

Translation, Transmediality, Comparative Literature

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“Translation, Transmediality, Comparative Literature” Susan Ingram.

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Why has the concept of “transmediality” (“*Transmedialität*”) not achieved the same level of acceptance in the disciplines that comprise the Humanities in English-speaking countries as it has in German-speaking ones? Or, to formulate this another way, why is it so difficult to carry over *Transmedialität* into English? I take transmediality to refer to an overarching approach to media, capable of effortlessly gliding across the borders of old and new media, whilst acknowledging the linguistic dimension of these media and determining them as phenomena in their own right, the acquisition of which requires of its practitioner similar abilities as speaking a foreign language. Why is this concept not (yet) a fixed component of the “translational turn,” which is the subject of this special edition of *Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften*? What does this mean, and what are its possible consequences? As a person, whose academic career was facilitated by trans-lation [*Über-setzung*, lit. to place above] (in Canada I wrote my dissertation in Comparative Literature and have held teaching positions in both European industrial centers (Saarbrücken, Katowice) as well as in cities that were once British colonies (Hong Kong, Toronto, Auckland)) and for whom it would have been much easier to write an academic article on this subject in English, who however, because of an invitation to contribute to this important and timely topic made the effort to both write¹ and think in German, it strikes me that this “academic” (Ger. *geistige*) phenomenon, which reflects a cultural one, cannot be thought apart from the discipline of *Komparatistik*.²

Although it has been nominalized and institutionalized under the aegis of “Comparative Literature,” there is also no helpful English rendering of the German “Komparatistik.” The presence of “Literature” has resulted in Comparative *Literature* becoming irrelevant as an academic discipline proportionately to the degree that visual and material culture gain in relevance. I find this development very unfortunate, since problems that arise in translation can be instructive: they have a diagnostic function, which one ignores at one’s own peril. In so far as I am trying to theorize a new Comparative Literature, in which the notion of transmediality inspires and broadens the concept of translation as a key feature, as both an approach and a perspective, that is, a Comparative Literature that does not primarily understand itself as being about the study of world literature, but which acts transmedially, I maintain that Comparative Literature, and not ethnography, should be considered “the science of translation” (Bachmann-Medick 260). That is, it can and should be regarded as the ideal space of transmedial analysis. Thanks to its broader methodological reach, Comparative Literature is better able to work against the limitations that tend to characterize our ever more complex global societies and university cultures, in that it calls for the consideration of, and the inclusion of difference, such as, for example historical and cultural mnemotechnics that take place in “foreign” languages and media.

1 I would like to sincerely thank Christina Lutter and Brigit Wagner both for the invitation to contribute to this special issue (Birgit Wagner, Christina Lutter, Helmut Lethen (Hg.) *Übersetzungen Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften*, Heft 2/2012), as well as for their understanding and patience in helping me bring this text to the standards of academic German. My thanks also go out to Markus Reisenleitner for his support and marvelous cooperation on this project.

2 Translator’s note: This term remains un-translated for the present, since it relates to the author’s point. However, as the author suggest, it will subsequently be translated as Comparative Literature.

Put another way: not only does Comparative Literature need the translational turn, but the Anglophone disciplines of the Humanities, which have been becoming ever more dominant and gaining increasing influence in their part of the global academic landscape are in need of a translational Comparative Literature if they are to save themselves from irrelevance in an innovation and future oriented, market-driven age. Lisa Gitelman's assertion in *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* that: "The humanities are our past-oriented disciplines: history, English, classics, philosophy, art history, comparative literature" (12) is typical.³ Gitelman is a historian of media in the Department of Media, Culture and Communication at NYU's Steinhard School of Culture, Education and Human Development, an institution that is representative of the new orientation in the Anglo-American academic world. At NYU cultural and media studies are not subsumed under the disciplines that comprise the Humanities – an important reason why the concept of transmediality has (still) not stepped into the foreground there. Media Studies, and in particular "remediation" (itself a key concept, introduced by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in *Remediation: Understanding New Media*,) stand in the way. Bolter and Grusin "argue that new visual media achieve their cultural significance precisely by paying homage to, rivaling, and refashioning such earlier media as perspective painting, photography, film, and television. They call this process of refashioning 'remediation,' and they note that earlier media have also refashioned one another: photography remediated painting, film remediated stage production and photography, and television remediated film, vaudeville, and radio."⁴

That the German-speaking "past-oriented" disciplines of the Humanities refer to transmediality and not "remediation" is easily established. To cite a few institutionalized examples: the mandate of the "Ibero-Amerikanische Forschungsseminar der Universität Leipzig" (IAFSL), founded in 1994, declares as its goals and tasks, "Cultural theory: Postmodernity, Post-colonialism, Hybridity, and Transmediality (Literature, Theater, Painting, Film, Internet)."⁵ The type of work the institute engages in was demonstrated at an international colloquium dedicated to the topic of "Inter/Transmediality and 'Transculturality' in Literature, Painting, Photography, Film (the Americas, the Caribbean, Europe, and the Maghreb)" (29 June – 3 July 2011).⁶ Another example is provided by the DFG-Research Project, "Mediality – Transmediality – Narration: Perspectives on a Trans-Genre and Transmedial Narratology (Film, Theater, Literature)," which Irina Rajewsky has headed since 2008 at the Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School for Literary Studies at the Institute for Romance Language Philology at the Free University of Berlin (see also, Mahne, Poppe, Seiler, Stegmann and Zwernemann). In the German-speaking academy, there would not seem to be a

3 In order to highlight the difficulty and also the importance of translation, all English quotations appear in two languages. I believe it important that German-speaking readers be given the opportunity to engage with the original. In this manner, as with subtitles in a film, one is confronted with the fact of otherness and should not give into the temptation to mistake the translation for the original.

4 <http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?ttype=2&tid=3468>, Accessed on 2 January 2012.

5 http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~iafsl/persp_obj.html, Accessed on 2 January 2012.

6 http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~ffsl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=73&Itemid=207, Accessed on 2.1.2012.

danger of either the concept of “art” as a descriptor or of the academic domain in which it is studied disappearing.

In the English-speaking academic world, on the other hand, those who work in the “past-oriented” disciplines of the Humanities seem to have been infected by media scholars to consider art as a medium – as also in Europe. Chiel Kattenbelt, for example, who holds a Chair for Theater Studies at the University of Utrecht, makes a point of no longer speaking of art and media, as in “theater” and “medium,” but rather only of media. That is his starting position (“I regard the different arts as media—that is my starting point. Personally, I do not speak any longer about arts and media, as in, for example, theatre and media, but only as media”). He thereby moves in the direction of media scholars like Terry Flaxton, who represent the opinion that the concept of art is antiquated: “So it seems to me that the concept of art forms with separate boundaries is effectively defunct. All is digital, all is transmediality. The journeying of an asset⁷ through the conceptual maze is a primary function of its status as an asset and if everything is an asset then everything is also the medium in which the asset functions. The digital is its own functionality and reality, its own medium. It has a simple and elegant language of two values, yes and no, on and off. It is the highest loss less compression/decompression system we have from which everything we know of the world can be de-constituted, manipulated then reconstituted” (8). This situation has arisen because “language is too slow for the speed of thought exchange that we are now capable of” (6). Flaxton is not arguing that the concepts of language and text are outdated, but rather that the intellectual environment in which we currently find ourselves is qualitatively distinct from previous periods and that we require new modes of understanding (“I am not arguing that text and language are defunct, simply that the intellectual environment we now find ourselves in is qualitatively different than before and will require new gestures of understanding” (6)). To which should be added: wherever new gestures of understanding arise, new academic constellations are likely also to be called forth, constellations in which the new modes of thought can be conceptualized and worked through.

I see no compelling reason why this trend should be determined by Anglophone Media Studies, which have a rather negative reputation with respect to historical and foreign-language perspectives on knowledge. It would be more beneficial if this discussion was led from the domain of Comparative Literature, which pays special attention to art and language, and which regards and understands precisely historical and foreign-language perspectives as virtues of the first order. It cannot be denied that even if Flaxton dispenses with the concept of art, he still regards the digital as a language, in contrast to earlier analogue language. He thereby remains in the domain of textuality, for which a vast array of theories were developed over the course of the last century, which during the last decade have been proclaimed dead by conservative forces that yearn for a return to the purely aesthetic, pre-political approaches which were unsettled and to some degree de-centered by “French” theory (cf. Cusset).

7 The term asset in English can refer to both a finance-specific concept, which can be translated into German as “Anlage,” and to programming multimedia, for example software programs such as Adobe Flash, in which the concept refers to constituent parts of an animation.

Two recently published articles can be considered exemplary of this expanded Comparative Literature. Capable of engaging with new media without giving up ostensibly antiquated concepts such as art, language and textuality, while at the same time attempting to counter the conservative turn in the academic landscape, they demonstrate the types of insights that can be achieved with theoretically informed work, which, as Cusset discusses, Comparative Literature departments and programs (especially Yale and Columbia) led the way in introducing into the North American academy. The first article, by Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, was published in *Comparative Literature* (Spring, 2011), the official journal of the ACLA (American Comparative Literature Association). While at first glance the article seems to present a rather mundane description of two contemporary British novels, the novels themselves (Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007) and Graham Rawle's *Woman's World* (2005)) provide a wealth of material to analyze the consequences of a "mediatized" environment on forms, which usually turn out to be disruptions, of identity formation.⁸ Even when the two novels "perform on a textual level the thoroughly prosthetic subjectivities of their respective enactor-protagonists" (137) traces of "a humanist self and the metaphors of depth and privacy associated with it" (121) become visible in the intersections of "textuality and selfhood" (135). After all, two white male authors who utilize traditional resources such as Cyberpunk and comics have written these texts. What matters is that one does not let oneself be dazzled by the jungle of electronic signs, but remains capable of recognizing the usual suspects. Having an appropriate theoretical armature for this undertaking helps; the works of Haraway, Steigler, Massumi and Hayles (119) function here rather like trail-markers. Also important is to expose the newness of "new media" as a mythology. In this context, Brillenburg Wurth articulates a formulation diametrically opposed to Flaxton, when she writes, "The mediasphere of the present is too prolific and multidimensional for one medium to succeed or replace another (Duguid 1996, Hayles 2002, Striphas 2009). Seen in this light, reinventions of the analog cannot be put aside as anachronisms but may be an integral, evolving part of an ever more, and more complexly, mediated present."⁹

The second example of an expanded notion of Comparative Literature that I would like to present here is more daring. Sarah Gilligen examines the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise in her article "Heaving Cleavages and Fantastic Frock Coats: Gender Fluidity, Celebrity and Tactile Transmediality in Contemporary Costume Cinema," the title of which gestures towards its author's poetic mien. As is already evident from the abstract, Gilligen is especially interested in the costumes which surface outside the films: "Through moving my analysis beyond the film text to explore gaming, cosplay and fashion in relation to the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise (Verbinski, 2003; 2006; 2007; Marshall 2011), I will argue that clothing creates a tactile platform

8 I find it counterproductive to reproduce the methodological conclusions drawn from postmodern texts, as though the authors had simply written them down and not made the effort to counter such linear formulations. I also do not intend to be drawn into a discussion regarding whether these novels are better classified as multi- or transmedial, post- or post-postmodern. Important is that these texts are complex, fragmented, collage-like and not simply constructed out of words. *Raw Shark Texts* is a word play on "Rorschach Tests" and tries to connect memory and psychosis with the internet (the neologism "unspace" is introduced for this purpose), while *Woman's World* is comprised exclusively of clippings [Ausschnitten] from women's magazines from the 1960s. Readers interested in the graphic arts are encouraged to treat themselves to a preview online.

9 <http://kienebrillenburgwurth.wordpress.com/back-to-the-book/>, Accessed on 2 January 2012.

in which the spatial distance *between the text and the spectator* can be bridged via adornment and touch and thus the processes of identity transformation and performativity can be played out in our everyday lives” (8, italics in the original). My reason for claiming this article for Comparative Literature is its approach: namely, a reflexive, transmedial comparison that remains text-centered. As Gilligan emphasizes, she, “adopts both textually centred and interdisciplinary cross-media methodological approaches” (7).

Finally, it should again be underscored how this vision of Comparative Literature differs from the traditional hegemonic understanding of the discipline as one primarily concerned with literature, especially world literature. What I am lobbying for is a shift in the emphasis of the discipline from literature to comparison, that is, from Comparative *Literature* to *Comparative Literature*. A typical example of the former (with an emphasis on literature) is found in the question which functions as a leitmotif for a special edition of *ttr*, the journal of the Canadian Association of Translation Studies (CATS), on *Littérature comparée et traductologie/Comparative Literature and Translation*, that asks, “Should *literary* translation studies, become the heart of comparative literature?” (Merkle 9, italics in the original.) This question was originally posed by Lieven D’hulst as a reply to Emily Apter’s provocation in *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*. Yet Apter’s (and D’hulst’s) focus is not Comparative Literature, but rather Translation Studies, even though Apter represents concerns central to Comparative Literature in an exemplary manner: “the book aims to rethink translation studies... in a broad theoretical framework that emphasizes the role played by mistranslation in war, the influence of language and literature wars on canon formation and literary fields, the aesthetic significance of experiments with non-standard language, and the status of the humanistic tradition of *translatio studii* in an era of technological literacy” (3). The conclusions drawn by Canadian theorists of translation allow the presuppositions of their argument to come to light: “what distinguishes the two disciplines is their object of study (Comparative Literature concentrating on translated literature and Translation Studies on the translation process and its effects)” (Merkle 17). If this description of Comparative Literature actually has any purchase and the discipline only deals with world literature, then it will have little staying power, certainly less than translation studies, unless one were to have an expanded understanding of translation as well as of literature itself. In so far as transmediality provides the possibility of extending this understanding still further, it is unfortunate that so far the Anglophone comparatists have not shown a greater willingness to take it up.

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