



## SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON IMAGOGY

**Ioana Mohor-Ivan and Michaela Praisler**

Since the nineteenth century, originating from the German concept of a "psychology of the peoples", there has been a long-standing interest in "national characters". For the most part, this interest has been essentialist, stemming from the belief that "nations" were discrete and distinguishable groups, each characterised by its own character that could be analysed from that "nation's" cultural activity. In the course of the twentieth century, the essentialist implications of "national characteristics" have attracted criticism, and, especially in the field of Comparative Literature, they have come to be studied as subjective terms, understood as attitudes and perceptions that affect cultural and social praxis. In the 1950s, imagology crystallised as a specialization in Comparative Literature in France, and has since gained currency among scholars and journalists interested in studying the discursively constructed nature of many social and cultural values, as a means of counter-acting re-emergent nationalisms.

**Imagology** (imago=image + logos=word, account, study) may be defined as the study of intercultural relations in terms of mutual perceptions, images and self-images, i.e. the ways in which perceived national/ ethnic/ racial/ cultural characters and identities – both one's own and that of others—are expressed in a wide range of discourses, including literature, film and the media. Because stress is laid on perception and not on the "truth" or accuracy of an image, the aim of imagology is to understand the structures of images and demonstrate their conventional nature, by focusing on the intersection between linguistic (aesthetic/rhetorical) and historical (ideological/ socio-cultural) aspects of discourse (Moyle, 2004: 9).

In recognizing the ideological character of images and drawing attention to their socio-cultural differences and similarities, imagology considers this mode of reciprocal characterization as pivotal in understanding national perception and representation in terms of the **self-other** dichotomy, which also underlies the dialectic of **identity** and **alterity**. (Voestermans, 1991: 219) As the identity of a human develops along the line of differentiation between (what is considered to be) the 'self' and everything which is not the self, the two are thus mutually dependable, investing each other with meaning. The same dialectic characterises the articulation of cultural and national identities, because "all human cultures articulate, situate themselves by categorizing the world [...], a predicative act [which] involves a distinction between that which is allowed into the sphere of culture and that which is excluded" (Corbey and Leerssen, 1991: vi). "Otherness" is thus created as both the contrastive as well as the cognitive background against which a cultural or national identity is circumscribed.

As its name asserts, **image** is the main working concept in the field. On the one hand, image is understood as communication, especially visual communication or presentation; on the other hand, image is understood as a "mental picture" or idea. Imagology has adopted the latter meaning, whereby image is "the mental or discursive representation or reputation

of a person, group, ethnicity or 'nation'" (Leerssen, 2003: 342.) In this, it resembles a cognitive "knowledge structure" or schema that controls our opinion and behaviour towards the "other". A fundamental distinction is made between **auto-image** (or 'self-image') and **hetero-image**: the first one refers to a characterological reputation current within and shared by a group, the latter to the opinion that others have about a group's purported character. Apart from these, **imagemes**, a term coined by Joep Leerssen, would refer to ambivalent images that can be applied to different kinds of situations (Leerssen, 2000). If images change, they do so not because the character of the nation changes, but because the attitude towards the nation changes, as cultural discontinuities and differences (in the form of languages, mentalities, everyday habits, and religions) trigger positive or negative judgements and attitudes.

When an image remains constant despite of historical changes, it turns into a **stereotype** or **cliché** (Schneider, 2005). According to a dictionary definition, a stereotype is "a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgement" (Webster, 1996: 1394) about a person or an entire group of people. In the absence of 'the total picture' of an environment which is "too big, too fleeting for direct acquaintance" (Lippman, 1922: 16), we build up 'intellectual images' that create simplified representations, categories or values which help us orient through and make sense of the world. In addition to this, stereotypes also play an important role in identity building, because if an individual's sense of self is closely related to the group to which he or she belongs - which may extend from school affiliation to race and nationality -, identifying with this 'in-group' means internalizing its own stereotypes. As such, the same as in the case of "image", stereotypes may be classified into **auto-stereotypes** (evolved at 'in-group' level) and **hetero-stereotypes** (relating to 'out-groups', i.e. the other groups to which the individual does not belong or identify with.) The dialectic of the two is often based on contrastive stereotyping, because the tendency is to assign negative characteristics to the out-group in order to create positive auto-stereotypes. **National stereotypes**, which involve the assignation of specific characteristics to members of a given nation, exhibit the same binary nature, often occurring in the oppositional pairs of auto- versus hetero-stereotypes, or positive versus negative ones. Because national stereotypes transcend the individual, they may be modified by changes in the group experience or the context of intergroup relations ranging from conflict to alliances. When economic and political rivalry characterizes the relations between two countries, there is a marked negativity in hetero-stereotyping, which gives rise to **xenophobia**. The reverse, when positive terms are employed to characterize a national group, leads to exoticism or **xenophilia**.

Though closely related to the concept of stereotype, the term **cliché** does not always connote the moral and metaphysical implications of the latter, referring rather to stylistic turns of phrase, images or gestures that have nothing to do with the expression of racism or ethnocentrism, nor do they give rise to prejudice.

Originally a judicial term, **prejudice** has become another key concept in imagology, referring to "any preconceived and unsupported opinion and attitude that influences our perception, description and judgement of others" (Beller, 2003: 404). Though in recent literature, prejudice and stereotype tend to be used interchangeably, "stereotypes are beliefs or opinions about attributes of a social group or members, whereas prejudice is conceptualized as a negative intergroup attitude." (Moyle, 2004: 22; Stroebe and Insko, 1989: 8) As such, prejudice plays an important part in hetero-stereotyping, being a key to deciphering intergroup attitudes and relations.

In point of the methodology that a critical study of cultural representations and of images of national identity presupposes, critics agree that the imagological approach blends different aims in an integrative type of analysis, sharing thus its concerns with anthropology,

cultural studies and literary criticism.

- In common with Cultural Anthropology, imagology starts from the premise that groups and cultures differ. One model for assessing differences among national cultures considers that four aspects (namely, power distance; collectivism/individualism; femininity/ masculinity; uncertainty avoidance) variously combine to differently mark mentalities within a given group (Hofstede, 1991, Gavrilu, 2002). The specific question that an imagologist asks relates then to how these differences are treated in mutual imagery.
- In common with the field of Cultural Studies, imagology views culture as dynamic, a process through which a particular group of people constructs or deconstructs a series of maps of meanings to make sense of everyday practices and experience (Mohor-Ivan, 2004: 4). Given that an image is one means of “mapping” experience, an imagologist would be interested in surveying the representational terrain of a given culture, investigating the form and function of the image within its discursive context and signalling changes in the perception of both in- and out-groups as markers of historical/political/social relativity in inter-cultural relations.
- Given its literary ancestry, imagology works primarily on “imagined discourse”, i.e. discourse that lies outside the area of verifiable report statements (Leerssen, 2003: 28). While the literary text is a primary resource to investigate the formation, perpetuation and dissemination of images, other more recent “poetically-ruled and fictional-narrative media” – such as film or some genres of journalism – which “often work[s] on the presupposition of a suspension of disbelief and some (at least aesthetic) appreciative credit among the audience” (Leerssen, 2003: 26) can be searched into for patterns of national characterization.

In analysing such “imagined discourse”, Leerssen (2003: 26-30) considers that other methodological assumptions are likely to be at work. According to his survey of the history and method of the field:

- Imagology adheres to a theory of cultural or national stereotypes, concerning itself with representations as textual strategies and as discourse, with referentiality contained within a textual and intertextual frame and not vis-à-vis empirical reality.
- Imagology acknowledges the subjectivity of its sources and takes it into account in the analysis of the dynamics between auto- and hetero-images, by placing it in the perspectival context of the representing text or discourse. Moreover, such images, usually categorized in national terms, do not reflect empirical real-world collectives, but possible identifications for such groups.
- Imagology considers that images work effectively in the cultural and communicative field because they are tropes, commonplaces turned familiar by repetition and resemblance. As such, one must uncover the tradition of a given trope by establishing its intertext. The trope becomes thus doubly contextualized: within a background tradition, which is echoed, reinforced or negated in the text of its occurrence, and within the latter itself, by analysing the given text-based function of the image.
- Imagology is also interested in contextualizing the image in its socio-cultural context, by resorting to a pragmatic-functionalist perspective through which it aims to investigate the way in which the rhetoric and deployment of stereotypes is geared towards a target audience, or the critical reception and the impact that a certain image has.
- Imagology goes beyond the self-other dichotomy that plays an important role in identity formation when it focuses on the role played by auto-images, which thematise the filiations between past and present through historical remembrance and cultural

memory, in the maintenance of a sense of national identity.

- Nevertheless, imagology remains a comparative enterprise, addressing cross-national relations by drawing attention to the fact that any image is constructed in accordance to a differential principle which restricts identity to particularism. When studied as a multicultural phenomenon, dichotomic coordinates like those established between the pragmatic North vs. the sensuous South, the backward periphery vs. the modern centre, or the masculine West vs. the feminine East become nationally unspecific, helping us realize that identity should define one as part of, and not in contradistinction to, humanity as a whole.

As such, the following are meant as practical guidelines for the integrative type of analysis that the critical study of our mental images of national character (expressed in terms of the Other/Self dichotomy) presupposes.

- **Identify the type of text chosen for analysis.** The distinction between fictional (e.g. literary works and feature films) and factual (e.g. newspaper articles and documentaries) texts is important in establishing “the degree of referential reliability of the reality communicated by the text” (Gavriliu, 2002: 101).
- **Identify the author of the text and the audience s/he is addressing.** Are they members of the same in-group, or are they differentiated along gender, class, ideological, ethnic, etc. criteria? This helps clarify the position that the author and her/his text take in relation to the target audience: e.g. solidarity/disaffiliation/discord.
- **Identify the type of images constructed by the text in terms of the distinction between auto- and hetero-images.** This distinction is useful in assessing both the text-based function of an image (how the author handles the self-other dialectic in her/ his text) and its extra-textual one (what the author wants to achieve by employing a given image) (Moyle, 2004: 11). It may be further employed to distinguish between the force lines underlying the respective cultural groups, which “account for *the how* and *the why* of a certain representation” (Gavriliu, 2002: 6) of the self vs. the Other in Hofstede’s model (1991).
- **Focus on the text’s hetero-images. How is alterity constructed by the text?**
  - Isolate the linguistic/visual elements which help circumscribe the Other (e.g. consider the distribution of lexical/auditory/visual signs in terms of the rate of occurrence of certain units, clusters.)
  - Assess the terms in which Otherness is articulated (national, ethnic, gender, etc.)
  - Identify the underlying attitudes (e.g. xenophilia, tolerance, cosmopolitanism vs. xenophobia, ethnocentrism) which lead to positive or negative attribution of characteristics to the Other. Such valorisation is also indicative of attitudes such as: assimilation, i.e. the appropriation of the Other by turning it into the familiar, or rejection, i.e. the exclusion of the Other “into utopia, dystopia or irreducible marginalisation” (Gavriliu 2002: 7).
  - Consider the extent to which hetero-images are recognisable as stereotypes. Because stereotypes are intertextual constructs, i.e. the referential signification process takes place not between text and reality, but between text and text (Leerssen 1998), establish their textual tradition. Refer to the function that stereotypes play in the text at hand: e.g. a starting point for characterisation; ironic markers; identifiers for alterity; invested with symbolic value; used to ‘go against the grain’ (Moyle, 2004:11). This helps establish the role played by stereotypes either in sustaining tradition (e.g. reinforcing myths of otherness or prejudices) or, by contrary, in undermining it.
  - Identify the dichotomic coordinates which underlie the representation of the Other. Phenotypical features, gestures, speech (e.g. foreign vocabulary or

onomastic preferences marked by caricatural intentions) may be employed to cast characters as statements of alterity, triggering oppositions as those established between self/ other; civilian/ barbarian; human/ beastly; good/ evil; superior/ inferior (Gavriliu, 2002: 101, Mohor-Ivan, 2004: 19). Indicators of place and time may similarly point to contrasts like: North/ South, West/ East, urban/ pastoral, centre/ margin, which further connote oppositions such as progress/ primitivism; pragmatic/ spiritual; individualist/ collectivist; prosaic/ idyllic, development/ backwardness, order/ chaos (Leerssen 1988, Mohor-Ivan, 2004: 86.) Such structural identifications may reveal the extent to which alterity is excluded, ascribed a negative role as a manifestation of disorder and cultural inadaptability in the out-group or the emitting culture, or, by contrary, conceived in more congenial terms, appropriated and included into the patterns of the in-group or the receiving culture. Moreover, they may help discern whether alterity is represented as continuous and homogeneous, similar to other instances of Otherness, discontinuous and contradictory, able thus to become fluid and incorporate the Self.

- **Corroborate the investigation of the form and function of images within the text with a macro-contextual analysis.** Placing an image in its cultural and historical context is indicative of political, economic, or diplomatic circumstances that condition the apparition of the text (Gavriliu, 2002: 102). As images shift with changing contextual circumstances, the identification of the cultural line forces that govern a certain period may explain why a particular representation is favoured over a range of possible alternatives. It also ensures a clarification of the referential frame, as well as of the cultural values and presuppositions that both author and audience involve in the communication process in order to encode/decode a given image. Finally, disclosing the properties of the context that makes an image available as a pattern of identification for a group of people may prompt a better understanding of the difference between “an ‘image’ and objective information” (Leerssen 1988), by explaining its role as a subjective construct which influences and is influenced by the cultural, historical and social praxis.

Though a specialism rooted in the field of Comparative Literary Study, this technical neologism referred to as imagology in many languages has come to transcend the field of literary analysis and to provide “a viable and fruitful approach to neighbouring specialisms (from cultural studies to postcolonial studies, and from social psychology and anthropology to art history)” (Beller, 2003, xv). Because it shares the interests in identity constructs and cultural stereotypes with so many disciplines within the wider and interdisciplinary area of human and social studies, the task of pinpointing the outlines of the field would remain on open-ended one, as the on-going dialogue between imagology and its neighbours can only enrich both theoretical premises and practical research in the study of different forms of cultural representation.

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### **Abstract**

*The paper attempts to facilitate research in different forms of cultural representations by offering a basic outline of imagology, a technical neologism which, though rooted in Comparative Literary Studies, has increasingly come to be positioned in the wider and interdisciplinary area of cultural and social studies. As such, after some preliminary considerations on the history, definition and basic assumptions underlying the field of image studies, the paper lists and briefly explains its basic concepts, to conclude with both theoretical and practical guidelines for the integrative type of analysis that the critical study of our mental images of national character (expressed in terms of the Other/Self dichotomy) presupposes.*

### **Résumé**

*Cet ouvrage se propose de faciliter l'analyse de divers aspects des représentations culturelles et offre un bref exposé sur l'imagologie. Bien qu'émergeant des études de littérature comparée, l'imagologie est de plus en plus souvent incluse dans le domaine plus large et interdisciplinaire des études sociales et culturelles. Ainsi, après quelques considérations préliminaires sur l'histoire, la définition et les prémisses fondamentales des études d'images, l'ouvrage indique et explique brièvement les concepts principaux de l'imagologie et s'achève par un guide qui inclut des aspects théoriques et pratiques pour l'analyse intégrative que l'étude critique de nos images mentales du caractère national (exprimé en termes dichotomiques par l'opposition Moi/L'Autre) implique.*

### **Rezumat**

*Lucrarea își propune să faciliteze analiza diverselor reprezentări culturale, prezentând, succint, principalele direcții de cercetare ale imagologiei. Avându-și originea în domeniul literaturii comparate, imagologia este din ce în ce mai des inclusă în sfera de interes mai largă și interdisciplinară caracteristică studiilor sociale și culturale. Așadar, după o introducere privind istoricul, definiția și premisele care se află la baza studiului imaginilor, lucrarea trece în revistă și explică pe scurt conceptele sale fundamentale. În ultima parte sunt avansate o serie de considerații teoretice dar și practice asupra modalităților de explorare, din perspectivă critică, ale reprezentărilor identitare asociate unui caracter național.*