

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-49701-5 — Conceptualising the Global in the Wake of the Postmodern

Joel Evans

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

Introduction

The earth, far from being a sphere, is ‘sausage-shaped’.

Flann O’Brien, *The Third Policeman*

Although this assertion – made by the fictional philosopher de Selby in Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman* (1967) – is patently, and intentionally, absurd, it nevertheless proves instructive in outlining the purpose and aims of this book. De Selby arrives at this conclusion by claiming, first, that there are only two possible directions of travel across the Earth. One can either go north or south, but ultimately this makes little difference as (if travelling in a straight line) one will eventually arrive back at the starting point, having somehow, therefore, travelled in both directions. The same point, by this logic, holds for travelling either east or west. Only two possible directions are available then: either west-east, or north-south. However, the very fact that circumnavigations of the Earth always end at their point of departure suggests a lack of *any* varied or distinct direction. This leads de Selby to make the wildly audacious claim that there is, in fact, a hidden direction when it comes to possible circumnavigations of the Earth. If, in other words, one always ends up running on what might be described as a giant sausage-shaped treadmill when moving around the Earth, then to discover this hidden direction would be to find a way to move horizontally along the length of the sausage. Apparently, if this were achieved, ‘a world of entirely new sensation and experience would be open to humanity’ (O’Brien 2007: 97–98).

To express this somewhat complex series of observations, then, de Selby fashions a concept of the Earth: the sausage-Earth. This is just one among a series of concepts of the global which we will encounter in this book. Whilst O’Brien’s text was written in the late 1930s (and published later on), the discussion here is focused on the contemporary world, more specifically from the 1990s onwards. Two and a half decades’ worth of concepts, then, all to be located primarily in a selection of literary, filmic and philosophical

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-49701-5 — Conceptualising the Global in the Wake of the Postmodern

Joel Evans

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

2

Introduction

works, which all come from a Western context, and predominantly hail from the Anglophone parts of the globe. One of the underlying claims running throughout this hunt for concepts is that – despite the sheer mass of authors who suggest otherwise – there is not *one* predominant or correct way of conceptualising the global in the contemporary conjuncture, but, in fact, a series of interrelated ways of doing so.¹ This is attested to not only by the various ways in which the global is conceptualised within globalisation theory, but also by a whole range of other theoretical and philosophical material. The claim also rings true in an equally broad range of contemporary literature and cinema, including works by figures such as Margaret Atwood, Iain Banks, Neill Blomkamp, Douglas Coupland, David Cronenberg, Mark Danielewski, Don DeLillo, Kazuo Ishiguro, Charlie Kaufmann, Patrick Keiller, David Lynch, Will Self and Ali Smith. This being said, this work does categorise various concepts of the global via four main headings, or master-concepts. These are: the immanent; the transcendent; the contingent; and the beyond-measure. These, we will suggest, are the four general ways of conceptualising the global in contemporary culture. Each chapter in the book is dedicated to one of these four master-concepts, and each chapter will in a general sense assess the political, philosophical and artistic implications of conceptualising the global in a certain way.

So, to continue with the example already given, de Selby's concept of the Earth is also a concept of the global, in a specific sense. Firstly, the Earth here is in one sense all-encompassing, in that one is never able to leave, never able to access the hidden dimension in which a different route might be taken, a route, that is, which allows one to travel the length of the sausage. But this hidden dimension also imbues the Earth with a noumenal quality, a feeling that we can never really have full access to the planet which we inhabit, that we can never grasp Earth in itself as a *totality*. This, in turn, is linked to a feeling of the absurd, which is presented not only in its crude sense through the image of the sausage, but also through the protagonist being taken in and out of various bureaucratic institutions, and being subjected to a host of bizarre scenarios for no forthcoming or ultimate reason (O'Brien 2007: 93–111). We are left, as a result, with a feeling that something is always being hidden in the body politic and the various institutions of which this is comprised. This is evidently a particularly modernist theme, the nearest correlate within literature being Kafka's gripping explorations of the absurd, the bureaucratic and the hidden. Both the absurd quality with which the Earth is imbued and its noumenal quality, then, link in

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-49701-5 — Conceptualising the Global in the Wake of the Postmodern

Joel Evans

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

The Return of the Totality

3

with the more grounded aspects of the novel, which in turn connect with the broader political, economic and cultural climate in which O'Brien was writing. The political, the philosophical, and the aesthetic are all linked together here through the way in which the global is being conceptualised, and this is something which we will see demonstrated throughout this book, in many different ways.

Let us briefly define the two key terms here, then, before moving on to a more thorough explication of the debates entered into, both when it comes to the notion of the global within contemporary culture and in a wider sense. The word 'global' will be used to designate anything which is seen to be all-encompassing, any figure, that is, which seeks to articulate or contain everything that *is*. In many cases, this is carried out with reference to the Earth, or the globe itself, but as we shall see the global and the globe are not *a priori* tied together. 'Concept' will be used to designate anything which seeks to articulate a series of complex states, relations and becomings in a shorthand, philosophical way, and which in turn affects the way we think about and react to these elements.

The Return of the Totality

Another way of defining what the global means here is to say that it concerns a figuration of the totality. But totality is a rather loaded term, one which has for some time been out of favour, and so it bears some further explanation, before moving on to link this in with the more general terrain of scholarship which deals with the global in contemporary culture. As Martin Jay has shown, the history of the concept of totality is a long one, from the various permutations of *holon* (ὅλον) in Ancient Greek philosophy, right the way through to Romantic philosophies like Jean-Jacques Rousseau's, up to the various musings of German Idealism, and the grand philosophical project of G. W. F. Hegel (Jay 1984: 25–60). Whilst this is the case, the concept of totality is most at home within the Marxist discourse, and Jay provides a history of the ways in which this has been thought within the Marxist canon, from Georg Lukács (whom we will have recourse to a few times throughout) to Jean-Paul Sartre, to Jürgen Habermas. Karl Marx himself, of course, is the progenitor of all these attempts to decide what the totality is, and how one ought to (if, indeed, one can) think it. We will be seeing one way in which Marx thought about the totality a little later on, but suffice it to say now that Marx considered this, in the main, to be the aggregate of human relations and production, in both their base and superstructural form.²

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-49701-5 — Conceptualising the Global in the Wake of the Postmodern

Joel Evans

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

More immediately relevant for our discussion are some of the more contemporary writings on the totality, which more often than not come directly from a Marxist perspective. Fredric Jameson is perhaps the most prominent theorist who has grappled with the concept of the totality in recent years. In general, Jameson views the totality either as something to which we do not have sufficient access and means of figuring, or something which is thoroughly obscured by some other figure which resembles the totality of human relations and production, and yet distorts them. This is most famously articulated in the work on postmodernism, which will be discussed in-depth in Chapter 1. A similar example comes from the essay entitled ‘Cognitive Mapping’. According to Jameson, after the passage from ‘market to monopoly capital, or what Lenin called the stage of “imperialism”’ there is an increasing incongruence between the individual and the network of social relations of which they form a part, to the point at which, were the individual to be in London, ‘the truth of that experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place. The truth of that limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India, or Jamaica or Hong Kong’ (Jameson 2000: 278). One is unable to grasp the totality of conditions which structure experience, something which for Jameson is evident predominantly in the aesthetic world, and has been enhanced within our own, global or late stage of capitalism, as we will see in more detail in Chapter 1. In response to this, Jameson employs the idea of an aesthetics of cognitive mapping, one which gives credence to ‘the realm of social structure, that is to say, in our historical moment, to the totality of class relations on a global . . . scale’ (283). The project of cognitive mapping, then, would be one which seeks to re-establish our lost connection with the totality. To take an example in which the totality is obscured, and yet referred to, Jameson’s work on cinema is illustrative. Here, the author is able to make the claim that the postmodern conspiracy plot in film, with its infinite web of confusions between characters, motives and allegiances is in fact ‘an *analogon* of and a stand-in for the overdetermination of the computer’, a claim which begins to allow us to grasp a ‘deeper truth of the world system itself, with its complex and unfathomable web of communications networks and technologies (Jameson 1992: 16). In other words, totality is overlaid, or obscured, by conspiracy in the films which Jameson explores here.

Jameson’s work is ambiguous in its attitude toward the totality, in that it both calls for a re-engagement and assessment of aesthetic production on the basis of this, whilst simultaneously claiming that access to the very thing is always in some way out of reach. Indeed, this attitude is taken to its

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-49701-5 — Conceptualising the Global in the Wake of the Postmodern

Joel Evans

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

The Return of the Totality

5

extreme point in a recent book (inspired by Jameson's writings on the totality) by Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle. After having looked at a whole range of contemporary aesthetic artefacts which seem to engage in a project of cognitive mapping, Kinkle and Toscano claim that that the latter is not really possible in the Jamesonian sense. As the two put it:

Overview, especially when it comes to capital, is a fantasy – if a very effective, and often destructive one. Because we can't extricate ourselves from our positions in a totality that is such through its unevenness and antagonism, there is in the end something reactionary about the notion of a metalanguage that could capture, that could represent capitalism as such (2014: 241–242).

Whilst this is not the perspective from which Toscano and Kinkle write, one cannot help but be reminded here of a related scepticism when it comes to the totality, and that is what Jean-François Lyotard summed up so well in his identification of one of the defining features of the postmodern as an incredulity toward meta-narratives (1986: xxiv). Indeed, the various discourses of the postmodern, as Steven Connor writes, pursue relentlessly 'the dissolution of every kind of totalizing narrative which claims to govern the whole complex field of social activity and representation' (1997: 8).³

We can identify two different yet related attitudes toward the totality arising from this brief survey. The first, which is tied to Jameson's, and Toscano and Kinkle's work (and is of a broadly Marxist persuasion), is interested in the totality, and yet claims we cannot really figure it in any lucid way, at least currently. The second attitude is that of complete disavowal, and we see it in that much more general cultural matrix which is the postmodern. The postmodern, then, stands out as the moment at which the totality disappeared, or at the very least became a proscribed figure in Western culture in general, with only a few plucky souls still attempting to think about it in any coherent way (again, Jameson's work is the stand-out example).⁴

At this point, we ought to lay the cards on the table, and state exactly what the approach toward the totality is here, which also entails an articulation of the overarching argument of the book itself. The contention will be that the totality has returned as a major concern in contemporary culture, and that the main way this is achieved is through conceptualising the global. Thus, the four general ways of conceptualising the global which are identified here all suggest a break from the restrictive discourse of the postmodern, with its distaste for overarching metalanguages and metanarratives. But the approach

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-49701-5 — Conceptualising the Global in the Wake of the Postmodern

Joel Evans

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

to the totality here is different to that of Jameson's emblematic contributions. Rather than seeing the totality as something which is ultimately elusive, we find within the annals of contemporary culture various *different* ways of figuring the totality, all of which have their own aesthetic, philosophical and political problems and contradictions. The task here, then, will be to assess these problems and contradictions, and to see how they relate to contemporary culture in a broad sense, rather than in some way suggesting that they either fail to represent or opaquely figure the capitalist world-system. This is not to say that concepts of the global do not relate to this world-system. Instead, it is simply acknowledged here that there is no one way to accurately figure the totality within the conceptual and aesthetic domains. Indeed, to suggest as much equates to ignoring the specificity and implications inherent in certain cultural forms, whilst simultaneously promoting a static vision of what the totality looks, or ought to look like. In other words, the difference from Jameson's approach to the totality here is that a) the aim is not to relate the figurations of the totality in contemporary culture to a fixed model, regardless of our belief in an *actual* totality of human relations and b) we do not accept the representative schema on which much of his analysis is based (more on this further down). So, whilst Jameson's work in this instance is highly influential, the definition of the totality which he offers, and his overall method, is also somewhat distant from the view put forward in this book.

Moving on to the more general terrain of the study of the global within contemporary culture, we encounter some further methodological points of difference from our own. Whilst some more of these will be witnessed throughout the book, it is worth giving a snap-shot here. As the main focus will be on relating literary and filmic works to philosophical and political discourses, a brief assessment of work on the former two elements is needed here. So, for example, within literary studies there is Bernard Schoene's *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (2009), in which the author's stated aim is to read examples of British literature which display a 'cosmopolitan outlook', to shift literary study away from 'national concerns', and instead focus on fiction as 'a response to new economic and socio-cultural formations within the world as a whole' (2011: 16, 32).⁵ Or, there is James Annesley's *Fictions of Globalization* (2006), which seeks to 'find ways in which it might be possible to read contemporary fiction in terms that add to knowledge about, and understanding of [globalization's] discourses' (6). For the purposes of this discussion, it is not a matter of locating ways in which texts respond to economic aspects of globalisation, or even for that matter seeing how literary or filmic works enhance our understanding of the

The Return of the Totality

7

discourses of globalisation.⁶ Rather, what we seek to articulate here is the way in which literary and filmic texts *produce* concepts of the global themselves, and how these might relate in a broad sense to ways of conceptualising the global in other frames of discourse. Further, for this work it is not really a matter of relating texts to globalisation *per se*, which, as will be seen, as a discourse itself contains various different ways of conceptualising the global, which can be brought under a few different categories.

When it comes to studies of cinema, the differences in approach between this project and others is starker. As a recent survey of ‘transnational’ approaches to cinema suggests, there are three main modes of investigation present in such analyses: ‘the national/transnational binary’, in which what is of concern is ‘the movement of films and film-makers across national borders’; ‘the transnational as a regional phenomenon’, where the national or region is seen as a site for the intermingling of culture and identity; and studies of ‘postcolonial cinemas’, which seek to challenge Western-centric normativity (Higbee and Lim 2010: 9). Again, here, none of these aspects are the primary concern. Instead, we will always start by trying to identify the way in which the spatial relations in film, and literature, lead us to a concept of the global. Following this, the movement of commodities across the globe, or the regional as a microcosm of the global, or even the challenging of Western normativity may well become a concern, but this is only in light of the concepts which the work gives rise to, concepts which form our primary concern.

The first mode of analysis just identified – namely, the movement of films and film-makers across geographical borders – is similar to what Franco Moretti and other world literature theorists have used to interrogate the movement of literature, and in particular the *forms* of literature, across the globe. ‘World cinema’ is rather different to this, as it almost invariably designates – as does the similarly oddly named ‘world music’ – simply non-Western cinema, or even non-Hollywood/US cinema.⁷ The concept of ‘world literature’, or *Weltliteratur*, is used in a more nuanced way by its theorists, who stretch from Goethe, through to Eric Auerbach, and on into the present day to the likes of Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova and Mariano Siskind.⁸ To take the most prevalent example of this, Moretti’s work on world literature in general is characterised by the parallels it makes with world-systems analysis, in which the emphasis on the world as a singular system which is sustained by the unequal relations between states is used as both a model and a condition of possibility for the distribution and variation of literary forms across the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-49701-5 — Conceptualising the Global in the Wake of the Postmodern

Joel Evans

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

globe: ‘One and unequal: *one literature* (*Weltliteratur*, singular, as in Goethe and Marx), or perhaps, better, one world literary system (of inter-related literatures); but a system which is different from what Goethe and Marx hoped for, because it’s profoundly unequal’ (Moretti 2013: 46).⁹ Or, as the Warwick Research Collective put it, world literature is that which registers, through its various different forms, the ‘combined unevenness’ of the world-system itself (49). Whilst analyses of the literary on the basis of its movement and variation across the globe, and within the capitalist world-system are, again, surely valuable, this book follows a different tack, in that it seeks to identify ways in which the global is conceptualised within texts and other artefacts themselves, in order to begin to form a broad picture of how this is being undertaken within contemporary Western culture. There is, however, a resonance here with Moretti’s and other world literature theorists’ work. This is the proclivity that all these critics display toward the totality – toward, that is, figuring the movement of literary forms as a whole, and throughout the world-system. The current popularity of world literature studies, then, is surely further testament to the resurgence of figurations of the totality within contemporary culture.

From this overview of the terrain of the study of the global, two main problems, or gaps, can be identified, which this book seeks to address. The first is to be found in the world literature model (to which is added the national/transnational binary in studies of cinema), which, whilst it is certainly a viable method, does not (by and large) pay much attention to the content of the works with which it is concerned. World literature studies do not seek to identify how the global, or indeed the world-system itself, is conceptualised *within* works, and we are consequently left with a model without content. Here, we will seek to close this gap by building up a broad picture of the way in which the global is being conceptualised in contemporary culture. In other words, if the totality is again a key part of our culture, then it is imperative that it is seen how aesthetic forms and contents express this, to see how this fits in with other disciplines, and to assess the implications of this. One might well posit that the problem the world literature model poses is solved by the representational model (which, again, remains a valuable method, and under which, ultimately, Jameson’s work would have to be placed), in that the latter pays attention to the *content* of literary and filmic works. But here we encounter the second problem, which is that analyses which seek to show how literary and filmic texts take their lead from the current state of globalisation fail to take into account how the realm of the aesthetic *itself* produces concepts of the global, which in turn relate to other discourses. The representational

Forms of the Global

9

model, then, discounts both the irreducible nature of aesthetic works, and the primacy of the conceptual in articulations of the global. In fact, the global is *overwhelmingly* a conceptual affair. Benedict Anderson once described nation as ‘an imagined political community – and imagined as both internally limited and sovereign’ (1991: 6). When it comes to defining the global, in very general terms, Anderson’s statement can be reformulated by saying that this is an imagined political and cultural community – imagined as both boundless and without sovereignty in the classical sense of the word. This is not to suggest that all the elements which have been identified within globalisation theory, world-systems theory, or theories of the totality are wholly virtual, but merely to recognise the fact that the over-riding factor in articulations of the global is the conceptual. Neither is it to suggest, as Schoene does, that we have abandoned or ought to abandon the paradigm of the nation state. The concepts of the global traced in this book are, after all, wholly Western, largely Anglophone, and therefore intimately entwined with constructions of identity and modes of production associated with the nation state in the particular bloc which the term ‘Western’ designates. It is also beyond the scope of this project to assess how the global is conceptualised in other geographical areas. In sum, this book provides a solution to two separate problems in the field, whilst at the same time tracing the return of the totality as an important concern in contemporary culture.

Forms of the Global

As was seen from the very beginning of this introduction, concepts of the global, and alongside these figurations of the totality, are at once political and philosophical, and often incorporate overtly aesthetic elements too. If we are to track the way in which the global is being conceptualised today, then, it is worth providing here a brief summary of the ways in which this has been undertaken within explicitly philosophical and political frames, a summary which will also introduce some of the main theoretical rubric with which concepts of the global will be discussed. This, in turn, will allow us to flesh out our understanding of the particular resonances and significances with which the global is imbued, and will also lead on to providing a more solid basis for the methodological approach pursued here, which will be explained in full toward the end.

Whilst conceptualisations of the global can be traced back at least to antiquity, the discussion is limited here to contemporary versions of this, and versions which overtly influence the former. For many theorists of

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-49701-5 — Conceptualising the Global in the Wake of the Postmodern

Joel Evans

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

10

Introduction

globalisation, Marx can be read as one of the founding figures of the field.¹⁰ Although we cannot agree in this instance (Marx, surely, would have been horrified to be associated with such a school of thought), it is the case that Marx's writings are in many instances concerned with the global, and the totality. It is also the case that many of the concepts of the global that we will be dealing with in this book are in some way indebted to Marx's thought, and we shall see various ways in which this is brought to bear on the contemporary moment. Marx – along with Engels – thought that inherent in the capitalist system was 'the need of a constantly expanding market', one which spreads itself across 'the whole surface of the globe', a 'world market' (2008: 5–6). As Marx puts it elsewhere,

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production (1949: 774).

From this point of view, then, the capitalist mode of production from its very inception strives toward an all-encompassing nature, to the point at which everything on Earth is brought under its logic. The world market is seen as all-encompassing, yet still expanding outward, continuing what Marx would call the operations of primitive accumulation into every minute part of the globe.¹¹

To some extent, this dynamic is maintained, but it is also taken in a different direction in the writings of Immanuel Wallerstein, and other world-systems theorists.¹² Like Marx, Wallerstein – writing on the subject from the 1970s up until the present day – locates the beginning of the world market, or what he calls the world-system in the sixteenth century, again suggesting that the world economic system is far from a contemporary phenomenon (1974: 15). In general, the world-system is said to consist of unequal relations and exchanges between strong and weak nation-states. According to this model there is a hierarchy of 'core', 'semi-peripheral' and 'peripheral' states, the core (predominantly Western) states being the most privileged and economically powerful as a result of the benefit they derive from the system of unequal exchange (28). Rather than a constant expansion, the model of a world-system suggests a global radiation, from the core out into the periphery, a pre-determinism which creates essence, and bounces back to yield profits. World-systems theory, then, is another, rather more precise way of talking about capitalism in its totality, and the phrase 'world-system' will be used throughout in order to designate just