

Transatlantic Aesthetics and Culture

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This series hosts works coming from both sides of the Atlantic that offer multicultural and interdisciplinary perspectives on modern literary, aesthetic, and cultural issues. It embraces studies of literature, theatre, cinema, visual arts, or dance. Defamiliarizing subjects by adopting an outsider's view or bringing to bear different aesthetic or theoretical discourses on particular cultural spheres are among the privileged approaches of *Transatlantic Aesthetics and Culture*. The series aims to foster dialogue and encourage different cultural and critical discourses. It welcomes monographs and collections of essays.

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PETER LANG

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TRANSLATING AMERICA

THE CIRCULATION OF NARRATIVES,
COMMODITIES, AND IDEAS BETWEEN ITALY,
EUROPE, AND THE UNITED STATES

Edited by

Marina Camboni, Andrea Carosso, Sonia Di Loreto,
and Marco Mariano



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Introduction

Our life as human beings is made possible not only by the biosphere in which we are immersed and of which we are all part, as semiotician Yuri M. Lotman convincingly argues, but by the *semiosphere*, which is both “the result and the condition for the development of culture.” Outside the semiosphere, he claims, there can be neither communication nor language, since it guarantees the functioning of all natural and cultural languages (Lotman 125, 123). Furthermore, the semiosphere is never static, for all the languages that make it function are in dynamic correlation. Translation from one natural language to another, from a cultural code to another, together with the flow and exchange between different levels within the same language, make the semiosphere a complex and dynamic cultural space that constantly renews itself.

If we turn from Lotman’s theory of culture to an examination of the dynamic changes and renewals that have characterized the western side of our semiosphere since the time when Columbus ‘discovered’ what he presumed to be the Indies, we can easily perceive how the very existence of “America” has not simply, and objectively, changed the relations between continents and between political powers, but also added to western cultural semiosis a sign that condenses facts and myths, history and imagination. Through a web of discourses and words that still cling to it, like barnacles to an ocean-sprayed rock, the name “America” – and the US, the country which has become coterminous with that name – is now the complex semiotic sign of modernity and dream. Even more so, starting with the twentieth century, the US has grown to be the producer of a great part of our contemporary semiosphere. It has become the emblem itself of modernity, and the dynamic center of the ‘soft’ cultural power that moves alongside political, economic, scientific, and technological production, infiltrating the globalized world and people’s imagination, for good or bad.

It has been stated time and again that Italy, Europe, and the rest of the world for that matter, occupy the margins of that center, participat-

ing in the production of signs and goods but not sharing its forwardly pointed arrow of innovative power. And yet, it is exactly this center-margin metaphorical representation of culture, and of the relationship between the US, Italy and Europe, with its rigid unidirectional focus, that the essays in this volume attempt to challenge, in a debate we have named – after the title of the Twentieth International Conference of the Italian Association for North-American Studies (AISNA) at which early versions of these essays were first presented – “Translating America:” a critical re-examination of the ways in which (the US of) “America” has been perceived, assimilated, transformed and, in sum, “translated” this side of the Atlantic.

The thrust our title, in fact, and the argument underlying it, emphasizes not so much the unidirectional flow of culture, from Europe to the US in the past, and from the US to Europe in present times, but rather the cultural circulation that has always characterized the relationship between the two sides of the Atlantic “pond,” necessarily also involving North and South America. And it is precisely the circulation of models and of goods, of myths, of languages, texts and cultural objects, through the translation from one natural language to another but also from one code to another, through adaptation, domestication and re-imagination, at all levels of the cultural semiosphere, that this collection of essays tries to emphasize. Consequently, most contributions function like films, or lab reports, showing how semiosis works at every cultural level, how and why ideas and objects, even goods that were meant to be simply commodities, conquests of the economic market, are transformed into artistic and cultural tools, given imaginary and life values and thus nourishing a new cycle of cultural production and innovation.

Israeli semiotician Itamar Even-Zohar draws a distinction between two conceptions of culture. The “culture-as-goods” conception, he states, considers culture “as a set and stock of evaluable goods, the possession of which signifies wealth, high status, and prestige.” “Culture as tools,” on the other hand, highlights the cognitive and performative value of culture, where culture is considered a set of “operating tools for the organization of life” at the individual and social levels. And while “culture as tools functions as organizer of ‘life,’” “goods” can do so only indirectly, “when converted (or transformed), into

tools.” Even-Zohar’s dis-articulation of the concept of culture uncovers a process whereby goods can be transferred from one place to another as commodities and signs of power, but it takes their transformation into tools of life for them to “work as models for generating situations in the life of people.” Therefore, it is only when they are translated into the cultural life of the receiving community, when they are ‘domesticated,’ that they can enter the creative process of cultural transformation and innovation.

And it is exactly the ways in which “America” is created, refracted, changed within the US and in the Italian and European cultural production, and the ways in which, vice-versa, Italy, Europe and other countries contribute to American cultural production, that the four sections of the volume highlight.

* * * * *

We open the book with a section devoted to the exchange of linguistic and cultural models to and from America, where its contributors interrogate the trans-Atlantic and trans-American migration and displacement of political ideas, economic models, as well as cultural discourses and commodities. In “Re-Translating America’s Key-words: A Look from Beyond,” Mario Corona addresses the question of whether, within the ongoing decline of the American Model, the terminology defining the self-representational construct of “America” is still viable when confronted with reality. Corona asks if such decisive terms in public discourse as “democracy,” or “terrorism” still signify – after the crucial divide of 9/11 – what they did in the past. By harnessing a wide corpus of examples of standard vs. critical representations of the US, and of possible alternative models chosen from a largely non-US array of historical, political, and cultural essays, Corona calls for the need to revise longstanding perceptions of America and Americanness.

The two essays that follow analyze the construction, and the persistence, of those perceptions as imbedded within cultural commodities that have successfully taken “America” global – both essays emphasizing the ways in which this process of globalization is the outcome of complex layering, cross-fertilization and repeated transatlantic encounters. In “Pouring your Heart into it: a Brand Brewed

from the Grounds of Arabica,” Eva-Sabine Zehelein discusses the globalization of American economic and cultural models – in particular the way in which the Starbucks corporation has thrived on an extraordinary narrative of the attempted translation of an originally Italian theme and cultural practice into an American discourse, which then it has striven to globalize. Zehelein investigates how a formerly cheap, everyday item such as a cup of coffee could be so effectively transformed into a high-priced “lifestyle” product operating on a global scale, which translates coffee into an “experience,” through the agency of logo, lingo and location. Likewise, Simona Sangiorgi’s “Disneyland in Europe: Cultural Chernobyl or Cultural Shock ‘Therapy’?” investigates the way in which the Disney theme parks have in the last twenty years gone global, having managed to take on a dominant, hegemonic role within the cultures they have reached out to. Sangiorgi specifically studies the case of Disneyland Paris (formerly known as “EuroDisney”), arguing that what has been typically discussed as a case of American “invasion” of Europe is in fact the result of a more complex trend of America’s appropriation of European leisure models, later “translated” globally – and to Europe in particular – through a long process of adaptation, which Sangiorgi defines as “cultural shock therapy.”

The remaining three essays of this section discuss how individual cultural texts from television, film and drama are never immune to adaptation whenever they undergo processes of trans-Atlantic fertilization and mainstreaming. Gianna Fusco’s “Marketing America: Adaptation and Mainstreaming in *Ugly Betty* and *The Office*” focuses on the way in which recent “quality” TV series have undergone a process of adaptation to new, wider, and much more varied and compound ideas of “Americanness.” By looking at the successful importation into the US market of two foreign TV series, Fusco considers how this has redefined a deeply felt, if not always a clearly articulated, idea of desirable, mainstream, Americanness in the cultural practices that these kinds of series invoke and realize. In “Exporting Tennessee Williams: The Translations and Adaptations of *Streetcar* abroad,” Alessandro Clericuzio examines the way in which Tennessee Williams’ 1947 classic play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, was immediately appropriated by the European intelligentsia and staged by artists of

such standing as Ingmar Bergman, Jean Cocteau and Luchino Visconti. Through processes of transculturation actors, directors, scene designers and translators, all contributed to a complex sequence of linguistic translations, stage adaptations, political readings, ideological censorship, academic receptions and intersemiotic transformations into other arts, like ballet or film. And, finally, Francesca De Lucia’s “‘*La linea della palma*’ in Brooklyn: Sicily and Sicilian America in Lattuada’s *Mafioso*” analyzes a notable example of Italian cinema that developed through joint cultural influences of American and Italian derivation. De Lucia shows how Lattuada’s 1962 film *Mafioso* (1962) produces a metaphorical translation of the American filmic representation of the gangster by displacing it geographically, while at the same time reading immigration as an “American nightmare.” De Lucia points out how, in the film, both Sicily and the United States function as antithetical exoticized areas onto which impulses of violence and criminality are displaced, thus making *Mafioso* a prime example of how the legacy of American cinema becomes translated into an Italian film, and in the process becomes a hybrid cultural product.

The second section of this volume deals with the idea of translation as a way of rewriting certain crucial stories, tropes, or images through the passage from one media or genre to another. The first two essays consider scenes of translation across cultures and across time. In her “A-Literacy, Performance, Translation: The Embodied Public Sphere in Early America,” Elizabeth Maddock Dillon defines the scene of colonial encounter as a site of translation. By focusing on the performance history of *The Tempest* and *Robinson Crusoe* in the theatres of Charleston, S.C. in the 1790s, the essay traces a New World genealogy of theatricalized colonial encounters, beginning with Prospero and Caliban’s conflict in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611), and following its permutations in John Dryden and William Davenant’s *The Enchanted Island* (1667), through Daniel Defoe’s scene of encounter between Robinson Crusoe and Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and Richard Sheridan’s theatricalized version of the same – *Harlequin Friday or Robinson Crusoe* (1781). This performance history, occurring at a time when the theatre had enormous culture currency, underscores the significance of the *geographical* translation of English

texts to American stages and points, as well, to the importance of an embodied public in the creole culture of America. De Angelis, in his “Left in Translation: Mirror Images of Italy and America in the Italian TV Version of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun*” examines a double translation and transcodification not only between the United States and Italy, but also across time. By looking at the Italian TV adaptation of Hawthorne’s romance, the essay discusses how Hawthorne’s original operation of cultural translation of Italy to America is somehow reversed, with the unexpected result of the TV version inadvertently exposing some of the hidden double entendres about the darkest censored truths of American history and civilization, that are mirrored in the plot and characters of Hawthorne’s Italian romance.

The two essays that follow concentrate on the American cultural landscape, addressing myths and images that have become central to America’s self-definition. “The Transformation of Wilderness from the Aesthetic of the Sublime to the Aesthetic of Life: *Into the Wild* as a Palimpsest of the American Myth of Nature” by Paola Loreto explores Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild* as an instance of the translation into contemporary terms of the American myth of the relationship of the individual to nature. In this perspective, Loreto reads *Into the Wild* as a double palimpsest, in which the first, translucent layer was written by young Christopher McCandless over some of the contributions to the American myth of the escape from civilization into the authentic life of the wild (Henry David Thoreau, Jack London); while the second, opaque layer has been written by Jon Krakauer in his attempt to interpret McCandless’ text (as a palimpsest) through his own, modernized conception – and myth – of mountaineering as a form of contact with pristine nature. With a similar concern in mind, but focusing instead on the urban scene of New York, Francesco Pontuale investigates the re-writing in novelistic form of the “jumpers,” (the men and women who leapt from the Twin Towers during the 9/11 terrorist attacks) who were, in some cases, immortalized in famous photographs. “The Eternal Frame: Photographs, Fiction, and Falling Men in Don DeLillo and Jonathan Safran Foer,” by looking at the translation from photographic representations of the “original” 9/11-jumpers into the fictional narrative and visual renditions in DeLillo’s and Foer’s novels, discusses the process of erasure and re-inscription, layering and supe-

rimposition, forgetting and remembering present in Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007) and Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). Pontuale highlights the fact that, whereas DeLillo’s performance artist represents an unsuccessful attempt to resist the oblivion of history, Foer’s photo series, with its attempt to re-write and reverse the destiny of one of the jumpers, moves the body of the falling man beyond history, thus making oblivion less inescapable.

The two last contributions of this section take up yet another media, graphic novels, as another site for translation. Stefania Porcelli in “Translating Memory and Trauma into Words and Images: Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1973–1986) and *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004),” reflects on the way in which the two works translate historical traumas into the interplay of words and images that constitutes the graphic form. Without denying the specificity of the two events, and also considering the debates about the uniqueness of the Holocaust, the author claims that *Maus* and *In the Shadow of No Towers* – although they use different formal strategies – establish a connection, rather than a discontinuity, between the trauma experienced by Artie’s father in the concentration camps (as told in *Maus*) and that experienced by Spiegelman himself on September 11, 2001. While Porcelli discusses how traumatic events find expression in the graphic novels, Paolo Simonetti, in “Translating Comics into Literature and Vice Versa: Intersections between Comics and Non-Graphic Narratives in the United States,” focuses on one specific instance of transposition from a novel into a graphic novel: Paul Karasik’s and David Mazzucchelli’s *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel* (1994). Karasik and Mazzucchelli’s text shows how an allegedly “simple” medium such as comics is able to render the full narrative potential of insistently language-oriented texts. The authors do not just translate Auster’s text; they adapt the poetics of postmodernist fiction, inventing a visual poetics for the medium they chose. By adapting current theoretic issues to graphic form, moreover, the graphic novel deals with the narrative unreliability, the instability of meaning, and the linguistic ambiguities of present-day life, proving itself as a perfect means to translate visual-oriented, computer screen-based, contemporary America.

The three essays included in the third section focus both on American authors' use of language to affirm gender identity and ethnic and cultural connections, and on the difficulties of linguistic translation. "Why speak of translation as a never-finished job, i.e., as a continuous process of writing and re-writing?" This question opens Marina Camboni's contribution to the volume and to the debate over "translating America." Through examples taken from her own Italian translation of H.D.'s *Trilogy*, Camboni sheds light on the reasons why the translator contributes to the continuing, or "afterlife" of an artistic text, and a translation can never be considered "definitive" or final. Insofar as each translated text is a "new writing" for the receiving audience, Camboni points out, it has the potential to trigger new creative texts, as well as critical and cultural responses, in a process that ensures permanence through discontinuity and difference, what she calls "transcreation." Translation, she tells us, thus participates in the larger, never-ending story of cultural opening, innovation, transformation, through the mediation of the translator herself.

"Translating Italian American Women Poets" means to "translate with an accent" for Elisabetta Marino, who illustrates the linguistic problems faced by whoever translates the bilingual poems written by Italian American women writers such as Maria Mazziotti Gillan, Daniela Gioseffi, Louisa Calio, Maria Famà, and Annie Lanzillotto. What makes these writers' work particularly interesting, Marino points out, is their political gesture of gender and cultural belonging, and their inscription of an Italian ethnic heritage within mainstream literature. Their aesthetic and poetic experimentation objectively enriches American poetry, and American English, by grafting onto it the softer sounds of the Italian language, with words dense with *evocative quality*, and with the oral and narrative rhythms of Italian immigrant culture. Finally, her analysis reveals how, liberated from the haunting shame of discrimination, Italian re-emerges not only as a sign that exhibits the complexity of the US semiosphere, built out of different cultural contributions, but through the very thickness of the language(s) used in the United States, each sound, each word carries cables of memory that extend, across the Atlantic, to Italy in the cases here discussed. Today these cables stretch across the continents to the rest of the world, well beyond US nationalistic political and cultural

stances, uncovering the flow of multiple transatlantic and transnational links with which languages and cultures connect peoples and places.

And it is again the extensive use of Italian, and of dialectal expressions and mafia jargon that, according to Cinzia Scarpino, is the most distinctive trait of the famous TV series *The Sopranos*, beyond its debt to Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather (Part I and II)* and Martin Scorsese's *GoodFellas*. In "Between God(fathers) and Good(fellas): To Kill, To Slur, To Eat in Tony Soprano's Words" Scarpino offers a well documented reading of the generational and cultural changes in the representation of the Italian American gangster. Through an examination of the lexical fields of "killing, violence, betrayal," "ethnic slurs," and "food," Scarpino shows how the language of *The Sopranos* conveys both the tragicomic downfall of the would-be-"Godfather," Tony Soprano, and the contemporary downsizing and displacement of the mob and its heroes from heroic greatness.

Finally, the fourth section of this volume examines how political ideas and cultural practices have been constantly translated and negotiated across the Atlantic. By focusing on the transnational circulation of ideas and people between the New World and the Old, the following essays contribute to the undermining of the traditional exceptionalist, nationalistic understanding of US history and culture.

The first two essays discuss the translation of ideas into the politics and the adaptation of European models to the American context as they deal with the relation between the state and free market – a crucial aspect of American liberalism placed at the core of the recent historiographical debate on the myth of the weak American state. Matteo Battistini's "Let the Trade Be *as Free as Air*: the Political Fight about the Free Trade and the American Revolution" questions this myth as it highlights the tension between the economic and political conceptions of liberalism in the views of Robert Morris and other mercantile leaders during the revolutionary years. On the one hand, liberal thought tended to express the vision of state-less society operating autonomously through free trade; on the other, it forged constitutional theories, financial and economic programs grounded on national statehood. Therefore, while a liberal tradition was being built on the dogma of the limited state, the early American republic did not escape

the European imperative of state-building. Moreover, this tension shed light on the semantic transformations of the concept of liberalism over the course of United States history, namely what Gary Gerstle has defined its "protean character" and its changing uses in American politics, as well as its ambiguous relation with European liberalism.

Such relation is also discussed by Gabriele Rosso in "Laissez-Faire Conservatism: William Graham Sumner and the Reception of European Classical Economic Thought in Late Nineteenth Century America." At a time when America was going through a deep economic and social transformation of the Gilded Age, the rise of industrialism, the social question, and the emergence of the labor movement severely challenged the common self-image of America as a class-less, prosperous society free from Old-World social conflicts and class warfare. In this context, the translation and adaptation of European ideas and doctrines had a strong impact in shaping American interpretations of the new industrial era. European classical economic thought was embraced by its American supporters as a rationalization of the inequalities produced by the capitalistic order and contributed to the framing of a sound conservative response to the demands coming from the lower classes. Rosso shows how William Graham Sumner (1840-1910) was one of the main protagonists of this translation: his many writings clearly testify the impact of the doctrines of Adam Smith, Robert Malthus, and David Ricardo's school of thought in outlining a new conservatism inspired by the principles of *laissez-faire*.

The two following essays analyze how labor and immigrants continued to provide links for transatlantic encounters and tools for the translation of political and cultural models even during the isolationist, and to some extent nationalist, turn of the US in the interwar years. Adopting a labor perspective, Catherine Collomp's "Against the Stream: Translating America to Europeans, Translating Europe to Americans. A Working-Class Perspective during the Nazi Years" demonstrates that transnational practices of political action were not totally severed in the 1930s, when isolationism was triumphant, the US adopted "neutrality" *vis-à-vis* European affairs, and exceptionalist self-images of America prevailed in the public sphere. Collomp discusses the case of the Jewish Labor Committee, which was able to rescue

hundreds of persecuted European labor leaders with whom it had remained in contact, notwithstanding the fact that major labor organizations like the AFL had embraced isolation from international labor organizations and restrictionist policies on immigration. This network of labor solidarity also acted as a *liason* and translator between America and Europe at a time of unprecedented international crisis.

Stefano Luconi's "Translating the US Political System for Italian Americans in the Interwar Years between Democracy and Fascism" is a study of the complex way in which the Italian American press translated the US political system to its readers at a time of crisis in the relations between the US and Italy. Luconi stresses that on the one hand the ethnic newspapers praised the inclusiveness of American democracy, urging Italian immigrants to participate in electoral politics to assert themselves, to protect their rights, and to lobby in favor of their native country. On the other, reflecting in part Fascist anti-Americanism, the Italian-American press contributed to shape the newcomers' political adjustment to the New World by offering a disparaging characterization of American representative democracy and by depicting the US system as a plutocracy in the hands of financiers and entrepreneurs that marginalized ordinary people. This critique of American democracy, which echoed Fascist propaganda, was abandoned only when World War II led the elite of the Italian American community to embrace mainstream, patriotic positions.

Finally, while wartime patriotism was a key to the access by Italian-Americans and white ethnics in general to the American dream in the postwar years, Fulvio Orsitto's "Martin Scorsese's Ethnic Vantage Point: The Case of *GoodFellas*" illustrates how the definition of such a dream was far from univocal. Scorsese's conscious attempt to depict what he saw in the streets comes to life in the film, providing a unique cinematic translation of Italian Americanness. His focus on details and minutia of gangsters' daily life allows him to show that the protagonist of *GoodFellas* thinks he is living the American dream. What Scorsese portrays, however, is the American nightmare, or what could be the darkest side of the American dream. By cinematically translating Nicholas Pileggi's novel *Wiseguy*, Scorsese's movie also represents, according to Orsitto, a pivotal change in the mafia genre film, portray-

ing essential transformations in the *Weltanschauung* of the modern gangsters.

To conclude, together with the many ways in which cultural goods circulate across the Atlantic, be they called democracy, political institutions, languages, novels, or films, the contributors to this volume have carefully scrutinized the social *multiaccentuality* of “America,” namely the ideological differences in the social “realities” it refracts (Vološinov 1973, 23). On the whole, their analysis has uncovered the boundless work of the transatlantic semiosphere, which, in absorbing and transforming everything, not so much obliterates national frontiers but rather, in crossing them, cross-fertilizes whatever it finds in its way, also transforming the original ideological, emotional and cultural value of sign and codes, of myths and identity representations.

The Editors: Marina Camboni, Andrea Carosso, Sonia Di Loreto and Marco Mariano

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PART I

Trading America: Circulation of Identities, Goods and Cultural Practices