

Plenary Session Report

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Since I had the opportunity to read all of the papers ahead of the conference itself, my reading of them took place outside the noise and dialogue of the event. In the calm of the post-coffee break plenary session, I was able to express a set of responses that had not been shaped – for better or worse – by the unfolding discussions of the day. What struck me most about the contributions was that – across the represented disciplines of film, archaeology, linguistics, and literary studies in English and German – they were all concerned first and foremost with the problem of meaning and interpretation.

It seemed to me that even the papers ostensibly concerned with formal acts of translation (from Chinese or German to English, for example) suggested that any distinction between literal and metaphorical translation collapses. As Ying Wang's paper on China English showed, linguistic expression cannot be understood except in relation to culturally distinct world views, in which an element of metaphor enters into the 'real' meaning and resonance of words in the first place. The process is equally complex, as illustrated in Meike Reintjes' paper, when one is trying not only to translate words and their cultural resonance in the original language, but to render something of the author-translator's own hybrid and shifting sense of cultural and national identity in relation to these words. Indeed, all translation involves, to some extent, transcribing words culturally as well as literally, and brings to the fore open-ended interpretive possibilities for the translator in a process that can never be mechanical or ideologically empty.

The papers, taken as a whole, not only engaged in some way with the epistemologically uncertain nature of interpretation, but also with the ethically fraught business of representation, suggesting questions about the responsibility of the translator to the 'original' text or subject, and about the desirability – or possibility – of 'authenticity' as opposed to the freedom of artistic expression. They raised questions about the impact of a translator's decisions on a wider audience. In these ways, the multiple translations discussed across the papers – from one language to another, from written text to film, in applying theoretical perspectives to material culture – were at once literal and metaphorical, at once scholarly exercises and political ruminations.

Furthermore, I thought (no doubt from my perspective as a modern cultural historian) that the papers either implicitly or explicitly grappled with the kinds of questions about meaning and interpretation that have animated – and brought closer together – scholarly disciplines in the humanities over the past forty years or so. What are the epistemological bases of our truth claims? How far is the meaning of a text dependent on its contexts of reception as much as those of production? How did people in the past understand their worlds? Are all interpretations valid, and if not how are we to determine the limits of their validity? What are the ethical problems hidden without our strategies of representation? I would argue that these are some of the questions that have driven the 'linguistic turn', the 'cultural turn', and the 'visual turn', and which have for some time informed French or French-inspired historical studies of *mentalité* and the *imaginaire social*. Perhaps what lies at the heart of this collective scholarly shift to interrogate the nature

of meaning is a belief in the constructed-ness of individual and group identity, and the crucial myth-making (and far from ideologically neutral) function of words and images in their creation. Perhaps, too, we have witnessed a somewhat post- and yet quasi-Marxist drive to investigate the material purchase of ideas. In any case, the emergence of these hybrid forms of scholarly enquiry has done an enormous amount to prompt and to sustain the inter- and multi-disciplinary cross-fertilisation that is today such a feature of academic life. Indeed, it seems to me that the content of the conference papers testifies to a convergence across disciplines in the humanities of just this kind of epistemological self-reflexivity about the nature of meaning and interpretation.

It was clear from the individual panel chairs' summaries of the day's proceedings which opened the plenary session that the metaphorical and ethically problematic nature of translation had resonated across the day. Dan Varndell surmised that the first panel on Theoretical Approaches had prompted discussion about the difference there might be between inter-language translation and inter-medium translation, wondering how far adapting a text across mediums (for example, from book to film) might itself constitute an act of translation. Tehmina Goskar, in summarising the second panel on Visual Translations, raised questions not only about the difference there may be between visual and textual translations, but about the ethical dimensions in representative practices and about the resultant potential for conflict around issues of authenticity. Finally, Hannah Ewence spoke about the third panel on Translating Judaism(s), evoking the instability of identity, which may render the very concept of translation problematic or even bankrupt since it would appear to be predicated on the coherence and stability of the original text or subject. Both Tehmina and Hannah prompted the audience to think of the importance of the identity of the translator in evaluating the nature of the translation.

I kicked off the discussion in the plenary session by commenting on what I saw as the metaphorical nature of translation in the way each paper had addressed the conference theme. The suggestion seemed to resonate across the paper givers and provoked a lively debate. In general, participants expressed both scepticism in the idea of a stable, 'original' text with a self-evident meaning, and unease at the prospect of abandoning the notion of interpretive certainty altogether.

Could there be an 'original' text of the Dracula story, for example, when Bram Stoker's novel was itself inevitably the result of other readings and borrowings? Even if one wanted somehow to fix the narrative in that nineteenth-century work of fiction, it would no doubt become clear that that seemingly 'version-less version' (in the phrase used by Dan Varndell) had its own antecedents whether in written texts or in folklore. What, then, was the story that later filmic adaptations 'translated'? And to whom did it belong? Perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is the myth of Dracula itself which has formed the substance of later visual depictions, so that what one sees is precisely the echo of a kind of cultural myth-making process expressed with new voices and, as Dan's paper itself suggested, for new purposes.

We also considered the possibility that the translator may in fact create the object of their study. How can authors 'translate' their autobiographical and poetic works into another language if part of the intention is not only to render the same meaning in a new linguistic form, but to express something of

an 'original' self which is already inevitably fluid and continues to evolve? How can we, in fact, distinguish between the way in which tomb effigies 'speak' to us, and the way in which each of their 'translators' may approach such objects within a changing frame of expectations about the 'inherent' meanings embodied by them? Such examples suggest that 'translation' (interpretation) in these senses is always relational, involving a dialogue between shifting subjects. The meaning of words and things might be contingent upon (among other things) an interlocutory relationship with the translator – not least when the translator is the original author herself.

The discussion ranged across the ethical dimensions of representation, too. How can one render human experience on film 'authentically' when the vision produced is either situated outside the paradigm of experience being portrayed, or informed by commercial and/or political pressures that places constraints on the story being told? In that sense, is the 'authenticity' of Gus Van Sant's purportedly realistic visual depiction of gay life in San Francisco (*Milk*) compromised by the ways its content may have been shaped by political sensitivities? Indeed, do directors of historical feature films have an obligation to educate rather than entertain, perhaps to privilege a drive for historical accuracy over the desire to express a point of view? That nonetheless leaves the question of whom they should be trying to convince. Indeed, crucially, we must ask who gets to decide upon the value, accuracy or authenticity of a film. Some may choose to side with historiographer Robert Rosenstone who holds that film, like history writing, is inherently fictionalised, so we should give up on the notion that either medium can 'translate' the truth of the past for new audiences. The sense of the plenary discussion, however, was that the drive for an ethical representation must impose limits on interpretation.

Besides, perhaps letting go of a faith in some kind of certainty forecloses the possibility of scholarly engagement altogether, and thus undermines our own authority as researchers and writers. To negotiate a way through – or perhaps just to live with – such unanswerable and therefore interminable dilemmas, I offered in conclusion the words of the Italian anti-Fascist intellectual, Antonio Gramsci, who counselled combining pessimism of the intellectual with optimism of the will. Otherwise the PhD may never get finished.