

Allophone Presences, in the “Here-and-Now” of the Humanities

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«Ça doit être beau pourtant!» se dit-elle, en songeant aux grandes cités américaines. Et une autre voix s'éleva comme réponse. Là-bas c'était l'étranger: des gens, d'une autre race parlant d'autre chose dans une autre langue, chantant d'autres chansons... Ici...

—Louis Hémon, *Maria Chapdelaine*

O melhor lugar do mundo / é aqui e agora...

—Gilberto Gil, “Aqui e agora”

À LA DÉRIVE... (AVEC GUMBRECHT)

I set out to write: literally. I've been asked to contribute a short piece on Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's work to this collection, and the deadline appears tight. Time to hit the road... I leave my office in the Portuguese Department at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth and head eastward, through New Bedford and southeastern Massachusetts on Interstate 195, across the Bourne Bridge onto Cape Cod, and on towards Woods Hole, with the *fados*, *funanás* and *noticiários* from a local Portuguese-language radio station on the car stereo. Due to weekend traffic, however, I arrive late, and my car is bumped from the 2:30 ferry to Vineyard Haven to a smaller freight boat leaving at 7:45 p.m. I spend the next few hours before my departure in a café near the ferry terminal, reading Gumbrecht and waiting; I am no longer in any hurry.

The one advantage of the freight ferry is its small size, one that crowds the passengers together on a single outside deck; in this intimate setting, chance encounters are made all the more possible. I find myself in a con-

versation with two families on vacation from a vast inland region of western Québec called L'Outaouais, these only a few of the countless French-speakers from the North who visit New England at this time each year. The conversation in French runs from that of *requins*, *méduses* and *phares* with the children, to a discussion of the French-Canadian diaspora in New England and recent political developments in Québec and the U.S. with one of the parents, all interspersed with exclamations of wonder and silent admiration at the beauty of this brief marine passage at sunset.

And even so, I still sense some impatience out there: so let me get to the point of what, to the unforgiving critical eye, will still be nothing more than just another self-indulgent autobiographical *dérive*... I begin to wonder whether this unexpected set of chance and habitual encounters, *entre langues* and interwoven with a certain richness of reference, might approach, in some embryonic way, what Gumbrecht calls "intensity": a "quecque chose" expressible not simply in translatable "meaning," but unable to be completely subsumed even in spoken dialect. Whether through a certain aesthetic complexity of accent, register, or approach to communication, each with its intermittent silences, reflections, occasional misfires, not to mention the final, sincere expressions of thanks and best wishes, it is here, somewhere between the forests of Québec and the Lusophone Atlantic, not to mention any number of other faraway "elsewheres," that I find myself enveloped in a new and different sort of intellectual milieu, one that values *a priori* the richness of lived experience.

So far from finding Gumbrecht "surprisingly (not to say outrageously) autobiographical" or "unacceptably self-centered" (Gumbrecht, *Production* xvi), I am actually beginning to sense a particular affinity with his approach to academic writing, especially in his book *Production of Presence*, in spite of how so many academics, often uprooted in unfamiliar cultural milieux, have become used to "being [their] own intellectual environment" (xvii). After all, such moments of institutional, cultural and social solitude are usually subject to an incessant cycle of subjective ebbs and flows; in my case, the very fact that I find myself involved in a project such as this at this particular place and time is enough to assuage, at least for the time being, any sense of intellectual *anomie* I might otherwise feel.

Instead, I feel more compelled to ask: what are the possible concrete and material implications of Gumbrecht's elaboration of "the production of presence" for scholars in the humanities? First and foremost, Gumbrecht's critical oeuvre continues to present a serious challenge, how-

ever inadvertently, to those academics, on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond, whose communications are characterized by a predominantly Anglophone monolingualism (with perhaps a small occasional side order of “bare-bones” bi- or multilingualism). Of all possible linguistic configurations at hand, it might be the moment to mention one which was, at one time, among the most common for U.S. literary theorists and their students: the one quite often set in place by those by-now canonical French theoretical texts from the 1960's, 70's and 80's in English translation, in which French might appear both in the original and in an ever-“problematized” English translation, along with key terminology from German philosophy considered to have “no acceptable equivalent” in English: most often, if not invariably, from Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche or Heidegger. In contrast to this ambivalent critical relationship to translation, one that nonetheless still results in a multilingual text, the intellectual environment of the early 21st century appears more often to favor a dispersed linguistic politics, in which English still emerges, ironically enough, all the more enshrined as its sole “default language,” especially in light of the (once again) presumably untranslatable linguistic diversity of non-Western, indigenous and creole languages beyond the ken of any one particular scholar, no matter how “global” (or even “post-global”) his or her optic may presume to be.

Gumbrecht writes across and beyond both of these limited models of academic multilingualism and (un)translatability; whether in the original or in translation, there are invariably those who might “get his drift,” not only in English and German, but also French, Spanish, Portuguese and most likely other languages as well not immediately apparent from his scholarly writings, to say nothing of his broad-ranging personal academic interactions from Dubrovnik and Rio de Janeiro to Montréal, California and across the Pacific. To provide one earlier example from Gumbrecht's *Making Sense in Life and Literature*, it would be unwise to ignore the medieval romances that emerge in his philological research, in the spaces between Latin and Provençal (at least in this particular case, but one might easily imagine Occitan, Catalan or Galician added to this continuum), all emanating from a historical period in which such multilingual transit was the order of the day (Gumbrecht, *Pathologies* 253).

Gumbrecht does not stop there, however. His philological study of the medieval period is extended through subsequent historical moments, each drawing in other languages—in this case, French—as the linguistic focus shifts (258), perhaps culminating in its translation of his own text from

German to English for publication in his new academic home, the United States. In the ever-moving “presence” of Gumbrecht, by way of both his circulating photographic image and his scholarly life in all of its uncompromising linguistic and philosophical complexity, I am thus compelled to ask: where else might this sort of multilayered, multilingual approach to the humanities take those who read him? And how is it key to arriving at a sense not only of “what meaning cannot convey,” but also what any of its possible translations might deliver?

HERE, IN “THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE ‘INTELLECTUAL’ WORLDS”

In the Acknowledgements to his book *Production of Presence*, Gumbrecht begins with the generous admission that “working on this book gave me the conviction of living in the best of all possible *intellectual* worlds” (vii, my italics). In their newly altered state, any allusion to Voltaire’s *Candide* and its faraway fantasyland called “Westphalie” in Voltaire’s original French “translation” from the German—and as both the original and the translation of this place are fictional, neither is to be confused with Gumbrecht’s former academic home in the present-day German state of Nordrhein-Westfalen—would only be the beginning. Nonetheless, these words (even if they appear here intentionally detached from any specific literary or cultural context) still led me to ponder as I read on what it might be like to find oneself in such a perfect place today, and not merely “ce meilleur des mondes possibles” (146), but one with an avowedly “intellectual” qualifier.

Even now, this statement still leaves itself open to a diverse series of interpretations, and not only that of a satirical send-up of the philosophy of Leibniz and other presumably universal values of the Enlightenment but also of the intellectual dimension that is supposed to accompany it, one all-too-familiar by now to students in the kind of broad-based undergraduate lecture-based survey courses in the humanities, of great works of Western (and increasingly, non-Western) literatures taught in translation, that Gumbrecht and so many other humanities professors (myself included) have often been scheduled to teach. After all, anyone familiar with *Candide* would be unlikely to forget the implicit sarcasm involved in crafting this emblematic phrase in the first place, all the more so when spoken by the pedantic, duplicitous and lustful professor Dr. Pangloss, “le plus grand philosophe de la province, par conséquent de toute la terre” (146). Moreover, that these “teachings” should be invoked repeatedly by

Voltaire's naïve protagonist Candide as he travels the world only complicates the cultural, intellectual and ethical picture. Though his itinerary is no doubt unnecessary to recap here, I will do so all the same, if only for the record: it winds through Europe to Lisbon at the time of the 1755 earthquake and inquisitorial *autos-da-fé*, all the way to the Jesuit missions of Paraguay, and then back through the Dutch slave colony of Surinam to Europe, only to end up in the Ottoman capital here called Constantinople. Along the treacherous path of this whirlwind world tour, a healthy dose of scepticism would serve any and all in dissuading them from taking Candide's statements too seriously; indeed, to be "candid," whether in the intellectual milieu of mid-18th-century Paris, present-day academia, or those far-flung official and unofficial regions shaped by the contact with the Portuguese language, may already be to err on the side of naïveté. In these contexts, much as a more seasoned Candide later affirms, optimism may still be "la rage de soutenir que tout est bien quand on est mal" (193).

Et pourtant, je ne me sens pas tellement mal, and this is what is all the more troubling to me intellectually, even with the convincing and sincere generosity of spirit in Gumbrecht's tone, balanced by that ever-necessary and delightful measure of irony. Whatever the chances may in fact exist, then, for finding oneself in the "best of all possible worlds," whether intellectual, academic, cultural or otherwise, a reading of Gumbrecht underscores for me the extent to which such chances are diminished by "feeling fine" in a single place, culture, paradigm or language, and that is in the intellectual voyage between spaces, perceived temporal paradigms and languages that best "stages complexity," creating those "moments of intensity" that so many search for in literary texts and the cultural materials that placed into broader circulation by way of university-level coursework in visual culture, music, architecture etc.

To be honest, however, I am still skeptical as to whether it is possible or even desirable to seek to occupy "the best of possible intellectual worlds," even if such a place were to exist. My instincts tell me that any intellectual or academic world that recognizes itself as "the best" would have to simultaneously undercut itself, as only a unconsciously guarded incomplete perspective could ever truly make such a world imaginable. Then again, that is probably because such incomplete spaces, even as they are continually bordered and reorganized, remain the only spaces we *can* inhabit as intellectuals. Then again, this recognition may just be one more way to "cultiver notre jardin" (233), if not, in the words of the dervish at

Constantinople, “[me] taire” (231), especially in light of how Gumbrecht urges his readers to reconsider, all the more vividly, how these two dictums may overlap even more than previously imagined.

TOWARDS A RETHINKING OF ACADEMIC TIME AND SPACE

In these instances, an awareness of presence must extend beyond any understanding limited by philologically informed knowledge of tradition, whether in the form of etymology or the vocabularies articulated by other creative genres such as architecture. Again, what would it mean for a single particular time-space to embody “the best of all possible intellectual worlds,” even for one person at a particular place and time? Be it an intimate seminar room or a cavernous *aula magna*, the combination of professor’s and students’ live voices, facial expressions and gestures with printed text, projected visual images, music and, as Gumbrecht reminds us, even the aroma and “the first bite of great food” (98) underscore a perception of presence that is quite often multidimensional and, at its best, all-enveloping in its scope and multifaceted perspective.

Paul Rudolph’s architectural design of the main campus of the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth may well provide another example of an attempt to bring such a break from conventional academic time and space into being. Beyond its initial conception, completion and subsequent labeling as a mid-1960’s “neo-Brutalist” space—this term in itself, derived not from brutality but from the use of *béton brut* (Fr. “rough poured concrete”) in its construction, must qualify as one of the most misunderstood terms in modern architecture—this academic space is ordered differently from the outset: its modular units separated by multilevel atria, filled with the green of tropical plants and openings which allow anyone inside to view diagonally onto other floors above and below, as well as into other departmentalized disciplines housed there, as well as out into the world outside (Rudolph *Paul* 72-81; Rudolph *Architectural* 162-69).

Such an approach to producing a new kind of academic time-space is thus not simply a static 60’s-style Utopian vision, however, as the experience of this space is not limited to the particular moment in which it was produced, much less a series of projected future moments, but may also be perceived over time as a sort of mutable canvas, on which different people and a broad range of educational materials and lived experiences can be (and, by now, already have been) collected, juxtaposed and represented. Add to Rudolph’s 45° angles and spirals the inevitable and often chaotic markings of student

life—whether posters, graffiti, vandalism and everyday wear and tear that characterizes any truly lived-in academic environment—and one might recognize how such split-level academic time-spaces might provoke a different set of reflections on “intellectual worlds,” at least for those willing to approach and inhabit them without the expectation that they ascribe to traditional notions of what academic space should look or feel like.

Some of these Gumbrechtian “presence effects,” when expressed in the architectural vocabulary of this different kind of academic space, stem from the complex narratives of cultural and intellectual history, conditioned by any number of different ethnocentric perspectives. Some emerge as a reaction to what academics in the U.S., Europe and elsewhere have come to expect of academic built environments, with their traditionally landscaped neo-Gothic or brick Colonial quadrangles and other enclosed spaces; still others appear as a form of escape from those now post-industrial New England cities that, with their defunct mills and often decaying ethnic neighborhoods comprised of block after block of row houses, are continually being sent “back to rehab” by a new set of planners and community promoters. And while it is undeniable that academics, Modernist architects and urban planners like Rudolph have played a role in such processes of challenging and reordering academic space in its broader societal context over the course of the late 20th century, it is only fair to concede that such transformations have been just as often been the result of a wide range of other complex economic and political forces, as well as any subsequent governmental or societal responses to them (or lack thereof): e.g., the continual migration of industrial plants in the direction of an ever-more inexpensive globalized labor force, the construction of the interstate highway system and its effect on city centers and ethnic neighborhoods, etc.

What interests me most, then, are not just the planned responses for reconfiguring academic time and space, but also those improvised extra-academic elements which emerge unforeseen, by way of the indispensable “allophone” (and not always explicitly intellectual) exchanges over and beyond what can longer be conceived as the clearly bordered confines of the range of academic discourses in broad circulation at any given time. One example: the seemingly mundane experience of a stopping into a Portuguese bakery in nearby Fall River to bring a box of *pastéis de nata* to work, and eating them there, in a modern building, in conversation with others as if each were a Proustian *madeleine*, with every unmistakable bite of custard and flaky pastry encouraging awareness of the often unexpected interconnectedness of objects and experiences across oceans and ages,

languages and borders, each underscoring once again the sheer immensity, richness and continual mutability of transcontinental diasporic culture. After all, how else would Gumbrecht's "bites of great food" get here, if not for such necessary extra-academic excursions?

Staging complexity at this point within this split-level context of the humanities, then, could well mean once again taking a page from its architect Paul Rudolph: that is, in recreating those uneven, skewed points of perspective that allow anyone passing through these spaces to peer obliquely across onto other levels and their ongoing activities, while juxtaposing and representing the ongoing dialogue between a multiplicity of historically specific time-spaces and that particular time-space experienced at any given moment as "the here-and-now." In this juxtaposition of present and other academic time-spaces, it might still be possible to imagine such a staging of complexity, one that combines both the global and the local, as well as the past, present and future.

In this curving, cross-referential, interconnected and unevenly placed reconfiguration of academic space, moreover, pedagogical approaches to caption, interpretation and relay of materials, especially those in other languages, might come to parallel that of a subtitled film, in which translations are made available to those who need them alongside of the original allophone text, without one or the other being completely effaced by the other translations: much like today's multilingual DVD's where, with the push of a button, two or more additional languages may appear on the screen, whether during single or subsequent viewings. While some monolingual viewers and others who prefer not to be distracted by the presence of other languages might not complain about the linguistic simplification represented by dubbing, even more troubling is the proliferation of a mass-cultural environment in which the number of allophone films in many cinematic and mass-circulation venues continues to slope downward. The slide toward the monolingual "default option" occurs not because of any lack of interest, but undoubtedly, at least in part, due to as all-too-comprehensible presence of overriding economic interests: of economic élites most likely invested in the further propagation of a uniform, more predictable and overwhelmingly monolingual mass (and in spite of this, still called a "free") market of goods, services and other commodities that dwarfs any other specialized niches that may emerge on the margins. That said, this is not to be construed as advocating reactively for a cultural politics that simply ignores or systematically discounts the products and other manifestations of corporate mass media, but rather as encouraging an actively staged juxtaposition of these cultural materials (once again, per-

haps in the style and spirit of that 60's cinematic staple, the *split-screen*) alongside of those other often-observed examples of cultural activity from the past and present, ones that research and pedagogical practice can allow to resurface in the here-and-now of academic time and space.

TO OTHER ALLOPHONE SPACES: OFF TO JAPAN?

In *The Production of Presence*, as a reflection on academic life that continues to spiral outward and onward into an ever more diverse range of allophone spaces and times, it is perhaps fitting that Gumbrecht should conclude his exploration of the production of presence in the study of the humanities with examples on its final pages taken from Japanese culture: specifically, Kabuki and Nō drama. Even more interesting than these apparently opposing points of reference invoked together, however, is the way he chooses to preface his tentative perspective, that as a Westerner of a presumably unknowable culture and language “not his own”: “I really believe that there is nothing more intellectually kitsch than the enthusiasm for Zen Buddhism among Western intellectuals who (like myself!) do not know a single Asian language and have, at best, a touristic knowledge of one or [an]other Asian culture” (149).

Then again, what could be more Zen than the paradoxical concept of nothingness (*mu*)? Precisely how much would one have to “know” in order to “truly” experience and speak about it? Might one actually come closer to sensing its presence by *not* talking or even thinking about it? The tensions that such incommensurable and presumably “authentic” traditions provoke, especially when juxtaposed against the cultivated superficiality of an all-too-globalized pop-cultural consciousness, whether “Western,” “Japanese,” or any of the other possibilities in the present-day mix, leads me to ask: setting aside the explicit and studied histrionics of Kabuki technique for a moment, is not the contemporary staging of “Nō drama,” with all its implicit “attitude,” in spite of its much-vaunted hyperstylized suppression of excess theatricality, perhaps the most appropriate cultural terrain for exploring “what meaning cannot convey”? In other words, is it possible for us, especially as academics, not to see the implicit “drama” in such claims of “no drama,” be it the reserved formality of tradition, or a commitment to intermittent silences or *Gelassenheit*?

Then again, these observations may simply be the product of my own academic positioning, one shaped as much by the Portuguese language as by others also “not my own,” ones resurfacing continually and invariably in the

company of a potentially myriad set of invariable non-native accents, dramatic and academic poses, ethnic stances and other allophone presences. Such an observation of the limits of intellectual powers of representation may in fact underscore how many of the materials we research and relay, much like the example of traditional Japanese performance given by Gumbrecht, are not simply “before” us to transfer along, at least not in the strictest of spatio-temporal senses. When this “before” is both time and space, it is simultaneously pre-existing, in front of us and even potentially somewhere else.

While the visual image or the printed page may lend itself to this complex relay(er)ing of presence elaborated by Gumbrecht, other cultural materials from different cultures and historical periods present themselves in a more three- or even multidimensional way. Whether in a gallery of neo-Classical sculptures, a Baroque concert hall, a late 19th-century Italian opera house, or a contemporary art exhibition/performance space in New York, Paris, São Paulo or Tokyo, the matter (or “stuff”) of such presence is not merely before us, but all around us: even in the air, like a kind of musical atmosphere or architectural landscape. Add to this conception of presence the often rapid transfer from traditional to futuristic spaces impossible for anyone to ignore on even a brief visit to Japan: from a seat on a high-speed train or the observation deck of a skyscraper, to one only a few hours later in a traditional Japanese stone garden or theatrical performance, for instance. In much the same way, the present is infused with elements of what is experienced, even simultaneously, not only as past but also as future, much like a fisherman’s hut from the Edo period dismantled and rebuilt as part of a restaurant seemingly floating in space on one of the upper storeys of a Shinjuku skyscraper, high enough above the ground that one might even look out the window to see a blimp floating not above, but squarely at eye level.

This displacement and juxtaposition of authentic or reproduced historical objects is thus not merely a case of simulacra or kitsch, like those vertiginous sensations provoked by the camera angles in widescreen movie theaters or virtual-reality apparatuses that can simulate the lived experience of faraway landscapes, flight or even natural disasters, often in rapid succession. As much as one may indulge oneself in the overt simulations of cosmopolitanism in one’s own life experience, such as those ultra- (or retro-)modern urban sushi restaurants where the standard favorites of *nihon-ryōri* are served with *caipirinhas* and electronic *bossa nova* as a background track, the increasingly elusive category of “authenticity” may not always take precedence over the ever-evolving transcultural mix that char-

acterizes much of contemporary lived experience. Elements from Japanese culture, and not only traditional ones that highlight tensions and dialogues between the traditional and the here-and-now, can be necessary parts of that discussion, even when what is at stake are the limits of one's own supposedly "Western" cultural identity.

Even when placed in seemingly "authentically hybrid" enclaves such as New Bedford's Portuguese-American Goulart Square or São Paulo's Japanese-Brazilian Liberdade district, such rapid flashback and flash-forwarding, temporally and culturally, might remind one of the culturally nondescript amusement park monorails that transport us between distinct versions of past, present and future while never seeming to make a local stop in spaces readily identified as part of "everyday life" (Prager and Richardson 206-12). Even so, one cannot ignore that many elements of cultural life still maintain some measure of historical continuity: whether a local performance of traditional *taiko* drumming, or the repeating series of Portuguese-American feasts, each with its origins in Azorean or Madeiran religious ritual, in towns across Rhode Island and southeastern Massachusetts each summer, recombined to a greater or lesser extent with elements of U.S., Lusophone and other points of cultural reference commonly perceived as more suited to the here-and-now. Similarly, every bit (or bite) of what can be experienced and recirculated in the context of the university classroom is dipped into and coated with a certain mixture both familiar and different: much like the batter of Japanese tempura, whose Early Modern ingredients, though they may not immediately reveal as much, might well be found in Portuguese fried cooking and seasoning as just another *tempeiro*, transposed in space and time.

If, as in Gumbrecht's book, Japan comes to symbolize an *Endstation* of sorts for the route of philosophical reflection that he provides us—whether of our own intellectual incompleteness, the need to cultivate a passion for complex cultural and linguistic sensitivities, or the ethical imperative to encourage students to value and continue to develop their own in spite of the inevitable difficulties of reconfiguring culture, *seja nesta ou numa outra língua*—the answer no longer need be one of all-too-facile retreat from the challenges of cross-cultural representation under the guise of respect for difference, but could instead involve a renewed commitment to stepping out beyond one's own cultural and linguistic comfort zone, beyond the externally and self-imposed limits of cultural identity: that is to say, out of the here-and-now of one's own sense of selfhood and alterity as presently imagined. In such instances, "staging complexity" might come to stand for a continual shift in one's own intellectual-aca-

demical point of reference, into previously neglected historical periods, cultures or languages yet to be experienced if not completely mastered, and beyond the narrow confines of present areas of academic specialization.

Ultimately, is there really “nothing” more kitsch than our own varying and uneven personal limits of cultural and linguistic understanding, interpretation and representation? If this is so, then, we must either be honest with ourselves regarding the bad taste of our own cultural mixity and incompleteness alongside that of others, or else recognize the inescapable nature and even unintentional stylistic beauty of such limits of perspective, limiting our own judgment of others’ equally skewed perceptions of mastery that at times only serves to inhibit the ever-expanding cultural and linguistic curiosity at the very core of so many pedagogical projects in the humanities.

True, I cannot and may never fully fathom the effacement of humanity as represented by the recurrence of slavery, war or genocide, much less comprehend the scientific minutiae of nuclear destruction as leveled out upon the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nonetheless, as so many other scholars in the humanities, I still feel compelled to re-present them, year after year, as part of my own continually shifting narrative of cultural and intellectual history, no matter in which culture, language or academic discipline I may find myself. Such disciplinary divisions, like ethnic enclaves, modern nation-states and the academics and others who inhabit them, inevitably face a measure of selective, if not always self-imposed, cultural incompleteness. As in the chronicles of those 16th-century Portuguese such as Fernão Mendes Pinto, who arrive in feudal Japan as part of an often-imagined but ultimately far-from-final stop in their own narrative of transoceanic excursion and as set within the inevitable limitations “em satisfação deste trabalho & dos gastos que tinha feito” (716), subsequent attempts at rearticulating them are often at their most intelligible when counterposed against other cultural, linguistic and intellectual modes of “making sense,” whether past, present or future.

In the end, such allophone presences, ones often inextricable from one’s own attempt at offering an explanation, may well be “what meaning,” in the original or in translation, “cannot convey.” Nonetheless, there remains so much in the pages of Gumbrecht that compels me to continue to answer this call to and from other languages, undeterred by the random interference that such allophone “roaming” might occasion, as well as the ever-present chance of being cut off... *Allô? Alô?*

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