

Sitting at the Table

At a lecture he gave in Barcelona some years ago, Amin Maalouf suggested a key to understanding the world today, and more specifically the world of contemporary cultural references, with a very interesting statement: according to Maalouf, twenty-year-olds today in Barcelona, Rome, Tokyo and New York have more in common with each other than they do with their own parents.

He was referring, of course, to their cultural references, their world of imagination, the films and TV series they watch, the songs they listen to. The statement says a lot. Clearly, it doesn't encompass all that is unfolding today. There are, for example, geographical boundaries; not all cities would fit on this list, nor all the neighbourhoods in a given city. And in certain regards, these young people will inevitably continue to share more in common with their parents than with their contemporaries from different places in the world, or from different religious or social backgrounds.

But there was a key point that struck me in Amin Maalouf's words, which was an important reflection on something that characterises the nature of our times, that is not strictly defined by the term "globalisation" yet linked to it. Departing from Maalouf's statement, I would say that in the world today, personal identities, cultural activities and literary and scholarly works find themselves, more than ever, at the crossroads of time and space. We could say that in order to have a grasp of different identities and cultural expressions today, two coordinates must come into play: longitude and latitude, as it were. Personal identities and cultural forms are understood, in part, as a product of a tradition, a territory, a vertical line passed on from parents to children, generation to generation, within the framework of their own cultural matrix. We are the offspring of a tradition, whether we take it on or reject it, adopt it or battle against it.

But this vertical axis that has always been in place is now counterbalanced by what we might call a horizontal axis that crosses territories and cultural traditions so that, as Maalouf points out, young people from Tokyo, Barcelona and New York share things that set them apart from their respective parents. It is a horizontal

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axis linked with the current times, and with shared cultural references. We inherit a tradition, but also a particular period of time. Our own period of time sheds light on our traditions, where we were born and where we live, but it also tells us about those horizontal axes that leap boundaries: of age, genre, aesthetics, sometimes religion, and even language. Latitude and longitude; global world culture and cultural diversity as a large pie, sliced both horizontally and vertically.

At certain points the word “globalisation” has been understood as uniformity. We were moving, we thought, from a homogeneous world to a uniform world. That is neither what Maalouf states, nor what I aim to put forth. There are many forms of diversity. It is not simply that what happens in one place is different from another. It also has to do with the fact that the experiences of one generation are different from the next, even in the very same place.

Within this context, both public and private institutions, among them the Institut Ramon Llull —commissioned by the Catalan and Balearic Islands governments to promote Catalan culture abroad— must continue to move forward. The vertical axis is well in place: a tradition, a land. But the connection must also be made on the horizontal axes: aesthetics, ideologies, generational questions that place cultural practices in context. This requires being aware of the horizontal axes without losing touch with the vertical axis. Maintaining a clear awareness of both the latitude and longitude.

In keeping with this, *Transfer* —co-published by the Institut Ramon Llull and the Universitat de València— took part, for the first time, in the annual meeting of Eurozine, the network of Europe’s leading cultural journals (Linz, May 2011), providing opportunities for

Catalan writers to exchange ideas with other authors and to open new doors for cultural journals in the Catalan language. Along these same lines, the Institut Ramon Llull took Mabel Palacin’s work to the Venice Biennial and has taken part in the Miró exhibition at the Tate Modern in London, as well as in Barcelona and Washington D.C. So that expressive works clearly infused with Catalan culture can enter into dialogue along the horizontal axes of other contemporary cultures —sitting down at the table together, each coming from a different place, and discussing what being modern means. To be present in the world has always been necessary for a given culture. Today that has become more important than ever II

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