

9 Listening to the Inaudible Foreign

Simultaneous Translators and Soviet Experience of Foreign Cinema

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FOR DECADES, NATALIA RAZLOGOVA had a recurring dream: she enters a film translator's booth and puts on the headphones. The audience is clamoring outside—they can hear the film, they demand the translation, but she hears nothing. She cannot translate; the foreign film is completely inaudible to her.¹ This story conveys translators' fears of failure: being unable to cope with shoddy technology, failing to relate to an alien culture, confronting an incomprehensible language. But most of all, it shows the fear of failing in their responsibility to their moviegoing public. Between the 1960s and 1980s, Soviet simultaneous translators made foreign-film screenings possible: at international film festivals, specialized theaters such as Moscow's Illiuzion, and tours of foreign films organized by cultural and propaganda agencies. They simultaneously observed and shaped the Soviet moviegoing experience. The improvised voice of a simultaneous translator was a key element of the foreign-film sound track throughout the Soviet Union.

What follows is an initial investigation into simultaneous translation of foreign films in the Soviet Union, centered on several interviews with and written memories of the earliest surviving simultaneous translators, who began their work in the mid-1960s. Four of the interviewees are my relatives: my grandmother, Kira Razlogova; my father, Kirill; and my aunts, Elena and Natalia. All of them were fluent in French because they had just returned after spending several years in France. Kirill began translating at the Moscow Graduate Director's Program and from there was invited to join Illiuzion's stable of translators. Razlogovs became the main translators from French at Illiuzion when it opened in 1966. I also interviewed Natalia Nusinova, who translated from Italian beginning in the early 1970s; Alexander Bondarev, who started as a translator at a Polish film retrospective in Illiuzion in 1969 while in graduate school in theoretical physics; and Grigory Libergal, who was a first-year college student when he began interpreting films for the Film History Lecture Series at the Filmmakers' Union. He translated from English on the second day of Illiuzion's existence. Many of the original

legendary interpreters are now dead, including Nelia Nersesian (English), Maria Dolia (Japanese), and Alexei Mikhalev (Persian and English). But the surviving translators' accounts convey the experience of interpreting and, to some extent, seeing and hearing a foreign film in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union.²

To understand the historical specificity of simultaneous translation in the 1960s and 1970s one only has to compare it to contemporary translation standards. Audiovisual translation manuals now focus on dubbing and subtitles.³ The few practitioners who consider simultaneous screen translation specifically take the existence of subtitles or a script for granted and recommend that translators prepare by previewing the film several times, reading and translating the script, and taking notes. "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 sub-titles or a copy of the script. I would in any case consider the task impossible for a variety of reasons." Snelling and other translation scholars have also recommended a minimalist approach to interpreting: one should condense phrases to their essential meaning and rely on the visual context to convey local turns of phrase and passions of the moment. "The interpreter is not an artist," Snelling declared. "He is an artisan . . . a modest *comprimario* whose discretion and professional skills are best displayed when he least intrudes upon his listening public."⁴

Not so in the 1960s and 1970s, at least in the Socialist bloc.⁵ Translators more often had to interpret the film cold, without a preview, script, or even subtitles. A fully bilingual simultaneous translator from the German Democratic Republic reported in 1975 that in such cases he helped himself by imitating gestures and facial expressions of the movie character he was translating at the moment, to his listeners' surprise. "It is hard for non-translators to understand," he explained, "that my head does not produce automatically (as you have to with speedy translation) the perfect word if I translate two opponents' heated discussion or self-conscious character's meandering interjections in a boring steady voice, without tuning in to the 'wave' of the emotions of the phrases' author."⁶ Far from advising minimalism, one Russian specialist insisted in 1978 that an oral translation must be nuanced enough to convey not just meaning but also the "spoken consciousness" of a people.⁷ Hardly modest *comprimarios*, translators of that era aspired to be artists.

For their part, moviegoers of the era responded to this expressive technique. In the early 1970s, Nelia Nersesian gesticulated and changed her vocal inflection and facial expression while interpreting for different characters in American films, including all seven protagonists in the famous western *The Magnificent Seven* (dir. Sturges, 1960). Audiences reportedly burst into applause at certain turns of phrases she came up with during screenings, and one spectator remembers her *Magnificent Seven* rendition as "brilliant."⁸ As mediators between

foreign cinema and the Soviet public, translators like Nersesian resembled not so much the model interpreter of the present but rather an “abusive translator” as defined by Nornes: “willing to experiment, to tamper with tradition, language, and expectations in order to inventively put spectators into contact with the foreign.”⁹ Yet if Nornes’s abusive subtitlers played upon the visual elements and cultural context of a film, simultaneous translators of the 1960s and 1970s explored the aural and affective elements of film spectatorship.

Foreign-film fandom in the Soviet Union rekindled after World War II. From 1947 until the mid-1950s, Soviet moviegoers for the first time encountered dozens of German, Austrian, Italian, American, and French films that were stolen from the so-called trophy fund during the occupation of Germany. These films, which were meant to provide funding for the then-moribund Soviet film industry, were dubbed (most German films were) or subtitled (most American films were) and shown without credits; initially, each copy began with the title “trophy film” but later even that title was omitted because many of the films shown were made by the Soviet Union’s allies in the war.¹⁰ Poet Joseph Brodsky remembered that his initial excitement over seeing Western lifestyles in trophy films abated after a few years, and he turned to the journal *Inostrannaya literatura* for more exalted literary examples of Western individualism, an alternative to the Soviet collectivist ideology he found unpalatable.¹¹ But Soviets who stayed faithful to film experienced the foreign lifestyles differently, in part because the official Soviet ideology led to spectators’ contact with non-Western cultures as well.

As the postwar Soviet Union opened up its cultural borders, it aimed to compete with the “first world” Western powers for the attention of the decolonizing and unaligned “third world” countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.¹² After Joseph Stalin’s death in 1953, international festivals came one after another: the Indian Film Festival in 1954, the International Youth Festival in 1957, the Moscow International Film Festival (MIFF) in 1959, and the first Asian and African Film Festival in Tashkent in 1968. The Moscow and Tashkent festivals took place in alternating years, and both used translators from Moscow. 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. MIFF also publicized and awarded prizes to films from Senegal, Algeria, Iran, and Latin America (especially Cuba), often for political reasons. Although most translators and cinephiles subscribed to a cultural hierarchy that put Western films at the top—a popular joke claimed that “films can be good, bad, and Chinese”—they could not avoid seeing non-Western films, often as part of a double bill with coveted Western pictures. By contrast, in this period Soviet cinephiles had equal respect for highbrow auteur-director fare, such as a Bernardo Bertolucci film, and for what film scholars today consider a lowbrow star vehicle, such as a Jean Marais picture.

The geopolitics of foreign-film spectatorship depended on the practice of two-tiered simultaneous interpreting, which was 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. Two-tiered interpreting was a Soviet improvement on the Nuremberg system, which was first used during the 1952 International Economic Congress in Moscow. The system delayed the translation and exacerbated errors but used fewer interpreters at once and did not depend on translators fluent in two foreign languages, which made it easier to cover more languages. Speeches at the Twenty-Second Communist Party Congress in 1961 were translated, using the latest equipment, to and from twenty-nine languages, including Vietnamese, Indonesian, Korean, and Japanese, as well as Arabic and several rare African languages:¹³ as a result, Nikita Khrushchev's famous announcement at the congress that the current Soviet generation would see the implementation of national communism reached a wider international audience.

While the Soviet Union's imperial ambitions shaped its simultaneous translation practices, they also shaped screen translation at film festivals. At the 1974 Asian and African Film Festival in Tashkent, each film was first translated into Russian, which played through the theater's loudspeakers, and then into the languages of the various foreign guests, who listened through transistor headphones. American film critic Gordon Hitchens complained in *Variety* that his "second-order" translation came up to half a minute later than the original utterance. Yet he also noted that it made it easier to interpret the huge number of languages, many of them rare, represented at the festival.¹⁴ In this respect, the Soviet interpreting setup also benefited foreign filmmakers in attendance. During the 1968 Tashkent festival, Alpha Amadou Diallo, secretary of state for information of Guinea, lamented that because of the variety of local African languages, a Senegalese may have to travel to Tashkent to see a film made in neighboring Guinea. Here the ungainly Soviet screen translation made audible the connection, pointed out by Nataša Đurovičová, between *translatio studii* (transfer of learning) and *translatio imperii* (transfer of power) in a transnational cinematic landscape.¹⁵

Soviet foreign-film spectatorship grew in scale and depth with the opening of Illiuzion—an official theater of Gosfilmofond (State Russian Film Archive)—a repository of Soviet film materials, copies of lawfully exhibited foreign movies, and all trophy films. Illiuzion opened in March 1966 with 369 seats, a translator's booth equipped with wartime sound equipment, and a stable of film scholars sent from Gosfilmofond as programmers and lecturers. By law, Illiuzion's repertoire was supposed to consist of at least half domestic films and included thematic film

series that sometimes lasted for years. A lecture from a staff member or an invited scholar preceded each film. Screenings started between 9 and 10 a.m., and the last show was at 9:30 p.m. on weekdays, while screenings ran from 8 a.m. to midnight on weekends. Patrons could buy tickets for an entire film series at once. In the 1960s and 1970s, foreign-film screenings, at fifty kopeks a ticket, always sold out, with a certain share of tickets always reserved for privileged officials and creative unions, and long but orderly lines for rush tickets sold immediately before the screening. Scalpers and informal ticket trading proliferated, especially during film festivals.¹⁶ Illiuzion shaped foreign film spectatorship as a key Moscow festival venue and through syndication of its programs to affiliated theaters around the country. It shaped screen translation because most famous interpreters of the 1960s and 1970s were trained at Illiuzion.

Spectators from every strata of society viewed foreign films in the 1960s and 1970s. Illiuzion mostly attracted intelligentsia, but anyone could come to the theater, and affiliated DK (Dom Kul'tury, or "House of Culture"), such as DK "Red Textile Workers," showed the same lectures and screenings for workers. The average Soviet citizen could see foreign films unofficially as well. During his work at Gosfilmofond in the 1970s, Kirill Razlogov routinely translated a racy Swedish film *Jeg - en kvinde* (I, a Woman, dir. Ahlberg, 1965), working from English subtitles, for workers who were building a new theater on the premises. This 35mm copy, stored in Gosfilmofond's archive, was shown informally by the archive staff for workers' entertainment.¹⁷ One typical cinephile of the time, Vladimir Durikin, attended one of the first day's screenings at Illiuzion and remained a faithful patron to the theater throughout the 1960s and 1970s, at the same time as he was building highways for a living.¹⁸ Thousands of *kinomany*—a stronger Russian term for cinephile or movie fan—shared Durikin's passion for film. By the early 1970s, the International Moscow Film Festival used hundreds of screens, from 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.¹⁹ Simultaneous interpreters introduced and translated films for theaters in capital and provincial cities throughout all Soviet republics and the far east of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic after every Moscow International Film Festival and during traveling programs organized by the national Filmmakers Union, Propaganda Bureau, and Sovexportfilm, the state organization that bought and distributed films nationally. By the 1980s, the Propaganda Bureau was even bringing films to high-security prisons.²⁰

By the 1970s, simultaneous translation grew into a lucrative profession that benefited from unofficial relationships between various branches of the Soviet bureaucracy. Simultaneous translators could get five rubles per screening at Sovexportfilm, and seven and a half rubles per screening elsewhere, including at Illiuzion and its affiliates, festival venues, the Moscow Graduate Director's and

Screenwriter's Programs, Dom Kino (House of Cinema, official headquarters of the Soviet Filmmakers' Union), and houses of other creative unions, Gosfilmofond, Goskino (State Committee for Cinematography), and other state agencies, including the KGB (Committee for State Security). Kirill Razlogov remembered his worst interpreting mistake: while interpreting a spy film from French for KGB officers, he wondered why his audience was laughing at odd times. Only later did he realize that, not knowing anything about counterintelligence, he vocalized FBI as "FBI" instead of "FBR," which is the proper Russian abbreviation for the Federal Bureau of Investigation.²¹ The New Year's season was the most lucrative, when every creative union and apparatchik organized a foreign-film screening, which was impossible without a 35mm print and a translator, who could demand a fee far above the usual rate. By comparison, a regular student's stipend was 35 rubles a month, and a salary for a white-collar worker, including an academic lecturer at Illiuzion, was 120 rubles a month. A translator could earn a student's salary in a day.²²

The same Soviet bureaucracy that fed simultaneous translators also made screenings of foreign films politically risky. Party and security officials monitored most interactions with foreigners closely, including foreign-film screenings. They selected only a small fraction of foreign films for general distribution and edited out politically incorrect scenes.²³ Illiuzion's program, controlled by Gosfilmofond and Goskino, escaped close state control—for example, the theater could show many trophy films that were never approved for wide distribution. Yet it, too, operated under close scrutiny. Former Illiuzion director Zinaida Shatina remembers several unpleasant audits of her foreign film screening practices in the 1970s, brought about by a denunciation of an anonymous staff or audience member. One of these audits found that, in violation of state-imposed limits, more than 50 percent of all films screened at the theater were foreign; this finding led to her forced resignation.²⁴

During international events, control over foreign-film screenings tightened. Communist Party officials approved all dialogue lists used for screen translation at MIFF. KGB officials required interpreters who worked with international guests to write reports about their conversations. And KGB "curators" watched interactions between Soviet staff and invited guests. Screen translators needed to be aware of this surveillance. At the Congress of the International Federation of Film Archives in Moscow in 1973, Kirill Razlogov, then working at Gosfilmofond, exclaimed how happy he was that Lia van Leer, founder of the Israel Film Archive, was able to come despite the strained relationship between Israel and the Soviet Union. Then he could not help but turn to check if the KGB curator standing behind him noticed his exuberance.²⁵

Yet screen translators usually managed to avoid being completely incorporated into the Soviet surveillance system. An interpreter attached to a foreign

guest was trained to write reports and often graduated from a higher institution that prepared diplomats and security officials. But even though Kirill Razlogov, as a recent resident of France, did not have the proper ideological background to work as a guest's interpreter, he was hired as screen translator.²⁶ When Natasha Nusinova interpreted for a film conference, she was informally asked to report on conversations she witnessed. But when she claimed that she could not translate if she tried to memorize what people were saying, her "handler" accepted her excuse and did not press for further information.²⁷ At the Moscow festival, simultaneous translators were not allowed to mingle with foreign guests. But at the Tashkent festival, where everyone stayed in one hotel and local KGB curators were less invested in surveillance, screen translators could socialize with African, Asian, and Latin American filmmakers and were not asked to write reports.²⁸ Thus, translators could usually escape the political and aesthetic control exerted by the state over their colleagues who read approved film dialogue lists or interpreters who accompanied foreign filmmakers.

If festival selection committees chose foreign films to represent discrete sovereign nations, ordinary spectators' emotional investment disrupted official political, ideological, and bureaucratic boundaries. Film scholar Maya Turovskaya remembered how she saw a sentimental Mexican melodrama *Yesenia* (dir. Crevenna, 1971), featuring mistaken identities and illegitimate children, while seated next to an ordinary harried Russian woman with a bag of groceries at her feet at MIFF. The woman kept talking to the screen under her breath and at one point started weeping, spreading her makeup all over her face with a large handkerchief. After the film, Turovskaya inquired why the woman found the film so riveting and heard back: "You see, it's all about my life!"²⁹ This spectator bypassed the national and cultural milieu of the film to relate to its depiction of private life.³⁰

Some evidence suggests that spectators used sexual content in films to imagine breaking through ideological and geographic boundaries separating their second world from the first and third worlds. Soviet movie fans sought a glimpse of Western sexual liberation—the cinematic equivalent to kissing "capitalist lips," as Yevgeni Yevtushenko described his most memorable moment of the 1957 Youth Festival in Moscow.³¹ Kirill Razlogov remembered how one middle-age schoolteacher from Tashkent, who regularly traveled to Moscow for the festival, kept asking his fellow movie fans whether he really saw a woman lying in bed between her two lovers, comparing the firmness of their penises in Bertolucci's *Novecento* (1900 [translated as *Twentieth Century* in Russian], 1976).³² Access to such graphic movie images at the festivals acquired double political significance in the 1960s and 1970s, when Soviet censors began to cut more and more sex scenes from Western and even Eastern European films before they went into general distribution.³³

Some Soviet spectators used sexuality to look for “unexpected points of congruence” between intimate lives at home and abroad.³⁴ Natalia Nusinova remembers an incident that took place at a Tashkent film festival: during a scene in which a topless Chinese woman emerged from a swimming pool accompanied by dramatic music, a middle-age Uzbek man suddenly rose up and exclaimed, “Ahmed, remember this?”³⁵ It is unlikely that this spectator had experienced anything like what he saw in the film. More likely, he remembered an instance when he transgressed, in some small way, the tenets of both Soviet and traditional Uzbek morality; both strongly discouraged looking at topless women. When Natalia Razlogova spent a day translating French drama *Loulou* (dir. Pialat, 1980) in Georgia, she noticed that spectators repeatedly applauded a scene that elicited no reaction whatsoever from her Moscow audiences, in which a woman says goodbye to her handsome husband and then says to her friend, who remarks on his beauty, “If only he was as impressive in bed.” At the end of the day, she asked her host at the Georgian Filmmakers Union to explain the applause. It turned out that local folk wisdom held that Georgian men were handsome and strong, but past thirty-five years of age, they tended to lose their virility—a point well made by the French female character.³⁶ To be sure, these stories show how exotic the spectators from Soviet republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus were to screen translators, who overwhelmingly came from families of intelligentsia in Moscow and Leningrad. Yet they also show interpreters’ wonder at their audiences’ ability to traverse the terrain between their own private experience and the experience of others.

In trying to connect with these audiences, simultaneous translators thought of themselves as self-aware practitioners of an improvisational sound art, invested in but not bound by the ideal of authentic viewer experience. Libergal explained, “When you are watching a film with a simultaneous translation, 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. If he is a virtuoso, if he can feel the balance between the film proper and his own voice, after several minutes the spectator in the theater will forget about the translator, feeling that he himself can understand English, French, or Japanese.”³⁷ Soviet screen translators would reject the contemporary standards of dubbed translation, a “domesticating” mode, in Lawrence Venuti’s terms, that erases any traces of the original text.³⁸

At the same time, they would also reject the contemporary minimalist view on live screen translation. In the 1990s, Venice festival translator David Snelling, for example, would not have had the translator use any verbal inflections at all, making no distinctions between “‘Would you like a cup of tea?’ ‘What would you say to a cup of tea?’ ‘Wouldn’t a cup of tea be super?’ and ‘av’ sum tea’ as these social distinctions will be abundantly clear from costume and mimicry. ‘Tea?’

with an interrogative intonation is the only minimal-disturbance alternative.³⁹ Conversely, translators spent multiple screenings perfecting their rendition of particular phrases and took pride in audience gratitude. Elena Razlogova, for example, most liked to perform films like François Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1962), because after multiple screenings she knew exactly how to render each line. Once, she came to translate the French comedy *À nous les petites Anglaises!* (Let's Get Those English Girls, dir. Lang, 1976) at Udarnik, one of the biggest festival venues. At the entrance she heard two cinephiles talking: "Who will translate?" "Razlogova." "Thank God!" She took this as an appreciation of her determination to use precision rather than minimalism in interpreting.⁴⁰ Some translators at the end of the film announced, "This film was interpreted by . . ." But according to Alexander Bondarev, only an incompetent would do that: "Audiences recognized the best ones by their voices."⁴¹

To achieve a perfect performance, translators tested any jokes or turns of phrase with the audience. At Illuzion, one usually translated the same film six times in a row, and eight times on weekends. 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." In the mid-1970s, Libergal used this technique to render *The Godfather* (dir. Coppola, 1972) each time to audience applause.⁴² Alexander Bondarev's first stint at MIFF happened when another translator refused to interpret Andrzej Wajda's comedy *Polowanie na muchy* (Hunting Flies, 1969): "I don't do youth slang," she declared. Bondarev did not have much experience, but he took the job and improvised, making up some jokes for the first few shows. He ended up interpreting every festival screening of the comedy to audience laughter. Bondarev remembered that he used to warn his friends not to show up for early screenings of films he translated.⁴³ Most regular Illuzion patrons got tickets to a fifth or sixth film show of the day, to enjoy the version perfected during previous screenings.⁴⁴

Rather than ignoring the translators, Soviet foreign-film spectators paid particular attention to them. Over the years, a cinephile would experience a range of translation styles, from painful to inspired. During a festival screening, translator Alexei Mikhalev complained to Libergal that an Iranian film was interpreted from error-ridden English subtitles. At the next screening at Illuzion, Libergal invited Mikhalev to translate directly from Persian soundtrack. Whether a given spectator would hear the mangled or the corrected version was just a matter of chance;⁴⁵ the audience responded to both. During a screening of the British film *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (dir. Reisz, 1960), the excited interpreter translated the character's "That's nice!" after a lovemaking scene, not literally—"Neplokho!"—but with feeling, "Khorosho-o-o!" ("[I feel] go-o-od!").

The audience burst into laughter.⁴⁶ A cinephile who frequented festival and club screenings became a translation art critic. During a 1965 MIFF screening of *My Fair Lady* (dir. Cukor, 1964) at the largest festival venue, 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!’”⁴⁷

Melodrama and epic-film lovers expected dramatic inflections and serious renditions of exalted emotions. Some could do it. Kira Razlogova excelled at rendering epic films such as German two-part production *Kampf um Rom I and II* (The Fight for Rome, dir. Siodmak, 1968 and Fight for Rome II, dir. Siodmak, 1969, shown together in Moscow as *The Battle for Rome*) with Orson Welles as Emperor Justinian. “It was especially important to convey the pathos without irony,” she remembered.⁴⁸ Others could not. Kirill Razlogov remembers his mother’s horror when he translated the religious appellation *mother* as *mom* in a respectful French screen adaptation of Denis Diderot’s eighteenth-century novel *La religieuse* (The Nun, dir. Rivette, 1966). Elena Razlogova once spent a day interpreting a French film she loathed, *L’éternel retour* (Eternal Love, dir. Delannoy, 1943)—an adaptation of the Tristan and Isolde story that inspired *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther to advise, “Whenever you find in a movie two persons who are solemnly in love and refer to this state as a ‘beautiful madness,’ brother, you’d better beware.”⁴⁹ While she translated every word of the film correctly, by the end of the day she pronounced the main characters’ repeated declarations of love in a bored monotone. As she was leaving the theater after the last screening of the day, she heard one weeping spectator tell her friend, “If I could only meet that translator, I would strangle her with my own hands!”⁵⁰ Each translator specialized in films compatible with their personalities and aesthetic preferences; still, it was difficult to avoid clashing with spectators’ expectations.

Repeatedly, interpreters described simultaneous translation as akin to a battlefield experience.⁵¹ For a simultaneous translator, keeping your wits under pressure was more important than fluency in languages. Mark Kushnirovich, Illuzion lecturer, remembered sitting in a translator’s booth during a screening of a Hungarian film *A ménészgazda* (The Stud Farm [translated as *Horse Stable Owner* in Russian], dir. Kovács, 1978). In the middle of the film, novice translator Misha, bilingual in Russian and Hungarian, forgot both languages and turned to Kushnirovich in a panic: “What do you call a mare’s husband in Russian?”⁵² Such lapses disappeared only with constant practice, and simultaneous translators took care to convey their practical knowledge to the next generation. Liberal learned the craft by listening to Nelia Nersesian’s turns of phrase and pace, and by asking her questions about her word choices.⁵³ For those films that were hard to hear, translators would get together and compare notes on unclear phrases in the original.⁵⁴ Three or four times a year, Illuzion organized meetings at which veteran translators shared their experiences with novices.⁵⁵

Imperfect audio technology also contributed to translators' anxiety. Take, for example, Kira Razlogova's first interpreting job in 1966, a screening of Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups* (The 400 Blows, 1959) at a DK for workers at the outskirts of Moscow: in a theater with four hundred seats, she stood leaning against the back wall, without headphones or a microphone, screaming over the sound track, which could not be muted because she had to hear it from the loudspeakers to translate. "I only knew I succeeded in reaching the spectators' ears," she remembered, "when I saw that they stayed in their seats silently, listening to me."⁵⁶ Although this is given as an example of the worst possible interpreting conditions, such arduous translation circumstances actually advanced Truffaut's attack on traditional narrative of cinema, further enhancing, for the interpreter and the audience, the disorienting effects of direct audio recording that produced French new wave's signature sound.⁵⁷

Ideal circumstances prevailed at Illuzion, however, which was equipped with a booth, mike, earphones, a soundboard, and a way to see and hear the reaction of the audience. Wartime earphones with limited frequency range would have been terrible for music but worked well for hearing human speech. Still, many trophy films shown at Illuzion had damaged sound tracks. Libergal remembered how he had to improvise for the first eight minutes of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940)—luckily he had seen the film previously—because the print could produce nothing but whining noise.⁵⁸ Most new wave films used a naturalistic sound track recorded during the shoot, fully audible only on the fifth or sixth viewing.⁵⁹ Technology, then, was one contributor to Natalia Razlogova's recurring dream of not being able to translate an inaudible foreign film.⁶⁰

But fear of the "inaudible foreign" reflected not just the state of technology but also translators' constant encounters with unfamiliar cultural contexts. Translating a film live for the first time, interpreters often tripped on its national and political context. When translating a French film about Chilean revolution, *Il pleut sur Santiago* (It's Raining on Santiago, dir. Soto, 1976), Kira Razlogova pronounced the last name of Victor Jara as "Iara," which was correct in French but not in Russian or Spanish. She realized her mistake only later, when her daughter Natalia told her that her dissident boyfriend was appalled that the ignorant translator did not know about the famous poet and revolutionary, well known in Moscow student circles at the time.⁶¹ No amount of preparation could protect against cultural lapses like this, given the variety of films translators had to cover.

A third and related fear of the "inaudible foreign" was related to the risk of working with an unknown, usually non-Western, language. Interpreters were often asked to translate non-Western films in languages they did not know from dialogue lists or subtitles. But these promised lists and titles did not always materialize. At the 1968 Tashkent festival, Kirill Razlogov was supposed to interpret an Iraqi documentary from French subtitles. But when the film began, he saw no

subtitles—the only word he could understand was *Baghdad*. He asked the projectionist to run only the first and last reel, to show only twenty minutes out of forty, but had to invent voice-over for the rest. In what he considers an inspired moment, once during the film he turned from describing the natural beauty of water reserves to water as a source of energy—and at the next moment footage of a hydroelectric station appeared on the screen.⁶² Kira Razlogova once translated an African film from a French dialogue list during a Moscow film festival. Ten minutes before the end, the script was over. The film goes on, in a rare African language; she has nothing to say; an administrator storms into her booth predicting a diplomatic crisis. To save the situation, she went ahead and composed the dialogue for the rest of the film on the basis of the moving images. She remembers that after the film, the ambassador, made aware that the dialogue list was too short, thanked her for making up the end. He claimed it was quite close to the original.⁶³

Such extreme situations recurred with alarming regularity. At the time, simultaneous translation was valued more than translation from scripts or subtitles because dialogue lists made for festival screenings were notoriously unreliable. Working at a Moscow film festival paid well and was prestigious. Many people who translated dialogue lists for the festival got the job through high-placed friends and usually did not know the languages as well as simultaneous interpreters. Natalia Razlogova remembered how a friend asked her to help translate French dialogue lists for the festival: she was able to find everything in the dictionary except a strange phrase, “*happi berdeh*.” Upon examination it turned out that the French “*happi berdeh*” was actually the internationally known English phrase “happy birthday.”⁶⁴ As a result of such uninformed translation, sometimes the only solution was to compose the dialogue on the spot.⁶⁵ People who could make up lines if a dialogue list skipped a scene or ended early—a frequent occurrence—were in high demand during film festivals.⁶⁶

In such cases, screen translators were forced to assume the role of a *benshi*, who vocally interpreted films for Japanese audiences into the 1930s.⁶⁷ Occasionally, such festival “translators” did not know the language at all. Right before the screening of *Onna hissatsu ken* (Sister Street Fighter [translated as *Lady Karate* in Russian], dir. Yamaguchi, 1974) in Illuzion at the 1975 Moscow festival, the usual translator from Japanese was suddenly called away to an official function. The eagerly anticipated sold-out screening could not be canceled: this was the first martial-arts film shown publicly in the Soviet Union and tickets for the screening at the cinephiles’ “ticket exchange” traded for two, three, or more tickets to other films. (Because festival tickets sold out quickly, often to party officials and their friends, to get into a particular screening, average cinephiles had to buy an extra ticket from another patron right before the show or exchange a ticket they had for another one, for a film they actually wanted to see.) Illuzion lecturer Mark

Kushnirovich had seen the film before but did not know a word of Japanese. He announced that the film would be translated from the dialogue list—expecting the audience, as usual, to attribute any errors to the list’s translator—and went on to make up the dialogue based on his memory of previous viewings of the film. Grateful spectators gave him an ovation at the end, and the only Japanese speaker who complained to the administration had to admit that Kushnirovich conveyed the general meaning of the film even though he mangled every single line in it.⁶⁸

Likewise, Kira Razlogova once acted as a *benshi* when she was asked to narrate a documentary about fishermen’s work and life in a small village in Iceland without any textual aids. When she pointed out that she did not know the language at all, the administrator replied that she would just announce the presentation as a “spoken accompaniment,” not a translation. In the end, the film and the “accompaniment” played to a satisfied audience. In that particular place and time, then, live simultaneous translation by a conscientious and invested commentator, whether by ear or sight, was as acceptable to audiences as an official written script or subtitles, and it was sometimes even preferable. The important thing, Kira Razlogova claimed, was that the audience “felt that it had the experience of understanding the film.”⁶⁹

As interpreters fought against the imperfections in sound technology, the difficulties of live translation, and the grueling regimen of having to translate the same film six to eight times a day, they also experimented with and “abused” foreign films, though not always intentionally. Yet their aural and embodied trial-and-error method for understanding a different world may have been useful. Musicologist Ingrid Monson argued, “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.⁷⁰ Likewise, interpreters and their audiences developed their perceptual agency by struggling with the incomprehensible in foreign films.

In part, translators’ practice capitulated to the Soviet hierarchy of languages—translators were invested in rendering American, French, or German precisely, but they took many more liberties with rare and non-Western languages.⁷¹ Yet, in different ways, they applied the trial-and-error method to both types of films. Just as they expected their audiences to intuit, together with the translator, what was said on the screen in the language they did not know, so did translators themselves plunge into the unknown in perceiving foreign speech. During tours to Soviet republics after the festival, each translator was usually given two films to translate live in a language he or she knew, and two films, for instance in an African or Indian dialect, to translate from a script. “I learned,” recalls Elena Razlogova, “that when you translate such a film for the twentieth

time you begin to soak in that culture and it was useful to not just experience the familiar European culture but something else. Often the dialogue lists were missing several scenes but by the fourth or fifth time I would invent translations of these scenes for myself.”⁷² The idea of “soaking in” another culture through multiple exposures to it seems to explain why simultaneous translators claimed to “understand” speech in films in languages they did not know and routinely agreed to translate from languages they did not speak fluently. “Knowing the language” acquired a different meaning as each translator usually claimed to “know” half a dozen languages.⁷³

In the 1960s and 1970s, a translator and a cinephile learned a language or a culture by interacting with it, not by systematic memorization. Theodor Adorno once compared 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 argued, “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.”⁷⁴ That seems to describe not only how simultaneous translators approached films but also how they encouraged their audiences to approach films—neither to fear nor to ignore the inaudible and incomprehensible elements of a foreign culture.

Notes

1. Natalia Razlogova, interview by author, April 15, 2012.

2. Vladimir Solov'ev, ed., *Kinoteatr Gosfil'mofonda Rossii Illiuzion: vchera, segodnia, zavtra* (Moscow: RID Interreklama, 2008), is an excellent compendium of recollections by and about Soviet simultaneous screen translators. See also Michele Berdy, Dmitrii Buzadzhi, Dmitrii Ermolovich, Mikhail Zagot, Viktor Lanchikov, and Pavel Palazhchenko, “Kinoperevod: Malo chto ot Boga, mnogo chto ot Goblina,” *Mosty* 8, no. 4 (2005): 52–62; M. A. Zagot, “Kinofestival’,” *Mosty* 10, no. 2 (2006): 70–75.

3. For an overview and an intervention of the “sub versus dub” debate, see Abé Mark Nornes, *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); for a film studies perspective, see Nataša Đurovičová, “Vector, Flow, Zone: Towards a History of Cinematic Translation,” in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Nataša Đurovičová and Kathleen E. Newman (New York: Routledge, 2010), 90–120; for a translation studies perspective, see Yves Gambier, “Screen Transadaptation: Perception and Reception,” *Translator* 9, no. 2 (2003): 171–89. One of the earliest works on the subject is Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour, eds., *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

4. David Snelling, “Upon the Simultaneous Translation of Films,” *Interpreters' Newsletter* 3 (1990): 14; Mariachiara Russo, “Simultaneous Film Interpreting and Users' Feedback,” *Interpreting* 7, no. 1 (January 2005): 1–26.

5. Several preliminary studies suggest live screen translation was widespread in Asia, Africa, and the Soviet Union in the silent era and in some cases into the 1950s. See Nornes,

Cinema Babel; Birgit Englert and Nginjai Paul Moreto, "Inserting Voice: Foreign Language Film Translation as a Local Phenomenon in Tanzania," *Journal of African Media Studies* 2, no. 2 (April 2010): 225–39; S. V. Srinivas, "Is There a Public in the Cinema Hall?" *Framework* 42 (2000), http://www.sarai.net/research/media-city/resouces/film-city-essays/sv_srinivas.pdf; Peter Fawcett, "Translating Film," in *On Translating French Literature and Film*, ed. Geoffrey T. Harris (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 65–88.

6. B. Shtaier, "O mekhanizme sinkhronnogo perevoda," *Tetradi perevodchika* 12 (1975): 105.

7. V. P. Gaiduk, "'Tikhii' perevod v kino," *Tetradi perevodchika* 15 (1978): 93–100.

8. Zinaida Shatina, "Kinoteatr Illiuzion v moei zhizni," in Solov'ev, *Kinoteatr Gosfil'mofonda Rossii Illiuzion*, 62; and Vladimir Golubev, "Zapiski kinomana," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 64 (2003): 303.

9. Nornes, *Cinema Babel*, 230.

10. Maia Turovskaia, "Gollivud v Moskve, ili Sovetskoe i amerikanskoe kino," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 97 (2011): 51–63; Maia Turovskaia, "Trofeinye fil'my poslevoennoi Rossii" (paper presented at the Hybridität in Literatur, Kunst und Medien der russischen Moderne und Postmoderne, Universität Konstanz, Switzerland, June 2006).

11. Joseph Brodsky, "Spoils of War," *Threepenny Review*, no. 64 (winter 1996): 6–9.

12. On this, see, e.g., Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

13. E. Gofman, "K istorii sinkhronnogo perevoda," *Tetradi perevodchika* 1 (1963): 20–26; Francesca Gaiba, *The Origins of Simultaneous Interpretation: The Nuremberg Trial* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1998).

14. Gordon Hitchens, "Mind-Bending, Discomforts at USSR's Fest for Asia, Africa," *Variety*, June 12, 1974. I thank Rossen Djagalov for making me aware of this article and other materials on the Moscow and Tashkent festivals.

15. Alpha Amadou Diallo, quoted in Kirill Razlogov, "Stanovlenie," *Iskusstvo kino* 2 (1969), 135–38; Āurovičová, "Vector, Flow, Zone." On nation-building empires, see also Paul A. Kramer, "Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (December 2011): 1348–91; Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

16. Shatina, "Kinoteatr Illiuzion v moei zhizni," 57.

17. Kirill Razlogov, interview by author, April 15, 2012.

18. Vladimir Durikin, "Illiuzion stal dlia menia vtorym domom," in *Kinoteatr Gosfil'mofonda Rossii Illiuzion: vchera, segodnia, zavtra*, ed. Vladimir Solov'ev (Moskva: RID Interreklama, 2008), 190.

19. Maia Turovskaia, "Zritel'skie predpochtenia 70-kh," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 11 (1991): 92–96; Grigory Libergal, interview by author, April 12, 2012.

20. Kirill Razlogov, "Moi festivali" (unpublished manuscript, 2011); Elena Razlogova, interview, April 21, 2012; Natalia Razlogova, interview; Libergal, interview.

21. Razlogov, interview.

22. Libergal, interview; Razlogov, interview; Elena Razlogova, interview; Natalia Razlogova, interview.

23. Razlogov, "Moi festivali"; Golubev, "Zapiski kinomana."

24. Shatina, "Kinoteatr Illiuzion v moei zhizni," 67.

25. Razlogov, interview.

26. Razlogov, interview.

27. Natalia Nusinova, interview by author, April 13, 2012.

28. Razlogov, interview; Elena Razlogova, interview.
29. Maia Turovskaia, cited in Aleksei Gusev, "Nekomu soperezhivat'," *Imperia dramy*, January 2010, http://www.alexandrinsky.ru/magazine/rubrics/rubrics_376.html; for more on *Yesenia*, see Turovskaia, "Zritel'skie predpochtenia 70-kh."
30. On *projection nationale*, see Āurovičová, "Vector, Flow, Zone." On Soviet spectatorship of Indian melodramas, see Sudha Rajagopalan, *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).
31. Yevgeni Yevtushenko, interview, *National Security Archive Cold War Interviews 14*: Red Spring, The Sixties (January 17, 1999), <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/interviews/episode-14/yevtushenko1.html>.
32. Razlogov, "Moi festivali."
33. Golubev, "Zapiski kinomana."
34. The phrase and concept were introduced by Ann Laura Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies," *Journal of American History* 88, no. 3 (December 2001): 829–65.
35. Nusinova, interview.
36. Natalia Razlogova, interview.
37. Grigory Libergal, "Illuzion—shkola dlia perevodchikov," in Solov'ev, *Kinoteatr Gosfil'mofonda Rossii Illuzion*, 143; several translators reported that the best compliment to the translator is if the audience exiting the theater discusses the film as if they heard it the original language. Natalia Razlogova, interview; Elena Razlogova, interview; Natalia Nusinova, interview.
38. See Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility* (London: Routledge, 1994).
39. Snelling, "Upon the Simultaneous Translation of Films," 15.
40. Elena Razlogova, interview.
41. Aleksandr Bondarev, interview by author, July 16, 2012.
42. Libergal, "Illuzion—shkola dlia perevodchikov," 147.
43. Bondarev, interview.
44. Elena Razlogova, interview.
45. Libergal, interview; Elena Razlogova, interview; Natalia Razlogova, interview.
46. Mark Kushnirovich, "Veselo delo," in Solov'ev, *Kinoteatr Gosfil'mofonda Rossii Illuzion*, 105.
47. Golubev, "Zapiski kinomana."
48. Razlogov, interview.
49. Bosley Crowther, review of *L'éternel retour*, *New York Times*, January 5, 1948.
50. Elena Razlogova, interview.
51. Natalia Razlogova, interview; Kira Razlogova, interview.
52. Kushnirovich, "Veselo delo," 105.
53. Libergal, "Illuzion—shkola dlia perevodchikov," 145.
54. Natalia Razlogova, interview.
55. Kira Razlogova, interview.
56. Ibid.
57. Nataša Āurovičová, "Vector, Flow, Zone."
58. Libergal, interview.
59. Elena Razlogova, interview.
60. Natalia Razlogova, interview.
61. Ibid.
62. Razlogov, "Moi festivali."
63. Kira Razlogova, interview; Natalia Razlogova, interview. Unfortunately, no one remembered the year or title of the film.

64. Natalia Razlogova, interview.
65. Elena Razlogova, interview; Libergal, interview; Razlogov, "Moi festivali."
66. Elena Razlogova, interview.
67. Kira Razlogova, interview; on *benshi*, see Nornes, *Cinema Babel*, chap. 3
68. Shatina, "Kinoteatr Illiuzion v moei zhizni," 65–66; Golubev, "Zapiski kinomana," 303.
69. Kira Razlogova, interview.
70. Ingrid Monson, "Hearing, Seeing, and Perceptual Agency," *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 2 (2008): 40.
71. On the hierarchy of languages, see Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, "The Cinema after Babel: Language, Difference, Power," *Screen* 26, nos. 3–4 (May 1985): 35–58.
72. Elena Razlogova, interview.
73. Libergal, interview; Nusinova, interview, Razlogov, interview, Kira Razlogova, interview.
74. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique* (1984): 161.