

Interview with Claus Clüver



by Márcia Arbex and Miriam Vieira¹

Claus Clüver, Professor Emeritus of Comparative Literature from Indiana University, USA, has been interviewed for this issue of *Revista Vis* dedicated to the dossier “Legible Images, Visible Texts”. A renowned pioneer researcher in the fields of Interarts and Intermedial studies, Clüver has served as visiting professor at the University of São Paulo (USP) and The Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP) and was one of the first guest scholars who, besides giving lectures, taught courses in both Literary Studies (Poslit) and Art (PPG Artes) graduate programs of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG). He has also served in such fellowship programs in Brazil as the IEAT/UFMG.

In several seminars and conferences organized by the research group *Intermídia* (CNPq/UFMG), which he coordinates along with professor Thaís F. N. Diniz, he has generously shared his knowledge and enhanced the training of professors and countless pupils. His essays have also contributed to the propagation of theories and methods investigating the relations between the various arts and media. His main publications regarding the areas under discussion were listed by him, please find them at the end of the interview.

¹ Entrevista concedida a Márcia Arbex e Miriam Vieira em julho de 2020.

In your career as a professor and researcher, what led your interests to delve into the word and image relations?

My career has been the result of inclination, choice, and accident. I was born and educated in Germany. The Gymnasium (high school) was highly elitist. My school emphasized the word: I studied English, Latin, French, and Greek, and I knew early that I would be a teacher of literature. I also had artistic talent and a very good art teacher. But at school there was no connection drawn between word and image. At university, I majored in English-language and Latin literatures. I also took a few seminars in art history, but they would not count toward my career. At that time, there was no academic institution in Germany offering courses connecting word and image. There also did not exist a course in Comparative Literature. But at Hamburg University I was assigned to be the graduate assistant of a visiting Fulbright professor from Indiana University, Horst Frenz, with whom I collaborated intensely for a year. He was the co-founder of a new Comparative Literature Program at Indiana and was also just co-creating, with Ulrich Weisstein, a new course there called “Modern Literature and the Arts.” Comparative Literature was new, and so was the understanding that the relation of literature to the other arts was one of its areas of investigation (although there were a few other programs in the US developing similar interests). In 1957, when Weisstein went to teach elsewhere for two years, Frenz, who happened to know of my interest in visual art, invited me to come to Bloomington to teach the new course. It was a huge challenge, but I was able to follow the course plan I inherited, which focused on poetry and some narrative, painting, and instrumental music as developing in somewhat parallel fashion from (Neo-)Classicism to the present. I was invited to return to Indiana in 1964, primarily to take over this popular course, and this line of teaching, which was not yet guided by any solid theoretical or methodological orientation, became the major area of my activities, also as a researcher and theorist. I taught my last course on “adaptation,” a key concept, in 2017.

In the article “Inter textus / inter artes / inter media” (2001/2006), there is a mention of your early involvement with the research area known in the USA for a while as Interarts

Studies, followed by a diachronic panoramic view of the development of new theories that redefined the areas of knowledge in academia and also introduced new terminologies and concepts. In your academic trajectory, which were the main impasses involving the development of these new theoretical branches of comparative literature, such as intermediality?

That article was written in German and published in 2001 in *Komparatistik* – my only attempt to address that audience in such general terms. I had previously been invited to write a programmatic introduction to the field for a new Swedish collection of essays on “Interartiella Studier” (1992), which was subsequently revised, translated into Portuguese, and published in Lisbon in 2001 as “Estudos Interartes: Orientação Crítica” in a new Comparative Literature handbook. By that time, the field had begun to be reconceived as “Intermedial Studies,” and in 2008 I examined that change in an essay that appeared, in my own translation, as “Intermedialidade e Estudos Interartes.” My latest overview of that trajectory appeared in 2019 as “From the ‘Mutual Illumination of the Arts’ to ‘Studies of Intermediality’.” My most accessible introduction in Portuguese is probably my 2008 essay “Intermedialidade.” See the list of my relevant essays at the end of this interview.

Historically, the interest in word-and-image studies and in all of interarts studies originated with literary scholars, and the new (or revitalized) field of Comparative Literature appeared to be a logical home, although its international organization did not recognize it until the 1970s. Art historians helped create the International Association of Word and Image Studies in the 1990s, which organizes regular week-long conferences and publishes selections of the proceedings. The field of Intermedial Studies has since established itself independently in such places as Växjö, Sweden, and Graz, Austria, and in such interdisciplinary research groups as the one at UFMG. But even there, scholars and students will bring along the baggage of their original discipline with its own interpretive community, which will inevitably orient their approach and the questions they will ask.

All these disciplines felt sooner or later the impact of the overall turn toward critical theory that occurred in the late 1960s. It gave us the concept of paradigm and

paradigm shift and made us see all our cherished concepts such as “art” and “literature” as cultural constructs. This turn also profoundly affected interarts studies and ultimately favored the substitution of “media” for “arts.”

Regarding the investigation of hybrid media configurations, there are several references to Brazilian Concrete Poetry in your oeuvre. What is the significance of this kind of poetry to your research?

I have published over twenty essays on topics of Concrete Poetry and closely related intermedia creations, and most of them are at least partly if not entirely concerned with the work of the Noigandres poets, all of whom I knew personally (as I knew several of the visual artists and composers connected with their work). It all started with the double accident of attending, with my Brazilian wife, a lecture by the Campos brothers at Indiana University in 1968, and the fact that their host, Mary Ellen Solt, at that time became my colleague in Comparative Literature and shared teaching the interarts studies course with me. Mary Ellen had just published the most impressive of all international Concrete Poetry anthologies. We immediately introduced such poems into our course as the most suitable and accessible material for teaching the interconnection of the visual, aural, and verbal aspects of highly condensed intermedia texts built according to a non-traditional spatial syntax, which are in their finest achievements embodiments of the most concentrated forms of text-oriented poetry (before we introduced the students to poems carrying their author’s voice). Our students reacted very positively and in 1970 mounted a large Concrete Poetry exhibition that featured as its logo a four-legged **m**. I subsequently had research grants to study Concrete Poetry in Brazil and in German-speaking countries, which I later followed up in Portugal and elsewhere. I always looked at Concrete Poetry in connection with Concrete painting and sculpture (Max Bill, Albers, and the Brazilians) and also in connection with the music of a Webern (as well as with the centuries of earlier forms of pattern poetry). My latest publication deals with the transcreation of Noigandres *ideogramas* into English (2020).

Your latest article « On Gazer's Encounters with Visual Art: Ekphrasis, Readers, 'Iconotexts' » (2019) ends with the acknowledgment of your need to update the definition of ekphrasis you had previously proposed since, as a cultural construct, this notion is susceptible to change (p.253). Besides constant self(re)evaluation, what are the inevitable methodological and theoretical issues in the formation of a new field of research, in this case, Intermedial Studies?

In teaching courses in this area, the most fundamental task was to create competent readers. Before analyzing how a musical setting relates to its lyrics or Haroldo de Campos's concrete poem "branco" might be read as a transcreation of a painting by Malevich, a student has to know how to read the lyrics or a concrete poem and what to listen for in music or how to deal with a Suprematist painting. The same goes for any scholar who ventures beyond his own field into a new "art" or medium. To create this competence and at the same time lay the foundation for analyzing the combination of media in a song or the intermedial transposition of a painting into a poem it was necessary to agree on the concept of "medium" and on the processing of verbal, visual, or aural signs and the conventions of representation and formal organization. We had to learn how to approach these signs in their cultural contexts and functions. We had to examine the ways in which readers'/ viewers'/listeners' responses were determined by the respective interpretive communities. And then we had to determine in what ways actual "works" (I generally prefer to speak of "texts" as complex signs) in different "arts" or "media" are related or can be seen as interconnected in some form.

For that we needed a terminology. Ours developed within the then dominant "arts" discourse, where we used the term "medium" rather ubiquitously and ambiguously. For us, the "media" employed by the visual art of painting were shapes, colors, lines, and textures, which were produced and supported by the "physical media" consisting of a suitable surface to which pigments held together by some liquid can be applied by a variety of tools, including the hand. Verbal art employed words as its medium, communicated either by the human voice or by some form of writing, its physical media, which are in turn produced, supported, or propagated by other physical

media; these have been expanded immensely by modern technology. Writing systems are in fact to be seen as specific types of visual “art” that have their own expressiveness, which can be independent of the language represented.

The latter statement should make it clear that the term “art,” which became increasingly questionable as a meaningful cultural construct, no longer covered the objects covered by our studies. But its substitution by “medium” brought about its own problems for the established terminology. It appears that there has not been an internationally fully established set of terms until this day; the Växjö program under Lars Elleström appears to be most influential right now. To my knowledge, “intermediality” has not been questioned as the label for the object of our field. I should add that there are quite a few terms in media discourse dealing with formal or communicative aspects in the production, distribution, and reception of media products that can be used transmedially, although that can also be deceptive (e.g., the terms “color” or “rhythm”).

Both on theoretical grounds and in view of actual scholarly practice we determined that the most common forms of intermedial relations were combination, transposition, and adaptation, with the latter having become the most elastic term. I suggested that we should distinguish between multi-media, mixed-media, and intermedia combinations. One of the realizations of our discourse was that in the final analysis there does not exist a “pure” medium; another, that the last century created a number of new media that are mixed and fused by their very nature (e.g., installations and environments); most prominent among these are the digital media.

Among the most fascinating word-and-image combinations are undoubtedly those of title and image and, very different, writings within the image. The former became most interesting with Dada and Surrealism (Schwitters, Max Ernst, Magritte), but also with regard to the non-titles of a Pollock or Sacilotto; the latter goes back to medieval art but in the last century created almost its own genre.

Intermedial transpositions are found in all visual representations of biblical narratives and in many book illustrations. Many children’s books, on the other hand, have mixed-media formats. In literature, we have many allusions and references to the visual arts (as well as to music and musical performance), which can result in direct

representation, i.e., intermedial transposition. For centuries, there has been a poetic genre called in German “Bildgedicht” (just as there are also “Architekturgedichte,” “Musikgedichte,” and “Tanzgedichte”). All these transpositions in poems or narrative prose have been known by the Greek term “ekphrasis”; I have spent much effort over the years in attempts at defining ekphrasis in such a way that the definition also covers non-representational art. As the title cited above indicates, I have now come to insist on understanding, and interpreting, ekphrastic poems as records of an encounter with a visual work. This view needs to be expanded: reader-reception theories of the past have dealt with actual and ideal and implied readers but not with such poems as records of an encounter. In literary narratives ekphrastic descriptions are often related to an actual encounter of an intradiegetic character with a painting or a sculpture.

“Adaptation” has become a very elastic term and covers many forms of “rewriting.” Its current range is best illustrated by the *Handbook of Adaptation Studies* edited by Thomas Leitch (2017), to which I have contributed an essay on “Adaptation and Ekphrasis.” Nelson Pereira dos Santos’s film *Como era gostoso o meu francês*, which I have analyzed for a volume on *Tradução Intersemiótica* (2001), has used both Hans Staden’s original narrative in an interesting transformation and also its visual illustrations while undercutting the contemporary French accounts both by what is shown and by their stylization as 20th-century newscasts. Its many forms of rewriting and re-mediating easily escape a conventional sense of adaptation, although the modern elastic version will apply.

In times of a pandemic, as we have been facing it worldwide, when social isolation and remote work became the rule, artists have been confronted with the need to use tools offered by digital media. How do you see the implications of such change for the reception of art and for the interaction with spectators of exhibition spaces?

I assume that art museums and perhaps also art galleries have found ways to create virtual visits of new exhibitions and of their regular holdings in these times when they are obliged to remain closed, provided they have means to advertise. I do not know if artists who do not ordinarily offer internet access to their work have come up

with possibilities to make it accessible. I can only state that work that was designed to be distributed by the internet now has a better chance than ever to cultivate an audience, as long as these possibilities are appropriately advertised.

This is most likely to involve digital art forms, which have been with us for a long time now and have taken on all forms of production, distribution, and reception. Personally, I have had very little contact with these forms, but I know, of course, that Augusto de Campos has had a tendency to experiment with whatever technologies have become available; this is also true of much of the work of a younger friend of mine, Eduardo Kac, about whose work I have written occasionally (but not specifically about his employment of digital technologies). My limited acquaintance permits me only a few observations. One concerns the general tendency to make these works interactive, already a significant feature of early computer literature: a fulfillment of the dreams of the producers of happenings decades ago. Digital technology has also had a strong impact on forms of performance and even the production of plays for computer audiences. And, quite fundamentally: I remember when some twenty-five years ago a Brazilian graduate student of mine whom I knew as a composer of music asked me, as he was ready to turn in an assignment, whether I would want to see it or hear it. The fact that many programs permit this alternative or are even designed to exploit it seems to be a basic feature of much digital work. Clearly, much creative digital activity offers interesting research possibilities for a competent intermedialist.

What advice would you give to aspiring Comparative Literature researchers keen on the investigation in the fields of Interarts and Intermedial studies, particularly aiming to work with new digital technologies?

As I indicated above, studies of intermediality should no longer be considered part of the domain of Comparative Literature – at least not as it operates in most countries. That the annual multi- and interdisciplinary national conferences in Brazil are featured under that label is an exception – in the US they have their equivalent in the annual national conferences of the Modern Language Association (MLA). Research in any area of Intermedial Studies can be undertaken by any scholar who is

competent in dealing with the media involved. As in any similar enterprise, it requires familiarity with the relevant research. It will certainly be to these scholars' advantage to have been associated with institutions or groups dedicated to these studies. There also exist relevant bibliographies.

It is a different matter when it comes to teaching a course (disciplina) dedicated to the field or any of its areas. Again, prerequisite is the appropriate competence. Familiarity with the research is another. Ideally, there should already exist a textbook, or several, that can be used. (Preparation of such textbooks, or digital equivalents, is a desirable task; at Indiana University we created and used our own for years but unfortunately never published it; in 2020 it would have to be entirely reconceived.) It may be desirable to team-teach such a course, especially if it is to introduce the entire field; at UFMG, several professors representing different media gave individual presentations, but with a coordinator present for all and providing the necessary coherence.

Intermedial Studies, where available in any format, have proven to be extremely attractive to the new generation of students. I know that in Brazil there are a number of universities offering some aspect of the field and organizing conferences also directed at their students. There are many contacts among interested parties. Besides sharing the results of their research, it appears desirable to direct attention toward teaching the field and developing the necessary support, which may no longer be literally in the form of printed textbooks but be based on the possibilities of the new technologies. In fact, since most presentations on relevant topics require somewhat complex technologies, relevant conferences should offer sessions at about sharing these. This is another aspect of importance for future researchers and teachers.

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