

The Impact of Globalization and the New Media on the Notion of World Literature

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Recommended Citation

Grabovszki, Ernst. "The Impact of Globalization and the New Media on the Notion of World Literature." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 1.3 (1999): [<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1040>](http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1040)

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Volume 1 Issue 3 (September 1999) Article 1

Ernst Grabovszki,

"The Impact of Globalization and the New Media on the Notion of World Literature"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss3/1>>

Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 1.3 (1999)***
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss3/>>

Abstract: Ernst Grabovszki discusses in his article, "The Impact of Globalization and the New Media on the Notion of World Literature," aspects of communication and scholarship in the humanities in the context of social processes resulting from globalization and the impact of new media. The author suggests that the process of communication, the processes of creativity, and the study of literature and the changes these areas are now experiencing owing to the impact of globalization and new media should be studied from a systemic and empirical point of view. Further, the article is an exposition of changes we observe with regard to the traditional model of literary communication contrasted with the new possibilities offered by the internet and the world wide web. His discussion includes his views on how this new situation results in new possibilities as well as requirements authors, distributors, and readers of literature today have to cope with.

Ernst GRABOVSZKI

The Impact of Globalization and the New Media on the Notion of World Literature

The notion of world literature is never static, as Yves Chevrel states: "la notion de *Weltliteratur* est sans cesse à réviser" (27). In this context, I would like to suggest that the contemporary situation of world literature should be discussed with regard to the phenomenon of globalization in a perspective of its social processes and the impact of new media from a systemic and empirical point of view. However, first I would like to elaborate briefly on "globalization" in the context of comparative literary studies, especially for the reason that many disciplines in the human sciences have already developed their own notion of the said term while there has been little written about it in comparative literature. Jan Nederveen Pieterse suggests that in general terms, globalization means boundlessness and/or the internationalization of social, political, and economic processes and he argues that globalization should also be understood as a process of modernism as well as postmodernism (87). He also argues that internationalization may not necessarily be a result of globalization; rather, it was a basis for the process of globalization itself. This explanation of modernism and globalization characterises globalization as a Eurocentric phenomenon insofar as it is spreading from Europe and results in the Occidentalization of the cultures of neighboring countries as well as the global community.

Anthony Giddens offers a more neutral definition of globalization: "Globalization is definable by an intensification of global social interrelations by which distant localities are connected to one another in such a manner that events taking place at one locality effect those that happen many kilometers away, and vice versa" (qtd. in Nederveen Pieterse 92; my translation; on Giddens, see Tucker). Between the two definitions -- that of Nederveen Pieterse and Giddens -- there is agreement that globalization means no unification, the flattening or the levelling of culture. Rather, contrary to the perceived dangers of globalization, regionalism, postmodern fragmentation, localism, the questions about and the formations of identity and community, and the contrasts or delimitations of these notions and acts have remained social, political, economic, etc., factors. Nevertheless, the process of globalization is considered troublesome by some and a positive development by others. Ralf Dahrendorf, for instance, foresees a new class society as a result of a reduction of employees due to the efforts of trans- or international enterprises to keep their labor costs to a minimum. On the other hand high incomes keep increasing and the rich are getting richer (47; see also, for example, Buell; Bird et al.; Dev; Featherstone; Friedman; Jameson and Miyoshi; Menzel; Moses; Wilson and Dissenayake).

For my discussion, I would like to take my point of departure with Giddens's notion of globalization being "an intensification of global social interrelations" and in an extension of his suggestion, I argue that that globalization also means the intensification of literary relations and of communication including that of artistic, i.e., literary communication and production. In the context of an empirical approach to the situation of globalization and world literature I propose the following preliminary aspects for discussion:

Copyright: The sale of copyright is an important pre-requisite for the global distribution of literature. In the German book trade, for instance, the sale of subsidiary rights has gained as of yet incalculable importance for publishers as a source of income in order to equalize the ever increasing costs of production, marketing, and inventory. The tendency towards selling copy rights -- to book clubs, paperback and special editions, anthologies, as well as film, TV, radio, video, foreign rights and merchandising, etc. (see Owen; Wittmann 427) -- results in an ever increasing international traffic of cultural production, including literature. In this respect it is also important to consider the role of literary agents (especially in English-speaking countries) and translators not only as mediators between literary institutions but also between cultures.

The role and function of literary institutions: The regional densities of literary institutions such as publishers, libraries, bookstores, distributors, etc. means that the circulation and knowledge of literature depend on the existence and function of the said institutions. In consequence, we must pay attention of the how of these institutions in their appropriate context. For instance, when considering African literature one would be misguided to assume that literary production and the business of literature in Africa is similar to the production and consumption of literature in European countries or

North America. Obviously -- and this is not a value judgement, simply a reference to the realities of production, distribution, and consumption -- because of the high quota of illiteracy in certain parts of Africa, printed texts are less used than media which do not require reading abilities such as radio, TV, theater, or video. Our Eurocentric notion where literature is more often than not equated with the written and/or printed text will not serve us well here. Literature, clearly, is not only the printed text and there are parts in the world where oral literature has a much broader tradition as well as social and cultural importance. And here again we may want to pay attention to the paradigmatic function of the method of comparison. Historians Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka state that "in the light of alternatives observed one's own development loses its former matter of course. Comparison allows the view of other constellations, it expands the awareness of potentialities ... and identifies the case being observed as one alternative among others" (14; my translation).

The question of global economics and the reading of literature: Again, using the example of Africa, there might be people who are able to read but are they in turn able to afford books? In many African countries, the price of a book ranges up to 25 percent of the monthly average income! (see Loimeier 8). As to European conditions (see also point 6) the recently adjourned resolution on the abolition of the "common book price-fixing" within the European Union is expected to affect the book trade seriously. Owing to their relatively stable financial background, large chain bookstores are able to sell books and other media products at low prices which will lead to the drastic reduction of book stores and, consequently, of publishers because of their inability to compete. This, of course, effects also the range of literature offered to the reader.

The problematics of the development of electronic media and the cultures of information with regard to their technical and content development in their global and regional settings: This point is again suited for making us realize that literature is not only bound up with the book as its traditional medium but that it is also perceived and functions as an oral form. Thus we have to draw our attention to such media which are dominant in a certain region such as certain parts of Africa and Asia. In the technologically advanced countries of the world, the role of the internet as a medium of communication between distributors and customers is still insignificant, at least for the German book trade, for example. In 1998 the German internet book trade could register sales of 30 million German Marks, which is no more than 0,00176 percent of the trade's total turnover! (see "Seifenblase Internet?" 60). Further, an analysis of the content of the media taken into consideration has to cover the ways and manners literature is dealt with in its different manifestations. The following questions can be posed: How is literature discussed? What rank does literature hold within the program of a radio or TV station or within literature-related sites on the world wide web? Which literature is discussed (high-brow, trivial literature, etc.)? Is there also foreign literature that receives attention or only literature in the national language(s) and if yes, is it dealt with in its original language or in translation? Especially radio or audio media allow to present literature in an authentic way. Audio books, for instance, may intensify the authenticity of literature by presenting a text read by its author in the original language. In addition, this kind of authenticity proceeds from the assumption that, according to the old model of literary communication a piece of literature is always linked with the name of a person.

The problematics of control and censorship: The control and censorship of literature occurs in both democratic and non-democratic countries and with regard to all kinds of media. However, censorship exists in Western democracies in subtle and at times more intangible ways (see, for example, <<http://www.clairecorner.com/censorship/banned.htm>>; <<http://www.luc.edu/libraries/banned/ecen.html>>)[inactive]. In the last decade, the discussion about censorship and the internet has developed on a large scale. Governments of all ideological orientations are earnestly discussing to what degree freedom of speech should be granted to the internet and its users. In whatever manner this discussion will develop, there is evidence that censorship of the digital space is hardly comparable with censorship of the book. From the censor's, the consumer's, and the producer's point of view, one aspect is of particular importance, namely that it is virtually impossible to monitor the traffic of information and material on the internet. Craig Atkinson puts it as follows: "For example, China is attempting to restrict political expression, in the name of security and social stability. It requires users of the Internet and electronic mail (e-mail) to register, so that it may monitor their activities. In the United Kingdom, state secrets and personal attacks are off limits on the

Internet. Laws are strict and the government is extremely interested in regulating the Internet with respect to these issues. ... In France, a country where the press generally have a large amount of freedom, the Internet has recently been in the spotlight. A banned book on the health history of former French president Francois Mitterrand was republished electronically on the World Wide Web (WWW). Apparently, the electronic reproduction of *Le Grand secret* by a third party wasn't banned by a court that ruled that the printed version of the book unlawfully violated Mitterrand's privacy" and finally sums up that "the internet cannot be regulated in the way of other mediums [sic] simply because it is not the same as anything else that we have. It is a totally new and unique form of communication and deserves to be given a chance to prove itself. Laws of one country can not hold jurisdiction in another country and holds true on the Internet because it has no borders" (see <<http://www.freqwerks.com/censor>>[inactive]; for restrictions imposed on the internet in Asia and Africa see also < www.aazquebec.com >).

The monopoly of media giants and its implications: The concentration of media businesses, enterprises, and publishers suggests increasing tendency towards the globalization of their operations. In turn, this may lead to a monopoly of conglomerates which means undue control of what gets produced and what does not, including the type of literature and the contents of the types of literature. With regard to specifics of the economics of the European Union, for example, this concentration poses the question whether the implementation of market prices based on competition of literary products in the European Union would help the preservation of the diversity of literary forms or destroy it.

In addition to the above points of consideration I am suggesting for a study of globalization and world literature, there is of course the broader implications of the event, processes, and consequences of cyberspace, or, in the words of Homi Bhabha, "third space". Personally, I prefer the term "digital space" instead of cyberspace because of the latter's inflationary use in connection with computer games, music, or techno-culture. Digital space in my opinion is a neutral enough term to circumscribe the technical as well as the contents-related aspects of new media and fulfills the idea of a global net which facilitates communication, information retrieval, and, of course, artistic representation freed from national, linguistic, or cultural assignments and value judgements. As to the global impact of the internet and the world wide web, the English language is indeed prevailing on account of the dominant influence of the United States and other English-speaking countries but serves, in this case, rather as a lingua franca than as an expression of imperialism (see Tötösy 17).

The term cyberspace was coined, interestingly, by an author of literature, William Gibson, who depicts it as an imaginary world "behind the screen" in his 1984 novel, *Neuromancer* (see Bollmann 163). "In his novel, Gibson describes cyberspace as a computer generated landscape into which his figures shift, sometimes by connecting electrodes directly to implants in their brains. What they see when they arrive there is a 'graphical reproduction of information from the banks of all computers in the system of mankind', in large department stores and skyscrapers of data. In a key scene of *Neuromancer* Gibson describes the cyberspace as follows: 'A consensual hallucination, witnessed daily by billions of people entitled to in all countries, by children to illustrate mathematical terms ... Incredible complexity. Light lines packed in the non-space of the mind, data packages arranged in groups'." (Bollmann 163; my translation) Stefan Bollmann expands on Gibson's ideas and suggests that cyberspace may be defined as "the new manner of interactivity and intersubjectivity which develops when the computer is connected to the telephone line" (165). In other words, the said interactivity does not just cover further means of communication but offers the opportunity to work on texts in a "third space."

Here I would like to expand on my last point of area I suggest for further discussion on the problematics of globalization and world literature today. New media, especially the internet and the world wide web, I argue, impact on the model of literary communication. As we know, this structuralist model consists of the author (the primary producer of the text), the distributors (the producers, distributors, and marketers of the product), and the readers (the consumers of the text who also include critics and scholars) (see, for example, Darnton). In view of contemporary literary scholarship, comparative or other, it is astonishing that the presence and impact of new media has seldom been considered to be of importance for the notion of world literature in any of its aspects and perspectives despite the fact that such intellectuals as Walter Benjamin already noted in 1936 that

world literature -- or any kind of literature -- should be discussed with regard to its medium (23, 32). In recent times, although there has been much discussion about the demise of reading or the book and the various relationships of this to the event of new media and the electronic revolution (see, e.g., Birkerts; Donatelli and Winthrop-Young; Kernan; Kerckhove), the discussion has been scarce with regard to scholarship specifically (for a recent example, see Tötösy 249-59; Jochum and Wagner <http://www.hist.net/htb/doku/kolloquium/material/jochum_wagner_1996.html>). In the following, I will present selected points I believe are worthy of attention with regard to the impact of new media in the context of globalization on world literature and the study of literature (for the impact of new media on scholarly publishing see, for example, Jäger <http://www.buchwissenschaft.uni-muenchen.de/download/Jaeger_Text.pdf>):

The author is no more an author of "texts" in the traditional sense but has the possibility to add audio-visual and/or pictural elements ("clips") to his/her "text" on account of the world wide web's technical spectrum. Such an author potentially creates a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the romantic sense, provided that he/she is skilled enough to cope with the mentioned technical spectrum available. Since the web represents an open medium unlike the book (i.e., the text of a book cannot be altered whereas the "text" on the web can continuously be modified and "updated"), the author in certain cases may lose the clear and unequivocal ownership of his/her "text" (I am not referring to copy right here but to the author as the creator of the product.) The web offers the possibility and, indeed, opportunity to change, complete, modify, vary etc., a text, thus the participants in the process become its (co-)authors.

In many instances, in literary production collective authorship replaces the single author associated with his/her proper name and work (see Foucault). This alteration of authorship has an impact on both the form and the content of creative texts. For example, there is now on the web the new literary genre called "fan fiction": "Fan fiction's roots trace back to the underground fanzine culture of the '60s and '70s. Fans further imagined adventures for the characters of their favourite TV shows, wrote them down, xeroxed them and distributed them by hand. But in the current decade, the Internet has spawned hundreds of fiction sites" (Dolan). For a central directory of fan fiction web sites, ranging from Jane Austen to MacGyver, see <<http://members.aol.com:80/ksnicholas/fanfic/index.html>>[inactive].

The web text itself is subject to a formal -- and content-related -- reshaping. With the use of hypertext (a text of whose elements refer to elements of other texts linked electronically; thus becoming a dense network of texts), it mirrors its medium: the texts stored in the internet also represent a network. Thus, their formerly clearly defined visual and tactile form (the book) and content-related (plot, line of reasoning, etc.) elements become permeable to changes in meaning or to deviations from linearity by other texts or other elements fraught with meaning.

Traditional distributors of literary and scholarly products such as publishers become increasingly redundant. This will become evident particularly in the area of scholarship but also in the distribution of primary literature. The impact on the economics of production and distribution here is such that it results in the lowering of costs but in turn this resulting in redundancy.

The internet and the world wide web as well as other digital media require new abilities and skills from the reader and this also has an impact on the process of reading. In addition to the knowledge of how to navigate in digital spheres in order to track down information or "text" wanted, the medial variety of a text calls for a higher level of activity by the reader because of the medium's demand not only on the visual faculty but on other sensory organs. This higher activity is a result of reading in the internet on the one hand but on the other hand -- and more likely -- it is also a consequence of the increasing flood of information through other media which in turn requires selection. Readers of digital texts have, therefore, more responsibility both toward themselves and their information because they have to decide *on the screen* which information is relevant to them. It is their decision that requires a different level and type of mental activity and responsibility than previously.

Paul Gilster characterizes the ability to use digital media for information recovery in a purposeful manner as "digital literacy is the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources when it is presented via computers" (1); market science distinguishes between the so-called high-involvement and the low-involvement customer: both categories can be differentiated above all by their specific way of information processing. High involvement means active

search for information whereas low involvement rather means passive irrigation. Whoever searches the web for data displays a different degree of involvement and interest than someone who uses the new media for entertainment. Today, using the web and the internet in the high-involvement mode probably means membership in a relatively small -- and not necessarily concentrated in technologically advanced societies although it is true that the density of such is at present higher in western societies -- information-oriented elite (scholarship) and/or business and sales. From studies of the book market we know that the ratio of this information-oriented elite constitutes no more than 20 percent of the world population ("Seifenblase Internet?" 64).

In addition to the above mentioned skills, reading hypertexts requires a different way of reading than reading books in the traditional tactile mode. We can distinguish between linear reading (books and printed texts) and structural reading ("texts" electronically linked to other "texts"). On account of the network structure of hypertexts, the reader is forced to examine this structure, their construction, and references and to recognize these structures in their entirety.

With regard to my central question as to how the above areas of new media in their entirety would have an impact on the notion of world literature, I suggest the following. Because of new media, literature obtains an additional public as well as individual dimension by means of the digital sphere. A consequence of this impact is a democratization of literary production in a range of its processes extended to not only the economics of production but also to the creative process of the production of the primary text and further extends to its scholarship and criticism. On the other hand -- and this is a consequence of this democratization -- there is much text in the internet and on the web which most likely would have never been published in the traditional printed form precisely because of the change in the processes of production and adjudication. Therefore, the democratization of literary production and distribution means an increase of the quantity -- although not necessarily the quality -- of literature.

In principle, the notion of world literature today finds its most relevant expression in infinite digital space. Goethe argued that national literatures depict different forms of human existence and that these fictional representations should be adopted for mutual returns resulting in an interplay that in turn would determine a new world (Albrow 428). In our age of new media and digital space this notion of world literature changes to a situation where: "In the global society globality shapes the frame for all social relations. Globality is indeed not simply the outcome of the interaction between social groups, be they nationally or internationally oriented. This is the big difference to the situation, Goethe had in mind" (Albrow 432). Further, the notion of the digital space gives rise to the democratization and a decentralization of the literary system (the primary text as well as its economics and business). However, this decentralization can also be understood in the postcolonial paradigm, although with an important distinction: a constituent aspect of postcolonial discourse is the tension between center and periphery. I will use the example of Salman Rushdie and the fate(s) of his novels to illucidate my point. His example shows that on the one hand we have the implicit and explicit differentiation between a "home" culture and a culture of the "Other." On the other hand, Rushdie's novels have made us realize a certain loosening of the said tension between "home" and "Other" on an institutional level, namely via the appreciation of a (mitigated) Third World writer in the West's literary system. In new media and its digital space, there are no reasons for such tensions (on the surface?) except maybe between the digital and the "real" or non-virtual space in the sense of a systems theoretical understanding of social interaction. In other words, within digital space there is no location of a centre or centres of a cultural or social kind. Consequently, world literature loses its determinable locations.

It is not only that the business of literature undergoes a process of decentralization, it is also that the text and the producer of the text become decentralized entities and hybrids precisely because of their infinite travel in digital space, therefore not belonging to any "nation" or even an imagined community (Anderson) because this travel is directed by data and information. Note that digital space is characterized as a duplicate of real space by the use of the term *netizen*, a "person" travelling in digital space but equipped with the same consciousness and the same rights as a *citizen* (see Rötzer 39, 48). A netizen of digital space is able to be anywhere and the text itself -- also literature, for example -- is not located anywhere specifically either (although this is not as clear cut as that: the exact location of the web site where a text is "housed" and therefore controlled from may be an

analogue of the library of tactile books). Importantly, this is a kind of literature that does not seem to stem from any national or cultural setting but comprises the world as a net, and thus becomes a world literature in a new sense of the notion. At the same time, I hasten to add, this type of "new" world literature is still written by authors with different cultural origins while digital space allows the same authors to produce a literature that contains a conglomerate of different cultural symbols travelling without discernable centres and locations.

In closing, I would like to discuss briefly Vilém Flusser's *Die Schrift. Hat Schreiben Zukunft?*, for the reason that he discusses literature from a traditional as well as progressive points of view. Flusser conflates elements of the old and the new models of literary communication. For my discussion, he raises the following relevant issue: today, we are leaving the age of writing (inscribing) for a new age of programming (prescribing), that is, we are abandoning alphabetical writing by progressing to a way of *indirect* communication by computer. This is because writing in the electronic age means communication *via* as well as *with* the computer in that one does not write alphabetically but in binary codes in order to prescribe the computer what to do. Flusser argues that alphabetical writing served a "historical" purpose: writing on paper with a pen or other writing utensils makes us aware of history and of our responsibility for history and it is this responsibility we are going to lose in the electronic age: "Every way of action becomes profane, scientific, functional, non-political, and people are free to give a sense of this way of action. ... A new, post-historical mentality comes to the fore, giving sense to the absurd. Whether this optimism really satisfies all persons concerned, remains to be seen" (62; my translation). Here, Flusser makes an important observation: Programming -- that is, the use of computers for writing and communication -- has to be differentiated from poetic writing. This leads him to the conclusion that literature is not only composed of commands, rules, and instructions: "And these other threads in the tissue of literature are by no means programmable. Therefore we will go on with writing. And the historical, political and valueing mentality may be preserved by this resumption of writing" (62; my translation). Thus, for in my understanding of Flusser's thought as related to new media is that digital space is an addition to communication, creativity, and social interaction rather than a replacement. In creative writing whether with a pen or a computer, we maintain intrinsically the factor of the poetical while we add to it and the process of writing further dimensions and possibilities not available previously.

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