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Translation, materiality, intersemioticity: Excursions in experimental literature

Abstract: This paper presents case examples of experimental literature that tap into the potentials of multimodality in the creation of an embodied aesthetic experience. In each case, translation performs the contingency of meaning by traversing the interliminal space between discursive sites: two versions of the same language, two semiotic planes. By reading the multimodal aspects of these texts, the paper traces the function of translation in foregrounding the materiality of the linguistic sign. It argues that in enacting an embodied literature, translation is not primarily about the transference of meaning from one text-site to another; it becomes an intervening site in its own right, where signs, readers and media intercourse to create a sensuous fabric that adduces “the pleasure of the text.” The paper also discusses the nature of aesthetics created by translation-mediated multimodal literature, and argues for critical attention to the role of translation in advancing the corporeality of literature.

Keywords: interlingual translation, intersemioticity, multimodality, materiality, technology, experimental literature

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1 Introduction

In her essay “Against Interpretation,” Susan Sontag famously called for an “erotics of the arts” (Sontag 1994: 14) in response to what she perceived as the tyranny of interpretation, which “tames the work of art” by reducing it to its content (Sontag 1994: 8). Resisting the prevailing hermeneutical tendency in literary criticism to impose “meanings” on texts, Sontag champions a privileging of form over content:

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What is needed, first, is more attention to form in art. If excessive stress on *content* provokes the arrogance of interpretation, more extended and more thorough descriptions of *form* would silence. What is needed is a vocabulary – a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, vocabulary – for forms. The best criticism, and it is uncommon, is of this sort that dissolves considerations of content into those of form. (Sontag 1994: 12)

The sexual metaphor cannot be missed in Sontag's scheme: artistic, including literary, form is (the erotic) body. How does such an erotics manifest itself? Extending Sontag's dictum, John Sutherland (2011: 14) says epigrammatically of the act of interpreting literature: "Don't read it, make love to it." But what is the relationship between text and (the erotic) body, and hence between reading/interpreting and making love? As Roland Barthes would have it, the key lies in the physical pleasure, as opposed to the cerebral message, afforded by language. Expounding on the aesthetics of the cinema, Barthes appealed to the sensuous qualities emanating from speech:

In fact, it suffices that the cinema capture the sound of speech *close up* (this is, in fact, the generalized definition of the "grain" of writing) and make us hear in their materiality, their sensuality, the breath, the gutturals, the fleshiness of the lips, a whole presence of the human muzzle (that the voice, that writing, be as fresh, supple, lubricated, delicately granular and vibrant as an animal's muzzle), to succeed in shifting the signified a great distance and in throwing, so to speak, the anonymous body of the actor into my ear: it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss. (Barthes 1975: 67)

In describing the qualities of speech, and applying them to literature in other writings, Barthes' approach is clearly synesthetic and sympathetic: the "materiality" of speech involves not only the auditory ("it crackles") but, for the most part, the tactile ("the fleshiness of the lips," "supple, lubricated, delicately granular and vibrant"). The climax or "bliss" deriving from sound (the erotic entity) culminates through a series of touch sensations and bodily movement: "it granulates . . . it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes." The sexual overtones of these terms, particularly of "it comes" – slang for the attainment of orgasm – bear intensely on the embodied nature of artistic representation and reception. Proponents of conceptual metaphor theory (Kövecses 2010; Lakoff and Johnson 2003) would insist on Barthes' mapping of the source domain of sexual activity onto the target domain of speech production, hence deriving the metaphor PRODUCING SPEECH IS MAKING LOVE. While such a view would not be incorrect from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, it also relegates the erotic dimension in Barthes' formulation to the target (figurative) domain, while one suspects Barthes might have been bordering on the literal in suggesting that language and writing are primarily about physical pleasure. The slippage between the sensuous and

the sensual in Barthes' thinking, as exemplified in the above-quoted passage, points to the potential for writing to be physicalized and for the physical to be verbalized.

2 Literature, materiality, translation

The erotics or physical pleasure derived from literary experiences emerges through a focus on the materiality of the text. Materiality is a multi-faceted concept; it includes anything that pertains to the physical constitution of the text, ranging from image configuration (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006), visual perception (Gordon 1997), typography (van Leeuwen 2005, 2006; Nørgaard 2009) to modes of inscription (Huang 2010).¹ Literary writing and translation are and always have been a material and multimodal affair – the kinesthetics involved in writing, the words on a page or screen complete with color and typography, vocal sound in the case of oral interpreting. At its etymological root and in line with the conduit metaphor, translation is conveyance of meaning from one point to another. More accurately speaking it is *intercourse* – between codes within a language, between language codes and between semiotic dimensions. In experimental literature,² intercourse takes place not only among signs but also, and crucially, between readers and their texts. If “the process of literary translation, a process of intense engagement with another's words, a process of intense reading, can be considered erotic if and when it is construed as the longing for full understanding of another's speech” (West 2010: 2), an alternative erotics of translation may be derived from the materiality of literature as well as the embodied, sensuous engagement between the reader and such materiality.

Erotics, as it pertains to literature and translation, has been the subject of some provocative conceptual studies. Drawing on Brooks (1984, 1993), West adopts the notion of erotics as

¹ Huang (2010: 49), for instance, cites the *tibishi*, or “poems written on the walls” by Chinese immigrants in a detaining station on Angel Island between 1910 and 1940 as an example of how literary works may “achieve their efficacy more as a result of their physical traces, rather than in spite of them.”

² In using the term “experimental literature” I am departing from conventional usage of the term in the Chinese context. In Lu (1995), for instance, the term refers to works by such post-Cultural-Revolution writers as Can Xue, Yu Hua and Mo Yan. Instead, I subscribe to definitions of the term in line with Gibbons (2012), who employs the term to refer specifically to intersemiotic (primarily visual) literary works.

a poetics that incorporates the reader's emotional/sensual response to the text, or a consideration of textuality that thematizes and interrogates specifically its affective dimensions. Extended to the domain of translation, an "erotics of translation" investigates the various and desirous negotiations of translator and author in the process of translating and being translated. As I am defining it, an erotics of translation participates in Brooks' erotics of reading, and both are species of a general erotics of art. (West 2010: 5)

While West elicits the erotics of translation by focusing on the "various and desirous" relations between translator and (the translated) author, this paper looks at how the reader engages the text in translation, not primarily affectively, but physically and sensuously. The body of the reader is involved in his/her intercourse with the text; indeed, literary meaning, as it were, is embodied in the kinesthetics enacted in reader-text interaction. Here, translation is not about transferring meaning from one text to another, but constitutes in itself an interliminal discursive space wherein readers participate in literary experiences with their bodies and senses.

Of relevance here are the notions of embodiment and multisensory perception, two aspects of what Gibbons (2012: 39–45) has called a "multimodal cognitive poetics." Embodiment, a central concept in cognitive linguistics, is the nexus that ties linguistic structures to the daily interaction between our bodies and the physical world. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) have posited that the conventional metaphorical expressions we use in talking about everyday reality, as for instance, *He's in high spirits*, are experientially based on conceptual structures deriving from our physical association of verticality with quantity.³ The body, and its interaction with its immediate environment, eventually determines how we perceive reality, which in turn is realized in the linguistic structures we employ to express that perceived reality. In multimodal experimental literature, the body, of a text and of the reader, is intimately involved in the construction and enactment of literary experience. Through the process of embodiment, the body of the reader participant interacts with the materiality of the text in performing the act of meaning production.

In the event that the physical body is not directly implicated, multiple sensory faculties invariably come into play. Just as the technologies of writing have tremendously changed discourses on rhetoric, including the definition of delivery (see McCorkle 2012: ch. 6), they too have revolutionized literary reading and reception in terms of the modes of communication involved. It is now a consensus that all texts employ more than one semiotic mode to some extent (Baldry

³ In this case, another metaphorical structure is at work to produce a coherent understanding of the statement *He's in high spirits*: the MORE IS GOOD metaphor. See Lakoff and Johnson (2003).

and Thibault 2006: 58). This applies not only to contemporary modes of *i*-prefixed communication using digital platforms but also to more conventional texts, including print ones, which have traditionally been assumed to be monomodal.⁴ A distinctive feature of experimental literature is its simultaneous engagement of multiple sense faculties, namely the verbal, the visual, the auditory and the tactile. This cognitive phenomenon finds support in neuroscientific studies, which inform us that it is a norm for our senses to operate in tandem rather than independently, in order to produce “a unified representation” of the sensory world (Ghazanfar and Schroeder 2006: 278). This synesthetic/sympathetic engagement of the senses produces a unique type of literature the critique of which cannot be based on its verbal component alone. Such literature, which deploys multimodality in its structuration, needs to be deconstructed on the basis of the interaction between the text and the plethora of senses invoked and played out.

This paper is about embodied literary communication mediated through translation. Embodied communication, including the literary, is defined as one rooted in the sensory and corporeal functions of the human body and which generates meaning through interaction between text, body and the senses. Multimodal texts are archetypal of embodied communication, presenting as they do a challenge to conventional modes of and discourses on communication, which invariably privilege the verbal sign. Research on multimodality within the context of translation has thus far concentrated on texts belonging to the promotional genre, predominantly advertising texts (Torresi 2009), or the audiovisual genre (Chiaro 2008; Gambier 2007).⁵ There have also been recent forays in extending the study of multimodality into experimental literature (Gibbons 2012) and literary translation (Lee 2012). The present paper contributes to the extant research by providing further case examples of experimental literature that tap into the multimodal potentials of signs in the creation of an embodied aesthetic experience. By focusing on the intersemiotic aspects of literary products, it traces the function of translation in foregrounding the materiality of the linguistic sign and of the literary artefact.

In the following I discuss two examples of experimental Chinese literature with respect to two of Jakobson's (2004: 139) oft-quoted triadic translational categories: intralingual translation or *rewording* – an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs in the same language, and intersemiotic translation

⁴ A case in point is children's literature, which employs pictures as a primary medium of communication alongside the verbal text. See Oittinen (2008) for a study of how pictures, words and sounds interact in children's stories.

⁵ See *Meta* 53(1) (special issue on *Le verbal, le visuel, le traducteur / The Verbal, the Visual, the Translator*) for a survey of translational issues arising from various other multimodal genres.

or *transmutation* – an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non-verbal sign systems. By deliberately circumventing interlingual translation, or translation *proper*, the paper focuses attention on translational acts that are less conventional – or, more accurately speaking, discursive acts that are less commonly seen as translational performances. It must be noted, however, that intersemioticity is also in operation in the case of intralingual translation, such that the examples challenge Jakobson's categories at the same time as they are framed by them.

In the first case, we examine two works by a Taiwanese poet, whereby the first is dismembered and then re-membered into the second, thus constituting a form of intralingual translation. In the second case, we look at a piece of design technology that translates verbal texts into Braille code and then into sound, thus enacting a two-tiered multimodal performance of literary translation. I will argue that translation instantiates the materiality and contingency of meaning by traversing the interliminal space between discursive sites: two versions of the same language, two semiotic planes. In this process, text, reader and technology engage one another with such embodied intensity as to produce an eroticized literary performance.

3 Recycling poetry: Intralingual translation and literary involution

The first work I examine is an experimental project by the avant-garde Taiwanese poet Hsia Yü (b. 1956), known for the cryptic imagery, destabilized syntax and anti-narrative stance that characterize most of her writings. For example, in *Pink Noise*, one of Hsia's most mind-blowing works, the poet traumatizes conventional reading experiences by exploiting the literal disposition of machine translation for the production of bilingual poetry (Lee 2011a, 2011b, forthcoming). In fact, Hsia's intention to frustrate traditional literary criticism was evident at a much earlier stage of her writing career in *Moca wuyi mingzhuang* (Rub Ineffable) (Hsia 1997b), her third volume of poetry published several years before *Pink Noise* was conceived.

At the time of its first publication in 1995, *Rub Ineffable* was seen as nothing less than iconoclastic – scandalous, even – in Taiwan's literary circle. The work is innovative in the nature of its genesis: it is both creation and non-creation. *Rub Ineffable* is borne out of Hsia's 1991 collection *Fuyushu* (Ventriloquy) (Hsia 1997a), in the sense of its being the latter's dis-membered and re-membered Other. Specifically, *Rub Ineffable* is fundamentally a work of *bricolage*, produced

by physically cutting up the individual Chinese words and characters that constitute its parent body *Ventriloquy*, and then permutating and re-combining them at random to form new poems. Each of the “new” poems is therefore a montage of characters used in the earlier collection, culminating in what can be called a volume of recycled poetry. In the words of Hsia’s commentator Luo Zhi-cheng (1997b, emphasis added), himself a renowned writer, *Rub Ineffable* is a “risk-taking game,” in which Hsia “attempts to make colored blocks out of words and subsequently assemble and paste them into an *image* of meaning,”⁶ not unlike the endeavors of impressionist artists. Of importance here is Luo’s covert distinction between “meaning” and “image of meaning.” The latter highlights both the visual nature of Hsia’s work and the ephemerality of what is usually understood as “meaning.”

The procedures of creating *Rub Ineffable* are as follows: first, Hsia “disperses in her mind all the works in *Ventriloquy*”; second, she “unscrambles the characters and words in *Ventriloquy* into autonomous ‘semantic colour blocks’”; lastly, Hsia reconfigures these “blocks” into “[re-] colored new works” (Luo 1997b). A product of this procedure is as shown in Figure 1. This is a poem from *Rub Ineffable* that is recycled and, if you will, reincarnated from the Chinese characters/words that appear in various works in *Ventriloquy*.

It is neither practical nor necessary to trace the origin of the individual characters/words, for they are put together at the whim and fancy of the poet. In some cases, the new poems flow considerably well – in terms of their conformity with accepted standards of contemporary Chinese, that is – thus concealing the fact that they are recycled. Such occasional fluency, however, only serves as a contrast with the majority of cases, whereby the poems enact a self-referentiality by pointing back to their own material constitution: forced juxtapositions of characters that form unlikely collocations (again, based on what is commonly accepted in the standard language); shaky syntax (if syntax is at all applicable); apparent non-connectedness of images (unless imagined into being by the scrupulous reader). Paradoxically, due to the unreadability of the poems, the reader cannot but be drawn to them. Incomprehensibility at the semantic level – an

⁶ It is unclear why Luo refers to the words and characters used by Hsia as “colored blocks” (*se kuai*), even though the two volumes of poetry in question are printed in black-and-white. I would venture to suggest that Luo is invoking the all-time favorite activity of children: organizing colored-blocks (e.g., Lego). The comparison of Hsia’s creative process to children’s activity has a positive connotation: it suggests a returning to the *character/word* as Hsia’s unit of poetry writing – a revival of child-like innocence – as opposed to the conventional meanings inscribed into them. If this understanding is correct, then the metaphorization of meaning units as color blocks also highlights the visceral nature of meaning.

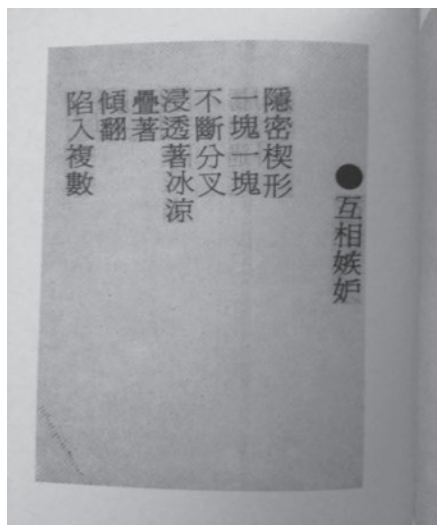


Fig. 1: “Recycled poetry” produced by pastiche in *Rub Ineffable*. Notice the watershed marks of cutting and pasting made deliberately evident.

impasse in signification – forces the reader to come to terms with the materiality of the signifier.

Immediately we are tempted to pounce on the overtly post-structuralist disposition here: the Chinese character/word as sign becomes an unstable semiotic entity, being framed into different semantic contexts as it is displaced from one collocation to another. Indeed the theoretical significance of *Rub Ineffable* lies in the very dispersal of its origin – the “source texts” (in *Ventroliquy*) of the “translated” poems (in *Rub Ineffable*) are but untraceable; even if they were, the actual routes of dis-membering characters and words from their poetic sources and remembering them to form new poems is anything but systematic, thereby rendering any attempt to track the semantic path untenable. Meaning, as it were, is disseminated from multiple textual origins and tentatively fixated in the poetic forms found in *Rub Ineffable*, potentially to be disseminated infinitely through a repetition of similar linguistic experiments. The signifier, therefore, does not point to a rooted signified; indeed, it points to the non-rootedness (we might go so far as to say nothingness) of signification. As the poetic context evolves, and as signifiers enter into new syntagmatic relations with other signifiers, the signified is set in perpetual flux.

My present concern is with the embodied manifestation of literary meaning, as linguistic signifiers travel from one book to another through a process of intra-

lingual translation. To conceptualize such travel under the rubric of intralingual translation might seem a bit of a stretch, as each poem in *Rub Ineffable* is not in any remote way a “rewording” of some corresponding poem in *Ventriloquy*. But I read *Rub Ineffable* as a re-verbalization and reconfiguration of the signs in *Ventriloquy*, not on the basis of a poem-to-poem matching but on the level of a discourse-to-discourse transcreation. The re-use of characters and words in a process of poetic transformation destabilizes the conventional assumptions of both literary writing and translation. It creates a paradox of originality – what is original is always already derived. The poems in *Rub Ineffable* are not new in that they are made up of recycled units, but they are also factually different from those in *Ventriloquy* – they have different formal structures, constituent words and potential interpretations.

In coming to terms with this paradox of identity and difference between the two poetry collections, the concept of intralingual translation can help us elucidate the literary operations at work. Translation itself implies sameness at some level, however formally different the target and source texts are. If Hsia is performing a complex “rewording” of her earlier work – a case of self-translation – *Rub Ineffable* is a reproduction of *Ventriloquy*. This is literary involution, incest within a language, for the new poems are created from the same pool of words and characters. The “source texts” themselves do not have a fixated meaning. As mentioned, the indecipherability of the poems in *Ventriloquy* is very much characteristic of Hsia’s poetics in general. But what if the signifiers constituting these poems were disseminated further down the line of semantic dispersal through arbitrary juxtaposition? The implication is this: literary meaning, as it were, is malleable and thus susceptible to linguistic alchemy. If there is no interpretive *presence* in *Ventriloquy* in the first place, the absence of meaning degenerates into *still absence* in *Rub Ineffable*. Intralingual translation is thus an exercise in the internal re-generation of signifiers, always to produce (more) tentative, contingent formations of sense-meaning.

If, following Derrida (1974: 47), meaning is both retentive and protentive, that is, signs always point to their previous usage and possible future usage (both absent) but not to the present, then literary meaning in *Rub Ineffable* can be seen as being located not in itself. Accidentally pieced together by Hsia through erratic procedures (read: no procedures), the poems in *Rub Ineffable* at once invoke intertextuality with their previous forms in *Ventriloquy*, point to a fragmentation of literary semantics in their present form and foreshadow further potential disintegration through reiterative “translation.” It thus constitutes an interliminal site, lying somewhere between itself and its previous self (*Ventriloquy*), as well as between itself and its future self (a potential re-translation). In the final analysis,

the intralingual translation that transpires between *Rub Ineffable* and *Ventriloquy* effects not a transfer but a suspension of meaning.

In Hsia's intralingual translation project, meaning (content) and form, presence and absence present themselves in an inverse dialectic: the transience of meaning is captured by bringing the reader's focus to the material presence of the Chinese signifier. The sign, eventually, stands not in a stable relationship with some other sign, but in and of itself, thus exuding the "pure strength of the word" (Luo 1997b). But if this gives rise to the impression that the Chinese character/word is *present* in itself, this illusion is shattered immediately as different tentative meanings arise – and collapse – as signifiers enter into different combinations.

Whereas the signified is starkly absent in *Rub Ineffable*, the materiality of the signifier is deliberately foregrounded through the mechanics of literary production. The mechanism involved in literary production is crucial here. Hsia's poetry collection is itself an artefact in book-making technology. As mentioned earlier, she "translates" by cutting individual characters and words from *Ventriloquy* and pasting them on to *Rub Ineffable* in arbitrary fashion. If we take a careful look at Figure 1, we seek that this pastiche technique is made deliberately visible through the mosaic constitution of the book. The faint aura of paper-edges surrounding each character marks out the process of semiotic recycling and the visual materiality of the literary signs, as if to remind the reader that each Chinese word/character is dislocated from an earlier source and replanted into the present collection. By making obvious the marks of cutting and pasting, the poet plays out the violence involved in poetry making, and therefore the physical traces of translating one book to another in what seems to be an alternative form of intralingual translation. Paradoxically, the more materialized the signifiers, the more arbitrary the constructed organicity of the poems, and therefore the more tendentious the literary meaning they seek, but must always fail, to refer to.

The theme of physicality permeates not just the production of *Rub Ineffable*, but its reception as well. Hsia designs her book in such a way that many of its pages are attached to adjacent pages along one or more edges. Thus, aside from the mental labor required in making sense of the highly disjunctive poems, physical work is additionally required on the part of the reader, who needs to tear – and in some cases, cut with the help of a pair of scissors – along the sides of several adjoining pages in order to access the content printed within them. The process of reading the "translated" poems is hence violently physical, and perhaps slightly erotic: page by page, the reader strips the body of the book apart as he/she works through each poem. Just as the translations within the book are created through the poet's own cutting and pasting, so their reception is similarly laborious.

Rather than merely added "fun," I argue that this is part of a more holistic literary concept that constructs literary writing/translating/reading as embodied

events. Here the experience of literature is not a passive affair, something transferred from the hands of an author to those of the reader. It is rather more engaged, even violent. At an analogical level, to deconstruct the linear movement of literary meaning from author to reader is to disrupt the notion of such movement from source to target in translation. Just as the reader literally takes a book apart to read its poems, the poet brings down the notion of literary signification by translating herself within the same language, creating jig-saw configurations from Chinese signifiers that at once coalesce and tear apart from one another. Intralingual translation in Hsia's project serves to materialize this deconstructive potential in literary experimentation. The product is a book full of tensions – between signifier and signified, original writing and word recycling, passive and active reading.⁷ It is in the intervening space of flux between these poles that literary meaning resides and literary experience unfolds.

4 Intersemiotic translation: Literary artefact as technology

If, as in the case of *Rub Ineffable*, intersemiotic resources are harnessed within the general operation of what may be called intralingual translation, the following case example exemplifies intersemiotic translation *par excellence*. Until relatively recently, intersemiotic translation has in the main been associated with audiovisual texts, which lend themselves readily to this approach due to their inherent multimodality. Practitioners of experimental literature actively engage in intersemiotic translation, not only to produce defamiliarized sensuous effects but also to illustrate more subtle theoretical issues pertaining to semiology.

Taiwanese artist Shen Bo-cheng's (b. 1986) multimodal literary exhibit *Read, Art*⁸ started out as a translation project. As Shen (2012) tells us, his artistic motivation came from a consideration of translational issues after his reading of classic works on photography by Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes. Having read the Chinese translations of these works, he began to ponder about the flux that might occur from the act of multiple re-translation. With the help of his blind

⁷ Some of the poems in *Ventriloquy* and *Rub Ineffable* have been translated into English by Steven Bradbury and published in *Fusion Kitsch*. One might thus further contemplate the tension between the particular brand of self-/intra-lingual translation by Hsia and interlingual translation as we usually know it.

⁸ Shen's work has been exhibited several times, most recently in Taipei's Eslite Xinyi in July 2012.



Fig. 2: The transposition of printed words into Braille. (Source: 讀聲字 – ART STUDIO × 沈柏丞 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6eTh2yidkoo>)

friends, Shen experimented with the idea of transposing printed texts into the Braille code, thus enacting an intersemiotic transcreation from the verbal to the tactile (Figure 2).

Subsequently Shen was inspired by the similarity between the texture of the Braille code and that of the teathed revolving cylinder equipped in wind-up music boxes. In a brilliant move to push the limits of translation further, he transferred the Braille patterning (transposed from printed texts) onto a music card by means of a puncher (Figure 3). The card was then mechanically wheeled through a hand-

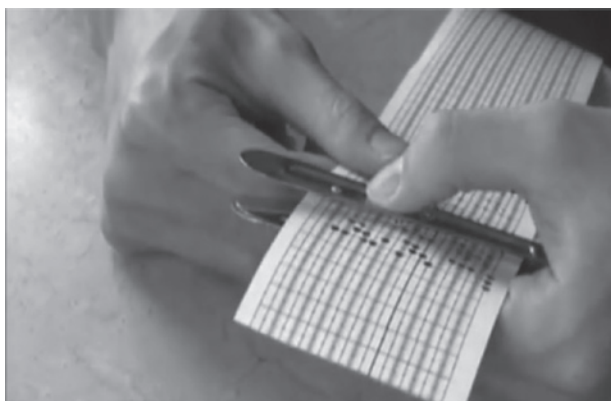


Fig. 3: The punching of holes into a music card, in line with the patterning of Braille code. (Source: 讀聲字 – ART STUDIO × 沈柏丞 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6eTh2yidkoo>)



Fig. 4: The wheeling of the music card through a hand-made music box. Notice the Chinese poem scrolling along the left side of the screen, which serves as the parallel (source) text to the “translated” musical performance. (Source: 讀聲字 – ART STUDIO × 沈柏丞 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6eTh2yidkoo>)

made music box, producing irregular sounds that are, at least theoretically, the aural version of the printed texts (Figure 4).

The following Chinese poem by Taiwanese poet Jing Xiang Hai is one of the first to be treated this way. I do not provide a gloss to the poem in English here, considering the fact that interlingual translation is not really part of Shen’s project. Indeed, an attempt at translation proper might have taken the focus away from the multimodality at work, at the same time as it brings the reader’s attention to the poem’s meaning-content. The musical output of this translational act is available on a YouTube video:⁹

鯨向海 《旧相片》

在傾圮的月台
不斷回顧
你趴在那節永遠廢棄的車廂上
落日正撼動人心
冷霧的鐵軌往前伸展
泛黃的感覺

⁹ The video can be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5u4F_8sFyGI (last accessed 26 June 2014).

彷彿火車仍將開動
 被黃昏截斷的一座鐵橋下
 時間繼續往前奔流
 是我們用意志抵抗了
 按下快門的那一瞬間

The inevitable question: is this translation? Aside from being a creative performance of intersemioticity in literature, Shen's project stretches the imaginary of translation. The two-tiered multimodal transposition from verbal text into Braille code and from Braille code into music brings us into confrontation with the materiality of literature and the perceived limits of translation. In the same way that sign interpreters translate verbal messages into coded signs for the deaf, Shen made Braille versions of Chinese poems (like the one above) and even of whole books, including Benjamin's *Little History of Photography* and Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (based on their translated Chinese versions). The translational act is thus as much aesthetic as it is ethic: it disseminates written literature across semiotic planes, thereby availing it to the visually handicapped.

Insofar as Shen worked from the Chinese translations of Benjamin's German and Barthes' French texts, the Braille versions are translations of translations. The intersemiotic transposition from Braille code into holes in the music card that are eventually corporealized as irregular sounds is a bit trickier. There is no inherent relationship between the Braille patterning and the spacing of holes denoting musical notes. The relationship is performed into being; in other words, the musical notes that are produced from the music box are constructed as the translation of Braille codes which, in turn, are the translation of verbal texts. This translational relationship is realized by Shen's placing of the original verbal text above or beside the music box installation, hence creating a triad of cross-semiotic parallel texts.

The succession of translations that take place are all embodied acts. The production of Braille codes involves typing on a Braille machine and feeling the embossed "words" with one's fingers. The generation of sound also requires the reader participant to turn the handle attached to the music box, and reel the musical card through it continuously. The physicality involved here is important, for it distracts the reader and fragments the reception process, thereby preventing meaning from subsisting within one semiotic mode. The verbal (the poem, for instance), visual (the reading of the poem), kinesthetic (turning of the handle) and aural (musical notes) commitment on the part of the reader rouses the sympathetic, synesthetic and, if you will, erotic potential of the literary experience. The sensuous nature of the reading act is central to the project – indeed, its *raison d'être* – where reading conflates with translation: whereas the Braille coder hears

the poem read and translates, the reader reads as (s)he literally plays out the product of translation by setting the music box in motion.

The theoretical significance of Shen's project is as intriguing as its production. Shen was initially inspired by Walter Benjamin's concept of the "aura" espoused in the essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." To Benjamin, "aura" represents the sense of authenticity that subsists at the moment of artistic creation:

[T]hat which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. (Benjamin 1969a: 221)

While Benjamin does not suggest that the loss of aura in artistic reproduction is necessarily negative, he does express palpable nostalgia for authenticity: "the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced" (Benjamin 1969a: 221). A picture, according to Benjamin, would represent authenticity by virtue of its being the artist's original creation. By contrast, a photograph, being an image of an image, is duplication – a copy that can technically be reproduced infinitesimally. What is reproduced is inauthentic because of its displacement from a temporal presence, or "historical testimony" – "testimony to the history which it [a work of art] has experienced". Such displacement in turn compromises the "authority of the object" (Benjamin 1969a: 221) represented. Benjamin's triad of related notions – aura, authenticity, authority – thus ties an original work to its genesis and affords its copy derived status.

Is translation, then, a form of mechanical reproduction? To Benjamin, it cannot be. For in his famous treatise *The Task of the Translator*, Benjamin rejects the notion of the authority of the original text by insisting that the task of the translator

consists in finding that intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original ... Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one. (Benjamin 1969b: 76)

In order to produce the “echo of the original,” translation is not about the transmission of meaning or informative content which, to Benjamin, is characteristic of “bad translation.” Translation is rather about foregrounding the form or “mode of signification” of the original text. As a consequence, “the language of a translation can – in fact, must – let itself go, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*” (Benjamin 1969b: 79). In Benjamin’s scheme, the semantic presence of a source text, its “aura,” at the point of its creation is not a privileged property that must but cannot be reproduced. On the contrary, it is to be evaded. To “echo” an original text is not to attempt to duplicate its “aura” – which cannot be done since an aura is always lost at the point of reproduction – but to afford the translating language with its own autonomy or “voice.” The visual and aural metaphors used in Benjamin’s conceptualizations of artistic reproduction and textual translation point to the separate realms to which they belong. Translation, which seeks to “give voice” to a target text, is conceptually irreconcilable with mechanical reproduction which inevitably is dispossessed of the visual primacy of some originary source.

What if literary translation and mechanical reproduction are implicated in each other? On a rather conscious level, Shen experiments playfully with Benjamin’s theoretical constructs. In a video of Shen’s translation gadget in operation, Benjamin’s dictum “the task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original” is quoted in Chinese translation. The concept of “aura,” on the other hand, is invoked in Shen’s (2012) own retelling of the process of his creation. The incorporation into each other, and hence reconciliation, of the two irreconcilable forms both appropriates and problematizes Benjamin’s scheme. By producing an artefact that exhibits the physical mechanics of literary translation, Shen corporealizes what is metaphorical in this scheme: the Braille code made by and for the blind relates, somewhat paradoxically, to the visual aspect of the “aura” of an original text; the sounds (an aural text) reeled out by the music box are an “echo” of this text. In so doing Shen is advancing the possibility, and indeed the feasibility, of *translation as mechanical reproduction*.

Does Braille translation represent the “aura” of a transcoded Chinese poem? And does musical output “echo” the original poem through the refraction of the Braille code? If so, how can we think the relationship between the sound that is the eventual “translation” and the written text? There is no available framework that can rationalize this relationship, aside from the term “intersemiotic translation” that has come to assume various guises in its applications. Shen’s project performs the multimodal potential of translation which, when combined with the physicality of the artefact, is a compelling demonstration of how design

technology can push the boundaries of literary writing and translation. By embodying literature and translation, it also invites the reader to contemplate, by way of setting the gadget into motion, how the body participates in the process of meaning-making across language codes and semiotic dimensions.

5 Discussion and conclusion

In the examples illustrated above, it may be appropriate to speak not of literary writing but of literary performance. The aesthetic output in question is not a passive product to be read or received, but a literary-technological artefact to be enacted by the body of the reader. In each case, there is a deliberate manipulation of multiple sense perceptions through technology – print and mechanical respectively. The interaction between literature, technology and our sensuous capacities culminate in a multimodal and trans-semiotic experience. This experience is also translational, in the sense of its crossing-over the verbal and non-verbal modes. Most importantly, it is embodied. The reader does not just interact with the text on an intellectual level; the reader's body becomes the very engine that drives the translational experience – in the stripping apart of a book to reveal its poems, in the rotation of the mechanical parts of a music box. The pleasure, and hence the erotics, of reading is premised on such physical engagement with the textual entity.

Such engagement is often carried out in an in-between space which one may think of as translational. A translational perspective enables us to observe the discursive space that separates and conjoins semiotic domains as well as the transmutation processes that constitute literary experience. In the case of Hsia Yü's deconstructionist poetics, by conceptualizing *Rub Ineffable* as an intralingual translation of *Ventriloquy*, we bring the tension between identity and difference into high relief. The negotiation of the space between the "source" texts in *Ventriloquy* and the "target" texts in *Rub Ineffable* is symptomatic of the semiotic disintegration and reintegration entailed in literary signification. On the other hand, Shen Bo-cheng's translation machine exemplifies a multiple travel of codes across different media. It fuses the concept of translation into a play with modes of representation, problematizing the relationship between aesthetic form and content, as well as transgressing semiotic boundaries.

Translation performs the materiality of the sign by way of creating this space of flux, wherein the signified is unstable, or otherwise irrelevant: the sign announces its presence by "carrying the signified a great distance" (Barthes 1975: 67). Just as intralingual translation in Hsia's project generates poems that challenge the syntactical and prosodic conventions of the Chinese language,

intersemiotic translation in Shen's technological product breaks the nexus of equivalence presumed to exist between "source" and "target" by juxtaposing three embodied manifestations (verbal, tactile, aural) of what is apparently one and the same text. What emerges, then, is form, the body of the text, one that "dissolves considerations of content into those of form" (Sontag 1994: 14). Iconoclastic as they are, these examples of experimental literature herald a multimodal movement in literary writing in particular and in aesthetics in general,¹⁰ wherein translation is often involved as a key mechanism, and whereby form and the material body take precedence over meaning and cerebral reading.¹¹

Other than being overt displays of materiality and multimodality in literature, these experiments often adopt post-structuralist approaches in their interpretation of translation and meaning. Such approaches privilege fragmentation and dispersal over continuity and self-sufficiency and, above all, the sign over the signified, providing a platform for contemplations about the meaning of meaning. Here translation turns into an intervening site where signs intercourse with several media and interacts with the bodies of readers to create a sensuous fabric that adduces "the pleasure of the text." It is anything but a disembodied process that aims to communicate meaning, literary or otherwise. A new discourse in multimodal aesthetics and translation is in the making, centered on the dialectic between writing and translation, body and text, technology and literature. A new vocabulary would therefore be required and forthcoming, following Sontag's call, for us to articulate the complex interactions among these elements that will increasingly emerge in our literary landscape in the digital era.

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10 This is similar to what Wang Ning (2009) calls "the iconological turn in literary and cultural studies." While Wang focuses on the visual aspects of literature and culture (which aptly encompasses Hsia's example described here), the movement I am referring to here is more multimodal in its coverage of the senses, including the visual, the aural, the tactile and the kinesthetic.

11 For other examples of such literary experiments in the Chinese world, see Lee (2011a, 2011b, 2012, forthcoming).

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