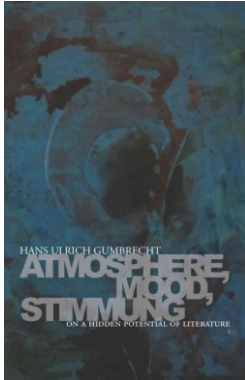


# Stimmungen or “In the Mood for Differentiality”

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Hans Ulrich GUMBRECHT, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*. Trans. Erik Butler, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012, 148 pp. [1st ed. Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2011] ISBN 978-0-8047-8121-0.

“It is right for the essayist to seek the truth,” Lukács wrote, “but he should do so in the manner of Saul. Saul set out to find his father’s donkeys and discovered a kingdom; thus will the essayist — one who is truly capable of seeking the truth — find, at the end of his way, what he has not sought: life itself.” (17) In this manner Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht discusses the right methodological approach to literature: like a distant echo, such a quotation sounds both as a reflection on his own work and as a withdrawal from previous conundrums. What is hidden in *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature* can be glimpsed, in a way, as a new light cast upon Gumbrecht’s effort to redeem some features of his literary experience, especially those that were excluded throughout his aseptic days at Konstanz School in the 1970s and, to a certain extent, during the development of *Materialities of Communication*, as the 1980 were turning into the 1990s, the aim of which was to make literary studies a “harder” science.

*Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature* was edited by Stanford Press, which has published Gumbrecht previously. The book, translated from German — *Stimmunglesen*, viz. “reading for Stimmung” — not by Gumbrecht himself but by Eric Butler (Emory University), is comprised mostly of short essays written for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Frankfurt General Newspaper). There is not a proper “Introduction”, though the first chapter — the minimalistic theoretical core of the book —

almost works as one, and there are no footnotes whatsoever, which in truth provides a smooth linear reading. In the final sections, we find some utterly personal acknowledgments, and some bibliographical references allow us to assume that the author has accurately quoted a few books. However, if the lack of academic references, which goes against Gumbrecht's scholarly style, causes surprise at first, it would be of no surprise if he had done so to mess up prescriptive rules. Be that as it may, this book is not strictly academic, or it was not supposed to be taken so: as a point of departure, the avoidance of flat "academese" would do justice to the author's critical intention: he aims towards freeing literary studies and humanities in general from any conceptual straightjackets.

Whether Gumbrecht himself might afford disposing of biographical outlines of some kind — such as we could hope for in an introduction, which was not the case — or take for granted his renown in the Republic of Letters, a good assessment of *Stimmung* requires a short recollection if its "powers" and possibilities for literary studies are to be fully grasped. The young Sepp Gumbrecht was a pioneering student of the Rezeptionsästhetik (an analogue to the American reader-response criticism) who, for good reasons, grew apart from H. R. Jauss, directing his concerns (and a highly complex intellectual enterprise) towards what can be understood as the "exteriority" of literature. This theoretical centrifugal drive led him to fully dissent from the *Literaturwissenschaft* (viz. "science of literature", "literary studies") and from the dead letter of the traditional *Geisteswissenschaften* (German "Humanities"), proposing instead what he would label "Non-Hermeneutic field". At the end of the 1980s, he left Universität Siegen for Stanford and his intellectual influence increased along with his polemicist drive.

In contrast to the dreary "principle of immanence", how could Sepp Gumbrecht seek and grasp that lively "exteriority" he glimpsed through the bars of the prison-house of knowledge? It is possible to say, in a sense, that Gumbrecht has set forth to seek out life but, until now, he has found only the so-called truths — propositions that, however accurate concerning literary theory, just won't enrich personal experience. There is an absent center in his scholarly carousel of dismays and dismissals: Aesthetics of Reception was a sort of heuristics of reading rules, Deconstruction was nostalgically misguided by false quarrels, New Historicism was never reliable, and Cultural Studies, from its very inception, was to turn into a cheap format of prose writing due to its epistemological hustle. Even the hiatus between Gumbrecht's excitement with *materialität* (*Materialities of Communication*, 1994 [1989]) and aesthetics (*Production of Presence*, 2004) seems to mean some disenchantment with the former. However, certainly there is more than a bad mood in this disillusionment — anxiety for an emphatic difference about to occur in literary studies, perhaps? A heed, it may be said, for something that wouldn't fall prey to old-school aesthetics of meaning and representation.

Gumbrecht was said to be a tenacious man by the time he published *Production of Presence*, someone who, in the wilderness of our contemporary culture, has been refusing to abide by the ventriloquism of "doing-theory", a general pretention of criticism that most times is prone to become blunt. Thus, while Gumbrecht promptly and programmatically rejected both the empty signs of "Theory" and "Criticism", words that started to mean either deconstruction or cultural studies, he set out on the quest that culminates in *Stimmung*.

He defended the end of Theory and, still, here he is, doing theory. That is the reason why Gumbrecht started his book by addressing some older quarrels. In "Reading for Stimmung: How to Think About the Reality of Literature Today" he claims that there is a complicity between Deconstruction and Cultural Studies (whose critique is as urgent as their inertia), which consists of their shared atavistic assumption of the constructed/representative character as an ontological condition of the literary work. They just differ in their leaning towards metaphysical or socio-political profits. Since they partake in the more fundamental gesture of "reading for (if any) sense," Gumbrecht discards the reconciliation of those false opposites: to solve the "extrinsic *versus* intrinsic" dilemma by exploiting their inner tensions is but a stalemate — what would literature be rather than raw material for the production and exchange of meaning inside the academic industry/market? What if, instead, following Gumbrecht through materialities and aesthetics, literature is irreducible to its "constructed" features, hence immune to deconstruction, and as such, it involves a different engagement with its experience?

As Walter Benjamin pointed out long ago, the key point of "Reading for Stimmung" is that, prior to any propositional expectancy or content-oriented framework to grasp it, the literary work has a *dingcharakter*, it is a thing. This "hidden potential", also recalled as "Presence" — either a concept or a metaphor for the intransitive/intrusive perception of a thing through the loss of its self-evidence (meaning-fulness) —, becomes a link to history through the essays in *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*. Because the literary work of art is a thing in the world and not a dumb object before a subjective chatterbox, its exteriority, the whole social, cultural, and historical *milieu* of its conception blends into its substance especially (but not necessarily) through aesthetical mediation: prosody, word choices, tone, technical *faux pas*, and minute inflections of any sort. Such an approach would cause no surprise if considered through a typical marxist prism, being a kind of historicism, but the chasm broadens amazingly when put into terms of "reading for differentiability" — assuming, along with Gumbrecht, that *Stimmung* is a sort of mediation of unrelated phenomena, a reading through its cracks.

Apropos its "thingness", if the *milieu* inscribes itself *not only in representational terms*, it means that the experience of something beyond-semantics *emerges* only as something non-propositional. Thus as some sort of

“atmosphere” or “mood” that cannot be grasped by just solving its structural coherence, nor denied as illusion, for its appearance as such is the very condition of thingness. Aesthetics and history collapse into one immediate *experience* (the German *Erfahrung* being a concept that includes a dimension of temporality), in short “what affects us in the act of reading involves the present of the past in substance — not a sign of the past or its representation” (14). So we see where we are led by *Stimmung*: literary experience is not a process of decoding a truth through scrambled textual surfaces, but moving within stillness, through which the reader, “affectively and bodily” (18), takes part in a different life-world, its moods and atmospheres. The backing down from Representation, and its logic altogether, does not mean a return to “authorial intention” or “universal historicism”. Because the idea behind it is not simply to abolish concepts, but to make them confess their fragility for the sake of what they first failed to reach, the concept of *Stimmung* stands up to the possibility of thematizing this sort engagement through which we are touched, “as if from inside”, by the alterity of these bygone presents. (It’s hard not to think about it as some sort of reception-in-a-new-key.)

The first part of the book, “Moments”, addresses literature and provides its readers with a specific type, for good and for bad, of scholarly *exempla*. Instead of usual *interpretive practice*, they are fashioned as short essays or, as the author proposes, *commentaries*: their proliferation does not imply, as the interpretative text, the obliteration of the object they seize; on the contrary, commentary (quite literally) means an augmentation of “the intensive concreteness of the experience that the work makes possible” (75). Nevertheless, for just as there are different styles of interpretation, there are also various forms of commentary. If, on the one hand, Gumbrecht intends to offer examples on how to read for “atmospheres”, paying attention to some aesthetic triggers instead of semantic continuities, on the other hand, such intents usually resort to a traditional discursive structure whose function is to produce (supposedly) authorized coherence, thus bypassing the fragility of what it presupposes. This discrepancy — between the experience he presents and the one he intended to *re-present* — derives from his pedagogical objectives and his refusal to reduce the possibility of critical discourse to a cheap play with words or, even worse, old days impressionistic criticism.

However, the imperative to “communicate” and the rules to achieve a clear and distinct understanding impoverish what has otherwise been seen as “a hidden potential”, while the resulting “coherence” hides some conceptual or rhetorical gap. This is one antinomy of literary criticism, or rather the old dispute of establishing criticism as a literary genre, with its (fragile) roots in ancient literature, or a more “scientific”, metadiscursive, genre. As for Gumbrecht, it seems that either his relying on an intuitive approach turns out to be not *that* intuitive at all — if the density of some of his *exempla* are to be

taken into account – or the author was not able to elaborate a proper presentation of his very working principle, which is aesthetics as the opposite of literary theory. Indeed, his short essays are (scholarly) *soft* and pleasant to read, yet it is as if he has eliminated the procedure after getting the by-product, not going too far from any reading for semantics. The essays work like expositions on the specific *stimmung* of a literary work but, despite being well formulated, they just don’t show how *stimmung*-reading works. Once again, maybe he is lagging behind his own insights – making too much sense out of its very refusal – in order not to sound too “intuitive”, and that’s why he sounds like an academic even when avoiding being one. But, if one considers what is truly at stake when spurning old-school hermeneutics, mainly the fact that these seem to be uncharted waters (charting itself would be one of the hermeneutical tasks *par excellence*), *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung* is a light cast on Gumbrecht’s past insights.

It is useless to rehash that the reader’s expectation is decisive in the evaluation of the quality of each of their — Gumbrecht’s as well as the reader’s — “Moments”; or, as the author quite apologetically states, “[a] ‘correct’ focus does not exist when one reads poetry” (48). If literary reading is by definition intuitive, it is not likely that a regular reader, one whose consciousness hasn’t been caught by the academic industry and intellectual addictions, would turn their own attention to *Stimmung* into a conceptual trawl net — only scholars seem competent enough to keep deferring theirs. This excessive self-evidence, nevertheless, works on behalf of the idea that intellectual life must not be restricted to a bodiless mind activity. The final section of the book, “Situations”, quite a proof-of-concept, shows that the absence of the criterium for a “correct” focus – or rather, that not knowing what you want to know in the first place – is a condition *sine qua non* to understand intellectual constructs in their mundane aspects, and, above all, to demonstrate that consciousness and reflection are able to reconstitute the immediacy of human experience. As a matter of fact, as the focal point of the book is the possibility of experiencing one’s own life beyond the sheer information exchanges we call communication (which ranges from academic work to small talk), it can be said that a second reflection on literary activity is about disclosing the powerful vitality of literature through its unstated worldliness. This could be acknowledged as Gumbrecht’s *Stimmung*-reading very own *mood/atmosphere*: as weariness of an everyday experience *in-itself* mediated to the point of effacement of the world’s concreteness, and, as an unconditional attention for an unconditional life, an attempt to consider things from the standpoint of differentiability.