

Futures of Comparative Literature

ACLA State of the Discipline Report

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Electronic literature as comparative literature

Jessica Pressman

Electronic literature is comparative literature. It operates across machine and human languages, requiring translation of these languages before it even reaches the human reader. It is born digital – meaning that it is procedural and computational, processed across multiple platforms, protocols, and technologies in real time and in accordance with the very real constraints and technical specificities of the hardware, software, and network configuration of the reader's computer. What is presented onscreen – the artwork and poetic – is multimedia and multimodal. Combining text, image, sound, movement, interactivity, and design, such works challenge traditional disciplinary boundaries (is a Flash animation a film, literature, a hybrid, or something else entirely?) as well as genre categories (is this narrative, poetry, or performance?). For these reasons and more, electronic literature requires its reader to read and think comparatively.

Electronic literature demands that readers compare not only language and text but also the media formats and ecologies that support them. Examining the medial contexts and networked configurations that support digital literature exposes the inextricable connections between the technological, linguistic, cultural, and political. We are compelled to recognize that there is never text without media and mediation; moreover, that literary studies *is*, at least in part, media studies.

In my scholarly work, I have tried to show the benefits of approaching electronic literature comparatively, comparing it to earlier literary traditions and to other textual media platforms. In this essay I suggest that reading electronic literature can support a paradigmatic shift *within* the discipline of comparative literature – a medial turn that can facilitate understanding not only specific art objects but also the larger paradigms, practices, and ideologies involved in such study.

Electronic literature

In the last few decades, electronic literature has emerged as a robust field across diverse genres, languages, readerships, and nations. Such work invites comparative reading practices that combine analysis of different languages and media forms. Let's take a look at a few examples of how digital works present onscreen poetics that promote comparative literary reading approaches.

First and foremost, Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries: these digital artists – one American, one Korean – challenge simple designations of nationality, genre, and language. In *Nihpon* (2002) and other works, Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries present a choreographed conversation between Western and Eastern languages that flashes upon a horizontally divided screen (Figure 4). The visual design invites translation and comparison but the speed at which the languages flash dispels comprehensive conclusions. The work promotes comparative reading ambitions and expectations but also awareness of how media challenge such traditional practices (see Pressman, "Reading").

William Poundstone similarly uses Flash to present a one-word-at-a-time aesthetic that also invites comparative literary analysis. In *Project for Tachistoscope [Bottomless Pit]* (2005), text and icons are embedded as image-texts (see Mitchell, *Picture Theory*). Their appearance onscreen is cued to ambient sounds, heightened speeds, and subliminal messages (Figures 5 and 6). Semiotics is here

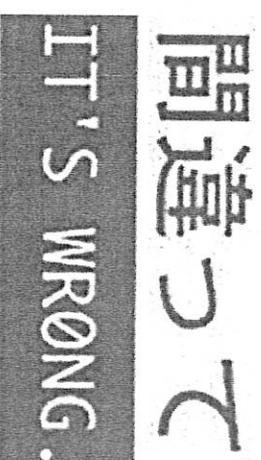
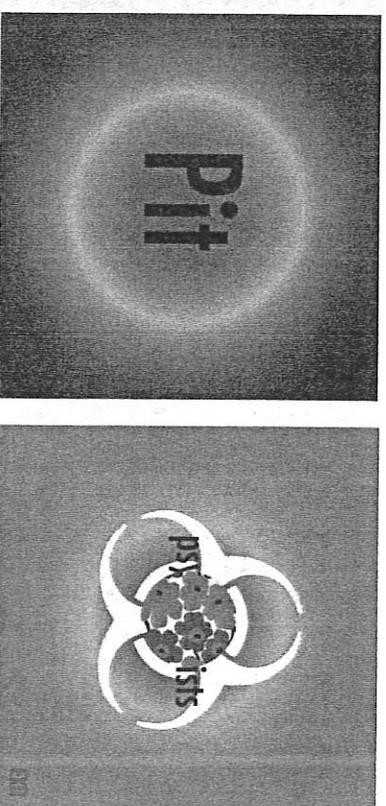


Figure 4 Screenshot from Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries.

Source: *Nihpon* (2002). Reproduced by permission.



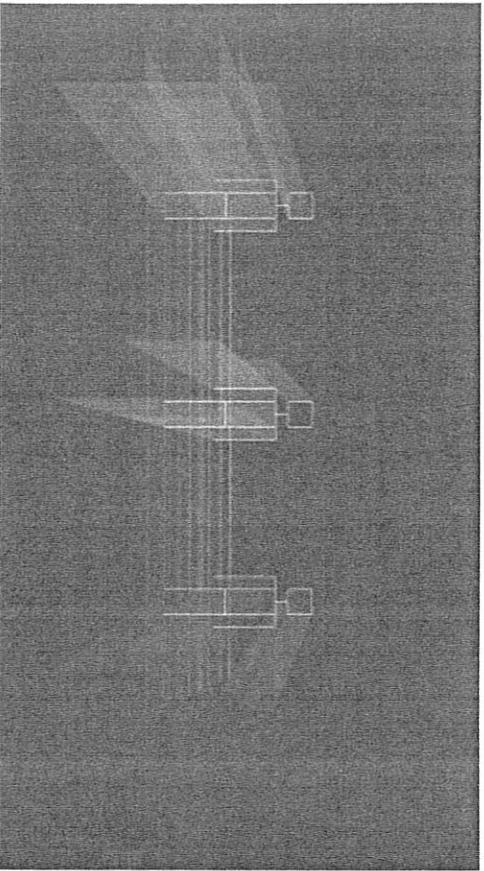
Figures 5 and 6 Nonconsecutive screenshots from William Poundstone.

Source: *Project for Tachistoscope [Bottomless Pit]* (2005). Reproduced by permission.

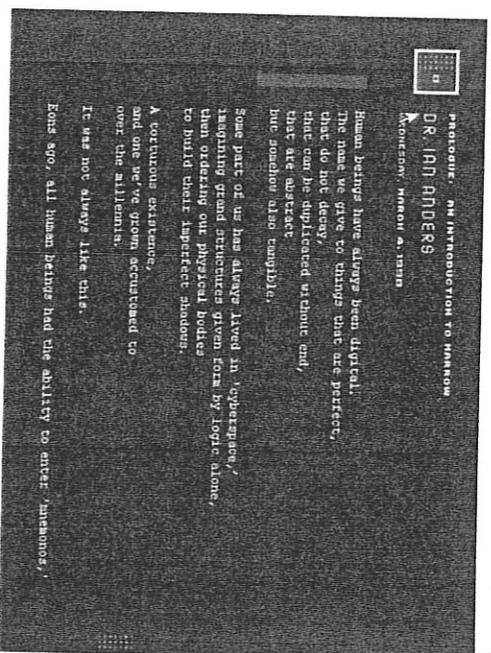
not limited to the visual or linguistic, and literary interpretation requires attention to the temporal, multimodal, and computational. Reading such a work makes explicitly and affectively clear that digital literature is not just about text but also about interface, interactive design, and programming code.

Other works of electronic literature promote comparative linguistic analysis by presenting different versions of the same work in different languages. For example, David Jhave Johnston's "Sooth" (2005) prompts readers to choose the language in which to read the work and thereby invites comparison between the different language-based versions. In addition to promoting comparison across languages, electronic literature can also invite consideration of the relationship between human and machine languages. An early genre of electronic literature called "codework" did this by placing linguistic language and programming code side by side, interspersing digital text into readable text, to create poetic neologisms that N. Katherine Hayles calls "creole" ("Print" 80) and which compel recognition of the computational languages working to produce digital text onscreen. Codework by such writers as Talan Memmott and Mez defamiliarizes language and the traditional practices of comparative literary studies by making visible and aesthetic the fact that programming code is a type of language that not only operates to produce the onscreen text but also itself can be read (see Marino).

Electronic literature invites comparison between languages and opportunities to compare how meaning operates across multiple medial and sensorial modes. Erik Loyer's *Chrona* (2001), for example, presents its reader with two ways of engaging its science-fiction narrative: viewing the novel as a visual animation with a voice-over narrative in "Perform Text" or reading the narrative as scrollable text with no animation and voice-over in "View Text" (Figures 7 and 8). The



Figures 7 and 8 Screenshots from "Perform Text" and "View Text" of "Prologue" in Erik Loyer's *Chrona*.



Figures 7 and 8 (Continued)

reader must choose between the modes and cannot open both windows at once (see Pressman, *Digital Modernism* Ch. 5). The choice compels reflection on the actions that go into the process of performing a comparative analysis. In "Why Compare?" R. Radhakrishnan argues that comparison always involves choices, and these choices (particularly those made unintentionally) have implications for the resulting comparison. He writes that "comparisons are never neutral: they are inevitably tendentious, didactic, competitive, and prescriptive. Behind the seeming generosity of comparison, there always lurks the aggression of a thesis" (454). Loyer's *Chrona* illustrates this point. Choosing "View Text" instead of "Perform Text" suggests an understanding that one reads a novel by viewing text. But "View Text" is not the default mode of experiencing *Chrona*. Chapters open in "Perform Text" unless the reader takes action to view the text in order to, presumably, read it. This little programmatic detail is significant for understanding the comparative work that *Chrona* performs and promotes. *Chrona*'s episodic narrative about the ideological pitfalls of imagining cyberspace as a utopian Eden is predicated upon the reader making choices to access the narrative – choices that compel consideration of the actions that go into reading and comparing. Both Loyer and Radhakrishnan push us to recognize that the work of translation and comparison often happens within contexts of asymmetries in power relations – among populations, languages, and nations – which are frequently overlooked in the effort to focus on text or media.

The field of electronic literature is full of artists exploring the actions, intentions, and purposes of comparative reading. In response to their works, and indeed to the evolution of electronic literature more generally, literary critics are developing a diverse set of analytical approaches so as to read electronic literature

comparatively, critically, and closely. From critically examining the programming languages that produce a literary work onscreen (as in critical code studies) and comparing the various technologies involved in producing the configuration of the digital performance (as in platform studies and media archaeology) to using data analytics software to pursue pattern recognition as an entrypoint for interpretation (as in cultural analytics), scholars are finding new ways to pursue comparative approaches with and through electronic literature (see Marino; Bogost and Monfort; Huhtamo and Parikka; Manovich). Such approaches invite reflective consideration about the scholarly discipline of comparative literature, prompting critical questions about how this professional field must evolve along with new literature.

John Zuern argues that disciplines of comparative literature and media studies are “two ongoing initiatives in literary studies, proceeding in parallel time but rarely intersecting, [that] have something to learn from each other.” Zuern identifies an opportunity to pursue comparison between these scholarly fields as a way of addressing the challenges each faces. He suggests an analogy between the confusion in digital studies over the distinction between “literary and artifactual properties” of an electronic work and the challenge in comparative literature to distinguish between “the specific ‘literariness’ of a text . . . and the text’s presumed linguistic, cultural, and national-political specificities.” Zuern cautions critics of electronic literature not to examine media at the expense of the literary, and this warning has a reverse implication: traditional comparative literary readings should also avoid the myopia of focusing solely on text and language. Bringing the practice of comparative literature to bear on electronic literature allows for readings that move beyond examinations of media formats and literary poetics to careful critiques of the cultural contexts and political practices that enable the very processes of computing and comparing. Electronic literature needs comparative literature.

But comparative literature also needs electronic literature. Rebecca Walkowitz introduces the term “comparison literature” to describe literature that “experiments with comparative structures” and therefore demands comparative reading of its content and medial format. Walkowitz uses the term as part of a larger argument that in the global networks of “world literature,” critics need to read comparatively across texts, translations, and media platforms, even while reading a single literary work (“Comparison Literature” 567).¹ In an essay on Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries, she claims that digitally created literature is “born-translated” because such works “not only appear in translation but are written for translation from the start” (“Close Reading” 173). Such literature, Walkowitz argues, is reflexively engaged with the network of production and distribution that enables its global poetics and thus requires readers to be attentive to the influence of translation in the digital network and the digital literature circulating on it.

“Comparison literature” might be considered a version of what N. Katherine Hayles earlier called a “technotext,” a work that reflexively draws attention to its materiality and technologies of meaning-making (*Writing Machines* 25). However, instead of describing a literary practice or poetic effect in a particular

work, the term “comparison literature” addresses comparative literature and literary studies more broadly. Comparison literature, Walkowitz writes, “asks us to imagine new geographies of literary production and requires methodologies that understand the history of a book to include its many editions and translations” (“Comparison Literature” 568). This is where comparative literature meets media studies. Yet, while Walkowitz’s formulation of “comparison literature” supports a critical shift from focusing on text to considering materiality, it still locates that material textuality in the print-based realm: the history of the book. Here is where a focus on electronic literature can support a paradigm shift in the field of comparative literature. The works I discuss in this essay show that electronic literature pushes comparative analysis from text to process, from translation to series of translation acts, from work to network. Comparative literature must follow.

Certain genres of contemporary web-based electronic literature depend upon the Internet’s technological structure for their literary effects. For these works, “comparison literature” and global literature have little to do with the history of the book and much to do with the history of the Internet. Works like the data-mined streaming poetry of “Twistor” and the Twitter-based Netprov piece “I Work for the Web” use algorithms to cull data from social networking sites and then use that content to constitute the “literary” product (Figures 9 and 10).² Other types of text-based, site-specific performances or public installations that include SMS messages from readers or participants bring to light new questions and concerns for critics. Rita Raley examines this type of text-as-networked performance and explains, “What was at stake was less the physical parts of the work than a negotiation of control over property, technological systems, and public speech” (6).³ This kind of public, site-specific performance of electronic literature, Raley writes, “allows us to think across media, platforms, and genres

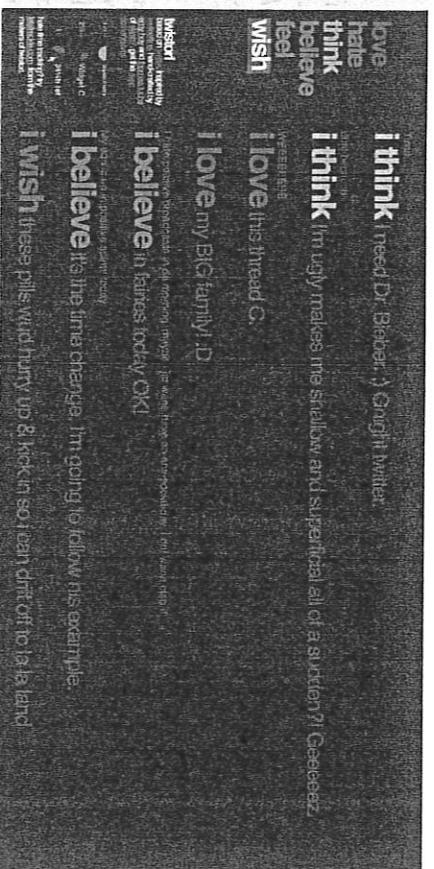


Figure 9 Screenshot from Amy Hoy and Thomas Fusch’s “Twistor” (taken January 30, 2016).

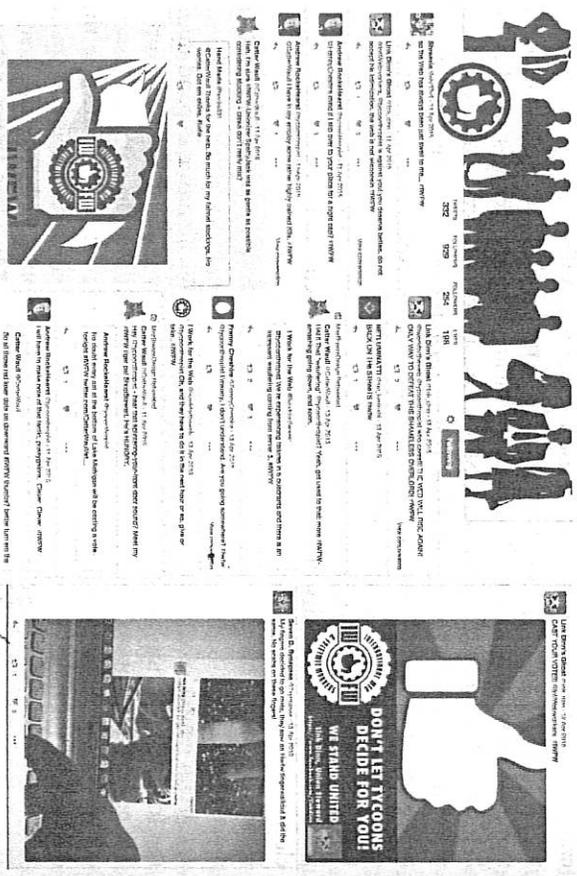


Figure 10 Composite of screenshots from Mark C. Marino and Rob Wittig's "I Work for the Web" (2015).

Source: Marino and Wittig, 2015. Reproduced by permission.

and to articulate a discourse on textual practices that are sited, social, and live" (8). Digital literature of this sort reshapes what and how comparatists compare. We can no longer just compare texts. We must now compare textual media.

Comparative textual media

Comparing media in the service of literary criticism can be transformative, both for understanding literature and for reconsidering the disciplinary fields and practices devoted to it. Hayles and I make this argument in *Comparative Textual Media: Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era*, a collection that proposes a paradigm shift by claiming that textual studies *is* media studies.

[P]rint is itself a medium, an obvious fact that tends to be obscured by its long dominance within Western culture. As the era of print is passing, it is possible once again to see print in a comparative context with other textual media, including the scroll, the manuscript codex, the early print codex, the variations of book forms produced by changes from letterpress to offset to digital publishing machines, and born-digital forms such as electronic literature and computer games.

(vii)

The book collects essays on different textual media – from ancient Greek scrolls to digital literature, medieval manuscripts to paper letterhead and video games – in order to present a collective argument that reading across and between different textual formats exposes how text is always dependent upon the particularities of media. Media, of course, are dependent upon the particularities of cultural, political, and economic contexts for their development and use; a comparative focus on textual media thus compels literary scholars to reframe what we do and how we do it. Including comparative textual studies as part of comparative literary studies opens interdisciplinary channels for communication, collaboration, and, yes, comparison.

Comparative media studies have obvious relevance in our digital moment. When pundits claim the death of books – the media form most associated with literature – and question the relevance of the humanities more generally, a comparative perspective provides context. A comparative media perspective has been part of modern literary criticism since 1924, when I. A. Richards introduced his foundational *Principles of Literary Criticism* by laying out “the questions which the critic seeks to answer,” such as “What gives the experience of reading a certain poem its value? How is this experience better than another? Why prefer this picture to that?” (2). He concludes: “[T]hese are the fundamental questions which criticism is required to answer, together with such preliminary questions – What *is* a picture, a poem, a piece of music? How can experiences be compared?” (2, original emphasis). Seen in this historical context, literary criticism has always been conjoined to comparative media studies. But in the age of digital media and global networks, this intersection is even more vital. As Hayles and I argue in the introduction to *Comparative Textual Media*, “A focus on media promotes awareness that national, linguistic, and genre categories (typical classifications for text-based disciplines) are always already embedded in particular material and technological practices with broad cultural and social implications” (x). This is particularly true in the age of new media and networked culture because text that circulates online is inseparable from its distributed medial instantiations.

Electronic literature supports metacritical awareness because it challenges us to identify what constitutes the literary “text” and also, of course, how to analyze it. Since electronic literature is procedural, critics can and should focus not only on onscreen poetics but also on the networked practices of production, circulation, and archiving of these products. Electronic literature thus promotes a shift of focus from objects – work, text, narrative – to processes, institutions, protocols, and relationships. How can onscreen poetics be separated from programming codes or the specificities of software versions and hardware configurations? How can we consider national, linguistic, and genre questions without considering how corporate and technological factors enable (or disable) literary aesthetics? When reading electronic literature, especially a work created in Flash and presented on an Apple product that blocks Adobe software, we cannot take for granted that the answers to such questions are purely aesthetic. Analysis of literature in the digital age, and

certainly analysis of electronic literature, must include examination not only of specific delivery technologies but also of institutional and infrastructural technologies that support the production, dissemination, and reception of literature.

Comparative literary critics are trained to read across and between, to seek out and explore the connections that configure meaning. These skills are ever more important in our networked age, when we need to harness the power of comparative approaches to examine the specificities of medial ecologies – the technological configurations, governmental policies, programming protocols, corporate confederations, and cultural norms – that support the production and dissemination of literary texts. We just have to learn to shift our comparative gaze to consider text as media. A focus on electronic literature supports this perspectival and paradigmatic shift. Digital literature is comparison literature that compels comparative literature to reconsider what counts as comparison and translation – indeed, what counts as literature and literary criticism in a digital age.

Notes

- 1 Walkowitz describes Coetzee's novel *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) as comparison literature: "It fits this rubric because of its circulation, to be sure, but also because of its production: formally, the text experiments with comparative structures such as lists and catalogues; typographically, it invokes historical practices of translation that emphasize comparison between source and target; and thematically, it reflects on gestures of ethical, national, and generic comparison" (567).
- 2 "I Work for the Web" was a Neoprov performance that played out over Twitter in April 2015. It was created by Mark C. Marino and Rob Wittig and is archived at <<http://robwit.net/iwfv/>>. "Twistori," an experiment by Amy Hoy and Thomas Fuchs, is available at <<http://twistori.com/>>.
- 3 The "public art installations" that Raley addresses "are *interactive* (remote and on-site participants are invited to contribute an SMS message of their own to the data feed); *sited* (they cannot but engage the specificities of each place and, by extension, prompt a consideration of what is 'public' and what is 'private'); and *social* (participants are continually negotiating their relationship to the audience, crowd, and readerly communities that are themselves continually mutating)" (6).

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