

**GENRES AS SITES OF INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS: NEW PERSPECTIVES FOR A  
COMPARATIVE GENRE THEORY**

César Domínguez

Universidade de Santiago de Compostela (Espagne)

Arguably, no other concept has played a larger or more important role in literary theory than *genre*. This concept has been used no less than in to define literature and, as a synecdoche of literature, has provided an unequivocal answer to the difficult question on what this semiotic system is. For Jean-Marie Schaeffer (1989: 8-9), the fortune of the concept is intimately linked to a radical difference between literature and other arts, namely, the problem of extensional demarcation (*délimitation extensionnelle*). While other arts do not need to distinguish themselves from parallel non-artistic practices, simply because they do not exist, literature is at pain to differentiate itself from non-artistic, verbal practices. Given this anxiety, it is not surprising that the map of genres is a guarantee of literary cognizability. *A* tragedy, for instance, may be good or bad, but even in the latter case *tragedy* will not stop being a *literary* and hence artistic genre.

Although Schaeffer's argument may be qualified in various ways, for example, by taking into account the complex dynamics of *paraliterary* works and genres that become canonized, or the role played by extensional demarcation in other arts as well, his main thesis remains important: «La théorie des genres est ainsi devenue le lieu où se joue le sort du champ extensionnel et de la définition en compréhension de la littérature: l'introuvable spécificité sémiotique est "sauvée" grâce à la relève (la *Aufhebung* hégélienne) de la théorie des genres» (10). To this logic of *difference*—between literature and other non-artistic, verbal practices—one may add a logic of *similarity*, which works in the heart of every genre by bringing together those works that share a repertoire of basic traits.

The aim of this paper is to reflect on this logic of difference/similarity, an inherent characteristic of genres, in an intercultural setting. In particular, I want to examine what happens when this logic is applied beyond the limits of the Western genre

tradition. To be more precise, looking at whether or not the criterion of similarity, that brings together several works in a specific Western genre, may be applied to non-Western works, and whether or not the difference that draws the frontier between the Western idea of literature and other arts is specifically bound to this cultural domain. This kind of research is best represented by East-West Studies.

Claudio Guillén (2005: 97) has recently stressed that one of the variants of East-West Studies—the one that matches up with his model *C* of supranationality—«viene a significar que el diálogo entre unidad y diversidad que estimula el comparatismo se cifra ahora en el encuentro abierto de la crítica/historia con la teoría; o, si se prefiere, de nuestros conocimientos de la poesía, supranacionales, con los de la Poética». As can be seen, the logic identified by Schaeffer is the very same logic that Guillén advocates for comparative epistemology, in whose model *C* of supranationality «[e]l grado de teoreticidad [...] más elevado» (97) is achieved, hence the importance of conducting research on genres in an intercultural setting. In this regard, it is consequential to note that, in spite of the twenty years between the first (1985) and the second (2005) version of *Entre lo uno y lo diverso*, Guillén did not change his diagnosis of East-West Studies, except for the inclusion of a new reference: *Comparative Poetics*, by Earl Miner (1990).

My analysis of genre logic in an intercultural setting will show that *Comparative Poetics* is the first comprehensive study devoted to the comparison of genre theories from an intercultural perspective and, at the same time, is fast reaching an impasse as a result of a highly partisan and schematic, ideological agenda.

The discussion of this underlying agenda requires, on the one hand, analysing Miner's proposal in its entirety, as the main argument has been put forward in several publications from 1978 to 1993. And, on the other, his theses should be contextualized within the parameters of a broader move by comparative literature, that is, an extension of research from intracultural to intercultural settings. This extension meets with several phenomena, of which I will focus specifically on cultural relativism. This analysis will show that the fortune of genres in Western literary theory—namely, their role in delimiting the literary field—may become their most enduring misfortune when comparison of literary theories is not supported by rhetoric and theoretical interculturality is not indebted to literary interculturality.

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## 1. LITERARY DIVERSITY AND CULTURAL RELATIVISM

The growing importance of East-West Studies within comparative literature is clearly linked to the extension of comparison from *intracultural* to *intercultural* settings. Franca Sinopoli has described this move as follows (1997: 14):

Sin dalle sue origini sette-ottocentesche, la letteratura comparata ha individuato il proprio campo generale d'interesse nella considerazione diacronica e/o sincronica di diverse tradizioni letterarie, con un progressivo specificarsi dei limiti de tale «diversità» da un più ristretto ambito *intraculturale* (le letterature europee comparate tra di loro) ad uno decisamente *interculturale* (la comparazione dei sistemi letterari occidentale, medio-orientale, e più recentemente la comparazione tra le letterature occidentali e quelle dei paesi ex-colonizzati sollecitata dalle così dette teorie postcoloniali).

It is not necessary to repeat her powerful argument here. Suffice to say that the opposition between intra- and interculturality needs some qualification. For example, is the comparison of Western and Eastern European literature *intracultural*, even if the latter has been pushed to the periphery? Or, are all comparisons defined as *intercultural* truly intercultural only because they are supposed to broaden the extensional horizon? In order to delve into this topic in more depth, Douwe W. Fokkema's proposal on cultural relativism proves extremely useful.

As Fokkema (1984: 239) says, cultural relativism is neither a research method nor a theory, but a researcher's attitude when selecting methods and theoretical stances that can be defined in the following terms: «cultural relativism [...] consists of an attitude of tolerance towards other patterns of culture» (240).

Cultural relativism, as an epistemological thesis, has multiple degrees of radicalness. Thus, for instance, one may think of an extreme degree of cultural relativism, wherein the epistemological thesis meets an ethical thesis that denies absolutism. For Fokkema, this radical version of relativism should be rejected: «Since cultural relativism in a more rigorous interpretation implies ethical relativism, that is, abstention from pronouncing any ethical judgement on events that happen *outside* one's own culture, common sense forbids the unrestricted acceptance of cultural relativism» (239). The issue of variable degrees in the understanding of cultural relativism—from radical to moderate—is not a minor one for comparative literature. The radical version equates with the denial of comparability because one starts from the premise that no literary theory is either true or false.

Therefore, it is striking to see how the long discussion about the pertinence of comparison has been directed more towards «textualist» issues (i.e., items in the work that ensure sufficient comparability) rather than towards «contextualist» issues (i.e., factors of production and consumption that ensure sufficient comparability). The relevance of either point of view in the history of the Western reflection on genres is clearly not a minor one. And if it is true that this move from textualist to contextualist issues has been advocated by Fokkema (1982) as a premise of the new comparatist paradigm, it nevertheless must be admitted that recently only a few researchers have started from this premise, and even fewer when studying genre theories from an intercultural perspective.

Fokkema interprets cultural relativism in a moderate way. His aim is to explore the conditions that ensure sufficient comparability for a research of communication-situations wherein texts, in certain circumstances, provide an aesthetic experience (1984: 243). Fokkema is well aware that moderately adopting cultural relativism may come into conflict with epistemic tools: «Although we wish to respect the ideal of cultural relativism, in practice we are bound to impose our own epistemological considerations upon our object of research. [...] Nevertheless, [...] by focusing on the communication-situation rather than on single texts we are in a better position to respect both the norms of cultural relativism and those of our own epistemology» (245). This phenomenon has been called *methodological paradox* by Mary Garrett (1999). When studying *other* cultures, the inquiry must begin *somewhere*, usually with principles and categories (genres, for instance) that are alien to these other cultures but familiar to the researcher. Therefore, there is always the risk of imposing these principles and/or categories on other cultures, creating a *force fit* or *dissonance*.

In my opinion, Fokkema's typology of aesthetic-experience degrees creates a force fit of both principles and categories. The issue of aesthetic autonomy is part and parcel of Western genre theory. The genre limitation to three literary kinds was instrumental when literary autonomy was identified as a *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck* (purposiveness without purpose). Fokkema develops his argument as follows. Not every culture in the world locates aesthetic experience independently of other kinds of experience (1984: 243). Therefore, a typology of cultures is necessary in order to indicate whether artistic texts are distinguished from religious, ethical, cognitive and

utilitarian ones (244). Fokkema faces this challenge and presents a typology of kinds of cultures with no empirical identification (244). His three kinds are: (a) there is not a distinction of kinds of texts (mainly oral); (b) there is a flexible distinction of kinds of texts (oral and written), but the criterion is alien to the distinction artistic, religious, ethical, cognitive and utilitarian; and (c) there is a distinction of kinds of texts (oral and written) according to the aforementioned parameters with a certain degree of osmosis between each kind.

For Fokkema, only the third kind of culture ensures sufficient comparability. Consequently, a more specific sub-typology of the third kind is needed (245), which means that a comparison between texts from culture *c* and texts from culture either *a* or *b* is not feasible:

The student of comparative literature will be unable to identify literary texts in a culture that does not discriminate between art and religion, art and hunting ritual, etc. Perhaps he would respect the norm of cultural relativism most if he refrained from making the texts of this culture the object of his research (244).

Fokkema's cultural relativist position is laudable. However, its implementation leads to a masked form of Eurocentricism, because in the end only literatures that fit into the European pattern are studied. Both the European category (*literature*) and principle (*autonomy*) are imposed, even if the author said, «it would be inaccurate to impose alien categories on these texts» (244). What Fokkema's typology describes is the evolution of Western literatures from the oral form to the written form. By way of the restriction of comparability, his typology becomes a teleological orthodoxy and Eurocentricism moves from textualism to contextualism: «Oddly enough, the chance for relativism in cross-cultural studies seem to grow where the main categories of thought are comparable, as in case *c*, which allows only for variation in the strictness with which the various types of text are distinguished» (244-245). Sufficient comparability is reified as a *manipulated* comparison and interculturality as cultural incommensurability.

## 2. INTERCULTURAL FRAMES AND TYPOLOGY OF COMPARABILITY

The same problem arises with Miner's way of using genres for an intercultural approach to literature. Miner's thesis on comparative poetics was not developed in a single work (*Comparative Poetics* in 1990), but rather in a series of publications between 1978 and 1993. It is real work in progress and, therefore, a demonstration of the complexity of the

research field. But processuality in this case has two problems. First, some proposals advanced in earlier works are not discussed in subsequent ones, thus weakening the line of argument. This happens with the three kinds of *intercultural comparison*, which are discussed in 1987 and 1989, but are not included in *Comparative Poetics* in 1990. And second, although secondary arguments are qualified in several ways in subsequent works, the main thesis remains intact. This occurs with the varying degree of pertinence that *explicit* poetics had in 1978, 1990 and 1991.

Miner first put forward his working hypothesis in 1978: «In brief, a critical system, or a systematic poetics, emerges in a culture after a literary system proper has been generated and when important critical conceptions are made about a then flourishing or normatively considered genre» (1978: 350). Nine years later, this hypothesis was supported by a reflection on *comparability*, which I need to examine before continuing with my discussion.

At this moment it is worth recalling Miner's comment on comparison: «Perhaps the least studied issue in comparative literature is what is meant by "comparative" and, more precisely, what are the principles or canons of comparability» (1987: 135). The echoes of René Wellek's diagnosis of comparative literature's crisis are conspicuous. But what I want to stress is that Miner's solution for the crisis lies not only in the so-called policy of openness (whether interdisciplinary, interartistic or interliterary), but mainly in an epistemological and methodological reflection on the comparison itself within the frame of a horizontal East-West axis. In this context, Miner distinguishes three varieties of *intercultural comparison*: (i) *alienation*, (ii) *homology* and (iii) *misreading*.

*Alienation* «is a deliberate introduction of something kindred but unconnected historically with the issue or matter at hand» (1987: 139). Miner gives as an example the alienation of Western renaissance sonnet sequences by examining Japanese royal collections. The comparison shows how integration works differently in each literary tradition. *Homology* refers to the fact that «in different literatures and societies, differing elements may serve the same function and therefore be compared» (137). Chinese History and Western Epic prove a useful comparison because both genres play the same role. And *misreading* consists of «interpreting a complex whole by an important subordinate, rather than the dominant, feature» (140). For Miner, the latter

case «may yield degrees of likeness or illumination that other procedures may not» (140).

### 3. FROM INTERCULTURAL FRAMES TO FOUNDATIONAL GENRES AND IDEAS OF LITERATURE(S)

For Miner, misreading is the most useful kind of comparison, a way to achieve a truly *general* theory of literature. His thesis on the emergence and evolution of ideas of literature is based on it. This thesis may be stated as follows: systematic poetics in a cultural domain emerges after both a proper literary system has been generated and a critical system is based upon a then esteemed genre. It is necessary to pause and unpack these categories: systematic poetics, literary system and genre.

As systematic poetics emerges later than the corresponding literary system in Miner's model, let us begin with the latter: «By a "literary system" we must mean [...] two distinct yet related matters: a discrete and continuous literary history of "occurrences" such as that we designate as English literature; and a continuous set of ideas about what that first system is» (1978: 341). Differentiation and continuity are valued by reference to English literature. Is this just an innocent comparison? To say that any literature in the world must fit into the pattern of English literature seems an odd point of departure for intercultural comparison, especially when it is not posited as an *etic* point of view which will be *emicly* specified. Therefore, there is a Eurocentric bias both in the fact that any literature continues to originate from the European idea of literature and in the fact that the written phase can be identified with the final one in a so-called universal process:

the genesis of *literary systems proper* involves three phases or emphases that shade into each other. *We* begin with undifferentiated thought. Later, thought becomes differentiated, but what may be taken as literature alone may have some other status as religion or history as well. Yet later, literature is considered as *we* consider it today, as a distinct kind of knowledge with distinct functions (1978: 345; emphasis mine).

What we are facing then is an intercultural comparison intraculturally restricted to *our* idea of literature according to an evolutionary process on which Fokkema insists five years later with identical number of phases.

For Miner, systematic poetics is an explicit critical text by a gifted critic, whose argumentation is based upon a specific flourishing or prestigious genre (1978: 350). This kind of text is later called *originative* or *foundational poetics*:

It is argued in what follows that there are two kinds of general poetics. One is implicit in practice, and such a poetics belongs to every culture that distinguishes literature as a distinct human activity, a distinct kind of knowledge and social practice. The other is an explicit «originative» or «foundational» poetics, and this kind of poetics is to be found in some cultures but not in others (1990: 7).

There are several striking things about the quoted passage. First, if *implicit* poetics are more universal than explicit poetics, why does Miner build his thesis around the latter, namely, Aristotle's *Poetics*, the «Ta Hsu» (Great Preface) to the Chinese *Shijing* (The Classic of Poetry), Ki no Tsurayuki's Japanese preface to the *Kokinshu*, and Murasaki Shikibu's metafictional comments in *Genji Monogatari* (The Tale of Genji)? Second, why does Miner trust explicit poetics when it is generally acknowledged that these critical texts are not based upon contemporary literary texts but upon ancient ones? Third, are poetics accurate descriptions of their literary corpus? And fourth, why does Miner use precepts found in poetics as a sort of universals of the literary system in question? In either case, it is an odd pastism which may be a consequence of Miner's complaint about literary presentism (1990: 20).

In 1991, Miner qualifies the value of explicit poetics. However, his main thesis remains intact and, consequently, some literary systems are deemed anomalous. This is the case of Indian literature, a system with many explicit but without foundational poetics. For Miner, the cause lies—as argued in a section tellingly entitled *Passage to More Than India*—in India's lack of an autonomous category of literature:

Why should there be so many treatises using a few key concepts and yet no definitive foundational poetics? The reason, so obvious to a visitor to India and so mysterious otherwise is that the Indian treatises do not present literature as an autonomous subject.

The idea that literature is autonomous has certain qualifications: literature is one kind of knowledge related to others. [...] A visitor to India quickly discovers the close alliance between literature and religion, whether in a national academy or in a public university in Islamic territory (1991: 149-150).

Finally, Miner proposes that there is a direct relation between systematic poetics and genres, which, in spite of their different names, are of universal validity in the intercultural axis: «The thesis of this essay is that an originative poetics develops when a critic or critics of insight defines the nature and conditions of literature in terms of the

then most esteemed genre. By “genre” is meant drama, lyric, and narrative. These “foundation genres” may be termed by other names» (1990: 7). Yet, this universality may be somewhat illusory since the extent of the data in the Western world: «the triadic conception of genre has no justification from Western critical tradition before the Renaissance, or in English criticism before Milton and Dryden» (1978: 348). Despite this, Miner uses the tripartite division without restriction. I will focus exclusively on two examples in different levels.

First, in the case of the Indian literary system, Miner acknowledges the importance of Bhrata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Treatise on Drama), but rejects the idea that this critical text had a foundational role: «The Gupta monarchy provides our first symbolic stage of Indian poetics, because it was supportive of drama, and its age saw the appearance of a poetics, the *Treatise on Drama*. [...] important as the *Treatise* unquestionably is, it does not provide a true generative poetics» (1991: 146). Although Miner does not provide any additional evidence, it is likely that he was forced to do so because of his premise that drama is «typically (always?) the last kind of literature to achieve separation» (1978: 344). If this is true, one must then infer that the Indian literary system cannot be generated from a treatise on drama. And yet, when studying the Western literary system, Aristotle’s *Poetics* deserves the recognition of generative role, even though here tragedy is the most esteemed genre.

Second, Miner proposes an evolutionary process identical for *every* literary system. This process has genre stages:

Such evidence strongly suggests a fundamental pattern of development in both literary and critical systems: throughout the world the literary systems begin with lyric or narrative, and the critical systems with a poetics based on lyric or drama. The subsequent literary and critical history depends on the order in which other genres come to be esteemed or on the attempt to account for earlier practiced genres with a system devised far later (1979: 556).

It is difficult to combine this generic evolution with the process from heteronomy to autonomy, proposed by Miner as well, because we would be dealing with disjunct levels. The most differentiated genres (lyric and narrative) are located in the heteronomous phase of literature, while the least differentiated genre (drama) is located in the autonomous one (1979: 555). Moreover, Miner’s statement on poetics that are modified by new esteemed genres (554) is a serious challenge to his own view

of Western poetics as exclusively mimetic and of any other poetics in the world as exclusively affective-expressive.

I shall turn now to Miner's main conclusion: «all other examples of poetics are founded not on drama, but on lyric. Western literature with its many familiar suppositions is a minority one, the odd one out. It has no claim to be normative» (1990: 8). My major reservations are concerned with the validity of his conclusion as well. Furthermore, when approaching genres under intercultural perspective, Miner shows greater interest in discussing similarities within a cultural system rather than in differences, which are underlined when it comes to discussing cultural borders. Here, it is worth recalling that there is a striking parallelism with the generic logic of similarity (within genres) and difference (between genres). While in 1989 Miner acknowledged the need to take into account the diverse kinds of mimesis and affectivism both internationally and chronologically (178n6), one year later he dismissed this relativist principle in favour of the following one: «In what follows there will be numerous contrasts between mimetic and expressive-affective poetics. I shall be emphasizing that neither is monolithic or immune to change. But *without some general characterization, one gets lost in details*» (1990: 13n1; emphasis mine).

But, is not getting lost in details the comparatist's main task? Miner himself, when discussing on comparability, states that we cannot compare what is completely identical (1989: 176). Diversity lives more in details than in big theories. Yet, Miner's approach is more indebted to the latter because of his trust in foundational poetics. Miner's argument on sufficient comparability in intra-/intercultural settings is a good example of how he simplifies details:

The nub of this problem is what elements constitute, or what procedure guarantees, *sufficient* comparability. It is also clear that scale determines the nature, and certainly the results, of comparison. Donne and Jonson may make a sound comparison, because they were contemporaries, indeed friends, who often wrote in the same literary kinds and subkinds. [...] Counterparts of the Donne-Jonson comparison exist in other literatures. Chinese are fond of comparing Li Bo (or Li Bai; d. 762) with Du Fu (712-70), and Japanese Matsuo Bashō (1644-94) with Yosa Buson (1716-83). On the Chinese scale, the two Tang poets are enough alike to compare, but they seem very different. The same holds for the Japanese poets.

When, however, we undertake comparison of the Chinese with the Japanese poets, the Chinese now seem very similar but different from the Japanese, who now seem quite like. If we then enlarge the scale further, introducing Donne and Jonson (or Hugo and Baudelaire, etc.), we are struck by the resemblances of the Chinese and Japanese poets to the one side and those of the west to the other (1990: 21-22).

Were we to replace Donne and Jonson here with Aristotle and Horace, Li Bo and Du Fu with Liu Hsieh and Chiang-tzu, and Matsuo Bashō and Yosa Buson with Ki no Tsurayuki and Murasaki Shikibu, we would find a condensed version of Miner's comparison method of genre theories. On the one hand, similarities between either Western or Eastern critics are stressed in an intracultural setting. On the other hand, differences between Western and Eastern critics are stressed in an intercultural setting. Be that as it may, once again we face another variant of the logic of Orientalism and Occidentalism.

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Cao Shunqing and Zhi Yu (2003) have proposed a typology of comparative approaches to intercultural dialogue through literary theories. They distinguish four approaches: (a) *different discourses but common topics*, (b) *different discourses but the same situations*, (c) *dialogue in the discourse interpretations*, and (d) *interlocked categories and the survival of different discourses*. Approaches *a* and *b* broadly correspond to what Miner has termed *alienation* and *homology*, respectively. On the other hand, approaches *c* and *d* are alien to his model.

First of all I will focus on approach *d*, which Shunqing and Yu advocate as a way of going beyond theoretical aphasia: «This form describes the state in which multiple discourses of the contemporary literary theory survive at the same time and the intricate relationship with one another. This is a radiant state in which different cultural discourses have their own say» (102). The aim of this approach is to finish with monological literary theories and, therefore, to achieve a *general* theory of literature wherein every regional theory would relativize theoretical determinism.

This programmatic proposal is at its infancy, but already we can foresee how extensively it will contribute to a reflection on cultural relativism. Cultural incommensurability and binary oppositions of categories (genres included) are abandoned in favour of a common ground for communication. It is worth noting here that, from a rhetorical perspective, genres (not only literary) are socially instrumental. Carolyn R. Miller (1984: 151) has argued that a genre definition should be based not only on content and form, but mainly on the social action the genre accomplishes. And Charles Bazerman (1988), who develops Miller's arguments further, contends that genres are more tools for typifying communication-situations rather than simply

answers to communication-situations. Therefore, one must conclude that, in intercultural settings, genres become a form of linchpin in the communities' communicative strategies as well. Genres contribute to cultural transfer at the same time that they are changed by it.

However, Miner's views on genres imply that an understanding between East and West is not possible, because their poetics are affective-expressive and mimetic, and hence incommensurable. And yet, genres between both cultural domains have been transferred and a common ground for communication has been found. Nonetheless, Miner's general thesis should not be dismissed. Despite my reservations, his arguments are a valuable and illuminating resource for reflecting on higher degrees of interculturality. And if the new comparatist paradigm advocates for a contextual-oriented research, this is precisely the approach most likely to succeed with genre theories. How can we implement it? Shunqing and Yu (101) included translation as the third approach to intercultural dialogue, but they confined themselves to translation of literary theory. What I would suggest is to broaden the scope of translation practices. Proper translation is just a variant of the intercultural encounter along as diaspora, migration, exile, and postcolonial literature among other possibilities. Are not all these texts and their contexts potential sites for an *implicit* literary theory of interculturality and a token of the fortunes of communication beyond borders, wherein genres embody communicative purposes?

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*Fortunes et infortunes des genres littéraires en Europe. 2ème Congrès du REELC*  
(Clermont-Ferrand, CRLMC, septembre 2007)

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*Fortunes et infortunes des genres littéraires en Europe. 2ème Congrès du REELC*  
(Clermont-Ferrand, CRLMC, septembre 2007)

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This paper forms a part of the research project “Hacia una teoría de la Historia comparada de las literaturas desde el dominio ibérico” (Towards a Theory of Comparative History of Literatures from the Iberian Domain), financed by the Ministry of Education (HUM2007-62467/FILO).