

The Interzone: We Are All Here to Go!

Inaugural Speech by Professor Didier Girard, General Co-ordinator

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Just as Norman Mailer once defined himself as a “White Negro”, I think today I may borrow Martin Luther King’s famous words “I had a dream” as my own. This morning, the dream has come true: *The Cultural Studies in Literary Interzones* EMJD exists, flesh and bones, and your non virtual presence here, Via Salvecchio, in one of the most irresistible cities of Lombardia, marks the historical starting point of new academic practices.

I still remember vividly that sunny day in early March 2009: I was in my hotel room in Santiago de Compostela, and I received a long phone call from Alberto Castoldi, then rector of the University of Bergamo, and who else but Professoressa Franca Franchi, suggesting we

should go for the first Erasmus Mundus Joint Doctorate competition. Given the deadlines (a mere five weeks), the proposal was insane; I accepted immediately.

As a matter of fact I was in Galicia for a Masters' class I was giving to the post-graduate students of the Department of Literary Theory and comparative Literature. The big topic of the moment in Santiago was "Writing in the blogosphere" whatever that meant and I had offered to investigate William Burroughs's less known literary experiments in the 60s, portraying the author as a cosmonaut of the inner space.

Then, I spent long hours in the vast empty lobby of one of my favourite hotels in the world (the Santiago NH, a real interzone for sure), musing about what could be exactly today but also tomorrow the most meaningful and the most innovative Doctorate in the field of Humanities. And here we are:

- 1) A dozen of brilliant Ph.D. students selected worldwide who will study and carry out research in 4 different universities thanks to the generous employment contract (more than 2000 euros a month, net before tax) made possible by the Education and Culture Branch of the European Commission
- 2) More than one hundred renowned professors across the world waiting for you, and already engaged in Interzones-related scientific collaborations.
- 3) 16 partner institutions on 4 different continents who, for the past 18 months, have fought hard with their national and internal structures to make it happen. It is not easy to fathom the amount of energy put into implementing such a doctoral programme in 16 different educational contexts. Equally difficult is to conceive is the innovative, almost revolutionary aspects of the doctorate as it stands.

You, belonging to the first round of *Interzones* doctoral students, probably think you have made it. Of course, leaving one's country and one's everyday environment to embark upon such a cosmopolitan adventure may appear as the hardest thing to do. Visa procedures, administrative adjustments and so forth have now been solved but things are only getting started in terms of cultural and academic challenges. It is my duty to warn you at this stage that things are going to be tough. You are the happy laureates of a worldwide competition which attracted two hundred applications for this first round. So there is undoubtedly something promising about you but it is now the time for you to deliver. The interzone(s) is not something to define as such, it is something to experience and to embody: in other words, you and your research will be the interzone. You will experience the limits, cultural, academic and otherwise of the world as it is and not only as it is or has been conceptualized.

I initiated this speech with a quote from Martin Luther King but I cannot dissimulate the Malcolm X in me: there is indeed a radically utopian vision of higher education (maybe not that far away from what Professor Marc Augé advocated in his *Anthropologie de la mobilité*) behind the political and scientific agenda of the *Interzones* EMJD.

Erasmus Mundus programmes (at master or doctorate levels) enable a reshuffling of the cards. Being a multi-centre programme, it has its own constraints but also its own fascinating challenges which will redefine the aims and practices of academic research, and develop

innovative co-supervision mechanisms. The author has been dead for quite a while; you are going to celebrate that of the father-like supervisor.

For some students, this adventure will represent a unique opportunity to establish VIP (read Very Interesting Persons, not anything else) networks and collaborations.

The movement is a one-way trip reflecting Stefan Zweig's comment in his *Journals* of 1918: « L'Europe? Une fiction dont il faut se déshabituer, comme de toutes les synthèses ». Although European by essence, European studies in this context are revisited from outside, not theoretically but pragmatically, physically, sensationally. Down with euro-centrism!

The innovative aspects of this doctorate will lead to institutional changes in terms of professional objectives, educational practices, disciplinarity, but also in our relation to culture in the lines of Koestler, Spenger, Warburg or even to Freud who wrote in *Malaise de la civilisation*, « Les cultures sont un moyen inventé par les Hommes pour régler leur psychisme plastique afin de donner une homogénéité psychique minimale permettant la vie en groupe. Toute culture est névrosée, elle est le siège d'une affection pathologique. » or in a more interzonal style, Antonin Artaud in his *Théâtre et son double*, « Il y a un étrange parallélisme entre cet effondrement généralisé de la vie qui est à la base de la démoralisation culturelle et le souci d'une culture qui n'a jamais coïncidé avec la vie et qui est faite pour régenter la vie. »

Another visionary writer might help us in grasping these issues. Hardly discussed in "serious" academic debates and barely mentioned by Gilles Deleuze in his *Mille plateaux*, William Burroughs is also the author of a book entitled... *Interzone*. In the 1950s, Tangiers in Morocco, as a topographical metaphor for so much of his life and addictions, was functioning on a quadripartite system divided into French, Spanish, English and American sectors. The limited scope of this introductory speech does not allow us to develop an exploration of Burroughs' art but let us simply insist for the moment on the key issues of self-positioning and whether one takes the "structure" trope for granted or not. "Arab music has neither beginning nor end. It is timeless. Heard for the first time, it may appear meaningless to a Westerner, because he is listening for a time structure that isn't there." (58)

It is now a great honor for me to officially inaugurate the cycle of seminars that will take place at the Università degli Studi di Bergamo during your induction semester. For the next 10 weeks or so, you will be the centre, and scholars of great reputation will rotate around you like free atoms from all around the world. This is the first stage of our lab-rotation academic policies. Later, you will take their place and become the free atoms circulating in various universities across the continents. Not everything in these seminars will be of equal importance to all of you, but trans-disciplinarity (rather than inter-disciplinarity) is quintessential to see the other side to the question, and to experience more subtly the forces at play within, beyond and around conceptual frontiers. Your feedback on these seminars will be essential for the doctorate and twice during the semester (With Profs. Castlodi and Franchi on November 10th ; with Profs. Franchi, Hotz-Davies and your humble servant on December 10th) seminar audits will be organized. The whole cycle of seminars will culminate with a Conference organized in Bergamo on January 21st 2011, We are all Here to Go!

Every one of the five editions of the Interzones Doctorate will have its own Godfather (or rather “Godperson”) and it is my immense pleasure to introduce you to Professor Marc Augé for this inaugural lesson today. You should be already conversant with the brilliant concepts of “non-lieux” and “surmodernité” which, if I may be personal for a few seconds, I always found very refreshing when confronted with the *lieu-commun* of postmodernity.

Cher Marc Augé, dans votre dernier opuscule, *La Communauté illusoire*, vous proposez une manière autre, une manière hétérologique de penser la frontière ; dans *Anthropologie de la Mobilité*, vous ajoutez qu’ «à l’inverse de Pascal, la circonférence est partout et le centre nulle part.» Pour toutes ces raisons, je formule le souhait que cette promotion de doctorants *Interzones* saura être digne de votre haut patronage et fera honneur à votre présence pour cette leçon inaugurale que nous nous réjouissons d’entendre cet après-midi.

Prof. Marc Augé, Prof. Alberto Castoldi, Prof. Didier Girard

