Reassembling the ruins: revisiting Latour's concept of translation in Modernity's growing aftermath


Published in:
The Translator

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal

Publisher rights
Copyright 2024 the authors. This is an open access article published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits distribution and reproduction for non-commercial purposes, provided the author and source are cited.

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The Research Portal is Queen’s institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

Open Access
This research has been made openly available by Queen’s academics and its Open Research team. We would love to hear how access to this research benefits you. – Share your feedback with us: http://go.qub.ac.uk/oa-feedback
Reassembling the ruins: revisiting Latour’s concept of translation in Modernity’s growing aftermath

Matt Valler & Piotr Blumczynski

To cite this article: Matt Valler & Piotr Blumczynski (25 Mar 2024): Reassembling the ruins: revisiting Latour’s concept of translation in Modernity’s growing aftermath, The Translator, DOI: 10.1080/13556509.2024.2312613

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2024.2312613

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 25 Mar 2024.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data
ABSTRACT
Bruno Latour’s concept of translation provides ways to both extend the ‘material turn’ in translation studies and conceptualise translation as process. This concept cannot be understood apart from Latour’s critique of Modern epistemology which requires an alternative conception of temporality and, in the context of the Anthropocene, provides a means to imagine futures and pasts beyond the tropes of growth vs contraction or progress vs regression. In this article, Latour’s concept of translation is read through Anna Tsing’s anthropological account of the matsutake mushroom trade, engaging this thick descriptive case-study to further develop translation as times of indeterminate encounters. This approach provides a means to conceptualise translation in terms of material agency, from which notions of translation-as-meaning, and linguistic translation can be more credibly theorised, contributing both within and beyond translation studies to discussions on new materialist philosophy and its implications, arguing for the importance of translational thinking.

A collective fantasy of unchecked production
In his 1993 essay, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour argued that what we have come to understand as Modernity can be defined as a process of disavowed translation. This article proposes an exploration of Latour’s notion of translation, which is only revealed through his exploration of the meaning of Modernity. For Latour, Modern epistemology is characterised by a fundamental division, structured in discourse, between Nature and Society. This division can be seen, for example, in the emphatic separation of Science and Politics, or in the language of ‘natural’ vs ‘artificial’. However, while discourse ensures these fields are kept sealed from each other, material practice demonstrates their perpetual translation: a process of hybridisation in which various domains of knowledge and disparate material systems become inseparable in the production of new phenomena. The characteristic of Modernity is thus a proliferation of hybrids, via a process of ever-more intense
translation, coupled with an emphatic disavowal of that translation process itself. The Modern, for Latour, is a collective fantasy that facilitates unchecked production.

Latour does not set out to theorise translation (and certainly not its linguistic kind). However, it is a theme that runs like a thread throughout his work (see Janicka 2023). In particular, it is a core concept in his description of the material process of hybridisation and it can be argued that, in theorising this way, Latour has provided a much more in-depth analysis of the material dynamics of translation than those explored in the more recent so-called ‘material turn’ (e.g. Littau 2016). The latter has remained largely focused on the material generation of interlingual translation products and thus, while opening some important questions regarding the relationship of meaning and form, translation remains conceptualised as a cognitive task involving material components, rather than a material process of which cognition is but one feature. By contrast, Latour’s thought takes us entirely around – and rather far beyond – what Kobus Marais (2019) calls ‘the linguistic bias’ in translation studies (see also Blumczynski 2023).

In his later work (Latour 2017, 2018), Latour turned his attention to the question of the Anthropocene. Geological nomenclature provides an alternative to the language of pre-Modern, Modern, or post-Modern as designations for our history. For Latour, taking the Anthropocene seriously requires exposing the translation that modernity disavowed. Drawing on Michel Serres (1995), he argues that both material and mental phenomena are governed by an interplay of forces – for example, think of the force of attraction as explaining what is meant by the force of law and the power of understanding. ‘[I]n the last analysis, we indeed speak the language of the world, provided that we learn to translate “the animist, religious, or mathematical versions” from one to another’ (Latour 2017, 65, quoting Serres). Translation, then, ‘becomes the way of understanding by what we are attached and on what we depend’ (Latour 2017, 65; cf.; Serres 1995, 108–109).

Thus understood, translation is thoroughly processual in an ontological sense: ‘translation is not lifeless, motionless, a-temporal form, but a complex, pulsating event’ (Blumczynski 2016, 70–71); ‘the translational process is somehow alive, . . . it is characterized by natural pulsation and processual becoming’ (89). This recognition goes beyond the familiar – if somewhat trivial – distinction between translation as product and translation as process, invariably found in various introductions to the discipline, including the classic Holmes-Toury map of translation studies (Holmes, (1972 2000), 176–177; Toury 2012, 4). Recent explorations into the processes of translation from a behavioural-cognitive experimental perspective, conducted under Translation Process Research (e.g. Jakobsen 2017) and especially within Cognitive Translation and Interpreting Studies (e.g. Alves and Jakobsen 2021; Halverson and García 2021), have brought the realisation that ‘[t]ranslation – the act of translating – is a complex adaptive system. The complexity engages systems of agents from the level of the neuron upwards to include social systems’ (Shreve 2021, 85). Yet, it is still hard to resist the impression that

In the largely material culture we are surrounded by, processes in order to be deemed worthwhile or ontologically valid must normally generate some sort of ‘substance’. Think of the rhetoric of ‘knowledge production’ versus ‘information processing’. Production, being generative, may easily be a worthy end in itself; processing normally has merely utilitarian value as a means to an end. (Blumczynski 2021, 39)
This fantasy of unchecked production, this surreptitiously capitalist regime of productivity, needs to be challenged on several grounds: runaway extraction, ecological damage, dangerous climate change, and threats to both mental and physical health, to name a few. In terms of translation specifically, it dramatically fails to account for the reality of the phenomenon as something not just performed but also experienced (see Blumczynski 2023). In his recent philosophical intervention drawing on phenomenological, epistemological and ontological insights, Piotr Blumczynski has argued that

The distinction between process and product no longer makes much sense (if it ever did): what emerges from a translational process is not only a relatively stable product . . . but also another process or rather multiple intertwining processes, constantly evolving through further processes of transmission, reception, interpretation, application, and so on, processed by processual beings. (Blumczynski 2021, 40)

Marais makes a similar point:

If one takes into account the basic arguments in fields such as physics, biology, and semiotics, they all seem to indicate that reality is process, and relational process at that. Einstein’s relativity theory, Gödel’s indeterminacy theory, Schrodinger’s uncertainty principle, the realization that DNA translation into protein is the process underlying the metabolism of life and the implications of the Second Law of Thermodynamics for cultural and social systems, all indicate that reality is not stable with some indeterminacy and instability. Rather, reality is process, moving, emergence with some patches of stability, structure, or form. (Marais 2019, 124)

But how to navigate a material theory of translation-as-process? We believe that Latour’s translation theory has much to contribute in this regard. While some aspects of Latour’s work, known popularly as Actor-Network Theory (ANT), or the sociology of translation, has been engaged by translation studies, the level of this engagement has remained rather superficial (with some notable exceptions, e.g. Buzelin 2005, 2007; Risku and Windhager 2013). Without a clear conception of the value of both the materiality of translation and translation-as-process, the relevance of Latour’s insights for the discipline has not been clear – and thus been sorely doubted. We will argue that Latour’s materialist – arguably, New Materialist – conception of translation provides a theoretical basis for a much broader conception of translation, which nonetheless facilitates language translation.

**Inducing mediators to coexist**

In *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Latour theorises translation as ‘a connection that transports, so to speak, transformations’, and defines it as ‘a relation that does not transport causality but induces two mediators into coexisting’ (2005, 108). We suggest that much of the rest of his oeuvre can be understood as an extended commentary on this definition. Yet in translation studies, this definition is unfamiliar and perhaps not readily accessible. So let us start with what we do readily understand. A *mediator*, for Latour, is a technical term to be contrasted with an *intermediary*. An intermediary simply transports without creating anything new in the process. A mediator, on the other hand, is transformative in creating a new version of what is being mediated. This is a very familiar distinction to translators, even if we do not necessarily reach for the same terms or think of *transformation* primarily in terms of physical form.
Translation studies has reckoned extensively with the complexity of translators as medi-iators. We will return to this distinction in due course.

Secondly, causality, which is about agency. Latour was a philosopher of science whose early career challenged the epistemological assumptions regarding scientific practice, in particular assumptions regarding cause and effect. It is true that under tight experimental conditions certain causes can produce reliable effects, but that is precisely the point: the reliable relation between cause and effect can only be observed under tight experimental conditions – in other words, only if a myriad of other agencies are forcibly excluded by the agency of the scientist(s) and the apparatus they construct. However, claims Latour, a conception of science as a simple chain of cause and effect has colonised our thinking about anything non-human. Animals and birds act out of pure instinct. This table and this cup act out of pure mechanism. Surely it is absurd to suggest that this chair is a mediator. Does not the chair simply act as a conduit for different forces? How could we say that the chair has agency?

The conceptual problems with understanding how we could attribute agency to so-called inanimate objects is, for Latour, precisely the flip-side of our conception of science as the discovery of pre-existing and unbending laws. Agent-less, predictable science inhabits the domain of Nature, of natural law, of the object. By contrast, humans possess complex psycho-social capabilities that endow us with agency, even while we recognise the limitations of individual agency in relation to societal norms – the familiar conundrum of Culture. The Nature/Culture division – the critique of which is now a common trope – still permeates our assumptions about agency, and therefore of causality. In order to rethink agency, argues Latour, we must do away with this binary that renders agency a function of intention. Instead, we should understand agency as the power to act. Just as I might unintentionally back into someone in a café, knocking their drinks tray to the floor, agency is the power to change the relations of objects to each other, regardless of whether that power is exerted according to intention or not. As we are all, often painfully, aware, our actions rarely correspond to our intentions anyway.

This is thus the sense in which this chair has agency. It not only has the power to keep me raised above the ground; it has the power to set my body in a certain position. The body language I project while sitting in this chair is a function of its particular agency. Thus the chair is part of a social assemblage, in that it participates in a particular arrangement of associations. Of course, a chair does not have a lot of agency; certain objects are able to exert much greater force over others, and thus possess greater agency. The human capacity to muster intention – however inefficiently – is part of the reason that people have more agency than chairs, or indeed whole constellations of other organisms. Although, as we are periodically and painfully reminded, the tiniest virus has the power to upend our lives, and the flows of gas particles that form pressure differentials have the power to destroy entire cities as cyclones make landfall.

For Latour, the relationships of social assemblages to human actors are complex. The room with the chair is a social assemblage, whether or not anyone is sitting on it, or whoever is across the table. Of course, in this example the chair and table are nonetheless arranged by human actors, even while their own agency shaped the arrangement (the shape of the table affects where it gets placed in the room, it attracts other objects to its upper surface due to its structural reliability, etc.) However, even in a room where absent humans remain the most powerful agent,
apparent stillness masks the negotiated forces that keep these so-called inanimate objects from moving. Indeed, they are only still and unmoving from a certain perspective of scale. Microbes feed on the detritus of dead skin cells and spores of fungi begin gradually – ever so slowly – to colonise hidden instances of organic matter. The inanimate is eroding but, like ants scurrying around a rock, the time with which we are concerned detaches the objects around us from time altogether – until a chair leg breaks or a computer crashes and the social assemblage that is the room must be remade.

Latour’s later work has become increasingly concerned with climate change and the time becoming known as the Anthropocene. This new geological epoch further complicates the question of human agency. If we consider the most remote rainforest, barely touched by human habitation, we could describe the flora, fauna, rocks and clouds as so many different agents in complex association with varying degrees of agency. However, since human actors now dramatically influence weather patterns through the impact of greenhouse gas emissions it is impossible to conceive of even this rainforest as a social assemblage without considering some human agency.

Now, discussing agency is very different from discussing meaning. Latour is not searching for meaning; he is searching for better description (anthropological, sociological, scientific, political, organisational, geographical – the list is long!). Or perhaps more specifically we could say that Latour is problematising the relationship of meaning and agency, using a more rigorously attentive, descriptive sensibility as a way to expose that dynamic. This important in a consideration of translation, since we normally associate translation with meaning.

Returning to Latour’s definition of translation, then, and thirdly, a relation – specifically, ‘a relation that does not transport causality’ (2005, 108). To help us understand this we can contemplate its opposite – a relation that does transport causality. According to Latour this kind of transported causality does not actually exist, but is nonetheless how we often think of relations. You hit a bell with a hammer and a note sounds. Cause and effect. That is a relation which, in popular understanding at least, simply transports causality. The cause (the hammer strike) happens, and the bell has no choice but to simply turn that cause into the effect; the effect is no more than the cause. This is what Latour means by the intermediary. Most of the ways we conceive of so-called ‘inanimate’ objects are in terms of relations which transport causality. Something happens because another thing happened. If something happens to us, we allow for some degree of choice in the way we react – the relation does not transport causality, or at least not completely. But if a rock falls from a mountain peak and crashes into other rocks, dislodging them into an avalanche, smashing trees, scattering creatures and destroying a town at the foot of the mountain, we treat the entire event as if it was a result of a single cause. The cause was simply transported throughout its effects; it happened as it had to happen because the event was simply a concatenation of causes.

A relation that does not transport causality is therefore one in which the effect is not determined by the cause (a point we come back to later while considering Tsing’s ‘indeterminacy of encounter’). Instead, the relation ‘induces two mediators into coexisting’ (Latour 2005, 108). Let us recall that a mediator is contrasted with an intermediary. Here we are starting to make sense of these terms. A mediator does not transport causality, but instead acts. Again, agency is not necessarily about intention. As humans,
we like to think that we act intentionally, and we associate our most significant actions with our most resolute intentions. But this does not mean that acting is a product of intention – it is a product of agency, of the power to act. (Our many unintentional actions, and the ways in which strong intentions sometimes inhibit our capacity to act, demonstrate the tenuous relationship between action and intention.)

Thus when I take a hammer and strike a bell there are a whole series of mediators brought into coexistence, from the respiratory systems of my body which facilitate the chemical reactions that provide the energy to move, the neurological systems which correlate sensory information to provide physiological coordination, the atoms of the hammer which align in such a way as to endow it with such rigid strength, the sonorous shape of the bell which allows it to vibrate in such a particular and consistent manner, and the particles of air surrounding the bell which vibrate, transferring energy through longitudinal waves until the thin film of my ear drum is brought to the same frequency as the bell and chemical signals make neurological connections by which I process the sound. In this very simple process, a vast array of microscopic actors are called upon to transform their associations, while larger scale actors – I, the hammer, the bell, the structure that houses the bell, and so on – also transform their association. All these agents form a new quasi-object; we now exist as an association – a social assemblage – which did not exist before. In other words – in Latour’s words – we ‘coexist’.

Translation, for Latour, is precisely that ‘relation that does not transport causality but induces two mediators into coexisting’. However, we must still clarify this a little more. Note that translation is not mediation per se, but rather the relation that induces the coexistence of mediators. These myriad mediators which demonstrate their agency through the power to act are not always able to easily coexist; their coexistence must be induced. This is evidenced at the subatomic level, where the coexistence of protons and neutrons in the nucleus of an atom is perpetually facilitated by even smaller particles which work hard to manage the relations of charge and provide the appropriate force – not too strong, not too weak – for atomic stability. It is evidenced in the example of striking a bell where the action of hitting induces hammer and bell to coexist in such a way as to produce a certain frequency of sound which transforms the air around it. It is evidenced in the example of the chair which is induced to coexist with the person sitting on it, which in turn – perhaps more interestingly – might induce two enemies to coexist around the same table. And, we would suggest, it is also evidenced in linguistic translation, where words are induced to coexist in new associations across apparently incommensurate language systems, opening new meanings to new readers or hearers, and in turn inducing coexistence between people and objects which would not otherwise have occurred. Each translation transforms associations and thereby induces novel coexistence. Translation is indeed negentropy because it is the processual relation required for any new form, whether atomic structure, everyday object, political agreement, artistic production, turn of phrase, climate model, habitat, planet, explosion or thought.

Translation and Modernity

For Latour this conception of translation is intrinsic to his understanding – and critique – of Modernity. The Modern is defined by the particular arrangement of two practices: translation and purification. Translation ‘creates mixtures between entirely new types of
beings, hybrids of nature and culture’ (Latour 1993, 10) – it is the messy process of entanglement and mongrelisation, of acknowledging and embracing complexity. Purification, by contrast, ‘creates two distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other’ (1993, 10–11). Purification is behind the distinction between Nature and Society, from which we derive Science and Politics. In this view, Nature is objective and operates without agency according to causal laws; Society is subjective, and is full of agency, constructed according to human choices. At the same time, Nature is constructed through Scientific knowledge, an activity of human Society; while Society turns out to have causal laws which are offered as explanations for the behaviour – specifically the lack of agency – of its constituent members. This problematic remains unaddressed by Modernity because of the necessity of enforcing the purification that structures its knowledge.

However, it is not just this purification which defines Modernity in Latour’s account. At the same time as this purification is enforced in the production of knowledge, in practice the production of hybrid objects (or ‘quasi-objects’) accelerates (This is Latour’s development of Serres’ notion of ‘quasi-object’, which ‘is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject’ [Serres 1982: 225]). By ‘hybrid’ objects Latour means phenomena which defy the categories that the work of purification enforces. A missile guidance system, for example, requires highly complex scientific laws – in the fields of ballistics and meteorology – to be thoroughly entangled with a whole range of political, cultural, historical, geographical, and economic concerns. The production of hybrid quasi-objects is the work of translation, the relation which induces mediators to coexist. But how can purification and translation be thought together: how can this extraordinarily complex quasi-object be described as either Nature or Society? That would be absurd!

It is absurd, and its absurdity has brought the Modern ‘Constitution’ (as Latour describes it) under intense critique. However, the absurdity has only been evident in the later-Modern period as the scale and complexity of hybrid quasi-objects began to remake the world. In the early days of the Modern Constitution (Latour traces its origins to a 17th-century debate between Hobbes and Boyle over the political and scientific implications of a vacuum pump [1993: 15ff]), hybrid quasi-objects were less complex and thus the purification of knowledge appeared credible. Translation and purification could co-exist as long as you did not look at both processes at the same time. ‘[E]verything happens by way of mediation, translation and networks, but this space does not exist, it has no place. It is the unthinkable, the unconscious of the moderns’ (Latour 1993, 37).

In fact, argues Latour, it is precisely this Modern ‘Constitution’, which requires the work of translation and the work of purification to never be seen in the same room together, that enables the emergence of ever-more complex hybrid quasi-objects. For the pre-Moderns, where translation and purification were expressly tied to each other, every hybrid quasi-object would very obviously have significant political, cultural, religious implications; so change or innovation was circumspect. But once the Modern era insists that the two processes are never considered together, the more that Nature and Culture are divided, the more extreme their translation in hybrid quasi-objects. Mutually assured destruction, climate change, globalisation – these are the enormous quasi-objects in which great swathes of so-called Nature and great realms of so-called Culture have
been induced to coexist in complex, fragile and frightening associations. It turns out we are monstrously Modern.

Except... Latour insists that we have never actually been Modern, because Modernity relies on particular notions of temporality. Let us then step back from Latour for a moment to consider the notion of time.

Our experience of past and future is so basic, so common-sense, that it can seem strange or even unimaginable to question it. Yet modern physics has demonstrated the relativity of time to space, and this should at least give us pause. While relativity is impossible to observe under ‘normal’ terrestrial conditions, the idea that space and time are related allows us to reimagine how we construct notions of past, present, and future. If I look outside my window I can see the seasonal colour of the leaves – right now, spring is here and the sycamore trees are lush while the ash are late to bloom. This is a chemical relationship affected by quantities of light, heat, moisture and the mineral composition of the soil. The seasons wax and wane like the tide on a beach but, like a coastline where each tidal movement brings different micro-changes in erosion and deposition, each cycle of leaf loss and regrowth is nuanced by the extension of some branches and the loss of others. How to conceive of this constant change? On the one hand we speak of the seasons as a cycle, a predictable pattern which always returns us to a time in the past (in a few months, autumn will come and the leaves will fall, just as they did last year). However, we also, noting the specific differences between last spring and this, observe that time has passed; we have returned to spring again, but it is also a new spring.

One way to conceive of this is as a back/forward movement. This is perhaps the most common conception of time for European cultures. Time is linear, and while we appear to return to the past in the cycle of the seasons, this is only an appearance, a simulacrum; of course, we say, we are actually in the future: this moment has not happened before. However, if we consider time as a spatial relationship, this linear conception becomes problematised. The changes in the trees, the erosion of the coast, the emerging wrinkles on my skin, the new buildings in my neighbourhood: these are spatial reconfigurations that construct time. They are not made by time; they make time. This can be imagined in physical terms by considering entropy, the so-called Second Law of Thermodynamics, which asserts that heat energy will always pass from a hotter to a colder object (never the other way around) and thus eventually the universe will achieve thermal equilibrium, slumping to a slow and stagnant rest. Under this law, the future is determined by changing spatial (atomic) relationships; it is impossible to go back in time because it is impossible for spatial relationships to reverse the process of heat exchange. However, what this law exposes is that time is a function of scale. Over unimaginable aeons the spatial construction of time might well result in time as an arrow. At the level of the local, however, this is far from obvious. In biological systems, negentropy is at least as forceful as entropy: for every organism that dies, many others are born and strive to remain alive; for every loss of form, new forms (with new bonds) are made. Thus, the seasons only take us forward to the future if we choose to interpret the reconfigured spatial relationships that way. Another way to describe the same phenomenon would be to say that the seasons have taken us back to a changed past, or forward to a future we have already been. This framing is an alternative way to make time; it emphasises similarity and familiarity over difference.
Alongside the sycamore and ash are also conifers. Through the cycle of the seasons they appear not to change at all. However, this is also a matter of scale; if I were to zoom in I would notice the seasonal differences. Or take rocks, which show no change from one season to the next, even at close-range. Over the time-frame of geological eras rocks are liquid, dripping as easily as freshly-made jam. Yet their spatial relationship to the temporality of the human species renders them unchanging; compared to trees, rocks are timeless, they exist in a permanent present. By contrast, microbial cultures in the soil build whole worlds and have them destroyed in the time it takes me to eat my breakfast. Thus, within the single view framed by my window there are multiple temporalities: cycles of time, an endless present, changed pasts, vanished futures – all of which are formed by the speed of change in spatial relationships.

This material construction of time is central to Latour’s conception of the Modern. For Latour, Modernity is constructed not just by its Constitution, but by the particular notion of time that the Constitution enables. To understand this, it is crucial to understand that temporality, for Latour, is itself constructed by a process of ‘sorting’ that places objects in different arrangements. For the Moderns, this sorting is the work of purification enforced by the Constitution; a ‘brutal separation between what has no history but emerges nevertheless in history – the things of nature – and what never leaves history – the labours and passions of humans’ (1993, 71). The Modern notion of history, a linear temporarily of progress or regression, is thus created from the very same insistence on the separation between object and subject. ‘The asymmetry between nature and culture then becomes an asymmetry between past and future. The past was the confusion of things and men; the future is what will no longer confuse them’. (71).

Modernisation, then, as a process,

consists in continually exiting from an obscure age that mingled the needs of society with scientific truth, in order to enter into a new age that will finally distinguish clearly what belongs to atemporal nature and what comes from humans, what depends on things and what belongs to signs. (Latour 1993, 71)

In other words, modernising involves the invention of a temporality in which translation is disavowed.

This is a fascinating aspect of Latour’s theory of translation which invites considered reflection. Does this mean that paying attention to translation is inherently conservative? For communities, or even nations, who desire to ‘modernise’, will this inevitably require the increased invisibility – and thus unaccountability – of translational processes?

The problem with thinking these questions is the problem of thinking time. For Latour, ‘One is not born traditional; one chooses to become traditional by constant innovation. The idea of an identical repetition of the past and that of a radical rupture with any past are two symmetrical results of a single conception of time’ (1993, 76). If we are locked into an idea of time that only imagines the future as ‘progress’ or ‘regress’ then we are also locked into the radical purification that separates nature from society, nonhuman from human, timeless from temporal; we are locked into a world which cannot see the proliferation of translation it creates.

What are we to do, if we can move neither forward nor backward? Displace our attention. We have never moved either forward or backward. We have always actively sorted out elements
belonging to different times. We can still sort. *It is the sorting that makes the times, not the times that make the sorting.* (Latour 1993, 76; italics in original)

This is the logic behind Latour’s claim that we have never been Modern. It is a self-consciously weak claim, for of course Latour describes in detail the Constitution which governs the Moderns; he wants to describe the phenomena. The phenomena do not hold up to this scrutiny, however, because the description exposes the disavowal at the heart of Modernity. The Moderns may have insisted on a radical purification which structures a radical rupture in time, but that does not mean that structure is credible. The work of translation has been carrying on, regardless of whether Moderns prevented themselves from describing it. The Moderns sort the elements of their world and thus make the time they are in, but that does not mean they cannot be sorted differently. By forcing our gaze onto the work of purification and the work of translation at the same time, Latour can expose the Modern double-think and claim we have never actually been Modern. It is the focus on the process of translation that provides the exit strategy from the fantasy of Modernity, not to a pre-Modern world (this is a Modern construction), but to a non-Modern past/future.

A different way of putting this is to say,

The moderns are quite right to want reality, language, society and being all at once. They are wrong only in believing that these sets are forever contradictory. Instead of always analyzing the trajectory of quasi-objects by separating these resources, can we not write as if they ought to be in continuous connection with one another? (Latour 1993, 89)

Indeed, for Latour, the Modern refusal to acknowledge that complex translations problematise categories of knowledge is integral to the proliferation of those hybrid quasi-objects which translation produces. If we could acknowledge that every translation redefines the social and transforms the natural, then we might be far more cautious about translational processes. Of course, first we have to recognise them. Conceptualising translation as process has been a strong trajectory in translation studies in recent years. However, the interlingual – even intercultural – focus of the discipline displays the inheritance from this Modern distinction that restricts translation to the domain of the ‘social’.

Here we return to Latour’s definition of translation, for which the distinction between mediator and intermediary is central.

The moderns … did not make quasi-objects disappear by eradication and denial, as if they wanted to simply repress them. On the contrary, they recognized their existence but emptied it of any relevance by turning full-blown mediators into mere intermediaries. An intermediary – although recognized as necessary – simply transports, transfers, transmits energy from one of the poles of the Constitution. It is void in itself and can only be less faithful or more or less opaque. A mediator, however, is an original event and creates what it translates as well as the entities between which it plays a mediating role. If we simply restore this mediating role to all the agents, exactly the same world composed of exactly the same entities cease being modern and becomes what it has never ceased to be – that is, nonmodern. How did the modern manage to specify and cancel out the work of mediation both at once? *By conceiving every hybrid as a mixture of two pure forms.* The modern explanations consisted in splitting the mixtures apart in order to extract from them what came from the subject (or the social) and what came from the object. Next they multiplied the intermediaries in order to reconstruct
If we can pay attention to the relation which does not transport causality, but which induces two mediators to coexist, then we can make a future which does not consist in a binary choice between an obstinate refusal to modernise and unaccountable modernisation, but instead treats time as an alternative arrangement of things – new associations, new socialities, new translations.

**The Mushroom at the End of the World**

We realise that the discussion so far has been rather abstract and conceptually dense. In order to give these theoretical formulations a more concrete shape, we offer the following excursion. Anna Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Tsing 2015) is an ethnographic study of the matsutake mushroom trade. However, it is also a critique of Modern notions of temporality in which translation plays a central role. Reading Tsing with Latour allows us to explore a case-study in translation and the problematisation of Modernity.

Matsutake mushrooms are a prized delicacy in Japan, with powerful nostalgic connotations. Evoking peasant landscapes now largely lost as a result of rapid urbanisation, matsutake have been exchanged as expensive gifts for centuries. During the 1980s and 1990s, when Japan’s economy boomed, demand for matsutake soared and a new global commodity chain emerged. It is the complexity and – specifically – the ‘translations’ of this chain which Tsing sets out to describe.

Tsing begins in the pine forests of Oregon’s Pacific Northwest, where ‘from the first [the wild mushroom trade] was linked to worldwide ruination’ (2015, 18). The Chernobyl disaster of 1986 damaged Europe’s mushroom trade. ‘When Japan began importing matsutake at high prices – just as jobless Indochinese refugees were settling in California – the trade went wild’ (18). Yet matsutake do not grow in well-maintained forests, and no human population has been able to cultivate them successfully. Instead, they grow among the ruins of large-scale logging. As Oregon’s iconic timber trade declined, vast areas of pine forest colonised the landscape, just as they had in Japan over centuries as deforestation gradually took broadleaf trees to build temples or fuel iron forges. Matsutake thrive with pine, which in turn thrives in the sunlight and minerals that deforestation leaves behind (6). The ruins of one form of value generation create the conditions for another. Thus, this is a description about a trade that begins in the ruins of Modernity. Nuclear fallout, Indochinese refugees fleeing proxy wars, abandoned industrial forests, precarious livelihoods: these are the refugia of a world whose gaze has moved elsewhere, but which still lives. As Tsing explains,

> Industrial transformation turned out to be a bubble of promise followed by lost livelihoods and damaged landscapes. And yet: such documents are not enough. If we end the story with decay, we abandon all hope – or turn our attention to other sites of promise and ruin, promise and ruin. *(2015: 18)*

Tsing turns instead to the detail of an extraordinary value chain. At one end are an assortment of mushroom pickers – constellations of Hmong, Mien, Lao, Khmer, a few Native Americans and a few Whites. They pick mushrooms, according to Tsing, because –
in different ways – the practice equates to ‘freedom’. ‘No pickers I met imagined the money they gained from matsutake as a return on their labor’ (77). Instead, in many varied ways, it is freedom from war, from the disappointment of cramped urban living environments, from social constraints, and – crucially – from waged employment. Each picker is their own boss and makes their own choices. Tsing narrates the ‘performance of freedom’ at Open Ticket, Oregon, a mushroom buying event, ‘self-consciously off the map’ and ‘a theatre of lively suspense and action’ (75) where pickers and buyers negotiate prices throughout the night.

This is not the freedom imagined by economists, who use that term to talk about the regularities of individual rational choice. Nor is it political liberalism. This mushroomers’ freedom is irregular and outside rationalization; it is performative, communally varied, and effervescent. It has something to do with the cosmpolitanism of the place; freedom emerges from open-ended cultural interplay, full of potential conflict and misunderstanding. I think it exists only in relation to ghosts. Freedom is the negotiation of ghosts on a haunted landscape; it does not exorcise the haunting but works to survive and negotiate it with flair. (Tsing 2015, 75–76)

Tsing suggests a number of different ghosts that haunt Open Ticket, from forcibly removed Native American communities, to the stumps of great felled trees, along with the memories of war and other less defined forms of power, particularly those associated with labour and property, since most matsutake in Oregon is picked independently via trespass. This talk of ghosts may seem strange, but Tsing takes haunting seriously. It is important in the narration of temporality. To return to Latour, ‘it is a long way from a provocative quotation extracted out of a truly finished past to a reprise, repetition or revisiting of a past that has never disappeared’ (1993, 74). In the ruins of Modernity, the past still lives and must be survived, even negotiated with flair. This is a temporality that cannot be conceived in terms that involve any radical break within history.

From the complex performance of Open Ticket, ‘buyers’ work with ‘field agents’ to sell on to ‘bulkers’, who then sell on to exporters. Whereas the negotiation between pickers and buyers is a complex performance of freedom in which both mushrooms and dollars are trophies, the movement on from buyers to bulkers involves a process of ‘alienation’ as mushrooms are ‘translated’ into commodities. As an example, Tsing cites the remarkable process of sorting mushrooms, a crucial process of quality control, which is carried out first by buyers at Open Ticket, ‘an eye-catching, rapid-fire dance of the arms with the legs held still’ (2015, 81) and then – astonishingly, given the skill of these first sorters – again by casual, disinterested, on-call labourers at bulkers’ warehouses. ‘Sorting creates the prowess of buyers; it is an expression of their deep connection with the mushrooms’ (127). Yet the bulkers’ sorters

are workers in the classic sense of the term: alienated labor without interest in the product.

And yet they are translators, North American style. It is precisely because they have no knowledge or interest in how the mushrooms got there that they are able to purify them as inventory. (Tsing 2015, 127, italics added)

Here we meet the concept of translation with which Tsing works, drawn from her colleague, Shiho Satsuka, in which (in Tsing’s words) translation ‘is the drawing of one world-making project into another’ (Tsing 2015, 62), ‘shows us misfits as well as joins’ (217), and ‘in which learning another culture both bridges and maintains
difference’ (112). Satsuka (2015) takes a self-consciously postcolonial approach to translation that involves the negotiation of hegemony – arguing, indeed, that this is the context in which most translation work is done. She explores the construction of translations of ‘Nature’ into Japanese as a result of 19th-century European and American expansion, which required the breaking of existing epistemologies and the creation of new contested subjectivities. Translation requires a negotiation with power, even as it transforms. For Tsing, the capitalist commodification of matsutake translates the cosmopolitan performance of Open Ticket, with its tales of danger and triumph, into crates of stock under humming neon warehouse lights. Matsutake is translated from one world to another: from the marginal, hidden world of Oregon’s abandoned pine forests to the hegemonic world of supply chain capitalism.

This translation is not the end of the story, however, since the primary market for matsutake is not culinary consumption but gift-giving. Japanese importers further categorise the mushrooms, parsing out certain size and quality for various wholesalers, who in turn sell selectively to retailers. When retailers buy matsutake they are often thinking about a particular client who may have a special ceremony (for example, a wedding) approaching and thus the commodity begins its translation into a new web of relationships (125). ‘Almost no one buys a fine matsutake just to eat. Matsutake build relationships, and as gifts they cannot be separated from those relationships. Matsutake become extensions of the person, the definitional feature of value in a gift economy’ (123). Thus, argues Tsing,

Matsutake is a capitalist commodity that begins and ends its life as a gift. It spends only a few hours as a fully alienated commodity: the time when it waits as inventory in shipping crates on the tarmac and travels in the belly of a plane. But these are the hours that count. Relations between exporters and importers, which dominate and structure the supply chain, are cemented within the possibility of these hours. As inventory, matsutake allow calculations that channel profits to exporters and importers, making the work of organizing the commodity chain worthwhile from their perspective. This is salvage accumulation: the creation of capitalist value from noncapitalist value regimes. (Tsing 2015, 128)

It is noteworthy that Tsing uses the language of purification to describe the process of translation from gift to commodity, when for Latour purification is a process that operates in contradistinction from translation. Of course, Latour is using ‘purification’ with a very specific, technical meaning within his conception of the Modern Constitution. Nonetheless, the idea that translation could involve separation and distillation, rather than combination or hybridisation, is an important difference. In many respects, Tsing’s anthropological approach shares Latour’s attention to the problematic construction of Nature and Society. Matsutake pickers and gift-givers are constituted by the mushrooms and the relationships they both create and destroy. Mushrooms make worlds, as much as humans do. ‘Humans, pines, and fungi make living arrangements simultaneously for themselves and for others: multispecies worlds’ (22). The matsutake trade cannot be understood without fungal spores, warehouse crates, cross-cultural performance, pine trees, cargo aircraft, or dollar bills. Tracing the specific lines of connection and transformation constitutes Tsing’s account as ‘translation’ in Latour’s sense. However, the difference in their respective use of translation invites some further exploration.
Indeterminate encounters

What is it that is getting purified, when the mushrooms sit on the tarmac in crates – ‘the hours that count’? For Tsing, this is the form of translation that makes capitalism possible. Capitalism, in this definition, is ‘salvage accumulation’: the collection of surplus value from the work of others (including other species). This translation requires a purification because the mushrooms must be stripped of all their social relationships – they must be extracted from their worlds – in order for this salvage accumulation to be possible.

Here, in the strangeness of this alienated translation we encounter something of the peculiarly Modern. In the pine forests of Oregon, it is easier to consent to the Modern purification, as Latour describes it. There are the complex social arrangements – the cosmopolitan interactions of various ethnicities, their rituals, economies and performances of freedom. And here is nature: trees, mushrooms, the weather. Yes, this is nature disturbed – otherwise matsutake would not grow – but the purification of this quasi-object into pure forms has a certain sense to it to those of us soaked in a persistent Modern imaginary. The same can be said of Japanese matsutake gift economies, where acknowledgement of mushrooms as makers (or breakers) of social bonds can easily slip into cultural practice on the one hand, evoking all-natural peasant landscapes on the other. Satsuka (2015) shows just how European/North American that conceptual division is – and how completely foreign it is to historically Japanese ways of knowing – which only serves to reinforce the point: that the default purification of the Modern Constitution is a construction of societies shaped by Modernity.

On the tarmac, however, the alienation is disturbing. Could we imagine a more unnatural space? Nothing grows, engines hum, charged neon flickers through tubes suspended amid foetid fumes. Yet this place is equally anti-social. This is not a home, not a place conducive to solidarity, nor for collective ritual (except the most depressing: the cigarette break; the clockwork shifting of stock; signing the health and safety waiver). Instead of too-easily sorting a complex quasi-object into Nature and Society, this alienated space resists description as either natural or social. Thus, here we see the Modern Constitution transgressed: we must look at the purification and the translation at the same time.

Into which world, then, do the mushrooms, as salvaged value, move? It is not yet the world of the Japanese gift economy. Through this tarmac-translation they inhabit a social world characterised by intense alienation. Yet it is only alienation from a certain point of view – a view characterised by normative notions of human sociality. In undergoing this purification-as-translation, Latour’s definition allows us to perceive the new associations which are assembled. The agency of the crates is their power to standardise and contain quantities, as well as to restrict biological contamination. The agency of the tarmac is the restriction of flora/fauna and the arrangement of topography to privilege the wheel. The agency of the aeroplane is the power to transcend large distances at speed and under temperature-controlled conditions. These associations of agents form an alternative assemblage, along with the exporters and their casual labour, the pilots, logistics companies, security firms and other gig-economy workers.

From the perspective of Latour’s definition of translation, this novel co-existence of mediators is the creation of a new quasi-object, a nature-culture phenomenon only possible because of the purification of the Modern Constitution which refuses to
acknowledge its existence as a translation. It resists a normative anthropological description of the kind Tsing uses to evoke cosmopolitan mushroom-picking camps as sites of freedom-as-performance or Japanese matsutake ceremonies as gift-economy remakes of an idealised past. This alienated site – mushrooms as capital in crates on tarmac – is an alienating translation, both in terms of the new world it has created, and – in more material terms – having induced various mediators to coexist.

What this translation also allows us to see is the fantasy of Modernity as a temporality structured by rupture. On the one hand we have the Modern idea of and pressure for ‘progress’; the break with an outdated past that still dominates our conceptions of growth, improvement, innovation, etc. This is the temporality critiqued by both Latour and Tsing. On the other hand, however, we have multiple temporalities with no discernible trajectory that can only continue to function if they are sustained by radical ruptures between worlds. The mushroom pickers of Oregon are not working to scale-up mushroom picking to increase returns on their time or earn enough at the practice to get themselves out of the game. There is no guarantee that next year’s crop will be as good as the last, and almost nothing that pickers can do to influence it. This is an indeterminate temporality, one very far from Modernity. Similarly, while ‘growth’-driven wealth has provided the Japanese consumer market for matsutake, the practices of its gift-economy create space for an alternative temporality which resists notions of capital value, of growth, or of a future that must break with the past. Yet, for either of these non-Modern temporalities to function, the capitalist translation – the radical rupture between worlds – must occur. Alienated mushrooms must sit in crates on tarmac or else there is no money for Oregon pickers to win nor mushrooms for wealthy Japanese to give.

The relation of time and scale is structured by indeterminacy. This is the heart of Tsing’s analysis. Indeterminate encounters are constantly producing worlds that are unpredictable. This is an insight with seismic consequences. There is no future, utopian or dystopian, which can lay claim to an epoch like Modernity has attempted to do. That rogue age, straitjacketing time into one line running from past to future, broken at its beginning – is losing its grip. Now we are – for Latour, we have always been – In times of indeterminate encounters, where multiple temporalities proliferate; we are always in many times. Indeterminacy becomes another way of saying ‘a relation that does not transport causality’. Reading Tsing with Latour shows how translation and time are thoroughly entangled.

Here we come to the central argument of this article: that a conception of translation as the inducing of a relationship between mediators allows us to escape determinate notions of time and instead provides for a material conception of translation-as-process. By following Latour’s notion of a mediator, translation is not reliant on meaning, at least as translation studies has conceptualised the term. Of course, meaning is relevant to mediation, but in a similar way to how intention is relevant to agency: the former can significantly increase or decrease the latter, but is not necessary for it to be conceptualised.

As a discipline, translation studies is dominated by questions of meaning. Even at its more radical edge, Marais’s work on biosemiotics as translation (2019), for example, while substantially broadening the notion of meaning, still limits translation to meaningful or meaning-carrying processes, where meaning is specifically conceived in terms of ‘signs’. The so-called ‘material turn’ has been concerned with the meaning of material aspects of
translation (and generally of translated products). Yet the restriction of translation to meaning, even in biosemiotic terms, brackets out much of the material processes that are involved in constituting meaning, that – for Latour – should themselves be described as translation.

In order to illustrate this relationship, consider this final example. I arrive at my local public library, automatic doors open and halogen strip lights illuminate a desk in the corner of the room. The fixture is old and hums noisily in its casing. I open my laptop and take out a book. Almost no one in this town could make sense of its letters, but I knew it as a child, far from here and I am re-writing it – some say translating it – for them. My hacking cough returns and I muffle the noise in my sleeve. An old man turns to scowl at me. One single phrase has kept me up at night, turning over images in my mind – it was the punchline of the book for me, but I cannot find a way to say it here; like a thief in a foreign city, it steals away from me down unfamiliar alleys. A class of children bustle in like a swarm of ants in tiny hi-vis jackets. The old man curses and, with great effort, stands to leave. I cough again. And then it comes to me, the words tumble onto my screen as a punchline remade. I breath out in exuberant relief; one of the children sees me, laughs at my puffed cheeks and performs a dance – in my honour, I think. The morning sun finally creeps past the window frame and bathes the room in a brilliant light. The halogen lights are switched off. The hum ceases; the dancing spreads; the old man shuffles away, angry breaths transmuted by grieving limbs. Then once again I am lost and the tumbled words appear thin.

What is described by this example? Of course, there are many possible ways to suggest that meaning has changed or created material effects. The meaning of a cough in a post-Covid world, the meaning of children to an old, grieving man, the meaning of words as they struggle to find form, even the meaning of chemical signals in the trachea and lungs as they produce ‘interpreters’ to expel excess mucus (in a biosemiotic explanation of the process of the cough). There is a clear indeterminacy to these meanings, although some meaning effects are more statistically probable than others: irritation to the trachea is more likely to produce mucus secretion and lead to coughing than a group of children is to trigger grief; coughing is more likely to irritate someone in a library than a group of children is likely to trigger the solution to a language conundrum. Yet even considering the complex relations of meaning in this short example ignores the material associations which create its conditions. The description offers several changes of association, from the sensory experience of light to the psycho-social bonds which are created or broken by involuntary physical processes, to the spatial organisation of bodies, both organic and inanimate, each acting with very varying degrees and dimensions of agency.

If we accept Latour’s definition of translation, we can identify several ways in which the novel coexistence of various mediators were induced by changes in indeterminate spatio-temporal relationships. The humming halogen light, the corner desk, the laptop is one coexistent association; the cough, as a complex coexistence of biological mediators, is another; the antagonism that follows from the cough is a third; the chaos introduced by the children is a fourth, and this is not just a new spatial association but, in some way unknown to us, a ghost of grief that remakes time within its borders; fifth, a new existence between language signs, meanings, the laptop keyboard and its screen, as well as the paper of the well-worn book and the paper yet to be printed with new words; sixth, the unpredictable relation between relieved exhale and dancing child; seventh, the return to
the changed past of the morning sun, its illumination, the cessation of the halogen hum; eighth, the movement of an ailing body in the sunlight, the dancing, the sudden doubt that returns like a thief. Even in this very simple description there are a multiplicity of temporalities and spatial relationships through which new quasi-objects are created (and destroyed): there are many translations, each one an ‘indeterminate encounter’ – let us say an ‘event’ – which together constitute the whole event, itself a relationship (translation), emergent from the others as a hybrid quasi-object, irreducible to them, and itself constitutive of other relationships.

Crucially, this material account of translation insists that translation is first a spatial-temporal relationship and then – derivatively – a change in meaning. Translation, in this conception, is a complex of processes that make time, and through which new associations come to exist. This is an account of translation almost wholly unfamiliar to translation studies but which, we suggest, offers a more robust theoretical position from which to conceptualise other, more familiar, notions. Crucially, as it relates to the urgent challenges of Modernity and its afterlives, this conception of translation exposes the fantasy of the Modern and a means to imagine futures and pasts beyond the tropes of growth vs contraction or progress vs regression. Instead, translation suggests times of indeterminate encounters in Modernity’s capitalist ruins where the future/past is not yet written.

Note

1. For clarity, Latour, in fact, develops a more complex set of definitions for meaning, resulting from the entangled relationship between material processes and the ‘sense’ they make, each articulated in different ways, in which ‘articulation’ is a technical term that draws on its double-meaning as a precisely engineered combination of components. For reasons of space and technical complexity, this argument, integral to Latour’s extraordinary An Inquiry into Modes of Existence (Latour 2013), is omitted here. The key point is that ‘if everything is meaningful, if everything makes sense, this does not mean that everything makes signs’ (2013: 237).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Matt Valler is a PhD student in Translation Studies at Queen’s University Belfast. His primary research interests concern the philosophy of translation, particularly in relation to New Materialism, and the materiality of narrative time in the context of environmental and ecological crises. He is also an associate researcher with the Institute of Cornish Studies at the University of Exeter where he curates a cross-departmental seminar series called Complex Cornwall: theoretical and practical innovations in interdisciplinary research.

Piotr Blumczynski is Professor of Translation and Intercultural Studies, and Director of the Centre for Translation and Interpreting at Queen’s University Belfast. His research focuses on philosophical aspects of translation, and tests this concept beyond its traditionally linguistic boundaries. He has authored the monographs Ubiquitous Translation (2016) and Experiencing Translationality (2023), and co-edited the volumes Translating Values (2016, with John Gillespie) and The Languages of Covid-19 (2022, with Steven Wilson). He is the Editor-in-chief of the journal Translation Studies.
References