CHAPTER 7

Narrative Production of Culture

As I already argued at the beginning of this book, cultural life forms are based on meaning-contexts (Schutz & Luckmann, 1974, p. 15) consisting of values, orientations, life plans, and representations of the Self, which enable the subject to act. In the light of current sociocultural upheavals, traditional meaning-contexts are being put to the test; a plethora of questions, reflectiveness, a willingness to experiment, and criticism or rejection of traditional systems of meaning in the narrations of the network actors and bloggers bear witness to this. This chapter starts off with an exploration of the connection between culture and narrating, as mentioned in Chap. 2, against the background of the empirical evidence presented so far, before discussing the future face of narrating from the perspective of translation.

7.1 Culture and Its Designers

Experiences of sociocultural upheaval are both oppressive and empowering. It is the contradictions, tensions, and inconsistencies above all which unleash insecurities and irritations, urging the affected to find solutions. According to Bhabha, experiencing ambivalence includes “a spur to speech, an urge to utterance, a way of working-through what is contradictory and unresolved in order to seek the right to narrate” (2012, p. 51). The interviews with the network actors and bloggers must have provided them with an appropriate forum as a spur for narrative debate. In their
narratives, they presented themselves as active individuals in the world with “significant capacities to plan and design their own futures” (Appadurai, 2013, p. 267). This capacity comes from their ability to reflect, to imagine alternatives, and to communicate their ideas, insights, projects, and solutions. As becomes clear from their narrations, they send posts to each other or position their narratives in digital networks or in blogs knowing full well that Others, too, write, film, and post. They anticipate the narratives of Others in order to gain inspiration to continue their own narratives. They know that they have to pay attention to Others so that Others pay attention to them or they know that they have to comment on the narratives of Others so that Others comment on theirs. They explain that they view such comments as the raw materials with which to create ideas and suggestions for their own narratives.

In their narratives, the network actors and bloggers create themselves as acting and configuring subjects. Configuration, in Appadurai’s mind, is a “social fact” when it occurs as the interaction between imagination, anticipation, and aspiration (2013, pp. 286ff.). What this interaction addresses is forward-looking cognitive and emotional capabilities like imagination, visions, hunches, anticipations, expectations, endeavours, aspirations, longing, and, above all, hope. Appadurai credits hope, or “the capacity to aspire,” with a “navigational capacity,” without which notions like “empowerment” and “participation” would be meaningless (2013, p. 289).

We come across such forward-looking potential in the narrations of network actors and bloggers when they report on

- Virtual self-staging being used as a counter-model which they strive to attain
- Virtual spaces being exploited for experiments with identity in order to find the best possible life trajectory for themselves
- Geographical borders being crossed in order to take on the new and the unknown
- Transnational dialogue being initiated via the internet while holding out hope for exchange and mutual understanding
- Traditional political systems being confronted with alternatives.

When telling their stories the network actors and bloggers create new life forms with the help of imagined or implemented, forward-looking configurative acts, which lay the foundation for new cultural practices.
Culture presupposes shared meaning-contexts, as described at the beginning of Chap. 2. Shared meaning-contexts are particularly apparent in those narrations in which the narrators have set their sights on cultural transformation. They emphasize the We; they describe themselves as being members of a generation whose voice should be heard. Narrators who are primarily focused on configuring their own personal lives, in contrast, understand their configurative acts to be individual actions, although they sense that they cannot act in isolation as otherwise there would be no wrestling for the Other’s attention, no need for exchange, and no insights into the lives of Others. Being dependent on Others means that it is not possible to live one’s life on the far side of social consensus.

The development of shared life forms which appear as new cultural practices does not necessarily proceed harmoniously as different or even contrary interests and needs intersect in this process. Instead it is far more likely, as mentioned in Sect. 3.2.3, that the path is not straightforward (Nederveen, 2010, p. 88), and that it may also be paved with conflicts and violence.

### 7.2 The Future of Narrating in Translation

It is becoming increasingly difficult to relate new cultural practices to a specific territory or a specific ethnic group as they are becoming progressively more transnational in character. This trend is not happening independently of the narrative flows which are in a process of developing into global flows with the assistance of transnational media. At the points where these global flows intersect, they can spark off a state of global interplay which, in turn, influences the emergence of new cultural practices. Bhabha posits that global interplay is an essential act of mediation, albeit one which I have omitted in my argumentation so far but which I would now like to bring to the fore, namely an act of cultural translation (1994, p. 228). It is not a new phenomenon by far: Narratives have always had to be translated into the context of other life-worlds which the addressees of the narratives belonged to. As cultural borders are gradually broken down, translating is being paid increasing attention by cultural studies, literary criticism, and, recently, media studies as well (Hepp, 2015, p. 21). In view of this newly formulated interest in translation, literary theorist and cultural studies expert Doris Bachmann-Medick has identified a “translational turn” (2016, pp. 132ff.). I will first discuss the relationship between narrating and translating before exploring the implications of the “translational turn” and addressing its entanglements with culture and media.


7.2.1 Narrating and Translating

In Sect. 2.2.2, under the heading of “Narrating Opening up to the You,” narrating was ascribed the value of a *tessera* in reference to Jacques Lacan’s comments on the substance and function of language (1953/1996, p. 209). This metaphor is a reference to “early mystery religions where fitting together again the two halves of a broken piece of pottery was used as a means of recognition by the initiates” (1953/1968, p. 101). Just like those pieces of pottery, narratives have to fit in the life contexts of their addressees, assuming that they should be understood and responded to by them. Narratives generally do not fit perfectly, however; they have to be made to fit. In *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, Adriana Cavarero repeatedly emphasizes the uniqueness of narratives, which, once again, underlines the necessity of connecting narratives to other contexts of experience. She writes: “No matter how much you are similar and consonant … your story is never my story” (2000, p. 92).

The 20-year-old Turkish network actor who came to Austria as an exchange student and decided to look for new friends online with the help of the social network *Netlog* (2010) turned the special nature of his story into the starting point of his search. He described his approach as follows: “The first time I write, ‘Hello, I’m still new to Austria.’ Then I tell people something about myself: ‘I come from Turkey. I want to get to know people, and how are you doing?’” His actions can be seen as an attempt to make his narration compatible with the narrations of potential friends in a foreign country by emphasizing the special nature of his story, thus increasing the plausibility of his request. After the justification, he expresses his wish, one which, he assumes, will connect him with people in his new surroundings. He emphasizes the potential connection by asking “How are you doing?” which also signalizes empathy. His attempt to make new contacts proceeds from emphasizing the difference to emphasizing presumed similarities; he describes a cultural translation, the most striking characteristic of which is currently the desire for social contacts, where he hopes that Others will feel that they are being addressed.

The concept of translation reminds us once again of the importance of the Other to whom the narrative is addressed. This never happens by chance, as Cavarero maintains: “In the autobiographical exercise, the real existence of the other, even just as an addressee, is always taken into account, whether he or she is a listener of an oral narration, or an ideal reader to which the text appeals” (2000, p. 85). Narrations transform
language boundaries, as illustrated by the narration of the Turkish exchange student, and are changed in the process, as Birgit Wagner suspects, because this transformation necessitates an examination of other cultural codes of values (2009, p. 2). The extent to which the narration in the example described earlier was changed through translation cannot be ascertained on the basis of the empirical data at hand. It is, however, possible to state that narrating in the virtual space of transnational networks frequently does not take place in the language in which what was narrated was experienced but is translated into a shared language. The network actors and bloggers produce “translating texts” (Wagner, 2012, p. 40), in the form of internet slang, for example, which can be expressed in a mixture of specific idioms, abbreviations, icons, and smileys, or by using the language of the addressees, as in the example described earlier. Whereas the Turkish exchange student decided to use German, a 23-year-old blogger from Austria decided to use English (see Sect. 4.2.2), one of the justifications being that he wanted to use an international language; in other words, he was addressing his narration about fashion and feelings to an international audience. The bloggers from the Arab region, in contrast, were obliged to write their blogs exclusively in English if they wanted to initiate an international dialogue, which was one of their avowed aims. The emergence of English as a lingua franca entails risks, as Bachmann-Medick points out, through its hegemonic tendencies, for example, and “its attendant standardization pressures” (2016, p. 133), which can lead not only to narrations being changed when translated but also to their cultural specifics disappearing.

In order to reduce this risk and to retain the foreignness of the original text, writers often resort to sprinkling their translated texts with words from their own languages according to Wagner; then, it is the readers who are in charge of the translating (2009, p. 7). A similar practice in digital narrating occurs when different languages are used in social networks. In its early days, multilingualism (Arabic, English, Farsi) left its mark on the Arab network Mideast Youth (n.d.), arising from its intention to give people from different linguistic contexts a voice. The texts then had to be translated by whoever felt like reading them, which circumvented the dominance of Western languages and even overturned it when posts were written in Arabic or Farsi. The Arab network actors were more likely to

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1 All quotations from German publications were translated into English for this book.
take ownership of the English texts than English-speaking network actors were for texts in Arabic or Farsi.

Network actors and bloggers are challenged to produce more than one translation. Not only do they have to translate episodes which they have experienced themselves into written language, whether it is their own, another language, or a common jargon used in the internet; they also have to translate the narratives of Others into their own everyday reality. If the specific singularities of the original context are to be maintained, the translation process has to take place by “crossing boundaries with an awareness of differences” (2008, para. 2) according to Doris Bachmann-Medick in an interview with Boris Buden. That involves “connect[ing] translations to practices, interactions and cultural representations” (Bachmann-Medick, 2016, p. 134). Cultural differences cannot be inferred from individual textual elements; they can be “unlocked only by examining the more comprehensive context of … their cultural self-interpretations” (2016, p. 134). Consequently, such narratives also have to be seen in the light of culturally specific rituals, rules, and practices.

Due to the complex structural context which they bear on, translations can only ever be approximations: Mistranslations, breakdowns, and misunderstandings are to be expected. The greatest obstructions are caused by power differentials. The way in which power can operate in the translations of network actors and bloggers has already been illustrated in the case of the 27-year-old blogger from Saudi Arabia (see Sect. 4.4.1). In the interview, she explained that in her country, she was not allowed to write about religion and politics, two very closely related fields, in a publicly accessible blog although she would certainly be very interested in doing so. She even described how she had blogged on racism in her home town, which provoked sharp criticism, revealing her limits as a blogger. Against this background she characterized her blog entries primarily as cultural commentaries (“It’s more cultural than political”), adding “so we try to keep it on a cultural level.” The vagueness of these remarks allows me to interpret them in two ways. On the one hand, it really could be the case that she avoided political and religious topics; on the other hand, she might not avoid them, declaring them to be cultural topics instead. If the latter is the case, it would be safe to assume that she translated politics into culture so as to avoid the clutches of power.

Bachmann-Medick reiterates how translation reveals itself as a “cultural technique” that does not develop in a neutral space but which is “embedded in power and dependency relations” (2016, p. 135); this could
manifest itself in censorship but also in the uneven distribution of the means and ability to translate (Hepp, 2015, p. 22), such as linguistic competence or knowledge of foreign languages. As narrating and translating go hand in hand, it is fair to assume that narrating and translating alike may be exposed to the potential influences of power which could steal, undetected, into narrative patterns or—when exposed—could become objects of conscious enquiry.

7.2.2 The Translational Turn

Although translating is not a new phenomenon and although it cannot happen in defiance of its cultural starting point in the interests of conveying the intended meaning, it was not until the 1980s that translation emerged as cultural translation with the cultural turn in translation studies, becoming the subject matter and research instrument of translation research (Bachmann-Medick, 2016, p. 132). Bachmann-Medick names this shift the “translational turn” (2016, pp. 132ff.). Using the word ‘turn’ implies that attention has shifted but not that something completely new has emerged. In the same interview with Buden, Bachmann-Medick postulates that

> the category of translation unfolds its potential to stimulate cultural studies only if it reaches beyond the qualities traditionally ascribed to translation, such as equivalence, “faithfulness” to the original, appropriation, or representation—that is, provided that the realm of translating language and text opens up to include a wider horizon of cultural translation practices. (2008, para. 2)

The distinction between traditional and cultural translation mentioned in the quotation may jar against the background of my remarks so far, according to which the cultural starting point can never be disregarded when translating. It is more likely that the distinction is due to academic dictates concerning classification rather than it reflecting the reality of translating, a question which does not have to be clarified in this context. At the very least, it is very much thanks to the translational turn that the cultural implications of translating, including critical questions on the practice of translation, have become the focus of scholarly analysis.

Essentially the translational turn came about in the light of criticism formulated in postcolonial studies that translations were unidimensional,
moving from the colonizers to the colonized; in their place came two-way translations on an equal footing which can celebrate the hybridization of life forms. The meaning of life forms, which is a constitutive element of a culture, gains a hybrid profile in so far as facets of meaning from other cultures are not only taken on board but also enter into novel alliances with existing facets of meaning, without hierarchies playing a role. Following Homi K. Bhabha, a prominent representative of postcolonial studies, Wagner proposes calling this process “transforming processuality” (2012, p. 36), which contrasts with a multicultural parallel existence. The quicksand of transforming processuality is the cultural translation, which Wagner describes as the “transfer of imaginative contents, values, ways of thinking, behavioural patterns, and practices from one cultural context to another” (2012, p. 30). This should not be envisaged as a “smooth transfer” (Bachmann-Medick, 2016, p. 141), but rather as a reciprocal depiction, scrutiny, and negotiation of differences, as a problematization, relativization, and overcoming of hierarchies. This then leads to the constitution of what Bhabha calls the Third Space (Babka & Posselt, 2012, pp. 10ff.), a subversive philosophical construction which undermines closed systems, whether on an individual or a social level.

In a complex world in which global flows and the global interplay are intensifying and accelerating, the demands placed on translation are increasing because it is a question of interconnecting cultural contexts which can seem quite alien to each other. At the same time, the need to translate is omnipresent. It cannot be left to the translation experts; instead it will be a requirement for everyday citizens wherever global flows arise or encounter each other, for example at borders when the police come across refugees from other countries, or at international conferences, on state visits, in diasporic situations, and, naturally, in the internet, where we are only one click away from an intercultural encounter.

A Yemeni blogger addressed the cultural translation of the political situation in her home country, which is part of her life story, in her blog as follows:

I’m not trying to say that Yemen is … a land of terrorism … we have a lot of stories, a lot of issues, a lot of aspects, a lot of faces that we want the world to know about. And it will be shocking for the rest of the world to know that there is another side of Yemen except the terrorism side. And so I would like to be part of that shock.
The blogger wants to translate her country for the benefit of the internet community and world public in a different way to how it has been translated before. She wants to replace an image which she assumes to be false. Her attempt to create a new translation starts with her rejection of the initial translation. At the same time she presents a revised translation which shows her country in all its diversity. She not only assumes that the new image will shock the world; no, she specifically aims to provoke that shock. The shock appears to be a strategic tool for a translation which is meant to correct an existing translation. Bronfen points out that Bhabha also believes that a shock is the means by which “cultural evaluations and interpretations are prised open” (Bhabha, 1994/2000, preface, p. xiv).

The Yemeni blogger addresses her translation to Western readers who, she believes, all have the same particular image of her homeland which she has rejected. More frequently, though, the network actors and bloggers have no idea who they are translating for when they post in social networks which everybody has access to. That could explain the popularity, or indeed the necessity, of the new globally shared jargons that network actors create in the internet which are detached from national languages. In doing so, they have common text elements at their disposal, which have the secondary advantage of being able to express feelings in a succinct way (YMMD = you made my day) or of giving information about actions which accompany the exchange (LOFL = lying on the floor laughing, amongst others) and which generally convey humour or tell jokes. The shared jargon of the internet promises to be understood across linguistic borders, even if it cannot be ruled out that the use of the symbols, acronyms, and emoticons differs by cultural context.

Alongside the establishment of connections, for Wagner, cultural translating is about making differences visible; indeed, I believe that she even considers this visibility to be a precondition for the translatability of a text (2012, p. 37). The two network actors quoted earlier confirm the relevance of differences for the translation process: The Turkish student expressly stated “I am new” or, in other words, “I am different from you,” whereas the Yemeni blogger presented her “counterargument” online with which she wanted to say that “this country is different from what you think.” In contrast to Wagner, I classify the presentation of differences not as a precondition but rather as a part of the translation because the depiction of differences already takes place with regard to other cultural contexts.
Yet much speaks in favour of Wagner’s proposition, even though I cannot verify it empirically, that a translation does something to a text (2009, p. 5) as in the course of being translated, it needs to become compatible with different cultural codes and interpretations. What is more, translations can be responded to at any time, in every place, and by anyone in the transnational space of the internet. New hybrid value systems can arise as a result, going beyond existing cultural contexts. Hybridity does not preserve tradition; it creates something new (Wagner, 2012, p. 37). Bachmann-Medick identifies cultural translation as a “counter-movement to binary thought and to ideas about identity that are rooted in essentializing determinations” (2016, p. 142). Thinking can profit from translational trends, she explains to Buden, because they urge us to “[cast off] binary constraints on perception and thought” and to appreciate alternative ways of thinking, for example by “stress[ing] the value of liminal and interstitial thought” (2008, para. 5).

The fact that the consequences of cultural translation and hybridity do not necessarily meet with a positive response is underlined by the reactions to Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988), for example. Aleida Assmann characterizes it as “a love-song to hybrid mixtures” (2012, p. 214). The condemnation and hatred that Rushdie aroused—on this a clutch of literary theorists agree (Assmann, 2012, pp. 212ff.; Bachmann-Medick, 2016, p. 149; Bhabha, 1994, p. 225; Wagner, 2012, p. 40)—can be ascribed to the hybrid identities which Rushdie created in this novel. It is not the “misinterpretation of the Koran” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 225) which so incensed the “guardians of ‘the Pure’” (Assmann, 2012, p. 214) but Rushdie’s plea for hybridity, which stands for nothing less than a rejection of tradition. In Bhabha’s words, “hybridity is heresy” (1994, p. 225) and as such an assault on cultural contexts which wish to be seen as homogeneous and closed.

The condemnation of narrations which transcend tradition is not restricted to the famous author, although the attention *The Satanic Verses* attracted was very much in the public eye. The network actors and bloggers who participated in the study, especially those from the Arab world, also talked about how their narrative practices online encountered opposition when they overstepped the limits of traditional value systems, how they censored their own narrations in the light of imagined risks, or how they attempted to circumvent censorship. My reference to the Arab world should not suggest that it is only there that censorship exists. From a translational perspective, it is necessary to keep tabs on possible sanctions
applied to Western narrators when they challenge the Western code of values when translating their stories and when they open up their narratives to other cultural interpretations.

### 7.3 Media, Culture, and Narrative Translationality

The entanglement of cultural translation and hybridity with culture and the media is elaborated on further in this section with a view to the future of narrating. In order to do so, I would like to return to my reflections on culture at the beginning of this book and take up two of the assumptions about culture formulated there which have proved to be useful for a discussion on the future of narrating and its culturally relevant implications: The first assumption is that culture derives from social consensus and the second one is that culture is a construct (cf. introduction to Chap. 2). Culture integrates shared meanings which arise in processes of negotiation and (also controversial) discussions and which, at least for one group of individuals, can provide a basis—at least temporarily—for orientation and action. Culture is a shared phenomenon but it is not necessarily shared by society as a whole or limited to national territories. It is merely a shared phenomenon in the sense that the systems of meaning which it provides are understood although not necessarily heeded. Culture is a construct which is not free of differences and conflicts which have to be negotiated on a continual basis. This process is never ending, which means that culture is a porous entity. Consequently, it cannot be cast as a rigid form, even when attempts are made to do so. Narrations are involved in both the establishment of social consensus and in the change and ongoing development of cultural systems of meaning, both as the stages and instruments of discursive debate.

In a world in which transcultural encounters have become the norm (Hepp, 2015, p. 21), increasing translational demands are placed on narrating. Cultural translation can only be successful when it draws on systems of meaning which can be understood cross-culturally. Starting off the cultural translation of his narration by pointing out that he was new and a stranger in the city, the Turkish student addressed an experience, either intentionally or intuitively, that he could embrace as a cross-cultural experience. If the aim is to create hybrid networks of meaning out of the cultural differences which have been revealed, further levels of cross-cultural
communication are required beyond linguistic differences. The narrative production of hybrid cultural practices is linked in with culturally specific and cross-cultural systems of meaning alike and is co-constructed intersubjectively.

In order to characterize the structure of hybrid constellations of meaning which create new cultural practices when connected to each other, it is fruitful to use a concept introduced by Norbert Elias to explain the emergence of smaller and larger groups up to entire societies, namely that of figuration (1970/1978, pp. 130ff.). He identifies networks of individuals constituting a larger social group through interdependent action as figurations, illustrating the concept with reference to games. The figuration is the “changing pattern created by the players as a whole” (1970/1978, p. 130), or what binds people together. Alongside games, this bond can be communication in general, or narration in particular. Andreas Hepp has transferred Elias’ terminology into media and communication studies as “communicative figuration,” exploring it in the second edition of Transcultural Communication (2015, pp. 28ff.) as a label for transcultural media-assisted processes of hybridization (2014/2015, p. 28). I would also like to align myself with Elias’ model with the concept of narrative figurations in order to describe the intersubjectively produced narrative entanglements of systems of meaning which feed on different cultural sources and accelerate the emergence of hybrid cultural practices. The term narrative figurations emphasizes the narrative production of culture but is not at odds with the term communicative figuration because hybrid cultural practices are always negotiated in a communicative fashion.

Both Hepp and Bachmann-Medick suggest that the power interests which potentially have an effect on cultural translation could also creep into hybrid forms of culture (Bachmann-Medick, 2016, p. 137; Hepp, 2015, p. 19). Hybrid narrative figurations emerge under the influence of the “unequal power relations of world society” (Bachmann-Medick, 2016, p. 137). Narratives written in dominant languages have a much greater chance of being noticed than narratives written in a language which has a more limited geographical scope. In contrast to narrators from dominant cultures, narrators from minor cultures have to deal with multiple layers of translation, which increases the risk of their cultural idiosyncrasies being lost. They have to translate from the minor language into the dominant language and, at the same time, they have to translate their narratives into another cultural context using a language which is foreign to them.
Media play no small part in the genesis of hybrid cultural practices. Long-established media like radio and television broadcast narrative flows or audio/visual products in which cultural codes of different origins intermingle which could become effective models for hybrid life styles and representations of the Self. The advent of digital media like the internet has vastly increased the potential for creating hybrid cultural practices. The structural characteristics of globality and interconnectedness facilitate “narrative figurations” (Elias, 1970/1978, pp. 130ff.) worldwide which are capable of incorporating cultural elements from different parts of the world. Multimediality unites a broad range of options for narrating and translating in one medium. After all, digital media are not only available for experts but also for everyday actors, both as spaces and instruments for narrative and translational acts. This increases the chance of getting involved in and co-creating processes of translation and hybridization, and yet it cannot only be celebrated as a paragon of participatory progress. Currently, attempts can be observed to stop global interplay in the virtual space of digital networks or to prevent tendencies which favour hybridization through so-called hate messages or threats in the interests of a homogeneous model of culture.

It is not by chance that alongside the “translational turn” (2016, pp. 132ff.), Bachmann-Medick has documented the “iconic turn” (2016, pp. 181ff.) as being another important turn in contemporary society. The “iconic turn” was announced in 1994 by art historian Gottfried Boehm; at around the same time, literary theorist and art historian W. J. T. Mitchell published his theory of the “pictorial turn” (1994; see Sect. 3.2.4.3 and “The Relationship Between Language and the Image” for more details). Both the iconic turn and the pictorial turn focus on an understanding of the world through images, in other words an understanding of images as a medium of perception. Remember the online photo gallery of the American globetrotter which she used to make the world’s diversity available to herself or the visualized self-staging which the network actors used to present themselves to a global audience. In the first example, the individual desires to understand the world through images; in the second, the world should see and understand the individual through images.

Liberated from language barriers, images promise narrators a greater outreach for their narrations in a world of cultural blends. Bachmann-Medick stresses that images “are leading to many unexplored spaces of perception and knowledge … and to vistas that were once blocked by the dominance of language” (2016, p. 191). As presentative symbols, they
address the senses and feelings more intensively, bringing enhanced translational qualities into play and compensating for linguistic difficulties. But just like language, images are no portrayal of experienced episodes and events; like language, they are constructed, produced, and configured. Digital media provide a broad spectrum of editing options which are used intensively by network actors and bloggers to configure their narrations.

Even when images are added, the resources of narrating have not been exhausted according to Boehm as, beyond language, there is “tremendous scope for meaning, unforeseen space for visuality, sound, gesture, facial expression, and movement” (1994, p. 43). Even though these narrative media have not yet been studied or reflected upon as translational media, they have already made their way into narrative practice. For example, certain movements and gestures have spread worldwide, like raising both arms and shaking one’s palms as a physical translation of political protest, as could be observed during the occupation of Kasbah Square in Tunis, on Syntagma Square in Athens, or during the protests of the indignés in France (Tsomou, 2014, p. 120). Here it is the demonstrators’ bodies which tell their joint stories. Another example for forms of cultural translation beyond language or image alone is the music platform Mideast Tunes (n.d.), an offshoot of the platform Mideast Youth (n.d.). It includes tracks from many different countries and from all genres of music, from classical to hip hop, which tell of discrimination, inequality, violence, and political resistance. Experiences of this type are translated into word–sound–rhythm combinations.

One hurdle confronted by translational endeavours which, at the same time, is inherently productive in its vigour is referred to time and again by Bhabha in The Location of Culture (1994), namely the untranslatable fragments which constitute the uncanny. This figure of thought provides important impulses for a discussion of the narrative production of hybrid cultural practices. Bhabha draws on Sigmund Freud’s (1919/1955) figure of thought of the uncanny; although the latter did not concern himself with cultural hybridity, his thoughts on the uncanny provide insights into the disquiet which is caused by the Other or the Foreign. Freud discloses the quality of the uncanny (literally the “un-home-ly,” das Unheimliche, in German) by pointing out that it is more than just the opposite of the “homely” (das Heimliche) and the “native” (das Heimische) (1919/1955, pp. 220ff.; 241). In the uncanny, as Elisabeth Bronfen’s interpretation reads, “what used to be native or familiar returns, after it has become foreign via the act of repression so that the foreign doppelgänger turns out to
be the distorting transcription of the known, the native” (Bhabha, 1994/2000, preface, p. x).

Untranslatable fragments can be found in an individual’s own narratives and in the narratives told by Others; they can be a constant theme running through individual and collective narratives. What is supposedly untranslatable is in league with the power which often holds sway, undetected, over the individual and/or society and which has a vested interest in suppressing certain things from the narratives. But this interest is boycotted by the uncanny, which emanates from the untranslated fragments and which confronts us with the “secretly familiar” (das Heimliche-Heimische), which has undergone repression, thereby giving cause for alarm (Freud, 1919/1955, p. 245). In her preface, Bronfen posits that Bhabha wishes to sharpen our awareness of “how unrendered aspects of the past which do not wish to fit into the traditional master narratives of our culture haunt the present” (Bhabha, 1994/2000, preface, p. xi). This is not about the deliberately suppressed but about the unconscious, which persistently evades being made visible, also because it is laden with fear. In a world criss-crossed with narrations and translations, there is an increased risk—and also chance—of encountering the repressed in the narratives of Others which then appear to us to be uncanny. The risk lies in the fact that this experience can trigger the wish to eliminate cultural differences and to replace them with unmistakeably pure models of identity, “for which some are prepared to go to the bitter end,” as Bronfen puts it (Bhabha, 1994/2000, preface, p. viii). The chance lies in such encounters when the irritating inconsistencies and angst-ridden contradictions arouse our interest, for it is those very inconsistencies and contradictions which flag the commonalities of the Foreign and, in the process, encourage the reorientation of the translational towards hybridity.

The media can contribute to an increase in such chances or can also prevent them from happening. In the future, their sociopolitical significance will be measured up against whether they provide the spaces and the means to identify the uncanny in its character as the secretly familiar, and whether stories arise in these spaces and are circulated, “the goal of which is to develop ways of dealing with radical otherness which cannot be subsumed in unanimous life plans” (Bhabha, 2000, preface, p. xiv). These are tasks which, in the age of the internet, do not only concern media companies but also the network actors and bloggers who have turned media space into one where they live and work.
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