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Area, Space and Culture

Reflections about ‘Travelling Concepts’ in Interculturality

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by

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The notions of “cultural area / *aires culturelles*” and “cultural space” are “travelling concepts” as Mieke Bal calls it¹. They travel between cultures, disciplines (anthropology, geography, history, geo-strategy...), and time. To understand their history, it is necessary to refer:

- more generally to the concept of culture, which can be defined in many ways. Its sphere varies with the language (there are plenty of meanings of the only notion of *culture* in English to what you can add those of analog expressions in other languages);
- more specifically, notions such as *Kulturkreis*, cultural landscape, ethnoscape, third space, *Kulturraum*... that have been developed in some disciplines or beyond disciplines, in various linguistic areas at different times.

In this paper, I will consider only some French, German and English concepts. The aim of my paper is not to draw up a detailed history of all of these notions, but to place some of them in their historical and political contexts in order to provide a critical approach of cultural area / *aires culturelles* / cultural space in the contemporary world.

Aires, Spaces and Cultures

Before turning to historical and intercultural considerations, I will begin to cross the definitions of the French words *aire* and *espace* with these of culture. I based my precedent research on the meaning of these terms in French. *Aire* (in latin: *area*) designates a lot of significations:

- the floor where grain is beaten,
- the flat surface of the rock where the eagle make his nest,
- the delimited grounds reserved for a certain type of activity (*aire de jeu*). It is similar to the meaning of *area* as a bounded portion of a surface, a region (*playing area*),
- the surface of a planar region, a solid or something else and its measures in square units² (it is also similar to the definition of *area*)

Contrary to the definition of *area* in English, the notion of *aire* concerns neither open, sunken places, nor fields of experience, activity or knowledge. The stability suggested by the word *aire* came up again in the notion of *aire continentale*. This expression designates a vast region of the Earth’s crust which remains stable over geological time. Beyond the notion of stability,

the previous frame of the nest evokes the protective and perhaps confined nature of this surface.

The French word *espace* (from latin: *spatium*) is very closed to space. It designates:

- an indefinite extent that surrounds and contains all objects,
- its representation,
- in mathematics, a set of points (vectors), with a structure,
- the three dimensional geometry in space, as opposed to the plan,
- the volume occupied by something,
- the environment affected for a particular purpose (*advertising space*),
- the extent in which the stars move³.

But the notion of *espace* or space is much wider in scope than the concept of *aire*. It can be used to designate imaginary and chimerical ideas (*imaginary spaces*), time (*a space of time*), and emptiness (*Newton's absolute space, the space between two words*). Within his "triplicity of space", Henri Lefebvre crossed different meanings of the term: the spatial practice of a society, the representations of space (*l'espace conçu*) and the spaces of representation (*l'espace vécu*)⁴.

As we saw, *aire* and space seems to be quite opposite. That means: when a theorist chooses the word *aire*/area or space, the meaning may be very different. In order to situate different theories between these two poles, I propose to elaborate two opposite ideal types (M. Weber):

<i>AIRE</i>	<i>ESPACE/SPACE</i>
two-dimensional	three-dimensional or more
definite, delimited	indefinite, infinite
multiple	united
stable	variable
close and confine	open

In my paper, *aire* and space are related to culture. Beyond the numerous significations of culture or *Kultur*, Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink underlines three concepts:

1. **The concept of intellectual-aesthetic culture** (*intellektuell-ästhetischer Kulturbegriff*) related to *Bildung* and art. It derives from the traditional canon of great writers, artists or composers, and their works that have played a central role. This notion is linked with an elitist conception of culture based on aesthetic, moral and ethical values, and opposed to popular or mass culture;
2. **The concept of material or instrumental culture** (*materieller oder instrumenteller Kulturbegriff*) that comes from the etymological sense of *agricultura*;
3. **The concept of cultural anthropology** (*anthropologischer Kulturbegriff*), which means all the collective representations, patterns of thought, and actions of a society.

It would be interesting to bring intercultural theories in relation with these concepts of culture. In this sense, the opposition between material and spiritual culture is crucial. Indeed, there is a similarity between the intellectual-aesthetic culture and the anthropological one. Both are based on a canonization process, linked to many values: aesthetics, ethics, religion...

The situation of different theories of interculturality in a multipolar space à la Bourdieu is useful to prevent bipolarity (*aire vs space, material vs spiritual culture*). This space opposes, on the horizontal axis, the poles of *aire* and space; on the vertical axis that of "material" and

“spiritual culture”. All concepts will be situated between these poles, within each of the following four quadrants:

- A, bottom right: cultural spaces taking into account material culture;
- B, bottom left: cultural areas taking into account material culture;
- C, top left: cultural areas based almost exclusively on spiritual culture;
- D, top right: cultural spaces based almost exclusively on spiritual culture.

Quadrant A: older notions of *Kulturkreis* and Cultural Landscape

Theorized by scientists as Friedrich Ratzel, Leo Frobenius or Fritz Graebner, the concept of *Kulturkreis* (Cultural Circle) appeared in the late 19th century. According to them, different cultures would not develop uniformly, but have gone through successive stages, during which they were able to transform themselves. A limited number of Cultural Circles may grow from a cultural center in various places at different time. Ratzel’s anthropo-geography, for example, links human societies to natural environments. The societies, and more generally the states, are compared to living organisms that grow before declining. According to him, the development of the population depends on his environment: when people are well adapted to a country, they tend to invade another one. Ratzel concludes that people are constantly moving and that they should be expansive when they are sufficiently strong. Borders are seen as the expression of an organic movement, which leads to justify the recovery of neighboring areas. Ratzel’s ideas, including the notion of *Lebensraum*⁵, were instrumentalized by the Nazis. This had discredited *space studies* for a while after WWII. But the new visions of Michel Foucault⁶ and Henri Lefebvre⁷ lead, after the *spatial turn*, to the rehabilitation of this domain of research. The notion of *Kulturkreis* is linked essentially with material culture and is closer to the conception of space than those of *aire*, as the organic and dynamic character of the Cultural Circles witnesses.

Influenced by the German geographer Johann Sölch⁸, the US-geographer Carl Sauer, founder of the Berkeley School, developed since 1925 the concept of cultural landscape⁹. Applied to human activity in its natural environment, this notion takes in account the relationships between groups, cultures and natural environment¹⁰. Far away from rigidly defined areas as will do some of his students and other theorists from quadrants B and C, Sauer is particularly interested in material culture, natural environment, and in how these could be jeopardized¹¹.

Quadrant B : the concepts of *aires de civilisation* (Mauss & Braudel)

According to Marcel Mauss, in 1929, “a civilization is both an area and a form”¹². “The form of a civilization is the sum total of the specific appearances taken by the ideas, the practices and the products common or more or less common to a certain number of given societies”. The “areas of civilization” (*aires de civilization*) include societies whose representations, practices and products form a common heritage. A civilization has “always its breakpoints, its limits, its core and its periphery. The description and definition of these areas are a key work in the history [...]”¹³ Mauss believed that civilizations can be circumscribed not only by their capacity of borrowing from other cultures and their will to expansion, but also by the internal resistances of the societies that compose them. However,

he notices a trend towards a kind of standardization in the process that we call nowadays globalization, largely due to the impact of science and cinema. Among the facts of civilization, Mauss mentions very different elements like industries, arts, science, local flavors, layout of ground... Therefore, his notion of civilization is linked to material culture. The fact that civilizations tend to isolate themselves refers further to the notion of *aire* than to those of cultural space.

Mauss has already highlighted the temporal dimension of civilizations. Braudel insists further on this point: for him, civilizations are perennial and their history is part of the “long-term”, since they survive even revolutions. Cultural traits can show a great diversity: shape and material of houses, languages and dialects, culinary tastes, agriculture (he differentiates the civilizations of wheat, maize and rice)... Braudel therefore takes account of material culture, but he also determines cultural areas which remain relatively stable on long-term scales:

- **European civilizations:** America and the other Europe (Muscovy, Russia, USSR),
- **Non-European civilizations:** Islam and the Muslim world, the black continent and the Far-East.

Quadrant C: the clash of civilizations (Huntington)

The clash of civilization is a notion proposed by the political scientist Samuel P. Huntington, who was an expert of the US National Security Council during the Carter administration. His notion flourished in the context of economic globalization following the fall of the Berlin Wall¹⁴. According to him, the borders of the world are less politically determined but related to cultural areas that prophesy the increasing of the clash of civilizations. Huntington distinguished nine major civilizations: “Western” (Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand), “Latin American”, “African” (Sub-Saharan Africa), “Islamic”, “Chinese” (including Korea, Vietnam and the Philippines), “Hindu” (India and Sri Lanka), “Orthodox” (Russia and partly in Eastern Europe and South-East), “Buddhist” (Tibet, Mongolia and Southeast Asia) and Japanese¹⁵. The reunified Western world fades in comparison with other regions which affirm their cultural independence and reject “Western intoxication”: Huntington emphasizes the rise of civilizations that he describes as “Chinese” and “Islamic”¹⁶. The names given to his cultural areas show the importance of religions, especially those that are not “Western”. Their renewal would be the most powerful manifestation of anti-westernism in non-Western societies¹⁷. The gap between the West, now reunited, and other civilizations has been masked before the fall of the Berlin Wall, by the antagonism issued from the Cold War. New alliances between civilizations in our complex world are motivated by common interests or enemies¹⁸. Much of the conflict would be located along the fault line between “Islamic” civilization and other areas. This theory develops precisely in the context of the events of 11 September 2001 and the Iraq War in 2003. If Huntington's theories continue to play a major role from a geo-strategic point of view, they remain highly contested, particularly because of the essentialist vision of civilizations, regarded as homogeneous entities back to themselves. In reality, cultural areas interact always, even in times of war. And even the Middle East conflict, essentially related to religion and culture, depends on a complex set of factors, including the legacy of colonialism¹⁹.

Among many critics of Huntington's theory, we can mention those of geographer Yves Lacoste. He provides an arrangement of the world into five groups: the West, the Islamic world, India, China, and the islands and peninsulas of Western Pacific²⁰. Unlike the civilizations of Huntington, Lacoste sets allow interpenetration of areas and the internal diversity of these. So he says that the clashes occur rarely in the fault lines between civilizations but more frequently within the same cultural areas²¹. Far away from material culture, Huntington refers primarily to the religious character of non-Western civilizations. In addition, his essentialist vision remains close to the ideal type of *aire*. The model of Lacoste, however, admitting blurred and shifting boundaries, is more oriented towards quadrant D that brings together the latest concepts of ethnoscape (Appadurai) and third space (Bhabha).

Quadrant D: the postcolonial deconstruction of cultural areas (Appadurai, Bhabha)

Since 1989, the world has seen the clash of civilizations gaining ground. At the same time, area studies have been questioned. According to Arjun Appadurai,

“thus left-wing critics of area studies, much influenced by the important work of Edward Said on orientalism, have been joined by free-marketeers and advocates of liberalization, who are impatient with what they deride as the narrowness and history fetish of area-studies experts”.

But Said, like the author of *Orientalism*, has often been regarded as the initiator of postcolonial studies. To what extent, concepts such as third space or ethnoscape, at the foundation of postcolonial theory, participate in the deconstruction of cultural areas?

Homi K. Bhabha has much developed the concept of “third space” which is situated beyond the bipolarity: “existence” of nation / alterity of other nations. This space, those of DissemiNation (i.e. cleaved and hybrid Nation), is “*internally* marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference.”²² The third space applies therefore to a performative utterance, far away from the material sense of culture. Furthermore, because of its hybrid and heterogeneous character, the third space refers much more to the notion of space than to that of area.

In the current globalization, we are caught in cultural flows of different dimensions, depending on the adopted point of view. In this regard, Arjun Appadurai identifies five dimensions of global cultural flows that can be termed: *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *financescapes*, and *ideoscapes*²³. These flows draw in our imagination fluid and irregular shaped landscapes. At the post-colonial era, Appadurai want to break with the structural opposition between center and periphery. Borrowing from the idea of rhizome-channel²⁴, he focuses on the flux of globalization and the experience of migration resulting from it. Appadurai defines the concept of ethnoscape, which interests us here in the first place, as follows:

“By *ethnoscape* I mean the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree. This is not to say that there are no relatively stable communities and networks of kinship, friendship,

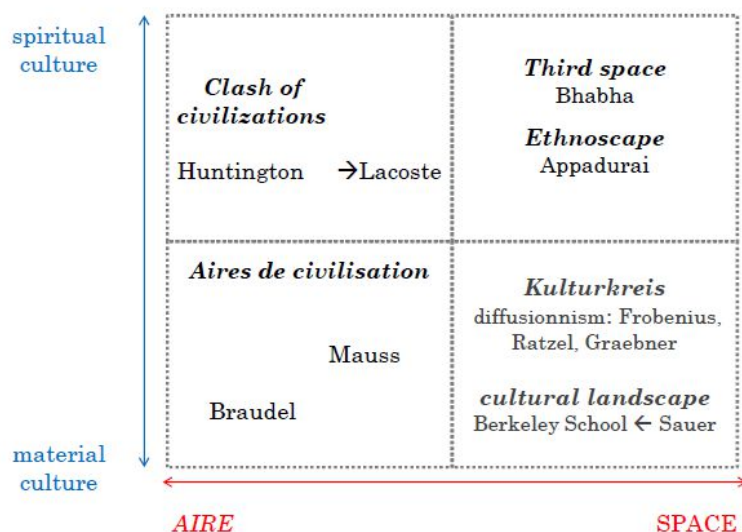
work, and leisure, as well as birth, residence, and other filial forms. But it is to say that the warp of these stabilities is everywhere shot through with the woof of human motion, as more persons and groups deal with the realities of having to move or the fantasies of wanting to move.”²⁵

The notion of *ethnoscape* refers to images and landscapes, which are shared into the identification process of diasporic communities. The construction of this kind of transnational identities is based on very different elements, like nostalgic memories or new communication technologies. The ethnoscape concerning at first the creation of transnational identities in the global city is very far from material culture. Because of its rhizomic and diasporic nature, this notion contributes to the deconstruction of cultural areas and heralds a new form of transnational space. Appadurai considers the area studies tradition as a “double-edged sword”²⁶. This tradition has been a “tiny refuge for the serious study of foreign languages, alternatives worldviews, and large-scale perspectives on sociocultural change outside Europe and the USA”. Area studies have been “one of the few serious counterweights to the tireless tendency to marginalize huge parts of the world in the American academy and in American society more generally.”²⁷ Appadurai regrets however that the area-studies tradition is probably too comfortable with:

“its own maps of the world, too secure in its own expert practices, and too insensitive to transnational processes both today and in the past. [...] What does need to be recognized, if the area-studies tradition is to be revitalized, is that locality itself is a historical product and that the histories through which location emerge are eventually subject to the dynamics of the global.”²⁸

A path between *aire* and space, material and spiritual culture

It is possible to locate graphically into the multi-space the various models discussed above, depending on their proximity to the poles of *aire* and space, and them of spiritual and material culture:



The fact that the newer models are moving away from material culture is most certainly due to the global dissemination of innovation and agricultural products. Thus, the tools or technologies cease to be specific to a natural environment or a cultural area. On the other hand, with the standardization of technologies and constructions (international airports or industrial areas), the diversity of landscapes tends to disappear. It also adds the importance of religions, whose visibility is increased after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in a world whose borders are less political than civilizational.

How to explain the transition from space to *aire* and then the return to space? After World War II, the concept of time has been preferred to that of space. This is due especially to the instrumentalization of the latter notion by Nazi propaganda. The term *Raum* has hardly been the subject of studies in German-speaking countries, with the exception of its use by authors living at the turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries as Georg Simmel or Walter Benjamin. The appearance of the concept of cultural area or *aire culturelle* is at least linked to the two following factors:

- the emergence of area studies which are much developed in the USA mainly for geostrategic reasons, notably under the impetus of the National Defense Education Act (1958);
- the construction of a sustainable European civilization after the horrors of the two world wars. This civilization, based on the spirit of the Enlightenment, would lie beyond national and cultural differences. If European civilization is seen as a universal model in the 1960s, the situation changed in the 1990s. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the worldview of a clash of civilizations emerges by neoconservatives in the USA. According to them, the reunited West (Europe, North America, and Australia) would be the target of other civilizations.

With the end of “grand narratives”²⁹, post-modernity accords less emphasis to the temporal category. Meanwhile, the concept of space is reintroduced into international research since the mid-1980s. The end of the Cold War and the expansion of markets in the context of economic globalization have profoundly changed the representation of space and world mapping. Nowadays, global development depends not only on nations, but also on a constellation of relational dependency networks and international mutual relationship.

Finally, the choice of models and their names also depends on the disciplinary culture of the theorists³⁰. Indeed, the fact that Braudel’s civilizations respond more to the ideal type of *aire* than those of space is largely related to his specialty, history, which was leading him to the question of long-time. It is quite different by authors whose theories are registered in the C-quadrant. Their specialty is in the field of geopolitics or international strategy. However, theorists oriented to cross-disciplinary research or cultural studies are located more towards the ideal type of space than those of *aire*. Thus, the A and D-quadrants fall within cultural sciences (*Kulturwissenschaft/en*) which designate:

- the cultural studies developed at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) of the University of Birmingham, then in the USA and now all around the world;
- the older concept of *Kulturwissenschaft* that emerged in Germany at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. Considered as too vague, Heinrich Rickert replaces the notion of *Geisteswissenschaft* by that of *Kulturwissenschaft* opposed to *Naturwissenschaft*. As nature is meaningless and valueless, a scientific approach to culture is necessary. If this first “cultural science”, partly linked to neo-Kantianism, feeds upon the work of

philosophers and theorists such as Georg Simmel, Max Weber or Ernst Cassirer, it has also been instrumentalized, like Ratzel's notion of *Lebensraum*.

Because of these different approaches, it is essential, in order to reflect on cultural area and space, to bring together representatives not only from different disciplines (anthropology, history, geography, political science...) but also, beyond disciplines, from cultural studies in the wider sense of the term.

Some perspectives...

It is possible to envisage different perspectives. One solution is to rethink area studies by taking into account, f.e. overlays of areas and nomadology³¹. Another solution is to move beyond cultural areas³². In this context, it would be interesting to establish a new theory by crossing area studies with other theories of interculturality as Empire or transfer studies³³. The ideal positioning of this new theory would be the middle of the multipolar space previously defined, halfway between the poles "material" and "spiritual culture", but also between the ideal types of *aire* and space. If transfer studies, especially in its recent transformation, tend more towards the notion of space, the Empire studies, however, accommodate themselves rather with a return to the *aire culturelle*. The planetarism of Gayatri Spivak or Sonja Neef can be added to this³⁴. Nowadays the planet is seen as more than a natural space devoted exclusively to the market. This new point of view would mark a slight shift from spiritual culture back to material culture. Therefore, the center of gravity of this new theory could well be situated in the middle of the multipolar space.

- ¹ BAL M., *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities. A Rough Guide*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2002 & NEEF S., “L’incertitude dans l’histoire des idées cosmopolitiques et cosmographiques”, NOUR SCKELL S. & EHRHARDT D., *Le Soi et le Cosmos d’Alexander von Humboldt à nos jours*, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 2015, p. 45 sq.
- ² Article “aire”, *Le Petit Littré*, 1990, p. 48; *Le Petit Larousse illustré 1996*, p. 50.
- ³ Article “espace”, *Le Petit Littré*, 1990, p. 632; *Le Petit Larousse illustré 1996*, p. 405.
- ⁴ LEFEBVRE H., *La production de l’espace* [1974], Paris, Ed. Anthropos, 4/2000, p. 48 sq.
- ⁵ RATZEL F., *Der Lebensraum. Eine biogeographische Studie*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1901.
- ⁶ FOUCAULT M., “Des espaces autres” [1967], *Empan* 54/2, 2004, p. 12-19: www.cairn.info/revue-empan-2004-2-page-12.htm.
- ⁷ See footnote 4.
- ⁸ SÖLCH J., *Die Auffassung der “natürlichen Grenzen” in der wissenschaftlichen Geographie*, Innsbruck, Universitätsverlag Wagner, 1924.
- ⁹ SAUER C. O., “The Morphologie of Landscape” [1925], AGNEW J., LIVINGSTONE D. N. & ROGERS A. (dir.), *Human Geography: An Essential Anthology*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996, p. 296-315.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 315.
- ¹¹ CLAVAL P., “Des aires culturelles aux réseaux culturels”, paper given at APHG, Caen, July 2, 1999, <http://aphgcaen.free.fr/conferences/claval.htm>.
- ¹² MAUSS M., “Les civilisations. Eléments et formes”, paper given at Paris in 1929: http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/mauss_marcel/oeuvres_2/oeuvres_2_13/mauss_les_civilisation.pdf, p. 11.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ¹⁴ HUNTINGTON S.P., “The Clash of Civilizations?”, *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, p. 22-49. HUNTINGTON S.P., *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996; French translation: *Le Choc des Civilisations*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2000.
- ¹⁵ See map “Le monde à l’époque du choc des civilisations après 1990”, *Le choc des civilisations, op. cit.*, p. 22.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 354-364.
- ¹⁹ LÜSEBRINK H.J., *Interkulturelle Kommunikation*, Stuttgart & Weimar, Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2005, p. 29-31.
- ²⁰ LACOSTE Y., “Tout sauf la fin de l’histoire”, *Le Monde*, October 24, 1997, p. 18.
- ²¹ “Le choc des civilisations, vrai ou faux débat?”, *Les Actes du FIG*, 2002, disponible sur : http://archives-fig-st-die.cndp.fr/actes/actes_2002/civilisation/article.htm [consulté le 16 juillet 2015] : “En fait, l’essentiel de ces conflits sont des conflits internes avant tout : les islamistes ont tué beaucoup plus de musulmans que de non musulmans.”
- ²² BHABHA H., *Les lieux de la culture. Une théorie postcoloniale*, Paris, Payot, 2007, p. 235.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 70-76.
- ²⁴ Cf. DELEUZE G. & GUATTARI F., “1. Introduction : Rhizome”, *Mille Plateaux*, Paris, Les éditions de minuit, 1980, p. 9-37.
- ²⁵ APPADURAI A., *Après le colonialisme, op. cit.*, p. 71-72.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- ²⁷ *Idem.*
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52-53.
- ²⁹ LYOTARD J. F., *La condition postmoderne*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1979.
- ³⁰ See the conclusion of the 12th Conference of the GIS Institut des Amériques *Aires culturelles 2014*, <http://trac.hypotheses.org/697>.
- ³¹ Cf. POTHIER J., “La recherche universitaire à l’heure de la mondialisation”, <http://trac.hypotheses.org/724>.
- ³² *Au-delà des Area Studies – perspectives transculturelles et comparatistes* is f.e. the title of the international conference organized by Laurent McFalls and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink in 2003 at University of Montréal.
- ³³ Cf. EHRHARDT D., “Transfer studies : une introduction”, EHRHARDT D. & NOUR SCKELL S. (dir.), *Interculturalité et transfert*, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 2012, p. 13-18.
- ³⁴ Cf. SPIVAK G. C., *Imperative zur Neuerfindung des Planeten / Imperatives to Re-Imagine the Planet*, Wien, Passagen, 1999; NEEF S., *Der babylonische Planet. Kultur, Übersetzung, Dekonstruktion unter den Bedingungen der Globalisierung*, Heidelberg, Winter, 2013; “L’incertitude dans l’histoire des idées cosmopolitiques et cosmographiques”, NOUR SCKELL S. et EHRHARDT D. (dir.), *Le Soi et le Cosmos d’Alexander von Humboldt à nos jours*, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 2015, p. 45-54.