ANDRÁS TARNÓC

VIRÁGOS ZSOLT—VARRÓ GABRIELLA: *JIM CROW ÖRÖKÖSEI: MÍTOSZ ÉS SZTEREOTÍPIA AZ AMERIKAI TÁRSADALMI TUDATBAN ÉS KULTÚRÁBAN*. [THE LEGACY OF JIM CROW: MYTH AND STEREOTYPY IN THE AMERICAN SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND CULTURE]. Budapest: Eötvös József Könyvkiadó, 2002. 370 pp.

One of the ever-present quandaries of any multicultural society is guaranteeing the tension-free and relatively harmonious coexistence of its constituent groups or cultural segments. The United States, a civilization composed of a variegated pattern of cultures has proven to be no exception. While making periodical attempts at restructuring: valid contemporary models of American culture, scholars dedicated to the examination of this topic have consistently sought the answer to Crèvecoeur's inquisitive exclamation: "What then is the American, this new man?" Until the ethnic and racial regeneration movements of the 1960s the American identity was built around one capstone, the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Male. It was the (WASP(M)) cultural segment against which all other elements of American culture had been considered Other and this protracted cultural diversity implied an ever-present need to cope with the person or social group representing the other side of the color barrier.

Zsolt Virágos and Gabriella Varró's book-size exploration examines how mainstream American society perceived and has understood the racial Other. *Jim Crow örökösei* is built on two thematic bases: [1] the analysis of the stereotyping process along with [2] a scholarly look at one of its objectified manifestations, the minstrel show, or blackface theater. The work addresses a broad spectrum of creative endeavor including literary descriptions, theatrical presentations, films, and popular culture. While the primary focus is on WASP-created black images, the authors provide a valuable glimpse at the macro-cultural context as well.

Substantiated by the fact that the authors consider (biased) stereotypy an ideological statement with a strong self-justifying—in other words: self-authenticating, i.e., "mythicizing"—potential, the book's theoretical section examines the stereotyping process and unravels the connection between myth and stereotypy Although the work explores various strategies for the construction of the Other, it operates with an expanded focus as the profound analysis surpasses the traditional dichotomy between the dominant Self and its objectified counterpart while underlining the interdependence of these constituent concepts.

While on one level the monograph provides a painstaking analysis of intellectual constructs purporting to deal with the Other, on a deeper plane it reaffirms how the creation of the Other defines the Self. Consequently, the book provides further reinforcement to Timothy Garton Ash's view that one's identity is circumscribed not only by individual will and preferences, but by the respective image of the out-group's Other as well.

Virágos and Varró's analysis makes a distinction between good (useful) and bad (disfiguring) stereotypes. The former, denoted as ST1, functions as a guarantee of cultural continuity, as these culture-specific automatisms help the interpretation and reading of intellectual products characteristic of given civilizations. According to the authors, good/useful stereotypes, by offering convenient shortcuts, accelerate the cognitive process and promote society's expressive, ideological, and creative activity. Those denoted by the code ST2 are stereotypes conveying "bad knowledge" distorting the image of a given group. These stereotypes rupture the organic unity of personal features by the deployment of such techniques as deliberate selection and undue emphasis of biological, physical, and intellectual traits along with the presentation of these presumed qualities as a normative standard. The authors also identify a connection between stereotypes and myths, with myths understood here not as sacred narratives but as self-justifying intellectual constructs functioning as cognitive filters promoting the production and interpretation of meaning.

Indeed, the monograph provides a tripartite categorization of myths distinguishing between M1 or classic, archetypal, or pre-modern myths with an expressive power, M2, or self-justifying social myths with an ideological charge fusing objective validity with falsehood, a challenging epistemological distortion, and M3, or myths with a creative force continuously integrated into the general social consciousness. Consequently, ST1, or good stereotypes are correlated with M1 as the cultural

automatisms produced by the former are augmented by prefabricated images, narratives, and paradigms generated by the latter. Moreover, ST2, or prejudice-based, biased stereotyping is analogous with M2 whose primary purpose is to maintain a "value distance" from the Other via emphasizing the imaginary or false elements over the realistic components. ST2 reaffirms Ralph Ellison's observation that the purpose of the stereotyping of blacks was not so much to crush the African American as to console the white man (Ellison 129).

Ideology, defined as the sum of theories, views, and principles expressing the priorities of social groups maintaining conflicting interests, plays a crucial role both in mythopoeia and stereotypy. A "we-ness versus they-ness" mindset generates M2 myths, eventually giving rise to stereotypical images utilizing such techniques as the masking effect or providing at best a freeze frame rendition of the target group's character development. The final product, the respective stereotypical image is presented to the consumer. It is no coincidence that the figurative masking process is reified in the blackface theatrical tradition.

Indeed the concept of the mask is central both to the analysis and cultural development of the African American community. One manifestation of the masking process, or the stabilization of distorted images, is the *Sambo* concept and the *Sambo* mentality umbrella terms describing the representatives of the black community as "childlike, irresponsible, lazy, affectionate and happy" (Takaki 111). This image entailing over ten components can also be considered a product of Mary Louise Pratt's contact zone informed by a physical and figurative clash between the white and black cultural segments.

Sambo as the most widely applied stereotypical concept in the history of American culture relegated the racial Other into a helpless, ridiculous, clown or an innocent, naïve entertainer. The deployment of the *Sambo* image had proven to be an apt tool for hiding the brutal reality of slavery in addition to alleviating Southerners' "constant dread of slave insurrection" (Takaki 114). The many faces of *Sambo* can be divided into four categories, the entertainer, a derivative of the institution of slavery, the substantiation of the paternalist argument for slavery, and the post-slavery icon.

Moreover, the *Sambo* concept reflects mainstream American reception of black creative activity. While Houston Baker targets his three-partite system to literary production, Virágos and Varró's book invites a broader application as out of "exclusion, qualified acceptance, and amused

contempt" (Baker 154) the latter two appear relevant. *Sambo* epitomizes both qualified acceptance and amused contempt. Due to the ever-increasing presence of slaves in the South the invocation of a simplistic Manichean perspective assigning the role of the villain to blacks simply would not suffice. It is the very psychological threat of a potential slave uprising that compelled Southerners to create a much more detailed image. As mere vilifying would lead to increased fears, the images of blacks had to be modified for widespread popular consumption. The primary aspect of *Sambo* is the lack of a physical or psychological threat paving the way for general social acceptance subject to the exaggeration of certain conditions and personal features. Consequently, the figure of the naïve entertainer or docile plantation slave excluded the acquisition of knowledge, or education, while the "unhappy ex-slave" ("the wretched freedman"), "the natural slave," and the "plantation darkey" implied the widely-perceived inherent secondary status of African Americans.

Moreover, while at first glance "Uncle Tom," "Uncle Remus," "Aunt Jemima," the "mammy," and the "pickanninny" are the products of the paternalistic perception of plantation society, they also testify to the resilience and cultural strength of the black community. "Uncle Tom" represents moral conviction and rectitude, "Uncle Remus" is the transmitter of authentic vernacular cultural production, while the "mammy" and "Aunt Jemima" as surrogate mother figures suggest the interdependence of the black and white cultural segment. The "pickaninny," often a product of miscegenation, or a[n illicit] plantation liaison testifies to the emotional and physical strength of the black community. Furthermore, while the foppish "coon" or the urban black dandy escaped the boundaries of slavery, he is still compelled to remain within the limits of white perception.

In addition to *Sambo* the book focuses on the *tragic mulatto* and the *brute Negro* images. Perpetuated by Langston Hughes' poem as "caught between the fine big home and the shack" the *tragic mulatto,* is another standard character carrying the condemnation of blacks and whites alike. Whereas *Sambo* is being laughed at, the *tragic mulatto* implies physical and psychological de-territorialization. The *brute Negro* is an additional subject of the book's scholarly focus. In his case the depiction changes from the loyal plantation slave to a suggestion of imminent physical danger primarily manifested in a phallic threat.

While the above-discussed three main stereotypes *Sambo, the tragic mulatto,* and the *brute Negro* bear witness to the resilience of a figurative

masking process, the minstrel show, or the blackface theater employs literal face cover. The burnt cork applied to the faces of white actors invites further thought. Although Hodge and Kress recognize a power relationship underlining the minstrelsy concept, via the assumption of the facial characteristics or physical appearance of blacks, the WASP male to a certain extent becomes the very Other he wants to ridicule. Consequently, while Jim Crow, Zip Coon, Coal-black Rose, etc. follow behavioral patterns formed by white expectations, at the same time these images demonstrate how blacks view themselves as subjects of the Euro–American cognitive process.

Paul Lawrence Dunbar's 1896 poem, titled "We Wear the Mask" asserted the mask's capability to "grin and lie." Naturally, the question emerges who does the mask lie to?

The white person masking himself black hides his own identity and to a certain extent crosses over the color line, thus the mask can signify a reverse or inverted passing process, or a precarious glimpse into "how the Other half lives." At the same time the hidden identity not only allowed the white man to overcome his internal psychological inhibitions but the sexual references and the occasional covert homo-eroticism of minstrel texts stretched the limits of the "genteel tradition."

The rise of the minstrel show parallels the worsening of the slavery crisis, as the "peculiar institution" on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line evolved into a political, constitutional, moral, and psychological dilemma. Nat Turner's rebellion struck fear in the heart of Southerners, while the abolition movement left an ambiguous wake in the North. Consequently, the fear of the black man was significantly alleviated by the humor of the minstrel show. At the same time the minstrel performance required a substantial knowledge of black culture, which on the whole promoted a greater, if reluctant, understanding of the racial Other.

In a somewhat paradoxical and unwitting way the minstrel show led to a more vigorous cultural presence for the black community and at the same time contributed to the legitimization of African American cultural achievements. Despite its pejorative intent, the creation of Cotton Jim, Dandy Jim and the others represented a partial recognition of the Other. While Cotton Jim emanated negligence, carelessness, and unbridled happiness, his infectious laughter offered panacea both to careworn actor and northern theatergoer alike. Dandy Jim's potential interest in white women on the one hand perpetuates fears of miscegenation, but at the same time it allowed members of the audience to seek escape from the

"web of desire, fantasy, or guilt" (Allport 420) woven by a suppressed longing for the forbidden fruit presented by the racial and sexual Other.

Virágos and Varró refer to the ambiguity of black-white relations, as the repressed desires paralleling a violent rejection of the Other laid the psychological foundation of the minstrel drama. Thus while on the one hand the minstrel images described blacks as unreliable, bragging, licentious, promiscuous, superstitious people, these depictions allowed writers, actors, and viewers to deal with their own insecurities. Moreover, the minstrel stage functioned as the physical manifestation of *Sambo* as the "Mammy's" and "Aunt Jemima's" features were retraced in Coal-black Rose, the plantation slave came alive in Cotton Jim, and Zip Coon, or the "coon" figure, was recreated in Dandy Jim.

A significant added value of the book is that the authors do not restrict their inquiry to the stage and emphasize the influence of the minstrel tradition both in high and low culture. The work demonstrates how the minstrel tradition impacted filmmaking and radio programs, and how such artifacts as the Coon Jigger toy and the Mammy Memo perpetuate the *Sambo* image.

The book provides a thorough overview of minstrel patterns in the literature of the 19th and 20th century. The authors point out that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) abounds in minstrel characters, and its plot reflects the structure of the minstrels show. In addition to Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain and Herman Melville resorted to the minstrel motif in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and in "Benito Cereno" (1855), respectively. Virágos and Varró also reveal minstrel elements in the poetry of John Berryman and in the plays of Ntozake Shange. Moreover, a reverse minstrel motif can be discerned in Douglas Turner Ward's drama, "Day of Absence" (1966) according to which blacks become invisible by assuming white make-up in order to prove their indispensability and the corresponding helplessness of the white community.

The minstrel trope, or the black mask theater is a powerful tool. It enables authors to convey hidden meanings and present criticism of the status quo. The use of the minstrel motif testifies to the strength of mainstream stereotypes in addition to indicating an intention of conformity. The deployment of the mask, as Hodge and Kress pointed out, is an expression of a power relationship, in the course of which the wearer or maker of the mask implies his domination over the object of his ridicule. While a prima facie look might suggest the exclusive validity of this assertion, the truth is that the object of ridicule has some power over

the mask maker and wearer. The imitated movements, accents, and actions originate in the black community, thus in an unwitting way African Americans can be considered co-authors of the minstrel image. Consequently, one has to look beyond the convenient cultural equation informed by the dominant subject and the muted object, as while the black community is certainly objectified, in a bizarre and indirect fashion its voice is heard as well.

In addition to taking a comprehensive scholarly look at the stereotyping process and performing a painstaking examination of the institutional, cultural, and historical background of blackface minstrelsy the authors illustrate the difficulty of the translatability of cultures, an issue familiar to anyone involved in intercultural and interlingual communication. The cogent examples lamenting the loss of crucial textual content due to translators' inability to understand the respective cultural context bring Ortutay's translation analysis theory to mind. Accordingly appropriate translations are based on a full understanding of the semantic, meta-semiotic, and meta-meta semiotic levels or reflect the denotative, connotative meanings along with the authorial intent respectively (269). Virágos and Varró prove that the translations of minstrel texts tend to be stranded on the denotative level, and the readers are not given an option to advance to a higher level of understanding. This book, however, offers a strong ray of hope as the treasure trove unearthed by the authors empower any interested reader to a greater understanding of the culture of the United States along with presenting a potential blue-print for the elimination of bad and disfiguring depictions of the racial or cultural Other. The authors of the monograph thus fulfill both missions of the translating effort. The detailed cultural analysis brings the target culture closer to the reader in addition to making him or her recognize the flaws of the mental maneuvers resulting in the stereotyping process.

Virágos and Varró's study functions as a milestone in the development of American Studies in Hungary. The book's conceptual apparatus surpasses the limits of the discipline, as the respective methodology can be used for analyzing other cultures. The work perpetuating the never-ending human quandary of dealing with the Other, goes beyond suggesting a mere acknowledgement of the presence of minorities. Virágos and Varró's seminal endeavor teaches an important lesson to anyone grappling with the consequences of cultural diversity as in the reflection of the mirror held up by the authors all of us can recognize the successors of Jim Crow.

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