



web www.leoalmanac.org

email info@leoalmanac.org

phone +90 216 483 9292

address Sabancı University, Orhanlı - Tuzla, 34956 Istanbul, Turkey

LEONARDO THINKS

Opinion: Translation Discussion: Michael Punt, Roger Malina and Martin Zierold: Part III: A Commentary by Martin Zierold

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Author: Martin Zierold

Academic Manager and Executive Board International Graduate Center for the Study of Culture (GCSC) Justus-Liebig University Giessen

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(The preceding editorials by Michael Punt and Roger Malina emerged from an intensive series of discussions on translation stimulated by Martin Zierold in Budapest during an INTR group meeting. Since that meeting there have been a number of other exchanges on the topic of translation between us, including e-mail traffic concerning early drafts. Martin Zierold has been kind enough to agree to allow us to publish one of his responses. Although there is ultimately some lack of synchronisation between his commentary and the editorials, the additional thickness it gives to the debate makes it seem worthwhile. -MP)

It is more than mere politeness that I would like to begin by thanking Roger Malina and Michael Punt for asking me to reply to their LRQ editorials. It is a privilege and an honour to be part of the inspiring discussions that take place within the Leonardo network and its rich publications. My perspective on both editorials surely is rooted in my personal disciplinary background in media and communication studies. At the same time, the intensive transdisciplinary discussions on the concept of translation at Giessen university's International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) have been much more inspiring to me than any single disciplinary vantage point.

In his editorial, Michael Punt makes a very important point about media history and the observation of media change/evolution: 'new' media at any given time always seem to tempt researchers (and journalists alike) to vast overstatements; simultaneously, we can find staggering euphoria and massive cultural pessimism on the other side. The equation of today's e-book hype with the situation of computer games some years ago seems very apt to me. Similar comparisons could be drawn to much older moments in media history, like the introduction of television, radio or even the printing press, all of which have been met with a concurrence of enthusiasm and panic.

Historic comparisons like these seem to suggest that in a way both arguments make a valid point: those who call for a more differentiated position and stress that the 'new' phenomena do not replace older practices and media, especially



not as quickly as is often claimed, or not at all outside the western world. What is more, the vast social and cultural consequences that are usually implied in dramatic narrations about the impact of 'new' media, quite often never materialise in the way they have been envisaged. On the other hand, the insistence on the profound newness of 'new' media and its potential for a real social and cultural transformation seems to hold true just the same-- especially if we look at older moments in media history and their impact, which we can evaluate today in retrospect much more profoundly than any contemporary ever could: no one would deny the massive impact the printing press, or electronic (pre-digital) media have had (and still have) for our cultures and societies. Any worldly- wise claim that puts the enthusiast's statements into perspective runs the risk of downplaying the potential 'new' media do have, even though it might be exaggerated or misinterpreted by its contemporary proponents.

To me, Viém Flusser is one of the key thinkers in this context. He has often stressed that the historical shift from one dominant medium to the following is by no means an immediate and smooth transformation. Rather it is a process of learning how to handle the emerging possibilities of new media technologies. This development is painful and slow, taking centuries rather than decades.

Thus, Martin Zierold Academic Manager and Executive Board International Graduate Center for the Study of Culture (GCSC) Justus-Liebig University Giessen we can never really understand what 'new' media 'mean' for a culture from a contemporary perspective, as they always imply uses, which will only be 'learned' over a long period of time. In the light of media history, Flusser advocates a very humble position: we cannot (yet?) understand the codes with which our new digital technologies operate--and we might need a very long time to come to grasp their social and cultural potential. (1)

I completely follow Michael Punt's scepticism about the term 'social' in 'social media'. However, I have some reservations whether 'poor translation' is the best way to frame this criticism for theoretical, or rather epistemological reasons: as Roger Malina points out in his editorial--and as translation studies have argued for quite a while, translation is not about being 'correct' or 'poor/false'. Untranslatibility is a fundamental aspect of every act of translation. Thus, any translation might seem 'poor' judged by external criteria and particularly by criteria coming from the 'original' domain of the translated. However, a 'poor' translation (in which a lot seems to get 'lost in translation' from a purist's perspective) could be highly suggestive, useful or productive and in this respect might still be a 'good' translation. Consequently, the term 'poor' to me simply seems to be a problematic adjective. Instead of judging translations as 'poor', it might be more useful to elaborate more explicitly on what exactly is lost in translation and why this is seen as a bad thing in this particular context. Brushing off 'poor translations' seems to imply that it could have been possible to have a 'correct' translation in the first place. But what would the 'correct' translation of 'social' be in digital cultures? This is by no means self- evident and will be a question for many discussions to come.

Roger Malina's metaphor of 'non-Euclidian translation' proves the point how important the exchanges or translations between arts, humanities and sciences can be. The metaphor seems to be really catchy and helpful, and it stresses the



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relevance of context and agency, rather than suggesting criteria for ‘true’ translations. As for the image of translation as ‘über-setzen’ in the sense of crossing a river, I do like this visualisation. At the same time, this etymological imagery again has its boundaries. While it can visualise the transformations and intranslatibilities of any act of translations, it suggests two unproblematic, given ‘sides of a river’. In many cases, the situation seems to be even more complex, as even the ‘origin’ and the ‘target’ sides of the river are anything but clear and static givens. If we think about academic concepts for example, there are examples where we would have to imagine a fictitious river with innumerable strands: think about the term ‘memory’ which is used in computer sciences, medicine, biology, social sciences, history, literature, archival sciences, psychology etc. with constant transformations and translations between disciplines. Douwe Draaisma has made this point in his inspiring study how psychological metaphors of memory have always been interwoven with changing media technologies like the historic wax board, computer hard drives and today’s metaphors of memory networks/connectivities. (2) Quite often, it seems extremely hard to identify a linear journey that a boat might have taken on the river of translation.



Endnotes

[1] Cf. Flusser, V. 2002a, Die kodifizierte Welt, in S Bollmann (ed.), Medienkultur, Fischer, Frankfurt am Main, pp. 21-8. (Or, for an English translation: Flusser 2002b, writings, in A. Strohl (ed.), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.)

[2] Cf. Draaisma, D., 2000, Metaphors of Memory. A History of Ideas about the Mind, Cambridge University Press.

Bio: Martin Zierold is the Academic Manager and Executive Board International Graduate Center for the Study of Culture (GCSC) Justus-Liebig University Giessen. His email is Martin.Zierold@gcsc.uni-giessen.de and more information about his work is available at <http://www.martinzierold.de/>.