

Comparative Literature Today: Notes from the Field

Ângela Fernandes

Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal
angela.fernandes@edu.ulisboa.pt
ORCID: 0000-0002-8186-4171

Donata Meneghelli

Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna, Italy
donata.meneghelli3@unibo.it
ORCID: 0000-0002-8194-3689

Jan Baetens

KU Leuven, Belgium
jan.baetens@kuleuven.be
ORCID: 0000-0003-2145-8005

THE COVER IMAGE of this sixth issue of *Compendium: Journal of Comparative Studies* invites the reader (or the beholder) to recall the pre-digital world, when epistolary correspondence relied on physical mailboxes and letters were made of paper and ink. In 2024, this world co-exists with e-mails and all sorts of digital correspondence, and living with these two kinds of communication is certainly an added benefit. Along with using both, one may compare the media and the procedures, analyse the texts exchanged and elaborate on contents and contexts, and all this contributes to a more solid and nuanced knowledge of epistolary practices. This kind of acknowledgement of the fruitful potentialities of accepting and studying our fast-changing world is what guides us in this issue of *Compendium*, dedicated to the reflection on the current position, the shifting practices and the conflicting views about the field of Comparative Studies within the Humanities in the early twenty-first century. Paying special attention to the historical place of Literature as the creative field that first witnessed the development and consolidation of comparative approaches, this issue proposes the discussion of contemporary perspectives on Comparative Literature and Comparative Studies, delving on what may seem both the vulnerabilities and the opportunities of the discipline, as well as its conundrums.

When considering the contemporary panorama of research, teaching and knowledge dissemination developed under the label ‘comparative studies’, one finds such a multiplicity of theories, paradigms, models and objects of study that any common denominator(s) might seem impossible to grasp. In addition, and somehow contradictorily, the broad diversity of this panorama is tainted by the recurrence of some aspects, such as the predominant attention to contemporary works and issues, with scarce historical reflection, and the use of English as the almost only language of reading, study and communication. Following recent scholarship on these topics (e.g. the short list of references offered below), we have selected a relevant number of articles and book reviews all focusing on the changing relations between Literature and Comparative Studies, in terms of theories, paradigms and models.

Moreover, we have asked seven scholars from different backgrounds to answer a short questionnaire dealing with their personal engagement with the field of Comparative Literature, their position regarding some key issues and their view on the near future. The diversity and discrepancy of their answers show the multiform vigour of the discipline, and in this sense the Interviews clearly resonate the main topics dealt with in all the items composing this issue. When entitling this foreword “Notes from the Field”, we would like to stress the ambiguity of “field” as both an area of research (i.e., Comparative Literature, Comparative Studies) and a place where things are being done, or the study is being conducted, as in “field work”. Indeed, all contributors to this no. 6 of *Compendium* are active agents of comparative practices in their everyday teaching and researching.

The three reviews included in this issue comment on books published in 2024, dealing with cutting-edge issues (the novel, narrative forms and human cognition; the relation between Eastern and Western cultures; the place of literary theory nowadays), and written in various languages (English, French, Italian). We wanted to have a substantial part of the issue devoted to reviews of recent books because

reviewing is an essential part of academic life, as more and more top-rated journals have now well understood, and certainly in the case of Literature and Comparative Studies, the review is an ideal format to freely discuss new and emerging insights in an in-depth way that the mention of these books in traditional articles does not allow. Additionally, this is an excellent way of having beginning scholars to start participating in the ongoing conversation, together with seniors, while the confrontation of young and more confirmed reviewers gives a good insight into the diversity of sensibilities gathering in the field.

The six articles published here propose different lines of discussion, all signaling relevant and timely topics of contemporary comparatism, including: the importance of multilingualism and of historical and material approaches to literature; geographical revisions and cultural power relations; feminist perspectives; reading procedures and hermeneutics; migration and border exchanges, and cyborg culture.

In the first article, entitled “The Vitality of Comparative Studies”, Jan Baetens and Donata Meneghelli discuss the main aspects of Comparative Literature as a discipline (multilingualism, history and textuality) and argue for the need to have them combined in relevant research in contemporary Humanities. The interdisciplinary and institutional dimensions of the field are also addressed, as the authors contend that a more open stance should be favoured, namely through the inclusion of non-academic stakeholders in the new dynamics of comparative research. Some viable and promising paths for the future of Comparative Studies are then critically exemplified when analysing the novel *14 juillet*, by Éric Vuillard, and the essay *The Chapter*, by Nicholas Dames.

In “Comparative Literature and the Quest for Global Literary Theory: Exploring a West African Margin”, Ewa A. Łukaszyk takes as her starting point the openness of Comparative Literature to supersede its innate Eurocentrism, sketching new ways of establishing a dialogue between debates on World Literature, and pointing to questions that are still underdiscussed in this more recent framework. The author suggests new theoretical and methodological openings, without reducing discussions on global literature to the colonial versus postcolonial dilemma. Theoretically speaking, Łukaszyk emphasizes the lasting impact of certain Western concepts such as genre (and the dominant position of both the novel and the lyric) and literariness (with its narrow take on orality) in World Literature, while also highlighting the limited historical scope of some postcolonial thinking. Instead of simply overthrowing these biases, the article insists on the value of finding new forms of multiplicity by linking traditional Comparative and World Literature questions to insights from hidden precolonial traditions. The author focuses on a political, linguistic and cultural context, that of Guinea-Bissau, often considered as a totally peripheral country with apparently “no literature”. A different, more patrimonial and collective way of defining literature, as a form of language that a community wants to share and considers worth maintaining, helps challenge this perception, which the article then discusses both in the field of poetry and that of the novel, disclosing original attempts to link local production with universal concerns.

Elena Cordero Hoyo and Laura López Casado, the authors of the third article, “Relaciones simbióticas: hacia un comparatismo ibérico feminista” [Symbiotic Relationships: Towards a Feminist Iberian Comparatism], address a key issue of

contemporary Comparative Studies, the relationship between disciplines, in this case the field of Gender Studies and Feminism on the one hand, and Iberian Studies on the other hand. Considering that both disciplines (although the term of discipline may be too narrow to completely cover the wide range of questions and sensibilities disclosed and explored in this kind of research) can only benefit from their dialogue and interaction, the authors make a plea for the integration of feminist activism in Iberian Studies, a field currently under construction and trying to supersede nationalist and colonialist biases inherited from traditional Spanish or Portuguese philologies. Moreover, Cordero Hoyo and López Casado claim for the use of the powerful comparative perspectives and orientations of Iberian Studies in the necessary repositioning of Feminist and Gender Studies in an age of queer, lgbtq+ and postcolonial criticism.

The essay by Bernardo Ferreira, entitled “Pourquoi ces choses et non pas d’autres?": Attention and Lists in Comparative Literature”, tackles a crucial issue in Comparative Literature and indeed in any study of literature: that of selection, of the choice of texts and authors, at the heart of operations such as the formation of canons, the construction of anthologies and syllabi. As tools to face this crucial issue, Ferreira proposes two related concepts, attention and list, explaining how the list may be seen as a product of certain forms of attention. Thanks to its potential arbitrariness and de-hierarchising power, the list is described as a means to rethink attention itself and to problematize the very act of selection well beyond the staple debates on the canon that have inflamed Comparative Literature in the last decades.

In her article “Hostile Households: Deportability and Reproductive Geography in Brown’s *Assembly* and Varvello’s ‘Brexit Blues’”, Vanessa Montesi highlights the value of literature today by arguing that literary works can contribute to interdisciplinary geopolitical debates and to social and political theory, while at the same time the tools of Comparative Literature as a discipline can become instruments of political and geographical analysis. To show such interplay in action, Montesi elaborates on the notion of “scale-bending literature”, stressing the capacity of literary texts to “reveal the reverberation of political discourse on the level of the body and the household”. The author argues for the value of literary works as powerful compositions capable of sliding between the private and the public, the individual and the social, the singularity of experience and the wider socio-historical landscape, also thanks to stylistic and narrative devices such as metaphor, repetition, or juxtaposition, that create patterns within the linearity of the unfolding story.

The sixth essay, “Comparatismo intermedial y posthumanismo: transmedialización del mito del cibernético” [Intermedial Comparatism and Posthumanism: Transmedialization of the Cyborg Myth], by Domingo Sánchez-Mesa and Nieves Rosendo, offers an overview of the use of the cyborg as a myth which has been conceptually productive in both Intermedia Studies and Posthumanism. The authors contend that Comparative Literature, as a discipline of frontiers, provides the most adequate frame for developing in-depth study on the multiple issues raised by all new entities existing on the border between the organic and the artificial. As Sánchez-Mesa and Rosendo persuasively show, the growing field of Cyborg Studies, as a relevant research line in Comparative Studies, allows for renewed attention

towards the relationship between culture and technology, as well as towards the crucial relevance of the medium in contemporary literary and artistic processes.

The idea to edit this issue of *Compendium: Journal of Comparative Studies* arose from the pedagogical and research experience the editors shared as members of the Directive Board of PhD-COMP, an international PhD programme on Comparative Studies in force at the School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Lisbon between 2015 and 2024, funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). If we take into account the diversity of the research projects developed by our PhD students, the intensity of the debates on theoretical and methodological issues we have conducted over the years, and (*et pour cause*) the contributions to this issue, we may conclude on a positive note: the systematic reflection on the relation between Literature and Comparative Studies does lead to renewed perspectives of knowledge-building in the Humanities, strikingly open to key issues in contemporary life.

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Ângela Fernandes is Associate Professor of Hispanic Studies at the Department of Romance Literatures of the School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Lisbon, where she teaches graduate and undergraduate courses on Spanish Literature and Culture, Literary Theory and Comparative Literature. Her areas of research include contemporary Spanish Literature, Iberian Comparative Studies, Literary Theory and the relations between Literature and Science. She is the author of *A Ideia de Humanidade na Literatura do Início do Século XX. Huxley, Malraux, Gómez de la Serna* (2013), and co-editor of *Looking at Iberia. A Comparative European Perspective* (2013), *ACT29. Literaturas e Culturas em Portugal e na América Hispânica. Novas perspectivas em diálogo* (2014) and *Iberian and Translation Studies: Literary Contact Zones* (2021).

Donata Meneghelli is Full Professor at the Department of Classical Philology and Italian Studies of the University of Bologna, where she teaches Literary Criticism and Comparative Literature. She works mainly on narrative and narrative theory, intermediality, literature and photography, literature and painting, cinematic adaptation, and remix culture, all subjects on which she widely published. She wrote extensively on Henry James, Balzac, Joseph Conrad, Robbe-Grillet, William Faulkner, Sophie Calle, Jane Austen. Amongst her publications: *Sequel, prequel, altre continuazioni: il testo espanso* (2018) and *Il valore degli oggetti: Segni, spoglie, scarti nel romanzo dell'Ottocento* (2024). As a creative writer, she published *Rue Lucien Sampaix* (2018; also translated in French).

Jan Baetens is Emeritus Professor of Cultural Studies at the Research Unit of Literary Studies and Cultural Studies, at KULeuven. He specializes on the analysis of so-called minor genres, such as comics and graphic novels, novelizations, and photonovels, all topics on which he has widely published, e.g. he co-edited *The Cambridge History of the Graphic Novel* (2018). He is also working in the field of poetry studies and French literary history e.g. *À Voix haute. Poésie et lecture publique* (2016) or *Illustrer Proust. Histoire d'un défi* (2022). He is also a creative author, having published some twenty collections of poetry, a novel, a nonfiction comic book.

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