BRIDGING:
From Urban Perversion to Urban Immersion

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I would like to begin with Yuri Lotman's words. In his latest major work, *Culture and Explosion,* analysing the problem of continuity and discontinuity Lotman refers to Anton Chekhov. 'In Chekhov's tale, *The First-Class Passenger*,' writes Lotman, 'the hero, a brilliant engineer, constructor of bridges, resents the fact that his name is unknown to the public' (Lotman 1999: 45). The more popular with the occasional public his lover becomes, a singer the builder does not think much of, the deeper his resentment gets. Complaining about the unfairness, he does not take into account, as Lotman continues, the fact that 'the artistic production even of a second rate singer is by its nature personal, while the work of a fairly good engineer dissolves, as it were, in the anonymous technological advancement' (Lotman 1999: 46). The author of *Culture and Explosion* used literary fiction to support his argumentation, as he did not have to know that, for example, the name of Ralph Modjeski, a brilliant American constructor of suspension bridges, appears most frequently as an element of his mother's, a great Polish actress, biography.

In everyday awareness of bridge users, the words of the hero of *The First-Class Passenger* as well as Lotman's comment are understandable and unobjectionable. However, in the awareness of a philosopher, architect, urban planner, or artist the bridge and the activities of designing and constructing it shift from the anonymous area of technology into the domain of personal subjective activities. If the difference between these points of view resolved itself merely into the mentioned shift, fair assessment and fame, we would be able to refer to the sociological analyses of the popular culture. However, as Georg Simmel said in one of his aphorisms, 'The philosopher should be the one who talks about things everybody knows; sometimes though he is the one who knows things everybody merely talks about.' In my paper, I am not questioning the significance of everyday experiences and internal history of technological innovations. However, I will adopt

the latter perspective to consider some examples of the phenomena I will briefly, metaphorically and literally refer to as bridging.

Both the selection of examples and the kind of interpretation will be subordinated to two purposes. One of them points to the relation between the bridge

Figure 1] Tartu, The bridge on the River Emajõgi (photo by author).

and the city, its way of existing and functioning. The other one is controversial in nature as it originates from Lotman's view and indicates aesthetic rooting of bridging. Both meet at the area, which I shall call the ontology of the postmodern city. Both introduce into it the two dynamic categories of bridging and event. In the framework of traditional ontologies they can be found on

the sidelines of considerations on motion, distinction and location, which are *sui generis* town planning notions, whereas bridge can be found in the search for the objects' ontological status. Bridging and event, however, belong most of all in the vocabulary of critical ontologies, whose appearance is linked with the attempts to overcome the crisis in the philosophy of subjectivity and with philosophical interpretations of reality multiplication in the virtual worlds. When we examine them more closely, bridging and event are inseparable like the two sides of a coin.

Bridging: in-between continuity and discontinuity

What makes the bridge so attractive to the philosopher, architect, and artist that they find new senses and forms for it? When Lotman situated bridges within the antonyms continuous/discontinuous, he referred again to the colloquial images in which the bridge is an example of technological development ensuring continuity on the disrupted roadway. So, the basic function of the bridge is to prevent the interruption of wandering and abandoning the pursuit of some goal, to surmount a natural obstacle. From this point of view the bridge represented fully the idea of modernity before the idea itself appeared. It served to conquer a new territory like the famous Appolodoros Bridge in Damascus. Lotman's aim was not to analyse bridging but taking up a dialogue with the French school of *l'histoire nouvelle.* With scholars like Marc Bloch, Philippe Ariès, Fernand Braudel, Jean Delumeau, Jaques Le Goff, who contributed to the revival of historical studies by directing attention to the slow, anonymous processes, development of technology, and everyday phenomena in which the role of individuals is minimal or none. Removing into the background both politics and art, they privileged, as Lotman wrote, the history of engineers rather than artists. Bridge building was to be a good, albeit anecdotal example of such processes. Lotman thought that the Annalists exaggerated absolutising anonymous processes. For him, history set tension between individual and collective, personal and anonymous factors, but he did not see this tension in the history of bridges.

In order to improve the Annalists' methodology he put forward a proposal for breaking the one-sidedness of this methodology focusing on the long historical processes by placing within the events motiving the historical process and causing that history as a whole should become highly unpredictable. The dynamic system faces some equally probable alternative solutions selecting from, which

can be accidental. And then for example, the role played by an individual's be-haviour can be decisive. A chance is not a symptom of something irrational, not a lack of cause, Lotman writes, but merely a phenomenon originating in different causal sequences, often an intervening element from some other system. Lotman perhaps would not like this example but I cannot think of a better comment on the history of Le Pont d'Avignon than his. Most secondary school graduates know the legend of St. Bénézet, the bridge's most likely builder, who by God's
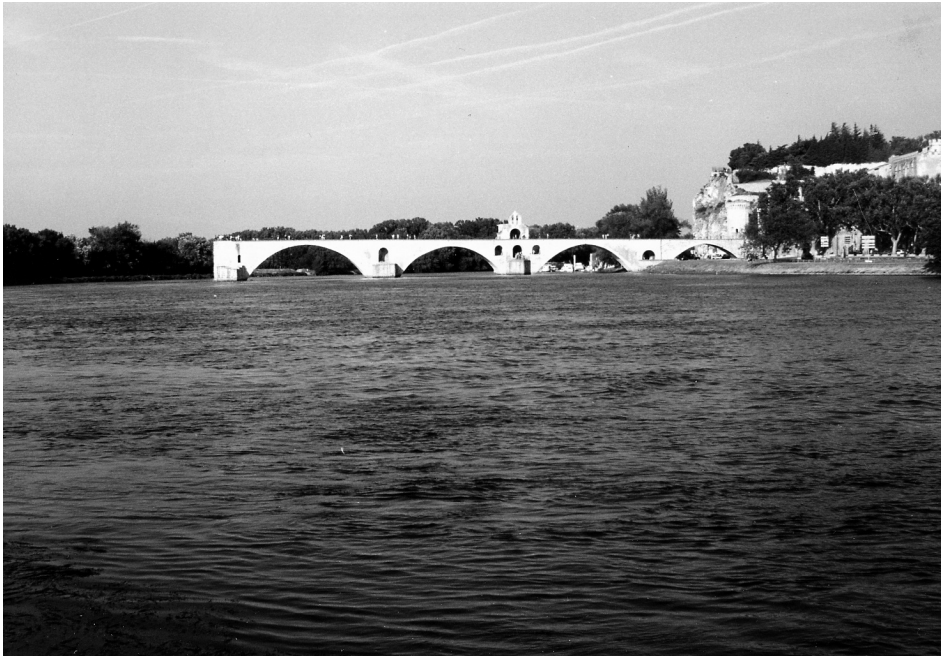

Figure 2] Le Pont d'Avignon (photo by Piotr C. Kowalski).

order quit shepherding and went to Avignon to build a bridge with divine help. Not many people know, however, that the legendary builder obtained for the town inhabitants involved in the construction absolution from the pope, whose official title is *nomen omen, Pontifex Maximus.* The bridge was their work as well, and with time it became the city's signature, its metonymic representation, part of the city substituting for its whole in the common awareness. Moreover, St. Bénézet established an order of the so-called Bridge Friars, who vowed to gratui-tously build bridges, maintain them and protect the crossings and travelers. As a matter of course, after many wars and floods, the town inhabitants were painstak-

ingly rebuilding the Avignon Bridge. All the elements Lotman used to assemble his methodology of history appear in this story. The bridge does not serve only to conquer: the bridge consolidates the old and creates a new community, gives sense to their endurance. This is the second meaning that bridging connotes.

Figure 3] White canvases on Le Pont d'Avignon (photo by Piotr C. Kowalski).

There is, however, another reason why the silhouette of Le Pont d'Avignon overlaps Lotman's book. There are only four original piers of the frequently destroyed bridge that have survived, so one of the most famous bridges is actually no longer a bridge and thus introduces into Lotman's continuous/discontinuous opposition the kind of perversion which takes bridging out of the field of simple associations. In architecture, continuity and discontinuity can appear as two synchroni-

cally occurring states of the same thing. The spatial discontinuity of Le Pont d'Avignon dramatically exposes its and the city's historical continuity. No longer functioning as a bridge in the practical sense, unable to ensure roadway continuity, it became a metabridge in the symbolic order, affirming the city's continuity, becoming its pride, attracting artists. Piotr C. Kowalski, a Polish artist whose work will be discussed here, pointed out that the city had other bridges across the Rhône, yet nobody pays any attention to them. The town inhabitants are proud of the bridge that cannot be walked or ridden across. It is as if the sense of continuity (of roadway, history) became clear only at the point of its disruption (of the event, breaking). Lotman appealed that the lack of synchronisation between various culture processes or texts be accepted as one of the culture's constitutive qualities. I do not know whether he was aware that similar considerations, originating in the tradition of the so-called Annales School, could be found in the writings of Michel Foucault. There, however, discontinuity becomes possible as a result of the intricate game between *les longues périodes* and *des événements discontinus*. It also acquires a more complex meaning by linking history to the reflection on space. Although the bridge was not Foucault's favourite spatial figure, which is quite surprising as it belongs in the knowledge-power discourse, Le Pont d'Avignon brilliantly visualises his denouncing approach to the continuous and linear vision of history.

Lotman's interesting idea though was the proposal to put together the historical process and an experiment in which unexpected information is obtained. At this point I would like to recall such an experiment. In 1999, Piotr C. Kowalski, who had been experimenting with different environments such as forests, beaches, city streets, etc., spread his canvases on the Avignon Bridge in order to record footprints of the people walking on the bridge. He intended to write down the rhythm of their wandering in the matter in which the wandering was carried out. The painter's experiment with the bridge, the metonymic representation of urban space, was determined by an attempt to make it directly present in the matter – the sand, mud, dust, which also constitute the metonymic representation of the city, bridge, road, even if it is of the second degree. As a result, an interesting record of the action was created, and the canvases were shown in the space of the urban art gallery. At the moment of spin – Lotman wrote – not only the mechanism of accidentalness plays a part but also that of a conscious choice that becomes the most important objective element of the historical process. Chance

and regularity cease to be irreconcilable phenomena. They occur as two possible states of the same object. As soon as we realise that the footprints are fragments of what they substitute, fragments of this place and definite time, Kowalski's canvases transfer Le Pont d'Avignon from town to town creating the third sense of bridging considered in this paper. That is of both repeatable and accidental interpretation, mediation between continuity and event.
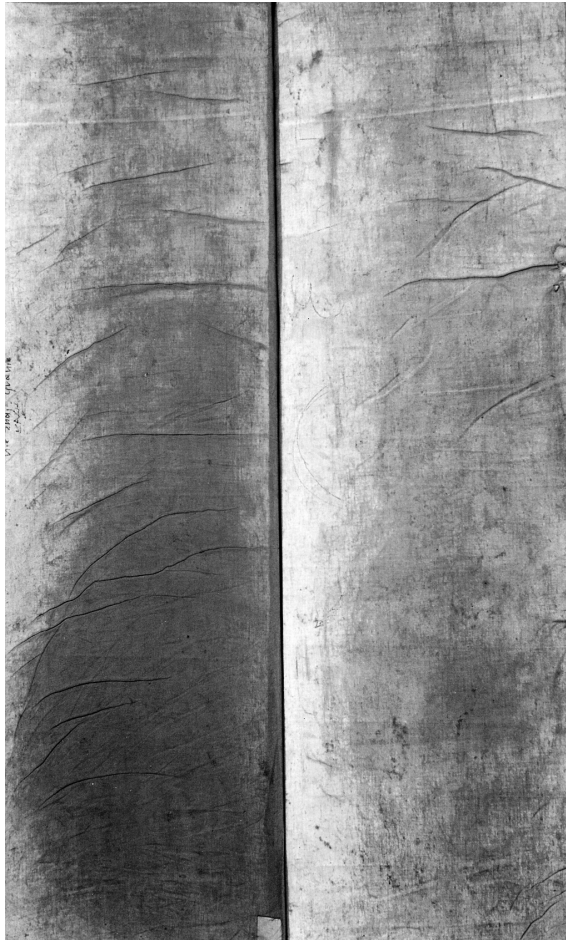

Figure 4] Piotr C. Kowalski, *Tourists' traces*
(photo by Piotr C. Kowalski).

Bridging: in-between connectedness and separation

In one of his most interesting essays, *Bridge and Door,* Simmel began considerations of bridge from the analysis of space. He saw in it various 'objects which

remain banished in the merciless separation of space' (Simmel 1997: 66). Human activity in this space specifically amounts to his, simultaneous separating and tying them. Separating begins at grasping two things and relating them mentally to each other. Anything that does not belong to them separates and distinguishes them. At the same time though, in an act of consciousness the separated objects get connected. 'The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream,' Heidegger wrote later (Heidegger 1997: 104). For Simmel, however, one of the greatest human achievements was first making a roadway between two chosen sites. Let us then consider the road construction and corresponding to this activity the mental relation between the objects as the first stage of Simmelian bridging. Simmel insists on giving it direct and symbolic, material and mental character. The bridge construction is the next and highest stage. 'Because the human being is the connecting creature who must always separate and cannot connect without separating – that is why we must first conceive intellectually of the merely indifferent existence of two riverbanks as something separated in order to connect them by means of a bridge,' Simmel writes (Simmel 1997: 69).

The road precedes the bridge, just like division as a natural form precedes the human inclination to separate. The man tends to join what nature divides. Most of all, we think here about territorial borders as one of the most widespread forms of liminality. That is why Simmel focuses on the figure of a bridge spanning the river. Yet, when we ask nowadays why the man chooses and mentally relates to himself these two, not any other, sites when building the bridge, we always hear about the city, about some vision, function and history of it. The frontier towns are particularly interesting examples of this dependence. Described as nobody's land, the middle of nowhere, attracting and repelling black holes, raising hope and fear, they are challenges to bridging. First of all because, as Simmel wrote, 'the human being is likewise the bordering creature who has no border' (Simmel 1997: 69), hence setting up borders and simultaneously building cities at their two sides constitutes a good example of inseparability of connectedness and separation. It is also the fourth example of bridging, this time as a peculiar town planning practice focused on the idea of the frontier town as an area of national and individual transgression. The border is something one crosses; it links motion and emotion in the staging of national exits and entries. Orvar Löfgren talks here about *rites-de-passage,* ritualisation of borders marked with strong existential and symbolic senses, about linking power with the systems of cultural signals (Löfgren 1999: 5).

There are more important borders, like the former East–West frontier in Berlin, or between North and South, the First and Third Worlds in Tijuana. There are less important ones as well. There are hot borders, areas of sharp divisions, and flowing, ambiguous, hybrid borders, which can be described, like the Tijuana border, as 'one of the major laboratories of the postmodern' (Saldívar 1997: 34). Bridging serves to transform the former into the latter. Let me present two examples of such strategies – artistic and socio-economic. The first one was an experimental, artistic activity-taking place at the Polish–German border in June 1999. It started, like Simmel would have imagined it, from selecting two cities separated by a frontier and connected by a bridge over the border river, from Polish Słubice to German Frankfurt-an-der-Oder. Over fifty years ago, the two cities were one organism, and the bridge was one of its many internal links like the electricity grid, tramway network, etc. The natural division of the city turned out to be less deep than the division made by people. The bridge across the river spanned the two cities in the physical sense. The Polish and German artists wanted to find out whether it was possible to link the cities also in the cultural sense, if the mental and cultural bridging was possible. Among the many interesting actions one visualised the result of the Simmelian conceiving of two things and relating them mentally to each other. At the two sides of the border crossing, Piotr C. Kowalski set up clean canvas stretchers he had been using to record changes taking place in nature. Inhabitants of Słubice walking to the German side and Frankfurt inhabitants walking to Poland could paint on them whatever they liked. Kowalski put the results of their play side by side. As one can see, Simmel did not take into account bridges connecting border towns when he wrote, 'it makes no difference in meaning in which direction one crosses a bridge' (Simmel 1997: 68). Heidegger, however, said, and we should agree with him, that 'bridges lead in many ways' (Heidegger: 1997: 104). Other artistic activities also exhibited this lack of symmetry characteristic of mental bridging.

Construction of the solid passageway between Copenhagen and Malmö and a new city, Örestad, situated a five-minute train ride from the centre of Copenhagen, is the second example of the strategy of dissolving borders through bridging. This time, it is a test on European integration, a cultural laboratory and a social experiment as well. 'The bridge, planned and discussed for more than a century, is finally there, and in the anticipation of the opening ceremony the future has been invested with utopian and dystopian visions,' Löfgren (1999: 21)

wrote. This was accompanied by the rhetoric of bringing down national borders and barriers, of cooperation and coexistence, of building the 21st century model of a genuinely trans-national region, historically, as some say, originated by the Danes when they conquered Skåne in 1658. The border between Sweden and Denmark is not a hot one, yet one could see inscriptions on Copenhagen's walls saying 'Keep Copenhagen clean, escort a Swede to the ferry!' Once again, we have here a non-symmetric project: this time, it is the Swedes who want to cross the bridge. Building the bridge, bridging, serves to bring the two regions closer practically and psychologically but maintaining different national legal systems, languages, histories and senses of humour. In the competition between the two

Figure 5] Piotr C. Kowalski, Two Canvases on the Bridge in Frankfurt-an-der-Oder/Słubice (from Piotr C. Kowalski's photo collection).

shores and trying to attract investors, the Öresund region frequently operates as one unit. Heidegger wrote, 'Thus the bridge does not first come to a location to stand in it; rather, a location comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge' (Heidegger 1997: 105). Bridging then brings to life new communities, but most of all, new locations. It provides a dwelling for man and allots him some space-city, like for example Cambridge – bridge on the river Cam.

Bridging: in-between perversion and immersion

When we look at the Öresund bridge from the air, we may agree with Simmel that 'by overcoming this obstacle, the bridge symbolises the extension of our volitional sphere over space' (Simmel 1997: 66). This bridge is read as an aesthetic value of space while bridging is considered to be an artistic practice. Practical purposes and concerns, contrary to Lotman's opinion on bridges, have been made less relevant and picturesque values more important in the aesthetic unity of the cultural and the natural. When we look at the bridge from land, we can see that this is an outdated bridging project. In the age of electronic communications in

Figure 6] Santiago Calatrava's Bridge in Barcelona (photo by author).

cyberspace, the time-saving the bridge gives is nil in comparison to the speed of the fax, e-mail and mobile phone. The beauty of this anachronistic form of bridging can be seen more clearly though when we compare it with its new form – the air bridge. The philosophers of culture, like Paul Virilio, as well as ethnologists, like Orvar Löfgren, place so-called bridging the gap first in the air space between the points-airports and then in the network. The airport replaces the city, supersedes its name, and takes over the function of the city centre. Air bridges between

cities dissolve spatial and temporal distinctions, invalidate directions. This kind of bridging still serves to conquer and continue on the road. Technological possibilities emanate from it but a new community is not created by the cosmopolitan, random wave of passengers and the airport is not the man's dwelling. Instead of

Figure 7] Santiago Calatrava's Telecommunications Tower in Barcelona (photo by author).

the recurring interpretation and non-symmetric transgression the old type of bridging provokes, the air bridge offers what Manuel Castells calls the space of flows and timeless time (Castells 2000).

Yet most importantly, the new air, telecommunications and electronic bridges do not bring out locations from space but immerse them in it. Once places and relations between them are deprived of meaning, the old bridging strategies become invalidated. Moreover, using metaphors bridging moves them into entirely

different practical and meaningful fields. While bridging in its original sense was the cause of countless perversions in the way we, humans, as Heidegger says, inhabit the earth, the new forms of bridging immersing us in space cause us to be forced to seek new ontologies. Bridging and event we began with become less useful as categories of these ontologies than immersion and flow. The repertory of urban planning and architectural metaphors that were exploited by classical ontologies make room for 'water' metaphors such as the network.

To conclude, I would like to show how these two titles, urban strategies of perversion and immersion, meet in the practice of one architect-engineer and in one urban space. The formal kinship between Calatrava's Bridge and the tele-communications tower is pretty obvious. The bridge, whose practical function was to connect Barcelona's deprived suburb with the city centre as part of the social democrats' policy, became a cult example of the author's architecture and bears his name. So, coming back to our initial considerations, the bridge gives a radical answer to Lotman's light-hearted example. Aesthetic valorisation of the downgraded city area became the basic function of this bridge. Its success has made the bridge the natural setting for almost all the films and video clips shot in Barcelona. The beauty of the telecommunications tower located at the Olympic site does not require a comment, except perhaps for one closing remark: this kind of bridging does not connect two objects, cities and banks, and does not relate them mentally. It connects the Earth with the open space of the sky via the net-work of multidirectional transmissions.

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Sildade loomine: linlikust perversioonist linliku immersioonini

Kokkuvõte

Uue sajandi kultuurifilosoofia üks uurimisteemasid on sildade loomine. Linnade tähendus ja roll, mille tavaliselt loovad linnaruumi ja mõjukate arhitektuuriteoste semiootilised ja tekstuaalsed representatsioonid, ähmastavad aga tänapäevaseid filosoofilisi tõlgendusi, sest filosoofia ja linn on vanad liitlased. Autor osutab, et väide, nagu kujutaksid linnad endast ruumide ja kohtade vahel ühendusi loovaid eksperimentaalseid maastikke, erineb vaid vähesel määral – kui sedagi – üldfilosoofilisest utoopia–düstoopia pinnal toimivast mõtlemisest. Vaadates lähemalt utoopilise ja düstoopilise mõtlemisega seotud filosoofilisi väiteid, on võimalik heita valgust mõnele silla kui linliku perversiooni ja/või immersiooniga seotud probleemile. Artiklis esitatakse valik pilte reaalsetest ja mentaalsetest sildadest koos nende võimaliku tõlgendustega.