

The Hidden Third as the Unifier of Natural and Spiritual Information

Basarab Nicolescu¹

Introduction

When Søren Brier asked me to be the follower of Ranulph Glanville as regular columnist, based on our previous discussions of my work in inter- and transdisciplinary work, I insisted on that he would ask me questions of relevance to the readership of CHK. The question initiating this column was: Why do think that transdisciplinarity needs a new ontology that goes beyond systems and cybernetics, though they consider themselves transdisciplinary in nature? And he explained that he had had trouble with the lack of a phenomenological aspect in systems and cybernetics' offer of a transdisciplinary framework and he suggested that I had dealt with that aspect in my work on a transdisciplinary foundation and should try to explain that in my first column. Thus this is my answer:

1. Pre-Modernity, Modernity, Post-Modernity and Cosmodernity as Different Visions of the Relation Between the Subject and the Object

The relation between the subject and the object is a crucial problem of philosophy (Nicolescu, 2002). This relation varied in the different periods of human culture. In the pre-modern world, the subject was immersed in the object. In the modern world, the subject and the object were supposed to be totally separated, while in our post-modern era the subject becomes predominant as compared with the object (see Figures 1-3).

Of course, the key point in understanding the subject/object relation is the vision on reality that humans shared in different periods of the historical time.

Dictionaries tell us that *reality* means:² 1. the state or quality of being real; 2. resemblance to what is real; 3. a real thing or fact; 4. something that constitutes a real or actual thing, as distinguished from something that is merely apparent. These are clearly not definitions but descriptions in a vicious circle: *Reality* is defined in terms of what is real.

In order to avoid any ambiguity, *reality* is defined in a sense which is used by scientists, namely in terms of resistance.

1. International Center for Transdisciplinary Research (CIRET), 19 Villa Curial, 75019 Paris, France.

Email: basarab.nicolescu@gmail.com

2. Retrieved May 2, 2014 from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/reality>

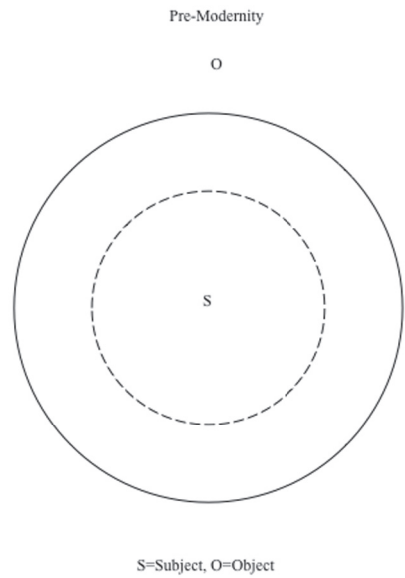


Fig. 1. The Relation Between Subject and Object in Pre-modernity.

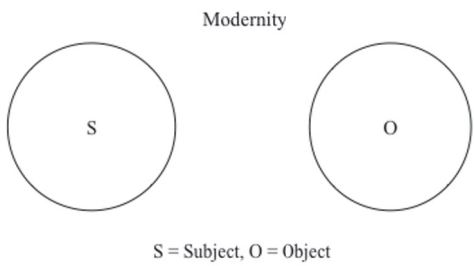


Fig. 2. The Relation Between Subject and Object in Modernity.

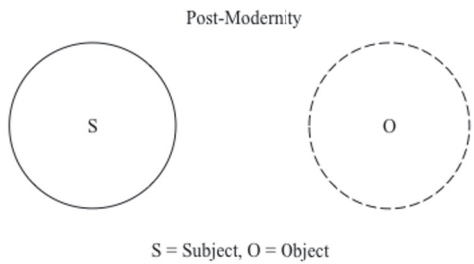


Fig. 3. The Relation Between Subject and Object in Post-modernity.

In order to avoid further ambiguities, we have to distinguish the words *real* and *reality*. *Real* designates that which *is*, while *reality* is connected to resistance in our human experience. The real is, by definition, veiled forever (it does not tolerate any further qualifications) while reality is accessible to our knowledge. The real involves non-resistance while reality involves resistance.

2. Towards a Unified Theory of Levels of Reality

Transdisciplinarity is founded upon three axioms (Nicolescu, 2002):

- i. **The ontological axiom:** There are different levels of *reality of the subject* and, correspondingly, different levels of *reality of the object*.
- ii. **The logical axiom:** The passage from one level of reality to another is ensured by the logic of the included middle.
- iii. **The epistemological axiom:** The structure of the totality of levels of reality appears, in our knowledge of nature, of society and of ourselves, as a complex structure: every level is what it is because all the levels exist at the same time.

The introduction of the levels of reality induces a multidimensional and multi-referential structure of reality. Both the notions of the real and of levels of reality relate to what is considered to be the natural and the social and is therefore applicable to the study of nature and society (Cilliers & Nicolescu, 2012).

Every level is characterized by its incompleteness: The laws governing this level are just a part of the totality of laws governing all levels. And even the totality of laws does not exhaust the entirety of reality: we have also to consider the subject and its interaction with the object. Knowledge is forever open.

The zone between two different levels and beyond all levels is a zone of *non-resistance* to our experiences, representations, descriptions, images, and mathematical formulations.

The unity of levels of reality of the object and its complementary zone of non-resistance constitutes what we call the *transdisciplinary Object*.

In agreement with the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1966; [1859-1938]), one asserts that the different levels of reality of the object are accessible to our knowledge thanks to the different levels of perception which are potentially present in our being. These levels of perception permit an increasingly general, unifying, encompassing vision of reality, without ever entirely exhausting it. In a rigorous way, these levels of perception are, in fact, levels of reality of the subject.

As in the case of levels of reality of the object, the coherence of levels of reality of the subject presupposes a zone of non-resistance to perception.

The unity of levels of reality of the subject and this complementary zone of non-resistance constitutes what is called the *transdisciplinary Subject*.

The two zones of non-resistance of transdisciplinary Subject and Object must be identical for the transdisciplinary Subject to communicate with the transdisciplinary

Object. A flow of *spiritual information* that coherently cuts across different levels of reality of the subject must correspond to the flow of *natural information* coherently cutting across different levels of reality of the object. The two flows are interrelated because they share the same zone of non-resistance.

Knowledge is neither exterior nor interior: it is simultaneously exterior and interior. Studies of the universe and of the human being sustain one another.

The zone of non-resistance plays the role of a *third* between the subject and the object, an interaction term which allows the unification of the transdisciplinary Subject and the transdisciplinary Object while preserving their difference. In the following this Interaction term is called the *Hidden Third*.

There is a big difference between the Hidden Third and the included third: The Hidden Third is a-logical, because it is entirely located in the area of nonresistance, while the included third is logical, because it refers to the contradictories A and non-A, located in the area of resistance. But there is also one similarity. Both of them unite contradictories: A and non-A in the case of the included third, and subject and object in the case of the Hidden Third. The subject and the object are the supreme contradictories: They do not only cross the area of resistance, but also that of nonresistance.

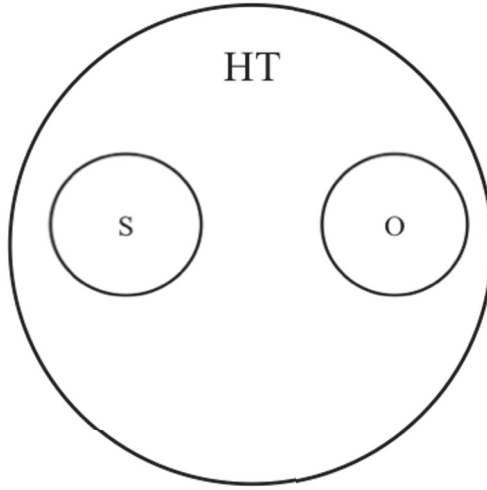
It is understandable why the Hidden Third is the one that gives meaning to the included third, because, in order to unite the contradictories A and non-A, located in the area of resistance, it must cross the area of nonresistance: The included third is actually a *middle-without-name*. This is precisely where lies the great difficulty of formulating a true logic of the included middle, which must necessarily integrate the discontinuous leap between the levels of reality. This new logic will be a *trans-categorical* one. If the compatibility between the levels of reality and the included third is certain, however, their reconnection inside certain logic will not be achievable according to the patterns of the known logics.

The role of the Hidden Third and of the included middle in the transdisciplinary approach of reality is, after all, not so surprising. The words *three* and *trans* have the same etymological root: *Three* means the transgression of two, what goes beyond two. *Transdisciplinarity* means transgression of opposing binary pairs: subject/object, subjectivity/objectivity, matter/conscious, nature/divine, simplicity/complexity, reductionism/holism, diversity/unity. This duality is transcended by the open unity that encompasses both the Universe and the human being.

The Hidden Third, in its relationship with the levels of reality, is fundamental for the understanding of *unus mundus* described by cosmodernity. Reality is simultaneously a single and a multiple one. If one remains confined to the Hidden Third, then the unity is undifferentiated, symmetric, situated in the *non-time*. If one remains confined to the levels of reality, there are only differences, asymmetries, located in time. To simultaneously consider the levels of reality and the Hidden Third introduces a breaking in the symmetry of *unus mundus*. In fact, the levels of reality are generated precisely by this breaking of symmetry introduced by time.

The ternary partition {subject, object, Hidden Third} is, of course, different from the binary partition {subject versus object} of classical, modern metaphysics.

Transdisciplinarity leads to a new understanding of the relation between subject and object, which is illustrated in Figure 4:



S = Subject, O = Object, HT = Hidden Third

Figure 4: The Relation Between Subject And Object in Cosmodernity.

In the transdisciplinary approach, the subject and the object are immersed in the Hidden Third.

The transdisciplinary Subject and its levels, the transdisciplinary Object and its levels, and the Hidden Third define the transdisciplinary Reality or *trans-Reality* (see Figure 5).

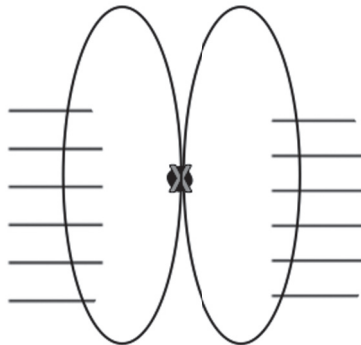


Fig. 5. Trans-Reality.

In Figure 5, the Hidden Third is constituted by the point X of contact between object and subject, the zone of non-resistance between the object and the subject and the zone of non-resistance between the levels of reality.

The incompleteness of the general laws governing a given level of reality signifies that, at a given moment of time, one necessarily discovers contradictions in the theory describing the respective level: one has to assert A and non-A at the same time. It is the included third logic which allows us to jump from one level of reality to another level of reality.

All levels of reality are interconnected through complexity. In fact, complexity is a modern form of the very ancient principle of universal interdependence. The principle of universal interdependence entails the maximum possible simplicity that the human mind could imagine, the simplicity of the interaction of all levels of reality. This simplicity cannot be captured by mathematical language, but only by symbolic language.

The transdisciplinary theory of levels of reality (Nicolescu, 2014) appears to be conciliating reductionism with non-reductionism. It is, in some aspects, a multi-reductionist theory, via the existence of multiple, discontinuous levels of reality. However, it is also a non-reductionist theory, via the Hidden Third, which restores the continuous interconnectedness of reality. The reductionism/non-reductionism opposition is, in fact, a result of binary thinking, based upon the excluded middle logic. The transdisciplinary theory of levels of reality allows us to define, in such a way, a new view on reality, which can be called *trans-reductionism* (Nicolescu, 2008).

The transdisciplinary notion of levels of reality is incompatible with reduction of the spiritual level to the psychical level, of the psychical level to the biological level, and of the biological level to the physical level. Still these four levels are united through the Hidden Third. However, this unification cannot be described by a scientific theory. By definition, science excludes non-resistance. Science, as is defined today, is limited by its own methodology.

The transdisciplinary notion of levels of reality leads also to a new vision of personhood, based upon the inclusion of the Hidden Third. The unification of the subject is performed by the action of the Hidden Third, which transforms knowledge into understanding. *Understanding* means fusion of knowledge and being.

In the transdisciplinary approach, the Hidden Third appears as the source of knowledge but, in its turn, needs the subject in order to know the world: The subject, the object and the Hidden Third are inter-related.

The human person appears as an interface between the Hidden Third and the world. The erasing of the Hidden Third in knowledge signifies a one-dimensional human being, reduced to its cells, neurons, quarks and elementary particles.

This trans-Reality is the foundation of a new era—the cosmodern era. *Cosmodernity* means essentially that all entity in the universe is defined by its relation to the other entities. The human being, in turn, is related as a person to the Great Other, the Hidden Third. The idea of cosmos is therefore resurrected. This is the

reason why I introduced the word *cosmodernity* in a book of aphorisms called *Poetical Theorems* (Nicolescu, 1994).

The present book gives the scientific and philosophical foundations of cosmodernity. The arguments coming from the contemporary American literature, exposed in the book *Cosmodernism* by Christian Moraru (2011) are excellent and necessary complements.

By analyzing American narrative in the late-globalization era, Moraru identifies several axes in his book: “These axes (a) thematize the cosmodern as a mode of thinking about the world and its culture, about cultural perception, self-perception, and identity; (b) forefront, accordingly, the intersubjective-communicational, dynamic dimension of cosmodernism; and (c) articulate the cosmodern imaginary into five regimes of relatedness, or subimaginaries: the “idiomatic,” the “onomastic,” the “translational,” the “readerly,” and the “metabolic” (Moraru, 2011, p. 8). The cosmodern mind is a “vehicle for a new togetherness for a solidarity across political, ethnic, racial, religious, and other boundaries” (Moraru, p. 5). A “new geometry of ‘we’” (Moraru, p. 7) and a powerful *with-ness* (Moraru, pp. 23, 57) distinguish cosmodernity from modernity or post-modernity. All cultures are inter-related. Cosmodernity is, by its very nature, transcultural and transreligious. In agreement with what is said in the present book, Moraru asserts that “... cosmodern rationality is relational. In cosmodernism, *relatio* is a new, sui generis *ratio mundi*” (Moraru, p. 29). Modern rationality is metamorphosed in relationality. Moraru coins the very evocative word “poethics” (p. 55) and he stresses that “... cosmodernism is best understood as an ethical rather than ‘technical’ project. This project has considerable bearings on how we think not just about the subject but also about discourse, history, culture, community, patrimony, and tradition” (Moraru, p. 316). The ethical imperative of cosmodernity is that of togetherness (Moraru, p. 304). The entire world, our world, is a “web of ideas and images” (Moraru, p. 312), of people, cultures, religions, and spiritualities.

4. At the Threshold of a New Renaissance

The unified theory of levels of reality is valid in all fields of knowledge, which, at the beginning of the 21st century, involve more than 8,000 academic disciplines, every discipline claiming its own truths and having its own laws, norms and terminology. The transdisciplinary theory of levels of reality is a good starting point for erasing the fragmentation of knowledge, and therefore the fragmentation of the human being.

“What is reality?” asks Peirce (NEM4:383-384). He tells us that perhaps there is nothing at all which corresponds to reality. It may be just a working assumption in our desperate tentative knowing. But if there is a reality, says Peirce, it has to consist in the fact that the world lives, moves and has in itself a logic of events, which corresponds to our reason. Peirce’s view on reason totally corresponds to the cosmodern view on reality.

A unified theory of levels of reality is crucial in building sustainable development and sustainable futures. The considerations made until now in these matters are based upon reductionist and binary thinking: everything is reduced to society, economy and environment. The individual level of reality, the spiritual level of reality and the cosmic level of reality are completely ignored. Sustainable futures, so necessary for our survival, can only be based on a unified theory of levels of reality. Reality is one. For a sustainable future, we have to consider simultaneously all levels of reality and also the Hidden Third.

We are part of the ordered movement of reality. Our freedom consists in entering into the movement or perturbing it. We can respond to the movement or impose our will of power and domination. Our responsibility is to build sustainable futures in agreement with the overall movement of reality.

We are witnessing a new era—cosmodernity—founded on a new vision of the contemporary interaction between science, culture, spirituality, religion, and society (Nicolescu, 2014). The old idea of cosmos, in which we are active participants, is resurrected.

Reality is plastic. Reality is not something outside or inside us: It is simultaneously outside and inside. We are part of this reality that changes due to our thoughts, feelings and actions. This means that we are fully responsible for what reality is. The world moves, lives and offers itself to our knowledge thanks to some ordered structures of something that is, though, continually changing. Reality is therefore rational, but its rationality is multiple, structured on levels. It is the logic of the included middle that allows our reason to move from one level to another.

The levels of reality correspond to the levels of understanding, in a fusion of knowledge and being. All levels of reality are interwoven. The world is at the same time knowable and unknowable.

The Hidden Third between subject and object denies any rationalization. Therefore, reality is also *trans-rational*. The Hidden Third conditions not only the flow of information between subject and object, but also the one between the different levels of reality of the subject and between the different levels of reality of the object. The discontinuity between the different levels is compensated by the continuity of information held by the Hidden Third.

Moreover, the Hidden Third is the transdisciplinary unifier of spiritual information and natural information, but it cannot be reduced to one of them. The subject cannot be reduced to the object. That would be a true ontological catastrophe which leads to wars, terrorism and extermination camps.

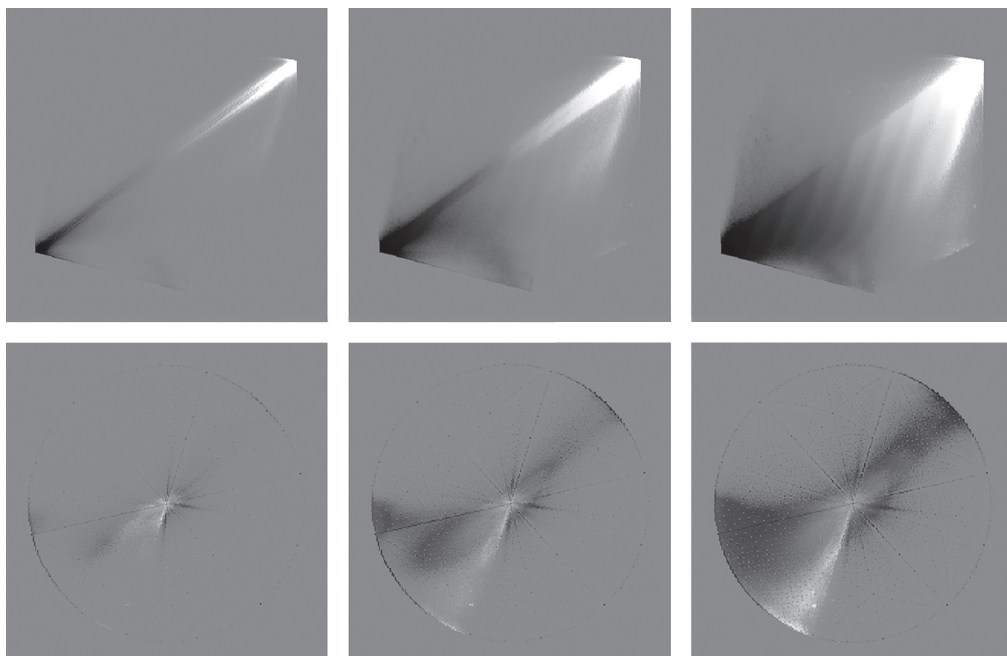
Source of reality, the Hidden Third feeds itself from this reality, in a cosmic breath which includes us and the universe.

The Hidden Third shows why transdisciplinarity needs a new ontology. Systems and cybernetics have not considered the Hidden Third until now. Therefore they are only potentially transdisciplinary, but in their present actualization, they are not transdisciplinary. In order to become transdisciplinary, they have to include the trans-categorical, trans-rational and non-algorithmic aspects of transdisciplinarity.

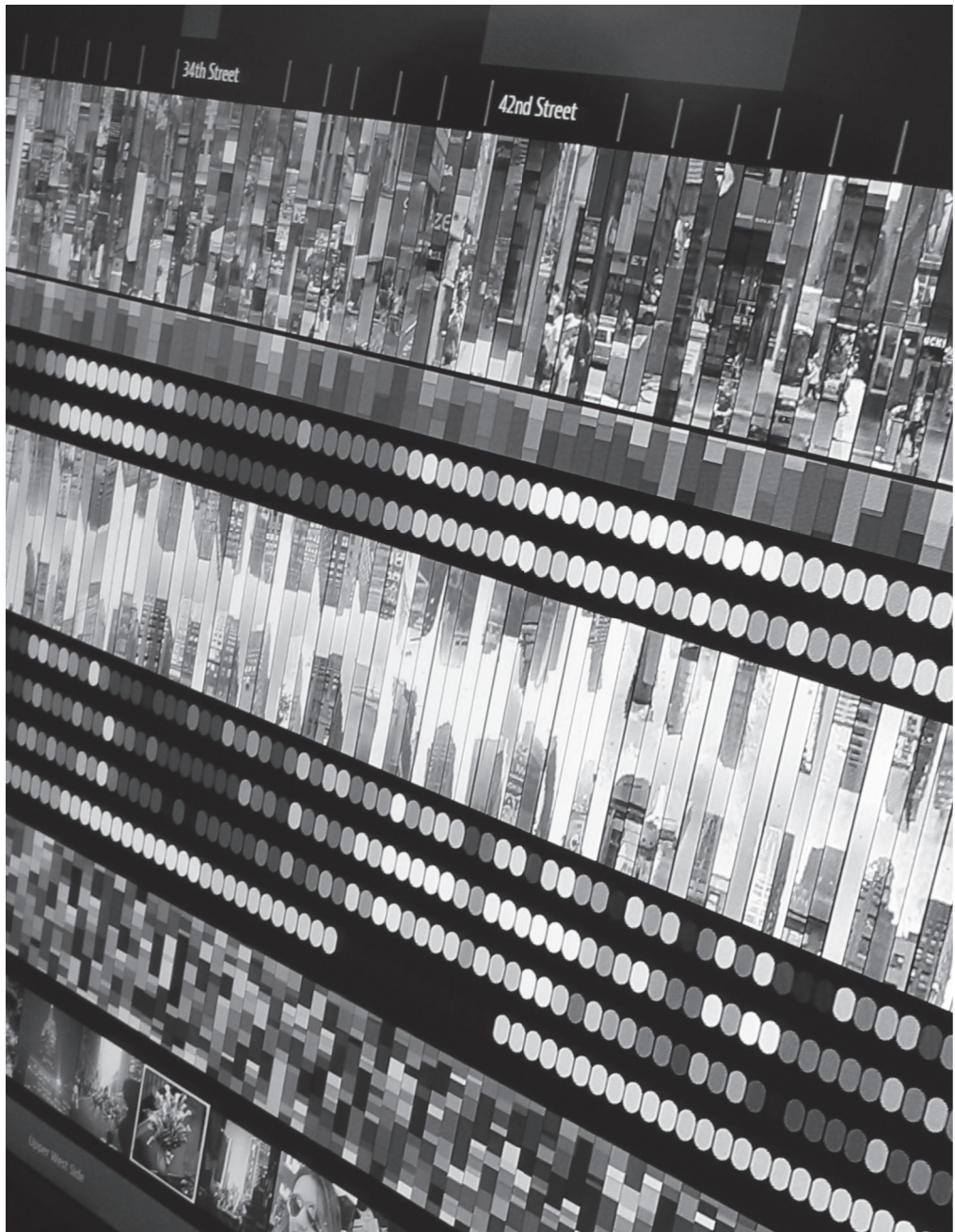
The irreducible mystery of the world coexists with the wonders discovered by reason. The unknown enters every pore of the known, but without the known, the unknown would be a hollow word. Every human being on this Earth recognizes his/her face in any other human being, independent of his/her particular religious or philosophical beliefs, and all humanity recognizes itself in the infinite otherness.

References

- Cilliers, P., & Nicolescu, B. (2012). Complexity and transdisciplinarity—discontinuity, levels of reality and the Hidden Third. *Futures*, 44(8), 711-718.
- Husserl, E. (1966). *Méditations cartésiennes* (G. Peiffer & E. Levinas, Trans.). Paris: Vrin.
- Moraru, C. (2011). *Cosmodernism: American narrative, late globalization, and the new cultural imaginary*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Nicolescu, B. (1994). *Théorèmes poétiques*. Monaco: Rocher. (The English translation of this book, under the title *The Hidden Third* is in press at Quantum Prose, New York.)
- Nicolescu, B. (2002). *Manifesto of transdisciplinarity* (K.-C. Voss, Trans.). New York: State University of New York (SUNY) Press.
- Nicolescu, B. (2008). The idea of levels of reality and its relevance for non-reduction and personhood. *Transdisciplinarity in Science and Religion*, (4), 11-26.
- Nicolescu, B. (2014). *From modernity to cosmodernity—Science, culture, and spirituality*. New York: State University of New York (SUNY) Press.
- Peirce, C. S. (1976). *The new elements of mathematics* (4 volumes, C. Eisele, Ed.). The Hague: Mouton Humanities Press. (Cited in the text as NEMVol:Page)



Manovich, L., & Douglass, J. (2009). *All Time Hues*. Visualizations of hues across all covers of Time magazine (4553 covers, 1923-2009). Project: TimeLine; <http://manovich.net/index.php/exhibitions/timeline>



Manovich, L., Goddemeyer, D., Stefaner, M., & Baur, D. (2015). *On Broadway #1*. Screen shot of initial plots exploring the juxtaposition of various data layers. Project: On Broadway; <http://www.on-broadway.nyc/>