

Transcending hybridity: recovering difference

Hagenbüchle, Roland

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hagenbüchle, R. (2006). Transcending hybridity: recovering difference. *interculture journal: Online-Zeitschrift für interkulturelle Studien*, 5(1), 3-15. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-454070>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Transcending Hybridity: Recovering Difference

Prof. Dr. Roland Hagen-
buechle

Professor (emerit.) für Amerikanis-
tik an der Kath. Universität Eich-
stätt-Ingolstadt

„Vive la différence“ (Ostendorf)

Critical fashions come and go, what stays is the need for critical discernment.

“Difference is the dimension in which we dwell” (Heidegger)

Originally developed by theorists such as Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Edouard Glissant to describe the creolized identity of post-slavery Caribbean populations, the idea of cultural hybridity was introduced into the literary universe (under the term „mongrelization“) by Salman Rushdie. Yet it was not until Homi K. Bhabha's theoretical development of the metaphoric notion of hybridity that the concept finally became indispensable to academic critical discourse. Although viewed by many scholars with skepticism, nobody so far has managed to offer an alternative of comparable power. Two aspects in particular have contributed to the concept's enduring attraction: its polemical edge and its optimistic promise.

From the start, 'mongrelization'/'hybridity' was directed by Rushdie/Bhabha against the racial purity and alleged superiority of white Western culture and its voracious appetite for global domination. Other civilizations have made similar attempts at hegemony but none has proved equally successful in the long run. Max Weber was the first to inquire into the specific reasons for this amazing phenomenon for which causal explanations alone seem to be insufficient. Buttressed by superior technology, it was above all the scientific, philosophical, and theological world picture which gave Europeans a rational and comprehensive conception of the world and a unified image of man – and hence the impression that their civilization was destined "to inherit the earth". Edward Said took up the gauntlet and used a postcolonial agenda to undermine Western hegemonic discourse and its colonial power basis. In the struggle for self-determination, the concept of hybridity could be used as an effective political weapon not only against racial discrimination, but also against discriminatory practices on the levels of gender, religion, and of ethnic bias frequently linked to national ambitions. In his enormously influential book *The Location of Culture* Bhabha tellingly named one of the chapters "DissemiNation".

In brief, 'hybridity' could be employed both as a pharmakon to heal unjust but ingrained sociocultural divisions and as a battle cry to fight discrimination in all spheres of life. This was quite in keeping with the postmodern effort to unmask the disastrous sociopolitical effects of absolutist binary thinking and of hidden power structures in general. Like Rushdie, Bhabha sought to overcome the self-erected borders of hu-

man societies and their nefarious desire for social, religious, ethnic, and political categorization. No wonder, 'hybridity' conveyed a tremendously optimistic message. It seemed to offer a *Camino Real*, a royal way, toward transcending those borders that have played havoc with us in history. Besides, the concept was sufficiently vague to accommodate different versions of 'hybridity', ranging from eclectic forms of syncretism to selective adaptations of everyday social practices. Not infrequently, 'hybridity' has assumed the function of a traveler's survival kit in crossing national, ethnic and religious frontiers. On closer examination, however, we find that 'hybridity' can be as much of a burden as a help. For those on the lower social level it may lead to tremendous difficulties and profound cultural confusion, for the better-off and the socioculturally secure it may prove a richly broadening experience. From this perspective, Clifford's "delight in cultural impurity and disturbing syncretism" remains dubious in view of underdeveloped and weak third-world cultures.

As a theoretical tool, 'hybridity' has unquestionably raised academic critical discourse onto a higher and more nuanced level of self-reflection. Not only in academia, in other cultural spheres as well, the concept appears to apply with considerable success. In art, for instance, 'hybridity' has practically become the norm. Hybrid and heterolingual texts and songs begin to abound. A Chinese musician recently composed a "Matthäus-Passion" (called "Water Passion" in honor of Bach, i.e. brook) that synthesizes Chinese musical structures with Western themes into amazingly novel forms. The composition is unusually enjoyable and strangely attractive to both Chinese and Western audiences.

The concept of hybridity appears to serve equally well in everyday life. It works for both individual persons (especially artists and academics) and collectively for cultures which have managed to transform destructive historical, political and sociocultural conflicts into dynamic and creative exchanges. Demonstrably, Chicano/a culture is a case in point. No wonder, Donna Haraway in her „Manifesto“ sees Chicanas as exemplary cyborgs and ideal postmodernist subjects. The question may nonetheless be raised whether the cultural success story of the Chicano/a community must be viewed as an isolated phenomenon within the larger context of the Americas and as a product of exceptionally favorable geographic, climatic and sociocultural factors. Relatively little comparative research has so far been done on the collision of various other Latino cultures with the dominant US-mainstream culture, nor do we have sufficient scholarship on inter-Latino relations and on variants of responses to the pressures of globalization. It would be immensely interesting to learn what

forms of hybridity (or modes of self-assertion) such encounters provoke in Latin America and the United States, both interculturally and intraculturally.

Similar questions might be raised for US-culture where analyses of inter-minority sociocultural exchanges are still somewhat rare. What remains largely unanalyzed (to select a random example) is the encounter between different religions in the Americas (e.g. magic-colored catholicism and evangelicalism with its penchant for scriptural fundamentalism). In how far the concept of hybridity is also of use on the level of everyday family life and its practices remains uncertain in view of the differing familial structures and the unequal status of woman in the US and its southern neighbors. Despite enormous cultural differences within the region, Latin America still presents a remarkably solid patriarchal system.

Only a hemispheric approach supported by detailed analyses of intergroup and interminority relations will enable us to answer such questions. What is disregarded in most current studies is the temporal development of Latin American cultures and their internal modifications which often display distinct phases of structural change. Cultures, after all, take shape in time and they undergo constant transformations – at least "hot cultures" do. Nor should intracultural differences be lost sight of. High culture (including avant-garde art) may well be contested and criticized by "lower" cultural art forms, in the field of music, song, and the performing arts no less than in the visual arts or in cyberpunk and other pop elements – with film and TV taking on the role of cultural leaders. The varying responses of these different strata of culture to high culture, to hegemonic influences from outside, and to the impact of a globalized culture in general may turn out to be rather diverse in different ethnopolitical areas. Here as elsewhere, the notion of hybridity can still be of use, but its analytical range and explanatory force for future research appears limited. These limitations become increasingly visible both in academic research, in praxis-oriented field analysis, and in social life at large. Let us briefly examine some of the reasons.

The crucial drawback of the concept of hybridity appears to be a lack of critical perspective. In consequence of its anti-discriminatory thrust, flattening out all racial, religious, ethnic and other sociocultural differences, 'hybridity' is practically devoid of all critical and evaluatory power. Its original strength thus turns out to be its central weakness. What is missing is an ethical horizon. It is by no means accidental that Rushdie's novel *Satanic Verses* is limited in its ethical concerns to sheer sarcasm, a form of disrespect toward Muslim culture which created a Pandemonium of hateful voices and an

unprecedented outburst of murderous hostility. His later novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* merely confirms the author's disillusionment about the possibilities of individual and collective cultural 'hybridity'.

Multiculturalism, envisaged as a postmodern way of peacefully living together in a metonymic side-by-side, and 'hybridity' as an attempt to overcome the pluralist discourse of "separate but equal" in terms of 'contamination' – or, at best, of a partial exchange of cultural elements mutually appreciated as valid alternatives to one's own cultural make-up – both present ways of existence that seem to rely on a specific vision of society. It is, by and large, a harmonious vision of "live and let live", reminiscent of Ivan Illych's ideal of "conviviality". As Rushdie's own biography shows, however, this vision does not appear to be true to present-day reality; Brecht's dictum comes to mind: „Doch die Verhältnisse, sie sind nicht so.“ Ours is a conflict-laden world, not exactly Lyotard's "general agonistic" perhaps, but we definitely have to face the fact that cultures differ in fundamental ways, and that we cannot avoid making critical decisions.

The concept of hybridity, by contrast, far from taking socio-cultural distinctions seriously, strives to disregard – and even dissolve – differences, thus making ethical choices largely irrelevant. It should be noted, however, that Bhabha has recently made his own ethical turn, albeit in a characteristically ironic mode. In two splendid (partly overlapping) essays he has raised the issue of "cultural choice" and of "cultural respect". In the latter, Bhabha focuses on "the neighbor in the moral sense of the term". Recalling Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, he notes the author's insistence on the impossibility to distinguish in Jim's choice between right and wrong, between truth and lie. All in all, Bhabha remains faithful to his tactics of ambivalence and ambiguity. The new element in both essays is the Freudian concept of the joke.

In a brilliant manoeuvre Bhabha exploits Freud's notion of joke-work, thus providing "a way for minority communities to confront and regulate the abuse that comes from 'outside' and the criticisms that emerge from within the community itself." It is a strategy of communal self-identification that evades the trap of erecting fixed ethnic defenses since the joker identifies with his own community while at the same time being able to appreciate the jokes directed against him by outsiders. The self-critical stance is meant to keep „a passageway open for a range of border-crossings and cross-border identifications." Finally, such joke-work raises the issue of truth "as an ethical and social practice." What the jokes attack, according to Freud, is not a person "but the certainty of truth itself." Taking the "third person", the witness

and his reaction into account, Freud highlights the insecure basis of all knowledge production. Such recognition, to Bhabha, „becomes an act of cultural survival and historical renewal“ not least because it defuses the ever-present danger of ideological collision. It is in the ironic wisdom of the joke that Bhabha grounds his hope for cultural continuity and solidarity, a slender hope no doubt, but a hope nonetheless.

Master of ambivalence and ambiguity, Bhabha tries to get around the crucial moment of decision by means of an “iterative practice of the self-critical joke-work”, basing his plea to leave alterity “neither disavowed nor suppressed but worked-around” on the expectation that such work “will be carried out somewhere between tears and laughter”. Bhabha’s use of the Freudian concept is highly sophisticated but its self-ironic performance has a double-edged quality, pushing both the jesting subject and the subject of the joke toward the parodic. Self-irony as an ethical stance may indeed be the peak of human wisdom (in a Nietzschean rather than a Socratic sense), but who can attain to such wisdom? As a shrewd intellectual gesture it is but of doubtful social relevance. Besides, Bhabha’s concern with value-loaded terms like choice and responsibility rests ultimately with Derrida’s notion of “accountability”, itself caught in the mesh of multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory injunctions, a posture which is in stark contrast to Lévinas’ radical ethics of unconditional responsibility. These reservations aside, it is to be hoped that Bhabha’s deep meditations on moral choice will enrich the concept of hybridity (and related concepts) with an enduring ethical quality, thus remedying a long-felt lack.

Indeed, what most strikes us in the academic usage of the concept of hybridity is its utopian core, more exactly the expectation that hybrid sociocultural processes might eventually help to erase all socially constructed differences, in particular troublesome value differences. The desired goal may be noble: interpersonal and intercultural concord based on a purely utilitarian view of society. One need not have read Max Weber or Simmel to recognize that this is not the way societies usually function. Brecht’s dictum comes to mind: “Aber die Verhältnisse sie sind nicht so.” If Dahrendorf is right, societies (especially “open societies”) are best described by means of a “conflict model”, a model early on adopted by the British Cultural-Studies movement (although the idea of class conflict no longer forms the model’s center). Fanon’s advocacy of revolutionary violence – his ethical impulse notwithstanding – should alert us to the profound antagonisms that endanger the liberal narrative of pluralistic difference. More recently, Bhabha himself has pondered this problem in his thoughtful

contribution "On the Irremovable Strangeness of Being Different".

Whatever social model we happen to embrace, however, in our present world we simply cannot afford to give up the notion of choice and, along with it, the critical concept of difference. Interestingly enough, these concepts are now increasingly being debated in scholarly discussions revolving around the subject or self which seemed to have become superfluous after the postmodernist assault on 'identity'. It was feminists like Butler and postmarxist critics like Jameson who tried to retrieve the subject as responsible agent in political affairs (especially in gender politics). In *The Psychic Life* Butler recognizes identity as an unavoidable if dangerous fact of social existence. After Seyla Benhabib's well-known and rightly celebrated work, two novel studies, in particular, offer an up-to-date analysis of the subject as agent: Calvin O. Schrag's *The Self after Postmodernity* (Yale UP 1999) and Meir Dan-Cohen's collection *Harmful Thoughts. Essays on Law, Self, and Morality* (Princeton UP 2002). Both books reflect on personal identity, moral dignity and autonomy, on freedom of choice, on responsibility and commitment.

Drawing on Dan-Cohen's insights, we may note that 'hybridity' is, by and large, concerned with value-neutral selections or preferences. It is not until we employ a differential perspective on culture that selective preferences become "elective", i.e. value-oriented choices. This is especially true for "differences that make a difference" as Gregory Bateson famously put it. And it is only in such cases that ethical commitments (over time) are being made, otherwise "investments" in preferential choices remain tentative (in a postmodernist sense). The suspicion may not be unfounded that, in addition to the postmodern bias toward relativism, the almost frantic shying away from the concepts of identity and moral choice was underpinned by the irrational fear of appearing politically incorrect.

Although the concept of difference (based on Saussure's work) was fundamental to the methods used by structuralists, we shall have to make a deliberate effort to recover 'difference' as a critical tool, since it was distrusted by many postmodernists anxious to prevent the return of identity philosophy and of binary thinking. It was especially Lyotard who – in choosing *le différent* as the key term and center of his worldview – totalized 'difference' to 'heterogeneity' and practically destroyed the concept's usefulness (as Habermas, Rorty and others were quick to point out). Nor was Derrida's intriguingly fluid and subtly temporalized *différance* – its phenomenal influence notwithstanding – helpful in advancing a theory of differential analysis, let alone a theory of moral choice. It

comes as little surprise that Derrida, late in life, had to turn to Lévinas in his "ethical turn" so as to offset the semantically and normatively precarious status of an endlessly free-floating signifier derived from an equally endless series of concatenated differences. In a recent – and somewhat self-defensive – move, he now lays claim to deconstruction as the most advanced method of (academic) criticism. Foucault's Nietzsche-inspired aesthetico-ethical turn, shortly before his death, is an instance too familiar to need detailed mention here.

Why, we may ask, is 'difference' indispensable as a conceptual tool to both theoretical reflection and social praxis? The answer is straightforward: it is our only way out of the quandary of relativism and pluralism postmodernity has left us in. For a long time it seemed to be an axiom in Western culture that there were overarching standards according to which we might judge and act. This hope for (and belief in) absolute guiding norms was wiped out by postmodernism, Derrida's "Mythologie blanche" (in *Margins of Philosophy*) being the deadly stroke that demolished the Platonic universe along with the Kantian system of transcendental thought and its critical rebuttal: Hegelian dialectics – or so it seemed.

Having lost an authoritative principle to judge by, we have to look for a different approach – and a different mode of reasoning – which might help us to reach fitting critical responses. These critical judgments – that is the crucial point – should be self-authenticating and independent of outer criteria fixed in advance. Calvin O. Schrag puts us on track: The criterion can be nothing else but the act of judging itself: "discernment". As David James Miller reminds us: to know is to distinguish, an insight graphically expressed by the Greek verb "krino" which includes the interrelated senses of "discerning, distinguishing, selecting, judging and assessing". The Greek verb is almost perfectly mirrored by the German verb "urteilen" which means both to distinguish and to judge or more exactly: to judge on the basis of distinctions.

What then are we as critics doing when we try to critically evaluate cultural phenomena, in particular features of widely differing cultures? In comparing cultural elements or sets of elements, we bring these features (which in reality form part of different life-worlds) into a unified mental configuration, thus playing them off against each other, not in a strictly dialectical fashion but in a relationship of challenge and competitive rivalry, tempered by mutual respect. Marking out differences intensifies our awareness of the cultural elements in question, creates a new horizon of understanding and elevates our reasoning onto a higher level of reflexion, at the same time inviting (if not compelling) us to make judgmental choices. "This construal of discernment" – Schrag insists –

"supplies its own criterion and sanction for judgment". Schrag has recourse to Wittgenstein's theory of language games and, ultimately, to Aristotle's *phronesis*, a form of "praxial critique" or practical wisdom, "infusing responsivity with responsibility", prompting ethically determined responses.

At this point we seem to come up against a wall. If our critical endeavors are supposed to generate considered judgments without the authority of ulterior norms, it is finally the act of comparing as such that is supposed to set our standards. Whatever degree of precision we may achieve, however, acts of discernment are still situated in our own time and milieu. It is only by interpreting our critical endeavors as "interventions" (Schrag) into cultural processes that we are capable of distancing ourselves from our respective traditions, thus transcending our ordinary positional limitations. It remains doubtful, however, whether cultural criticism can be effective without at least some vision of what the good life should be, which in turn, can hardly be conceived without help from the critic's own cultural heritage. On the other hand, the encounter with the Other is apt to create a new and expanded context which modifies and broadens our emotional and cognitive horizon (and along with it our sphere of liberty), enriches our relations, enlarges our critical resources and at the same time problematizes our cultural perspective.

In conclusion: the search for critical standards is by no means a hopeless project even though we have to do without the assistance of anterior and exterior norms, be they of a Kantian, Hegelian or whatever other provenance. Nonetheless, critical discernment involving differentiation and evaluation is never an easy task, the more so as such discernments are per se revisionary acts requiring ethical choices that – depending on one's respective cultural circumstances – all too often involve the risk of sailing into the wind.

The notion of difference as a critical concept (along with subject and choice) was never entirely abandoned, of course, though it may have lost its cutting edge for a while as demonstrated by the rise of neopositivism and the advance of systems theory in science and the humanities. It soon returned with a vengeance in the method of deconstruction which – based on differential readings – set out to exploit the internal conflicts between different layers of language. Though denounced by traditionalists as destructive and even nihilistic, the method has displayed a considerable potential for unmasking surface arguments used to disguise hidden aporias. From this angle, deconstruction is by no means unqualified to make critical value judgments as James Hillis Miller has com-

pellingly argued in several studies that both continue and significantly transform Derrida's critical mode. Rudolph Binion's fascinating study *Sounding the Classics* (Praeger Publishers 1997) is a fine example demonstrating the ethical dimension of deconstruction. Interpreting eminent works of world literature, Binion reveals the dialectical tension of text and subtext, which he understands as conflictual processes interior to the theme of a given work of art.

A comparable mode of analysis in the field of political studies may be found in the indispensable collection *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society* (Princeton UP 2002), a volume whose essays present in-depth studies of various versions of civil society (Jewish, Islamic, Christian, Confucian, communitarian, classical liberalism). It is in the concluding essay by Michael A. Mosher that we discover an interesting example of differential analysis. Mosher critically surveys the several alternatives from a comparatist point of view, highlighting their respective differences vis-a-vis each other. The result is a reasoned value judgment, approaching what Rawls has called "a reflective equilibrium".

Pursuing this line of critical thought, we should be careful to keep in mind the dialectical aim of difference, namely synthesis, although no longer understood in a strictly Hegelian sense but rather as a regulative idea of creating a society grounded in peaceful togetherness. Now that all "great narratives" are abandoned and all the grand utopias turned sour, we have become modest in our expectations. Not coincidence but convergence should henceforth be our goal (Schrag). The recognition of differences is a necessary precondition but not an end in itself. Although we have to make an effort to expand our knowledge of sociocultural differences so as to better appreciate and respect each other (not only as we are but also how we have come to be who we are, how we appear to others and how others judge us), we must not stop there. A further step is required: opening up a dialogue, not by adopting Apel's or Habermas' project of a consensus-oriented conversation but (to use Schrag's term) aiming at a form of "transversal communication" (a concept reminiscent of Wolfgang Iser's "Transversalität" and "transversale Vernunft") which, more than any "reasonable Middle Way" strategy, enriches our knowledge of each other and, most importantly, of the differences that separate us from one another – differences which, strange to add, make our cultural lives interesting and meaningful.

As we may learn from Kant, Arendt and Kohlberg, the precondition of all dialogic exchange is the readiness to listen, more precisely: the willingness to assume (in Stuart Hall's terminology) a "bifocal view" or "double perspective"

(Hagenbuechle) which is at bottom no other than a differential view signaling distinctions rather than likenesses (which would need no further effort). In this context, Kant speaks of an "enlarged mentality" and an enlarged self, Arendt (echoing Cicero) of "representative thinking, to think from the point of view of others", Seyla Benhabib of a context-sensitive „reversing of perspectives“, and Kohlberg calls it tout court "the moral point of view". Whatever term we use, we are called upon to make an effort in order to achieve a self-transcendent view which allows us – based on the concept of cultural differentiation – not only to evaluate the Other qua Other but also to criticize ourselves in relation to and in rivalry with the Other. Such enactment of differences transcends the postmodernist ideal of oscillation, of yo-yoing (Pynchon) between different cultural stances, a tactics that successfully avoids the particularism of identity politics but has its price in that it lacks an ethical horizon and a vision of the good life thereby neglecting the emancipatory goal which alone can orient a society towards a better future.

Helmbrecht Breinig offers an excitingly new concept called "transdifference" and which – unlike hybridity – emphatically insists on difference while aiming for a transformed state of cultural identity (not to be conflated with the notion of "transculturation"). As a critical term it is undeniably superior to most rivals in the field, and its potentiality for generalization – if not universalization – is impressive. "Transdifference" as a carefully defined notion should encourage us to rethink the question of how to deal with difference both on an individual and a collective level. The prefix "trans", in developing Bhabha's notions of "transformation" and, more pointedly, "transvaluation" carries an ethical quality that has been wanting so far in the concept of hybridity. Still, like other approaches "Transdifference" has to meet the challenge of how to put theoretical reflexions into praxis and to apply them to everyday life. This is the more difficult as it is a transformative process which is, as Herrnstein-Smith reminds us, inevitably value-loaded and positioned.

There is no universal solvent to this vexing problem. Wittgenstein (as Stephen Toulmin recalls) was convinced that any agreement we might reach would not be a matter of intellectual consensus, it would be a convergence of humane attitudes. To teach ourselves and our children better ways of respecting sociocultural differences is far from easy, but it is our only chance. We have to "proceed with caution" and with respectful distance as Doris Sommers advises us. To risk going an uncertain way toward the other while keeping our integrity is an unavoidable task in an increasingly globalized

world; what is more, it is a historical summons if only we take our cultural roots seriously.

Paul Geyer has recently proposed a critical theory of culture ("Eine kritische Theorie der Kultur") based on a refreshingly innovative model of differential analysis as part of an ongoing research project at Bonn University. In his remarkable study *Beyond Solidarity. Pragmatism and Difference in a Globalized World* Giles Gunn has explored in depth a comparable line of inquiry from a universalized pragmatist perspective in order to come to grips with cultural differences. Remembering pragmatism's notorious illusions concerning human evil, some might hesitate to accept Gunn's optimistic conclusion, but his all too brief reference at the end to aesthetics as a promising field in our search for "a sharable human world" deserves attention. Clearly, aesthetics has once more become an issue in contemporary scholarship but a fully developed theory of aesthetics as a formative principle of cultural production is still lacking. Such a theory might radically redirect research in this area. Whatever the chosen angle of inquiry, it should find a rich and provocative source in Friedrich Schiller's magisterial *Letters on Aesthetic Education (Ueber die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen)*.

In view of the above reflections, the concept of border takes on a radically different significance from its conventional meaning as a stable and divisive frontier. José David Saldívar's shrewdly ambivalent title sets the agenda: *Border Matters*. Indeed, borders matter supremely. On the level of praxis, borders highlight sociocultural differences functioning as potential catalysts for intersubjective processes of negotiation and exchange; on the theoretical level, borders are signifiers of the first magnitude. The problem is that they can be misleading signifiers, depending on one's point of view. Bhabha himself – relying on his notion of "cultural difference" (as against "cultural diversity") – has repeatedly reflected on the problematic and ambivalent aspect of borders. He speaks of "border line engagements", and of "interstices" across which culture-specific views and social practices can be negotiated. Unfortunately, Bhabha has omitted to supplement his abstract theorizing with concrete examples. The idea of an open, if ambivalent, "Third Space" (including Bhabha's notion of a "nonsovereign" subject) is attractive but vague and offers little theoretical and practical help. After Hegel and, more recently, Jaspers it was probably Plessner who made the most constructive contribution to the concept of border, throwing into relief its double quality of closing off and opening up – viewing borders and frontiers as starting lines for bridge-building as Bassam Tibi has reconceived the concept.

In assuming a differential double perspective (call it an "ethics of imagination") we are enabled to create a self-transcendent value horizon, certainly not in Gadamer's sense of a "fusion of horizons", but in terms of a heightened awareness of the differences that separate us from others yet (as we ought to remember) also link us to others through what often are invisible ties of connection which tend to form "contrapuntal ensembles" (Said), inviting us to interact, contest, and negotiate. In this way, we not only come to gain a perspectival basis for criticizing other cultures, we also lay ourselves open to the Other's critical gaze. Most importantly, we must summon the courage to turn our eyes critically on ourselves and our own cultural tradition. This is, in the final analysis, the true challenge given by the bifocal view or double perspective.

Lastly, we should not ignore the many pitfalls that put our project at risk: the ceaseless struggle for power, the dangers of ideology, instrumentalization and indoctrination, false consciousness, 'bad faith' and, most of all, the profound ambivalence pervading human nature whose creative center, as Freud has taught us, remains the source of the best as well as the worst that humans are capable of. Uncomfortable as such insights may be, they should induce us to foster a sense of humility or, at least, of reserve and "interpretive charity" (Davidson) – lacking which no genuinely critical discernment, no ethical choice, no open dialogue, and no livable community seem possible in our strife-torn world.

References:

Bhabha, H.K. (1998): On the Irremovable Strangeness of Being Different. *PMLA* 113 (1), pp. 34-39.

Bhabha, H.K. (2000): On Cultural Choice. In: Garber, M./ Hanssen, B./ Walkowitz, R.L. (eds.): *The Turn to Ethics*: New York: Routledge, pp. 181-200.

Bhabha, H.K. (2002): On Cultural Respect. In: Breinig, H./ Gebhardt, J./ Lösch, K. (eds.): *Multiculturalism in Contemporary Societies: Perspectives on Difference and Transdifference*. Erlangen: Univ.-Bund Erlangen-Nürnberg, pp. 53-67.

Breinig, H./ Gebhardt, J./ Lösch, K. (eds.) (2002): *Multiculturalism in Contemporary Societies: Perspectives on Difference and Transdifference*. Erlangen: Univ.-Bund Erlangen-Nürnberg

Breinig H./ Lösch, K. (2002): Introduction: Difference and Transdifference. In: Breinig, H./ Gebhardt, J./ Lösch, K. (eds.) (2002): *Multiculturalism in Contemporary Societies: Perspectives on Difference and Transdifference*. Erlangen: Univ.-Bund Erlangen-Nürnberg, pp. 11-36.

Dan-Cohen, M. (2002): *Harmful Thoughts. Essays on Law, Self, and Morality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Critchley, S. (1992): *The Ethics of Deconstruction. Derrida & Levinas*. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, esp. "The Ethics of Reading: Hillis Miller's Version", pp. 44-58.

Geyer, P. (2000-2003): *Eine kritische Theorie der Kultur auf differenztheoretischer Grundlage/ A Critical Theory of Culture based on a Matrix of Differential Analyses (a long-term project developed at Bonn University)*. Online Document: via the home page of Prof. Paul Geyer <http://www.uni-bonn.de/~pgeyer/> [Zugriff 18.03.2006].

Gunn, G. (2001): *Beyond Solidarity. Pragmatism and Difference in a Globalized World*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Hagenbuechle, R. (2001): Living Together as an Intercultural Task. *Intercultural Negotiations in the Americas and Beyond. Special Issue of Comparative Literature and Culture* 3 (2).

Hagenbuechle, R. (2001b): Das zukünftige Subjekt als Grenzgänger / The Future Subject as Grenzanger. In: Geyer P./ Jünke, C. (eds.): *Von Rousseau zum Hypertext*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, pp. 91-125.

Hagenbuechle, R. (2002): *Von der Multi-Kulturalität zur Inter-Kulturalität / From Multiculturalism to Interculturality*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann.

Miller, J.H. (1989): *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, De Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin*. New York: Columbia UP.

Miller, J.H. (1979): The Critic as Host. In: Bloom, H./ deMan, P./ Derrida, J./ Hartman, G. / Miller, J.H. (eds.): *Deconstruction and Criticism*. New York: Continuum pp. 217-253.

Schrag, C.O. (1999): *The Self after Postmodernity*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Sommer, D. (1999): *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.

