

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES: PERSPECTIVES AND INTERSECTIONS VIA MULTICULTURALISM

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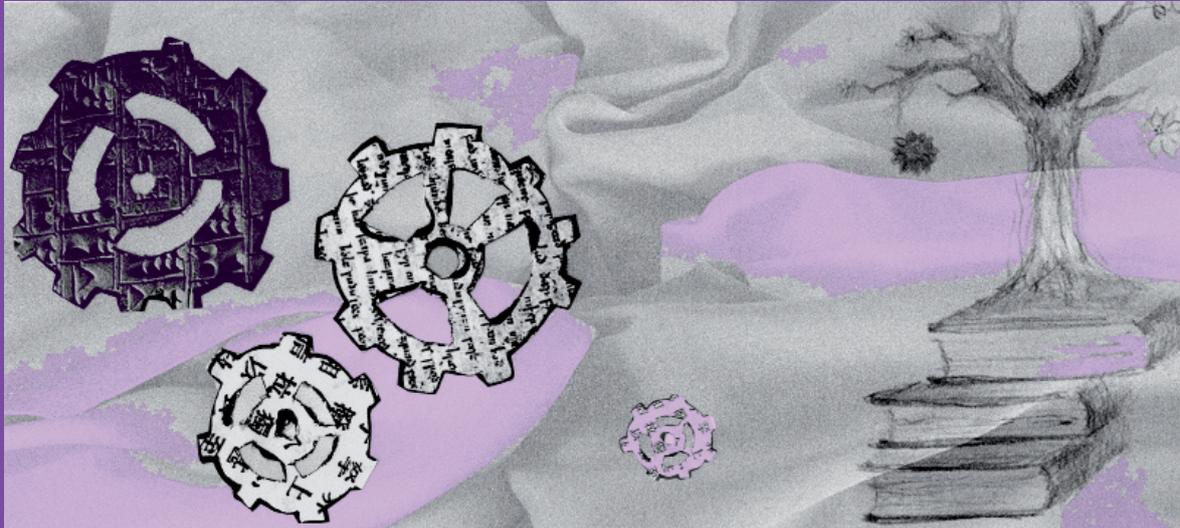
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Abstract || This paper proposes a series of reflections on comparative literature and its relationship with cultural studies with a particular interest in the place of literature among these relations. It addresses the importance of interdisciplinarity and multiculturalism to reevaluate the perspectives or tools used to address both literary analysis and cultural practices in general. It also reflects on a socio-historical concern and commitment to achieve a productive approach. By means of a general consideration of the aims of contextualizing and of the relationships and complementation between discourses, a contrasting dialogue between different positions takes place.

Key-words || Comparative literature | Multiculturalism | Interdisciplinarity | Cultural studies | Culture.

La disciplina es un principio de control de la producción del discurso. Ella le fija sus límites por el juego de una identidad que tiene la forma de una reactualización permanente de las reglas.

Michel Foucault
*El orden del discurso*¹

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1 | FOUCAULT, M. (2008): *El orden del discurso*, Barcelona: Tusquets, 38.

0. Introduction

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha provides an illuminating personal perspective on the term *gathering*, when various horizons, representations and configurations come together. This partly influenced and determined the general proposal of this paper:

I have lived that moment of the scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering. Gatherings of exiles and *émigrés* and refugees; gathering on the edge of «foreign» cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos or cafés of city centres; gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another's language; gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present. Also the gathering of people in the diaspora: indentured, migrant, interned; the gathering of incriminatory statistics, educational performance, legal statues, immigration status (199-200).

This inventory of meanings, ideas and frontiers concerns, surrounds and in a way encapsulates my personal appreciation of the study of comparative literature and its project.

This paper is also based on a series of reflections on the relationship mentioned above between comparative literature and cultural studies; in particular, it is based on my own individual interest in literature's place in this relationship.

I begin with an exploration of the general perspective in which comparative literature, fed by other disciplines and directions, can enrich literary analysis and interpretation and the analysis of various cultural practices. I therefore intend to base my work initially on a subtle reassessment of the relationship between comparative literature and cultural studies specifically and to put it into perspective in the light of its relationships with other disciplines (interdisciplinarity), distinguishing and reviewing in particular multiculturalism's importance and contributions to reassessing the paths or tools used to approach the matters being studied once they have been identified.

I am also interested in addressing these subjects without overlooking socio-historical and political concern and commitment within the discussion and analysis of cultural processes or practices; the aim of this is to achieve an approach from and for a more productive, objective study. The importance of a reassessment of the concept of multiculturalism plays an important role here, as does a general questioning of the aims of contextualisation and the matters studied, the potential relationships between them, and their additions to other discourses. For this purpose it is essential to reconsider the tools and ways of approaching or “reading” these practices, beyond the mere object of study.

I therefore feel it necessary to redefine a possible type of literary research (a “how to read”) by commenting on and discussing several proposals developed by various critics who are concerned with the place of comparative literature both in university departments in which it is studied and outside them in a broader cultural context. I therefore begin with some reflections on culture made by Itamar Even-Zohar, Edward Said and Stuart Hall; some general proposals on comparative literature and cultural studies by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Jonathan Culler and Mieke Bal; and the valuable proposal put forward by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam regarding the place and point of view of multiculturalism.

1. The Place of Comparative Literature

Comparative Literature must always cross borders.
And crossing borders, as Derrida never ceases reminding us via Kant,
is a problematic affair.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak²

In recent years, comparative literature has been suffering a sort of constant, unending theoretical debate. Concerned with its current status, its so-called “crisis”, it is constantly questioning the objects it studies and its methods of doing so. At the same time, rather than focusing on specific works or texts, most of its debates concern the trends of thought and seem to show what Charles Bernheimer calls “the anxiety of comparison”.

As early as 1958, René Wellek claimed: “Ha de abandonarse la delimitación artificial entre la literatura ‘comparada’ y la ‘general’” (1998: 84), and called for these disciplines to be redefined to include the contributions of comparative literature to literary studies in general, and to language studies.

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2 | SPIVAK, G. (2003): *Death of a Discipline*, New York: Columbia University Press, 16.

As stated by Antonio Monegal, following a similar vein as that of Even-Zohar, comparative literature helps us to

ver la literatura como un fenómeno no limitado por las fronteras de las naciones o de las lenguas, ni siquiera por la división entre las artes o la distinción entre lo elevado y lo popular. Cada texto literario que se escribe o que se lee participa en un diálogo inagotable con otros textos, con otras modalidades de discurso, con otras esferas de la cultura, de la sociedad y de la experiencia humana (1999: 8).

One of several things that must be taken from this description is the study of the place from which texts are written, the audience and its context, without the restrictions imposed by national or linguistic boundaries; it also implies recognising the transcendence of these practices, their contributions to culture, their relationship to society in general.

However, Spivak believes that one of the best proposals made by traditional comparative literature must be rescued. This is the possibility of reading works in their original language, considering, moreover, the plurality of languages within the old “national frontiers”; also, the fact of studying all literatures with linguistic rigour and historical understanding, which is undoubtedly essential today (59).

Now, this is almost impossible unless we consider the possibility of approaching what we are interested in studying with the support of interdisciplinarity, cultural studies, multiculturalism, criticism of Eurocentrism, etc.

I am therefore interested in adopting a position which approaches Even-Zohar’s view of literature in general, which for him represents a totality of textual activities (1994: 361); a network, a complex of activities (1999: 29), and all activities involved in its production, distribution, repetition and evaluation, *i. e.* taking into account the critical, social and political positions and analyses involved in addressing it: a vision that allows it to be directly connected to its context, thus avoiding isolation.

In addition, it should be stressed that literature also represents “una institución social muy poderosa e importante, uno de los instrumentos más básicos de la mayoría de las sociedades humanas, para ordenar y manejar su repertorio de organización de vida, es decir, su cultura” (Even-Zohar, 1999: 33). I will return to this idea later.

To continue this description, I think it appropriate and necessary to rescue first some of the contributions of what is known as cultural studies and their convergence with other tools and disciplines.

2. Cultural Studies?

As is already known, the various criticisms made of cultural studies can be summarized for this analysis in particular in two basic facts, stated and criticised openly by Spivak in *Death of a Discipline*. These are its political apathy and its monolingualism.

The openness, so characteristic of cultural studies, the fact that it is not a discipline, has no precise definition or methodology, can include a large number of approaches and studies, or, as Spivak says, since they are not sufficiently trained in close reading they become narcissistic, presentist and monolingual (19-20), has led to a certain disdain, and various attacks from many different critical positions.

Eduardo Grüner, inspired by Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, highlights the emergence of this lack of political commitment, which cultural studies did have originally:

los logros originales –que es imprescindible rescatar y reevaluar– de los «Estudios Culturales» han venido precipitándose en los últimos años, como decíamos, en el abismo de una cierta (no decimos que necesariamente conciente) complicidad con lo peor de las teorizaciones post (modernas/estructuralistas/marxistas). Ello es explicable, en buena medida, por el progresivo ensanchamiento de la brecha entre la producción intelectual y el compromiso político (aunque fuera también él meramente «intelectual») que es el producto de la derrota de los movimientos post-Mayo del 68, y la consiguiente sumisión a formas relativamente inéditas de fetichización mercantil producidas por el capitalismo tardío [...] Pero no basta tampoco apelar ritualmente a una necesaria «renovación» de aquellos instrumentos si no se está dispuesto a discriminar críticamente la paja del trigo (28-29).

Although it is both viable and necessary to take some of cultural studies' main tools and directions, I believe that the need of an analysis or criticism of the various cultural practices must be redefined. One of these involves questioning this political commitment, which cultural studies embraced at their beginnings and was born in Birmingham with Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson and their peers.

It is also possible to rescue the importance attached to interdisciplinarity and the fact of borrowing, so to say, different methods from different disciplines and reusing them critically and productively within particular studies. These disciplines might include the analytical tools of literary theory and psychology, for example, which may illuminate and enrich some dissertations on cultural practices.

Similarly, there is one aspect that must not be overlooked in current proposals: the importance that arose a few years ago of decentralising the notions of the canon, *i. e.* questioning Western literature and high

culture as the main paradigm of literature. For Michael Riffaterre, the canon comprises a cultural projection of the text connected to a type of social behaviour, and must therefore be the sole domain of cultural studies (71). For Haun Saussy, a genuine comparative literature scholar must first be well-versed in the canon and one or more specific languages (11).

Armand Mattelart and Érik Neveu, meanwhile, see as positive the fact that cultural studies are not considered exactly a discipline, as counterpart of the huge number of specialised fields which are not always productive or refractory. However, they also question this same lack of rigour or seriousness which is mentioned so often.

los partidarios más radicales de estas investigaciones reivindicarán el estatuto de una «antidisciplina». El término señala el rechazo de los fraccionamientos disciplinares y de las especializaciones, la voluntad de combinar las aportaciones y los cuestionamientos resultantes de conocimientos híbridos, la convicción de que la mayoría de los retos del mundo contemporáneo ganan al ser cuestionados a través del prisma de lo cultural. La iniciativa tiene el mérito de alterar los efectos de encerramiento ligados a la hiperespecialización. Sin embargo, plantea algunos interrogantes. La palabra disciplina también significa seriedad, control, respeto de las reglas. ¿Cómo recusar las disciplinas –en su acepción de especialidades– sin liberarse simultáneamente de la disciplina –en su acepción de rigor en el trabajo y en los métodos– que puede ser su cara positiva? (16-17).

It is essential to analyse the fact that because cultural studies first arose within a very specific context (1960's England), they may or may not be able to study contexts and realities other than those in which they arose. To give an often-quoted example, the reality of cultural studies in the USA is very different, as stated by Culler:

In Britain, where the national cultural identity was linked to monuments of high culture –Shakespeare and the tradition of English literature, for example– the very fact of studying popular culture was an act of resistance, in a way that it isn't in the United States, where national identity has often been defined *against* high culture,

as high culture has not been part of the definition of national identity in the USA (1999: 337 338).

The possibility of defining a perspective of analysing literary and cultural practices in or from a Latin American, African or Asian context initially implies a series of questions in which there is no need to concentrate on Manichaeist dichotomies of high/low culture or particular emphasis on popular or mass culture³. In other words, it is essential to determine in general terms what arguments and tools may or must come into play to address different contexts as objectively as possible, as it is impossible to apply the same criteria

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3 | On this subject, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam state that Dependency Theory, Theory of Underdevelopment and World-Systems Theory must all be remembered in order to understand that a global hierarchical system controlled by capitalist countries and their multinational corporations simultaneously generate both wealth for the First World and poverty for the Third World, which are ultimately two sides of the same coin (36).

to different contexts. Grüner says that it is necessary to

sortear los peligros del «exotismo» en que suelen caer los Estudios Culturales anglosajones, para quienes lo latinoamericano, lo asiático o lo africano [...] constituye una especie de reserva textual para una Historia que en el «primer mundo» habría llegado a su «fin» (58),

a problem which he believes also affects post-colonial theory, and which should be addressed and redefined in search of different nuances.

One of the main reflections which I would like to address in this paper is the possibility of evaluating the benefits which may or may not result from the use of various theoretical discourses applied to specific cultural practices. For Culler:

the question becomes not one of the general relationships of cultural studies to theory but, rather, a question of the benefits and virtues of various theoretical discourses for the study of particular cultural practices and artifacts. I think that this would be a beneficial sort of debate, for too often these days in the United States, at least, argument about theoretical discourses or approaches is carried on not in relation to particular sorts of cultural practices but as an abstract evaluation which often appeals to general theoretical and especially political consequences (1999: 341).

Spivak, meanwhile, pits cultural studies against the interdisciplinary fields known in the USA as Area Studies, and considers the latter to have greater importance and scientific rigour:

Academic «Cultural Studies», as a metropolitan phenomenon originating on the radical fringes of national language departments, opposes this with no more than metropolitan language-based presentist and personalist political convictions, often with visibly foregone conclusions that cannot match the implicit political cunning of Area Studies at their best; and earns itself a reputation for «lack of rigor» as well as for politicizing the academy (8).

The importance of the contributions of various fields of study, from the point of view of their correlation with other areas and disciplines, should therefore be highlighted.

3. Boundaries and Disciplines

One of the things described by Michel Foucault in *El orden del discurso* (*L'ordre du discours*) is the limiting, excluding quality which constantly hounds discourse. A text or a discourse provides almost infinite possibilities to create other discourses, new and different; however, it is highly likely that one will be unable to assess this condition if one forgets the very principle of coaction, which discourse

always involves (38).

I therefore consider it necessary to speak of a renewed interdisciplinarity: one that offers results which are objective, productive and, especially, open to beginning other dialogues by enriching the approaches of literary and cultural research.

For Peter Brooks, genuine interdisciplinarity occurs when the process of analysis reaches a point at which the disciplinary limit no longer has any meaning, when the internal logic of the analysis drives a transgression of these limits (102). However, it is important to be able to recognise the interdisciplinarity which effectively gathers or sustains knowledge of the other discipline(s) which it will address.

In the US context, by raising the matter of area studies Spivak questions the relationship, which barely exists, between these and the humanities. For her, they are not yet truly interrelated, and this limits them both: comparative literature cannot really cross boundaries without a transformation of area studies, and its presumed interdisciplinarity with other areas, such as music, philosophy, history of art and the media, remains limited (7).

Nowadays, a view of disciplines or fields of knowledge divided into specific, well-defined areas is no longer sustainable. This can be seen clearly within our field of interest, in the origins of comparative literature, which emerged due to precisely this wish to integrate into and relate with points of view other than those of national linguistics and literature departments in universities.

So-called post-colonial theory, meanwhile, represents a very important meeting point between comparative literature and cultural studies, and has provided a new approach to literary studies where interdisciplinarity and other subjects come together, particularly during contextualisation and analysis. One of its most important contributions, which perhaps needs no repeating, is the reference and importance attached to difference, and especially to groups which until now have been socially and culturally marginalised.

Shohat and Stam, however, do not share this enthusiasm for the use of the term *post-colonial*. This is for various reasons, which to me seem fairly sound: on the one hand, they reject its connotations of surpassing the anticolonial nationalist theory and the closure of a historical period or surpassing a political paradigm (as if this were a “post” stage in the disappearance of colonialism); on the other hand, the term is expanded to such an extent (it commonly refers to Third-World countries which gained independence after World War II) that

it addresses diaspora processes and literary output of all societies “affected” by colonialism, whether they were colonised or colonisers (including Great Britain and the USA). It also blurs and evens out the distribution of points of view, as it does not make clear who the discourse belongs to: the ex-colonised, the ex-coloniser or the displaced immigrant; it minimises and simplifies chronology, as not all countries gained independence at the same time or in the same way; and it does not clarify or address the various current situations of domination. Thus they propose that we return to terms such as *neocolonialism* or *post-independence*. They also highlight the fact that the term is rarely used within the intellectual contexts of Latin America, Africa or the Middle East (59-61).

There is a great variety of positions and theories in this area, relating to the matters being studied and the relationships between these areas of knowledge, a kind of dichotomy: on the one hand, those who advocate placing literature within discursive or cultural practices in general, and on the other hand those who propose placing literature on one side and cultural studies and other cultural analyses on the other. The question is whether literature should be approached as another discourse within a larger group of cultural discourses or practices, whether it can function as a reference or approach via which other analyses are carried out, or simply whether a broader horizon is opened up for it.

Even-Zohar speaks of a sort of “cultural research”. This would include literature itself, allowing a general contribution to analysis thanks to its importance within the cultural context; thus it is possible to

integrar la investigación de la literatura en un marco más amplio, concretamente en una disciplina de investigación de la cultura, no a través de una reducción, sino totalmente al contrario: subrayando la función más distintiva y manifiesta de la literatura en la creación y en el mantenimiento de la sociedad a través de su cultura (1999: 35).

Riffaterre, however, does not support the idea of a combination of literary studies and cultural analysis or studies. Instead, he supports the idea of a “redistribution” of its areas of study and its aims so that their complementary nature and even their definitions can be precisely stated (67).

Similarly, Culler maintains that comparative literature must not be merged with cultural studies, as these must be part of national literature departments, which would form kinds of Japanese studies, French studies, etc., focusing on national cultural studies in general and leaving comparative literature, with its specific literary aims, aside. This would make it possible to define comparative literature in

contrast to “national” cultural studies (1995: 119 120).

However, as Spivak states, the alliance between comparative literature and these areas of study must have a new political openness which allows for rich feedback between the areas involved in literary analysis:

a simple splicing of Comp. Lit. and Cultural Studies/multiculturalism will not work or will work only too well; same difference. A combination of Ethnic Studies and Area Studies bypasses the literary and the linguistic. What I am proposing is not a politicization of the discipline. We are *in* politics. I am proposing an attempt to depoliticize in order to move away from a politics of hostility, fear, and half solutions (4).

It is therefore undeniable that it is unproductive and unsustainable to carry out a study or analysis of any cultural practice, whether this is called literature or not, without addressing social, political and economic matters. When I talk about a new redefinition of interdisciplinarity and the place for criticism, I am referring to the reassessment and redefinition of various different positions which may enrich this study. To give one example, for Raymond Williams the socioeconomic question and the contributions of Marxism are implicit in the very treatment of what we understand by culture.

Hi ha, doncs, una interacció [entre estructura y superestructura], però aquesta no es pot entendre positivament, a menys que sigui reconeguda la força organitzadora de l'element econòmic. Una teoria marxista de la cultura reconeixerà la diversitat i la complexitat, prendrà nota de la continuïtat en el canvi, deixarà un marge a l'atzar i a algunes autonomies limitades, però, amb aquestes reserves, prendrà els fets de l'estructura econòmica i les relacions socials subsegüents con la corda conductora de què una cultura és teixida; i és seguint-la que cal entendre una cultura. Això, que és més un subratllat que no pas una teoria compacta, és el que els marxistes del nostre segle han rebut de la seva tradició (401).

For Grüner, for example, following Williams or Hall, cultural studies have lost their political links, mainly regarding oppressed, marginalised or subordinated groups, especially when they reach US institutions (27 28).

Beginning with the involvement and association of various different disciplines, economic and sociopolitical aspects must therefore be reassessed when cultural research or analysis is undertaken.

4. Towards a Reassessment of Multiculturalism

We must take the languages of the Southern Hemisphere as active cultural media rather than as objects of cultural study by the sanctioned ignorance of the metropolitan migrant.
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak⁴

Can the aim of freedom of knowledge be the simple inversion of the relation of oppressor and oppressed, centre and periphery, negative image and positive image?
Homi Bhabha⁵

I am interested in starting off with an idea of multiculturalism that can function as the central axis of the proposal of literary analysis (including cultural analysis in general) by clarifying and recognising the place of criticism and its aims.

It should be highlighted that from this point onwards I will use the term *multiculturalism* in the sense in which it is defined and used by Shohat and Stam:

Sólo el reconocimiento de la inercia del legado colonialista y del papel crucial de los medios de comunicación en su prolongación puede explicar la necesidad de un llamamiento al multiculturalismo. Para nosotros, el multiculturalismo significa ver la historia del mundo y la vida social contemporánea desde la perspectiva de la igualdad radical de los pueblos en estatus, potencial y derechos. El multiculturalismo descoloniza la representación no sólo en cuanto a artefactos culturales – cánones literarios, piezas de museo, tipos de cine–, sino también desde el punto de vista de las relaciones de poder entre comunidades (24)⁶.

I also believe that to this “call for multiculturalism” we should add the necessary, renewed “call for interdisciplinarity” mentioned above, which also allows other texts and contexts to be brought closer on the basis of the rigour and academic, linguistic and historical knowledge advocated by Said, Spivak, and Shohat and Stam.

By addressing some propositions of post-colonial theory, Francesca Neri states one of multiculturalism’s most salient features:

el movimiento que ha cuestionado la formación del canon [...] nos ha enseñado que las obras que siempre hemos considerado como portadoras de valores fundamentales e inatacables, aparecían así porque nos confirmaban en nuestros valores, reflejando las creencias de nuestro mundo y nuestra sociedad; además, la consideración que se les había otorgado a lo largo del tiempo las hacía prestigiosas a nuestros ojos [...] si un texto que nosotros consideramos canónico expresa juicios contrarios a las opiniones generales difundidas en el mundo contemporáneo, intentaremos «salvar el texto», desplazando la atención sobre características formales o estructurales que nos confirmen en nuestra opinión de que se trata de una obra maestra, e

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4 | SPIVAK, G. C. (2003): *Death of a Discipline*, New York: Columbia University Press, 9.

5 | BHABHA, H. (2004): *The Location of Culture*, London & New York: Routledge, 28.

6 | *In Multiculturalismo, cine y medios de comunicación. Crítica del pensamiento eurocéntrico* Shohat and Stam propose, in general terms and in their own words, an exploration of the opportunities which open up before a multicultural, anti-Eurocentric audiovisual education (29).

imputando los «defectos» de la obra al contexto o al período en que se escribió. Para el multiculturalismo, en cambio, el contenido ideológico de la obra debe ser explicitado siempre y, si es necesario, condenado, aunque a la obra se le siga reconociendo su valor expresivo o su papel innovador de las formas literarias (395).

At this point it is worth reviewing Žižek's criticism of the idea of multiculturalism:

El multiculturalismo es una forma de racismo negada, invertida, autorreferencial, un «racismo con distancia»: «respeta» la identidad del Otro, concibiendo a éste como una comunidad «auténtica» cerrada, hacia la cual él, el multiculturalista, mantiene una distancia que se hace posible gracias a su posición universal privilegiada. El multiculturalismo es un racismo que vacía su posición de todo contenido positivo (el multiculturalismo no es directamente racista, no pone al Otro los valores «particulares» de su propia cultura), pero igualmente mantiene esta posición como un privilegiado «punto vacío de universalidad», dese el cual uno puede apreciar (y despreciar) adecuadamente las otras culturas particulares: el respeto multiculturalista por la especificidad del Otro es precisamente la forma de reafirmar la propia superioridad (172).

For Shohat and Stam the concept is polysemous and it's debated and interpreted in various different ways. However, for these theorists, the term *multiculturalism* has no “essence”, but rather signals a “debate”. It therefore represents both a criticism and a major responsibility. As inequality of power itself generates multiple divisions, multiculturalism contributes, or at least will try to contribute, a vision of equality, among other things (68 69). Moreover, for these critics multiculturalism must always go hand in hand with criticism of Eurocentrism (328).

It is therefore almost impossible to continue without considering Said's and Even-Zohar's statements on the impossibility of detaching the study or reading of literary works without considering their ideological context:

Hay que liberarse de la identificación automática [...] de la literatura con un «valor» positivo, estético (en el sentido de tener validez atemporal) o de otro tipo, y con la idea popular de que es portadora de una verdad, auténtica o profunda –más allá de lo corriente–, acerca del mundo. Es precisamente sobre este conjunto e *doxa* que está basada actualmente la reputación de la literatura. Pero, al tratarse de una base que depende de las relaciones de poder, podría derrumbarse de un día a otro, y hacer que el grupo literario entero se convirtiera en irrelevante y marginal (Even-Zohar, 1999: 35).

However, we should remember that, as mentioned by Hall, social contradictions arising from different origins generally make it impossible to establish conclusively the socio-historical conditions or effects which particular cultural practices may have, as they do not always appear in the same place and or have the same results (28).

The interest that has arisen, particularly thanks to cultural studies and post-colonial theory, in addressing and “rescuing”, so to say, manifestations, practices and languages of the periphery and the so-called Third and Fourth Worlds, must channel and act as a starting point for the study of cultural manifestations, in which Eurocentric positions must continue to be questioned. However, I am interested not only in criticising Eurocentric postures and readings but in recovering some of the circumstances which tend to be overlooked in literary analysis, e. g. power relationships or the reaffirmation of certain ideologies which may remain influential today within a context defined by globalisation and neo-colonialism.

Said has stated that:

Según ha dicho algún crítico por ahí, las naciones mismas *son* narraciones. El poder para narrar, o para impedir que otros relatos se formen y emerjan en su lugar, es muy importante para la cultura y para el imperialismo, y constituye uno de los principales vínculos entre ambos. Más importante aún: los grandes relatos de emancipación e ilustración movilizaron a los pueblos en el mundo colonial para alzarse contra la sujeción del imperio y desprenderse de ella (13)⁷,

which refers directly to Foucault and the presence of systems of exclusion within discourses (25).

One of the main tasks at the forefront consists in a serious and rigid analysis of both texts and domination discourses: for Hall the new redefinition that must take place is clear, because

las categorías étnicas y raciales, aún hoy día, siguen siendo las formas a través de las cuales se «viven» las estructuras de dominación y explotación. En ese sentido, los discursos tienen la función de «reproducir las relaciones sociales de la producción». [...] El mundo no está limpiamente dividido dentro de sus categorías sociales/naturales, ni las categorías ideológicas elaboran necesariamente sus propios modos «apropiados» de conciencia (56).

I would like to highlight at this point the interesting, innovative proposal made by Mieke Bal and the group of critics who created ASCA (Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis) in the Netherlands by explaining their concept of “cultural analysis”⁸, considered a genuine interdiscipline. This consists of an open proposal which includes, rather than excludes, varied discursive and/or cultural practices and everything classed as “cultural conduct”, rather than culture *per se*. Interdisciplinarity is therefore an essential part of their proposal, as well as questioning the silent facts of history. They also attach great importance to the place from which the discourse or analysis of these practices begins, taking the past to be an essential

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7 | See *Culture and Imperialism* by Edward Said on the privileged role of culture in the modern imperial experience (38).

8 | See BAL, M. (1999): *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press. One of the main aims of ASCA, through various specific analyses, is to ascertain the true efficacy of interdisciplinarity by giving the so called “object” of study the property of a “subject”, which means that it directly collaborates in the very construction of theoretical perspectives.

part of the present, *i. e.* “the social and cultural present from which we look, and look back, at the objects that are always already of the past, objects that we take to define our present culture” (1).

One of the indisputable aims that I would like to highlight in this exploration, and which is truly relevant to this paper, is summarised by Shohat and Stam as follows: “la cuestión es simplemente convertirse en lectores de prácticas culturales que aprecian los matices artísticos y que están bien informados históricamente” (26). Text, apparatus, discourse and history, and especially the tensions between them, must be addressed by the analysis of these practices: how they construct the spectator and how the spectator assimilates and perceives the reading (320).

However, it is a fact that it is almost impossible to detach the ideology of a particular text or cultural practice. Monegal, following the guidelines of Terry Eagleton, says that:

Cuando Terry Eagleton dice que «la literatura, en el sentido de la palabra que hemos heredado, es una ideología» [...] está llamando la atención sobre el hecho de que ni la delimitación del objeto ni el modo de tratarlo vienen dados por su naturaleza intrínseca, sino que se han ido construyendo históricamente. Tanto los textos seleccionados para ocupar la categoría de literatura como el uso que se hace de ellos cambia según las culturas y el momento histórico. Y si leemos los textos considerados literarios de una determinada manera es porque existen instituciones –de todo tipo y no sólo las educativas– que nos enseñan a hacerlo así (280).

Due to this constant transformation of our ways of addressing texts and determining which of them are or are not literary, a historical and social approach may provide us with more global, productive perspectives. Because it is impossible to determine precisely the limits between high and low culture, as both define themselves by rejecting the other (Easthope, 77), they must first be brought together in a kind of category that allows us to address them and distinguish them from each other so that we can understand the lines they follow and have followed, in order to separate and organise them.

One of the key points in *Culture and Imperialism* is precisely the emphasis given to the fact that when they study classical authors critics often relegate their ideologies (especially on matters regarding colonialism, racism, etc.) to a location far away from culture, which is conceived as a place to which they truly belong and within which their work is recognised (Said, 14).

The separation between culture and ideological context, which tends to see culture primarily as something noble and elevated which is

unrelated to socio-historical conditions, now seems out of place. However, it must be reminded that this analysis should not rashly move away from its aims.

The relationships between literature and power, nation and identity are currently indisputable: the view of literature “as goods”, insists Even-Zohar, is a fundamental fact,

[los cuales] llegan a ennoblecer y consolidar el sentimiento de identidad y bienestar de grandes colectivos. Además, la posesión de tales bienes se presenta –a través de la propagación por parte de quienes tienen interés en la creación o el mantenimiento de la entidad colectiva– como un signo de comunidad y riqueza compartida (1999: 30-31).

Literature and different cultural manifestations are also “a source of identity” (Said, 14).

One of the ways in which the separation between nation and region begins to be overcome in comparative literature, for example, is via the destabilisation of the concept of *nation* itself, introducing the use of French, German, English, Spanish and Portuguese languages within national boundaries (Spivak, 9).

But to what extent should or shouldn't a work be contextualised? How can the description or setting of a political commentary be discerned? “How far should literature be read as sociological evidence?” (Spivak, 17). Informed knowledge of the context and various characteristics put in play in constructing practices and discourses, opening the doors to multilingualism, will allow the formation of readers who are able to appreciate them by distinguishing their many socio-historical facets.

For Wellek, it is clear that in literary research “la teoría, la crítica y la historia cooperan para llevar a cabo su tarea central: la descripción, interpretación y valoración de una obra de arte o de cualquier grupo de obras de arte” (85). This is where the interdisciplinary role which a critic must adopt in order to address these practices (cinematographic, philosophical or literary texts) comes into play.

It is also genuinely significant that a proposition can begin with a change from and via the institution, as supported by Spivak, Bernheimer and others. The role of the critic and the teacher are essential when approaching or addressing a new student of comparative literature. *The Bernheimer Report, 1993: Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century* promotes various guidelines, as well as the importance of initiating this dialogue in classrooms and lecture halls⁹, that utopian space still present in universities and in which these phenomena are

researched and discussed (Said, 31).

All of the above certainly leads to a new set of questions when we address these new fronts and interests. Francesca Neri, for example, proposes the following:

si la escuela italiana no promoviera, por razones políticas, el conocimiento de la tradición literaria nacional, ¿cuántos italianos leerían por su placer personal *I promessi sposi* (*Los novios*)? Pero, por otra parte, si se eliminara de los programas obras como esta novela de Manzoni, ¿cómo sería reconocible la literatura italiana? ¿Qué se enseñaría en las escuelas y las universidades? ¿De dónde éstas obtendrían su prestigio? ¿Qué se guardaría en las bibliotecas? (393).

The important question here is not so much whether or not particular works are selected, but how to approach and define their analysis. Selection of the object of study is restricted to the academic environment which attempts to expand criteria and proposals related to the literary or cultural canon, whether these are considered “classical”, popular or mass culture texts.

Culler, a member of ASCA, describes the school situation in the Netherlands, which is truly enlightening: “in the Netherlands [...] the teaching of literature in secondary schools has been abandoned for ten years now (teachers are free to use whatever cultural materials they wish), so that literary studies may not be the orthodoxy against which cultural studies defines itself” (1999: 337).

Said, for example, says that US, French and Indian students have been taught to read and appreciate, often acritically, the classics of their own countries above those of others. Even so, rather than condemning this fact, which is an unquestionable social reality, he suggests that knowledge and awareness of this fact enriches the reading and comprehension of the work itself (14 15). Broad research, multilingualism, multiculturalism and consideration of the “difference” (in language, religion, race and gender) are some of the tools which should support debate in academic institutions and departments, eliminating terms such as *foreign languages* and adopting new ones such as *modern languages*, as noted by Mary Louise Pratt (64).

For Bhabha, meanwhile, the purpose of criticism is very clear: “to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present. Our task remains, however, to show how historical agency is transformed through the signifying process” (18). Here a decisive position and an interest in “maintaining” these practices also come into play.

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9 | See BERNHEIMER, C. (1995): *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press on the debates and proposals in and from US literature and humanities departments.

In *Multiculturalismo, cine y medios de comunicación. Crítica del pensamiento eurocéntrico (Unthinking Eurocentrism. Multiculturalism and the Media)*, Shohat and Stam offer a complete panorama and an exemplary analysis of various cultural practices from the Third and Fourth Worlds. Beyond merely criticising Eurocentrism, which they consider politically retrograde, aesthetically stale, outdated, sparkless and unproductive, they embark on a study of various “alternative” practices (29) and carry out, in their own words, a double task of criticising and celebrating, dismantling and rebuilding, criticising Eurocentric tendencies within the dominant discourse and at the same time celebrating the transcendent utopianism of multicultural texts and practices, proposing a positively predatory attitude which covers educational and aesthetic possibilities in a wide variety of cultural practices, and which finds in them the seeds of subversion which may blossom in an altered context (30).

Among many other things, most of these authors profess a redefinition and reassessment of the appropriate place for countless cultural manifestations, particularly those that have been moved away from the cultural territory in some way:

En un momento en el que los *grand récits* de Occidente se han dicho y se han repetido hasta la saciedad, cuando una cierta posmodernidad (la de Lyotard) habla de un «final» de las metanarrativas y cuando Fukuyama habla del «fin de la historia», nos debemos preguntar: ¿de quién o quiénes son exactamente esa narrativa y esa historia de las que se dicen que han «terminado»? Es posible que la Europa dominante haya empezado a agotar su repertorio estratégico de historias, pero la gente del Tercer Mundo, las «minorías» del Primer Mundo, las mujeres y los homosexuales y las lesbianas sólo acaban de empezar a contar y a deconstruir las suyas (Shohat y Stam, 249).

By addressing the dichotomy between theory and practice, Bhabha describes the existence of various types of political writing, whose effects are obscured because they are divided between theory and practice. Both an activist organisation and a theoretical ideological text consist of discourses which produce the objects to which they refer, rather than reflecting them. The difference between the two rests in their operational qualities: activist discourse has a defined organisational and explanatory aim linked to the event, whereas a theoretical ideological discourse contributes to the deeply-rooted political ideas and principles which inform the right to act. The latter does not justify the former, or necessarily precede it. They exist side by side, each one making the other possible. In this regard, Bhabha is interested in the process of “ideological intervention” (which he borrows from Hall) which describes the role of “imagining” or representing politics in practice (32).

5. By Way of Conclusion

If we consider the need to redesign some of the various positions which have been mentioned and include them in the field of comparative literature, it will be possible to achieve and generate greater advances within its undertaking. With various aims and perspectives ahead, the discipline is coming closer and closer to achieving some of these goals.

For Wellek, one of the main aims of comparative literature is to find a way to reintegrate into the great current of modern literary research and criticism (85 86). Spivak, meanwhile, finds it essential to specify its relationships with other areas of knowledge, such as the social sciences (particularly regarding the development and care of marginalised literatures), seeking to define it “in the eyes of the other”, as stated in the text (25).

In this regard, the literary analyses of Spivak and Bhabha, to mention just some, are genuinely enlightening and exemplary. They find them truly suited to explain various concepts around some of the questions which have been mentioned in this paper. The possibility, provided by literary analysis of both modern and old works, of initiating a dialogue between concepts such as collectiveness, identity or culture itself is truly incomparable. For Spivak, comparative literature will always try to benefit from the power of fiction when moving closer to area studies and social disciplines (49).

It is important to highlight that whatever the object of study, comparative literature will always try to expand its criteria and proposals, bearing in mind the constant development of what we understand by literature. This is because in order for there to be a discipline it must be possible to formulate, to formulate new proposals indefinitely (Foucault, 33). Meanwhile, it will continue to contribute major tools and approaches to the study of culture and its various practices.

As Bernheimer states, to say that literature is one of many discursive practices is not an attack on the specific nature of literature, rather it locates it within history and contextualises it. This means we must constantly continue to question and reassess what we have always considered to be literature and literary.

The study of world literature can even consist of studying the ways in which cultures recognise themselves via their projections of *otherness*, in which we can address the transnational histories of migrants, colonised people or political refugees, and border conditions (Bhabha, 17) or those of “resistant practices” (Shohat

and Stam, 251). We should also highlight the importance of not only representing the Other but also collaborating with him or her (Shohat and Stam, 55).

This also points to what Easthope refers to when he speaks of “different readings within different contexts of reading” (21), *i. e.* the ability to discern differences between different analyses and ways of addressing cultural practices or texts on the basis of their origin, their context, their past.

However, this general redefinition that I have discussed here can only be carried out via a new description and connection between theory and practice. Both these fields must be explored and rearticulated again and again. The work carried out in this regard in *Unthinking Eurocentrism. Multiculturalism and the Media* is encouraging and exemplary.

Hall describes very well how the meaning and connotation of a term or concept can be transformed when a particular group has decided to do so. Using the term *negro* as an example within a very specific social context (that of Jamaica), he explains how this word, which used to denote something negative and obscure, now has a new, positive meaning for this culture, achieved via action:

Una cadena ideológica concreta se convierte en punto de conflicto, no sólo cuando las personas intentan destituirla, romperla o impugnarla por medio de su suplantación por algún otro conjunto de términos alternativos totalmente nuevos, sino también cuando interrumpen el campo ideológico para transformar su significado por medio de un cambio o rearticulación de sus asociaciones, por ejemplo, desde lo negativo a lo positivo (58)¹⁰.

Finally, I would like to conclude with another idea described by Spivak in this revealing, invaluable paragraph:

We cannot not try to open up, from the inside, the colonialism of European national language-based Comparative Literature and the Cold War format of Area Studies, and infect history and anthropology with the «other» as producer of knowledge. From the inside, acknowledging complicity. No accusations. No excuses. Rather, learning the protocol of those disciplines, turning them around, laboriously, not only by building institutional bridges but also by persistent curricular interventions. The most difficult thing here is to resist mere appropriation by the dominant (10-11).

It is therefore the comparative literature scholar’s task to re-establish and redefine our discipline in the context that includes the various voices of Others, in which these institutional “bridges” also serve us as spokespeople to expand and reconfigure the tools that will allow

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10 | «En la revolución cultural, que barrió Jamaica a finales de los años sesenta y en los setenta, por primera vez las personas reconocieron y aceptaron su herencia negra-esclava-africana. Y en ese momento, cuando el fulcro o centro de gravedad de la sociedad modificó su postura con respecto a “las raíces”, a la vida y a la experiencia común de las clases inferiores negras urbanas y rurales, como representantes de la esencia cultural de “lo jamaicano”, el término “negro” quedó refundado como su opuesto (éste fue el momento de radicalización política, de movilización de masas, de solidaridad con luchas negras de liberación en cualquier lugar del mundo, de los “hermanos del alma” y del soul, tanto como del *reggae*, Bob Marley y el movimiento *rasta*). El término “negro” se convirtió en el punto para la reconstrucción de la “unidad”, del reconocimiento positivo de la “experiencia negra”. También se convirtió en el momento de la constitución de un *nuevo* sujeto colectivo: “las masas negras combatientes”. Esta transformación en el significado, en la posición y en la referencia de la palabra “negro”, no fue ni el resultado, ni el reflejo de la revolución cultural negra en Jamaica de este período. Fue una de las vías a nivel de las cuales se *constituyeron* esos nuevos sujetos. Las personas (los individuos concretos) siempre habían estado allí. Pero aparecían por primera vez como sujetos-en-lucha por una nueva época de la historia. La ideología, a través de una categoría antigua, fue constitutiva de su formación contraria [...] Cuando los movimientos sociales desarrollan un conflicto alrededor de un programa determinado, sucede que aquellos significados que para

us to honestly “read” different cultural practices.

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siempre empiezan a perder sus amarres [...] Porque el término “negro” en otro tiempo significó todo aquello que menos se respetaba, puede ahora ser afirmado como “bello” como la base de una identidad social positiva, la cual requiere y suscita respeto entre nosotros mismos» (59- 60).

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