

Foreword

Literature and the Arts: Comparative Circulation(s)

Amândio Reis

Universidade de Lisboa

amandio.reis@edu.ulisboa.pt

ORCID: 0000-0002-8285-6878

Stefano Evangelista

University of Oxford

stefano-maria.evangelista@trinity.ox.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0001-7967-0768

With the rise of interarts studies in the 1990s, not so much as a new discipline, but as “an interdisciplinary field that can only be properly established when many disciplines join forces within an institutional framework” (Fischer-Lichte, 2016: 25), Comparative Literature departments and courses of literary studies at universities around the world have paid increasing attention to the other arts and their diverse interactions with literature, challenging traditional boundaries as well as long-held hierarchic views in academic approaches to different typologies of “texts”. Notions of intertextuality have thus greatly expanded, inviting scholars, students, and the general public, to think less in terms of pure territories and dividing lines, and question instead the intervals and overlaps, and instances of friction, between different artistic practices, forms and media.

The inaugural issue of *Compendium* set out to combine this growing awareness of a transmedia environment in recent decades with the scales of comparison of world literature and their contribution to present developments in the study of production, circulation, and translation (in a broad sense). It also responds to the persistent hesitation of world literature — despite its intrinsically comparative methodology — to think of literature beyond its own confines. As Michael Wood and Delia Ungureanu have noted in their recent attempt to connect the adjacent fields of world literature and world cinema, “many world literature scholars are trained in comparative literature, but their comparisons are rarely made across media” (2021: 290). In promoting precisely such comparisons, this first issue of *Compendium* has brought together a selection of essays which propose to investigate artistic processes within world literature, connecting the literary with many other spheres of art and culture, as well as exploring the fluctuating limits of “text” and, consequently, the limits of reading and changing contexts of reception.

However, the main goal of this issue is more than simply to restate the 20th-century legacy and the contemporary expressions of a “high degree of interactivity among the arts” (Clüver, 2009: 524) which seems increasingly hard to overlook, yet not easy to discern and describe from within traditional disciplines. Rather, it is to understand literature itself as a virtual space for the international circulation of works of art.

The six articles in this issue disclose different possibilities of understanding literature, and therefore narrative, not only as a locus for the description and discussion of non-verbal art forms, but also for their dissemination, translation, transformation and even creation. They span three languages (English, French and Spanish) and several geographic and cultural contexts, from past and present transnational poetic renderings of an engraving by Albrecht Dürer’s from the 16th century to contemporary Anglo-American novels in the genre of art-fiction, dwelling on the art world and featuring painters, performance artists and writers as fictional or semifictional characters and protagonists. Read collectively, they argue for the advantages of exploring the comparative circulation(s) of art and literature today.

The following articles illuminate ways in which real, i.e., existing, works of art and images participate as powerful mediators in literary creation. By so doing, art works assert their presence as companion pieces to texts and books, in the form

of explicit references and illustrations, or as hidden influences and source texts in intermedial reworkings. The contributions of Aratrika Choudhury, Ana Fernandes, and Jorge García Fernández Arroita fall into this category. Choudhury examines the interconnected circulation of texts and images in illustrated collections of stories from the east, a book form especially crafted for the western market between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, in the context of the British Empire. By looking specifically into three story books illustrated by Warwick Goble — *Folk-Tales of Bengal* (1912), *Indian Myth and Legend* (1913), and *Indian Tales of the Great Ones Among Men, Women, and Bird-people* (1916) — Choudhury provides an eloquent example of “how illustration can and often does modify text” (see p.42). Comparing the collected stories with their accompanying images, Choudhury identifies the colonial prejudices imbued in the practice of “Asian” story book illustration, while analysing at the same time the specific features of the work of one illustrator (Goble). This work is then located at an interval between knowledge and misconception, reality, and imagination.

Turning to Balzac’s *Le Chef d’oeuvre inconnu* (1831), a fictional text which is also a reflection on art and creativity, Fernandes suggests that in fact Balzac employed “the style of Rembrandt” (see p.46) in his story, appropriating the pictorial techniques of a real artist by translating them into words. Comparative readings of passages from the text alongside Rembrandt’s oil paintings *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer* (1653) and *Philosopher in Meditation* (1632) seem to attest to Balzac’s pictorial style of writing, founded on sophisticated methods of description. While identifying a paradigm of the ekphrastic mode in *Le Chef d’oeuvre inconnu*, Fernandes also interrogates the limits of representation, be it through words or images, as well as the limits of translation *between* words and images, and the underlying tensions of mimesis and invention. She finally locates the object of her study, like Choudhury, in the hybrid space of an untranslatable palimpsest.

Ekphrasis — one of the most recurring conceptual tools in this Issue — emerges again as a creative force in García Fernández’s study of a cluster of literary works with a common pictorial antecedent: Dürer’s *Melancholia I*. García Fernández’s essay shifts the discussion from narrative to the lyric, encompassing the multiple literary afterlives of a single work of art in a plurality of languages and epochs, from Nerval to Eliot, to Gil de Biedma, Enrique Lihn, and Rafael Ávila Domínguez. By so doing, he invites us to conceive of ekphrasis not so much as a descriptive tool for replacing images with words, but more as a transformational and interpretive process affecting the ekphrastic text as much as its source work, of which the former is in fact a reading. As shown in this article, Dürer’s work has not only been transferred from images into language as a pictorial emblem, but it has also circulated within a literary continuum, melded into poetic “melancholia” as an intertextual motif.

The remaining articles focus on how the contemporary novel tackles the other arts and the art world in general as a theme and fictional construct. Julia Clayton’s and Kathrin Neis’s meditations on the genres of “art-fiction” and the “artist novel”, as well as Belén Quinteiro Pulleiro’s account of the “quality bestseller” in Spain in the 1980s, all examine the ways in which literature has located itself and circulated at different levels of high and popular art and culture. Clayton explores

the *topos* of “misattribution” in three works by contemporary women writers to analyse how these texts reflect, and reflect on, the interrelatedness of gender politics and the politics of reception, distribution, and commerce. She suggests that by responding creatively to the question of “Why there have been no great women artists?”, art-fiction and the misattribution novels studied here re-historicise, but also revitalise, traditional accounts of art history, inasmuch as “fictional art can also be a way of recovering the initial *frisson* of art movements that have become so familiar that we’ve forgotten how radical or shocking they once were” (see p.23).

By contrast, Quinteiro offers a distant look on the specific phenomenon in recent history of the “quality bestseller” in Spain, and the ways in which it altered the literary landscape of the 1980s with lasting consequences. Considering the role that publishing houses, literary awards, editorial collections, agents, copyright laws, and even film adaptations, have played in that phenomenon (along with five case studies associated with the Spanish publishers Tusquets, Anagrama, Lumen, Edhasa/Minotauro, and Alfaguara), Quinteiro reminds us that literary circulation is also subject to extra-literary material factors and incidents, perhaps even more so when it shifts from the “highbrow” and politically-driven into the more commercial end of the spectrum, based on sales numbers and tending to a model of “internationalisation”.

Closing the Articles section of this Issue, Neis returns to the concept of ekphrasis — which is also addressed by Clayton — in her analysis of Louise Erdrich’s artist novel *Shadow Tag* (2010), seen in the light of Laura Eidt’s 2008 book-long essay on how cinema and literature have approached and *depicted* painting. Erdrich’s novel not only combines real and fictional works of art but it also deploys the mechanism of ekphrasis as more than a decorative element, or an inspiration in the search for literary equivalents to vividness and visuality. Neis suggests that ekphrasis operates in fact within the text, at the level of characterisation, pointing to the characters’ personal history, their ethnic and cultural background, as much as, perhaps counterintuitively, invisible dimensions, such as character psychology and emotional life. Ultimately, Neis reframes ekphrasis as a narrative catalyst in *Shadow Tag*, and not necessarily as a descriptive tool, thus challenging one of the most enduring notions concerning the interactions between art and literature.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s meditation on “Flaubert’s Landscapes”, published in 2004 and included in the section From the Archive, contributes to historicise the discussion carried out in this Issue. Although not tackling any artist or non-literary work of art *per se*, Gumbrecht retrieves the pictorial notions of “landscape” and, on one occasion, of “portrait” (see p.113), in his reading of specific passages from Flaubert’s four novels, *Madame Bovary*, *Salammbô*, *L’Éducation sentimentale* and *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, as well as his *Tentation de Saint Antoine*. After a nuanced account of the nineteenth-century tension between Romantic vision and the precepts of Realism, Gumbrecht offers a thought-provoking “tentative thesis about how Flaubert’s ‘realistic’ views of landscape and of the human body can also be seen as a ‘romantic’ attitude” (see p.107). The article concludes with a stimulating hypothesis on the simultaneous irony and enthusiasm in Flaubert’s descriptions: regardless of whether we view them as romantic or non-romantic, such passages

help us better understand romantic landscape descriptions and the relationship between body and landscape. But apart and aside from that, Gumbrecht's reflection is itself a demonstration that other arts and fields of knowledge — such as romantic painting and its epistemological frame — can have a vital influence even on literature that is not openly “interartistic”, from character-making to narrative and focal innovation, and across genres of fiction and non-fiction.

The Reviews section of this Issue further testifies to the importance of including the circulation of art in current discussions of comparative and world literature, encompassing a field rich with areas of contact and crossover. Raquel Morais identifies the continuities and discontinuities — surprising in their relational nature, even if individually perhaps not new for the familiar viewer — between the works of three contemporary Portuguese artists in a collective exhibition commissioned this year in Paris by the Centre Georges Pompidou: the film-maker Pedro Costa, the sculptor Rui Chafes and the photographer Paulo Nozolino.

In his review of Satoshi Machiguchi's editorial project *Ango*, José Bértolo continues the discussion on the modes of coexistence between words and images. *Ango* not only brings Sakiko Nomura's photographs together with Ango Sakaguchi's literary text, but it also builds (in)visible historical bridges between Nomura's contemporary images and Sakaguchi's post-World War II short story, creating a hybrid object that we could perhaps call a photo-fiction-book.

It seems especially adequate to conclude this Issue with Hugo Pinto Santos's review of *Literatura-Mundo Comparada, Parte III: Perspectivas em Português* [Comparative World Literature, Part III: Perspectives in Portuguese], the third and final part of a ground-breaking six-tome anthology of world literature in Portuguese. After the two first volumes devoted to charting the literatures of the Portuguese-speaking world and of Europe, respectively, the final instalment of Helena Carvalhão Buescu's monumental endeavour looks further out into the wide world. Ancient and contemporary texts are brought together in dialogue, under thematic chapters which are in themselves an invitation to active and comparative modes of reading; authoritative, historical, and not rarely entirely new translations are provided by a large set of scholars, historians, professional and non-professional translators. *Literatura-Mundo Comparada* is evidence that comparative and world literature are by nature based on conversation and the making and remaking of communities — they teach us that literature is essentially about not being alone.

Works Cited

- CLÜVER, Claus (2009). “Interarts Studies: An Introduction”, *Media inter Media*. Edited by Stephanie A. Glaser. Rodopi, pp. 497-526.
- FISCHER-LICHTE, Erika (2016). “From Comparative Arts to Interart Studies”, *Panagrana*, vol. 25, n. 2. De Gruyter Verlag, pp. 12-26.

WOOD, Michael, and Delia UNGUREANU (2021). “The Artistic Object and Its Worlds: Literature and Cinema”, *Journal of World Literature*, n. 6, pp. 287-296.

© 2022 Amândio Reis and Stefano Evangelista

Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).