



Iulia COSMA
University of Padua

Review of: SIMON, Sherry (2019):
Translation Sites. A Field Guide,
London / New York: Routledge.
282 pp. ISBN 978-1-131-53110-9
(eBook).

**Translation as Event.
Performing and
Staging Translations**

Brian O’Keeffe
Larisa Cercel
Marco Agnetta
[eds.]

3/2023
Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics
Jahrbuch für Übersetzungshermeneutik

Journal of the Research Center
Zeitschrift des Forschungszentrums

HK

Hermeneutics and Creativity, University of Leipzig
Hermeneutik und Kreativität, Universität Leipzig

DOI: 10.52116/yth.vi3.80



Cite this review:

Cosma, Iulia (2023): „Review of: SIMON, Sherry (2019): Translation Sites. A Field Guide, London / New York: Routledge. 282 pp. ISBN 978-1-131-53110-9 (eBook).“ In: *Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics 3: Translation as Event. Performing and Staging Translations* (ed. by Brian O’Keeffe, Larisa Cercel, Marco Agnetta), pp. 397–404. DOI: <10.52116/yth.vi3.80>.



Iulia COSMA
University of Padua

Review of: SIMON, Sherry (2019): *Translation Sites. A Field Guide*, London / New York: Routledge. 282 pp. ISBN 978-1-131-53110-9 (eBook).

Readers have expectations, naive and professional alike. Academic researchers and scholars are no exception. And this truism, I would argue, is ever more indicative when it comes to

Translation Studies. Depending on the subfield of TS the reader is most fond of, or is more invested in, it still remains the case that a book on translation is expected to have a theoretical framework, one preferably infused by a practical aim. It should contain at least some excerpts of contrastive analysis and is supposed to offer a few guidelines on how to translate better while refraining from blunt criticism of previous translations and/or translators. An approach, to put it short, that is descriptive or prescriptive.

Translation Sites follows a different path, one that would perhaps be more familiar to a Comparative Literature or a Cultural Studies reader by proposing an itinerary, rather than a perspective, a creative setting rather than a methodological scaffold. By means of intellectual speculation, and by carving out textual and visual evidence, Sherry Simon identifies “translation sites” (p. 1) or “polyglot places” (p. 1), as she refers to them in the Introduction. These places could potentially be any site that is, or has been, “shaped by conversations across languages”, where “words and histories meet – in modes of coexistence, rivalry or conquest”: “a hotel in Sarajevo, an opera house in Prague, a memorial in Lviv, a bridge in Mostar, a museum in Ottawa, a garden in Ireland, a market in Hong Kong and a church in Toledo, among others” (p. 1). And this intriguing potentiality of “polyglot places” is explored in accordance with their volatile and polymorphic nature by means of a perspicacious instrument, as sensitive as is required by such an object of enquiry, namely translation.

Besides an Introduction and a Conclusion, the “guidebook” (p. 1) is presented in five sections, “Architectures of Memory”, “Transit”, “Crossroads”, “Thresholds”, and “Borders, control, surveillance”, each of which is divided into a variable number of chapters. As the author warns us, “Each of the short chapters of this book examines place through a different

facet of translation”, but “neither place nor translation is a reliable touchstone: each explodes into fragments. What kind of place? What kind of translation?” (p. 8) To get a sense of what is peculiar to Simon’s quest, it suffices to read the names of some chapters: “The Monument. The Struggle for memory: Space of Synagogues, Lviv”; “The Opera House. Languaged architecture: The Neues Deutsches Theater in Prague”; “The Hotel Between place and non-place, difference and indifference: The Grand Budapest Hotel and the Tokyo Park Hyatt”; “The Mountaintop. Translation changes you: The language of heptapods”; “The Translator’s Study. Picturing translation from Saint Jerome to Nurith Aviv”; “The Garden. Replication: The Japanese garden in Ireland and the German garden city in Turkey”; “The Checkpoint. The Shibboleth and Ellis Island”; “The Edge of Empire. Far from where? Joseph Roth and Brody” (just to mention my favourites). Simon’s itinerary is an exercise in unfolding mental spaces that converge in the ‘translational site’ metaphor.

To my understanding, these mental spaces are built in a similar manner to Mark Turner’s blended spaces, as creative blends from which meaning arises (cf. Turner 1996: 57). That is, if you agree, as I do, with Turner’s way of considering concepts in the sense of “something conceived by the mind”, as not being something already present in our minds in the form of “packets of meaning”, and the meaning we give to what we experience as something other than “localized and stable” (ibid.: 57). From a cognitivist standpoint, the ways in which Simon experiments with the semantic potential of the ‘translational site’ metaphor in *Translation Sites* constitutes the perfect illustration (or the textual embodiment) of Turner’s characterisation of our mind’s generative mechanism of sense-making: “Meaning is not a deposit in a concept-container. It is alive and active, dynamic and distributed, constructed for local purposes

of knowing and acting. Meanings are not mental objects bounded in conceptual places but rather complex operations of projection, binding, linking, blending, and integration over multiple spaces. Meaning is parabolic and literary” (ibid.: 57). ‘Literary’ is to be intended here as an attribute of the ‘everyday mind’ since, according to Turner, we “mistakenly classify” as ‘literary’, that is to say specific to literature and literary works, “*story, projection, and parable*” (ibid.: v), which are principles of mind indispensable to human cognition (cf. also ibid.: 5–7). In other words, all human minds are ‘literary’ once they use stories and parables to make sense of the world.

So, just to give an example of Simon’s metaphoric exploration and interpretation, two opera houses, one Czech, the *Národní divadlo* (Czech National Theatre, opened in 1881, reopened in 1883) and the other one German, the *Neues Deutsches Theater* (New German Theatre, which opened in 1888) built in nineteenth century Prague, are envisaged as protagonists of “languages disputes” (p. 30), as “linguistic rival[s]” (p. 31), and as instances of “Languaged architecture” (p. 30). In the late nineteenth century, theatre and architecture became powerful instruments of national self-determination, involved as they were in the conflicting process of cultural and political transfer (and translation) that contributed to the construction of the Czech identity. In Simon’s words “The stones of both theatres were designed to deliver messages as eloquent, as meaningful and as ideologically tinted as the musical languages played within them. The Czech National Theatre translated the glorious Czech past into the present. The New German Theatre, built as an expression of the Habsburg Empire, was later translated out of its German origins into the Czech-speaking *Státní Opera* (Prague State Opera House). These structures show how architectural forms can be “languaged” (p. 31) when they are as-

sociated with specific tongues at the time of their construction or through subsequent layerings of meaning and memory”.

Simon’s book is “working at the intersection of translation studies, memory studies, urban geography, architecture and history” (Meschia 2020), so an attempt to summarize *Translation Sites* would undoubtedly result in a stylistic reduction of that multifaceted display the author creates out of textual, visual, historic and literary products and events, much like a 3D mandala. I will, nonetheless, refer the reader interested in more perceptive considerations on the textual architecture and content of Simon’s book to one I have already quoted (cf. Meschia 2020) and other reviews available, like Purvis (2020) and Duval (2021), for instance. My interest lies elsewhere, namely in the displacement of the order of things, rather than the encapsulation of content. More precisely, my aim is to observe Simon’s techniques when dealing with the complexities of translation, as well as the devices she resorts to, like filmic representations. It is no longer a novelty that cinematic products, thanks to their appealing versatility, were appropriated by other domains of study and that they were given a somewhat more ‘practical’ employment in developing language and cultural competence, for example. However, the use of movies as heuristic devices in translation theory is done in such a way by Simon that her insightful analysis benefits both Film and Translation Studies: interdisciplinarity at its finest. Cinematic products as a means of knowledge would sound familiar to film historians and theorists, since Jean Epstein’s written works are all about that, for instance, although the French-Jewish-Polish filmmaker, film theorist, literary critic, novelist, and occasional translator, intended it in a different way and expressed not only distrust, but also dislike for translation per se (cf. Epstein 1947/2002: 21–23):

Rival de la lecture, le spectacle cinématographique n'est assurément pas incapable de la dépasser en influence. Il s'adresse à une audience qui peut être plus nombreuse, plus diverse qu'un public de lecteurs, car elle n'exclut ni les demi-lettrés, ni les illettrés : car elle ne se limite pas aux usagers de certaines langues ou de certains dialectes ; car elle comprend même les muets et jusqu'aux sourds ; car elle n'a pas besoin de traducteurs et ne craint pas leurs contresens ; car, enfin, cette audience se sent respectée dans la faiblesse ou la paresse intellectuelle de son immense majorité. Et, parce que l'enseignement qu'apporte le film va droit au cœur, parce qu'il ne laisse guère de temps ni d'occasion à la critique de le censurer au préalable, cet acquis devient tout de suite passion, c'est-à-dire potentiel ne demandant qu'à travailler, qu'à se décharger en actes à l'imitation de ceux au spectacle desquels il est né. (Epstein 1947/2002: 23)

My mention of Epstein is not an intellectually gratuitous reference. It constitutes an attempt to take Simon's journey even further, as if to supply a mini spin-off of her book, and indeed to suggest a plausible by-product, one which brings us to my second point of interest: the translative worlds she entangles by summoning and giving textual body to Central and Eastern Europe figures, both animated and non-animated: writers and translators like Ivo Andrić, Israel Ashendorf, Joseph Roth, Bruno Schulz, Debora Vogel, rivers like Drina and the Danube, cities like Chzernowitz/Chernivtsi, Brody, Lemberg/Lwów/Lvov/Lviv, or buildings like *The Neues Deutsches Theater* in Prague and the Grand Hotel Pupp in Karlovy-Vary.

The presence of these spaces is arguably one of Simon's most important contributions to translation scholarship. Translation theorists and historians are justifiably wary of Eurocentrism and seem to consider, as Duval's critique of Simon not including any reference to Latin America suggests (cf. Duval 2021: 233–234), that the only way of exorcizing this demon is by scholarly migration towards other parts of the world: Asia, India, Africa, Central and South America. A legitimate endeavour, undoubtedly. However, Europe is not just England, Ger-

many, France, Italy, or Spain. There is a Europe that, I claim, is more peripheral in Translation Studies than the Global South, a space in the geographical heart of Europe described by patches of multicultural and multilingual zones where culture, in the broadest sense of the word, is translation born and translation bound. The Europe that Simon, unlike most, sees and makes seen in her book. The Europe I was born into.

Many leads are opened by Simon, some of which are not extensively followed up. And this could leave the reader rather puzzled, or wanting for more, if not frustrated, much like Italo Calvino's main character in *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979, translated into English in 1981 by William Weaver). We recall that the reader, whose expectations of completing the reading of the novel he began (his copy seemed to have a manufacturing fault) are constantly renewed and postponed by the intromission of other incipits. But we should not forget Simon's caveat: it is a risk willingly taken. In order to understand, you must explore from different angles, and this may very well lead you to make excursions of various duration and depth in different spaces (and places), real and imaginary, literary, scholarly or geographic. The interpretative process is fueled by curiosity and intuition: to have answers, one must first pose the questions. The right ones, which is to say the complex ones: the ones that emerge from the displacement of (b)order(s).

References

- CALVINO, Italo (1981): *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*. Translated by William Weaver. San Diego / New York / London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers.
- DUVAL, Roch (2021): "Review of «Simon, Sherry (2019): *Translating Sites. A Field Guide*. London/New York : Routledge, 282 p.»." In: *Meta* 66/1, pp. 232–234. DOI:<10.7202/1079334ar> (15.12.2023).

- EPSTEIN, Jean (1947/2002): *Le cinéma du diable*. Édition électronique réalisée à partir du livre (Paris: éd. Jacques Melot). URL: <https://negatif.co/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Jean-Epstein_Le-Cinema-du-diable_1947.pdf> (15.12.2023).
- MESCHIA, Karen (2020): “Review of «SIMON, Sherry, 2019, *Translation Sites. A Field Guide*. Routledge, London & New York, 281 p. (ebk)». ” In: *La main de Thôt 8: Traduire la chanson*. S. 1–6. URL: <<https://revues.univ-tlse2.fr:443/lamaindethot/index.php?id=868>> (15.12.2023).
- PURVIS, Lee (2020): “Review of «*Translation Sites: a field guide*, by Sherry Simon, London and New York, Routledge, 2019, 282 pp.».” In: *The Translator* 26/1: *Retranslation, Multidisciplinarity and Multimodality*, pp. 112–116. DOI: <10.1080/13556509.2020.1764288> (15.12.2023).
- TURNER, Mark (1996): *The Literary Mind*, New York / Oxford: Oxford University Press.

