



Eurozine News Item

Changing places (What's normal, anyway?)

20th European Meeting of Cultural Journals, Sibiu, 21–24 September 2007

The Twentieth European Meeting of Cultural Journals took place in Sibiu, Romania, on the 21–24 September 2007. For centuries, Sibiu has been regarded as the cultural capital of Transylvania and it seems only natural that it also have the official status of a European Capital of Culture 2007. This has led to major renovations in and around the historic city centre (a Unesco World Heritage site), which also houses the Brukenthal Museum, Romania's oldest museum. That Romanian philosopher and aphorist E.M. Cioran ("The Real gives me asthma...") spent sleepless nights walking the streets of Sibiu, before he emigrated to Paris, was only one more facet that made the city the ideal location for this year's conference.

Under the heading "Changing places (What's normal anyway?)", panels addressed the challenges facing cities and states as well as art, literature, and the media as the need for change meets the urge for normality. In choosing to discuss "normality", Eurozine was referring to Sibiu's slogan as European Capital of Culture: "Sibiu normal". The title "Changing places" acknowledged the transformations currently affecting Sibiu, and referred to the transformations, both physical and mental, taking place in eastern Europe as a whole. However, the title also suggested the act of moving to another geographical and or symbolic location, be it in the form of migration, emigration, exile, or asylum. Each panel attempted to address one of these two aspects of normality and change.

All over central eastern Europe, new freedoms seem to be accompanied not only by hope for prosperity but also by longing for "normality"; normality not so much as something to be experienced for the first time, but as something to be recovered. But what is this precious normality? As Mircea Vasilescu [pointed out](#) in his opening address, for eastern Europeans, the myth of a free and prosperous West, of western *normality*, has been replaced by the observation of *normalities*. Now that Romania is an EU member, it turns out that the West has problems of its own, problems by no means as exotic as once believed.

Isn't it perhaps time to leave concepts like "transition" and "change" behind? Then again, isn't the experience of constant change, of "flexibility" and precarity, rather than stability and "ordered states", what constitutes the "western norm"? The first panel, entitled "Normality: The Obscure Object of Desire" aimed to analyse the concept of normality in the post–communist context. Alexander Kiossev elaborated on the conflicting layers of meaning in the concept of normality, among them "routine" or "status quo"; "discipline" or "normalization" (in the Foucauldian sense); and "health" and "sanity" versus madness. Along with these definitions, argued Kiossev, was the eastern European longing for western "normality" immediately after the system

change. More recently, this longing, faced with the neoliberal and bureaucratic discipline of Europe, has transformed into a longing for "difference", "authenticity", and "national roots".

Catalin Avramescu took issue with the idea that a democratic constitution is "normal", or something we can expect. Historically, an exemplary constitution has been the exception to the rule: "Imitating or perpetuating this constitution requires exceptional strength, skill and determination." Avramescu pointed out that, according to political philosophers, individuals and states, when left to their own devices, tend to prove that the state of natural freedom is "nasty, brutish and short" (Hobbes).

In the third and final speech on this panel, Elena Trubina challenged established linear "transitional" narratives of "then and now", as well as thinking limited to "East" and "West". These, she proposed, cannot capture the complexity and continuity of experience. One attribute of normality that existed during socialism was materiality — the chance to establish oneself as an owner and maker of things. Surely, she asked, the growing importance of one's private life as opposed to an alienated social existence was something that united the worlds across the Berlin wall?

The second panel focused on literature in exile. Writers fleeing from fascist or communist dictatorships have come to form our concept of the experience of writing in exile. However, authors have been forced or have chosen to go into exile throughout literary history; furthermore, political oppression is not the only reason for an author to go into exile — aesthetic and social considerations are often important in decisions to leave a certain cultural context.

A text collage that preceded the panel provided an amusing and unusual way into the subject of literary exile. Audience members read selected excerpts from authors including Dante and Shakespeare, Heine and Mandelstam, Canetti and Kertesz — all read in the original languages. Opening the panel proper, Seloua Luste Boulbina [discussed](#) how Algerian–French novelist Assia Djebar has had to find a way to Arabize the language of the former colonizer. In doing so, said Luste Boulbina, Djebar has cut the "umbilical cord" to her country of origin. Her writing turns the tables on the post–colony, so that the question now is not, "Can the subaltern speak and write?", but "Can the non–subaltern hear and read?"

Next, Zimbabwean poet, novelist, and journalist Chenjerai Hove [recalled](#) two incidents typical of the censorship that forced him into internal exile; and how, once in exile, he discovered new creative perspectives. Concluding the panel, novelist and broadcaster Zinovy Zinik [traced](#) the history of the shadow motif as metaphor for exile through Evgeni Shvartz's play *The Shadow* and earlier fables by Hans Christian Andersen and Adelbert von Chamisso. Zinik, who left his native Russia in the 1970s and moved first to Israel and then to Britain, succeeded in creating a web of intermeshed émigré biographies and fictions spanning two centuries.

And then it was over; or not quite. In her closing address, Slavenka Drakulic [described](#) one place that has witnessed a great deal of change since the collapse of communism: her own bathroom. The dearth of toilet paper may not have been the sole reason for communism's failure, remarked Drakulic, but it's an apt metaphor for a regime unable to fulfil its subjects' basic needs. Although her bathroom is better stocked these days, she's still prone to doubt: was the normality she and her fellow eastern Europeans longed for just another false

paradise?

Published 2007-11-02
Original in English
© Eurozine