

**POSITION PAPER**  
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**TRANSCULTURE**

**1. Mikhail Epstein's Theses on Culture/Culturology/Transculture**

Mikhail Epstein is Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Cultural Theory and Russian Literature at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA. He is the author, together with Alexander Genis and S M Vladiv-Glover, of *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Late Soviet Culture* (Berghahn Books, New York, 1999, 592 pp). He has also published *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (U of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1995, 394 pp). The extract on 'transculture' in your Course Reader is a chapter in this 1995 monograph.

Oswald Spengler's 'civilization' versus 'culture'

Spengler is most famous for an analysis of European (German) culture of Modernism (in: *Der Untergang des Abendlandes – The Decline of the West*, 1913), which Spengler interprets as a culture in decline, pushed into the *decadence* of the end-of-the-century (1890s) by the pressure of technological civilization. Epstein maintains, *contra* Spengler, that 'civilization' (technology) does not always have to follow 'culture' or be the end-phase of 'culture.' In the USA, Epstein claims, a "bourgeois-democratic" 'civilization' of "high technological and economic development" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was "destitute of culture." America 'imported' all its cultural forms (literary genres, cultural discourses) from Europe. "The appearance of *American culture*, as an original, spiritually rooted, national organism capable of exerting worldwide influence, is a fact of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, determined by the First World War."<sup>1</sup>

An interesting comparison with Australian culture can be made. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and up to the 1880s, Australia was culturally 'unmapped.' Then its Heidelberg School of Painters emerged in the late 1880s, with Tom Roberts' *Shearing the Rams, 1889-90* and Frederick McCubbin's *Coming Home*. After WWI, Australian national identity, brought into existence through Federation in 1901, generated a new cultural production. This led to the establishment of new cultural groups and journals on the eve of World War Two (the *Angry Penguins* journal and literary group in Adelaide, *Meanjin* in Brisbane, both launched in 1940). ) Australian culture then went through a telescoped Modernism/Postmodernism in Patrick White's novels after WWII, in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. By the 1980s, Australian culture had become postmodern. These developments are mapped in, for example, George Johnstone's novel *My Brother Jack* (1964) or Rodney Hall's *Captivity Captive* (1986).- An interesting question is whether Australian culture is capable of "wielding a worldwide influence" and if it is not, why not?]

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<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (U of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1995), pg. 282. All subsequent quotations are from this source, and are given as a page reference in brackets in the body of the text.

Epstein's second example of an instance where culture follows on civilization is 17<sup>th</sup> century Russia. After its great reforming tsar, Peter the Great, brought European civilization (the technology of ship-building, architecture, dress, civil bureaucracy and government) into Russia, the country went on to generate its own indigenous cultural forms. A 'giant' cultural figure is the 'Russian Byron,' Alexander Pushkin, 1799-1837. What Epstein does not say, but what propelled Russia into 'Modernity' in Foucault's sense, is the development of a new *language* or *discourse* that did three things: it drew on the spoken vernacular language; it also tapped into the Old Church Slavonic roots of Russian which made the literary language into a more concrete, more 'original' and 'spiritually rooted' 'national organism' 'capable of exerting' a wide influence; and it **appropriated** European cultural models (Byron, the European Romantic tradition) via this new 'modernised' and *experienced* contemporary language which was capable of constructing a new, more self-reflexive contemporary reality. Epstein does say something similar when he claims that "culture is civilization that has realized its ends and embraced its own limit...a cultural metalanguage capable of using 'civilized' language in a practice of self-analysis or self-critique." (p. 284)

Having established his case for Russian culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century following in the wake of Russian civilization of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century (in a somewhat telescoped argument), Epstein then makes a leap into the 1970s, to claim that 'culture' is only truly self-reflexive if it develops a discipline like 'culturology.' Russian culture developed such a discipline in the 1970s and 1980s.

### **Culturology**

Epstein sees culturology as something analogous to 'cultural studies.' His definition of 'culturology' is categorical, unlike the definitions in Western 'cultural studies' that baffle with their nuances and diversity of content and ideological orientation (Raymond Williams, Marxism, Leavis etc). Epstein's definition of Russian culturology is

**the study of culture "as an integral system of various cultures – national, professional, racial, sexual, etc."**

Thus according to Epstein's definition, "culturology is called upon to realize the ideal of cultural wholeness, as it reveals connections and relationships unknown to separate disciplines."

Thus 'culturology' (cultural studies) is for Epstein a metadiscipline, subsuming all other disciplines of the human sciences and arts and able to comment on them in a self-reflexive manner. This is reminiscent of Aristotle's concept of the 'science of politics' as the Master Science. Also when Epstein speaks of 'cultures', such as 'the sexual', 'the racial' etc, he is really speaking of 'discourses' in Foucault's sense of the term 'cultural discourse'.

This all-encompassing discipline (culturology) owes its broadness to the very nature and scope of culture. For according to Epstein,

**“The scope of culture is much broader and deeper than that of society as such. While society encompasses all living people in their combined activity and the interrelations of their roles, culture embraces the activity of all previous generations accumulated in artistic works, scientific discoveries, moral values, and so on. The social level is but one horizontal section of culture, which in its totality permeates all historical worlds, as we see in the perpetual migration of texts and meanings from country to country, from generation to generation. Culture is the totality of objectified relations of human being amongst themselves. “ (p.287-8)**

For Epstein, then, ‘culture’ is, as for the poststructuralists (Derrida, Foucault) *intertextuality, quotation and translation*. **What is missing from Epstein’s definition of culture is – power.** Perhaps this is deliberate since his next statement about freedom establishes the foundations for his idea of ‘culture’ and subsequently ‘transculture.’ Thus Epstein claims that ‘culture’ cannot be reduced to the ‘social dimension.’ In other words, ‘culture’ is not about ‘identity politics’ or about ‘sexual politics (Epstein’s model of transculture, in fact, cancels out the category of identity):’

**“To live within society *and* to be free of it – this is what culture is about.” (p.288)  
“Culture is the porous and spongelike quality of a social body that enables it to breathe the air of all times.” “It is an objectified form of freedom...”**

Epstein concedes that culture can be produced only by people who are free from physical, social and other ‘needs.’

‘Culture’ since the revolutions of the (19<sup>th</sup> and) 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the Russian Revolution (which Epstein uses as his example), was a ‘liberating’ force more so than the political revolutions. This ‘liberating’ that ‘culture’ has brought about has expressed itself through the ‘divine madness’ of the 1920s – that is – the Modernist movements. ‘Culture’ since Modernism has been like a “thousand-barreled flute”, “enlivened by the breath of all ages at once.” (p.288) In other words, ‘culture’ in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has become a **polyphonic totality, encompassing all earlier periods of culture within this dialogic totality.**

The above is a view of ‘culture’ which resonates with the views of the poststructuralists, who take their cue from the Modernist French poet Stephan Mallarmé. The latter claimed that ‘culture’ was ONE BOOK and that he wished to write such a single, total work encompassing ALL of culture. This view also resonates with the definition of postmodern culture and postmodern knowledge. Postmodernism advocates a **synchronic approach** to all culture(s) of all ages: these are brought into a synchronic, flat plane – a level playing field – since all of culture consists of a myriad of ‘texts’, connected with each other ‘intertextually’ and potentially able to enter into a ‘dialogue’ with each other.

**Cultural Schizophrenia** Being a Russian, even though a Russian postmodernist, Epstein has not experienced ‘capitalism’ in an organic historical way. However, he has lived in the USA for more than a decade. Hence he has experienced first-hand the ‘schizophrenia’ or ‘fragmentation’ which is an effect of the social heterogeneity of capitalist society. However, he does not critique the schizophrenia of capitalism from any Marxist positions. During the writing of our joint project on Russian Postmodernism, between 1994 and 1999, Epstein does not appear to have been aware of Deleuze and Guattari’s work. However, Epstein’s notion of transculture has a lot in common with the idea of the *rhizomatic model of culture* in Deleuze and Guattari’s *Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Anti-Oedipus*, and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1970s-1980s). Just as D&G see the rhizome as an antidote to the oedipalized, hierarchized, coercive power of capitalist exchange, Epstein sees ‘transculture’ as an antidote to the fragmentation and proliferation of culturally heterogeneous productions:

**“Taken separately, all this [cultural diversity] can split and empty one’s personality rather than enrich it. How should we respond to the threat of cultural schizophrenia? Transcultural development is necessary to bring humanity into the wholeness of culture...Otherwise we may end up with hundreds of books, concerts, exhibitions, ensembles – but no culture at all. The transcultural approach inspires us to search the diversity of educational and professional spheres for some center that is culture itself.” (p. 296)**

### **The ‘Center’ of Transculture = “Non-Belonging”**

Transculture is for Epstein “a mode of being” at the “cross-roads of cultures.” While culture frees humanity from ‘nature’, transculture frees humanity from culture itself. For culture is a ‘prison’ (compare Jameson’s ‘prisonhouse of language’), “we ...act and think in full accordance with the presumptions established in our native traditions.” (p. 297)

Epstein claims that “the multiplicity of cultures [in the world of transculture] ... makes a social being free of society.” This means that cultural heterogeneity liberates the individual from cultural dogma and ideology. Epstein’s view cancels out, in one breath, the cultural studies ‘industry’ in Western academies.

However, Epstein is not so far removed from the ‘transcultural’ positions of a Jacques Derrida, who claimed, as recently as the year 2000, on his visit to Monash, that the condition of possibility of contemporary culture is a total open-endedness and indeterminacy. This notion was captured by Derrida in the concept of the *arrivant* – *the one who is to come, unexpectedly and unrecognized and unannounced.*

In the ‘genealogy’ of cultural ‘messianism’ since Friedrich Nietzsche’s ‘prophet’ Zarathustra (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1883-5), who announced the ‘Superman’ as a carrier of the culture as the simulacrum (or sign), Epstein’s ‘Transculturalist’ brings the message of ‘not belonging’ as the ultimately desirable cultural position. He borrows a term from the Russian ‘translinguist’ and original ‘Transculturalist,’ Mikhail Bakhtin (who died in 1975) – *vnenakhodimost’* = *vne* – ‘outside’ *nakhodi-*

*'to find oneself', 'be located'* . To be 'located' 'on the outside' is the ideal transcultural position. This 'outside' position means, for Epstein, a subject

“outside of its national, racist (racial?!), sexist, age, political, and other limitations.” (p. 298)

The transcultural orientation “means being located beyond any particular mode of existence, or...finding one's place on the border of existing cultures. This realm *beyond* all cultures is located *inside* of transculture and belongs to this state of not-belonging...” (p. 298).

### Epstein's 'Center' of Transculture and Mehrab Mamardashvili's (1930-1990) 'Nothing' : Against Multiculturalism

Epstein's model of transculture is contrasted to the model of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is an “impulse to unite different cultures while recognizing their multiplicity.” (p.300)

While transcultural and multicultural tendencies have much in common, multiculturalism obliterates *difference* through its policy of 'tolerance' which Epstein. says degenerates into 'indifference.' Epstein. recognizes *difference* as a category necessary to culture and to compassionate interaction within a cultural community.

Identification with one's 'native' culture (we would say 'ethnic culture' in Australia), claims Epstein, leads us “back' to our “nature,” our “origins.” Here Epstein is not speaking like a poststructuralist or, indeed, like a post-Kantian. In Poststructuralism, there is no “Nature” in discourse and in identity issues, and there are no 'origins,' since there is nothing outside the 'text' (Derrida's *il n'y a pas de hors text*). What we could accept in Epstein's implicit claim is that identification with our 'native' or 'ethnic' culture turned into an ideology tends to reify us and essentialise us as 'ethnics' instead of leaving us the ambience of being open subjects.

This ambience of open-endedness is what Epstein claims for transculture. Here Epstein invokes the views of a philosopher of Georgian origin, who lived in Moscow and wrote in Russian. Mamardashvili' **phenomenological investigations** into culture and discourse were not published during the Soviet period (which ended in 1989). They are now undergoing a revival among post-Soviet scholars, in Eastern and Western Europe.

According to Mamardashvili, what needs to be preserved, says Epstein, is “the right to live beyond one's culture, on the borders of cultures.” Epstein quotes Mamardashvili: one needs the right to take

**“a step transcending one's own surrounding, native culture and milieu not for the sake of anything else. Not for the sake of any other culture, but for the sake of nothing. Transcendence into nothing. Generally speaking, such an act is truly the**

**living, pulsating center of the entire human universe. This is a primordial metaphysical act.” (p. 303)**

As Epstein explains, ‘metaphysical’ in this context means: “the movement beyond any physical determinance and liberation from any social and cultural identity.” P.303) This movement of transcendence into nothing is an escape from “culture-centrism’ (such as Eurocentrism), which is a kind of “reverse racism” (this is Epstein’s and Mamardashvili’s objection to multiculturalism’s insistence on national or cultural identity).

Thus according to Epstein, feminist ideology and politics use the category of *difference* to reinforce ‘self-identity’ (which is an undifferentiated, reified state without difference, empathy and basically exclusionary in orientation).

Thus multiculturalism and, we infer, also identity politics, ‘essentialise’ the cultural identity we were born into, without giving us the freedom to transcend our ‘origins.’ (p.305)

(Epstein keeps returning to the notion of our “natural state” as if he were a Romantic of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and a believer in the existence of “the man of Nature” or “the Noble Savage.” This is a little irritating to poststructuralist ears).

Epstein’s final point is:

*difference* should not form the basis for an excluded ‘*otherness*’ by dint of which we form our own self-identity. Instead, *difference* should allow us to “embrace *otherness*, by occupying the standpoint of different cultures.” (p.306)

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