The principle demarcating Europe into an “inside” and an “outside” has a long and shifting history. It contains echoes of an East-West division that is many centuries old and has since then appeared in different guises – as Orient and Occident, Europe and Asia, or alternatively framed in social science terminology as centres and peripheries. Each of these divides rests on an uneasy binarism that replays a sense of European exceptionalism. Such categories or ‘metageographies’ are more of world-making practices. They constitute a mental map that demarcates certain places as more distant from others, and from one’s own location. Rather than relating to actual distances, these oppositions constitute cultural projections that are also historical assumptions. The designations, whatever their nomenclature, have carried a genealogical baggage that maps an array of cultural attributes onto a set of geographical coordinates. Its staple feature has historically been the association of Europe/the West/Occident with reason and progress. While Europe has been upheld as the single, driving force of modernity, the East – Europe’s other – is linked to spirituality and stagnation, making it a ready receiving ground for technological, economic and cultural Europeanisation. The geo-politics of knowledge that underlies such ascriptions asks us to attend not only to what is being said, but also equally to the place of
enunciation. Scholarship has examined myths of centres and margins mainly in the contexts of European colonial empires of modernity; yet this imagined geographical scheme is not exclusive to modern colonialism. Early modern empires of Asia such as the Qing, the Mughal, the Safavid and the Ottoman, were all held together by ideologies envisioning themselves as centres. Similarly, well into modern times, the eastern regions of Europe were cast as peripheries of the North Atlantic West. And today, the so-called Global South – the earlier Third World – continues to be perceived as the other of the northern hemisphere designated Global North. The distinction inside/outside prevails equally within individual nations, such as those of Western Europe in particular, which have experienced the effects of large-scale global migration, following wars and climate crises in regions of Asia and Africa. The presence of those viewed as cultural others in the midst of the Western world has meant a destabilisation of mental geographies, as the ‘outsider’ is now seen as being present in the heart of one’s homeland, though destined to remain what Sara Ahmed has called the ‘outsider inside’.²

Inside/outside: a mutable and relational constellation

My contribution argues for a different ontology of culture that treats established notions of inside/outside, near/far, European/non-European, centre/peripheries as mutable and relational. A theory of transculturation that vitally informs my understanding of globality directs our attention to rethinking the processual quality of culture by attending to how the “cultural” is radically made and remade: in processes of interactions with other units, not necessarily contained within territorial fixtures of the nation state or even larger regional entities and the imagined geographies discussed above. Transculturation as a process designates those long-term transformative relationships between cultural entities that follow from encounters and are constitutive for the actors, practices, and epistemic configurations implicated. This distinct ontology of culture is equipped with a critical potential that enables us to dismantle core assumptions underpinning disciplines such as history and art history, rather than dealing only with examples on their fringes.

I write from the position of a historian of art and culture, in addition as a scholar who initiates her investigation from one of the global ‘off-centers’³ in order to exert analytical pressure on the existing repository of knowledge that shapes the canons of disciplines, and to loosen their rigid linearity. Conceptions of that which is located on
the outside, the peripheral, generally identify these places with obscurity and marginality. And yet, the so-designated outside – I wish to argue – has the capacity to challenge foundational ideas of exclusivity and universality and to offer alternative positions to sedimented intellectual claims. In other words, mining the outside/periphery to rebound on the inside/centre can effectively dismantle the Manichean dualism of centre and periphery. Such a proposition cannot, however, be carried out by simply reversing an established hierarchy, while leaving its teleology intact. Writing from the periphery is premised on viewing both centres and peripheries through a transcultural lens, to argue that each site is a hotbed of transculturation and cannot be studied in exclusive pockets.

The constellation “Europe-and-its-outside” has long served as a canonical framing device for narratives within art history of the so-designated mainstream, told as a genealogical account of styles anchored to single, self-contained locations. For instance, the trajectory of modernist art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though constituted through the experimental energies of innumerable sites across the globe and traversing all continents, appears as a story of diffusion from Euro-American centres to absorptive margins. The opposition between the place of origin, the supposed locus of originality, and the sites of the allegedly belated, second-hand variants of the modernist canon finds its echoes in museological displays. In most leading European museums of modern art – London, New York, Paris or Berlin – modernist works from other continents (with the exception of North America) come up against a glass wall; even East European works were denied a place in the modernist canon. Works emanating from the outside either do not feature in the museums’ collections on the assumption that modernity beyond the North-Atlantic axis could only be derivative; or at best, they are relegated to galleries devoted to individual regions, to be viewed as incommensurable with the “mainstream”. Yet modernist art in all its locations, like its cognate modernity, was a product of a world of artistic and cultural exchange enabled by commerce, colonialism and travel. Following innumerable site-based studies of modernity undertaken during the recent decades, the recognition that the West, though a major ‘clearinghouse of global modernity’, no longer offers the sole template for the unfolding of its culture, is now scarcely a matter of debate. Their authors have argued for a modernity that is migrant and mutable, continuous and at best contingent, one with many possible ‘habitations’, to borrow from Dipesh Chakrabarty. Similarly, our atlas of modernist art today has been enriched by countless micro-stories unearthed from sites across the globe. These include Shanghai, Mexico City, Bombay, Tehran, Ljubljana, Cairo, Dakar, Tokyo, São Paulo, Lahore, Lagos, Moscow, Beirut … the list goes on. In the light of such findings, it is no longer plausible to hold on to a now notoriously historicist account of modernist art that presents Euro-America as
its original locus and central axis from where its achievements are said to have spread and brought forth rehashed versions of its expressive forms. Each of the stories above presents us with a vigorous modernism, not reducible to stylistic content, informed but not determined by counterparts in Paris, Vienna, or Berlin. At the same time, however, it is not helpful to speak of this plurality in terms such as multiple, alternative, regional or vernacular modernisms, as each of these designations implies a normative centre whose status it reaffirms. The challenge is how to meaningfully write those modernist initiatives and experiments that unfolded in locations beyond the New York-Paris corridor into a shared relational matrix.

The quest for non-hierarchical, non-homogenising relationships

In other words, we require a framework that will enable us to go beyond simply adding unknown modernist artists to an existing canon or, alternatively, relegating regional articulations of the modern to the isolated domains of individual “area studies”. How can regions and nations be brought into a more dynamic, non-hierarchical and, importantly, non-homogenising relationship with each other? Recent transculturally framed studies of artistic modernism have brought to the concept a less formalistic intonation and opened it to accommodate experimental ventures, at times disparately so.6

Scholars of literature have paid special attention to the nexus between modernism and the colonial experience. Simon Gikandi, for instance, describes modernist literary production as an ‘intense … site of encounter between the institutions of European cultural production and the cultural practices of colonised people’, as a ‘dynamic’, mutually constitutive relationship.7 The encounter between European artists and intellectuals with their counterparts from the colonies, though marked by asymmetries of power in which the colonial subject was located in a space of unfreedom, nonetheless enabled creativity on both sides: it was in such an encounter that modernist art and literature acquired a critical edge. The revolt against the artistic and literary orthodoxies of bourgeois culture in Europe was made possible largely through an intensive engagement with the objects, practices, and philosophies of the colonised. And the same encounter opened the space through which colonial hegemony could be undermined and the colonised “other” could become a self-reflecting subject. Andreas Huyssen reminds us that whenever and wherever modernism arrived, it did so at the threshold of a not yet fully modernised world, where ‘old and new were violently

https://europedebate.hypotheses.org/1462
Such an experience of transition gave modernism its critical, creative potential, which unfolded according to regional and local contingencies. Representational strategies, vocabularies, and practices were generated by the subjectivities of the actors involved, shaped by varying factors – colonialism, industrialisation, migration, or decolonisation. Stylistic considerations in a narrow sense and taken in isolation do not allow us to access the meanings of this productivity. Actors invariably worked with, and within, the language of dominant international forms and practices, yet could and did resist their formal canonicity.

Modernism as a global and relational process

Individual micro-stories from Asia, Africa and South America, when placed on a shared matrix, are a useful way of creating a mental map of modernism as a global and relational process, of art that travels the way people and things did, to describe a process that is not linear or seamless, but one that is uneven and even erratic. Chronology can no longer provide the single key to signposting the modern on the map of art history. As we follow the logic of these individual stories, we uncover the tracks of barely acknowledged networks, of sites of interaction, of journals and universities that force open the binaries positing Europe against the territories that lay beyond it. Surrealism in North Africa, the New Negro Movement, the CoBrA group, the Progressive Artists’ Group in Bombay, Mexican muralism, or the Harlem Renaissance are only a few among an increasing number of examples that show modernist art as having been from its inception a multi-centred, always and already transcultured phenomenon, whose actors dynamically engaged with its sites in Europe without, however, presuming the universality of the models they encountered. Case studies from the regions outside of Europe reveal synchronicity and coevalness, where belatedness or derivative practices were assumed. At the same time, they allow us to take a closer look at regional singularities, to underline that transcultural interaction did not follow a straight, single, or foreseeable path. Instead, we become aware of a modernism shaped by the distinct problematics of modernity in local, regional, or national contexts across the globe, whose actors at the same time understood its cultural articulations as embedded in a quintessentially international movement. Not least, a theory of transculturation allows us to rewrite the story of European modernism by situating it within the larger, complex political and cultural determinations of colonialism and global connections that made its emergence possible.
Blind spots in modernism’s history

Bringing studies from the margins of Europe centre-stage and conjoining these to “mainstream” narratives can help to rectify persistent blind spots in the recounting of modernism’s history. Among these is the chronological signpost set by the year 1945, with which all traditional accounts end. This had for long meant the exclusion of a large number of global sites of modernist experiments that had emerged after the end of the Second World War, following the decline of European artistic power to set the agenda of modernism. The years following 1945 indeed saw a far-reaching reorganisation of the map of global modernism, rather than its end. While an internationally prominent American art sustained by abstraction attained hegemony in the North Atlantic West, emergent nations in Asia, Africa, the Middle East as well as those of the newly formed Eastern bloc in East and Central Europe, all experimented with fresh paradigms of artistic modernity anchored within their specific histories to mirror the changed terms of geopolitical dialogue across the world. Synchronously with the bipolar division effected by the Cold War, a number of newly independent nations of Asia and Africa, as well as former Yugoslavia, formed a third group, the Non-Aligned Movement that refused co-optation with one or the other of the power blocs, preferring to remain as its name, non-aligned. Such far-reaching changes in the world order generated innumerable debates that sought to link issues of aesthetics and form with cultural questions of autonomy, subjectivity, humanism, international solidarity or regionalism. The idea that art and artists had a role to play in a period of instability, of recovery and self-definition through new subjects and experiments with form and materials was crucial to the shaping of artistic modernity – as recent research from beyond Europe has brought to light.

Waves of decolonisation that followed in the mid-twentieth century did not bring a form of closure, as the oft-repeated phrase “end of empire” in imperialist historiography proposes. Rather, formal emancipation from colonial rule meant a redrawing of relationships between imperial nations and their former colonies. One determining factor in such renegotiation was an accelerated migration of former colonial subjects – Asian, African, Caribbean, West Indian, South American – to European cities, where they sought exile or opportunities to live, work, study, practise as artists. Arrivals to Britain or France, for example, came expecting a land of opportunity where their careers as artists would thrive, but were soon confronted with marginalisation, structures of othering and a general climate of decolonisation hostile to migration in the reverse direction. In Britain Black Art was a blanket term used to collectively
describe a mix of voices and art produced in the shadow of unwelcome migration, and which swelled into a stream of modernism that called into question long-standing myths of purist Englishness. Far from positioning itself outside of the mainstream, this body of artistic production was constitutive of a transcultured, metropolitan modernism that reclaimed its critical potential to produce counter-images, to resist being pushed to the margins. In one respect, it shared with high modernism the drive to overthrow the canonicity of classical ideals of Greco-Latin Antiquity. Like modernist experiments that unfolded across the globe in the 1950s, to which migrant artists in Britain and elsewhere in Europe retained existing connections or formed new ones, Black Art showed a preoccupation with rethinking the human through an anti-colonial, anti-racist lens, conjoined with a focus on agency, which often prevailed over the climate of widespread abjection or trauma infusing art making in a Europe ravaged by war and fascism.

For these fascinating micro-stories of modernism to be inscribed within the larger narrative of modern art, the discipline needs to free culture from political-cum-territorial frames and disconnect style from fixed location. The above sketch has pointed to the ways in which historical experiences from the periphery can unsettle the certitudes of an accepted canon by urging its authors and upholders to rethink explanatory paradigms, to recast concepts by attending to their transcultural valences, and not least to aspire to theory building that takes place from thinking across the inside/outside divide. Unfortunately much of scholarship produced in regions outside of the North Atlantic West, has been parcelled into national units or isolated area studies. It therefore does not feature in the contemporary canon of the global. Not only has it not found a place in a global repository of intellectual resources and narratives, its potential to exert analytical pressure on that repository, to recalibrate, even unsettle the certitudes of that canon, has yet to be fully realised. We might therefore usefully imagine that which we think of as being on the outside, or distant, or peripheral, less as a place and conceive of it instead as a critical modality.

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4. The expression has been used by Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, On Alternative Modernities, in: Public Culture 11/1 (1999), pp. 1–18. [🔗]
5. Dipesh Chakrabarty, Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies, Chicago 2002. [🔗]
9. These individual, yet interconnected, experiments and sites were effectively visualised in an exhibition at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen that ran from November 10, 2018 to March 10, 2019, and was a collaborative project between the museum’s team and the Chair of Global Art History, HCTS, University of Heidelberg. See Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (ed.) Museum global: Mikrogeschichten einer exzentrischen Moderne, Weyertal 2018. [🔗]
10. An ambitious attempt to represent these global currents was undertaken by Okwui Enwezor in an exhibition he curated at the Haus der Kunst in Munich and that ran from October 14, 2016 to March 26, 2017. See Okwui Enwezor / Kathy Siegel / Ulrich Wilmes (eds.), Postwar: Kunst zwischen Pazifik und Atlantik, 1945–1965, Munich 2016. [🔗]