

Universality as Invariability in Comparative Literature: Towards an Integrative Theory of Cultural Contact

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The paper analyzes the problem of cultural contact within the comparative framework of the existing dialectic between the universal and the national. The idea of universal invariants, manifesting themselves in the absence of direct influence or dependence is explored mainly in the work of two comparatists of Romanian origin.

Keywords: comparative literature / national literatures / cultural contacts / literary influences / universality / Romanian literary criticism / Wellek, René / Munteanu, Basil / Marino, Adrian

During the 19th and the 20th century, comparatism and literary comparability strictly depended upon binding configurations of concepts such as “nationality” or “the local specific” (local specificity). Universality is a result of some kind of operation involving either national literatures or, at least, “specific” elements of a given area. In this context, advocates of universality and universal values enter a field of tension in which national and universal are antagonized and, more importantly, are set in an equation of cultural contact. The present paper aims to discuss this form of interdependence, where the universal is either the opposite, or a function of the national (specific), as well as the development of the idea that universal values are established as a result of complex operations involving specific (mostly national) comparisons. This theory, which compulsively connects universality and world literature to a causal action, to comparability and selection, was put into question by several comparatists working around the possibility of cultural invariability. Although the idea of cultural invariants is not new, as we shall see, some comparatists exploit it further, imagining world literature as an ideal synthesis of invariable forms, which does not necessarily rely on cultural contact.

While it is true that, following Goethe, Wellek (“The Crisis”) defines the discipline of comparative literature as a reaction against the narrow

nationalism of much of the literary research, in East-European countries, the writer is considered, at about the same date, primarily national. As a product of a given society, the writer is thought to be in the service of a given society – this is how, for instance, Romanian sociologist Mihai Ralea sees national specificity, which he considers the greatest quality of an artist (see Mecu 512). The decisive contribution to this type of perspective upon national literature was brought during the 19th century, when the political nations appropriated literatures and literary histories and, “as a result of the appropriation..., although we do not always realize it, our literary unconscious is largely national.” (Casanova XI) Casanova is not the only one who still believes that we analyze and evaluate with national instruments and that “the study of literature almost everywhere in the world is organized along national lines”. For that very reason, supporters of the national bind maintain that we are not culturally equipped to deal with a certain number of transnational phenomena.

However, the concept of world literature, as defined from Goethe to Damrosch, says the opposite. In the terminological history of “comparative literature” Merian-Genast (4) lists three different meanings of the concept: first, the “cosmopolitan” understanding as in Goethe’s concept of supranational literature (described as *Weltliteratur*). Second, the canonical understanding, referring to those works whose effect last beyond their time or place of origin, realizing what Boileau calls “universal consent”. Finally, the third refers to the sum of all poetic products of humankind. As a matter of fact, most approaches of world literature itself enter the “trinomial” perspective (Gálik 2), where three different meanings of the concept function alternatively: 1) literature of the entire world (or literary history categorized according to national history and language of circulation), 2) a selection of the best creations (classical literature, the world canon, the “selective” concept of Ďurišin) and 3) product of all individual literatures (the “additive” concept of Ďurišin [Čo je] or, roughly but not identically, Damrosch’s concept of world literature). At times, the perspective becomes, however, binomial (see Etiemble).

Regardless if they adhere to the trinomial or the binomial classification of the meanings of world literature, comparatists seem to agree that some sort of operation (a mathematical one, in some cases: addition, subtraction, etc.) is needed in order to advance from the particular and the specific of a single author’s literature, or the literature produced during a national epoch or inside a literary trend or genre, etc., to the universality and generality of world literature, whatever be its definition.

It is not the purpose of this paper to select and define all the possible operations, but some things need to be mentioned. The most notorious

operation of this sort is conceptualized in the idea of influence, which was set to organize a type of hierarchical comparatism, where “major” cultures were irradiating values and “minor” cultures were imitating them. Even when contested for the implicit imperialistic ideology, the influence was replaced by concepts that involved, as it was to be expected, some sort of cultural contact as the basis for comparability. Subsets of the influence, as the dependence or the parallelism, are forms of analogy operated in the presence of at least one cultural contact. Intertextuality was proposed in the sixties as both a criticism and a solution to the strict genetic causality of the influence (for a history of intertextuality in relation to the influence, see Juvan “Towards a History”, esp. 1–3). Đurišin’s replacing the influence with techniques as diverse as reminiscence, impulse, filiation, literary correspondence, and so on (*Theory of Literary* 158–62) does not exclude the binary contact. Even the concordance, a concept proposed in 1968 by theorist Paul Cornea to integrate the reception context within the comparison, without hierarchical systematization, involves the analogy between at least two given cultural contexts, considered *in praesentia*.

At the middle of the 20th century, Romanian literary studies and comparative literature assert a certain unease regarding universality. Often, when assumed as a cultural goal, universalism is understood as cosmopolitanism or as anti-nationalism. Surely, there are also some balanced stands. Historian Vasile Pârvan claims that the national element is the raw material of creation, processed and ennobled by general human thought in the form of creations “valid everywhere and eternally.” (Mecu 515) Largely however, “the universal” and universality have an unbalanced status, whether the source of literature that “prevents” national originality to express itself, or the locus of absolute models, to be pursued at any cost. The most transparent metaphor of this suspicion towards the universal is the cataloging of Mihai Eminescu, the most important 19th century Romanian romantic poet, as a “national and universal poet”. Eminescu encouraged himself the theory of a “national genius” that would ensure the foundation of the existence of strong and healthy literature. The valuation of Eminescu’s creation strengthened the national myth and instilled Romanian writers with enough confidence in the generative powers of their culture to motivate the opening to universality. The metaphor of the national and universal poet, namely “so Romanian, he becomes universal” (Arghezi), symbolically links universality to the legitimizing anchor of nationality (see also Nemoianu 249–255).

The uncomfortable relationship to a universal canon that is refused, even if dreamt about, is not specifically Romanian, or even specifically East-European. We encounter the same situation in postcolonial studies,

which aim to dismantle the opposition between “large and small” cultures, between the European (universal) canon and national canons. The interest for universality would compensate the national interest, which might excessively conquer literary studies especially in areas traditionally classified as “minor literatures” and, moreover, distort, in the absence of a universal point of reference, the true dimensions of national values (see also D’haen, Juvan “Worlding,” Orr 82–83, and Terian).

Although the comparative theoretical assumption of the 19th century is the horizontal comparison between equals, some literatures, categorized as primitive, receive less value than others, considered unique, of universal importance. (Bassnett 19) This inequity is paradoxically rooted in the Herderian idea of the “soul of the people” (*Volksgeist*), intended by Herder to promote equality and mutual respect among nations. It is balanced, at least at a declarative level, by claims that world literatures help sharing, at a transcultural level, a set of human emotions and ideas that are the same for all nations and that go beyond the historical accident and vicissitude. Most commonly used intuitively rather than critically, this competitive-contrastive positioning of comparative and world literature against national literatures is often programmatic. For Moretti the only justification for the study of world literature (and for the existence of departments of comparative literature) is “to be a thorn in the side, a permanent intellectual challenge to national literatures – especially the local literature. If comparative literature is not this, it’s nothing.” (68).

While obvious when confronted with the sphere of national literatures and cultures, the issue of universality gains a different weight when developed by the history of comparative literature in a frame that does not involve any binary causality. At times, universality is explored *per se*, as an almost *a priori* (if not external) sum of values that escape the particular determinacies of nationality. When asked about the source of universal values, some comparatists point to certain apparently unchangeable elements to be discovered in contexts that had no cultural contact. The idea of literary invariants, expressions of a universal ground of representations that humankind use regardless of particular languages or cultures is a direct heir of the romantic belief in a universal human soul. It was used at the beginning of the 20th century to explain obvious resemblances and relationships between authors or texts beyond any common influence. This concept of literary (sometimes ideatic or cultural) constants that cannot be attributed to influences or analogies is rather old in the history of comparative literature. It features even in Van Tieghem’s *Comparative Literature*, as the object of “general literature”. For Van Tieghem, comparative literature is concerned with proven influences, while general literature (or what he

calls “international literary history”) is preoccupied to emphasize the undeniable similarities of literary works from different countries, even when the hypothesis of an influence should be discarded (163). Even earlier, in 1921, in the first issue of *Revue de littérature comparée* Fernand Baldensperger supports the idea that a new humanism will emerge from a “less uncertain core of common values,” which would be described precisely through comparative exercise.

In Romania, as in most of Europe, both Eastern and Western, practicing comparative literature was a mandatory part of the history of national literature. Most theorists, historians, linguists and literary critics were concerned, at the end of the 19th century, with founding a national culture to endorse the realities of the burgeoning nation. The idea that a national soul expresses itself in literature was ideologically used to coin a new concept, that of the “national specific”. In the first half of the next century and particularly during the communist regime afterwards, expressing the national specific became the most important task of the artist.

Mainly during the Romanian fifties and sixties, world literature had to balance this heavily burdened ideological position. Among the universalists are the aesthetics professor Tudor Vianu, who opened the first Romanian course on world literature in 1948, published in 1963, and – much earlier – the literary historian Eugen Lovinescu, a firm believer and promoter of modernity and of synchronization to urban, modern, European values. Their work in comparative literature is, however, mostly analytic and feature comparisons between Romanian works of literature and works of the European aesthetic canon.

As far as a theory of invariability is concerned, two names are especially important: Basil Munteanu, who lived and worked in Paris since 1922 to the end of his life in 1972, and Adrian Marino, who lived in Romania until his death in 2005 and was a political prisoner of the communist regime between 1949 and 1963. Of the two, Basil Munteanu is nearly unknown to the Romanian scholars, in spite of his notoriety abroad, while Adrian Marino’s fame as a theorist and comparatist is undisputed.

Educated at Etiemble’s school of comparatism, but opposing the historicism of the French school, Adrian Marino conceives comparative literature as a “comparative poetics,” (see also Booker or Miner, for different explorations of the idea of poetics in comparability). In his understanding of the term, it denominates a new type of comparatism, where cultural contact or even contextualization of any kind yield to “what we might call synthetic, synchronic-typological and theoretical” (*Etiemble* 56). Ceasing to be a mere chapter of literary history and the history of international relations, comparative literature has, in Marino’s vision, a precise and auto-

mous object, but also a specific method (*Comparatisme* 5). Prior to Đurišin's definitions (see Čo je) of world literature being founded on interliterary processes, Marino entertains a transnational perspective. His project can be properly understood only in the context of the crisis of comparative literature of the 60ies and 70ies, when the need for scientificity sometimes led to the overestimation of specific methods and concepts (following the dogmatic model of Van Tieghem's positivism). Seeking to precisely define comparative literature as a perfectly legitimate scientific discipline, given exclusive authority over a methodological field, Marino overestimates the value of methodological generalization in conceiving comparative literature as a comparative poetics and makes great efforts to outline the differences between the practitioner of comparative poetics and the mere poetician (whom he sees not qualified to operate beyond close reading).

Today, it is difficult to accept his methodological exclusivism, but his work on literary-theoretical invariants remains productive. He defines invariants as "the totality, manifested in all of these forms (explicit or hidden), of theoretical reflection of literature and about literature, having a categorial nature, repetitive, stable, circular, pseudo-original" (*Etiemble* 47) and being "a privileged object of comparative research" (56). This definition points towards a history of ideas, but the Romanian comparatist maintains invariants are not simple ideas in historical evolution. For him, invariants are "ideal, Weberian models" (*Biografia* 9) that form the ideal "being of literature" and are to be studied using comparative poetics, that combines hermeneutics (understood as a theory of interpretation) and a "biography of ideas". The most notorious example of invariant that Marino gives is the idea of *literature* (which he studies along six volumes, on thousands of pages in his *Biography of the Idea of Literature*). The premise is that *literature* is not a homogeneous concept (to be followed along an "evolution" throughout a "history of ideas"), but its variations are limited and recurrent in the history of culture. This way, the study of the idea of literature is better served by comparative poetics (a hermeneutics of the forms and regulations used to define literature), than by the history of ideas.

Prior to this, Adrian Marino finds the concentrated expression of the new method precisely in René Wellek's formulation (59) who argues that comparative literature should be the study of literature "independently from linguistic, ethnic and political borders". But the breakthrough of comparatism, understood as *comparative poetics* is discovered in the double approach of Etiemble, which combines typology, advancing from the particular to the general, with theory ("towards an objective definition of literature") in order to produce a final result of a generalizing theory, where the entire literature has been assimilated and where one can find "literature

without any adjective” (61), beyond national or other particular borders. At this point, Marino selectively orients his reading of Etiemble towards a theoretical perspective, even if the French comparatist pleads more for a pragmatic enlargement of the frame of world literature, to include non-European literatures (see D’Haen 2). Text analysis is, for Marino, a form of subordination (of the comparative act by the literary criticism), and so is literary history. Isolating the invariants (ideas, cultural forms or processes) allows the comparatist to gain both autonomy for his actions and access to universality.

The only concession Marino makes to historicism in his conceptualization is the view of the invariant as “a sort of Platonic idea that we continually discover, spontaneously, by anamnesis” but “the verification is historical.” (47) Of a classic and rigorous nature, the Romanian comparatist builds, in his project of a comparative poetics, a personal geometric utopia of universalizing value, a reduction to essence of what he calls “disorder of the real”, which is actually the clutter of literature. The explanation for his rejection of history can be traced to the comparatist’s own suffering under the communist regime, as if, by rejecting the historical and subjective “accident” of literature, one could reject the personal and collective drama of totalitarianism. In his definition of “world literature”, one must distinguish between the quantitative meaning (world literature as the sum of all literature, regardless of their language of circulation) and the qualitative one (world literature as a sum of masterpieces, the map of the “peaks” of literature). Marino points out that the adherence of the East-European countries to the universal is greater, the more urgent their need to “fit” their national literature within world literature. Even qualitatively, the attractiveness (or “seduction”, as Marino calls it) of world literature to the countries of Eastern Europe is given by the opportunity to access universal values: despite belonging to a little known culture, the chance to universality is offered to East European cultures in an exceptionalist manner, for their best creations, where they become universal. “The key word is always universal literary value. It is invoked as a rampart, claim, reality, and also resentment.” (*Comparatisme* 27) From here to the proposal of a transnational perspective, the Romanian comparatist uses the concept of invariant in order to fight the “defenders of specificity and the national and regional traditions whose share remains significant” (30). The defenders of the national perspective appear to Marino to transfer the idea of the national character from an ethnic to an aesthetic level. His invariants would create a bypass of the entire national issue in order to engage the comparatist in a transnational approach: since ideas and forms of literature have “an ideal, Weberian” existence, studying the limited number of their

occurrences would not take into account national specificity, but accidental alterations of the regulators of those occurrences.

The first Romanian comparatist to tackle the issue of literary and cultural invariants was however Basil Munteanu, a disciple of historian Nicolae Iorga, who taught at the Sorbonne and published in *Revue de littérature comparée*, becoming its secretary after the World War II, when he focuses mainly on pre-romanticism and a theory of comparatism. In 1967, he publishes *Constantes dialectiques en littérature et en histoire. Problèmes. Recherches. Perspectives*, a study that had been anticipated by several of his studies from 1935, 1957 and 1958. His contributions are completely overlooked by Etiemble (1963) and only briefly mentioned by Marino.

Basil Munteanu anticipates, in a much more balanced manner, Marino's theses of literary invariants in a theory of dialectical constants, where he manages to preserve historical transformation without giving up the claim to universality. At the first Congrès national de littérature comparée de Paris (1957), he presented a paper entitled "Littérature générale et histoire des idées". Here, he proposed an original synthesis of "general literature" (which is horizontal) with the vertical of the "history of ideas", in a final summary that would constitute the philosophy of history. Literary history and comparative literature are concerned with real and conscious contacts, while general literature would include a much larger overall data, relevant authors, trends and arts. A year later, the Romanian critic diagnosed the disciplinary crisis, accusing "the worst divisions and infighting" among those who should be fellow comparatists. In this study, he abolishes the myth of the literary work of art as a self-contained object. From his point of view, and against Welles (who presented at the same congress his seminal "The Crisis of Comparative Literature"), any comparatism is necessarily dialectic. Comparative literature represents only a particular case of this type of hermeneutic exercise.

The first study that led Munteanu to such a statement is "Des 'Constantes' en littérature, principes et structures rhétoriques" (1957), reproduced and subsequently developed in 1967 (388–420), which affirms the importance of a systematic study of the "reality of constants" in the dialectical, synthetic and heuristic sense. In fact, this study will provide a reference point for the comparative poetics of Adrian Marino, who identifies Munteanu as "the only one who accepted and understood the importance of constants". Munteanu describes his theory of constants since 1934 (in a first study on historian V. Pârvan), then in an article in 1935, anticipating Etiemble's much more famous paper from the sixties.

The final development of his theory is however to be found in *Constantes en littérature et en histoire dialectiques*. His starting point is the idea that com-

parison is a well-known figure and process of the systematic knowledge, a mental mechanism used to understand the world, where nothing exists in itself, but in a contradiction, tension, antinomy, etc. The next step is that all comparison is dialectical, since it involves oscillation, cancelation of tension, and finally synthesis. Creative products such as literatures are, consequently, the result of contacts and exchanges between known and unknown, or the Hegelian thesis and antithesis, so they necessarily display series of structural dialectical constants (see *Constantes* 122–30): temporal constants such as present/past, or spatial ones such as here/there, internal/external, close/remote, or any other categories like physical/moral, intellect/emotion, mind/matter. A different set of dialectical constants are of a rhetoric nature: literary conventions, themes, motifs, types, cultural trends or genres. The action of these constants has been confirmed by time and in time they have oscillated in nuances that need thorough historical examination, although this examination will rather account for their universality, than point out a certain type of cultural contact. Basil Munteanu defines two types of invariants, which he calls “dialectic constants”: structural ones, which are fixed and ahistorical, and “variable constants, at the same time fixed and supple” – *Constantes* 131). This way he designs a grid of constants, accounting for their oscillation and dialectical transformations over a given duration, in which they are subjected to certain developments.

If Marino hardly makes any compromise with historicism (though his invariants are, in theory at least, a “form of universality both methodological and historical” – *Comparatisme et Théorie* 64), arguing that only the verification test of invariants is historical, nothing else, Basil Munteanu warns at the outset that “all denial of history is frivolous” (*Constantes* 13). He defends theoretical systems, using the very example of Renan that Marino will review in his later paper and explains that “any synthesis manages to create a system or more, not only rigid but also provisional and therefore theoretical. This is its reward and coronation. . . . One must react against this always present tendency to deny the ever present authority of the spirit, to reduce moral truths to petty proofs, to imitate, within the realm of the untouchable, the safe but cumbersome walk of practical evidence.” (24) Reading Munteanu, Marino complains about his “entirely historicist prudence” that makes Munteanu a partisan of the history of ideas (*Comparatisme* 71), while the goal should be – in Marino’s view – to surpass all historicism. In his turn, he urges for the universality of ahistorical or transhistorical value.

Characterized by a certain escapism of abstract structures, Marino self-projects himself in a perpetual state of siege against the “dangers” of the

contemporary world (where he lists Westernized acculturation, loss of scholarship and taste for high culture, consumerism, ignorance of the founding values of universal ideas, lack of theoretical discernment in judging values, etc.). His dream of a classical, perfectly ordered universality of world literature turns, with a single sentence, into an intrinsic quality of the invariant: “in the clutter of the real, in the extreme variety of literatures, it introduces a certain principle of order, an order of its own.” (60) As a result, the invariant appears as a form of “reductive generalization”, operated upon the disorder of fragmentary, particular texts. To Marino, this reduction, which other interpreters of literature might fear as too inflexible, is preferable to accepting that literature cannot be entirely constrained to reductive generalizations, as he envisions, since literature is intertextuality, “plurality and anarchy, but especially interaction” (Juvan, “Towards a History” 3). Also, the all too human failure to exhaust all existing documentation of a given invariant (say, the idea of “literature”) seems to him a negligible price to pay in comparison to the gain of developing a scheme “that would retain and incorporate all new acquisitions or possible revealing data” (59).

His need for order and geometrically ordered systems prevails over his literary and scientific common sense. He consents to the more than questionable idea of Lovejoy’s “unit-ideas”, that maintains the error of understanding ideas as compact homogeneities, able to migrate unchanged within the history of ideas. Lovejoy’s concept of intact units (*unit-ideas*) has been criticized for its idealistic fallacy and for its presupposition of a word order where intersubjectivity, communicational change and contextual interpretation are nonexistent. Basil Munteanu is among those who criticize it, warning of the serious risk of exaggeration and excess of conceptual formalization, arguing against Lovejoy’s supposition that in literature ideas are only “ideas in dilution”. While Munteanu always acknowledges “the moving and thus relative nature of our terrain and materials” (*Constantes* 131), going as far as to speak, in spite of the paradox, of “variable constants”, Marino prefers to exaggerate in the direction of fixing the invariants, rather than remain in the fluid indecision of literature, which does not conform to crystal clear formalism. He finds the heterogeneity of literature anguishing and comparative literature, conceived as a history of invariants, implicitly gains, in his theoretical fantasy, soteriological functions. “It would therefore be impossible to answer the capital question of what is literature? outside a purely logical model, a formal one, that would have the great advantage of freeing the science of literature (including comparative literature, no doubt), from the ghetto of ‘humanities’.” (*Comparatisme* 218) At one point, his theoretical utopia gains such a perfect rigor, that it sounds downright dystopian: “what would remain [in the

analysis of comparative poetics] would show a scheme that would amount to a possible definition of literature, according to some pre-concepts and certain objective parameters, well defined and methodically analyzed. No eclecticism, no amalgam, only a true synthesis to obey its own laws.” (21)

In the comparative tension between the universal and the specific, comparative literature has often taken sides. The integration of an in-between approach to universality should take into consideration a third place, where the connection universal-particular does not follow a causal logic, but the logic of invariability. Of the two comparatists from my case study, Basil Munteanu is the one who proposes the concept of “dialectical constants”, being aware of its limited effectiveness. “Dialectical constants” exist only modulated by the transitional and the contextual. Their method of study is “a philosophy of the history of ideas” (*Constantes* 33).

Universal values or specific ones do not exist in and by themselves, but in their relation of mutual determination, already transformed in meta-analysis. This is why I urge for a *metacritical* level of comparison and comparability, regardless of the presence or absence of cultural contact. One can admit to the existence, in world literature, of forms, ideas, figures, conventions and processes that are constant realities in different literatures and cultures, apparent invariants founded on some *a priori* data of shared ideas and images. However, the invariants remain but a formalist illusion unless they acknowledge the fact that their very fabric is already dialectical, historical, intersubjective and intertextual. Universality itself, imagined on modern terms, as a homogeneous space of greatness, has become an unsustainable concept, which has served its function (post-war unification, transnational shift, ahistorical or transhistorical refuge during totalitarian regimes). In a context whose national framings are not self-evident (Juvan, “Towards a History” 1), comparatists go beyond the opposition universal-national, towards interactive, dialogic or multiple-level frames. A reconfiguration of universality according to fluid, global and “cluttered” phenomena requires not only the work of the hands-on historian or literary analyst, but also an effort of theoretical abstraction, which can find support in the notion of “dialectical constants” or “invariants”.

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Univerzalnost kot stalnica v primerjalni književnosti: v smeri celostne teorije kulturnih stikov

Ključne besede: primerjalna književnost / nacionalne književnosti / kulturni stiki / literarni vplivi / univerzalnost / romunska literarna veda / Wellek, René / Munteanu, Basil / Marino, Adrian

V drugi polovici 20. stoletja sta v primerjalni književnosti prevladovali dve teoriji, po katerih so utemeljevali razloge za primerljivost: prva je zagovarjala dejstvo, da je primerjanje mogoče zato, ker je med dvema ali več kulturami prišlo do določene oblike kulturnega stika (vpliva, skladnosti ali odvisnosti), po drugi pa obstajajo določene univerzalije, ki se kažejo v obliki invariant ali konstant pri različnih književnostih, kulturah in avtorjih, pri čemer ni sledu o kakršnem koli vplivu ali stiku. V članku so na kratko predstavljeni argumenti teh dveh teorij, avtorica pa predstavi tudi teorijo o tem, da ju lahko razumemo kot celostni rešitvi. Eno glavnih vprašanj, obravnavanih v prvem delu članka, je vprašanje *nacionalnega* (ponazorjeno z romunskimi razpravami iz obdobja med 60. in 80. leti 20. stoletja) kot nasprotujočemu ali sestavnemu vidiku *univerzalnega*. Drugi del članka se osredotoča na razprave o ideji univerzalnih invariant, ki se v različnih kulturah kažejo neodvisno od kulturnega stika. V romunskem kontekstu ta teorija izhaja iz del Basila Munteanuja in Adriana Marina. Več kot očitno je, da so epifenomeni globalizacije tisti, ki zahtevajo nov, celostni pogled na nekdanji polarizirani odnos med lokalnim, zgodovinskim in kontekstualnim na eni strani ter univerzalnim, splošnim in množično skupnim na drugi.

September 2014