

**Closing the Project: Processes, Experiences, Plans
Q and A Dialogue of the Members of the Contact Zones Research Group¹**

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Q:

The last phase of a project is also the time for reflection, for discussing goals and results. Our research, initiated four years ago, was designed to focus on contact zones and interconnections. As an intercultural (Romanian-Hungarian) and interdisciplinary enterprise (bringing together literature, cinema, visual culture) it also wished to move between various discursive fields. The dichotomy of Eastern and Western Europe was one of our points of departure – the presupposition of clashing or diverging theories. How do you see this dichotomous relationship now? By theorizing Eastern European experience – or: by producing and transmitting 'Eastern European knowledge' – how do we position ourselves in the academic / theoretical space? What terms, phenomena and constellations can be used to describe our cultural and professional positions?

When participating in a joint research, our differences inspire deeper self-reflection. How did our professional communality develop and how did our community function? What obstacles and perspectives became visible during the four years of our interaction?

Our societies currently undergo fundamental changes, therefore it is necessary to discuss the relationship between academia and society, between professional activity and societal activism. In the era of the new nationalisms, how do you see the role and the agency of academics?

A:

Balázs Varga

Beyond Contact Zones and Comfort Zones

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There are projects that take place at the best point and at the best times. Our research project is (actually, I do not consider it as completed or something that has come to an end) certainly one of these. Not merely because the academic discussion of Eastern European cinema and literary cultures gained new impulse in the 2010s, and the work of our research team could critically and relevantly connect to these scholarly discussions. But primarily because – in the context of and because of the political crises and storms of recent years through the migratory crisis to the issues of new illiberal democracies – we were not only faced with the theoretical problems of the contact zones, but we also had to face the question where the limits of our own comfort zones are. The question, then, is whether we can leave our own zone, what do we think of other (contact/conflict/comfort) zones, how do we recognize and undertake conflicts?

For me, the answer is the simplest: open communication. Talk. Debate. Discussing views and opinions. Finding our blind spots. And the method is teamwork. Shared, common, joint and public thinking. So for me, the most memorable and significant moments of the project were those meetings and discussions (be it at a conference or in a group meeting) when we examined, reviewed or explained a topic in details. Academic work and public activity is not an individual exercise. That is my first and foremost 'lesson'.

As for the more 'academic' aspects of the research project, I think that it is not possible to overestimate the importance of examining shifting trajectories, changing/switching/altering theoretical frameworks – moving beyond binary oppositions, blurring rigid boundaries, navigating in the 'Eastern European third space'. Indeed, one of the most important challenges of the research is how to find concepts that can be relevant, flexible and sensitively used in a wide variety of contexts and cultures.

Moving beyond comfort zones can also mean that we are looking beyond the canon (be it the 'canon' of our research group), and we are also attempting to include works into the scope of research that we would not have thought about before. At the outset, our research project focused on the field of arthouse (auteur) films and canonized literary works in a clear, yet exclusive way. However, over the course of the research, a question has been raised more and more excitedly: what about the films beyond our comfort zones? What can we do with popular/mainstream films? Do we (b)other about films which might seem like the 'other' of our region's arthouse cinema culture? Where is the contact zone between the different registers of

cinema culture?

Teri Szűcs

Non-national Contact Zones and Solidarity

The interdisciplinary and international nature of our joint research was really refreshing, and I firmly believe that within Hungarian academia, humanities need to be invigorated with such an approach. I need to correct my choice of words already: instead of inter-national focus, we worked on the basis of non-national contact zone-oriented approaches, which is a far more fruitful attitude than any academic stance still based on nationalism.

I truly valued the discussion-focused sessions of our group. The interactions among the colleagues taught me a lot. One outcome of such joint learning for me is that it is important to position myself as an Eastern-European researcher, but the content of my position is strictly situational. We indeed have 'Eastern European knowledge' to share.

Our small community underwent a slight change from a cloud of isolated professional individuals to a kind of communality. But it did not mean that a real sense of belonging together emerged in the research group. The affiliated, embedded members did not pay any interest to the conditions of those who live and work precariously – in spite of the efforts of the founder of the research group, who wanted to base the joint work on communality and solidarity.

I think now is the time finally for Hungarian academia to embrace solidarity, when our government is about to sign the order of our execution.

Eszter Vidosa

Scholars, Academics in the Age of Technology

Agency of academics is going through a significant change not just in terms of the necessity to discuss relations between academia and society, but also in terms of discovering new modes and ways for inventing and applying new discourses that could help us talk about these relations in a new age of communication, informatics and technology. First of all, in the era of fake news and the communicational boom academics have to adapt constantly so they can strengthen their

position on all these new virtual platforms of communication. With our body extensions, devices and the way of handling information in general, we are becoming posthuman, if we already haven't. These major changes make whole societies face new challenges: in order to obtain the required discursive frame that enables academics to fit into a new social environment, they have to reconsider the assertions of Katherine N. Hayles, who attempts to define the meaning, the goals and the main aspects of posthumanism: in her text, *How We Became Posthuman* she argues that it is inevitable to connect science with humanities and to recognize interrelations between different kinds of cultural productions, specifically literature and science. Nowadays, this could also mean that academics have to be more up-to-date when it comes to tendencies of virtual reality, social media, technology and maybe even cybernetics too, so they could acquire a voice which they can unfold various theories and assertions with, in order to find a much more alert and responsive audience and to plan greater goals overall. In other words, academics have to be much more multidimensional to maintain their agency in professional activity and societal activism at the same time. If we only take a look at the current tendencies of cultural and literary theory, it is indisputable, that transhumanist, posthumanist, post-anthropocentrist, nonhumanist etc. tendencies and movements begin to rewrite the whole scene of actual products of contemporary literature. We simply cannot turn our backs on the new tools, new media and ways of discourse, for they are affecting and transforming each other – from the picture of the body imagined as a machine in contemporary poetry to the realisation that ludology and video game studies effects narratives of motion pictures or novels more than ever. The new era of nationalisms is just as much the result of information technology and the virtual-technological boom than it is its antipode. We can stabilize our agency, be equipped readers of all the new cultural products, and all types of social changes (and it is highly needed for us to be so), only if we are able to keep up with the recent developments and achievements of the age of technology, fuelled heavily by posthumanist desires and fantasies.

András Hlavacska

From *Dracula* to *The Whiskey Bandit*

Four years ago I joined to the project with my Dracula-research. Although at the beginning my main interest was the metaphors of Stoker's novel, during these years many spatial theories

influenced my research, so in the followings I'd like to shortly summarise the most significant of them, to show how my basic ideas changed in this period.

At the first glance Hungarian readers probably interpret Bram Stoker's *Dracula* as the bluntest manifestation of the Western gaze: a novel which fails to give a so-called authentic representation of the Eastern European region, because its author only has second-hand information of Transylvania. And probably this attitude is one of the reasons why so many Hungarian-language papers associated with *Dracula* are obsessed with the historical and ethnographic background of the myth. While on the one hand these papers certainly show how superficial Stoker's knowledge was, on the other hand they usually fail to draw attention to the importance of the regional and cultural representations of the novel. The English-language papers seem different: instead of focusing on the question "How authentic is the historical, geographical and cultural background of the novel?" they rather try to answer to following one: "What does the novel tell about us? How does it represent the cultural, political, ideological, etc. situations of the fin de siècle and of our present?". (Of course, it does not mean that they are totally ignoring how the novel's historical, geographical, cultural representations live on nowadays. See for example: Jason Dittmer, *Why Do Vampires Come from Eastern Europe?*). Here, among many articles which try to answer these questions I'd like to mention Stephen D. Arata's article, because it accurately analyses the anxiety of reversed colonisation, the fear that the colonisers become colonised. And the imperialist guilt, because *Dracula* "provides an opportunity to atone for imperial sins, since reverse colonization is often represented as deserved punishment". It is worth noting – as Arata emphasises – that in the 1890s *Dracula* is only one among many novels and short stories that represent this fear. And we could add, that this idea was not only popular in the 1890s, but we can find it in earlier gothic novels, for example in Mary Shelley *Frankenstein* where the doctor destroys the female monster, because he fears that "the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror." But it is more important to see, that this fear lives on in our days. that the fear of the annihilation of the human species, our civilization, our culture is not the past but our present, and it manifests in novels, movies and series, as well as in political discourses.

To this idea the film analyses written by the project-fellows during the last four years give a

wider scope. Here I'd just like to mention the last Q and A of the Contact Zones online journal, where many answers focused on Nimród Antal's *The Whiskey Bandit* – a movie which is important for two reasons from the perspective of the reversed colonization. First, because in the movie the protagonist – coming from Transylvania – cannot adapt himself to the society of Budapest, and therefore he becomes a grotesque reflection of it. And secondly, because in the movie many characters associated with Budapest repeat the *Dracula*'s distinction between the West and the East – with the difference, that now Budapest becomes the West.

Bence Kránicz

Academia and Eastern Europe: Learning to Fit In

As a note of farewell to this project I would rather reflect on it on a personal level. I started to participate as an MA student and now, at the closing stage, I am at the midpoint of my PhD research. For me, Contact Zones was the first glimpse into academic work beside a student's tasks and effectively proved to me that there is an environment here for free thinking and a shared love of interpreting art and our societies.

During these years I also learned that the way I perceive the world, how I regard art and what I look for in work is far away from all that is currently politically encouraged in the society I live in. I was glad that our project was an international one: in many cases, the cultural and even moral condition of Romania gave me reason for hope and to feel ashamed of the politics of my country. I contributed less to this project than I would have liked to – the reason for this is that I constantly juggle more work than I should, because I feel that in the future there might be less and less opportunities to do what I'm interested in.

These last few years often made me think of being an Eastern European as a constant challenge, and our project provided the most reliable theoretical background to this reasoning. Naturally, I also met some very smart people who are still passionate about their work despite all the circumstances that influence their home institutions negatively. Apart from my occasional contribution, it was good and rewarding to know how this project has developed and follow it to its finish.

Zsolt Győri

Project Closing Remarks

During the four years of the project the fundamental questions posed initially are no less relevant now. Eastern Europe does suffer from considerable economic and social deficit as the strengthening of protectionism and populism in Hungary, amongst others, suggests. The official Hungarian reaction to the migrant crisis did not only turn a back on the European humanist heritage but embraced the worst aspects of insularity and nationalism in the name of a freedom fight against the imaginary ghost of global liberalism. Enjoying the political and moral support of the majority of people, the ideological engineers of the so called illiberal democracy have declared a war on grassroot civic initiatives and academic disciplines that have long made their task to address and study exclusionary social practices and stereotypes. The vilification of these presumably Western liberal knowledges of problematizing uneven distributions of power and mechanisms of marginalization is all the more short-sighted since these could easily be adapted to the study of Eastern Europe's subaltern position.

Researchers invited to participate in the project shared the conviction that their Eastern European position was a benefit in exploring questions of local knowledges. This position was itself situated in a symbolic contact zone, in more than one sense of the word. On the one hand, our approach was strongly interdisciplinary in nature, synthetizing numerous branches of film and literary studies, history and cultural history, cultural studies and its many subfields, sociology, anthropology and political science. On the other hand, scholarly inquiries tested, refined, and expanded the findings of Western academia in the local context and also aimed to open up these local contexts to the external gaze.

The initial hypothesis of the project was that literature, cinema and the visual arts discover and describe spaces of intercultural translation, or contact zones as we termed these. Contact zones are not invented but real sites of translation, adaptation, transculturation, but also of negotiation, contest, and critical reflection. Research has acknowledged that creators of literature and screen products are relentless problem-seekers, who rarely pose as educators of the masses, rather they provide social diagnoses which are worthy of serious consideration. While approaching these diagnoses we hope to have clarified the ways they propose and manage meanings, dwell upon collective experiences, imaginations and traumas, involve recipients in a shared responsibility

towards social dialogue, formulate insights and put forth visions. Our task as scholars has been to explore creative practices in a theoretical space and to reinvent this theoretical space in the light of such practices.

The study of contact zones between and within cultures, nations, people, sexes, generations and ethnic groups, just as much as between art forms, disciplines and tenets of theory is always an unfinished project. Results, for the most part, are inconclusive, answers carry the seeds of new queries. Requesting the opposite is denying the dynamics of scientific scrutiny, or simply saying that societies have ceased to change. Well, they haven't. Demanding artists and scholars to not offer the insights and ask the questions that social and scientific transformation allows for is a false demand and a challenge to their hard-won autonomy. Change is everywhere and also affects the agency of academics. We have to continue with the task of locating and theorizing social phenomena, tendencies and conflicts and involve, probably more efficiently, the general public in the debates of societal challenges and everyday experiences.

Mónika Dánél

Intersections and Inner Institutions

Our research project was rooted in the concept of the interchange of mediums and disciplines, that of national cultures and institutions. Most importantly, it was born out of the trust in the Romanian and Hungarian researchers' networking and interaction, the fluent exchange of ideas and experience, and the transfer of knowledge.

An important part of the process was to create 'contact zones' with the help of conferences (see: <http://contactzones.elte.hu/archives/1880>) and workshops together with our partners from Romania (see: <http://contactzones.elte.hu/archives/824>), seminars held with invited researchers (see: <http://contactzones.elte.hu/archives/category/esemenyek>), as well as meetings organized for the project's participants.

Many of the ideas, for example the idea of the Q and A writing-mode, were formulated by Teri Szűcs in one of these project events. Many individual and common aims were realised, a great number of individual contributions – articles, book chapters – (see: <http://contactzones.elte.hu/cikkek>), books (see: <http://contactzones.elte.hu/konyvek>) were

published. We edited six issues of *Contact Zones* (see: <http://contactzones.elte.hu/journal>) and a special *Metropolis* issue on contemporary Romanian films (see: <http://epa.oszk.hu/03300/03349/00002/pdf/>). The publication of two co-edited books (one in Hungarian and one in English) is in progress.

We contacted students and cooperated with doctoral students. Our project can be considered new in the sense that most of the project members were from the same generation, but from four different universities (Eötvös Loránd University, University of Debrecen, University of Szeged, Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design). The main question was how a research group can function without authority (in both the positive and the negative sense of the word) in a society with hierarchical traditions.

The non-hierarchical structure – I hope – created more space for open interactions. However, sometimes it was not easy to achieve the aims we had set out in the project description. I was socialised in a hierarchy and I detest it. Therefore, it was a great learning process for me to understand that coordinating a project does not automatically and necessarily have to make use of hierarchical structuring. What is essential is clear and precise operations.

It is also important to note that the institutional frames (such as that of a university) are more or less internalised. Therefore, it takes more time and reflection to open these invisible borders in a cooperative situation in which an obvious authority is absent. In our project, we explored (post)communist research fields and, perhaps, we could and should have reflected more critically on how deeply our ways of thinking and our practices were shaped by those traditions and therefore how we “struggled” with non-hierarchical structures.

The tradition of individualism is greatly embedded and incorporated in our scientific self-understanding. Therefore, we were searching for ways of how individual goal orientedness can be compatible with cooperation and with the sharing of ideas.

The most elementary cause of this “struggle” is not the individual; it is rooted in an Eastern-European phenomenon. Every young researcher is overloaded/overburdened, and leisure time is also research time. In this very precious and expensive time, cooperation – without the benefits of the “authority” – can only come after the individual goals have been achieved.

Our project was also exceptional from the point of view of gender equality (see: <http://contactzones.elte.hu/researchers>). The fact that the project was coordinated and led by two female researchers (Hajnal Király and myself) also meant in our Eastern-European reality

that we managed the administration too. (Which and also the hierarchical structure of course is not just an Eastern-European specificity...)

The aim of our research project was to show a different perspective – the perspective of the inner Eastern self toward the narratives of the "Western Gaze" in contemporary Eastern European literature, film and society. It is essential to be more reflective of the inherent eastern/western opposition and to rethink it from the perspective of scientific self-colonialization too. Nevertheless, there is a more disquieting phenomenon of Hungarian contemporary propaganda's language and the way it uses elements (concepts) of (post)colonial discourse. In one of the contemporary Hungarian discourses regarding artistic canons, the conservative values are defined as "colonized" by "liberal" aesthetics and intellectuals and the nationalistic propaganda's diction defines itself as "de-colonizing" discourse. If scientific concepts are re-appropriated in a very contradictory way, how can we use those very same concepts in our scientific discourse?

Personally, I made very precious Romanian contacts, I got to know new colleagues and I strengthened my relationship with essential Hungarian colleagues. It was a unique experience and a great opportunity where, individually and as a group, we had the chance to re-frame our traditions, social connections as well as our "inner institutions".

Dear Project Members, thank you for your work and for this four-year-long process and experience!