

THE LIMITS OF AN UNBORDERED SPACE

VIRTUAL ETHNICITY – ETHNIC IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE INTERNET

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Abstract

The essay is mainly dealing with the concept of space and its reflections within the virtual context of a web-site. The perspective is evolving: from a first neutral approach of the envisioned territory (in this case, the two analyzed web-sites), the *visitor* is then provided with a detailed description of images of the past and of the present intertwining, while being led to a global overview- that of interpreting the web-site as a global home. The leading question of this essay was to find out how does the virtual affect the reality of the people that are spending a certain part of their daily life in a parallel cyber space. In attempting to give an answer we divided our essay into five sections, each of them being structured around sub-topics that help explaining how certain dynamics take place and how they seem to be encouraged and nurtured by the *participants* on the site, generally referred to as *users*.

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THE LIMITS OF AN UNBORDERED SPACE

1. INTRODUCTION

Everything around us is primarily dimensioned, and located in space. We all lead our lives in accordance with certain spatial coordinates. But what actually is space?

The first meaning we attached to this notion would be the idea of physical appearance, of what is there in order to be seen, what meets our eyes. The space around us is, in this respect, something that we can perceive and which is strongly connected to our senses, being profoundly visual.

What could be asked here is why we have decided to research the different meanings of space on two ethnic web-sites in the first place. As a general approach we started our reasoning starting from the words of Karim, in whose views the concept of space is a key word in discussing the Diaspora. Further to this we were intrigued by Doreen Massey theory (quoted by Karim H Karim, "The Media of Diaspora" 2003, p.6) which interprets space as "the simultaneous co-existence of social interrelations at all geographical scales, from the intimacy of the household to the wide spaces of the trans-global connections". In how much these theories are proven within the two sites that we analyzed it is still too early to make assumptions.

When researching for this essay we had in view the understanding of the space as visually perceptible, but not necessarily "touchable". The notion of space we referred to is not necessarily defined by a three-dimensional perspective; space could be real, as well as it could be virtual. Further to this, we took into consideration the fact that space, in general, seems to be somehow delimited by borders and thus requires a specific entrance.

Bearing all this in mind, we started our observation from the fact that a website, is primarily itself constructed as a space. It could be named *virtual space*, a *cyberspace*, but still a space, being as well, profoundly visual and also somehow bordered. But are these really boundaries? Isn't Internet anyway a completely open space? By a "www" one can only delimitate a virtual space, in the sense of confining it into recognizable parameters, but the access is, in most of the cases, completely free. Everything depends on one's willingness to enter or not; it does not make any difference who the user is, all that

matters is the user's interest in visiting the website. More than this, the visitor of such a space is stepping on no ground, no physical territory, but still has a feeling of belonging to an "in-doors".

Besides being a perceptible bordered territory, the space, as we perceived it, is also something created. It is generated by a mind, by a hand, it has a creator and therefore it follows an idea, and some certain schemes and plans of circulations. In this concern we couldn't stop wondering to which extent the mind and the idea of the creator can be discovered in the architecture of such a website.

The space we have in view, and also the space as such, the space around us is subsumed to a certain function and due to this, all of us attach to each place a certain attitude. It is a common feature the labelling of spaces as public or private, which leads to the same idea of certain attitude being attached and certain norms being respected when interpreting, and feeling a space. At a first glance one could argue that public and private are fundamentally attributes of the physical space around us, not applicable to a virtual space. At a certain extent we could say that indeed, they are not applicable in the sense that, our virtual spaces, are not to be labelled as public or private; on the contrary they are a little bit of both.

There is another categorisation of space we also put under scrutiny. The space as a fundamentally physical feature, the virtual space and a mental dimension of it. The latter one concerns mainly the value and the emotions we attach to each place, the memory of it we keep within our eyes. The satisfaction to call a place home, notion that involves so much feeling, so much protection, a notion meaning much more than one's place, be it virtual or not.

In the end we decided to link the idea of space with the notion of dimension and distance, to discuss to which extent the virtual space is an infinite one, to which extent the virtual home is national or global.

2. WHAT MEETS THE EYE OF A VISITOR

Overview of the websites

First thing related to the concept of space would be the delimitation of the space, its borders, the action of entering it, the first step over a door, a key to open your way. In this respect, the key to open a virtual space is a *keyword*, is writing the address of the site and then taking the first step by pressing “Enter”.

A closer look cast over the address of the two ethnic websites could bring one to the conclusion that this denomination used as key to open the virtual space not only leads the visitor towards a space, but is in itself a space related formula.

As an example, the Romanians living in France have as website’s gateway, the joint names of their host country and their mother country. The linking by a hyphen of the two geographical locations establishes a connection within the two spaces, thus making the distance in between almost fade away. It seems perfectly understandable why the entrance key to a diasporic community is actually drawing two points on the map, marking the geographical sites that somehow orientated their life. One might ask though, why France – Romania and not the other way around. More than marking a priority list, more than being a simple alphabetical order, it appears to be, when analysing the site into more detail, a present-past path, a French present – Romanian past direction.

Somehow different is the case of *romanians-de.org*, where the address under which you find the virtual ethnic community seems to be speaking more about the website. Indeed it makes the same two connections, but not by placing the names of the countries as such. Consequently, Germany, the idea of the host country, is introduced in an Internet language, wrapped in a more virtual form. This address appears to be less symbolic, delimiting exactly the place it transfers you to, namely an ethnic based (*romanians*) website (-de).

Very interesting is the language used in these idioms. While in the case of *franta-romania.com* the use of the Romanian language brings in front the idea of a Romanian space, affirming maybe the orientation and the main language of the website, the case of *romanians-de.org*, by introducing an English term, and though the idea of a third space, might raise some questions. However, as strange as it may seem, the use of the English

language might be as well a mark of Romanity. The explanation could be simple: in the present times the English language seems to have become a neutral idiom, while being used by people all over the world as primary technology language. Consequently, using English terms when assessing a name to a Romanian cyber space initiated in Germany might provide an easier international access of the site, without implying from the beginning the giving up of the Romanian identity.

Pressing the “Enter” key, the virtual space opens in front of us. It is a homepage with a little bit of colour and a lot of words. This first glance cast over the website is enough for a visitor to observe its purpose, to notice the fact that it is more about information than about image.

To a large extent, the homepage within both websites is filled in with what could be broadly placed under the name of “news”. Meetings, Events, Opinions, Practical Advice, news concerning more the virtual community, but also news from both Romania and France, respectively Germany.

At a certain level the structure of the two homepages is similar. On a horizontal toolbar one could find features strictly related to the website, to the forum, discussions, suggestions, a top of articles and links for those who want to post. A left column is reserved for information of more general interest, for news, useful information, articles, debates. Although in the case of *romanians-de.org*, the front page of the site contains also a right column, comprising features, which could be placed under the term of tools (a dictionary, an agenda, a calendar of events), one could easily conclude that both websites follow the same line of design and are profoundly similar both in appearance and in aims. However, an essential differentiation could be made in what concerns the level of *organizing* the information within the site. Any user, however inexperienced or unskilled in the use of the Romanian language, might easily spot out this difference, starting, for example, from the first page of both of the sites. It seems that the information on *franta-romania.com* is linked together in more general categories, than the information on *Romanians-de.org*, which on the contrary, seems to be correlated in detail and placed first into sub-categories, which only later are gathered under more general topics. Indeed, only by accessing a topic on the front page of *franta-romania.com*, the user is immediately brought into the middle of forum discussions. On the contrary, in the case of

romanians-de.org, first page topics open into tables of sub-topics, organized under general titles. Only by accessing these particular sub-topics, can the user participate in the forum discussions. As mentioned before, this differentiation between the two sites is essential, and that is mostly, while it gives way to raising important questions: Does the differentiation come from the fact that one of the sites has an administration body while the other one has none?(In the case of *franta-romania.com*, a banner on the front page states: there is no redaction, the articles are written by benevolent or passionate persons) Could one claim that the site of Romanians in Germany is more organized than that of the Romanians in France as a mark of better integration within the German society, which features the stereotype of a very organized daily life? Certainly these questions raise difficulties when attempting to provide them with an answer. Only by furthering the analysis of the site, assumptions might be constructed.

When discussing the visual effect, one very important element associated with this idea would be the colour, or the lack of colour. As mentioned before, both websites are primarily constructed through letters and words, leaving aside the colour. In both cases almost all the colours of the homepage are concentrated into one single item, the logo, a tint of nationality, binding together the colours of the home country and of the host country, and also telling about the identity of the website.

The absence of a coloured view is replaced with a colourful sensation provided by those who generated and maintain the site. The features that create this atmosphere, are the discussions, the articles posted, the tone of the debates, the comments upon the news and not only. To sum up, this atmosphere is created by all those involved in the websites, and it seems fair to say that it confers the virtual spaces enough colour, and all the more important, some national colour.

The virtual space as a labyrinth

Going through the rows of letters of the homepage the eye of the visitor is lured by notices written in bigger letters, by sentences written in bold or underlined. Thus, the user might feel compelled to access these categories first. Why could this most likely happen? To a certain extent, alternating bolded or underlined writing with regular font might lead to the idea that to certain features a greater value is attached, that certain

articles are more important, or more worth reading. The case of the *romanians-de.org* is more puzzling, so to say, while the titles do not respect any rule concerning the using of the font.

Among the items written in bold letters, and consequently pointed out as more important, are: Consular Information, Recent discussions in Forum, Photo Gallery, Prognostications.

In the same register of a visitor guided exactly towards a certain spot, could be placed the selection of news and announcements from different areas if interest making almost 80% of the homepage, and this, mainly because the news presented there were *those chosen* from many, the most important topics. Though, a question remains open. Who decides what is more important, what is worth reading, who decides what makes visitors tick?

Linking this argument to the idea of space, one could argue that the emphasizing of certain features points at the organization of the website and underlines the fact that the virtual space is a created world, having as regulating power, a webmaster, who takes decisions and administrates. This does not necessarily mean that the virtual space is one-way road on which one is driven by the powerful Webmaster. No, each of us has to choose his/her own way, and maybe each of us, by taking one way or another determines also what is to be written in bold or underlined.

Still, at a certain extent, the virtual space is a labyrinth. In a way "the aesthetic of the medium is designed like a trap" (Miller and Slater, 2000, Ch.4, pg 104) and we cannot deny the fact that within the virtual space we are visiting, we are continuously under observation, that someone is there to decide what can be posted, that someone designed the space and the links and maybe predefined the route we are going to follow.

The virtual space between a public and a private place

Space, considered in more general terms, is usually categorized or labelled as private or public. This delimitation leads towards another sense attached to the idea of space, its associated function. Apart from being perceptible, delimited and created, the space, be it virtual, or non-virtual, also plays a role in people's lives. The label of public or private also conducts towards the idea of generating and respecting norms. The

difference in perceiving the private and the public appears to exist to a large extent due to the conventional rules of the society, and privatising more or less a space is, in a certain way, a negotiation of these rules.

Transposing these ideas to our object of research, it might be fair to say that the information and the atmosphere one could find on the two ethnic based websites, seem not so easy to be classified in terms of public and private, of formal and informal.

It could be argued that to a large extent, both websites are subsumed to the notion of media. Both websites are in this respect operating as means of mass communication, being in a high percentage directed towards providing information. Browsing the homepages of both websites, what catches the eyes in the first place is the section of "News". News in the first item of the menus, news, the main part of the homepage, links towards websites with news and newspapers. Consequently, one could easily argue that the two ethnic based websites could be placed in the same register as the media, broadcasting from one sender to thousands of receivers. Partly it is true; there are pieces of information sent via Internet towards thousands of computer screens. What makes the difference then? First of all the difference stays in the main goal pursued by this type of websites. To bring together people that have a common background, a similar present, the same interests. Therefore, remaining in the same terms of the comparison with a means of mass communication which is the domain of public, it can be argued that, both websites are not providing news, but providing a selection of news, information regarding Romania, information about there host country, in general terms, news following the same ethnic oriented line. If analysing the items comprised into the *News* section, one could state at a first glance that the site of Romanians living in France is equally directed towards both Romania and France, placing two different sections for *French Press* and *Romanian Sources*. But a closer approach would show that even if under the title of *French Press* the news presented are somehow related or into the interest areas of a Romanian reader, it is not reading *French Press* in general, but reading what the French press writes about Romania. Browsing through the titles of news presented by both sites, one can find to a large extent topics concerning the Romanian political life, means of travelling to Romania and back, and also a cultural agenda, all these supporting the idea

of a strong link of the users with their common past, or, expressed in terms of space, their look back from miles away towards the territory they once felt under their feet.

Returning to the public-private demarcation line within a virtual space, and the association with the means of mass communication, it can be argued that the communication in the case of the two websites is not only from the source towards the receivers, but it has a double orientation, providing the receivers with the possibility of reply. After receiving the information, the user can reply by posting comments or, as in the case of *romanians-de.org*, to evaluate the article. This double orientation of the information flux is somehow personalizing the public sphere, by posting a personal comment and making it public.

Following the same pattern, it seems that both websites aim at informing their users as much as they aim at creating a connection among them. They create the environment for a public exchange of ideas but on a certain topic, which strongly connects them and interferes constantly with their personal life. We refer here to the items placed under the generic name of *Useful information*, providing insights on how should one get a green card, how to deal with the problems with visas and all the documents required, ways to stay in touch with Romania and all other elements connected with the social integration and immigration. Therefore we would consider one more time the object of our research as belonging to a public space constantly turning into a private one.

A debate over the terms of private and public, would put inevitably under scrutiny the idea of property, of a place that is fundamentally personal, a place where one is safe and can hide from the eyes of the others. Relating this idea to the two websites, subjects of our research, we could link the notion of private with the users' personal account. This personal account, locked under a password, gives each user the opportunity to send and receive personal messages and, maybe more important, gives the user the possibility to post articles. Consequently, opening your private virtual space, is a prerequisite for your contribution to the *public place*.

But having as shield the anonymity provided by the Internet in its whole, do people still feel the need for such a private place? As answer could be relevant an example taken from the site of Romanians living in Germany. After posting on the Forum

a question about the feeling of being Romanian in Germany, besides the answers given within the same discussion in the Forum, there have been sent also personal messages. Could this be a way of evading from the public, of hiding from the eyes of the others? It could be this, or it could be more. One of these replies, which ended with “I am also from Brasov!”, couldn’t have been more an attempt to restrain the subject guiding the exchange of ideas from Romanians living in Germany, to Romanians from Brasov living in Germany? And maybe more, a discussion about home, about something so personal, is more easily debated on personal (through private messages) than on a private (the Forum) ground.

In order to conclude, we could refer to the Internet, respectively the virtual space, as a space that describes something special. If considered a means of mass communication it is fundamentally public. Every piece of information posted on *the net* is public, is completely reachable by every eye, and also the format it is presented into, generally respects, to a certain extent, a formal frame. On the other side, the Internet could be defined by a private screen, a private keyboard, one’s own path to choose and one’s anonymity, one’s own id and password to login. Therefore we could state that the Internet creates somehow a middle way, an intermediary path between the private and the public, between the informal and the formal, or, as Harding and Jenkins claim, within the cyberspace, “the formal is simultaneously an absence and a presence within the informal and vice versa” (Harding and Jenkins, 1989 quoted by Richard Jenkins, 1997, pg 210).

3. REPRESENTING THE ‘HERE’

It is a fact that, even when trying to evade into another world, a virtual one in our case, the environment, the ground you have under your feet, the sounds you here inevitably reach to a certain extent that world and the involved parties, as well. Every time you are going ‘there’, you are taking a piece of ‘here’ with you.

As we have mentioned before, defining the space around us is mainly perceiving, evaluating, feeling it, analysing and interiorising what we see. What has to be kept in mind is the fact that the chronology of the world around us is maintained. The notion of space we refer to is fundamentally related with time, they are inseparable parameters of our *everything*. Therefore, bringing into discussion a term like ‘here’ we would also have

in mind a 'now'. Applying these coordinates to our analysis, we could define the two virtual spaces as places between here and there and having as a background a past continuously becoming present and a dynamic present immediately becoming past. Consequently, the 'now' we have in view, the present, is closely related to the past. This could be due to the high speed within the virtual reality, in which, by a single click, one is able to transmit instantly information, feelings, and thoughts. Here, the present can turn very fast into history. Through a website, through writing into a forum with wide access, one writes history, the history of his own virtual reality.

But the notions of 'here' and 'now' we had in mind, refer to more than this high-speed virtual present, they involve more, a daily one, the reality that the users of the two websites face everyday, and this on the grounds that besides writing history and bringing history into the present, the users also transport their "now" into the history of the site. Transposing all the others into one's 'here' could be exemplified by a whole discussion on the Forum of www.romanians-de.org, gathered under a topic named "Instant Flash" in which are posted images, thoughts, smells, and colours from the very moment of writing: grey weather, snow, rhythms of *Radio Gaga*, the sun light invading the room. This is a very transparent turn of a personal 'here' into a shared 'here', a shared present.

Hence, one can find within the ethnic based websites, also more subtle infusions of the present the users live in. One of the most present discussions over the 'here' and 'now' have as background the need, the desire, to integrate into a new society or the inadaptability to a new life and a new environment. In this register could be placed all the items belonging somehow to a pragmatic sphere of the integration: useful information about visas, about green card, papers required, working or studying in the host country, pieces of advice that are a necessary helping hand for the newcomers.

Going through the topics discussed in the forums, such guidelines seem to make the grounds of a great percentage of the debates, and it seems fair enough to say that they are somehow the very purpose of these websites. The sites as such were created in order to help the users to cope with the present, to be a support whether in a practical or in an emotional manner. Searching for an atmosphere within the forums in describing the *present*, it is sensible a difference in perspective between the two websites. The tone of voice within the debates of the Romanians living in Germany is in most of the cases a

friendly one, warm and shielding. The feeling emanated from the discussions is one of familiarity, of people that understand and know each other maybe without ever meeting face to face, a familiarity generated by dozens of discussions. The topics seem to be coloured with the tones of longing for home, with a nostalgic tint even when describing the German present around.

Slightly different is the approach of the Romanians living in France, who seem to have a more critical view over both the past and the country of origin and the present and the adoptive country. Both realities seem to present their inconvenient. As in the case of the Romanians in Germany they were confronted with a new society that most of them seem to have perceived as hostile or at least unwelcoming. However, there are opinions forming 'the other side', stating that the newcomers are the ones that should adapt without expecting the Frenchman to integrate them, and if they don't it is completely their fault. Therefore, in this perspective the search for an emotional support is less justified.

Referring to the same subject area, that of the French reality and the integration of migrants, one can spot some instances when the level of adaptability might raise some questions. Sometimes, relating to their daily reality, the dialogues might be led on an ironical tone, carrying traces of nationalism, racism and ethnicity. The idea that one could detach from this discussions regards the fact that some categories of inhabitants of the "adoptive society" (in this case France) do not correspond to the standards of other "incomers". This dialogue seemed curious, mostly because the Romanians emigrating in other countries mostly claim to have suffered of the same prejudices and discriminatory attitudes that some members of this site seem to adopt towards the Arabs, the Black and the Chinese. Is it the fact that they feel "at home" on this site that gives them the "right" to be judgmental? Or is it that they are using this site as means of releasing the anger they have been accumulating in the "outer world"?

Be it an implant of stereotypes, be it the possibility that Romanians residing in France started to share the supposed racist attitudes of the French people, be it just an accidentally expression of discontent, more scenarios seem possible, but what seems more significant is that, at a closer look, most of the Romanians living in France and also those living in Germany seem to attach the same colors to their perspective on the

present; in both cases a taste of bitterness seems to detach itself from the dialogues between the users.

Within the forums, not only the messages transmitted are an implant of the everyday 'here' into a virtual space, but the code seems to be relevant as well. The language used is as significant as the information transmitted. At a first glance, if taking into account that the main language used within both websites is Romanian, one could argue that the language argument is not at all sustaining the idea of a link with the present, on the contrary it is an obvious connection to the past. Though, the exceptions, the occasional attempts to post articles or replies using the language of their adoptive country, apart from confirming the rule, are also marking a, maybe significant, fact.

Analysing the two websites from this linguistic perspective, we would cross-examine the labelling of the language used as a *barrier* prohibiting or hardening the access to the sites. If we start our judgement from the assumption that an ethnic based website is through its very purpose addressed to a certain public, than the use of Romanian language in addressing a Romanian audience should not create a strong inconvenience. Although Romanian, the language in use does not eliminate the access of users who feel more at ease in another language. As a general trend, the conversations are held in Romanian, although users of both websites, not a few times, proved to be comfortable with the use of French, respectively German phrases and terms.

Bringing the use of a certain language in connection with space, we could see in the use of Romanian a trip to mother country, whereas the use of French and, respectively, of German could be interpreted as a connection with the host countries. In the same line, to a certain extent, the specific internet language can be regarded as a link towards a virtual environment.

Even though the use of Romanian language is predominant, it is hard to argue, however, that on a language basis the website denies the access of Non- Romanians. A good example sustaining the idea that language is not a barrier, is offered by a presumable French user's English posting: "Hi, my name is Frédéric, I'm French and I like to corresponding with young Romanian. I like this culture and this country even if I know this country only by books. All web site about Romania are welcome!!! Thanks."

(The message is kept in its original version). Consequently, when the interest and the determination is a powerful enough mobile, the language used is not of major importance; what counts is the message.

Keeping to the same register, that of relating language to locations, one important feature for the virtual spaces is the development of a hybrid language. We refer here to the case of the *franta-romania.com*, where the users have developed a new linguistic code that gathers terms from both languages: Romanian and French. However, the percentage of French in use is a small one. Hence, a half page long message can contain up to one full sentence in French. The proportion varies, of course, according to numerous factors. Basing our reasoning on the analysis of multiple conversations among various users we deduced that what is actually happening is the fact that, the language becomes more French-ized either after spending a lot time in France, or as a consequence of disregarding their Romanian roots. The matter is though not easy to deal with. There are users that apparently have left the country and established in France more than 12 years ago. Paradoxically enough, some of these users seem to be also very much against any type of “nostalgia” towards the origin land. And still, they prove to be the ones using the most accurate and pure Romanian language.

Through means of comparison, within the site of Romanians living in Germany the percentage of use of the German language seems to be much smaller, at least in what concerns the articles and the news. However, when discussing within the forum, a short reply, a pun, a joke might be expressed in German language, which could come more easily as a reflex or as a habit. Not once, the difficulties faced by some users in learning the language of their adoptive country were invoked within the debates. And though, they seemed to be always correlated with a strong determination to improve by every means. Therefore, the sum of links towards on-line courses of German language or the placement of an English-German dictionary on the homepage of the website could be seen as visible efforts in this direction. The willingness to improve their German language skills is proved also by the inauguration by the users of *romanians-de.org* of the first thread in German, not hundred percent in German, but still maybe a step forward in adapting to their present ‘here’.

When discussing the argument of importing some of the present everyday life of the users into the two ethnic based websites, one should have in mind also, apart from the idea of adaptation, the mixture of two apparently incompatible spheres, the virtual and the physical space. What seems to bind these two features best, are certain items like, events or meetings, by which the two mainly home-oriented websites seem to be redirected towards a much closer space and a present or future perspective.

The idea of living the present through events is sustainable only partly, in the sense that, even if the events take place “now” they seem to be talking about the past. This effect is more visible in the case of the Romanians living in Germany; the most substantially advertised events on the website, regard, in a large majority, cultural manifestations linked to the idea of Romanianity: for instance, Romanian theatre plays or Romanian bands concerting in Germany. In spatial terms, participating to such events would not be experiencing the ‘here- Romania’, but experiencing from the ‘here-Germany” a mask of a ‘there- Romania’. The site of the Romanians living in France offers us a different example, by presenting and advertising indeed fewer cultural events. However the intertwining of ‘here’ and ‘there’ is visible also on this site, mostly by the featuring of meetings among co-nationals. In most of the cases these meetings could be regarded as part of rituals. For instance there is the so called ‘last Saturday of each month’, which appears to be a tradition among the members of the site. The repentance of meetings, maintaining the general parameters, provides them with the value of ‘rituals’, which could help to the preserving, on a large scale, of the past ‘there-Romania’ within the now ‘here-society’.

Continuing the analysis we would like to emphasize that the meetings among the users on both sites help to the non-virtualisation of the virtual world. The users are setting appointments for cultural events, they are taking trips together, they are meeting for a weekly football game, or they are going out for a beer. They turn the virtual relationship into a non-virtual one; they add to the connection among them also a physical dimension. By using the site as means of setting appointments the virtual space becomes more touchable, more informal, becomes less a website and more an everyday call. Though, a question is to be raised, does the virtual space give way for more? Why do people feel the need to meet? Is a virtual space, a virtual relationship not enough?

Referring again to the notion of space in its perceptive determination, we would like to bring as a last argument for the link of a virtual world with a real and present one, the introducing within the websites of some images of 'here'. We would point in this case only at the site of Romanians living in Germany, since only its users have felt the need to post pictures, to visualize places or moments that represent them. However, we could not help asking ourselves why this feature is missing within the other website. Maybe this is a change that is to be made soon in the architecture of the site, maybe the site follows a more pragmatic path, or maybe these places have too strong colours in the minds of the users, making no sense to portray something that one could see only by closing ones eyes.

Reaching the conclusion, when counting the pictures, that there are as many photos from Germany as there are from Romania, we could argue that these pictures do not necessarily constitute the case of a nostalgic need for a familiar panorama, but rather an argument for the curious eye in search for the colours around. Analysing the pictures portraying the German scenery and also the comments attached to some of them, we could gather them into a more or less tourist's frame. Browsing through the photos that reveal Germany, one might experience to a certain extent the feeling of sightseeing, in other words the feeling of looking at the world with the eyes of a visitor. But at a second thought, how would any of us present his or her own world? If it would be our case, wouldn't we also first attempt to capture the symbols? Therefore, a glance cast over "Romania in images" made us believe that the local colour, the feeling of an eye belonging to the place it views, is given not through the photo camera, but through the meaning that each of us attaches to the images.

In the end we would like to direct again the attention to the permeability of time and space, to the fact that present and past, here and there, are not only strongly connected features but they can be, to a certain extent, simultaneously experienced. In this respect, Richard Jenkins quoting Barth (1984;1989), brought into discussion the term of history, invoked in two different senses: "as the ongoing progress of events which constitutes the context and content of the here-and-now, and as 'streams' of 'tradition' within which people are to different degrees located and of which they differentially

partake”. (Jenkins, Richard; 1997; “Rethinking ethnicity”, pg.198). Consequently, the history of each user on the two websites, is not only a *here-and-now* scenario, but also *streams of tradition*, and more, to a certain extent, both of them in the same time.

To conclude, we could argue that these two websites are addressed to people located neither here, nor there, to people that need to evade into a ‘somewhere’ in between the present and the past. Describing them through Werbner’s (Werbner, Pnina “Debating Cultural Hybridity”, pg 12) zoological metaphor, it can be said that those who create and visit these websites are in the same time the bees that need butterfly wings to fly, and some other type of species, a mixture that is flying like butterflies and settling like bees, continuously oscillating between the two states of being.

Still it seems fair to ask in the end, why do they choose to swing between here and there and then between there and back, why do they try so hard to adapt to a place they feel they don’t belong to, why do they keep in mind the memory of two views they are trying to name home? Instead of answer we would just quote a personal opinion of one of the users from *romanians-de.org*:

“1. At first it is nice, because it is a different world

2. Then it is bad because,..... it is a different world

3. Then it is nice again because it is a different world which doesn’t bother you anymore

4. And then again it is bad because,... it is the same world, and you are tired of it, and you would like a new one

It doesn’t matter if you call this world Germany or any other name”

4. REPRESENTING THE LOST 'THERE'

At a first glance the active participation of the users on both sites might induce the conclusion that they are searching for means to deeper and more quickly integrate into the hosting society. However, what is interesting to notice is that, in the meanwhile, they seem not willing to give up their origin. Even if in some of the cases one can spot out a lack of reverence towards Romania, what remains unquestionable is the frequent reference to subjects related to Romania. The front page of the *franta-romania.com* lists as a separate category entitled 'Romanian-ism' a whole range of subjects that make close reference to Romanian society and its reflection on the site. The users discuss the relevance of founding a Romanian school in Paris, which could help preserving the Romanian language among the Diaspora. The opinions are divided. Never the less the subject is one of those which raised the most comments on the site. Could this mean that the users are still nostalgic for their *roots*, no matter the image they try to promote? Or is "homeland" a favoured subject only as an element of comparison with the place where their *routes* have led them. (Clifford, 1990)

The feeling of nostalgia, very present in the case of Romanian teenagers living in Germany is expressed whether directly, by means of conversation, or through posting pictures. The roots become transparent also within the debates on the Romanian political context and its evolution. The articles and links to articles regarding the future accession of Romania to the EU that are posted on the site seem to animate fervent discussions, which transform at times in attempts to find valid solutions aimed at helping the country. What could it be a valid explanation for the need of the Romanians abroad to remain in contact with the political development of the country that they left? Anderson seems to offer a possible answer when discussing the emotional links to a particular landscape that, in his view characterize Diasporas, in general: "Diasporas are frequently described as 'imagined communities'". "Homeland politics form a major topic for the media of some Diasporas". "Ties to the former country remain strong in these cases and individuals seek out the most current information" (Anderson 1983, quoted by Karim, Karim H., "The Media of Diaspora", 2003, p.3)

On the contrary, as a general trend, on the site of the Romanian Diaspora in France nostalgia seems to be rejected, or kept within as a forbidden feeling. We got this

impression by reading several dialogues that apparently trivialized the earning that some of the users felt for Romanian specificity: such as Romanian dishes or Romanian music. However, one could run quite often into controversies and disagreements between the users.

It might be argued that the information one can find on both sites deals with the Romanian reality, the Romanian present. To a large extent it is true. Still, even this present Romanian reality is perceived from a distance by the members of the community it might affect them inside, but not necessarily outside.

They might talk about it and debate on it, just as an expression of their Romanian-ity. It might be of interest to them, but then again, more from a more distanced point of view, so to say, because the events that occur in their home-country have no direct effects on them.

Referring again to the grounds on which an ethnic group is formed it seems that such a group has as fundamental base the relation with the past, a past that is continuously brought in present. In the words of James Clifford this might be translated by the fact that “the linear history is broken, the present constantly shadowed by a past that is also a desired, but obstructed, future: a renewed, painful yearning” (Clifford, “Diasporas”, 1994, p.318).

Mutations in the vision of Romania

The perspective on Romania, its political, social, economic state, might change when seen from outside, meaning whether from France or from Germany. The picture might be idealized, or critical, or maybe a little bit of both.

Romania seen from the outside seems to be both idealized and criticized. The images that remained somehow like myths are mostly personal memories of the things that people were once attached to. Apparently, not the whole picture of Romania is an ideal one. “Why have the right to work in Romania, and not being able to find something?!... or find something for 4 millions lei, money you spend all on a nanny for your child?!” (www.romanians-de.org, Forum, discussion “What goes wrong in Germany”). The answer given to the post quoted before reveals both the internal

definition of Romania and an external definition projected upon the Diaspora. “You, those from Germany, stop looking at those from Romania as if they were some losers living in a country selling bananas. Please don’t bring up over and over again the same dusty ideas like “low salaries”...etc, because the situation is not so dark as it may seem.”

There can be invoked reasons for choosing a life so far away from Romania. There are brought into discussions arguments about criminality, about corruption, about the health system, all placing Romania under a definite NO. On the other side, there are the parents, friends, the homesickness, the mountains, and also the hope that somehow maybe Romania will change, or maybe they will somehow change Romania. Some are in Germany, never wanting to go back, some are still longing for home, some are home, never wanting to go back in Germany, their adoptive country.

Another article induces the impression that the users consider themselves as being part of the “Emigrants’ Generation”, a generation of young people leaving the country hoping to find somewhere else a better life. It is a sort of the American Dream. They miss home, but the opportunity to earn decent money and to live a decent life is stronger. They are part of the “Generation GO”. Indeed, sometimes they feel like Oblio, and that is why they need this site, to identify themselves with some other “Oblios”. But while reading about their emotions we had the feeling that they prefer to be a Diaspora, to be a group linked just through a web page. They find it the best possibility to have both, an opportunity to lead a better life, and also the opportunity to be a Romanian.

Representing the Romanian space

The past invoked within the website www.romanians-de.org, is one highly personalized, is a time of individual memory. There are moments of remembrance, instances of home like: “Late afternoon, June, wet sand. The wind starts to blow in Vama Veche...” It seems that by sharing them with others, such moments are actualised; by telling their story people resurrect the fragments of the past. They are able to live these moments again by posting. Even though the history brought into present has not a deep

national character, one could say that it involves somehow a shared background, similar places and customs and lived moments.

On the contrary, on the site of Romanians in France the time spent in the “lost home” seems to be locked away. Memories seem to be rejected or even suppressed. The majority of people that are writing on the site deny, apparently, the existence of good remembrances regarding Romania. More than that, while observing the manner of their writing, one might easily get the impression that they are adopting an ironic approach towards those that affirm themselves nostalgic for the time spent in their country of origin. Some of the users seem to have adopted radical opinions, which they are expressing fervently. To their opinion most of those that came to France wanted to act as “Frenchman”. In this context, habits such as watching *mioritical* movies, which in the happiest of cases are described as of mediocre quality, eating *mititei* (Romanian special dish) at the, what they are calling, former Security restaurant, drinking *tuica* (Romanian drink), craving for *mamaliga* (Romanian traditional dish) or *cheese* seem to have lost any connectivity with tradition. Their meaning is altered as such that they become reasons of stigmatisation among the co-nationals, that seem more eager to give up on their past, even if only in writing.

Sometimes the way of representation could be an idealized one, maybe out of a need of those visiting the sites “to recover through re-enactment what they were missing” (Miller, Dan and Don Slater, “The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach”, 2000, p. 93). One of the aims of the sites could also be a representational one, “a process by which strangers should become acquainted with the world” of Romanians. (Miller, Dan and Don Slater, “The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach”, 2000, p. 105)

The transactional nature of ethnicity and the space coordinates

Referring to the example of Romanian teenagers living in Germany, there can be found three overlapping pictures: the image they wrap themselves with, the image projected by the others upon them and the image they use to describe the others.

The users categorize themselves as Romanians, maybe more Romanians that they have ever been, or maybe a little bit more open-minded. However, in their present non-virtual life, this people seem sometimes to be accepted neither as Germans, nor as

Romanians, being constantly labelled as outsiders. As Pina Werbner explains, “most trans-locals actively construct ‘community’ to shield them from racist rejections, but also to compete for honour, to have fun, to worship and to celebrate – together – collective rites of passage or ceremonies of nostalgic remembrance for a lost home”. (Werbner, Pina, “Debating Cultural Hybridity”, 1997, p 12). Could it be then concluded that the virtual space is the only world accepting a passport for both German and Romanian nationality?

The same question could be raised also in what concerns the Romanians from France. As mentioned before, the majority of users seem to have a critical opinion about the country of origin. Generally, such opinion is also projected on the remaining “inhabitants” of Romania. In a way it seems that some of the users are adopting the same views as the majority of the members of the non-virtual society to which they belong in the present. Talking about the fact that one Spanish DJ has composed a song, which vividly and vulgarly attacks the image of the Romanians from Spain, the users on www.franta-romania.com seem to have been divided into two major categories: those who are more eager to criticize the Romanian society, as if, by doing this they would detach themselves thoroughly from their origins, and those who seem to act in the direction of improving the Romanian image abroad.

The individuals within the Romanian Diaspora from France do not form alone the category of “otherness”. French people are also viewed upon and catalogued: either as discriminators, or as excessive spenders. The categories are modified and shifted constantly.

A specific feature of the www.franta-romania.com is that on this site, definitions of “self” and “others” seem to evolve and change very frequently. It is almost impossible to form an over-view opinion on the matter. As one user said “one cannot talk about a real community among the members of the Diaspora”. The users seem not to be aware of belonging to an ethnic group. Most of the times they entitled themselves “Romanians that came to France to play the Frenchmen”. Their image of “self” is that of a hybrid category, as if they neither thoroughly integrated in the French society, nor remained attached to their Romanian origin. The picture is completed by references to the attitudes of the French people towards them. However, the apparently only example of direct manifestation of a French towards the Romanians, seem to contradict the above-

mentioned constructed image. “I like this culture (talking about the Romanian culture) and this country even if I know this country only by books” says, Frédéric, a user who claims to be a Frenchman looking for young Romanian pen pals.

What could these contrastive definitions imply? Could one consider the lack of cohesion among the members of the site as a possible answer? Or maybe the different backgrounds of the users have put their print upon the users perspectives on others, or upon their interpretation of the positions that “others” apparently adopt towards them?

In diasporic terms it can be claimed that those once “dispersed from an original “centre” [...] believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host country”, and consider “the ancestral home as a place of eventual return”. (William Safran, in Clifford, “Diasporas” 1994, p.304). In other words, they live somehow a hybrid life, a life between two worlds, while being connected with one another by both “roots” and “routes”. (Clifford, 1994)

5. THE NOTION OF “HOME”

“Sometimes I feel that the whole land is my homeland, and the only foreign land is Romania.”(Mircea Cartarescu, in article “Deprimarea la Romani” (Romanian Depression)). “Romania is no more the way I left it...Germany is not the way I thought...where should I go...” (www.romanians-de.org - Forum-Dorul de casa (Missing Home)). Interpreting these quotes through Werbner’s zoological metaphor it can be said that sometimes people are neither bees, nor completely butterflies, or maybe both of them in the same time. ”Such gorgeous butterflies in the greenhouse of global culture are a quite different social species from the transnational bees and ants who build new hives and nests in foreign lands”. (Werbner, Pnina, “Debating Cultural Hybridity”,1997, p.12). Our subjects, seem in a way not to feel completely in neither of the two matrices. They were once butterflies dreaming of flying towards a warmer sun, and now, are sometimes building a nest, sometimes breathing the fresh new air around. If we were to classify the attitudes from the two websites, we would argue that the Romanians living in France seem more butterfly like, or maybe more determined to become French bees, while the users of www.romanians-de.org seem more like building, voluntarily or involuntarily, a Romanian nest into a German environment. But is worth mentioning again that each of

the two labels carries a strong print of the other, or, in other words, each of the butterflies is searching for a nest, and each of the bees has when flying a butterfly shadow, therefore it is maybe justified to name them all hybrids.

The feeling of living a hybrid life is usually mentioned as the major reason for being on the Internet, for those people somehow trapped between two worlds, a non-virtual past, which they keep in their minds, and a non-virtual present to which they cannot adapt. By creating and using a new space on the Internet they built for themselves an environment in which they feel at home. This is their virtual present, a present having their non-virtual past as a fundamental base. The site of Romanians living whether in France or in Germany is an island of “home” which they can access whenever they feel like. It is somehow like travelling home in an instance from thousands of miles away, from your chair in your office.

All this debate about the place we name “home”, about the place we name “new home” or maybe “lost home”, leads to the idea that the space is not at all a homogeneous dimension, it contains breaks and holes in the sense that some places, some spaces are qualitatively different from others. This quality of the space comes from the value we attach to one location or another. And in a way, we think that anyone would agree, that the place more valuable for us is the place we fell at home.

Home can be anywhere, home is where you are

In the case of www.romanians-de.org it seems that the new space creates some links between the people that access the site, generating a certain feeling about being on the site. But how strong are these links and how can one define the atmosphere there? At a first glance one could say that this site generates strong friendships, judging from the big amount of information users have about one another, maybe without ever meeting each other. But can't it be just the familiarity generated by dozens of discussions?

While researching on the site of Romanians in France, one could spot out many contrastive attitudes regarding the *roots* of the users. Most of them are adopting an ironic attitude towards Romania, calling it names such as **Mioritika** (the denomination makes reference to a Romanian traditional ballad) or Romanika (a combination between Romania and romantica). It is hard to say whether the users have felt “betrayed” by the

country in the past. Many of them seem to have left the country during the Communist domination. Others seem to have arrived in France only recently. But most of them seem to have developed a sense of resentment towards the country as a symbol; as if the country would have been somehow guilty of their misfortune or of the fact that they had to live to another place.

It seems very interesting, from an analytical point of view, that the users on the www.franta-romania.com appear to have invented a thoroughly new territory within the site. They seem to help among themselves with useful information. Consequently, people that seem to come from technical backgrounds become all of the sudden juridical advisors. By accessing this site, one might get the impression of finally finding a place not suffocated with bureaucracy. A relevant example in this direction are the words of one of the users- “thank you for making me feel like I can really find reliable persons within this site in such a short time. Thank you for your prompt help.”

The new space involves new rules, new organization features, and new time. What we have tried to emphasize within this essay is the fact that with the creation and the maintenance of these sites, the users have found a breach in space, allowing them to preserve their *roots* while being on the *route* (Clifford, 1997). While analysing the forums on both sites we couldn't help to wonder whether the users that criticize their *roots* are really resenting their origin as a negative feature? If such a theory would be true, why would they be part of a virtual community that keeps on reminding them about where they came from? While attempting to get in touch with some representatives of www.franta-romania.com, in order to figure out the reasons that bring them together, we ran into an interesting answer “I believe that *home* is more likely a state of mind...I do not know really how many of those visiting this site really want to feel at home (...) I believe this site is more like a pact of virtual non-solitude, the best inner reason being a common heritage of language and nationality”. In this way, the new space gathers the attributes of a hive, such as that created by the bees. The metaphor can be completed by the fact that generally users seem to act as bees not only regarding the site, but also among themselves, providing (information) for one another and for the whole community, while the data and facts that they gather and share among each other are stored in archives that can be easily accessed by anyone who decides entering the site.

The dilation of space to global “home”

The idea of space could easily be related with the idea of distance, with terms like close and far, with the idea of proximity.). John Macgregor Wise (2000,quoted by Karim, Karim H., “The Media of Diaspora”, 2003, p. 9), “asserts that the marking out of a space as one’s home involves the infusion of that place with one’s own rhythms. Re territorialisation occurs through sound and movement, cadencies and action.”

If we refer to the two websites as infusions with Romanian rhythms, we could state a strong link between them, a strong link mainly at the level of the aims of them both. But still, searching a little bit deeper the vast global territory that is the Internet, we could find, coming not as a surprise at all, other links just as strong, with other websites, following the same purpose, that of gathering Romanian ideas, news and talks. For instance the site of Romanians living in Germany provides a whole item of “Other sites and their news”, where one can find links towards, not only the site of Romanians living in France, but also of the Romanians living in Switzerland, or of those in British Columbia. There as well it can be found a “collection of news from all the sites of Romanian Diaspora”. We mentioned this fact, willing to emphasize, not the idea of the collection of news, but the focus on an entire Romanian Diaspora. All of a sudden it seems that the space expands itself, even the virtual one, which we always regard as an infinite one. The two points on the map we have always referred to, France and Germany, seem to be interconnected with other points, and others, comprising in the end the whole Globe. Isn’t it in fact also the idea of internet that emphasizes this global dimension?

Now trying to connect the idea of global, which itself has a strong special determination, with the notion of home we were discussing, it can be argued that in a certain extent, the home can be as well global. Paraphrasing Miller and Slater, in their “Being Trini and Representing Trinidad”, we could say that such an ethnic virtual space leads to the abolition of distance and dis-embeds relationships from particular places, “people would hold no older sense of self and place in their encounter with a sudden, immediate incursion of ‘the global’” (Miller and Slater, 2000, p.85).

The Romanians living in France, having as home the *franta-romania.com*, or the Romanians living in Germany, having their home at *romanians-de.org*, can be here, there, anywhere, and still finding their home in a computer screen. They seem so familiar with their website as they would feel at home, they seem to know every spot of it, as they would know their home, they even start to know each other. Wherever they are they can always find their virtual home there, on the screen and behind the web address.

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