Imagining historical imagology: possibilities and perspectives of transdisciplinary/translational epistemology

According to the dominant epistemological trends marked by the global exchange of theoretical paradigms, this paper is aimed at examining possibilities of the epistemological constitution of the historical imagology as a transdisciplinary and translational research practice. Defining images as interferential configuration of the mental images, representations and practice patterns within certain socio-historical context, the main focus is put on the interpretative and explanatory landmarks stemmed from neurobiological and psychoanalytical theories of the self, discourse and dispositive analyses and praxeological theories. Final part of the paper highlights some theoretical impulses of intermedia, performance, visual and postcolonial studies for examining complex dynamics of the process of appropriation, modification and distribution of images, or, more generally, for understanding insolvable dialectics of the mutual constitution of identity and alterity in sign of Werner Kogge’s hermeneutics of non-understanding.

In the wake of a transdisciplinary era in the humanities and social sciences it seems the right moment has come to seriously consider “hybridising” classical literary imagology with other paradigms as well. The first step into this direction was a new approach to the mode of knowledge production and scientific disciplines in general which were conceptualised both as epistemological and social formations characterised by transdisciplinarity, heterogeneity, organisational diversity and high contextual dependence.1 However, since epistemological experiments with multi- and inter-disciplinarity did not manage to resolve the problem of creating socially relevant and effective knowledge, at the beginning of the

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1 For a more detailed account see Gibbons et al.
21\textsuperscript{th} century a new project of transdisciplinarity\textsuperscript{2} was successfully launched with an ambitious goal of searching for innovative ways of addressing and reflecting on issues of the life-world (\textit{Lebenswelt}).\textsuperscript{3} According to its most recent manifesto,\textsuperscript{4} transdisciplinary research is challenged by and aimed at grasping the complexity of explanatory and interpretative problems from various perspectives, both linking abstract with case-specific knowledge and constituting knowledge forms which would simultaneously have cognitive, practical and moral value from the perspective of the phenomenologically defined \textit{Lebenswelt}. This kind of transdisciplinary methodology thoroughly focuses on the research question which functions as a “knowledge base”, necessary to determine all available theoretical and methodological means for adequate problem solving.\textsuperscript{5} The research process must be then designed in a way that it takes into account mutual dependencies of different forms of knowledge, i.e. science (\textit{episteme}), life-world action (\textit{praxis}), production (\textit{poiēsis}) and prudence (\textit{phronēsis}) as the only guarantee that transdisciplinary produced knowledge would strongly relate to problem fields in the life-world or successfully navigate “between the Scylla of political irrelevance and Charybdis of technical inadequacy”.\textsuperscript{6} If we eventually give credence to Manfred Müller, a decisive advocate of transdisciplinarity in \textit{Literaturwissenschaft}, after more than half a century after the famous Carré – Wellek debate, it becomes not only epistemologically justifiable but also necessary that literary history and criticism transcend their disciplinary boundaries and transforms themselves into complex and heterogeneous \textit{Kulturwissenschaft}.\textsuperscript{7} However, despite its welcome subversive effect on the rigid structure of academic disciplines, disciplinary transgression is not efficient without articulating an appropriate theoretical and methodological platform. A

\textsuperscript{2} Alongside some French theoreticians (e.g. Jean Piaget, Basarab Nicolescu), transdisciplinarity is the most systematically promoted by a group of German speaking scholars gathered around a workgroup THESIS of the University of Göttingen and the Department of Environmental Sciences at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zürich.

\textsuperscript{3} The concept of life-world (\textit{Lebenswelt}) has been coined with the reference to phenomenology of Edmund Husserl who comprehends it as a self-understandable and unquestionable foundation of all human everyday reflection and practice. Cf. Husserl, 52-55.

\textsuperscript{4} The first one was published by Basarab Nicolescu, French theoretical physicist of Romanian origin. According to his view that there exist several levels of Reality, Nicolescu considers that transdisciplinarity is epistemologically superior to disciplinary research since it concerns the dynamics engendered by the action of many levels of Reality at once. Cf. Nicolescu.

\textsuperscript{5} Cf. Hirsch Hadorn et al., 35-36.

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 19-42.

\textsuperscript{7} Cf. Müller, 131-140.
fruitful starting-point for such a project might be a so-called translational epistemology, a metatheoretical derivative of a recent “translational turn” that encourages creative transfers and adaptations of theoretical models, heuristic concepts and methodological procedures between various, previously strongly separated disciplines. The main catalyst of this kind of transdisciplinary translation could be “travelling theories” as well as epistemological practices of “displacement” which could bring about comparative interchanges, internationalisation and deep inner transformation of the theoretical fields of humanities and social sciences. Judging from a more and more influential postempirical stream in the theory of knowledge which takes into consideration the hermeneutical dimension of nomothetical explanations, it could be foreseen that a productive exchange of humanities and social sciences with natural sciences becomes possible as well.

In my opinion, such a platform might provide suitable metatheoretical coordinates within which the epistemological constitution of historical imagology as a transdisciplinary and translational research practice could take place. The first important steps in that direction have already been taken by French literary imagologists, such as Daniel-Henri Pageaux and Jean Marc Moura, who, under the influence of Annalist history of mentality, plead for the interpretative analysis of literary images which seriously takes into account the socio-historical context of their production, distribution and reception. Although they identified insightfully important influence of hierarchical power-relations in construction processes of images and social/cultural imagery in general, the main weakness of their theoretical and methodological approach is the understanding of a literary image as a constitutive part of the historically modelled social imagery, without rigorous theoretical reflection on the relationship between the literary text and its social, cultural and historical contexts, which is, in the best case, defined as ideological and dialectical. A possible solution to this kind of aporia might be provided by Theodor Adorno’s concept of mediation by which he does not imply the existence of a middle term bridging two phenomenological orders but a process of production of the one

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9 E.g. cf. Susam-Sarajeva.
10 For a more detailed account see Bachmann-Medick, Cultural Turns, 256-272.
11 Cf. Pageaux; Moura.
12 For an elaborated theoretical conceptualisation of cultural imagery with recourse to early Völkerpsychologie cf. Dukić, 71-80.
phenomenon by the other, such as social and cultural construction of reality by and within the language.\textsuperscript{13} It means that the relationship of the literary text and its socio-cultural context might be conceptualised as recursive, i.e. a literary text and its imagery both constitute and are constituted by complex dynamics of a cultural field in general.

Alongside the text/context relationship, new historical-imagology-under-construction should necessarily reflect a problem of bodily experiences and material conditions of practice which go beyond the main-stream poststructuralist linguistic or culturalistic interpretations, mostly focussed on textually mediated phenomena. As a matter of fact, the cognitive interest of recent social, cultural and feminist theory seems to become more intensively focussed on corporeal appearance, experience and practice, as well as on the phenomenon of embodiment in general. For that reason, critically distancing from Cartesian dualism, they build their epistemological approach on the premise that simultaneously having and being a body is a basic feature of human existence.\textsuperscript{14}

A useful orientation in this respect might offer praxeological theories as well, approaching human experiences and practices as mental and bodily performances which include a complex set of cognitive and affective corporeal dispositions and material objects involved in the dynamic process of structuration.\textsuperscript{15} Its product is a social structure which is simultaneously a medium and a result of the social practices which it organises recursively. Social and cultural practices are thus meant as routinised bodily performances, incorporating both a reflexive and unreflexive knowledge of the world, which results with unstable effects involved in a constant process of functional re-evaluation and resignification. As a matter of fact, social practice involves a double contingency of (symbolical/practical) categories caused by objective factors, i.e. a certain intractability of the world in its resistance to facile categorisation, and by subjective ones, resulting from the

\textsuperscript{13} Cf. Adorno, 5-6.
\textsuperscript{14} Cf. e.g. O’Neill; Shilling; Price and Shildrick.
\textsuperscript{15} The main proponents of praxeological theories are Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, William H. Sewell Jr., Marshall Sahlins, Richard Biernacki and Andreas Reckwitz. Besides profound and sometimes irreconcilable differences between their theoretical and conceptual approaches, they all share an explicit endeavour to bridge theoretically a structure/agency dichotomy as well to emphasise adaptive, tactical, routinised and automatised uses of cultural patterns which were actualised, reproduced and transformed in the very act of their performance. Their praxeological theories are strongly influenced by neo-phenomenology which means that they begin from a belief in individual perception as the agent’s own source of knowledge about, and action in the world, a perception which is mediated and constrained but not wholly determined by the cultural schemes within which it takes place. For a systematic overview of praxeological theories cf. Spiegel.
individual’s intentional and practical construction of meaning. In a word, from a praxeological point of view culture is constantly (re)-making itself in a dialectical play between system and practice, stability and instability, past and present, diachrony and synchrony.\textsuperscript{16}

Based on the mentioned theoretical presumptions, I would like to propose a working definition of image as an interferential configuration of the mental images, textual and non-textual representations and practice patterns which are constituted within a certain socio-historical context. Structurally, they resemble Bourdieu’s concept of habitus as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations” or “an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted”, which, as a kind of \textit{lex insita}, “engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions and all the actions.”\textsuperscript{17} Seen from the perspective of that subtle dialectics of structure and agency or objectification and embodiment, an image could appear as a constitutive part both of collectively disposed cultural imagery and individual experience of the world.

This broader heuristic definition of an image has far-reaching consequences in theoretical as well as in methodological respects. Besides successfully bridging the ontological gap between social and cultural, individual and collective, production and representation, the proposed definition of an image presupposes a broader and more differentiated conceptualisation of identity and alterity. As far as a concept of identity is concerned, a very operable definition congruent with praxeological theories offers a “grammatological” anthropology by Gerd Baumann and André Gingrich who designate identity as social subjectivities of persons and groups of persons simultaneously including sameness and differing. They claim that these subjectivities are multidimensional and fluid and include dialogical power-related inscriptions by selves as well as by others, which are processually configured, enacted and transformed by cognition, language, imagination, emotion, body and (additional forms of) agency.\textsuperscript{18}

From this theoretical point of view, an image should not be considered only as a representation of the ethnic/national \textit{ther like in traditional literary imagology, but it has also to comprise a wide scope of variously ontologically and phenomenologically conceptualised manifestations of Otherness alongside social, cultural, religious, confessional, civilisational,
generational, gender etc. lines. The Other is therefore constitutive for individually and collectively determined selves in cognitive, emotional and practical respects which are imbedded in the dense network of hierarchically distributed power relations.

It goes without saying that such an approach requires an attentive focus on an identity/difference relationship which must be analysed both on individual and collective levels. As for the first objective, it would be necessary to establish an interdisciplinary cooperation with e.g. neurobiology which explores neuro-anatomic foundations and neurological mechanisms of feeling (self)-consciousness, and with psychoanalytical theory, a discipline interested in the structures and modalities of the mutual constitutions of the self and the Other. Regarding the first goal, Antonio Damasio’s neurobiological explanation of deep interconnectedness of neural mental models and subjective feeling of (self) – consciousness enacted in the very process of cognition seems to be very instructive.\(^19\) As for the second, it could be advantageous to rely on recent psychological/psychoanalytical theories. Starting from Lacanian concept of the mirror-stage,\(^20\) thanks to which the unified self is acquired through seeing this self being the mirror image of an-other, they give prominence to emotions and embodiment which are central for every mental act, including the cognition and affective acceptance of the self.\(^21\)

Furthermore, in order to detect subtle relations between individual and collective forms and functions of images, historical imagology might also rely on research results of social psychology, especially its branch engaged in stereotypes and prejudices which have an important function in cognitive orientation and reduction of complexity of the human \textit{Lebenswelt} and which not only serve as psychohygienic, protective and identity-building instruments of individuals and groups but are also vital factors of the culture of memory.\(^22\)

When a collective level of the identity/difference relationship is concerned, historical imagology should primarily focus on manifestations

\(^{19}\) Cf. Damasio.
\(^{20}\) It is worth mentioning that Lacan’s notorious description of the mirror stage is as follows: “The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures or the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development.” (Lacan, 6.)
\(^{21}\) For a systematic overview see Gallagher et al., 33-209.
\(^{22}\) A useful insight into the main trends in social psychology of stereotypes and prejudices offer: Spears et al.; Stangor; McGarty; Konrad.
and functions of inclusion and exclusion mechanisms which are not only necessary conditions and consequences of material and practical actualisation of images but also generate asymmetrical power relations. For these reasons, historical imagology should both adopt and adapt theoretical approaches, methodological procedures and explanatory paradigms of e.g. historical anthropology, intellectual, social, economic and gender history. In that way, it would be better equipped to trace historical continuities and patterns of changes in the production, uses and functions of images in the *longue durée*.\(^{23}\) Furthermore, an interdisciplinary exchange could be set up with postcolonial studies, the theoretical and conceptual apparatus of which is especially appropriate for the interpretative analyses of scenarios of polycentric interactions and translational constellations, mostly initiated by the so-called cultural mediators and realised in the hierarchically structured field of transculturations and hybridisations.\(^{24}\)

Since “new” historical imagology views an image not only as a product, but also as a cognitive, symbolical and communicative process, its analytical approach must necessarily show sensitivity for the phenomena of performativity and intermediality in order to grasp more precisely the process of image production situated in the intersection of the experiential, semantic and practical. In this respect, Barbara Bolt’s theory of radical material performativity is worth mentioning. Building upon theoretical prepositions of Heidegger, Derrida, Deleuze and Latour, she is less concerned with representational than with a productive materiality and co-emergent (*methektic*) character of the image brought forth in the material performance involving material objects, language and body.\(^{25}\)

Starting from the broad definition of media which, besides technological means, encompass body, communicative strategies and other discourses present in a communicative context, intermedia studies could provide a useful orientation to historical imagology as well. They are interested in performative action which is referring to social and political realities, autobiographies and everyday life. Encouraging “bold perspectives which look at the interspaces and the liminal of the process of the artistic”, intermedia studies aim at exploring the production of the exchange between

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23 A volume of papers presented at the conference on imagology and cross-cultural encounters in history, held August 29-31, 2007 at the University of Oulu shows ostensibly analytical and interpretative possibilities of combined, historico-imagological research. Cf. Alenius, Fält and Mertaniem.

24 For an appealing example of explicit linking of imagological and postcolonial theoretical and analytical approach see Flundernik, 63-90.

25 For a more detailed account see Bolt.
different meaning-generating systems in time and space. Helpful support to historical imagology in that respect could also be brought by visual studies which, conceptualising the process of creation, perception, reproduction and circulation of images as socially and culturally constructed practices, put into their research focus precisely that complex interdependence of images, discourses, institutions, knowledge and power.

A more comprehensive definition of an image has important consequences for the choice of potential sources for the imagological analysis as well. Alongside usual textual sources which should include all literary and non-literary genres such as scientific production, diplomatic reports or private correspondence, productive source material for the historical imagology could consist of various kinds of visual sources from cartography to film, but also of bodily and cultural practices like gaze, perception, memory, imagination, dreaming, inscenation etc. As an illustrative example in this regard there might be mentioned Horst Wenzel’s interpretative approach which arguably appeals for the integrative analysis of the textual, visual and sensorial in historical research.

To conclude, thanks to their reliable analytical platform and accurately elaborated methodological model, historical imagology could profit considerably from critical and historical discourse analyses as well as dispositive analysis, which programmatically amplify the research field of two previously mentioned paradigms both in heuristic and hermeneutical respect, focussing on the relationship between discursive and non-discursive practices, processes of symbolic and material objectivation and situation-specific interactive production of actors/subjects.

From their side, critical and historical discourse analyses approach discourse as a form of practice which has a crucial function in the constitution of social reality as well as in acquiring and changing comprehensions and representations of the human Lebenswelt, individual and collective identities and social roles. Both critical and historical discourse analyses define discourse as a practice constitutive of and constituted by the socio-historic and the socio-cultural contexts while their methodology insists on an interrelated three-dimensional analysis of discourse on the textual,

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26 The main centres for contemporary intermedia studies are the University of Iowa and the University of Dortmund. For the programmatic platform of intermedia studies cf. Breder and Busse.

27 For an overview of the main trends in contemporary visual studies see Dikovitskaya; Sachs-Hombach.

imagology and contextual levels. On the textual level, discourse analysis scrutinises lexical, grammatical, phonological, paralinguistic and visual structures of a text (e.g. graphic design, illustrations) as well as various strategies and mechanisms of the ideological activity of a discourse. The intertextual aspect of discourse analysis predominantly engages in higher forms of linguistic organisation (structures of argumentation, topology, generic models etc.) and a relationship of a text with a certain configuration of conventionalised linguistic practices (genres, narratives, discourses), available both to authors and recipients. Finally, on the contextual level, discourse analysis explores medial and institutional contexts of discursive practices in order to get a firmer interpretative grasp of its structural and functional polyvalence.  

While critical discourse analysis mainly deals with contemporary media discourse, historical discourse analysis, as a recent offspring of German Begriffsgeschichte, mostly focuses on the complex and dynamic processes of historical modifications of discursive representations of reality, which are seen to have recursive influence on changes of the historical reality itself. Although they share many theoretical, conceptual and methodological features, historical discourse analysis is more thoroughly concerned with the historical context, trying to detect and interpret linguistic, semantic and pragmatic continuities and changes of historical discourses in a certain historical period.

Finally, describing itself as a re-constructive research-style and research-perspective, dispositive analysis endeavours to discern conditions for emergence and transformation of a certain dispositive, conceptualised as meaningful and material social practice or complex configuration of knowledge, power and social being/practice. Starting from the assumption that a dispositive is crucial for establishing a social relationship between human beings, their material environment (objectivation) and (self)-experience (subjectivation), dispositive analysis epistemologically converges with praxeological theories, not only in its attempt to mediate a discursive and non-discursive, structure and agency, and but also through highlighting a “double dimension” of a subjective self which is defined as a cognitive-theoretical and praxeological “doubler”, simultaneously disposed and disposing, subjecting and subjected, active and passive while intricated in the historically conditioned and enacted action.

Therefore, historical research of the construction process of the image

29 For a more detailed account cf. Fairclough; Wodak and Meyer.
30 For a more detailed account cf. Eder; Landwehr.
31 For a more detailed overview of the theoretical presumptions, methodological features and empirical research goals of dispositive analysis see: Bührmann and Schneider.
of self and/as the Other is doubtlessly a great intellectual and moral challenge which, according to Werner Kogge’s hermeneutics of non-understanding, should involve a more attentive and creative dealing with boundaries and differences. According to Kogge, they should be approached under the sign of discretion which, on the one hand, designates a hermeneutical act of oscillation between the boundaries known and unknown, understandable and non-understandable, and postulates that not only sense, but also non-sense and counter-sense are constitutive factors of the process of understanding in general. On the other hand, discretion is a specific hermeneutical practice which strongly appeals for the constant re-examination of its own epistemological and explanatory limits and, even more importantly, for the development of a deep hermeneutical respect to impermeable and

32 Alongside boundaries and differences, crucial foci of Kogge’s interpretation are structural dynamics inherent to a sense-system and processual and performative character of understanding: “Wenn Sinnsysteme nicht als blinde Selektionsmaschinen, sondern als je spezifisch konfigurierte Zusammenhänge betrachtet werden, dann wird deutlich, daß sehr unterschiedliche Verfahren in solchen Systemen dazu führen können, trotz dieser Spannungen Zustände von Handlungsicherheit zu bewahren oder wiederherzustellen. Als solchen Verfahren, nicht als Prädikaten, die bestimmten Objekten in der Welt zugeschrieben werden, kommt den Kategorien des Un- und Widersinns strukturbildende Realität zu. Im performative Akt des Verschiebens gegebener Konfigurationen in spezifische Innen- und Außenbereiche werden diese Strukturen gebraucht und als Grenzen affirmiert. Unsinn und Widersinn sind deshalb für Sinnsysteme ebenso konstitutiv wie Prozesse, die in positiven Abschlüssen münden.” (Kogge, 288).

33 Here is Kogge’s brief summary of the hermeneutics of non-understanding: “Der Prozeß des Verstehens, so könnte man pointieren, beginnt mit einem Nicht-verstehen. Mit dem Aussetzen des nächsten Schrittes beginnt eine Handlung anderer Art. Man bewegt sich nicht mehr innerhalb eines Musters, sondern versucht, ein solches allererst aufzuspüren. Die Spannung zwischen aktuell Gegebenem und bekannten Mustern kann aber erst dann einen Schwebezustand auslösen, wenn dem aktuell Gegebenen so viel Selbständigkeit zugestanden wird, daß es nicht ohne weitere Umstände auf ein bekanntes Muster zugeschnitten wird. Dann aber verläuft die Suche in einem Widerstreit, bei dem im Frage steht, ob der Gegenstand ‘gewaltsam’ einer bekannten Regel angemessen wird oder aber eine Regel vom Gegenstand her mit Witz erschlossen wird. In jedem Fall aber ist der Abschluß keine Identifizierung, durch die ein aktuell Gegebenes mit einem Bekannten gleichsetzt wird, vielmehr wird im Hintergrundwissen nach einem Tertium gesucht, das es erlaubt, Gemeinsamkeiten und Differenzen auszutragen. Gelingt dies, dann schließt das Verstehen in einer neu geschaffenen Relation, die das Gegebene in Beziehung zu Bekanntem setzt, wobei diese Beziehung nichts anders ist als der Weg des Beziehens, dessen Gangbarkeit nun unproblematisch ist.” (Kogge, 271).

34 Kogge defines non-sense (Unsinn) as insufficient knowledge of the rules which govern a certain configuration of meaning and counter-sense (Widersinn) as violation of that which is held as the possible reality. For a more detailed account cf. Kogge, 261-325.
irreducible aspects of Otherness. This I would proclaim a first guideline for the emerging transdisciplinary and translational historical imagology.

References


The concept of “epistemology” as a distinct field of inquiry predates the introduction of the term into the lexicon of philosophy. John Locke, for instance, described his efforts in Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689) as an inquiry “into the original, certainty, and extent of human knowledge, together with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent”. According to Brett Warren, the character Epistemon in King James VI of Scotland’s Daemonologie (1591) “was meant to be a personification of [what would later.