Rethinking *Cultural Studies* and Postcolonial Theories in their French Version

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REFERENCES

Bhabha, Homi K. *Les Lieux de la culture : une théorie postcoloniale*, Paris : Payot, 2007
 Hall, Stuart. *Identités et Cultures : politiques des Cultural Studies*, Paris : Amsterdam, 2007
 Stuart Hall, Paris: Amsterdam, 2007, (Méthéoriques)

- 1 The almost simultaneous publication in France of a must-read, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) by the British thinker of Indian extraction Homi Bhabha, an anthology encompassing under the title *Identités et Cultures : politiques des Cultural Studies*, some of Stuart Hall's most important essays carefully selected by Maxime Cervulle, and the welcome transcription of an interview conducted by Mark Alizart in 2005 with the Jamaican-born British thinker, usher in a feeling of relief, by filling a publishing lacuna. However, reading the writings of S. Hall and H. Bhabha in French after studying them at length in English calls for a period of adaptation. As if an understanding of the concepts raised by these major thinkers to do with cultural and postcolonial studies ought to pass through a translation filter¹. The reason might well be the distance that divides political and cultural reality from the historical context that has permitted these essays to exist in the United States and Great Britain—in some cases since the 1970s—but not, until recently, in France. By calling on the analysis made by Hall of the notion of “diaspora-like” displacement, which he defines in terms of dispersal, and links, precisely, to the issue of movement created by translation, it is possible to borrow his evocation of linguistic space transformed into a political form of representation that comes across like

the unity of a collective fragmentation. The origins of this delay with the French translation have still to be unravelled, and this is what M. Alizart straightaway tries to do in the first question he puts to S. Hall. He happens to describe this absence, and poor knowledge, not to say ignorance in France of the theoretical work undertaken over several decades by the author he addresses, as well as, implicitly, the work of other postcolonial theoreticians. “You are regarded as one of the founders of postcolonial studies. Despite this, your work in particular, and, more generally, postcolonial studies as a whole are still little known about in France, although France was once a major colonial metropolis. How do you explain this?”², he asks. At the outset, this interview was filmed for the conference organized for the exhibition *Africa Remix* held in June 2005 at the Centre Pompidou. S. Hall flashes a smile as he listens to the question and replies in a firm, composed voice : “It’s not for me to explain that for you, it’s up to you” He nevertheless goes on with a direct comment : “I think at the heart of all the great imperial powers there’s an incredible ability to forget—an incredible factory of forgetfulness”³. Henceforth it falls to thinkers belonging to those colonized cultures to analyse this kind of process of forgetting. It is because of their work on identity and otherness that the construction of differentness helps to form a line of thinking about the interstice which, by articulating the memory of a past and present of history, origins and displacement, (re)establishes the significance of representations of ethnicity, race, class and gender, as central paradigms within this world which Hall describes as “self-centered”, and whose “extreme complacency” is given a hard time. In a complementary way, S. Hall and H. Bhabha question these notions of identity and identification based on the concept of hybridity, and refer recurrently to the thinking of Frantz Fanon who radically expressed the autonomy of a black identity in the period of decolonization. “As cultural and radically marginalized groups unhesitatingly assume the mask of the Black, and the stance of the minority, not to disavow their diversity but to boldly announce the important device of cultural identity and its difference, Fanon’s need becomes urgent”, writes Bhabha⁴. Within this committed construction of difference, Hall and Bhabha base their analyses on this “identity of otherness” which, in the context of cultural and postcolonial studies, renders theory and politics inseparable. By choosing as the opening gambit of his preface this quotation by Hall : “The issue of culture [...] is absolutely and indisputably a political issue”, M. Cervulle steers our reading of the essays by emphasizing the critical awareness of intellectual commitment⁵. It is also this latter point that Bhabha asserts, specifying “the erasure of the traditional boundary between theory and politics” and confirming his interest in “the conceptual structure of the terms—the theoretical, the political—which inform a series of discussions about the place and time of the engaged—committed—intellectual.”⁶ These discussions link up directly with the reality of contemporary artistic praxis and research, and it is henceforth not for nothing that Bhabha has decided to quote, in his introduction, the work of Renée Green who, through imagery and words, studies the plurality of her cultural entity, and the fact that Hall has regularly worked with Isaac Julien, also incorporating his visual work within an acute awareness of this link between the theoretical and the political.

- 2 M. Alizart pertinently winds up his interview with Stuart Hall by observing the importance of contemporary art in the context of his research into culture. By reversing the proposition, we must question the undeniable influence of cultural and postcolonial studies on history and art criticism today. Quoting Gilles Deleuze, Hall describes

theoretical books as so many tool kits ; it is up to us, pending further translations, to use these writings of Bhabha and Hall as engines driving our thinking.

NOTES

1. It should be noted that to keep some coherence in the editing of the article on the three works mentioned, the thread of post-colonial theories has been preferred, without borrowing the analysis of cultural studies as undertaken by Eric Macé and Eric Maigret in their introduction to *Stuart Hall* whose title, “Le Noir de la famille” obviously calls for some explanation.
2. *Stuart Hall*, Paris, Ed. Amsterdam, 2007, p. 45.
3. Ibid.
4. Bhabha, Homi, *Les lieux de la culture*, *op.cit.*, p. 118.
5. Preface by Maxime Cervulle, *Identités et cultures*, *op.cit.*, p. 9.
6. Bhabha, Homi, *op.cit.*, p. 72.