



# **Exotopy: Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Lacan on the Outside Context of Discourse**

Экзотопия: Михаил Бахтин  
и Жак Лакан о внешнем  
контексте дискурса

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The present text treats the concept of exotopy in Bakhtin and Lacan, explicating the direction and the possible indices for comparison between post-Marxism and Psychoanalysis. The general idea is not to seek a new causative element – the unconscious in place of economics, although this problem cannot be overlooked in view of contemporary debates – but rather to trace the logic of outsideness of truth and knowledge: the concept of desire in Eastern and Western theory constitutes an immanent (real) outside, which cannot be subsumed into *Aufhebung* or any higher level of unity. Both Bakhtin (1895–1975) and Lacan (1901–1981), without having met each other, belonging in one and the same generation and facing different conceptual challenges and problems, work in a condition of unique philosophical ‘likelihood’ on the subject of the human being’s ex-centricity – the secret of the human being, its innermost intimacy, is located outside itself.

OUTSIDENESS, EXOTOPY, REFRACTION,  
OUTSIDE-STANDING, IDEOLOGEME,  
EXTIMACY, INTERMEDIATION

Текст посвящен экзотопии Бахтина и Лакана, показывая направление и возможные индексы сравнения между постмарксизмом и психоанализом. Идея не в том, чтобы искать новый причинный элемент – бессознательное вместо экономики, хотя этот вопрос нельзя игнорировать с учетом современных дискуссии, а заключается в том, чтобы проследить логику вненаходимости истины и знания, стремление восточной и западной теории конструировать имманентное (реальное) внешнее, которое нельзя удалить в *Aufhebung* или на более высокий уровень единства. Здесь и Бахтин, и Лакан – не встретившись никогда, принадлежащие почти к одному поколению (Бахтин жил с 1895 по 1975 г., Лакан – с 1901 по 1981 г.) и, несмотря на разные мысленные трудности и проблемы, которым они посвящают свое время в поисках ответа – в удивительных «окрестностях» мысли развивают тему, что человек является экс-центричным и его центр находится снаружи. Секрет человека, его глубокая интимность, скрыта снаружи.

ВНЕНАХОДИМОСТЬ, ЭКЗОТОПИЯ,  
ПРЕЛОМЛЕНИЕ, ЭКС-СИСТЕНЦИЯ,  
ИДЕОЛОГЕМА, ЭКСТИМНОСТЬ,  
МЕЖДИННОСТЬ

The present study compares the *exotopy* theories of two of the most prominent thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Lacan, both of whom belong to different intellectual traditions (Bakhtin’s semiotics is greatly indebted to Marx, Neo-Kantianism, *Lebensphilosophie*, but also to folklore; Lacan’s psychoanalysis is faithful to Sigmund Freud’s and concordant with the structuralism of Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Jacobson, as well as with French Heideggerianism and the Neo-Hegelianism of Alexander Kojève). In many respects both schools – Bakhtin’s circle and Lacanian psychoanalysis – are parallel in their conceptual movements, assuming critical stances in relation to dominant discourses, Soviet totalitarianism and Western capitalism respectively. In both cases the criticism is directed against the constitution of truth as a dominant category, against its tautological enclosure and against the denial of the subject’s ability to construct his or her own autonomous meaning.

If we are to trace shared influences in the course of history, they would be related to the theoretical tendency, advancing Kierkegaard’s polemical attitude towards Hegel and the shift in the dominant position of the cognitive subject at the expense of the object’s subjectivization. With Bakhtin and Lacan alike, monumentality of speech is split up by the *Other*, who is not merely the listener in a communicative situation, but someone believed to be able to commune with us through the medium of one’s *outsidedness*. According to Bakhtin, human consciousness attains maturity by mastering the virtue of *dialogism*, while Lacan defines human unconscious as *the discourse of the Other*. The communication model of intersubjectivity with both thinkers is an attempt to indicate the topos of the social relation, realized through transformation of the outside context of the discourse. According to Bakhtin, the outside context is connected to the concept of *outsidedness*; for Lacan this would relate to *ex-sistence as outside-standing*.

In relation to method, both authors attribute to art and literature the status of *via regia* when tackling the problem of reality's hybrid nature. For Bakhtin literature becomes *refraction* of the world which has come undone with the emergence of language. For Lacan literary fiction, apart from its employment in the practice of interpreting works of art in defense of psychoanalytical propositions, is associated with the functioning of the signifying chain and refers to the constitution of truth as the truth has the structure of fiction (Tenev 2012: 250–251).

The basic theoretical differences between the two schools are related in their respective references to Saussure's linguistics and Freud's psychoanalysis. Language according to M. Bakhtin, V. N. Voloshinov, P. Medvedev is an ongoing process of becoming and practically there exists no actual moment in time, – as Saussure suggests – in relation to which the synchronic system of language can be structured. The sign can only come about on an 'international territory' i.e. it is a necessary condition that individual consciousnesses are socially organized and that individuals inhabit a certain community. On the other hand, an individual consciousness related to *answerability* not only cannot explain or understand a certain something but, on the contrary, is in need to be furnished with an explanation by the social ideology (Voloshinov 1973: 12). Lacan, as well as Laplanche and Lecercle after him, employs spatial graphics in relation to the signifier/signified pair, differing from Saussure's presentations in that the signifier is composed of a multi-level metaphoric chain, while the demarcating line between signifier and signified demonstrates a peculiar value of its own, nowhere to be found in Saussure. With Lacan the signifier and the signified exist in a relationship of variability and become fixed (coincide) only at particular points of communication, the line between them comprising the repression of the signified (Barthes 1967: 49).

In 1927 under the authorship of Voloshinov is published the short critical article ‘Freudianism’ (Voloshinov 1976), treating the unconscious as an aspect of consciousness – it is the ‘unofficial conscious’ – linguistic in nature – which comes into opposition with the ‘official conscious’ (Bruss, Titunik 1976: vii). It is believed that Voloshinov exerts a direct influence on the structuralist studies of the Prague Linguistic Circle, an influence which in turn affects the works of Lacan through the studies of Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss (Wilden 1980: 1–30, 31–62). If possible, although within certain limits, such an influence of Bakhtin’s circle on Lacan’s ideas should refer to the Marxist philosophy of language, rather than to the critique of Freud. Despite the French translation of ‘Freudianism’, published in Switzerland, the book remained overlooked in France due to situational reasons (Lecerle 2006: 116).

Despite the lack of explicit dialogism between Bakhtin and Lacan, belonging in one and the same generation, and the different conceptual challenges and problems, to which they devote their time in search of answers, the points of proximity between them confirm Koyré’s observations on the complexity and unpredictability in the history of ideas: ‘We must not forget, moreover, that “influence” is not a simple, but on the contrary, a very complex, bilateral relation.’ (Koyré 1957: 5). In a state of unique conceptual ‘likelihood’ the two thinkers work on the subject of the human being’s ex-centricity – the secret of the human being, its innermost intimacy, is located outside itself.

Although working with different concepts and enduring the effects of different political coercions, both Bakhtin and Lacan think that the unconscious has an exotopic character. They approach the problem of the ‘outside’ by dissociating it from the naïve realism (in the form of socialist realism or as a return to ‘positive’ or ‘empirical’ narratives on

consciousness, behavior and sexuality). Both scholars invest an ambivalent meaning into their notions of exotopy – at once *outsidedness* and *lack*. According to both, exotopy refers to the opposite of positive reality, to an outside context, which is not simply located on the exterior of a surface or structure, but also in the sense of functioning as a lack in relation to it.

### **CULTURAL EXOTOPY, IDEOLOGEME, EXTIMACY**

In his article from the early 1924 ‘The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art’ Bakhtin points out that culture should not be understood as a spatial totality with an inner territory of its own: ‘A cultural domain has no inner territory’ (Bakhtin 1990: 274). Culture is entirely situated upon boundaries, it is a boundary in itself – composed and refracted by other boundaries. They traverse creative activities transversely, so they cover all their composite characteristics. Bakhtin compares the boundary with a ray of sunlight, refracted in every drop of cultural life. In his last text ‘Response to a Question by the *Novyi mir* Editorial Staff’ from 1970 Bakhtin discusses the relationship between one’s own society and the foreign culture, again insisting that in order to delve deeper into one’s own culture, one has to cross its boundaries. Only through the eye of the Outsider or the Foreigner can one comprehend one’s own culture (Bakhtin 1986: 1–10). The notion of culture composed of similar elements (actually each separate element can be refracted into or constitute a boundary for another) is related to the theory of *refraction* (Rus. *преломление* [*prelomlenie*]) worked out by Bakhtin’s circle of scholars. This theory is an objection against the former formal-structural proposition, which radically constrains the work of art into a kind of inner space, having no relation to the outside

context, as well as against the theory of *reflection*, which proposes a mechanical and objective representation of the outside context. The refraction theory poses the problem of the more complex dynamics (dialogue) between the inner and the outer space of the work of art, of the possibility for the ‘outside’ to invade and transform literary phenomena on the level of their minimal units.

In Lacan’s works the problem of traversing the outer space is often illustrated with topology figures – Möbius strip, Klein bottle, torus. Employing topological figures, he provides solutions for different problems: the Möbius strip represents the exteriority of the *object a*, preceding the negation non-I/I, outside/inside; Klein’s bottle describes the relation between the master-signifier and the Other; the torus represents the relation between demand and desire. Those are two- or three-dimensional figures which disrupt the traditional Euclidean representation of space – they represent the way in which psychoanalysis problematizes binary oppositions such as outside/inside, social/natural, real/fictional. With the Möbius strip and Klein’s bottle we cannot affirm which point is on the inside and which one on the outside, nor can we say at which particular moment one moves from the inside outwards (or vice versa), any localization becomes impossible. In his tenth seminar on anxiety Lacan shows how a remainder of the *cross-cap* figure has the form of a Möbius strip. If an ant is crawling on one of its visible sides – by virtue of their identical character – it shall move on to its opposite side without having to traverse the edge of the strip. In a similar way the vase from Bouasse’s famous experiment can only become, in Lacan’s version, a one-sided surface, its outer and inner side being caught up into one and the same continuity: ‘From then on, the whole vase becomes a Möbius strip because an ant walking on the outside comes onto the inside without any difficulty at all.

The specular image becomes the uncanny and invasive image of the double.’ (Lacan 2014: 97)

Both Bakhtin and Lacan show how each of the dichotomous terms inside/outside can ‘transition’ into one another. Although such a process may seem dialectical (interpretation of Hegel’s master/slave dialectics is of key significance in the approach of both authors), here the crucial point is not the mutual transformation of opposites, but rather the formulation of an ‘outside’ which is immanently postulated. Exotopy actually assumes the status of *intermediation* and represents an attempt to conceptualize the ‘outside’ as traversing, transitioning, continuity between two discourses. Working out the details of overcoming theoretically the inside/outside dichotomy, Bakhtin and Lacan introduce various neologisms, which make the demarcating line between them grow thinner. Bakhtin’s circle comes up with the neologism ‘ideologeme’, while Lacan coins the term ‘extimacy’.

The history of the ‘ideologeme’ neologism can be traced back from its coinage during the 1930s in Voloshinov’s monographic study ‘Marxism and Philosophy of Language’ (1930) up to its ‘resuscitation’ in the context of French humanities after 1968, related to Julia Kristeva’s work on the concept of dialogism. Her conception of the ideologeme preceded her theory of intertextuality – the ideologeme of the sign displaces the symbol, representing that which has not yet, but will or may come to pass, setting the modes of an infinite variety of future transformations (Kristeva 1969: 71).

Voloshinov introduces the concept of ‘ideologeme’, formulating it as a regulator between authorial intentions (inner context) and ideology (outer context). The ideologeme is ambiguous and immaterial, incomplete thought, the trace of the outer context, of that which is in the air, a sort of *Zeitgeist*, functioning on a micro-individual level.



Voloshinov makes a distinction between immaterial ideologeme and ideology that possesses form, structure and solidity. According to him ‘The ideologeme is a vague entity at that stage of its inner development when it is not yet embodied in outer ideological material; it can acquire definition, differentiation, fixity only in the process of ideological embodiment’ (Voloshinov 1973: 33). According to Bakhtin an example of a speech that is similarly incomplete and unfolding ‘in the midst’ of the dialogue is the speech of human self-definition. The self, defining itself by way of ‘Who am I?’ and ‘With whom am I?’ is a moment of *opening up of speech*, in order that the possibility for the emergence of an ever new meaning is preserved. The very opening up presupposes that what exists on the outside participates in the constitution of one’s identity (Bakhtin 1984: 233).

The concept of *extimacy* is introduced by Lacan at the seminar on February 10, 1960, and defined by him as follows: ‘What we described as the central place, as the intimate exteriority or *extimacy*, that is the Thing.’ (Lacan: 1992, 139). The neologism is derived from the oxymoron intimate exterior – through the desire of the Other the secret is exteriorized. It is namely the Möbius strip that can demonstrate the paradox of extimacy: the real is all at once exterior to the symbolic and central to it in the sense of exception (‘excluded in the interior’). If we favor a distinction between the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) and the extimate (*extimité*), then in Lacan’s terms the uncanny would belong to the domain of the imaginary, while the extimate – to that of the real. Speaking in spatial terms, in contrast to the extimate, determined by the coinciding of inside and outside, *das Unheimliche* seems to have the effect of coinciding distant and close: a threatening approach of something we have kept at a distance (Spassova 2017: 134–161).

In *City Lights*, one of Chaplin's masterpieces made at the time when Warner Bros. created the first sound-track series, we find an illustration of Lacan's extimacy (Žižek 2006). Chaplin chooses to demonstrate sound severed from speech, to focus the attention onto its materiality and blur the distinction between what lies outside the body and what resides within it. His character 'The Tramp' swallows a whistle and starts hiccupping, each hiccup resulting in a whistling sound emission from the inside of his body. By virtue of the fictional framework this extimacy produces a comic effect in the audience, while the character himself burns with shame since what is constitutionally excluded from the interior becomes an exterior, a haunting sound. With extimacy we have the illusion that something screened becomes visible, while in fact the concept refers to a structural exception which serves to displace the lack.

Should we choose to look for another example from Chaplin's oeuvre that would illustrate Bakhtin's ideologeme then it seems that the most adequate one can be found in his autobiography, particularly in the account of how the image of the Tramp came to be invented. In *My Autobiography* Chaplin recounts that during the shooting of *Kid Auto Races in Venice* Mack Sennett told him to make himself up as a comedian and put on whatever he fancied. On his way to the check-room, having no idea of the image he was after, Chaplin decided to huddle on a pair of loose and baggy pants, put a bowler on his head and pick up a small cane. The only thing he had been after was the discrepancy – between the baggy pants and the tight jacket, between the small bowler and the oversized shoes, between the moustache of an adult and the expression of a youth in his twenties. The make-up and the costume gave rise to the character and his image emerged on the scene – The Tramp became alive. Those behind the camera started laughing, a crowd gathered,

composed not only by the rest of the actors but also by various laborers, woodworkers, check-room keepers etc. (Chaplin 1964: 154). The episode of the actor, discovering his peculiar fictional persona, approximates Bakhtin's idea of the creation of the hero – moving from the make-up and the costume toward the character proper. In such a way the face is born out of the mask (the persona), while consciousness becomes a product of the social role. Human self-definition proceeds from the inside outward.

Both examples from Chaplin's actor's experience, although describing to a certain extent the traversing of the outside and inside contexts in Bakhtin and Lacan, manifest a flaw by creating the impression that extimacy and the ideologeme comprise a 'risk-free', controllable and indestructible outsideness. What remains insufficiently emphasized is that, in order to evade the threat forewarned of by both authors, a particular structural presence of a lack or an exclusion from the domain of the Other should be preserved. In the case of *City Lights* the conventionality of comedy refers to its opposite – the extimate – nonetheless preserving the divide (non-coincidence) between reality and madness. The ideologeme in turn possesses a transformative and revolutionary force by virtue of its incompleteness. This incompleteness (non-sublimation) of negation is a condition of it not becoming a 'fossilized' construct. Should it attain its complete embodiment without reserve, it transforms into a slogan, an ossified mark of totalizing ideologies, a dead-end for dialogism.

### **TO STEP OUTSIDE**

In Bakhtin's philosophical anthropology the notions of autonomy and completeness of the human body are generated by an illusion, similarly

to Lacan's 'mirror stage' where the I's visual field registers missing 'pieces' of 'my' body. At any given time exterior contexts of the human being and its self-likes (Lacan will term the human self-like *objet petit a* – *object little a*) do not coincide – there is always something inaccessible to vision and consciousness, something strictly subjective, yet belonging in the context of the other who is outside and in front of myself. The head, the face and its particular expression – mostly the world behind our own back – are accessible only as a reflection in others (Bakhtin: 1990, 23). The concept of 'context' in Bakhtin's early aesthetics is understood through the term *krugozor* (*field of vision*, literally *circumvision*; Rus. *кpyзoзop*), the outside context being the *krugozor* in the world of values, a spatial form, traversed and refracted by the perspective of others. Similarly, in *Lost Unicorns of the Velvet Revolutions* Miglena Nikolchina interprets the Bulgarian neologism *obzhivayavam* ('*living about and around*'), seeking to clarify the mysterious moment in theoretical exchange as a kind of drawing on of the unknown (the outside) towards the known (the familiar). The prefix *ob-* presupposes an emptiness, a possibility of accepting in your *krugozor* foreign life and speech in a way that what is foreign never assumes the status of absolute takeover and 'possession' of the individual interior (Nicolchina: 2013, 38). Bakhtin's context is organized around the constant presence of such a lack – the center of dialogism is situated on the outside, on the side of others. The concept of lack is interpreted as remainder, as insufficiency, as something which is 'nowhere' for the personal horizon to attain completeness – hence, in Bakhtin's view, the 'lack' and the 'excess' of seeing conceptually coincide. In his treatment lack and excess come as a surplus and at the same time as something lesser in relation to the outside context, they constitute its disproportionateness, irremediability and excessiveness. The lack-excess of the subject in the

dialogue characterizes its ‘outsidedness’: ‘Cognition surmounts this concrete outsideness of me myself and the outsideness-for-me of all other human beings, as well as the excess of my seeing in relation to each one of them, which is founded in that position of outsideness.’ (Bakhtin: 1990, 23).

Lacan, on his part, introduces the neologism *ex-sistence*, outside-standing, in order to demonstrate that the center of human being is radically exterior, other, outer, while the subject of the unconscious is decentered and *ex-centric*. The new term from the Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’ is introduced on condition that outsidedness is correlative to compulsive repetition (*Wiederholungszwang*), the principle of which is organized in accordance with the insistence of the signifying chain (Lacan, 2006: 6). Lacan borrows Heidegger’s term *ex-sistence* as in French translations of ‘Being and Time’ ‘*ex-sistence*’ renders the Old Greek *ἔκστασις* and the German *Ekstase* (Fink: 1995, 122). The ancient meaning of the word is usually employed in the sense of ‘being or standing outside oneself’, ‘being displaced’. Heidegger aims at splicing different nuances of meaning into the term: from the derivatives of the Old Greek ‘to stand outside’, ‘to step outside’, ‘to be into the open’ to a search for the associative relation with the lexical base of the word ‘existence’. Without rejecting the nuances, already introduced in the course of history from Plotinus through Meister Eckhart and Saint Teresa of Ávila to Heidegger, Lacan employs the term with a view to point to the place of the subject in the unconscious. At the same time he points out that something is lacking on the inside but demanding on the outside. Such an exotopic positioning of the subject alludes to a type of recurring context or to the existence of an outside which recurs. *Τύχη* is on the one hand sought for, and on the other – ‘banished’ outside the functioning as *ἀυτόματον* ‘network of signifiers’ (Vidinsky: 2017, 91).

According to Jean-Jacques Lecercle such a shift in the position of the unconscious – not as something deeply concealed but as a surface – can be traced already in the Marxist critique of Voloshinov’s ‘Freudianism’. According to the latter, what Freud calls ‘unconscious’ is to him an internalization of the outer social dialogue (ideology), while the transference between analysant and analyst is a social interaction related to the linguistic agon, and, ultimately, a speech genre (Lecercle: 2006, 107). The result of matching Lacan’s subject of the unconscious with Bakhtin’s concept of ideology – in the present case, not as a set of ideas but as a set of signs, comprising the arena of class struggle and forming the contents of the unconscious – would allow us to think ideology as a space, constantly re-accentuated and polyphonically displaced by the activity of subjects. Also, the ideology, moving behind one’s invisible back in order to fill in the missing materiality of our *krugozor* of values, will make use of us as its own distorting mask, its excess.

According to Harold D. Baker, Bakhtin and Lacan exhibit specifics which prevent the ultimate splicing of their respective notions of discourse. For Bakhtin the discourse is dialogically articulated, it is always a historically concrete sequence of utterances, while for Lacan ‘the signifying chain’ is an imaginary construct in the unconscious, traversing the axis of the utterance at each and every one of its points (Baker: 1995, 502). Where Bakhtin will insist on diachronic relations, Lacan will refer to linguistic synchrony. Bakhtin sticks to the sound (intonation), Lacan subtly points towards the letter (writing).

Although approaching intersubjectivity from different perspectives, both Bakhtin and Lacan pose the problem of the *outside* of truth and knowledge. It is precisely in the mode of outsidedness that truth and knowledge could have the chance of being explicitly formulated and clarified. Presently, theoretical thought is deeply concerned with

the problem of truth and knowledge that seem to shed their specific 'outside' status and become engulfed by economics as its last remaining refuge of outsideness (Habjan: 2011, 73-74). The market is perceived as a natural context, as a whole new Nature, as the only factor capable of imparting significance to values. In a broader context or, as Bakhtin himself might put it, within the scope of 'Great Time', we ought to persistently pose the question what would happen should we do away with the concept of subjective oscillation and the human being loses the ability to displace or step outside itself. ♡

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## Резюме

В статията се съпоставят теориите на екзотопията у двама от най-значимите мислители на ХХ век – Михаил Бахтин и Жак Лакан. В много отношения двете школи – кръгът на Бахтин и лаканианската психоанализа – са паралелни мисловни движения, заемащи критични позиции спрямо господстващи дискурси, било на съветския тоталитаризъм или капитализма на Запада. И в двата случая критиката е насочена срещу конструирането на истината от доминираща позиция, нейното тавтологичното затваряне и отричането на субекта да изработва свое автономно значение. Интерсубективният модел на комуникацията при двамата е опит да се посочи местонахождението на социална връзка, осъществена чрез трансформация на външния контекст на дискурса. За Бахтин външният контекст ще бъде свързан с понятието *внезаходимость*, за Лакан това ще е *ex-sistence*.

През 1927 г. изпод авторството на В. Н. Волошинов излиза критическият очерк “Фройдизъм”, който разглежда несъзнаваното като аспект на съзнанието, то е „неофициално съзнание“ – лингвистично по своята природа, – което влиза в противоречие с „официалното съзнание“. Счита се, че Волошинов пряко влияе върху структуралните изследвания на Пражкия лингвистичен кръжок, което влияние от своя страна през работата на Роман Якобсон и антропологията на Клод Леви-Строс достига до работата на Лакан. Ако е възможно подобно, макар и ограничено влияние на Бахтиновия кръг върху идеите на Лакан, то трябва да се отнесе обаче по-скоро към марксистката философия на езика, отколкото към критиката на Фройд.

Въпреки отсъствието на експлицитен диалог между Бахтин и Лакан, принадлежащи почти на едно и също поколение (Бахтин

живее от 1895 г. до 1975 г., Лакан – от 1901 г. до 1981 г.), въпреки различните мисловни предизвикателства и въпроси, на които посвещават времето си в търсене на отговор – точките на близост между тези две фигури са впечатляващи. В удивително “съседство” на мисълта и двамата автори развиват темата, че човешкото съществуване е екс-центрично и неговият център е извън него. Тайната на човека, неговата най-дълбока интимност, е скрита отвън.

И при Бахтин, и при Лакан – въпреки че работят с различни понятия и са подложени на различни политически принуди – несъзнаваното е *екзотопично*. Те подхождат към проблема за “външното”, спасявайки го от наивния реализъм (под формата на социалистически реализъм или пък като връщане към “позитивни” и “емпирични” разкази за съзнанието, поведението и сексуалността). И Бахтин, и Лакан придават на разбирането си за екзотопия амбивалентен смисъл – на *външност*, но и на *липса*. За двамата екзотопичността препраща към противоположното на позитивната реалност, към външен контекст, който не е просто вън от една плоскост или структура, но и в смисъла на липсващ от нея.

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