

# The Politics of Translation at Soviet Film Festivals during the Cold War

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Some time between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, my grandmother, Kira Razlogova, translated an African film at the Moscow International Film Festival. It was an official screening, with the ambassador of the African country present in the audience. She sat in a translator’s booth at the back of the theater, reading into the microphone from a printed French dialogue list just given to her. She had never seen this film before. She watched it now for the first time through the window of her booth, and synced her reading to the spoken lines flowing into her earphones, lines in an African language she did not know. Loudspeakers transmitted her voice into the cinema hall over the partially muted original soundtrack. Ten minutes before the end, the script ran out of pages. The film goes on; she has nothing to say; an administrator storms into her booth predicting a diplomatic crisis. To save the situation, she went ahead and invented the dialogue for the rest of the film on the basis of the moving images. After the screening, the ambassador, made aware that the script was too short, thanked her for making up the final scenes. He claimed her translation was quite close to the original (Kira Razlogova).

My grandmother’s experience underscores Soviet innovation in simultaneous film translation—as an improvisational sound art and as a form of cultural diplomacy during the Cold War. As the postwar Soviet Union opened up its cultural borders, it aimed to compete with Western powers for the attention of the decolonizing and unaligned countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Engerman). Film festivals in Moscow and Tashkent played a key role in this project. Simultaneous interpreters made these festivals possible, through their screenings as well as their heated debates about the role of cinema in newly independent states and ongoing liberation movements in the Third World. The Soviet state tightly controlled the festival in Moscow, and to a lesser extent, in Tashkent. Even so, festival participants formed friendships and discovered films in ways that explored dissident and postcolonial politics.

New work on world cinema, film festivals, and film translation has barely acknowledged the existence of live film interpreting after the silent era, when live sound accompaniment was widespread.<sup>1</sup> Audio-visual translation scholars today focus almost exclusively on dubbing and subtitles (Gambier). I learned of this forgotten chapter of Soviet and world cinema history only because I experienced live translation myself,

watching foreign films from a translator's booth and listening to stories my relatives told me since childhood. Here I draw, among other sources, on several interviews with and written memories of the earliest surviving Soviet simultaneous film translators—some of them my relatives—who began their work in the mid-1960s.<sup>2</sup>

Although you would not know it from the scholarship, during the Cold War all film festivals used live translation at one time or another, if often unofficially. On paper, most festivals have required or preferred subtitled films since the early 1950s. Yet as late as 1990 one could encounter a Chinese film in Berlin with only German loudspeaker translation ("Film Festival Guide: Berlin"). By then, an electronic subtitles system, introduced at the Florence Film Festival of Independent Film in 1986, made it possible to screen films with subtitles in two languages, a local language and in English, a global lingua franca ("Trimmed Lineup at Florence Fest of Indie Pictures"). Berlin and Venice still use live earphone translation at jury and some press screenings (Ferguson; Oncins). Soviet festivals—the Moscow International Film Festival, launched in 1959, and the Tashkent International Festival of African and Asian Cinema, inaugurated in 1968 (it had included Latin American cinema since 1974)—chose simultaneous film translation as the standard.

The conventional distinction between written "translation" and oral simultaneous "interpretation" makes little sense for Soviet film festivals.<sup>3</sup> At different times during the same screening, the "translator" could translate a foreign dialogue list, interpret the soundtrack, or make up the dialogue based on the visual track when the vocal track was in an unfamiliar language and neither subtitles nor script were available. Observers at the time used both "simultaneous film translation" and "simultaneous film interpretation" to describe the practice. I will do the same in this article.

Simultaneous film interpreting at Tashkent and the Moscow International Film Festival serves as an apt starting point to investigate the transnational circulation of films and ways of seeing them during the Cold War. Whenever simultaneous screen interpretation appeared, it revealed the uncertainty of festival film traffic and spectatorship: cash-strapped festivals, last-minute screenings, censored films, exiled or blacklisted filmmakers, nascent postcolonial film industries, or inexpert local audiences. I will begin by providing an overview of Cold War festival film translation history, focusing on live commentary. I will then show how simultaneous translation helped form social networks and film canons at festivals.

International festivals became enmeshed in the politics of translation from their inception. The first international film festival, in Venice in

1932, demanded films with no subtitles or dubbing, in line with Benito Mussolini's nationalist program, which also required dubbing all foreign films into Italian for general distribution (Ďurovičová 198). The Cannes film festival, conceived as a liberal answer to fascist Venice, was scheduled for 1939 but delayed by World War II until 1946. Cannes organizers also required films without subtitles or dubbing but for the sake of aesthetic purity, "on the grounds that they must be shown exactly as made" ("Power Politics"). The practice of showing "original versions" of films without any translation continued into the 1970s in art film exhibition spaces such as Cinémathèque Française in Paris and Anthology Film Archives in New York (Canby).

Official rules notwithstanding, the Soviets introduced simultaneous film translation at the first Cannes festival. This sparked the first film translation-related Cold War conflict. Until Cannes programmers decided to choose films themselves in 1972, governments selected films to represent each nation at festivals, and interpreted every glitch as a geopolitical insult. Soviet representatives charged "sabotage" when technical difficulties interrupted the screening of their documentary, *Berlin*. American guests took offense when the Soviets provided "French commentary" for their films. "We do not understand," fumed Harold L. Smith, Paris representative of the Motion Picture Association of America, "how, in such an important event as the Cannes Festival, the conditions of the competition can be thus modified in the midst of things. [...] a certain favoritism which is unfavorable to us is being shown here" ("Power Politics"; "Cannes Festival Planning"). Soviet decision to provide French commentary presaged the live multilingual translation via loudspeaker and earphones at Moscow and Tashkent festivals.

Nations thus fought the Cold War both on vocal and visual film tracks. A year after the first Cannes festival, film producers lamented the expensive "epidemic of film festivals" where "all countries producing pictures are anxious to have them internationally reviewed as national propaganda" ("European Pix Festival Rash"). In 1956 the International Federation of Film Producers Associations set up a rating system for festivals to regulate aesthetic, political, and commercial aspects of the epidemic. The most important A-rated festivals admitted films to competition upon governments' nominations, convened an international jury, and only accepted new films not previously shown in Europe (Moine). Propaganda required intelligibility. *Variety* advised American companies to always subtitle pictures sent to the Moscow festival because "titles are burned into film and can't be changed to distort a thought, add or omit another, as might have been the case if a local speaker had been charged with on-the-scene commenting" (Hawkins). By 1953, both Venice and

Cannes required subtitles for films in competition (“Venice Fete Cuts Down”; “Bigger Entry List”). Still, in 1965 Marlen Khutsiev’s *Mne dvadtsat let (I Am Twenty)* screened at Venice with an Italian commentary instead of officially required Italian or French subtitles (Kumar, *World Cinema ‘65*; “Orange’ to Venice”).

Festivals could rarely deliver the linguistic clarity the cultural Cold War required. The United States helped launch the Berlin International Film Festival in 1951 in West Berlin to showcase achievements of capitalist film industries to nearby socialist countries (Fehrenbach). The festival featured pictures from 21 countries (all but one subtitled in German), Oscar-like prizes, and an opportunity for East Berliners to view the films (“First ‘Oscars’ Awarded”). But the labor and expense of subtitling proved difficult to sustain. The second Berlinale in 1952 showed many films with no subtitles, dubbing, or commentary and offered no official prizes, instead asking local spectators to vote for favorites. Japanese *Rashomon* screened with French subtitles. “For the most part,” *Variety* reported, “few of the viewers were able to understand the dialog.” The film appeared among the ten pictures most popular with ordinary Berliners based on its visual track alone (“‘Happiness,’ Swedish Pic”). By the end of the decade, German officials crafted Berlinale as one of the “big three” A festivals, along with Cannes and Venice (Fehrenbach). By the 1960s, one company, Neue Mars Film took on subtitling for all Berlinale films. Still, film reels sometimes arrived too late for subtitling (Hoehn, “Berlin Finds Yanks ‘Unsnappy’”).

Simultaneous translation thus persisted at film festivals during the Cold War. The aims, budget, and target audience of a given festival determined translation methods. Major West European festivals served the contradictory interests of art cinema, city publicity, and film commerce. In addition to requiring subtitles in a local language, they eventually set up multilingual live interpretation via earphones for the jury and the press. In 1959, Berlin festival introduced high-frequency transistor receivers to non-German speaking guests for simultaneous translation of German subtitles into English, French and Spanish (Hoehn, “Berlin Film Fest Chatter”), later adding Russian as well (Ferguson). In 1960, Cannes followed suit, promising interpretation in six languages (“Cannes Film Festival Gets Translation Unit”). By 1968, however, it provided “hesitant” earphone translation only into English (Moskowitz, “Boxoffice”).

Smaller specialized West European festivals that catered to local audiences did not require subtitles but resorted to auditorium voiceover translation in the local language only. The 1978 Trieste Science Fiction Film Festival screened only one subtitled film and provided “shout commentary” in Italian for all others (Rosenthal). The Madrid Festival of Imaginarium and Science Fiction Cinema, founded in 1981, provided

loudspeaker translation into Spanish until 1984, when it switched to translation via headphones into Spanish and English (Besas, "Madrid's 4th"). At the 1978 Festival dei Popoli in Florence, many visitors complained about loud translation, but one reporter noted that without it, "the Italian public would have been greatly reduced" (Hammond). Popular participation coupled with limited budgets required live commentary.

Liberation movements led to a regional focus for translation in the Third World and separatist regions in the West. Such festivals usually short-changed the needs of outsiders. The Cartagena des Indies festival, established in 1960 for Spanish and Latin American films, offered no translation either for visitors or the jury (Ehrmann). At the 1963 Rio de Janeiro film festival, only jury members got headphone translation; other foreign guests could only see films in their own language ("Brazil Fest More Social Than Trade"). The Carthage festival of African and Middle Eastern films, established in 1966, offered no French subtitles for Arab language films as late as 1980 ("Carthage"). The Montreal World Film Festival, founded in 1959, in 1988 still screened French films without subtitles and offered simultaneous translation for some competing third-language films at only one out of three screenings (Gold). The San Sebastian International Film Festival introduced headset simultaneous translation in French and English in 1972, yet as late as 1978, its press screenings had no translation equipment, prompting one reporter to dub San Sebastian "a fest by the Basques and for the Basques" (Besas, "Simul-Translation Helps Sebastian"; Besas, "Confused, Angry"). In these cases, withholding translation served as a declaration of independence.

Socialist international film festivals set dual national and global aims. They thus used live translation the most (Moskowitz, "Boxoffice"): commentary aloud and via earphones, translation in a local language and multilingual interpretation for foreign guests. The first East European International Film Festival, in Karlovy Vary, was founded in 1946 and received an A rating in 1956. Its interpreters translated Czech subtitles aloud at every screening in a "babel of five translations" up until 1958, when the festival introduced headphones (Moskovitz, "Karlovy"; Moskovitz, "Party"). Another major socialist film festival, in Leipzig, was founded in 1955 and specialized in documentary films. The festival installed a "four-track earphone translation system" in 1977, but even then it coexisted with German loudspeaker voiceover (Holloway). The Moscow International Film Festival took place every other year beginning in 1959, as an A festival alternating with Karlovy Vary. Earphone translation coexisted with megaphone commentary from the festival's inception until 1977 (Werba). By 1965 the festival offered interpretation in 13 languages (Myers 12). The first Asian and African Film Festival in Tashkent took place in 1968. The

Moscow and Tashkent festivals took place in alternating years, used the same translation format and the same interpreters, from Moscow.

Simultaneous translation thus forces us to consider the entire global festival network without placing major West European festivals at the center. East European festivals needed multilingual translation all the more because they courted filmmakers and critics from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Like the Moscow and Tashkent festivals, they had to deal with many more languages and preferred, but did not require, subtitles for all films. Indian filmmaker and critic Devendra Kumar noted that Karlovy Vary was the first festival to provide a forum for discussion among Third World filmmakers (Kumar, "To Tashkent with Love"). A report in the Moroccan journal *Cinéma 3* congratulated the 1970 Leipzig festival on screening Cuban director Santiago Alvarez's film *79 Springs* (1969) (Sail). *Variety* reporter Gordon Hitchens, also the founding editor of *Film Comment* and formerly filmmaker for the United States Information Agency, recommended the Moscow Film Festival as "an extraordinary opportunity to see a great quantity of films that are unavailable in the West, and to see them all together in one time and place" (Hitchens, "Festival Report: Moscow"). Cannes, Venice, and Berlin celebrated select non-Western art films, but were not interested in cultivating Third World filmmakers as a group. In contrast, socialist bloc festivals, as well as a few specialized Western festivals such as Mostra Internazionale del Cinema Nuovo in Pesaro, Italy, brought together a critical mass of varied films from Asia, Africa, and Latin America and aimed to create a community for Third World filmmakers and critics.

In the Soviet Union, during the period of "the Thaw"—a relative democratization that followed Joseph Stalin's death in 1953—international festivals came one after another: the Indian Film Festival in 1954; the International Youth Festival in 1957, which included its own film series; then the Moscow Film Festival in 1959 and the Tashkent festival in 1968. Latin American films were well represented in Tashkent as early as 1974; two years later, the festival was renamed as the Asian, African, and Latin American Film Festival. The Moscow festival also publicized and awarded prizes to films from Senegal, Algeria, Iran, and Latin America (especially Cuba), to support revolutionary governments or movements in these countries. Organizers took care to dub all films screened at the 1954 Indian festival ("Reds Woo India"), but by the time the Moscow and Tashkent festivals rolled in, dubbing became too labor-intensive and costly, and live commentary became the standard.

Soviet film festival spectatorship depended on the practice of relay interpretation, now used at the United Nations and the Council of Europe,

but then unique to the Soviet Union. In Russia, simultaneous translation was first used informally during the Sixth Communist International Congress in 1928. Systematic professional simultaneous translation of speeches and testimony dates back to the Nuremberg Trials, where each foreign delegation translated the proceedings into its own language, and the Americans translated into German. Relay interpretation was a Soviet improvement on the Nuremberg system. It was first used during the 1952 International Economic Congress in Moscow: each speech was first translated into Russian, then from Russian into guests' languages. The system delayed the translation and exacerbated errors but used fewer interpreters at once and did not depend on translators fluent in two foreign tongues, which made it easier to cover more languages (Gofman).

The Soviet Union's Cold War ambitions thus shaped screen translation at film festivals. A Western visitor to the first Moscow festival lauded the "elegant, efficient, modern" headquarters theater "inside the walls of the fortress" of the Kremlin, the Soviet seat of power: "By wearing headphones and a transistor set, one could tune in simultaneous translations as at an international conference" ("The Festivals: Berlin; Cannes; Moscow; Venice."). Most Soviet festival-goers could not avoid seeing non-Western films, often as part of a double bill with coveted Western pictures, with voiceover commentary at satellite theaters. After every Moscow and Tashkent festival, interpreters introduced and translated films over loudspeakers at theaters in capital and provincial cities throughout all Soviet republics and the north and far east of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic (Libergal, "Illuzion"; Turovskaya; Elena E. Razlogova).

Simultaneous translation benefited festival guests from North America and Europe. In 1974, Gordon Hitchens visited the Tashkent festival for the third time. His *Variety* report described at length the perils of screen translation at the festival. Each film was translated live, first into Russian, broadcasted through the theater's loudspeakers over a turned-down original soundtrack, and then into the languages of the various foreign guests, who listened through transistor headphones. Although this "second-order" translation came up to half a minute later than the original utterance, Hitchens lauded this ungainly Soviet interpreting method because "a great number of films in so many languages, often obscure, participate in Tashkent." To Western observers like Hitchens, simultaneous interpreting at Tashkent gave "a unique opportunity to view films totally unknown outside their area" ("Mind-Bending, Discomforts").

Live translation also benefited Third World filmmakers. In 1974, 45 states sent official delegations to the Tashkent festival; 32 more nations participated unofficially. Besides the Asian and African representatives, participants included seven Latin American countries, as well as the

United Nations, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Liberation Front of North Vietnam (Hitchens, "Mind-Bending, Discomforts"). Most participants did not have the funds or the time to provide subtitles in the three official festival languages—Russian, English, or French. For example, African feature films at the first (1968) Tashkent festival included: a Guinean film with dialogue in a local dialect of French as well as in Susu; a Ghanaian film with English voiceover and dialogue in English as well as several local languages; and a Senegalese picture in Wolof with French subtitles. In part because of language barriers, lamented Guinean Secretary of State for Information, Alpha Amadou Diallo, a Senegalese may have had to travel to Tashkent to see a film made in neighboring Guinea (Razlogov, "Stanovlenie").

Annoying loudspeaker translation served millions of Russian-speaking film fans as well. By the early 1970s, the Moscow festival used hundreds of satellite screens, from art house Illuzion that trained the best simultaneous film interpreters, to the Houses of Culture affiliated with factories, to Houses of various creative unions, to large first-run movie theaters like Udarnik with 735 seats, and even the Palace of Sports with 13,700 seats. Mass audiences transformed the embodied context of festival film viewing (see Marks; Barker). During a 1965 Moscow festival screening of *My Fair Lady* (dir. Cukor, 1964) at the Palace of Sports, every time the interpreter tried to speak over a musical number, all 13,700 spectators "stomped their feet and screamed indignantly, 'No translation!'" (Golubev). Local spectators' judgments often contradicted the Soviet political party line. Father Ambros Eichenberger, director of the Film office of the Swiss Catholic film commission, described Uzbek viewers during the 1974 Tashkent festival as even less disciplined than Moscow festival-goers: "Uzbeks, when they don't like the film, react in a completely 'normal' way: whistle or leave the theater. Especially during political films, sometimes it was a true 'exodus' from the Palace of Arts theater with 2,300 seats" (Eichenberger). Such unruly spectators would not be present at the Cannes or Venice festivals, closed to locals.

Instead, Soviet viewers resembled African festival-goers: "After having exposed oneself for a week to the reactions of Tunisian audiences," U.S. critic Gideon Bachman remarked on the gap between the cinematic taste of Third World intellectuals and their popular constituencies at the 1973 Carthage festival, "one begins to fear that the political cinema of direct utility has not yet been born" ("In Search of Self-Definition" 48). Anti-imperialist politics did get a warm reception when expressed in popular genre form. "Audience involvement was maximal, with laughter and applause aplenty for the right moments," Gordon Hitchens reported about the Ougadougou Festival of Pan-African Film in Upper Volta (now



Burkina Faso). “Anti-western put-downs, as when Algerian guerrillas bested French soldiers in karate-combat, were particularly approved” (“Black Films for African Blacks” 199). Simultaneous translation helps explain this matching visibility of Soviet and African audiences. Africa has the strongest tradition of live megaphone translation, from missionary “cinema vans” of the 1930s to twenty-first century video parlors in Uganda and Tanzania (Achen and Openjuru; Krings). These live translation practices have encouraged “negotiation between the film, the authorized voice, and the spectators” (Bouchard 95). In similar ways, Soviet and African audiences made festival screenings unpredictable for programmers, participating filmmakers, and foreign guests.

Soviet geopolitical ambitions created conditions for filmmakers and critics to meet and form friendships that went beyond socialist geopolitical agenda. At the Moscow festival, neither film translators nor film fans were allowed to mingle with foreign guests. Communist Party officials approved all dialogue lists used for screen translation. KGB officials required interpreters who worked with international visitors to write reports about their conversations. And KGB “curators” watched interactions between Soviet staff and invited guests. Still, even in this tightly controlled scene, informal interaction was possible. Film scholar Neya Zorkaya remembered how at the 1965 Moscow festival she and her friends, all young film critics, argued about cinema with Michelangelo Antonioni at the Aragvi restaurant, aided by “virtuoso simultaneous translator” Georgy Bogemsky. Waiters kept bringing them Georgian wine even after closing hours (38). Such personal relationships helped the circulation of Soviet films in the West. Tom Luddy, program director of the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, California, at the 1973 Moscow festival organized a retrospective of 105 silent Soviet films at PFA, which then traveled to the Museum of Modern Art in New York (“Moscow Fest Gossip”; “Russe Pix at MMA”).

At the Tashkent festival, everyone stayed in one hotel and local KGB curators were less invested in surveillance. Film translators, local audiences, and foreign visitors mingled daily (Elena E. Razlogova). “I never saw a festival,” Ambros Eichenberger remarked, “where people would spend so much time dancing, singing, and, incidentally—eating.” Press-conferences turned into heated discussions that routinely went over the time limit (Schlegel). An Afghani film critic visiting the 1974 Tashkent festival remembered that during an overnight train trip to Samarkand, festival guests stayed up until six in the morning talking. After the festival, the Afghan entry *Andarzi Mudar* (*Mother’s Advice*, dir. Abdul Khaliq Halil, 1972) was shown in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan. After the screening, local spectators approached the Afghan delegation to say that

they liked the film. They claimed *Andarzi Mudar* did not require translation, although the film was in the Pashto language, distinct from the Tajik variant of Persian (Raheeq). Programmers cultivated informal contacts to find Third World films for their own festivals. At the 1980 Tashkent festival, Berlinale Forum of Young Cinema's co-programmer Gerhard Schoenberner saw Ruy Guerra's *Mueda*, made in Mozambique in 1979. He invited *Mueda* to Berlin, where it screened in February 1981 ("Tashkent Tidbits," 1980).

Soviet festivals served as a node for circulation of U.S. political films and filmmakers to the Third World. As a stringer for *Variety*, Gordon Hitchens attended every Moscow and Tashkent festival in the late 1960s and early 1970s, where he encountered African, Asian, and Latin American filmmakers and their work. When the United States boycotted the Moscow festival in July 1971, Hitchens brought with him activist documentary and educational films for an unofficial program ("Non-Official Yank Product"). In March 1972, he was invited to the Ougadougou Festival, with a program of African American films ("Hitchens, White"). At Ougadougou, the head of the Carthage festival, Tahar Cheriaa, asked him to bring black American films "with strong political content" to Tunis (Hitchens, "Black Films for African Blacks"). Hitchens obliged in September 1972 (Hitchens, "Arabic & African Festival At Tunis"). In July 1973, he was back in Moscow with a program of U.S. films made by women and "minorities" ("Hitchens to Moscow"). The U.S. government most likely supported his activities, given that some films Hitchens carried were produced by the United States Information Agency. Still, routes of films by Gordon Parks, William Greaves, and Sandra Hochman, beyond the most prestigious festivals—Hochman's *Year of the Woman* (1973) was to play at Berlinale's Forum for Young Cinema after Moscow—depended on Hitchens's willingness to suffer precarious translation to encounter films, filmmakers, and festivals "unknown" in the West.

Soviet film translation involved more contingency and skill than live translation at Western festivals. At Cannes, Venice, or Berlin practitioners of simultaneous film translation took the existence of subtitles or a script for granted. Experts recommended that translators prepare by previewing the film several times, reading and translating the script, and taking notes (Russo). "In eight years of experience of translating films at the Venice Film Festival," David Snelling wrote in 1990, "I have never been required to interpret a film directly from the sound-track without either subtitles or a copy of the script. I would in any case consider the task impossible for a variety of reasons" (14). Not so at the Moscow and Tashkent festivals. Translators more often had to interpret the film cold, without a preview,

script, or subtitles. They could be asked to interpret non-Western films in languages they did not know from dialogue lists or subtitles, but these promised lists and titles did not always materialize. Given such extreme conditions, Soviet festival organizers valued extemporaneous film interpretation more than translation from scripts or subtitles.

Soviet interpreters thought of themselves as skilled performers. They rejected the dubbed-film standard, a “domesticating” mode, in Lawrence Venuti’s terms, that erases any traces of the original voice. “When you are watching a film with a simultaneous translation,” film translator Grigory Libergal explained, “you, the viewer, have to clearly hear the original soundtrack of the film. If the translator is a master of his craft, he will not ‘dominate’ the screen, speak on top of the actors” (Libergal, “Illuzion” 143). Interpreters perfected their translations during multiple screenings, using audience response as a guide. As Libergal explains it, “You’ll begin with one variant of translation and listen to the audience reaction. At the next screening, you’d use a different word construction—and again, test it by spectators’ response. By the evening, you’d work out the most precise Russian text and a perfect intonation that would elicit the strongest emotions from the audience” (Libergal, “Illuzion” 147). The best interpreters survived by becoming “abusive” translators, as defined by Abe Mark Nornes: “willing to experiment, to tamper with tradition, language, and expectations in order to inventively put spectators into contact with the foreign” (230).

Such freeform translation may have been fundamental as a method of encountering foreign film. A certain disregard for the source language has been a pattern in film translation in both the East and West since the dawn of sound cinema. Herman Weinberg, who, some argue, invented subtitles in the 1930s, claimed to have subtitled films “in Sicilian, Japanese, Swedish, Hindustani, Spanish, Brazilian, Greek, Finnish, Yugoslavian [sic], Czech, Hungarian.” And Japanese translator Okaeda Shinji claimed to have written subtitles for films in English, French, German, Italian, Russian, and Spanish (Nornes 149). Likewise, Soviet simultaneous film translators professed to “know” at least half a dozen languages each, claimed to “understand” speech in films in languages they did not know, and routinely agreed to translate from languages they did not speak fluently (Libergal, Personal Interview; Nusinova; Razlogov, Personal Interview; Kira Razlogova).

Translators’ trial-and-error approaches to foreign films had an analytical dimension. Theodor Adorno compared critical essay writing with learning a language. A man forced to learn a language in a foreign country derives nuanced meanings from particular contexts; this serves him better than memorizing a dictionary. “Just as such learning remains exposed to

error," Adorno argues, "so does the essay as form; it must pay for its affinity with open intellectual experience by the lack of security." Thus an essayist deliberately "abrogates" certainty and proceeds "methodically unmethodically" (161). Interpreters, too, preferred to "soak in" meanings of foreign speech through repeated contextual translation rather than to wait until they learn the language systematically (Elena E. Razlogova).

Translators' methods for understanding film also parallel more recent accounts of foreign film viewing at festivals. As Soviet translators' comments make clear, part of the pleasure of festival spectatorship has been the inability to pinpoint the precise meaning or value of foreign films. Some contemporary festival-goers agree. According to Bill Nichols, festivals create a sense of "humility," making the encounter with foreign, especially non-Western, films, both more pleasurable and less certain. Nichols describes his experience of viewing Iranian cinema at the Toronto Film Festival as "a precarious, ephemeral moment in which an imaginary coherence renders Iranian cinema no longer mysterious but still less than fully known" (27). This uncertainty, including translation, may have not been an obstacle, but a prerequisite for discovering films at festivals.

Festival-goers discovered foreign films, especially non-Western films, in the process of precarious translation. At any film festival, live translation led to frustrations and complaints. Shirley MacLaine, a jury member at Cannes in 1967, watched a competing film without translation for an hour because her earphones broke: "I don't dig Italian and the French subtitles were too much for me. And when on the English earphones you can get something you also get the lousiest literal translations of the French subtitles which are always minutes behind the action" (Green). Moscow and Tashkent bore the brunt of criticism. Russian megaphone translation at the Moscow festival "drowned out even familiar dialog" for one reporter, who added: "literally emasculating creative screenwriting effort in competing pix was the simultaneous English interpreting via earphones from a self-indulgent quartet identified as Arthur, Sam, Stan and Anatol" (Werba). Discovering films at Soviet festivals amid such distractions took hard work, yet it happened. "Projected under almost comically bad conditions," American film critic Cynthia Grenier described Satyajit Ray's *Jalsaghar* (*The Music Room*) (1958) at the first Moscow festival, "the film was one of those rare events—a genuinely great work of art" (42). Grenier praised the film *event* despite the terrible screening environment.

Simultaneous interpreting became part of the film event. As Rick Altman points out, exhibition acoustics matter for spectatorship. "In order to understand sound—cinema sound in particular," he argues, "we must recognize both the narrative and the represented nature of sound as it

reaches our ears in the movie theater" (28). The latter, *represented*, film sound includes live commentary. Theoretical work on "unheard voice" points toward aesthetic and narrative effects of live translation and its discontents. Michel Chion has proposed a notion of *emanation speech*—"speech which is not necessarily heard and understood fully," including instances where characters speak one or more languages not translated for the audience (177, 180). More recently, Justin Horton labeled the phenomenon *voice-out*: "any instance of character speech that a spectator cannot hear or comprehend as a result of sonic obfuscation" (12). Horton catalogued more than a dozen such devices, intentional and not, and their effects. They include dubbing errors, censored expletives, overlapping speech, partially or wholly inaudible whisper, and incomprehensible (foreign) speech.

All of the above apply to an experience of either translating a foreign film live or seeing a film with (faulty) simultaneous translation. Foreign guests complained they could not hear original soundtrack behind Russian megaphone commentary. Translators had to make up scenes when they could not hear or did not know the original language. When they were not quick enough to invent dialogue, their audiences heard incomprehensible speech. Censorship remained an ongoing concern. When Kirill Razlogov interpreted Jean-Luc Godard's *Week End* (1967), theater administration demanded that he omit explicit language. He complied, but every time he suppressed an expletive he added, "More explicit in the original." Finally, after one especially juicy phrase, he reported: "Much, much more explicit in the original." One audience member cried out, "Please, please tell us, what's in the original?" A literal translation of Godard's slang was in any case impossible because Russian swear words are much stronger than their French counterparts. The interpreter instead made censorship audible in order to convey more clearly his own feeling of the film (Razlogov, Personal Interview).

Crime films presented an especially difficult job. When making up inaudible dialogue, one always risked announcing the death of a character only to have her walk into the room in the next scene. A throwaway phrase could become crucial by the end of the film. When Natalia Razlogova translated a French crime flick, *Melodie en sous-sol* (*Any Number Can Win*, dir. Henri Verneuil, 1963), for the first time, early in the film she heard the protagonist ask, "Where did you hide the loot?" His interlocutor answered, "Under the lemon." She translated automatically but the entire screening was kicking herself for not hearing the phrase correctly because it made no sense until the very end, when the protagonist arrives at a church and learns that it was built in place of a lemon tree. When construction workers uprooted the tree they found a stash of money and

used it to build the church. "Would you like to donate something to the church?" asks the priest. "I already did," replies the criminal and walks away. Had she not translated the original line literally, the subtle joke of the finale would have been lost.

Translators would get together and compare notes on unclear phrases in the original films. They did not always agree. In accordance with Italian practice, when filming *La storia vera della signora dalle camelie* (*Lady of the Camelias*, 1981) director Mauro Bolognini used both French and Italian actors speaking their own languages and made two dubbed final versions, in Italian and French. Soviet translators could not hear the last line, in which Alphonsine Plessis's father, played by an Italian actor, Gian Maria Volonté, dubbed in French, conveys her dying words. Some believed he quoted her as saying, "I don't want to leave this world of bandits and prostitutes." Others heard, and translated: "I will never be sorry that I'm leaving this world of bandits and prostitutes." And so, depending on the interpreter of the day, Alphonsine left this world either despondent or defiant. "I still don't know what her father says in the end because the soundtrack was damaged," says Natalia Razlogova. She translated Alphonsine as defiant: "I thought she despised her world. But I still don't know what the screenwriter thought."

When Soviet interpreters translated films, then, they completed the represented film sound. Musicologist Ingrid Monson argues, "The human ear ... has the capacity to reinstate sounds that have been masked by noise or other auditory interference and in the process create a more stable interpretation of the auditory landscape." This ability to intuit missing sounds in music, which she calls "perceptual agency," can be trained by repeated listening and interpretation (Monson). When Soviet interpreters perfected their translations during multiple screenings, they followed the same principle: "You have to immerse yourself in the atmosphere of the film in order to anticipate the turns in dialogue, story, and mood," Natalia Razlogova argues. "The best case is when you translate a film for the first time and speak the exact line that haven't yet been said in the original. ... You have to like the film, the director, the problems in the story. Then you can guess by the character's expression what is coming next."

Precarious viewing conditions forced festival audiences to reconstruct represented film sound as well. British critic Catherine de la Roche lauded Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, winner of the Golden Lion at Venice in 1951, as a visual masterpiece: Kurosawa "tells his tale according to the tradition to which he belongs—*graphically*. The film *shows* it ... I understand no Japanese and little of the Italian subtitles. For me, *Rashomon* is, therefore, the supreme example of the true sound film: one whose pictorial narrative maintains its own continuity, strengthened, blended

with, but not interrupted by sound" (90-91). Yet de la Roche did not see the same *Rashomon* that a Japanese saw, or an Italian who understood the subtitles. As film distributor Munio Podhorzer pointed out in 1960, "when a patron does not understand the foreign language to which he is listening, that sound might even be considered a part of the 'background score'" ("Crowther's 'Subtitles Must Go' Stirs Trade's 'Uh-huh'"). The "pictorial narrative" uninterrupted by sound de la Roche "discovered" was a different film.

The influence of precarious screening conditions on evaluation of films extends beyond sound. Avant-garde directors Peter Kubelka and Jonas Mekas designed the Invisible Cinema at the Anthology Film Archives as an ultimate ocularcentric cinephile space, where a spectator could not see other viewers or any surroundings and focused only on the screen. The theater operated between 1970 and 1974 and played only "original versions" of films without any translation. Experimental filmmaker Ken Kelman remembered how he was entirely unimpressed with Ernie Gehr's *Still* (1971) after a screening at the Invisible Cinema. Then he saw it again a year or two later, at the Chelsea Hotel, in "the afternoon, in a hotel room, the light was coming through the windows, the blinds weren't very good," and declared it a masterpiece: "We had first seen the film [in] the ideal circumstances and it was nothing, and the second time we saw the film, in the worst possible conditions, it was one of the greatest films ever made" (Sitney 112). Perhaps Cynthia Grenier was so impressed with *Jalsaghar* as "a genuinely great work of art" precisely because she evaluated the film while Russian auditorium voiceover drowned out bad English earphone translation.

Traffic in newly minted festival prints required inventive translation throughout the festival network. At the Telluride Film Festival premiere for Werner Herzog's *Herz aus Glas* (*Heart of Glass*) in 1976, the rushed print was neither color-corrected nor subtitled. Herzog's wife provided oral translation (Siegel). Often such impromptu interpreting accompanied political unrest. In 1968, as students protested on the streets of Europe and North America, young French filmmakers shut down the Cannes festival because the government sacked Henri Langlois from his long-time post as the head of the French Cinematheque. The Venice Festival that year had to waive its subtitles requirement when John Cassavetes did not add them to his just-finished film *Faces* (1968) in time. The film was shown at the morning press screening without translation. Italian journalists walked out. The next screening added Italian auditorium commentary. Foreign journalists walked out because they could not hear the original soundtrack. The evening screening had no translation, with more walkouts and outcry

but overall good reviews and a best acting prize. Italian journalists decried the translation-less *Faces* screenings all the more because they agreed with local radical filmmakers who boycotted the Venice festival as elitist and corrupt (Moscowitz, "Boxoffice").

Outside of Western Europe and North America, both political strife and last-minute screenings were the rule rather than the exception. Third World filmmakers, many in exile, or from countries under dictatorship or in turmoil, often had to carry film reels with them. Latin American filmmakers came to the 1979 Havana festival, "with the films in their hands. ... Schedules for screenings were tentative until the date of screenings, and many films had no subtitles or translation facilities" (Aufderheide). Moscow and especially Tashkent festivals had to deal with last-minute subtitled prints as a matter of course. A Swiss labor newspaper reporter complimented 1974 Tashkent organizers' ability "to account for the possibility of unexpected changes in the program, to include a film brought at the last moment in a director's suitcase" (Simanet). Devendra Kumar carried to Tashkent his documentary *India's Struggle for Freedom* with only a Telugu vocal track. "Film was shown and understood without translation," he reported, because its universal theme matched the purpose of the festival (Kumar, "Art Must Serve the People").

In the socialist bloc, too, simultaneous translation accompanied impromptu premieres of dissident films. U.S. journalist Daniel Bickley described how at the dawn of the Solidarność trade union movement in Poland, during the 1981 Gdańsk Film Festival, he "jammed into a screening room with several hundred others, almost all Poles, to see five formerly banned documentaries." By chance, Bickley was interviewing the director of one of the films when the latter got news about the event, only an hour in advance. Both the flyer for the unofficial screening and the screening itself were only in Polish. On the way, Bickley grabbed one of only two English interpreters at the festival, who happened to be free at the moment—the other one was translating a film at an official projection—and "enjoyed a personal simultaneous translation" (14). Here, extemporaneous film interpreting was a price paid for a unique experience of seeing a film together with a politically charged local public.

Extemporaneous screenings exclusively for festival guests could be a charged experience as well. Andrei Tarkovsky completed *The Mirror* in 1974, after many bureaucratic interruptions. The film had only a limited release in the Soviet Union; a roundtable in the premiere Soviet cinema journal *Iskusstvo Kino* panned it as confusing and unpatriotic ("Glavnaya"; Marshall). Requests from Cannes and Berlin festivals to include *The Mirror* were denied ("Bessy, Le Bret"). Only when Michelangelo Antonioni threatened to leave the 1975 Moscow festival unless he saw the film, did



organizers arrange two special screenings for foreign guests (Tarkovsky 115; Johnson). By then, *Ivan's Childhood* (1962), *Andrei Rublev* (1966), and *Solaris* (1972) had already appeared, often over considerable Soviet official resistance, at European and North American festivals. Guests jumped at the chance to view a forbidden film by a brilliant, censored director.

*The Mirror*, a meditative autobiographical tale, calls for utmost concentration and close translation. The film unfolds on several temporal planes, showing the protagonist as a younger and an older child. It switches back and forth between black and white and color sequences out of synch with temporal shifts. Its many linguistic intricacies include voiceover readings of poems by Tarkovsky's father Arsenii, and a story about a magazine that misprinted Josef Stalin's name as a derivative of a Russian word for "shit." Everyone involved in the misprint, the story implies, could be sent to the Gulag. The film seems to require ideal viewing conditions.

As it happened, chaotic excited noise shaped the ad-hoc screenings. Foreign guests had to rely on interpreters assigned to them by the festival for an impromptu live translation. According to Albert Johnson, then a film professor at UC Berkeley and former director of the San Francisco International Film Festival, the second screening "was jammed with just about every delegation, whose various interpreters turned the theater into a horrifying Babel of translations." British critic John Gillett described seeing the film amid "opening doors, flashing lights and the murmurings of simultaneous translators all over the hall." Linguistic subtleties should have been lost in the confusion. Instead, Johnson remembered the screening as "a beautifully haunting experience." *The Mirror* was "unanimously praised by everyone ... a brilliant psychological story ... extremely lyrical and full of verbal poetry." If anything, collective precarious sensory experience enhanced appreciation of the film's verbal as well as visual elements. It assured *The Mirror's* place in film history, as cinematic art and as a political statement.

The status of films as art and politics becomes particularly fungible when they move across geographic, cultural, or institutional boundaries. In 1976, Gideon Bachman lamented that festival-goers paid less attention to objective qualities of foreign films than to the reactions of their peers: "What counts is not an intrinsic quality, but that unaccountable attraction that travels by osmosis, surrounding a particular film with an aura like a sick moon, magnetic and vicarious" ("Confessions" 15). In such cases, questions of correct or incorrect translation became moot. Like human travelers, Bachman seems to suggest, some motion pictures returned to their country of origin as changed films, carrying the imprint of their life

in foreign festival contexts. Bachman's longing for intrinsic qualities of films is perhaps misplaced. As Elizabeth Povinelli and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar have argued, scholars of transnational media should pay more attention to "circulation and transfiguration, rather than meaning and translation" (Gaonkar and Povinelli 387). Soviet translation thus reveals how festival films took shape as political artifacts as they traveled.

Soviet film translation also clarifies a much-repeated point that film festivals are sites of power (Nornes 65). Nataša Đurovičová draws on medieval translation theory to link *translatio studii* (transfer of learning) and *translatio imperii* (transfer of power). Rossen Djagalov and Masha Salazkina analyze the Tashkent festival as a "cinematic contact zone," involving—in Mary Louise Pratt's original definition of a contact zone—"radically asymmetrical relations of power" (Salazkina and Djagalov 6-7; Pratt). Yet it is not always clear when "power" refers to film canon formation; the economics of film production and distribution; or Marxist, postcolonial, feminist, and other radical politics of films and filmmakers. Simultaneous translation makes "power" more concrete. It forces us to focus on festivals in socialist and non-aligned countries; on state censorship and political exile; on economic constraints of independent and postcolonial film production and distribution; on informal relationships crucial to finding, screening, and evaluating films; and on multi-sensory dimensions of collective festival viewing, by juries, guests, and local audiences. Scholars could learn from Soviet translators' informal, improvised ways of interpreting these precarious historical conditions.

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### Notes

1. Excellent starting points in these three fields are Đurovičová and Newman on world cinema, de Valck on film festivals, and Nornes on film translation. Early work on film translation in film studies includes Shohat and Stam; and Egoyan and Balfour. On sound commentary during the silent era, see Lacasse and Nornes; on the Soviet case, see Pozner.
2. For more on Soviet translators and their memories, see Elena Razlogova. I use several background paragraphs from this earlier essay in the current article.
3. On this terminological quandary, see Oncins, footnote 3.

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