

Guest Editor's Interviews

A Pioneer on His Work: An Interview with Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht

⊙ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht

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Abstract: In this interview, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht visits some of his groundbreaking theoretical contributions, providing an ample archeological gaze towards the emergence of Digital Humanities. The key concepts proposed by Gumbrecht are discussed as well as the new theoretical framework he developed over the past two decades towards an understating of Humanities not primarily focused on the semantic attribution of meaning.

Keywords: Materialities of Communication, Production of Presence, Non-Hermeneutic Field, Stimmung

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Guest Editor's Remarks

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's career is in itself hyperbolic. His numbers are unparalleled and legendary: he has surpassed the unprecedented number of 3000 publications, including articles in academic journals, chapters in books, edited books, and translations into multiple languages. There is also an authentic legion of authored books under his name—and I am not even mentioning his constant and consistent contributions to newspapers and magazines, such as the prestigious journal *Merkur* or the world renewed newspapers *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, among many other venues all over the world.

Gumbrecht's areas of teaching and research are literally larger than what an academic life is supposed to embrace: he has written on the histories of French and Castilian, Italian and German literatures (with emphasis on the Middle Ages, the long 18th century, and the first half of the 20th century). His books also have performed keen analyses of early 21st-century culture, the history of Literary Criticism and of the Humanities, and the history of Western Philosophy since its classical origins. Occasionally, he has produced insightful readings of South American literary and cultural histories. In one sentence, Gumbrecht's analytical scope and theoretical horizons make him akin to Terence, the Roman African playwright who famously said, "Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto" ("I am a man, I consider nothing that is human alien to me").

From 1989 until his retirement in 2018, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has held the Albert Guérard

Chair in Literature at Stanford University, in the Division of Literatures, Cultures, and Languages (Departments of Comparative Literature, French & Italian; and, by courtesy, in German Studies, Iberian and Latin American Cultures, and Modern Thought & Literature). Since June 2018, Gumbrecht has become Professor Emeritus at Stanford University. He continues to teach compact seminars as a Distinguished Professor of Romance Languages at the Hebrew University (Jerusalem), and as Chair at the University of Lisbon.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has been for decades a leading and innovative scholar, whose work has enjoyed worldwide reception and increasing accolades. In this interview, he visits some of his groundbreaking theoretical contributions, providing an ample archeological gaze towards the emergence of Digital Humanities.

JFLC: Your work was pioneer in the creation of a new approach initially to Literary Studies and then to the so-called Human Sciences, in general, the Materialities of Communication. It was the outcome of a truly transnational interdisciplinary effort developed mainly through a series of legendary colloquia held at Dubrovnik. Could you summarize this historical moment?

Gumbrecht: Thank you for the compliment. To be called a “pioneer” of an academic—and intellectual—field by a younger colleague of your caliber feels good, regardless of whether you are right or wrong. Now let me begin my answer to your first question in a very personal way. This may help us to get closer to a “summary of historical moment,” as you call it, to the historical moment that was the context of our meetings in the decade of the 1980s in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, a no longer existing country and nation. I once described my initial motivation as “oedipal” in the Freudian—and today current—sense of the word. My doctoral adviser (“Doktor-Vater,” as the German language says) had initiated a very prestigious series of programmatically “interdisciplinary” colloquia under the name of “Poetik und Hermeneutik,” an institution that soon became the highest achievement of the German World War II-Generation in the Humanities. Younger scholars were only occasionally invited but hardly ever became part of the intellectual core group. At some point, I arrogantly (and “oedipally”) claimed to be considered a permanent participant, under the condition that I would only return if my proposal was accepted. The answer obviously was a —punishing—no. As a reaction I came up with the idea of creating a competing sequence of colloquia, mainly carried by colleagues of my own generation—and without a well circumscribed intellectual focus at the beginning. The only goal was frankly to produce and provoke more national and international resonance than “Poetik und Hermeneutik.” Instead of a German location, we chose the so called “Center of Interdisciplinary Studies” at Dubrovnik as the site for our project, not only due to the natural beauty of that historical town on the Mediterranean but also because Yugoslavia, as a socialist country independent of the Soviet Union, had a connotation of “progressive leftist thinking,” then dear to intellectuals of my age. Our first two-week seminars (beginning in 1979) had quite conventional topics: a revision of the history of Literary and Linguistic Studies within the Humanities; the totalizing concept of historical “periods” (“Epochen”), the notion of “style,” as a quite different approach of leading to higher “theoretical” degrees of abstraction in our observations (those were the explosive years in the history of “Literary

Theory”). But while we were successful in receiving academic resonance and reputation, the truly productive moment of intellectual and even epistemological discontinuity came when we invented the concept of “Materialities of Communication” as a title for our fourth meeting (taking place in 1987).¹ It was originally meant to serve as a strategy to attract participants from the then officially “Communist” eastern European nations who were allowed to travel to Yugoslavia (but not to the “western” countries) —for we thought that the intersection between their “materialistic” legacy (in the Marxist sense of the word) and the then emerging “Media Studies” might particularly fascinate them. What however happened at the fourth colloquium was very different from our plans—and both philosophically and epistemologically much more innovative than our mildly Marxist expectations and imaginations. Thanks to the impact of powerful thinkers of different generations—among them the sociologist Niklas Luhmann and Friedrich Kittler whom I remember as the founding figure of Media Studies—the vanishing point of the debates was a new style of dealing with cultural phenomena that no longer tried to be “interpretative.”² It took my friend and co-organizer Karl Ludwig Pfeiffer and me quite some retrospective time to realize that, almost inadvertently, our debates had projected us way beyond the original “oedipal” and still traditionally “hermeneutic” project. Both intellectually and privately—I fell in love with my marvelous wife during those two seminar weeks—April 1987 in Dubrovnik turned out to be a decisive, probably indeed the ONE decisive moment of my life.

JFLC: How do you conceptualize Materialities of Communication?

Gumbrecht: If I remember correctly, the programmatic (but quite philosophically incoherent) definition of “Materialities of Communication” on the book cover of the colloquium proceedings (published 1988 in the German original) was “any conditions that contribute to processes of meaning constitution, without being themselves meaning-constituted.”³ Now this concept was not only incoherent because it assembled a collection of ontologically different phenomena, ranging from the fonts used in the printing of books to pre-conscious impulses in the psyche of authors and readers; it also preserved a (then no longer personal) oedipal energy as it tried to become an alternative to “understanding,” “meaning attribution,” and “interpretation,” practices that the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey had identified around 1900 as the common denominator for all academic disciplines united under the roof of the “Humanities” (“Geisteswissenschaften,” i.e. “sciences of the spirit,” in Dilthey’s language). Our emerging notion of “Materialities” was certainly no longer Marxist but, on the other hand, we did not see yet what new forms of intellectual practice it could inaugurate and enhance. Early on, an association between “Materialities of Communication” and “Media studies” looked plausible—but I hope we have meanwhile overcome this idea of a convergence which was all too specific of the intellectual and academic moment of the late 1980s.

JFLC: In your work you have developed a new paradigm, the Non-Hermeneutic Field. What are the main assumptions of your theoretical framework?

Gumbrecht: The “Non-Hermeneutic Field” was my most frequently used name for a dimension of conceptual work as it began to develop, during the 1990s, from the Dubrovnik impulse. While this name toned down some of the originally oedipal energy (that readers and students of your generation could not be interested in) it preserved the conceptual heterogeneity of the notion “Materialities of Communication” and its dependence on the hitherto dominant and even exclusive practice of “interpretation” within the Humanities. After all, I am quite sure that it was you, the young João Cezar de Castro Rocha who, during a seminar taught at the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) around 2000, asked me, almost dismissively, why I did not use a concept like “production of presence” instead. Now this, i.e. “production of presence,” sounded much better from the first moment on, not only because of the poetic moment of its alliteration, but above all because it was a concept not based on the absence or on the bracketing of the dimension of meaning. Thanks to this proposal I went back to Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology and to the insight that each “intentional object,” that is each physical perception that becomes an object in our mind, inevitably triggers two different reactions: the reaction of meaning attribution (“interpretation,” “comprehension”) which had become the matrix of Hermeneutics—but also the impulse of establishing a both spatial and corporeal relation to the intentional object. Listening to your voice, I cannot help trying to attribute meanings to its sound waves—but I also cannot help noticing that it comes from the left or from the right, is loud or not loud enough, irritating or appealing. For this second reaction, which of course occurs simultaneously with “meaning attribution” and which, to my knowledge the Humanities had never dealt with, I proposed the word—your word! —of “presence,” in the etymological sense of its meaning, that is in the sense of the Latin verb “prae-esse,” i.e. “being spatially in front of something or OF somebody.” Ever since, my proposal for the Humanities has been to dedicate new attention—and to develop new concepts—for this dimension of “presence.” The book which marks that very state in my own thinking is *Production of Presence* whose English original version appeared in 2003.⁴

JFLC: The traditional notion of THE Humanities, understood as *Geisteswissenschaften*, has been under attack over the past decades. Would the Non-Hermeneutic Field offer an alternative to the declining presence of Humanities in the contemporary university?

Gumbrecht: Perhaps the Humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*) have not been all that much “under attack” during the more recent decades, at least not “under attack” from outside academia (“Future” web). Compared to the time of intensity and intellectual explosiveness during the 1970s and 1980s that I have already mentioned and that energized our Dubrovnik colloquia, I see a mood of internal boredom and tediousness spreading within the Humanities today—and it may well have to do with the climate and the norms of “political correctness” that many colleagues of your (and even my) generation have embraced. Instead of encouraging new questions and a desire for intellectual complexity, their attitude has imposed a certainty of “ethically” grounded answers upon our thinking. In this situation, “the Non- Hermeneutic Field” —or “presence studies” —may become (and I believe have indeed become in some places) a source of fresh intellectual endeavors. This said, I no longer see “presence studies” as an alternative [let alone a counter-movement] to

the traditional, interpretation-centered work. After all, it would be counter-intuitive—and even absurd—to bracket “meaning attribution” within our academic disciplines. The next internal philosophical challenge, I feel, is rather to try and describe how meaning-effects and presence-effects are intertwined within acts of cultural production and cultural reception. To give you an elementary example: we do not have a convincing theory yet that explains the relationship between the content (“meaning”-effect) and the prosody (“presence”-effects) of poems. Traditionally, literary critics would subsume the functions of prosody under the production of meaning—which premise looks less convincing than ever before today.⁵ But we need patience and philosophical competence to analyze and describe their complex relationship. Whether the pursuit of similar problems will earn us Humanists more resonance (and even influence) outside the universities, I do not know—and I really do not know, in the sense that I am neither terribly pessimistic nor very optimistic. Sometimes I do have the impression that people from outside the academic world have new, rather optimistic expectations towards the Humanities, I even sense that they believe we might have answers or orientations for some among the urgent problems of our present, like for the long-term ecological development or, more recently and more specifically, for the political and military tensions in eastern Europe. My fear is, however, that these expectations have only little to do with the actual intellectual pursuits and movements that we are really interested in (and capable of coping with successfully). Perhaps we should admit that the academic Humanities today, after that moment of increased visibility in the late 20th century, have returned to a position of half-distance vis-a-vis what some of my more politically inclined colleagues call “the real world.”

JFLC: How would Digital Humanities potentially impact the curriculum in the so-called Human Sciences, including Literary Studies?

Gumbrecht: What we call “the Digital Humanities,” at least in the daily work and in the curricula of the Academic Humanities of Stanford (in the heart of Silicon Valley) —is the practical use of digital tools within the—institutionally established—research tasks that the Humanities are undertaking. These tools can indeed be very powerful and efficient for our time budgets. When you were writing the “history of a concept” in the Humanities during pre-electronic times, it would take you years, quite literally, to put together a sufficient archive of relevant quotes (I do know what I am talking about from writing detailed histories of concepts like “modernity,” “style,” or “measure”). Today, I hear, such an archive can be generated during one afternoon in conversation and with the help of a specialist in the practical use of digital instruments. However efficient such an instrumental use of computing power within the Humanities may be (and certainly is), I do not believe that it transforms the intellectual landscape we are operating in—nor do I think we should consider what colleagues call the “Digital Humanities” a specific competence belonging to the Humanities as an intellectual enterprise and an academic institution. While I am not in position to make a competent personal judgment, friends from “Computer Science” or “Electrical Engineering” are telling me that the technical and instrumental know-how required is quite basic in their view. Now I could imagine that, in a near future, the name of “Digital Humanities” might become associated with a completely different and indeed important intellectual task.

For it is my impression that the Humanities have not even begun to describe and to analyze, on a philosophically and historically serious level, the consequences of electronic technology for the everyday existence of what is probably a majority of humans living today. We are still in a state of first—and often fascinating—observations and hypotheses. But even this new task would not necessarily change the intellectual style and the epistemological basis of our academic profession. On the contrary, a new—and probably partial—concentration of the Humanities on the consequences of electronic technology for human everyday existence would mean that we adapt our work to what according to Hegel has to be the ultimate goal and vanishing point of all serious thinking, that is to the description and understanding of our own present—including what I like to call its dimensions of “presence.”

Interviewed by João Cezar de Castro Rocha

Notes

1. A selection of papers presented at the colloquia was later published in English: Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Karl Ludwig Pfeiffer, *Materialities of Communication*, Stanford UP, 1994.
2. “I therefore want to emphasize that the intellectual program circumscribed in the title of this volume as ‘Materialities of Communication’ *intends to be theoretical and, nevertheless, to focus on concrete and not always ‘spiritual’ phenomena*” (Gumbrecht, “A Farewell to Interpretation” 389; author’s italics)
3. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Karl Ludwig Pfeiffer, editors. *Materialität der Kommunikation*. Suhrkamp, 1988.
4. See Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford UP, 2004.
5. For an overview on this issue, see Gumbrecht’s “Hermeneutic Complexity and Philological Powers,” lecture presented in 2021 at The New York School for Social Research, www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRD2dNo7B_U.

Works Cited

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