

**Barbara Czapor-Zaręba**

**Transition...**

**Transgression  
of identity**

**SUMMARY**

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## **SUMMARY**

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## Transition...Transgression of identity.

Our life is largely composed of habits and rituals that we unreflectively repeat. However, the man thinks and acts not only within limits set by biology and society. There are some circumstances where we try to cross them by undertaking creative actions that go beyond our former experience and achievements. History of mankind abounds with such expansive, transgressional behaviour, and therefore the continuity of development and ideas exists. Deconstruction is followed by construction anew. By stretching limits, art continually transmutes one's spirit and emotions. It is an operation on human identity.

Further to a dictionary definition, the word transgression derives from Latin *transgressio*, which literally means transition. "Breach or violation of norms and rules, (...), transition or transformation" is another meaning of the term.<sup>1</sup>

When focusing on the meaning of the word „transgression”, understood as breach of norms or rules, we need to define what a norm or an order is. In this context, juxtaposing it with the term “cosmos” is not accidental. The concept of cosmos, which derives from Greek, means an order, a harmony. According to Mircea Eliade, a historian of religion, since the dawn of time it is connected with the sense of sacred Universe and universal harmony.

The Latin word “transgressor” denotes “a criminal who has violated the divine law, or who has disrupted the current order”. In turn, the Polish term “criminal [*zbrodniarz*]” means “a person who deflects from a ford [*bród*], i.e. from the law or the norm.” It has a similar meaning to the word “wicked” [*zdrożny*].

Maria Janion and Józef Koziński are the Polish researchers who dealt with the transgressional concept of the man.

“The transgressional man”, according to Józef Koziński, is a multidimensional person who is able to cross material, social, and symbolic limits. The author states that the history of man is a history of “unceasing attempts to cross their own limits”.<sup>2</sup> One of these limits is the biblical one which pertains to the first parents. Picking the forbidden fruit from the tree by Eva is one of such transgressional acts.

In my opinion, in order to decode the transgression concept in art it is not enough to present only its shocking and brutal side, which incessantly leads to pushing old limits. The following question needs to be posed: Are there any areas which remain unexplored, and which still shock us with its uncompromising and primal nature? Is there anything that makes us hold back our urges, so that we can discover our true nature? This is when one should ask about the essence of limits and whether they can be crossed.

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1 Słownik Języka Polskiego PWN, Warszawa 1995, p. 486.

2 quoted from: J. Koziński, *Transgresja i kultura*, Warszawa 2002 p. 4.

It is difficult to talk about transgression or breach without defining the word “limit”. It is a space where a specific order exists. The premodern world, both Greek and Christian, believed that a constant cosmic order existed. The 19th and 20th century were different. Both Nietzsche (by declaring the death of God) and Bataille denied centralization of the world and pursuit of the metaphysical Absolute.<sup>3</sup> The man was meant to be free from religion. There was no point in seeking the metaphysical perfection. By self-development we were to become superhuman and self-sufficient beings, free from divine and natural law. The limits were shifted...

The term “limit” in the context of cultural transgression can be understood widely. Therefore we can name social, biological, physical, intellectual and cultural limits.

Art is where human conventions are continuously transgressed. My research perspective is defined by terms from the fields of art, cultural anthropology, religion and philosophy. I use the concepts of spirituality that are not subject to any specific, institutionalized form of religiousness. As I explore “the area of muddy genres”, I am aware that such interdisciplinary approach may lead to inaccuracy.<sup>4</sup> However, I believe that this is the most effective way of learning about the present reality. I try to unveil the mystery that is covered, coded.

Undoubtedly, the reason for my doctoral thesis “Transition... Transgression of identity” and the graphic series “Transgression” was the quest for New Transcendence. I understand transgression as literal overstepping, transition, and I link it with both physical and initiatory death. They both lead to transition, to rebirth in a new, symbolic form, to change of identity.

When analyzing archaic symbolisms as well as modern religious systems, Mircea Eliade states that the man inhabits their body in the same way as one inhabits a house or cosmos made for their use. In this context, the term “cosmos” pertains to microcosmos, that is the environment we live in. An inhabited area, be it a temple, a house or a body, always has some kind of opening upwards, which allows for contact with another transcendental reality. In Hinduism or Buddhism, this opening upwards means the transition from human existence to spiritual condition. Thus, it is an identity change in a sense. The upper opening in an Indian tower is known as *brahmarandhra*, which means “an opening in the crown of the head”. The human soul after their death escapes through *brahmarandhra*. In Europe and Asia, the soul of the deceased ascends through a chimney or a roof, especially through a part known as “the holy quoin”. In the case of a lengthy agony, one of the roof beams is taken off or broken. It makes it easier to free the soul from the body, when another body image – cosmos, a house – is crushed in the upper part.<sup>5</sup>

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3 M. Lipowicz, *Od transcendencji człowieka do transgresji człowieczeństwa. Próba filozoficzno-socjologicznej konceptualizacji transhumanizmu*, [in:] „Ethos” 28(2015 ) no. 3 (111) 57–80 DOI 10.12887/28-2015-3-111-05 [in:] [online] [https://www.academia.edu/33789569/Od\\_transcendencji\\_czlowieka\\_do\\_transgresji\\_czlowieczestwa.\\_Prоба\\_filozoficzno-socjologicznej\\_konceptualizacji\\_transhumanizmu](https://www.academia.edu/33789569/Od_transcendencji_czlowieka_do_transgresji_czlowieczestwa._Prоба_filozoficzno-socjologicznej_konceptualizacji_transhumanizmu) [access 12.10.2018].

4 quote from: Paweł Moźdzysłowski, *Inicjacje i transgresje. Antystrukturalność sztuki XX i XXI wieku*, Warszawa 2011, p. 15.

5 *Ibid.*, pp.143–145.

Transgressing the human form of existence is possible by destroying the house or cosmos which the man chose for their residence. Choosing the absolute freedom means destruction of the conditioned, familiar world. Freeing the spirit by killing the body leads to the absolute.

According to current knowledge, death is not equal to the end of one's life. Our body cells live more than a week after the clinical death. Death is programmed and has consecutive stages. At present, in order for a man to die, their brain must finally die. Some scientists think that human death does not begin in their terminal stage, but that almost every human being starts to die in their embryo stage. That is when the effects of the body's wear and tear, known as ageing, can be observed. Therefore, we approach the ultimate limit, the final Transgression. In the course of our lives we gradually lose our cells, hence bit by bit we die every day.

The term "time" is inevitably related to death and passing away. Mircea Eliade, the specialist in religious studies, claimed that when gods created our reality, they also created the sacred time.<sup>6</sup> Everything that is alive is subject to its specific, cosmic rhythm. It is born and then grows in order to wither.

The Romanian researcher divided time into sacred and secular one. We ordinarily exist in secular time, tending to our daily tasks. The sacred time is a mythical primeval time. It consists in a religious exit from an ordinary existence in time and transition into mythical time, which is manifested again in a particular celebration by religious rites. Thus, according to Eliade, time is not constant or homogenous, because the man lives between these two types of time. The more important one – the sacred time – is reversible and is a form of the mythical, eternal presence, to which the man returns with the help of rites.

It is the yearning for the earliest beginnings that is constantly taking place through religious rites.

In my series entitled "Transgression" I try to register or stop the time by naming the graphics with particular time sequences, eg: 2'25", 3'05". They are very intimate as they are a code pertaining to passing away – Transgression – of my dear ones. In a sense, these graphics are related to the category of reversible, sacred time, as mentioned by Eliade. I focused on the moment that became liminal for me. In my work 3'05" I tried to show the passage of time by separating the particular elements of the graphic. The graphics are placed in three rows. I applied some kind of time lapse. I treated the image sequentially which allowed me to stop "the mythical eternal presence", as defined by the Romanian historian of religion. The change of light in most of the last modules of the realization also reflects the fact of passing away. I purposely made the line vanish so that it symbolizes the Transition from the earliest beginnings to *Imago Mundi*. Therefore, the moment of Transition is strictly connected with time. The possibility of Transition lasts only for a moment, a moment which is transitory and blurred as light...

The liminal phase of Victor Turner, the British anthropologist and thinker, has a special place in my dissertation. "Antistructural liminality", as described by Turner, is of crucial importance to me because of its initiatory character. It is the state of suspense "inbetween", whose next stage is looking for *communitas*. A specific

preparation to the rite of passage takes place in this stage. Turner researched the Arnold van Gennep's theory of tripartite structure of the rites of passage, and he developed the middle (liminal) stage. He noted that in the liminal stage, which is the transition stage between two other phases, the participants in the rite find themselves "inbetween" the stages. They do not belong to their community anymore, but they are not yet included in the other group. The liminal stage derives from the Latin word *limen* which means a "threshold". For me, the threshold is also the limit between the primary and secondary process. It is the limit of identity and it separates what is known from the unknown. Each change destabilizes the system, as it is an entry into an unknown area of experience. What is unfamiliar and vague is the source of our anxiety. Crossing the threshold can also be symbolic. It is an entry from ordinariness into *sacrum*. The threshold is therefore a barrier, a division line, which separates these two worlds. In the majority of religions, crossing a temple's threshold is connected with specific purgatory rites: crossing oneself, taking the shoes or the headgear off. The aim of all these acts is to reconnect us to the absolute.

The typical place for going through this stage is a secluded place, eg. the desert, as mentioned before. How to reach the emptiness? How to lift the curtain and experience initiation? Many artists ask themselves this question. Usually it leads to a specific initiation death. It was described by Kazimierz Malewicz in the context of forsaking "the world of desires and performances" and embracing the freedom offered by abstraction instead, which he defined as "the desert".<sup>7</sup>

According to him, not only is the desert the symbol of emptiness, but first and foremost the symbol of transgressional internal experience. Relinquishing "this world" leads to change, a Transition. That is why I find this fragment especially valuable. My quest led me to similar conclusions. The transgressional character of my graphics is based not only on the metaphorical Transition, as mentioned before, but also on gradual elimination, on clearing the picture. At the end of my work I was convinced that in order to express the heart of the matter, a single bright line is enough. Nothing more – just the line...

For me, the bright line is the limit. It is the final limit that everyone will cross at some point. Death – the Transition – is the only certain thing which affects us all, no matter what our religion, age, or opinions are. I remember the situation which took place several years ago. I was being transported to an operating theater through a hospital corridor. I was under the influence of analgetics and tranquilizers, so the only thing I noticed was the row of ghastly fluorescent lamps on the ceiling. As I was being moved along the corridor, the light blended, becoming a single line. I could feel a kind of inevitability, and I felt that my fear was pointless.

Hegel classified light and darkness as two voids. This assumption was very helpful in defining my graphics. That is why in the final my stage my work consisted in gradual clearing of the picture. All "added values" seemed unnecessary, as they disrupted the seriousness and monumentalism that were important to me. The 2'25" realization refers to the bright gateway, or Transition; while the 3'05" one is minimized as to the choice of artistic means of expression. Consequently, I defined

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7 K. Malewicz, *Świat bezprzedmiotowy*, translation: S. Fijałkowski, Gdańsk 2006 p. 66 [in:] P. Moźdzynski, *Inicjacje...*, op. cit., p. 55.

only the bright line on a dark background. Behind the crack, or the line, there is the invisible absolute. Everything else is only a false pretence.

In my opinion, abstraction is a language that is able to express other dimensions of existence in a most direct way.

In art, transgression can also be pondered upon in terms of purely formal or genre transgressions, like transgressing the frame. Formal transgressions in my doctoral thesis can be seen in the scale of realization and in the technique of "Transgression" series. In technological terms I needed to revise my own knowledge and look for new solutions. I define the technique I used as transfer acts with the use of equipment which is typical for relief printing. In my case, I understand transfer printing as moving the defined essence of image and emotions with a roller onto the matrix. Both the method of paint application and the printing process are characteristic for relief printing. My technique resembles the monotypic, fantastic landscapes of Koichi Yamamoto. He uses the reductive and the additive method. I can see the similarity mostly in the subtle tone gradations made on a plate with a big roller. However, the main difference is the possibility of making multiple graphic prints. This is one of the reasons why I call my graphic technique a transfer print, not a monotypic one.

I believe that the abstract world created allows for the most complete entry into other worlds. I searched for an abstract which would not be the next simulacrum in reflections upon transcendence. Joining the light and a vertical symbol was the starting point.

My opinion is one of many among the artists who pursue the quest for the New transcendence. I am far from the modern mystic artists.

Especially today, the search for the New Absolute is the result of the condition of the modern man and leaving the death out by aesthetisation of life. This was repeatedly mentioned by Zygmunt Bauman in his works. In this context, I consider my doctoral thesis as my personal transgression, along with its liminal stage.

By creating graphics, I try to prepare myself for the final Transition. I am not the only one. I do not discover anything new, I only ask – mainly myself – questions about the sense of our existence. Are we the part of a bigger whole? Are the scientific theories about the "primordial soup" (the theories that we come from a mixture of water, methane, ammonia, and hydrogen; which were subject to enormous energy and therefore transformed into life-giving amino acids) right? Questions about our origins and our end have been pervading the modern art for a long time. We may wait a long time for an answer...

