

## Comments on Stefan Jonsson's presentation

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Here, Stefan Jonsson delivers, as he usually does, knowledgeable, well-written essays and analyses, which provide the reader with new insights and material for further reflection.<sup>1</sup> In this text, Jonsson deliberates on questions of key significance within cultural studies and media studies, and gratefully his frames of reference move beyond the strictly methodological and those of theoretical juggling for its own sake. In other words, it is as a broadminded essayist Stefan Jonsson writes his paper, not only as a practicing editor of the cultural affairs pages in one of Sweden's most significant broadsheets. Jonsson, thus, has both an insider's view on journalism and the benefit of an external view on the logics of the media in a time of globalisation. I have read his contribution with great interest, but also with increasing frustration on behalf of media studies. Although I share some of Jonsson's views on the state of affairs, I am not quite sure whether I also share his pessimism. Further, I do not share his elitism. In order to comment on his intense paper, I have had to do exactly what Jonsson criticizes Western media for: I have found it necessary to make a selection based on my interests and from my particular point of view.

I would like to start my commentary on Jonsson's paper by providing an example for the world outside Scandinavia and from the media in the age of globalisation. When Black secondary school youths in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe in the late 1990s, before the country's plunge towards chaos, started in earnest and wanted to signal among themselves and to the world around them that they were progressive and modern, they were careful to speak in English with one another. Not only during school time, as English is after all the language of instruction in the country, but some of them spoke English even outside school. Provided they had access to a television set in working order, they chose to watch television series from the US or from Australia (which were imported cheaply by the state broadcaster); they tuned into the English language state radio broadcaster, which played mostly foreign music; and they certainly did not listen to the state radio focussing on the cultures and music of the majority population in general and the politics of the ruling party in particular.

These youngsters, popularly referred to as the "nose brigade" for their use of English and their apparent embracing of Western culture in general and Western popular cultures in particular, both illustrate the globalized media world and the status of languages

therein, as Stig Hjarvard discussed with examples from Denmark,<sup>2</sup> and the problems inherent in global media and cultures, as Stefan Jonsson elaborates on in his paper. These youngsters gather the stuff of their dreams, as do many of us, from the media, among other places. The products of global popular culture are central as points of orientation. Journalism, however, is chiefly at the mercy of the government's political regulations. The saying that 'news equals propaganda' is unfortunately a sad reality in Zimbabwe as it is in many other parts of the world. The global, on the other hand, might become a resource for those who have access to it, albeit in an uneven power relationship between the Zimbabwean youth and the global media products and their owners.

The youth from Harare fundamentally break with the image of Africans we in Scandinavia may easily get from the media reports of war and catastrophes in the so-called Third World, and through the silence around events and people not embraced by the Western media logic's definition of newsworthiness. This is the starting point for Stefan Jonsson when he quotes the question "Why all these full-page spreads from Sydney?". When four casualties in a brushfire in Australia get more media coverage in Swedish news media than do ten thousand people who lost their lives in an earthquake in India, this is an illustration of news values and culturally sensitive priorities in practice. Unfortunately, the fact that a person from the West is worth more than one from the Third World when represented in Western media output is manifested time and again. Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge showed this in their article on the structure of foreign news as early as 1965.<sup>3</sup> Jonsson comments that globalization entails that the news reporting of Western media corporations appears as universal values. This is an established truth that fortunately must be partly modified. The Western media logic has admittedly become the norm in a great proportion of the world's news media, but the manner in which the news is framed and in turn interpreted in various cultures around the world nonetheless leaves room for local variations. Thanks to the interpretive powers of the readers or audience which provide for considerable interpretive leeway, and certain attempts at providing news according to different criteria, the picture might be pessimistic, but not only so. The slantedness of the global news system to which Jonsson draws our attention, may on closer inspection be less globalizing and less standardized than the impressions we get from our position. To people in totalitarian regimes, national government restrictions on their lives and their media seem to hold more apparent threats. On the other hand, this should not make us close our eyes to the state of matters and comment in resignation that we are too small agents on the global actors' great stage.

Jonsson discusses various developments within the field of cultural globalization. The first tendency he points to is the worldwide triumph of US mass cultures. The Harare youths may at first glance seem to confirm this tendency. They have seemingly adopted Western culture or more specifically certain parts thereof. Although they seem to be as familiar with parts of Western popular culture as are many Scandinavians, there is a fundamental difference. The youths in Harare adopt certain elements of Western popular culture and appropriate it. They do so knowing well that their social, political and cultural possibilities for changing their life accordingly are meagre. The dreams with which they engage in popular culture will remain dreams for the majority of them.

Jonsson's second example is taken from the world of art and cartography, namely the art exhibition of Alfredo Jaar in Oslo, where the visitor is given a passport and a map case containing pictures of the culture's and the world's marginalized others. Jonsson argues that Alfredo Jaar opens the doors to the worlds of the marginalized others chiefly

by arguing that the visitor becomes aware that he or she *does not see* the others. This might well be correct, but we are still talking about the rest becoming available to people in the West. What about turning the perspective around? The image of the West in the Third World is not constructed only through media images of wars, catastrophes and conflict, but rather through the products of popular culture, the sweatshops of global capitalism, and the temptation of buying the West's capital products sold in the Third World. The products are mixed with images of freedom, democracy and political double standards, and such dreams sell well. When the Danish arts festival "Images of Africa" in 1996 published the book *Images of the West*, they turned the gaze around: Instead of merely providing the Danes with alternative images of Africa, the festival published a collection of texts and images that attempt to show how the West is viewed from Africa. The book *Images of the West* is a reminder that the West is a composite concept and an invitation for the West to question its self-assumed position and reputation in the world.<sup>4</sup> The question remains, however, whether art exhibitions such as that of Jaar, or the *Images of Africa* collection, contribute to a widening of vision within journalism. Jonsson argues that these two worlds are able to fruitfully expand one another, and that art compensates the "blinds spots" of journalism. In my opinion, such cross-fertilization must come from within journalistic practice itself, or from the media in general, such as through products of popular culture.

Jonsson presents the hypothesis that the "standardisation of mass media journalism and the politicisation of art is interdependent". Many might agree that the global media logics are based on a White, male, Western and property-owning subject position. This subject position is suitable both to the implicit narrator and the implicit listener in the mass media geared to a global audience. But, is this not a bit too simple? Research has suggested that the so-called global appeal is overly emphasized, as different people in different cultures read different things into the same media text. We did perhaps not get wall-to-wall Dallas, but we did almost get wall-to-wall Big Brother and other programme formats that are bought and sold as commodities on the global market before being adapted to the main cultures in the markets in which they will be broadcast. Furthermore, there are formats developed in less mainstream cultures and subsequently exported. Let me merely mention telenovelas or Indian film production in so-called Bollywood. It may be a problem that Jonsson, to such a considerable extent, moves the potential to comment on the state of affairs from the mainstream media and over to the special-interest media for so-called narrowly defined interests. This is some of what I find problematic in Jonsson's otherwise inspiring paper, and this constitutes one of the points on which I do not share his pessimism. Is popular culture a failure in such a way of thinking? There are, on the other hand, several examples of popular culture with liberating potential that Jonsson also could have noticed. He does not. Why? May I suggest that the aesthetics argument loses its potential when moved out of the realm of the special interest media? Will the aesthetics aspect maintain its critical potential when not only purporting to fertilize journalism, but rather to influence popular culture?

Local, ethnic or national movements that offer resistance to the globalization processes of culture are also, in my opinion, central counter-forces. But it is important to caution that not all that is local is resistance, and that not all resistance is local.

The fourth tendency within globalization can, according to Jonsson, be found within the aesthetic field and within contemporary cultural theory. He argues, however, that this has not yet made its way into journalism, as people and events are there assessed according to the imagined centre. Aesthetics seem to be Jonsson's answer to saving

journalism from unidirectionality, standardizing, and from repeating the gestures of those in power. This will, according to Jonsson, point to new conflict areas and content forms that will influence journalism to come. Today's journalism, in Jonsson's words, is equal to soap opera, crime drama, war films or pure fiction. Although I read Jonsson's text with great interest, I sometimes wonder where he, with his considerable grasp of postcolonial theories, is keeping his knowledge of media in other parts of the world. Certain kinds of journalism, for instance in Zimbabwe's government-controlled mass media, may be pure fiction, but that is, I will argue, a fiction that does not exist isolated in its own universe. Nor is it a fiction that moves from journalism to the art gallery. This is a kind of fiction that concurs with tear gas, lack of food, lack of money and appropriate money notes, and ill treatment because one bought the wrong newspaper.

Jonsson argues that it is politicized art that will constitute the counter-force to the global capital's unidirection of journalism. This is an interesting point. The question remains whether these two processes are active within separate fields of action. Youth in Harare who watch American fictional television series seem not to care whether art comments on the shortcomings of the media to which they have access. Hence, Jonsson argues about the media in a very narrow sense of the word, and his arguments on journalism's rendering of reality are limited in the global media flow. It is therefore rather problematic when he discusses the media as if they equal journalism, and the media as if they only exist as they do in the West. Journalism in the pocket of global capital is only one side of the coin.

The myth of global media's so-called view from nowhere must be called a bluff once and for all. But it is also a myth, in my opinion, that journalism will be improved thanks to the influence of aesthetics and politicized art. It is not necessarily a bad thing that journalism seems to equal soap opera, crime drama or war films. What is key is having structures on which to hinge this kind of journalism. Pure fiction radically breaks with the ideal of journalism, but the idea that journalism is mirroring reality is a myth only journalists believe.

Last, but not least, I find it problematic that Jonsson refers to the globalization of the culture as if globalization is a homogeneous singular entity, despite its theoretical complexity and wide empirical focus.

## Summing up

Jonsson sees aesthetics and art as counter-weights to tendencies of uni-directionality within the globalization processes. The problem, as I see it, is that these tendencies seem to operate under other kinds of premises, paradoxically primarily available first and foremost for those who may not necessarily need them: people who *already* are tuned into the multicultural diversity where various media and art styles interact and fruitfully influence one another. The people outside these inner circles are then left out once again.

Art, literature and film develop modes of presentation that are subsequently brought into journalism and the mass media, Jonsson argues. Popular cultures as independent agents are also a vital power source, and Jonsson seems to overlook the field of popular culture outside the capitalist popular culture between high culture (i.e. art, literature and film) and journalism. At the same time, the individual's interpretive activities in dealing with popular cultures, art, literature or journalism are part of the ongoing global processes of change. They continue to have, on the other hand, creative and counter-weighting potentials.

## Notes

1. For instance *De andra* (1993), *Andra platser* (1995), and *Världens centrum* (2001).
2. Stig Hjarvard's plenary paper at the Kristiansand conference.
3. Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge, 1965: "The Structure of Foreign News. The Presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus Crises in Four Norwegian Newspapers", *Journal of Peace Research*, No. 1, 1965, Oslo: International Peace Research Institute.
4. *Images of Africa* (1996) published by the "Images of Africa" festival in cooperation with Baobab Books, Zimbabwe.

