

Dislocutions: on cultural translation. Sarat Maharaj and Annie Fletcher in conversation

A. I was thinking of how to describe your work having heard you comment on the necessity of theory but also its deadening effects when it is not linked to cultural practices. Could you expand on this in view of your approach to multiculturalism and cultural translation?

S. I hesitate over the idea that theory's job is entirely to explain practice, to 'administer and manage' it. This managerial role needs questioning - particularly in what I call emergent 'multicultural managerialism' - something we have to watch out for in EU approaches to cultural diversity. We might grasp the theory/practice interaction in terms of Adorno's remark that high art/mass culture are ripped-apart halves of a whole to which, however, they do not add up. Today, we'd want to ask whether we can pre-suppose that cultural differences add up to anything like a pre-scripted 'multicultural whole'.

Today we'd have to focus on theory as both an explanatory *and* exploratory mode. At the one pole, it renders cultural difference visible, sussing out, targeting and identifying what has to be brought into the arena of cultural representation - a crucial, if somewhat touchy business of government policy - something that's being looked at in uneven ways by several EU political administrations. But we should also be aware that the way 'cultural difference' is treated in the political sphere means that it can get bogged down, fixed in bureaucratic-discursive lingo. The exploratory pole tries to counter this effect: here theory operates as a kind of spasmodic, unscripted conductive activity grappling with cultural difference beyond the limits of multicultural legalistic-discursive representation. The drift of the 'sounding difference' project we're attempting at the Jan Van Eyck Akademie, Maastricht has to be seen in relation to this pole.

A.
You're saying that theory can also become a kind of containment field which makes meaning and cultural difference static..

S. ...essentializing identity and difference. Today it should also be activating and articulating difference without reducing it to Plexiglas, echoless communicative discourse. It should be bringing to light elements of cultural difference that escape the net of signification, what's left out - the penumbra of the 'excremental other' - *sounding difference* whether of a sexual, bodily or cultural kind. This means theory has to shift gear, to translate into something else, transmogrify into object-lingo, film voicing,

into enacting strategies rather than exclusively seeing itself as the business of 'identifying and representing'.

A. I have found this whole exploratory side fascinating. I am thinking of your writing on Marcel Duchamp who would not have sprung to mind in connection with cultural translation - whereas you use him as a theoretical tool to think 'difference'. Your essay 'Typotranslating the Green Box' - reading Richard Hamilton's reading of Duchamp through James Joyce is for me a wonderful example of the complexities of translation, its layers and filters. The long process of typotranslating Duchamp's Green Box - and now the White Box - was never static and was continually producing new meanings.

S. My explorations in cultural difference began with rather linguistic models of translation - centred on 'Babel', the sticky thickness of language and meaning, 'the untranslatable'. This sought to question the ideal of 'transparency' of relationships - perhaps a hangover from Habermas's notion of crystal-clear communicative competency- generally assumed as the objective of multiculturalism. For me Joyce's terms 'diasportation' - slave-transportations, immigration, diaspora - and 'dislocution'- the double-disruption, dissolution of place and speech, a topsy-turvy locality and voice - capture that turbulence of contemporary experience where elements churn up in high-speed, unending scenes of translation. Joyce as exileimmigrant writing through and beyond imperial English, the Irish Troubles cultural transmutations in the wake of the traumatic Irish immigrations - all resonate with the post-war 'dark immigrations' as 'outsiders' came to write themselves 'inside' the Western cultural space. Refugees, asylum-seekers, deportees, *sans papiers*, nomadic Roma, African/East European sex-workers along the EU highways - are today's hotspots of cultural swap that are in turn somehow symptomatic of all contemporary experience. Duchamp's 'juxtilinear translation' and 'infra-thin difference', 'readymades and fake-similar originals' helped me to grapple with absolutist notions of identity, with hard-hat, fixed cultural essences on the one hand and identity as 'diff_rance', as perpetual translation on the other.

I applied these models, illicitly or queerly, to sites of cultural swap – so as to tussle with what in heavy-duty socio-lingo we call ‘multiculturalism, inclusion/exclusion, globalization, internationalism, postcolonialism, hybridity and cosmopolitanism’.

A. Well, they sound like really interesting theoretical models through which to work.

S. The models also question a bookish, over-textualized view of cultural translation by highlighting the non-discursive – what Guattari called the ‘*d_tournement* of discursivity’. This dramatizes the encounter with difference, the multicultural, otherness, the foreign – what I call *xeno-sounding* – which we should see against the rising tide of xenophobia across the EU and the xenophilia of global cultural tourism and areas of pop entertainment. My idea takes off from the Situationists’ strategies of the *d_rive* and *d_tournement* – twists of expectation in their visits to immigrant clubs, watering holes, hang-outs, dives for ‘outsiders’ from Morocco, Martinique, Antilles. It is hard not to feel that their raids, sorties, sallies on ‘otherness’ were not tinged with the desire to soak up exotic sensations, smells, sounds. But they were also suggestive, pilot negotiations of immigrant difference – against the tide of consumerist sameness and racism. This touches on our proposed Maastricht *d_rive*.

The models stress the flux, the rawness of cultural translation – that its an unfinishable process. For government policy and for culture industry programmes, cultural diversity perhaps necessarily boils down to establishing a spectrum of convenient, fixed categories of essential identities. The ‘culturally different’ have to be pinpointed, labelled, rendered visible, given representation – perhaps, up to a point, a crucial, quite inescapable task. But its troubling spin-off is that it tightens into a pigeonholing logic. People, practices and practitioners come to be seen in terms of an assumed, static ‘origin’ elsewhere rather than the ebb and flow of unceasing translation through which they live the present. Against such potential closure, we have to affirm the open-ended, unscripted production of difference of everyday cultural translation.

A. Do you find curatorial projects enable you to work through these very complexities and double-binds of cultural translation,

to think through ideas of the visual, the verbal, the non-discursive?

S Such projects for me are not unconnected to educational efforts of sorts ...does this perhaps sound too earnestly pedagogical (both laugh).... But by the end of the 1990s being a tutor, curator, critic and practitioner has rather telescoped into one another. It also means we venture beyond our 'specialist ground' - at any rate, a liquidity, an uneven de-territorializing had brought to the fore the question: how to engage with works deemed somehow to be 'different', 'diasporic' or 'transitive' without reducing such practices to an ethnographic epistemic - to the notion that they 'belong' to some pre-given cultural essence rather than to dislocutive translations in the present?

A I'm thinking of the problematic issue of making visible communities and cultures that were previously perceived as invisible. The exhibition seems like a very interesting model of thinking through how do we do this and more importantly who does it ?

S. Who is equipped remains prickly. But should a sense of authority come readymade with the curator or should it emerge from the show? Perhaps, paradoxically, the issue only really gets thrashed out in the making of the show. We might refer here to something like Mike O'Kelly's current/recent open-ended project *Multiple Tongues Displaced Bodies* (Orchard Gallery, Derry) involving a refugees-asylum-seekers-citizens chat-loop - an airwaves voicing, a speaking-listening frequency, a liquid sonic space of exchange and encounter. I pray I don't do Mike's project injustice in this reductive reference - its a striking, fresh kind of move into unknowns, into having to rub up against and work through mistranslations, the sparking unpredictables it throws up - we cannot guess beforehand what the 'product's' going to look like. For it seems there is none and tussling with that might be itself an unending process of thinking and analysis. So while the question of authority is daunting when posed in abstract, one should not freeze up over it. Someone has to take an informed stab at the job.

A. This reflects back to the exploration element of discourse we were taking about.

S. Precisely. We should try to get away from imagining that exhibitions always get everything perfectly right. Whatever can this mean? If curating is an act of translation then we should be prepared for serendipities, for things to go haywire, to go off-beat, even 'mistranslation' of sorts. The show is perhaps less a

machine for staging a rounded-off statement or conveying a packaged argument than it is about setting up an experiment, about triggering unfinishable visual and intellectual discussion and debate. Its propositions might also be, dare one say, 'falsifiable'.

A. I am just thinking about the widely criticized 'Magiciens de la Terre'(1989) as a show which explored cultural mix, but the criticism itself serves as a bench mark for the debate and how it has since developed.

S. Without letting the curators off the hook, its possible to say that an unintended outcome of the show was that critical responses – insights of Rashid Aareen, Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Jean Fisher, Gilane Tawadros, Sean Cubbit amongst others – added up to trenchant clarifications of the field. This was less the case with another such event 'Two or Three Things I Imagine About Them' (Whitechapel Gallery , London 1992). Alfredo Jaar and Gayatri Spivak were the artist/theoretician dream-ticket curators. They consulted closely with local Bangladeshis engaging with the inside/outside demarcation in all sorts of ways. Something, however, did 'go askew'

despite the show's programmatic, pre-scripted lucidity. Some young women insisted that their images be removed from the gallery. They felt they could not accept how they were represented. The gallery tended to clam up about the incident when much could have been learned, as Spivak noted, from airing points of disagreement and clash. To see the show as a test – where failure or 'going wobbly' can throw up new insight and awareness – seems a more low-key, perhaps less overbearing kind of attitude to curating.

A. We talked a little before about that idea that the productive moment can be that point of crisis, where epistemic structures clash, where they don't match up.

S. We do need to look more carefully at the creative possibilities thrown up in such moments of mis-match, mistranslation and melt-down. The liberal democratic response tends to be couched in terms of tolerance. Though we might rather wish to think of tolerance as a kind of 'common decency' it more than often ends up as an exceptional, noteworthy stance – perhaps because

responses to difference and otherness are so often in distorting terms of fear, loathing, exoticizing or violence.

But what price does tolerance exact? What violation of the other does it involve? What recasting and rephrasing of 'difference' and 'otherness' in terms that mirror and suit its own interests?

In the mainstream tolerance-scenario, the self is somehow always rather too comfortably intact – the other is expected to change, revise, reconstitute. Tolerance, in such instances, becomes the engine for the management and control of difference and otherness, the 'demand for assimilation', the logic of sameness – it amounts to repressive tolerance.

Against this, a self-examing, critical tolerance is about the logic of difference which grapples with difference as on a tightrope where self and other can equally plunge into freefall, breakdown and mutual re-making. In this electric interplay, the dislocutive scene of cultural translation opens up as an unfinishable existential, ethical encounter.

A. Cultural translation as taking on board unknowns, unforeseens thrown up by 'mis-translation'...?

Sby the creative force and fission suggested in such moments of apparent slip-up or divergence from the pre-scripted. This photo was taken for me by Nina Folkersma in the massive, amazing storage vaults of the Volkenkunde Museum, Leiden, The Netherlands – highly impressive in its sense of 'ordering and classifying' the other, the 'autre-knowledge' it contained. The museum's floor plan guided the visitor flow through the displays – along-the-wall vitrines, light-boxes, showcases. The design was apparently inspired by George Perec's *Life: a User's Manual* – which touches on obsessive classifying – not unlike Joyce's attempt in *Ulysses* to inventory, list, label, organise elements of the world via a 'technical lingo' – an apparently exhaustive but unfinishable classification. For something nevertheless slips away, is left out, gets to be omitted – falls through the net of signification.

At any rate, I came across a shelf in the vaults labelled Africa Unknown – with its powerful if unintended resonance. It had surprisingly an India drum (tabla) on it – 'misplaced next to Afro-ware'. It was most unlikely that it was wrongly catalogued. More than likely it was momentarily misplaced, shall we even say 'diasported, dislocuted'? Afro-India rapping together, it suggested a shifting, collision, coalescing of cultural continents – a mucking up of classificatory order. I could only think of the fission through wily Joyce's fantastic phrase anticipating the unceasing 'misplacing' of cultural translation: 'semi-semitic serendip ... you....Europasianised Afferyank!'