Visual culture matters

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Visual culture matters

The trails of light which they seemed to leave behind them in all kinds of curlicues and streamers and spirals did not really exist, but were merely phantom traces created by the sluggish reaction of the human eye, appearing to see a certain afterglow in the place from which the creature, shining for only the fraction of a second in the lamplight, had already gone. It was such unreal phenomena, the sudden incursion of unreality into the real world, certain effects of light in the landscape spread out before us, or in the eye of a beloved person, that kindled our deepest feelings, or at least what we took for them.

W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

ALESSANDRA **FICARRA**

UNTRANSLATABLE MEMORY

SLAVERY MUSEUMS AND ANGOLAN VOICES

aracne

ISBN
979–12–5994–571–6

FIRST EDITION
ROMA 7 SEPTEMBER 2022

Ao meu querido marido,
fiel e incansável companheiro de viagem,
que me inspirou a fazer da traducibilidade cultural
não só um projecto de pesquisa,
mas também um projecto de vida.

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that gray vault. The sea. The sea
has locked them up. The sea is History.
Derek Walcott, *The Sea is History* (1979)

Un ringraziamento ai Professori João Dele, Joaquim Domingos Pinheiro e Fernando Ivulo, per avermi dato la possibilità di incontrare i loro studenti. Un ringraziamento speciale alla mia mamma Giovanna Amoroso, e alle Professoresse Franca Dellarosa ed Alex Robinson, per essere state fonte di motivazione e di profonda ispirazione intellettuale.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

TRANSLATING CULTURES, REPRESENTING HISTORY

The title of this work — *Untranslatable Memory: Slavery Museums and Angolan Voices* — is heavy with meaning, and immediately suggests the complexity of the contents explored and the multidisciplinary approach it entails. An overview of the sciences of anthropology and ethnography will introduce the discussion on museum studies and their evolution, while the controversial issue of memorialisation in museums will intertwine with the concerns of cultural heritage and the "historical silencing" of marginalized pasts. This demanding analysis is constructed through the examination of museum specialists', anthropologists', linguists', and historians' theories and works, paving the way for the case study for this research — i.e., a survey carried out in three universities in Angola, which involved students in a virtual tour of the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool. The students were asked to provide their responses and personal perspectives on the way a Western cultural institution tells and represents the most atrocious historical experience of the enslavement and the transatlantic traffic of human beings from Africa to the Americas, over the course of almost four centuries.

The connection between the concepts and the fields of studies listed above is to be found in the subjects — or,

better, the acts — of translation and representation of cultures. Using an anthropological and sociological perspective to understand culture, one finds it is created by shared making-meaning processes — a social construction, where actions, words and things are invested with a specific meaning that is significant for the group. Language is the privileged medium through which a group can "make sense" of things. Thanks to language, meaning is produced, shared, and exchanged. In the words of Stuart Hall, the capacity of language to construct meanings — and consequently cultures — lies in the fact that language operates as a representational system[1]. Although culture is one of the most difficult concepts in the human and social sciences — as will be discussed in chapter 2 — in recent years its anthropological and sociological definitions appear as the most effective and comprehensive, where the first interprets culture as whatever is distinctive about the "way of life" of a given group or community, and the second describes it as the "shared values" of the same group or community. Viewed within this perspective, then, culture is to be considered as a set of practices, which are significant to the community only if the community interprets them as meaningful. As Hall continues, «[m]eaning is what gives us a sense of our own identity»[2], and since it is by our use of things, and how we represent them, that we give them a meaning, «[r]epresentation through language is therefore central to the processes by

(1) See S. HALL, "Introduction", in S. HALL, ed., *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices,* London, Thousand Oaks, SAGE Publications, New Delhi 1997, p. 1.

(2) Ivi, p. 3.

which meaning is produced»[3]. Hall's words appear to echo Gayatri C. Spivak's *The Politics of Translation*, in which she asserted: «[i]n my view, language may be one of many elements that allow us to make sense of things, of ourselves. […] Making sense of ourselves is what produces identity»[4].

Of course, language in this sense should not be considered as a mere system of speech acts — on the contrary, it encompasses all kinds of signs, from written words to sounds, images and objects. Museums' exhibitions, for instance, produce meanings through the display of objects and artefacts. In the case of ethnographic and historical museums, curators have to choose how to arrange and display the objects — they choose how to represent other cultures, and every single choice has a consequence both for how meaning is produced, and for what it conveys: meanings, in fact, can be differently perceived by the audience, influenced not only by the arrangement selections of the curator, but also by the conceptual framework already set in her mind. Furthermore, the construction of meaning has the power of crystallizing roles or creating stereotypes: defining what is "normal", "usual", "conventional", implies the exclusion of something else. Meanings are in fact often constructed in a binary system, where the subsistence of opposite realities strengthens their right to exist — white vs. black, rich vs. poor, straight vs. gay, modernity vs. tradition, and so on. In every field of action — no less in museums — meanings are implicated in relations of power: it is always

(3) Ivi, p. 1.

(4) G. C. SPIVAK, "The Politics of Translation", in L. VENUTI, ed., *The Translation Studies Reader*, Routledge, London and New York 2000, p 369.

a case of who is exhibiting and who is exhibited[5]. Meanings are thus to be considered as the product of a process of translation which, on the one hand, facilitates the "cultural communication" between different groups, and on the other hand, embodies the existence of power relations between the different speakers in the action[6].

Michel Foucault asserted how, in turn, these power relations are decisive not only in the meaning-making process, but also in the construction of knowledge: once knowledge is determined — by those who have the power to do it — it becomes true, regulating the conduct of others, entailing constraint and disciplining practices. Consequently, «[t]here is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations»[7].

However, if meanings are produced by members of a community using language — the process of representation — then words, actions, objects, and events do not have any fixed meaning: their significance will change, from one group to another, from one period to another. The reading of a meaning, thus, involves an active process of interpretation: what is important about the idea of representation, in fact, is the acceptance of the existence of cultural relativism between one community and another, a condition which needs the act of translating if

(5) See H. LIDCHI, "The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures", in S. HALL, ed., *Representation*, p. 153.

(6) See S. HALL, "Introduction", in S. HALL, ed., *Representation*, p. 11.

(7) M. FOUCAULT, *Discipline and Punish*, London, Tavistock 1997, p. 27, quoted in S. HALL, "The Work of Representation", in S. HALL, ed., *Representation*, p. 49.

we move between conceptual systems of different cultures[8].

In exhibiting "other" cultures, ethnographic and historical museums are deeply involved in the process of translation: the demanding task of representing other cultures in a way that is understandable for the conceptual system of their audience inevitably entails the act of translating, both in its narrowest sense, i.e. as the re-encoding of a message from a source linguistic code to a target one, and in its broader sense, i.e. as a delicate process of "cultural negotiation"[9].

At this stage, a question rises almost spontaneously, and it is the one raised by Kate Sturge: how translatable are languages, and cultures? «[I]s there or is there not enough common ground between human cultures to enable meaningful translations?»[10]. It is not easy to answer, but, according to Sturge, «whether or not things are untranslatable, translation still happens»[11]. Mieke Bal, however, argues that the act of translating always leaves something behind: the word — or, in the case of museums, the object translated — loses some of its elements during the act of its "trans"-lating, hence translation is always inadequate, impoverished. Furthermore — and this may be the answer to the previous question — Bal defines the act of translation as the bridging of a gap between the source-object and the target-object; for even if translation carries out this operation, it can never completely build the

(8) See ivi, p. 61.

(9) See H. LIDCHI, "The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures", in S. HALL, ed., *Representation*, p. 153.

(10) K. STURGE, *Representing Others: Translation, Ethnography and the Museum*, St. Jerome Publishing, Manchester 2007, p. 17.

(11) *Ibidem.*

bridge: the gap remains, and it is the act of translating itself that makes the scars visible[12].

Exhibitions in museums — Bal continues — can be considered as a form of translation; in the same way, Henrietta Lidchi considers museums as systems of representation[13]. Viewed in the context of museums' exhibitions, translation is the act of "conducting through", beyond, to the other side of a division, or of a difference. This sense of transference can happen between language and image, between form and meaning — but also, and in the case of this study — between present and past[14]. Commemorative slavery museums today are trying to represent a history of the past, a history which was suffered and endured by other cultures, but which was reconstructed, interpreted — represented and translated, indeed — by a dominant conceptual system, the Western one.

The process of rewriting history exclusively through the dominant Western voice may be compared to the "epistemic violence" exerted in the Foucaultian discourses of knowledge, where relations of power are always enmeshed. This epistemic violence has been largely condemned by Spivak who, however, recognises that even when postcolonial critics tried to give voice to the silenced people, this inevitably repeated and reinforced the

(12) M. BAL, "Exposing the Public", in S. MACDONALD, ed., *A Companion to Museum Studies*, Blackwell, Oxford 2006, pp. 536–7.

(13) See H. LIDCHI, "The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures", in S. HALL, ed., *Representation*, p. 205.

(14) See M. BAL, "Exposing the Public", in S. MACDONALD, ed., *A Companion to Museum Studies*, p. 537.