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Horizons of Hermeneutics: Intercultural Hermeneutics in a Globalizing World

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Abstract Starting from the often-used metaphor of the “horizon of experience” this article discusses three different types of intercultural hermeneutics, which respectively conceive hermeneutic interpretation as a *widening* of horizons, a *fusion* of horizons, and a *dissemination* of horizons. It is argued that these subsequent stages in the history of hermeneutics have their origin in—but are not fully restricted to—respectively premodern, modern and postmodern stages of globalization. Taking some striking moments of the encounter between Western and Chinese language and philosophy as example, the particular merits and flaws of these three types of hermeneutics are being discussed. The claim defended is that although these different types of hermeneutics are mutually exclusive from a theoretical point of view, as interpreting beings in the current era we depend on each of these distinct hermeneutic practices and cannot avoid living on them simultaneously.

Keywords intercultural hermeneutics, globalization, horizon of interpretation, premodernism, modernism, postmodernism

1 Introduction

Globalization, the global circulation and exchange of people, ideas, habits and goods, is not a recent phenomenon. The fact that our ancestor *Homo erectus* started to spread from Africa to the other continents about two million years ago, together with its habits and Stone Age artifacts, justifies the claim that globalization has characterized the hominids from their very origin. Moreover, when we look at the history of our own species, *Homo sapiens*, we witness a

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history of an increasingly accelerating pace of globalization. Already in the third millennium B.C. important trade links existed between Sumer and Indus Valley civilization. Several millennia later, the Silk Road started to connect the economies and cultures of the Roman Empire, the Parthian Empire, and the Han dynasty. However, as the KOF Index of Globalization shows, especially in the last decades, due to the rapid growth of new means of transport and telecommunication, globalization has become a decisive phenomenon in the life of almost every world citizen, from the bankers in financial capitals of the world to the workers in the sweatshops in the developing countries.¹

Globalization has a deep impact on virtually all aspects of human life and culture. It not only has far reaching economical and environmental implications, it also affects social relationships, politics, religion, entertainment, and language, to mention only a few of the affected domains. This impact has always been both positive and negative, ranging from the global distribution of advantageous genes, knowledge, technologies and cultural treasures to exploitation, cultural assimilation, war, and the spread of infectious disease and ecological disasters.

Globalization is also a hermeneutic challenge. The people, ideas, habits and goods that are being exchanged in intercultural encounters are often unfamiliar and have to be interpreted in order to be understood. In this article, I will analyze the challenges and the pitfalls of intercultural hermeneutics. Starting from the often-used metaphor of the (personal and cultural) “horizon of experience” I will discuss three different types of intercultural hermeneutics, which respectively conceive hermeneutic interpretation as a *widening* of horizons, a *fusion* of horizons, and a *dissemination* of horizons. I will argue that these subsequent stages in the history of hermeneutics have their origin in—but are not fully restricted to—respectively premodern, modern and postmodern stages of globalization. Taking some striking moments of the encounter between Western and Chinese language and philosophy as example, I will argue that each of these three types of hermeneutics has its particular merits and flaws. I will further argue that, although these different types of hermeneutics are mutually exclusive from a theoretical point of view, as interpreting beings we depend on each of these distinct hermeneutic practices and cannot avoid in the present era living on them simultaneously.

2 The Horizon of Human Experience

In the history of hermeneutics the word “horizon” has been used often to express

¹ See <http://globalization.kof.ethz.ch/>.

the fundamental finitude of human experience. Human beings and human cultures are finite, both in time and in space. They are finite in time, because they are characterized by a beginning and an end. Moreover, they are finite in space, because they inhabit only a tiny place in the vast space of the cosmos. And because of this finitude in time and space human experience is necessarily limited. We are always living within a particular horizon—spatially and temporally, personally and culturally, literary and metaphorically. Within this horizon many experiences and expressions are familiar, easily understood without the need for (extensive) interpretation. Other expressions are further removed from the center of our horizon of experiences. In these cases of temporal and/or spatial distance we experience unfamiliarity and strangeness, often accompanied by distrust and disbelief. This happens, for example, when we are confronted with texts that have been written centuries ago within a different historical horizon or with ideas, habits and traditions in cultures that strongly differ from ours. In these cases we experience non- and misunderstanding and we feel the need for interpretation and communication. It is actually at this point that hermeneutic practice and reflection arises, ranging from everyday hermeneutic practice (the visitor from a foreign country, trying to decipher the written signs in a language which he doesn't master in order to find his way through the city) to academic, methodologically underpinned forms of systematic interpretation in the humanities and the social sciences.

Of course, the horizon of personal and cultural experience is not fixed. Just as in the case of a person wandering through a landscape, on our travel through time and space our horizon of experience constantly changes with us. Individuals and cultures exist in time, which implies that their temporal horizon constantly changes. And when an individual or culture moves geographically, the spatial horizon changes as well, both materially and mentally. Moreover, at every moment in spacetime, many experiences and expressions are wholly beyond the spatial and/or temporal horizon of persons and cultures. Before the "discovery" of America, Europeans didn't have any experience of the Native Americans, just like Chinese people for many centuries did not have experience of African culture. And at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we hardly have access to the horizon of experience of prehistoric man, nor for that matter, to the horizon of experience of twenty-third century human beings, who might by then live on the moon or might even have genetically modified into a different species. In these cases the interpreter not only has no access to the unfamiliar horizon, but he often will not even be aware of the existence of these possible horizons of experience. As Wilhelm Dilthey, one of the founding fathers of hermeneutics

puts it: “Interpretation would be impossible if expressions of life were completely strange. It would be unnecessary if nothing strange were in them” (Dilthey 1914–2005, Vol.7, p. 225).² Hermeneutics always takes place somewhere in-between the extremes of complete familiarity and complete strangeness. Confronted with unfamiliarity and strangeness, we are in need of hermeneutical practices to overcome non- and misunderstanding.

As intercultural encounters often start with non- and misunderstanding, hermeneutics seems to be a promising starting point for a theory of intercultural understanding, interpretation, and communication. However, as already indicated in my introductory remarks, we should realize that hermeneutics is not a fixed discourse. In the course of its history, both in the practice and the theory of hermeneutics, different types of hermeneutics have been developed. Taking the notion of the “horizon of experience” as my starting point, I will discuss in somewhat more length the three aforementioned stages of hermeneutics—respectively aiming at a *widening*, a *fusion*, and a *dissemination* of horizons—and connect them to premodern, modern and postmodern stages of globalization.

3 Widening Horizons

The first type of hermeneutics, which aims at the widening of the horizon of experience, has been explicated and systematically developed by nineteenth philosophers such as Schleiermacher and Dilthey. The history of this type of hermeneutics, however, is much older. It is strongly connected with the long tradition of the Jewish and Christian religion, more specifically with the exegesis of the Bible, the holy scripture. We find this type of hermeneutic practice as well in many other premodern or traditionalistic societies in which authoritative texts (or objects) play an important role. In China, for example, we could think of the millennia-old traditions of Confucianism and Taoism. In this kind of—often relatively closed—societies the truth of the authoritative texts is generally taken for granted. However, because of temporal distance this truth is not always easy accessible. The aim of hermeneutic interpretation is to disclose this truth in order to apply it to everyday life.

² Research has shown that this famous phrase in fact is part of a series of notes Dilthey excerpted from Schleiermacher, and which for that reason has been omitted in the English translation (Dilthey 2002, p. 246, note 13). However, the quoted phrase without doubt is a starting point of the whole tradition of hermeneutics. Hans-Georg Gadamer, for example, expresses a similar view in *Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode)*, 1960: “Hermeneutical work is based on a polarity between familiarity and strangeness” (Gadamer 1986, p. 295; quoted from the English translation: Gadamer 1989a, p. 301, p. 295).

In the beginning of the nineteenth century Schleiermacher expanded hermeneutics from a specialized theological exegesis to a general method of text interpretation. And in his unfinished *Critique of Historical Reason (Kritik der Historischen Vernunft, 1883–1911)* Dilthey transformed hermeneutics to a general method for the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*). In Dilthey's view, hermeneutics has its foundation in everyday human life. Human life is characterized by a structural nexus of lived experience (*Erlebnis*), expression (*Ausdruck*) and understanding (*Verstehen*). Lived experience designates the subjective, first person perspective in which we experience our life. In contrast to the Kantian concept of experience (*Erfahrung*), the lived experience Dilthey is talking about (*Erlebnis*) not only is a theoretical knowing of the world, but it is also composed of willing and feeling (De Mul 2004, pp. 218–283).

One way to gain access to lived experience is introspection. Introspection, however, has narrow limits. Not only is introspection inaccessible for other persons but, because of the fleeting character of lived experience, introspection is even for the person who has the experience not a very reliable source of understanding. However, often lived experiences get their expression in spoken and written in language, in gestures and actions, in human artifacts, buildings and social institutions. “An expression of lived experience,” Dilthey states, “can contain more of the nexus of psychic life than any introspection can catch sight of. It draws from depths not illuminated by consciousness” (Dilthey 1914–2005, Vol. 7, p. 206)³. Implicit relations, which often remain unconscious in lived experience, find articulation in their expressions. For that reasons, expressions can be called creative (Ibid., p. 220)⁴. Moreover, expressions are not only understood as psychic expressions of other people, they also have an independent existence and meaning of their own. A temple, law or poem does not only express the lived experience of its creator, but is also a “spiritual formation that has its own structure and lawfulness” (Ibid., p. 85)⁵. Finally, in understanding we grasp the meaning of expressions, by placing ourselves (*sich Hineinversetzen*) in the position of the other, re-creating (*Nachbilden*) and re-experiencing (*Nacherleben*) the lived experience. This hermeneutical nexus of lived experience, expression and understanding characterizes our daily lives, and as such constitutes the foundation of the explicated methodologies of the human sciences (Ibid., pp. 86–87)⁶.

³ Quoted from the English translation: Dilthey 1985, p. 227.

⁴ English translation, p. 241.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 106–107.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 108–109.

Although the heritage of Christian exegesis is still detectable in the emphasis on the disclosure of truth, Dilthey, writing in an age in which the natural sciences have started to dominate the worldview, interprets this truth in terms of objectivity. Understood as a scientific method of interpretation, hermeneutics becomes a *monological activity*, a *theoretical reconstruction of foreign horizons* of experience in order to *widen our own horizon*. According to Dilthey, the final aim of hermeneutical understanding is to overcome the limitations of our individual lives by widening the horizon of experience “Understanding widens the horizon of our existence” (Dilthey 1914–2005, Vol. 5, p. 275).

Understanding first overcomes [the] limitation of the individual lived experience [...]. Extended to various people, creations of the human spirit, and communities, it widens the horizon of the individual life and, in the human sciences, opens up the path that leads from the common to the universal. (Ibid., Vol. 7, p. 141)⁷

What kind of implications does this conception of hermeneutics has for intercultural hermeneutics? First of all, within this perspective intercultural hermeneutics consists of a *theoretical reconstruction* of the lived experience of people from other cultures, and of the meaning of their cultural expressions, such as texts, technical artifacts, artworks, buildings, customs and institutions. Intercultural interpretation would then be a *monological* attempt to understand the meaning of other cultures in order to widen one’s own (personal and cultural) horizon. Our own horizon of experience would be both the starting point and endpoint of the hermeneutic practice.

It almost goes without saying that the widening of our cultural horizon is often an enriching experience, theoretically, practically, and aesthetically. It may expand our wisdom, and provide us with useful tools and delightful experiences. It may also enable us to better understand the limitations of our own culture. In premodern cultures, which were (and in certain parts of the world still are) relatively closed, traditions are mostly taken to be self-evident. After all, when there are no other world views or alternative political systems known, the existing worldview or political system is not likely to be questioned. The encounter with other world views or political systems can be an important impetus for expanding our world openness.

However, monological hermeneutics also has its pitfalls. Dilthey sharply realizes that there is no such thing as an “innocent” understanding. As we always

⁷ Quoted from the English translation: Dilthey 2002, p. 162.

start from our own finite horizon, we are always tempted to solely interpret the other culture in terms of our own finite horizon and in doing so to reduce the “other” to the “same.” Moreover, in these cases the own culture is often conceived of as being superior to the foreign culture. The history of cultural encounter and globalization shows an abundance of these kinds of descriptive and normative *ethnocentrism*.

An interesting example is the interpretation of the nature of Chinese script by Western philosophers. Most of them evaluated Chinese script entirely from within the horizon of phonetic, alphabetic script (Chang 1988). John Wilkins, for example, an early contributor to the debate who in 1668 published “An Essay towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language,” was convinced that “there are many considerable faults” in the Chinese script:

These Characters are strangely complicated and difficult as to the “Figure” of them. Besides the difficulty and perplexedness of these Characters, there does not seem to be any kind of Analogy [...] betwixt the shape of the Characters, and the things represented by them, as to the Affinity or Opposition betwixt them, nor any tolerable provision for necessary derivations. (Wilkins 1968, p. 450)

About 150 years later, Hegel, in section 459 of his *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences (Enzyklopädie der philosophische Wissenschaften, 1817)* also represents a similar logocentrism, that often characterizes the linguistic ontology of the Western alphabet.

[T]he development of spoken language is very closely connected with the habit of alphabetical writing, which is the only way in which spoken language acquires the determinacy and purity of its articulation. The imperfection of the Chinese spoken language is well-known; a mass of its words have several utterly different meanings, as many as ten, or even twenty, so that, in speaking, the distinction is made noticeable merely by stress and intensity, by speaking more softly or crying out. Europeans beginning to speak Chinese stumble into the most ridiculous misunderstandings before they have mastered these absurd refinements of accentuation. Perfection here consists in the opposite of that *parler sans accent* which in Europe is rightly required for cultivated speech. Owing to hieroglyphic written language, the Chinese spoken language lacks

the objective determinacy that is gained in articulation from alphabetic writing. (Hegel 1969–1971, Vol. 10, p. 274)⁸

Of course, not *all* Western philosophers judged as negatively about Chinese script as did Wilkins and Hegel. Leibniz, for example, is a clear exception. In his *New Essays in Human Understanding* (*Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain*, 1704) he claims that Chinese would be a good candidate for a universal language, just because it was not bound to oral language:

Those who know the Chinese characters are right to believe that it will become a universal character, whose written form would be understood by all the world. If all peoples in the world could agree on the designation of a thing by a character, one people could pronounce it differently from the other. And we could introduce a Universal Symbolism. [...] if in place of words we used little diagrams which represented visible things pictorially and invisible things by means of the visible ones which go with them, also bringing in certain additional marks suitable for conveying inflections and particles. This would at once enable us to communicate easily with remote peoples. (Leibniz 1981, p. 290)⁹

At first sight Leibniz seems to be far removed from the kind of ethnocentric prejudices we find in Wilkins and Hegel. However, in order to appreciate his

⁸ Quoted from the English translation: Hegel 2010, pp. 196–197.

⁹ It should not surprise that Hegel, in his discussion of the merits and flaws of Chinese language, extensively criticizes Leibniz's appraisal of the Chinese language: "While on the subject of spoken language (which is the original language), we can also mention, but here only in passing, *written language*; this is merely a further development within the *particular* province of language which enlists the help of an externally practical activity. Written language proceeds to the field of immediate spatial intuition, in which it takes and produces signs (§ 454). More precisely, *hieroglyphic script* designates *representations* with spatial figures, whereas *alphabetical script* designates sounds which are themselves already signs. Alphabetical writing thus consists of signs of signs, and in such a way that it analyzes the concrete signs of spoken language, words, into their simple elements, and designates these elements. *Leibniz* allowed himself to be misled by his intellect into believing that a complete written language, formed in a hieroglyphic manner — which occurs in a partial way even in alphabetic writing (as in our signs for numbers, the planets, the chemical substances, etc.) — would be very desirable as a universal written language for communication of peoples and especially of scholars. [...] It is only a stationary spiritual culture, like the Chinese, which is suited by the hieroglyphic script of that people; in any case only that lesser portion of a people which remains in exclusive possession of spiritual culture can share in this type of written language. (Hegel, 1969–1971, Vol. 10, pp. 272–273; quoted here from the English translation: Hegel 2010, pp. 195–196)

positive appraisal of Chinese script, we have to take the theological-philosophical impetus behind his interpretation into account. Like Wilkins, Leibniz's interest in Chinese was motivated by the Christian desire to develop a universal language. Certainly, in his case this was not so much an attempt to restore the primordial Adamic language that existed before the Tower of Babel, but rather the development of a future *characteristica universalis*, an "algebra" capable of expressing all conceptual thought, including a *calculus ratiocinator*, consisting of a set of rules for symbolic manipulation, (Eco 1993, chapter 14). Nevertheless, the very idea of universal language is strongly rooted in the Christian idea of a universal language.¹⁰ In this sense Leibniz's interpretation of Chinese remains Eurocentric.

Because of the radical finitude of our horizon of experience, it could be argued that ethnocentrism can never be avoided completely. However, depending on the horizon of the interpreter, ethnocentrism may show different manifestations. As Lin Tongqi, Henry Rosemont and Roger Ames explain in their overview of the reception of Chinese philosophy in the West:

The ethnocentric position of Western philosophy, however, differs markedly from its Chinese counterpart. Chinese ethnocentrism has not traditionally denied Western culture; it only denies its relevance and value. China's ethnocentrism has generally been grounded in a perceived cultural self-sufficiency: China does not need the West. It's ironical that Western ethnocentrism, by contrast, lies its faith in universal claims. To date, the opportunity to engage Chinese philosophy has been greeted by mainstream Western philosophers with an indifference justified by one strain of reductionism or another. This reduction is largely a function of Enlightenment assumptions which have shaped modern Western philosophy since Descartes, usually entailing the assertion of some universalistic, often methodological, index, and including as one more absolutism extreme forms of relativism which deny any kind of cultural commensurability. (Lin et al.1995)

Whereas Wilkins is ethnocentric in the sense that he bases his perception of

¹⁰ Derrida, who discusses in *Grammatology* (*De la Grammatologie*, 1967), Leibniz's interpretation of Chinese, the notion of a universal language "always leads to an infinities theology and to the logos or the infinite understanding of God," and he continues: "That is why, appearances to the contrary, and in spite of all seduction that it can legitimately exercise on our epoch, the Leibnizian project of a universal characteristic that is not essentially phonetic does not interrupt logocentrism in any way" (Derrida 1976, p. 78). At least, we should add, it does not interrupt universalism. As we will see in section 5, Derrida himself *does* claim that Chinese does radically interrupt logocentrism.

Chinese script completely on his own prejudices, Leibniz pretends to envisage a neutral transcendent omega-point, but nonetheless he ends up with the imposition of his own particularity in the name of a universal, Christian truth.¹¹ This longing for the universal is also inherent in the Diltheyan notion of the widening of the horizon. After all, as we already read in one of the quoted passages, this widening pretends to “open [...] up the path that leads from the common to the universal.” Hermeneutics as understood by Dilthey aims to expand our knowledge of other cultures in order to achieve a Hegelian kind of universal and absolute knowledge. Although Dilthey, strongly influenced by the Romantic Movement, acknowledges that in the historical world “all understanding always remains partial and can never be completed” (Dilthey 1914–2005, Vol. 5, p. 330)¹², his regulative ideal remains to expand our individual life experience into a global horizon, encompassing all human experience.

4 Fusing Horizons

In the first half of the twentieth century Heidegger and Gadamer in their philosophical reflection on understanding have radicalized the notion of human finitude and, as a consequence, have argued that widening one’s horizon of experience to a universal level is beyond our reach. Elaborating on Heidegger’s analytics of *Dasein*, in *Truth and Method (Wahrheit and Methode, 1960)*, Gadamer develops an alternative form of hermeneutics that aims not so much at a widening of horizons, but rather at a *fusion of horizons*.

According to Gadamer, Dilthey’s reconstructive hermeneutics falls victim of a positivistic desire for objectivity (Gadamer 1986, p. 241).¹³ In reconstructive hermeneutics, the interpreter is conceived of as a neutral knowing subject whose own finite horizon of experience is not taken into account. As a consequence, Dilthey became a victim of a prejudice, that equally characterizes the Enlightenment and the romantic movement, that one should judge without prejudice (Ibid., p. 281).¹⁴ According to Gadamer, the discrediting of the prejudice since the Enlightenment has led to a misunderstanding of the fact that understanding is always only possible on the basis of certain pre-understanding of things to be understood. Prejudices are the condition of the very possibility for

¹¹ See for a more extensive analysis of these two different types of ethnocentrism: Helder De Schutter’s “Gadamer and Interculturalism: Ethnocentrism or Authenticity” (De Schutter 2004, pp. 51–58).

¹² Quoted from the English translation: Dilthey 1996, p. 249.

¹³ Quoted from the English translation: Gadamer 1989a, p. 237.

¹⁴ English translation, p. 277.

understanding.

One might argue, as I have done elsewhere, that Gadamer uncritically repeats Heidegger's rather vicious critique of Dilthey, strongly exaggerating Dilthey's objectivism (De Mul 2004, pp. 311–325; pp. 330–337). In the writings of Heidegger and Gadamer, Dilthey figures as the antagonist which enables them to promote their own alternative hermeneutical projects. But in reality Dilthey's ontological analysis of the nexus of lived experience, expression and understanding in many respects foreshadowed (and inspired) Heidegger's analytics of *Dasein* and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. However, the fact remains that Gadamer's constructive conception of hermeneutics in some respects crucially differs from Dilthey's reconstructive hermeneutics.

In opposition to Dilthey's rather monological model of understanding Gadamer defends a *dialogical* model. Reaching back to Plato and Scheiermacher, Gadamer explicitly states that the proper model to conceptualize understanding is conversation (Gadamer 1991, p. 173, p. 163). In a conversation we do not aim primarily at a psychological reconstruction of the meaning of our conversation partner, but at understanding the *matter* under discussion.

In addition, in opposition to Dilthey's theoretical conception of understanding, Gadamer emphasizes the practical import of hermeneutics. In his view, hermeneutic understanding always aims at a practical application. We not just want to understand the interpreted matter, but we want to apply it in our own life. Moreover, according to Gadamer, Dilthey also lacks insight in the temporality of all understanding. The meaning of a text is not something objectively present, but something that unfolds in the history of understanding. The meaning of the work of Plato or Confucius cannot be reduced to the original intention of the author or to the lived experience of the original readers, but is a temporal process that takes place in the history of their interpretation. This effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) is a historical movement which can never be fully objectified and which bears both work and interpretation (Gadamer 1986, p. 306).¹⁵ The effective historical consciousness is the awareness of the radical finitude of every individual interpretation.

Again in opposition to Dilthey, Gadamer does not conceive the temporal or spatial distance between the interpreter and the text to be interpreted primarily as an obstacle, but rather as the very source of the productivity of understanding. The notion of effective history enables us to define the dialogic process of understanding as a *fusion of horizons* (*Horizontverschmelzung*) (Ibid., p. 311).¹⁶ The idea of fusion expresses the fact that understanding is not a reconstruction,

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 301.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 305.

but rather a productive *construction* of meaning: “That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well” (Ibid., p. 301; p. 296). After a successful interpretation neither the interpreter nor that which is interpreted is the same as before. In a certain sense the idea of the fusion of horizons is misleading because in effective history there are no two separate, closed horizons, crucial is the event that encompasses the different horizons (Ibid., p. 311).¹⁷

Here is the tension: the play between strangeness and familiarity encountered in tradition is the midpoint between a distantiated object of history and membership of a living tradition. *The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between.* (Ibid., p. 300)¹⁸

Unlike Dilthey, Gadamer pays much attention to the role of language. For Gadamer, who follows Heidegger in this respect, language is the medium that opens up our world: “Being that can be understood is language” (Ibid., p. 478; p. 474). Moreover, language is also the medium in which a dialogue takes place. For that reason, the fusion of horizons can also be understood as the attempt to find a common language, in order to come to a common understanding and agreement about something: “Every conversation presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language” (Ibid., p. 384).¹⁹ With a play on words that easily gets lost in translation, Gadamer states:

Thus people usually understand (*verstehen*) each other immediately, or they make themselves understood (*verständigen sich*) with a view toward reaching agreement (*Einverständnis*). Coming to an understanding (*Verständigung*), then, is always coming to an understanding about something. (Ibid., p. 183)²⁰

The partners in a conversation construct a language that did not exist prior to their conversation, but is developed in the dialogue. In this constructive process, we are “transformed into a communion, in which we do not remain what we were” (Ibid., p. 384).²¹ A genuine dialogue

always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other. The concept of “horizon” suggests

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 305.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 295.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 371.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 180.

²¹ Ibid., p. 371.

itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion. (Ibid., p. 310)²²

At first sight, Gadamer's constructive, dialogical hermeneutics seems to be a more promising candidate for an intercultural hermeneutics than the reconstructive, monological type attributed to Dilthey. It especially seems to be more suitable for a modern age which has to cope with a dramatic intensification of cultural encounters. In *Legacy of Europe (Das Erbe Europas 1989)*, Gadamer emphasizes that intercultural encounter should not be a unification that neglects the differences between the member states, but that we should rather learn from the differences:

Where the goal is not (unilateral) mastery or control, we are liable to experience the otherness of others precisely against the backdrop of our own prejudgments. The highest and most elevated aim we can strive for in this context is to partake in the other, to share the other's alterity [...] We may then learn to experience otherness and human others as the "other of ourselves" in order to partake in one another. (Gadamer 1989b, p. 34)

And in a conversation with the Indian political thinker Thomas Pantham he continues that this model of a unity in diversity should today be "extended to the whole world to include China, India, and also Muslim cultures. Every culture, every people has something distinctive to offer for the solidarity and well-being of humanity (Pantham 1992, p. 132).

Although the Gadamerian project of intercultural hermeneutics sounds sympathetic at first sight²³, it seems to pass over the difficulties that characterize intercultural dialogue and interpretation *in practice*. In the first place, Gadamer seems to overlook the *asymmetries* that often characterize intercultural encounters. One of the most important ones is the asymmetry of *language*. In intercultural encounters, the "conversation partners" (be it two persons, or a person and a text) often have different native languages. In many cases, this implies that in order to find or create a common language, only one of these

²² Ibid., p.304.

²³ However, we should not forget that not all fusions of horizons are sympathetic. We could for example think of the fusion of the horizons of Muslim fundamentalism and of the terroristic movements of the seventies, such as the Rote Brigade, which lead to the violent Muslim terrorism of the last decade.

languages is used in the conversation and interpretation. For example, as only few Westerners are able to speak or read Chinese, the dialogue between Chinese and Western philosophy often takes place in English, as this language has become the *de facto* international standard for intellectuals.²⁴

However, languages are no neutral media. They disclose, structure and evaluate the world differently. As “houses of Being” (Heidegger) different languages bring along different ontologies and, as a consequence, different deontologies, too. Claiming this does not necessarily imply a strict linguistic determinism (as famously expressed in the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis) nor does it necessarily imply that no reliable translation between languages is possible at all (as Quine claims in his thesis of the “indeterminacy of translation” (Quine 1969)). Languages do not so much determine what can and what cannot be said, but they are—at least partly²⁵—constitutive for the way we experience the world. Thus the Chinese language give grounds for different beliefs and attitudes about the world than those we attribute to thinkers in the Indo-European tradition (Hansen 1985).

Let me illustrate this with an example. In his book *Language and Logic in Ancient China* Chad Hansen has advanced the thesis that the (folk) semantics of classical Chinese nouns are rather like those of mass-nouns (like “water” or “sugar” in English) than count nouns, and that for that reason ancient Chinese semantic theorists tend to organize the objects of the world in a mereological stuff-whole model of reality (Hansen 1983, 1998). In Indo-European languages, on the other hand, nouns typically function as count nouns. This leads to strikingly different ontological models of reality.

With the count-noun function-pattern and one-to-one naming paradigm in mind, one might be encouraged and motivated to think that the world consists of countable self-sufficient things both at the particular level and at the universal level when one looks at the structure of the world. Under the count-noun functioning pattern in the Indo-European language, the Platonic one-many problem with the following presupposition seems to be quite natural: there is one single, self-sufficient universal entity which is common or strictly

²⁴ This has also all kind of indirect effects. For example, the majority of (South-)Korean students who used to study Chinese as a second language, nowadays only study English as a second language. For that reason, nowadays they only have access to an important (Chinese) part of the Asian cultural heritage via English translations.

²⁵ In the last decades the Whorf-Sapir hypotheses has been criticized by many linguists and philosophers. However, recently research in the neurosciences seems — for what it’s worth— to offer support for a modified version of this hypothesis (Gilbert 2006).

identical across all the particular individuals which share the same name. Those philosophers with this presupposition in mind have searched for such a single entity and tended to identify it either with one ontic universal instantiated by particulars (Platonic realism or some other versions of realism regarding universals) or with one conceptual entity shared by minds (conceptualism).

However, if the folk semantics of Chinese nouns, whether it goes with the collective-noun function pattern or with the mass-noun function pattern, tends to organize the objects basically under the part-whole relation and hence makes their implicit ontology have a mereological character, the classical Chinese philosophers who use Chinese nouns to express themselves would be encouraged to look at the world in terms of mereological ontology, and they would be discouraged from posing the Platonic one-many problem with the presupposition aforementioned. For the classical Chinese philosophers, the common names raise no Platonic one-many problem at all. That, I believe, is why the classical Platonic one-many problem has not been consciously posed in the Chinese philosophical tradition and, generally speaking, the classical Chinese philosophers seem less interested in debating the relevant ontological issues. (Mou 1998)²⁶

As a consequence, when an intercultural dialogue between Chinese and Western philosophers takes place in English or when a Western philosopher interprets English translations of ancient Chinese philosophical texts, the question is whether this can really lead to a fusion of ontological horizons which leads to a “higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other.”²⁷ It rather seems that in these cases the one horizon is subsumed in

²⁶ This might, for example, affect the discussion about human rights. Depending on the prevailing ontology these rights may be interpreted as predominantly individual or predominantly social rights (Hansen 1997, pp. 83–96). This is expressed in the 1993 Bangkok Declaration: “Recognize that while human rights are universal in nature, they must be considered in the context of a dynamic and evolving process of international norm-setting bearing in mind the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds.” This should not prevent us from criticizing states, communities or individuals that violate these universal rights, but in this discussion we should try to avoid the kind of lecturing tone that stems from the idea that our own particularities and backgrounds are identical with the universal.

²⁷ Although Gadamer acknowledges the problem of translation, he does not seem to regard it as a real problem: “If we are dealing with a foreign language, the text will already be the object of a grammatical, linguistic interpretation, but that is only a preliminary condition. The real problem of understanding obviously arises when, in the endeavor to understand the

the other. According to critics of Gadamer this danger is inherent in the very notion of effective history. It is difficult to avoid the impression that in Gadamer's constructive hermeneutics effective history is assigned the role of Hegel's all-encompassing Spirit. This devaluates the dialogical perspective of his hermeneutics: "Thus, the speculative dialogue of the effective history ultimately becomes a version of the speculative monologue of the dialectic" (Frank 1989).

This problem becomes more striking if there exists an additional asymmetry with regard to power-relations between cultures, the desirability of cultures and the goals of the intercultural "dialogue." In the forgoing I already referred to the fact that Western philosophers often neglect Chinese philosophy because of an ethnocentric belief in the superiority and/or universality of Western thinking. And insofar Western languages produce and deploy desired knowledge more readily than third world languages do, non-Western intellectuals often cannot afford to ignore Western culture (Asad 1986). Although changing power-relations and the growing Chinese nationalism may change the nature of the intercultural dialogue between China and the West, at this moment there is a strong asymmetry:

While Western sinologists find China to be an intriguing subject of study, they seldom find China a model on which the West should urgently reform itself. In contrast, many Chinese intellectuals perceive the ethical, technical, and economic outlooks of the West as real options, or even the best and only option, for future China. (Chew 2009, 38f.)

The history of Leibniz intercultural encounter with the Yin-Yang principle offers a striking example of such an asymmetric "dialogue." Within the context of his aforementioned quest for a universal language, Leibniz also worked on the construction of a mechanical calculator. However, using a decimal system this would require many parts. For that reason in "Explication of binary arithmetic" ("Explication de l'arithmétique binaire," 1703), Leibniz developed a binary system, that would enable a much simpler construction. In his essay Leibniz points out that his binary system shows strong similarities with the Yin-Yang binary code that constitutes the 64 hexagrams of the *I Ching*.²⁸ And in his

content of what is said, the reflective question arises: how did he come to such an opinion?" (Gadamer 1986, p. 184; quoted from English translation: Gadamer 1989a, p. 181)

²⁸ "What is astounding in this [binary] reckoning is that this arithmetic by 0 and 1 happens to contain the secret of the lines of an ancient Chinese king and philosopher named Fohy (Fu Xi), who is believed to have lived more than 4,000 years ago, and whom the Chinese regard as the founder of their empire and their sciences ..." (Leibniz 1705).

correspondence Leibniz even credits the *I Ching*—a book that was probably introduced to him by the Jesuit Claudio Grimaldi, who had spent seventeen years in Beijing and whom Leibniz met on a journey in Italy—as an important source of inspiration (Leibniz 1976–2004). However, Leibniz claims that the true explanation of the hexagrams has to come from the Europeans.²⁹ But in reality this “fusion of horizons” is rather an interpretation of the hexagrams from the perspective of the universal again shows a rather violent appropriation of the hexagrams from the perspective of the project of a universal language, that—after an incubation time of many centuries—finally would lead to the invention of the digital, binary computer, an “informatization of the worldview” and a global “information age” (De Mul 1999, 2007, 2010).

5 Disseminating Horizons

The pitfalls of the theory and practice of the reconstructive and constructive projects within intercultural hermeneutics have evoked a third type of hermeneutics of which Jacques Derrida’s deconstructivism has been the most famous representative. As this “deconstructive hermeneutics” questions the very notions of horizon and understanding, some will hesitate to call this approach hermeneutic at all, or will rather call it a kind of anti-hermeneutics. Derrida radicalizes Friedrich Schleiermacher’s thesis that hermeneutics is based on a fundamental non-understanding (Schleiermacher 1985, p. 1271). According to Schleiermacher, no word has a fixed meaning. Its meaning depends on the context or horizon in which it appears. However, such a horizon can be extended on all sides and without end. For Schleiermacher this means that hermeneutic understanding is an infinite task. Derrida takes this insight one step further and argues that in every demarcation of meaning a decision is made about something

²⁹ “The Chinese lost the meaning of the Cova or Lineations of Fuxi, perhaps more than a thousand years ago, and they have written commentaries on the subject in which they have sought I know not what far out meanings, so that their true explanation now has to come from Europeans. Here is how: It was scarcely more than two years ago that I sent to Reverend Father Bouvet,³ the celebrated French Jesuit who lives in Peking, my method of counting by 0 and 1, and nothing more was required to make him recognize that this was the key to the figures of Fuxi. Writing to me on 14 November 1701, he sent me this philosophical prince’s grand figure, which goes up to 64, and leaves no further room to doubt the truth of our interpretation, such that it can be said that this Father has deciphered the enigma of Fuxi, with the help of what I had communicated to him. And as these figures are perhaps the most ancient monument of science which exists in the world, this restitution of their meaning, after such a great interval of time, will seem all the more curious” (Leibniz 1990–2008, Vol. 7, pp. 226–227).

that is fundamentally undecidable.

Furthermore, every word can be taken out of its “original” context and transposed to another. By quoting a word or a longer piece of text in another context—Derrida uses the image of “grafting” a word on another “branch”—new meanings are continuously produced:

Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the usual sense of this proposition), as a small or large unity, can be cited, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion. This does not suppose that the mark is valid outside its context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring. This citationality, duplication, or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is not an accident or an anomaly, but is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could no longer even have a so-called “normal” functioning. (Derrida 1972a, pp. 320–321)³⁰

The aim of Derrida’s deconstructive hermeneutics is not to disclose the abundance of meaning that every text is supposed to have, but rather to question the very possibility of hermeneutic understanding:

The semantic horizon which habitually governs the notion of communication is exceeded or punctured by the intervention of writing, that is of a dissemination which cannot be reduced to a polysemy. Writing is read, and “in the last analysis” does not give rise to a hermeneutic deciphering, to the decoding of a meaning or truth. (Derrida 1972b, p. 294; see also 1972a, p. 392³¹)

Continuing to build on the image of the horizon that is also employed by Derrida in the last quote, we might argue that when he sets dissemination against polysemy, Derrida is not aiming at a broadening of horizons (as with Dilthey), or at a fusion of horizons (as with Gadamer), but at a *dissemination* of horizons. And instead of a monologue or a dialogue, Derrida seems to promote an anarchistic kind of polylogue.

Whereas Dilthey’s reconstructive hermeneutics is theoretical and Gadamer’s constructive hermeneutics practical, the aim of Derrida’s deconstructive hermeneutics is rather an endless aesthetic play with meaning. However, this play is far from devoid of seriousness. For Derrida, the refusal to assign a

³⁰ Quoted from English translation: Derrida 1982, p. 381.

³¹ English translation: Derrida 1982, p. 329.

definite meaning to a text or to the utterance of a conversation partner is an act of respect for the “otherness of the other.” If every hermeneutic act of understanding unavoidably results in a violent act of appropriation of the other, Derrida defends—to use an expression of Édouard Glissant—“the right of opacity” (De Schutter 2004; Glissant 1997, p. 29). We find it expressed in the resistance of some groups to join the often violent “conversation of mankind” that characterize the process of globalization.³² But Derrida’s project is not a defensive one. His deconstruction embarks on a “letting arrive the adventure or happening of the complete other” (Derrida 1987, p. 61). As such, Derrida takes his deconstructive hermeneutics to include a radical critique of ethnocentrism.

How difficult the predicaments of this endeavor are becomes clear in Derrida’s own encounter with Chinese script in *Of Grammatology* (De la grammatologie, 1967). In this work Derrida aims at a deconstruction of the logo-centrism that characterizes Western metaphysics from Plato and Aristotle on. One of the most striking aspects of logocentrism is phonocentrism: the idea that the truth of the logos is only to be found in speech and that writing is secondary and subordinate. In the foregoing we already touched upon this phonocentrism in the discussion of Hegel’s critique of Chinese script. Although alphabetic writing is inferior to speech, according to Hegel its phonetic form at least endows it with an evident similarity with vocal language. For that reason alphabetic writing is superior to Chinese script, because this lacks the intimate relationship to speech completely.³³

Derrida criticizes the hierarchical dichotomies that characterize Western metaphysics, such as inside/outside, self/other, man/woman, and speech/writing.

³² Derrida also followed this strategy in the famous “debate” with Gadamer in Paris in 1981. Whereas Gadamer tried to involve Derrida in a conversation, Derrida intentionally avoided Gadamer’s attempt to get at mutual understanding (Michelfelder 1989).

³³ “Alphabetic writing is in and for itself the more intelligent form; in it the word, the worthiest mode, peculiar to the intelligence, of expressing its representations, is brought to consciousness and made an object of reflexion. In this preoccupation of intelligence with the word, the word is analyzed, i.e. this sign-making is reduced to its few simple elements (the primal gestures of articulation); these are the sensory component of speech, brought to the form of universality, and at the same time acquiring in this elementary manner complete determinacy and purity. Alphabetic writing thereby also retains the advantage of spoken language, that in written as in spoken representations have genuine names; the name is the simple sign for the genuine, i.e. simple representation, not resolved into its determinations and compounded out of them. Hieroglyphic language arises not not from the direct analysis of sensory signs, like alphabetic writing, but from preliminary analysis of representations. This then readily provokes the thought that all representations could be reduced to their elements, to simple logical determinations, so that from the elementary signs chosen for these (as, in the case of the Chinese *kua*, the simple straight stroke, and the stroke broken into two parts) hieroglyphic language would be generated by their composition.” (Hegel, 1969–1971, Vol. 10, p. 275; quoted from the English translation: Hegel 2010, p. 197).

This is the reason that in his view both Hegel's radical rejection of Chinese writing and Leibniz's hyperbolic admiration as well are products of the ethnographic scorn that haunts Western metaphysics (cf. Chang 1998, see also endnote 5; Derrida 1976, p. 78). Derrida aims at undermining hierarchical dichotomies by deconstructing their opposition.

For example, the opposition between self and other turns out to be a very problematic one when we look somewhat closer at cultural differences. Every culture derives many elements from other cultures. For example, when the tulip is presented as a traditional Dutch flower, it is usually forgotten that this Dutch icon comes from Turkey and Afghanistan. And when pasta is worldwide regarded as typical Italian food, we should remember that several centuries ago it was brought from China to Italy by Marco Polo. What we can learn from these examples is that cultures are no homogeneous, self-contained and unchanging wholes of traditions, ideas, goods, and norms. When elements are transferred from one culture to another, these elements become grafted into a new cultural context and acquire new meaning. For those who "quote" the inherently citable elements of other cultures, these "foreign" elements soon become their "own." Italians certainly regard pasta as part of their cultural identity, but we have to keep in mind that pasta owes its Italian-ness to the very differences that exist *between* the role it plays in the Chinese and the Italian cuisine and culture. Thus, we could even say that every culture is already *intercultural* in itself. The "origin" of any culture always lies "elsewhere." The play of identity and difference is not possible without the dimension of the in-between.

However, it is surprising that in *Of Grammatology* Derrida himself seems to revert to the same hierarchical opposition that he aims to deconstruct. In his crusade against logocentrism Derrida—not unlike Leibniz—cannot resist a hyperbolic admiration of the Chinese script, which he calls "the testimony of a powerful movement of civilization developing *outside of all* logocentrism" (*le témoignage d'un puissant mouvement de civilisation se développant hors de tout logocentrisme*) (Derrida 1976, p. 90, italics JdM). Probably it is his fascination for "the otherness of the other" that seduces him to this radical exclusion from logocentrism. It not only completely overlooks the fact that Chinese writing has a large number of phonetic elements, but also that phonocentrism is far from absent among classical and modern linguists in China.³⁴ For that reason Sean

³⁴ As Chang Han-Liang states in "Hallucinating the Other: Derridean Fantasies of Chinese Script": "The Chinese version of logocentrism can be glimpsed from the following statements of the sixth-century Liu Hsieh, the first and probably the only systematic literary critic in classical and medieval China: 'When the mind is at work, speech is uttered. When speech is uttered, writing is produced. The Tao inspires writing and writing illuminates the Tao. What in

Meighoo's extensive analysis of Derrida's concept of Chinese writing arrives at a devastating conclusion: "Derrida's own concept of Chinese writing functions as a sort of Euro-American "hallucination," a hallucination that he shares [...] surely with Leibniz himself. This concept of Chinese writing remains a "domestic representation," harboring a profound "misunderstanding" of Chinese language, culture, and society" (Meighoo 2008).

Although we may not generalize this example, the fact that even a deconstructive philosopher like Derrida in this case does not succeed in avoiding (an inverse) ethnocentrism, seems to force us to lower our expectations concerning the possibility of a flawless intercultural dialogue and hermeneutics. Should we add to Schleiermacher's thesis that all interpretation is based on non-understanding that it also inevitably continues in non-understanding, and conclude that intercultural encounter in the age of globalization is doomed to fail or even to result in a "clash of cultures" (Huntington 1996), at least on the level of understanding? Or will the postmodern stage of globalization we have entered also disclose a new and not yet to be foreseen stage in intercultural dialogue and hermeneutics?

6 Kaleidoscoping Horizons

In the preceding discussion of the reconstructive, constructive, and deconstructive hermeneutics, I have stressed the crucial significance of the concept of "horizon." In each of these conceptions of intercultural understanding, the existence of different (cultural) horizons constitutes the condition of the necessity *and* the possibility of understanding. Even in the case of Derrida the dissemination of horizons presupposes their existence. As such horizons tend to function as prison houses, which inevitably force their prisoners into an ethnocentric position. This seems to be an inseparable aspect of the finitude of the human life form.

However, this does not mean that ethnocentrism is a thing that we should

mind is idea when expressed in speech is poetry. Isn't this what we are doing when dashing off writing to record reality?" [...] Under the tyranny of logocentrism, writing is rendered as secondary and subordinate. In Aristotle's celebrated phrasing which opens *On Interpretation*: 'Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words' [...] This formulation, which Derrida criticizes in *The Margins of Philosophy* as psychologism, is almost a verbatim paraphrase of Liu Hsieh: 'When the mind is at work, speech is uttered. When speech is uttered, writing is produced.' Thus in both China and the West, at least in the Aristotelian and Confucian traditions, the category of writing is inscribed only in relation to speech and to the subject of writing" (Chang 1988, p. 6).

demonize as such. A (unavoidably ethnocentric) horizon is not only an obstacle, but also the very condition of the possibility of understanding and communication. It is a meaningful nexus without which there would be no understanding or communication at all. And as we have seen, *each* type of intercultural hermeneutics has its merits. Broadening our horizon by reconstructing and incorporation of other horizons of experience enriches our lives. In the fusion of horizons we construct new knowledge and develop new practices. Deconstructing existing horizons may create openness for other possibilities. And even when intercultural understanding and communication results in ethnocentric misunderstanding of the other or in miscommunication, in many cases this might be preferable to the experience of complete strangeness and sheer non-understanding of the other. Moreover, misunderstanding is often very productive. Without a doubt not all misunderstandings are desirable. They may easily lead to all kinds of tensions and conflicts. However, these tensions and conflicts are an integral part of the “motor” that drives human history.

Moreover, we should not exaggerate the clash of horizons. As we already noticed, the concept of horizon on closer inspection is rather monolithic. In reality we exist in a multitude of horizons: ethnic, linguistic, gender, sexual, religious, political, philosophical, emotional, social, economical, scientific, just to mention a few of the countless horizons that surround and constitute us. Some of the horizons are quite narrow and idiosyncratic, others are almost universal. Understanding a conversation in a foreign language may be impossible, whereas it is not difficult to understand the grief of parents in that foreign culture mourning about their dead child. And although there may be a wide cultural gap between a Saudi Arabian woman and a woman from Canada, living as women in a world that is often dominated by men, they may share a specific horizon of experience at the same time. And the horizons of experience of a cab driver in Beijing and one in Berlin may have more in common than those of the Beijing cab driver and a Beijing university professor.

Moreover, in the postmodern stage of globalization, the circulation and exchange of people, ideas, habits and goods has reached a momentum in which the conception of horizons as monolithic wholes has become fully obsolete. Millions of migrants, workers, students and tourists are moving between cultures. Locally produced goods are being distributed globally. Ideas circulate through global computer networks. A growing number of the world inhabitants are becoming hybrid subjects that belong to a variety of different horizons. These “true hybrids” are in-between many different horizons (Bauman 1991, p. 58). This kind of hybrid subjectivity is typical for postmodern globalization.

Although globalization is as old as humankind, premodern cultures are often *monocultural* in the sense that they have a relative lack of means of transport and

communication, and as a consequence, often have a slow pace of circulation and exchange. Modern cultures, on the other hand, mostly are *multicultural*. In modern societies, many different cultures are living next to each other in the same place. In modern cultures, especially newcomers are often considered as strangers, physically close but socially and culturally distant (Marotta 2009). Postmodern globalization, structured by a variety of information and communication networks, is characterized by a situation where we can be physically distant, but socially and culturally close. We are *intercultural* because we are part of the processes of constant circulation and exchange.³⁵

In the age of postmodern globalization personal and cultural horizons are increasingly becoming kaleidoscopic. Postmodern culture has the character of a database that constantly combines, recombines and decombines the elements of the human “mentome” and global cultural “meme pool” (De Mul 2009). In this kaleidoscopic experience the distinction between the self and the other becomes increasingly blurred and ambiguous. The more, because in our present world, premodern, modern and postmodern horizons simultaneously exist and interact in many parts of the world.

This complex and often confusing situation offers a new challenge for intercultural hermeneutics. The hermeneutic reconstruction, construction and deconstruction of horizons without a doubt will continue. Although they are, in the strictest sense, irreconcilable notions and practices of interpretation, we simultaneously live them, because in the practice of interpreting each other they continuously presuppose each other. However, the kaleidoscoping of our horizons will force us to develop new strategies for understanding and interpreting each other and ourselves.

Because of the radical finiteness of our (present) life form, it is unlikely that will be able to overcome ethnocentrism. However, what we may hope to achieve in intercultural hermeneutics (or at least cherish as its regulative ideal), is a “reflective ethnocentrism.”³⁶ Just like we may hope to achieve a “reflective anachronism” in our studies of cultures of the past. Without doubt this is a never-ending task for hermeneutics. But having no end also means having a future.

³⁵ “Why the issue of interculturalism rather than multiculturalism? Multiculturalism is a policy based on the notion of personal autonomy. Interculturalism, in contrast, recognizes that in a society of mixed ethnicities, cultures act in multiple directions. Host or majority cultures are influenced by immigrant or minority cultures and vice versa. Multiculturalism tends to preserve a cultural heritage, while interculturalism acknowledges and enables cultures to have currency, to be exchanged, to circulate, to be modified and evolve” (Powell 2004, p. 1).

³⁶ I owe this phrase to Karl-Heinz Pohl, who used it during his lecture “Chinese and Western Values: Reflections on the Methodology of a Cross-Cultural Dialogue” at the conference *Traditions and Contemporary World*, Beijing Normal University, December 12–13, 2009.

Afterimage



Fig. 1 Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*, 1987–1991. Mixed Media Installation. The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa



Fig. 2 Xu Bing's *New English (Square Word) Calligraphy Square Word Calligraphy*, 2005



Fig. 3 Xu Bing's *Square Word Calligraphy*, 2005

content (cf. Peng 2009), it also seems to comprehend a more general reflection on the unfathomable character of human expression, which leads to a fundamental non-understanding. Xu seems to radicalize experience of non-understanding by creating Chinese characters that, although at first sight they look familiar (they express Chinese-ness), turn out to be completely unreadable, not only for non-Chinese readers, but for Chinese readers as well. The vast planes of text seem to convey ancient wisdom, but are in fact fully unintelligible. They constitute an impenetrable horizon of experience, which radically defy hermeneutic understanding.

In a subsequent project, *Square Word Calligraphy* (1994–1996), Xu Bing seems to express a more optimistic vision on understanding by investigating the possibility of a fusion of the horizons of Chinese and English. Just like *Book from the Sky*, *Square Word Calligraphy* makes the impression to consist of Chinese characters, whereas in fact they are not (see Figs. 2 and 3). In this case, however, the “characters” are composed of English words, arranged in a way that gives them a Chinese look. In that sense they are a fusion of two linguistic horizons. The project seems to be a humorous comment or critique on the asymmetry that, as I have argued in the foregoing, often characterize the “fusion” of horizons (for example when the discussion between a Chinese and an English person takes place in English). In order to communicate with *Square Word Calligraphy*, the Chinese user still has to learn English, but the English speaker at least has to become familiar with some of the features of Chinese writing. As Xu Bing explains, the effect is an experience of “in between”:

Square Word Calligraphy [...] exists on the borderline between two completely different cultures. To viewers from these two cultures, the characters present equal points of familiarity and of strangeness. A Chinese person recognizes the characters as familiar faces but can't figure out exactly who they are. To a Westerner, they first appear as mysterious glyphs from Asian culture, yet ultimately they can be read and understood [...] The absurdity of Square Word Calligraphy is that it takes two different words from two completely unrelated language systems and fuses them together into one entity. If you use existing concepts of Chinese or English to try and read or interpret these characters, you won't succeed. This total disconnection between outer appearance and inner substance places people in a kind of shifting cultural position, an uncertain transitional state. (Ibid., pp. 4–5)

In the recent project *Book from the Earth* (2008), Xu Bing seems to give an ironic comment on the Eurocentric obsession for a universal language. It consists of a computer program, which can translate Chinese and English into a universal

icon language, inspired by the type of icons that can be found on international airports (Fig. 4). The computer program enables Chinese and English persons who don't speak each other's language to communicate in a visual manner. Although Xu Bing in interviews claims that "the program is meant to enable communication regardless of the user's cultural background or level of education" and even states that "the continuation of this trend is humanity's future" (Ibid., p. 7), at the same time the work seems to contain an ironic reflection on the ambition to develop a transparent, flawless language. Whereas elementary messages and stories can be successfully communicated by *The Book from Earth*, Xu Bing's attempts to convey more complex meanings in works such as *Novel* (Fig. 5) make us not only realize the richness of our finite, natural languages, but at the same time demarcates the unsurpassable boundaries of any intercultural dialogue and polylogue.

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