

A transcultural experiment[†]

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Abstract

The project of creating a graphic and cartoons archive (portraits of the great Romanian writers from various literary eras), accomplished with the support of dedicated artists around the world, has gained a new historical-literary dimension, as a result of the huge interest it has stirred up. After a certain geographical and qualitative selection, two editions have been published on paper: one in Romanian and one in English, each of them comprising 3600 images by artists from all continents (112 countries). This unprecedented book, called *A History of the Romanian Literature drawn by the Great Illustrators of the World* (Romanian Literature Museum Press, 2011) presents transcultural aspects that are well worthy of attention from literature historians, biographers, word and image artists (writers, graphic designers, cartoonists), but also from cultural studies specialists (anthropology, semiotics, mentalities), due to the unusual form of open dialogue.

1. We all live with this incontestable reality that is globalisation. The effects of this phenomenon in areas like economy, social and culture have generated numerous disputes among the specialists interested of the contemporary society's challenges and the “clash of civilizations”. Due to the gravitational force that knowledge exercises over billions of people, human civilization continuously reconfigures itself in a Brownian move, through Informational Knowledge Society (IKS)¹, on a world level².

Between the cultural phenomenon and the expectations of the society³, the changes generated by the new technologies have literally shaken the relations, creating a huge gap, manifested in the predominance of the effects of globalisation over the structures of tradition. The consequence of this pressure exercised through the economic vector led to a continuous erosion of the identitary aspects, expressed in national linguistic codes and preserved through ethical and moral sets, that are characteristic for those specific nations. If each of the cultural languages has kept its grammar structure, one couldn't say the same about their lexic, whose nucleus (essential vocabulary) was invaded, in the Informational Knowledge Society, by unique terms describing technologies and instruments of communication, that are available to billions of users. The observation of a famous French linguist (A. Meillet)—namely that the history of civilisation⁴ is reflected into the etymology of words—proves its premonitory character for this “terminal” phase, when the powerful destructuring tendency of old values and identitary tradition takes place after forming an authentic communicational mainstream. Due to globalisation effects, the term *national* has been placed

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¹The society in which the information is acknowledged as main (re)source, and the information production and consumption is the most important type of activity.

²It should be reminded that the *top* of the most common professions is taken by ones that are very new, and were not even existing five years before.

³Simmel (1987) argued that the crisis in culture is “the result of conflict among the processes of life, which doesn't know any rest, and its forms of cultural expression, which do not know what change is”.

⁴“La langue étant de tous les faites humaines le plus manifestent social—car ni langue n'est imaginable sans la société, ni la société des hommes sans langue—les conditions sociales dominant le langage”, in “Bulletin de la Société Linguistique de Paris, XXV”, fasc. 2. p. 2, *apud* Graur & Wald (1977).

into the area of meanings of a different concept, *identitary*, partially synonymous, which allowed crossing the axiological rigors that act according to tradition. Even tradition itself has been annexed components with a consumerist role. The study of the new social–cultural forms (Baber, 2012), marked with prefixes such as *inter–*, *multi–*, *trans–*, or with nouns like cosmopolitanism and hybrid, which form themselves linguistic compositions along the terms culture / cultural, has determined a conceptual relaxation and new interdisciplinary approaches. This sort of studies and research open new horizons, that naturally go cross subjects, aiming multiple surprising contexts, yet filled with valuable information⁵.

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2. Agreeing to the previously said, the present article refers to the chances offered to cultures that are spread on small geographic areas (in our case, Romanian literature), of making themselves known (visible) in the contemporary multicultural dialogue. From the beginning, we mark the Romanian language's disadvantage of being active only on a small linguistic area, as compared to the widely and internationally spread idioms, such as English, French, Spanish, Chinese. This is why we have taken on an experiment in which the “independent” laws of multiculturalism have been conjuncturally reconfigured.

Out of the two terms (*multi–* and / or *transculturalism*), from the title of the Conference, we prefer the transculturalism (Cuccioletta, 2001–2002)⁶, like it was manifested within the experiment. The situation represents an aspect that is different from the standard intercultural communication research⁷. The aim is to optimise, not find dysfunctions; under this aspect, the term transculturalism could easily be replaced by the hybrid culture syntagm, as per Ryszard Kluszczyński⁸, that we only partially agree with.

The experiment has resulted in creating an anthology (Ioniță, 2009) and comprised addressing the graphic designers' “community” all over the world with the matter of expressing, according to their profession, a synthetical and cultural point of view over the most important Romanian writers of all times. They (the respondents) were required to adapt to the new inter- and multicultural context, under the following attributes: (a) an invitation to dialogue through a (foreign) unknown subject; (b) gathering information and, later on; (c) accomplishing, due to the gains of knowledge / information, the transcultural dialogue, with (d) its varied forms of interpretation. Relativising “one's own cultural field” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 41), which meant interrogating and negotiating a common ground of knowledge, as well as the newly achieved capacity, was also taken into consideration. A first conclusion refers to gathering information and then ordering it into what was called a panorama of Romanian literature (rather imprecise, but persuasive name). The edification was possible on both valoric and historical–literary (diachronic) criteria. The explanation for realising this type of good practice is due to the cast's ability to quickly and efficiently “filter” the information. In order to gain recognition in the profession they chose, these graphic designers, regardless of nationality and location, share common real qualities, such as intelligence, curiosity, fantasy, power of abstracting, speed, and each of these is served by their own artistic talent.

⁵Their diversity can be noticed everywhere. For instance, the Doctor's thesis called *Food as a Transcultural Metaphor (Food Imagery and Ethnocultural Identities in Contemporary Multicultural Women Writing in Canada)* by Katarina Hinnerova from the Faculty of Art. Department of English and American Studies, Masaryk University, Brno (2007).

⁶*Transculturalism* is defined as “seeing oneself in the other”.

⁷This kind of research and studies is, on its vast majority, dedicated to studying the (concrete) state of facts and do not target ... challenging them, as it happens in this case. On the other hand, we are not particularly happy to note that, for instance, many of the revealing discoveries within the communication have resulted into studies oriented towards people with expression / communication disabilities.

⁸“One of the most important factors of the hybrid condition of contemporary arts is the complex relationship between arts and sciences and technologies. Such relations develop a new concept of *third culture*, not based—as in the theory of John Brockman—on the conflict between traditional humanistic values and scientific systems, but on the interactions between them. (...) *Hybrid cultures* are phenomena of essential connections in the present. They emerge from diverse and complex influences. Hybrid cultures are mergers that combine past and present, local and translocal, space and place and technoscape. Hybridity is expressed in various cultural contexts and in the in between spaces of arts, media, science and technology. Under the sign of the digital and the global, hybridity connotes a cultural manifestation of multiple appearances, as in cyberspace and multiple selves” (ISEA 2011 Istanbul. The 17th International Symposium on Electronic Art. 14–21st of Sept. 2011).

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3. The other interpretative situations flow from the answers received, and presented as a volume of 450 pages and approximately 3500 images. From the drawn conclusions, we mark:

A. The collaborators of this transcultural experiment represent 122 nations, given in alphabetical order and spread throughout the world, allowing us to note its mondialising, multi- and transcultural aspect. One should note that, without the communication technologies, this purpose would not have been touched, at least not in its spreading area and the simultaneity effect of the communication. The present summary grants globalisation a new statute: that of being axiomatic.

B. “The chapters” of this *History*... come in varied sizes, according to the importance (value) of the targeted personality. It is easily noticed that the internal sample (the notoriousness of the writers in the national cultural context) keeps the same proportions as the world spread vision. The explanation is found in the good organisation of valoric structures present in the direct access documentary sources. The most substantial are focused on I.L. Caragiale [642 icons], Mihai Eminescu [342 icons], Mircea Eliade [124 icons], Eugen Ionescu [112 icons], Nichita Stănescu [112 icons], Nicolae Iorga [102 icons], Emil Cioran [90 icons] and Tristan Tzara [70 icons]. If, in this context, the first two, (and also Nichita Stănescu) are the most cherished authors in the Romanian area, the authoritarian presence of the others is decisively due to their international presence. This way of representation certifies, through external data, the internal historical and literary evaluations. Within the national / international report, they rank higher than Mihail Sadoveanu [39 icons], Tudor Arghezi [15 icons], Liviu Rebreanu [15 icons], Marin Preda [15 icons], writers whose essential contribution to the development of national literary art remains “captive” in our linguistic code, as one could say.

C. Because there are a few thousand “portraits” in the *History*, and because this year we mark 100 years since I.L. Caragiale’s death, as a mark of our appreciation, we have resorted to the illustrations made for him. In order to keep this overwhelming majority from narrowing down the generalising character of the “message”, some other few exemplifications have been used. As shown above, the information offered by the respondents have, in themselves, a complexity that is easily subject to interpretation. These can be drawn into types of information:

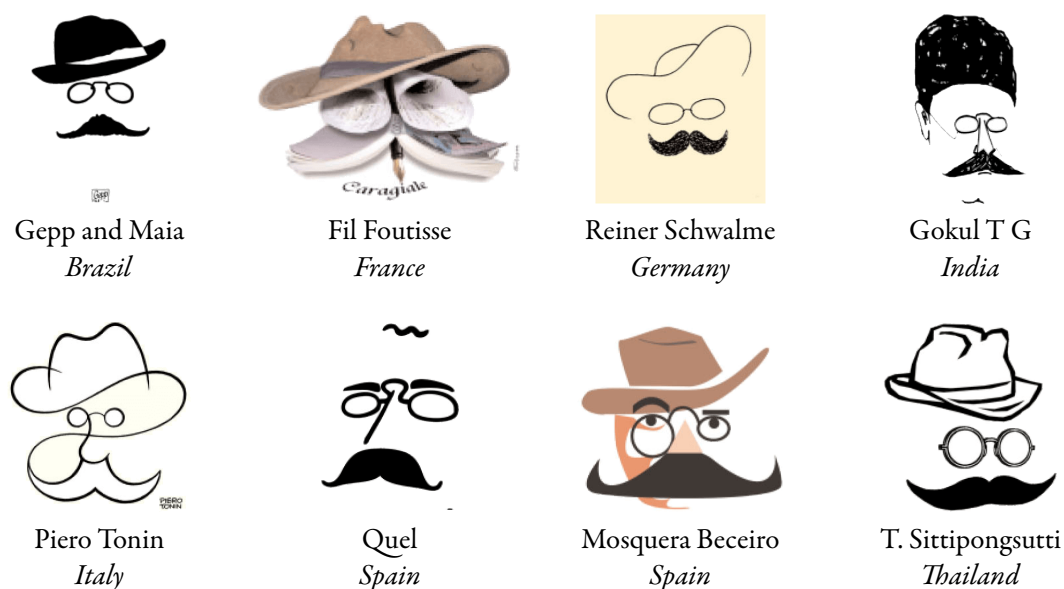


Figure 1

a) Some of the images are the result of a remarkable intuitive and summarising ability, an aspect under which I. L. Caragiale is reconstructed from only a few details / lines⁹, proving semiotic valences (Figure 1).

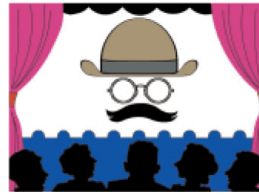
⁹In order to represent the human face, the photo camera “constructs it” with many contrasting dots (pixels). The video



Thiago Lobo
Brazil



Tsocho Peev
Bulgaria



Roberto Alarcon
Guatemala



Doddy Iswahyudi
Indonesia



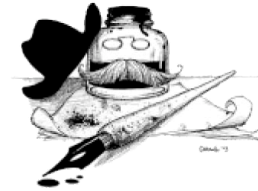
V. Sardinha
Portugal



Nedal Deep
Syria



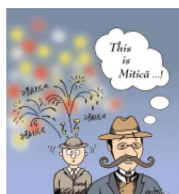
D. Gray
United Kingdom



S. Carroll
United Kingdom

Figure 2

b) Iconography is more present than the other types of information, fact that can be explained by the profession of the authors, whose means of approach, lacking literary text—from case to case, the access was different—resumed to a photography or cartooning a portrait. Beyond the image resulted, the cultural data is added through series of symbols of the tools of writing (writing feather, book, nib pen, typewriter, manuscript, library; see Figure 2)—ephigies of their belonging to the guild; On the other hand, the images cumulate information about the writer's biography, his work, characters or the activity of managing magazines.



Martina Klein
Germany



Arturo Rosas
Mexico



Guillermo Soria
Spain



Hikmet Cerrah
Turkey



Nikolaj Kapusta
Ukraine



Matt Duck
United Kingdom



David Baillie
United Kingdom



Diane Barton
United States

Figure 3

c) Many of the drawings, graphical presences or cartoons show a historical-literary information, sometimes very detailed, fact which proves that the dialogue has suscitated more vast investigation, subtly interpreted

camera can produce the same human figure by using approximately 900 horizontal lines, whose fragmentation generates the image. Or, it is known that portraitists can get the same performance by drawing one single continuous line, through which both the image in itself, as well as temper features, can be presented.

and represented (Figure 4). For instance, the friendship between Eminescu and Caragiale is often represented by picturing the two next to Veronica Micle (last panel of Figure 4), the female poet which was involved with both of them.



Figure 4



Figure 5

d) Among the means of representing quotes from the work of the writers presented in the *History...*, one can also find inventive solutions. For instance, what we could call “the Cyclops eye” attached to I. L. Caragiale refers to his well-known formula “I have a huge feel and a monstrous sight” (Figure 5).

It is also through differentiation that the national component can be drawn (Figure 6), but also the references about its universal value (Figure 7).

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4. Regarding the transcultural character of these images, they draw attention to portraits of the most notorious Romanian writers (Figure 8).



Figure 6



Figure 7

Without listing the numerous examples that we can appeal to, we only invoke two fully clarifying examples. Regarding Caragiale, the force of transposing into a different cultural horizon is clearly manifested in the representation made by a Japanese graphic designer, who adapts the ironic incisiveness of I. L. Caragiale's drama, picturing him as a fighter (samurai), with a pen instead of sword and many other details in sight.

The same artist handles Eugen Ionescu, resorting to the well-known Asian shadow theatre, in order to assimilate him. A... rhino is profiled ("game" of shadows made with hands) on the same wall where the theatre writer is found (innuendo for the theatre play *The Rhinos*). For an African author, the transcultural assimilation of I.L. Caragiale and Eugen Ionescu is shown by applying African facial characteristics to the first writer, and tribal totem tattoos on the face of the second one, thus suggesting that he is accepted as one of them. The same happens with Mihai Eminescu and Emil Cioran, in the view of Egyptian and Turkish designers, who anthropologically "see" the two writers as people of their own.



Figure 8

5. The tendency shown by most of the volume's authors is to represent the best known and genius Romanian writers through post-modernist message visions, which we consider to be another transcultural effect. We see these representations different from a simple fashion, but a way of dialogue with the contemporary world, a dialogue that is mostly accessible to the works we can truthfully call immortal. It is the only way we can explain the enormous catch that I.L. Caragiale is enjoying, and whose death took place more than one century ago: his work's message has kept an intact actuality, making it possible to metabolise it in any surprising postmodernist variants (Figure 9).



Figure 9

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6. As a whole, *O istorie literaturii române în viziunea marilor graficieni ai lumii* [History of the Romanian Literature drawn by the Great Illustrators of the World] represents a notable transcultural effort and presents some of its most important attributes:

1. The great writers can be good ambassadors of the culture they represent, if there is an appeal made to

new, still unexplored ways of dialogue. Through these, their creation can substantially contribute to awareness among cultures.

2. The contemporary means of promotion have surprising resources and will certainly influence the society, as they are completely unpredictable. Only due to the new communication technologies and amazing upgrading speed, it was all possible. They facilitate fast, almost instantaneous reactions.
3. The assimilation of the cultural contributions of writers and their penetration into IKS dialogue, regardless of their era and language, is now comprised into the “grids” of postmodernism. The works that continue to exist through the interrogations and answers of the new generations will be privileged.

As a result, the experiment would have been doomed to fail, had it not been for the beneficial effects of mondialisation (globalisation), that not all of us are equally optimistic about.

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