

Wolfgang Welsch*

We have always been transcultural

I. Introductory remarks

Let me begin by explaining how I came to develop the concept of transculturality more than 30 years ago, in 1992.

I had the impression that the habitual concept of culture no longer fits contemporary cultural conditions. The inherited concept was strongly national: culture was supposed to be German or Polish or Chinese or US-American culture or the like. And culture was regarded as a homogeneity event: the culture within a nation was supposed to be the same for each member of the nation. So, the concept was highly unificatory. In external reference the cultures were considered as clearly distinguished and separated and even opposed to each other. They were regarded as closed spheres, and such spheres can, as Herder stated already in 1774, when he first established this nationalistic concept of culture, only “clash with one another”.¹

But contemporary cultures – I thought then and still think today – are not closed spheres and are not to be described in terms of inner homogeneity and outer separation. Culture is not to be equated with nation. Rather the cultural elements within each country are highly mixed and diverse; and they cross political boundaries, are equally found in other regions and countries. Contemporary cultures no longer follow the model of closed spheres but are characterized by manifold permeations and entan-

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¹ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* [1774] (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1967). 46. – This was, by the way, the birth moment of the idea of a “clash of civilizations” – a thesis which Huntington became famous for more than two hundred years later, in 1993.

gements.² They go beyond the traditional concept of culture. Therefore, I labelled the contemporary cut of cultures as “trans-cultural.”

In 1992, when I first introduced my concept of transculturality, the term “transcultural” was not yet in use.³ And my suggestion met with an incredible amount of reluctance and offense. But in the meantime, everybody speaks of transculturality. The concept has become familiar and quite natural for a wide range of disciplines, from cultural theory to education, art studies, musicology, sociology, history, and linguistics, as well as for psychology, anthropology, and medicine. Transculturality has become a key concept for understanding our present.

The original version of my concept was, however, in need of two supplements. In 1992, I did not know that other scholars had already made proposals that went in a similar direction. I was very happy to learn that transculturation was not my private invention, but had already been propagated outside Europe more than 50 years earlier by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortíz, who in 1940 spoke of “transculturation” with regard to Cuban identity.⁴ According to Ortíz, the identity of Cuba can only be understood if one considers the many ethnic groups and cultures that have come together there, influenced each other and taken on a different form as a result of their encounter. Ortíz was also convinced that transculturation was characteristic not only for Cuba, but might apply throughout North and South America, and perhaps even worldwide.

Second, it turned out that transculturation is by no means only a characteristic of the present but has de facto determined the cut of cultures since time immemorial. Transculturality is not a phenomenon of the 20th or 21st century. It has been the rule already historically. Edward Said, the great Palestinian intellectual, put this aptly: “the history of all cultures is the history of cultural borrowings” – “all cultures are hybrid.”⁵

In 2024, I could finally publish a book which shows that, already in the past, the design of cultures has been highly transcultural.⁶ Today, I

² We are mistaken when we continue to speak of German, French, Japanese, Indian, etc. cultures as if these were clearly defined and closed entities; what we really have in mind when speaking this way are *political* or *linguistic* communities, not truly *cultural* formations.

³ I presented a first version of the concept in 1991 under the title “Transkulturalität – Lebensformen nach der Auflösung der Kulturen” (published in *Information Philosophie*, 2, 1992, 5-20).

⁴ Fernando Ortiz, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (Havana: Jesus Montero, 1940).

⁵ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* [1993] (London: Vintage, 1994), 217 and „Kultur und Identität – Europas Selbstfindung aus der Einverleibung der Welt,“ *Lettre Internationale* 34 (1996), 21–25, here 24.

⁶ Wolfgang Welsch, *We Have Always Been Transcultural. The Arts as an Example* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2024). Cf. also Wolfgang Welsch, *Transkulturalität: Realität – Geschichte – Aufgabe* (Vienna: new academic press 2017).

will present a few case studies from this book. I do so by referring to examples from the arts. For the arts, it seems, always provided evidence of transculturality. While transculturality often met with rabid objections where political, social, or psychological levels were at stake, it was considered far less controversial in the realm of art; here, it was rather welcomed and appreciated. In fact, transculturality was almost the rule in the various branches of art, from painting, sculpture, printmaking, and architecture to literature, theater, dance, comics, film, and music – and this throughout history and across the various cultures and continents.

II. Transculturality – already in history

1. Greece

The first case refers to Europe. Ancient Greece is often considered the cradle of the Occident. For a long time, it was believed to have sprung purely from itself. But this is plain wrong. Without Egypt and the Near East, without Babylonia and Phoenicia, the formation of Greek culture would not have been possible at all.

In the case of Greek sculpture, for example, it is plain evident that it has sprung from Egyptian models. Here is an Egyptian figure from the 13th century BC representing Ramses II.



Fig. 1: *Ramses II*, ca. 1290–1224, Cairo, Egyptian Museum

The posture is stick-straight upright, the left foot is set forward, and the arms are pressed tightly to the body.

Here comes, about six hundred years later, from the seventh century BC, one of the first Greek sculptures, a *Standing Youth* made by the so-called Dipylon Master:



Fig. 2: Dipylon Master, *Standing Youth from Attica*, ca. 620 BC, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Its derivation from the Egyptian model is obvious. Here, too, the posture is statuesque, the left foot is set forward, and the headdress is similar to that of the Egyptian models. Only now is the figure naked, and the arms begin to loosen.



Fig. 3: *Kouros of Tenea*, ca. 560 BC, Munich, Glyptothek

Sixty years later, the changes are still minor. But the figure becomes more serene. The loosening begins from the face – the Kouros smiles.



Fig. 4: *Head of the Kouros of Tenea*

And then, about hundred years later, the sturdy Egyptian model is still recognizable, but the body no longer follows a rigid, externally imposed scheme as in Egyptian sculpture which hardly ever changed over two thousand years, but the body becomes a manifestation of organic life and a figure of self-articulation.



Fig. 5: *Apollo Choiseul-Gouffier*, Roman marble copy after a Greek bronze original, about 460–450 BC, London, British Museum

This is typical of Greek sculpture as we know and appreciate it. But this achievement would not have been possible without the Egyptian models as starting point.

Similarly, the Greek alphabet is derived from Phoenician letters. This provenance is, by the way, preserved in the myth of Europa being abducted by Zeus: when her brothers desperately sought for her in Greece (without finding her) they gifted the Greeks the Phoenician alphabet.⁷ Without this Phoenician heritage no Greek literature and no Greek philosophy, i.e., no Homer, no Sophocles, no Plato, no Aristotle. Greek culture is polycultural from the ground up.⁸

2. Gandhara – a hinge between West and East

My second example refers to Asia. How did the Buddha figures, that today are so widespread in East Asia, originate?



Fig. 6: *Standing Buddha*, Gandhara, 2nd–3rd century AD

They were developed in the first century AD in Gandhara, a region located in the present border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Back then this region was a melting pot of cultures. Since the first century AD, the first sculptures depicting Buddha were created here.⁹

⁷ Herodotus reports that the Greek alphabet was called “Phoenician letters” (Herodotus, *Histories*, V 58).

⁸ Incidentally, Hegel was already aware of the transcultural origins of Greece, pointing out that Greek culture “developed from a confluence of the most diverse nations” and was based on a “colonization of educated peoples” “who were already ahead of the Greeks in education” (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (*Lectures on the Philosophy of History*) [Vorlesungen 1822-1831], *Werke*, vol. 12, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1986, 278 and 281). The Greeks were essentially “transforming formers”, they took up and continued many things (ibid., 294).

⁹ Previously, the “awakened one” had not been visualized, but was represented only by symbols.

The way of representing the Buddha was based on a cultural transfer, namely on Greco-Roman models. Since Alexander the Great's India campaign, in the wake of the migration movements of Hellenized peoples, as well as through the long-distance trade of the Roman Empire with India, the area of Gandhara was permeated by Greco-Roman cultural elements. The artists were familiar with the figures and motifs of ancient imagery and drew from this pool for their Buddha figures.

The starting point were representations of the Greek God Apollo.



Fig. 7: Roman copy after a Greek original from the 4th century BC

In addition, the Roman toga (the common clothing of Roman citizens) provided the model for Buddha's monk's robe.



Fig. 8: Roman toga, 1st century AD

So, the East Asian Buddha representations are based on Greco-Roman models, which still echo in them from afar, shimmer through to this day. Considering that Greek sculpture was based on Egyptian models, Egypt also echoes in them. We are used to think that these Buddha figures are typically East Asian. But in fact, they are inherently transcultural.



Fig. 9: *Buddha Amida Nyorai*, about 1490–1550, Japan

These were two examples of the circumstance that, already in history, cultures fed themselves from several sources, took up influences from other cultures and integrated these incitements into their own design.

3. African Carmen

After these two examples which referred to the general cut of cultures (Greek and East-Asian) I now turn to specific cases, to single artworks of transcultural character.

My first example is the adoption of Bizet's opera *Carmen* in Africa. This opera was first performed in Paris in 1875. It became one of the greatest global successes in opera history. One component in its genome predestined it for cultural rewriting from the very beginning, namely the fact that the opera's main character is not French but a gypsy, i.e., a foreigner and also (according to the understanding of the time) of dubious reputation.

In 2000, British director Mark Dornford-May and composer Charles Hazlewood created an African version of *Carmen* in Cape Town that finally led to the film *U-Carmen eKhayelitsba* which won the Golden Bear at the 55th Berlin International Film Festival in 2005.



Fig. 10: Khayelitsha

The opera is situated in Khayelitsha, the largest township in Cape Town. And the African version combines Bizet's music with traditional African music, and instead of French the opera is sung in Xhosa, one of the official languages of South Africa, which consists of clicks (and therefore sounds very unusual to European ears).

The story is quickly told: Carmen works in a cigarette factory. Police officers pass by, including the attractive Jongikhaya.



Fig. 11: *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*, 2005, Carmen and Jongikhaya

Carmen flirts with him and throws a rose into his car. Later, while watching television, the cigarette girls learn that Lulamile Nkomo, a famous opera singer from their township, will return to the area for a concert. When one of the girls turns off the TV despite Carmen's objection, she grabs a knife and injures her colleague. Carmen is arrested by Jongikhaya for this act of violence. But she uses all her charms, so that he releases her.

A few days later, Jongikhaya declares his undying love for Carmen. She, however, warns him that she belongs to herself alone and rejects him because of his jealousy. Jongikhaya, in turn, declares that he will kill her if she rejects him for good.

Finally, Carmen meets Lulamile Nkomo – it is love at first sight for both. Carmen is supposed to sing at Nkomo's homecoming concert. But when she tells Jongikhaya, who has come to the concert, that she wants nothing more to do with him, he stabs Carmen.

We see: The story is very much that of Bizet's *Carmen*, but transposed to a different country, a different time, a different life situation. The plot is not only transferred from Spain to South Africa; it is also realized in a partly different music, a different language, and above all a different reality of life. The actors are all from South African townships and had never worked in a film before. But they felt that Carmen expressed something of their own reality and that they could create an "African Carmen" out of their own living conditions and with their own resources.¹⁰ They did indeed succeed perfectly.¹¹ The new Carmen is absolutely authentic – a wonderful transcultural transfer.

The woman-man constellation depicted by Bizet is not bound to the European image of Sinti and Roma but belongs likewise to the reality of Khayelitsha. And not only of Khayelitsha. Pauline Malefane, the leading actress, said: "Carmen is a very universal story"¹² – "it could be anywhere, anytime, anyone."¹³

¹⁰ Significantly, Khayelitsha native Pauline Malefane, who plays the role of Carmen, said that she feels the story originated in that township (<https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,1050210,00.html>, accessed Sept. 07, 2022).

¹¹ There is no comparison with Otto Preminger's 1954 adaptation *Carmen Jones*, which features only Black actors (a great provocation for the time and for America then) without leading to a transposition of the drama into the world of people of color; everything remains "very American."

¹² <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,1050210,00.html>, accessed 07/09/2022.

¹³ <http://www.phase9.tv/moviefeatures/ucarmenekhayelitshaq&a-markdornfordmay&paulinemalefane1.shtm>, accessed 07/09/2022.

4. Dürer – a Venetian

Let me now turn to a German-Italian crossing. Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) is often considered the German artist par excellence. But was he really simply German? Not at all. Dürer only became himself in Italy, and he had to visit Italy a second time in order to completely become himself.

Certainly, he had enjoyed a solid education in Nuremberg. But he soon set off on travels: to the Netherlands, Alsace, and Basel. And shortly after his return to Nuremberg, he sallied on his first trip to Italy (1494–1495), which finally took him to Venice, where he met the master painters Gentile and Giovanni Bellini and was so impressed by Italian painting that, after his return, a major artistic change from a drawing to a painting style can be noted.



Fig. 12: Albrecht Dürer, *Madonna Haller*, ca. 1496–99
Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art

The *Madonna Haller*, which Dürer began one year after his return, was for a long time even thought to be a work by Giovanni Bellini. This alone speaks for the Italian inspiration of this 'German' artist.

And then Dürer set out on a second trip to Italy (from 1505 to 1507). The *Feast of the Rosary*, which Dürer painted in 1506 for the church of the German Merchants' Guild in Venice, was highly praised. The Doge offered Dürer an annual salary of two hundred florins if he would work in Venice in the future. The 'German' artist found the highest recognition

in Venice. It was acknowledged that this Nuremberg artist would be good for the city's art life, and the Nuremberg artist in turn benefited from the inspirations of Venice.



Fig. 13: Albrecht Dürer, *Feast of the Rosary*, 1506, Prague, National Gallery

Dürer considered Giovanni Bellini the greatest painter of his time and, of course, knew his triptych *Madonna Enthroned with Child Jesus and Saints* in the Frari Church in Venice.



Fig. 14: Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna Enthroned with Child Jesus and Saints*, 1488, Venice, Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari

And just as Dürer's *Madonna Haller* reflects the central panel of this work, its side panels served as models for Dürer's famous depiction of the *Four Apostles*.



Fig. 15: Albrecht Dürer, *The Four Apostles*, 1526, Munich, Old Pinakothek

All in all, it can be seen that German and Italian elements are combined in Dürer and that only in this way could he become the great artist of European stature as whom we know him today.

And Dürer was not an isolated case. Transculturality was widely natural in European art. There was not national compartmentalization, but international exchange. Styles transgressed countries and nations. Many artists created their best works far from home.

5. Carl Zuckmayer: numerous migration backgrounds

Carl Zuckmayer's (1896–1977) novel *The Devil's General* from 1946 contains a passage where Zuckmayer wonderfully describes the historical multi-rootedness of the population living on the Rhine. General Harras says to the pilot lieutenant Hartmann: "[...] just imagine your line of ancestry – since the birth of Christ. There was a Roman commander, a black guy, brown as a ripe olive, who taught Latin to a blond girl. And then a Jewish spice trader came into the family, he was a serious person, he became a Christian before he married and founded the Catholic house tradition. – And then came a Greek doctor, or a Celtic

legionnaire, a Grisons lansquenet, a Swedish horseman, a soldier of Napoleon, a deserted Cossack, a Black Forest rafter, a wandering miller's boy from Alsace, a fat skipper from Holland, a Magyar, a Pandur, an officer from Vienna, a French actor, a Bohemian musician – they all lived on the Rhine, scuffled, boozed, and sang and begot children – and – and Goethe, he came from the same pot, and Beethoven, and Gutenberg, and Matthias Grünewald, and – oh whatever, look it up in the encyclopedia. They were the best, my dear! The best in the world! And why? Because the peoples there mixed. Mixed – like the waters from springs and creeks and rivers, so that they flowed together into one great, living stream.”¹⁴

This is a realistic description of the genesis of a ‘people.’ The fiction of homogeneity is mistaken. We all have multiple migration backgrounds. Our collective identity is based on a history of migrations, adoptions, and mergers, it is transcultural from the ground up.

Such a mixture is not simply the fantasy of a writer, but a scientifically corroborated fact. Genetic studies today make it possible to reconstruct the confluence of different ethnic groups in minute detail. They show, for example, that the genome of Europeans is considerably mixed – that it only became the genome that is widespread today through immigration.¹⁵ Only about 45 percent of the DNA of today's Europeans is derived from their African ancestors (the Europeans were, after all, emigrants from Africa in the first place), while another 45 percent is due to immigration from the Middle East and the remaining 10 percent to an influx of peoples from northern Eurasia.

And these migrations were associated with highly important cultural innovations. For example, in Europe the “Neolithic Revolution,” i.e., the transition from the hunter-gatherer period to agriculture and animal husbandry, took place only about 7,500 years ago, while it had occurred in the Near East already about 11,000 years ago. The fact that just at the time of this cultural transition, i.e., about 7,500 years ago, the genome of the Europeans changed drastically by incorporating genes characteristic for populations of the Near East speaks for the circumstance that Europe owes the transition to agriculture and animal husbandry to the influx from the Near East. The Neolithic Revolution was not an indigenous achievement in Europe. It was brought to us by peoples migrating from the Near East, who had already made this transition about 3,500 years earlier.

¹⁴ Carl Zuckmayer, *Des Teufels General*, in: *Werkausgabe in zehn Bänden*, vol. 8 (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1978), 93–231, here 149.

¹⁵ Cf. Johannes Krause et alia, “Ancient human genomes suggest three ancestral populations for present-day Europeans,” *Nature*, doi:10.1038/nature13673 (2014).

The second migration-related change in the European genome, which occurred about 4,500 years ago and was prompted by the immigration of northern Eurasian peoples who had lived north of the Black Sea, was also culturally momentous: It led to the spread of the Indo-European language.

Europe's culture is determined by migration events. Perhaps this fact could make Europeans more inclined to think not only of everyday problems but also of possible cultural opportunities in future migration movements.

6. Death Metal and Buddhism

Let us finally jump to two examples from East Asia, from Taiwan. The first one is about a fusion between pop culture and Buddhism. Since a few years there exists an unusual Death Metal band in Taiwan which combines death metal with Buddhism and Daoism. Accordingly, they have given themselves the name "Dharma."



Fig. 16: The instrumentalists of Dharma

The band's performance corresponds to the death metal image on its face: The members wear black robes and are splattered with bloody make-up. But the message is Buddhist: it is about compassion. If one takes a closer look, the performance already contains Buddhist elements: The black robes are *haiqings*, as they are worn by followers of Buddhism during temple ceremonies or domestic exercises.



Fig.17: Mia Ben at a Dharma concert

Alongside the band members a woman with a shaved head enters the stage in an orange Buddhist wrapping; she is a Buddhist nun named Mia Ben. She sings at the beginning of each concert, strikes ritual bells, and reads from Buddhist scriptures.¹⁶

The musical connection between death metal and Buddhism lies in the fact that Buddhist chants sometimes resemble the screamo technique of hardcore punk. But one might believe that death metal and Buddhism must be worlds apart: Death metal seems to stand for aggression, for black and violent powers; Buddhism, on the other hand, teaches compassion, mercy, and peace. However, for someone who knows Asian culture, the difference is not so definite.



Fig. 18: *Zochoten*, Guardian of the South, Kamakura period, Japan

¹⁶ The band's exposure to Buddhism is anything but superficial. Since the Buddhist mantras were originally written in Indian Sanskrit rather than Chinese, the group set out to study Sanskrit and learn its pronunciation. They actually chant in Sanskrit, with Chinese translations appearing on a screen for the audience.

In Buddhism and Taoism, there are many gods and guardians that have a fearsome appearance. The purpose is to deter evil-doers and thereby protect the faithful. Very similarly, the music of death metal is supposed to serve as a fearsome protection to keep evil away (“*we chase evil away with loud noise*” said Jack Tung, the founder of Dharma). The blood on stage symbolizes the blood spilled in the battle with evil forces. And the energy of the music is meant to amplify the power of the mantras.

Dharma combines contemporary Western music and traditional Asian religion. In this respect, it is exemplarily transcultural. The raw sound of death metal is accompanied (completely unusual for this music genre) by a message of compassion. And the religious message is conveyed (quite beyond its traditional framework) in rock concerts. Innovation and tradition, Western and Eastern culture come together. The result is absolutely worth hearing and experiencing.¹⁷

7. Cloud Gate Dance Theater: national pride transcultural

Finally, let me point to the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan, founded in 1973. It realizes amazing cultural interpenetrations.



Fig. 19: Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, *Wild Cursive*, 2005

The group combines Western dance forms of classical as well as modern kind with Asian traditions (Tai Chi, Qi Gong, martial arts, calligraphy). It does, so to speak, “Asian Swan Lake” – with a physiognomy of its own, characterized by flowing movements. The combination of Western and Eastern elements leads to something genuinely new.

¹⁷ 2021 saw the release of the group’s first full album, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye* (Independent).



Fig. 20: Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, *Moon Water*, 1998



Fig. 21: Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, *Water Stain on the Wall*, 2010

And this group is held in high esteem in Taiwan. Although it has only one leg, so to speak, in Taiwanese culture, it has virtually become a paragon of national pride. A special holiday was dedicated to it. The day of the group's 30th anniversary performance in Taipei on August 21, 2003, was designated "Cloud Gate Day" by the city government. – We see: In advanced societies, national pride does not have to refer to the national; it can also refer to the transcultural. – I'd like to consider this as a model for other nations, too.

8. Our menus are transcultural

One might query that I have been using only examples from high culture. Therefore, my last point is meant to demonstrate the everyday naturalness of transculturality.

Nowhere is transculturality more firmly anchored than in our menus. Even if we do not go to a foreign restaurant in order to enjoy ethnic food, but stay at home and prepare simple meals, they are still full of foreign arrivals and ingredients. The lemon, for example, came from Asia, the potato from South America, chili from Mexico, garlic from Central Asia, and cabbage stems not from Germany, but from the Mediterranean region, and the tomato not from Italy but from Central America. So, even

when we eat modest meals, the world is our guest, we enjoy a transcultural diet.

The same applies, by the way, to our ornamental plants, our tools, our trees. The rose stems from China, the tulip from Kazakhstan, the carnation from Indonesia, and the edelweiss from East Asia. The metal saw was invented by the Egyptians, the articulated pliers by the Greeks, the sickle comes from the Levant, and the mortar from Egypt or Central America. The spruce comes from East Asia, the maple from Asia, and the northern fir (which is so popular as a Christmas tree) from the western Caucasus.

In conclusion: Our highly civilizational as well as our everyday environment is transcultural to the highest degree. Every part of our life world is permeated by a plenty of immigrants. We just do not notice it anymore. Transculturality has become a matter of course.

III. Conclusion

We went through numerous examples presenting quite diverse types of transculturality. In the case of Greece, we saw the formation of a culture out of the integration and transformation of other cultures' achievements. In the representations of Buddha connections across continents and millennia resonate. African Carmen exposes universal traits of the human condition. Dürer is an example for the naturalness of transculturality in European art. Zuckmayer makes us aware of historical blendings, both genetic and cultural. Death Metal achieves a fusion of pop culture and religion. The Cloud Gate Dance Theater shows that national and transcultural pride can go hand in hand. And the transculturality of menus makes us aware that we are transcultural in an elementary sense – for we are, after all, what we eat.

We saw that transculturality was widespread and simply natural already in history. And transculturality is all the more so the order of the present time. Just think of its advantages for the coming together of people. Transcultural identities inherently overlap, hence they can enter into exchange and communication more easily than if they were determined by a single pattern only. Its potential to foster appreciation and understanding is one of the great advantages of transculturality.

And the problems we are facing today worldwide (economic and ecological challenges, problems of poverty and human rights) can only be solved if we achieve an understanding with one another across all state and national borders. The climate crisis, for example, can obviously not be overcome in this or that country, but can only be overcome globally,

only in cooperation between all countries. Transcultural understanding is not a pious wish or a faded idea – it is an elementary necessity of our time. We will only be able to solve the problems of the future transculturally.