

## Foreword

The current issue of *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie Orientale* gathers contributions from a doctoral workshop held at Ca' Foscari University of Venice in December 2017. The workshop, and thus the present volume, attempted to reconsider the mutual understanding inherent in 'area studies', generally conceived as an autonomous field of research, which seldom questions the nature of its role. The initiative was organized by the guest editors of this journal issue with the generous support of the Student Office. Overall, it offered a precious opportunity for sharing ideas and fostering interdisciplinary dialogue.

Considering the variety of specializations expressed by each contributor, we have identified the broad topic of textual agency as a thought-provoking ground on which to lay the foundations for our debate. The primary question this collection of essays intends to address is the rethinking of the concept of 'text' and exploring the multiple forms of meaning it engenders. The familiarity with the text as a closed, self-standing unit of meaning has put aside the multi-dimensional process of signification, leading to a widespread misperception of the text's value in its full complexity. Rather, we should delve into the factors or 'strategies' – rhetorical, visual, aural, kinaesthetic – that a text might employ in order to convey its message and thereby re-orient human thought and action. In other words, what conditions may enhance or hinder the text's potential of 'doing things'? Opinions on this matter vary considerably among intellectuals, traditions, historical periods, and cultural spheres; thus no answer can be easily found. Yet, such questions have triggered our interest as young scholars from different backgrounds and areas of expertise, opening a lively discussion around the theme of textual agency.

This notion has been central to theoretical reflection over the past few decades and has recently gained momentum thanks to the influential work of Bruno Latour. In particular, his efforts moved beyond the common philosophical ground which posits a strict ontological divide between subject and object. A similar shift in perspective resulted in a more inclusive idea of 'network', a social space produced by both human and non-human agents through their interaction. Within this framework, the textual artefact has been entrusted with previously unnoticed functions – and responsibilities –, but how can we discern when a text is just an inert object and when it is capable of – or culpable for – eliciting a specific audience's reaction? How can we detect the agenda underpinning its emergence and keep

track of its reception? The problem becomes even more compelling when it is intertwined with cultures distant from our own in time and space.

Often criticized for being too self-referential, area studies are now facing the challenge of proving their relevance by contributing to the creation of a border-crossing, transcultural knowledge. At the same time, area studies may well profit from this mutual encounter by developing innovative tools for critical inquiry to apply in their respective fields. For instance, a nuanced theorization of text and agency could serve the purpose of deepening our understanding of social phenomena and products, without losing sight of their irreducible contexts. In response to such a challenge, the following papers have sought to balance the micro and macro perspectives by looking at individual case studies – which surely will gain the interest of specialists – while tackling the broader issue on the transformative – and transformable – potential of texts beyond East and West. Moreover, the variety of topics mirrors the diversity of methodological approaches, which range from ethnography to semiotics, and from cultural history to comparative literature.

This volume consists of three sections. The first looks at the manifold sources of agency, which frequently finds a powerful catalyst in the human body. In Simona Loi's opening paper, ritual flesh and blood become a living text, which seems to proclaim the flagellants' autonomous choice of self-giving against any orthodox religious narrative. Carlotta De Sanctis focuses on the shifting edge between past and present in her interviews with Turkish left-wing intellectuals, whose life stories embody a disenchanting protest against the current wave of authoritarianism. Silvia Rivadossi examines the rising popularity of urban shamans in contemporary Tokyo and the way in which they build new forms of spirituality through the means of artistic performance. In these cases, one may notice a sort of permeability between text, word, and body, making difficult – if not useless – the task of separating such elements. Texts produce (dis)order and (de)stabilize sociocultural, political, and sexual identities, leading to the formation of unstable boundaries. In turn, the body is endowed with a sort of 'textuality' which allows for the codification and transmission of meaningful signs.

The second section takes into account some of the mechanisms which enable the efficacy of a text, with a specific attention paid to the techniques and forms of logic underlying discursive practices. In its countless declinations, language constitutes a privileged place for the articulation of meaning. More specifically, the oscillation between 'doing things' and 'making others do things' project onto linguistic forms and grammatical constructs, producing multi-layered texts in both content and expression. Luca Rizzo proposes a subtle analysis of a premodern Arabic epigram, read through the lens of semiotics to enlighten the interplay between overt and hidden meaning within the dynamics of textual interpretation. Arianna Magnani traces the migration of books across territories and cultures. She

observes how texts imported from China would become the (complicit) victims of (mis)translation, eventually reshaping the European imagination of 'otherness' on the verge of the eighteenth century. Beatrice Gallelli investigates the rhetorical devices adopted by Chinese Prime Minister Xi Jinping in his political speeches, focusing in particular on the metaphorical language and normative messages they conceal. The authors have shown that a painstaking scrutiny is needed whenever one wants to decode the verbal and non-verbal features from which a text draws its force.

The last section looks into the possible outcomes of textual agency. It opens with Vittorio Cattelan, whose contribution points to the ideological implications of the musical text by discussing the diffusion and reception of Italian opera in Ottoman Turkey. The final paper by Veronica De Pieri attempts to re-evaluate literature in the wake of catastrophic events. Her arguments include but are not limited to the recent Fukushima disaster and aim at emphasizing the ostensible therapeutic effects of writing and reading for people who have suffered a traumatic experience. In conclusion, we might say that the ability of any text to act always implies a symmetrical quality of being acted in response to the re-negotiation of values, beliefs, interests, and practices it constantly prompts and generates.

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The Editors

