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STUDIA IMAGOLOGICA  
AMSTERDAM STUDIES ON CULTURAL IDENTITY

13

Serie editors  
Hugo Dyserinck  
Joep Leerssen

*Imagology*, the study of cross-national perceptions and images as expressed in literary discourse, has for many decades been one of the more challenging and promising branches of Comparative Literature.

In recent years, the shape both of literary studies and of international relations (in the political as well as the cultural sphere) has taken a turn which makes imagology more topical and urgent than before. Increasingly, the attitudes, stereotypes and prejudices which govern literary activity and international relations are perceived in their full importance; their nature as textual (frequently literary) constructs is more clearly apprehended; and the necessity for a textual and historical analysis of their typology, their discursive expression and dissemination, is being recognized by historians and literary scholars.

The series STUDIA IMAGOLOGICA, which will accommodate scholarly monographs in English, French or German, provides a forum for this literary-historical specialism.

# Imagology

The cultural construction and literary  
representation of national characters

A critical survey

Edited by  
Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen



Amsterdam - New York, NY 2007

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### TROPE → Topos

### TYPE, TYPICALITY

In the representation of national peculiarities, a remarkable ambivalence is often at work: the nationality as such is singled out from the rest of humanity (which emphasizes the notion of difference) while individuals tend to be seen merely in terms of their nationality, i.e. as representatives of that nationality (which elides the differences between them). Thus nationality becomes, in imagined discourse, an impressionistic "ideal type", which, in Max Weber's classic 1905 definition, "is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct" (Weber 1949: 90).

Thus, in imagined representations, Spaniards, Swedes or Russians will easily become 'typical' Spaniards, 'typical' Swedes or 'typical' Russians. Or,

to put the same thing the other way around: from the great many possible individuals belonging to those nations, those will be selected, foregrounded and highlighted who are considered 'typical'. This 'typicality effect' or *effet de typique* (Leerssen 1997) is ambivalent. On the one hand it refers to an individual conforming to a type, on the other hand it refers to that individual and type thereby saliently standing out from the normal default value. To call a bullfight *corrida* 'typically Spanish' means both to stress its representativity of what is properly Spanish, and its unusual way of standing out from mundane normalcy.

As such, the typicality effect generates a mode of discourse which is proper to stereotyping, namely the "confusion between the attribute and the essence" (*la confusion de l'attribut et de l'essentiel*, Pageaux 1994: 67); in a similar vein, Foster (1982) has pointed out that the discourse of →exoticism will conflate "the distinct and the distinctive". The tendency will result in an overdetermined mode of characterizing nationalities by way of recognizable, salient aspects which are thereby constructed as representative, typical and characteristic. This overdetermination will in turn lead to the reductive recycling and foregrounding of formulaic attributes — indeed, → clichés — like Dutch windmills and clogs, German *Lederhosen*, French berets and *baguette* bread, English bowler hats. Typicality thus tends, inherently, towards the very definition of *caricature*, the "grotesque or ludicrous representation of persons or things by exaggeration of their most characteristic and striking features" (OED).

Joep Leerssen

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### VISIOTYPE → Stereotype

### VISUAL ARTS

[See also: *National history visualized*]

The terms 'imagology' or 'image studies' are not used in historical or systematic studies of the visual arts, for the obvious reason that these

disciplines use the term 'image' in a number of meanings, both literal and abstract, that have nothing to do with the representation of national characteristics. More specifically, the term *imagology* is avoided for fear of confusion with 'iconology', an approach that studies artworks as signs that obtain their meaning from a broader intellectual background. Obviously, even without using the actual term 'imagology', the approach is valuable to the study of the visual arts. Two dimensions can be distinguished: national stereotypes expressed in art, and national stereotypes used by art historians. National stereotypes have, indeed, been more central to the development of art scholarship than to any of the other humanities. Even today, art historians and connoisseurs persist in organizing their material according to schools and national categories, even when such categories did not exist in the period they denote. Often these schools are characterized by stylistic constants that are by definition stereotypical.

The assumption that visual representations of people directly express their national characteristics is rooted in →physiognomic theory. Art treatises from the Renaissance onwards suppose, on the one hand, that the sight of specific objects may directly induce a change in character, and, on the other, that states of mind find their immediate reflection in one's body and gestures. Following Theophrastus' theory of →character, artistic theory explains the visualization of national characteristics through the four temperamental humours combining the →climatic opposites of cold/warm and moist/dry. Moreover, one's past and even one's future actions are deemed to find direct expression in one's body. The theory is ultimately based on animistic notions and is not limited to depictions of the human form: also in architecture, the column orders were given the names from the regions in Greece whose qualities they purportedly represent.

In the history of art ranging from tribal images to monumental sculpture and city planning, 'high art' has been regarded as pre-eminently expressive of a people or nation's own consummate achievements. Especially in the nineteenth century, history painting and architecture were motivated by the explicit intention to visualize perceived national qualities and →national history; but art historians have in hindsight also interpreted past masters and their works as reflections of their own national identity. By contrast, the task of making visual stereotypes of other peoples was relegated to 'low art': examples can be found in illustrations to →maps, travel accounts and guides, costume books and *Völkerspigel*, as well as in propaganda graphic art and photography, in →comics and →caricature. The nineteenth century witnessed a surge in the stereotypical portrayal of others, triggered by the World Fairs that presented peoples from other continents to Europeans, usually in the context of 'orientalist' attitudes inspired by →colonial power relations. The ideology of the Fairs was reflected in the architecture of contemporary ethnographical museums.

The most important exception to the rule of thumb that high art visualizes one's own cultural qualities, while those of others are reserved for low art, is →primitivism. When in the context of primitivism high art expresses the foreign, two components can be differentiated. In the first case, the depiction of other peoples and their supposed primitive qualities is regarded as an important artistic aim in itself. In the second case, a mode of representation that is labelled as primitive is positively valorized. The latter trend, to prefer the primitive qualities of 'others' to one's own (supposedly degenerate) artistic tradition, is a recurring trend in European art theory from antiquity (Gombrich 2002). The popularity of depicting primitive peoples is, by contrast, a more particularly nineteenth-century phenomenon. In both cases, the qualities of other peoples are not generally praised out of an autonomous interest in these peoples, but to hold a mirror up to one's self-image.

Renaissance writings on art, which sometimes doubled as →travel guides, differentiated various artistic schools, borrowing from classical theory of rhetoric that also made regional distinctions. These arguments were taken over in eulogies of cities and regions that extol the qualities of 'their' artists in contrast to those of other areas. Terms of periodization and stylistic analysis like 'gothic' and 'romanesque', still used today, first appeared in these texts, where they are often linked to a disparaging stereotype of a geographical region and its inhabitants.

Humanism in Tuscany appropriated the rhetorical division of 'Attic' versus 'Asian' to differentiate its own art from 'foreign' works made in Northern Italy. This negative stereotype of Northern art has been termed the "Tusco-Roman negative" (Emmens 1979). It was echoed in larger European discussions contrasting for example Mediterranean and Northern painting, and it developed into the most enduring dichotomy in art theory and criticism up to the twentieth century. It is influential on several dimensions: on that of visual analysis, where a linear approach is contrasted to a colouristic approach; on that of working method, where the making of preparatory studies is contrasted to the spontaneous sketch; and on the more ideological level of adherence to inveterate 'rules of art' versus belief in inborn genius. Through this dichotomy, national stereotypes became insolubly linked to the terms and concepts of art criticism.

Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), who is often called the first art historian, saw art as determined by climate and described it as the 'revelation' of a nation's 'way of thinking'. Winckelmann projected this idea on the peoples of antiquity rather than on contemporary European nations. In the history of art collecting, Luigi Lanzi (1732-1810) was the first to present artworks according to regional schools rather than format and subject matter (in the Uffizi, Florence). Some of the influential ideas about *Volkgeist* or 'national spirit' developed by Johann Gottfried Herder

(1744-1803) met with an eager reception among art historians. German authors, for example, stretched the idealized 'spirit' of their 'people' to include the art of the Netherlands (promoting Rembrandt as a model of Germanic virtues), and even the works of Raphael and Michelangelo: allegedly, these artists by virtue of their genius transcended their regional roots. That artworks in general should not be judged as the work of individual geniuses, but as a function of race, moment and milieu, was put forward by Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893). Although Taine reiterated much of the traditional theory of climate and temperament, his admonition to the critic to be sensitive to the artist's environment was seminal to a positivist approach of art history. In architecture, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879) instigated historicizing styles imitating those of the period which was seen to best reflect a nation's achievements. He also theorized about the restoration of monuments that arguably expressed national values.

The →North-South dichotomy expressed in the 'Tusco-Roman negative' proved very appealing to Hegelian dialectical models. Along dialectical lines key terms like 'gothic' and 'romanesque' were interpreted as proof that history proceeds via the conflict of opposing principles. Even aesthetic theories that were predominantly focused on the visual like that of Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945), who based his method of analysis on a number of central dichotomies, explained stylistic opposites as functions of national characters. Related to his approach was Alois Riegl's (1858-1905) concept of *Kunstwollen*, literally 'will to art', that thematized how style should not be seen as a function of technical problems, but of the spirit of an age desiring to express itself analogously in painting, architecture and the applied arts. Although Riegl divided the history of art along temporal rather than geographical lines, his ideas were used by Wilhelm Worringer (1881-1965) to explain national characteristics in art. At the same moment the notion of *Kunstgeographie* or 'artistic geography' was elaborated by Paul Pieper (1912-2000), who stated that the most enduring constants in art history are broader than time periods and are determined by space (he opposed *Raumstil*, the style of a place, to *Zeitstil*, the style of a time). To his theory Dagobert Frey (1883-1962) added racist stereotypes, which have made most later scholars suspicious of geographical arguments. Only the beginning of the present century has witnessed a new interest in the so-called 'geohistory' of art, replacing the older climatological explanations with neutral models based on relations between centre and periphery and on the international activities of travelling artists (Murawska-Muthesius 2000; DaCosta Kaufmann 2004).

The main critics of the use of national stereotypes in art history were the émigré scholars Meyer Shapiro (1904-1996) and Ernst Gombrich (1909-2001). The latter coined the term "physiognomic fallacy" for the approach that studies art not as a structure of individual signs but as "an

utterance of the collective, in which a nation or an age speaks to us" (Gombrich 1963: 112).

A recent art historical approach studies how stereotypical images work, using the concept of 'the gaze'. It analyzes the artist's manipulation of the beholder's gaze and relates these visual observations to Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905-1980) idea that the act of looking reflects and strengthens existing power relations. The examination of how the depicted figures are 'objectified' and made into 'others' by an act of looking on the spectator's part, can be relevant to an exploration of relations "between the majority and the minorities and between the first world and the third world" (Olin 1996: 215). The approach has, however, been more successful in the analysis of gender relationships than in that between different nations and races, since the power relations in stereotypes of →foreigners in visual art are often very explicit, as in the case of propaganda art and caricature.

In contemporary visual art the conscious expression of national or regional identities is mainly the domain of architecture, e.g. when civic buildings are ostentatiously made of local building materials. Nationalist ideologies have promoted their 'historic' architectural styles and sometimes buildings express a tension between the ideas of the artist and those of his patrons. Recent debates, where art history may be integrated in the wider context of 'visual culture', connect imagological issues to the monumentalization of *lieux de mémoire* and to the conservation and presentation of artworks.

*Thijs Weststeijn*

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XENOPHOBIA →Foreigner, →Toleration/intolerance

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## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL APPENDIX