

Approaching the Archipelago in-between: Archipelagicity, Scale and Comparativism

Francisco C. Marques
University of Lisbon
(Portugal)

Abstract:

This essay proposes a conceptual reading of the archipelagic applied to three different objects: *The Song of Songs*, Gilles Deleuze's *Desert Islands*, and Christo and Jeanne-Claude's large-scale installation *Surrounded Islands*, analyzing them through the lens of the comparativist method. We will demonstrate how specific modes of reading the fluid spaces in-between the constitutive elements of these works and their respective compound forms can be transversely applied. Our attention will focus primarily on the nature of the archipelagic, which we will understand to be fragmentary, contingent and fluid. By thinking *with* the archipelago, we will question the mechanics by which the archipelagic facilitates mediation between different intra and extra-textual dimensions, effectively changing the scales at which reading occurs, fluidly, in the viscous spaces between what is social and what is geological.

Keywords: Archipelagicity, Comparativism, Fluidity, Islands, Viscosity

Introduction:

“Archipelagoes”, a noun most used in reference to define clusters of islands and islets, can be used as analogue for a methodology of complex thought concerned with ideas and entities which embody and tell of manifestations of the *congregative*, in as many forms as possible. They not only are a theatre of the happening of congregative events – as was the case for the Pacific archipelagoes during World War II as a ‘theatre of war’-, but also, and most significantly, the embodiment, both material and conceptual,

of the networks of interchangeability and movement that map the various and multi-scaled happenings of rhizomatic relationships between parts. In this sense, we are invited to transpose the image of the archipelago way beyond the watery limitations that the science of geography primarily conceives while still grounding, or *earthing*, theoretical analyses in historical and material constructs. Thinking archipelagicity as an epistemological tool with practical implications for the practice of comparativism is, therefore, the goal of this analysis of ours. To do so, we must start by considering our categories, repositioning ourselves before the theoretical complexities that arise from common understandings of certain *poetic*, *geological* and *geosocial* problems brought about by the objects of study, archipelagic bodies which are, ultimately, as put by Lanny Thompson (2017), “geosocial locations for the production of knowledge” (p.68). The essay is divided into four parts. The first three are concerned with the question “what is an archipelago?” and will serve to articulate the archipelagic through three distinct dimensions of its happening in three distinct case studies: firstly, through *The Song of Songs*, we will look into the mechanics of particulars in order to understand how to deal with the dynamic complexities between isolates and complex objects; secondly, we will wonder about how archipelagicity can be conveyed in thought, for which we will be directly dealing with a small essay by Gilles Deleuze, “*Causes et raison des îles désert*”, translated into English by Michael Taormina as “Desert Islands”; finally, we will wonder about how, and at which scale, is the body of the archipelagic experienceable. For this third part, we will focus on the specific case of *Surrounded Islands*, a 1980 large-scale installation by the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude. We will conclude with the suggestion that new modes of *viscous* readership must emerge for comparativism to fully grasp the extent of the archipelagic dimensions of its objects of study.

1 – The mechanics of particulars:

The Song of Songs, from now on referred to as *The Song-*, is a poetic work usually divided into eight chapters, a number which may vary according to the edition at hand (Robinson, 1902, p. 193). We can identify in the narrative at least two main characters, the Lovers, Shulamite and Solomon, besides a choir and a short reference to third characters identified as Shulamite’s brothers. What is relevant for us, when enquiring about the

archipelagic quality of this literary object, is not necessarily its narrative but the particularity of its ever-pending fragmentation. This is to say that *The Song* exists in the breakable limits of its own interpretation, and is not, therefore, a hermeneutically impenetrable block of text, a closed system. In fact, it works around various interpretative possibilities, through which a series of *references* and *referents* take their place (and time) autonomously from each other and from the narrative. Each passage, each verse, assumes a mediator role of its own, connecting themselves to other passages and other verses, facilitating a constant and vibrant reorganization of the text which could be taken up to a virtually infinite potency. Like a rhizome, the biblical poem is circumscribed around *multiplicities* which reflect as one (or more) unified working system(s), and it is this group of signifying small units, the text's *verse-islands*, that pend in meaning from one to the other, interchanging values and ultimately accumulating and reorganizing themselves depending on the reader who experiences the text. As Julia Kristeva (1987), in her inescapable reading of *The Song*, points out: "lyrical meaning is contained in each of the minimal elements of the text, which thus condenses, in microcosmic fashion, the totality of the message" (p.92). In this sense, each element is simultaneously each and every other referent which may complement it. The title itself is the first enunciative border and, at the same time, the *archipelagic scope* of the text as a whole, its interpretative and identifiable vitality. The possessive through which *The Song* becomes "of" Solomon, to whom it is traditionally attributed, reformulates readership, enlarging it to the maximum extent of all possible "Solomons": the king is simultaneously poet, and, eventually, will also become the lover, via the subtle associations to an apricot-tree (*The Song*, 2:3), a gazelle (2:9), wine (4:10), the tower of David (4:4), and, ultimately, Shulamite herself. This ontological complexity reveals a territory in which individual identity, that of a particular Solomon, will always pend to change, pushed by the accumulation of meaning, constantly redefining the subjacent ontology in a process that works *ad infinitum*: as put by Kristeva, "the protagonist constitutes himself (...) as lover, as he speaks to the other, or as he describes himself for the other" (p.93). Solomon is, therefore, a multiplicity of Solomonic *particulars*, units moving around, expressed and impressed, revealing and revealed in codes of meaning that pend, always, to the archipelagic-scapes in which they cluster and from which they come. These particulars, nonetheless, will need an observer, a signifier, a third element with which they establish a

communicative relationship in an attempt to organize chaos. This third element, the reader, in our case, will be the functioning compiler, the hermeneutic vector whose function it is to agglutinate dispersed meaning and confer possible unicity to the text. As with the poetic fragment, the constitutive elements of an archipelago, whether they are fixed in particular geographies – or *voices*, like that of Solomon –, are, primarily, dynamic, fluctuant and actively invested in the interchangeability of meaning. Thus, by *comparing* the lover to a gazelle, the enunciative Solomonic unit, such as [Lover-Shulamite], will be composing a constellation, a product of the archipelagic, itself composed by the units [Lover] and [Gazelle], amongst others. This constellation will also be a unit of significance, one which can be conceptualized by the relationships emerging between it and the other particles of meaning, as for example [[Lover-Gazelle]-[Shulamite]]. The constitutive units of this assemblage, whether they are geographically enforced, or molded by historic sociability, converge in the congregative internal dynamics of the archipelagic body that is, in this case, the text. While the islands of meaning that characterize the narrative, when isolated, will still emanate a certain knowledge of themselves, filled with significant, historic, extra and pre-textual associations, [Gazelle-in-*The Song*] will be at the same time, an archipelago-type ontology, filled with its own nets of meaning and associated universes, which will incessantly report to a previous knowledge of its own, with its own narratological value. The archipelagic is the open quality of particulars to being repeatedly pasted over other units of meaning and eventually engulfed into other archipelagic bodies, such as another text, speech or practice, interchanging endemic qualities with qualities of other units, continuously feeding into the processes of signification of the experiencing of the world. As Clark and Yusoff (2017) tell us when reflecting on the nature of geologic strata:

[T]here are [...] three main groupings of strata, each with their own ‘concrete’ historical formation: the inorganic or geological, the organic or biological, and the ‘alloplastic’ stratum of human culture and language. However, this too is a simplification, for they speak of multiple substrata, and – more importantly – of endless possible combinations between materials that compose the various strata.
(p.13)

In *The Song*, which has plausibly been born from millennia of adaptations of certain fertility rituals from Mesopotamia which went into circulation within different oral traditions of the Middle East (Kristeva 1987, p.86), the archipelagic and its contingencies, sociological and geological in nature, led to the existence of the networks of symbols that characterized spatiality (and meta-spatiality) in the text. The place of the textual happening, that of the stratum, is built from the mnemonic recoveries of previous places and is, by itself, also a complex of belongings *to* and *of* the place: the body of the archipelagic is a variation of memory, simultaneously a place of the signifying agent and another in which it serves as a reportage plan, scenario and/or metaphoric context.

2 – Thinking with the archipelagic:

In a short essay written around 1974, Gilles Deleuze (2002), expands on the conceptualization of what is a “desert island”. He starts by postulating that there are “two kinds of islands”, *continental* and *oceanic*, an information he directly takes from an enlarged community of scholars, the “Geographers” (p.9). He goes on to say:

Dreaming of islands [...] is dreaming of pulling away, or being already separate, far from any continent, of being lost and alone – or it is dreaming of starting from scratch, recreating, beginning anew. (p.10)

By “dreaming” of *desert* islands, Deleuze is re-engaging abstract processes of thought with observable manifestations of reality, *earthing* thought back into those phenomena themselves. Dreaming pushes thought into tracing each desert plane, while the desert that dreaming helps to cross, is a desert of hermeneutics, of what is opaque in language, which “some humans [...] make [...] sacred ” (p.10). Island-forms, in their turn, are nodes in the archipelagic rhizome which operate as *loci* of readable – that is to say, *relatable* – significance: “[t]hese two islands, continental and originary, reveal a profound opposition between ocean and island” (p.9). It is the “opposition between ocean and island”, not that between “*continental*” and “*oceanic*” that interests Deleuze when approaching the archipelagic of everyday contexts. The opposition between ocean and island is analogue to the opposition

between himself, the theoretician, and his partaking in the observed, but it also is an opposition of matter, between polar *physical states*. When he says that “the sea is on top of the earth, taking advantage of the slightest sagging in the highest structures” (p.9) he is incorporating into his “dreaming” what is *sensible* about the mechanics of fluids on Earth, as well as the fragile and contingent nature of solid structures. He follows this by saying that “the earth is still there, under the sea, gathering its strength to punch through to the surface” (p.9), and here again his thought reminds the geologic scales of matter. This is a similar move as that which Jonathan Pugh (2013) has identified, in the footsteps of Godfrey Baldacchino’s “hint”¹, as “thinking with the archipelago”, a “tradition that has encouraged us to frame the world as a ‘world of islands’ rather than narrowly focus upon ‘islands of the world’” (p.12). In the same manner, the composite [[Gazelle]-in-[*The Song*]] conveys a complex of narratological materialities earthed back in a network of relations, prior to the text, between humans and language and between human-animals and the non-human animals which species is attempted by the noun “gazelle”, itself a linguistic representation of a scale between what is *meaningful* and *sensible* about reality. A reality that is not one where elements belong to the composite world, but, indeed, *become* it. Both *The Song*’s earth-bound *analogies* and Deleuze’s island-ocean *allegories* push the reader towards the outermost borders between thought and the concrete, only to reveal they never truly *are*, since neither are they there, nor are they true borders. By telling us that “the island is [...] that toward which one drifts; but [...] also the origin, radical and absolute” (p.10), Deleuze is pointing out that thought itself is never truly *isolatable* enough to be an eruptive expression of new beginnings, nor ever *continental* enough to bridge over the *oceanic distances* between one’s most intimate geographies and those of others. The archipelagic condition of both texts stems from the *in-betweenness* persisting in the crossover from and to materiality, practiced via poetics and theory. By mirroring this crossover, tensions between oceanic and islander types are not only expected, but they are needed, as much in thought, as in all comparativist endeavors. In the words of Nirvana Tanoukhi (2008), in a commentary about Kwame Anthony Appiah’s problematics of the post-colonial novel:

¹ Vide: Baldacchino, Godfrey. 2006. “Islands, Island Studies, Island Studies Journal”. *Island Studies Journal* 1, no.1: 3-18.

[A] scale-sensitive procedure — a procedure that “conceptualizes” by following — [...], carries significant consequences for the idea, method, and perhaps the ethics of comparison. (p.604)

This is a principle applicable both to the reading of cultural objects, as such, and to the reading of other spheres of the real, such as the geological. As stated by Elizabeth Grosz, in an interview with Nigel Clark and Kathrin Yusoff (2017):

It is a question of scale. [... A]t the level of, say, the ‘lived’ time of a geological element – the time it takes, for example, for a stalagmite to form – there is continuous, unpunctuated (even if interrupted and transformed) change (p.5).

Following certain scales of measuring the in-betweenness the material integrity of an object, a Nigerian sculpture, in Tanoukhi’s example, or the stalagmite in Grosz’s, and the magnitude of its readability, scales out the hermeneutic distance between what is abstract and what is concrete, much like when by “dreaming” with what is sensible at the scale of the geological, Deleuze dreams *with* islands. Even if, as per the functioning of disciplinary systems, when trying to comprehend the in-betweenness of two terms, Deleuze recurs to what Elizabeth Grosz (2008) calls “more or less stable expressions of chaos” (p.15) such as the vocabulary with which we codify knowledge, like that of geography, as it serves, at its own scale, to map the *strata of geosocial formations* (Clark & Yusoff 2017, p.6) that lay bare in time and space simultaneously. The archipelagic quality of (composed) objects must, therefore, be theoretically approached with a comparative will to understand the cosmology of very real transactions happening at a diversity of ranges and in a plenitude of distant, but co-existent, geosocial landscapes. Tracing the varying possibilities of scale is following the archipelagic and that which it brings about. The ethics of comparativism, in our moment in history, invite us to reconsider not only how we regard categories of otherness in the sphere of the globalized-political, but also how they can be regarded with some geosocial accuracy. Like Deleuze’s usage of analogy, we are invited to rethink the scales of time and space at which theory – in its etymological sense, meaning to contemplate, to perceive the observable – meets the concrete, and so, we may be able to learn to read fluidly with the oceans, the atmosphere, other water bodies, as well as larger-than-thought socio-affective abstractions analogue with very real hyper-objects, such as [the Cosmos] and [Climate Change].

3 – Experiencing with the archipelagic:

Surrounded Islands was a large-scale work installed between 1980 and 1983 in Biscayne Bay, Miami. Having as its centre a set of eleven uninhabited islands, created by anthropogenic deposits resulting from the urbanization around the bay, it attempted a reshaping of the landscapes, as well as highlighted the mesologies of the relationships that they sustained. The installation, which took three years to build and involved a lawsuit that reached the United States Supreme Court, consisted of an archipelago of eleven artificial, uninhabited urban islands around each of which were stretched 603,870 square meters of pink canvas.



*Surrounded Islands, Biscayne Bay, Florida, 1980-83.
Photograph by Wolfgang Volz*

The work transformed the place at the edge of the bay, reformulating it according to the scale of the materiality of its contexts. If, on the one hand, the disposition of the tarps around each of the islands expanded their territories, extending them 60 meters over the water, on the other hand, the floating condition of the material in which they were made (polypropylene) translated, into the code of what is solid, the dimensions of what is liquid in the middle, incorporating the dynamics of waves in its constitutive fabric. Its preparation involved recognizing the particularities not only of the bay's space, but also the properties of the natural elements with which it would deal. The engineering involved in the structures that supported them under the surface of the water, resorting to anchors, cables, etc., reproduced, in the tension they exerted on the fabric of the canvases, themselves representative

extensions of what is narratological in the islands of the bay (the uniqueness of the coastlines, which shapes these followed, for example), the geosocial particularities of what was submerged. In the same way that the integrity of the structure of the work depended on the three-dimensionality of the maritime territory for which it was designed, since, for example, the stability of the anchors depended on the stability of the soil on which they were based, being subject to unpredictable external factors, such as aggregation of biomass, or movements in deposits of sedimented urban waste, the patterns of movement expressed on the canvas also depended on the movement of navicular traffic over the water surface, in its occurrence as a place-between-places. This raises questions on the nature of non-solid space and movement as elemental parts in the understanding and experiencing of objects in the world. As Philip Steinberg (2013) puts it:

[O]bjects come into being as they move (or unfold) through space and time. Conversely, space ceases to be a stable background but a part of the unfolding. The world is constituted by mobility without reference to any stable grid of places or coordinates (160).

The work thus evidenced the existence of a primordial continuum between what is organic and inorganic, between what is human and what is geological, the geosocial continuum in which the archipelagic expresses itself. With this in mind, one could argue that the main contribution of *Surrounded Islands* was to have translated what is dynamic between the isolated bodies of the desert islands and the mesological complex of the bay, serving as a congregational plan for a series of different material forces acting within (and upon) each other. The islands and their own narratives, central elements of the installation, are individual parts of a single-multiple, constituent elements of a network of multimodal relationships. In the landscape complex of the bay, the islands break with the apparent hegemony of the body of water, disturbing its homogeneity and, in addition, due to their permanence, accentuating the dimension of time, especially when thought of in comparison with the navicular bodies we alluded to before. The islands are also landmarks of a spatiality that opposes, at the heart of the maritime environment, the fluid nature of water to the continentality of the surrounding urban area, necessarily based on the solidity of the earth. Nevertheless, *Surrounded Islands* subverts this opposition by manipulating the boundary

zones between each of the individually narrated units as well as those between states of matter. The polypropylene tarpaulins will therefore be frontier identities and ontological negatives where what is solid is only so because it is not liquid but being, nonetheless, an aspiration, a becoming-solid and a becoming-liquid, simultaneously X and Y, varying according to the scale of their experimentation and to the intensity of the vibration of the narratives and the codes of manifestation of each of the parts in the context of the whole system. The way in which different forces and reading voices converge in the same materiality, focusing not only on isolated elements, on their atomic integrity, but on the variability of a collective, gives them becoming. The archipelago will be simultaneously multiple and unified, congregational and atomistic, existing as such according to the framework in which the approximation scales fit when used to observe its strata. The geological analogy of the stratum is relevant insofar as it conveys, in addition to the palimpsestic expression of the accumulative process of matter on the fabric of the tarps (the paint, the effect of sunlight, or other) the expression of a rhizomatic compound, where an element is dependent on a previously layered materiality. The interpretive challenge lies in the application of the scale tool, and the way we think about it when approaching the nodes of emerging events in all dimensions of time and space. Thus, when we look for an epistemology of the archipelagic in the example of Christo and Jeanne, we find the representation of what is in fact a web of incident relationships both in the space of the bay and in the times of the process. Its isolatable parts exist in a phenomenological network of different degrees of territoriality, allowing an approach to the work as a living organism¹, in constant change, in a state of becoming. In this sense, understanding the archipelagic in the light of a single ontology would be a seismic exercise, given the myriad of phenomena in which this happens at any given moment. The bay, itself a hyper-object, in the case of *Surrounded Islands*, is the first place for the oceanic dimension of what is in potential and its liquidity. It is present and sustains each and every one of the constituent elements of the environment, present and future. To this extent, it is the

¹ Regarding the idea of what is “living”, Clark and Yusoff (2017) sustained that: “[E]quating materiality with the living or the life-like has much to do with the ways in which ontologies of more-than-human entanglement have sought to evidence their political relevance – and in particular with the imperative to unsettle and open what counts as politics” (15).

plane of what is yet to be codified, the *smooth maritime plane* where “the points are subordinated to the trajectory”, a space “filled by events or haecceities, far more than by formed and perceived things” (Deleuze & Guattari 2005, pp.478-479).

4 – Final appreciations: What does this mean for comparativism?

As we have tried to demonstrate with our analysis, the archipelagic is a model of relatability between the parts and the internal mesologies of objects of composite nature, and serves to facilitate the scaling of distance, difference and similarity. Having said this, how can comparativism use the archipelagic as a mode of reading? To classify the modes of reification of the archipelagic, comparativists must bring into their armory the lexicon of very distinctive modes of materiality, bridging continental and oceanic epistemics with a vocabulary that reflects the viscous¹ state of the in-between what is liquid and what is solid. In our examples, navigating the viscosity of the archipelagic manifested in exercises of scale which served to approach what was *sensible* in the inner worlds of the texts, whether that being [Love], in the form of [Solomon], thought, reproducing the scale of ocean dynamics on Earth, or movement itself, materialized in the constitutive structures of Christo and Jeanne’s installation. All this tells us that, while very helpful as a literary motive with both poetic and poietic value, the archipelago exists beyond its metaphoric quality, through specific historic materialities, continuously mapped on the structures of objects, both cultural and natural, and essentially concerned with the relational. An “archipelagic” (Thompson 2017, p.66) which reflects the viscous quality of the complexity of readable objects which can become useful to drive comparativism’s ethical imperative of mediating difference. By doing so, and notwithstanding the experimentalist and introductory character of this analyses, we have laid the basis for comparativist authorship, specific in time, exposed

¹ An interesting insight into viscosity as an expression of the oceanic dimensions of culture can be found in J.L. Jones’s words on her short essay from 2016 for the Los Angeles Review of Books: “It is worth mentioning that oil discourse has always yoked oil to the ocean, metaphorically and materially. On the material register, oil was supposed by 19th– century geologists [...] to have come from the organic matter in primordial oceans. And in the 19th century, the ocean was the site of the energy source that petroleum supplanted: whale oil.” [No Page] online source last accessed on January 23rd, 2023.

to historical and geosocial contingencies, to extend its conceptual landscape to include an archipelagic approach to experiencing the world, being drawn into reconceiving knowledge, creativity and ethics' relationships with what, in the fabric of the geosocial, is liquid.

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