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Translation – between Philosophy and Cultural Theory

Peter Osborne / Boris Buden

Boris Buden: In your book *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, you tackled the concept of translation within the area of tension (what Germans would call *Spannungsfeld*) between two poles of contemporary theorizing – as a form of theoretical generality typical of theory construction in much of the field of contemporary cultural studies. But let us go one step further and ask: isn't this area of tension between philosophy and cultural theory itself a product of a translation between them? Roman Jacobson was talking about a translatability of one form of artistic expression into another, for instance, a verbal art into music, dance, cinema, etc. He called it "intersemiotic transposition", a translation of one system of signs into another. Why not then talk about a sort of interdisciplinary transposition of philosophy into cultural theory and vice versa? In your book, this mutual translatability between the two disciplines is an effect of critical reflection: it is philosophy that makes a critical self-reflection of cultural theory possible; and it is only on the ground of cultural theory that philosophy can critically reflect on itself as a cultural form. Is it also possible to understand translation itself as a methodological form of critical reflection? At its best!

Peter Osborne: In a broad sense, and in part, yes, the force-field between philosophy and cultural theory is a product of translations. Semiotically speaking, there is a transcoding, which presumes – and thereby *produces* – some level of equivalence, some shared conceptual space, which has the effect of transforming, or at least inflecting, both discourses. However, there are important limits to the application of a structuralist model of an "intersemiotic transposition" between disciplines here. They derive from the historical relations between the two disciplines; and they lead to a questioning of the model of disciplinarity itself. In the first place, the cultural theory with which I was concerned in that book (essentially, the theoretical aspect of Anglo-American Cultural Studies) is to a large extent already a bricolage of displaced fragments of the European philosophical tradition, received through the double prism of the Parisian intellectual life of the 1960s and the British Left of the 1970s and 1980s, through which it was imported into English. So there is a complex historical internality of philosophical elements to this avowedly 'post-philosophical' cultural theory, prior to its 'encounter' with its philosophical other. It is thus in certain respects misleading to think of the two as discrete sign-systems, on Jakobsen's model of the differences between the arts – which is a semiotic version of a medium-specific modernism, which has itself been problematic for quite a while now, in the context of art. This raises the question of disciplinarity. Even if one accepted the formalist-modernist version of the system of the arts, intellectual disciplines in the humanities are not analogous to artistic mediums. They lack the formal differentiation, and have more recent, messily complicated and often nationally specific histories. There has been no Greenberg of the humanities capable of tidying up this history; and I doubt there could be.

One of the main things, for me, which makes the confrontation between the critical post-Hegelian philosophical tradition and Anglo-American cultural theory productive is that they share a certain *anti*-disciplinary impulse, which imparts to them a powerful *trans*disciplinary, rather than an *inter*disciplinary, dimension. This is why they are able to function well as mediums of translation. But their translational functions are not best understood in terms of "intersemiotic transposition". Rather, they require a more constructivist conception of translation. This is what I am trying to get at when I speak of translation as a mode of production of theoretical generality, or of a translational model of theoretical generality. The primary productive mechanism here is a form of cross-cultural or comparative cultural study that is committed to the transformation (rather than mere 'application') of basic concepts in the process of the expansion of their range of reference to new circumstances – indeed, tendentially, to the empirical totality.

I am trading here on a distinction between generality (the Germans would say *Allgemeinheit*) and universality (*Universalität*), the terms of which become relativized, dialectically, as soon as they are subjected to a thoroughgoing historical understanding. For strict universality is always ultimately hypothetical in these domains. Nonetheless, it must still be projected in order for general concepts to enter into cognitively productive relationships of various kinds with the new situations to which they are applied. A kind of 'reduction to conceptuality' is required at a certain moment in the process of theoretical understanding, but things do not end there because philosophical concepts are not best understood as more general varieties of scientific concepts, but rather as means of interpretation, elements for the transformation of experience. Each new interpretative context thus adds something to the concept. I

used the idea of translation as a way of thinking about the relationship between concepts and new sites of interpretation, in order to stress the two-way character of the process: the fact that the 'host language' (here, philosophy) is changed by the experience. In this respect, following Walter Benjamin, I use the idea of translation in a way that both emphasizes and valorizes 'foreignization'.

Boris Buden: The concept of translation as a form of theoretical generality clearly originates in cultural theory. It seems to be at home there. In philosophy, on the contrary, it is rather a guest in a "foreign country". Is there any chance of domesticating the concept of translation philosophically? In short, can't we think of translation as a philosophical concept, as a philosophical model of theoretical universality, for instance, especially in the context of what Derrida, speaking of translation, called a "passage to philosophy"?

Peter Osborne: Once again, I don't think one can set out from a simple distinction between the two fields and ask the question of their relations, or even transformations, as if they were self-sufficient domains to begin with. What a first reflection reveals is that they are historically mutually constitutive, in various ways. Just as 'cultural theory' carries bits of philosophy within itself from its very beginnings, so philosophy itself only ever exists in culturally (and that means linguistically) specific forms. This means that what we call 'Western philosophy' or 'European philosophy' are always already the result of translations: between Greek and Latin and Arabic, in particular, even before we get to the modern Romance languages and their vernaculars – which is still a fairly recent phenomenon, in philosophy, after all – no more than three

hundred years. There is a linguistic *longue durée* here, which is only just beginning to be examined in the light of recent translation and cultural theory, and in the context of processes of globalization – in that massive 'dictionary of untranslatables', the *Vocabulary of European Philosophies*, edited by Barbara Cassin, for example. Interestingly, that has become a linguistically and theoretically self-proliferating project. As the original French edition – for which French inevitably functions as a meta-language – is "translated" into other national languages, problems arise about its own translatability. These are generating a second-level theoretical project focused on the relations between the different editions of the *Vocabulary* itself.

However, I'm not sure that the 'domestication' of translation by philosophy is the best way of describing this, since it is in its foreignizing effects that translation tends to most philosophically productive – as a form of defamiliarization that generates a need for conceptual construction. The problem with the image of a "passage to philosophy" is that it suggests that one day you might actually arrive, at which point you could presumably discard your translational ladder, so to speak. Derrida didn't mean that, of course, on the contrary. For him, philosophy was itself an infinite self-deferral – hence its translational character. But do you need a "passage to" infinite self-deferral? Haven't you always already arrived? Translation is not so much a "passage to philosophy", perhaps, as a stimulus to philosoph*izing*, as a critical reflective activity. This was one of the effects of the so-called 'linguistic turn': an emphasis on philosophy as an activity, rather than a doctrine, a set of positions or results. That distinction is already philosophically active in Hegel, of course, although he had a more classical – which is to say – optimistic view about the kind of experience such philosophical activity produces.

We can certainly think of translation as a philosophical concept, but as such it remains in the early stages of its construction – not least because the relationship between its cultural, its disciplinary and its more strictly linguistic senses is only just beginning to be explored. And the fact that this enquiry is itself increasingly in a single language – English – is as problematic as it is enabling.

One of the things that the idea of translation as a philosophical concept does is raise the general question of what it means for a concept to function philosophically. Each model of philosophy has a different answer to this question. To treat translation as a philosophical concept is in many ways not so surprising. After all, a lot of people still view 20th-century philosophy primarily in terms of a variety of 'linguistic turns'. If philosophy is essentially – even in part – philosophy of language, or if it sets out from problems of meaning of one sort or another, then one would expect translation to be a central issue – rather more than it has been in fact, outside of the later Wittgensteinian tradition, where it appears in a fairly conventional anthropological form.

This is one of the connections between Anglo-American philosophy and the British tradition of cultural theory, of course: the anthropological problematic. It links Wittgenstein to Raymond Williams. It is very much a phenomenon of the period immediately after World War II: decolonization found its first theoretical reflex within the colonial powers in a generalization of the anthropological problematic. It was there that translation became a concept of general theoretical import. The shift to structuralism (driven from within the anthropological problematic) changed the dynamics of this relation, since it provided an 'ontology for decolonization' (as Levinas put it) by maintaining multiple cultures on a single plane of significance. But the relation of this single

plane to the multiplicity of cultures remained a translational issue. Afterwards, with so-called 'poststructuralism', there was a return to the problematic of multiplicities and encounters. In many ways, Derrida's later works – with their focus on the gift, hospitality, etc – underline a continuity here with pre-structuralist anthropology. In a way, he viewed issues raised by the post-1989 dynamics of globalization from the standpoint of the anthropology of the colonial period, albeit with philosophically 'updated' methodological tools: as a generalization of the problem of the singularity of 'encounter'.

Boris Buden: You have written on "modernism" as both a philosophical concept and, in its generality, as "translation". We can understand various culturally and historically specific articulations of "modernism" as its translations, but – and this is crucial for your argument – not from an alleged original. A "Chinese modernism" or "Indian", "African anti-colonial", "Soviet" or "socialist" etc modernisms are not specific variants of an original Western modernism, which is defined *a priori* by a set of essential formal-stylistic features. What is essential for a translation is not, according to Benjamin, its relation to the original, but rather a certain quality that is inherent in this so-called original – its translatability. In the case of "modernism" as cultural form, you understand this translatability in terms of a transcendental (prior to every translation), abstractly universal temporal formalism, a specific temporal logic of negation that structures a particular time-consciousness; in concrete terms, the idea of a difference between the "old" and the "new", that is, to quote your own words, "a rupturally futural sense of the present as an (always, in part, destructive) transition to a (temporary) new order". It is on this level – the level of its purely abstract translatability – that we can

talk about global modernity. This understanding of "modernism" clearly opens up the possibility of thinking of it from a critical, i.e., a non-hierarchical or, rather, a counter-hegemonic, or even an emancipatory perspective. However, it also raises the question of whether this purely abstract level of its translatability is the only possible way to experience "modernism" in its global sense? In other words, is it again only philosophical reflection, however critical, that provides the experience – in the form of an abstract knowledge – of global modernity? To put it more radically: without a philosopher to open their eyes to the global, universal meaning of "modernism", are the particular translators of modernism, the modernists who in a particular, culturally specific context articulate, implement or actualize its abstract translatability, necessarily blind to this translatability itself, being themselves representative of the global character of modernity? Is culture without philosophy blind? Is philosophy without culture empty?

Peter Osborne: Again, I am going to reject this abstract opposition of 'philosophy' and 'culture' as anything other than a phenomenological starting point, to be reflexively overcome – just as, ultimately, Kant's opposition between intuition and concept has to be overcome, if we are to make sense of the possibility of experience. There are several things at stake in your set of questions. Philosophically, the issues primarily concern: 1) the status of transcendentals, and relatedly, 2) the sense in which the universal temporal formalism of the modern – and its collective cultural affirmations (modernisms) – are 'abstract'. Cultural-politically, the issue would appear to concern the social or institutional role of 'philosophers' as carriers of the experience of

some high-level universality – or as Hegel would have said, *bureaucrats*.

You say that I understand modernism's translatability in terms of "a transcendental (prior to every translation), abstractly universal temporal formalism". But this is not quite right, or at least it can be misleading. It's true that I understand it as having a transcendental status, in the sense that it is a transcendental-logical condition of possibility of each instance, but this does not make it 'prior to' *all* instances; but only to each individual one, individually. There are methodological issues here about the relationship of transcendental method to historical ontology, which go far beyond Kant's own horizon. Certain particular instances are the actual, historical conditions of the possibility of the transcendental form, which is a formal representation of their generality. This generality may be retroactively posited as a condition of each of them individually. Furthermore, though, what is ontologically peculiar about capitalist societies is that various of the social forms that function transcendentally – and hence abstractly – also exist 'concretely', or have a concrete dimension. There are 'concrete' or 'real' or 'actual' abstractions'. This notion was developed paradigmatically by Marx in his analysis of the value-form (using Hegel's logic). My claim is that it has much wider application. I am still working on this (see my essay, 'The Reproach of Abstraction', in *Radical Philosophy* 127, September/October 2004, for example). My own paradigm case is the temporal formalism of the modern. This does not negate its transcendental role in establishing the possibility of translation; nor, alternatively, does it negate the need for translation. But it does complicate the relationship between them. The difficulty – as always – is in how to think certain historical processes philosophically – that is, in the full significance of their disjunctive unity – without regressing to an *a priori*

philosophy of history, on the one hand, or empiricism on the other.

So, with regard to the question of whether the purely abstract level of the translatability of "modernism" is the only possible way to experience it in its global sense: the answer is emphatically 'no'. Not only is it *not* the only way, it is not even *a* way, by itself. We only *experience* the 'purely abstract' level as a concretely particular 'pure abstraction', and hence as a local manifestation. There are plenty of local manifestations of the 'purely abstractly' global; they are not less local for that. That is the 'bad abstraction' of the global: it appears in direct empirical forms. A better philosophical understanding of "modernism in its global sense" would seek to grasp its global extent *distributionally*, as the unity of its historical ensemble. The transcendental level of its 'pure formalism' mediates its individual instances, transforming their meaning: 'globalizing' them, so to speak, as individual instances. The broader the field of instances, the deeper our (contradictory) experience of the pure formalism will be.

So, no, it is not only a philosophical reflection that provides the experience of global modernity. The philosophical reflection aims to give explicit conceptual shape and presentation to a structure of experience that is socio-historically immanent. In one sense, yes, this takes the form of an abstract knowledge; but in another sense it can further concretize the knowledge implicit in the social experience, by rendering explicit the multiplicity of its determinations in a way that can be returned to practice. "Philosophy" takes two forms here: a distinctive – conceptually 'pure' and 'abstract' – discourse and an immanent transformation of experience. But they are connected. The first form is the product of philosophical work on materials that are necessarily in part non-philosophical. I don't believe in 'self-sufficient' philosophy.

“Translation’ is one way of thinking the relations of the philosophical to the non-philosophical, as the ‘purification’ or ‘distillation’ of the relations internal to the non-philosophical itself. The bureaucrats are the purveyors of bad abstractions. But this is an ineliminable element of the *practices* of abstraction through which we are constituted as subjects by the social forms of capital.

The rhetorical point of Kant’s antinomy of the blind and the empty, was that neither (intuitions alone, nor concepts alone) is possible. So yes, culture without philosophy (in the sense of reflection on its universality) would be blind; and philosophy without culture (in the sense of lived relations and practices of universality) would be empty. But neither situation is possible, since then there would be neither ‘culture’ nor ‘philosophy’ – which *is* possible, of course!

Boris Buden: My last question concerns the emancipatory promise that is today often ascribed to the concept of translation. In this context translation, or more precisely, “cultural translation”, is seen primarily as a dynamic mode of cultural hybridization that subverts essentialist concept of culture and therefore implies an immanent critique of multiculturalism and, in a broader sense, a critique of nationalistic ideologies and their political practices. However, I am interested in a capability of the concept of translation to articulate a more general form of critique, the one that concerns the way theoretical concepts transform experience and vice versa, which is precisely how you understand the idea of translation. The question is: can the concept of translation rearticulate this mutually transforming relation of theoretical thinking and experience in the interest of emancipation? In short, can you imagine the “purveyors of bad abstractions” – the bureaucrats who serve the status quo –

being translated into critical thinkers whose "good abstractions" generate an emancipatory change?

Peter Osborne: Not really. It's more that the critical thinkers need some kind of ongoing translational experience in order to stay critical and to develop critically. Emancipation is a political problem – in a deep sense – that so exceeds the question of theory, and the transformation of experience by theory, that it is hard to find the mediations to think their relations. The gap between 'emancipatory promise' and 'emancipatory change' seems to have widened to the point at which the term 'promise' is becoming misleading. There is a problem these days about the possibility of politics in the classical sense that hasn't yet really been adequately confronted. To have any general social effectivity, the kind of transformations to which you refer – the transformation of experience through theoretical reflection – need to issue from the immanent structure of social relations and practices – political practices in a broad sense. They need a translation into 'politics' before they can transform experience. Otherwise we are just talking about the experience of intellectuals. It's not the critical thinkers' 'good abstractions' that generate change, directly, but the immanence of those abstractions to broader practices, albeit a constructed immanent. So it is question of mediation, which is always also a question of translation, in its broadest sense. It would nice to be able to think of translation as a passage to practice; not just a 'passage to philosophizing' but a passage to practice as well. But that's not in itself a politics of emancipatory change. That only comes afterwards, if it comes at all.