

Crossing-over:
Translation and Interdisciplinarity, with the Example
of Deconstructivist Architecture and Philosophy

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Abstract

The issue of interdisciplinarity in the postmodern background involves the interaction between the verbal and the visual/spatial, the relationship between the source text and the translation, and the opening of interdisciplinary boundaries. Three key concepts are re-defined for this interdisciplinary analysis: translation, interpretation, and boundary. First, the "translation" from one discipline to another is a process of transformation that involves changes, differences, and (re)creation, rather than a faithful reproduction. Elements of the source text may be respected, highlighted, or dimmed in the translation. Peter Bruegel the Elder's translation of the myth of the Tower of Babel from verbal language to visual presentation serves as an example.

Second, the meanings of a translation work are not controlled solely by the author, the reader, or the text itself. Rather, the interpretation of a text involves several interacting factors, which include the author's intention, the text's prefiguration of its own reception, the reader's creativity, the interpretive framework, and the dominant cultural discourse. The complex interplay among these factors is analyzed with recourse to Lacanian diagrams of the "gaze" and the "screen."

Bruegel's two versions of the Tower of Babel and M. C. Escher's modernist rendering of the same topic serve as examples.

Third, the boundary between two disciplines is not a dividing line that creates hierarchy and barriers, but a zone of exchange and communication. The multi-disciplinary application of a critical theory promotes the opening of boundaries. Communication can be achieved by extending a theoretical framework from one discipline to another, by exchanging critical perspectives, and by locating common themes among different disciplines. These forms of crossing-over contribute to the emergence of new aesthetic expressions and knowledge.

The interaction between Derridean philosophy of deconstruction and contemporary architecture serves as an example of such a crossing-over. Derrida deploys architectural metaphors and other architectonic expressions to define and explain the concepts of deconstruction. Architects and critics translate deconstruction into a critical language, designing concepts, and spatial techniques. What has been part of Derridean theory is now materialized and can actually be seen in built projects, especially in the works of SITE.

These redefined concepts--translation, interpretation, and boundary--can be extended to the analysis of the intersection between postmodern arts and postmodernist social/cultural discourses, as in Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Jameson.