Response by Littau to the responses to "Translation and the Materialities of Communication"

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I would like to thank the many respondents who have, in three separate rounds, reflected on my paper and taken its materialist lines of enquiry into new and sometimes unexpected directions. The extraordinary range of the contributions bringing to bear insights from fields as diverse as comparative literature, literary translation, translation technology, book history, ecocriticism, autoethnography, and object-oriented philosophy is testament to the sheer interdisciplinarity in which translation studies thrives. In writing my Position Paper, the aim had been to provoke a renewed discussion of the materiality of cultural or human operations, which is long overdue, especially when we think we understand what this means. I am grateful that my respondents agree as to the necessity of this debate, although as will become apparent, I disagree with some of the tenets they seem to hold.

"Translation and the Materialities of Communication" put forward two potentially contentious points: (1) that media technologies repeatedly organize our cognitive and perceptual modalities; (2) that material objects such as books or computers shape practices of translation. The former point is derived from media theorists influenced by McLuhan; the latter is an extension of the argument put forward by historians of the book. Since I sense discontent with these arguments

among several of the responses, I would like to use my response to explain the rationale for the thesis in more detail. Historians of the book have shown that practices of reading and writing have varied historically in accordance with the material forms available for the storage and retrieval of information. If we accept that "Transformations of the book and transformations of reading practices necessarily go hand in hand" (Cavallo and Chartier 1999, 15), then why should this not also be the case for translation? After all, translating partakes in both reading and writing, and leaves us with a material record in the form of the translation itself. But here we must not confuse empirical evidence with material evidence. True, it is difficult to assess reading practices in the pre-modern period, or indeed in any period given the scarcity of empirical evidence left by real readers. Yet, the history of reading has shown that significant quantitative and qualitative shifts in reading practices have occurred with the shift from codex to print to hypermedia. Given that translation leaves real traces and marks on the page, I don't see how assessing transformations of translation practices in relation to transformations of the book (codex, print, digital) is any more of a "speculative exercise", to address Guyda Armstrong's concern, than assessing transformations of practices of reading. If anything, it makes the historian's life easier to have at hand the material record of the empirical base in the form of a written-down translation.

But the disagreement is perhaps more fundamental than this. "Where we diverge" Armstrong writes, "is in our approach to and understanding of the relationship between historic media technologies and their supposed 'effects' on translation (simply put, the question of whether they shape or are shaped by their contemporary textual practices – or both)." My argument follows a key point made by

print historian Donald McKenzie, namely that "forms effect meaning" (1999, 13). He goes on to address "the complex relation of medium to meaning" in the context of the medieval codex and reiterates the point by stating that there appears to be an emergent consensus in medieval studies that "forms effect sense" (ibid., 18), a recognizably McLuhanite point.[1] As Anne Coldiron rightly points out McKenzie's work proved crucial in collapsing the "old division" between "the supposedly immaterial work and the supposedly incidental material text that conveys it". McKenzie's work also of course pushes the boundaries in making a case, very much ahead of his time, for studying the book and the verbal arts alongside "visual, oral, and numeric data" in the form of non-book materialities of communication, such as maps, music, recorded sound, films, video, and computer-stored information (ibid., 13). This broadening of the remit of book studies sits well with my proposal for comparative media. And yet, given his extraordinary foresightedness as regards the explosion of material media, I wonder whether the implications of McKenzie's materialism have been fully grasped, including by McKenzie himself.

Editors McDonald and Suarez gloss the importance of McKenzie's works in these terms: "he gave fullest expression to the idea that the forms of texts affect their meaning" (2002, 9). Similarly, Chartier cites his phrase "forms effect meaning" (1997, 82) as a key tenet of book history, reiterating the point two pages later in his own words as "forms affect meaning" (84). Since Chartier's essay is based on a translation by Lydia Cochrane of his "Préface" to the French translation by Marc Amfreville of McKenzie's *La bibliographie et la sociologie des textes* (1991), it is instructive to re-examine the French. While Chartier's "Préface" leaves the McKenzie quote in English (7) – as if the phrase were untranslatable (in a Derridean sense) – the

rephrasing appears as "les formes affectent le sens" (10-11). In turn, Amfreville translates the phrases from McKenzie as follows: "les formes ont un effect sur le sens" (30; 38), thus watering down the overtly determinist stance by McKenzie. In contrast to the French, the Spanish version of Chartier's Preface, now entitled "Un humanista entre dos mundos: Don McKenzie" (2005) omits the direct quote from McKenzie altogether (8) and gives Chartier's gloss as "las formas de los textos afectan a su sentido" (12). The translator Frenando Bouza renders McKenzie's "forms effect meaning" as "las formas repercuten en el significado" (30), and "forms effect sense" as "las formas crean sentido" (35).

The reason I am quoting citations and translations of what Chartier acknowledges to be one of the most "powerful" ideas in McKenzie's book – here, that "forms shape meaning" (Chartier 1997, 82) – has to with the inconsistency in the way in which this idea circulates: "effect" (to cause) slides all to easily into "affect" (to alter or influence). While *The Book History Reader* misprints "effect" as "affect" (Finkelstein and McCleery 2002, 29, 31), the editors of *The Renaissance Computer* imply that there is a misspelling in McKenzie's original when they quote the line as "Forms effect [sic] meanings" (Rhodes and Sawday 2000, 9).[2] Whether typographical error, spelling mistake, translation decision, or interpretive strategy, one thing is clear, *effect* and *affect* are not at all the same thing,[3] and therein lies a fundamental confusion and clearly an unwillingness to explore the implications of technological determinism.

Further, by citing McLuhan approvingly, McKenzie (1999, 17) makes himself vulnerable to the charge of determinism by association. His insistence – on the one

hand that material forms *effect* meaning or sense, which in effect gives objects agency, and on the other that we should not lose sight of "human agency" (15) because counter to the "anti-humanism" practiced by much of theory, bibliography can "correct that tendency" and "show the human presence in any recorded text" (29) – brings to the fore two radically incommensurable positions. One is object-oriented, the other is subject- or human-centred. This is a dividing line that characterizes many of the responses to my paper.

Song Hou and Xuanmin Luo, for instance, highlight the importance of Latour's theory that allows for the agency of objects, and Allison Burkette in drawing on archaeology makes it clear that objects are not necessarily passive things but "*enactive* partners in the creation of meaning". Working in the field of computer-aided translation and machine translation, Minako O'Hagan is well aware of the impact of technology and non-human agents on translation and quite rightly presses for "theorization" to catch up with the "reality of modern translation". Rebecca Kosick's response offers precisely such a theorization by framing these issues in relation to speculative realism, a philosophy that critiques the way in which human-centrist discourses regard even objects that precede humanity (Meillassoux's "arche-fossil" springs to mind here: 2008, 1-27) exclusively in terms of how these objects relate to us or what they tell us about ourselves, as Narcissus to a mirror. Evident here is an emphasis on the constitutive role that objects and machines play in translation.

Other respondents emphasize that objects, technologies, and media are "human-created" and the "results of human imagination and labor", that is, that they are "not haphazard or incidental but rather are conceived, planned, executed and

signifying inside cultural matrices" (Coldiron); or, as Norbert Bachleitner does, that "media do not develop and work by themselves in a mystical way; they are invented, developed, adapted and eventually exchanged for other tools by human beings to serve certain purposes". Contrastively, when Susan Bassnett points out that I don't see technology as "dehumanizing" but regard it as a "mediation of basic laws of nature", she hits the nail on the head: technology, and indeed nature, are not passively there to serve as man's workshop or "inorganic body". There is no distinguishing the soil in which we grow stuff from the paper on which we draw. Rather, what is at issue is a non-reversible hierarchy: without nature to produce us, there can be neither technology, culture, nor politics, whereas without technology, culture and politics there still can be nature. My quibble then is with the over-inflation of the role and rule of humans in nature: yes, we make technologies, but a technology that acts counter to the laws of nature is impossible. As Durham Peters, making a case as to why "a philosophy of media needs a philosophy of nature" (2016, 1), puts it: "The agency of human beings is a question we should answer, but not a fact we should assume" (89). And in so doing, we should neither "underestimate[] the power of devices" nor "overestimate[] the power of people" (88).

What is objected to, but not stated directly except by Michael Cronin, is the issue of technological determinism[4] – a "political fatalism" which Cronin urges us to resist. So, let me make the point crystal clear by way of McLuhan and Raymond Williams, whose debate also brings into focus the repeated watering down of McKenzie's claim that material media *effect,* i.e. determine, meaning and sense. The ideological stance taken by Williams, and subsequently adopted within cultural studies, rejects the idea that technology could be an agent of cultural change, and

stresses instead how it is certain cultural conditions that make possible technological change. This is how Williams puts the issue: "If the medium – whether print or television – is the cause, all other causes, all that men ordinarily see as history, are at once reduced to effects" (1974, 127). For Williams it is not technology that has determining effects, as if it stood outside a given cultural and historical context, but rather, technology is itself an effect determined by socio-historical, i.e., finally human causes. By contrast, I think that we would be mistaken to assume that culture solely depends on how humans *make use* of technology. Inherent in Williams's argument is a humanism that increasingly sits ill with technological development, which neither has foreseen uses (as William also concedes) nor has intentions, but does, I contend, induce effects that are not in our control. Williams' assumption therefore that *we* make use of technology or interact with it, or even that as humans we are solely responsible for having invented it, betrays too narrow a conception of its effects. Technology is environmental. This is why I wrote that humanity cannot sequester itself from the ecology, as "natural" as it is technological, nor stand apart from, or without it, as if controlling it was simply a matter of pulling a plug. Thus, where Williams pitches technology against human agency, culture against materialism and physiology, I have been gesturing towards another kind of argument altogether: since no human culture is possible without an enabling materiality and a possibilizing technology, culture and technology are not mutually exclusive, but on the contrary necessarily inclusive. And if this is so then technologies produce consequent imaginations: they are active in effecting the ways in which we think, read, write, and translate.

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Notes

[1] Compare McLuhan's point that "the medium is the message" (1964, 15-30).

[2] Rodes and Sawday reference, as do Finkelstein and McCleery, the British Library edition of McKenzie's *The Panizzi Lectures 1985. Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (1986). The salient passages are the same as in the Cambridge University edition I cite.

[3] On the substantial difference between the use of these two terms in McKenzie and Chartier, see Littau (2006, 26, 159-160); on "subtly" changing the meaning of "effect" to "affect", see Gayley (2010, 113-14); on the ease by which effect/affect are misspelt in English, see Van Mierlo (2013, 142).

[4] The most sophisticated argument I have come across as to the differences between McLuhan and Williams is offered by Iain Hamilton Grant (2003) in developing an account of technological determinism that is quite different to that which Williams ascribes to McLuhan: deploying not the logic a mechanical causality but of non-linear causality.