Mª Carmen África VIDAL CLARAMONTE
University of Salamanca

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Brian O'Keeffe
Larisa Cercel
Marco Agnetta
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Translation and Dance. The Case of Matthew Bourne

Mª Carmen África VIDAL CLARAMONTE
University of Salamanca

Abstract: This chapter takes Matthew Bourne's *The Car Man* as an example of today's enlarged definition of translation, following the new approaches to contemporary translation. Taking this expanded way of seeing translation, I will analyze many of his choreographies as performances of previous literary and operatic works. He translates through embodied performances, through bodies, understood here as semiotic systems that transmit meaning. Bourne's ballets translate the classics through dance. He uses bodies to retranslate in order to update old meanings. The second part of the chapter will concentrate on how Matthew Bourne's ballets offer an up-to-date version of Bizet's world, of Cinderella and other. Using the body, he retranslates by performing the classics through movement and music: he deconstructs genres and genders by subverting opera and dance, but also straight and gay binary oppositions, thus creating richer and more ambiguous identities and characters.

Keywords: Identity, Intersemiotic rewritings, Ideology, Queer translation theory, Gender.

1 Introduction

This chapter takes Matthew Bourne's *The Car Man* as an example of today's enlarged definition of translation, following those new approaches to contemporary translation which argue that communication that takes place not only through words but through other nonlinguistic media, through images, sounds, movements, the olfactory, etc. Following this research avenue (see for instance Bassnett/Johnston 2019, Campbell/Vidal 2019, Bennett 2022, Meylaerts/Marais 2023, Blumczynski 2023, Dam et al. 2019, and many others), I will understand translation as a task to be addressed from an interdisciplinary perspective, beyond the verbocentric tradition. Taking this expanded way of seeing translation, Matthew Bourne's choreographies are translations of previous literary and operatic works.

Bourne is, in my view, a clear example of how translation is "a travelling concept" (Bal 2002) and how in our visual culture the definition of 'text' has been expanded. So, the first part of this chapter (cf. section 2) will analyze the new views on translation and the new definition of 'text.' In the field of dance, bodies will be understood here as semiotic systems that transmit meaning. Therefore, they translate and need to be translated. Bourne's ballets translate the classics through dance. He uses bodies to retranslate in order to update old meanings. The second part of the chapter (cf. section 3) will concentrate on how Matthew Bourne's ballets offer an up-to-date version of Bizet's world, of Cinderella's, of Dorian Gray's, and others. Using the body, he retranslates the classics through movement, rhythm, gesture, clothes and music: he deconstructs genres and genders by subverting opera and dance, but also straight and gay binary oppositions, thus creating richer and more ambiguous contemporary identities and characters.

2 Towards an enlarged definition of translation

Translation is always a mirror of the society in which it is inscribed. Today we live in a multimodal context where meaning is constructed not only with words but through many other semiotic systems. Translation is no longer the mere substitution of one linguistic system for another. We communicate through nonlinguistic systems of representation. We do things with words but we also perform with bodies, sounds, images, colors, silences. Translation today underwrites all cultural transactions (cf. Brodzki 2007: *passim*). Translation is ubiquitous (cf. Blumczynski 2016). It is the precondition under which all communication is based (cf. Gentzler 2017). Translation will be understood in this article as a way of being-in-the-world:

> What if translation is an adventure not in meaning but in readerly consciousness and the *experience* of language? What if reading is looked upon not as a process of interpreting, or extracting meaning from, text but as a process of existential/experiential self- coordination or self-orchestration? What if translation is not a test of comprehension but of the fruitfulness of our inability to comprehend? […] experiences evaporate unless we know how to name them; language becomes the indispensable repository of our collective experience […] Translation must be allowed to open up and develop its own multimedial discursive space. It ceases to be a discipline ('translation studies') and becomes a philosophical enquiry into its own functions and possible relationships with the translator's being-in-the-world. (Scott 2019: 88)

The idea of what is translation has changed because the concept of what a 'text' is has also changed. Stories are no longer constructed with words alone but also employ a wide range of semiotic resources.

> Translation scholars need to look beyond the linguistic and literary to music, lights, set, costumes, gestures, make-up, and facial expressions to better understand this new intercultural and intersemiotic age of translation. As the media changes, so too do the performance options

> increase, and more dynamic theories of translation and internationalization are needed for the future (cf. Gentzler 2017: 217).

The body is one of these channels. We communicate through our movements. There are contemporary dance pieces that translate, for instance, Gertrude Stein (cf. Aguiar/Queiroz 2015). We also have Wayne McGregor's dance translations of Virginia Woolf's novels, and traditional ballets that translated Greek pastorals like *Daphnis and Chloe*, Shakespeare's plays such as *Romeo and Juliet*, novels like *Don Quixote*, and folktales like *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* (cf. Smith 2003; Bennett 2007; Desblache 2019). All these movement-based corporeal texts embody communication (cf. Maiorani 2021) and translate previous originals outwards by understanding dance as a language. Translation is today "experiential." We translate with our whole body, as Madeleine Campbell/Ricarda Vidal (2019) have demonstrated in a brilliant book in which each chapter shows how to translate through and with our senses.

This is what many scholars argue today in Translation Studies: this *Yearbook* is a good example. Translation is a "travelling concept" (Bal 2002). Our discipline is beginning to look outwards (cf. Bassnett/Johnston 2019) in order to erase the limits of purely linguistic communication. Many scholars see translation in this light, as a broad process which needs to be problematized (cf. Gambier/van Doorslaer 2021: 3). Translating is a dynamic, "ludic," process, which works "*alongside* an original work" (Lee 2022: 2):

> Hence, translation is not subservient to a source text in a vertical hierarchy but articulates the latter sideways to develop a more expansive intertextual network […] the potential of translation to transgress and transcend the source text. That is, translation subjects an original work to experimental play replete with contingencies and idiosyncrasies, furnishes it with performative resources for aesthetic expression in excess of the linguistic signs, and extrapolates it toward multiple trajectories and plural media. (Lee 2022: 2)

Translation is performative in so far as it reinterprets reality with forms, colors, images. Languages are not confined to linguistic borders but "open up a myriad of possibilities to carry form and sense from one culture into another beyond the limitations of words. At the same time, such processes impact on the source artefact enriching it with new layers of understanding" (Campbell/Vidal 2019: xxvi). Translation mediates in communication, which is seen now as an experiential process which performs meaning with all our senses.

Understanding translation "outwards," as an "experiential" process, means challenging the word-based model of reading reality (cf. Apter 2007: 149). It implies assuming that "the purely verbal text is something of a chimera and that in even the most banal and everyday kind of text, multiple semiotic codes conspire in the generation of meaning" (Bennett 2022: 61). Matthew Bourne's performative translations through the body will highlight that a text is always many texts and has many readings.

3 Matthew Bourne: performing translation through the body

Matthew Bourne is a performative creative translator who brings texts to new contexts and values. Therefore, in his translations "the final product is going to be very different from the starting point" (Bassnett 2020: 14). He thus participates "in powerful acts that create knowledge and shape culture" (Tymoczko/Gentzler 2002: xxii). Bourne's dance productions, dance theater, choreographies and performances are translations which incorporate questions of race, gender and ideology. He is a fluid, non-universalist and post-positivist translator against the binary oppositions which used to be taken for granted (man/woman, majority/minority, black/white, visi-

ble/invisible). His translations show that these binarisms are no longer universal but turn out to be socially constructed narratives.

Part of his goal is political—to make homosexuality acceptable, as he said in an interview à propos of his Swan Lake—and he achieved it. The DVD of his Swan Lake is now part of the syllabus for the college-entrance exams in dance in Britain (cf. Bourne 2007: 42), with his bare-chested male swans. Bourne's Swan Lake is one of several queer translations of the classical ballet:

> Two contemporary renditions in particular—the versions by Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, an all-male American troupe that dances in drag, and the British choreographer Matthew Bourne, whose swans are male—dramatically alter the strict conventions of gender and sexuality that make up the ideological and formal structure of classical ballet. As gender and sexuality become more like shifting sands than granite pillars, these ballets open up in ways surprising and revelatory with respect to both aesthetics and cultural politics. Yet what is "queer" about these two renditions is not the same, alerting viewers that the contemporary concept of queer is not monolithic, that its possibilities and contributions are multiple. (Juhasz 2008: 54)

Bourne's swans translate with the body. They perform "a modern setting, a sendup of the British royals, a psychoanalytical slant, and, most notably, swans danced by male dancers. Bourne's swans are not in drag as women, but on the other hand they are not exactly 'men' either" (Juhasz 2008: 57) because they are half men half animals. Another great bodily, performative and experiential translation of *Swan Lake* is that of Dada Masilo in 2010. Masilo includes African dances and rhythms, a black swan and aids, within an infinite process of contemporary references. These translations through different bodies imply an ideological rewriting of dominant Western views:

> The body, like all other things, cannot be thought, as such […] As a body, it is a repetition of nature. It is in the rupture with Nature when it is a signifier of immediacy for the staging of the self. As a text, the inside of the body (imbricated with the outside) is mysterious and unreadable except by way of thinking of the systematicity of the body. It is through the significance of my body and others' bodies that cultures become gendered, economicopolitic, selved, substantive. (Spivak 1993: 20)

The body is a *topos* through which one can communicate and thus overcome what Marais (2019) calls the "linguistic bias". It is a space of representation, and representations are fictitious and contradictory constructions that give rise to social relations and different forms of subjectivity: identities are linked to the representations of cultures, and the discursive codes we use are nothing but arbitrary orders historically constructed, apparently fixed and immutable, but biased by specific ideologies and through which we apprehend the world, because reality does not exist outside representation. From this point of view, the representation of the body by Power in the West has never implied making a neutral representation of reality, but rather it means re-presenting, from a concrete point of view. Bourne's translations of the body implies a rewriting of perspectives, plans, direction of thought, pre-existing discourses. Translating the corporeal implies

> Perceiving through the eyes, ears, tongue or body of another opens the willing recipient (performer or spectator) to unfamiliar affects and sensory experiences, a "disorienting" event that can, if enacted in a safe environment, lead to personal growth and greater levels of awareness and understanding of the other, and thereby enhance cultural literacy. (Campbell/Vidal 2019: xxxiv)

Bourne has also rewritten Prokofiev's *Cinderella*, shifting the fairy tale from the land of fantasy to London during the German Blitz of 1941 (cf. Tokofsky 2000). In his translation of *Dorian Gray,* he finds "physical and visual ways to translate

words on a page into the three-dimensional, present, visual, physical, musical form of dance" (cf. Smart 2012: 180).

Without using words, his dance theatre is a form of drama and many of his choreographies are rewritings of previous literary and operatic works. He translates the classics using a new iconoclasm:

> In "Cinderella," the Fairy Godmother figure, a man, saves Cinderella, but he is also an angel of death. In "Nutcracker!," the Nutcracker abandons Clara, the heroine, for another woman—indeed, marries the other woman. This scene is anguishing to watch, and finding out later that it was all a bad dream does not entirely salve the pain. Life is nasty; Bourne shows it. (Bourne 2007: 40)

Bourne has also produced a homosexual version of Romeo and Juliet, to the Prokofiev score, and named it "Romeo, Romeo." Again, projects like these have an ideological content, they try to overcome traditional binary oppositions, the barriers of acquired conventionality, of what we have been taught is 'normal:'

> It's more to do with dancing than with sexuality. A male dancer, whether he's gay or straight, fits into a relationship with a female partner very happily. It's something you're taught, and it fits, it feels right, the lifting and all that stuff. Getting away from that, making a convincing love duet, a romantic, sexual duet, for two men that is comfortable to do and comfortable to watch—I don't know if you can (Bourne 2007: 44).

One of his best well-known translations is *The Car Man* (2000). This ballet is a re-vision and re-writing of different genres and different works: *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (both Cain's novel and the two Hollywood movies) and Bizet's score for his opera *Carmen*. Bourne translates the novel, the films, and Carmen's music and content into a rewriting, into *The Car Man*. In fact, *The Car Man* offers a new treatment of Bizet's score for the opera *Carmen*: the music has been not only rearranged but also reordered. *The Car Man* highlights the palimpsestuous na-

ture of the original text, of any 'original' text. Bourne's translation highlights the plural readings inside any text and the multiple voices (of his dancers, of many agents in his company, cf. Smart 2012: 181–182) introduced in his translations.

The Car Man includes many layers, many texts, like for example *The Birds*, by Hitchcock (cf. Macaulay 2000: 198), which Bourne performs in the scene through allusions where the swans climb on the Prince's bed in Act Four, *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), by Visconti, and other films like *Fight Club* (1999), *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) or *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) (cf. Macaulay 2000: 371–373).

Bourne's translations are political. Gender reversal as a translation strategy with regard to Bizet's opera appears several times throughout the ballet: Seville is translated into Harmony, USA in the 1950s, the tobacco factory becomes an auto repair shop and the diner is populated by women waiting for the men to come out of work, whereas in *Carmen* Act One the men of Seville are waiting for the female workers to come out of the cigarette factory. The Carmen–José axis in the opera is rewritten into the Lana–Luca–Angelo triangle in *The Car Man*, although "Angelo's character has no aspect of Carmen—he's entirely on José's side, and like José, he will come back from prison obsessed, a transgressor" (Bourne in Macaulay 2000: 659). Contrasting with Bizet's binary dichotomy, Carmen is here a double identity, both male (Luca) and female (Lana). Whereas Micaëla, Don José's childhood sweetheart, represents the stereotypical Angel in the House, with a musical discourse which accordingly is simple, lyrical, diatonic and sweet, Carmen is the dissonant Other, with the music which represents her grounded in the physical impulses of exotic dance, the Habanera and the Seguidilla, and marked by its chromatic excesses (cf. McClary 1991/2002: 56–57).

Thus, Bourne rewrites gender dichotomies. But he also rewrites ethnic representation. Bourne's dancers are a mixture of sizes, shapes, races and genders (cf. Macaulay 2000: 210). His Italian-American community in *The Car Man* highlights the hybrid character of our global society and his rewriting is also polyphonic: Luca and Angelo are rewritings of Simone and Rocco in Visconti's *Rocco and his brothers* (1960). Other intertexts used by Bourne are James Dean and Sal Mineo in *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), among others, for instance *Blood Simple* (1985) and *Midnight Express* (1978).

Bourne's translations in *The Car Man*, *Cinderella, Romeo, Romeo, Dorian Gray, Swan Lake,* therefore exemplify the new way of looking at translators, the new expanded definition of translation:

> The intersection of translation and music can be a fascinating field to explore. It can enrich our understanding of what translation might entail, how far its boundaries can be extended and how it relates to other forms of expression. Research into this area can thus help us locate translation-related activities in a broader context, undermining more conservative options of translation and mediation. It can also offer us a new perspective on who may act as a "translator" under different circumstances. (Susam-Sarajeva 2008: 191)

Bourne is a performative translator who does things with words, bodies, movement, music, gestures and many other semiotic systems. His translations are performances which rewrite through all the senses. He is a visible translator who recontextualizes texts rewriting them within new social values:

> Since Antoine Berman (1984) and Lawrence Venuti (1995), many modern scholars have posited the two-voiced nature of translation, i.e., that the translator is no longer invisible, but that his or her voice can also be heard in addition to the author. In the post-Venuti world of translation, rather than the translator's visibility being a negative trait, it has become a to-be-expected, if not entirely positive, aspect of any translation […] translation is much more than double-voiced;

> rather, the voices are multiple, a translation of a translation of a translation, extending back diachronically. (Gentzler 2017: 223)

His translations are iterations: "translation as iteration, as repetition-with-a-difference, a mode of textual proliferation rather than a mode by which semantic content is transferred" (Emmerich 2017: 161). They are beyond any traditional binary opposition:

> STOP thinking of source texts in terms of translatability and untranslatability and of translation as involving loss or gain;
> START thinking of translation as an interpretive act that can be performed on any source text (Venuti 2019: 175).

These are translations in movement,

> STOP using moralistic terms like "faithful" and "unfaithful" to describe translation.
> START defining it as the establishment of a variable equivalence to the source text.
>
> STOP assuming that translation is mechanical substitution.
> START conceiving of it as an interpretation that demands writerly and intellectual sophistication. (Venuti 2019: ix)

Bourne's Bizet, Shakespeare and others, are examples of "translation as a mode of iterative proliferation" (Emmerich 2017: 162). This is a clear example of the new avenues taken today by translation. Translation is transformative and interrogative:

> it sets going a deconstruction of the foreign text […] A translation is never quite "faithful," always somewhat "free," it never establishes an identity, always a lack and a supplement, and it can never be a transparent representation, only an interpretive transformation that exposes multiple and divided meanings in the foreign text and displaces it with another set of meanings, equally multiple and divided (Venuti 1992: 8).

As observed by Jorge Luis Borges in "On William Beckford's *Vathek*" (1943), translation completes the original. Borges ar-

gues that a translation is not inferior to the original and suggests that the concept of the 'definitive text' is a fallacy:

> …I think you are enriching me. Because after all reading is an elaboration. Every time I read something, that something is being changed. And every time I write something, that something is being changed all the time by every reader. Every new experience enriches the book. (in van Wyke 2012: 95)

These performative ways of addressing translation turns our task into a creative gesture which is as important as its original:

> to argue for translation as a creative endeavour and translations as original artefacts that bring something new into the world, and whose relationship to their sources, although involving a degree of copying, includes sufficient novelty vis-à-vis their sources to qualify as original creative works. (Malmkjaer 2020: 49)

Bourne's translations question the dominant paradigm of reading the world through "intense looking [...] which includes the full immersion of the translator in the text, with eyes, ears, skin, nose, limbs and heart" (Campbell/Vidal 2019: 3). These new ways of looking at translation exemplify how translation "remains a decisive event, a performance," as Marco Agnetta, Larisa Cercel, Brian O'Keeffe, the editors of this *Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics* 3/2023*,* say in their Call for Papers: translation is "a unique, unrepeatable, transformative and embodied occurrence." During the structuralist paradigm, "there was skepticism about the capacity of nonverbal codes like music, painting or dance, to transmit a message with the accuracy and precision of verbal language. Now, however, the exceptionality of the verbal is no longer taken for granted" (Bennett 2022: 61).

These new avenues in Translation Studies encourage autonomy for the translation

> not by turning away from the ST, but by conceptualizing it, that is to say, by endowing it with virtuality, by treating it not as something recuperable from the TT, but as something which the TT is taking forward, *and only taking forward* […] the ST can never properly come to itself in a rematerialization. Of course, there will continue to be a product, a TT, but this TT is no more than a token, asking to be treated putatively, an instigation, an invitation, a provocation, a relay, pushing the ST on its way. Translation transforms the ST as percept into the ST as concept. In such circumstances, we cannot desire to be accurate about, or faithful to, the ST. We can only desire that the ST continues to live its literariness differently, in a sequence of constant self-differentiations, of constant perceptual renewals. (Scott 2006: 41–42)

Seen in this light, translation is not subservient to the original text but an event in its own right. Not a repetition but a (re)creation:

> To repeat is to produce and to alter, to make and to make anew. Repetition is a principle of irrepressible creativity and novelty; it would be impossible to repeat without making and without altering what is already made. Even to repeat "exactly the same thing" is to repeat it in a new context which gives it a new sense. (Caputo 1987: 142)

4 Conclusions

Mathew Bourne's performances exemplify a new avenue in translation studies which insist in the idea that words are not enough to achieve "the full semiotic scope of translationality" (Marais 2019: 43). Far from being a mere substitute of words, Bourne's translations as performance have shown how these new ways of translating changes the components of a sign system and the relationships between them. This means "that if the code is changed, a translation has taken place" (Marais 2019: 141). As shown above, Bourne exemplifies new venues in Translation Studies which Bassnett describes very well: "[t]ranslating a text means reconfiguring it […] No translation can ever be the 'same' as the original, for translation involves

so much more than the linguistic, though obviously language is a crucial element […] translators have to deal with more than just words which may or may not have dictionary equivalents" (Bassnett 2022: vii). Bourne's performative interactions translate previous stories through the bodies of his performers, including difference, not equivalence, in his new queer translations. Thus, he problematizes any binary regime typical of Cartesian dualism, any supremacy of the mind over the body.

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