COMMUNICATING IDENTITIES. LITERATURE AND OTHER FORMS OF VERBAL INTERACTION

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Introduction

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Over the years, the organizers of this conference have showed their interest in (but also their dedication for) the three key-notions featured in the title of the conference. Because *identity, communication* (and even *comparison*) are not only objects of study or methods to apply, but also genuine treasures deserving to be upheld and hailed, either in times of peace and prosperity or in times of social and political upheaval. That is why we could not help but wonder in what way are these undeniably valuable categories threatened by the recent transformations we are confronted with, on a global scale.

Last year, as we all know, everybody's life was turned upside down not only by a new disease but also by the strict measures imposed by national governments at the recommendation of transnational institutions like WHO (World Health Organization). Terms and phrases like *lockdowns, social distancing, flattening the curve* and *the new normal*, have spread like wildfire and rapidly "colonized" the collective imaginary. It has been, around the world, an occasion for a deeper reflection on the fundamentals of the political and social contract. Equally, an occasion for the rethinking of the legitimacy and epistemological foundations of some of the scientific or theoretical disciplines we currently practice. Scholars, writers and artists have searched for specific modalities and techniques whereby to make sense of what they were living, while also striving to find ways of productive and creative resistance, endurance and healing. For example, the *British Comparative Literature Association* (BCLA) proposed to its members, on the website, to reflect on the topic of "Culture and Quarantine", by asking

> "What does it mean to cogitate in gated communities, to think and to write in enforced isolation? […] The question is particularly pertinent for the discipline of Comparative Literature, predicated as it is upon breaking down borders between languages and cultures. In an age in which borders have been re-erected almost overnight, how do we retain intellectual freedom of movement? In an era in which we have all been weaponized against each other, how do we avoid simply retreating to our castles and closing the drawbridge?" (*Covid-19: Culture and Quarantine* – British Comparative Literature Association [BCLA]).

Early on at the beginning of the pandemic we were told that the world "will never be the same again". The mass-media worldwide enthusiastically promoted the idea of a "great reset", which is an all-encompassing project, conceived on a multitude of levels and domains: economic, societal, geopolitical, environmental, technological, industrial, culminating with the very ambitious outline of an "individual reset", based on a strategy of "redefining our humanness" (Schawb & Malleret 2020: 161). The authors, who are very critical of capitalist consumerism and deplore environmental degradation, talk about a post-pandemic landscape which will, presumably, be a better world, more equitable and sustainable. They even refer to "the principle of creativity under duress" (*ibidem*: 179), with examples from literature, from Shakespeare to Pushkin. And they also warn us that "the genie of tech surveillance will not be put back into the bottle" (*ibidem*: 130).

What could possibly go wrong, with such a well-thought plan?

The totalitarian potential of (political) utopia has been recognized by many exegetes: according to Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, the "crisis of contemporary imagination" resides in the effects of a "monopoly of the utopian" (1979: 9). Similarly, Theodore Dalrymple (2001) pointed out that utopian logic presupposes an enemy which must be eliminated, and this feature of the genre has been revealed in the clearest manner by the dystopian imagination of fictional works like Orwell's *1984* or Huxley's *Brave New World*. Some people are afraid that the frame of biosecurity (Agamben 2020) is being used by the "new tech elite" (Brockmann *et al.* 2001) to usher in a totalitarian, leviathanic, technocratic system, which, in eschatological terms, is sometimes termed "the beast-system".

All these sudden and somehow brutal interventions in an otherwise relatively settled collective life (at least in the rich part of the world) could not remain without consequences when it comes to the issue of identity, or self-perception and perception of otherness which, in their turn, represent the very basis of communication. Apart from the justification by medical urgency, are we being depersonalized by the forced use of masks, especially as this practice does not seem to have an end, in the foreseeable future? This very controversial but mandatory use of facial coverings has turned virtually everyone into a potential felon. A "naked" human face is something almost scandalous, in a way in which no one would have thought possible a year before. Conversely, for many people the masks are positive signifiers, conveying or suggesting not only self-protection but also patriotism, altruism, the love for one's neighbor or an inclination towards self-sacrifice.

Will the prolonged isolation have a devastating psychological impact, or will the "crisis of identities" and their "mutations" (Dubar 2003), which scholars have analyzed from so many perspectives, worsen, while most downtrodden citizens of the world (and, as a novelty, even members of the middle class) feel totally stripped of agency? Dismantling traditional social structures might be a deliberate modus operandi in a process of social engineering which appears to take inspiration from alchemy: *ordo ab chao*, *solve et coagula* (cf. Jung 1968). The newest slogan "build back better" could be just the latest variation of these principles. Only recently some

voices began to say that it's "time to question" our unelected and unaccountable "overlords" (O'Brien 2021: 1).

Not much seemed to have changed since one of the initiators of "public relations", Edward Bernays, serenely and cynically asserted that

> "The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized. Vast numbers of human beings must cooperate in this manner if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society" (Bernays 1928: 9).

In this view, individual autonomy appears largely overestimated and overrated. We are now far beyond the flexible or fluid understanding of identity and the self, which was seen, together with otherness, as always under "re-visioning" (Walton & Haas 2000). The "network society" generates the "network economy" and also "network identities" (Barney 2004: 143). But a "network", a "web" or a "system" could not possibly be appropriate replacements for "community", at least as long as the sinister transhumanist utopia (which seems more like a dystopia) does not become reality.

We should bear in mind that, communication as practiced by mass-media is rarely "dialogical" and, more often than not, "monological", primarily due to the fact that it does not allow a "reversibility of discourse" (Lochard, Boyer 1998: 23). The neuroplasticity of the brain bombarded with negativity is certainly threatened by the state of permanent fear and despondency, and by the induced obsessive thoughts, while the cognitive abilities of the public, for instance the solving-problem capacity, are inevitably reduced. The "fear of freedom" (Fromm 2001) itself, in a new guise, could actually be a result of the overconsumption of anxiogenic messages. In fact, freedom seems to no longer be "in fashion", as the cult of *safety* gains momentum.

Should we so easily dismiss people's fears, when the media themselves are sometimes engaging in blatant fearmongering and sensationalizing? Nor is this a recent phenomenon, but seems to be only the culmination of what could be called the bread and butter of some media outlets: controlling and demoralizing the public through constant panic and catastrophic reporting. There is a strong connection between "fear and fantasy" (Araújo *et al.* 2015), and in this way the masses' imaginary world (Wolf 2012), or their ability of "worldmaking" (Goodman 1978) can be authoritatively shaped by those who push certain agendas and narratives: "More than open barbarism, I fear barbarism with a human face – ruthless survivalist measures enforced with regret and even sympathy but legitimized by expert opinions" (Žižek 2021: 4).

The magician of previous eras has turned into advertising or publicity agent (cf. Couliano 1987) but also into the "infallible" and heavily promoted "expert" whose predictive models are at the origin of comprehensive public policies with very real consequences for the most vulnerable people. Ironically, the reign of the "experts" we are not allowed to question coincides with an unprecedented crisis of *replicability*, especially in the field of social studies and medical studies:

> "The world of science is in the midst of unprecedented soul-searching at present. The credibility of science rests on the widespread assumption that results are replicable, and that high standards are maintained by anonymous peer review. These pillars of belief are crumbling. […] Professional scientists' career prospects, promotions and grants depend on the number of papers they have published, the number of times they are cited and the prestige of the journals in which they are published. There are therefore powerful incentives for people to publish eye-catching papers with striking positive results. If other researchers cannot replicate the results, this may not be discovered for years, if it is discovered at all, and meanwhile their careers have advanced and the system perpetuates itself" (Sheldrake 2015: 1).

Under these conditions, it should be understandable that there is a persistent concern for the future of academic inquiry, including in the field of humanities. In the recent period, with the rise and radicalization of the so-called "woke culture", lately metamorphosized into a very disturbing "cancel culture", freedom of expression, and in particular academic freedom (McWhorter 2020) have been more and more put into question.

Apart from the rampant online censorship from Big Tech (and the phenomenon of self-righteous Twitter and Facebook mobs, engaged in virtue-signaling), we should we also be concerned with the fate of literature and culture in general, in a context where the banning of books and movies, even cartoons, becomes part of a new trend. From pointing out problematic aspects in the canon and "decolonizing" the curriculum (Muldoon 2019), things are escalating very quickly to "cancelling Shakespeare" (Harris 2021) because of "white supremacy" and other unforgivable sins (as identified in the catechism of the new political religion of social justice). When scholarship is reduced to activism, the need arises for a more balanced and nuanced approach of the (inevitably) political dimension of culture, for instance from the perspective of classical liberalism (Pluckrose & Lindsay 2020).

Another important element on the recent agenda is increased digitalization. Perhaps more than in previous years, we can begin to assess the impact that the new communication technologies have on our daily lives, as work, school, shopping, entertainment and even some church services have massively moved online. Several decades ago, the Canadian scholar Marshal McLuhan underlined the shaping power of communication technologies (writing and printing, in particular) over culture and collective psychology. After the "making of typographic man" in the context of "the

Gutenberg Galaxy" (McLuhan 1962), is the "making of a digital man" the next logical step? On the other hand, the newer field called "digital humanities" (Burdick *et al.* 2012) has been full of promises, including for the study of literature, by complementing the already established "close reading" with a strategy of "distant reading" (Moretti 2013).

From the ancient clay tablets to the current electronic tablets, the "written world" (Puchner 2017) has registered innumerable fluctuations and transformations which have not remained without consequences in the realm of human history. When libraries suddenly closed, the hope came from digitized depositories, the "libraries without walls" (Mani 2017: 215) which have been already studied for several years. The heritage of previous world culture can offer precious information for the understanding of contemporary challenges: William Marx (2020: 2) explains how literature can teach us about epidemics, by identifying four types of discourses: documentary, semiotic, eschatological, moral. The aesthetics of film (Goss 2021) and the theological discourse (Gaál-Szabó 2021) can offer important lessons about the predicaments of modernity.

In whatever form or medium, we believe in the powers of literature and other forms of discourse to reach minds and sensibilities, to provoke and console, to instruct and comfort, to unsettle and delight. There is no end to the depth of fine literature, but we should not forget that literature is on a continuum with other discursive forms of dialogue or communication:

> "A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. […] The dissimulation of the woven texture can in any case take centuries to undo its web: a web that envelops a web, undoing the web for centuries; reconstituting it too as an organism, indefinitely regenerating its own tissue behind the cutting trace, the decision of each reading" (Derrida 1981: 63).

Books of fiction can stimulate the readers' creativity in the form of a "core attitude of tolerance for ambiguity", which, interestingly enough, is tightly connected to the many "dimensions of critical thought" (Piirto 2011: 29-30). Artistic creation entails "the emergence of a new reality" (Burgos 2003: 22), characterized by a dynamic symbolism. The most gifted artists often tap into the "spiritual unconscious" (Larchet), which is even deeper than Jung's collective unconscious, the realm of the archetypes. The "new interdisciplinarity" (Parpală 2011) of cognitive sciences and neurosciences can shed new light on literature's and art's complexities and intricacies, often outlining the peculiarities of individual style (Deaconu 2021). The surveys have shown "an increasing rapprochement between literary scholars and cognitive scientists, as well as an effort by these groups to consider human biological universals in relation to specific cultural and historical factors" (Jaén and Simon 2012: 24). Linguists can also attest to the relevance of this approach for the codifications of emotions embedded in language (Csillag 2021).

In accord with the title chosen for this year's collection of articles, we want to provide a space for the unfettered communication of different identities: personal, collective, intellectual, scholarly, ideological. We believe in the possibility of authentic and fruitful dialogue across similar and different scholarly backgrounds, disciplines and interpretive communities.

The contributors come from Irak, Hungary, Romania and The United States (Spain). We have divided the material into: Part I. *Cultural Identity and Comparative Literature* and Part II. *Discursive Variation in Interactions.* Across the two parts, one can notice several common threads uniting the chapters in distinct groups, according to subject matter and methodology. These are the following:

a. Cultural identities

This rubric includes four chapters, which deal with the manifold issue of "identity" in its inextricable relationship with "otherness". Problems of gender, the "imagined community" of the nation (or the Empire) and theological implications of the racial identity are brought into discussion in this section.

The transnational comparison proposed in the article *Ambivalent Magical-Realist Masculine Spaces in Junot Diaz's "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" and Ștefan Agopian's novel "Tache de catifea"* by Alina Ciobotaru seeks to contribute to the efforts of establishing a more encompassing hermeneutical framework for magical realism as a universal mode or genre capable of subverting authoritarian discourses and of building a cultural identity. Junot Diaz's novel tracks the author's own diasporic experience as a member of the Dominican-American community and deconstructs the category of "masculinity" by using magical realist strategies that oppose the protagonist's (Oscar) passive nature to the hyper-masculine figure of Raphael Trujillo, whose dictatorial regime between 1930 and 1960 had negatively impacted the Dominican Republic for years to come. In contrast, Ștefan Agopian's novel *Tache de catifea* was published during the communist regime in Romania in 1981 and consequently the use of historical detail and the lack of direct political reference reflect the need to avoid censorship. By using various local magical realist strategies that are specific to the Eastern European context, such as anti-mimetic elements, grotesque details and carnivalesque descriptions, Agopian subverts the image of a traditional type of violent masculinity, embodied by Tache's father.

Hayder Naji Shanbooj Alolaiwi's article *Feminist Concerns with Frederick Douglass and William E.B. Du Bois* draws a comparison between these two important African American writers, whose writings and activism for the rights of their minority present similarities (the author of the article classify them as *integrationists*) but also differences. They both opposed oppression or segregation and fought for their people's emancipation (which is not reduced to the abolition of slavery) but had different views about the causes of the inter-racial problems and the

appropriate solutions. Douglass' outlook was a Christian and an optimistic one (he even granted the United States a messianic role), While Du Bois had a secularized and rather pessimistic vision. The former was born into slavery and struggled for his freedom, realizing from an early time the importance of education. The latter was a leftist and considered that the Black people's problems were systemic. There is an anticipation, here, of current concerns for intersectionality (in this case, the intersection between race and gender), because the two authors are interested in the fate of women, especially African-American women, who are hailed as mothers, capable workers but also as revolutionaries. Alolaiwi makes the effort of evaluating Douglass' and Du Bois' contribution through the lenses of contemporary feminism.

The "Up" Series of Documentaries (1964-2019): From Imagined Community to Unimaginable by Brian Michael Goss provides an extensive and detailed context for the analysis of nine installments (1964-2019) of this famous oeuvre belonging to the British director Michael Apted. By observing the life trajectory of 14 subjects from childhood to seniority, the documentary builds a certain type of "imagined community" (see Anderson 1983), in an era when television had replaced, to a large extent, novels, or books in general, as a vehicle for communicating the more or less "constructed" unity of the nation. However, this familial togetherness is harder and harder to maintain because of the aggravation of socio-economic inequalities generated by Thatcherite neoliberalism and its aftermath. Another factor that is taken into account is the persistence of a class system even after its apparent fall into obsolescence. The elite, posh children have a predictable existential route: they got to keep their privileges, unlike their counterparts from a working-class background, although the latter were not without a chance of upward mobility. Gradually, the series lost its political edge. The chapter goes on to analyze in depth three different faces of an imagined community, by focusing on three participants, John, Jackie, and Neil. Despite some tensions and confrontations between the subjects and the documentarian, they are very much like a team or a family. Jackie, for instance, a divorced single mother of three, with arthritis, declared she felt she could rely on Apted as potential help in a difficult situation. The ups and downs of Neil's life configure a narrative of British resilience, while his own perception was that he failed in almost everything. The larger "family" of the nation risks to become "unimaginable", when its representatives are "recruited into incompatible narratives". The diminishing of this imaginability is ultimately generated by major changes in the socio-political, economic and media environment.

The next chapter, by Peter Gaál-Szabó's, is called *Intersections of African American Culture and Theology in James Cone's "Black Theology and Black Power"*. The author shows that in his 1969 book Cone attempted to reconcile Martin Luther King's dream of integration with the revolutionary spirit of Black movements reclaiming social and racial justice, while also trying to elevate black theology to the status of a legitimate discipline. One strategy for doing that is the recourse to the Biblical prophetic tradition, with its often-vehement rhetoric, and the sermonic

tradition of African-American preachers who opposed discrimination. The "white" church is harshly criticized for its complicity with racism, in an attempt to "empower" African Americans theologically by liberating them from the objectified state of "nonbeing". Within the logic of Biblical parallelism, if the Black community is identified with Israel, then the white majority plays the role of Israel's oppressors. The justification of violent rioting as a form of Christian "love" is, however, harder to accept. The author is also critical towards "Cone's militant insistence on ontological blackness" and his exaggerated concern with power. While his merits in giving a new "impetus" to the "black religio-cultural self-conceptualization" are recognized, Gaál-Szabó also points out the perpetuation of "binary limitations" in Cone's intellectual project, which diminishes its effectiveness in offering a response to the current challenges faced by the African American community.

b. Cognitivist concepts applied

This section we have delineated includes three articles which resort to methods from the ever-growing field of cognitive theories with their different branches: linguistic, rhetoric- stylistic, communicational.

Andrea Csillag's chapter, *Prepositions in English Expressions of Disgust – A Cognitive Semantic Approach*, shows how, among the six universal basic emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust and surprise), disgust is less studied, from a cognitive linguistic perspective, especially when compared, for example, with the interest researchers have taken in the conceptualizations of anger, happiness and fear. In order to fill this gap, the paper will study a large corpus relevant for the language of disgust in English: 175 sentences. The rich theoretical background outlined at the beginning of the chapter reveals the complexity of this emotion, which can be analyzed on multiple levels. Drawing on Darwin's legacy, some researchers underline the biological, and hence universal elements of the disgust experience (irrespective of the cultural background), while others distinguish between a *core* variant and an *interpersonal* one, meaning that the reaction can be elicited by mental processes, even in the absence of a disgusting object. The purpose of Andrea Csillag's paper is to study the role of the prepositions *at, for, from, in, to, toward(s)* and *with*, occurring in phrases with *disgust* and the image schemata underlying their use. The cognitive approach can assess if the prepositions are used in their literal sense (spatial or functional) or figuratively. The prepositional phrases analyzed in this chapter, the author concludes, cover two aspects of the disgust experience, namely, the cause of this particular emotion and the way the subjects behave in a state of disgust.

In her contribution entitled *Vasile Voiculescu, the Light Seeker: Metaphors of Light in Vasile Voiculescu's Antemortem Poems,* Steliana-Mădălina Deaconu deals with the stylistic strategies employed by the "organically faithful" (as he characterized himself) Romanian poet Vasile Voiculescu. The poet had his own theory about the limitations of poetry in apprehending the ineffably mystical, when

contrasted with prayer, which can approach the divine apophatically, via silence. The poetry here analyzed distils childhood epiphanies and indefinite metaphysical longings, as well as the poet's readings from the *Bible* and science or his participation in the mysteries of the Church. By applying a cognitive reading, the author of the article shows how the Absolute is conveyed through metaphors of light (the thread uniting the poems in the corpus), while non-essential aspects of the world can be rendered through a colorful imagery. The article also mentions the discourse world theory, which considers the cognitive tracking of entities, relations and processes to be a mental space. The semantic sphere of the light and clarity is made more evident through contrasting metaphors of darkness, fog, confusion. Explicitly, light is seen as the "redeeming sign" from God (the poem *Durerea / The Pain*). The cognitive approach is all the more appropriate, considering Vasile Voiculescu's theological interests and taking into account that conceptual metaphors, as associations between a target and a source domain, apprehend, as the scholars in the field explain, a system of thought, and not simple stylistic ornaments of speech. In the "blended space" of the metaphor, a "new emergent understanding" becomes visible, while the poet turns the poem into a "world" where the communion with God through prayer becomes indeed possible.

Cognitive metaphor is also the focus of Alina Țenescu's article entitled *Absinthe in advertising discourse*. Although analyses of wine and beer in advertisement proliferate, research on the figurative language for this particular spirit is scarce. Here, the author tackles the mediatic representation of the so-called "green fairy", a very strong green alcoholic beverage which was the (dangerous) attraction for many European writers and artists from La Belle Epoque, before being prohibited. However, it was mistakenly believed that one of the chemicals contained in the mixture produced hallucinations, which determined its unjust banishment. It was the improper mode of production and distillation which provoked illnesses or even death. More recently, the limited use of the drink was allowed in America and France. Advertising absinthe has currently become pervasive in the online environment, where linguistic and visual images are mobilized as persuasive strategies aimed at potential consumers. Several features of absinthe are emphasized by advertisement: aroma, flavour, mouthfeel and finish. The descriptions show an inclination towards the anthropomorphic metaphor, by focusing on the categories "personality and temperament features" and "physical traits". Organicist metaphors and metonymies are predominant and, as regards the pictorial similes in vintage prints, one can notice the association with an attractive woman drinking the absinth, in order to make the beverage more desirable for the male public.

c. Comparativism and Geocriticism

Geocritical studies represent a growing field with extensive applications in the realm of world literature, thus also establishing close connections with the methodology of comparative literature, as shown by the three articles listed under this rubric.