

# Metaculture as a Place for Personal Creativity on the Borders of Cultural Environments

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**Abstract.** Among the consequences of the antinomic trends of contemporary culture the author points out what he sees as the most important – the forming of metaculture. He argues that metaculture is the state of culture arising on the borders of cultural environments enabling reflexive exposure of dependence between cultural development and the creative potential of personality.

**Keywords:** Metaculture, Personality, Creativity, Border, Reflection, Gift, Culture, Metacultural Potential.

## 1. Introduction

This article aims to bring to light the connection between human development and cross-cultural interaction. Human resources are nowadays seen as a key factor not only for culture, but for politics and economy as well. The quality of human resources, or, in other words the creative potential of a personality depends on where the person stands cross-culturally: either accepting mass-culture patterns as unreflexively as consuming mass production goods, common for the whole globalized world, or transcending, outgrowing any particular culture in its development. Such transcendence which we call metaculture enables the person to creatively contribute to the development of all the interacting cultures.

The content of any national culture consists of the contributions made by its greatest minds ('geniuses'): writers, artists, scientists, teachers, reformers, etc. As a rule, all the geniuses were on the border of cultural environments, they were influenced by other cultures and mainly due to this influence they have made contributes to the native culture.

This does not imply that anyone who finds himself on the border of two cultures can make a significant creative contribution to one of them, but such a person inevitably takes an innovative position towards established cultural models, values or behaviour patterns. Psychologically, existentially and even institutionally it is quite understandable that a personality on the border of cultural environments unable to use tradition (customs, rules) to solve current tasks has to demonstrate innovative, independent thinking (creativity in the formal sense).

Stepping out of the borders of one's own culture is a necessary but insufficient condition for a personal creative contribution. In other words, a personality should at least take a position of '*outsidedness*' (a term coined by M. M. Bakhtin) towards the native culture to make a creative contribution. The principle of outsidedness explains why geniuses of national cultures are usually also geniuses of all humankind. However, being on the borders of cultural environments (outsidedness towards one's native culture), a personality does not fall outside cultural forms per se, but instead gains access to unvarying elements of culture, thanks to which creative achievements become comprehensible and available to any culture (e.g. Shakespeare, Chekhov, Mozart and others). Nevertheless, regardless of the importance of cultural invariants, one should remember that any creator (national genius) *originates* from his or her own culture.

Such contributions to a culture are characterized by the term metaculture, with 'meta' indicating a source of a culture's development lying *outside* the culture itself in the creative potential of personality.

Daniel Andreev, who made the term metaculture widespread (the topic of his well-known book 'The Rose of the World') uses it roughly in this meaning. Metaculture is the vertical enabling a personality to create cultural products subsequently replicated in the horizontal of national culture. The term metaculture can seemingly be applied to any state of a dynamically developing culture. However, for the reasons described below, we think it best to use the term to define only a certain state of contemporary culture.

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Stepping out of a cultural form is likely to be a universal condition of its creative development at any stage of the spiritual development of humankind. This mechanism was not used reflectively until the modern age, which usually describes itself as ‘informational,’ ‘innovative’ or ‘creative.’ In the past, prominent modern creators were quite aware of their creative gifts and deliberately used themes from other cultures in their work (e.g. music themes, story plots, experiences of philosophical reflection, scientific achievements), but they never attributed their creative activities to cultural border zones, meaning that the border effect was never used *reflectively* to form a creative position of personality. This practice emerged in the 20th century in scientific-technological and creative artistic activities. The practice was intended to arrange a *meeting point* (an essential definition of ‘border’) of intellectual norms (scientific paradigms), traditional methods and techniques aware of their differences, in order to solve problems collectively and creatively. In the field of science and technology, that was the way of organizing brainstorming among various professionals; ‘think tanks’ also emerged along with the whole elaborate methodology of collective mental activity, the theory of inventors’ problem solving (TRIZ), and reflexive methodologies, etc. In the arts, the innovative theatre of the 20th century is especially representative, as it is collective creative work built on metacultural foundations, adopting art techniques of other national cultures and arranging a meeting of theatrical traditions (personified by actors) within a single performance.

But it is only quite recently that the reflexive use of differences (borders) for the creative development of cultures has been methodologically described or conceptualized as a certain state of culture [1]. From this standpoint, metaculture can be seen as ‘reflexive culture,’ but it should be noted that the contour of reflection goes through the personality and thus transcends cultural form and that true reflection is possible only in a community of personalities participating in different cultural forms. The human is capable of reflection (i.e. aware of itself), but can ascend to the level of *methodological reflection* only when encountering the Other. This idea underlies the classical research approach (research practice) of cultural anthropology. From this point of view, metaculture could be described as an explication of the traditional research approach of a cultural anthropologist who regards the culture studied as a ‘mirror’ of his own. This scientific approach became widely known and acknowledged after C. Kluckhohn’s ‘Mirror for Man’ was published in 1946 [2].

The principle of reflexivity as a basis of metaculture can be supplemented with the concept of border as a necessary condition of genuine reflection. This supplement stems from the heuristic view of the systemic-theoretical approach developed by N. Luhmann [3]. The key to this approach is differentiation, represented through the border of environments (inner and outer environments of a certain form), with the border existing solely as a challenging crossing place.

This approach reveals that cultures can develop through borders with other cultures, rather than cross-cultural borrowings. One of the most heuristically convincing statements of synergetics is that development takes place along the borders of different environments. It entails principles of cognition and projecting: if you see intensive qualitative changes, look for the borders generating them; if you need qualitative changes, create borders<sup>2</sup>.

Borders ‘challenging to cross’ are crucial for reflexive construction of creative teams and areas of global co-development of cultures. By cultural environments and their borders, we mean a wide range of cultural environments – the environments of national cultures, as well as professional, corporative, disciplinary and subcultural environments, all of which can bring personality into border conditions.

Tendencies related to cultural globalization processes are ambivalent. On the one hand, intercultural interactions intensify, with many people shifting to the borders of other cultures, which can result in an increase in a person’s creative potential. However, the opposite also occurs: intensification of intercultural contacts that can erase cultural borders, leading to mass distribution of standardized cultural patterns having no direct relationship to any national culture. Consequently, a person’s creative potential decreases dramatically, showing itself in a stereotyped, clip-like way of thinking, creative imagination failure, decreased qualitative saturation of personal existence, etc. Seeing this threat, for which global mass culture is usually held responsible, international organizations do their best to preserve cultural diversity and heritage.

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<sup>2</sup>A simple example of border-making is using competition or rivalry by dividing an organization or a team into rival groups.

One of the leaders is UNESCO. By adopting the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity in 2001, UNESCO member-states highlighted the importance of cultural diversity, a source of development which is “as necessary to humankind as biodiversity is to wildlife.” In support of this, UNESCO launched the Global Alliance for Cultural Diversity.

Although praiseworthy, we believe the cultural policy of this organization is slightly lop-sided. None of its numerous programs is aimed at developing personal creativity, without which declarations on mutual cultural enrichment are mere words. In fact, the efforts devoted to preserving cultural diversity look like preserving external features of culture, which can be termed a lasting ethnic masquerade.

Metaculture serves as an alternative to the tendency of erasing cultural borders and can be regarded as the ‘*art of setting borders*’ between cultural environments. The border is seen not as a barrier, but as a *cultural meeting point*.

Under Luhmann’s approach, reflection can also be understood as the self-reference of a system (in our case, culture), where the reflection does not itself imply differentiating individual and collective reflection, a difference that constitutes the specific state of metaculture. Only the textually or scenically embodied experience of collective and creative reflection can create a metacultural effect, with a special self-description contour built over usual cultural practices (art, theatre, science, education). If there is no self-description (self-reference) contour, there is no metacultural state.

Modern society realizes that all its institutions, including theories, ideologies and myths, exist within frames of self-description. The institutions of state and law cannot exist without a theory of state and law and people studying it at universities; economies cannot exist without economic theory – the basis of a state’s monetary, credit and tax policies; the minimum requirement for any social organization is to have ‘instructions for use’ (statutes). Culture (no matter how interpreted) transmits experience, knowledge, norms and values from one individual to another and is the focal point for the self-references of social organizations and institutions. As soon as culture discovers its exclusive role in reproducing social life (as occurred relatively recently through the efforts of the Frankfurt School), it forms its own reflexive (philosophical) contour or a program of its own existence in the form required to cross the boundaries of any cultural form. This is the substance of postmodernist inquiry and the reason it is difficult to formulate clearly the ultimate conclusions of the latter.

I emphasize the role of personal creativity as a source of cultural development. Regarding the relationship between creativity and reflection, it is noteworthy that no significant creative work has been done by an author who did not reflect on what he was doing. To some extent it is the ability to embody one’s vision that keeps an author reflecting. The border of cultural environments does not itself generate creation, but is capable of putting personality into outsidership and letting it remain alone with its own creative reflection.

It is quite telling that in our time many scholars see the role of creativity for culture within the framework of the canonical anthropological theme of gift [4]. A notable contribution was made by L. Hyde[5], who discusses in his ‘The Gift’ the meaning of archaic customs and legends related to the exchange of gifts, taking a stand on the logic of artists and poets. What archaic consciousness accepts as a custom, rite or tradition, a creative personality experiences directly. Archaic consciousness expresses the need to give and accept gifts in the formula: *to possess is to give*, with the possessor of a treasure expected to share it with others.

This suggests that a gift is what a good creator makes, with ‘good’ here meaning that the motive of acquisition or profit, while necessary to sustain oneself, is subordinated to the requirement to share one’s gift with others, thereby becoming a free and creative personality through relationships with other personalities. Through giving, a creative personality reveals itself as free and creative.

If we imagine a culture based on the principle of creative gifts, it can be called metaculture, as its source lies outside the culture itself in the creative potential of personalities: ‘[...] a gift is a thing we do not get by our own efforts; we cannot acquire it through an act of will. It is bestowed upon us. [...] for although a talent can be perfected through an effort of will, no effort in the world can cause its initial appearance. Mozart, composing on the harpsichord at the age of four, had a gift’ [5].

A gift in its various forms (modern or archaic), cannot be reciprocal, being irrevocable or a 'total prestation' (a term coined by M. Mauss and used by M. Godelier[4] to describe what constitutes a gift as such). The relationship between a student and a teacher, inevitably creative, perhaps best illustrates the asymmetry of relations between the one who gives and the one who receives. The same is true for the relationship between a painter and people who admire the paintings. The gift received, whether from God or a teacher, cannot be given back, which is the heart of a culture's development through the accumulation of content.

The mutual enrichment of cultures, a major concern in our time, arises only *through personality*. It seems important to bring the creative ability of personality into play in settling the old controversy between evolutionism and diffusionism in the theory of culture. The heart of the controversy is the question: are forces of cultural development generated within a culture, or is their origin in other cultures in contact with it. Although the majority of researchers (mostly anthropologists) hold a synthetic view (e.g. F. Boas [6]) and rule out pure diffusionism, this controversy has not lost its relevance, with globalization bringing it to the foreground with new intensity.

There is persuasive evidence that any cultural community (held together by traditions and a common language) isolated from others has no stimulus to develop itself. Such communities can reproduce their traditional life style over centuries, but with no innovations in their values or ways of thinking, provided there is no perceived threat from outsiders, which occurs rarely. On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that the more contacts with others a culture has, the more dynamic its development (Sorokin, [7]). It may seem that diffusionism is taking over, but how then can we resolve the observation that innovation must have a source, and no culture can produce innovation without outside input. In our view, the conflict between evolutionism and diffusionism cannot be resolved unless one views personal creativity as a link between two cultures in contact with each other.

Borrowing from one culture to another occurs in two ways, which we term 'mimetic' and 'cathartic.' The former is the mass copying of foreign patterns. The latter is the creative activities of personalities assimilating ideas while living abroad and integrating these ideas into their own culture through literary, musical, philosophical and scientific works.

In the past, the social gap between upper and lower classes concealed the differences in the ways of cultural borrowing, but as education became widespread this difference became a determinative force in cultural development. Mimetic borrowing follows the semiotic-symbolic logic of the cultural form itself, without any appeal to creative reflection. This process was thoroughly described in the semiotics of culture (see 'The Fashion System' by R. Barthes). Cathartic (or creative) borrowing is made possible only through personality, so that the logic of the cultural form is inevitably transcended.

It is this cathartic borrowing *through personality* that we call metacultural, ultimately crucial for cultural development. There are always people making creative contributions to their culture, intensifying the growth of cultural diversity, or cultural schismogenesis (an idea contributed by G. Bateson [8]).

## 2. Conclusion

Finally, the following question must be answered: should metaculture be seen as a modern form of culture, or is it essentially different from any form of culture? What makes this question important is a shift of meaning in the cotemporary use of the word 'metaculture.'

This shift was not accidental, as the main approach of ordinary consciousness and the classical scientific paradigm is to take the simplest, the elementary, and the average as the measure for a process or a whole. This approach results in understanding cultural dynamics from the standpoint of a mass consumer of cultural events, who believes, as do the makers of mass products, that the number of books and disks sold and box-office receipts indicate the cultural effect, with 'popular' becoming synonymous with 'great.' No one asks who makes the makers, as the consumer is satisfied.

However, if we agree to accept, as a measure or criterion for evaluating the development of culture, the highest achievements of the latter (i.e. its classical examples), the cultural life of the globalized world would prove to be more complex. Global cultural development is ambivalent: along with global mimetic mass

culture, metaculture emerges as a place of outsideness in relation to any particular culture that gives birth to the creativity of personality. But there is also a conspicuous ‘in-between.’ As barriers between different cultures wear away, mostly due to mass media, each person is faced with two alternatives: either become a creative, critical, innovative personality or resign oneself to the power of impersonal information flows or net structures. M. Castells sees this opposition between I (identity) and the Net as the most important conflict of the age[9].

Metaculture should be understood against the antinomic background of the modern age. Antinomic underscores that the situation is a result of two groups of laws (‘nomoi’): laws of personal creativity, and laws of information networks (semiotic webs). We shall try to reach conclusions through reasoning by analogy. If *metaphysics* (‘meta-language’, ‘meta-theory’, ‘meta-politics’) implies ‘transcending’ the logic (or laws) of physics (language, theory, politics), then physics (language etc.) becomes a subject of special care from without, and metaculture implies transcending the logic of a cultural form by personality, so that the latter covers this form from its donative position towards the content of culture.

By using the phrase ‘the state of metaculture’ we explicitly recognize the *composite* character of this phenomenon, since metaculture actually consists of both cultural content and creative activity of personality *from outside* a culture. This state arises at the borders of different cultural environments, but this was not recognized until the modern era.

Summing up, we can express the above in a single formula: *metaculture* is a specific condition of culture, arising on the borders of cultural environments and enabling reflexive exposure of the dependence between cultural development and the creative potential of personality.

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