

## Translation in Visual Arts | MODESTA DI PAOLA

During the last two decades the versatile concept of “translation” has been increasingly connecting Translation Studies with other fields of study. The dividing line between some disciplines such as Cultural Studies, Diaspora Studies, Anthropology has become much more permeable and the relationship between translation and other fields of study is more and more evident. This interdisciplinary relationship is marked by the cultural turn promulgated in the translation theory by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere<sup>[1]</sup>. Both authors have defined the culture as a dynamic process that involves differences and collisions and therefore it requires constant negotiation processes. In this sense, translation is the paradigm of mediation, not only from one language to another but also from one culture to another. The text representing the relationship between translation and culture is *Constructing Culture* (1998), a collection of essays about translation edited by both authors. One of these essays entitled “The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies,” proclaims a new partnership between both disciplines, whose main focus is the recognition of a comparative analysis between interculturality and interdisciplinarity. Hence, Translation Studies move their interests to the difference of cultures. The attention to otherness and diversity is what most directly links translation to Ethnography, (Post) Colonialism and Gender Studies. From feminist theory, for example, is analyzed the inbetweenness status of translation, rejecting the bipolarity between the source text and target text, as well as the original and the copy. This last one is a focal point recognizable in many social, cultural, philosophical and psychoanalytic theories.

In this context, the multifaceted and interdisciplinary act of translating is manifested in a multitude of synonyms, such as “emulating”, “adapting”, “rewriting” and “recreating”. From André Lefevere comes the term “rewriting” that, in some cases, would prevent us from distinguishing between various forms of rewriting, such as “translation”, “adaptation” and “emulation”.<sup>[2]</sup> “Translation as recreation” or “transcreation” is a well-known definition elaborated by the brothers Haroldo and Augusto de Campos, founders of Brazilian visual poetry and promoters of the Brazilian school of translation. For them “recreation” is the ability to translate with creativity and therefore making “translation-art”.<sup>[3]</sup> The creation of all those terms has also fostered the interest of Art Theory for translation even if we consider the progressive incorporation of them in the artistic

production.

Some issues related to translation have been integrated with the visual arts, firstly as an indispensable tool for interpreting works of art produced in different geographical or cultural environment, and secondly as a "formal" element essential for the artefacts that represent the artistic, social, anthropological or political realities. Thanks to contributions arising from the History of Art, Visual Studies, Studies of the media, translation is now used as a strategy to interrogate epistemologically and ontologically the expressive possibilities opened up by art.[4]

Although a more direct relationship between art and translation due to socio-cultural theories, we can find some of the most important speculations about this relation in the field of Philosophy. Indeed, some contemporary art works have obvious affinities with translation's concepts emerged in philosophical theories, including some of the most prominent for our analysis are the "possibility and impossibility" to translate, the "survival" of a text and the "ethics of linguistic hospitality".

Within the ontological approaches we owe to Walter Benjamin the most revealing description of the translator's activity. In his essay *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* Benjamin founded the basis of a metaphysical translation. This conforms to his idea that what inspires the task of translator is the great chance to integrate different languages in one true, perfect and universal. The universal language reveals the intimate relationship between languages as well as the possibility of translation in the form of an interlinear version that matches language and revelation: "To some degree all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines".[5]

Nevertheless, translation is possible and impossible at the same time. If the "translatability" of the text is possible because of the intimate relationship between all languages, its impossibility lies in the difficulty to disclose that relationship. Paul de Man explains it very well when he discussed the essay by Benjamin : "whenever I return to this text, I think about what I have, then I read it again, and again I do not understand it".[6] Walter Benjamin in his essay introduced the concept of *Aufgabe* which means both task or activity as surrender or failure, two components of translation that adhere to the translator's activity, and reveal the difficulty involved in every act of interpretation.

The challenge posed by Benjamin has been a fundamental reference for any subsequent text that has faced the problem of translation. Some of the most important examples are: *Translating* by Maurice Blanchot, *Survivre* by Jacques Derrida, *L'épreuve de l'étranger* by Antoine Berman and *Sur traduction* by Paul Ricoeur. The question of possibility or impossibility of translation has ruled many approaches to the linguistic and cultural diversity that has received a multitude of names: "task" for Walter Benjamin, "duty" for Maurice Blanchot, "trial" for Antoine Berman", "ethical problem" for Paul Ricoeur; all those illuminations that describe the philosophical discourse on translation and also stress its ethical value.

According to Maurice Blanchot, translation is a "duty" that leads to discovery and emphasizes the difference between languages. Blanchot said: "Translating is not at all intended to make the difference disappear –it is, on the contrary, the play of this difference: it alludes to it constantly; it dissimulates this difference, but occasionally in

revealing it and often in accentuating it; translation is the very life of this difference; it finds in this difference its august duty, and also its fascination as it proudly brings the two languages closer by its own power of unification, a power similar to that of Hercules drawing together the banks of the sea".[7] In 1984, Antoine Berman proposes this same difference within the definition "l'épreuve de l'étranger" (trials of the foreign), where l'épreuve, in both senses of pain endured and trial, reveals the difficulty veiled behind the task of the translator. The trial comes from a desire to learn the foreign, but at the same time it shares its semantic space with the pain. According to Berman, the translator has to take pain as an inevitable thing, as a loss given by the adoption and acceptance of differences between self and the foreign. In any case, for Berman, trials always share both pain and desire to have an experience of the foreign, in a word to translate.

In this theoretical context the act of translating manifests the desire which comes from two different cultures, but also the necessary challenge to remove the complications and difficulties that exist in the approach to the Other and its language. The necessity of the challenge led Jacques Derrida to formulate his ideas on translation: it is an impossible and necessary task. "Impossible" in the Benjaminian meaning of a universal translation; and necessary because the act of translating is the life after the death of a text, it is his survival chance. From this thought Jacques Derrida deconstructs the metaphysics of the translation of Benjamin and the utopia of a messianic dream of a pure language. In this way Derrida offers us the vision of translation as possible and also necessary, because the absolute translation is impossible. Hence the impossibility is a chance more than a divine punishment, as Christian mythology teaches. The impossibility of the translation, final and universal, is the real possibility of translation given for the desire, the need and urgency. "A text lives only if it lives on (sur-vit), and it lives on only if it is at once translatable and untranslatable... Totally translatable, it disappears as a text, as writing, as a body of language (langue). Totally untranslatable, even within what is believed to be one language, it dies immediately. The triumphant translation is neither the life nor death of the text, only or already its living on, its life after life, its life after death".[8] Untranslatability therefore entails the death of the tongue, the collapse of the meaning. In this sense, for Derrida, the total "impossibility" of translation transforms the text into something insignificant, unreadable, even among speakers of the same language, because to understand is to share, compare, move, or translate. George Steiner explained it very well in *After Babel* when he said that every act of human communication is an act of understanding and decoding, because "to pay attention is to translate".[9] Without this understanding we would be alone and isolated, insignificant bodies without identity, without memory or history.

The "impossibility" is the translator's work, a desire that leads him to communicate with our similes, understand and decode messages, learn a foreign language and host it in his/her body. As for Derrida, Paul Ricoeur also remarks that universality erases the history of languages and "would turn all who are foreign to it into language's stateless persons, exiles who would have given up the search for the asylum afforded by a language of reception. In brief, errante nomads".[10]

In the loss of absolute language the translator finds his reward, that is, the happiness which is open to difference. Paul Ricoeur calls this experience "linguistic hospitality", a place "where the pleasure of inhabiting the other's language is compensated by the

pleasure of welcoming home the foreign word". With this paradigm Paul Ricoeur says that translation is an "ethical problem" that reveals the necessity for mediation between the plurality of cultures and the oneness of humanity. From the notion of "challenge" and "happiness" of translation, Ricoeur outlines that the "ethical problem" of translation is characterized by the idea that communicating with others is also the pursuit of happiness.

From those theoretical premises artistic production turns out to be particularly suitable for setting the parameters of a possible or impossible linguistic ethics of hospitality. These parameters are evident in some works of "displaced" artists who have lived within the possible or impossible linguistic hospitality. The following three artistic works have been developed from discourses of membership and distance, the rewriting and manipulation of cultural codes, the difficulty of communication and the impossibility of a definitive and universal translation between cultures, possibility of linguistic ethics of hospitality and acceptance of difference.



English As a Second Language is a work of Turkish artist Kutlug Ataman. The title of the work concerns the use of English as a lingua franca of modernity, which, however, instead of increasing mutual understanding often leads to a loss of meaning in communication.

The work consists of a double projection showing two young Turks reading some poems by Edward Lear, the English artist, illustrator and writer known for his poetry and non-sense (nonsense). In Victorian times, Edward Lear created a personal alphabet rhyme that allowed no logical sense in terms of content. In reading the two young Turks are facing a double task, on the one hand they are trying to understand a foreign language, English which is in fact considered a tool for communication and survival in the globalised standard world, on the other side they have to face the non sense content in the text. The two videos are opposite to each other, not only confusing mostly words and therefore understanding, it recreates the double movement of misunderstanding, incomprehension and misunderstanding to read the other. Kutlug Ataman uses the

alphabet nonsense of Edward Lear to describe thus the impossibility of the translation process as described by Jacques Derrida: untranslatability transforms text into something meaningless and unreadable also among speakers of a language, which entails the language death and the collapse of meaning.



Tere Recarens. 'Miss Work', 2005. Colección Fundación Coca-Cola.

Miss Work is a work of Catalan artist Tere Recarens. It consists of a photograph of the same artist playing an office worker who is honoured as Miss work. The formal elements that make up the atmosphere are typical of any office, but the shelves are full of dictionaries and the same artist stands above the others. With this work Tere Recarens shows us directly about his personal vision of an ethics of hospitality language, a need that has to accept the word of others. Art is a means to experience itself, tested in complex, living in different geographical contexts and confronting the limits of linguistic communication. Miss Work is the result of a process of learning many languages and the problems it entails in terms of travel and communication. Learning the English language, that it considered a step Tere mental, led her to develop the work entitled "I Was ready to jump" in 1999: "Simone Weil – tells us the artist explains it very well in gravity and grace, you imagine a mountain, but it doesn't really exist".<sup>[11]</sup> German is another example of physical decline as embodied in the work Besenrein (spotlessly clean): "My theory is that when I get to a place where I do not understand the language, I imagine. This creates an ethereal state. So ethereal that I'm swinging to and from geographically from Tibet to the Amazon, from Mali to Kurdistan. "In the Beige book, Tere again explains the translation process: "a room that you walk through a automatic glass door. Inside, there are six large windows with shades of beige palette. If you leave and want to return the door will not open".<sup>[12]</sup>



Home (stories) is a film based on a performance that made the Iranian artist Ghazel on the occasion of the 37th Theatre Festival at the Venice Biennale 2007. The performance took place in 2005 between Mestre and Venice, as a result of a workshop held in collaboration with a group of illegal immigrants: women, men and boys from Afghanistan, Kosovo, Kurdistan, Romania, Albania, Iran, Congo and Cote ivory reflected on concepts like "home" or "country of origin". All the ideas were expressed using different artistic media, especially the drawings, photography and narration. The stories were focusing on the immigrant condition, their personal experiences, memories, histories, worries about the future and the feeling of instability given by living temporarily in transit zones. Two years later, Ghazel reunited with some of these illegal immigrants doing the film called Home (stories). The film retains some of the previous performance and aims to document the changes that have occurred on the situation of immigrants, especially in terms of legal residence and social status. Two of the migrants have returned home and the other six are still living in Italy trying to stay there and build a house. Ghazel's work expresses the definition of "hospitality" by Derrida: "The foreign is primarily abroad about the legal language the makes the duty of hospitality, asylum law, limits, standards, codes police, etc. You must ask for hospitality in a language that is not yours, that it is imposed by house owner, the guest, the king, power, nation, state, father, and so on. They impose a translation in their language, and that is the first violence. The question of hospitality begins from here: ask understanding from the foreigner, speaking our language, accepting it".[13]

Leaving the sense of security provided by the idea of having a house, put the alien in the condition of transition or transfer from one place to another without a fixed goal. So the translation rather than a metaphor becomes an obligation required not only for understanding the others, but also for self-acceptance. The translation and all other words of its semantic area give us a sense of progress in the intention to understand cultures, but reveal little of the process, often painful, which makes the subject emotionally and socially dislocated.

Tere Recarens lives between Spain and Germany, Iran and France Ghazel, Kutlug Ataman between Turkey and England. The three within the confines of Europe, and beyond them, shared reflections on translation, understood not only as the act of interpreting languages and cultures, but as a way of grasping moral and ethical standards, values and feelings in a process summarized in the idea that life is translation. Nomadic art and language is no longer the expression of a unique story, but

the expression of thoughts wandering beyond the boundaries that are moving and need to be translated. Thus, the cultural translation in artistic production reveals the possibility and also the impossibility of an ethics of a language of hospitality. However, between desire and grief, task and duty, happiness is definitely open to difference.

This paper was presented in occasion of the Congress "VISUALIZING EUROPE: The Geopolitical and Intercultural Boundaries of Visual Culture". Universidad de Barcelona, April 11 – 12, 2011.

[1] Bassnett, Susan; Lefevere, André (eds.), *Translation, History and Culture*, London/New York, Pinter, 1990.

[2] André Lefevere uses the word "rewriting" instead "translated", "adaptation" y "emulation". Lefevere, André, *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, London, Routledge, 1992.

[3] Süssekind, Flora; Guimarães, Júlio Castañon, *Sobre Augusto de Campos*, 7Letras: Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa, Rio de Janeiro 2004.

[4] In 2007, the British Journal of Visual Culture dedicates a monograph on the subject of translation in visual studies, which compiles articles from Mieke Bal (2002), Joanna Morra (2000), Gary Shapiro (1997); Steyn (1996), Venuti (2007), etc. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 6; 5, 2007.

[5] Benjamin, Walter, "La tarea del traductor", en *Ensayos escogidos*, Ediciones Coyoacán, México, D.F., 2008, p. 137. Translation is mine.

[6] Paul de Man, "Conclusiones: La tarea del traductor de Walter Benjamin", *La resistencia a la teoría*, Visor, 1990.

[7] Blanchot, Maurice, *La risa de los dioses*, trad. de J. A. Doval Liz, Taurus, Madrid 1976, "Traducir", pp. 55-58. (L'Amitié, Gallimard, Paris, 1971). *Friendship*, (trad. by Elizabeth Rottenberg), Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1997, pp. 58-59.

—  
[http://books.google.com/books?id=v9HJIxr1yxsc&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=v9HJIxr1yxsc&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)

[8] J. Derrida, *Sopra-vivere*, trad. it. de G. Cacciavillani, Feltrinelli, Milán, 1982, pp. 43-44. <http://www.jacquesderrida.com.ar/frances/survivre.htm>. (Translation is mine).

[9] Steiner, George, *Después de Babel*, Aspectos del Lenguaje y la traducción, trad. en español: Adolfo Castañon y Aurelio Major, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Madrid 2001, p. 13. (After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1975).

[10] Ricoeur, Paul, *Sobre la traducción*, trad. Patricia Willson, Paidós, Buenos Aires 2005, p. 27

[11] Tere Recarens, e-mail interview.

[12] Ídem.

[13] Derrida, Jacques; Dufurmantelle, Anne, Sull'ospitalità. Le riflessioni di uno dei massimi filosofi contemporanei sulle società multietniche, Baldini & Castoldi, Milano, 2000, (De l'hospitalité, Calmann-Lévy, 1997).