



The scientific innovation behind INTERZONES

There is something slightly revolutionary when taking distance, for the sake of brevity, from the poststructuralist and post-modern doxa of literary exegesis which has now also invested the Social Sciences. The liberty taken by *Interzones* is considered to be the main added value to current further education in this field, especially in Europe.

More open than any other existing “national” PhD applying scientific specific concepts to other fields, *Interzones* is quintessentially trans-disciplinary rather than interdisciplinary. By introducing a whole range of possible new methodologies, the consortium is suggesting – and encouraging – cultural transfers and migrations not as the outcome of a PhD programme, but a return to a more literal, re-contextualized and sensational (sensual) perspective. After all, is there still a place or a cultural space made of no more than two cultures with clear-cut frontiers and lines of demarcation?

These idealized lines and definitions appear to the consortium as drastically distorted into zones (no longer discontinuous lines or zigzagging ones) which open up the valves of sensation (Francis Bacon, for example), but also dissipation, intuition, indifference, hopeless affect or glorious passive surrender to a world where there is no “other” or where there is no “other” any longer. Maybe the mysterious heritage of Paul Valéry, according to whom “modern man wants the sensation without the boredom of its conveyance” is yet to fathom and explore to a greater advantage. Even the renowned critic and theoretician Tristan Todorov, in one of his latest major works, takes distance from the work of art and the literary work as absolute (in other words: closed, perfect, self-sufficient) linguistic objects but, reviving the Warburgian spirit of cultural “nachleben” pronounces himself in favour of discourses on the world voiced out from the real world, and not from high solitary towers. Actually aimed at changing the world, and initiating unheard-of dialogues between literature and other types of knowledge, anthropology, philosophy, visual arts, or new technologies, literary and artistic practices definitely impact subjectivities, and hence the real.

The lab rotation policy of the *Interzones* consortium wishes to turn research centres as we know them today into a living unpredictable laboratory. Cultural research is also about thinking about one does not know yet, whereas conservation is about what one has forgotten one once knew. This is precisely a difference which can make one realize what skills a doctoral thesis in the Humanities can help develop and how they can, once applied to any other field of human activity, be performative.

Beyond identities: Interzones

Very broadly, in the history of European thought, the term of identity covers two separate but inter-related ideas: that of “sameness” (*idem*) and that of individual form or “selfhood” (*ipse*). Although the latter aspect has been defined in all manner of ways, it is

nonetheless possible to find a common denominator in the act of definition itself. Literally, an object or being is defined in respect to its limits (*fines*). In other words, its identity as a separate reality, its very “nature” as an identifiable “thing”, is the outcome of an operation of delineation or demarcation. Western metaphysics and aesthetics have always conceived of form (*eidos*) and beauty in terms of just such an operation: the circumscribing contour, boundary or borderline which serves to distinguish an object from its surroundings is what allows us to apprehend its form, and the beauty of its form. The question that we would therefore like to ask is: is it possible to examine cultural phenomena without referring to such a linear notion of identity?

With the rise of the human sciences in the 20th Century, the notions of otherness and difference have received ever increasing emphasis. In the fields of linguistics, poetics, anthropology and psychoanalysis, the structuralist and post-phenomenologist approaches have promoted the concept of pure difference as not only a necessary but a sufficient condition for establishing the identity of a given *aliquid* (the signification of a concept, for example). Such approaches have proved to be immensely fertile. The fact that in some post-modern discourses difference seems to have been replaced identity as the most valued side of the different/same binary opposition, the old dialectical relationship has remained what it was: the one must be thought –inescapably it seems- in terms of the other.

However, as long as we continue to carve up the real into perceptible and conceivable realities whose identity depends on their difference from other perceptible and conceivable realities, we are still thinking of both identity and difference in terms of demarcation. This is why it is important to “undo” the (mental and sensorial) operation of delineation, and to think of the frontier between one reality and another not as a line but as a zone. Difference and identity are in fact mutually dependant. To step outside of such a frame of reference means affronting/confronting that which, for want of a better word, might be termed the undifferentiated, or even, from a an ethical or psychological perspective, the indifferent. A zone, or region, where firmly entrenched identities and differences lose their defining contours.

Form, identity, and line are essentially spatial concepts and as such are employed by human intelligence in order to make sense of, and to freeze, the essentially fluid nature of the real. At the turn of the 20th Century, the French philosopher Henri Bergson addressed this very issue. He suggested that we distinguish between two very different categories of multiplicities: homogenous multiplicities juxtaposing elements to be grasped in terms of proportion and degree (hence their spatial nature), and heterogeneous multiplicities which allow for the interpenetration of their elements (revealing the the time factor). Change and movement are no longer to be thought of as accidental phenomena which affect an essentially unchanging formal substance, but as the ontological substance of reality itself.

What Bergson helps us to realize is that a mode of thought which jettisons the concept of identity can only do so if it is capable of perceiving movement as movement (rather than as the linear trajectory of a mobile object towards a given point, for example). The true incompatibles are not identity and difference, but identity and change: alteration, rather than otherness. This is why we cannot content ourselves with the analytical tools and methodological procedures bequeathed us by structuralism. A dynamic structuralism of the kind developed by Pierre Bourdieu, Jurii Lotman and Itamar Even-Zohar in the 1990s which takes into account the diachronic dimension of mutating identities and historical change, is required.

Admittedly, the zone is neither image nor concept, it would be more exact to think of it as an “intercept” (A. Villani), a scheme meshing together the perceptible and the intelligible. What we call “zone” is precisely that region of experience where the apprehension of the world as a set of formal unities, a homogenous multiplicity, is no longer viable. However, if the zone is to be understood as being situated between (*inter*) fields, or classes, or systems, or between (*intra*) subsystems of a larger system, we need a theoretical base with which to conceptualise the fluctuating in-between nature of zones within a global cultural paradigm.

This is where dynamic models such as Even-Zohar’s polysystem theory or Lotman’s theory of the “Semiosphere”, come into play. Such a theory recognizes that the identification of any one, two, five, hundred systems is in fact a construct imposed upon a mass of observable data rather than a given something. It postulates a very complex model of how particles and whole clusters of particles travel from one semiotic system to another, are transformed, reappropriated, adapted, reused, etc., without the need to refer to any kind of identity (or even of agency in the strong sense of the word). Culture “is thus conceived of not as an isolated activity in society, regulated by laws exclusively (and inherently) different from all the rest of human activities, but as an integral – often central and very powerful – factor among the latter” (I. Even-Zohar). Literature, for example, represents a system (composed of subsystems) within the wider semiotic polysystem of society and culture. By adopting different intra- and inter-cultural perspectives, it is possible to study how “foreign, strange, other” things become integrated within a given system. When do these things enter the semiotic canon, when not? How does this affect the canon? Do they contribute to renewing a system so that it may maintain its position, or do they bring about the substitution of a petrified system by a new one?

Within the context of such a theory, it would be more appropriate to talk in terms of a “dynamics of positionality” rather than of identity. We intend to retrace the circulation of any number of given elements = x (objects, ideas, philosophemes, semes, genre particles, etc.) from one system or subsystem to another, across zones of indifferentiation, in processes that partake of the open dynamism of the translational and transvaluational mechanisms of what shall be called the INTERZONES.