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Semiospheres, Media, Discourses, and Comparative Studies: Some Developmental Perspectives

1. Comparative Studies Today: Status, Conditioning, Expansion

Two factors seem to stand behind, one, the reasons for a notable rise in the interest in the comparative studies, two, the consequent reasons for the development of the discipline, and, three, the increasing pressure for new comparative analyses. The first factor can be accounted for by change in thinking about the comparative studies; nowadays, they are no longer reduced to comparing or juxtaposing texts or cultural phenomena. Originating in hermeneutics and similar to intertextuality, the ascertainment of an act of examination being an act of interpretation (which, of course, always takes place in the context of the known (see Sławek)) makes it possible to consider the comparative mode of thinking as an ontic feature of every mode of thinking of any text or, in Tomasz Bilczewski's words, as "… existential need to situate all things" (29).

"[Contemporary comparative studies] … are characterized by a dialogic, multidirectional opening to the different and the other. Such a position is a position of an epistemological curiosity, a bold utilization of the freedom of going beyond what is known and recognized, beyond the present areas, forms or patterns of thinking, an audacious juxtaposition that can bring about surprizing cognitive effects or that would disclose new aspects of what is considered as recognized. [Such comparative studies] … exclude the isolating and atomizing thinking and accept a way of thinking that linguists and literary scholars call metonymic or metaphoric. That is to say, this discipline is a proposal to see things from ever new perspectives that make it possible to perceive unused or unnoticed meanings and areas of meanings; it makes it possible to extract texts and artistic and, more broadly, cultural phenomena from fossilized and established pigeonholes of interpretations, by means of resolute comparisons and juxtapositions. [Contemporary comparative studies] thus make it possible to expand knowledge of texts and of phenomena, and encourage readers to freshen and invigorate their understanding through the introduction of the examined phenomena into a new set of relations that has hitherto remained unconsidered" (Szczęsna *Komparatystyka dzisiaj...* 6–7).

The broad formula of humanist comparative studies closes the period of thinking about the studies only in terms of literary criticism and the methodology of comparisons or tracking influences, relationships, and literary origins. Instead, they come to be perceived as an epistemological method and a way of thinking about culture: its discourses and texts. Interestingly, the "going beyond," the essence of comparative studies, has paradoxically included the discipline itself so that we can no longer keep it within the tight frames of literary criticism; as I wrote in the introduction to *Komparatystyka dzisiaj* (*Comparative Studies Today*), comparative studies extend their interest onto the whole "universe of culture": examine it, and argue that otherness is a truly ontic entity, and not only an axiological one.

"[Comparative studies] confront literature with other forms of writing and non-literary discourses (political, religious, philosophical, journalistic), clash together various levels of culture (high, popular, mass), ethnic cultures …, areas of culture (literature and art, music, photography), and media (literature and theatre, film, digital media); adapt sociological, semiotic, and cultural methodologies for itself; examine relations, points of bordering and contact, influences, affiliations, and intercultural, inter-media, inter-artistic, and inter-disciplinary transfers" (Szczęsna *Komparatystyka dzisiaj...* 8–9).

The contemporary culture of globalization, the Internet, inter-disciplinariness, and political and economical multinational structures, forms a perfect subject for comparative studies characterized by openness, transcending barriers, hospitality, or being--towards other texts. Therefore, we need to see the cultural (or, more broadly, civilizational) conditionings of modernity as the second factor facilitating the development of comparative studies. That is to say, comparative methodologies can be successfully put to use in the examination of the multi-semiotic and multi-media reality of a text, as well as the multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural reality of a given society. By definition, comparative studies are hospitable and open to the unknown, the foreign, and what is to come. In addition, they allow us to establish identity in the process of expounding similarities and differences.

The openness of comparative studies can be expressed in their functioning almost like a homonym being simultaneously a type of intellectual thinking, a discipline, an interpretative exercise, and a provider of specific scholarly tools and methods. Finally, they are an epistemological position that maps the horizon of cognition. "Every human being lives within a determinate cultural pattern and interprets his or her experience according to a set of acquired forms," claimed Umberto Eco (*The open work* 78), and his claim has recently been supported by epistemological research. Zdzisław Cackowski says, "people think with all the elements of their life; heavy (tools, means of communication, and other

conditions of their life), acquired conditions of social relationships, and light – linguistic and extra-linguistic sign systems" (103).

The epistemological perspective and methodology map out the conditions of cognition and determine the cognitive effects. Contemporary comparative studies, going beyond human relations towards discourses, media, and culture, counteract a stagnation of epistemolog[1]: only new and unconventional juxtapositions of various areas of human activity, diverse disciplines, forms of art or media can have surprising and unexpected results. Moreover, the comparative method facilitates the transcending of any fixed notions, the updating of works, and the discovery of new and unpredicted meanings. A respected Polish scholar, Seweryna Wysłouch, repeatedly stressed this aspect in her *Wyprzedaż semiotyki* (*Semiotics for Sale*) (66). Practically speaking, the comparative study of semiospheres and media allows us to juxtapose works not only on the axis of plot, objects and events but also, and perhaps chiefly, on the axis of *structures, textual operations*, and *formal devices*. Further, it develops the theoretical analysis of the sense making role of texture, of the description of super-semiotic features of a text, and of devices for expressing in one sign system meanings uttered in another sign system, and, finally, of semiotic and aesthetic transpositions resulting from intersemiotic translations, or of the role of semiospheres and media in the creation of textual meanings.

Importantly, the interactions between texts representing various media are a commonplace (consider, for example, textual paraphrases, transpositions, adaptations, the techniques of collage, hybrids, and allusions). However, in thinking about the relations between sign systems and multi-semiotic texts, a number of scholars have raised the issue of non-translatability of a language into non-linguistic systems and, therefore, the inability of any system to interpret a language. Yet Roland Barthes wrote that language is the only semiotic system capable of interpreting other systems and itself (42)[2]. In Poland, Wysłouch also drew attention to verbo-centric tendencies in Polish literary criticism: Jerzy Ziomek's and Maria Renata Mayenowa's argument concerning the non--translatability of language into image, or Janusz Sławiński's thesis of the exclusively linguistic character of poetic imagery (*Literatura i obraz* 18).

The juxtaposition of literature with non-linguistic texts was permitted by a semiotic perspective, and by the categories of rhetoric and poetics in the works of Boris Uspenski, Yuri Lotman, Umberto Eco, and Barthes; their key terms – sign, meaning, style,

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[1] Arguably, we tend to follow cognitive patterns and see things in a typical (if not stereotypical) way, in line with widely accepted norms of cognition: "where one works in 'the same way' too long, thinking runs dry" (Cackowski 102).

[2] Although this ascertainment did not prevent Barthes in his *Mythologies* from analysing the issue of sign in film, plot patterns in advertisements, and consider myth as a super-linguistic structure.

composition, trope, and narration – can be deciphered in texts representing various media and discourses. A comparative mode of thinking, therefore, turns out to be fruitful in inspiring various disciplines with a sort of a theoretical center, and their natural tendency to accept a certain viewpoint turns out to be the only appropriate one. Confrontation as such, therefore, helps renew and develop scholarly disciplines.

Finally, the confronting of media appears valuable for thinking about them; comparisons make us focus on their specific features: mapping out a shared area, an area undergoing modifications, and a medium-specific area. In addition, such a method helps to estimate the influence of technology on texts, to analyze their technological modeling, to point out their tissue in various discursive situations, and to answer the questions of how discourses and media model texts: for example, what happens to a text of journalistic discourse when it uses new, interactive digital media? What happens to a literary plot when it gets translated into the language of a film or a comic strip? By examining these relations we can estimate if culture is a cluster of heterogeneous, parallel discourses, all stressing their own individuality, or if it is homogeneous and remains a oneness amongst a multitude of media discourses and their versions.

2. The Inter-semiotic, the Inter-media, the Inter-discoursive: Research Objectives.

The direction of the development of culture (especially, the rapid development of new technologies of text production, and the text world's penetration of the digital media world) has resulted in a new model of a text sign, and, effectively, of text and discourse. Inter-semiotic and media comparative studies constitute a basic method of analyzing the ongoing process and capturing the essence of the change within the media text.

The development of the digital media, the adaptation of old textual forms for their needs, the creation of new genres, new textual and discursive forms, and the extent of these phenomena, make it clear that digitalisation is no longer just a technological fad or a passing novelty; it is what creates and paves the way for a new epoch of our civilization. The previous status of the media is changing: new media adapt and in the process they acquire a new digital identity, and by changing their identity they change the identity of texts that they are vehicles for. Without the employment of a comparative perspective, an analysis of the processes involved would be impossible.

In the 1960s, Umberto Eco called for the need for interdisciplinary studies. He stressed that such studies help notice "structural similarities" in a number of phenomena (Eco *Badania interdyscyplinarne* 290). Fishing those similarities out can help not only to describe the structure of a phenomenon, but also of research procedures (287–288).

In addition, the comparisons between multi-semiotic, multi-media, and multi-discourse texts indicate how the semiotic, the media and the discourse are all inextricably connected. One cannot speak of the semiotic of a text without referring to its media and discourse conditioning. The image – word relation functions differently depending on genre and medium (literature, comic strip, poster, news programme, theatrical performance); a painted picture is never identical with a photograph, nor is a literary work with a piece of journalism, etc. In other words, an interpretation of the semiotic aspect of a message heavily depends on the media and discourse context. Therefore, semiotic comparative studies are not identical with media or discourse comparative studies, although their fields often overlap. This in turn makes some scholars use the terms the interdisciplinary, the inter-semiotic and the intermedia interchangeably, as the extent of each field of research has yet to be fully delineated. Wysłouch's *Semiotics for Sale* is a good case in point; she provides examples of film adaptations of novels, novel adaptations of dramas, picture adaptations of poems, and confrontations of literature and ideology, literature and religion, and literature and film as confrontations of sign systems (*Wyprzedaż semiotyki* 66). The question is, however, whether all the systems are really sign systems or media systems, or, perhaps, types of discourse. Consequently, the chief task of comparative studies, or strictly speaking, the theory of the discipline, is to describe its terminological extent. A description of characteristic features (which would also make it possible to describe phenomena belonging to various types of relations at the same time) would be considerably more useful than a definition which, by definition, is rather definite and closed. The range of the interrelationships among semiotic systems and discourses and media has to be described; for instance, when do we speak of comparative studies of semiospheres, of media, and of discourses? To what extent do their fields overlap?

By a semiotic system I mean an iconic, acoustic, verbal sign system or mixed systems (for instance, a comic strip makes use of iconic signs and written words). The comparative study of semiospheres, generally, aims to compare sign systems within one culture, between cultures, within one medium (as in the word – image relation in a magazine or a children's book), between media (sound in radio and sound in television), or within one discourse and between discourses. It seems interesting to follow devices and sign mechanisms allowing us to express in one system something that has already been expressed in another system (what Wysłouch calls an intersemiotic translation). The cooperative production of meanings by various sign systems within one medium is also included in research on meaning-making operations; consider the image – word relation in a comic strip or a moving picture – sound (sound effects, music) in films. It is also interesting to compare cases when different systems produce meanings together,

as intended by an author (for example, in *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* by Eco, and *Breakfast of Champions* by Kurt Vonnegut), or accidently, when a picture added by an editor reinterprets, say, a text's meanings.

The comparison of the modes of existence of one system in various media and discourses can find an honourable place in the comparative studies of semiosphe-res. Such studies can definitely disclose the multitude of variants of semiotic systems: an iconic system in painting, photography, the comic strip, and poster; a linguistic system in literature and journalism; an acoustic system in film and radio plays – these are all such variants. Even the example of a film adaptation of a literary work illustrates the over-lapping of semiotic comparative studies with media and discourse studies. Examinations of the relations between the semiotics of literature and of film invariably mean exami-ning the relations between media and between discourses. Thus, what appears obvious here is that the means for describing the specificity of medium and discourse should be developed, so that we can establish the borderline between the comparative studies of media and of discourses.

Media system analysis pertains to foregrounding the technology of communication (see: Szczęsna *Poetyka mediów* 21). Therefore, comparative studies of media concern the juxtapositions of the systems of communicating and creating informative, aes-thetic, and persuasive messages. Moreover, such studies facilitate synchronic analyses of the influence of technology of communication on the creation of a textual reality, the message sender (for example, the level of complexity of the sending subject in film, theatre, or novel), and the sender – receiver relation. Synchronic comparative studies of media will also include the media translations of texts ranging from faithful ones, maximally identical with respect to plot and ideology, to free adaptations, paraphrases, interpretations, for which the source text is but an inspiration. Moreover, the synchronic approach allows us to examine semiotic transpositions: how the semiotic and textual mechanisms of a given medium get to communicate a message, and how the same message is communicated in a different medium. Finally, the issue of how texts sat-urate a particular act of communication by means of references to another medium is worth serious examination. Consider Frank Miller's and Robert Rodriguez's *Sin City*; the directors constructing their film adaptation of the comic strip used comic strip sty-listics (for example, strong light contrasts, black and white picture, chromatic shades, as means of emphasizing a specific element, or a narrator telling what a character is thinking). Other examples are easy to find: Stefan Chwin's *Hanemann* is constructed in such a way as to portray the artistic sensitivity of the narrator-character. In a chapter "Okno" ("Window"), the narration and the descriptions of objects and appearances

reflecting the changing light and a sensitivity to colors, literary pictures of objects seen from the perspective of the subject's emotions, the dominance of a noun-adjective mode of narration over a verb mode resulting in the narrative's focusing on appearances instead of events and action, and the reader's becoming a viewer – are all means to (re)create the perspective of an aesthetic and artistic sensitivity marked chiefly by Caspar David Friedrich's works. Peter Greenaway's *Nightwatching* scenery, in turn, alludes to Rembrandt van Rijn's paintings; the way in which particular motifs emerge from darkness resembles Rembrandt's fascination with chiaroscuro. Similarly, Peter Webber's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* also features semiotic transpositions: whole sequences are stylized after Johannes Vermeer's paintings. *Goya's Ghosts* by Miloš Forman, too, relies on the famous Spanish painter's pictures of violence and death. In Vincent Ward's *What Dreams May Come*, the stylistics of painting serves to reflect the artistic sensitivity of the characters.

Another example of semiotic transposition is an attempt musically to render the characteristics of Pablo Picasso's works. Harry Sommers' film score, *Picasso Suite – Light Music for Small Orchestra*, mirrors the stages in Picasso's painting career and furnishes musical analogies to the painter's styles and techniques: some cuts in musical phrases and motifs and dissonant emphases are equivalents of Cubist prismatic cuts in form.

Any literary or film attempts to communicate scents are also of interest here. Tom Tykwer's film adaptation of *Perfume* by Patrick Süskind renders a given scent by close-ups of detail and colour, and by specific music. The director wanted thus to reflect either the sensuality and evanescence or disagreeability of a specific scent. An interesting device, transporting the viewer into the sensual (of smell), is the use of close-ups of the moving nostrils of the protagonist as he is trying to capture and remember the surrounding odors.

Diachronically, comparative studies make it possible to examine the influence of the development of communication technologies on shaping the message and on the development of social discourses. The works by Walter Ong, Marshall McLuhan, Derrick de Kerckhove, Henri-Jean Martin, Paul Levinson, and, especially in Poland, Maryla Hopfinger are essentially works that belong to diachronic comparative studies, demonstrating the influence of the evolution of information communication (orality, writing, print, audio-visuality, digitality on language, text, discourse, and culture). Walter Ong's work is perhaps most illustrative here: his confrontation of primary and secondary orality, as well as the description of the latter as implemented by electronic technology and media such as telephone, radio, and television.

"This new orality has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use

of formulas. But it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print, which are essential for the manufacture and operation of the equipment and for its use as well" (133).

In an examination of computer media, Make Sandbothe argues, the category of secondary orality is superseded by writing's becoming more oral, speech's becoming more literate, writing's becoming more iconic, and the image's becoming more literate (215–222). Further, some modifications in the realm of media are followed by reinterpretations in the realm of semiospheres, and in the sphere of the text itself. Paul Levinson wrote about the modifiability of a digital text, the possibility of its being immediately disseminated, and the incorporation of the net of its intertextual relations (122–127). Lev Manovich, on the other hand, reflected on the variability of text, digital representation, and automatization (102–114). These and other features of the digital text (as, for example, its programmability, multi-variability, non-readiness, and openness) are all recognized in diachronic comparative studies.

These studies of media make it possible to notice the influence of technological evolution (or even revolution) on discursiveness, and principally, on the communicative situation. If we create the world of a text in the image of how we perceive it, the changes in perception will become the source of a modification in the sphere of image creation or, simply, the sphere of thinking. De Kerckhove comes to interesting conclusions when, drawing on Ong, he compares oral listening with literate listening, and speech-based thinking and writing-based thinking (104–112). De Kerckhove juxtaposes orality and literacy, stressing their influence upon discourse, and, thus, illustrates how a communicative situation, when produced by a given technology, models thinking about the text and, in this way, the creation of that text. A good instance of the connection among mutual interrelations of the semiotic organization of a text, the technology of its communication, and the discourse that it co-creates, is the category of *browsing*[3]. The term stands for a way of reception of a message more and more frequently associated with reading, watching, and listening. Browsing means a surface, selective, and fragmentary reception (as opposed to a thorough studying or profound reflection), somewhat equivalent to Heideggerian babble. As such, browsing is nowadays a dominant way to read the texts of various media: we browse through newspapers, journals, photo albums, but also the Internet, books (as in big bookshops when we are choosing one to buy), or CDs (as when we listen to some excerpts). In a way, browsing is forced upon us by a multitude of media simultaneously communicating analogous messages, as well as by semiotic

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[3] The category is analyzed in the context of journalistic discourse. See Szczęsna, *Komparatystyka mediów. Poetyka, semiotyka, komunikacja medialna* (Subchapter 4).

factors: a considerable percentage of an image, or the semiotic hierarchy of contents in a message used to attract a reader's attention. The latter appears characteristic in advertisements and press articles where the size of the font, the underlining of some parts of an article, or even the separation of an excerpt into a paragraph, function as emphasis markers, directing our attention and the reading process. The comparative study of discourses (political, advertising, journalistic, scientific, artistic, religious) helps to examine the influence of a communicative situation on the poetics and rhetoric of a text, to separate and to analyze possible types and means of the functioning of the sending instance, and also to recognize means of dealing with a text that turns a receiver into a viewer, reader, listener, browser, user, consumer, or believer.

Nowadays, media systems are complex and variously conditioned: technologically, semiotically, and discursively. When combined, they make multimedia (see: Manovich 119) and enter into relations with social discourses, such as political, cultural, scientific, or economic ones. Multimedia today, more than communication techniques, have become the producers of social discourses. Maciej Mrozowski wrote that the influence of media on politics, economics, culture, and society is profound: politics change into an interesting performance, economics into an advertisement- and consumption-driven mechanism, culture into a popularity-dependent dynamic, in which media replace other forms of contact with culture, and society turns into dispersed para-social and nomadic groups that participate in the social life of their community only through media (44).

As a result, what we are dealing with here is the multiplication of textual information caused by media combination and multiplication. The multitude of media does not increase information (Mrozowski 53), but leads to its discursivization: one piece of information functions in many media versions, and each of them interprets it whilst an event, in turn, becomes described from different viewpoints. The particular viewpoints interpret and comment upon each other, creating one multi-media discourse. Information does not only exist in a number of embodiments or media forms, but also starts to live on its own; discursivized, it turns into an autonomous story. At first inspired by extra-media reality, information breaks from its source and becomes a subject and often a point of departure for a multi-media narration that is in turn propelled and developed when attractive to social discourses. More importantly though, the mutual interaction of multimedia and social discourses change the status of an event: from real to fictional.

3. Summary

The usefulness or even the necessity of comparative studies of semiospheres, discourses, and media is a result of the essence of culture itself: no product of culture comes into being and exists in isolation. Instead, texts and phenomena are relational (and belong to the act of interpretation) from the moment of their coming into being and existence in culture; that is, in the realm of reception, the definition of their understanding, various associations, allusions, or reworkings. Texts never exist on their own and for themselves, but are always rooted in the surrounding world of texts representing other sign systems, other discourses, or media, entering with them into various sorts of interactions.

Every text is anchored in the universe of culture via the universe of thinking. It is created and received during the act of interpretation, being an utterance of an understanding of the text world, and a discovery of the dimensions of our own experience. The notion of understanding is itself profoundly comparativist. Hans Georg Gadamer's interpreter (as a translator of one sign system into another sign system) is, in a way, a negotiator or someone who goes between or straddles text and reader. As a result, we deal with an essentially dialogic structure that represents the perspective of continuous confronting, juxtaposing, being between possible understandings of a text. The dialogic anchorage of a text is evident in what Paul Ricoeur calls the refiguration that expresses the text's capacity to restructure a reader's world by subverting, questioning, or remodelling his or her expectations (248).

The comparative dimension of interpreting and recognizing a text (describing its meanings, establishing its senses) is reflected in the relational essence of a sign, the basic component of every text. A sign is a construct or an order that is realized in the interaction of various elements. Irrespective of its (binary or triadic) construction, we always deal with an amalgam of elements entering relations together. Relationality features in the theories of construction and meaning of signs; in Lotman's notion of the meaning of a sign as just a recoding of one semiotic system into another, or in Charles Sanders Pierce's argument that meaning is a translation of one sign into another sign system (see Buczyńska-Garewicz 75). In other words, in the act of interpretation, one sign is built into another sign that is its meaning. The act of interpretation, in turn, situates a sign in the relation to an interpreter (the cognizing subject) inasmuch as "there is no sign outside its use and there is no usage of a sign without consciousness"[4].

This between-being, discovering unpredictable dimensions of experience is nothing else but reaching what the subject usually calls "truth". Uttering a meaning of a sign

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[4] „… nie ma znaków poza ich użyciem i nie ma użycia znaku poza świadomością" (Pelc 61).

or a text or their interpretation is but a confrontation of various possible meanings-truths about them, looking for adequacy, or, possibly, a precise analogy. The interpreter (receiver) is not only between a text and a reader, as hermeneutics has it, but is rather situated between various possible interpretations (readings) of a text that come into being as a result of interaction of textual knowledge, reception experience, individual predispositions, familiar conventions. The comparative, therefore, is the constituting or, better, the experiencing of a meaning of a text. If we understand comparative studies in this way, they are a kind of epistemology; a means to establish the identity of a thing (text, cultural phenomenon) by examining its relations and inter-influences with other things (texts, cultural phenomena), and a way of participating in the identification of the texts of culture (notwithstanding their changing or stable, different or similar qualities).

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