

Journal of Visual Culture

<http://vcu.sagepub.com>

Editorial: Acts of Translation
Mieke Bal and Joanne Morra
Journal of Visual Culture 2007; 6; 5
DOI: 10.1177/1470412907076198

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://vcu.sagepub.com>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Journal of Visual Culture* can be found at:

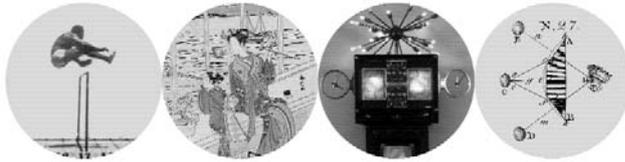
Email Alerts: <http://vcu.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://vcu.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

journal of visual culture



Editorial: Acts of Translation

Mieke Bal and Joanne Morra

Today translation is gaining ground as a crucial trope, idea, concept, metaphor and mode of interpretation within discussions of international visual and cultural practices. Art historians, cultural and literary critics, philosophers and psychoanalysts are turning to modern and contemporary theories of translation in order to consider visual, historical, social and subjective transformations. This issue of the *journal of visual culture* situates itself within this context and offers new elements to the emerging debate.

The figure of translation has a long history in the fields of theology, philosophy, literary studies and critical theory. From its early theological history, the study of translation produced an understanding of language as polyvalent. Based on the crossing of boundaries, this polyvalency was coupled with a recognition of language as polysemous. Together, these aspects of translation have led to the flourishing of divergent theories within various fields of study. Much of this work seeks to exploit the potential of translation's polysemy rather than tame it by pinning down meaning or interpretation. Walter Benjamin's (1992[1955]) work on translation is vital to an understanding of this. For Benjamin, translation is a mode of writing that works against codification, imitation, derivation and stasis. Instead, he proposes a philosophy of language in which translation does not serve the original, but liberates and releases its potential – which resides in that which resists translation. In this way, theorists that have followed him have been able to conceive of translation as a resistance to reading.

Benjamin's conception of translation as a mode or movement highlights its etymological relation to metaphor: both translation and metaphor share the notion visible in the root *transfer*. It is this idea of transfer or the crossing of boundaries, based on an accentuation of difference that supports translation's move into the study of visual culture. Scholars working in a variety of areas of study, across historical moments, and with diverse objects have taken up translation because of this mobility and the potential of art to

journal of visual culture [<http://vcu.sagepub.com>]
Copyright © 2007 SAGE Publications (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore)
Vol 6(1): 5–11 [1470-4129(200704)6:1]10.1177/1470412907076198

preserve and foreground it, instead of making it invisible. Hence, translation is vital to linguistic anthropology and the understanding of the mediated differences between linguistic signs; it forms the basis for an historical and critical epistemology within literary theory (de Man, 1986); and a deconstruction of the 'origins' and 'genealogies' of translation provides the foundation for a philosophy and ontology of language wherein translation becomes a 'necessary and impossible task' (Derrida, 1985a[1982], 1985b). Translation also plays an important role in the development of psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity: it is an aspect of dreamwork (Freud, 1958[1900]); it is a means of unraveling the 'inter-textuality' or 'transposition' of subject formation and creative practices (Kristeva, 1984[1974]); and is a modality through which subjectivity is understood as a series of translative seductions (Laplanche, 1989[1987], 1999[1992]). Translation is central to discussions of race and politics: it is conceived of as an historically located and gendered event (Spivak, 1993), as well as a site (Niranjana, 1992), and as a means through which we can level a critique of the prominence of 'English' as an imperial and globalizing force (Venuti, 1998).

Benefiting from and paralleling these contributions are the recent engagements with translation within art history, visual culture studies, film, media and cultural studies. For instance, translation is deployed as a way of interrogating and understanding the epistemological, ontological and philosophical possibilities provoked by a work of art (Bal, 2002; Morra, 2000; Shapiro, 1997; Steyn, 1996). It is integral to recent discussions on diaspora, exile and the construction of the other within analyses of modern and contemporary visual culture practices (Bhabha, 1997; Maharaj and Papastergiadis, 1999; Naficy, 2001). Translation provides a discursive context for discussions about globalization, and the necessity and impossibility of intercultural and international dialogue (Apter, 2001, 2006; Chow, 1995; Doherty, 1999; Fisher, 2000; Hall and Maharaj, 2001; Rofes et al., 1999). These edited collections, articles, catalogues and books enable us to grapple with translation as a means of critically interrogating the production, consumption and interpretation of visual cultures from the past to the present, nationally and internationally. This work makes it abundantly clear that translation is indispensable for understanding the visual realm.

Acts of Translation builds upon both of these genealogies: the longstanding tradition within theology, philosophy, literary theory and psychoanalysis, and its contemporary manifestations within visual culture. It also proposes something quite new to the debate. On the one hand, this series of articles provides us with a variety of ways in which translation is vital to visual and cultural practices and analyses and, on the other hand, it presents us with more speculative inquiries into the possibilities and limitations of translation's travels within visual culture. Upon soliciting, reading and reflecting upon the texts published here, we were struck by the ways in which the authors felt compelled to examine translation as a crossing of boundaries between media, and between cultures within an international context. We were also struck by the fact that these two modes of translation – 'intermedially' and 'interculturally' – are often intertwined.

We are using the term 'intermedial translation' to mean, quite simply, translating across media. To 'translate across' is to work within discourses and practices of intertextuality, intersemiotics and interdisciplinarity, which can lead to movements across genres, media, bodies of knowledge and subjects. More figuratively, translating across is concerned with the marginal, the gaps, fissures and contradictions of working in the interstices between these various boundaries. As will become clear, these issues are intimately connected with matters of intercultural translation, and require us to think and work across nations, ethnicities, subjectivities, histories, politics and ethics.

Within any discussion of translation, one is immediately confronted with the question of language. The texts that deal with this here begin from a point beyond the basic understanding of translation as a word-to-word process, and consider it a poetic, hermeneutic, political and experiential mode. In this way, translating across media becomes, for Gary Shapiro, a means of understanding the practice of ekphrasis as the moment in which the gap between words and images is constituted as the necessity and impossibility of translation as an 'infinite relation'. Constructing a fascinating and illuminating history that spans classical texts to contemporary philosophy and art, Shapiro considers how ekphrasis as a plurivocal translative practice revolves around the absence of the image and our attempts to represent that gap through language. In doing so, he is spurred on to interrogate the notion of infidelity, a central concern of translation, by asking where the absence of the image lies: within the original, at the place of translation, or in both sites.

Several contributors consider the complexity, losses and gains of word-to-image translations. In a thoughtful and sustained analysis, Lawrence Venuti proposes a new translative methodology for understanding what is at stake within film adaptations. Beginning with an examination of the hermeneutic and polyphonic aspects of this intertextual practice, Venuti considers both the formal and ideological parameters of what is lost and gained when we interpret, interrogate and critique both the source text and its filmic translation. In the end, he presents us with the possibility of rethinking both theories of adaptation and translation as methodological practices based on a critical dialectic between the two works.

Nora Alter offers us an incisive and engaging analysis of the visual translation of the written essay into an audio-visual form known as the 'essay film'. Alter examines the various ways in which the essay – with all its rhetorical devices, such as chiasmus, anamorphosis and the dialectical image – has been translated into the essay film from avant-garde, documentary and feature filmmaking, to contemporary video and installation art. She achieves this by considering both the writings of the Frankfurt School on the essay, and these works' impact on the essay film's relationship to history, social and political crises, and multivocal storytelling. All in all, Alter puts forward a new understanding of the relationship between the audio-visual essay, philosophy and translation.

Also translating intermedially is Sonja Neef's article, which presents us with a genealogical mapping of Europe's visual and verbal mythographic,

cartographic and graphic translations. Neef's analysis puts forward a reading of Europe in relation to its multiple, intermedial translations of a deferred original, and as the locus for an examination of its place within a politics of migration with the resulting relationships between 'homeland' and 'diaspora'. By considering the various historical, verbal and visual translations of Europe, Neef deftly negotiates the ways in which these translations of Europe and the prime meridian afford privilege to the west, and represent migrations and displacements in the construction of otherness.

In addition to these intermedial translations, several texts in this issue consider translation as a means of configuring transformations within subjectivity and the phenomenology of experience. Jillian St. Jacques undertakes a daring consideration of what is at stake in the translations and performances of transsexual and post-transsexual subjectivities. By defying the terms laid out by legislative and certain feminist discourses, St. Jacques provides us with an alternative means of considering the post-transsexual outside of the singular auspice of 'regret'. By thinking through Bhabha's (1997) notions of translation as a means by which a migrant culture of the 'in-between' brings to the foreground moments within a culture's untranslatability, St. Jacques unpacks the ways in which a move from transsexuality to post-transsexuality is not a regretful 'going back' to an original, a priori sexual position, but a complex moving forward to an ambiguous subject formation that is in the process of becoming and being spoken.

Joanne Morra also considers the possibility of a translative subjectivity, and does so within the context of autoethnographic films, videos and installations. In examining works made by artists living and practising in exile, and thus speaking a language which is not their mother tongue, Morra offers a thoughtful and nuanced analysis of the intimacy and distance involved in daughters translating their 'mother's tongue'. She considers this mode of translation both within the framework of a shared language and its community of users, and as a synecdoche for our relationship to our mothers, both personally and psychically. In this text, Morra develops an understanding of the autobiographical, ethnic, gendered and geopolitical task undertaken by the artist and filmmaker as translator.

Having touched upon the migrant and the enforced movements of people in colonial, postcolonial or exilic circumstances, we are firmly on the ground of intercultural translation. This moment also highlights the fact that intermedial and intercultural translation often cut through and across one another. As we have mentioned, intercultural translations are concerned with the practices, politics, ethics and poetics that sustain the possibility and failure of speaking across cultural divides within a transnational context. They represent the necessity of translation as a means through which we can begin to 'think continents, think continentally' as Emily Apter (2001, 2005) has proposed. In thinking continentally, many of the authors in *Acts of Translation* are concerned with the geopolitical, geo-aesthetic and geopoetic aspects of transnational and intercultural translations. Several of the contributors demonstrate the importance of subjectivity within this context,

particularly the intersubjective experience and the ethical imperatives involved in living communally and transnationally within cultures constituted by many people who are displaced, dispossessed, and living in exile.

Mieke Bal's contribution engages with the politics, ethics and aesthetics involved in translating and writing the subtitles for a series of films she was involved in making. This practice foregrounds a way of coming to terms with what it means for works of art to 'withhold the promise of translation' (Holly, forthcoming, 2007), particularly when they are about this very withholding. By focusing on the accent as a 'trace, the remainder, of the language the subject cannot speak', Bal develops the notion of a 'migratory aesthetics'. By this she means and goes on to analyse the 'cultural inspiration' that migration contributes to questions of displacement and everyday life; the cultural, ethical and political issues that emerge from migration, as well as the difficulties that arise in speaking in a foreign language. Also interested in language and diasporic peoples and cultures, Susan Pui San Lok provides us with a poetic, performative and astute analysis of translation and 'pidgin' – specifically, 'Chinglish'. This text examines the politics and poetics of cross-fertilized languages, their impact on questions of identity, authenticity and home, and representations of these problematics within contemporary art and theory. By thinking of translation as always partial, interrogative and political, Lok theorizes pidgin in terms of its history (particularly its military usage), language and technology, and then proceeds to offer us the possibility of thinking a pidgin culture and aesthetics.

Finally, we are delighted that Emily Apter has provided an afterword to the collection. In this text, Apter conjoins the work of Paul de Man and that of T.J. Clark to extend the notion that translation after Benjamin can be conceived of as a resistance to reading. Considering the materiality of language offered to us by de Man, as a type of 'hearing–thinking' or 'reading–thinking', alongside Clark's concern with the aporias between the verbal and visual orders in terms of the language with which the materiality of the work of art is translated into linguistic form, Apter's afterword enables us to rethink the acts of translation between which we carry out our work.

We would like to thank all our authors for their contributions, their commitment to the project and enduring patience; and Sage for their continued support, particularly our astute and ever-patient production manager, Jane Price.

References

- Apter, Emily (ed.) (2001) 'On Translation in a Global Market', *Public Culture* 13(1), Winter: 1–12.
- Apter, Emily (2005) *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*, esp. Ch. 13, 'Nature into Data'. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bal, Mieke (2002) *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press

- Benjamin, Walter (1992[1955]) 'The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*', in Hannah Arendt (ed.) *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, pp. 70–82. London: Fontana Press.
- Bhabha, H.K. (1997) 'Fireflies Caught in Molasses: Questions of Cultural Translation', in Rosalind Krauss et al. (ed.) *October: The Second Decade, 1986–1996*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Chow, Rey (1995) *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- de Man, Paul (1986) 'Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator"', in *The Resistance to Theory*, (foreword) Wlad Godzich, pp. 73–105. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1985a[1982]) *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. Christie McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1985b) 'Des Tours de Babel', in Joseph F. Graham (ed. and trans.) *Difference in Translation*, pp. 165–207. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Doherty, Claire (1999) *Babel: Contemporary Art and the Journeys of Communication*. Bristol: Ikon Gallery.
- Fisher, Jean (ed.) (2000) *Tactics of Resistance, Forms of Agency in Trans/cultural Practices, Reverberations*. Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Akademie Editions.
- Freud, Sigmund (1958[1900]) *The Interpretation of Dreams*, ed. James Strachey and Alan Tyson, trans. James Strachey. London: Penguin.
- Hall, Stuart and Maharaj, Sarat (2001) 'Modernity and Difference', *IV: Annotations* 6.
- Holly, Michael Ann (forthcoming, 2007) 'The Melancholic Art', *Art Bulletin*.
- Kristeva, Julia (1984 [1974]) *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Laplanche, Jean (1989[1987]) *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, trans. David Macey. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Laplanche, Jean (1999[1992]) *Essays on Otherness*, trans. John Fletcher. London: Routledge.
- Maharaj, Sarat and Papastergiadis, Nikos (1999) 'Critical Issues – Fatal Natalities: The Algebra of Diaspora and Difference after Apartheid', *Critical Issues Series*. Woolloomooloo, Australia: Artspace Visual Arts Centre.
- Morra, Joanne (2000) 'Translation into Art History', *parallax* 6(1) (January–March): 129–38.
- Naficy, Hamid (2001) *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.
- Niranjana, Tejaswini (1992) *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism, and the Colonial Context*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rofes, Octavi et al. (1999) *Muntadas: On Translation: The Audience*. Rotterdam: Witte de With.
- Shapiro, Gary (1997) *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Spivak, Gayatri (1993) 'The Politics of Translation', in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, pp. 179–200. New York: Routledge.
- Steyn, Juliet (ed.) (1996) *Act 2: Beautiful Translations*. London: Pluto Press.
- Venuti, Lawrence (1998) *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*. London: Routledge.

Mieke Bal is Dutch Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences Professor and has her home base at the University of Amsterdam. She has published many books, the most recent one *A Mieke Bal Reader* (University of Chicago Press, 2006). She has also taken up documentary filmmaking and video installation. Her areas of interest include literary theory, semiotics, visual art, cultural studies, transcultural theory, feminist theory, French, the Hebrew Bible, the 17th century, contemporary culture and art presentation.

Joanne Morra is Reader in the School of Art at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London. She has published on modern and contemporary art and theory, and is writing a book entitled *The Art of Translation*. She is also a Principal Editor of *journal of visual culture*.