Constructing the global corporation and corporate constructions of the global: a picture essay

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Abstract

The constructive potential of text and numbers is now fairly well established in the accounting literature. In this paper we explore further the constructive potential of images as part of the mediascape of annual reports. We seek to do this in and through pictures and by establishing a tension between image and text by placing quotes from other sources throughout the picture essay. To frame the picture essay we re-present how corporations construct themselves as global entities and in doing so how they construct the global. © 2000 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Although some would maintain that the “crucial takeoff” period for globalization was the 1880s, it was in the 1980s that this term acquired a more urgent currency. During that decade, globalization became commonly used in intellectual, business, media and other circles (Robertson, 1990, p. 19). As one example, Business Week reported in 1991 that globalization was one of the pervading themes in annual reports that year, a theme that has persisted throughout the remainder of the decade. In this pictorial essay, we propose that annual reports are one site for the representation and construction not only of the global corporation but also of the “global.” The global, as represented not only by pictures of the globe, but also by flows of money, people and technologies, is constructed as a conceptual arena in which multi-national business can be conducted.

The terms, globalization and internationalization, have been used in a variety of ways with a multiplicity of inflections. Early debates on globalization emphasized the process of homogenizing local cultures and societies into a singular global culture, a process often described as the Americanization or commoditization of the globe (Hamelink, 1983; Gans, 1985; Iyer, 1988; Matte- lart, 1983). However, by the late 1980s, concerns about homogenization were being eclipsed by arguments proposing that the process of globalization is one in which “[c]ultures pile up on top of each other in heaps without obvious organizing principles” (Featherstone, 1995, p. 6), an emphasis upon a multiplicity of cultures each uniquely translating or indigenizing global influences. be they, from America, Europe, Japan, Russia or from a closer proximity (Barber, 1987; Feld, 1988; Hannertz, 1987, 1989; Ivy, 1988; Nicoll, 1989). In this respect, Appadurai (1990, p. 295) argues that theories of homogenization have failed to consider “…that at least as rapidly as forces from various
Abstraction today is no longer that of the map ... simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory—PRECESSION OF SIMULACRA—it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 2.)
metropolises are brought into new societies, they tend to become indigenized in one or another way: this is true of music and housing styles as much as it is true of science and terrorism, spectacles and constitutions”.

From the perspective of heterogeneity, how does one explore the multidimensionality of shifting politics, cultures and economies around the globe? Within the context of this essay, how can one begin to theorize representations and constructions of the global? Appadurai (1990) offers five dimensions of global cultural flow. These are ethnoscapes (the movement of people and the changing relationships between people and cultures), technoscapes (the increasingly rapid movement of high and low technologies as well as mechanical and informational ones), and finance-scapes (the “blinding speed” at which global capital moves in and around the world). These scapes are not discrete as “Money flows, political possibilities and the availability of both low and highly skilled labor” interconnect with technology, allowing for the construction of a multiplicity of globalized cultures (Appadurai, 1990).


This is the very point of the map, to present us not with the world we can see, but to point toward a world we might know. (Wood, 1992, p. 12.)
These three flows are further represented and constructed through the images produced in and by mediascapes and ideoscapes. These two scapes carry different nuances than the relatively more concrete flows of people, money and technologies. Mediascapes produce and disseminate image of
the globe through media such as “newspapers, magazines, television stations and film production studios” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 299). Information and communication technologies allow the dissemination of these images, so that audiences with little direct experience of the represented world are “more likely to construct ‘imagined worlds’ which are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects” (p. 299) In turn, ideoscapes suggest how these image contain ideological overlays such as freedom rights and democracy and how these also move around the globe. However, even these ideas are indigenized as different nation states organize their political and social arrangements around them.

Thus, the global cultural flows emanating from multiple points around the globe intermingle in varied and unpredictable ways as they are indigen-


The relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. it is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other’s terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying ... . (Foucault, 1973, p. 9.)

[We] set up the world up as a picture... [and arrange] it before an audience as an object on display to be viewed, investigated and experienced. (Gregory, 1994, p. 34.)
ized (i.e. accepted, rejected, resisted and translated) at specific locales. In this respect, Appadurai’s choice of the common suffix, scapes, is fortuitous for this essay. Not only does it possess a strong visual sense in that it places emphasis on perspective(s), but it also avoids connotations of directionality and determinism. His use of the term, scape, suggests both the importance of multiple points of view and the impossibility of a single point of view. He offers a Ptolemaic grid through which we may view the world simultaneously from different vantagepoints rather than imposing upon


Although the grid that Ptolemy proposed, and those that Mercator later imposed, share the mathematical uniformity of the Renaissance perspective grid, they do not share the positioned viewer, the frame, and the definition of the picture as a window through which an external viewer looks. On these accounts the Ptolemaic grid, indeed cartographic grids in general, must be distinguished from, not confused with, the perspectival grid. The projection is, one might say, viewed from nowhere. Nor is it to be looked through. It assumes a flat working surface. (Alpers, 1983, p. 138.)
In effect to construct an identity, to know who you are, you need to know who you are not, and the material excluded or confined to the boundaries may continue to exhibit a fascination and allure, and to stimulate desires. (Featherstone, 1991, p. 82.)
us a single Euclidean point of observation.

The purpose of this paper is not to trace these flows nor to trace their effects, but rather to consider the ways in which annual reports operate as mediascapes and ideoscapes and thereby represent and construct the global through images and image/texts of people, technologies, and money. We regard annual reports as mediascapes and ideoscapes in that they deliberately seek, through various textual, visual and numerical strategies, to invite or incite the viewing subject to accept, as real, corporations representations both of themselves as global entities and of the global. In this respect, they offer possibilities for constructing “imagined worlds” and locating the corporation within them. Yet, annual reports, which encompass a gallery of images and texts, not only represent global cultural flows but also overlay them with ideological meanings. In annual reports, the global is often seen as an opportunity for expanding markets, as a site for capital investment and a source of increased earnings. For example, in annual reports, we find phrases such as:

The New Market Order is global. (Northern Telecom, 1991, p. 16.)

[T]he Company’s joint ventures and acquisitions around the world have leveraged MEMC’s capital resources as well as its ability to get products to customers. (MEMC, 1995, p. 12.)

We have a leading presence in the three largest health care markets in the world and now have the critical mass to take advantage of huge opportunities in developing markets. (Pharmacia and Upjohn, 1995, p. 19.)

Just what can be expected or understood from photographs? I will argue that, culturally, not very much can be understood about Navajo from photographs of them. But certainly something can be understood of photographers, of the various ways the West privileges photographs, and of the way Navajo graphically appear to the West. Photographs of Navajo mirror the West’s desire and ambition, its obsession and pathology ... (Faris, 1996, p. 12.)

Pitney Bowes is ready for the opportunities that will be created in the expanding international markets of the 1990s. (Pitney Bowes, 1989, p. 12.)

In the following picture essay, we have arranged the images into various scapes, three of which are borrowed from Appadurai; namely, ethnoscape (Plates 8–13), technoscape (Plates 14–18) and financescape (Plates 19–22). In the case of financescapes we have included the flow of products around the world which in turn generates cash flows. We have also added a fourth—the landscape (Plates 1–7) in order to better encompass the diversity of image/texts found in annual reports. In this essay, the landscape refers to the possibilities for represent-

Post-modernism ... operates as a Euro-American western hegemony, whose global appropriation of time-and-place inevitably proscribes certain cultures as ‘backward’ and marginal while coopting to itself certain of their cultural ‘raw’ materials. Post-modernism is then projected onto these margins as normative, as a neo-universalism to which ‘marginal’ cultures may aspire, and from which certain of their more forward-looking products might be appropriated and ‘authorised’. (Adam & Tiffen, 1991, p. viii.)
ing and manipulating the physical terrain. This scape includes maps and images of the globe as well as citiscapes, monuments and tourist sites that are often seen synonymous with particular places around the world. Although we have organized these in ages and the accompanying quotes into these categories, we recognize that the images faun in annual reports do not always fit neatly into a single scape. For example, Plate 10 could as easily be defined as a technoscape and Plate 3 could also have been a finance or productscape.

This paper is not only about showing pictures. It is also about the representational and constructive qualities of images by themselves or in combination with text. The constructive potential of texts and numbers is now fairly well established within the accounting literature. Borrowing from a variety of literary and social theories, the articulable in accounting has been and continues to be interrogated and deconstructed as to its role in representing and constructing rather than merely reflecting the real. Only recently has the visual been included in the accounting literature. However, there is a long and lively debate in the visual arts literature emphasizing the “constructed” rather than “found” quality of images (Jay, 1996, p. 3).

Curiously, visual theory itself has until recently been largely informed by what has been termed the linguistic turn in philosophy and social theory (Mitchell, 1994). Within this turn, the tools of semiotic discourse and textual analysis already found in the accounting literature have also been applied to images. Mitchell (1994, p. 14) comments that the visual arts are now regarded as “sign systems informed by conventions that paintings, photographs, sculptural objects and architectural monuments are fraught with ‘textuality’ and


Leaps, discontinuities, regressions, and deferred action—I can think of no more appropriate description of the way we receive the contemporary image environment. The meanings that govern us are not arrived at by “a simple one-way road.” (Burgin, 1996, p. 36.)
Computer-aided design, synthetic holography, flight simulators, computer animation, robotic image recognition, ray tracing, texture mapping, motion control, virtual environment helmets, magnetic resonance imaging, and multispectral sensors are only a few of the techniques that are relocating vision to a plane severed from a human observer. (Crary, 1992, p. 1.)
‘discourse’”. However, in the past few years, the acceptance of language as the master metaphor for interpreting all forms of representation has been challenged and an effort has been made to establish a “pictorial turn” based on emerging models of spectatorship and visuality. Rather than abandoning or abolishing language, proponents of the “pictorial turn” seek to open up a space between image and text or between the discursive and figural in order to explore the complex interplay between the visual and articulable (the seeable and sayable) or between “visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies and figurality” (Miller, 1994, p. 14).


Working up a sweat is no longer in style .... [but] hard labor has not been eliminated. It merely has been shifted out of sight to ... other countries where wages are low and unions nonexistent. (Bolton, 1989, p. 261.)
The relationship of image and text is particularly important for annual reports. The images often are either surrounded by or overlaid with text. Such combinations of text and image are common. Indeed, Victor Burgin (1982, p. 51) states that “we rarely see a photograph in use which is not accompanied by language”. In image/texts, the relationship between the word and the image is inescapable. These mixed media invite the viewing subject to read the image and decipher or interpret its (often intentional though never fixed or unitary) meaning, translating the picture into words. However, a relation between images and words is not limited to image/texts. As Burgin (1982 p. 51) notes, “even the uncaptioned art photograph is invaded by language in the very moment it is looked at”. As we attempt to interpret its meaning, associate it


... if, in their turn, visibilities are never hidden, they are none the less not immediately seen or visible. They are even invisible so long as we consider only objects, things or perceptible qualities, and not the conditions which open them up. And if things close up again afterwards, visibilities become hazy or blurred to the point where ‘self-evident’ phenomena cannot be grasped by another age .... (Deleuze, 1988, p. 57.)
My reading tells the story of these little calculations, at the moment when the threat of the Incalculable surges forth, when the crack breaks open. Then, there will be elsewhere. (Cixous, 1994, p. 31.)
with other images or describe it, language comes
into play.

We have arranged the pictures and quotations
in the manner we have, not so much to impose a
singular viewpoint [although we inevitably have
imposed some viewpoint(s)], as to disrupt the
connections between the discursive and figural in
annual reports. This allows for alternative connec-
tions to be forged between image and text as well as
the making of alternative representations and con-
structions of global corporations and the global.

In order not to impose too firmly our own
viewpoint(s), but unable to remain entirely silent,
we limit our commentary on the images to the
following few paragraphs. Our focus will be on the
constructive potential of images and on the ten-
sion between homogeneity and heterogeneity in
annual reports.

The constructive potential of images is most
starkly demonstrated in the series of images we
define as landscapes. In almost all of the images,
the world is being worked upon from the outside.
The corporations stand in a world apart from the
global, measuring it, (Plate 1), using it as a game
board (Plate 2), remapping and rearranging it
(Plates 4 and 6), and packaging it (Plate 3). Even
in Plate 7, which is a more gentle, even romantic,
representation of the world, it is nevertheless
opened up and presented for view from the out-
side. The exception is the citiscape of Tokyo at
night (Plate 5). In annual reports Tokyo is almost
always represented at night; as if suggesting that
the Orient never sleeps. In the use of citiscapes, as
well as monuments such as the Eiffel Tower or Big
Ben in other annual reports, the designers rely on
stereotypes to represent the foreignness of the
image both suggesting the global reach of the cor-
poration and constructing the global in terms of
these stereotypes. In this respect, the world is at
once both familiar and knowable.


The Process of Globalization suggests simultaneously two images of culture. The first image entails the extension outwards of a
particular culture to its limits, the globe. Heterogeneous cultures become incorporated and integrated into a dominant culture
which eventually covers the whole world. The second image points to the compression of cultures. Things formally held apart are
now brought into contact and juxtaposition. Cultures pile on top of each other in heaps without obvious organization principles.
(Featherstone, 1995, p. 6.)
Ethnoscapes rely heavily on stereotypes. The images in this series connote foreignness through difference and in this sense corporations apparently represent (but also inevitably construct) indigenous cultures. However, it is the loaf of French bread and the sign “BOULANGERIE” (Plate 8), the pagoda atop the new Beijing railway station (Plate 10), the colorful dresses (Plate 11), the Japanese windows and table (Plate 12), and the pushcart and bicycle transport (Plate 13) that...
place these images in a foreign or global context. The people in the images, in terms of their appearance and apparent well-being, are quite homogeneous despite their different ethnicities. Indeed, all of these people might be seen in any major US metropolis. Only in Plate 9 do we see a
more emphatic difference. Corporations tread a careful path between constructing and effacing difference or between heterogeneity (the construction of indigenous cultures) and homogeneity (the construction of a single global culture) in the construction of themselves as global corporations and of the global itself.

The effacement of difference is repeated in one of the technoscapes. In the case of the oil refinery (Plate 14) only the title, pointed out by the diagonal line of the crane’s boom, informs the viewing subject that this is a non-US investment. Technology is offered as a means of effacing difference. Otherwise in this series, technology envelopes the world (Plate 17), captures and re-presents it (Plate 15), molecularizes and universalizes it (Plate 16), and transforms it from the analogue into the digital (Plate 17). The world is worked upon and transformed; in this case, by technology.

In the financescapes difference is furthereffaced. In Plate 21, except for the Japanese signs, this could be a supermarket anywhere in the world. The image suggests the homogenizing forces of the global markets, with only a token gesture to the possibility of indigenization. In the financescapes, the notion of working upon the world is also reinforced. The world is transformed into a “Global Washing Machine” (Plate 22), translated into currency (Plates 21 and 22), and inscribed upon (Plate 19).

References


