

INTRODUCTION: CULTURE AS AN INTERFACE AND DIALOGUE

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The preparations of this issue started at an interdisciplinary conference of the KREAS project (Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World) at Charles University in May 2022. The key questions addressed by the conference, as well as in the articles in this issue, are those of the nature and status of present national and cultural identities, and of the possibilities of intercultural dialogue.

The urgency of these questions is greatly increased by the unprecedented acts of terrorism and genocide committed by the Russian army in Ukraine. The causes of the Russian aggression include the upsurge and radicalization of nationalism based on Russian Orthodox Christianity,¹ and its recent transformation into a militant ideology leading to violence and destruction unseen in Europe since World War II.

¹ Originally conceived as an “emancipatory narrative designed to remind the West that it is not the centre of the World” (Jindřich Toman, “Jakobson and Bohemia / Bohemia and the East,” *Jakobson entre l’Est et l’Ouest*, ed. Françoise Gadet and Patrick Sériot [Lausanne: Université de Lausanne, 1997] 237), the twentieth-century ideology of Russian/Soviet cultural identity is double-sided: on the one hand it deploys the discourse of “Eurasianism” representing the Russian/Soviet identity as a heterogeneous ethnic mixture of Slavic, Mongolian, Finnish, Turkish and Caucasian identities, on the other hand, it emphasizes Russian Orthodox Christianity as the principle of unity and continuity. See Robert J.C. Young, “Structuralism and the Prague Linguistic Circle Revisited,” *Prague English Studies and the Transformation of Philologies*, ed. Martin Procházka and Ondřej Pilný (Prague: Charles University Press, 2012) 129. For the wider and deeper historical context of the resurgence of Russian nationalism and its connection with Orthodox Christianity, see, e.g., Dimitry Pospelovsky, “Russian Nationalism and the Orthodox Revival,” *Religion in Communist Lands* 15, no. 3 (1987): 291-309.

The decisive impact of militant and aggressive nationalism on the present destabilization of global security implies particularly that nations face a crucial political and cultural challenge: replacing traditional concepts of identity based on mythology, exclusivity and sovereignty with new ones stemming from the plurality of identifications and richness of inter- and transcultural communication using dialogue. Apart from the direct military, economic and environmental threats, the necessity of this transformation of identities arises from the growing political and ethical divisions within individual countries resulting from the manipulative disinformation narratives spread via social networks.

Obviously, the present special issue cannot offer a political solution of this deep crisis. Its main purpose is to search for a different cultural paradigm posing an alternative to essentialist notions of national and ethnic identities. While these notions still refer to organicism, an approach emerging in the latter half of the eighteenth century and based on an analogy of “genius” / work of art / culture / nation with a plant and its growth as a model of the natural *organism*,² the paradigm resulting from the proposed transformation of identities is that of the *interface* – a device enabling the transmission of information from a system to another one, a notion of the systems theory and the theory of communication – both of these combined especially in computer science.³ In contrast to the last mentioned approach, cultural studies emphasize the *performative* character of the interface, its functioning as a “heterotelic model” discussed in this issue, or as specific “protocols,” narrative fictions connecting cultures across borders understood as “contact zones.”⁴

² For a useful survey of the later eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century organic theories, see M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and Critical Tradition* (1953) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) 57-70. For a recent analysis of the relationship between organicism and Romantic nationalism, see Joep Leerssen, “Notes toward a Definition of Romantic Nationalism,” *Romantik: Journal for the Study of Romanticisms* 2, no. 1 (2013): 9-35.

³ This approach can be exemplified by numerous studies, e.g., Manfred Broy, “A Theory of System Interaction: Components, Interfaces and Services,” *Interactive Computation: The New Paradigm*, ed. Dina Goldin, Scott A. Smolka and Peter Wegner (Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2006) 41-96.

⁴ On “protocols” in computer science, see, e.g., Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004). On the relationship between interfaces and protocols in computer science, see “Interfaces and Protocols,” *All About Wireless and Telecommunication*, 19 February 2011,

Most articles in this issue attempt to reconceptualize cultures as interfaces of transcultural communication, which engender dialogue and use fictions to enable and facilitate sharing knowledge, emotions, attitudes, beliefs and values. This transformation does not imply a loss of cultural identity, only a change of paradigm, which directs its understanding. Contrary to static, arborescent models of cultures as organisms, the *pragmatic* understanding of culture focuses on aspects like “emergence” and “recursivity” (discussed later in this issue), and on the *environmentalist* approach parallel to ecocriticism and complementing a nature-based and largely material notion of environment with a pragmatic understanding of culture as human-made habitable and sustainable surroundings.

The opening article of this issue on “Performative Models and Physical Fictions” draws from Pavel Drábek’s rich experience in theatre studies and practice of a teacher, director, dramaturg and librettist. Drábek combines theoretical reflections of epistemology and theatre performativity with the account of his recent project of “Arcadian Theatre,” a series of dramatic scenes deriving from the “heterotelic model” (a “open” model “repurposed” in its use) of Arcadia following a well-known Renaissance pastoral novel by Sir Philip Sidney. Drábek argues that the “use of scenographic environments with their [...] spaces and performance objects” in stage productions can generate “performative models and *physical fictions* capable of engendering novel ecologies with their

<http://allaboutwirelesstelecommunication.blogspot.com/2011/02/interfaces-and-protocols.html>.

As regards narrative fictions, see Martin Procházka, “From Boundaries to Interfaces: Autopoietic Systems and the ‘Ontology of Motion,’” *Devouring One’s Own Tail: Autopoiesis in Perspective*, ed. Vojtěch Kolman and Tomáš Murár (Prague: Karolinum, 2022) 79: “The main means of generating protocols in cultural exchange are generally known fictions – narratives using symbols and myths –, which, among others, enable the transmission of emotions or value criteria.”

The term “contact zones” was coined by Marie Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992) to describe spaces of “interactive, improvisational dimensions of encounters [...] copresence, interaction, interlocking understanding and practices” (7). Pratt’s characterization of “contact zones” defines them as spaces of cultural dialogue, which does not have a generalized form and can be seen in performative terms as “functional approximation” (André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech* [1964], trans. Anna Bostock Berger [Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993] 306). Instead of the relationship between “the maker” and “the material employed” analyzed by Leroi-Gourhan (*Gesture and Speech* 306), Wolfgang Iser focuses on the relationship of individual participants of the dialogue (“Smyslem toho, co děláme, je dialog” [Dialogue is the Meaning of All We Do], an interview with Olga Lomová, *Literární noviny*, no. 19 [9 May 2006]: 15).

autonomous epistemologies and ethics." The article demonstrates how these fictions, defined as "possible worlds that take place in the shared presence" of the performance, establish "[t]heatre's empirical basis," which "enables an ostensive interface that does not necessitate language for interaction," and "allows for a genuine *dia-logue*, an encounter between different (*dia-*) outlooks and epistemologies (*-logos*)."

In the following contribution, "Challenging Communicative Cultural Competence: Culture as an Emergent Phenomenon," Martin Štefl focuses on teaching intercultural communication to students at higher education institutions. He shows how the understanding of culture "as emergent phenomenon," pioneered by Clifford Geertz, Eric Gans and Wolfgang Iser, can challenge the "static and essentialised cultural models" of Michael Byram and especially Geert Hofstede, massively used in contemporary teaching practice. What the teaching of English for Specific Purposes in business and management studies needs is the employment of "dialogic personalism" developed by Emmanuel Lévinas or Paul Ricœur, as well as Iser's literary anthropology. The use of these approaches, stressing their performative aspects and functions, can significantly contribute to the change of teaching methodology, rectifying the models based on misconceptions regarding "the ontological status of the cultural dimensions as supposed natural laws" and attributing to cultures a "mythological status" based on their "discernible origins." The last-mentioned feature marks the failure of the allegedly objective, progressive methodologies: namely their recourse to "primordialism,"⁵ an important feature of Romantic nationalism.

Alternative strategies of cultural communication based on "dialogic dislocation" are outlined in an article by Darya Kulbashna. Using Claude Shannon's and Fred Dretske's approaches to communication theory, Kulbashna suggests to shift "the focus from textual and semantic interpretations of cultural interactions as well as cultural environments" to an interpretation "based on information instead of meaning." Instead of understanding dialogic interaction as a textual process, Kulbashna stresses the importance of specific "dialogic spaces [...] dislocated in order to gain advantage in the sphere of cultural communication." Although the approach is claimed to be in keeping with the notions of a "posthumanist" era, it fails to consider a topical problem of "disinformation" which does not include only a manipulation of meaning but also the abuse of information, which may result in decreasing the efficiency of dialogues or in obstructing them.

⁵ On "cultural primordialism," see, e.g., Anthony D. Smith, *Nation in History: Historical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Oxford: Polity, 2000) 20-25ff.

The articles in the second part of the issue shift their attention from predominantly theoretical problems to the interpretation of these phenomena and processes in individual forms of popular culture, and works of visual art and literature. Russell Gilbert focuses on a “kayfabe” reading of social identity, performativity and performative identity. His approach using case studies from the world of professional wrestling explores the diverse meanings of the slang word “kayfabe,” as well as the often contradictory practices it denotes both as a “method of deception” and as a factor playing “an integral role in the processes of societal interaction.” Drawing from George Lakoff’s theory of metaphor and the notions of fictional worlds, Gilbert demonstrates that kayfabe, and the popular culture based on it, performatively embody “the questions of ontology, the nature of existence, the limits of reality and its perception and understanding.” In the popular culture (and industry) of wrestling, kayfabe may function as an interface mediating “a greater understanding of social identity” and a performative nature of social reality.

The approach of contemporary visual art to the traumatic legacy of slavery is discussed in Valeriya Sabitova’s contribution, entitled “Precarious Dialogues with ‘Inner Plantation’ in Kara Walker’s Silhouette and Sculpture Installations.” Sabitova convincingly shows the effects of Walker’s capitalization on stereotypes as an artistic strategy. Her installations not only move “beyond common cultural and representational paradigm of dealing with trauma and violence of slavery,” but target “the process of internalization” of that “paradigm per se.” Engaging both with the responses of her audience and historical references to stress “the ambiguity of her images,” Walker exposes the “trauma and violence of slavery as subsumed by their representation.” In view of this, Sabitova interprets the performative nature of Walker’s visual art as a sophisticated use of a set of interfaces, including the arrangements of gallery spaces, historical references of individual objects and varied perspectives from which the installations can be perceived. Here the interfaces mediate between the historical reality of slavery and its diverse present, individual as well as collective, imaginings called the “inner plantation.”

In the final article of this volume “Verbal Arts and Storytelling in Mouloud Feraoun’s *La terre et le sang* (1953),” Nadia Naar Gada discusses a novel by an Algerian Kabyle writer. Successful in establishing an epistemologically, ethically and aesthetically productive dialogue between the oral narrative culture and French novelistic tradition, Feraoun’s novel uses the clash of two fictional worlds – the seemingly timeless setting of a Kabyle village and that of mid-twentieth-century France – for a radical critique of the condition of Kabyle ethnic minority under French colonial rule. By building bridges between the oral tradition and the written heritage of the colonial culture, Feraoun’s novel not only “celebrates cultural

diversity and the valuable richness of experience” but also establishes a remarkable intercultural dialogue mediating to European readers the life of a cultural minority on a margin of a colonial empire.

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