INTRODUCTION

Transnational image building
Linking up translation studies, reception studies and imagology

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This special issue develops research trajectories initiated during the panel titled “Transnational image building and reception: linking up Translation Studies, Reception Studies and Imagology” and presented at the 9th EST Congress held in Stellenbosch, South Africa (9–13 September 2019). This session combined imagological perspectives with insights on the reception, selection, representation and promotion of translated cultural products.

With the panel, our main objective was to expand the boundaries of imagology – the study of ethnic or national stereotypes and commonplaces (Leerssen n.d.) – by integrating it with a transnational perspective. Though imagology’s objective has always been to analyze – diachronically and synchronically – images and ethnotypes in literary representations, Leerssen (2016) has pointed to the strong need to open up this circle and zero in on the ways in which these representations are created and mediated by the agents operating in transnational cultural spaces. However, relatively few researchers have sought to show how translation does this, despite the central role translation plays in shaping cultural images across national and cultural borders. As Flynn, van Doorslaer and Leerssen point out:

though it is the stated purpose of Imagology to trace ethnotypes and tropes across time and space as they become manifest in literary representation, how such manifestations are mediated by translation and its agents […] has as yet remained largely unexplored.

(Flynn, van Doorslaer and Leerssen 2016, 8)

The dynamism of images in translated cultural products is determined not only by historical developments, but also by changes in perceptions, political and cultural agendas, personal interests and contacts between the people selecting and translating them. The cross-pollination between imagology and translation studies has proven fruitful in recent publications focusing on the role played by images
not only in literary translation, but also in news translation, marketing and even political speeches (van Doorslaer et al. 2016; Ross & Gentile 2020).

When we launched the call for papers for this special issue in the spring of 2020, we received an enthusiastic response from academics all over the world, and obtained more submissions than we expected. This confirmed the continued relevance of the topic for translation studies. The hardest part of our task as editors was to make a selection from these submissions, which were all of very high quality and addressed a wide array of topics related to the reception, translation and adaptation of cultural products, without losing sight of the role that cultural images play in all these processes of cultural transfer. We would like to extend our thanks for the tireless work of the peer reviewers, who did not spare themselves in giving advice and suggestions. We selected the articles published here not only on the basis of the perspectives they provide (although we recognize that the special issue is still predominantly Eurocentric), but above all because they fully illustrate key issues and interact wholeheartedly with current theories at the intersection of translation studies, reception and imagology.

We started from the premise that the production and reception of translations are closely interwoven with the process of image building. Readers’ images of a country are constructed on the basis of the texts that are selected for translation in the first place, but also based on the particular ways in which translated books are subsequently promoted and packaged within their specific book covers. Cultural images thus undergo an evolution: they are constantly re-elaborated, re-shaped, re-processed, and filtered through marketing, promotion and reviewing phases. Drawing on sociological theories of the transnational circulation of literary works expounded by Sapiro (2016) and Heilbron (1999), the articles we present here provide insight into the ways in which translated cultural products are selected, come into being, and are received by foreign audiences.

Although our main focus was literary transfer, we made room for different genres and perspectives. Among these, we included: children’s literature with an innovative approach to how editorial choices in the target culture foster images of Balkanism (Todorova); news translation, with a case study of translated news articles on the BBC Chinese website (Ping); and text creolization, with a study on the Spanish translation of a hybrid vernacular in Sam Selvon’s The Lonely Londoners (Castillo Bernal). Reception analysis with a focus on paratexts is the hallmark of the articles by: Ross, who focuses on Cees Nootboom’s reception in five languages; Snauwaert, who analyzes the French and Dutch reception of Santiago Roncagliolo’s La pena máxima; Freeth, who deals with the English reception of Timur Vermes’ Er ist wieder da; and McMartin and Gracza, who explore the varying images projected by the British and Hungarian reception of Miklós Bánffy’s The Writing on the Wall. The combination of imagology and translation
policy – which emerges most clearly in Loogus and Van Doorslaer’s article – lays the groundwork for the integration of research in imagology and the workings of state-sponsored organizations that finance and promote translations from peripheral languages.

We believe that this wide range of perspectives will not only contribute to enriching existing research, but will also help expand the disciplinary boundaries of translation studies, reception studies and imagology. In particular, we hope that future research will include views from the Global South and will dig deeper into the links between translation policy/politics and cultural images.

References


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