

**TRANSCULTURAL BOUNDARIES – FACE AND/OR
EFFACE THEM:
FOREIGN CULTURAL PATTERNS IN THE BULGARIAN
CONTEXT**

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Theoretically the paper builds on Bakhtin's premise that the most intense life of culture takes place on the boundaries and that culture has no internal territory, but is rather a boundary itself. Transcultural communication is a border-case par excellence trying to mediate various boundaries within and between individual national cultures. By analysing some dominant foreign cultural models in the present Bulgarian context of social, political, and cultural changes, various structures for transcending cultural difference are tested out.



The most intense and productive life of
culture takes place on the boundaries.

M. Bakhtin

In recent years, the question of cultural values has been most crucially enacted not within the field of individual cultures, but across and between cultures. Nowadays it is impossible to keep local cultures isolated from each other, yet the already familiar universalist and particularist cultural models of regulating such value transactions do not offer any relevant approach to the "boundary" issue in this complex process. At the end of our century, national boundaries are either being ignored and subverted or overemphasized and fortified. What about cultural boundaries, which are not so clear-cut and easy to draw and re-draw? What are we to do with them in the current cultural process, labelled by theorists as "globalization," "hybridization" and "creolization"?¹

In the last four or five years of transition in Bulgaria there has been a lot of debate and panic over the despoiling of the "purity" of Bulgarian culture and its self-effacement due to strong intercultural influences. Bakhtin's understanding of culture as a borderland/bordercase and Lotman's semiotic approach to culture as a homeostatic mechanism open up new possibilities for establishing a dialogics of culture, where individual cultures could meet and interact, be apart and yet a part. Their ideas could be instrumental in our attempt

to analyse the current Bulgarian cultural situation and (perhaps?) alleviate to some extent the tension and panic over cross-cultural influences in the Bulgarian context.

In what follows, I will evade the political aspect of our culture as a "borderland" (despite my awareness that boundaries are not natural but political occurrences) and I will focus our attention on the cultural boundaries within and without, more particularly on the various European, American and global cultural patterns in the Bulgarian context and on the present state of Bulgarian culture-living not simply at a crossroads of various cultures but as a limen itself, as a liminal time/space in-between tendencies, categories, influences, and paradigms of transition.

Transition, etymologically speaking, is a passage from one place to another, a progress from one state or condition to another; it does not necessarily have to be expressed by a fluid linear movement since it involves a deep reordering and disordering of long-established frontiers. Again, from an etymological point of view, transition and transcendence go together. What limits and limitations are we to transcend now? What old borders have we effaced and what new borders do we have to face? Has the transformation of the Iron Curtain into an ironic veil precluded the question? Obviously, not. It looks as though the whole of Eastern Europe is now entering a kind of a postmodern cultural situation – there are no specific directions, purposes, no up and down, no left and right, no specific borders to transcend. Now all of a sudden, everything and anything can be said, written, done; in this total chaos and vacuum of values we have a bit of everything – a bit of the West and a bit of Dalai Lama, a bit of Europe and a bit of America, traces of national pride and shame, some expectations for a better future and nostalgia for the past, a bit of modernism, a bit of pornography ... Full of liberating euphoria and destruction, Bulgarian culture seems to be at a dead end – or rather at a huge crossroads, where all the possible roads to be taken, all the possible discourses too, have lost their legitimacy.

Paradoxically enough, Bulgarian culture is again looking for a center not inside, but outside – traditionally we have had our Turkish, German and Russian (Soviet) ones. This time, we are looking for the Western center, which ironically enough, does not exist (even the question of margin and center in culture is much more complicated than in politics). The Bulgarian cultural dilemma boils down, more or less, to the import of the two dominant world cultural models: the American and/or the European one. The choice between the two is not simply a matter of geography, history or politics, it is rather a choice between two different cultural principles: that of European Christian universalism and that of pragmatic American particularism. An interesting process is emerging in Europe – on the one hand, the local principle is gaining momentum – all these old and new local states, cultures and languages, both historically specific and spatially limited, are struggling feverishly to keep/rediscover their identities. On the other hand, this local gravitational pull is developing against the background of an

increasing centralisation towards the utopian project of building a homogeneous European cultural space based on universal Christian values and traditions. This is not a matter of creating unity in or through diversity, i.e. creating one cultural community of diverse similitude, enveloped by a common European boundary, but creating an European “family of culture” through keeping the specific national and cultural boundaries and yet stressing such overlapping and boundary transcending cultural and political motifs as Roman law, Renaissance humanism, Enlightenment rationalism, the Judeo-Christian traditions of ethics, the value of idiosyncratic national traditions and past, common achievements in the fields of art and scientific inquiry, and so on.

A similar process of localism goes on in America too, but in a different way. The culture of unity within diversity and diversity within unity, i.e. the desire to unify the plural and reconcile differences, based on the American creed of liberty, individualism and capitalism has turned out to be impossible to achieve. Simply because the other name for diversity is conflict and it is not so easy to reconcile conflicts and reach integrity. During the last decades of “cultural separatism” in America the differences along the lines of ethnicity, class and gender have not diminished, have not been absorbed – on the contrary, they have been emphasized, and they still co-exist relatively independent as long as there is no claim to hierarchy, and as long as the individual, “the self” is still the center. In such a way, all these different cultures and subcultures have their own territory to operate on, something like a “cultural ghetto” or a “cultural niche” and they make no attempt to transcend the borders in-between, to come together, to converge in a common universal pattern.

Thus, figuratively speaking, there is a similar movement towards “compartmentalisation” going on both in Europe and America, though grounded in different founding principles: the European cultural model stresses the universal, the common, which crosses over the national and cultural boundaries, i.e., the European cultural pattern, figuratively speaking, is speaking across the boundaries, across the frontiers, while the American model celebrates the particular, the different – as long as it is not trespassing the boundary line (whether ethnic, gender, national etc; that is, speaking within the boundary and somehow ignoring it). The former cultural model seems to believe still in a future utopia of a unified/unifying humanity, while the latter cultural model has given up its historical dream of “E Pluribus Unum,” declared as early as 1782 on the Great Seal of the United States.

Let us return to our initial question: which cultural model are we to choose? Although Bulgaria is geographically situated in Europe and has recently been accepted in various European political and administrative bodies, it looks on the surface, as if the American cultural model has been accorded a warmer reception. Wherever you go the decibels of the Voice of America, signs in English mainly, even the four-letter words are pronounced with a clearly American accent – (more cultured?); American Marlboro-ization and Coca-Cola-ization go hand in hand with the consumption of American westerns, best-

sellers, pop and rock music ... Bulgarian children grow up with "Alf," "Batman" and the numerous "Walt Disney" products, while the adults' universal pacifiers are "Dallas," "Camel," supershow "Nevada," etc. Why is the American model so appealing to Bulgarians? Perhaps, because at the moment everything in Bulgaria is a divisive issue – society is divided into all sorts of groups and factions on political, economic, social, religious, ideological, cultural, foreign issues ... and the idea of a unified/unifying position is unthinkable and unattainable. Or probably because the myth of the American superpower is still thriving unchallenged in many ways in the Bulgarian consciousness – contrary to the European myth (there are hardly any pleasant European memories to be recalled after the two world wars and the Balkan disputes – Bulgarians prefer to suffer European amnesia). Or probably what is most appealing are the very founding American principles of individualism, difference, decentralisation and spectacle that could provide an outlet for all sorts of irrational fears and dreams and that serve also as a counter-point to the hated collective roles and affiliations that have stamped the individuals in the country for almost half a century.

At the same time, it is more than obvious that we have very little in common with the American way of life and values. We are the radical "other" to America: a small country, poor, melancholic, family and kin-oriented, with a too painful sense of history, roots and locale, stuck forever in its past memories – mostly tragic for thirteen centuries on end, with no sense of mobility, full of innate distrust of any social system and public institutions, as well as of Edenic gardens and messiahs, passive and subversive to authority – that is, the sheer opposite of the American background of achievement and success, consumerism, individualism and plurality, historical optimism and independence. The American mythic core, reduced by M. Fishwick to the so called "M-factor" (122)-movement (physical, psychological, spiritual and institutional), migration and mobility (i.e. outward mobility = the Manifest Destiny, upward mobility = the Success Myth and the Salvation Myth) is totally alien to our experience of misery, sacrifice, fatalism, complaint and nihilism.

The Bulgarian stance on the American omni-culture contains much of the puzzled twofold European attitude to America established ever since the classical, mediaeval and Renaissance European mind invented the idea of America – it has always been suspended between two extreme positions: the ideal and the real, utopia and anti-utopia – a land of goodness, liberty and plenty as well as an emblem of crass materialism, shallowness of practices and values. When referring to the American cultural presence most Bulgarians use the term "penetration," probably quite unaware of the pronounced sexual implications in it. Yet, consciously or not, the word "American penetration" speaks of a kind of erotic conquest, certain forcefulness and despoiling of cultural virginity and purity, together with sexual play and aggression. Perhaps this analogy between masculine and cultural imperialism is not accidental if we take into consideration Baudrillard's order of seduction strategies – the ritual, aesthetic and political phases. We have already gone through what he calls "the ritual phase" of

seduction, now we are entering the “aesthetic phase” – “the one approaching that of the feminine and of sexuality, of the ironic and the diabolic,” that has taken on the obvious meaning of diversion, gaming and appearances (1988: 164).

In Baudrillard’s words we “live in non-sense” and we can’t help the challenge of “seduction as destiny,” which might be a deception, an illusion but the lure is always there. In his book *America*, the French sociologist has suggested that America is the best possible illustration of that idea – it is all image, or even the image of the image, twice removed from reality: “Everything is destined to appear as simulation. Landscapes as photography, women as the sexual scenario, thoughts as writing, terrorism as fashion and the media, events as television” (1986: 32) ... As against the melancholy of European analyses Baudrillard reflects on the last great myth of our modernity – the cult of stars:

They say that stars give you something to dream about, but there is a difference between dreaming and fascination by images. The screen idols are immanent in the unfolding of life as a series of images. They are a system of luxury prefabrication, brilliant syntheses of the stereotypes of life and love. They embody one single passion only: the passion for images, and the immanence of desire in the image (1986: 56).

In a similar way, in the Bulgarian scene, America has been reduced to a huge “trompe-l’oeil,” a picture/image, offering at distance the illusion of a better reality. The American presence has a strong cinematographic quality since it is mainly through the silver and the TV screen that it produces its special effects – it is like a non-stop running TV ad of euphoric and erotic images which can hardly be resisted. “Pepsi: the choice of a new generation,” “It’s a whole new world,” “Bermuda now!” “Always Coca-Cola,” and so on. If we try to decipher these “stereotypes of life and love” in terms of American values the legacy is easy to see: new over used, now over then, tomorrow over today, here over there, young over old – the total reversal of the traditional Bulgarian value-system. To put it in a nutshell, the two national narratives are totally opposite: the American is a teleological one, the Bulgarian – a retrospective one. Historically, the American choice has been to transcend one’s roots, fate, history and ancestors in order to become something new: a new identity for a new place in a new world. Most Bulgarians seem to be fascinated by this American model of transcending the past, transcending one’s origin and limitations and they are willing, as soon as possible, to leave behind their cumbersome roots, past and memories – both literally and metaphorically. What is at stake in a similar write-off procedure and automatic transcultural transplantation?

The alarming thing about the current Bulgarian situation is not the very American model of difference and diversity that is being transplanted. The problem is that it would hardly work in Bulgaria – by simply imitating it, quoting it, adopting/adapting it. Deep at heart, the Bulgarian is quite intolerant and suspicious of foreign/alien structures. To him, otherness is as much of a

“promise as a threat” – if we repeat R. Barthes’s words. Historically, Bulgarian culture has been many times the “colonised” one – the “Other.” What is even worse is the fact that this external colonization and the painfulness of being “the Other” has exploded into a counter-reaction of “internal colonization” – a kind of safety valve. The victims of the internal colonization, that is, the internal “others,” have usually been the ethnic Turks, Gypsies and women in general (Turkish women being in the worst possible situation – thrice muted by the Turkish patriarchal norms, by Bulgarian authorities and the official discourse of the Bulgarian language). At the same time, there is no general awareness and sensitivity to these problems in the Bulgarian collective consciousness. Yet, when it comes to matters of external colonization, the reaction is drastically different. For example, if I extend my colonization analogy, I would say that there is a widespread feeling of humiliation and pain about the “woman’s” position of Eastern Europe (Bulgaria included) in relation to Western Europe, that is, Eastern Europe being the weaker one, the would-be-man, trying to draw the attention of Western Europe just like a woman has become the “other” of man not because of anatomical but because of cultural differences – in our particular case, not because of geographical but because of cultural and economic differences. Expressions like “Bucharest- the little Paris,” “Prague-the little centre of Europe,” “the Balkans-the backyard of Europe” illustrate the desire of Eastern Europe-the little girl/periphery to grow into Western Europe-the man/centre. The analogy might be a bit far-fetched but it is indicative of the general desire to identify with the Western centre, to transgress the periphery which stands for backwardness, for spatial, temporal and cultural divisions. It is also indicative of how the question of difference could easily become corrupted into inequality and/or indifference.

The problem of facing and appropriating difference is not just a Bulgarian cultural phenomenon. Transcultural communication has become a central issue in the present movement towards a world culture. In a recent article dealing with the issues of the local and the global, Stuart Hall asks a crucial question: “What would be an identity that is constructed through things which are different rather than things which are the same?” (39). He views the current globalization process not as a pacific and pacified process, but as a global formation working on the terrain of post-modern culture, which is an extremely contradictory space. For him, this “global post-modern” is a peculiar homogenizing form of global mass culture and cultural representation, enormously absorptive of things, which recognizes and absorbs differences within a larger, overarching framework of what is essentially an American conception of the world. The new post-Fordist forms of global economic and cultural power cannot continue their global expansion without learning to live with and work through difference; their paradoxical nature of being both multi-national and de-centered, demands proliferation of difference and operation through difference. “In order to maintain its global position,” Hall argues, “capital has had to negotiate – incorporate and partly reflect the differences it was trying to overcome. It had to

try to get hold of, and neutralize, to some degree, the differences. It is trying to constitute a world in which things are different. And that is the pleasure of it but the differences do not matter" (32-33).

It is this new tendency of marketing difference, of producing the pleasure of the transgressive "Other" (not the "Other" as a kind of epistemological mirror in the Bakhtinian sense²) which makes me sceptical about the transplantation of the American model of difference and diversity in the Bulgarian context at the present moment. Perhaps before we plunge uncritically into this new regime of "the global post-modern" we ought to return to the modern stage, which we seem to have skipped in our development. First, we have to write – not write off – our hidden history and identity, even if they seem marginal, reconsider the position of our internal "others," redraw the boundaries within our own culture – what Hall calls "retell the story from the bottom up instead of from the top down" and then try to import ready-made cultural structures. It is only then that there can be a certain reciprocity between cultures, a certain exchange of difference – otherwise, there will be no meeting/crossing of cultures, but only one-way "penetration" and cultural commodification.

I am also sceptical about the whole issue of cultural boundaries in a world where everything is a "hybrid," a crossover, where there is hardly any historically pure and homogeneous culture, language or entity. Besides, the enclosing effect of the boundary starts working in the opposite direction when the boundaries become too manifold. The existence of several boundaries puts "under erasure" ("sous rature," according to Derrida) everything that borders stand for, namely, the strict dichotomies of inside/outside, us/them, here/there etc. This is what is happening in our culture of transition – old and new boundaries are being multiplied (between ideologies, political parties, ethnic groups, professional groups, cultural structures, sub-cultures etc) while the ultimate effect is just the opposite – the boundaries have been diluted, the enclosed spaces in the concentric circles have become relative – there is no pure in and out, no definite/definitive borders to transcend.

At the present stage of erosion of nation-states and identities we need a new understanding of "culture" and cultural process as related to territory, the local and the global, the core and the periphery. Bakhtin's methodology – rejecting the territorial definition of culture, could give us such a new perspective to interpreting cultural diffusion and transcultural convergence/divergence.

We do not have to imagine the field of culture as a spatial entity having its own boundaries, as well as internal territory. Culture does not have internal territory: it all is situated on boundaries, and these boundaries go through everything, through its every single moment; the systematic unity of culture goes into the atoms of cultural life and is reflected like a sun in its every single drop. Every cultural act lives most intensely on the boundaries: this brings meaning and significance to it; when remote from the boundaries the cultural act loses its ground, it grows empty, swells up, degenerates and dies. (1983:59)

The semantic field of the boundary is an extremely rich one. It opens out onto edge, margin, border, exteriority, enclosure, state, but also onto dividing line, frontier, barrier, foreign, xenophobia, limit, restriction. It is this gamut of ambiguity, complexity and indeterminacy, not the binary oppositional logic inherent in the concept that could be productive in approaching (trans) cultural interaction. It sets "culture" in motion towards new meanings without obscuring the trace of its other meanings of the past. Bakhtin's insistence on interpreting culture itself as a "borderland," a kind of an eternal state of "borderliness" erases the very notion of boundary as a demarcation line – of defense and/or aggression. On the contrary, to him the boundary is the most natural state of things, it is not an enclosing structure, but rather a disclosing structure – the necessary pre-condition to the process of self-knowledge and self-perception. Thus, by employing Bakhtin's dialogical pattern, when observing certain dominant cross-cultural patterns in the contemporary Bulgarian culture, we do not simply see the image of the "other" culture(s) but we also have an image of the "seeing self," of our "own" position. So the boundary between two or more monolithic cultures becomes an interspace/interface where we can observe the clash of various ideologies, paradigms, traditions enacted.

Throughout the paper I have maintained a certain hesitation between the various uses of the word "culture" and consequently "Bulgarian culture," "American culture," "European culture," "global/local culture" and so on. I am quite aware of the distinction between the anthropological use of the term as a way of life, the values, beliefs and customs of a certain identifiable social group and of the critical use of the term as representation, as artistic excellence, the production of art-forms, the arts and the media of such a group. I am also aware of the totalizing and critically disabling connotations behind such a term aiming to capture a social totality. We can hardly speak of culture in the singular, let alone in the case of the oxymoronic terms "American" and "global culture," which erases the diversity of various ethnic, regional and religious sub-cultures. However, I am using this holistic term for two major reasons: first, for the sake of convenience when trying to generalize, juxtapose and analyse certain points of contact between individual cultural systems at the same level of discourse. Second, because this loosely-employed concept, describing a variety of processes, institutions and discourses, somehow brings the two basic understandings together and reflects the complicated world situation nowadays where there is no unmediated reality, no simple dividing line between life and art forms. Everything is representation rather (raised to the n-th degree) and the value/practices are both determined and determining by/of cultural representation/production and vice versa. What is more, the above-mentioned transcultural patterns dominant in the present Bulgarian culture are operating mainly through the images and sounds of the global media network (films, music, books, advertisements and all sorts of cultural products) rather than through first-hand information and contact. I am also using the unified/unifying concept of "culture" drawing upon the understanding of the Russian

semioticians Yurij Lotman and Boris Uspensky of a nation's culture as "the shared non-hereditary memory of a community," not simply a repository of texts, beliefs and codified behaviour, but also "a mechanism which produces further similar texts and behaviour, a homeostatic mechanism for organizing and preserving information in the consciousness of the community" (213).

Although differing in many ways, Bakhtin, Lotman and Uspensky share a common view of culture as a dynamic system. Bakhtin stresses the need for each cultural phenomenon to be immediately related to the unity of culture – in this way "the cultural phenomenon does not remain a naked fact, it acquires meaning and significance, turns into a sort of a monad, which reflects everything in itself and is respectively reflected in everything" (1983: 60). Lotman's and Uspensky's semiotic model of culture as a de-automized system stresses the homeostatic functions of culture which make it possible for a particular mechanism to emerge and preserve the unity of memory, that is, to remain the same, and at the same time "to continually renew itself, de-automizing itself at every phase and thereby maximizing its ability to absorb information" (226). This working mechanism of culture as a "continual self-renewal," the possibility "to become different and yet remain the same" could explain the co-existence (not annihilation) of reciprocal tensions within the system – for example, old vs new, static vs mobile, unity vs diversity, as well as oppositions between different cultural systems – i.e. "own" vs "foreign," sameness vs difference.

Bakhtin's and Lotman's systematic approach could provide a legitimate ground for the emerging global culture in a world where everything exists on the border of its opposite, on a threshold. If we view "culture" not as an internal territory to be guarded or violated by boundaries (undeterminable, any way), but as a boundary process we could have a new model of transcultural communication and exchange. Instead of the already familiar patterns of cross-cultural opacity or osmosis by penetration, imitation and acculturation we could have a homeostatic cultural equilibrium where the foreign cultural structures are infused and mediated by the receiving tradition, so that gradually they disappear in a new structure, which would gain its own identity. Cross-cultural transfer as a boundary process (a continuous process because the appropriation of other cultures is never definitive, final) by erasing the "either/or" logic could function as a process of supplementation in the Derridean sense of the word; that is, as an act of "supplement," preserving the two separate, somewhat contradictory, yet equally important significations of this concept. First, Derrida insists, "the supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence." Second, it "adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void" (312). Cross-cultural interaction as a bordercase is a perfect illustration of this double dynamic: cross-cultural transfer will inevitably display something lacking in the receiving culture, quite probably, not seen as lacking until the act of transfer, but then revealed as a void that has to be filled in. At the same time, the cross-cultural act of transference,

by revealing this lack, will reveal also an endless series of future acts of transferal providing further supplementation.

Approaching cross-cultural interaction as an endless process of supplementation, of "plenitude enriching another plenitude" is very much in tone with Bakhtin's dialogic principle of human existence and artistic creation as supplementation through/of the "other." Bakhtin is critical of the aesthetics of reception/interpretation as one only of empathy and identification because in both cases it is a reductive process – it leads to the merging of the creating/receiving "self" with the "other." Similarly, in the exchange between cultures empathy or identification could only be a transitory, preparatory stage in the aesthetics of cultural dialogue, where the two cultures do not merge into a whole, but stay apart and yet a part. Why insist on this double position? Bakhtin has given us a simple answer:

In what way will the event be enriched if I succeed fusing with the other?
If instead of two, there is just one? What do I gain by having the other
fuse with me? In a mere fusion with someone else's life I only deepen its
tragic character, literally double it. (1984: 107)

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NOTES

1. For an analysis of these terms see Anthony D.King, ed., *Culture, Globalization and The World-System*, London: Macmillan, 1991, especially Chapters 1, 3 and 4.
2. See Mikhail Bakhtin. *The Dialogical Imagination*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981.

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Θεωρητική βάση της εργασίας αποτελεί το αξίωμα του Μπαχτίν ότι η πιο έντονη ζωή μιας κουλτούρας εντοπίζεται στα σύνορά της καθώς και ότι η κουλτούρα δεν διαθέτει ενδοχώρα αλλά μάλλον συνίσταται η ίδια σε ένα σύνορο. Η διαπολιτισμική επικοινωνία αποτελεί μια ιδιαίτερα οριακή περίπτωση, καθώς επιχειρεί να διαμεσολαβήσει μεταξύ διαφόρων συνόρων τόσο εντός όσο και ανάμεσα σε διαφορετικές εθνικές κουλτούρες. Η ανάλυση ορισμένων κυρίαρχων ξένων πολιτισμικών προτύπων στην παρούσα, μεταβατική κατάσταση που συνθέτουν οι κοινωνικές, πολιτικές και πολιτισμικές αλλαγές στη Βουλγαρία, μας επιτρέπει την εξέταση διαφόρων δομών υπέρβασης της πολιτισμικής διαφοράς.