

From Comparative Literature to Comparative Humanities

A Conceptual Approach

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Abstract: *The present paper analyzes the possibility of applying intermedial logic and intermediality to various fields of research in Romania, especially to Romanian literary and comparative studies. The aim is to critically examine the main challenges and to expose the main fallacies that build a real resistance against intermediality and interdisciplinarity, mainly for reasons of losing disciplinary autonomy and of sacrificing the aesthetic principle. The paper underlines, from the same critical perspective, some of the epistemic and systemic benefits of an intermedial view on literature, with special attention to world literature, introducing the paradigm of comparative humanities.*

Keywords: *intertextuality, interdisciplinarity, intermediality, digital studies, world literature, comparative literature*

Résumé : *Cet article analyse la possibilité d'appliquer la logique intermédiaire et l'intermédialité à des champs différents de la recherche, surtout aux études roumaines littéraires et comparées. Le but est d'examiner d'une façon critique les principaux défis et d'exposer les principales idées fausses qui créent une résistance réelle contre l'intermédialité et l'interdisciplinarité, surtout pour des causes liées à la perte de l'autonomie disciplinaire et au sacrifice du principe esthétique. L'article souligne, en gardant la même perspective critique, quelques-uns des bénéfices épistémiques et systémiques d'une perspective intermédiaire de la littérature, en ayant une attention spéciale pour la littérature universelle et en introduisant le paradigme des sciences humaines comparées.*

Mots-clés : *intertextualité, interdisciplinarité, intermédialité, études digitales, littérature universelle, littérature comparée*

In this paper I will explore the possibilities of interrelating cultural or literary items in a new paradigm of comparative humanities instead of the traditional one of comparative literature. It is my contention that the time has come for literary comparatists around the world (and implicitly for Romanian ones) to worry less about the disciplinary purity or autonomy of their beloved field and discipline and to embrace the integration and hybridization brought along by a paradigmatic shift in humanities. My proposal is merely the result of unanimous observations made by comparatists coming from various cultural contexts, but also the consequence of previous attempts to establish theoretical and

methodological approaches of mixed discourses and praxes, such as *intermediality*, *intertextuality*, and *interdisciplinarity*.

Let us begin with a short overview of these terms, since they make the mandatory vocabulary of the new humanities. Intertextuality—the term was coined by poststructuralist Julia Kristeva in 1966, in a paper subsequently included in the volume translated in English as *Revolution in Poetic Language*—points to the shaping of a text's meaning by another text. However, it has come to have more denotations than this, all of them involving some sort of dialogue or evocation (Coșeriu). One speaks of intertextuality in cases of *allusion*, *quotation*, *calque*, but also in much more complex cases (both theoretically and ethically), such as *plagiarism*, *translation*, *pastiche* and *parody*. In conclusion, any author's act of borrowing and transforming a prior text or any reader's act of referencing one text in reading another have come to involve an intertextual operation.

Interdisciplinarity, on the other hand, is understood as the methodic combination of two or more academic disciplines into one activity (e.g., a research project). It attempts to create something new by crossing boundaries and thinking across them. As open as it is in its project, interdisciplinarity understands a given subject in terms of multiple traditional disciplines, without dissolving disciplinarity itself (see Augsburg for a complex analysis of interdisciplinary challenges). By comparison, the concept of intermediality—although at first sight extremely similar to that of interdisciplinarity or transdisciplinarity—makes it necessary to forget about disciplinarity altogether, even if some of its advocates would not agree with that, as Augsburg shows in the aforementioned study.

Although, as a term, *intermediality* started being used as early as the beginning of the 20th century (see Schröter for a brief overview), there is no consensus as to what the concept should cover. Therefore, I would like to briefly mention three of the most current meanings given to intermediality, all of which I discussed in my study entitled “Literature 2.0—Hybrid Cultural Objects in Intermedial Practice: The Case of Romania” (published by the New Directions in the Humanities knowledge community in *The Ekphrastic Turn*, Common Ground Publishing, Illinois Research Park, 2015): the first one refers to new methodological and theoretical approaches to given objects of study (such as literatures), beyond disciplinary borders of any kind. This would mean, of course, that traditional disciplines such as aesthetics, the history of literature, the theory of literature or comparative literature in their classic senses lose disciplinary autonomy and, what is more, disciplinary specificity. From this first meaning, I derive a second meaning of intermediality in order to rethink a transmedial approach: it would use intermedial rhetoric and strategies to draw the main lines of literary research beyond the frame of reference of national literatures. Finally, a third meaning postulates the creation of an entirely new intermedial system and discourse to include certain hybrid cultural objects which are at times treated as literary, but are in fact impossible to fit within traditional frames of disciplinary discourse (see Schröter's concept of *synthetic intermediality*, as the fusion of several media into an *intermedium* that is more than the sum of its parts, e.g., “graphic poetry”). This third meaning allows the proper methodological inclusion of objects like comics, graphic novels, iPhone novels, blogs and electronic collaborative

forms of creation or media applications, without the exclusion of traditional literary praxes.

The great conceptual and disciplinary advantage of this intermedial approach is integrative and restorative, closely related to the much prophesied crisis in the humanities. Some of the new humanities that have emerged in the last years integrate literary and social studies together with disciplines that were traditionally cast among the hard sciences or the natural ones. To name just two of the most promising forms of new humanities, one cannot overlook the importance of *medical humanities* and especially that of *digital humanities*. While the former create the interface for arts, literature and biology, neurology and medicine, for both therapeutic reasons and for scholarly advancements, the latter have a good chance of dismantling the dualistic system of disciplines that traditionally opposed the hard sciences to the humanities. What is more important is that both classes of new humanities are intermedial by definition and a good argument in favor of comparative humanities.

Are We Going Intermedial?

As good as it sounds, the intermedial turn may be facing serious difficulties, at least as far as Romanian culture is concerned. The first one is the perpetuation of the reign of the aesthetic value and value judgment in Romanian literary criticism—which often surpasses the importance of theory and method, when it does not attempt to pass for literary theory. Let us notice that the argument of this volume, written by Mircea Martin, points to the paradox of literary studies specialists abandoning literature for literary studies, while philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists and literary sociologists use literature as testing grounds for their own disciplines. Specifically, while admitting to the beneficial results of this so-called “invasion,” the critic also raises the question of possible risks, especially at the expense of the aesthetic specificity of literature and literary studies (see also Cernat, Dumitru). In the same context, an influent critic of the younger generation asks:

Which is the limit beyond which literary studies are at risk of losing their own identity, of being transformed into cultural studies or just disappearing altogether? How, in which way could we renegotiate “the place and role” of literary studies in a global society which is defined not only by “generalized communication,” but also by the ever tenser relations between the local (national, regional) and the global, between the centers and the peripheries of globalization? (Cernat; my translation)

Prior to 1989, some of the main surviving tools of the Romanians who were facing political and social conditions imposed by the communist regime were “high culture” and especially “high literature,” seen as subversive forms of individual freedom. In Romania, the concept of “surviving through culture” or “resistance through culture” (Cornis-Pope) is still revered today. However, given the changes which have taken place over the last two decades and a half, the idea of protecting the status of high culture and

of keeping literary studies as “pure” as possible, for the same reasons as before 1989, is questionable, to say the least.

One should add that the first set of challenges in the way of intermediality arise from a very narrow understanding of literature within the frames of the aesthetic convention. Maybe the first difficulty in implementing intermedial study in Romania is the traditional lack of approval, within academic and scholarly media, of both theory and method. As influential critics have shown (Terian), aesthetic theory and the aesthetic principle were sometimes the only systematic criteria used to analyze and evaluate literature. Even Romanian literary history was and still is (with the exception of a few studies published in the 2000s) written by authors of literary chronicles and reviews, that is, by a very particular type of literary critics.

The literary chronicle enjoyed tremendous prestige in Romania compared to other East-European countries, since it was the first medium of contact with Western culture during the communist years and a place where ideological censorship could be kept to a bare minimum, not to mention subverted. Rather than being condemned for its lack of scientific character, impressionistic criticism, based on taste alone, was used instead of (or as) a critical method of reading and interpretation, with no connection to theory. The situation is justified to some extent: since “theory” meant “ideology,” Romanian intellectuals were seeking a sort of relief from communist ideological pressure by turning to non-ideological areas. Applied as the sole or the most important method of critical judgment, impressionistic criticism led to the conclusion that only aesthetic fiction is “real literature,” a tenet which gave birth to a very strange situation: on the one hand, non-fiction was everybody’s favorite in the 90s, if we are to take into account editorial statistics, but critics failed to admit non-fiction as a valid category of literature, capable of dismantling the aesthetic principle. Non-fiction and non-fiction studies are still seeking legitimacy within Romanian literary studies, unlike in Hungary, Slovakia or the Czech Republic.

Since the most influential theoretical system within Romanian literary studies is still Lovinescu’s theory of the mutation of aesthetic values, literary critics and scholars assuming his stand disregard non-fiction as a kind of literature that cannot fulfill the aesthetic requirements. Although massively published in Romania after 1990 in the form of diaries of previously censored authors, memories of communist prisoners or testimonies of various kinds, non-fiction still lacks both a theoretical frame and a proper recognition within Romanian literary hierarchies and canon. Authors of non-fiction are often not considered to be “real writers” and writers who are not aesthetes (such as Norman Manea or Paul Goma, who pen novels based on their own experience of the Gulag or the communist repression) are also contested, in spite of their fame and recognition, acquired in the West. Although not written by aesthetes, the massive literary production born out of trauma, exile, prison, and terrorism acquires a growing importance both in understanding the world and in the preferences of readers. Recently, a dispute about the alleged lack of aesthetic value of Norman Manea’s novels divided the Romanian literary world (see the issues of the Romanian journal *Observator cultural* of February 2013). The extremely heated arguments divided the polemicists into two opposing sides:

on the one hand, advocates of “aesthetic beauty” as the unique value of literature, and on the other, defenders of the idea of an “ethical aesthetic,” which values the representations of humanity in literature.

An Intermedial Literature for Intermedial Citizens

A second type of challenge in the way of constructing an intermedial framework for the study of literature in Romania is the question of national literature, directly connected to the assertion of a Romanian national identity. In this respect, Romanian culture is no different from all the other European cultures linking national identity to statal recognition. Some of the problems arising from understanding literature in national terms emerge from the fact that a system of national literatures cannot avoid hierarchical operations. As a consequence, comparative literature within the national literatures frame of reference is based on the idea of influence, that is, the idea of a center of cultural power irradiating and shaping “smaller” or “minor” cultures. The project of world literature, as set down by Lomnitz in his 1877 journal *Acta comparationis* (Emerson), does not accept cultural hierarchies (in terms of large/small cultures, central/peripheral literatures, etc.), maintaining that all literatures have equal chances to be represented in world literature. However, it is quite ironic for Romanian or Hungarian comparative studies (and mostly for the school of Cluj) that *Acta comparationis litterarum universarum* had no real impact upon the development of comparative literature. The French model of comparative reasoning ruled the cultural climate of Eastern Europe throughout the 20th century (when the communist rule did not reject comparatism altogether, as it did during the fifties and the sixties), empowering the very imperialist perspective that Lomnitz’s multilingualism had tried to subvert.

We should remember that, at the beginning of the 20th century, Romanian studies could relate to previous comparative attempts made by B.P. Hasdeu and Lazăr Șăineanu in studies on folklore, to Titu Maiorescu’s studies of aesthetics or to C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea’s sociological analyses, but mostly to Hugo Meltzl von Lomnitz’s programmatic effort to derive comparative literature from Goethe’s concept of *Weltliteratur*. While Hasdeu, Maiorescu and Gherea are mainly preoccupied to determine the Romanian specificity within the cultural and the literary realm, in order to establish a national literature, Hugo Meltzl von Lomnitz moves towards world literature; in 1877, he founds *Acta comparationis litterarum universarum*, conventionally considered to be the first journal of comparative literature (Voia). The journal is neither the result, nor an example of a “national” tradition (Romanian, Hungarian, etc.), since its project is plurilingualistic to begin with, not to mention transnational. *Acta comparationis* initially had a threefold target: to reevaluate literary history, unjustly seen as a “servant” of philology and history; to reevaluate translation as a form of art; and finally, to offer constant and careful support to multilingualism.

Sometimes, in Romanian literature and culture, “the national argument” is used as a claim to universality and one should not disregard this obsession for universality. When coming from a marginal culture, one cannot be blamed for revering foreign models

that seem to have universal value, and Goethe is perfectly aware of this fact when he considers “the need for an intercourse with great predecessors” to be “a sure sign of a higher talent” (qtd. in Damrosch 9). However desirable, the same models can have a “crushing weight” (Damrosch 9), so it is not surprising that theories which relate value to the national factor appear to counterbalance this weight. Even in Goethe’s sense of *Weltliteratur* and of a “supernational literature,” a certain dream of an all-encompassing universality is still visible. The Romanian literary studies of the sixties witnessed the surge of a theory serving nationalist ideology, which claimed that a certain creator is “so Romanian, that he becomes universal.” Mihai Eminescu, still considered iconic for all kinds of national ideologies, is named “the national and universal poet,” his work being taught as such to this day in secondary school and high-school curricula.

A seminal proposition in favor of world literature in Romania comes as late as 1948, when Tudor Vianu—a disciple of the aesthetics professor Karl Gross from Tübingen—introduces a course of comparative literature at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy in Bucharest, later to become his first volume of comparative studies (published in 1960, and then reprinted, revised and completed in 1963). When arguing that world literature should be studied as an academic subject, Vianu is in fact promoting the very method of comparative literature. He understands world literature within the so-called “theory of peaks.” Paying tribute to the super-evaluation of the aesthetic and the literary, Vianu’s concept of world literature will direct comparative study towards a study of the Great Books and the literary canon, while at the same time keeping to the task of explaining the life and history of human societies as a result of operations of generalization and universalization starting from this study of the literary canon.

Less explored in Romanian comparative studies is the concept of “world literature” as a “mode of circulation and of reading” (Damrosch 5). With its dependence on translation studies (quite disregarded in Romanian theoretical studies, with a few notable exceptions—Paul Cornea, Gelu Ionescu, Sorin Mărculescu, etc.), this concept of world literature projects a phenomenology of literature, rather than an ontology of literature, since works of art manifest themselves differently in their generative space and outside it. This last concept of world literature goes against the “present-ism” that “erases the past, as a serious factor, leaving at best a few nostalgic postmodern references, the historical equivalent of the ‘local color’” (Damrosch 17). To this, one can add the obvious refusal of localism, which presupposes that untranslatable content is completely opaque to the foreign public. This understanding of world literature dismantles the nation-based literary system, or rather opens it to a dynamic view of the alterations of the work of literature in a heterogeneous reception.

The Impossible Challenge of Dismantling Disciplinarity

A third challenge of intermedial practice within world literature is the possible re-writing of traditional disciplines and objects of study in an intermedial fashion, in order to shed light on their ability to overflow their domain of predilection and to flood new fields, giving birth to new practices and methods. It is my contention that disciplinary

discourses (such as the discourses involved in the study of national literatures) can be given conventional medial status. I find the concept of “remediation” particularly useful here, even if it was designed (Bolter and Grusin) to refer to media, and not to disciplinary approaches.

Cultural studies (including the literary domain) are a hybrid field of scholarship emerging from critical humanities and social sciences theories. As such, due to remediation, traditional disciplines move towards different places within a system of disciplines as soon as the need for new disciplines (or “indisciplines”) emerges, much in the way Friedrich Kittler (qtd. in Schröter 38) believes new media force the media system to a new distribution. This way, “old” media coexist with the “new” ones, rather than being replaced by them. Following this train of thought, we can relate to “old disciplines” becoming defining “traces” (in the Derridean sense of the term) in the disciplinary language of “new disciplines.” Cases of intertextuality or interdisciplinarity are, in this sense, former manifestations of intermedial junctures, but they do not attempt to dismantle the nation-based literary field as world literature does in its dynamic view of a generator of circulation between cultures. Intermediality acts as a reorganizer inside the system of disciplines devoted to literary studies, and one of its main actions of remediation is the advance of comparative reading from a position related to national literatures studies towards a position related to world literature studies.

In my teaching practice of comparative literature since 1998, I have heard students (entirely dedicated to their work and hoping for a cultural and social role for their subject of study) expressing doubts regarding the extent of the social impact of their studies, both for their own future and for the change they might have been able to make in a given field. Just recently, a student approached me asking for possible explanations for the fact that she felt that faculty years and the study of comparative literature and of other literary fields were “building a bubble” around her, both protecting her from and debilitating her when facing the “real world.” Although anecdotic, I find this situation to be the very reason why an intermedial approach is crucial to the study of world literature, even if it means sacrificing the literary field to a larger frame of media studies or of comparative cultural studies (Tötösy de Zepetnek). Such an approach might manage to shift the attention from different objects (literary works, authors, tradition or contemporaneity) or different media (words, visual or other types of images) to the very connection between these objects or media and some idea of cultural change.

On the one hand, openness and interdisciplinarity are among the dearest slogans of the academia everywhere, but, on the other hand, imposing an intermedial or even interdisciplinary system challenges the academic *status quo* and its traditional resistance, beyond superficial slogans. I will only mention two such forms of resistance, of the utmost importance: firstly, there is a systemic resistance among literary scholars and professors of literature to the idea of opening the literary field to new practices, to what I call *hybrid objects*, or to *digitally born* praxes or methods; secondly, there is also a silent but systemic resistance within the university to the idea of interdisciplinarity, not to speak of intermediality. A lot of energy is lost in Romanian studies which advocate the preservation of disciplinary purity and autonomy, or reject a reinterpretation of one’s

own place in the new web of knowledge, along with a theoretical and methodological reformulation of one's own discourse.

And yet, with the advent of the digital world and the unavoidable digitization of all information comes an inherently new type of organizing knowledge, whose values are quantitative analysis, mapping and digital humanism. An intermedial solution could help integrating the digital and literary studies, but there are no signs that such a solution might be adopted or even put to the test within our current systems of literary research and teaching. Traditional disciplines, such as aesthetics, the history of literature, the theory of literature or comparative literature in their classic senses might lose disciplinary autonomy and, even more, disciplinary specificity. When digital humanists themselves admit that, unlike the first archives, which were more textual, the new ones are more visual, haptic and exploratory, a certain amount of traditional literary specificity is bound to give. In addition, the issue of data-driven research cannot be warmly received in a culture where literary study mostly meant hermeneutics, symbolic and aesthetic reading. While posing serious problems and risks at a systemic level, which need to be publicly and scholarly addressed, an intermedial system of research and study could function along *projects*, rather than disciplines, with a clearly defined set of methods. Sacrificing some form of autonomy might receive compensation from the fact that humanists are still the best equipped for what has been called “the humanisation of big data” (Prescott), that is for the development of critical analysis systems and theories, a so-called “big theory for big data.” If it is true that “the latest frontier is about method” (Prescott) and that contextualization as “making sense of data” is one of the most important issues on the digital agenda, then Romanian literary scholars could still find meaning and reason to intermediate. Data in itself is never raw, its presentation is already a selection and an interpretation. This is where hermeneutical reading still makes a difference.

A massive switch from a hermeneutic mode to a quantitative analysis mode also implies a change in how authorship is itself understood and practiced. Romanian literary studies still have difficulties with team work. The most important literary historiographies are written by individual authors and famous cases of literary dictionaries or encyclopedias on Romanian literature, that result from collective projects, are incomplete or unfinished. The type of authorship which Romanian critics, literary historiographers, theorists or comparatists seem to favor is the strong, exceptionalist form of individual authority. While it has been observed that a new, intermedial and digital authorship involves a return to a diffuse, collective and collaborative form of authorship very similar to the one active during the Middle Ages in the art work of teams of artists, Romania has no real tradition in accepting team work at the same level of importance as individual work.

To conclude, integrating literary studies within media and cultural studies would give recognition to one of the things that readers have always known: that literature shapes behaviors and sets markers of understanding and interpretation in the amorphous space of reality. Seeing the idea of literature as a “social system” and literary activities as “acting roles” (Schmidt 230) turns the study of literature into a rich field for media studies and into an empirical enterprise in search of a new methodology. The study of literature as an alternative praxis, with aesthetic and pragmatic value, would help integrate the aesthetic

view within a more comprehensive framework. The main objection to sacrificing the specific aesthetics of literature can be met within media studies, where specific forms of different media receive specific semiotic attention. An intermedial approach to both fiction and non-fiction could find ways of inscribing both types of literature within the literary system, since Western theoretical solutions for non-fiction have not been adopted in Romanian studies. In this way, intermediality can correlate terms from the aesthetic frame of value judgment with terms from the ethical frame of value judgment, in a way that would give non-fiction and fiction equal chances.

The main intermedial challenge addressed to humanities today is, however, one that seems ontological in nature. Just as one needs to speak of a new type of digital being, replacing to an ever-greater extent the good old human being, world literature scholars need to define and assess works and phenomena that no longer belong to literature *per se*, be it fiction or non-fiction. Within Romanian literary studies, hostility from contemporary literary criticism and theory towards intermediality, and some critics' resistance to the use of virtual technology are primarily due to a certain concern with the disappearance of the sign. The cherished utopia of digital technologies seems to be, from this point of view, the perfect transparency of the medium. However, to the written culture and to the literary tradition, this is a sign of disciplinary apocalypse. Signs are regarded, in the analogue culture of the written word, as the very substance of reality. To be able to prove their contribution to the construction of reality, signs should be as visible as possible and by all means non-transparent. In a traditionally literary world, a way of communication based on a transparent medium deprives the user of his critical faculties, resulting in semiotic blindness.

As far as the future of intermedial studies in Romania is concerned, the most important reason for hope is the significant amount of graduates of comparative literature (most of them benefitting from the absolutely crucial experience of stages abroad), who have defended or are about to defend MA dissertations or PhD theses on intermedial subjects of world literature touching other media, sciences, forms of art, or social praxes: comic books, graphic novels, computer games, collaborative writing, cyberpunk culture, scientific metaphors, digital world. Their existence is not only the best guarantee that intermedial studies in Romania do have a future, but also a sign of an educational intermedial turn that, in spite of their personal idiosyncrasies, scholars of literature and the humanities can no longer ignore or minimize.

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