Zrinka B L A Ž E V I Ć (University of Zagreb)

GLOBAL CHALLENGE: THE (IM)POSSIBILITIES OF TRANSCULTURAL IMAGOLOGY

Drawing upon transcultural theories (Welsch), praxeological cultural analysis (De Certeau, Reckwitz) and actor network theory (Latour), this paper examines theoretical and methodological possibilities for creating a transcultural imagology. Its main objective is to conceive a transcultural comparative semantics appropriate for interpretative analysis of textual, visual, mental and embodied images. In this manner, transcultural imagology might meet the challenge of global cultural hybridity: to recognize complex strategies of image production and dissemination through the rhizomatic structure of global cultural networks, as well as the silent and invisible tactics of their productive consumption.

Key words: globalization, culture, image, transcultural imagology

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Twenty years have passed since British literary scholar Susan Bassnett pessimistically announced the death of comparative literature, the disciplinary homeland of imagology.[1] She ascribed it to an epistemic turmoil, which instigated the rise of both Postcolonial Studies – which usurped most of its thematological concerns – and of Translation Studies, which appropriated much of its methodological preoccupations (Bassnett 1993: 47, 161). Fortunately, imagology soon found its place within the expanding field of Translation Studies. This is a field that has been thoroughly affected by the pervasive epistemology of the Cultural Turn, and analysis of the power-dependent politics of translation. Consequently, questions of how different cultures construct their images of (other) writers and texts (Trivedi 2005: 3–4) are part of its ambitious research agenda.

On the other hand, epistemological coupling of imagology with Postcolonial Studies has not been so successful, mostly due to the former's

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[1] This article is an extended and slightly revised version of my keynote lecture, delivered at the International Conference "Transferring/Translating Cultural Images. Parallels Between Stereotyping and Globalising", held on 16th and17th September 2014 at Yeditepe University in Istanbul, Turkey.

obstinate adherence to the tacit universalizing of Eurocentric orientation, and an uncritical metatheoretical promotion of the "supranational standpoint", which somehow miraculously survived the "constructivist turn". Apart from that, imagology's more unforgettable theoretical sin is its implicit fostering of the so-called container model of culture, which presupposes that cultures are ethnically and socially homogeneous entities with firm and impermeable boundaries (Perner 2013: 32). This is in complete discordance with the creole, hybrid and translocal notions of culture, which postulate Postcolonial Studies to be within its critical and emancipatory epistemological project.

To make matters worse, the processes of cultural globalization – generated by a hypertrophied media culture – have been constantly producing and disseminating an enormous amount of floating translocal images. In opposition to the customary concept of "transnational", which is deeply ingrained in the theoretical garment of Postcolonial Studies, literary scholar Linda Ng recently proposed the concept of translocal as a more suitable heuristic tool for describing the integration of globalization processes into localized systems. She claims that this term better recognizes both the accelerated flows of symbolic and material artefacts across national borders, and the ways in which they embed themselves in local culture and then interact with it (Ng 2013: 110). Viewed from the imagological perspective, a reconsideration of culture in translocal terms implies that, in the context of the contemporary globalized world, images can be simultaneously situated within both local and global realms. This renders every demarcation line between "foreign" and "own" indistinct and blurred. On that account, it is more than obvious that imagology is nowadays faced with the, literally, global challenge.

For these reasons, it is necessary to reformulate both the concept of culture and the concept of image, as crucial prerequisites for the epistemological foundation of transcultural imagology. As distinct from the traditional Aachen version, new transcultural imagology should become theoretically and methodologically better equipped for critical and analytical dealings with the complex cultural images circulating within the "multifaceted semiotic context" of a global network society (Castells 2010: 403).

Etymologically, the term "culture" stems from the Latin verb *colere* (to maintain and to worship), which neatly subsumes three dimensions of human cultural practice – existential, normative, and creative – within which the term culture has oscillated for the duration of its conceptual history (Ort 2003: 19). From its ancient beginnings, the term "culture" has been firmly correlated with the pedagogic ideal of cognitive, moral and communicative

perfection necessary to create a virtuous community, and provide it with an important political dimension (Fisch 1992: 679).

Although traditional meanings of culture – which mostly rested upon the binary opposition between the cultivated and non-cultivated – dominated for centuries, they were challenged by the prevalence of a historicized and holistic Herderian notion of culture from the end of the 18th century onwards. This notion presupposes that diversity in various human material and symbolic forms of life exists within certain spatial and temporal contexts. Further, it implies a certain group of people who inhabit a common territory and share a unique historical tradition. Despite its essentialist connotations, this idea of culture has influenced the myriad functionalist and semiotic approaches prevalent in cultural theory for most of the 20th century (Ort 2003: 20–23).

The common denominator of the various functionalist approaches that envisage culture as a specific social sub-system is the concept of cultural patterns. These are defined as a set of historically generated systems of meaning, which are enacted through institutions, artefacts and practices. Cultural patterns have both the function of preserving and modifying collective systems of meanings, thus creating a dynamic heuristic model of culture determined not by passive replication, but rather active re-creation of given cultural patterns (Shaller and Crandall 2004: 353–355).

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Starting from the de Saussurean idea of semiology as a science that studies the role of signs as part of social life, semiotic approaches to culture explore various cultural sign systems and, by analogy – in their most radical Geertzian version – conceptualize the whole of culture as text. Their analytical focus is therefore on semiotic processes, codes and media, which are destined to play a decisive role in the symbolic construction of reality (Posner 2003: 39–72). However, although they view culture from different symbolic or practical angles, both functionalist and semiotic approaches suffer from the same epistemological malaise: insufficient elaboration of the problem of cultural boundaries.

The same might be stated for literary imagology, which has built its critical and interpretative project around the concept of cultural difference. Striving to epistemologically question and analytically explore the phenomena of cultural difference, imagology deals with discursive constructions and representations of various forms of collective identities. It is especially concerned with ethnic and national ones (Leerssen 2007: 17–32), under the tacit premise that they epitomize phenomena of cultural identity, and alterity in general. To paraphrase Lyotard's famous syntagm,

the global condition inevitably urges critical rethinking and theoretical revision of this traditional imagological stance.

The issue of cultural difference can also be approached from the theoretical perspective of multiculturality, interculturality and transculturality. Starting from the premise that cultures are diverse and separate entities, multiculturality opts only for the peaceful cohabitation of various cultures within one society (McLaren 1994). Interculturality goes a step further, and advocates intensive communication between cultures in order to heighten intercultural competences, leading finally to an increase of cultural self-understanding (Kalscheuer 2005). In opposition to both, transculturality declines the static and monistic understanding of cultural identities, and concentrates instead on mechanisms of cultural exchange as the main catalysts of generating and proliferating cultural differences (Pratt 1992).

German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch recently articulated an influential theory of transculturality, appropriate for scrutinizing the contemporary "global condition" (Welsch 1999). Welsch claims that contemporary globalized culture has been characterized both on individual and collective levels by inner differentiation and external networking, producing a high degree of cultural annexability and transmutability. This means that modern culture encompasses a number of lifestyles and cultural practices that interpenetrate or emerge from one another (Welsch 1999: 198–199). Additionally, as a consequence of worldwide material and immaterial communications, economic interdependencies, and migration processes, various cultures are deeply entangled with each other. The final result of these hybridizations is a transcultural network, which is not formed by a juxtaposition of clearly delineated cultural elements but is instead a complex web, simultaneously enabling overlappings and distinctions (Welsch 1999: 203). As a consequence, the process of individual and collective identity formation is no longer marked by differentiation from cultural others, but by the integration of components of various cultural origins (Welsch 1999: 199). Welsch sees the main heuristic advantage of the concept of transculturality in its inherent possibility to go beyond the global and local, or universalistic and particularistic aspects of globalization, which are themselves subsumed within the dialectics of transcultural processes themselves. Seen from the epistemological angle, Welsch's concept of transculturality is structurally compatible with Ng's concept of translocality, since "the globalizing tendencies as well as the desire for specificity and particularity can be fulfilled *within* transculturality" (Welsch 1999: 205).

Assistance in comprehending these highly complex nodal entanglements, intermixings and permeations within the global cultural scenery might be provided by the actor network theory, a material semiotics inspired by the symmetrical anthropology of French sociologist Bruno Latour (Latour 1993). Focusing on materially and discursively heterogeneous relations enacted by non-substantially defined agents, actor network theory aims to explore a heterogeneous amalgam of natural, cultural, discursive, technical and social actors, which constantly re-generate themselves in the intermedial dynamics of the network. Accordingly, actor network theory comprehends a network as a processual configuration of semiotic ties or clusters that guarantee it constant variability and contingency. Guided by three methodological premises – the principles of agnosticism, general symmetry, and linking freedom – actor network theory focuses on the mechanics of network power or relational performative strategies by which various actors assemble and translate themselves (Latour 2005).

Therefore, by conceiving the process of connection-making as coterminous with the process of meaning-making as perceived in translational terms, actor network theory might be very successful in elucidating the nodal and relational characters of the globalization process. According to eminent social theorist Manuel Castells, global society is structured as a network, enacted by the convergence of social evolution and information technologies to create a material basis for new, fluid and relational performances thorough social structures. Similarly to actor network theorists, Castells conceptualizes network society as a web of interconnected nodes, communication codes and switches. He claims that network society is able to expand without limits, and is susceptible to innovation without threat to its balance (Castells 2010: 501–502). Castells indicates the emergence of a culture of real virtuality within the cultural domain as the main consequence of this pervasive communication. In this system, not only is reality itself fully immersed in a virtual image setting, but all forms of cultural expression are integrated within a complex multimedia communication system, which permeates and shapes the entire human experience (Castells 2010: 404). This is especially evident in those radical transformations of space and time that are detached from the concrete geographical and historical framework and inserted into functional networks or image collages. Thus "space of flows" and "timeless time" have become the material foundations of a new culture of real virtuality (Castells 2010: 406), causing ontological and epistemological boundaries between real and virtual and material, symbolic and corporeal to become increasingly fluid and blurred.

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Praxeological theories advocate a similar approach to cultural practices, conceiving them as rhizomatic assemblages composed of various material, semiotic and social actors. In a recent outline of practice theory formulated by German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, culture is comprehended as a collective intelligible social practice. It manifests in an incorporated complex of competencies and body-mental routines that are both intersubjective and interobjective in structure. Reckwitz's theory presupposes a shift from the symbolic and textual approaches of culture towards the stance which gives priority to practical ability and materiality of bodies and artefacts. It means that from the praxeological perspective, the micro-logics of the cultural and social consist of implicit and routinized cultural know-how including certain cultural knowledge, routinized bodily performances and relations with material artefacts (Reckwitz 2002: 252–255). Praxeological understanding of social and cultural practices, conceptualized as fragile configurations of routinized activities that build collective life forms or social fields, also has important consequences for Reckwitz's theoretical elaboration of the issue of cultural differences (Reckwitz 2005). He states that cultural differences are no longer comprehended as incommensurable and reified boundaries of meaning between various cultural systems, but as complex overlappings and appropriations of elements of knowledge with diverse spatial or temporal origins (Reckwitz 2005: 99). This hybridity of practices – the routinized or conflicting reworking of overlapping cultural elements taken from various time and spatial contexts – is, according to Reckwitz, most significant feature of cultural difference (Reckwitz 2005: 107). In other words, cultural differences within a global context are generated through a micrological process of bricolage, resting not on active interpretation but on non-reflexive habitualized and routinized "practical knowledge" (Reckwitz 2005: 107). Taking into account the global condition, the main advantage of such a "heterogenizing" approach to culture like praxeological, is a creative rethinking of culture, beyond the opposition similarity vs. difference. In Reckwitz's opinion, praxeological cultural analysis simultaneously reveals a potentialization of certain, actively reworked similarities and certain dissimilarities, thus envisaging cultural elements as spatial and temporal hybrids (Reckwitz 2005: 108). Additionally, comparable epistemological stance advocates a theory of new materialism, which approaches difference in terms of affirmative relationality. This means that difference is no longer conceptualized as involving a binary opposition or relation structured by inherent negativity, but as a relation of inclusive and mutually constitutive terms (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012: 129).

Therefore, by eroding the ontological distinctions between human and non-human, meaning and materiality, and body and mind that are considered embedded in each other, actor network theory and praxeological cultural theory can provide a suitable theoretical framework for transcultural imagology. This new imagology must carefully consider the material, semiotic and corporeal aspects of cultural imagery generated through the various media of the contemporary information society, which circulates within global cultural networks.

Consequently, it is necessary to broaden the traditional imagological concept of the image. From its disciplinary beginnings in Dyserinck's foundational text on "images" and "mirages" (Dyserinck 1966), the concept of image has been more or less consistently ontologically and epistemologically settled within Popper's "World 3", a world inhabited by objects of scientific and poetic thought, and works of art (Popper 1979: 106–108). Despite attempts by the French imagological school to render them with wider psychological, social and historical meanings (Pageaux 1989; Moura 1992), images are defined merely as intertextual tropes in recent theoretical formulations (Beller 2007; Leerssen 2007: 26). This means that they are firmly entrenched in the symbolic domain, and exclusively associated with representational aspects of literary discourse.

Inspired by translational and transnational epistemology, I have proposed a wider definition of image, which might be conceived as an interferential configuration of mental images, textual and non-textual representations and practice patterns constituted within a particular socio-historical context (Blažević 2012: 105). Accordingly, images can be understood not only as cognitive and perceptive products of the human brain, or as various kinds of visual representations, but also as a formative element of all imaginaries (i.e. systems of signs and/or thoughts with ideological, axiological and affective potentials, such as stereotypes, ideologies, myths, beliefs, and worldviews). If we assume that images are semiotic in structure, and disseminated through media communication systems that people employ and are embedded in, every theoretical reflection on images must highlight the relationship between the material, social and cultural.

Conversely, the processes of image production are not only conditioned by language, but by phenomenal experience and practice, which can concurrently be described as corporeal and historical. This means that human experiences and practices are dependent on embodied practical knowledge, mental and bodily activities, states of emotion and motivation, and relationships with material artefacts. Moreover, these cultural codes and

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practices are diverse in both their spatial and historical origins, which points to the fact that every theoretical consideration on global cultural hybridity must necessarily involve a temporal dimension. The proposed definition implies a strong focus on the performative aspects of images, which are an important element of the historically determined human *Lebenswelt*, and a vital factor of social and cultural agency in general.

Taking into account these broadened concepts of culture and image, I will sketch a theoretical and methodological framework of transcultural imagology, instigated by theoretical reflections on the translocal media culture of Andreas Hepp (Hepp 2009). Drawing upon the theory of transculturality by Wolfgang Welsch and Reckwitz's praxeological theory of culture, and following incentives of contemporary media and culture research, Hepp elaborates transcultural comparative semantics suitable for the interpretative analysis of global media culture. He starts from the premise that the whole global culture is mediated by communication, which is decisively marked by its translocal features. This means that discursive and material spaces of representation coexist within the translocal realm – which is a result of integration of globalization processes into localized systems. In this sense, all contemporary media cultures are more or less hybrid, and build their structures mostly on translation processes (Hepp 2009: 8). As a consequence, the classificatory systems and discursive formations from which the production of meaning in everyday practices is drawn transgress the local, since in the time of globalization communicative connectivity is becoming increasingly deterritorialized. For these reasons, Hepp argues that media cultures rest primarily on the thickening of translocal processes of the articulation of meaning (Hepp 2009: 10). In order to emphasize the constitutive importance of media connectivity for creating specific cultural identities, Hepp borrows the concept of cultural thickening from the Swedish anthropologist Orvar Löfgren. In his insightful analysis of Swedish national radio broadcasting during the 1920s, Löfgren traces a microphysics of articulation of culture by exploring the ways in which everyday "minor" cultural practices and routines form a national culture, layer by layer (Löfgren 2001: 11–19). Alongside the problem of conceptually linking the levels of national and transnational, Hepp is chiefly concerned with the processes of articulation of meaning, which he perceives to be embodied in complex circuits, heuristically distinguished in interrelated levels of production, representation, appropriation, identification and regulation (Hepp 2013: 66).

This is the starting point for Hepp's model of transcultural comparative semantics, which aims to explore the assemblage of cultural patterns. Mostly

inspired by praxeological theories, he defines these as modes of thickening of interrelated, processually conceptualized patterns of thinking, discourse and practice (Hepp 2009: 25). In Hepp's opinion, cultural patterns are focal points, where the overall hybridity of global culture manifests itself most clearly. He argues that the very process of cultural thickening reveals the totality of mental, symbolic, material and performative aspects inherent in cultural patterns themselves, and the openness of a culture in the sense of the in-exclusivity of many or most of its cultural patterns (Hepp 2009: 27).

From a methodological viewpoint, it is important to emphasize that Hepp's model rejects traditional binary comparative semantics. This means that comparative units of analysis are not aggregated within a national frame; rather, data clustering follows transcultural lines. Therefore, data are structured in cases of comparable discourses, media, groups, or organizations, enabling detection of transnational commonalities of cultural patterns. The next analytical step within Hepp's model of transcultural comparative semantics is the categorization of these cases by different cultural patterns, which can be nation-specific (i.e. national imagery), transculturally stable (i.e. cultural images of Other) or deterritorial (i.e. cultural imagery of diasporic, political or religious movements). Finally, the comparative results themselves are interpreted from the perspective of observed dynamics of cultural thickening, which, as mentioned previously, include different patterns of thinking, discourse and practice. These dynamics are traced on a territorial level (region, nation), a deterritorial level (different kinds of deterritorialized translocal communities), and within patterns that are stable across them (Hepp 2009: 30).

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Hepp accentuates analytical and interpretative possibilities, along with critical potential, as the main advantage of his model of transcultural comparative semantics, since it is founded on three basic theoretical principles. A non-essentalist or constructivist approach to the analysis of the construction processes of cultural articulation enables detection of the various possible points of "centering" media cultures, such as "national-territorial", "deterritorial-religious" and "global popular". Conversely, by focusing on the relation of cultural patterns and the question of power, transcultural comparative semantics can discern how certain cultural patterns reflect a dialectics of domination and subversion, and whether they open or close spaces of agency in everyday life. By integrating the above-mentioned approaches in a multi-perspectival description, transcultural comparison of various kinds of cultural thickening should make different cultures more analytically accessible in their power-related inconsistency (Hepp 2009: 32).

For all these reasons, Hepp's analytical model seems quite appropriate for a critical examination of the complex transcultural and nodal structures of global media culture.

How might this theoretical and methodological model be adjusted to the imaginary project of a new transcultural imagology? If we suppose that all kinds of images essentially have a medial character, they might be equated with Hepp's concept of cultural patterns, which entails patterns of thinking, discourse and practice, corresponding to my broad definition of image. Accordingly, in the analytical and interpretative focus of transcultural imagology, there should be logic and mechanisms of translocal thickening of various kinds of images, from the visual and mental to the textual, along with their intermedial aggregates, which circulate through the rhizomatic structure of global cultural networks. This process propels a mechanism of "othering" which is no longer determined by fixed national and cultural boundaries, but realized transculturally, as a provisional and unstable constellation of hybrid identities, built through innumerable spatial, temporal and cultural overlaps. Nevertheless, this mechanism urges the need to define a "mediated centre" (Couldry 2003: 47) beyond determined national and cultural boundaries, to implicitly govern the specific cultural articulation of image-thickening within the wider framework of global communicative connectivity. In this respect, we must emphasize the methodological advantages of transcultural comparison which – by virtue of abandoning the binary logic inherent in intercultural approaches – is able to discern the constants and variables which propel diverse processes of image-thickening, and acknowledge their complex interrelations on a global level. This, in turn, results in a further increase of cultural complexity. Moreover, transcultural imagology should not disregard the performative or practice-generating aspects of image-thickening, which include their influence on the asymmetrical distribution of power relations, and on social and cultural practices in general.

Finally, transcultural imagology must seriously reflect antiglobal criticism, which on the one hand, warns of the reproductive and uniform nature of global culture, and on the other predicts an implosion of global culture into its own "transaesthetic banality" (Baudrillard 2002: 181), due to a hyperproduction of images. Faced with the potential danger of losing its own research object, transcultural imagology would benefit from turning to Michel de Certeau's theory of productive consumption. Despite premise that in contemporary media society an increasing expansion of systems of meaning production leaves no place for "consumers", de Certeau detects

another sort of devious and dispersed production: consumption (de Certeau 1988: xii). This encompasses tireless, quasi-invisible and fragmented modes of re-use, which show themselves not in their own products but through the art of their using, which multiplies with the extension of transculturation processes (De Certeau 1988: 31). Therefore, by borrowing de Saussurean's famous distinction between "langue" and "parole", de Certeau heuristically equates consumption with enunciation. Consequently, both processes presuppose the realization of a linguistic or non-linguistic system in the concrete act of usage, its appropriation by the consumer, a relational contract of producer and consumer, and the specific organization of a temporality, in which "the present creates a before and an after" (De Certeau 1988: 33). Since it is highly contextually dependent and indissociable from *a faire* (a peculiar way of doing things, producing language, and modifying the dynamics of a relationship), consumption includes the use of a particular material artefact or symbolic system, and an operation performed on it (De Certeau 1988: 33). From this point of view, every act of consumption of images generated by the various media systems that permeate the global culture can be seen as their creative production. On account of this, it can be concluded that the material, performative, social, and symbolic dimensions of images which are interwoven in the process of their mutual (re)production, disclose a generative, poietic potential, emanated by images within the global cultural scenery.

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This is a valid corroboration of the statement that imagology, although hailing from the national and territorial thinking of culture, has a future in the transnational, globalized world. To make this future brighter, imagology needs to adopt a "chiastic" notion of image, conceived both as an anthropological universal dependent of the neurophysiology of the brain, and as a historically specific, socially and culturally generated and generative phenomenon (Wulf 2014: 74). Furthermore, it should embrace a "heterogenizing" and "in-exclusivist" approach to culture by conceptualizing it as a dynamic network yielded in the dialectic processes of inner differentiation and external networking. Only in this manner might imagology be able to meet the challenge of global cultural hybridity: to recognize complex strategies of image production and dissemination through the rhizomatic structure of global cultural networks, as well as the silent and invisible tactics of their productive consumption.

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