Conceptual and Methodological Challenges in Writing Cross-Cultural Literary History: Reflections on Two Recent International Projects

Elske v. P. Smith Lecturer Award Address

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My purpose is not to argue that conceptual history ought to supersede all other methods, but rather how to show how it complements many of them. The interest and significance of cross-cultural transfers are heightened when considered from different angles of vision, and studied through more than one mode of analysis. Melvin Richter, “Conceptual History, Translation, and Intercultural Conceptual Transfers” (169)

1. The Relevance of Conceptual History to Multicultural Literary Studies

A little further in the same essay, Richter argues that conceptual history is “an unique form of knowledge, providing detailed accounts and explanations of both continuities and key shifts in the conceptual vocabularies, normative and descriptive, of politics, government and society” (169). I want to argue that “conceptual history,” especially in its focus on the transformations of political, social and linguistic structures, has been relevant also for several recent efforts to move literary history beyond traditional narratives that treat individual authors, texts, genres, and styles within frozen national(istic) and temporal frameworks. What is needed is a reconceptualization of literary history that would, in the manner argued by Reinhart Koselleck (in “Social History and Begriffsgeschichte” and elsewhere), interface a history of concepts with the history of discourses and forms. The two approaches are not incompatible but rather complementary: literary analysis, like conceptual analysis, requires attention to both linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts (Kosellek, “Response to Comments on the Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe” 64). Such a reconceptualization of literary history will restore the dynamic dimension of concepts, artifacts, and styles analyzed, reminding us that they are “complex,
ambiguous, controversial and contested” (64), as Kosellek himself has demonstrated in his introduction and contributions to the multivolume dictionary Geschichtlichen Grundbegriffe (Basic Concepts in History, 1972-1997), which emphasize how the logic of conceptualization changes over time in the process of modernization. In similar ways, a transcultural literary history should call into question unitary descriptions of historical and cultural periods, demonstrating that both the literary phenomena described and the concepts used to frame them have no fixed contents but are changing entities.

Much like Kosellek’s own historical projects, the examples of literary histories that I will describe in this talk offer “contextual accounts of how key concepts [and forms, I would add] came into existence, were modified, or became transformed, always understanding that these concepts were fiercely contested” (Richter, “Conceptual History” 184). Like Richter, I am interested in the transformations that literary concepts and messages undergo as they are transferred between cultures (a central issue in several essays and in a section of volume 3 of the History of Literary Cultures in East-Central Europe); but also transferred between media, as demonstrated in the new project on New Literary Hybrids in the Age of Multimedia Expression published at the end of last year. As Richter argues, “If conceptual transfers between cultures are to be studied in ways that capture the complexity of the multi-faceted process of exchange and adaptation …, then the effects of translation must be considered in terms of reception, just as much as the strategies adopted by translators to convey the meaning of the original text” (201). This is exactly what we do in our two histories, in which translation between cultures and media plays a major role.

2. Argument for a Prismatic and Multicultural Model of Literary History
Literature itself provides a mode of cultural contact and has done so for centuries.... In addition to offering direct figurations of otherness and cultural contact, literary texts actually deploy complex discursive strategies and aesthetic devices in order to mediate these fictional cultural encounters for their readers. Thus they form part of the cultural politics toward otherness, including the cultural imaginary which they help continually to reshape.

Gabriele Schwab, *The Mirror and the Killer-Queen* (39)

Under the altered post-1989 conditions, which have phased out the traditional polarizations between Eastern and Western Europe, but have at times replaced them with nationalistic and ethnocentric ideologies that promote no less violent divisions between countries and regions, most of us working in the field of literary and cultural studies have become increasingly mindful of the need to provide new ways to conceptualize and relate cultures—comparing, translating, and interfacing traditionally separate entities. Focusing on “cultural contacts” is even more important today than during the Cold War period: literary history must venture into new areas, acting as a corrective both to narrow ethnocentric treatments of culture, but also to the counter-theories of globalism that erase distinctions between individual cultures.

Literary history—Priscilla Wald reassures us in her review of the *New Literary History of America*, edited by Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors (2009)—is not at all a dead activity. Genres, like disciplines, are dynamic, as is the concept of the literary” (1). As she explains further, the guiding principle of the *New Literary History of America* is prismatic, assembling various disciplinary perspectives and offering a “carnival of style, voice, and topic.” The various chapters in it “function as individual vignettes, moments in time that readily form connections to other vignettes and help the reader see constellations among eras” (1).

The prismatic, multicultural and to some extent multimedia model of literary history that Wald attributes to the *New Literary History of America* has been anticipated and developed more boldly in a few recent histories, including the *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central*
Europe (2004-2010). This four-volume work edited by John Neubauer and myself responds to the momentous events that have unfolded since the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, offering the first transnational study of the cultural and literary region that stretches from the Baltic countries to Bulgaria and Albania and from the Ukraine and Moldova in the East to the Czech Republic in the West. In the words of a recent reviewer, the task pursued by the joint work of more than 130 contributors from Europe, United States, Canada, and Australia, is to re-conceptualize literary traditions in the [East-Central European] region by deconstructing national myths and focusing on common themes, thereby opening up perspectives which are routinely overlooked in traditional national literary histories. […] The richness of the material makes up for occasional unevenness, and such shortcomings do not spoil the fact that the History is a trendsetter and launches a novel route into the subject, one which scholars will want to follow and explore in the future. (Monika Baár 468-69, 471)

Inspired initially by the comparative-intercultural approach to literary history outlined in Mario J. Valdes and Linda Hutcheon’s 1995 position paper and applied to the sister project on Latin American Literatures by Linda Hutcheon, Djelal Kadir, and Mario J. Valdés (1996), both our theoretical thinking and our practical work has gone through several versions over a period of fifteen years. It is not hard to imagine why a work that proposes to cover two eventful centuries in the evolution of a score of literatures from several different language areas (the Baltics, the Balkans, Slavic Central Europe, non-Slavic Moldova, Romania, Hungary, and Albania) and which has required some hundred-and-thirty contributors to map the exchanges between them, has periodically raised quasi-insurmountable problems for us. Both John and I have from the start been aware not only of the enormity of this undertaking, but also of the polemical nature of its conception, challenging traditional literary histories based on national and even text-oriented premises (we focus on other media as well, such as theater, opera, and occasionally visual art, and discuss literature in a broad sociopolitical context). Moving beyond the boundaries of
national literatures, historical trends, and generic divisions, seeking instead those "junctures" or "nodes" that allow for a cross-cultural interpretation, this history upset at times both national sensitivities and narrow aesthetic or text-oriented concerns.

It is true, however, that neither John nor I have been known to shy away from a bit of creative controversy. As we argued in our 2002 ACLA position paper, the conceptual approach we chose as editors for this history

rejects the positivist and orthodox Marxist traditions that regard literature as a mimetic reflection of an underlying ‘reality,’ ‘internalist’ histories that isolate the discipline from the surrounding culture, Hegelian, organicist, and teleological generalizations of periods and cultures, reductive national perspectives, and, last but not least, histories dominated by ‘grand narratives’. (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, Towards a History 1)

In place of all these, we decided to emphasize “crossings” and “nodes” that bring together various traditions,

deconstructing national identities. [They] point up internal differences and suggest that the apparently consistent structure turns out to be hybrid upon closer inspection. What the national literature projects tended to ignore, or label as alien ‘contamination’ or ‘corruption,’ is shown here to be no less indigenous. In this last conception of the nodal, the meeting points become intra-national points of dispersion. Literary works, authors, regions, and ideas are more complex and multi-faceted than their reductive images within the national projects. (36)

Building on the theoretical suggestions offered by Valdés and Hutcheon (1995), we decided to organize our history around five kinds of “nodes” – temporal, generic, topographic, institutional, and figural – conceived by us and our contributors as points of contact or interfaces at which various literatures, genres, and historical moments come together, transcending national definitions. The nodal approach has offered us a more flexible model for the discussion of literature in a continually shifting geo-cultural environment such as that of East-Central Europe.

In both its theoretical premises and in its applications, our work converges not only with the perspectives of Foucault, Lyotard, and Hayden White on the contested nature of historical
construction, or Dennis Hollier’s effort to retrieve the “heterogeneity that escapes the linearity of traditional literary histories” (xix) in his multi-perspectivist New History of French Literature (1989), but also with Koselleck’s emphasis on historiography as a dynamic discourse that foregrounds historicity both in society and in language.


The ECE History seeks to replace organic conceptions of literary history with an understanding of cultural evolution as nontotalizable, open to potentially limitless “mappings,” to borrow J. Hillis Miller’s terms from his essay on Wallace Stevens’s topographies. As Miller puts it, a given mapping is always provisional, “infinitely variable, always open to revision.” The different mappings can be thought of as “superimposed on one another and on the landscape, like different navigations through a hypertext” (Topographies 281). While we do not understand “limitless” in an absolute way, we do share Miller’s “not so totalizing or totalitarian” view, which replaces organic narratives of national cultures with open-ended “hypertexts” that interplay different frames of reference and interpretive perspectives. Such an approach is particularly important in today’s political climate, in which resurrected nationalist and ethnocentric concepts of culture vie with globalist ones. Though seemingly opposed, both the globalist and the ethnocentric models prefer “organicist” narratives, unified either by some Romantic notion of ethnic and linguistic purity or by a Western trust in late-capitalist global markets. We have proposed to rearticulate East-Central European literary history around a transnational approach that foregrounds disjunctures as much as junctures, emphasizing the interplay of specific regional features without dissolving them in a universal melting pot.
In the process, we have reconceptualized rather than erased national histories: bringing them into a dialogue with one another, we have foregrounded the minority literatures, the transnational German and Yiddish text, and we have given special attention to multilingual figures, translations, and other modes of cultural mediation. We have also taken "literary culture" as our subject, trying to navigate between the Scylla of internalist (or formalist) history and the Charybdis of a broad cultural approach.

In effect, our history consists of a great many *microhistories*, i.e., of localized, perspectival, and situated stories that cannot be easily read as illustrations of an overarching organic system. More specifically, we "scan" the last two centuries of literary production five times, looking at the region’s literary cultures each time from a different angle or through a different “node.” Vol. 1 (2004) contains two of the five parts. In Part I, the nodes are crucial dates or date clusters in political history. Deployed in reverse order to avoid the impression that the region’s history unfolded in a necessary and predictable way, the temporal nodes (1989, 1968, 1956, 1948, 1945, 1918, 1867/1878/1881, 1848, and 1776/1789) emerge as “nonhomogeneous” entities that connect cultures across national boundaries while at the same time allowing them to experience similar events with different rhythms and directions of development. In Part II, the traditional concepts of literary history -- genre, movement, and period -- serve as nodes, though we treat them with a degree of skepticism: we regard them as temporary and impure crystallizations of literary life and focus on the dynamics of their transformations instead of their imagined essences. Instead of seeking the "core" of a national or regional genre (the "essence" of Polish lyric poetry or the Romanian realist novel), we focus on "boundary transgressions," highlighting the emergence of new genres like the reportage, the
lyrical novel, the fictionalized autobiography, parody, and literary theory, or examining literature’s interplay with other media in the subsection on opera and film.

In Part III (volume 2, 2006) the nodes are topographical: we consider the literary culture of multinational cities, border areas, (sub-)regions, and the Danube corridor, exploring in particular how shifting ethnic compositions yield different literary maps of geographical space. By remapping the literary production across traditional ethnic and national borders (as we do in our discussion of Ashkenaz culture) we emphasize the role that these hybrid sites have played in diversifying and pluralizing national literatures. Part IV (volume 3, 2007), subtitled The Making and Remaking of Literary Institutions, considers the impact of various literary institutions (theater, folklore, universities, academies, multicultural magazines and journals, translation, and literary history as a genre) on the development of East-Central European literatures, while Part 5 (vol. 4, 2010), entitled Types and Stereotypes, focuses on the representation of real and imaginary figures such as the national poet, familial figures, figures of female identity, figures of others, figures of outlaws, figures of trauma, and figures of mediators. Many of these figures have experienced forms of territorial and cultural displacement, have historically been challenged by hegemonic groups (national minorities in general), or have been excluded from any existing territorial belonging through an arbitrary process of othering (the Romany).

Volume 4 ends with an Epilogue that pursues the region’s history beyond 1989, the final nodal point of our project. The Epilogue is particularly interested in the movement of writers across borders, as new forms of exile and cultural mobility are emerging after 1989. For some writers, this meant straddling languages, cultural experiences, and geographic boundaries, in order to promote what Franca Sinopoli has called a “poetics of intercultural translation” (“Migrazione/letteratura”). To a considerable extent, the history of literature in East-Central
Europe has been alternating between exile and problematic returns: from the exodus of the great Polish romantics of the nineteenth century, to the writers who left Hungary in fear of the white terror in 1919, the refugees fleeing Hitler, and the exiles fleeing Communism. After 1989, renewed anti-Semitism and violence against minorities, especially the Roma, forced a number of writers, among them Imre Kertész, to move full time or part time to the West. As John Neubauer and Zsuzsanna Borbála Török’s 2009 book on *The Exile and Return of Writers from East-Central Europe* makes clear, the saga of exile is not yet over; it merely assumes new modalities.

In the current context of lingering interethnic conflicts and divisions around the world, our *History of ECE Literary Cultures* challenges the isolation of national literatures, recontextualizes cultures from a regional perspective, relativizes national myths, and recovers works, writers, and minority literatures that have been marginalized or ignored. The good news is that our effort to retrieve the idea of a multicultural “Third Europe” as a buffer between countries with hegemonic ambitions and a response to local ethnocentrisms are being undertaken in East-Central Europe by several groups of scholars, some (e.g., those associated with the University of Sofia, the Slovenian Institutum Studiorum Humanitatis, the Bucharest “New Europe Institute,” the Timişoara “Third Europe” group, or the Central European University in Budapest), discussed also in our History. For these scholars and institutions, East-Central Europe is not a fault line (as some Western thinkers continue to believe), but a “region of convergences” (Victor Neumann, *Tentaţia* 223), a “Third Europe” of negotiation between east and west, central and peripheral, global and local. As Fausto Bedoya has argued in a recent review of vol. 4 of our History, the work we have proposed has larger implications for a “rethinking European literary history” in the post-Cold War transition:

> generating an alternate and collaborative form of critical discourse on literary developments, while conceptualizing regional histories within a transnational
context,” the *H.L.C.E.C.E.* “moves beyond conventional, linear literary histories thereby establishing this volume as a hallmark not only for studies in East Central European Literature, but as a model for global literary study. (79)

4. Transculturality and Multimedia

In the past, literacy has chiefly meant alphabetic literacy. That meaning has dominated because the chief technologies of literacy, especially the early printing press, have privileged the written language over all other forms of semiosis. [. . .] Today’s definition of literacy] includes visual, electronic and (for want of better terminology) non-verbal or gestural or social literacies.

Nancy Kaplan, “E-literacies” (3, 13, 15, 28)

… [D]iscussions of cultural conceptual transfers necessarily involve differences among natural languages, forms of writing and argument, rhetorics, and structures of authority, as well as the media through which texts are transmitted in the source and target societies respectively.

Richter, “Conceptual History” (193)

My newest project, titled *New Literary Hybrids in the Age of Multimedia Expression: Crossing Borders, Crossing Genres* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2014), is informed by a similar desire to cross not only geocultural borders but also genres and in this case even media. Part of the History of the Literatures in European Languages sponsored by the ICLA, this project recognizes the global shift toward the visual and the virtual in all areas of textuality. Historically, textual study meant writing and reading verbal texts in the medium of print. The final decades of the twentieth century, however, witnessed an explosion of new media forms—notably the internet, television, video, graphic and mixed media and digitized sound—as well as a worldwide shift towards the visual, the mass-produced, and the virtual text. This shift has opened up new domains of human achievement in art and culture. It has also generated new ways of understanding the art and culture of the past, which have suddenly appeared more closely integrated with their medium (the book, the manuscript, the gallery, the museum) than was realized before.
These massive technological shifts have inspired enthusiastic praises but also appropriate caveats. We are clearly, as David B. Downing and James J. Sosnoski argued in 1994, “in a period of transition, a moment when the modes and the technology for cultural reproduction are shifting, this time from print to electronic environments which opens new possibilities for freedom as well as oppression” (10). Theorists are divided over the effects of the new technologies. Cyberutopianists like Ted Nelson, George P. Landow, and a few others, believe that the new electronic technologies will liberate us, advancing our cognitive and expressive horizons through borderless multisequential texts. By contrast, “[c]yberdistopians […] fear that the use of technology will destroy the cultures that we inhabit” (Downing and Sosnoski 16). They further warn that “technology has created not only a new division of society between onliners and offliners but also a new form of ‘capital.’ Social status may soon be marked by access to information” (Idem, 14). Most other theorists have articulated a more balanced position, between the claims of “liberation” from “all arbitrary fixity and stability of the print culture” and the awareness of the “constraints of the computer system and … of the writing system the computer embodies” (Jay Bolter 59-60).

The digital divide was more pronounced in the 1990s, at the beginning of the transition from “a predominantly print environment toward a predominantly electronic one” (Downing and Sosnoski 18). Today, a literate public is more accustomed to write and read in multiply-defined textual media. More recent theoretical evaluations have emphasized the contribution that the internet, text-based media, and interactive media are making to reading and writing. As Mads Rosendahl Thomsen argues, “the future of writing and reading looks much better with these newly blended media, as opposed to the once dominant dichotomy of text versus images” (30). He also points out that a few decades earlier, writers were already involved in other media, participating in the theater and film productions of their work:

Where Beckett took part in the productions of his plays, Nabokov himself wrote
the screenplay for Stanley Kubrick’s adaptation of *Lolita*, and both can be seen as transitional figures from Modernism to Post-Modernism, both in their use of media and in their attitude towards the world. (Thomsen 83)

More recently, writers from various cultures have taken advantage of the current computer-saturated environment producing hypertexts, hypermedia installations, and animated works that stretch the definition of textuality, moving beyond the verbal to the visual, aural, and kinetic.

These shifts have been aided by the new hypertext and networked communication technologies emerging over the past three decades. The new electronic technologies have allowed us to interact with the text more closely, highlighting its associative/dissociative impulses and enriching its structures with layers of annotations, linked intertexts, and “winding paths” of signifiers. They have also given a concrete shape to Roland Barthes’s prophetic announcement of the “plural text.” As he argued in *S/Z* (1970), in the plural text “the networks are many and interact, without any of them being able to surpass the rest,” turning the text into a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extent as far as the eye can reach, they are interminable. (5-6)

This type of plural text was already illustrated by the work of B.S. Johnson (*The Unfortunates*, 1969) or Italo Calvino (*If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, 1979), who wrote novels in sections that can be shuffled and read in random order, producing different versions of the narrative.

Electronically-assisted textual production has taken this process even further, replacing the linear logic of reading and writing with the creative “logic of patterning”: “The writer and the reader do not discover or recognize a preexisting pattern; rather, they make patterns possible” (Travis 9).

The new communication technologies have not only enhanced the interplay of literature and other media but have challenged the very definition of verbal literature. The contributors to the volume on *New Literary Hybrids in the Age of Multimedia Expression* recognize the global
shift toward the visual and the virtual in all areas of textuality, but also the new responsibilities that this creates. Analysts usually describe the internet as a participatory space, facilitating free and oftentimes anonymous participation and therefore fostering equality. Recent studies on internet chat rooms highlight the notion of agency and identify this medium as a site for transnational connections and the development of an idealized public sphere. (McMillin 159)

One of the unexpected developments during the recent round of Balkan conflicts was the grassroots use of the internet and video technologies, especially by Bosnian women, to report on the atrocities of war. In the absence of any reliable newscasts out of Bosnia, their blogs did more than feed a voyeuristic proclivity in their readers: they were also a “responsive phenomenon” (Ringrose and Baghdad 308), but in the sense that they responded to larger civic needs for information and narratives of the real. At the same time, while we celebrate the expansion and diversification of electronic modes of communication, we should remain cognizant of the role that digital technologies have in both promoting and limiting the effects of the emerging textualities.

A major emphasis in our new volume is on literary production and expression in multimedia environments. Literature remains an important focus, even as its modes of manifestation expand to include new hybrids that stretch the definition of what is “literary.” The four-volume History of East-Central European Cultures also foregrounded a range of multimodal literary forms, from emblem literature to new genres such as concrete poetry, graphic novels, strips, hypertexts, performances, installations, and other “combined and simultaneously displayed artforms in which literary texts function as one component” (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer 1: 513). As John Neubauer explains further in his Introduction to the section on “Histories of Multimedia Constructions,” the
criterion of simultaneity excludes artforms in which literature merely served as a point of departure or inspiration but does not appear in the final form; similarly, it does not include the various forms of *ekphrasis*, i.e., literary descriptions of visual art objects, and *verbal music*, i.e., verbal representations of real or imaginary music. (513)

In the present volume we do include forms of *ekphrasis* at least to the extent they break down the boundary between arts, allowing the interpenetration of discourses as in the contamination of literary descriptions with elements of other artistic discourses. We are also interested in the parallel and often uneven evolution of the various arts, calling into question their undifferentiated treatment in the name of globalization.

Clearly, globalization is not something to be taken lightly. As Gayatri Spivak reminds us, while cyberliteracy may be “an excellent, enticing, and seductive wonderful thing,” the “invasion of the unmediated, so-called, cyberliteracy in the subaltern sphere is deeply frightening” (Hedge and Radha 285). Though Spivak may be overstating the case, we do need to submit the call for globalization to a careful critique. We should also emphasize—as a number of articles submitted to our volume do—the fact that global messages are often filtered through regional or local interests that create hybrids, both thematically and formally. As D. C. McMillin also argues, global channels have resorted, especially of late, to “strategies of hybridization, dubbing, cloning, and collaging” (103) in an effort to win over Third World markets. Conversely, Third World countries have employed new media with a postcolonial, regional edge to “build community and create spaces for subaltern empowerment” (197). Eurocentrism itself has been complicated of late through the infusion of multicultural and multimedia messages. This was evident already to Ella Shohat and Robert Stam who in their 1994 book, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, advocate a polycentric form of multiculturalism that foregrounds exchanges between Europe and its Others. Occasionally, they call attention to
the hybridity of the European media themselves, their “cultural mixing: religious (syncretism); biological (hybridity); human-genetic (mestizaje); and linguistic (creolization)” (41).

Our project on *New Literary Hybrids in the Age of Multimedia Expression* foregrounds various examples of creative “entanglements of the global, regional, national, and local” (Chopra and Gajjala 11), emphasizing the hybridity of the European media and their messages, especially evident in sub-regions of Europe such as Scandinavia, East-Central Europe and Southern Europe. In discussing East-Central European cybertextuality (see my own article, “New Literary Hybrids in the Age of Multimedia Expression: The Case of ‘Post-Colonial’ East-Central Europe”), we challenge the lingering construction of a unidirectional world system that relays advanced Western multimedia technologies to non-Western and postcolonial peripheries, as in the “Hollywoodcentrism” that Shohat and Stam (29) attribute to much global film. Shohat and Stam underscore the uneven distribution of messages from the First World to the Third, but when they argue that “Each imperial filmmaking country had its own imperial genres set in ‘darkest Africa, the mysterious East,’ and the ‘stormy Caribbean’” (109), we need to factor Eastern Europe (especially the Balkans) into this orientalizing tradition. Some of the films mentioned by Shohat and Stam (especially *Red Dawn*, 1984) take us to Eastern Europe, with the “Cubans, the Soviets, and the (presumably Sandinista) Nicaraguans” taking “over the functional slot of the Indians” in the Western tradition (123). Likewise *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971) extends the orientalizing treatment to the Eastern European Jews in their old shetl culture.

We need to challenge the “Hollywoodcentrism” and any other paradigm that emphasizes the uneven distribution of messages from the West to the European peripheries. But we should also acknowledge that the “peripheries” have reacted in contradictory ways to the new media, both resisting and embracing them, turning them into political tools to propagate “the
authoritative voice of the nation” (Shohat and Stam 30), but also into tools of transnational resistance and innovation. Related to this is also a need for a more flexible understanding of the interplay between global and local, national and transnational. The end of the Cold War challenged the grids used by writers to make sense of an ideologically polarized world. New emerging identities (most of them hybrid) and narratives have made their way into the vacuum created by the collapse of the bi-polar world. A post-national space has been created as nation-states have been weakened by transnationalism, identities have been hybridized, and language has been deterritorialized in cyberspace. Some of the arts, especially film, have benefited from this transnational reach, allowing a series of traditions (not only Polish, Czech, Romanian or Yugoslav film, but also the new Roma film) to reach transnational audiences.

Genres themselves have been hybridized in areas of Europe, replacing the traditional grand narratives that promoted nationalist or ethnocentric visions with transitional and cross-genre forms that emphasize tensions between the global and local. Intermediality is a particularly useful concept to describe the newly emerging literature, emphasizing its complexity of form, medium, and technology. As several essays in our New Literary Hybrids in the Age of Multimedia Expression volume suggest, not only literature, but also some of the other arts (theater, film, music) have moved towards intermediality. Culture has also been expanded to include other genres that escape hegemonic control, such as “street theatre, puppetry, local rallies, shadow plays, even karaoke bars, video parlors, and cassette tapes” (McMillin 192). If we add the new possibilities of “mobile phones, streaming technologies, wireless networks, and the high-quality publishing and information-sharing capacities of the World Wide Web” (Bennett 19), we have a much broader picture of the generic range and cultural rich of the new media.
5. Case Study Two: New Literary Hybrids in the Age of Multimedia Expression

The contributors to the new volume on Literature and Multimedia pursue a broad range of issues under five sets of questions that allow a larger conversation to emerge, both inside the volume’s sections and between them. The five sections cover, 1) Theoretical and Methodological Questions; 2) Multimedia Productions in Historical Perspective; 3) Regional and Intercultural Projects; 4) Forms and Genres; 5) Readers and Rewriters in Multimedia Environments.

More specifically, Part One puts forth a number of questions and arguments concerning the definition, hybrid genre, and intercrossed forms of a range of multimedia products, from digital literature to more complex transmedial work. Part Two offers a brief historical overview of the advent of multimedia productions, seeking the antecedents of the current multimedia synergies while also pointing out tensions among the various media. Part Three proposes a regional mapping of the recent multimedia cultures of Europe, one that—while recognizing the global trends in the visual and performative media—foregrounds also the distinctive features of cultural subregions. Central Europe and Russia receive a particularly strong focus because of their alternative mapping and rewriting of paradigms from Western Europe. Other regions highlighted are Scandinavia and Southern Europe. Several articles also emphasize the role that hybrid literacies -- moving beyond the verbal to the visual, aural, and kinetic -- play in a postcolonial redefinition of Europe. Part Four focuses on a broad range of intermediate forms and genres that literature has created or has become part of as it moved into the realm of digital expression, multimedia performance, the blogosphere, and the virtual. Part Five, the last in the volume, argues for an enhanced interactive connection between authors, texts, and readers in the multimediated forms of literature.
The individual articles in each section emphasize the fascinating projects and inquiries that have become possible at the interface between literature and other media, new and old. One of the most important shifts in recent textual production has been the emphasis on “non- or multilinearity, its multivocality, and its inevitable blending of media and modes, particularly its tendency to marry the visual and the verbal” (Landow, *Hypertext 3.0* 220). In principle, the new technologies such as hypertext reading/writing, networked communication and multimedia performances have served well the goal of introducing an interactive component in the writing and interpretation of literature. Hypertextual, multimedia, and virtual reality technologies have also enhanced the sociality of reading and writing, enabling more people to interact than ever before. This is especially significant within traditionally self-contained national and local cultures that are encouraged to enter a larger circuit that leads to new exchanges but also self-examination. As Jola Skulj argues, based on her knowledge of electronic Slovenian literature,

[E]lectronic textuality, with its inherent principles and potential choices, involves—and above all radically re-examines—our understanding of ourselves in a new perspective, including what we comprehend as “body” or physical being; issues regarding our identity and differences and our changed views on … the continually extended boundaries of reality, and so on. With the flourishing of computer technology, the World Wide Web, multimedia communication, the digitalization of texts and virtual reality, not only are the humanities challenged, but also the human condition … (187)

However, as long as these technologies are used to reinforce old habits of reading/writing or to ask “fairly traditional questions of traditional texts” (Olsen 312), they will deliver modest results. One of our urgent tasks is to integrate literature in the global informational environment where it can function as an imaginative partner teaching its interpretive competencies to other components of the cultural landscape. The global informational environment is inconceivable without the exigencies of creative authorship, critical rereading/rewriting, and cultural reformulation. In turn, the cross-fertilization between literature
and the new media has produced innovative literary practices that challenge monologic concepts of culture, emphasizing “interference” and cross-cultural “translation”—the kind that according to Kosellek and Richter, renew the participating systems (Richter, “Conceptual History’’ 176).

A final note: The two ample projects described, *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*, vols. 1-4, and *New Literary Hybrids in the Age of Multimedia Expression*, have benefited from the support of VCU’s English Department and College of Humanities & Sciences, including a stipend for a research assistant-editor for the period 2011-2013. The International Comparative Literature Association and the Union Académique Internationale have also helped cover other expenses related to project colloquia and the publication of the two works. The editor is grateful for the generous support received. The editor also extends his deepest thanks to the external readers and members of the Coordinating Committee for the insightful editorial suggestions offered along the way.

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