

# Philology

An International Journal  
on the Evolution of Languages, Cultures and Texts



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# Philology

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*Philology and Performing Arts. A challenge.* M. Cavagna and C. Maeder (Eds.). Louvain: Presses Universitaires de Louvain (Floating texts series), 2014, 324 pp. – ISBN : 9782875583208.

In the last three decades scholars have periodically questioned the purposes, the instruments, and in fact the very role of philology: from the debate on Cerqueglini's alleged "New Philology" in 1991 to the courageous but small-scale discussion on the methodologies of textual philology on *Ecdotica* in 2011, it demonstrated to be a topic that triggers contrasting opinions. Mattia Cavagna and Costantino Maeder take the risk to pick up some threads from this ongoing fluctuating discussion, focusing on the notion of "moving text". This notion comprises two interlinked nuances of meaning: considering texts as transmedial and in-process cultural products, and considering performing cultural phenomena with the instruments of philology; in both cases, the discipline is forced to face a major challenge to its 19<sup>th</sup>-century formulas. Indeed, as the editors put it in the Introduction, *About moving texts* (7–13), philology is bound to focus on the dynamics of texts, and must realize that its object of study exists precisely in its continuous elaboration, in its openness: "codes and texts are, by definition, approximations, that hint at tendencies and regularities. Human codes, and the resultant texts, [...] refer to open, incomplete systems" (10). The aim of this volume, therefore, is indeed a challenge, and a risky experiment, too: the exploration of the multifarious possibilities of interaction between philology and performing arts, in order to stimulate new ways of thinking the discipline, and to provide new theoretical insight into performing arts.

The nineteen papers that compose this volume present a wide range of interpretations of the topic at stake, providing views from different fields, ranging from textual philology of the Middle Ages to the study of 17<sup>th</sup>-century opera, from Japanese Noh theatre to Italian Neo-Realistic cinema, to contemporary novelists and songwriters. Although the "multi-disciplinary approach" is the new mantra of scholarly research, it is often less productive than anticipated, and it requires particular skilfulness and determination to integrate different contributions in a faceted but coherent discussion. This volume is no exception, since the papers, both for their distant approaches and their weak connections to the main topic, tend to form a discontinuous mosaic of voices, managing to provide little more than some evocative arguments and few brilliant takes on the main issues of current philological research. On top of that, I am afraid that some of

the essays would have benefited from some significant proofreading, as their present form hinders the comprehension of their content.

However, an attempt to organise the diverse materials of the volume is provided by the division in four sections: *New Theoretical Approaches, Opera and Philology, Multimediality and Transmediality, Case studies*. In addition to this subject-related selection, there are some recognizable topics recurring in the papers throughout the volume. One of the most represented topic is the preoccupation with the role of philology when it approaches performance-related aspects of textual traditions. Francesco Benozzo, whose paper is significantly the first of the volume (17–27), faces some of the trickiest issues of textual philology today. The author, taking after Foucault, vehemently attacks the “colonisation” exercised by philologists over the cultural products they aim to study, stressing the hegemony applied by the discipline to the texts. As an antidote to the perpetuation of these “patterns of domination”, he claims the necessity of a mutual communication between scientists and their human community (23–4). Moreover, Benozzo criticizes the obsession of the discipline with explaining every phenomenon within a simplistic cause/effect frame, the preference accorded to the reconstruction of an *Ur-text*, and the lack of interest for the dynamics of cultural transformation and for the multimediality of cultural products, thus missing the complexity and pluralism of texts. Other contributors of the volume share similar views: the problematic relationship of domination of the scholar over its object of study is criticised also by Ingrid Schraffl (105–12). Schraffl takes her experience in the study of the transformations of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Italian *opere buffe* in Wien as a demonstration of the inadequacy of the principle of textual reconstruction: where a play was modified at every performance and the very author considered his own text unstable, every version of that play is equally valid. That of the reconstruction of the *Ur-text*, in fact, is a 20<sup>th</sup>-century obsession, and the student must be careful not to superimpose this modern perspective on the texts; rather, he or she should aim to reacquire a “more ‘jocose’, experimental and lively treatment” of the subject to avoid its musealization (111).

The broader issue of the role of philology in respect of “moving texts” is at the centre of several papers, especially to those belonging to the section of the volume dedicated to opera: Paolo Rosato and Giovanni Polin question the role of reconstruction work for 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>-century opera plays. Rosato (71–86) explores the role of the interpreters in the tradition of Rossini’s *Barbiere*: he finds out that performers operated adaptations of

the score independently from the author, and thus wonders how a critical edition could take into account the variety of interpretations that constituted the text. Moreover, traditional philology contrasts with a historically realistic view of the author: since Rossini was aware of the modifications operated on his plays and appreciated them as a way to respond to different market needs, the notion of “authenticity” loses its absolute value and becomes, in fact, a mystification of the will of the author. A similar concern is expressed by Polin (87–105), who depicts a very similar picture for 18<sup>th</sup>-century opera: the complexity and variability of the text and its *mise-en-scène* cannot be described through a classical critical edition; rather, the opera philologist should look for the performed text, and appreciate the collectiveness of artistic creation.

The continuous re-elaboration of the text is another recurring topic of the volume. The last article in the section dedicated to opera discusses an aspect of this stratification of versions: Bianca De Mario (113–34) concerns herself with a 18<sup>th</sup>-century play, *Sallustia*, whose text has never been performed as it is written, but was always adapted to the needs of the interpreters or to the tastes of the audience. As De Mario suggests, contemporary performances must show awareness of the variability of the text, and accept to participate to the tradition of the play. As anticipated by the stress of the editors to the concept of art-in-progress in their Introduction, also other papers deal with the processes of transformation of the text and the challenges it poses to philology. In the third section, Jelle Koopmans (137–46) provides a brilliant consideration on the persistence and modification of the text in the *longue durée*. The author starts by wondering to what extent can philology grab the essence of “texts” that were intended to be performed, and, through the specimen of old-French epics, questions traditional philological postulates against the issue of long-time continuity of cultural forms. In Koopmans’ words, “a claim to intermediality – a currently fashionable concept – is simply a sacrifice on the altar of modernity” (139). Rather, philologists should challenge the limits of their discipline, by interrogating different types of documents in search of information on performance, by investigating the transliteration of traditions through different media (ballads, popular novels, songs, opera, etc.), and by considering texts as living entities, whose reality just cannot be grabbed through “pure” textual philology. A different point of view on the issue is provided by Herri Veivo (163–76): he investigates the interaction between historical *avant-garde* and contemporary media, by studying the re-appropriation of

Marinetti's manifesto in the videos produced by YouTube users. Surprisingly, the re-contextualisation in a new medium and a new historical and cultural frame, gives new light to some previously misinterpreted aspects of Futurism, and in general provides a positive example of a "dialogic, interactive, nonlinear and playful literary historical thinking" (170). In the fourth section, also Pascal Terrien and Christina Ljungberg concern themselves with the dynamics of re-elaboration of texts through time. Terrien (225–55) does so by illustrating the composition process of the Japanese opera *Sumidagawa*. This play originates from an adaptation of five 15<sup>th</sup>-century Noh plays, and the composition of both music and text shows the preoccupation of the author for the transmission of a Japanese narrative to a French audience, and at the same time for the preservation of a Noh feeling to the play. Ljungberg (257–69), similarly, investigates the sources of another type of performing texts, this time Laurie Anderson's songs from 1972 to 1999: this study shows Anderson's ability of handling long-time cultural transmissions and playing with different sign systems involved in multimodality.

As it should appear evident by now, that of multimodality and transmodality is indeed the topic recurring most frequently throughout the volume. Sarah Bonciarelli (29–37), while exploring the alleged gap between oral and written texts, provides a fundamental consideration on the hypertextual and multimodal nature of literature. According to Bonciarelli, hypertextuality is by no means a product of our age, as also in the past oral and written constantly influenced each other, and texts were in fact performed and experienced through a blend of different sign systems and media. By highlighting the natural "remediation" in literary transmission, in which new and old media interact and absorb each other, the author proves that no real separation exists between oral and written texts. After this useful theoretical framing, the other articles dealing with multimodality are more similar to case studies: Johan Wijnants (39–57), for instance, deals with the issues and guidelines for the creation of interlingual and intralingual opera surtitles. In the overview given by Wijnants, the philological preparation of the surtitlers is fundamental to help them choose the best strategies to render every nuance of the libretto's text, but at the same time not take too much of the audience attention off the play. Mara Santi's view on multimodality (177–95) comes from the study of Italian writer Mauro Covacich, and, in particular, of his use of intertextuality among novels, videos and artistic performance; philology, in this case, is barely hinted at as a possibly inadequate instrument for the critical edition of Covacich work. Sebastiano

Ferrari (199–211) concerns himself with another type of passage between different media, that from poetry to song writing: by analysing the similarities and differences between De André's *Cantico dei drogati* and its model, Mannerini's poem *Eroina*, Ferrari discovers a definite will of faithfulness to the poem on behalf of De André, and an example of seamless intermedial transposition. Another type of intermedial transposition is the one explored by Stefano Carlucci (213–23), who examines Gaiman's comic-book version of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Contrarily to the previous case study, the transposition gives way to a loose adaptation, which however keeps intact the feeling and the expressive intentions of the play, thus confirming that texts have a certain degree of independence from their own author, and that a free adaptation can be more faithful than a copy.

The focus on multimediality does not push into the background the classical issues of literary semiotics, as the role of the author and that of the reception; rather, it kindles new ways of thinking them. The illusion of a single author in the process of transformation of texts through different media is the core of Guendalina Sertorio's article (271–88), that deals with the complicated relationships linking together Montanelli's report on Generale della Rovere, Rossellini's movie, Amidei's screenplay and the later Montanelli's novel. Through the work of comparison among the four works, belonging to different media and genres, Sertorio cannot reach a final decision on who is to be considered the "real" author, and rather opts for a sort of conflicting teamwork, in which it is hard to distinguish a definitive hierarchy. On the other end of the communication process, lies the problem of the role of reception in the work of art. The most extensive reflection on it comes from the article by Augusto Ponzio and Susan Petrilli (289–307), examining the function of free indirect speech in novels and movies as a place for interaction between the Self and the Other. This proves to be not only a linguistic matter, but also part of the different reception mechanisms of different languages, i.e. part of a socio-historically determined orientation towards the discourse of the Other, which involves both verbal and preverbal sign systems.

Finally, at least three papers present a description of the main features and problems of particular forms of performing arts: although the connection of these papers to the philological issues that more or less inform the rest of the volume is weak, they manage to provide examples of complex texts that are impossible to tackle with present philological instruments. Caspar Schjelbred (59–68), for instance, describes his experience in improvisation

theatre, listing its objectives, its forms and its rules, but focusing on the ability of the performer to create a balance between continuity and change through the performance. A peculiar type of theatre is also analysed in Eusebio Ciccotti's paper (147–61), which explores the issues raised by radio plays to aesthetic theory in the Thirties: according to the philosopher Blaustein, radio theatre is an aesthetic activity including non-perceived images, originating from aural reception and personal visual memory. In the fourth section, Loreta De Stasio and José Maria Nadal (309–24) investigate Natalia Ginzburg's drama plays. These plays are often disregarded in spite of their linguistic peculiarity, namely the use of dialogues in an uncommunicative fashion, and the authors highlight how this same technique is part, *mutatis mutandis*, of the cinematographic language of postmodern directors such as Tarantino and Almodóvar.

In spite of its heterogeneity, the volume must be praised for its intention of opening a place of interaction for scholars of distant fields to discuss new ways of conceiving philology, its means, its objects and its role. While doing so, the volume dismantles once and for all the idea of a text as a solid, written and single-authored cultural fossil, and proposes a wide range of possible performing texts, or rather moving texts, which are indeed the real, multiple, ever-changing and terribly ambiguous products of human communities which philology is devoted to study.

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