

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Stimmungen lesen: Über eine verdeckte Wirklichkeit der Literatur* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2011) / *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012)

In this extraordinary and highly personal collection of essays, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht develops his groundbreaking understanding of literature and the arts as generators of *presence*. In *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (2003), Gumbrecht exposed the idea that Western modernity was a “meaning culture,” that is, a paradigm that gave priority to intellectual-linguistic signification rather than to bodily-sensorial experience. In more philosophical terms, hermeneutics rather than presence has been pursued in modernity. Gumbrecht develops this idea in *Stimmungen lesen* by focusing on the “mood,” “atmosphere,” or “ambiance” that the literary text engenders in the reader. In this way, Gumbrecht develops his philosophical proposal by analyzing the physical-affective aspects of literary communication. That this has been a carefully matured project is clear from the fact that it is also a continuation of Gumbrecht’s interest in the notion of *materiality* (cf. the edited book *Materialities of Communication* (1994)). Through these and other works, he shows how the Western intellectual tradition too often has lost sight of the concrete and sensual dimensions of experience. In this way, Gumbrecht’s thinking represents a change of paradigm in relation to the typically modern focus on meaning and abstraction. In his *presence paradigm*, the aesthetic experience is restored to its perhaps primeval function, that is, to create a certain *Stimmung* rather than to produce a more or less precise meaning to be deciphered through endless interpretations.

Stimmungen lesen consists of two main parts, on the one hand, “Momente,” which is a series of close readings of classical works of literature and culture, and, on the other, “Situationen,” which aims at representing collective moods from the past. As regards “Momente,” Gumbrecht reads Walther von der Vogelweide’s poetry, the first picaresque novel *Lazarillo de Tormes*, Shakespeare’s sonnets, Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew*, Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis’s *Counselor Ayres’ Memorial*, and Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*. Special mention should be made of his reading of María de Zayas’s *Novelas ejemplares y amorosas* (1637). Gumbrecht’s reading of this author – who should be part of the international literary canon – is extremely congenial with what can be assumed to be her literary and social intentions. Zayas is a feminist *avant la lettre* who both rhetorically and narratively creates an emotional and psychic intensity – the existential proximity of death and love – that Gumbrecht analyzes with extreme perspicuity. In addition, also visual and musical expressions are explored in *Stimmungen lesen*, specifically the painter Casper David Friedrich’s pictorial production and Janis Joplin’s song. Gumbrecht thus proves his extraordinary sensitivity as regards aesthetic expression. His readings combine sharp intuitions with a thorough philosophical and literary erudition. The second main part of the work, “Situationen,” pursues to recuperate or recreate the experience of living at a particular historical moment (similar to the intention behind the wonderful work *In 1926 – Living on the Edge of Time* from 1998). Gumbrecht uses, as the primary motif for the circumscription of the European mood during the twentieth century, the notion of the *crisis of representation*. During this historical period, the world is perceived as impossible to depict, an

experience that causes a feeling of drama. Through a series of space-time sequences running from the beginning to the end of the twentieth century, Gumbrecht shows the attitudes governing this historical epoch. From Surrealism to Existentialism ending with Deconstruction, the evocation of the *Stimmung* belonging to a certain historical period is highly convincing. Gumbrecht's emotional-historical reconstructions thus represent an achievement that is both aesthetic and philosophical at the same time. The value and fruitfulness of Gumbrecht's work cannot be questioned, as it already is, and will remain, a central reference for many academic disciplines.