

COMPARATIVE (DIGITAL) LITERATURE STUDIES FOR AN OPEN SCHOLARLY SOCIETY ON THE WEB: THE CASE OF AVANT-GARDE

Close encounters or Missing of the worlds

In the emerging studies of literature founded on the technologies of the new age - i.e. in the Digital Literary Studies, there is scarcely any mention of comparative / general / world literature whatsoever. One of the very few comprehensive publications on the subject of new researches of literature, *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies*,¹ gives a survey of theoretical and methodological traditions, procedures and problems involved in the so called "new media encounter" — meeting of the literary and the digital world. In the review of traditions, ranging from philology to modern-time textology, field of comparatism is completely forgotten. Apart from mentioning some ideas on hypertext pointed out during the ICLA conference on comparative literature and hypertext (Madrid, 2006), practically the only case of vaguely touching the subject of (methods of) comparative literature is the possibility of describing the TEI encoding standards as "an attempt to enable greater comparative study between [...] texts".²

The absence of comparatistic heritage is a peculiar fact, because comparative / general / world literature was aimed at establishing relations or common features of widest range of literary phenomena, i.e. connecting (textual) similarities on the largest scale. One of the reasons for disappearance of the original discipline - in past few decades studies of literature dissolved in culture-, gender-, (post)colonial-, sexual orientation- etc. studies, and ceased to exist, at least in the West, as a theoretical framework for comparison of concrete (textual or artistic) phenomena.³

On the other side, with rare exceptions, in the surveys of works on recent comparative literature theories and methodologies there is almost no awareness of (the full scope of the) semantic web possibilities. However, some understanding of importance of hypertext and hypermedia as

¹ Ed. Susan Schreibman and Ray Siemens. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.

² James Cummings, "The Text Encoding Initiative and the Study of Literature", in Schreibman, Siemens, Part IV: Methodologies, Chap. 25.

³ Comprehensive account of most important conceptions, methodological problems and current directions in (the history of) comparative literature can be found in recent Gvozden Eror's two volume study: *Poredbene književne studije : predmet i vokabular*. Knj. 1, Književne studije i domen komparistike, Knj. 2, Književna terminologija i domen komparistike, Pančevo : Mali Nemo, Beograd : Institut za književnost i umetnost, 2010.

technologically innovative means in the presentation of comparative research and the appropriate material, and informative-didactic tool for teaching at all levels, can be found.

Accordingly, Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek discusses on several occasions the problems of new media scholarship / technology and online publishing in the humanities today. He points out that scholars in the humanities tend to be suspicious of putting their texts on the Web and are slow to adopt new media technology; he also discusses aspects of theory with regard to the information highway and new media on one side, and practical matter such as online research, on the other. De Zepetnek hopes that while a radical change in thinking and practices is not likely to happen too soon, humanities scholars would employ, increasingly, the possibilities and the advantages – in both content and form – new media technology offers for knowledge management and scholarship in the humanities.⁴ In another paper, Tötösy de Zepetnek tries to give a brief description of the impact of new media technology on the study of literature, and more specifically, of online work and research in the humanities in general and in the study of literature in particular; his focus is on the implications of new media scholarship and technology for knowledge transfer and knowledge management.⁵

Fallacies of automatized search for relations – an example

In the field of literature studies, knowledge transfer and knowledge management by the means of new media technology tend to limit role of human expertise to simply collecting data on certain subjects and leave the rest to automatic linking. However, it seems that human interpretation of textual and art semantics is far from being obsolete. A quick test in one of the available on-line tools for interactive relationship discovery in RDF datasets: RelFinder based on DBpedia / Wikipedia,⁶ shows the deficiency of automatization of relations even in scholarly most well known literary/art topics;⁷ for example, when trying to make connection between the terms of special interest for this paper – “avant-garde”, “futurism” and “expressionism” – the results are quite unsatisfying. There is no direct link

⁴ “The New Knowledge Management and Online Research and Publishing in the Humanities”, CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, Vol. 3, Iss. 1, pp. 1-15, 2001.

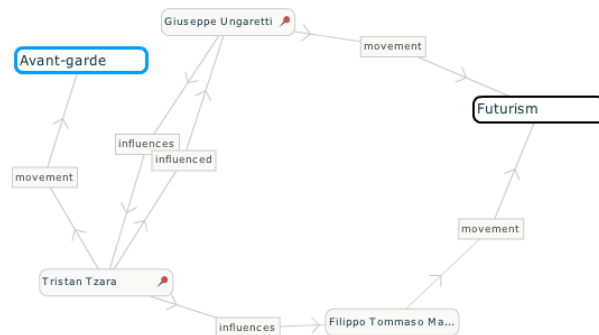
⁵ “From Comparative Literature Today toward Comparative Cultural Studies.” in *Comparative literature and comparative cultural studies* by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Purdue University Press, 2003. pp. 235-267.

⁶ <http://relfinder.dbpedia.org/relfinder.html>

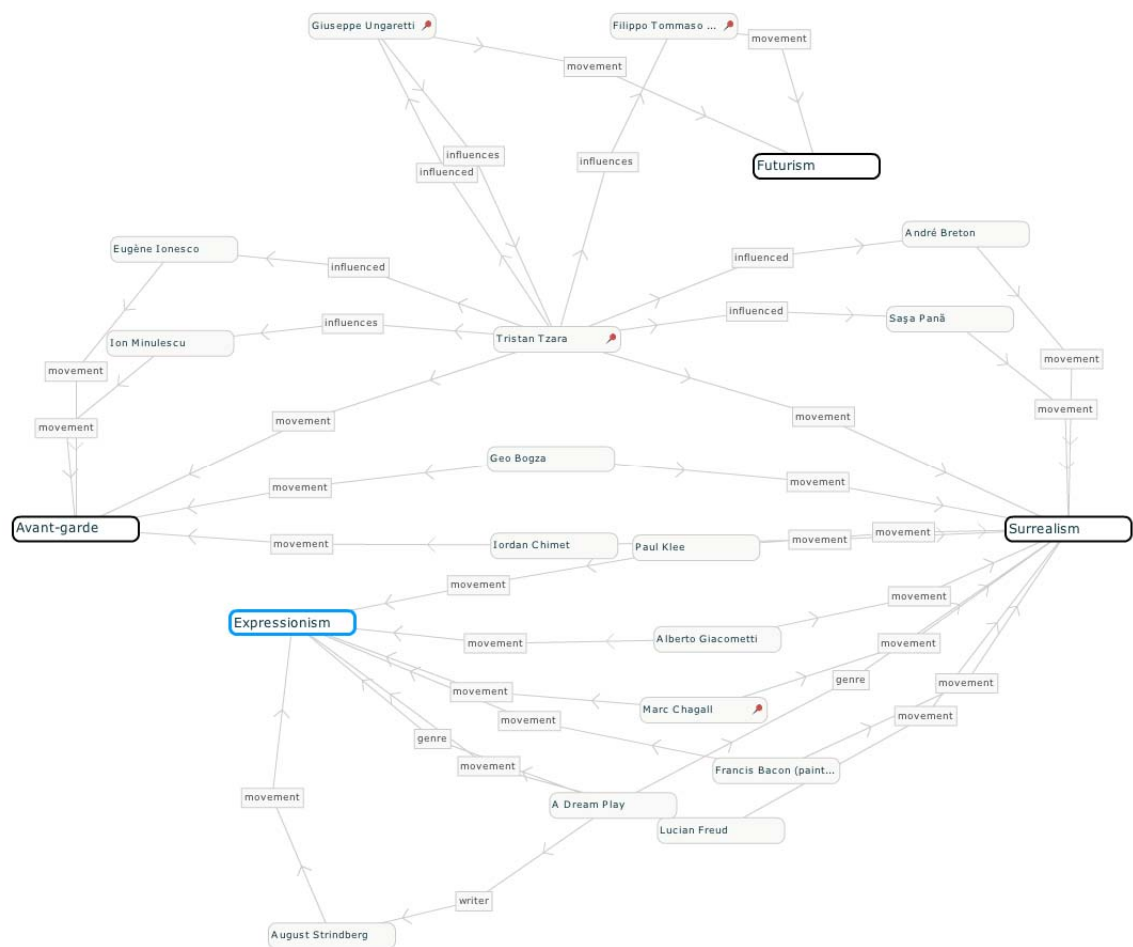
⁷ Nevertheless, the ability of this and similar digital research Finders to be integrated into specific projects / thematic collections makes them potentially very useful tools for organizing and manipulating expert datasets even in literature studies.

between “avant-garde” and “futurism”, and, furthermore, “expressionism” does not even find its place in this graph, despite the fact that it is described in the textual part on the left side as an ‘avant-garde movement’.

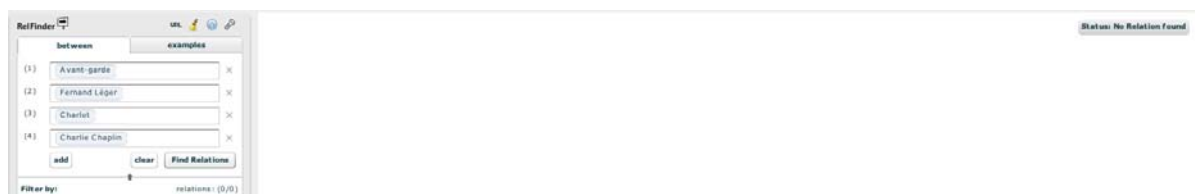
The screenshot shows the RelFinder interface with two search results. The first result is for 'Expressionism', which includes a description: 'Expressionism was a cultural movement, initially in poetry and painting, originating in Germany at the start of the 20th century. Its typical trait is to present the world under an utterly subjective perspective, violently distorting it to obtain an emotional effect and vividly transmit personal moods and ideas. Expressionist artists sought to express the meaning of "being alive" and emotional experience rather than physical reality. Expressionism emerged as an "avant-garde movement" in poetry and painting both in the First World War and the Weimar years, and was embraced by a mass audience, reaching its popularity peak in Berlin, during the 1920s. Expressionism is exhibited in many art forms, including: painting, literature, theatre, dance, film, architecture and music. The term often implies emotional angst. In a general sense, painters such as...'. The second result is for 'Avant-garde', which includes a description: 'Avant-garde means "advance guard" or "vanguard". The adjective form is used in English, to refer to people or works that are experimental or innovative, particularly with respect to art, culture, and politics. Avant-garde represents a pushing of the boundaries of what is accepted as the norm or the status quo, primarily in the cultural realm. The notion of the existence of the avant-garde is considered by some to be a hallmark of modernism, as distinct from postmodernism. Many artists have aligned themselves with the avant-garde movement and still continue to do so, tracing a...'. A blue arrow points from the 'Avant-garde' description to the 'Expressionism' description.



If one adds another member of relation, “surrealism”, situation changes significantly, gaining in complexity. Now, “expressionism” is present, related to surrealism, but still there are no relations between the original terms. Of crucial intermediary phenomena and persons, for example, like *Der Sturm* magazine, Guillaume Apollinaire, etc, there is still no mention whatsoever.



More specific cases, like relations between “Avant-garde”, “Fernand Léger”, “Charlot” and “Charlie Chaplin” results in no more or less than zero relations:



But there is another, maybe even more interesting point – if one looks at the nature of links in the more successful cases, one notices that they are of restricted kind, like passive and active influence, movement, genre, writer: the kind of relations that by tradition belong to the positivistic phase of comparative literature.

In this way, the task of collecting and describing data in separate research domains and letting the new media technology tools investigate and establish links between them with almost complete absence of human intervention shows deep similarities with the positivistic faith in the

possibility of objectively describing facts without the need of interpreting them.

Reviving Exquisite Disciplinary Cadavers

There could be another reason for meager success of (scholarly important) linking of relevant data, found in some examples of deliberate misleading / deception with the purpose of preventing and "cheating" web searches by key-words and expressions. This is the case of Haun Saussy's text with extravagant title "Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares: Of Memes, Hives, and Selfish Genes".⁸ Of course, work with such a title is dedicated to analyzing the present and future status of comparative literature on US universities. Saussy points out simultaneous success and failure of comparativism - the ability to spread itself onto virtually every field of literature and cultural study, but losing its distinctive methodological and theoretical features. For this reason, the death of the discipline has been announced more than once.

Speaking of literature on the Internet, Saussy make some interesting observation about the nature of on-line search results. He stresses that the world according to Google is vast, and getting vaster all the time, given the fact that whole libraries are being scanned into its database, and instantly searchable all the way to its farthest recesses. However, Saussy finds that its intellectual landscape looks rather flat: far flatter than the flattened hierarchies that knowledge industry corporations were supposed to build for themselves through spontaneous organization. "A keyword occurs (or does not); it occurs on a page that is more or less frequently consulted, more or less often the goal of links on other pages, in greater or lesser proximity to other keywords, more or less highly ranked in a reputational algorithm that depends on following the behavior of other users of Google."⁹

Saussy asserts that in the heart of Google's leveling the world of text to high degree ("no 'privileging' or aestheticizing, just 'results'") lies the idea that a wider context will take care of hermeneutic problems: this kind of attitude takes for granted that text and context are co-present, "really," in certain precritical fashion that would allow for a positivistic style of reading. The problem is, however, could the right questions be posed in such a positivistic setting, among endless quantitative correlations or preestablished categories narrowing down into preestablished subcategories?¹⁰

About the future prospects of comparative literature, Saussy points out that one of the most successful strategies of comparative literature has

⁸ *Comparative literature in an age of globalization*, JHU Press, 2006, pp. 3-42.

⁹ Saussy, p. 32.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 33

been interdisciplinarity. Thus comparatism teaches to adjust to multiple frames of reference and to attend to relations rather than givens. And for the possibility of Comparative Digital Literary Studies, which is however not present in his considerations, one could conclude with Saussy that it is "always the season for rendering accounts in this most successful and most phantom-like of humanities disciplines; time we went knocking on doors and announced ourselves to all the disciplines that have borrowed our patterns of thinking."¹¹

Establishing relations. Finding the meaning

The need for Comparative Digital Literary Studies, in the full scope of experiences of its classical predecessor's intertextual and interdisciplinary research, has its origins firstly in the methodological and theoretical necessity emerged from dealing with complex research phenomena. In spite of theories of textual deconstruction and disorientation, in the history of European (and World) literature there are texts, genres and traditions clearly oriented towards other texts, genres and traditions, forming tightly interwoven contextual relations. Sub-genre of *voyage fantastique*, the *Trip to the Moon*, for example, attracted a string of authors like Plato, Plutarch, Lucian, Dante, Ariosto, Kepler, Godwin, de Bergerac, Defoe, Raspe, Sterija Popović, Verne, Wells, etc). Their texts constitute transnational tradition from antiquity to modernity, connected to multiple literary-historical and poetical aspects the genres of serious-comical literature (Menippean satire) and carnevalization, the Utopian, religious and mythic view(s) of the world, the fantastic (cosmic) voyage, the roots of SF literature, as well as to aesthetic-poetical problems of the relationship between fictional and fictitious, truth and lie, the probable and the possible in literary form.

Among many others, this one example of research field and type of knowledge represents a specific multidisciplinary task of/for the comparative literature, and can't be achieved by confining research to boundaries of singular authors, literatures or periods. Furthermore, this range of research and knowledge cannot be carried out nor published in a digital form appropriate for electronic scholarly use without the intervention of comparative literature experts. Waiting for the relevant semantic relations to automatically establish themselves from works of Lucian of Samosata – even digitally published in an appropriate e-philology way – to texts of other authors could take even longer than waiting for works of literature to translate themselves by methods of Machine translation.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 36.

So, the need Comparative Digital Literary Studies also emerges from the intrinsic demands of scholarly organization of material and societies on the web – construction of substantial and meaningful inner and outer structure(s) and relevant links enriching the semantic layer with non-positivistic aspects.

Also, from the e-learning point of view, there are unmatched possibilities of presentation / transfer of knowledge on diverse primary sources, highly economical in terms of finding and accessing the material and shaping it in an instructive scholarly way. For that purpose, the interdisciplinarity of comparative literature is of utmost importance.

The ultimate comparative research challenge – European avant-garde

One of the most challenging but at the same time most adequate and rewarding research fields for both Comparative literature and Comparative Digital Literary Studies is European avant-garde.

Historical avant-garde (period from the end of the first decade of XXth century until the Second World War) is much more than research construct or mere aggregate of literary and artistic movements or stylistic formation(s) of one provisory spatiotemporal stratum. It's a proper culture, highly complex literary-artistic-socio-historical phenomenon that could serve as a real-life foundation for comparative digital literature study and semantic web of avant-garde literature and art.

Avant-garde is an occurrence that transgresses boundaries of nations, languages and states. It is one of the rare examples of spontaneous and genuine European (cultural / artistic) projects, with range from Siberia to England (and further, to the USA and Japan) in spite of war(s) and ideological, religious and political differences.

As such, it represents a dynamic unity of different kinds and levels of features, at the same time centripetal and centrifugal, deconstructive and constructive, innovative and traditional, including movements/groups, individual authors, literary and theoretical texts, individual and collective works of arts, magazines, performances, etc.

Avant-garde Thematic Research Collection

One century after the appearance of the avant-garde tendencies in Europe, there are still no adequate studies of the research field on the European level: even more, there are no comprehensive collections of primary material. For example, all-inclusive printed anthology of the most important avant-garde genre of all – manifesto – doesn't exist on the European level (in original languages, let alone in translation). This

absence provides an excellent opportunity for the founding of the Digital avant-garde repository, with all the experience of scholarly e-publishing and inter-linking original texts and its translations in several major languages.

Further segments of collection of avant-garde works belong practically to every art existing in the first decades of XX century – literature, fine arts, theatre, opera, music, photography, and film. These works transgress boundaries of genres in individual arts (manifestos are at the same time programmatic and artistic texts, mixtures of prose and verse in works), and also limits of different artistic media (illustrated books, avant-garde magazines, Kino-Gedichte Bühnenkomposition, Gesamtkunstwerk).

Relations between all these components are numerous and complex, and that provides possibilities to construct stratified multi-linked digital repository that could incorporate complementary – but also contrary or contradictory – knowledge(s). Scholarly (comparative) tying things together would in that way be present in two forms – in classical form of discourse/analyses of avant-garde in (digitally published) papers, and in semantically relevant links, that are intrinsically found in the avant-garde phenomenon. Both range from formal analysis of works to shedding the light on personal ties, group dynamics, relation of artistic movements, influences, common inspirations, etc, of importance for better interpretation of the meaning and intellectual and artistic achievements.

Consequently, avant-garde repository should be innerly analogous with the demands of thematic research collections, i.e. to be electronic; made of heterogeneous datatypes; extensive but thematically coherent; structured but open-ended; designed to support research; authored or multi-authored; interdisciplinary; should consist of collections of digital primary resources.¹²

For this purpose, existing digital libraries, like *The International Dada Archive* of [The University of Iowa Libraries](http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/collection.html) – with its *Digital Dada Library Collection* (<http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/collection.html>) – could be seamlessly incorporated in the core of avant-garde thematic research collection(s) by semantic links pointing to the chosen material, thus avoiding problems of copyrights and reproduction/publishing issues.

Leaving the boundaries of avant-garde as synchronic occurrence, thematic collection should make references to diachronic connections, pointing out intellectual / literary / artistic traditions that lead to / are activated in avant-garde (primitivism, medieval and baroque art, for

¹² A Companion to Digital Humanities, ed. Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, John Unsworth. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004. 24. Thematic Research Collections, Carole L. Palmer.

example). Also, it would show how the post-modern era established critical dialogue with the main contributions of avant-garde.

Returning to the previous example of unsuccessful search for relations between “Avant-garde”, “Fernand Léger” “Charlot” and “Charlie Chaplin”, avant-garde thematic research collection created by scholars should reveal the importance of the Charlot-figure for the avant-garde as a whole, both as a representative of the new – cinematographic – art (thus the subject in numerous manifestos and articles), and even an important part of some poetic ideas. It should then link the film's French original title “Charlot présente le ballet mécanique”, emblematic use of Charlot in the movie and Léger’s paintings with numerous other occurrences in avant-garde magazines from France over Yugoslavia to Russia. “Ballet mécanique” on the other side should point to the role of experimental music of George Antheil in the film and efforts to produce multi-sided work of art. That should link back first to the “Skating Rink” (1922), Swedish opera (for which Fernand Léger created backdrop) inspired by the Italian Futurist poet Riciotto Canudo's 1920 work where he describes a skating rink in the poorer section of Paris, enabling ordinary people to enter a world of fantasy, and, of course, inspired by Chaplin's film “The Rink” (1916). Secondly, it should link back to the thematizing of Charlot in literature of Ivan Goll /“Die Chapliniade”/, Aragon, Mayakovski, Mandelstam and numerous others, parallel to the tendencies to achieve hybrid form of film and poem.

Further Possibilities

One of the specific benefits of avant-garde thematic research collection organized on the principles of Digital Comparative Literature Studies is offering to the e-student (e-reader) immediate possibility of choosing alternative interpretations of the same phenomena based on the direct experiencing and linking/comparing (digitalized) primary resources. For example, works of one of the leading figures of Serbian avant-garde, Rastko Petrović, are perfectly suitable for ‘classical’ comparative analysis of influences and real-life ties. They also permit structuralist approach to the texts, establishing constants in language and thematic strata and stressing structural semantic relations in the whole of his opus. Last but not the least, Petrović is one of the rare authors whose works allow more than justified use of a number of post-structuralist methods, like gender and body studies, post-colonial research, relations between self and other, gay and lesbian criticism, etc.

Methodologically, in classical paper-like comparative literature study it's impossible to implement all of these approaches at the same time and get comprehensible results. In Comparative Digital Literary Studies

however, complementary/alternate/competing approaches present in the branched out links could be superimposed and displayed with a kind of RelFinder-like tool, only finer-grained and 3-dimensional. Directly choosing and comparing lines of different methodological assumptions and research results should widen the comprehension of semantic complexity of interpretational potentials and show the scope and depth of cultural context(s) in which the texts (can) operate.

This could also lead to some discoveries specific for the Comparative Digital Literary Studies, like finding distinctive places (“knots”) of semantic importance, in which structure of text / work show particularly dense multifaceted semantic fields.

Thus, the avant-garde thematic research collection as a result of Comparative Digital Literary Studies is a promising possibility for reviving comparative literature studies, enriching and dynamizing often inert and short-ranged linking of positivistic and automatized digital repositories, and, finally, for founding the real Open Scholarly Community on the Web.

Literature

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Keywords: *Comparative (Digital) Literature Studies, semantic relations/links, semantic web, thematic research collection, avant-garde*

Abstract: *This paper stresses the need of the emerging Digital Literary Studies to implement theoretical and methodological traditions, procedures and problems of comparative / general / world literature. Full scope of experiences of intertextual and interdisciplinary research is necessary for studying of complex research phenomena, establishing relevant semantic relations and creating Thematic Research Collections ready for e-learning and founding the real Open Scholarly Community on the Web. European avant-garde is seen as one of the most challenging rewarding research fields for both Comparative literature and Comparative Digital Literary Studies.*

Rezime: *U radu se polazi od činjenice da su uporedno proučavanje književnosti i studije književnosti zasnovane na novim tehnologijama ostale razdvojene: metodologija, teorija i problematika komparatistike nije našla primenu u digitalnom izučavanju književnosti dok su komparatisti ostali gotovo potpuno nesvesni istraživačkih mogućnosti koje im pruža informatičko doba.*

Dalje se postulira nužnost primene komparatističkog iskustva sa ciljem oblikovanja uporednog digitalnog proučavanja književnosti, za složene predmete proučavanja poput evropske avangarde. Odbacuje se mogućnost automatskog povezivanja građe u semantičke veze i ističe nezamenjivost stručnog komparatističkog pristupa kroz intertekstualnost, interdisciplinarnost, intermedijanost. Na primeru avangarde pokazuje se mogućnost sinhronijskog i dijahonijskog povezivanja građe u digitalnu tematsku zbirku, kao i mogućnost istovremenog postojanja različitih, često i suprotstavljenih, interpretacijskih modela od koristi za e-učenje. Na kraju se opisuju zahtevi postavljeni pred avangarnu tematsku istraživačku zbirku i upućuje se na istraživačka pitanja specifična za digitalnu komparatistiku.