

The Ekphrastic Turn. Inter-art Dialogues. Edited by Asunción López-Valera and Ananta Sukla. Champaign, Illinois: Common Ground Publishing, 2015, ISBN 9781612298245, 443 p.

Review by Cristina Diamant
Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University
Cluj-Napoca, Cluj
cristina.c.diamant@gmail.com

The humanities have been plagued for quite a while now, it seems, by the fear of driving themselves into a corner or, worse, into a "bubble" or an echo chamber that is both validating and debilitating. Literary studies have been especially sensitive to the accusation of irrelevance in a world that is performance-oriented in the economic sense. A possible way out is represented by *The Ekphrastic Turn* which, much like Richard Rorty's *Linguistic Turn*, is a process thanks to which discoveries in one area of the humanities radiate and serve to create a real revolution in the target field of research. A new instability, even fluidity is revealed and the image of fixed categories is shattered to expose previously unsuspected mutually affecting processes. Breakthroughs in linguistics revealing the arbitrary nature of language and its slippery relation with reality meant that historical and literary studies could no longer accept straightforward, unassuming and univocal readings.

Similarly, until recently, the dialogues between arts, when not actively discouraged as a perversion of the means and scopes of the arts involved by muddying their specifics, as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing did, true to the Enlightenment ideal of clear and distinct ideas, it was seen as a feat of virtuosity, showcasing one's culture or creating an atmospheric rendition to support their universe-building, yet nothing more than a cultural quotation of sorts. However, this specific kind of intertextuality hints, etymologically, to a less reductive vision of the world, less dependent on the stylistics of one art or the other.

The ekphrastic turn is also yet another development brought on by technology, from the early days of the 20th century when films and photographs were made

accessible to the public at large rather than the elites of the 19th century. The faster, cheaper, and easier interplay between different mediums made possible by the new technologies soon impacted the way in which literature was written. A notable example is that of Franco Marinetti and his colleagues who reflected this tendency in their creative process and started speaking of *polyexpressivity* or *multisensoriality*. The process was only accelerated once digitalization became widespread, so much so that the 1990s have seen a renewed interest in intermedial studies.

While the term "intermedia" itself originates from the 1960s, when the English poet-composer Dick Higgins spoke of the Fluxus movement, the idea of eliciting from the art consumers a reaction to various formats (audio, text, image, video) at once to engage more than just one of their perceptual modalities has only gain traction recently, especially given the rise of interactive modes of art consumption. The individual's multimodal experience of the world displaces language from its prior assumed position of centrality as the major carrier of the message, while movement, sound, and colour are no longer reduced to paralinguistic tools.

The present anthology serves to promote the field of intermedial and multimodal studies by showing how ekphrasis can no longer be seen as little more than a curiosity, but needs to be addressed to understand how literary studies, cultural studies, and media studies are to interact in an interdisciplinary, hopefully even transdisciplinary, approach. The volume represents the result of an ambitious, long-ranging international project, not just in terms of the breadth of topics and the depth of the inquiry, but also in the variety offered by the perspectives of researchers based in the United States, Western Europe (France, Germany, Spain, Italy), Eastern Europe (Romania), Central Asia (Kazakhstan), East Asia (China, Japan), Africa (Egypt), and Australia. What is demonstrated here first and foremost is an interest in storytelling as a device that proliferates beyond the narrow constrains of the textual and the literary, so that not only songs and paintings may be said to be narrative in nature, but various media formats such as architecture, sculpture, film, dance and performance acts, as well as electronic literature, following Monika Fludernik's cue.

The transmedial discussion of narratological concerns allows for a more applied investigation of interconnectivity and how the combined conventions of

different arts may be said to strengthen expressivity, especially in digital culture. Mihaela Ursa's chapter on hybrid cultural objects in Romanian intermedial practice or what she proposes to call "literature 2.0" takes Bolter and Grusin's concept of "remediation" out of the media studies context to apply it to disciplinary approaches to suggest that the "old disciplines" (semiotics, literary studies, etc.) are not completely replaced by the "new disciplines" (cultural studies, media studies, intermedial studies, digital art studies), but coexist with them as Derridean "traces". Artistic practices of various kinds are investigated, not only sensitive to contemporary developments, but also exploring traditional national arts with a certain sensitivity to their multimodal nature. Egyptian Fayoum portraits, Chinese calligraphy, and Kazakh accordion music are analysed in a manner which defines the binary constructs of the past, the last of these being the collaborative work of two researchers, Zaure Smakova and Medelkhan Konysbayev, preoccupied with such accounts of popular oral historiography. Marie-Thérèse Abdelmessih's text, for instance, highlights the paradoxical nature of age-old paintings that refuse the definite categorization in either sacred or profane, ritual or aesthetic regimes, while Jinghua Guo offers insights into the interconnectivity of cultural development and calligraphy, unveiling the intermedial potential of the iconic correspondences that exist between ideograms and their signifieds.

The present volume also greatly benefits not just from diverse applications of intermedial and multimodal theories, but also from several proposals of enlarging the existing framework. One of the editors, Ananta Charan Sukla, offers a non-Eurocentric theory of artistic reception by turning to Sanskrit poetics to examine the concept of *rasa*, the aesthetic experience of theatre audiences, comparing it to *dhvani*, a feature of textual arts only. How aesthetics and art reception are to be thought of is also a matter of interest for Li Quingben, whose chapter proposes philosophy as a way of life, impacting the perceived legitimacy of popular art and its hermeneutics, as well as somaesthetics (Richard Shusterman). Non-duality is the central concept used in building a personal theory of complex cross-cultural crossings where comparative translation is revealed to be, in effect, a mode of transcultural intermediality. The implications are detailed when applied on the poetry of Wang Wei, a rather well-

known Chinese writer, thus offering to meet the reader half-way. Mihaela Ursa also attempts to expand the available theories proposing a more systematic approach to hybrid cultural objects. Since her interest is also local, she begins by explaining the challenge Romanian culture faced in the 1990s, unlike Central-European countries such as Hungary, Slovakia or the Czech Republic, seemingly unable to break away from an aesthetic appreciation for high culture seen as the only viable type of artistic reception. Since theory was equated under communism with ideology, Romania developed a surprisingly energetic preference for literary reviews rather than criticism which was to shape current literary attitudes. The examples used illuminate the issues of reception in transnational contexts, as in the case of Dan Lungu's *I Am a Communist Biddy* (*Sunt o babă comunistă*), more appreciated abroad rather than at home, as well as those of format hybridity, as seen in the online public conversation in letter format of the contemporary poets Radu Vancu and Claudiu Komartin and more experimental types of digital art that encourages the active participation of the viewer rather than passive consumption.

Arts with a temporal perception such as music and dance are also given a special focus in this volume. Experts on musicology and performance arts discuss the ways in which music adaptations of works of literature such as *The Phantom of the Opera* may be said to illuminate new features of the source text and even develop characteristics of their own. Both over musicalization of the kind identified in William Gass's "A Fugue", a passage from *The Tunnel*, and the covert musicalization seen in *The Pedersen Kid* are analysed by Marcin Stawiarski. The embodied aspect of performance arts is not overlooked, and Emily Petermann's text, an analysis of choreographies that were inspired by literary (pre)texts that are capable of narrative semantization, manages to capture accurately and suggestively the existing tensions between language, music and dance in both pop culture and national arts by resorting to the Greimasian actantial model.

The rather unusual aspect of this volume is having artists draw on and reflect on their own work to develop a more cohesive and customized understanding of how intermediality and multimodality are to be identified and problematised in ekphrastic arts. Geoffrey Sykes, benefitting from his double vocation as playwright and

semiotician, explores his own production, *Tales of Kabbarli*, so as to observe how ancient Australian rites have been transmuted into contemporaneity. Photographer Verena Laschinger explores her own image(s) of Beijing, coming to see how physical perception and photographic narration are interconnected and can be said to influence one another in a feedback loop. Such considerations on topographical intermedial relations illuminate the inner workings of a later chapter by Ilka Kressner, whose examination of Paris in literary texts produced by exile authors (Juan Goytisolo, Rachid Boudjedra) also poses the city in the center of a discursive formation that can be continuously re-signified through successive revisiting and subversion. As such, the palimpsestic nature of perception is debated after the ground has been prepared both by the author and by the volume through its inner structural logic.

Last but not least, the most provocative section of the volume is devoted to contemporary digital practices that foreground communal cultural experience, which can be said to be among the major factors of paradigm changes in the field, and so Carolina Fernández Castrillo, Leonardo Flores and editor Asunción López-Varela Azcárate discuss digital archiving, e-poetry, space-time digital architecture that radically transform landscapes and buildings into ambient art, e-installations, as well as the controversial immersive possibilities offered by VR (virtual reality).

Without failing to indicate that monomedial art is largely a theoretical construct rather than an artistic reality given how traditional popular arts can also be recuperated in an intermedial and multimodal framework, the present volume is an excellent introduction in and elaboration on the interactive character of art that is well worth reading regardless of one's main research field. Shifting the focus from the so-called decodification semiotics of "the old disciplines" of the humanities to the interpretation semiotics useful for "the new disciplines", it might just offer researchers and scholars alike examples on how to use the necessary conceptual tools to save the humanities from seemingly inevitable alienation. Hybridity and digital interactivity are not bemoaned as spoiling the very scientific rigueur demanded of the humanities to be taken seriously, but instead manage to indicate the palimpsestic

nature of culture and even clue the reader in on how to pick such embedded layers apart for a more informed perspective on all of them.