



Fluid Borders of 'Literature': Literary Theory versus the Practice of Literary Documentation

/// Revised title: ///

Fluid Borders of 'Literature' and the Efforts to Read Literary Culture from Afar.





Polish Literary Bibliography (PBL) is a publication that covers literary production in Poland as well as Polish theatre and film through the analysis of Polish printed sources (books, journals) from 1944 to 2002.

Through almost 60 years it has gathered huge amount of data, app. 3 million records (more than 2 million in printed volumes, and about 600 000 in an online database).

Recent efforts to digitize printed volumes of PBL and create a new database are met with efforts to conceptualize PBL's data in order to facilitate data research. This paper is a this kind of effort.





PBL was established in 1950s and its methodology was construed to meet the needs of modern Polish science and “literary community”.

Its main goal was to register Polish literature in its entirety through the analysis of Polish print production.





Cultural modernity plays a crucial part in PBL's development.

Due to complex political and ideological (but not only local) reasons Polish literary life was subject to the process of a certain kind of modern "stabilization".





Stabilization was partly an effect of state-driven institutionalization and control of culture, but it also was an effect of broader processes like the domination of print culture with growing, but limited and organized, influences of other media like TV and radio, and the development of modern science with its tendency to form specialized departments eager to construe their own identities in modern terms.



Of course, at the same time there was an underground literary production - samizdat - that could not have been registered in official bibliography due to obvious reasons. But because it was not a methodological decision I will leave this matter aside.



This modern “stabilization” of literary culture allowed PBL to become a universal, almost complete, literary bibliography.





PBL paints a realistic and rich picture of literary culture between 1944 and 1988 (especially when we include bibliography of samizdat aimed at supplementing PBL), because...:

1. in print culture a lot of data on literary culture is... printed,
2. in modern science there is a scientific agreement as to what is literary (PBL's methodology was consistent with this agreement),
3. of local political conditions (authoritarian state controlling culture).





The first point - PBL painted a realistic and rich picture of Polish literary culture after 1944, because “in print culture a lot of data on literary culture is... printed” - is only seemingly tautological.

It has a very direct influence on documenting literary culture.

It results in the confidence in the amount of data deposited in printed sources which allowed PBL to open up bibliography to the practice of registering many non-textual entities which are part of literary culture.





Over decades PBL has built rich catalogues of data on events, institutions and other non-textual entities that map out Polish literary life i.e.:

1. literary meetings, conferences,
2. literary festivals, competitions,
3. NGOs; i.e. associations of writers and NGOs aimed at promoting literature,
4. theatrical repertoire,
5. radio plays and programmes on literature,
6. radio and TV plays and programmes.





Specific events, institutions and non-textual works structured data gathered in PBL; i.e. literary prizes served as headlines in printed PBL (only under this headline there were texts commenting on this event). Therefore PBL served as a source of reliable data on literary culture itself.

In an online database this is even more evident: PBL gathers data only through processing texts (books, journals), but when a text concerning an event is processed there are two types of records added to PBL's database.

Firstly, a record of event with specific data. Secondly, a record of text that is connected to the record of an event.





Let's note that there is an important distinction between

1. processing texts to create bibliography

and

2. mapping out literary culture using data gathered from texts.

And PBL - because of the universal approach to registering printed sources and the domination of printed culture - situated itself right in the middle of these approaches.





Print culture is also a culture that limits literary production, due to the costs of print and it has also influenced PBL's methodology in a very specific manner.

PBL established a rather egalitarian definition of literary work - bibliographers do not assess the value of literary works - but the printed volumes could not include certain literary texts due to the costs of print.

That is why around 50 000 texts from 1944 to 1988 were registered in card catalogues and were not included in printed volumes.

After 1989 each literary text is registered in PBL's online database.





Relatively to what literary community considers to be literature nowadays.



In the last two decades three important processes impacted PBL:

1. the scientific definition of what is literary and of literary text have become more fluid:
 - a. literature may be conceived as a combination of cultural discourses, many kinds of writing are considered literary (philosophy, theology, sociology etc.), and culture itself might be conceived as a text (hence the idea of reading culture).
 - b. empirical (or at least sociological and cultural) studies emphasize the non-textual aspects of literary culture.

 2. the emergence of post-print culture:
 - a. more and more data on literary culture is outside of printed sources, so PBL has relatively less and less data on literary culture as a whole,
 - b. PBL is a post-print publication itself, it has unlimited space for data, but limited resources to produce data.

 3. the explosion of literary production due to the development of a capitalistic economic system and democracy
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Important processes that impacted PBL in the last decades (they are to some extent intertwined):

1. the scientific definition of what is literary and of literary text have become more fluid:

Example 1.

Literary theory is subject to a certain de-professionalization and literary community considers more and more works created outside of literary studies departments to be important and influential for our understanding of literature (i.e. the works of Derrida, Agamben, Zizek etc.) even though they may not be on literature at all.





Important processes that impacted PBL in the last decades (they are to some extent intertwined):

1. the scientific definition of what is literary and of literary text have become more fluid:

Example 2.

Polish literary studies used to be mostly text-oriented (with certain exceptions), but now we do observe the growing interest in empirical literary studies which need data on literary culture. For PBL it is tempting to contribute to this development of empirical studies, but it lacks tools and procedures other than processing official printed texts that could satisfy the needs of empirical research.



Changes in literary studies; emphasis on social infrastructure of literature.



Important processes that impacted PBL in the last decades:

2. the emergence of post-print culture:

Example 1.

The emergence of Internet and electronic literature which include: new forms of literature, new publishing methods, changes in social infrastructure of literature.

The phenomena of potential interest for bibliography are for example:

- blogs,
- writers' websites and social media presence,
- portals for writers (amateur writing, fanfiction etc.),
- literary podcasts.





Radio plays, audiobooks and changes within radio industry influence the emergence of literary podcasts.



Literary podcasts

PBL nowadays registers radio plays (adaptations of literature and original radio plays) published in Polish public radio. It does not register programs broadcasted by commercial stations.

Literary podcasts are a form of oral literature, and a new literary contribution to audio culture.

Up to 1989 PBL had a very reliable data on the presence of literature within audio culture, now it covers only a small margin of this phenomenon.



Important processes that impacted PBL in the last decades:

1. the emergence of post-print culture:

Example 2.

Due to the emergence of post-print culture data is more dispersed.

There is no need to publish information in print, when there is a possibility of informing - i.e. about literary meeting - on a website or on FB.

Which means that we are not only missing out on Internet literary culture, but also on “regular” literary life.





Even if we process the “Internet” (which sounds silly) there is still a strong possibility that we will not register basic information on important aspects of literary culture.

We might register the fact that in Poland there are 50 book clubs organized by Polish Book Institute, but we know that there 350 book clubs of that kind.

Should we gather this data through other channels? Try to strike up a cooperation with Book Institute and ask them for their reports or statistics? This might certainly interest empirical studies on literary culture.



Without this deeper knowledge we could not even conduct statistical research on printed sources - if we know nothing about book clubs in Poland in general it is impossible to interpret data on book clubs gathered through processing texts.



There are two main consequences of these processes for bibliography like PBL:

1. bibliography is “wider”, but also “thin”; we produce more data, but it cannot be that “rich” as we would hope to,
2. our data still seems to be too “narrow”, because it no longer corresponds with our vision of literary culture, because this vision entails registering more and more non-printed and non-textual entities.

This amounts to a paradoxical situation: we have more and more data, but our knowledge is more fragmented and cannot map out literary life like it used to do and its value for research is more and more dubious.





1. Bibliography is “wider”, but also “thin”.

It means i.e. that we know how many poems were published in 800 journals per year, but we do not know their genres

or

we know the name and date of each conference that even mentions literary matters that we find in printed sources, but we cannot register the topics of papers

or

we know how many novels are published every year in Poland, but we have zero information on their content (topics, themes etc.)





PBL has never gathered that kind of rich data, but nowadays basic search engines or social media tools might allow you to gather data on literary culture that cannot be gathered through traditional bibliographical methods.

For example librarything.com or Polish biblionetka.pl have data on contents of literary works created through social tagging and scientific conferences have their own websites where scientific papers are summarized and tagged.



This data - crucial to our knowledge on literary culture - cannot be gathered through bibliographical methods, even if they are applied to Internet sources.



2. Our data still seems “too narrow”, it no longer corresponds with our vision of literary culture, because this vision entails registering more and more non-printed and non-textual entities.

Maybe we should supplement our bibliography with data gathered through processing other sources of data i.e.:

- grey literature (i.e. reports of cultural institutions),
- datasets concerning material culture, i.e. data on the names of streets, schools and other institutions,
- digital tools for cooperation with the society (individuals and institutions).



So maybe we should register certain phenomena even when they are not mentioned in any official sources; independently of their existence in any official texts; which changes the core practice of bibliography.



Conclusion

Bibliography was an optimal tool for reading culture from afar during the time of domination of print culture.

1. What should bibliography like PBL do nowadays in a new cultural context?
2. What is the optimal tool for reading contemporary literary culture from afar nowadays?

I hope that I have managed to convince you that these two matters are interconnected and it is essential to answer first question to answer the second.





Conclusion

For sure the best tool that we might imagine to register literary culture would be some sort of “data aggregate” or “hub” combining bibliographies, dictionaries and other sources of data.

But at the same time there is data that we are missing out on because we have not introduced new methods of registering literary culture in an institutionalized manner (but we have bibliographies and dictionaries that are institutionalized). And it is not a call to expand literary documentation, but a call to just keep in touch with our literary culture in its entirety, like we used to under different conditions couple of decades ago.





Conclusion

And to take up this challenge we need a comprehensive discussion on what literary data is today and what kind of data contemporary “literary community” needs to have a possibility of reading literary culture from afar.

