



Literature for Intercultural Awareness: A “Key to Perception”?

Guest post by Michael Steppat

It has been said that literary works can benefit and advance intercultural understanding. For instance, Mazi-Leskovar maintains that “literature should alert readers to all those who are in one way or another different from the readers themselves. Literature thus encourages inter- and intracultural awareness” (2010, p. 10); “multicultural literature remains one of the sources through which issues related to intercultural communicative competence can be successfully addressed” (2006, p. 278). Wasikiewicz-Firlej (2012) explains that “works of literature enable the reader to observe the world from multifarious perspectives and cherish the diversity of individual perception. The power of literature lies in its unique ability to deeply involve the reader both at a cognitive, as well as emotional level.” Taking Japanese writer Haruki Murakami as an example, Kuryleva and Boeva have found: “The overwhelming majority of the writer’s literary heroes, placed into alien cultural environments, become the participants of intercultural communication” (2010, p. 171). This is not only a feature of recent literature, however. In the very beginning of western literary culture, Homer’s *Iliad* culminates in a Book 24 which poignantly depicts the furtive (and rather desperate) visit of Trojan ruler Priam in the quarters of the Greek enemy, at risk of his life.

Of course it is more recent developments that are especially relevant for us today. We owe to Edward T. Hall an insight into sources of knowledge that bring to light the concealed snags of what we like to take for granted, what culture “hides” from its own members. In *The Hidden Dimension*, Hall illustrates this with the desirability of using literary artifacts as “a key to perception”: from fictional works of different cultural origins one may gain data on the experience and perception of spatial distance as “a significant cultural factor” (1966/1982, pp. 94ff.). Some time after this, communication scholar John C. Condon suggested: “The potential of literature and film for our understanding of intercultural relations is considerable, and can be explored both through the analysis of cultural patterns expressed in the works, and in the analysis of intercultural themes, of conflicts and resolutions by the characters in novels, biographies and films” (1986, p. 153). It is hence not surprising that Patrice Buzzanell, studying intercultural adaptation, should develop an argument about career design processes partly by calling attention to narrative fiction, viz. Lionel Shriver’s novel *The Post-Birthday World* (2012, pp. 85, 91-92): by bricolage, the same set of skills and abilities “can be channeled into different career paths.”

Literature, in fact, is now being explored especially for its intercultural dimensions, using a comparative approach. Studies edited by Lindberg-Wada offer a global perspective, tracking

literary developments and genres “across times and cultures.” Aiming to overcome distortions in western biases when writing about genres in non-European literatures, the approach includes “intercultural comparisons between literatures.” This means studying, for instance, the history of Indian, Chinese and Japanese drama, and demonstrating that “intercultural understanding in the literary field is now more indispensable than ever before.” With the shifting picture which a tracing of multiple lines of analogy and difference brings about, it becomes easy to recognize that beneath its surface literature is strongly mobile, on the move. As “the product of many logics,” we are told, literature “teaches us to think *polylogically* rather than monologically” (Ette, 2016, p. xxii). The closer we look, the more we are likely to find that fictional works have the capacity to open up “other spaces, dimensions and patterns of movement.” Very often, cultural experiences from outside our previous knowledge are inscribed in them, so that literature characteristically traverses its terrain without a distinct terminal point. More often than we may sometimes realize, we are dealing with literature that has “no fixed abode.” If so, can we as readers try successfully to stand still? “The texts move along, even without us, and leave us behind” (Ette, 2003, p. 9). We have Umberto Eco to thank for this provocation, when he remarks that seemingly enduring narrative characters, as individuals, are “becoming evanescent, mobile, and shifting, losing that fixity which forced us to acknowledge their destinies” (Eco, 2004, p. 11). As in Alexander Calder’s mobiles, the form itself “moves” before our eyes, so that the work becomes “an opus in movement” (Eco, 1989).

This experience illustrates a transcultural condition. From another angle, it’s a transtextual one. A mobility across borders, which interweaves local dynamics of seemingly fixed and stable individual texts within one e-book reading program or one codex, not only allows but compels textual bodies to be read through each other beyond imposed limitations of genres, media forms, and sociocultural determinants. The same applies to the motion picture. In tackling such works, and attempting to unlock their interpretive potential, one would expect an educated reader to employ tried and tested methods—from stylistic or rhetorical analysis to narrative focalization. Or mise-en-scène and montage. And, instinctively, the recipient might indeed do so. Classical methods of investigation can help in making cultural comparisons and seeking to overcome a particular culturally-bound bias.

But is that really enough? Regarding literature, we are dealing with what librarians sometimes (and helpfully) call “Intercultural Communication Fiction“ (as in <https://library.jccc.edu/home/>): from Shaila Abdullah’s *Saffron Dreams*(2009) to Riichi Yokomitsu’s *Shanghai* (2001). In looking more closely at such works, a comparative approach which more or less tacitly assumes that there are given cultural communities which may or may not interact with each other reaches its limits. We might even suspect that many imaginative works, not only those of one genre or in recent years, would require an understanding of culture as process (Faulkner et al., 2006, for instance pp. 40-43), one “in which the different cultures penetrate and alter each other,” a “*transcultural* phenomenon that is all mixed up” (Ette, 2003, p. 11).

A closer look will show that we have a rich variety of cases in which the usual methods reveal less about complex works as a key to perception than we may reasonably expect for adequate understanding, in which methods fail or do not carry all that far. If literature is mobile, and the cultures of which it speaks are “mixed up,” it is hardly sufficient to keep analytical tools out of the mixture. Should we go beyond disciplinary boundaries? Hwa Yol Jung in *Transversal Rationality*

& *Intercultural Texts* does indeed urge us to navigate disciplinary border crossings, for a “fusion of cultural (and disciplinary) horizons” (2011, pp. xii, xiii, 22, 29). For the imaginative shaping of situations in which different cultures communicate and penetrate each other, research in the wide terrain of Intercultural Communication can open new perceptions. The conference of the International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies (IAICS) in summer 2016 has gone some way in illustrating the potential.

Just consider, for example, the well-known Sino-American writer Gish Jen, as in her witty second novel *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996). The two sisters, Mona and Callie, who are children of immigrants in the US, for a time live in a co-ethnic area where rocks (and also crab-apple mash) are thrown at them—as a nasty brand of welcome. In unexpected ways, the Chinese minority in America can turn against group members. This “hyphenating” world, a setting filled with communicative mishaps, challenges the sisters as well as further characters to learn to reshape their identities by interactions, which turn out to be different for each ethnic community with which they have to deal: Chinese, Caucasian, Jewish, Black. The novel has been read with the help of certain standard methods: as testing the idea of ethnic identity’s fluid nature, exploring interethnic coalitions to enable a genuine mutual understanding, going beyond demands of ethnic authenticity. It has been read from a postcolonial concept of hybridity, and from a focus on overdetermination by class differences. Useful as such readings are, they do not go far enough. One of the sisters may appear to enjoy a subjectively free and individual choice of who and what she desires to be, yet the novel operates at least partly with the forms of cultural contract as mapped by Ronald Jackson (as in Hecht et al., 2003), in which choice becomes complexly related to its opposite. (Mis)Communication processes are at work beneath the surface, which have hardly been explored. In another work, Gish Jen has pointed to “the seriousness of human communication” (1994), and one can locate it also within the seemingly light mode of *Mona*. The different solutions at which Mona and Callie along with further characters in the novel arrive indicate the need to look more carefully. In particular, as a sample analysis shows, the processes at work emerge as those mapped in Identity Negotiation Theory—which can add precision, with attention to intersectional conjunctions, so as to place concerns of hybridity and class in perspective. Such possibilities may well be worth tracking.

That is just one little illustration. As we have seen, interculturally oriented communication scientists use literary works, and I would argue that, conversely, studying intercultural literature(s) can gain a vital dimension by making use, with all due caution, of the methods and findings of Intercultural Communication research in its various branches. The “borderlinings of scholarly disciplines” open the opportunity of a dialogue which can point us in new directions (Ette, 2003, p. 13). The borderlinings can help us to ask questions about literature and also film, such as: Is there any representation of other cultures’ (nations, regions, ethnic groups) attitudes toward the cultural background patterns, as hetero-images? What predispositions and stereotypes are shown regarding ingroup and outgroup identification factors? If no background patterns and/or predispositions are depicted at all, what reason could there be? By what narrative devices or tropes or semiotic methods are auto-images represented, if at all? Or: Is there any depiction of a search for interpersonal and relational identity for fictional communication partners, to renegotiate apparently fixed or distinct cultural identities? Are alternative ways suggested to cope with new cultural context, from which a selection becomes possible in any situation? Does the interpretation

which socioculturally subordinate personae or actants give to their conduct differ from the interpretation of that conduct by any dominant ones? With what means of representation is this shown? Such questions are just samples, from a wider range being developed within linked thematic cycles. A research program can open from such beginnings, one that would benefit from the participation of anyone who might be interested in joining the cluster that has begun forming. Together, we could explore a catalog of analytical questions to enhance the supportive potential from across a disciplinary frontier, for more productive reading.

For any scholars interested in exploring these options: The author may be contacted via e-mail, <michael.steppat AT uni-bayreuth.de>

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