Introduction to New Work in the Empirical Study of Literature and Culture

Aldo Nemesio

University of Torino

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb

Part of the American Studies Commons, Comparative Literature Commons, Education Commons, European Languages and Societies Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Other Arts and Humanities Commons, Other Film and Media Studies Commons, Reading and Language Commons, Rhetoric and Composition Commons, Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons, Television Commons, and the Theatre and Performance Studies Commons

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, Purdue University Press selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Volume 18 Issue 2 (June 2016) Editorial
Aldo Nemesio,
"Introduction to *New Work in the Empirical Study of Literature and Culture*"
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss2/1>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 18.2 (2016)
Thematic Issue *New Work in the Empirical Study of Literature*. Ed. Aldo Nemesio
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss2/>

Aldo Nemesio, "Introduction to *New Work in the Empirical Study of Literature and Culture*"   page 2 of 4
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 18.2 (2016): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss2/1>
Thematic Issue *New Work in the Empirical Study of Literature*. Ed. Aldo Nemesio

Aldo NEMESIO

Introduction to *New Work in the Empirical Study of Literature and Culture*

In order to understand literature, rather than looking only at the surface of the texts, it is useful to look at ourselves as readers. Empirical research on texts of literature and culture concerns human behavior in producing, distributing, using, and the scholarship of such texts. Traditionally, literary studies proposed rules of interpretation, rather than trying to understand empirically observable events, while empirical observation shows that the same texts can generate different effects in different times and with different readers. Even the permanence in time depends on a sufficient amount of polyvalence that makes it possible for a text to be read differently in different historical periods. In times of great contacts between different cultures, it is easy to see that the same texts can be read differently. Meanings are not entities residing in texts: they are the result of socio-culturally oriented cognitive operations taking place in contexts (see, e.g., Nemesio; for an overview of the history of the empirical study of literature, see Schmidt <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1569>).

Literature plays an important role in identity formation, because it involves us in possible worlds, thus training us and making us more prepared to deal with changes (see, e.g., Boyd; Carroll). Empirical research on literary texts is a complex interdisciplinary project requiring different skills and the contribution of researchers trained in different fields including interdisciplinary teams. The observation and analysis of phenomena ought to meet the same standards as all scientific procedures and theories, instruments of observation ought to be explicitly formulated, argumentation ought to be rational, solutions must be open to intersubjective inspection. Authors of articles in *New Work in the Empirical Study of Literature and Culture* of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 18.2 (2016): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss2/> present recent work in the field about topics ranging from the processes of literary canon formation to the impact of fictional narrative on readers' response, students' reflections on reading literature, adaptation theory, methods of data collection, typology of weblog genres, the pedagogy of literature, film adaptation and literature, etc. *New Work in the Empirical Study of Literature* contains the following articles:

In "Empirical Research and Practice-oriented Physics for the Humanities and Sciences" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss2/2> István Berszán proposes an empirical approach for the humanities and sciences he designates as "practice-oriented physics." He bases his argumentation on Albert-László Barabási's network theory applied and questions tenets of complexity, networks, and spaces. Further, Berszán elaborates on the affinity between the spaces of practical orientation and the spaciousness of parallel worlds as explicated in Brian Green's string theory. Berszán posits that because the universe is a "symphony" of string oscillations, it leads to parallel rhythms of happenings and their different spaces of motion and argues that this kind of "complicacy" of spaciousness cannot be analyzed with the use of network models.

In "Fictionality and the Empirical Study of Literature" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss2/3> Torsten Pettersson surveys three types of studies and argues for research which disentangles fictionality from other aspects of literariness. Next, he conceptualizes the basic paradoxical phenomenon that made-up stories can influence readers' perceptions of the real world and presents an empirical study of the impact of fictionality based on a five-page narrative presented to two groups of young Swedish readers as an extract from an autobiography and a novel, respectively. A questionnaire elicited reactions to the narrative, as well as attitudes to fictionality and to literary reading in general. Results include the respondents' professed preference for real-life stories, which was not, however, matched by their actual appreciation of the text. The participants' attitude to learning something from fictional narratives was positive, but in their stated reasons for reading fiction entertainment and relaxation loomed large.

In "Teaching Literature through Online Discussion in Theory and Practice" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss2/4> Monica Manzolillo focuses on the teaching of literature at the university through on-line discussion. Integrating discussion-based techniques with the predominant lecture mode is necessary because we need to modify students' merely receptive attitude, and help them develop the fundamental skills of reading, interpreting, and criticizing literary texts. Compared to live discussions, electronic communication has the advantage of providing a more relaxed atmosphere where social conventions are less important and this encourages positive interaction among students. Manzolillo illustrates the experimental use of the website *Learning Literature* <http://www.learningliterature.it/> as support for traditional literary courses designed and implemented at the University of Salerno and discusses how a forum provided in the website was used to improve close reading skills of students.

In "Toward an Aesthetics of Adaptation in Empirical Research" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss2/5> Marion Behrens, Christian Kell, and Pascal Nicklas discuss the requirements and potential of empirical research into the reception of adaptations: adaptation is one key strategy in the creation of literature and art in general. The creative process and product of adaptation has its counter-part on the side of reception. Empirical research into the aesthetics of adaptation aims at the experimental elucidation of the physiological background and the establishment of a model describing the perceptual underpinnings of the act of seeing an adaptation as adaptation. This implies evolutionary biological reasoning concerning the memory tasks required for this kind of perception and experimental work showing neuronal, psychological and perceptual specificities contrasting acts of reception of artistic and non-artistic stimuli. A particularly promising arena for model building research lies in poetic language and rhetorical structures of repetition.

In "The Indirect Path to the Literary Canon Exemplified by Shelley's *Frankenstein*"

Aldo Nemesio, "Introduction to *New Work in the Empirical Study of Literature and Culture*"   page 3 of 4
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 18.2 (2016): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss2/1>
Thematic Issue *New Work in the Empirical Study of Literature*. Ed. Aldo Nemesio

<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss2/6> David Fishelov examines the indirect path of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to the literary canon. Fishelov offers a multi-dimensional model for describing the dynamic process of acquiring, maintaining, and changing canonical status. The model emphasizes the important role played by artistic dialogues and echoes that certain works initiate or inspire in other authors and artists in the form of allusion, homage, parody, and adaptation. The data introduced in the article suggest that the popular cinematic versions of *Frankenstein* probably not only played a mediating role but also contributed to making Mary Shelley's novel part and parcel of the contemporary literary canon.

In "Young Adults in Sweden on Reading Literary Fiction in Print and Electronic Media" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss2/7> Skans Kersti Nilsson analyses 16-25 year old young adults' reflections on the reading of fiction in printed books versus electronic media. In Nilsson's study focus group interviews were conducted to gauge how conversations on the importance of reading literary fiction develop inside and outside the learning environment of school. The results suggest that young adults derive benefit from reading fiction and that they think this activity yields more benefits than reading fiction on electronic media or viewing filmed literature. Results also suggest that participants in Nilsson's study think reading fiction is important for self-insight and personal development.

In "Toward an Empirically-generated Typology of Weblog Genres" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss2/8> Maciej Maryl, Krzysztof Niewiadomski, and Maciej Kidawa propose a typology of weblog genres based on empirical data, namely on the analysis of metadata and the study of blogs' content. In Study 1 they explore 287 categories used by Polish bloggers to classify their blogs. The analysis shows that most categories are topical, but some could be useful for genre analyses. In Study 2 they analyse "syntagma" combinations of 2-3 categories assigned to 88 252 blogs on one of the Polish blog platforms. Through quantitative analysis and clustering 3 main groups are identified: public sphere, private sphere, leisure-time activities. And in Study 3 the authors present an alternative take on findings conducting a qualitative, non-topical analysis of 322 Polish blogs aimed at uncovering weblog genres according to their communicative purpose. In consequence, the following genres emerge: diaries, reflection, criticism, information, filter, advice, modelling, and fictionality.

In "Methodological Reflections on Investigating the Reception of Fiction in Public Spaces" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss2/9> Katarina Eriksson Barajas discusses how to find and approach research participants in public spaces. Eriksson Barajas's study is based on tenets of the empirical study of literature. Reader response and reception theories and discursive psychology are employed in the analysis. This approach, called discursive reception studies, enables researchers to analyze the role of social interaction in the co-construction of the experience of, in this case, a film or a play. Eriksson Barajas discusses the following methodological issues: 1) how to gain access to "naturally" occurring practices such as when people meet to talk at cafés after seeing a film together and during the intermissions at the theater and 2) how to record data on such practices. The results of Eriksson Barajas's study show that gaining access to participants in cinema settings is difficult, but not impossible.

In "Paratexts in Travel Blogs, Travel Books' Hypertextuality, and Medial Format Usage" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss2/10> Stefano Calzati compares a number of contemporary travel books and travel blogs. Calzati's objective is to promote a bridging approach between the digital and the analogue that goes beyond their differences. He posits a socio-linguistic critique where online multimodal texts are analyzed by identifying layers of analysis. Against these compositional models, Calzati suggests a double move: on the one hand, he applies Gérard Genette's notion of "paratext" to travel blogs and on the other he extends the concept of "hypertextuality" to travel books. From his analysis it emerges that in travel blogs hosted on platforms paratextual elements tend to invade the space of the text and challenge the blogger's authority. At the same time, travel books turn out to be more hypertextual than travel blogs hosted on platforms. Calzati's study is complemented by selected interviews with travel writers which show that bloggers whose blogs are on platforms have a weak awareness of the potentialities of the medium and that their media-related choices are often arbitrary. Individual bloggers, by contrast, have a deeper understanding of the medium's potential.

In "Audience Response and from Film Adaptation to Reading Literature" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss2/11> Klaudia H.Y. Lee analyses results from 3000-plus interviews conducted across university campuses in Hong Kong in order to investigate the roles of screen adaptations and their intertextual relationship for developing students' critical textual practice. Lee combines reader-response theory (Iser and Rosenblatt) with empirical data to explore students' actual encounters and experience with texts. While the data suggests an influence of screen adaptations on students' choice and motivation of reading, this interest can potentially be developed into a critical awareness of the various intertextual possibilities that exist in different forms across media.

In "Picture Storybooks in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss2/12> Elizabeth K.Y. Loh presents a case study of the use of picture storybooks written and illustrated by ethnic minority students who participated in a government-sponsored Chinese as a Second Language project. The one-year teaching experiment suggests that picture storybooks as teaching materials played a significant role in enhancing students' motivation in learning Chinese. The research project resulted in students' proficiency in Chinese as a second language**,** particularly in reading and writing.

In "A Mid-range Episode Reading of Odoevsky's *The Cosmorama*" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss2/13> Slobodan Sucur argues that David S. Miall's theory of foregrounding and the mid-range episode may help to minimize ambiguities and contradictions which often emerge in readings of Gothic literature. Sucur analyzes Vladimir Odoevsky's 1839 novella

Aldo Nemesio, "Introduction to *New Work in the Empirical Study of Literature and Culture*"   page 4 of 4
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 18.2 (2016): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss2/1>
Thematic Issue *New Work in the Empirical Study of Literature*. Ed. Aldo Nemesio

The Cosmorama and elaborates on the idea that the fantastic and sublime are naturally reader-receptive and anticipate some aspects of Miall's theory. In relation to this, Sucur also discusses the possibility that mid-range episode reading may help bridge the gap between some tenets of cognitive philosophy and reader-response criticism that is sometimes at odds with cognitive studies.

Readers of *New Work in the Empirical Study of Literature* and those interested in the empirical study of literature in general are encouraged to consult the "Bibliography of Contextual (Systemic and Empirical) Approaches in the Study of Literature and Culture." Comp. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. *Art, Literature, and the Empirical Paradigm*. Ed. Aldo Nemesio. Thematic Issue *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 3.3 (2001) [Update 2016]: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1115> and the "Bibliography of Siegfried J. Schmidt's Publications." Comp. Agata Anna Lisiak and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12.1 (2010): <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1581>.

Works Cited

Boyd, Brian. *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition and Fiction*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009.
Carroll, Joseph. *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature and Literature*. London: Routledge, 2004.
Carroll, Joseph. "The Human Revolution and the Adaptive Function of Literature." *Philosophy and Literature* 30.1 (2006): 33-49.
Lisiak, Agata Anna, and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. "Bibliography of Siegfried J. Schmidt's Publications." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12.1 (2010): <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1581>.
Nemesio, Aldo. *Il lettore vagante. La percezione dei testi. Letteratura, cinema e web*. Torino: Nuova Trauben, 2015.
Schmidt, Siegfried J. "Literary Studies from Hermeneutics to Media Culture Studies." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12.1 (2010): <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1569>.
Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven, comp. "Bibliography of Contextual (Systemic and Empirical) Approaches in the Study of Lite-rature and Culture." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 3.3 (2001): <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1115> [Update 2016].

Guest editor's profile: Aldo Nemesio teaches contemporary Italian literature and text linguistics at the University of Torino. In addition to numerous articles in English and Italian, Nemesio's recent book publications include *Il lettore vagante. La percezione dei testi. Letteratura, cinema e web* (2015). E-mail: <aldo.nemesio@unito.it>