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**Comparativism and Cyberculture:
A Review Article of New Books by Płaszczewska and Zawojski**

The two books — *Przestrzenie komparatystyki – italianizm* (Spaces of Comparative Studies – Italianism) by Olga Płaszczewska (Kraków: Jagiellonian UP, 2010) and *Cyberkultur: Syntopia sztuki, nauki i technologii* (Cyberculture: Syntopia of Art, Science and Technology) by Piotr Zawojski (Katowice: UP of Katowice, 2010) — I review in this article represent innovative scholarship of seeing the contemporary world in the context of human history: one through the textual analysis of literary works and the other by describing how technological innovation is constantly expanding the boundaries of cyberculture. The one is concerned with an established historical form, namely the text and the other with the multiplicity of new forms of electronic communication. Although the two books offer different perspectives, they share the same objective: to describe the significance of phenomena common to humanity or their intercultural migration. The medium for achieving this varies according to the period in question: historical or poetic texts or, as is of increasing significance today, the exchange of ideas on the world wide web. We are reminded of Marshall McLuhan's aphorism that "the medium is the message", which applies here to two different media utilized towards the same end. It should be added that both books are methodologically coherent and supported by extensive bibliographies and that each contains an index of personal names, the latter also having a general index.

    Przestrzenie komparatystyki – italianizm (Spaces of Comparative Studies: Italianism) by Olga Płaszczewska, is made up of two parts divided into chapters and sub-chapters. The book contains a wealth of literature and over 30 illustrations. In the introduction the author makes clear where she stands on the question of comparative studies, stressing that the book results as much from the need to systematize theoretical knowledge as from the practical application of comparative methodology as a basis for intercultural comparison. She emphasizes that her main concern is with the content of literary works rather than literary theory: "This book, like comparative literature itself, straddles theoretical and practical research. It aims to present comparative studies as a methodology and field of literary research in its own right, set in a historical-theoretical context and illustrated by specific examples from the literary and cultural phenomenon of Italianism" (14; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). Such an approach locates clearly the subject of research in the humanities, here from the metalevel of comparative research, specific intercultural similarities arising from a familiarity with literature become significant. The main theme is Italianism, the cultural-literary phenomenon which was important in Europe in the fifteenth century. The book's principal focus is on Poland's relationship with Italy, but it also considers the topic from a wider European perspective. The first part, entitled "The Spaces of Comparative Studies," provides a historical outline of comparative studies and makes reference to such authors as Degérando, de Villers, Croce, Meltzl de Lomnitz, Villemain, and Posnett. Her discussion and analyses provide a general, although factually rigorous, introduction to pioneering scholarship in the field of comparative research. In particular, she points to nineteenth-century research comparing French and German literature and the emergence of comparative studies in academic institutions. With regard to the twentieth century, Płaszczewska refers to the idea of tracing influences and intercultural borrowings. She emphasizes the influence of the German school of comparative studies at this time, with reference to such fas Benjamin, Cassirer, Schmeling, Zima, Schmitz-Emans, and Szondi, the latter founder of the Berlin Institute for General and Comparative Literature.

    The last thirty years or so have witnessed the globalization of comparative studies, developing along the lines of transculturalism and anthropological research and establishing its own methodology. Thus, Płaszczewska presents other definitions of comparative studies, starting from five basic phenomena and tendencies (45-46) set out by Tötösy de Zepetnek as an theoretical and methodological framework and application for comparative literature and comparative cultural studies. Płaszczewska considers this — along with the US-American renaissance of "world literature with representatives such as Damrosch — development significant in shifting some of the emphasis from literary to cultural considerations in view of the impact of globalization and thus considering Tötösy de Zepetnek's work a new approach in American (i.e., the U.S. and Canada) comparative studies. Importantly, she considers the growth of new technologies, which have become a medium in the exchange of culturally significant content and the fact that issues concerning the exchange of information have taken on an entirely different character. Further, she considers the development of research into European literature including the establishment of comparative literature as a discipline in countries such as Poland and

Italy since 1990s. A significant amount of discussion is devoted to comparative studies in Poland where the approach evolved since the nineteenth century. She presents some interesting findings concerning the nineteenth-century assimilation of national literature and the ideas it contains and the need to differentiate one's so-called "own national path" from French and German influences (86). At that time comparative studies in Poland became academic in character, investigating the similarities and differences between Polish and European literature. Płaszczewska underlines the international flavour of comparative studies in Poland, which resulted both from the detailed study of foreign works by Polish thinkers of the time and from the involvement of Polish researchers in academic institutions abroad, as evidenced in the number of academic titles they obtained from various European universities. Comparative studies in Poland received a boost in the 1960s through the work of Brahmer, which applied the discipline to wider spheres of activity, such as the arts in general: "The aim of comparative studies is not to show historical processes in the widest possible perspective for the sake of examining the convoluted network of relationships between different literatures but, as Brahmer maintained, to lead to a fuller, deeper understanding of and sensitivity to works of art" (110)

In the chapter "The Main Areas of Comparative Studies" Płaszczewska deals with the traditional divisions within comparative studies. Taking the classifications of Teighem and Guyard as her starting point, Płaszczewska discusses areas such as the comparative study of literary history, the legacy of the ancient world, thematology, genealogy, imagology, the history of ideas, multiculturalism, correspondences between art forms, translation, and Italianism. Each of the above is accorded a separate section and dealt with in a transparent manner with detailed reference to the literature. Of particular interest is the section on imagology, a field where any encounter with the "other" requires a prior knowledge of the "self." It touches on philosophy and psychology as it considers the "living" and not merely the "textual" person, resulting in a feeling of empathy and, in the case of art forms, an aesthetic experience. This breaks the boundaries of consciousness, requiring a change in existing conceptual and behavioural structures in a manner coherent with the changing situation. Płaszczewska's treatment has undertones of philosophical and existential anthropology and she refers to the work of Carré and Hazard, stressing the need to extend the scope of comparative studies to cultural, political and sociological issues, thus fully addressing the question of multiculturalism.

The first part of the book concludes with "Annotations on the Margin," in which Płaszczewska describes comparative studies as a discipline expanding its scope beyond literary studies, which could result in losing its identity and redefining itself as a vague, nondescript form of comparative research. Such questioning views can be said to reflect those of the author inasmuch as they inform her wider reflections on the subject when comparing specific texts. It is worth adding that the nature of "the text" is changing through technology, a range of sources of knowledge other than literature may now provide material for comparative research. It may be that in these times of ubiquitous digital technology, information about people, the nation, or the world sought by researchers in the humanities is no longer the sole preserve of literature but may now be accessed in a multiplicity of sources through the use of technology (298-99).

The theme of the second part, entitled "Through the Kaleidoscope of Italianism," deals with "the many facets of Italianism and the diversity of possible comparative approaches to it, all of which are concerned with a recognisable phenomenon made manifest in literature, but which can also be perceived as a cultural phenomenon making its presence felt through the medium of literary texts" (323). In the chapter "A Comparative History of Literature" Płaszczewska refers mainly to the romantic era, showing that this period was crucial in the interpenetration of influences felt in literature, principally Polish and Italian. She cites traditional European dialogically based forms of literature, and refers to architecture, stressing the symbolism of interiors (d'Annunzio) and she also describes the issue of thematology, with reference to Culler and she also deals with the connections between Italian and Polish literature and the influence of the former on the latter. Her investigation is concerned with specific cultural phenomena and historical autobiography, as well as with philosophical and political perspectives. Płaszczewska refers to two novels of the period, *Fontamara* by Silone (1930) and Stryjkowski's *Bieg do Fragala* (1951), providing an interesting comparative analysis of their setting, plot, character development, concept of time, narration, and historical context. She also cites Markiewicz's idea of "interliterary analogy" shifting the focus of her analysis to the cultural-historical aspect underpinning the comparative study of texts and highlighting the extraliterary dimensions connected with a given historical period.

Płaszczewska considers different art forms, but focuses mainly on painting. A series of comparative analyses demonstrates the effectiveness of this method of explaining real similarities. For example, the fine arts and performing arts are capable of conveying universal meaning regardless of the

uniqueness or individuality of the creative process. Certain layers of an artistic work assume universal significance according to their level of abstraction or parabolic quality; thus, one is more likely to discover the universal meaning of tragedy in the works of Sophocles than from a dictionary definition. We could also point to contemporary art, which is often highly conceptualized, general and abstract, and therefore able to transcend its specific context and speak to the human condition. The chapter "Imagology and the Italian Journey," merits particular attention since it deals with the experience that results from the confrontation of the imagination with reality. The "Italian journey" made by writers and intellectuals usually involved an experience of art and culture which frequently inspired them in their own creativity, for example writing on Italy. Płaszczewska points to a certain cultural perspective evident in the descriptions of Cooper and the Polish writer Kremer of their journeys. This juxtaposition is intrinsically interesting as a comparison of descriptions of Italy from two different perspectives. Kremer was a traveler who, more than simply describing what he saw, was rebelling against orthodoxy through literature, art, history, and legend: "Kremer's observations on the masterworks of painting, sculpture and architecture have all the hallmarks of originality precisely because of their comparative perspective, while the experience of communing directly with art in its natural setting imbues them with an air of authenticity" (513). Cooper compares that which he encounters in Italy with US-America, seeking connections and meaning to link the two cultures on the basis of the similarities discovered (493). It has as much to do with architecture and space as with human mentality. Płaszczewska points out that Cooper's descriptions, which are sometimes fairly detailed, are a commentary of evaluation which regards Italy as a place to be examined and provide intercultural exchange. In this sense Cooper's approach appears to be more synchronic when compared with Kremer's diachronicity.

The final chapter of the second part is entitled "On Translation". Here, Płaszczewska stresses a fundamental aspect of comparative studies, that of translation. This involves not only knowing another language but also one's attitude towards such knowledge, mastering the style and preserving the spirit of the original, for example with regard to history or culture — in short, one's commitment to the humanities. Płaszczewska focuses on examples of translation between Polish and Italian, mainly from Italian to Polish. Translation allows the history of one nation to become part of the historical knowledge of another, something which is not always reciprocated. It entails the selection of criteria for translating texts in respect of their aesthetic-artistic and historical-cultural qualities and their universality. Płaszczewska makes use of the poetry of Adam Mickiewicz as an example of Polish romantic literature particularly well known in Italy. She states that the reason why Mickiewicz is well known in Italy is not so much because of his travels in Italy but because he formed the Polish Legion in Rome and in so doing became a protagonist in both Polish and Italian history. The historical climate surrounding Mickiewicz led to the translation and dissemination of his poetry. Included is a detailed history of Italian translations of Mickiewicz together with examples of texts translated into Italian, such as excerpts from the *Crimean Sonnets*. There is also information on other Polish authors translated to Italian. I regard this chapter as being of considerable significance and interest and written with more engagement and somewhat greater openness than previous chapters. Here, Płaszczewska's extensive knowledge of her subject and the ease with which she writes on it become apparent. The book is written with great attention to methodology and factual accuracy. Engagement and diligence do not always go hand in hand with the expression of personal attitude, that is to say, it was difficult to discern the author's views on the content of the book. Reading it, I found myself constantly searching for the author. Having said that, the book is well organized and reads well.

The second book under review is Piotr Zawojski's *Cyberkultur: Syntopia sztuki, nauki i technologii* (Cyberculture: Syntopia of Art, Science and Technology). The book is an outstanding compendium, as well as an analysis of the history of electronic media including a rich bibliography. Its most prominent idea is that of *syntopia*: the meeting of art, science, and technology (16), described by Zawojski as the foundation for the development of cyberculture. The idea of *syntopia* is presented in a well-grounded manner from a broad perspective and the approach is holistic without succumbing to eclecticism. Examining *syntopia* as thus described has the character of a theoretical description of the origins of the technology and an elucidation of the human connection with it. *syntopia* is the merging of the three fields mentioned above and it results from encounters between those involved in experimental work in a particular area of knowledge, often without a predetermined practical objective but driven by a need to explore, and who, through this need, are able to reveal new phenomena. The effect of *syntopia* is cyberculture, a culture determined by the constant development of computer technology and universal digitalization, which also bears on artistic creativity. Zawojski reviews definitions of cyberculture and considers both the origins of the concept and different interpretations of it. It is an in-

valuable contribution to the field, not least as a bibliographical source on the phenomena arising from the development of electronic media. It makes the generalized connection between cyberculture and the phenomenon of universal digitalization and its overall impact on perceptions of reality. One short-coming of the book is its somewhat free use of such concepts as reality, authenticity, and virtuality and this might not have been significant were it not for their being linked with ontology, anthropology, and other areas of philosophy in a manner which is not always clear or well described.

The book consists of an introduction, seven chapters, a summary, bibliography, a general index, and an index of names. In the introduction Zawojski refers to historical figures such as Lanier and Rheingold. He mentions two perspectives for understanding cyberculture. The first is historically con-nected with the ideas of Weiner and stems from a methodological understanding which regards all states of being as basically cybernetic. This perspective assumes significance today in robotics, artifi-cial intelligence and artificial life and is used in applications where cybernetics has a direct connection and defines how a technology should establish itself. The second, which derives from the universal use of computers and the communicative and social platform this provides, is the study of the various manifestations of modern technology and the creation of a digital community. Referring to Silver, cy-berculture is defined as a new, contemporary field: "Cyberculture and critical studies on its history, forming a new cultural paradigm, are among the most significant phenomena of the digital commu-nity, whose functioning is determined by new digital media and computer networks. The fundamental thesis guiding the theoretical and interpretative direction of the present work is the conviction that cyberculture is based on a syntopia of art, science and technology" (16).

The first chapter, "The Third Culture and Cyberculture", deals with the origins of cyberculture since the 1960s, including the role of academics in creating and shaping concepts for the new phenomena resulting from technological change or the creativity of enthusiasts operating spontaneously, uncondi-tionally and without questioning the new technologies. In this chapter the author refers to the epoch-making changes cited by Castells (*The Rise of the Network Society*, 1996), which reveal the social transformation brought about by the emergence of the network society. Zawojski alludes to the ability of individuals to shape the way a generation thinks about itself, reflecting the sense of freedom, rejec-tion of divisions, and the ability to introduce a new kind of public discourse in which science or, more loosely, knowledge becomes an integral part of "public culture" (25). Here we are dealing with notions of cyberspace, understood in its widest sense as applied to all technology and its growing use by ordi-nary people. Zawojski points to two decisive factors in the development of cyberculture: the first was the development of technology and the second, how it was used. Both factors soon extended their influence, defining the direction of change and new behavioural strategies. A further effect of these factors was to accelerate the process by which cyberculture has been shaped, no longer only on the basis of the universality of the technology but also of its indispensability. This process has intensified people's dependency on the technology to such an extent that it is difficult to imagine communication or the conveying of information without cyberspace. The closer the relationship between technology and humans, the greater our needs and desires. In today's world, ever more aspects of reality and human activity are immersed in technology, which consumes and transforms what used to belong to the domain of the physical world, leading to the further development of technology and postbiological culture.

The second chapter, which has the same title as the book, provides a valid and systematic survey of the historical relationship between art, science and technology since the 1920s (46). It shows how, in their encounter with each other, these three areas of human activity broke through the boundaries between them to discover a metalevel of common activity while maintaining their separate identities. The coming together of protagonists from these fields was inspired by the expectations of changing times; the efficiency of the exact sciences was linked with artistic creativity and, not infrequently, the obsessiveness of hackers. The *syntopia* of art, science and technology is an extraordinary meeting of these disparate disciplines, in which science and the creative process find common ground in creating and exploring the human world; when technology is added to the mix, the phenomenon of cybercul-ture begins to appear. Reference is made to the views of Cubitt, Lunenfeld, Manovich, Wilson, Spiel-mann, and Krueger.

The third chapter, "Cyberculture: Defining a New Paradigm," distinguishes between the notions of cyberculture and cyberspace. Zawojski takes an augmentalist position, regarding cyberspace and net-work phenomena as supplementing or extending the real/physical world. According to this view, cy-berculture is defined by the meeting of two worlds: cyberspace and physicality. Zawojski cites several historical definitions of cyberspace, including that found in Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*. Cyberspace is regarded as one of the most important elements underpinning cyberculture while coexisting with the

physical world, supplementing human reality on the basis of convergence and hybridization. Of interest are references to the cyberpunk tradition, to the early 1960s, and to the first experiences of Multi-User Dungeon (99). Zawojski also discusses the views of McLuhan, Silver, Lévy, and Hayles. The description of cyberculture is deterministic: its transformations are unidirectional and paradigmatic, and any deviation in the direction of change seems unlikely. Creating innovation, meaning and an understanding of reality and humanity are dynamic, dominant and developing phenomena which are being driven by technology (109). Extending the augmentalist view, cyberculture can be understood as a set of practices arising from technology which form a new cultural model based on an online-offline synergy. Such a conclusion would be in keeping with an augmentalist position, although the issues surrounding virtuality which the book deals with lack something in the way they are presented; the references to Baudrillard, in particular those concerning artificiality and simulation, are today of historical, rather than cognitive significance. Currently, if notions of virtuality are used at all, they are done so in a historical context, and then referring to unreality. However, to refer to the network phenomena of today as virtual in the sense of being unreal would render problematical the idea that the use of computer technology is real. This amounts to a certain inconsistency in the book which consists in thinking about cyberculture in terms of authenticity and reality. Overemphasizing the simulatory nature of network events may deprive them of any real existence, which could have consequences for our understanding of how technology is used, and even for the way we live.

The fourth chapter, "Cyberart as an Expression of Cyberculture," deals with the perception of art through interface. Interface controls the process of aesthetic experience, whether of traditional works of art, such as digitalized paintings, or of contemporary art intended to be presented electronically. Examples of cyberart, which Zawojski regards as the avant-garde of the digital age, are interactive installations, software art, virtual reality art and digital music. Moreover, quite apart from newly emerged electronic art forms, traditional forms, such as music, the fine and performing arts, also make use of electronic media. As a result, technology has become both a workshop for artistic work and a paradigm in art, manifesting itself in the documentation and digitalization of all art.

The fifth chapter, entitled "Cyberart: Forms of Participation," begins with the slogan of the 2007 Dutch Electronic Art Festival, "Interact or Die!" Zawojski seeks to describe concepts from the perspective of electronic art. Reference is made to the ideas of such authors as Krueger, Shaw, Rokeby, Hershman, Feingold, Sommerer, Mignonneau, Sermon, and Rogala. Reading this chapter one can come away with the impression that it lacks a certain perceptiveness since the analysis of such phenomena as interactivity, and particularly immersion, is somewhat vague. His treatment of interactivity is correct but could have been more elaborate, especially with regard to different types of interactivity. The discussion of immersion would have benefited from a wider perspective, for example at the interface of philosophy and psychology. Today, network phenomena run into billions of events each day, with individuals frequently spending many hours a day online. The reason for such activity could be that, far from being simply practical and communicative in scope, it allows users to derive existential value from their everyday involvement in the Net. This process of plunging into technology shows that immersion often amounts to much more than mere communication.

In the sixth chapter, "Theory and Practice of Documenting and Presenting Art in the Digital Media," Zawojski refers to the possibility of archiving digital versions of cultural works, mainly works of art. This is connected with the creation of large databases, which have the potential to offer the user entirely new content or enable a change in thinking. Never before has such simple access to various corpora been possible, creating unprecedented potential for shaping attitudes. The sheer amount of documentation and academic articles can make one dizzy, making it seem that a lifetime is too short to take in all the content connected with one's sphere of interest. This can make the world wide web and the data within it seem like a gaping abyss. None of this alters the fact that there has been an extraordinary growth in access to, for example, the world of art. The world wide web is a space for exhibiting both proscenic and interactive works of art and this has created a need to find an intelligent method for finding one's way through the expanse of the digitalized world. As examples, Zawojski refers to the annual Ars Electronica festival in Linz, the story of the creation of ZKM (Center for Art and Media) in Karlsruhe, as well as a number of websites devoted to art, including Netzspannung, ArtBase, the Database of Virtual Art, and Media Art Net.

The final chapter, "Virtual Museums: New Locations for Art," links to the previous chapter, specifically to developments in how exhibitions are staged and changes in the way art is presented. Zawojski refers to the first exhibition devoted to computer art, "Cybernetic Serendipity," organized by Jasi Reichardt in 1968, which brought together the work of over forty artists. It is worth mentioning that "Cybernetic Serendipity" exhibited what is generally acknowledged as one of the earliest exam-

ples of interactive art, Edward Ihnatowicz's "SAM: Sound Activated Mobile". Zawojski describes the virtual museum as a virtual platform for exchanging ideas as well as somewhere where both artists and actively participating consumers of art can find stimulation in the process of creating new art. Web portals and artistic projects of this kind are intended to enable interactive collaboration on the syntopic model, involving not only artists (273). The author also tackles the issues of immateriality and physicality; original and copy; and relating the experience of physical works, that is, locating consumers and art collections together in the same physical space, with access to electronic museums and connecting with art in immaterial form, especially as the point of first contact. These issues, which are constant subjects of discussion, help create everyday life and are real. There is no point in asking such questions as "Is it worth looking at traditional art on the internet?" or "What is better: an interactive structure that stimulates creativity or the proscenic contemplation of beauty?"; rather, one should be aware that these are two different ontological, historical and cultural orders that have discovered the Internet as their exhibition space. Art, whether transferred from the physical sphere or created for the Net, does not change its essential character but only the place where it is exhibited.

Zawojski concludes by citing two figures, Richard Stallman and Bill Gates. Despite their careers developing on very different lines, he contends that through their intensive activities both have exerted a significant influence on the shaping of cyberculture. Here some interesting observations are made concerning the basis for making decisions, for example, ideological considerations. This involves understanding cyberculture as appropriating the cultural space through technologization and forcing modes of activity on the user, which might be seen as domination. However, considering our need for computers today and seeing how even 10-year-olds are glued to their screens, I wonder if they have the same choice as users did just five years ago; or perhaps there never was any choice, merely the illusion of one, and it is just that a few years ago computers were not as good.

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