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**CULTURAL MEMORY AND CULTURAL HYBRIDIZATION
ON THE INTERNET
(ASPECTS OF SLAVIC PARTICIPATION)**

Abstract. We try to formulate main questions of the e-existence of Slavic cultures and to observe some aspects of the influence of constantly developing technologies on cultural memory. Two different approaches are discussed: a total digitization and a variant when, applying new standards, we have to establish stricter criteria in the process of selection of objects for digital recreation.

Key words: cultural heritage, memory, digitization, cyberculture, Slavic languages and cultures.

The developments in Eastern Europe during the last decade of the 20th century, intensified by global processes, considerably changed century-old identities, ideas and concepts, as well as the old divisions in academic disciplines. Regional communities, defined in political and economical aspects – Balkan, Visegrad, Baltic – are more widely and actively discussed and accepted in practice and scientific analyses than were previous entities, based on culture and language. At the same time, one of the most dynamic areas of contemporary development – the Internet and cyberculture, are based on language and script, on discourse practices which are largely unaffected by spatial determinants. This research concentrates on East-European (with a focus on Bulgarian) presence and expression in cyberculture, and tries to answer the question “what heritage do the nations bring to the Internet community and use to continue their existence there?” The paper also deals with the differentiation of the characteristic national features in texts and images on the Internet and with the principles of succession in culture and their realization through the resources of the virtual culture. These resources play an important part in self-identification of young generations in Slavic countries and should thus be thoroughly examined and analyzed. Alain Renaud in “The New Digital Order“, concentrating on *openness and multiplicity*, claims that “Social organisms are henceforth confronted with an informational space that is constantly expanding and in which each element, each region, takes its meaning from the relations that tie it to other regions (interconnections). Although it may provoke predictable reactions of cultural identification, this space nonetheless marks the definite end of stable, separate territorial authority (in the order of things as well as the order of words and knowledge).”[1] This opinion undoubtedly is widely accepted and supported and can be applied to Slavic cultures, but it is also necessary to judge what tendencies, originating from the past, characterize their off- and online present and may have substantial influence on the virtual future.

The generalized problems we face can be formulated as follows:

- degrees of influence of cyberculture on the processes in initial reality and vice versa;
- cases of concurrence and non-concurrence in the cultural and political agenda, which reflect on cyberculture and the cultural memory it is based on;

- the tendency to multilingualism on the Internet and its influence in Slavic cultural zones;
- cyberculture – a duplicate of real cultural dynamics or a model of a new hybrid culture with some of components which belong to common European cultural memory, and others representing global tendencies.

Main groups of particular problems:

- digitization of cultural heritage – preservation or incorporation; “who is the heir to the electronic treasure-house?”;
- creation and circulation of works of art, related to folklore, on the Internet – internet communities, cyber mysticism, net-folklore (netlore); subjects, plots, rituals, texts, coexisting in the virtual space after centuries of isolation, ensued from split territories and languages;
- non-anonymous works on the Internet – authorship, genres and topics of electronic literature in comparison with the European/Western Canon.

The sources and research fields I use and observe are: digital libraries and museums, online forums, groups, societies, sites for electronic literature and culture; sources of reverse reflection – works on paper (books, magazines) discussing electronic culture. Some local academic projects for digitization of early and modern Slavic Texts and e-publishing (University of Sofia, Bibliotheca Slavica, Littera et Lingua, Electronic journal for philology and humanities) will also be taken into consideration and appraised.

Slavic engagement in the Internet community came relatively slowly, in the mid 1990s, when the concepts of the net-pioneers had made way for more pragmatic ones, although commercial actions in the virtual universe were not yet dominant. Scores of ambitious projects started their realization in order to make electronically accessible textual and subsequently sound and visual heritage. This is logical, in view of the fact that digitization of discursive layer of culture seems to be the easiest to realize, that books and manuscripts were the first exhibits in the Slavonic virtual museum. If we add to this the fact that most Slavic cultures during the last two centuries had a literary core or were literary centered and built their identity on the art of words, it will be quite evident why the initial manifestation of the Slavic areas on the Net were literary texts. Emigrants, missing their real homes and trying to construct their virtual ones, designed some of these sites. It was an early gesture of nostalgia and seeking of self in an abandoned world, which could be reconstructed solely by technologies (and imagination and memories, of course). As a matter of fact, in the trend of digitization of cultural objects we can read an attempt to preserve the familiar world and to bring back to life what was lost. Nostalgia is generally considered to be one of the symptoms of *fin de siècle* periods.

Thus, each of the Slavic language zones on the Internet has its literary sites which gradually developed into digital libraries or originated as such: <http://slovo.bg>; <http://litternet.bg/> <http://aptechka.agava.ru/>; <http://lib.ru/>; <http://www.litera.ru>; <http://nubskc.nubsk.edu.mk>; <http://www.borut.com/library/>; <http://citanka.cz/texty.php3> <http://www.literatura.zapis.net.pl/start.htm>. Immediately after virtual libraries, there began to appear museums, archives, portals for culture, international projects. Cultural projects can be national regional, European or even global. They may involve common strategies and support new theories about cultural diversity and memory. (<http://cultivate.cl.bas.bg/bg/welcome.htm> – European net for cultural heritage) (<http://www.unesco.org/webworld/rsl/index.shtml> – a project for modernization of the

Russian State Library; <http://julia.univ.gda.pl/~literat/zulu/zasad.ht> – Virtual library of Polish literature; http://www.unesco.org/webworld/public_domain/archives.html – the program “The Memory of the World”, supported by UNESCO). We should say that literary resources are extremely variegated, even chaotic, but, most importantly, thanks to the efforts of amateurs and professionals on personal sites and institutionalized e-libraries, the classical heritage of Slavic literatures is actively being collected.

These aspects have their influence upon but do not determine the advance of resources because widening access to the global Net and knowledge about it integrate more and more participants who are not institutionally bound in the process of digitization of national cultural heritage. As a result, we notice a tendency of delimitation of the choice of powerful institution made for objects that should be digitized and the choice of the free user who wishes to be a creator too. We can record the appearance and coexistence of institutional and personal projects. They present the history, culture and language of a nation, but also personal history, texts, articles, relics. In this way, history is broken down into individual stories, which are undeniably of great importance for the preservation of cultural memory.

The Internet may proclaim but also may keep silent about the Slavic community, it may focus the public’s attention on the shared language and past, but it may on the other hand prefer to use a language and a culture serving as mediators (which we are now actually doing and demonstrating) to mutual reading of cultures. This practice helps to heal the nostalgia and to leave behind us, in the previous century all misunderstandings once these cultures were stored on the Internet. This is of main importance, because, as J. Assmann points, the culture of memory is a part of the process of planning and hope, i.e. it serves for building social horizons of meaning and time. [2]

The development of electronic resources which present the cultural heritage of Slavic nations gives an opportunity not just to estimate but to re-arrange these remains and to structure in different way their cultural memory. Consequently the responsibility of net developers grows and they must take into consideration some new factors and the necessity of new strategies demanded by the process of globalization and the regional commonwealth. It is not impossible to rearrange museums, libraries, galleries and so on, at least in their virtual variant, but the question is why we should do this, and if we decide to do it, what is worth presenting in the Slavic section or *Slavica*, (what it could possibly be entitled). There is a subsequent question - is it necessary to differentiate such section, having in mind the informational oversaturation in this field of knowledge and culture.

Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” recently supported two projects, taking a step in this direction in view of the fact that Bulgaria has always been one of the centers of Slavic enlightenment and culture. *Bibliotheca Slavica*, based on the collections of the Library of Sofia university and sponsored by Open Society Foundation and UNESCO, is built in accordance with “priorities of the intellectual climate of the nation” [3] and strategies of the University directed to modernization of educational recourses and methods in the field of the Slavic studies. *Bibliotheca Slavica* gradually makes online accessible Old Bulgarian and Medieval manuscripts and Slavonic early printed books, biographies and bibliographies of notable scholars, past polemics. Current disputes about philology and humanities, their history and preset status, e-publishing, digitized cultural heritage are the focus of the e-journal *Littera et Lingua* – a project of the Faculty of Slavic Studies, supported by the University’s

Science Research Fund. These resources are pragmatically estimated in Bulgarian academic researches and higher education, but they are also regarded as an important effort directed to preservation of cultural memory.



As is well known, the loss of memory or at least the fear of this loss is normally compensated through the establishment of memorials, rituals and symbols. However, it is worth asking the question whether digital resources – monuments of a new type – are rather a way of forgetting than of remembering. When we write something down, we forget about it, relying on the record and the reminder, which had been mentioned by Plato (*Dialogues, Phædrus*) and discussed as external memory in a lot of scholarly texts. We may say that creating objects of memory on the Internet we take part in the same process, which is a further externalization of cultural memory. However, the record becomes more and more intangible for the individual, being displayed just virtually by the newly acquired medium.

Another interesting aspect is that on the Net living culture, created in real time, meets the culture of the past, that is the foundation of the cultural memory. In large number of literary sites we find centuries old masterpieces alongside texts written some days ago; contemporary rules of web design predetermine the frame of old paintings and sculptures in virtual art galleries. They are all signs of cultural memory and are as such the basis of personal identification and national self-awareness and recognition. Simultaneously they motivate intercultural communication and a willingness to accept the position of the other. In this sense, the Internet as cultural memory acquires a further task, one that was always important but only the digital age has gained the necessary instruments to solve it. According to Eric Wainwright in his work entitled “Capturing the Rainbow: Preservation of Electronic Media” the task is to assure an acceptable future preservation of the present, which of course bears the past and the cultural

memory, which are the spiritual essence of society. [4] All these efforts might be interpreted as a manipulative predestination of our future image but at the same time as pathetically expressed intention to seize the opportunity to preserve in virtual form absolutely everything that we have inherited. Let us just imagine Gutenberg's contemporaries attempting to print everything existing at that time in manuscripts. In so far as we cannot determine what the main book, the Bible of our time, is, we try to digitize everything. This is a type of horizontal culture without hierarchy, which defines and provokes a new type of thinking, knowledge and, possibly, cultural memory, but we will have to admit the right to existence of one more practice and policy regarding national heritage – the one of silence, of non-presentation, of refusal to digitize.

Accessibility and wide dissemination of internet-based information has for an object memorization, personal, national and cultural identification and cultivation of tolerance to other viewpoints. However, there might be a different position, lacking the breadth of the former one, an ascetic variant, according to which we must master our will to digitize and restrict the process, establishing stricter criteria when choosing objects for digital recreation. A commonplace and a piece of our everyday experience are the instant changes of the Internet landscape and the vulnerability of the resources though they are claimed unlimited and super-accessible. But the main characteristic feature of cultural memory in pre-digital societies is considered stability. Along with that, old concepts should not be extended over contemporary situation or state, which can no longer be post-defined. The community, evolving digital resources we are observing – the one of the people speaking Slavic languages, has already transformed large areas of cultural heritage, and the most significant knowledge we have gained is that preserving and presenting our past, supporting cultural memory, we can choose traditional or new entireties. This is a situation of choice, which seldom occurs even on the edge of centuries and millennia (supposing that this opportunity is a real, but not a virtual one).

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