

An Affinity of Intellectual Liveliness: A Conversation with Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht

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Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (April 12, 2019). Photo by Fábio Waki.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (Würzburg, 1948), now an Emeritus Scholar at Stanford, is a prolific thinker whose theories are at the base of many contemporary studies on the influence of aesthetic experiences in our lives, from the most immediate nature of our pleasures to the increasingly complex nature of our perception of the world. Gumbrecht is one of the earliest advocates of what we can understand today as a “non-hermeneutical” or “post-hermeneutical” epistemology in the study of art—that is, an epistemological appreciation of art, particularly the literary art, that is not reductively based on the interpretation of artworks, and which therefore tries to explore dimensions of aesthetic experience that cannot be conveyed by meaning. The impact of Gumbrecht’s thoughts on the present state of the Humanities in general is blatant, but they are an especially powerful epistemology for the Materialities of Literature: not

only did they inspire the very creation of this doctoral program at the University of Coimbra, they also played—and still play—a major role in the development of the materialities of literature as a discipline, as an innovative way of appreciating the literary art in light of material changes in society, culture and technology.

This interview took place at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Coimbra on April 12th, 2019, and followed Gumbrecht's seminar "Diderot's 'Materialism': about the Potential of an Epistemological Affinity", which advanced some of the discussions in his forthcoming book *Prose of the World: Diderot, Goya, Lichtenberg, and Mozart and an End of Enlightenment*. The talk was delivered to one of the biggest audiences to have ever crowded Sala Ferreira Lima, and, yet, it had a delightful intimate tone. Gumbrecht conceded us this conversation after the room was left empty to the three of us, and, to our relieving surprise, what we feared would be a perhaps overly philosophical debate easily dissolved into a relaxed discussion about the curious experiences that build the world we live in. As we set all our worldly little things on the table—the microphones, the recorders, our annotations, and a bowl of walnuts and dried peaches—, we soon found ourselves involved by Gumbrecht's intellectual enthusiasm, and, indeed, it soon became clear to us that there are probably no theories too complex to be broken down by a patient, curious mind.

1. First of all, on behalf of the Doctoral Program in Materialities of Literature, we would like to thank you for conceding us this interview. This debate is really important for us because, as you may have noticed, your theories played an important role in the conceptualization of this program. It is in this context that we would like to conduct this conversation: we will try to follow a line of thought that allows us to map and clarify the epistemological bases of some of your propositions that, directly or indirectly, are most influential upon our research and activities.

For example, a fundamental book for our program is your *Production of Presence* (2004), in which you explain the importance for literary criticism today to distance itself from a "hermeneutical" epistemology and embrace a "non-hermeneutical" or "post-hermeneutical" epistemology. In your book, this process is connected to yet another process—namely, that of overcoming the Cartesian *co-gito ergo sum*, which reduces the ontology of our existence to the

“movements of the human mind”¹, as you describe it. In order to contextualize our discussion, could you elaborate on the reasons why it is so important for us readers and literary critics today to overcome the Cartesian subject, distance ourselves from a hermeneutical epistemology and embrace a post-hermeneutical one?

I have, of course, no Hegelian argument for that, it would be a contradiction. I have several explanations, and I think the best one would have to do with the concept of *broad present*. In the historical worldview that I described, and pretty much according to Koselleck², the past is something that we leave behind, we move towards an open future, and live in a short present. The short present is related to a Cartesian self-reference. In the short present, you *are* with your *mind*, and, based on experiences from the past, you choose among the possibilities for the future. If the *short* present is related to a Cartesian self-reference, and if now we live in a *broad* present, that would explain why our self-reference is changing. Think about everyday life: the number of people who are jogging, caring about their bodies, people who are interested in sports, who are in diets—the number is exponentially higher than ever. But, at the same time, the body has become more than ever before an object of philosophy. Whether that’s good or bad, there’s a drive to pay more attention, practically and theoretically, to the body. So, what I’m trying to elaborate is part of a movement. But that is very separate from the story I’ve been told when I was younger, and I can still tell and remember. In Germany, we had an academic genealogy. In Germany, there’s a great awareness of academic genealogy. My advisor was a student of Gadamer, Gadamer was a student of Heidegger, Heidegger was a student of Husserl... If you have that load on your shoulders, you want an Oedipal revolt. So, like I was saying in the talk earlier, you can show that the affinity between your program and the time when I was younger is part of a much larger trajectory, of which Baumgarten and Diderot are part of, and it goes beyond that—in that sense, I think that my Oedipal revolt is part of a much larger trajectory.

2. One of the central questions in your work seems to be your interest in rehabilitating the human body as a fundamental element in our critical view of aesthetic experience, which you describe as a “tension between meaning and presence”³—sometimes with the primacy of the former, sometimes with the primacy of the latter, but always in a process of cross-pollination. In one of your interviews, you state very briefly that, from your experience, “*desire*

1 Gumbrecht 2003: 17.

2 See Koselleck 2004: x-xi; 3-4; 22-5.

3 Gumbrecht 2003: 111.

is the most underestimated dimension in an attitude towards aesthetic experience”, and that you understand *desire* as something “we have been deprived of a long time ago.”⁴ How exactly does this understanding of *desire* fit into that conception of aesthetic experience? And, therefore, how can we better estimate *desire* in a critical examination of aesthetic experience?

I’m using the Lacanian concept of *desire*. More than in Freud, but, like in Freud, Lacanian self-reference is never purely spiritual. The body is always part of it. Also, in this Lacanian logic, the more you’re aware that you’ll never fulfil a desire, the more burning this desire is. I think that what I meant then, and what I still mean, is that, while there’s this kind of return of the body, we’re living our everyday in a world that is more Cartesian than Descartes could have imagined. We basically live our everyday in a fusion between software and consciousness. And not just us intellectuals; on the contrary, every person. I happen to know the BMW production plant in Germany. The proletarians there, they sit in front of a screen like we do, even if they have to do different reactions, like pushing a button at some point. There’s still people who make their living by investing their body, but very few. In such a situation, and with a self-reference that is increasingly including the body again, I think the possibilities of aesthetic experience are much more widespread than they used to be. Think of the aestheticization of food, for example: it’s amazing what people pay for food today. My point is that there are opportunities for aesthetic experiences, experiences that are not predominantly physical, that are not predominantly sensual, but experiences from which sensuality can’t be separated. Take poetry as opposed to the novel, for example. Poetry here seems to be a strong case, because, I think—or at least the layout says so—normally a poem should be recited. You have the sound of the voice; you have prosody together with semantics. But back to desire: I’m an absolute sports fan. And when I go to sports events, at the closing of the stadium I run faster than I can normally run, or so my wife says. That’s what I mean by desire. We should activate this desire instead of killing the interest of our students by telling them what the interpretation of a poem or artwork is. Sometimes I think our teaching should be more *deictic*: you show them something and say, “this is so cool!” You show them a Rubens painting, and you say, “these naked bodies, they’re so cool.” Instead of spiritualizing everything, instead of permeating everything with your own authority as a professor, you should awake this desire. And I’m

4 Lage 2017: 204.

saying it because the environment is very positive, there are lots of opportunities to do that, and schools and universities should *activate* that, rather than stop it and sanitize it.

3. In her Letter XIX, Mary Wollstonecraft affirms that “we reason deeply, when we forcibly feel”⁵; in a conversation with Frank Harris, Oscar Wilde supposedly said something very similar—he allegedly said that “knowledge came to me through pleasure, as it always comes, I imagine”⁶. Whether he actually said this or not we cannot be sure, but in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) he does have Henry Wotton, his alter-ego, provokingly suggest that “pleasure is the only thing worth having a theory about”⁷. These statements reminded us of some of your works: on several occasions, such as in *Production of Presence, In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (2006) and *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung* (2012), you seem to try to recover that “erotics” (as Sontag describes it)⁸ of aesthetic experience that tends to be crippled or neglected by an overly hermeneutical criticism, but, at the same time, you also seem to use these “erotics” as guidelines for more rational ponderations. Does post-hermeneutical criticism also consist of bringing forth new theories about pleasure and its influence upon rational thinking? What could be an ideal relation between pleasure and reason in your view?

That’s interesting. First of all, I have to say, I’m a great fan of Oscar Wilde. I have lots of sympathy for him, he’s a fabulous character. But I disagree with him on that. I mean, this is a beautiful paradox, of course, especially for the Victorian times, when everything had to be moralized. It’s great, and I like the sentence, and I’d like to memorize it and quote it, but let me give you an example that is completely on the other side: if I were Salazar, I mean, an almighty dictator, the first profession I’d eliminate would be that of the *sommeliers*, the people in a restaurant who talk about wine. The *sommelier* pours a little bit of wine, and then he tells you the family history of the wine producer, and he’ll always say they produced only very few bottles, which makes me say “oh, if they only produced very few bottles, the wine can’t be very good, because someone will want to drink it.” And then they tell you all this and that, and, once you taste the wine, you don’t taste the wine anymore. I’m exaggerating, of course, but you see what I mean. In a second example, I do think that in a *torcida*, even if in an aggressive one—my favorite soccer team, Dortmund, has the most aggressive *torcida* in Europe—, those

5 Wollstonecraft 2009: 107.

6 Harris in Wilde 2013: 2041.

7 Wilde 2013: 1050.

8 Sontag 2001: 10.

people are having an aesthetic experience. This aesthetic experience may be ideologized and God knows what, and they may hit—the other day they tossed the bus with the fans of the other team—, it can be very horrible, but that's not the only aesthetic experience that can get into violence. I don't want to say that these people aren't capable of aesthetic experience, and only if they go to the opera, where they're not allowed to move their bodies, they'll have an aesthetic experience. I'd definitely never tell the fans of Dortmund that what they're having was an aesthetic experience, because, as we say in German, they would *in die Fresse hauen*, they would hit me. But that's their aesthetic experience, and I'm not saying it's lower than mine, or it's higher than mine... it's theirs. That's the second reason. So, why are you producing all these theories? I'd say, in the first place, because there exists something like a "theory desire", there's a desire to *think through* things. I hope you have that too. Sometimes, there's an interesting problem, and you want to think it through. And sometimes you get paid for that, and that's a very lucky circumstance. We think about literature and we think about aesthetic experience because it's very interesting, it's a very difficult phenomenon to think about. Now, not as an alternative, but juxtaposed to that, if there's any "applicability" of theoretically thinking about aesthetic experience, it always goes towards the question: "how can we efficiently motivate more people to expose themselves to aesthetic experience?" And that's not necessarily by having them read our theories, but by developing *strategies*, *motivation strategies*. This is what I mean by *deictic*. I mean to say "look, just listen to Beethoven", and not "oh, it means this, oh, it was written in 1825, when he was already deaf." As you've seen, I'm fascinated by biographical detail, but I mean in order to develop strategies to motivate people. Does aesthetic experience make them better human beings? I'm convinced it doesn't. But it makes for a more intense life, it makes for a rich life.

4. To some point, there seems to be a contradiction between linguistic and non-linguistic spheres in thinking about aesthetic experiences. The more an aesthetic experience tends towards the side of materiality and presence, the more we sense it as feelings, emotions and intensities—that is, the more this experience eludes the possibility of being translated into linguistic terms, into linguistic meaning. However, when we write a criticism on this experience we often do this by means of some kind of prosaic discourse, normally the textual language of an article or an essay. This is not automatically a problem, and surely we are not suggesting researchers to give up textual expression; but, considering the intentions of a post-hermeneutical epistemology, should we not also revise or innovate in the way we express our criticism so that we

avoid constraining into the potential asceticism of a typical textual form those phenomena that are really extra-linguistic?

Absolutely, I absolutely think that. Of course, it's not returning to Romanticism and writing like Friedrich Schlegel, but I can give you an example. In *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, the center chapter is on Janis Joplin. I've always been enormously hooked; I think my two favorite voices are Janis Joplin's and Elvis Presley's. In that essay, I'm trying to write about a type of liberty: "freedom is just another word for nothing left to loose", she says in *Me and Bobby McGee*. I'm not trying to unfold that philosophically; I'm trying, autobiographically, but without talking about my own life, to write about how that felt, in 1967 or 68, when I heard it for the first time. Its function is ultimately meant to be *deictic*. And, if you read that, and if you're interested in that experience, you expose yourself to Janis Joplin. Sometimes, I also think, counter to the *sommelier* example, in some cases knowing more about something makes it more interesting. Think about history of art. If you don't know much, in these Rubens paintings, they're all overweight people—there's always too many people and it's always too allegoric. If you know more about the context, all of the sudden... The day before yesterday, my wife and I went to the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, where we saw this Early Modern collection. Bosch, he's absolutely fantastic. But, while you can enjoy Bosch without knowing anything about the historical moment, I think you can enjoy it even more if you know more. It's actually interesting that the aesthetics of aesthetic experience is very strongly back in literary criticism. When I was your age, or younger, we had a gay professor in Munich, at this large university where we were not supposed to talk about aesthetic experience. This professor, he wasn't openly gay, but there was a rumor. And people were always saying—and, of course, this was the homophobia of then—, "he's so interested [in aesthetic experiences] because he's gay." And he was very, very good. It was the 1968 student revolution, and people would call him "bourgeois", and all sorts of things, it was horrible. So, the sheer fact that aesthetic experience, in a project like yours, that is called *Materialities of Literature*, seemingly plays a role is already an interesting innovation. Within literary studies there isn't a great tradition of writing about aesthetic experience. Again, to quote somebody great, Novalis, Schlegel, the first Romantics... the German romantics, they were not *Literaturwissenschaftlerin*, that was the Grimm brothers. So, there's a challenge. But there's a danger there, though. I'm not convinced that I'm a very good writer, but most academics in literary criticism are convinced that they are good writers, and they are *not*. I must be the only literature professor on the planet who has never tried to write a poem.

5. In that essay, in *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, you suggest that Janis Joplin’s voice, especially as it rocks through the lyrics of *Me and Bobby McGee*, epitomizes the carefree, libertarian ethos of the 1960’s and 70’s that created her and the lyrics in the first place. In a recent interview⁹, you also mention Elvis Presley, and say that many of your childhood memories are related to his voice coming from the radios in the US-occupied part of Germany. In that same interview, you also mention an attraction that you feel for Adele’s voice, whose quality, whose impact, you say is really difficult to explain. There are, in fact, many voices that seem to have lives of their own, not only because of their singular physical qualities, such as *tessitura*, *passaggia* or weight, but also because they seem to channel entire realities into spellbinding aesthetic experiences: historical contexts, social ethos, generational conflicts or even pathologies related to the singers themselves, as you hint at in the end of your Janis Joplin essay. Is this what you understand as a “non-Husserlian phenomenology” of the voice, and what you mention as a possible subject for a future book of yours? Could you elaborate on your conception of a “phenomenology of the voice” in this case, as well as on the possible theoretical origins of this conception?

Well, I have several books that I want to write—not that I think humankind will need them for the next two hundred years. But, to have a certain hierarchy, the next thing I’m going to do is, I’m going to translate the *Oráculo Manual* into German for Reclam, for this classics series, and I’ll also write a preface. Then I’m going to write a book about stadiums, and then, I think, I’m going to write a book about the phenomenology of the voice. As you may have realized from my lecture today, Husserl is a very important philosopher for me; but I say phenomenology not in this sense of Husserl’s, but in the everyday sense of a *precise description*—and this is what I call a “non-Husserlian” phenomenology of the voice. The book I want to write about the voice is not necessarily a foundational theory. It will be somehow theoretical, but maybe I’ll start with examples. I try to remember voices and what they’re like and it’s very difficult to *describe* a voice... What’s so fascinating about Adele’s voice? It is a fascinating voice. Even if you ask a musicologist who would never hear rock music, he’d say that Elvis’s is now canonized as one of the greatest voices of the 20th century, and it is an unbelievable voice. He was a racist, he was God knows what, but the voice is fantastic. So, there’s this appeal of the voice. On the one level, it may be trans-historical and

9 Queiroz 2018: 1106.

trans-cultural, but it's also historically specific. "What is a voice for us today?" is what I want to describe. And that has many phenomenal dimensions. For example, a voice can be like a congestion of a historical moment. I don't know whether you realize that it's not only because of the recordings that male voices in the 1920's were much higher pitched. Men would speak with a higher voice. It was actually found to be sexy to speak with a higher voice, which today is definitely not the case. I know very little about opera, but nobody would want to hear Maria Callas today, it would sound shrill. There's a historicity to the aesthetics of the voice, and then what most interests me from an aesthetic point of view is the phenomenon of *die äußerlich*. A voice is always already a presence experience; even if it's not a language articulation, you always read a voice. Every sound that is produced by a body we can't help reading. But, at the same time, once again, it's imposed upon me, we can't subtract the physicality of the voice, the sound weight. That's what I'm interested in. And we have all this character production that sometimes is terribly disappointing. Have you ever heard a sound recording of Heidegger? Seemingly, his classes were spellbinding, but he has the most horrible voice, and then he tries to speak perfect *Hochdeutsch*, but he can't, so he speaks the Swabian dialect that nobody can leave behind in Germany. It's absolutely horrible, but interesting in that sense—that yet, we know that there were hundreds of people sitting in Heidegger's classes who couldn't understand a word. But there's something there. It's a very complex and very interesting phenomenon. In the context of what I'm working on, and what I mean by "non-Husserlian" phenomenology, this book would be a much more descriptive book than a theory book. Some of the basic theoretical distinctions are already in *Production of Presence*—the oscillation between presence and meaning, what is presence, what is meaning; these are the basic distinctions I'm going to use, and perhaps a couple of others. It would be more like the best chapters of *Stimmung*; I think the Janis Joplin chapter is pretty good, and the one on Walther von der Vogelweide, the medieval troubadour, I think is a really good chapter. It would be a book of that kind.

6. A post-hermeneutical way of thinking can also have a strong impact on the writing of history, as you demonstrate in your book *In 1926* (1997). What you propose there is a "presentification" of that year, which in practice consists of writing a history of that year not necessarily in terms of the events that were finally most influential upon the future, but more in terms of a description of a general feeling of that year based on a number of very diverse episodes—something like a hypnotic or illusory plunge into the space-time of 1926. In another book, in *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, you suggest *Stimmung* as a coalescence between historical experience

and aesthetic experience. Whereas in *In 1926* you seem to suggest a hypnotical plunge into the past, in *Stimmung* you seem to suggest aesthetic evocations of a certain social ethos from the past. Could you tell us a bit more about the role of aesthetic experience in post-hermeneutical readings and writings of history?

In 1926 has a strange position in my work. Because, you see... why do you want to do an interview with me? It's about a series of books. And when I started writing these books, I already had written what most people would ever write. I tell myself I write way too much. But the threshold of my production is *In 1926*. *In 1926* doesn't say a word about *presence*, and I didn't have these distinctions, it's not even terribly anti-hermeneutical or something like that. And yet... Ever since Marc Bloch's *La Société Féodale* (1939), there was this idea of a synchronic history, to write history synchronically, and what I really wanted to do in the *In 1926* project was to fill up this concept of synchronicity. What came out of it was something completely different, it was this presentification of the year. But the book itself doesn't have the word *presentification*. I was only able to say that after *Production of Presence*, which came out seven years later. Only there I said: "that's what it is." So, in this sense, if you ask me today, "what approach to the past does *In 1926* presuppose, or propose?", I'd say it's an aesthetic approach to the past. Not aesthetic in the sense of only talking about theaters and symphonies, but to presentify a certain historical moment as much as possible, not only in a meaningful way, but also in a sensual way. As I write in the introduction to the book, "the more you can hear, smell, feel, that year, and forget that you are not living in that year" ... I'm not saying that that's the concept of history that we should have today or that it should be the only one, but I think it's a very delightful concept of history. This is why people are travelling to Coimbra, to stand in this beautiful praça, and to imagine what it was when it was first inhabited. Talking about a university next to you, Salamanca, this university *es antigua*: Cervantes was sitting in those classrooms. Yes, this is very naïf, but it's this naïveté that I want to offer. Not in a sense that this is the only thing we should do, but in a sense that it's also legitimate to teach classes this way, and it's legitimate to expose yourself to the past in this way. All of a sudden they're doing historical classes on food—in Stanford it's very trendy. Then they cook that food and eat that food, and sometimes it tastes very strange. Once again, I'm not saying this is how we should relate to history today. To the *past*, I should say, not *history*. I think the distinction is very important—to say *past* and not *history*—because in *history* you always already have the historical worldview, and then we're continuing this belief that the historical worldview is the only relation we can have with the past.

7. When we study the materialities of communication and the materialities of literature today, it is impossible not to discuss the relationships that we establish with digital technology, an interaction that influences both the way we structure meaning and the way we relate to our own bodies. These new technologies often mediate a chaotic influx of information and a frenzy of bodily experiences that seem to hinder or defy *Gelassenheit* experiences; however, the hectic experiences mediated by these new technologies might also take part in the composition of new forms of *Stimmungen*, concentrated intensities and productions of presence. In your opinion, what is the importance of *Gelassenheit* practices and experiences today, and what are the general pros and cons of having these new technologies as mediations for the configuration of new meanings and for the physical and sensorial perception of new phenomena?

In the first place, I think there's a good way of translating *Gelassenheit*; I think *serenity* is the best way. For a long time, I was saying *Gelassenheit*, and then I would say *composure* or I would say *serenity*. It has a positive vibe that's very nice; when I'm using *Gelassenheit*, it's always positive. For a start, and quoting Lyotard, whom I like a lot; he didn't have the concept of *broad present*, but, almost anticipating the existential temporality of the *broad present*, Lyotard talks at some point about "*mobilisation générale intransitive*." I think it's genius. We constantly feel that we have to get mobilized, but we don't know where. We're always hectic, but I don't really know why I'm hectic. I mean, I'm retired, for example, and I'm still hectic. And being hectic, not to a certain degree, but in general, doesn't contribute to the quality of your life. Being *intense* is very different than being *hectic*. Being hectic in that sense also means that you constantly want to determine where you go, so you don't allow anything to happen, and in that sense *serenity* or *composure* or *Gelassenheit* is the precondition for a self-unconcealment of being. It doesn't have to be in a full Heideggerian sense, but in this beautiful way that, if you already know what to expect and how much time you have, a landscape will not unfold itself for you; a music will not unconceal itself for you. You have to let it happen, you have to *allow* that it happens. You have to allow for a conversation, for interesting things to emerge. The strange thing is that today we're no longer living in this teleological time, I mean, people have less hours of working time on a global level than ever before. Maybe in the Middle Stone Age, in order to survive, people had to hunt and do agriculture for about five, six hours per day. But, spread over the week, the average obligatory working time is not more than this, and, nevertheless, today we have the burnout syndrome. So, in that sense, there's a very large applicability to

Gelassenheit: let things happen, sit somewhere without a plan. A philosophical decision should never be too goal-oriented, too problem-solving-oriented, you should let the conversation happen, and then you see what happens. That was the idea of Plato's academy, for example, to have this ongoing conversation. I know it's very bad taste, but I like these hop-on buses: at every station, they allow you to get out and you can stay for as long as you want. It's a metaphor, but what I mean is: take your time for certain things. I'm a speed reader; if I get an 800-page dissertation, however horrible this sounds, and I have to write a judgement that is not completely bad within three hours, I can. But if I read really for pleasure, I read enormously slowly. It takes me forever. This morning, I was doing the Lisbon seminar about those *cantigas de escárnio*. One of them is absolutely beautiful, and I spent the whole morning with it. Not analyzing it, just... it's just beautiful. So, philosophically, there's an unconcealment of being.

8. We're close to the end of our conversation, but it seems like a good opportunity to go back to your seminar today, so we would like to place a question about it. Could you elaborate on how you would relate the idea of *materiality* with the idea of *materialism*—that is, if you would relate them at all—, either in Diderot's sense of *materialism* or in any other sense?

I want to insist that, although I'm visibly not a Marxist, I am a great fan of Karl Marx. I want to make this very clear. And when I'm saying Marx's materialism has zero to do with Diderot's materialism, I'm not saying that therefore it's illegitimate or something like that. Marx is very Hegelian, Diderot is the least Hegelian. People are saying that I'm an anti-Marxist; no, I'm not an anti-Marxist, I'm just not Marxist, which is different. The fact that a name like *Materialities of Literature* has a certain potential for Marxist connotation is actually very positive, I like that. That's not what I meant, not even in 1987, but I do like that. Actually, the reason why we chose the topic might be interesting. We did this colloquium in Dubrovnik.¹⁰ Why? Because Yugoslavia was the only country in the world where you could have people from Eastern Europe, from the Soviet Union, from Poland. As they were part of the Soviet pact, their governments didn't like their people in colloquia with westerners, but they couldn't prohibit it. So, we chose *Materialities of Communication*—the idea was Friedrich Kittler's and mine—, and one reason was that we were just interested in a non-Cartesian subject position—what then became *media researching*. But we also said, “that's interesting because

10 The colloquium *Materialities of Communication* was held in Dubrovnik, present-day Croatia, in the spring of 1987. See Gumbrecht 2003: 1-4 and also Gumbrecht & Pfeiffer 1994.

it allows for people from Eastern Germany to go to the colloquium: it's about materialism, right?" Now, going back to your real question, Diderot's materialism doesn't solve any analytical problems that we have. We'll not do better media research with Diderot's distinction. It is, in the first place, a genealogical relationship, and you can have the pleasure of saying, "this is where the tradition is coming from." It's quite interesting—and I'll be spelling that out a little bit more in the book—that Diderot has a great awareness of the things he should be able to say he's not able to say. So, he doesn't try to say, "I can't explain to you how the mind emerges from matter." No, he says, "I just don't know, it will take a long time." He thinks 30 years or so, then he'll know. And, from these lacunae, from these voids where you can't give an answer, oftentimes, instead of theorizing it, he has these very interesting existential conclusions. Well, we would have called them "existential", even though in the 18th century he wouldn't have called them that. His conclusions would be like "I have no basic principles for my judgements, they're very centrifugal, but I know that judging gives me energy. If I can judge much, this gives me energy." Or he says, "I have no coherent concept of life, but isn't life the most intense thing we have?" So, I would almost say that the value of just knowing what materialism was in the 18th century, that's good enough. And I mean in the *In 1926* sense: this is how they thought in the 18th century. The fact that he thought that a beehive is so intense because the bees sting each other is fantastic, and I like such details. I'm not saying he's stupid; that's just how he thought. But there are certain existential things, like the lack of principles of judging. When he writes about the *Salons*, he tries to say, "these are my aesthetic values", and then it doesn't work, but he discovers that when he goes to the *Salons*, these are moments of intensity. He really likes to write that. In Diderot's materialism, there's an existential flavor that I like. I feel a huge affinity with Diderot, and that's an affinity of intellectual liveliness. I think materialism has such a potential.

9. One last question, mostly biographical, but of no less scientific importance: you started your research as a medievalist in postwar Germany and now you are an Emeritus Stanford scholar whose studies range from 12th century literature and 18th century philosophy to sports competitions and mass communication. This is a really multifaceted career, but, when we read your works today, you seem to have an interrelated way of handling these subjects that feels quite cohesive to us, and which contradicts that apparent dispersion. It seems to us that, no matter how different your objects of study are, there always seems to be an interest in addressing the intensity of experiences, as we physically sense them in our bodies. This predisposition always seems to be there, in one way or another,

and it always seems to help you achieve a new theoretical thinking that shows us that there is a bigger world out there, beyond, or maybe before, interpretation. Do you also see it this way? How do you look at your own productions, in perspective? And, perhaps most importantly, when you look back at your own paths, the ones you took and the ones you opened up, what do you believe would be important for you—and for us—to study today and in the near future?

I think I've had a lot of fun in the profession. I'll start with something arrogant: I think that, with the same brain, I could have made ten times more money in any other profession. Professors of humanities are not really wealthy, but this isn't saying that it's something negative. I had a great time in my profession. If you do the humanities, you more or less write, and you see what I mean by write. I would say—and that's realistic—during 80% of the time that you have to invest to make a living, you can do things you like to do. The funny thing is that many humanists constantly ask themselves what they *have* to do. And if you ask yourself what you *have* to do, you always *don't do* the things that you *like* to do. I, for example, never in my life ever repeated a seminar. Because it might be less work, but the intensity is fantastic. You saw it, I've never given this talk before, and I'll never give it again, but then I have a great time here, and it's an experiment, and I'm a little bit nervous when I'm coming. The positive thing about this profession is that you're doing things that you *like* to do. At least among the things that you *can* do. As a professor of literature, you can't do human biology, you can't do medicine, but you *can do* lots of things and you *should do* the things that you *like to do* instead of asking yourself what you're *supposed to do*, what's politically correct. What do you like to do? That's in the first place. So, in my university—and that doesn't happen very often in Stanford—, they organized a big colloquium for my retirement, in February last year. They asked me if I was okay with it; I said, "yes, but I don't want to choose the topic, I want to know the topic like a week before it happens, and I also don't want to choose the people"—I know so many people, there will always be somebody who'll be offended that I didn't invite them. In this colloquium, twenty of the forty speakers were former students of mine. They're now in big positions, one of them is dean at Hopkins, the other one is a world leading historian of Eastern Europe. Some are very widely known, others not so widely known. What impressed me a lot and made me very happy was that there's absolutely no common denominator. There's no school. I mean, yes, most of these people think more about *presence* than other people, but some of them absolutely not. Trying to have fun in my profession while also trying to do my duty—this is very German—, I saw that I've had this centrifugal impact in quite a

number of lives. In a sense of *Bildung* almost, but not in the sense of “they have to be like this, and they have to always vote for social democratic parties.” I don’t care what they vote. But *Bildung* in the sense of this intensity to have given so many different people an impulse that goes in so many different directions. Ever since this colloquium, I consider this to be the main achievement of my life, if there is any achievement. And, in comparison to that, those books that will last... I can proudly say that *Production of Presence* has sold enormously, it sold 13 000 copies only in the English version; for a philosophical book, that’s quite something. And it has nine translations, it’s enormous, and I’m very proud of it—and yet, compared to this... I’ve never considered myself a particularly good teacher, and never said teaching is the most important thing. But, all of the sudden, when I saw these inputs... People *had fun*. People go away and try something out. That, I think, is what I’m proud of. I would recommend young colleagues to try that, to invest in that, and, above all, going full-circle here, not to ask yourselves, “what do I have to teach?”, “what do I have to do?”, but to *use that freedom* that you have as humanities people and as humanities professors.

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