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Reviewing the Muse's New Abode: A Review of *Museum of Words: European and American Interart Poetics*

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Abstract: This review examines Ou Rong's co-authored *Museum of Words: European and American Interart Poetics* (2022), a brilliant work of interart studies which offers a systematic survey of the historical evolution and conceptual reorientation of modern interart poetics through its "Theoretical Survey" and "Critical Practice" sections. A primary contribution of the volume is the redefinition of "ekphrasis" as a dynamic transformation across different artistic media and sign systems, thereby challenging the long-standing privileging of textuality in literary criticism. Furthermore, the book moves beyond Eurocentrism by integrating Chinese aesthetic traditions and employing innovative methodologies, including digital humanities. Ultimately, this work serves as both a retrospective synthesis and a forward-looking intervention that reshapes the paradigm of literary studies in the digital age.

Keywords: *Museum of Words: European and American Interart Poetics*; Ou Rong; Ekphrasis; *yigefuhuan*; interart poetics

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题目：探访缪斯的新居所：《语词博物馆：欧美跨艺术诗学研究》述评

摘要：本文评述了欧荣及其研究团队的新著《语词博物馆：欧美跨艺术诗学研究》（2022）。该书通过“理论爬梳”与“批评实践”两大部分，系统梳理了跨艺术诗学的历史演变，并剖析了该领域的现代转向。其核心贡献在于将“艺格符换”（ekphrasis）重新定义为不同艺术媒介与符号系统之间的动态转化，挑战了文学研究中长期存在的文本中心主义。此外，该书打破了欧洲中心主义，将中国美学传统纳入对话，并融合了数字人文等创新研究方法。该著作不仅是对跨艺术研究传统的总结，更是对数字化时代文学研究范式的积极重构，是该领域的里程碑之作。

关键词：语词博物馆；欧美跨艺术诗学研究；欧荣；艺格符换；跨艺术诗学

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Introduction

In an intellectual climate increasingly shaped by the convergence of disciplines, methodologies, and media, *Museum of Words: European and American Interart Poetics* emerges as a timely and ambitious intervention into contemporary literary studies. Authored by Ou Rong and her research team, this substantial work surveys the historical evolution of interart poetics and proposes a conceptual reorientation of the field with notable precision and comparative depth. Intended for scholars and advanced students of comparative literature, art history, musicology, and intermedial studies, the work manages the rare feat of being both encyclopedic in its historical sweep and discerning in its close-critical moments. It reveals that literature is not a closed system of symbols, but rather a dynamic existence that constantly flows, translates and re-creates itself across different media.

1. Theoretical Lineage of the Core Concept “Ekphrasis” in Interart Poetics

At its core lies a compelling and far-reaching argument: poetry has never existed in isolation. Rather, it is fundamentally interartistic—born from and continuously shaped by its entanglements with music, visual art, and performance. This claim is not merely interpretive; it is ontological. The book thus invites readers to reconsider what poetry is, rather than simply how it may be analyzed. The metaphor of the “Museum of Words,” adopted and developed from James Heffernan’s theoretical discourses (1993), provides a powerful organizing principle for the volume. Drawing on the etymological roots of the “museum” as the *mouseion*, or seat of the Muses, the authors reconstruct a premodern imagination of artistic unity, more than just “verbal representation of visual representation” confined in Heffernan’s book. In this framework, reading poetry is not just a temporal unfolding of the verbal text but a spatial and sensory experience—akin to walking through a gallery where language serves as both medium and architecture. Such a metaphor is more than illustrative; it functions methodologically, urging readers to engage poetry through multimodal perception, activating

vision, hearing, and imagination simultaneously. In doing so, the book challenges the long-standing privileging of textuality in literary criticism and repositions poetry within a broader aesthetic ecology.

Structurally, the volume is divided into two major sections: a “Theoretical Survey” and a “Critical Practice.” The first part undertakes an intellectual archaeology of interart poetics, tracing its lineage from classical antiquity to the present. Beginning with foundational texts, the authors revisit early reflections on the relationship between artistic forms, including the analogies drawn between poetry and painting in ancient rhetorical traditions. These early formulations are shown to have laid the groundwork for a persistent line of inquiry into the affinities and distinctions between temporal and spatial arts.

The discussion then moves into the Enlightenment, where attempts to delineate the boundaries of different art forms became more systematic. Here, the tension between unity and differentiation comes to the fore. While earlier traditions often celebrated the kinship between the arts, later theorists sought to define their limits, distinguishing, for instance, between the temporal unfolding of poetry and the spatial immediacy of visual representation. This dialectic, between convergence and separation, becomes a central thread running through the history of interart poetics.

A major turning point identified in the book is the twentieth century “Interart Turn,” during which comparative literature expanded its scope to include relationships between literature and other artistic and cultural systems. The authors carefully reconstruct this shift, highlighting how scholars began to move beyond purely textual analysis toward a more relational understanding of literature. Interart studies, once considered peripheral, gradually gained legitimacy as a distinct area of inquiry. This development was further institutionalized through the formation of international scholarly communities like International Association of Word and Image Studies, the International Society for Intermedial Studies, the International Association for Word and Music Studies, which have fostered sustained dialogues across disciplines and national boundaries.

One of the most significant contributions of the theoretical section is its engagement with the concept of “ekphrasis”. Traditionally understood as the verbal representation of visual art, ekphrasis has long occupied a central place in the discussions of interart relations. However, the authors argue that this definition is no longer sufficient. In contemporary scholarship, ekphrasis has expanded to encompass a wide range of intermedial interactions, including description, transformation, translation, and reinterpretation across different sign systems.

To address this conceptual expansion, the book undertakes what it terms a “rectification of names.” (Ou et al., 1) Recognizing the inconsistencies and limitations in existing Chinese translations and interpretations and built on Siglind Bruhn’s definition of ekphrasis — “a representation in one medium of a real or fictitious text composed in another medium” (559), thereby, Ou further proposes that “ekphrasis is the dynamic transformation among different artistic media and sign systems”, and emphasizes “the continuous and dynamic bi-directional/multi-directional influence” throughout the very process (Ibid., 10). This redefinition is not merely terminological; it reflects a deeper theoretical shift. By emphasizing transformation rather than

representation, Ou reconceptualizes ekphrasis as an active process, a set of operations through which meaning is generated, exchanged, and reconfigured across media.

Equally noteworthy is the book's insistence on situating interart poetics within a global, rather than exclusively Western, framework. While the historical narrative engages extensively with European and American traditions, it is consistently refracted through a comparative lens that brings Chinese poetics into the conversation. This approach challenges the implicit Eurocentrism of much interart scholarship and demonstrates that the intuition of artistic interconnectedness is by no means unique to the West.

Drawing on classical Chinese texts, the authors illustrate how the integration of poetry, music, painting, and calligraphy has long been a defining feature of Chinese aesthetic thoughts. According to Ou, with a holistic view of nature and culture in mind, Chinese education used to be a holistic education: art and literature, poetry, painting, calligraphy and music were required of the Chinese Scholar-official class; and more and more talented writers and artists with three or four perfections turned up and practiced the intermedial play of sister arts in their works, the tension between word and image and *paragone* of painting and poetry characteristic of the West exist less prominent in China, particularly before the modern China. (Ibid., 170) Concepts such as the mutual illumination of poetry and painting, or the synthesis of multiple art forms within a single work, resonate strongly with contemporary theories of intermediality. At the same time, the book is careful not to collapse these traditions into a homogeneous framework. Instead, it highlights both convergences and divergences, suggesting that different cultural contexts give rise to distinct configurations of interart relations.

This comparative perspective is particularly effective in revealing the limitations of existing theoretical models. Categories developed within Western scholarship, while useful, are not always adequate for capturing the complexity of non-Western practices. By placing these models in dialogue with Chinese aesthetic traditions, the authors open up new possibilities for conceptual and theoretical refinement. Nevertheless, with a comparison of ekphrasis and Chinese literary genre of *Fu* (赋), Ou also advocates the refinement of Chinese poetics to revitalize the writing and criticism of *Fu*. (Ibid., 219)

In addition to its historical and theoretical scope, the book distinguishes itself through its methodological pluralism. Traditional approaches such as close reading and intellectual history are complemented by insights from digital humanities. The use of bibliometric analysis, for instance, allows the authors to map the development of interart studies across different academic contexts, revealing patterns of influence, gaps in study, and emerging trends. This empirical dimension adds a layer of rigor to the study and underscores its relevance for contemporary scholarship.

At the same time, the book remains attentive to the changing conditions of literary production and reception in the digital age. The proliferation of new media technologies has fundamentally altered the ways in which texts are created, circulated, and experienced. Poetry, in particular, has increasingly moved beyond the printed page, taking on new forms that incorporate visual, auditory, and interactive elements. The authors recognize that these developments by expanding the possibilities of poetic expression and challenging existing theoretical frameworks. In this context, the concept of interart poetics acquires renewed significance. If poetry is no longer confined to a single medium, then its analysis must likewise transcend disciplinary boundaries.

The book thus positions itself at the intersection of tradition and innovation, drawing on historical insights while engaging with contemporary transformations.

Taken together, the first half of *Museum of Words* lays a robust foundation for rethinking the nature of poetry and its relationship to other arts. By combining historical depth, theoretical rigor, and comparative sensitivity, it offers a comprehensive account of interart poetics as both an enduring tradition and a dynamic field of inquiry. More importantly, it advances a bold and persuasive argument for the centrality of intermedial thinking in the study of literature today. In doing so, the book rather surveys an existing field but actively reshapes it. It challenges readers to move beyond entrenched disciplinary boundaries and to embrace a more integrated vision of the arts, one that recognizes the fluidity, hybridity, and transformative potential of aesthetic expression.

2. Critical Practice of Interart Poetics Across the West and East

While the first half of *Museum of Words* constructs a dense and historically grounded theoretical framework, the second half “Critical Practice” demonstrates the interpretive power and flexibility of that framework through a wide-ranging series of case studies. Here, interart poetics is no longer an abstract proposition but an analytical method, capable of illuminating texts across periods, genres, and media environments. The transition from theory to practice is not structural; it enacts the very principle the book advocates: that meaning emerges through dynamic interaction rather than isolated contemplation.

The section opens with what might be considered the “origin scene” of Western ekphrasis: the description of Achilles’ shield in Homer’s *Iliad*. This canonical example is revisited not as a static instance of “verbal representation of visual representation,” (Heffernan, 1993) but a complex intermedial event. The shield, as described in the epic, is not simply an object rendered in words; it is a microcosmic world, a narrative device that integrates visual imagery, temporal progression, and symbolic layering. By re-reading this passage through the lens of ekphrasis (*yigefuhuan*, 艺格符换), the authors foreground its dynamic quality: the poem does not merely depict the shield but re-creates it as a performative space in which multiple artistic logics intersect.

From antiquity, the discussion moves into the Renaissance, where the relationship between poetry and painting becomes increasingly self-conscious. Portrait poems, in particular, are examined as sites of negotiation between visual likeness and verbal interpretation. These works do not simply “translate” images into words; they interrogate the very possibility of representation, often exposing the tension between appearance and meaning. The interart framework reveals how such texts operate simultaneously within and against the conventions of both media, producing a layered aesthetic experience that cannot be reduced to either.

The book’s engagement with Romanticism further expands this trajectory by highlighting how poets began to internalize visuality. Rather than describing external artworks, Romantic poets often generate images through language itself, blurring the boundary between perception and imagination. This shift marks a crucial

moment in the evolution of interart poetics: the visual is no longer merely an external reference point but becomes embedded within the structure of poetic expression.

Particularly compelling is the discussion of American modernist poetry, where interart experimentation reaches a new level of intensity. Poets such as R. M. Rilke, Hart Crane, Lanston Hughes and Bernard Spencer are presented as key figures who actively engaged with visual art, architecture, music and dance, as inspiration and structural principles.

The scope of the “Critical Practice” section is further broadened by its engagement with global and intermedial phenomena. Case studies examining the intercultural circulation of literary works, such as the transmission of Western poetry into Eastern contexts and vice versa, highlight the role of intermedial processes in shaping global literary and artistic exchanges. These examples demonstrate how texts are continuously reinterpreted and transformed as they move across linguistic, cultural, and medial boundaries.

Importantly, the authors do not treat these processes as neutral. While the primary focus remains on aesthetic transformation, there is an implicit recognition that interart and intermedial exchanges are embedded within broader historical and cultural dynamics. The movement of texts across contexts involves creative adaptation and negotiation, reinterpretation, and, at times, contestation.

The methodological diversity of this section mirrors the complexity of its subject matters. Close textual analysis is combined with historical contextualization, comparative reading, and theoretical reflection. This pluralism allows the authors to capture the multifaceted nature of interart phenomena without reducing them to a single explanatory model. Instead, interart poetics emerges as a flexible and evolving framework, capable of accommodating a wide range of artistic practices.

At the same time, the section reinforces the central claim of the book: that poetry is fundamentally interartistic. Whether through its engagement with visual forms, its incorporation of sound and performance, or its participation in global networks of exchange, poetry is shown to be a dynamic and relational medium. The boundaries between arts are not fixed but porous, constantly reshaped by processes of interaction and transformation.

In this sense, the “Critical Practice” section does more than illustrate theoretical concepts; it enacts them. By moving across different historical periods, cultural contexts, and artistic forms, the authors demonstrate how interart poetics operates in practice. The result is a richly textured account of poetry as a living, evolving phenomenon—one that resists confinement within any single medium or disciplinary framework.

3. The Future of Interart Studies

Having established both a comprehensive theoretical foundation and a diverse range of critical applications, *Museum of Words* turns, in its broader implications, toward the future of poetics in an increasingly digitized and interconnected world. This forward-looking dimension is one of the book’s most distinctive features, positioning it as a retrospective synthesis and a programmatic statement for the evolution of literary studies in the twenty-first century.

Central to this future-oriented perspective is the recognition that the “media revolution” has fundamentally altered the conditions under which poetry is produced, circulated, and experienced. The rise of digital technologies has given birth to new forms of artistic expression that defy traditional categorizations. Poetry is no longer confined to the printed page; it now exists in multimedia installations, interactive platforms, and algorithmically generated environments. In such contexts, the interart nature of poetry becomes an observable reality.

The book engages with these developments through a nuanced discussion of intermediality in the digital age. Drawing on contemporary theoretical insights, the authors argue that digital media do not simply provide new channels for existing forms but actively reshape the ontology of artistic works. Code, databases, and interfaces function as mediating structures, influencing how texts are constructed and interpreted. This shift requires a corresponding transformation in critical methodology, one that can account for the complex interactions between human creativity and technological systems.

This book is also recommendable by its commitment to methodological innovation. The book’s use of digital humanities tools, such as bibliometric analysis and citation mapping, exemplifies how quantitative methods can complement traditional interpretive approaches. By visualizing patterns of scholarly production, the authors provide empirical evidence for the development of interart studies as a field, highlighting both its achievements and its gaps. This integration of qualitative and quantitative methods reflects a broader trend in the humanities, where interdisciplinary collaboration is increasingly necessary to address complex research questions.

At the same time, the book remains attentive to the limitations and challenges of its own approach. In its concluding reflections, it acknowledges that the scope of its analysis, while extensive, is not exhaustive. The primary focus on European and American traditions, even when supplemented by Chinese perspectives, leaves other cultural contexts relatively under explored. The authors identify this as an area for future research, calling for a more inclusive and globally representative account of interart practices.

Another area identified for further development is the critical examination of power dynamics within intermedial processes. While the book touches on issues such as the politics of representation and the role of cultural hierarchies, these themes are not explored in depth. A more sustained engagement with questions of gender, colonialism, and ideological influence could enrich the analysis, revealing how interart transformations are shaped by aesthetic considerations and social, political forces.

Despite these limitations, the book’s overall contribution is both substantial and far-reaching. It succeeds in redefining interart poetics as a central concern of literary studies, rather than a peripheral specialization. By articulating a comprehensive framework that integrates historical analysis, theoretical innovation, and critical practice, it provides scholars with a powerful set of tools for engaging with the complexities of contemporary culture.

Perhaps most importantly, *Museum of Words* reaffirms the relevance of the humanities in an age often characterized by technological determinism. By demonstrating how poetry continues to evolve through its interactions with other arts and media, the book highlights the enduring vitality of aesthetic expression. It

suggests that, far from being rendered obsolete by digital technologies, the arts are being transformed in ways that open up new possibilities for creativity and understanding.

The metaphor of the “museum” thus acquires a renewed significance. Rather than a static repository of past achievements, the Museum of Words is envisioned as a dynamic and evolving space, a site of ongoing dialogue between different forms, traditions, and perspectives. It is a place where boundaries are not enforced but explored, where meaning is not fixed but continually renegotiated.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Museum of Words: European and American Interart Poetics* stands as a landmark contribution to the field of interart intermedial studies. Its synthesis of theoretical depth, methodological innovation, and critical insight makes it an indispensable resource for scholars across disciplines. More than that, it offers a compelling vision of the future of literary studies, one that embraces complexity, fosters dialogue, and recognizes the interconnectedness of all artistic expression.

By reimagining poetry as an inherently interartistic practice, the book expands the scope of literary criticism and invites us to reconsider our own modes of perception. In an age defined by fragmentation and rapid changes, it reminds us that meaning emerges not from isolation but from relation, from the continuous interplay between words, images, sounds, and the human imagination.

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