

**Translation and Culture:
A Review of *The Trans/national Study of Culture:
A Translational Perspective*, Edited by
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The Trans/national Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective is, through its own structure and approach, the best proof that the project proposed in the title can be successful in research. By its integrative power, it is likely to contribute to the setting up of a rewardingly inclusive space of views, interests and theories. Reuniting researchers from a variety of fields – cultural and literary studies, translation studies, sociology, philosophy, politics, history, art criticism, media and communication studies – the volume serves as a place of encounter whose most appealing quality is polyphony. It manages to make independent, sometimes dissonant, voices fuse into a concerted effort to address issues of utmost concern for both the academic and non-academic world. It seems to be conceived of in perfect awareness that ‘a special intellectual and moral responsibility attaches to what we do as scholars and intellectuals [and that] it is incumbent on us to complicate and/or dismantle the reductive formulae and the abstract but potent kind of thought that leads the mind away from concrete human history and experience into the realms of ideological fiction, metaphysical confrontation, and collective passion’.¹

The volume is organized into two main parts, ‘Conceptualizations and Histories’ and ‘Knowledge Systems and Discursive Fields’, both stemming from a number of questions formulated by the editor Doris Bachmann-Medick in her introductory chapter ‘The Trans/national Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective’. The articles also benefit from the theoretical framework outlined by Ansgar Nünning in ‘Towards Transnational Approaches to the Study of Culture: From Cultural Studies and *Kulturwissenschaften* to a Transnational Study of Culture’.

The main question Bachmann-Medick starts from is about ways in which monolingualism can be counteracted in the study of culture (3) given that ‘even cultural studies is in the process of internationalizing and hybridizing itself’ (Ning and Yifeng in Bachmann-Medick, 2). The author’s worry is that essentialism is not only at work in viewing and interpreting culture, but also permeates the study of culture, dominated by the assumption ‘that Anglo-American and European concepts and theories possess universal applicability’ (12). It is at this point that the concept of translation proves its usefulness, even indispensability, since it involves intellectual cooperation.

¹ Edward W. Said, ‘Preface to the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition’, in *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xxiii.

‘Translation’ gives coherence to the research project the volume represents, the various perspectives converging in the conclusion that ‘[k]nowledge is gained through translation – not through dissemination from an original, but through ongoing translations and negotiations, appropriations, and transformations’ (18).

Ansgar Nünning’s study furthers Bachmann Medick’s argument and supports the necessity of ‘theoretical and methodological pluralism’ (31). Considering the status quo of research, the author draws attention to the fact that ‘there are still marked differences between various national research cultures and traditions’ (23) despite the recent tendencies towards internationalization. By comparing British cultural studies and German *Kulturwissenschaften*, Nünning concludes that the study of culture, essentially international and interdisciplinary, should, by all means, be ‘characterized by theoretical and methodological pluralism as well as multiperspectivism’ (30). Translation is offered again as one of the key concepts to use in the study of culture, alongside ‘travelling concepts,’ cultural exchange, cultural transfer and emergence (38). Nünning seems to be fully supportive of a transnational and transcultural approach to the study of culture, but he is also aware that adopting this stand involves a new set of guiding principles ‘to expand the limited horizons of British cultural studies, American cultural studies, German *Kulturwissenschaften*, and other nationally specific research traditions’ (45).

Dipesh Chakrabarty’s ‘Place and Displaced Categories, of How We Translate Ourselves into Global Histories of the Modern’ connects translation to displacement and proposes ‘displacement-as-translation as an explanatory trope in discussions of modernity’ (53). Focusing on India’s history, Chakrabarty (who admits that, theoretically, translation is bilateral, involving mutual reflections of cultures) cannot help warning that it also actually implies ‘domination and power in global history’ (56). It is precisely his own condition as a migrant, of an ‘in-between-cultures’ that makes him more sensitive to the fact that no country can serve as a perfect model for any other country, as ‘no human society is a *tabula rasa*’ (59). The conclusion the author reaches by using examples from his *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* and *Subaltern Studies*, the series with which he has been associated since 1982, is that translation/displacement is indispensable to all ‘postcolonial projects of political historiography,’ as ‘[i]t is through such a relay network of translation of certain key categories of modernity that we all, whether in or outside of Europe, become the modern subjects of global histories’ (67).

Translation is also central to Jon Solomon’s ‘Transnational Study of Culture and the Indeterminacy of People(s) and Language(s)’. Either at a linguistic or a cultural level, translation is expected to function as a bridge, eventually leading to understanding, through symmetry and equality. However, the author incitingly signals the asymmetries associated with translation. By referring to Naoki Sakai’s *Translation and Subjectivity: on ‘Japan’ and Cultural Nationalism*, Solomon asserts that ‘[t]hese asymmetries cannot be limited to the gross imbalance of translational flows, but must also include the creation of mutually co-dependent forms of identity on both sides of the divide’ (75). A process of mediation between languages and cultures, translation also presupposes elaborate strategies of self-translation.

Andreas Langenohl’s ‘Scenes of Encounter’ opens by introducing the concept of translation both ‘as a (potentially) travelling concept and as a mode of travel’ (94). The author’s analysis is aimed at interpreting translation by enlarging upon its uses in postcolonial studies (subchapter ‘Translation and Literary Studies’) and the Actor-Network Theory of science and technology studies (subchapter ‘Translation in Science

and Technology Studies'), which he sees connected by their 'established marginality' (95). Langenohl explores the concept of 'translation' by deftly connecting it to that of 'encounter'. Translation across disciplines proves that what really matters in both literary studies and sociology is the encounter. Therefore, '[f]rom a translational perspective, [...] "cultures" and "context" have no existence beyond their relation to encounter' (111).

Doris Bachmann-Medick's own essay in the volume, 'From Hybridity to Translation: Study on Travelling Concepts', starts from the premise that '[g]lobalized circumstances demand the development of new, transnational positions for the study of culture, its concepts and theories' (119). The author investigates the concepts of 'hybridity' and 'translation,' revealing their multifacetedness through theories to which they come central, to be able to see whether concepts 'in translation' could be more effectively used in a transnational/translational study of culture, rather than 'travelling' concepts. From Bachmann-Medick's questions at the end of her essay, subtly opening it towards further discussion and reflection, one might infer that translation as translocation essentially means 'becoming'.

Possible answers to Bachmann-Medick's questions are formulated in Matthias Middell's 'Is There a Timetable when Concepts Travel? On Synchronicity in the Emergence of New Concepts Dealing with Border-Crossing Phenomena.' Middell's assumption is that cultural transfers, inspired by the study of translation, are mainly associated with the permeability of borders, because '[w]ithout looking beyond the borders of one's society or culture, there would not be any kind of cultural transfer' (145). From the author's point of view, 'the cultural transfer approach is a travelling concept par excellence' (149). Theory and disciplinary borders are constantly transgressed, but the flow is never unidirectional. Similar questions are simultaneously asked on both sides of the divide and answers, subsequently crystallized into approaches, emerge in different places.

Christina Lutter's essay, just like Middell's, is constructed as a possible answer to the question formulated in the title 'What Do We Translate When We Translate? Context, Process, and Practice as Categories of Cultural Analysis.' From the standpoint of the medieval historian, Christina Lutter addresses issues related to translation, both as a linguistic and as a cultural act. The idea underlying the author's argument is that '[a]ctors, texts, and objects are changed within the process of translation; they are not only trans-*lated* but eventually trans-*formed*' (157). From Lutter's point of view, translatability and transformation apply to research carried out across rather than within disciplinary boundaries and, as she emphasizes, '[i]nter- and transdisciplinarity are specific forms of transcultural communication and translation' (158).

In 'Translation and the East: There is No Such Thing as an "Eastern European Study of Culture"' Boris Buden challenges the idea of an East-West divide in cultural studies, pleading for the necessity of a 'transnational cultural theory – to be globally applicable' (175). Relying on Peter Osborne's theories in *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, the author deems it appropriate to envisage translation as the possible path to cultural universality (175), which does not mean ignoring the struggle and conflict inherent in any process of cultural exchange. For Buden, 'a genuinely transnational cultural theory must go beyond the East-West difference' (175) and must prevent potential supporters of an Eastern European study of culture from turning the East into the West's cognitive Other (171).

Drawing on her Australian cultural experience, Christa Knellwolf King identifies the opportunity of comparative cultural studies, which necessarily imply translation, to be underlain by 'the desire to make an intervention that benefits those who are affected by it' (195). 'Australian Cultural Studies. Intellectual Traditions and Critical Perspectives' is a plea for a translational perspective which, in the author's view, should give proper credit to cultural specifics and 'refrain from making universalizing pronouncements' (195).

For Rainer Winter, '[c]ultural studies should be more than research on contemporary culture' (202). His essay 'Cultural Studies: Critical Methodologies and the Transnational Challenge' starts from considering the Birmingham transdisciplinary history of cultural studies, whose original ideas the author seems to support by adding a transnational perspective, which would mean analysing 'the complex relationships between culture and the other domains of global society' (217). Conceptual and methodological translation can prove useful in the study of culture, with cultural studies and *Kulturwissenschaften* eventually benefitting from each other.

Thomas Weber's "'Media" and "Communication": National Assignment and Transnational Misunderstanding' explores the concept of translation evincing its centrality to media and communication studies. Analysing issues associated with the emergence of media and communication studies in various cultural spaces (Germany, France, and the United States, for instance), the author identifies the 'within-and-across-limits' position of disciplines, their simultaneous internationalization and national circumscribing.

By investigating major distinctions between the iconic, central to image studies (*Bildwissenschaft*) and the pictorial, at the heart of visual studies, in 'D/Rifts between Visual Culture and Image Culture: Relocations of the Transnational Study of the Visual' Birgit Mersmann is in the position to conclude that global art studies have emerged as transcultural studies (258). Art history has evolved into 'transnational cultural studies', *Bildwissenschaft* growing into a transnational 'transdiscipline', namely visual studies.

Reuniting contributors from a variety of fields, the volume constitutes itself as a kaleidoscopic image of culture, with 'translation' serving as a guiding concept and principle. By the approaches adopted, the volume invites a clear change of mindset in academia. The meaning of culture exists across rather than within disciplines and must therefore be decoded trans/nationally through a translational perspective.

References

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Preface to the 25th Anniversary Edition by the Author. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.