

# Comparative Study and the Nature of Connections: Of the Aesthetic Appreciation of History

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## ARTICLE

# Comparative Study and the Nature of Connections: Of the Aesthetic Appreciation of History

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X has something in common with Y. Y is different from X. Boiled down to its basics, comparative study is based on these two thoughts. It is impossible to undertake comparative work without a notion that distinct things may be grouped together using the same term (for example, comparative modernist studies) There is, therefore, no comparative study without a strong notion of sameness and of commonality. Aesthetic resemblances are of fundamental importance to such connections in comparative cultural study. Put another way, comparative study involves attending to how things feel or appear to be alike, to the sensual textures of what they share, of their sameness. These sensations are those of persistence and intimacy. Rather than analysing the history of culture, we might engage in aesthetic appreciation of the similar shapes, forms, moods even that we find across its vast expanses over place and time. Rich ways of appreciating sameness may enable the marginalized and subjugated to re-assert their own value. In tracing such things, we give shape to poetics that become the very heart of how we do comparative study: vocabularies and narrative styles. More still, the aesthetic appreciation of sameness constitutes a psychological journeying.

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X has something in common with Y. Y is different from X. Boiled down to its basics, comparative study is based on these two thoughts. It is impossible to undertake comparative work without a notion that distinct things may be grouped together using the same term (for example, comparative *modernist* studies). There is, therefore, no comparative study without a strong notion of sameness and of commonality. When we state this commonality, we set out a connection across and through manifestly disparate things. In articulating sameness – in saying ‘X has something in common with Y’ – we lay bare the very nature of connections across culture: the qualities and characteristics that connections have, the forms they take. If we say, ‘let’s compare Lorca and Apollinaire as modernist poets’, our use of the phrase *modernist poets* must have of itself something of the fundamental qualities of connectedness and of commonality. Such connections must not merely cut across but surpass attempts to assign works to discrete places and times, periods or contexts (one could not ‘cut across’ anything, were this not so). They are characterized by what I will call their persistence – their resistance to boundaries – and their intimacy – their capacity to join in commonality beyond their own particularities.

Aesthetic resemblances are of fundamental importance to such connections in comparative cultural study. Put another way, comparative study involves attending to how things feel or appear to be alike, to the sensual textures of what they share, of their sameness. These sensations are those of persistence and intimacy. Rather than analysing the history of culture, we might engage in aesthetic appreciation of the similar shapes, forms, moods even that we find across its vast expanses over place and time, bringing together disparate things. We might accept that these are a fact of our experience of the histories of culture. I will argue that such attention to intimate sameness does not necessarily lead to the flattening out of cultural difference, nor to marginalization and exclusion of what does not fit in. Instead – as has historically been the case – rich ways of appreciating sameness may enable the marginalized and subjugated to reassert their own value. I will argue that such tracing of patterns of commonality is a practice and a craft – it is, as it were, something that we do by doing it – not because of, or in obeisance, to any large philosophical theory. I will suggest that, through this craft, we bring into relief a wide variety of patterns, and ways of appreciating patterns, that persist across the histories and geographies of culture, in spite of limitations of place and time. In tracing such things, we give shape to poetics that become the very heart of how we do comparative study: vocabularies and narrative styles. In so doing, there is no avoiding either the risk that such disregard of delineations into places and times poses to intellectual rigour and sanity, or the reality of the suffering often inflicted in the name of sameness. Rather, these risks must come to the fore: the aesthetic appreciation of sameness constitutes a psychological journeying.

### **Aesthetic Resemblances and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Cultural History**

Across the expanses of place and time in the cultures of our world, many things may appear to resemble one another. These things may, in other respects, seem to be disparate (X has something in common with Y; Y is unlike X). For example, in his monumental text *Constructive Universalism* [*Universalismo constructivo*] (1944), the Uruguayan artist and thinker J. Torres García linked zeppelins, ancient Egyptian art and El Greco as spiritually powerful architectures of geometrical forms, and thus of classicism (76–91). These qualities he finds too in the works of the Aztecs, Maya and Incas (113). On one account of comparative study, the grouping together of such diverse things can only be rigorous and valid if there is some causal connection between them. It would in turn be appropriately scholarly only to discuss such comparisons by showing causal connections, whether that be through the demonstrable influence of one work upon another, or through some shared ancestor or common cause (say, a feature of the human brain). Anything else would be deemed superficial, a mere surface similarity. In their work on transatlantic studies, Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor describe such a vision of rigorous historiography as one concerned with ‘the structure of implied priorities and progressions’ (10).

An alternative view is that resemblances are, in and of themselves, a reality of the history of cultures, and that there is nothing rigorous about ignoring this fact. The experience of two (or more) things having something in common is significant in its own right, whether or not this comes about through accident and contingency. Causal connections, however direct or indirect, simple or intricate, are of relevance only insofar as they inform our awareness of such realities. Further still, to look to the causal roots of commonalities is to risk overlooking what drew us to their comparison in the first place: the experience of disparate things having something in common. In attending primarily to the latter, we turn away from – or at a minimum treat as of secondary importance – the kinds of rigour offered by historical or scientific causality, formal logic or philosophical frameworks (metaphysics or ontology, for example). Tracing a contrast with the first of these – but it could as easily be said of all of

them – Manning observes that ‘a poetics-led comparison supplements the historical lacunae of connection’ (232).

Ultimately, a ‘poetics-led comparison’ must centre on the aesthetics of sameness and commonality: the sensual experience of things having elements in common. This involves appreciation, not explanation or interpretation as such. Echoing Susan Sontag, the classicist Shane Butler has recently written, of the need to appreciate poetic form, that ‘the problem of interminable analysis is not that it tells us too much but, rather, that what it does tell us crowds out all perceptions of what it cannot’ (83). What Butler says of any individual work may also be writ large, and applied to the experience of the history of culture itself. To envisage history this way is to attend, in their own right, to the sensations of commonality, ‘the “texture” of likeness’ (Manning xiii), that stretch across the vast expanses of place and time. Each of these sensations may properly be thought of as a *mood*: ‘an overall atmosphere or climate that causes the world to come into view in a certain way’, as Rita Felski has put it (20). Each sensual feeling brings into view a kind of sameness, each kind of sameness a sensual feeling.

Aesthetically, to perceive the history of culture as series of similar but disparate forms is to alter the way in which we attend to it. It is to change our ‘mood’. What the art and design group Patternity have claimed of the urban environment might also be said of our refreshed disposition and attentiveness towards the expanse of the history of culture about us: ‘The search for pattern has the power to positively shift the perception of our surroundings, and seemingly in an enduring way. [...] Encouraging individuals to look up, look down and all around them with an attuned eye invites them to pay full attention, as if seeing their surroundings for the first time’ (44). In such experiences, as Picasso famously remarked, ‘there is no past or future in art’, or, for that matter, in literature, or any other medium (cited in Cowling 336). The whole point of the patterns is that they associate things that are remote from one another. We find ourselves here in the ‘deep time’ of literature of which Wai Chee Dimock has so eloquently written in *Through Other Continents* (2008): a world in which connections stretch back and forth across the centuries and around the globe. Or, perhaps, better said, there is no depth, only extent. Speaking of the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein’s vision of Mexico, Andrea Noble once evocatively recalled the notion of history as a subtly textured shawl, a *serape* of diverse, interlinked forms, resting together in spite of their chronologies (181).

We may, of course, recoil from such thoughts, for fear of loss of rigour. There is good reason for some reluctance, in the apparent loss of criteria for what constitutes a valid connection, and in the old question, to which Manning returned in her final book: ‘Is analogy argument?’ (xi). I will come back to the importance of that fear later in this essay. As regards the position I have set out thus far, I will note only that words such as *fear* – or *danger*, or *risk* which, anecdotally, one hears used with seeming casualness in conversation among humanities academics – have connotations beyond any intellectual content. They suggest an anxiety that might itself present a risk: a mistrust of giving ourselves to our aesthetic experiences, even that such sensations are not really real, and, in much broader terms, a supposition that we must be in a state of continual vigilance against what might imperil us.

### **Sameness and Intimacy: Inclusion, Exclusion and ‘Going On’**

It may be said that through whatever disposition and attitude, through whatever sensual forms we experience sameness and commonality, these will be moods of intimacy. There has, of course, been much talk recently of *intimacy*, as a result of rise of interest in the haptic, the notion that touch is crucial to culture. While I am concerned here with sensual experience, my interest in intimacy has greater similarities to the use of the word by the philosopher Stanley Cavell. I seek to evoke the notion that signs, images, words may enable any person

to be attuned enough with other things and people so as to experience 'the world' (80), and thus other places, times and outlooks. In this usage, culture that connects intimately does so by extending and persisting beyond any supposed confines of a place and time, beyond any narrow delineation of its 'context'. We may get a sense of what such intimacy might be like by playing with a thaumatrope, a simple nineteenth-century optical toy. The thaumatrope is a disc hanging from a string; on each side of the disc, there is a distinct image (say, a chicken and a cage). The idea is that, when the thaumatrope spins, the two pictures appear as one (say, a chicken in a cage), even though they are at that moment in distinct places and have been seen at different times.

It may be ventured that without intimacy there can be no sameness, no commonality across the aesthetic patterns traced in our experience of the history of culture. To return to my opening remarks, saying that 'X has something in common with Y' supposes a 'something in common' to which we can attend – and that 'something in common' must be shared beyond the particular place or time in which X is found. More still, to experience the histories of culture as a series of aesthetic patterns of resemblance is to suppose that the many Xs and Ys – the many texts and images and sounds – do indeed come together into patterns, that they share in these forms, and that the latter must then extend beyond the limitations of any given context. Put another way, the aesthetic patterns traced by the history of culture are its commonalities – they become the stripes of its serape, say – and these have no regard to the confines of any specific place or time. For instance, when Torres García brings together the zeppelin and El Greco and ancient Egyptian art, he 'causes the world to come into view' such that we behold a pattern, not simply of what these things share (potently expressive geometric form) but of their being together. It is as if we were to perceive the overall shapes of a collage involving those three things, and thence their "texture" of likeness'.

It seems to me impossible to demonstrate through reasoned argument that such intimacy actually occurs or could occur, hence my use of *may* at the start of the last two paragraphs. Either one holds that things are only what they are in their own place and time, or one holds otherwise (which is not, incidentally, an argument for relativism). In telling phrases, glossing Cavell, Michael Fischer remarks of 'intimacy' that it is 'remarkable because nothing seems to account for it'. By 'starting from the fact of our intimacy', Cavell 'emphasizes the astonishing reality of our attunement' (61). Among the reasons for reluctance by scholars to give themselves to such experiences, or for denying their existence, are: that sameness eliminates and occludes all that is specific and heterogeneous, and is itself no more than a masquerade for the interests of a particular group or person; that the alteration of our perceptions will prevent us from seeing the (often unpleasant) realities of social, political, gendered and economic struggle; and that any grouping together of things with something in common is inherently exclusionary of others, and by extension may serve the cause of prejudice and discrimination. Once again, the balance of assessment of risk is manifest in such thoughts. Borrowing words from the psychological thinker R. D. Laing, one might even say in response: 'It seems ungracious not to take delight|In day because it turns so soon to night'. Yet equally, the fear matters, and to it we will return in due course.

There is an alternative view: that commonality and sameness may offer possibilities for culturally specific things to be appreciated and valued in a shared experience, and for their importance to be asserted, without eliminating their particularity. This attitude has prevailed far from the 'West', and before, after and during periods of 'Western' colonialism: it has often been cultivated in opposition to imperialism and to the outright hegemony of any particular culture or society. At times, it has taken shape in versions of universalism. Ironically, it has often been well-intentioned, anti-colonial 'Western thought' that has been dismissive of such outlooks. Writing of the Indian subcontinent and of Asia more widely, Sugata Bose

has observed that 'a universalist patriotism emerged at various venues across the colonized world', and that '[b]oth notions of universalism with a difference and cosmopolitanism springing from vernacular roots are dramatically at odds with the dominant discourse and debates within the charmed circle of contemporary British and North American analytical philosophy. They are also located at some distance from the premises of French and North American intellectual currents that are deeply suspicious of all meta-narratives and are prepared to only valorize the fragment' (99, 98).

Inspired also by Indian culture, Sonal Khullar has noted how an experience of marginalization, of being relegated to a periphery or being devalued, may lead to creative efforts to reshape our experience of the shared and the global, and of being part of such things. Comparing the Mexican writer Octavio Paz and the Indian artist Francis Newton Souza, she remarks that 'the task of the artist was to make meaning of that unbelonging and remake belonging to the world' (25). This is true of the expanses of time as well as those of place. Media theorist Siegfried Zielinski speaks of how the past contains 'dynamic moments' (11): specific cultural and intellectual developments whose rich potential is not yet exhausted, and whose creative force therefore persists beyond the bounds of their location in chronological time. By extension, it may be said that any such moment is able to escape its own situation in place as well as time. At the point at which we – or anything or anyone else – makes a connection to a 'dynamic moment' from elsewhere, we – or they – will be transformed by that potential. The originary moment will offer something that it has not yet disclosed, and all parties involved will intimately share in the same metamorphosis.

In such instances of connection, our appreciation of sameness will change, because we encounter a commonality of which we were previously unaware, or because we might abandon one account of what things had in common and look to another, or simply because the 'texture of likeness' is enriched by a previously un-included element. Ginger (2012) shows, for example, that if we include the Hispanic world in a narrative about the origins of 'modernism', we will identify a distinct series of shared patterns across modernism than we would otherwise. Distinctiveness thereby actively transforms our appreciation of sameness, rather than being eliminated by it. When Torres García sees something in common between a zeppelin and an Aztec image, the zeppelin does not cease so to be. We do not lose our awareness that it is separate from Aztec civilization. And an unencountered sameness comes into view.

The ways in which we appreciate sameness enable us to 'go on', to borrow a phrase from Wittgenstein. Going on does not involve identifying a schemata or set of fixed rules to which things we subsequently encounter must be subjected: our appreciation of sameness to date does not prevent us from recognizing future kinds diversity. Rather, it involves a capacity to trace and find what things have in common as we encounter them. As Wittgensteinian education theorist Nicholas C. Burbules puts it, this is a 'notion of learning [...] through participation in a kind of activity', one in which there is 'openness and indeterminacy', and where 'explanations can never exhaust our sense-making' (131–2). What we are learning as we go along, and what enables us to learn, is a disposition, a mood, 'that causes the world to come into view in a certain way', which 'has the power to positively shift the perception of our surroundings'.

### **The Aesthetic Forms of the History of Culture**

As we appreciate the way that things, across the history of culture share something intimately in common, we experience patterns across the expanses of place and time. These come into view like recurrent forms over an immense, if mutable, landscape. Such formations are the fundamental subject matter of comparative cultural study. Often, they have taken shape in the use of apparently abstract terminology across seemingly disparate things – as *Travelling Concepts* (2002) as the title of Mieke Bal's influential book has it (modernism would be an

example). We may, however, look beyond a highly conceptual vocabulary in enriching our aesthetic appreciation of patterns. To give an example, we might consider what is shared by Baudelaire's poem 'The Seven Old Men' [Les sept vieillards], and the American independent teen movie *Before I Fall* (2017). In Baudelaire's verses, the narrator is wandering the streets of a foggy mid-nineteenth-century Paris. He reaches a location where identical old men appear in exactly the same place seven times; eventually the narrator leaves the scene in horror. *Before I Fall* shows us an occasion in the life of an adolescent woman: a Cupid's Day on which she and her friends are going to a party, and where she is under pressure to lose her virginity. As they depart the festivities, they find themselves in a fatal road crash, after which she awakes at the start of Cupid's Day. Though she lives the day differently, it ends always with a fatality and with her awakening once more at the start of the day, until she alone dies. In the incident at the heart of both works, there is a finite amount of time and place: for Baudelaire, the particular spot on the street in Paris at a specific moment; in *Before I Fall*, a period shorter than twenty-four hours and a series of proximate locales (the woman's home, her school, the house where the party is held, adjoining roads and so forth).

We might envisage these two works each as a kind of bubble. The normal confines of a place and time have been maintained, but at the same time become sufficiently capacious so as to encompass a succession of similar but incompatible events occurring consecutively (an old man cannot follow himself). It is as if these circled one after another, within the confines of that identical place in time, but without exceeding them. As we gaze across the expanses of the history of culture, we would be able to appreciate many such bubbles, and their coming together as a pattern. To take a different example, we might consider the many occasions on which a work of literature or art echoes the contents of another, without explicitly repeating it. Obvious cases might be the movie *The Forbidden Planet* (1956) and Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, or the emulations of classical Latin sentence structure in the Spanish of the seventeenth-century poet Góngora. While we may think of these as instances of imitation, emulation or intertextuality, we may also attend to the very experience of noticing that one work both is and is not obviously present within another, that the two might seem fused together (*The Forbidden Planet* is infused with *The Tempest*) and yet are also utterly different. This might appear as a flickering: an image in which two things seem alternately to join seamlessly, and to separate into diverse parts. This habitually happens when we spin a thaumotope, and sometimes see the two pictures as one, and sometimes not, such that the fused and the separated images all flicker before our eyes. The landscape of the history of culture is criss-crossed with such patterns of flickering.

Each such 'texture of likeness' offers what Caroline Levine calls 'affordances' (6–7): that is, specific forms render possible certain experiences. Above and beyond the sensation of appreciating the patterns taken by our experience of the history of culture – the textures of its bubbles and flickers, for instance – these affordances are emotionally charged, giving us moods. The bubbles that we have seen here open up recurrent pain, trauma's looping. Flickering may afford a longing both to join with and to separate from others. The *Anxiety of Influence* (1973, 1997), evoked in Harold Bloom's book of that title, is but one version of such blends of desire and rejection.

### **Experience, Poetics and Psychological Journeying**

It is tempting to draw up a grand theory to describe such experiences of sameness, and some impressive efforts have been made in that direction. Notable recently among these is Kaja Silverman's *The Miracle of Analogy* (2015), in which patterns of similitude are seen as the unfurling disclosure of Heideggerian being-in-the-world. Yet, as we have seen, to attend to resemblances for their own sake is specifically to take leave of their causes and explanations

as a primary matter of interest. Moreover, if we are to 'go on' in the discovery of similitudes, a systematic theory is more an impediment, a constraint, than it is a help. Like Dimock's weak networks, the patterns of commonality themselves are notable for 'not yielding any theory with enough predictive (or even descriptive) authority to be called sovereign' (738). The appreciation of the forms of sameness across the history of culture is, in turn, a practice and a craft, and it is concerned with – indeed, it is a matter of – our experience. Richard Sennett has aptly pointed out the merits of the notion of *experience* in its very fuzziness: its spanning seamlessly from 'emotional inner impress' to 'an event, action, or relationship that turns one outward' (288). The practice and craft here is to work through our experiences of the history of culture so as to bring out forms of sameness. As a way of 'going on', it involves what Sennett describes as a continual 'dialogue with materials' (268) (in this case, literary texts, visual images and so forth), a 'not knowing quite what you are about when you begin' (262), and 'a realm of skill and knowledge perhaps beyond human verbal capacities to explain' (95).

It is in this way that we may realize a 'poetics-led comparison', to borrow Manning's words, far from the conventional academic essay-writing in which so many of us have been trained. Pondering the challenge of putting global interconnections into prose in her *Planetary Modernisms* (2015), Susan Stanford Friedman remarks that 'the logical progression of a Ciceronian argument seldom structures an oftentimes more dialogic or associational procession of ideas and examples' (13). Through our practice of writing sameness down, we develop styles, turns of phrase, structural patterns, lexical choices – an aesthetic, in short. I have tried to give a glimpse of such a thing in my evocation of bubbles and flickers across the landscape of the history of culture, in the vision of the spinning thaumatrope or the textures of the serape.

In such a passage through intimacy and persistence, the forms take us into sensations and moods: endless looping pain, for instance, or the tug and pull of desire and rejection, across the expanse of place and time. The aesthetic experience of history is the form of a psychological journey: 'esthetic art [...] does something different from leading to an experience. It constitutes one', remarked John Dewey in *Art as Experience* (1934) (85). Such travelling is anything but free of risk. In its renunciation of some forms of rigour, and its embrace of sameness, the possibility is ever present that we will slip into delusion or oppression. That risk cannot be removed, and with it come fear and anxiety. These are inherent to and experienced within the journey, which supposes both those attendant hazards and an attendant hope: that the travelling will effect a transformation in us which can be described only by the journeying itself – it has no map, no fixed start point, no destination and no justifying theory – and that the intimacy it permits will be worthwhile.

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