

York, C. (2015). [Review of the book *Transfiction: Research into the realities of translation fiction*, by K. Kaindl and K. Spitzl (Eds.)]. *Linguistica Antverpiensia, New Series: Themes in Translation Studies*, 14, 227–231.

Kaindl, K., & Spitzl, K. (Eds.) (2014). *Transfiction: Research into the realities of translation fiction*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 373 p.

The term “transfiction”, in the context of translation studies, refers to the phenomenon whereby translation serves as a theme or motif in fictional works, and translators and interpreters are presented as characters in literature and film. As Klaus Kaindl observed in the introductory chapter to this volume, the phenomenon is becoming increasingly common in the wake of globalisation, as translation itself becomes a key metaphor to describe social processes in a world in flux. “Translation is movement. Translation is motion,” states Kaindl (p. 1), and movement—change, transformation, displacement, wandering—appears central to a globalised world in which stable geographical and social networks are dissolving, migration is intensifying, and high-speed electronic communication is the norm. If the identities of individuals are no longer tied to fixed social structures and locations, the figure of the translator or interpreter as a person who moves between languages and cultures would seem to be an appropriate symbol. Sure enough, we are experiencing a boom in the number of literary and cinematographic works that explore the theme of translation or that portray fictional translators and interpreters. While such representations may initially have been associated with postcolonial writing, they are now found across genres: in prose, poetry and drama; in everything from science fiction to thrillers and historical novels; in comedies, musicals and experimental film.

What does this development mean for translation studies, asks Kaindl (p. 4)? What methodologies and translation theories might be brought to bear on the study of this phenomenon? In 2011, a scientific committee composed of Brian Baer of Kent State University and Michèle Cooke and Klaus Kaindl of the University of Vienna, along with a local organising committee, proposed the First International Conference on Fictional Translators in Literature and Film. Held at the University of Vienna’s Centre for Translation Studies, the conference aimed to promote a systematic approach to the study of fictional translators and to stimulate interdisciplinary research by bringing together scholars not only from translation studies but also from disciplines like sociology, literary studies and film studies. The 22 chapters that make up *Transfiction: Research into the Realities of Translation Fiction* are drawn from papers presented at that conference. A second conference on the same theme was organised in 2013 in Tel Aviv under the title *Beyond Transfiction: Translators and (Their) Authors*, and in 2015, *Transfiction 3: The Fictions of Translation* was held at Concordia University in Montreal. A fourth conference is tentatively scheduled to take place in China in 2017. The topic seems to be a fertile one indeed, and one hopes that the follow-up conferences will also result in publications.

Transfiction: Research into the Realities of Translation Fiction aims to be more than a “mixed bag” of conference papers. It is carefully

structured to generate dialogue between the chapters and to help the reader explore the subject from various perspectives. It starts with two introductory chapters. First, Klaus Kaindl provides a thought-provoking overview that sets out the concept of *transfiction*, provides a brief history of references to translators and interpreters in literary and cinematographic fiction, and suggests ways to systematise translation studies research in this area. Karlheinz Spitzl follows with a more traditional introduction presenting the book's sections and chapters. Exploiting Kaindl's metaphor of movement, Spitzl suggests that the book takes the reader on a journey—though a rather open-ended one: “You may join or leave wherever you wish, move in slow motion or scamper about, take shortcuts, break your own trail, or, start right at the end” (p. 28). Accordingly, the four sections of the book are called “episodes”—reinforcing the impression of distinct elements that nonetheless fit together and contribute to a larger whole.

The first episode, containing six chapters, delves into certain theories, concepts and methods that have been fruitful in studying the relation between translation studies and fictional representations of translators and interpreters. For example, recognising the prevalence of translation as a theme in Latin American fiction, Rosemary Arrojo (pp. 37–50) examines the stories of Borges to show how they not only feature translators as protagonists, but also act as ingenious creative translations into fiction of certain philosophical concepts (by Nietzsche and Derrida, among others) on language and texts. Walter Benjamin figures prominently in this episode. His famous essay “The Task of the Translator” is referred to first by Fotini Apostolou (pp. 69–86), who examines how the essay has been “transplanted” into fictional form in a short story by Todd Hasak-Lowy, in an act of both destruction and reconciliation; then by Klaus Kaindl (pp. 87–101), who looks at how the German-Japanese author Yoko Tawada plays on Benjamin's view of translation as ensuring the afterlife of the original without having any significance for that original. Tawada tells the story of an unnamed translator who fails in her attempt to translate a tale of villainous dragon slayers, and in his reading of this complex intertextual work, Kaindl offers up the dragon as a new metaphor of translation: “Powerful but vulnerable, strong but endangered, hidden but redoubtable” (p. 28).

In the second episode, we travel through a range of sociocultural contexts in Italy, Russia, Quebec and France. Two strong articles in this section that cover overlapping territory are the examination by Natalia Olshanskaya (pp. 141–155) of three Russian works of fiction in which translators play prominent roles as translators, and the close reading by Brian James Baer (pp. 157–175) of one of those three works, Liudmila Ulitskaya's bestselling novel *Daniel Shtain, perevodchik*, translated into English as *Daniel Stein, Interpreter*. Stein is a complex character: a Polish Holocaust survivor who worked as an interpreter for the Gestapo, then became a Catholic monk and emigrated to Israel. Whereas

Olshanskaya reads Stein as a spiritual leader whose “ability to interpret and translate across linguistic and religious divides, to communicate with people from all cultures stands as a symbol of love, freedom and tolerance” (p. 148), Baer questions that characterisation. More particularly, he takes issue with the tendency among critics of the novel’s English translation to see it as “a postmodern celebration of pluralism and hybridity” (p. 168), instead reading a subplot connecting homosexuality to excessive American individualism as evidence of *Stein*’s rejection of diversity in favour of more traditional Russian concepts of universalism.

The third episode, called Experiencing Agency and Action, introduces us to several more members of the colourful cast of fictional or fictionalised translators and interpreters whom we meet over the course of *Transfiction*. Interpreters take the spotlight here. Recalling the recent success of Hollywood films like *Lost in Translation* (2003) and *The Interpreter* (2005), Ingrid Kurz (pp. 205–219) points out that increased attention to translation as a theme or plot device has led to more sophisticated representations of the process. The depiction of moments when interpreters fail to convey a message adequately—for example, when a Japanese interpreter renders in only a few words the director’s lengthy instructions to an American actor shooting a whisky commercial in Tokyo—signals a new recognition of translators’ “potential power to distort and manipulate” (p. 216). “You must not become involved!” was the mandate given to interpreters hired to work at South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission starting in 1995, and those were the opening words of Michael Lessac’s theatrical production on the harrowing experiences of the interpreters. In her masterful analysis of the play, Alice Leal (pp. 233–245) draws on Derrida’s essay “On Forgiveness” and observes that while notions of professionalism mean interpreters are expected to perform objectively in all situations, the extreme context of the Commission exposes the need to acknowledge subjectivity—in the sense not of emotion and sentimentality, but of having personal history and responses—in the discipline of interpreting studies.

In the fourth and final episode, the articles look at how specific translation activities are carried out by the protagonists of fictional works, who may not be professional translators themselves. Alice Casarini (pp. 329–344) uncovers numerous instances in the *Harry Potter* saga, in which the characters’ survival is dependent on successfully negotiating and mediating between English and the magical languages of the world of wizardry. She compares the translation strategy of Harry, who depends on innate ability or outside help, with that of Hermione, who applies her outlook to life—hard work, willpower, and logical skills—to the task of translation. Casarini argues that the difference between these strategies is not gender-based but “proof that brainpower, perseverance, and the ability to think ahead are invaluable means of empowerment” (p. 342). Professional translators are virtually absent, as well, from the

cinematographic and literary genre of science fiction, as Monika Wozniak (pp. 345–361) points out. Perhaps because the genre is dominated by English-speaking writers, many assume that all people on Earth—and in other galaxies—will eventually communicate, if not through magic tools like decoding machines, in English or in “Spoken Galactic Basic,” which, as Wozniak wryly observes, “coincidentally is identical to spoken English” (p. 349). It is striking that in science fiction, the job of establishing communication with alien civilisations falls rarely to translators or language experts but is often handled by scientists, robots and various spaceship crew members.

Studying the representation of acts of translation in fantasy novels and science fiction, in the end, gives us insight into how translators and interpreters are perceived by the wider audiences who read these genres with expectations of a coherent universe and plausible situations. Similarly, the character traits assigned to the fictional translators who appear all throughout *Transfiction: Research into the Realities of Translation Fiction* shed light on ways in which translators and interpreters figure in the collective imagination—and they seem a rather unhappy lot. Analysing Jacques Galat’s *Le traducteur*, about a frustrated, disillusioned and obsessive would-be author, Nitsa Ben-Ari (pp. 113–123) concludes that recent fictional interest in translators has not enhanced their status or diminished their perceived innate weakness in the public eye. In Quebec, as Patricia Godbout shows (pp. 177–187), the translator is typically portrayed as a loser with few options, particularly in the period prior to the mid-1970s, mirroring the sense of linguistic and cultural insecurity felt by many Québécois at that time. Other translators and interpreters embody existential conflict, rootlessness and communication difficulties.

These characterisations point to what is, perhaps, the greatest value of *Transfiction*: not what it tells us about fiction, but what we learn through fiction about the actual practice of translation and the lives and working conditions of translators around the world and in different time periods. Portrayals of translators in literary works from previous centuries become valued sources of knowledge about the profession in history. Mainstream films featuring translators and interpreters bring awareness of the potential for manipulation in the act of translation to broad audiences. Memoirs by interpreters in war zones that bear witness to the impossibility of neutrality align with recent studies recognising interventionism in interpreting, as Marija Todorova explains (pp. 228–229). In a brief afterword, Karlheinz Spitzl (pp. 363–368) argues that fiction can speak to the emotional aspects of translation in a way that nonfiction cannot and as such, is a particularly useful resource for exploring the impact of feelings like desire, empathy, shame, anger and fear on the translation outcome. For in the end, as this volume makes abundantly clear, translation is “not about signs, symbols or things, but about us and our relation to each other” (p. 365). Because of the

coherence of its chapters, which do indeed take the reader on a journey, and for the fascinating picture of translation—in fiction and in practice—that emerges from its pages, this volume is a remarkable contribution to contemporary translation studies and succeeds in opening a new area of study where fiction and translation intersect.

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