yet as a person involved in intergenerational upward social mobility, and as a notoriously sedentary person who reputedly scarcely ever left the horizon of his native town, there must have been limits to his defiance of the established socio-cultural conceptions of his own society. As a child of his time and age, he is sometimes reproached for having been a racist.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not these allegations are true for his earlier work, his critical work, sprinkled with non-European examples, certainly reveals a considerable amount of what much later<sup>7</sup> came to be known as cultural relativism. Yet in Kant's time the basis for the social sciences was merely being laid, they would take another century before formally emerging as a distinct academic field, and Kant hardly had the conceptual and theoretical tools to critique his own views of aesthetics for any ethnocentric or Eurocentric bias.

To this Lyotard, as – among other qualifications – an aesthetic philosopher and art critic, adduces his own, vast, familiarity with the late twentieth century North Atlantic art. Lyotard's cultural horizon does not conspicuously extend beyond the North Atlantic intellectual confines – in my impression, less so than Kant's. The contemporary avant-garde artist and art connoisseur seem to be Lyotard's touch stone of the aesthetic experience and its philosophical foundations.<sup>8</sup>

In his 1992 text, Lyotard's makes claims as to what is evidently the case in the field of beauty and the sublime, implicitly on the basis of three types of justifications:

- a. directly: Lyotard's own familiarity with the twentieth century art scene;
- b. indirectly, Lyotard's reading of the systematics of Kant's critical edifice;
- c. even more indirectly: such socio-cultural aesthetic convictions as Kant shared with his contemporaries and as he took for granted in the writing of his *Kritik der Urteilskraft*.

Already centuries ago, it has become accepted practice in philosophical

texts to refrain from empirical analysis and to concentrate on conceptual and theoretical discourse. In this respect, Lyotard's statements of type (b) are epistemologically unsuspect. They can only be inspected and criticised as to the extent to which they faithfully render Kant's *Kritik der Urteilkraft*.

Clearly, Lyotard 1992 text would be futile if the rendering was 100% faithful. Lyotard himself admits to a considerable departure from Kant, which he admits to be problematic and illuminating:

'...Kant adds, as if to aggravate the evidently anthropological character of this definition of the universalizing procedure, which *to my great irritation* seems completely to ruin the transcendental reading which I have just suggested (...)

The dossier seems heavy against my thesis or my hypothesis according to which the common is transcendental...' (Lyotard 1992: 17; my italics, WvB)

If today my philosophical friends prefer to consult Lyotard in addition to Kant, this means that they are of the opinion that Lyotard's departure makes sense. Smugly, Lyotard claims that his 1992 argument has a form which Kant particularly cherished:

'I have given it the form, dear to Kant, of the logical or mathematical problem, of the *Aufgabe*' (Lyotard 1992: 20).

But to the reader who, like I myself, prefers to keep a distance from Lyotard's prose, his text may have rather different genre connotations: those of the religious sermon, which makes a familiar reality (in this case: Kant's critical project) appear in a new, surprising light by highlighting – creatively and through a rhetoric fireworks of bricolage and hyperbole – additional fine points for what is in essence a captive audience of co-religionists. An example:

'This aesthetic pleasure is not the purpose of a purposiveness experienced (or not experienced) beforehand as desire. It has nothing whatsoever to do with an end or purpose. It is finality, purposiveness itself, which had no end, no purpose in front of it and no lack behind it. So an instantaneous purposiveness, immediate, not even meditated by the diachronic form of the internal sense, nor by our way of remembering and anticipating. (...) It is an animation of an anima there on the spot, which is not moving towards anything. It's as if the mind were discovering that it can do something other than will and understand. Be happy without ever having asked for it or conceived it. An instant which will seem very long, measured by the clock of intrigue, but which is not in the purlieu of its timekeeping; a flash made of delayings (you tarry near beauty), a form, a little synthesis of matters in space-time, made sense, sensus. A sense that has to be thought of as absolutely singular.' (Lyotard 1992: 4f)

Lyotard's is the staccato, almost rapping, post-modern version of *Kritik der Urteilkraft*, Kant translated to our world (but not of course to the vocabulary) of soap operas :

'The beautiful doesn't get elected like Miss World.' (Lyotard 1992: 11).

Doubtlessly this is a fair paraphrase of Kant, for whom the subjective necessity of the aesthetic judgement is the point of departure in his analysis of

*sensus communis*. Probably beauty does not get so elected; or at least a great many epiphanies of the beautiful do not. But is that only because election is per definition without compulsion? Or is it also<sup>9</sup> because Miss World is not truly beautiful, in other words, because the experience of her beauty is contaminated – if not defeated – by the mass-reproduced, electronically mediated clichés of beauty which cling to her and which are, to an intellectual elite, the more despicable the more they are popular, commercially manipulated, and sustained by a lechery whose disguise is deliberately imperfect? In other words, do we need to make far more allowance for the social dynamics of beauty as – among other aspects which are, admittedly, less conspicuously social – a concept of distinction, by which a personal elitist identity is constructed through the subjective exclusion of vast selections of humanity considered not to be capable of appreciating beauty with quite the same profundity and intensity as the distinguishing connoisseur himself?

### **Beauty and empirical social science**

However, let us return to the points (a) and (c) as implicit justifications of many of Lyotard's assertions as to what is evidently the case in the realm of beauty. It is my contention that the epistemological status of (a) and (c) is corrupt, and that this undermines the argument on which Kant and Lyotard base their theory of *sensus communis*.

Despite the fact that these statements pose as systematic deductions from a pre-established discursive edifice, (a) and (c) are statements about empirical social reality, notably about the way in which specific sets of people have chosen to structure, in terms equivalent to the English word beauty, their experiences of empirical non-human reality ('nature'), of human corporeal reality ('the human figure'), of man-made objects ('art'), and of man-made texts ('literature'). What we might have had on these two points is detailed ethnography: of the personal articulation of aesthetic experiences, of the social pre-modelling of such articulation, and of the subsequent social and economic circulation and political manipulation of such articulation. In that way the socially constructed nature of the aesthetic experience and of its articulation, its intersubjective dimension, could have been appreciated. Variations between persons belonging to the same social category, and variations in the same person's (articulated) experience between one moment and the next, could have come to the fore. The specific historical, social and economic context could have been identified in which a particular social category holds particular views of beauty. Let me suggest two such social contexts:

- post-modern artists and art dealers in Paris, at a time when social and political structure of North Atlantic mass society is controlled by formal organisations and cultivates a social experience largely devoid of direct production; when in artistic and philosophical circles representation has

become deeply problematic; and when art, as an investment, has become 'a girl's best friend';

- children of the urban artisan class in provincial late 18th Germany,<sup>10</sup> engaged in upward mobility in a highly stratified society, and seeking to justify their acceptance by 'higher' circles through the faithful display of the symbols of leisure class acquisition, taste and experience.

In both social contexts, people's aesthetic experience, the patterning of that experience, its being triggered by specific aspects of nature and the human person, and its precipitation in works of art including literature, are so emphatically bound to social, economic and political specificities, that it is only by sleight of hand that we claim knowledge of underlying essential qualities of such experience and products.

Yet, in both Kant's and Lyotard's texts, we are treated to assertions about empirical social reality disguised, however, as profound universal insights, as *a priori* self-evident truths.

What sort of a theory of beauty could we expect to circulate among the Königsberg 'higher' circles, or among post-modern Paris art dealers – both of them social categories which define their identity in terms of their consciousness of being an elite? They would not have quite the same theory, of course, but in both cases we would expect an aesthetic theory which lays an emphasis on transcendent, essential, de-humanised qualities of the work of art, and which consequently underplays such messy aspects as the following: the actual production of the work of art by a human being; the production and commercial distribution of the materials that have gone into the work of art; the economic circulation of the art object itself, where it is in the nature of the artist's social role as a petty commodity producer that he or she parts with her product in exchange for money in the context of a market; the self-definition of the art dealer, and of the acquisitioning connoisseur, by a specific positioning in the process of social circulation of art objects (where the part of the dealer lies in the miraculous enhancement of symbolic and financial value; whereas the part of the connoisseur lies in hoarding, the termination of the object's social circulation), and so on. Both elites define their identity through non-production. The works of art in their lives, although unmistakably produced, are elevated to such an exalted, sublime level of symbolic and financial appreciation that in the socially constructed consciousness of the members of these two elites art's eternal essence reigns supreme, regardless of any 'primal scene' of art's production, appropriation and exploitation. Elevating arts to non-human exaltation lends a particular subjective value to the activities of these elites, in the light of which more mundane and – even in their own strategies – ultimately decisive concerns (like money, exploitation, power) no longer qualify as topics of polite conversation – especially not if broached by non-fellow-members of these elites. Indeed, in such a context one cannot have 'the beautiful (...) elected like Miss World', who after all is human, is likely to regularly use toilets, and sanitary pads or

tampons, and whose frequently displayed navel bears irrefutable witness to the fact that she was once produced. One needs a beauty that is at the same time inhuman, objectified, and exalted to the point of the sublime. Political systems based on violence tend to conceal their violence underneath layers of cosmological and religious symbolism, and to relegate the actual violence to inconspicuous corners of public life. Elites whose social and economic position is based on exploitation tend to conceal such exploitation under similar cosmological and religious symbolism – including for instance a view of art as transcendent. Meanwhile we must appreciate that it is not only the specific class interests of the elite, but also the economic and cultural history of West European society in general, which has produced this exalted view of art and beauty, especially as from the Renaissance; here Judaeo-Christian notions of transcendence, creation and of the prohibition of carved images of God, have combined with Hellenic and Hellenistic notions of truth, beauty and the sublime, and in a process of secularisation, individualisation, and the transformation of craftsmen into courtly and entrepreneurial artists, greatly reinforced by the spread of literacy, have combined to produce the conception of beauty as we find it in the eighteenth century.

A socially constructed conception of beauty with this sort of exalted contents will do very well among the two elites described, and in North Atlantic society in general, but is unlikely to exist in basically the same form in totally different socio-cultural environments, whose social arrangements in terms of production, circulation and exploitation are significantly different. I would not be surprised if yet such a conception has been projected onto African art, which is a notoriously fertile field for cross-cultural appropriation both physically and conceptually. However, I have never encountered such exalted view of art among the rural Africans who in various local settings have been my research counterparts for many years; instead, I have found an emphasis on cosmologically validated production to prevail in Africa – like in agricultural production and in biological reproduction.<sup>11</sup>

As a poet I know full well that one cannot reduce the sense of beauty entirely to a social class's justificatory manipulation. Nor can we close our eyes for the fact that the fundamental social, political and philosophical dilemma's of our time are articulated in art in a most pregnant way,<sup>12</sup> towards whose understanding Lyotard has made a contribution which is widely acclaimed. Yet enough group interest and justification has by now entered the sublime picture of art as presented by Kant and Lyotard, to make us suspicious of the universal, timeless claims they make in the field of aesthetics.

Now when from aesthetics both Kant and Lyotard proceed to the conceptualisation of *sensus communis* as something which is emphatically not socially constructed and at the same time constitutes the basis of human judgement and even of human sociability, fallacy may be piled upon fallacy: the disembodied, a-productive view of exalted beauty forces us to consider a

disembodied, non-human space of purity, a high heaven of overwhelming non-humanness to be contrasted with man's sordid social existence as a fallen angel.

### **Lyotard's admonition to de-anthropologise**

All this is highly relevant to Lyotard's emphasis on the need to resist, by all means, the temptation to anthropologise our aesthetic discourse.

'As for the *common* [ italics original ] of this 'sense', the 'community' or communicability which qualifies it, that is certainly not to be observed in experience. It is certainly not what we call a 'public'. Not the society of art-lovers in museums, galleries, concerts, theatres, or who today look at reproductions of works (and, I may add, of landscapes) in their homes. *The sensus must be protected from anthropologization.*' (Lyotard 1992: 10; italics added WvB)

'Here is where the true difficulty of understanding (and hearing) the *sensus communis* begins, once the anthropological temptation has been chased away.' (Lyotard 1992: 12)

Admittedly, this abhorrence has a broad systematic basis in both Kant's and Lyotard's oeuvre, to which I cannot do full justice here. However, our suspicion has been raised that underneath Lyotard's admonition hides an unwillingness to consider the social production of art, and in general (given the central place that is attributed to beauty by both Kant and Lyotard in their elaboration of the concept of *sensus communis*) the social matrix within which their entire theory of *sensus communis* should have been conceived.

From within the parameters of Lyotard's own discourse, any proposal to re-anthropologise his concept of *sensus communis* is clearly absurd and anathema. However, my priorities are elsewhere: not with assessing Lyotard (or, for that matter, Kant) as such, but with exploring the extent to which their respective concepts of *sensus communis* may be conducive to a viable approach to interculturality as a central philosophical and political problem of our times.

### **Re-anthropologising Lyotard**

Of course it is not my intention to claim that all social science is anthropological. The type of social aesthetics proposed above is more the domain of social and cultural historians of European modernity than of anthropologists proper. When I use the term 'anthropologising' I mean by this: bringing to bear upon the philosophical analysis at hand, an inspiration from the contemporary, empirical social sciences including history. I realise that with such usage I give a twist to Lyotard's use of 'anthropological', which clearly denotes a branch, not of empirical social science, but of philosophy.

Where would re-anthropologising Lyotard's approach to *sensus communis* lead us?

First of all to the proposed deconstruction of an aesthetic theory which smuggles into the core of its argument, under the guise of what is evidently the case, (sub-)culturally patterned specific collective representations concerning aesthetics – the North Atlantic concept of art Eurocentrically declared to be universal and within the central framework, as well as the strategic ideological baggage of specific elite groups in a bid to conceal the exploitative nature of their privileged position, and to develop an idiom of identity through distinction.

As a next step, we have to see how Lyotard's Kant-based argument can be rebuilt on the basis of the insight this deconstruction claims to have offered.

While this would in the first instance yield an alternative analysis primarily pertinent to the intra-societal dynamics of beauty and of *sensus communis* within one specific, more or less homogeneous, social and historical context, the more important step would be to, finally, explore the revised approach's potential for the analysis intercultural problems.

### **Kant and Lyotard converging with Durkheim and Turner**

Below we shall return to the intercultural problematic. Meanwhile it is important to note that for Lyotard anthropologising, although emphatically the wrong approach to *sensus communis*, is far from terra incognita. The rich variety of human culture, contemporary and the past, outside modern or postmodern North Atlantic urban society is not Lyotard's principal frame of reference in the way it is, for instance, mine. Yet echoes of an anthropological acquaintance may be heard in his text.

With some stretch of the imagination, one might even claim that Lyotard's 1992 text is – like presumably some of his political works<sup>13</sup> – implicitly a sympathetic exchange with the social sciences, in a bid to define what is, after all, the human condition, and even to indicate, however sketchily, not only the constitution of the human subject again and again throughout the lives of contemporary individuals, but also a genetic model for its emergence in the remote past of humanity:

'The essential is this: the feeling of the beautiful is the subject just being born, the first equalling-out of non-comparable powers. This feeling escapes being mastered by concept and will. It extends itself underneath and beyond their intrigues and their closure.'  
(Lyotard 1992: 24)

In this formulation we may detect a concern with unveiling, reconstructing, man's spiritual origins, – a concern once central in anthropology and continuing to produce fascinating studies although now largely outside anthropology.<sup>14</sup> Although they are due (as I suggest) to a failure to deconstruct elite aesthetics at two specific points in West European history (in

other words, even although they can be said to be ‘conceived in sin’ for lack of a social-science perspective). Lyotard’s ideas on these more general points are extremely interesting. His interests intersect here with what has been – after earlier explorations by philosophers such as Hobbes whom he mentions<sup>15</sup> – the leading problem of the social sciences ever since their academic professionalisation in the late 19th century: how is social life possible?

‘What can a *communitas* [ italics original ] be which isn’t knitted into itself by a project? this philosophy whispers to us. Which has no Idea of what it wants to be and must be’ Not having the Idea of its unity even as a horizon? These are false questions, directed by a line we haven’t questioned: by the prejudice according to which what comes first is the diverse, chaos (matter, according to Kant himself and many others), and according to which a principle is needed to unify it even if only into *elementary forms*. [ italics added WvB ] (...) Even if it is explained to us that that doesn’t exist, that it’s always missed, that this happiness of fulfilment is a trap - that changes nothing about the principle that community is the desire experienced by diversity.’ (Lyotard 1992: 5f)

It would take us too far in the present context to ascertain to what extent Kant has been a major influence on what has constituted, for almost a century, the most seminal sociological theory of the constitution of society, that presented by Durkheim in *Les formes elementaires de la vie religieuse* – still the most classic text in the field of the anthropology of religion.<sup>16</sup> Considering the fact that in France – contrary to, e.g., the Netherlands – philosophy has for a long time been taught at the secondary school level, and considering the ease with which French intellectuals who would appear to be entrenched in the French national philosophical tradition turn to Kant,<sup>17</sup> I would not rule out the possibility that despite the far more conspicuous influence of such conservative philosophers de Bonald and de Maistre on Durkheim’s work, his central theory of the arbitrariness of the sacred, and of the identity of the sacred and society itself, owes a debt to radical Kant’s *sensus communis*. In particular, there is a remarkable parallel between the dehumanised exaltation of the beautiful as constitutive of *sensus communis*, and Durkheim’s central notion of *effervescence* – the boiling group energy which is released in ritual and, through the experience of the sacred, both refers to and constitutes society. The non-human, de-anthropologising connotations which Lyotard stresses for *sensus communis*, remind one strongly of another basic position of Durkheim’s (one of which his theory of the sacred is a brilliant elaboration):

‘les faits social sont des choses’,<sup>18</sup>

in other words the claim – of course as controversial as seminal – that the social exists on a plane of its own, where it cannot (e.g. by means of methodological individualism) be reduced to the characteristics and actions of the respective human individuals whose interactions constitute the social.

And from Durkheim it is only a few steps (via Durkheim’s populariser in the United Kingdom, Radcliffe Brown; and the latter’s junior colleague and

fellow-South African Max Gluckman) to Victor Turner's *communitas*,<sup>19</sup> which reads like an anthropologically more sophisticated rephrasing of *effervescence*, while in terminology and analytical use Turner's term is close to Kant/Lyotard's *sensus communis*. The amazing state of affairs now is that both for Durkheim and for Turner the point of reference is not a plurality of societies but one unique, localised society (or in Durkheim's version, *the primordial society*) – so that the approaches of these seminal social scientists are not much more effective than Kant and Lyotard if we want to understand aesthetic constructs, and *sensus communis*, under conditions of a plurality of cultural, social and ethnic groups existing side by side.

### Lyotard and intercultural philosophy

Lyotard's de-anthropologising venture in the positioning of *sensus communis* has implications for intercultural philosophy. His own elaboration on this point remains limited, at least in the 1992 text; let us accept that interculturality is not his priority. Lyotard quotes Kant:<sup>20</sup>

‘“But under the *sensus communis* we must include the idea of a sense *common to all*, i.e. of a faculty of judgment which, in its reflection, takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation of all other men in thought”’

and goes on to say:

‘to which Kant adds, as we have seen: ‘This is done by comparing our judgment with the possible rather than actual judgments of others’ (KUK §40; CJ p. 136).<sup>21</sup> This operation of comparison apparently occurs over a collectivity of individuals. Interpreted like this, this operation induces a realist empirical anthropological definition of the said *sensus*. How many illusions or political crimes have been able to nourish themselves with this pretended immediate sharing of feelings? (...)

The required comparison is an eidetic one. The task is to form a pure aesthetic judgement by ‘imaginary variations’, as Husserl would have said. The purposiveness of this mental ‘technique’ is to remove from the pleasure in the beautiful any empirical individual charm or emotion. And thus to make certain that what is left after this ‘degreasing’ is communicable. It will be communicable if it is well purified.

‘At the end of the same paragraph, Kant writes:

“We could even define taste as the faculty of judging of that which makes *universally communicable*, without the mediation of a concept, our feeling in a given representation.” (KUK §40; CJ p. 138)’ (Lyotard 1992: 23f).

I am inclined to interpret this passage as implying the following with regard to interculturality. If the ultimate impetus of the *sensus communis* is the experience of the de-humanised beautiful and the sublime, an experience which is as culturally unspecific as it is constitutive of humanity as whole, then we would have here one way of pinpointing our underlying universal communality as human beings. The community implied in the concept of *sensus communis* could be taken to encompass the whole of mankind. Cultural,

national and ethnic differences, however conspicuous at the surface of our social and political experience, could be ultimately relegated to the status of mere epiphenomena, passing illusions of diversity and divisiveness waiting to be chased by the light of our pan-human *sensus communis*. *Alle Menschen werden Brüder* – although this is not Kant himself but his devoted disciple, Schiller.

However, I have adduced reasons to suggest that this splendid, immensely hopeful result of philosophical analysis is based on an epistemological error, or if you like on ethnocentrism.<sup>22</sup> If the exalted view of beauty underlying the above, universal, *sensus communis* could only be constructed by sweeping the subcultural specificity of Paris postmodern art dealers and Königsberg eighteenth century elites under the carpet, then the escape to universalism via a claim of exalted non-humanity is likely to be spurious, and the domain left available to be governed by *sensus communis* would not be universal mankind, *but a specific subset of mankind sharing a specific aesthetic production and the specific cultural patterning of the ensuing aesthetic experience*. Aesthetics would be back where anthropologists have always tended to situate it: as the force of strict customs officers installed at the socially constructed boundary around a specific cultural identity, rather than as a fount from which the whole of humanity could freely draw without impediment of cultural specificity. Expressive cultural production, e.g. art objects, music and dance is particularly prone to serve as boundary marker in cultural identity. Presumably, it can do so for more or less the reasons which Kant and Lyotard have pinpointed. In triggering an aesthetic experience which the actors involved construct as cosmic, absolute, eminently valid, not subjected to taste or will, the aesthetic does create a *sensus communis* implicitly uniting the people subscribing to the *subset* of humanity (a people, a sub-cultural group, an artistic movement etc.) which is pursuing that identity. But what is as tragic from a point of view of ethnic divisiveness, as salutary from a point of view of human cultural and artistic diversity, is that this *sensus communis* defines by its very essence, a (usually relatively small) subset of humanity, and never the whole of humanity. By consequence, the experience is beauty is not untutored and universal but culturally patterned and learned – members of a culture need to learn through extensive enculturation how to appreciate even the art that is co-constitutive for their own identity. And by the same token it is rare that they spontaneously and without extensive acculturation appreciate the beauty of art forms from other cultures. If they do, a closer analysis of their aesthetic experience tends to reveal spuriously subjective projections on the basis of culturally patterned conceptions and concerns from their own culture – or the alternative, a remaking of the earlier, culture-specific symbolic production along the format dictated by a wider, increasingly global, context of circulation and consumption.<sup>23</sup>

In short, through culturally specific aesthetics, *sensus communis* breeds the multiplicity of cultures, instead of exploding that multiplicity.

### Conclusion: Towards interculturality

There appear to be a number of ways out of this prison of divisiveness.

One lies still within the domain of the aesthetic experience, and involves the possibilities of creating, with modern electronic media under conditions of globalisation, an aesthetics which, at least in principle, does penetrate and does captivate the whole of mankind. Whether it is to be universally broadcast Miss World elections, or Fred Flintstone, or the Champion League's cup final, or the funeral of Princess Diana of Wales, or a world-wide concert like *One for Africa*, the basis for a world-wide *sensus communis* is in principle available to us. But, I regret, at a price that few in my audience would be prepared to pay, in terms of the nauseating massification of commercialised pseudo-aesthetics; and of course, the whole of humanity would still be limited to a world-wide minority with access to electronic media.<sup>24</sup> More surreptitiously and probably more effectively, the effects of these media seep into local expression culture, and there produce a recognisable globalising format, as already indicated.

Another, far more promising, factor lies in the experience of psychophysical humanity, the human body and mind which, however we conceptualise their interconnection, constitute and sum up the principal feature of the human condition shared by all humanity. Anthropologists have long recognised this fact as the one fundamental limiting factor in the otherwise free variation of culture. While Kant and Lyotard insist on basing the communality of humanity on a *sensus communis* which revolves on disembodiment, on non-human beauty, the obvious alternative is to explore our (partially) embodied experience as the communal factor – the basis on which we can, admittedly, inflict violence and death upon our fellow humans, but can also identify existentially with their birth, growth, maturity, and death, with both their suffering and their glory.

Beyond these two totalising devises (one postmodern, the other perennial and of extreme generality), it is probably wise to assume that the construction of enduring human patterns of sociability is complex and kaleidoscopic. There is no need to put all our eggs into one basket. Ecstatic religion may be one, fairly widespread and ancient, device for the construction of the kind of transcendent principle hinted at by Kant and Lyotard's *sensus communis*. Durkheim, and more recently Turner (for whom ritual *communitas* amounts to 'anti-structure'), have identified ritual in general as a factor. Institutionalisation and its normative structure has a long history in the social sciences as an explanatory factor, although its suggestion of consistence and consensus sits uneasily in a postmodern context. Beyond institutionalisation and its emphasis on structure, reconciliation as another form of anti-structure would appear to be another factor, especially in segmentary settings, like the life-worlds of pastoralists, civil servants and academics.<sup>25, 26</sup>

Without unravelling these patterns of human sociability, the specific forms of sociability which are posed by interculturality are not likely to be illuminated.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the members of the Dutch-Flemish Association for Intercultural Philosophy, and particularly to Henk Oosterling, for constructive comments on an earlier draft.

<sup>2</sup> Kant, I., 1983, 'Kritik der Urteilskraft', in: Weischedel, W., ed., *Kritik der Urteilskraft und Schriften zur Naturphilosophie, Bd 8, Kant: Werke in Zehn Bänden*, Sonderausgabe, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, pp. 233-620, espec. §§ 6-8, 40-41, 56-57.

<sup>3</sup> Lyotard, J.-F., 1992, 'Sensus communis', in: Benjamin, A., ed., 1992, *Judging Lyotard*, London: Routledge, pp. 1-25, tr. Marian Hobson and Geoff Bennington. Lyotard touches on the same topic elsewhere in his vast oeuvre, e.g. Lyotard, J.-F., 1986, *L'enthousiasme: La critique kantienne de l'histoire*, Paris: Galilée, pp. 52ff. I did not have access to the French original underlying Lyotard 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert, K., & H. Kuhn, 1956, *A history of aesthetics: Revised and enlarged*, London: Thames & Hudson.

<sup>5</sup> After World War II Königsberg was known as Kaliningrad and politico-socially became a part of Eastern Europe. Before that time, as a Hanseatic town, as the capital of Eastern Prussia, etc., it could be counted as a peripheral part of Western Europe – with this rider that the Eastern Europe / Western Europe distinction in itself became reified as an effect of the 20th-century CE Cold War.

<sup>6</sup> Rose, P.L., 1990, *Revolutionary anti-Semitism in Germany from Kant to Wagner*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Palter, R., 1996, 'Eighteenth-century historiography in Black Athena', in: Lefkowitz, M.R., & MacLean Rogers, G., eds., 1996, *Black Athena revisited*, Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, pp. 349-401. For a general critical background to this kind of allegations, cf. Blok, J.H., 1997, 'Proof and persuasion in Black Athena I: The case of K.O. Müller', in: W.M.J. van Binsbergen, ed., *Black Athena: Ten Years After*, special issue, *Talanta*, 28-29: 173-208.

<sup>7</sup> Herskovits, M.J., 1951, *Man and his works*, New York: Knopf, first published 1948; Herskovits, M.J., 1972, *Cultural relativism: Perspectives in cultural pluralism*, ed. F. Herskovits, New York: Random House.

<sup>8</sup> At least, in the 1992 text. I admit that I have only a very limited knowledge of Lyotard's extensive oeuvre and of the secondary literature it has generated. For a general background I am relying on: Oosterling, H., 1996, *Door schijn bewogen: Naar een hyperkritiek van de xenofobe rede*, Kampen: Kok Agora.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Benjamin, W., 1963, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit: Drei Studien zur Kunstsoziologie*, Frankfurt a/M.: Suhrkamp, first published 1936; and the host of related studies in the Frankfurt School and its aftermath.

<sup>10</sup> Kant's father is reputed to have been 'lower middle class': a saddle-maker; incidentally, I come from a similar background.

<sup>11</sup> For selected glimpses of this complex and controversial field, cf. Preston Blier, S., 1993, 'Truth and seeing: Magic, custom, and fetish in art history', in: R.H. Bates, V.Y. Mudimbe & J. O'Barr, eds., *Africa and the disciplines: The contributions of research in Africa to the social sciences and humanities*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 139-166; Preston Blier, S., 1995, *African Vodun: Art, psychology, and power*, Chicago/ London: University of Chicago Press; Fagg, W., 1965, *Tribes and forms in African art*, London: Methuen; Jules-Rosette, B., 1984, *Messages of tourist art: An African semiotic system in comparative perspective*, New York: Plenum; Willett, F., 1977, *African art: An introduction*, London: Thames & Hudson; 1st ed. 1971; Azevedo, W.L., 1973, ed., *The traditional artist in African societies*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Oosterling 1996 and extensive references there.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. Lyotard 1986.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Jaynes, J., 1990, *The origin of consciousness in the breakdown of the bicameral mind*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Cie, first published 1976, 6th impr; Vroon, P., 1992, *Wolfsklem: De evolutie van het menselijk gedrag*, Baarn: Ambo; Snell, B., 1955, *Die Entdeckung des Geistes: Studien zur Entstehung des europäischen Denkens bei den Griechen*, Hamburg: Claassen & Goverts; Eng. tr. *The discovery of the mind: The Greek origins of European thought*, New York: Harper & Row; Frankfort, H., Frankfort, H.A., Wilson, J.A., Jacobsen, T., & Irwin, W.A., 1957, *Before philosophy: The intellectual adventure of Ancient Man: An essay on speculative thought in the Ancient Near East*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, first published 1946; Leroi-Gourhan, A., 1984, *Hand und Wort: Die Evolution von Technik, Sprache und Kunst*, , tr. M. Bischoff, Frankfurt a/M.: Suhrkamp, 2nd ed., first ed., 1980; German tr. of 1964, *Le geste et la parole: Technique et langage*, Paris: Albin Michel; Bottéro, J., 1974, 'Symptômes, signes, écritures: En Mésopotamie ancienne', in: *Divination et rationalité*, Paris: Seuil, pp. 70-195; Bottéro, J., 1992, *Mesopotamia: Writing, reasoning, and the Gods*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>15</sup> Lyotard 1992: 5.

<sup>16</sup> Durkheim, E., 1912, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

<sup>17</sup> E.g. Lacan, J., 1993, 'Kant avec Sade', in: idem, *Écrits 2*, Paris: Seuil, pp. 119-148, first published 1971; Deleuze, G., 1963, *La philosophie critique de Kant*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

<sup>18</sup> Durkheim, E., 1897, *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique*, Paris: Alcan.

<sup>19</sup> Turner, V.W., 1969, *The Ritual Process*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

<sup>20</sup> Kant 1983: §40.

<sup>21</sup> KUK=Kant 1983; CJ = Kant, I., 1966, *Critique of Judgment*, translated with an Introduction by J. H. Bernard, New York/ London: Hafner.

<sup>22</sup> Since when is a social science position capable of illuminating an epistemological argument? Perhaps since the time that Winch, against the opposite view as ventilated by, e.g. Laslett, argued the central position of epistemology also in social science. Cf. Laslett, P., 1956, ed., *Philosophy, politics and society*, Oxford: Blackwell; Winch, P., 1970, *The idea of a social science*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, first published 1958.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1992, *Kazanga: Etniciteit in Afrika tussen staat en traditie*, inaugural lecture, Amsterdam: Free University; French version: 'Kazanga: Ethnicité en Afrique entre Etat et tradition', in press in: W.M.J. van Binsbergen & K. Schilder, eds., *Perspectives on Ethnicity in Africa*, special issue on ethnicity, *Afrika Focus*, 1993, 1: 9-40; expanded and revised version in: 'The Kazanga festival: Ethnicity as cultural mediation and transformation in central western Zambia', *African Studies*, 53, 2, 1994, pp 92-125. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1994, 'Dynamiek van cultuur: Enige dilemma's van hedendaags Afrika in een context van globalisering', contribution to a special issue entitled *De dynamiek van de cultuur*, guest editors L. Brouwer & I. Hogema, *Antropologische Verkenningen*, 13, 2: 17-33, 1994; English version: 'Popular culture in Africa: Dynamics of African cultural and ethnic identity in a context of globalization', in: J.D.M. van der Klei, ed., *Popular culture: Africa, Asia & Europe: Beyond historical legacy and political innocence*, Utrecht: CERES, 1995, pp. 7-40. Van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1997, *Virtuality as a key concept in the study of globalisation: Aspects of the symbolic transformation of contemporary Africa*, The Hague: WOTRO, Working papers on Globalisation and the construction of communal identity, 3. Van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 'Ethnicity and identity in Central Africa', in press in: J.M. Middleton, ed., *The encyclopaedia of sub-Saharan Africa*, New York: Scribner's; and references cited in these publications.

<sup>24</sup> E.g., on an estimated population of 7,731,000 in 1990, the West African republic of Niger boasted 35,000 TV receivers, or less than one per two thousand inhabitants; source: Anonymous, 1994 [ © 1993 ], 'Statistical survey [ Niger ]', in: *Africa South of the Sahara*, London: Europa Publications, 23rd ed., pp. 642-645. This means that even with widely shared

use of the available sets, still far less than one percent of all Nigerese have access to television consumption.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 'Verzoening: Perspectieven vanuit de culturele antropologie', bijdrage voor een studiedag over 'Verzoening', Bezinningscentrum, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 9 October 1997; in press in *In de marge*, theme issue on *Verzoening* [ reconciliation ], December 1997.

<sup>26</sup> One of the most rewarding discussions of intercultural judgement from the point of view of anthropology is the final chapter of Redfield's famous *The primitive world and its transformations*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966, first published 1953. Here Herskovits's position of radical cultural relativism (Herskovits 1951 and n.d.) is critiqued and the anthropologist is revealed, in all honesty and against the grain of established political correctness, as an incorrigible critic of the cultures he or she studies, and particularly of the one or two cultures in which personal field-work has been conducted – somewhat in the line of Heinlein's *The strange profession of Jonathan Cape* [ check title ], whose protagonist turns out to be a demiurge sent as art critic to the various worlds his fellow demiurges have created. Remarkably, Redfield reserves the term 'anthropologising' precisely for intercultural judgement. For a related argument, cf. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1986-87, 'Culturele dilemma's van de ontwikkelingswerker', *Wijzgerig Perspectief op maatschappij en wetenschap*, 27, 4: 124-28; also cf. Procée, H., 1991, *Over de grenzen van culturen*, Meppel: Boom.