

Comparative Literature in the Digital Age: Semiotic and Cultural Implications

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Abstract

Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media* (2001) inaugurated a decade of inquiries into the effects of the digitalization of culture and its transcoding, that is, its translation into other formats. Until then, literature had been identified with book culture so strongly that, for centuries, it was institutionalized as a practice of the book, even if printing is only a stage in the history of textual transmission.

In *The Nature of the Book* (1998), Adrian Johns reminds us that until the middle of the 18th-century the book was an unstable object, with Shakespeare's first folio including not only more than six hundred typefaces, but also numerous discrepancies and inconsistencies regarding its spelling, punctuation, divisions, arrangement, proofing and page configurations. As a result, readers had to make critical decisions regarding particular manuscripts, their origin, identity, consistency and trustworthiness (31-32).

Bad Quarto (1603)	Good Quarto (1604-1605)	First Folio (1623)
<p>Ham. To be, or not to be, that is the question, Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The pang and torment of a conscience Keepeing his conscience, or to take A short and easy way out of the pain, To sleep, to say we'll never wake That is the question. To die, to sleep, No more, no more, to sleep, to say we'll never wake That is the question. To be, or not to be, that is the question, Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The pang and torment of a conscience Keepeing his conscience, or to take A short and easy way out of the pain, To sleep, to say we'll never wake That is the question. To die, to sleep, No more, no more, to sleep, to say we'll never wake That is the question. To be, or not to be, that is the question, Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The pang and torment of a conscience Keepeing his conscience, or to take A short and easy way out of the pain, To sleep, to say we'll never wake That is the question. To die, to sleep, No more, no more, to sleep, to say we'll never wake That is the question.</p>	<p>Ham. To be, or not to be, that is the question, Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The pang and torment of a conscience Keepeing his conscience, or to take A short and easy way out of the pain, To sleep, to say we'll never wake That is the question. To die, to sleep, No more, no more, to sleep, to say we'll never wake That is the question. To be, or not to be, that is the question, Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The pang and torment of a conscience Keepeing his conscience, or to take A short and easy way out of the pain, To sleep, to say we'll never wake That is the question. To die, to sleep, No more, no more, to sleep, to say we'll never wake That is the question. To be, or not to be, that is the question, Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The pang and torment of a conscience Keepeing his conscience, or to take A short and easy way out of the pain, To sleep, to say we'll never wake That is the question. To die, to sleep, No more, no more, to sleep, to say we'll never wake That is the question.</p>	<p>Ham. To be, or not to be, that is the question, Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The pang and torment of a conscience Keepeing his conscience, or to take A short and easy way out of the pain, To sleep, to say we'll never wake That is the question. To die, to sleep, No more, no more, to sleep, to say we'll never wake That is the question. To be, or not to be, that is the question, Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The pang and torment of a conscience Keepeing his conscience, or to take A short and easy way out of the pain, To sleep, to say we'll never wake That is the question. To die, to sleep, No more, no more, to sleep, to say we'll never wake That is the question. To be, or not to be, that is the question, Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The pang and torment of a conscience Keepeing his conscience, or to take A short and easy way out of the pain, To sleep, to say we'll never wake That is the question. To die, to sleep, No more, no more, to sleep, to say we'll never wake That is the question.</p>

Comparison of the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy in the first three editions of Hamlet, showing the varying quality of the text in the Bad Quarto, the Good Quarto and the First Folio . Wikipedia

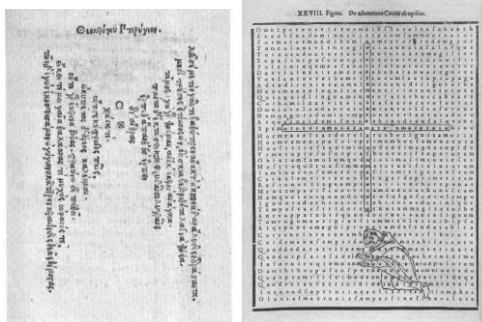
Since the 1990s, digitalization has encouraged the integration of the discourse on literature with that of mediated communication. Thus, theoretical reflections on the nature of media have stimulated growing critical concerns with remediation (Bolter and Grusin), intermediation (Wolf, Rajewsky, Hayles), 'media convergence' (Jenkins and Thorburn), and its impact on culture since, according to Manovich, cultural categories and concepts are being substituted on the level of meaning and/or language by new ones which derive from the computer's ontology, epistemology and pragmatics. (12) In this perspective, which can be traced back to work by Marshall McLuhan, new tools, the computer in this case, are at once the symbol, the means, and the agent of cultural changes. This paper inquires further into the impact of digitalization upon culture in general, and literature in particular, briefly revising the evolution in the transposition of art across media, including writing, painting, sculpture, the performing arts, music, and more recently film, and online digitalization in relation to the literary.

My aim here is to constellate a conception of media and literary studies that, by virtue and necessity of taking up the global circulation of multimodal texts as a central concern, might help trace the differences in the practices of reading/writing in comparative literature and in media studies, and highlight some of the key aspects that should be in the agenda of future comparative literature in Europe.

Just as a corollary from this is the reading time of this paper. English is spoken at an average rate of about 160 words per minute; French at about 200 words a minute and Spanish at about 220. I will try to read the 3000 words of my paper in 20 min. Please forgive me, I wrote it in silent reading mode, and academics silent-read quite fast. The medium matters.

* * *

Digitalization has encouraged the study of the evolution and transformations of printed paper-based writing as a mode of inscription to the new screen formats. Writing has been explored as verbo-visual dynamics by Jerome McGann. In his works, he has unveiled the different materializations and configurations of writing (print, colour, illustrations, fonts, etc.) within a historical perspective. The materiality of those “embodiments,” to use Katherine Hayles’ term, which point to the nature of representation as individual and historical memory, interacts dynamically with linguistic, rhetoric, and literary practices to create what we call literature. In digital environments, the kinaesthetic qualities of letters and words, their ability to move, appear, disappear, dance, rotate, etc., are enhanced, making the digital the perfect place for experiments in Concrete Poetry, for instance. More importantly, McGann shows how, in Western discourse, where ekphrasis largely developed under the auspices of Horace’s comparison ‘*ut pictura poesis*’, these techniques mobilized the spatiotemporal frameworks of print culture in multiple ways.



Simias Rhodius's Simias Rhodius, "Eidullia Theokritou Triakonta". 325 a.c. aprox.

Hrabanus Marus "De adoratione crucis ab opifice / De Laudibus Sanctae Crucis" Augsburg, ca. 845.

Harvard Library Bulletin “Material Poetry of the Renaissance/ The Renaissance of Material Poetry”, Roland Greene (ed.) 1992, Vol. 3, N°. 2.

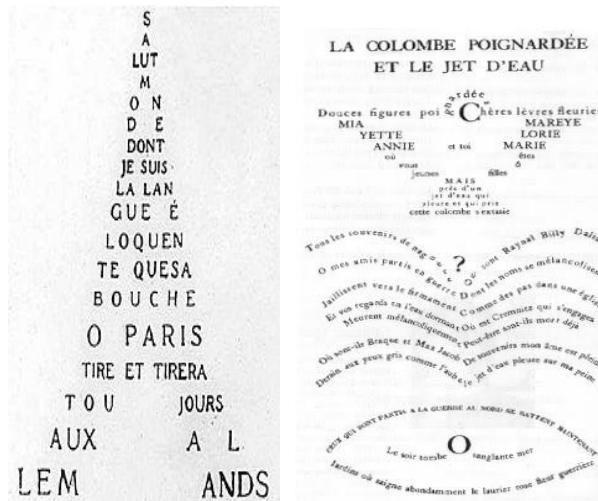


Giovanni Battista Palatino Sonetto "Figurato, Parte I, Compendio del Gran Volume de l'Arte del Ben Scrivere" Roma, 1566. *Harvard Library Bulletin* “Material Poetry of the Renaissance/ The Renaissance of Material Poetry”, Roland Greene (ed.) 1992, Vol. 3, N°. 2

In *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (1993), Jerome McGann explored how the changes in the form of mass production in the western world during the 18th and 19th centuries caused the remediation of many aspects of the oral tradition, with an interest in speech and vernacular voices. Paradoxically, the ideological, symbolic and conceptual elements directed attention away from the material aspects of writing because such recognition removed art from nature and emphasized the artificiality of creation, bringing it close to the industrial and mass-production mechanisms that the Romantic imagination rejected. In other non-western cultures, where some of these aspects have remained largely unexplored, iconicity played an important role. For example, while in the west and until the 18th-century, the visual

mode was carefully controlled in written texts, keeping images tied around discourse, it has always been fundamental in Chinese language and representation.

The explosion of visuality in the 20th-century western art was related to the impact of changing technologies for cheaper image reproduction (fundamentally photography and moving pictures and cinematography). The fascination with visual aspects was used to subvert discursive meaning in the works by Marcel Duchamp, the art-game experiments of the Surrealists, the compositions of Tristan Tzara and the Dadaists, Russian constructivism, the anti-art mechanical sensibility of the Futurists, Ezra Pound's Vorticism or James Joyce's language puns in *Finnegans Wake*.



Guillaume Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*: "La colombe poignardée et le jet d'eau", 1918
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guillaume_Apollinaire

Avant-garde art enabled, for instance, the projection of simultaneous occurrences within linear narrative forms by means of techniques borrowed from montage in Futurist visual arts and sculpture. Other modernist experiments included the suspension of the rapid fluidity of time in an “epiphanic” instant, in James Joyce’s terms, or “a moment of being,” as Virginia Woolf called it. Many of these early experiments brought to the fore the material aspects of language by focusing on graphical coding, the acoustic and visual aspects, and the articulation of meaning through the aesthetic/writing space. They also opened the art work to their audiences and removed partially or entirely the semantic content of discourse, anticipating many contemporary experimental digital works.

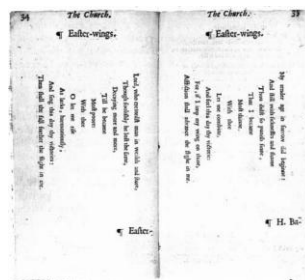


Umberto Boccioni, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913)
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Futurism>

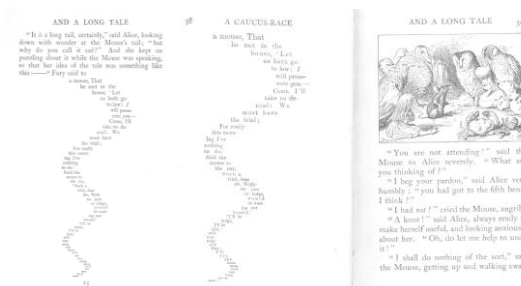
Comparisons between poetry and painting were already present in Plato (*Republic* Book X, 605), who banned all mimetic art from his *Republic* because, in his view, it makes “phantoms that are very far removed from the truth” (Plato *Republic* 1968: 289). Rescuing mimetic art from Plato’s attack, Aristotle develops the parallel between poetry and painting in his *Poetics* (9.16-21). He emphasized that the object of both arts is the imitation of human nature in action, but that their means are different: poetry uses language, rhythm and harmony, and painting uses colour and form. For generations, the poem was the epitome of the literary text. In fact, poetic expression captures the original idea/emotion by echoing biophysical perceptual rhythms in alliteration, homonymy, synonymy, and by means of contrastive variations such as antonymy, negative parallelism and other defamiliarizing techniques.

In *Laokoon* (1766), the German writer Gotthold Ephraim Lessing emphasized the ability of poetry to excite mental pictures in a temporal sequence, thus creating the illusion of reality. The 20th-century usage of the term *ekphrasis* was, in fact, coined by comparatist Leo Spitzer in 1955 in his analysis of Keats’s poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn”. Spitzer defined *ekphrasis* as “the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art, which description implies, in the words of Théophile Gautier, ‘une transposition d’art’, the reproduction through the medium of words of sensuously perceptible *objets d’art* (*ut pictura poesis*).” (Spitzer 1955: 207)

In the west, the shape of the writing space became more prominent in the late 19th-century, possibly under eastern influence brought by the expansion of European empires. Pattern poems, for instance, were common in China, where pictograms, ideograms, and phonograms were incorporated into poems as part of their writing system. Shapes are also part of many Japanese *haiku*. More research would be necessary to show the crossings between east and west that encouraged the visual poems of the Greek *Carmen figuratum*, and later work by various poets such as George Herbert (i.e. “The Altar”), Dylan Thomas (i.e. “Vision and Prayer”), Lewis Carroll (i.e. “Long and Sad Tail of the Mouse” in *Alice in Wonderland*), as well as e. e. cummings’s “L(a)”, Edwin Morgan’s “Siesta of a Hungarian Snake,” Francois Rabelais’s “epilenie,” or Guillaume Apollinaire’s “Il pleut”.



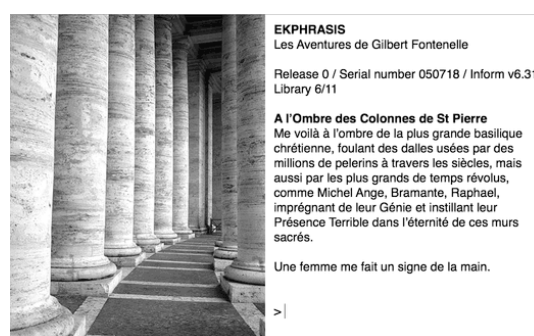
George Herbert, "Easter Wings / The Temple" Cambridge, 1633



A Mouse's Tail Tale. *Alice in Wonderland*.

In some of these, as well as in many examples of ‘concrete poetry’, graphic design and shape are visual complements to the sound patterns that accompany the general perceptual effect of the pieces. The Futurists’ “words in freedom” were ‘works in progress’ (a term also used by James Joyce for *Finnegans Wake*), open to new multi-sensory experiments, particularly the impact of typographic innovation, including ink colours, typefaces, paper texture, book-binding techniques, etc. All these innovations enabled a greater interplay of perceptual modes, enhancing diverse forms of emotional and aesthetic charge, alternating between ‘showing’ (*mimesis*) and ‘telling’ (*diegesis*). As William J. Thomas Mitchell writes in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (1994), “The real question... when confronted with these kinds of image-text relations is not ‘what is the difference (or similarity) between the words and images?’ but ‘what difference do the differences (and similarities) make?’ That is, why does it matter how words and images are juxtaposed, blended, or separated?” (Mitchell 1994: 91)

Among the first studies on ekphrasis we can cite Jean Seznec (1972) “Art and Literature: A Plea for Humility” (1972) where he emphasizes the need for monographic studies on the topic. Also Ulrich Weisstein in his *Interrelations of Literature* (1982), primarily concerned with guidelines to make valid inter-art comparisons, Wendy Steiner *The Colors of Rhetoric*, who defines ekphrasis as an attempt to imitate the visual arts by describing a still moment and thereby halting time (Steiner 1982: 41), Ernest B. Gilman who discusses the “Imperialism of Language” as central to inter-art comparisons since antiquity, Grant F. Scott who sees it as an attempt to “transform and master the image by inscribing it.” (Scott 1991: 302) and as “a means of [...] demonstrating dominance and power” (303). In *The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (1993), James A.W. Heffernan from Princeton University, explored “picturacy,” that is, how the verbal can become an instrumental medium for investing pictures or other visually accessed representations with meaning.



EKPHRASIS
 Les Aventures de Gilbert Fontenelle
 Release 0 / Serial number 050718 / Inform v6.31
 Library 6/11
A l'Ombre des Colonnes de St Pierre
 Me voilà à l'ombre de la plus grande basilique
 chrétienne, foulant des dalles usées par des
 millions de pèlerins à travers les siècles, mais
 aussi par les plus grands de temps révolus,
 comme Michel Ange, Bramante, Raphael,
 imprégnant de leur Génie et instillant leur
 Présence Terrible dans l'éternité de ces murs
 sacrés.
 Une femme me fait un signe de la main.
 >|

<http://grandtextauto.org/2006/11/>

In *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Mitchell, one of the pioneers on visuality, claimed that, although the visual and verbal media are different “at the level of sign-types, forms, materials of representation, and institutional traditions” (1994: 161), in terms of “expressing intentions and producing effects in a viewer/listener, there is no essential difference between texts and images” (1994: 160). Soon after, Claus Clüver argued that the concept needed redefinition because “contemporary ekphrastic practices have subverted the traditional relation of the representational visual text to its verbal representation, even to the point of discontinuity.” (1997: 30) Since then, the conceptualization of ekphrasis as a verbal representation of a visual representation has been increasingly perceived as too narrow,

and thus Margaret Persin has expanded the range of ekphrastic studies by discussing “uncanonical art forms such as television, photography, comics, and cinematography.” (Persin 1997: 19) The following year, in his paper “Quotation, Enargeia, and the Function of Ekphrasis,” included in the volume edited by Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel, *Pictures into Words: Theoretical and Descriptive Approaches to Ekphrasis*, Claus Clüver explains that ekphrasis retains a certain degree of Aristotelian *enargeia* and defines it as “the verbalization of real or fictitious texts composed in a non-verbal sign system” (1998: 49). Since then, the matter has become increasingly complicated with the inclusion of film studies and, more recently, hypertextual models. As Bernhard F. Scholz recognized, the concept is a “complex multi-dimensional multi-faceted semiotic phenomenon,” (1998: 75) that also has ties with intertextual relations (1998: 74).

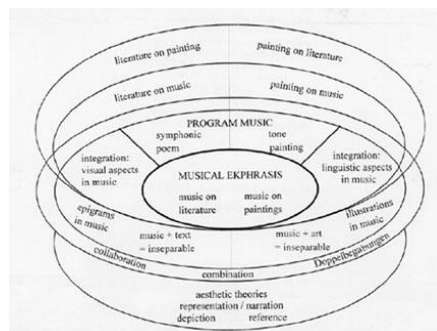
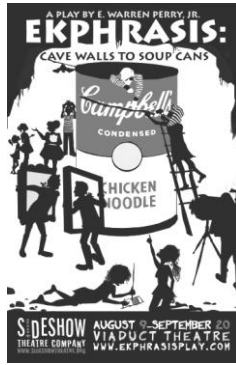


Image from Siglind Bruhn’s personal page
<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~siglind/ekphr.htm>

A radical redefinition was proposed by Siglind Bruhn’s *Musical Ekphrasis*, where she expanded Clüver’s to the “representation in one medium of a real or fictitious text composed in another medium” (2000: 8). She explores the synaesthetic intersections between music, words, pictorial image and moving images, the iconotextuality of visual poetry, the simulation of poetry in sculpture, the changes within literary adaptations, or the influence of filmic techniques upon written works. In all these cases, a given medium thematizes, evokes and sometimes imitates elements and structures of another medium in order to stretch semiotic levels to their limits, modify perception and conceptual imagery, and increase immersion and aesthetic response. The same year, Elizabeth Drumm in her discussion of “Ekphrasis in Valle-Inclán’s *Comedias bárbaras*” showed how ekphrasis can be used in the stage directions of drama. Mitchell’s recent collection of essays *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005) discusses the value of discourse with regard to the visual arts, an analogy Mitchell constructs in postcolonial terms, that is, the empowerment offered by discourse to the voiceless subaltern which is visual representation. Here, critical elaborations on intermediality use analogies between the power relations at work in strategies of exploitation and othering, and the dynamics that can be perceived in relations between verbal and non-verbal art forms. In 2008, Laura Mareike Sager explored *Ekphrasis in Literature and Film*. Finally, in *Intermediality and Storytelling* (2010) Marina Grishakova’s distinguishes between “metaverbal” (an attribute of verbal texts that evoke images) and “metavisual” an attribute of images that reflect on the incomplete nature of visual representation).



<http://www.sideshowtheatre.org/performances/productions/ekphrasis-cave-walls-soup-cans>

Changes in scholarly discussion on ekphrasis since the 1960s evidence a trend also visible in cultural studies, media studies and education, from perspectives that sought to map structural concepts from one field to another to a focus on dialogue between voices and power positions. T. S. Eliot had already spoken about the three voices of poetry:

The first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character. The distinction between the first and the second voice, between the poet speaking to himself and the poet speaking to other people, points to the problem of poetic communication; the distinction between the poet addressing other people in either his own voice or an assumed voice, and the poet inventing speech in which imaginary characters address each other, points to the problem of the difference between dramatic, quasi-dramatic, and non-dramatic verse. (*On Poetry and Poets* 1957: 96)

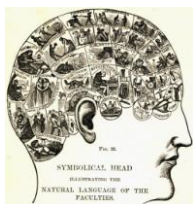
Literary voices correspond to diverse spatiotemporal contexts and crossings among generic categories, for instance the fact that drama could be considered both a narrative and a performance, and a sung version of a poem, might be both literature and music. These voices are also related to overlapping media configurations that might share metaphoric relations of similarity (what Jakobson termed the axis of ‘selection’), as in ‘ekphrasis’ or intermedial reference, or metonymic relations of contiguity (what Jakobson described as ‘combination’), as in intermedial transpositions or ‘adaptation’ from one medium to another. These types of relations are the basis for Jakobson’s distinction among genres, with lyric poetry tending toward the metaphoric and realistic prose toward the metonymic.

An interesting line of thought in the philosophy of sound and its relation to ‘ekphrasis’ can be traced from the pre-Socratic thinkers through to Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida and Deleuze and Guattari, and more recently in contemporary theorists in film, cultural and communication studies. In *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, Nietzsche’s idea of the ‘spirit of music’ within the Dionysiac, confronts the Apollonian visual ‘dreams’. Although Nietzsche favours sound over vision, the relationship between the two is one of mutual need and symbiosis. Similarly, for Heidegger, “We not only speak language, we speak *out* from it” (Heidegger 411), so

that sound comes out of words as a mode of action, a way of speaking, the *poietic* element of sounding. The importance of sound is very evident in Joyce's writings, with his concept of epiphany emphasizing a phenomenological convergence of all the physical senses, but possibly stressing sound more than any other. There are many memorable examples that bring to the fore the importance of sound in *Ulysses*, with some of the transitional passages in the novel marked by sounds: from Bloom's belly grumbling in "Lestrygonians," to the tap-tap of the blind-man's cane and Bloom's flatulent coda at the end of "Sirens", an episode structured like a fugue. Derrida's deconstructive work, much inspired by Joyce, has sought to break the importance of visuality and the illusion of presence in the Western world, and many of his works contain forms of nostalgia for the loss of the sound of music. This emphasis on sound is also commonplace in other postmodern critical approaches, for instance, Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, where sound and deterritorialisation are related. What they term "line of flight" (Deleuze and Guattari, 21) signals shifting adjustments marking new spatial alliances. In postmodernism, sound becomes a metaphor for hybrid unstable process-formations which, unlike fixed structures, are constantly changing under I-other negotiations, conscious and unconscious affects, and power struggles marked by desire and wishful thinking.

Nowadays, many approaches from a range of interdisciplinary fields in the Social Sciences and Humanities emphasize these dialogical, agentive, and mediating aspects of communication, understood as body of acts/performances made known through verbal registers as well as non verbal signs, whether face-to-face or by means of representations. From Mikhael Bakhtin's work on textual voices that negotiate hierarchies of intertexts such as allusions, quotes, references, footnotes, endnotes, or annotations on the margins, to Julia Kristeva's expansions in her 1967 essay "Word, Dialogue, and the Novel," intermediality, as understood for instance by Irina Rajewsky, consists in voices of overlapping media configurations that might share metaphoric relations of similarity, as in ekphrasis or intermedial reference, and metonymic relations of contiguity, as in intermedial transpositions or 'adaptation' from one medium to another. Werner Wolf has proposed a concept of "transmediality" to forward the notion of narrative as an extension of the verbal medium able to 'read' other media, thus establishing narratology as transmedial *tertium comparationis* across intermedial configurations. Wolf indicates that intermediality in the broad sense is the medial equivalent of intertextuality, and in the narrow sense, it refers to the participation of more than one medium. He uses the term "transmediality" for phenomena such as narrative, whose manifestation is not bound to a particular medium. "Intermedial transposition" are adaptations from one medium to another while "intermedial reference" refers to texts that thematize other media (for example, a novel devoted to the career of an artist –painter, musician, etc.). This term is also used for processes of ekphrasis (for instance, a novel structured as a fugue).

But it is not just the process of medial exchange that has become dialogical. Because effective communication requires several modes of sense perception to locate things in space and time, whether in situations where participants share the same spatiotemporal coordinates or in recorded (past) events that use deictic pointers to the original happening, the workings of a given medium — be it biophysical (the air that conducts speech waves for instance) or technological (the printing press; a computer) — are based on experiences where several perceptual/communication modes (or sense modalities) speak across to each other. And there is also neuroscientific evidence on this (see work by Jordan Zlatev).



"Symbolical Head, Illustrating the Natural Language of the Faculties." (Image from Wells, Samuel. *How to Read Character*. New York: Wells Publishing, 1870. p.36.)

MIT OpenCourseware Anthropology

See also: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/33223/33223-h/33223-h.htm>

Within the dialogic trend, the idea of the solitary reader engaged in ‘close reading’ of a literary piece, a notion integral to the teaching of literature, is also beginning to shift. Close reading is based on a solitary engagement with the text. However, performing, singing, story-telling and reading aloud were common practices for adults in the 19th-century household, and it was not until recently that these forms of leisure and entertainment were displaced by radio, television, cinema, and the computer screen. Despite the interactive turn and the frenzy for social networks such as Twitter or Facebook, I believe humans have never been more separated than since the advent of computer communication. The well-known slogan “connecting people” only works based on individual choices; likes and dislikes. It shows a preference for asynchronic forms of communication that allow the management of individual time.

Turning back to the topic of the literary, I must emphasize that literature has no definite medial home base. In the previous lines I have referred mostly to the dialogue between text, images and sound, moving within ekphrasis, that is, between words that speak in colours, sound and music, as Joyce put it in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and ‘picturacy’, the ability to read visual signs and speak for pictures. The movement, from the unfolding of writing as inscription to other forms of adaptation, and the mutation of print-based narrative into encoded interactive multimedia pieces of electronic literature or computer games, as well as the reverse dynamics, from screen to paper, as in novelization, for instance (on this see work by Jon Baetens) constitutes the intermedial turn. This shift is also the artificer of the a focus away from performativity, which became the paradigm from the 1990s until quite recently, towards **a focus on translation and circulation**, mediated by the interactions between specific types of medial circulating forms and the interpretive communities built around them.

As mentioned above, the trends that have dominated comparative literary studies for the past few decades are very similar to those that gave rise to media studies. Critical readings of literary texts provide a special understanding of history, politics, philosophy, ideology and economics. Initially, the impetus to redraw the boundaries of comparative literature came largely from progressive critical demands to include "other" literatures, to undo the opposition between high and low and incorporate popular culture, to foster a dialogue between centres and peripheries, interrogating reception and mass audience while questioning the culture industry, and more recently, exploring the role of translation. Emphasizing the transmission and cosmopolitanism of culture as well as the exchange of creativity and art among diverse cultures, Goethe’s understanding of *Weltliteratur* became the basis of the discipline we know today as comparative literature. The incorporation of approaches coming from the field of cultural studies into comparative literature highlighted differences in literary transmission across the world, whether in postcolonial contexts (see for instance Said 1978, 1993; Bhabha 1990, 1994), or including the role translation (Bassnett 1993). These incorporation processes into the body of comparative literature were the reason

behind Charles Bernheimer's acknowledgement in his 1993 report that the term 'literature' may no longer adequately describe its object of study (1993: 15). The current revival of world literature needs to be placed within these shifts in points of view, encompassing complex processes of relations and appropriations, including political and economic issues of space-location — both local (self, community, nation) and global (transnational). But it also needs to take into consideration the multi-material basis of the literary.

The evolution of the discipline of comparative literature, possibly unlike any other field of research, stages the many forms and ways to capture processes of simultaneous multidimensional change, across space—by exploring recurring aspects in different cultures, and across time—by searching for historical parallels and differences, inquiring into themes, topics, semiotic processes, stylistics, and so on. From René Wellek and Austin Warren's structuralist conception of the literary work of art as “a highly complex organization of stratified character with multiple meanings and relationships” (*Theory of Literature* 1984: 27) to Damrosch's definition of world literature as “a mode of circulation and of reading” (*What is World Literature?* 2003: 5) and as “writing that gains in translation” (281), with translation contemplated as “an expansive transformation of the original, a concrete manifestation of cultural exchange and a new stage in a work's life as it moves from its first home out into the world” (*How to Read World Literature* 2009: 66), the shift in vantage point is indeed spectacular as it opens “multiple windows on the world” (Damrosch *What is World Literature?* 2003: 15). Damrosch's visual metaphor 'windows on the world' is particularly apt to highlight the ways in which art-forms impact upon each other, showing, for instance, how intermedial transposition (adaptation) from one medium to another has extended representational possibilities, and how processes of intermedial reference (or ekphrasis) help thematize other media, as well as how the narratological basis of transmediality enables themes to be presented in more than one medium, thus having a multiplied impact upon literary reception. Roland Greene advocates a conception of comparative literature that “concerns itself with the exchanges out of which literatures are made: the economies of knowledge, social relations, power, and especially art that make literatures possible; not literature but literatures; not works but networks.”(214) Problematizing the concept of world literature by re-introducing material concerns into the discussion, and addressing comparative literature in terms of dynamic systems of relations, rather than structures, requires minds open to the plural. It requires to look at comparative literature, not just from a 'distant reading' perspective, but from multiple languages and diverse cultures. But it also requires to perceive it from different semiotic locations, not just textual. The typographical trace literature(s) is almost mandatory.

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