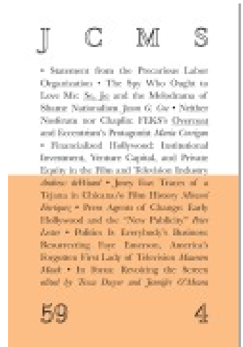
# The Liberation Politics of Live Translation: Global South Cinemas in Soviet Tashkent



Elena Razlogova

JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies, Volume 59, Number 4, Summer 2020, pp. 183-188 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press
*DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2020.0057*

*For additional information about this article*
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/761301

[ Access provided at 4 Aug 2020 14:04 GMT from Concordia University Library ]

in festival screenings. While translation often works to be unmarked, invisible, and unnoticed by the audience, the techniques used by festivals shape specific experiences of the transnational nature of cinematic cultures. In visualizing or exemplifying festivals' imagined relationship to world cinemas and their role in film traffic flows, these translation techniques constitute powerful mechanisms that activate and define a festival's position within the larger cinematic circuit. Whereas international festivals' use of subtitling often conceals the ideological effects of translation (its propensity for textual domestication), Cineffable brings its politics and processes to light. From cultural explanations in the form of translators' notes and glosses to the physical presence of a translator, Cineffable's subtitles effectively "give voice" to the festival's community. ✻

# The Liberation Politics of Live Translation: Global South Cinemas in Soviet Tashkent

by Elena Razlogova

When new Global South cinemas entered transnational circulation in the decolonization era, film translation became a weapon of liberation.[1] In reconstructing this key role, this essay seeks to temper the current tendency in film studies to celebrate untranslatabilty in Global South cinemas. It focuses on the Festival of Asian, African, and Latin American Cinema in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, a biannual event that hosted hundreds of films and filmmakers from dozens of Global South countries between 1968 and 1988.[2] At Tashkent, translators literally revoiced

1 On translation and "the transnational," see Nataša Ďurovičová, "Vector, Flow, Zone: Towards a History of Cinematic Translatio," in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Nataša Ďurovičová and Kathleen Newman (New York: Routledge, 2010), 90–120; Masha Salazkina, "Translating the Academe: Conceptualizing the Transnational in Film and Media," in *The Multilingual Screen: New Reflections on Cinema and Linguistic Difference*, ed. Tijana Mamula and Lisa Patti (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 17–35.

2 Rossen Djagalov and Masha Salazkina, "Tashkent '68: A Cinematic Contact Zone," *Slavic Review* 75 (2016): 279–298. The festival officially included Latin America as of 1976. By then, Tashkent hosted four hundred guests from seventy-three Asian, African, and Latin American countries. Sharof Rashidov and Filipp Yermash, report to

© 2020 by the University of Texas Press

films via a live performance piped into the movie theater on top of the original soundtrack.[3] In the Soviet "relay" system, interpreters translated films made in an array of colonial and indigenous languages: first, via loudspeaker, into Russian for local Uzbek audiences and Soviet participants, and then, via headphones, from the Russian translation into the other official languages: English, French, and, after 1976, also Spanish and Arabic.[4] The festival employed translators working from subtitles, dialogue lists, or live soundtracks in European languages. It also brought in experts in non-Western languages and cultures. Translators worked with several languages in one day or even one screening—what Japanese poetry scholar Aleksandr Dolin remembered as a "linguistic bootcamp" in Japanese, English, and French.[5] Finally, during projections, escort interpreters whispered their translation in Khmer, Bengali, Wolof, and other indigenous tongues to delegates who did not speak official festival languages, a type of interpreting called *chuchotage*.[6] Soviet organizers provided simultaneous translation for every single guest. The Tashkent festival was the most ambitious multilingual film translation project of its era.

As film translation scholars have demonstrated, and as mentioned in previous essays in this dossier, standard dubbing and subtitling techniques aim to get rid of the inconsistencies between source text and translation. In so doing, they strip the original text of its "otherness," destroying especially the specificity of cultures originating outside of Western Europe and North America.[7] Echoing this argument, recent work on multilingual cinema finds critical potential in incomprehensible or hard-to-understand "heterolingual" film dialogue. A director's decision not to translate such "heterolanguage," these scholars argue, subverts the erasure of diasporic, indigenous, and minority languages and cultures.[8]

In contrast, decolonization-era Global South filmmakers considered translation essential to reach their multilingual, often illiterate audiences. At Tashkent in the 1970s, the Chilean director Miguel Littín decried untranslated Hollywood English in Latin American theaters.[9] Egyptian participants convinced the Tashkent festival to

---

the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR (hereafter Central Committee), June 2, 1976, *opis* 2944, *delo* 26, *ed. kh.* 69, Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (hereafter RGALI).

3 In this essay, I use "revoicing" to denote film translation in various forms, but especially oral commentary during projection.

4 Rashidov and Yermash to Central Committee.

5 Aleksandr Dolin, "V iaponskii mir vrasti nelzia," *Chastnyi Korrespondent*, June 10, 2009, http://www.chaskor.ru/article/aleksandr_dolin_v_yaponskij_mir_vrasti_nelzya_7310.

6 List of escort translators for the 1980 Tashkent festival, May 1980, opis 3159, delo 1, ed. kh. 283, RGALI (Khmer); Budget for the 1976 Tashkent festival, *opis* 3159, *delo* 1, *ed. kh.* 604, RGALI (Bengali, Wolof). On *chuchotage*, a French term commonly used by English-language professionals to denote whispered interpreting, see Robert Neal Baxter, "A Discussion of Chuchotage and Boothless Simultaneous as Marginal and Unorthodox Interpreting Modes," *Translator* 22 (2016): 59–71.

7 Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, "The Cinema after Babel: Language, Difference, Power," *Screen* 26 (1985): 35–58; Abé Mark Nornes, *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

8 See, e.g., Carol O'Sullivan, *Translating Popular Film* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2011), 5–6; Mamula and Patti, *Multilingual Screen*.

9 *Kino v borbe za mir, sotsialnyi progress i svobodu narodov* (Moscow: VNIIK, 1981), 20.

add Arabic as an official language in 1976.[10] And the Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène proposed educating African filmmakers in indigenous languages.[11] These Tashkent debates echoed the anticolonial Third World Cinema Committee's 1973 resolution to make "the new films understandable to the masses of people."[12] To that end, the Senegalese filmmaker and film historian Paulin Soumanou Vieyra proposed that all films distributed in Senegal be dubbed in Wolof.[13] The Bolivian director Jorge Sanjinés planned two versions of *Yawar Mallku* (1969), shot in Quechua and Spanish and each dubbed entirely in one of the native languages, Quechua (dubbing the Spanish dialogue) and Aymara.[14] Arab producers discussed adopting a revision of classical Arabic developed for international radio broadcasting to convey films across Arab nations and dialects.[15] Whether Global South filmmakers approached revoicing from a nationalist, regionalist, or militant "Third Worldist" point of view, they rarely proposed withholding translation as an effective strategy.

In the West, translation was withheld during the Cold War, in the name of Western cultural diplomacy and art cinema. In 1946, the Cannes and Venice international film festivals invited national governments to submit only unsubtitled "national" versions.[16] The Cinémathèque Française in Paris and the Anthology Film Archive in New York showed unsubtitled "original" versions into the 1970s.[17] "There is a sacrifice involved in the substitution of the purity of the image for the sense of the words, but it is a necessary one," Anthology founders responded to patrons' complaints.[18] This notion of cinema as a universal visual language, common since the silent era, justified a solution to a decolonization-era economic problem.[19] Even after subtitles became standard for festival and art-house screenings, most Global South filmmakers often could not afford them.[20] Only a few activist institutions, such as the International Forum of Young Cinema at Berlinale, covered the cost.[21] Most cinematheques instead supplemented

10 Hasan Imam Omar, "Egyptian Film's Overwhelming Success," *Al-Musawwar* (Egypt), June 14, 1974; Russian translation in *III festival stran Azii i Afriki v Tashkente: Otkliki zarubezhnoi pressy*, 18–19.

11 *Kino v borbe za mir, sotsyalnyi progress i svobodu narodov* (Moscow: VNIIK, 1978), 39.

12 "Resolutions of the Third World Filmmakers Meeting (Algeria, 1973)," in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Scott MacKenzie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 280.

13 Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, "Film and the Problem of Languages in Africa," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58 (2019): 123.

14 Jorge Sanjinés, "*Ukamau* and *Yawar Mallku*: An interview with Jorge Sanjinés," *Afterimage* 3 (1971): 46.

15 Galal El Charkawi, "Language in the Arab Countries," in *The Cinema in the Arab Countries*, ed. Georges Sadoul (Beirut: Interarab Centre of Cinema & Television, 1966), 62–63.

16 Sergei Budaev, report to Andrei Zhdanov, Secretary of the Central Committee, on the 1946 Venice Festival, December 24, 1946; and Mikhail Kalatozov, report to Zhdanov on the 1946 Cannes Festival, November 14, 1946, both in *opis* 2456, *delo* 4, *ed. kh.* 103, RGALI.

17 Vincent Canby, "Now You Can See Invisible Cinema," *New York Times*, November 29, 1970.

18 P. Adams Sitney, qtd. in Tessa Dwyer, *Speaking in Subtitles: Revaluing Screen Translation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 60, 57.

19 John Mowitt, *Re-takes: Postcoloniality and Foreign Film Languages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 51, 64; Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 6–14.

20 See Adrienne Mancia's report to the Museum of Modern Art on her trip to Tunis, November 1, 1972, 7, box 23, folder 3, Jay and Si-Lan Chen Leyda Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University.

21 Telegram about *Mueda, Memory and Massacre*, in Catarina Simao, *UHURU* (Bratislava: Apart, 2015), 8.

original versions with printed texts meant to be read before the screening. They ranged from a full list of translated silent-film intertitles to, most often, a short synopsis. During the 1978 Senegalese cinema retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, California, twenty-six out of thirty-six features and shorts played in Wolof and French accompanied by synopses in English.[22] Whereas anticolonial filmmakers aimed to convey their audiovisual message to the masses, only the visual integrity of their films became a priority for Western programmers.

The Soviet Union wielded translation as a weapon in the cultural Cold War, in the form of commentary written in advance to be spoken during projection. At the 1946 Cannes and Venice festivals, the Soviet delegation alone screened films with prepared commentary, insisting that Soviet films' unique "ideological richness" requires "detailed elucidation."[23] At Tashkent, Soviet officials planned to translate festival films in a way that confirmed official Soviet internationalism. Soviet leaders took credit for bringing Global South filmmakers together and making their works accessible to the international festival public. Many shorts and documentaries and some features from newly liberated nations had their international premiere at the festival. Vieyra, for example, encountered the first shorts from Ghana and Somalia and met their directors at Tashkent in 1968.[24] These films had to align with Soviet ideology. No documentary should play without "the most careful vetting" of the translated dialogue list, one of the organizers argued in 1976.[25]

In practice, however, live commentary evaded political oversight at Tashkent.[26] Most films arrived late, leaving no time for translation and vetting. Many films had partial or missing subtitles or dialogue lists. Some interpreters had to translate films in unfamiliar languages, such as Punjabi or Bambara, from subtitles in a language they understood, such as English or French. Often entire scenes would remain unsubtitled, forcing interpreters to make up the missing dialogue and reinvent voice-overs for documentaries from visual cues. In the relay system for foreign guests, the English or Arabic translation of the Russian translation came half a minute after the original dialogue. Occasionally, it added humor to the film, as when an English saying, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak," arrived as "The drinks are pretty good, but the meat is lousy."[27]

Tashkent spectators relied on the Soviet art of live translation, developed previously during the 1950s and 1960s. After Joseph Stalin's death in 1953, special screenings of foreign films with live commentary became possible, in addition to censored and dubbed foreign films in general circulation. The best Soviet film interpreters had

22 "Films from Senegal: 15 Years of an African Cinema, 1962–1977," *MoMA* 5 (Winter 1978): 2; PFA programs, February and March 1978.

23 Kalatozov, report to Zhdanov.

24 *Rol kinoiskusstva v borbe za mir, sotsyalnyi progress i svobodu narodov* (Moscow: USSR Filmmakers Union, 1972), 12.

25 Budget for the 1976 Tashkent festival.

26 Descriptions of live translation draw on Elena Razlogova, "Listening to the Inaudible Foreign: Simultaneous Translators and Soviet Experience of Foreign Cinema," in *Sound, Speech, Music in Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema*, ed. Lilya Kaganovsky and Masha Salazkina (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 162–178.

27 Gordon Hitchens, "Tashkent Festival," 1968, 3, box 1, folder 5, Gordon Hitchens Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.

improvisation skills honed at festivals and at public theaters, such as the Illiuzion, opened in 1966 in Moscow, which ran talkies in live translation eight times a day, every day. The Tashkent festival brought in such expert translators from Moscow. One of them, 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. 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, it will seem that he himself can understand English, French, or Japanese."[28]

Soviet simultaneous film translators kept the original soundtrack audible, reminding the spectators that they experienced a foreign language, then helped the audience relate to the foreign through domesticating techniques, such as reinterpreting jokes and obscenities to match the local context.[29] Despite forgetting about the translator while films were screening, Soviet cinephiles knew the best translators by name and, whenever possible, chose festival screenings depending on the interpreter.[30]

At Tashkent, skilled translators refashioned film dialogue in real time unbeknownst to festival censors. According to one account, at a 1968 screening of the Uzbek film *Vsadniki revolutsii* (*Riders of Revolution*; Kamil Yarmatov, 1968), a heroic scout, "riddled with bullets," collapsed on-screen before his Bolshevik commander, who bent down and asked—via earphones in a translator's "ironic" English—"'Well, now, what's the matter?' in a rather petulant, irritated voice."[31] This translator performed for Anglophone festival guests, opening up Uzbek revolutionary history for their reassessment. Multiple translation channels created separate festival publics. Interpreters into Russian addressed a different, Russian-speaking public longing for sexual liberation; some Uzbek festivalgoers recalled going to the screenings for the erotic scenes, knowing censors had no time to edit them out.[32] When forced to make up dialogue during screenings, these translators occasionally invented steamy innuendoes and love affairs.[33]

Heterolingual—partial, improvised, and provisional—translation also helped militant Global South filmmakers, another key coalition present at Tashkent, reach transnational audiences. The first feature made in independent Mozambique, *Mueda, memoria e massacre* (*Mueda, Memory and Massacre*; Ruy Guerra, 1979), was shot in Portuguese and Makonde but arrived in Tashkent with a French dialogue list and was most likely translated from French during projection.[34] Yet it became "the most talked about" film of the festival; it went on to the Berlinale Forum. At Tashkent, it impressed

28 Grigory Libergal, "Illuzion—shkola dlya perevodchikov," in *Kinoteatr Gosfilmofonda Rossii Illuzion: Vchera, segodnia, zavtra*, ed. Vladimir Soloviev (Moscow: Interreklama, 2008), 148–149 (my translation).

29 On domestication, see Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility* (London: Routledge, 1994).

30 Razlogova, "Listening to the Inaudible Foreign," 170.

31 Hitchens, "Tashkent Festival."

32 "South by Soviet East: Uzbekistan's Rule-Breaking Feast of Film," *Eurasianet*, October 5, 2018, https://eurasianet.org/south-by-soviet-east-uzbekistans-rule-breaking-feast-of-film.

33 Leonid Volodarsky, "Interview," *Maxim*, 1990, http://www.lvolodarsky.ru/leonid-volodarskij-intervyu-dlya-zhurnala-maxim.html.

34 Report about *Mueda* screening for the 1980 Tashkent festival selection committee, May 6, 1980, *fond* 3159, *opis* 1, *ed. kh.* 18, RGALI.

Global South participants who could not travel to Berlin.[35] "Militant, revolutionary" cinema, the Cuban director José Massip reported in 1968, found a "passionate, sensitive, and receptive" public at Tashkent.[36]

Live revoicing at Tashkent helps us theorize how multiple translocal and transnational cinematic affinities can form and intersect in a "contact zone" of unequal power and linguistic diversity.[37] The choices to translate or not and between particular forms of translation—dubbing, subtitles, printed matter, or live commentary—have different valences depending on the contact zone and the particular public or movement that takes them up. Heterolingual film dialogue can be subversive today, when subtitling costs little and English has become a global language. During the decolonization era, subtitles and dubbing remained a desired but often unattainable luxury and live interpreting a frequent stopgap. The Carthage Festival for Arab and African Cinema in Tunis did not require subtitles for Arab films in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, so as Vieyra pointed out, sub-Saharan African viewers occasionally relied on their Arabic-speaking neighbors in the movie theater for *chuchotage*.[38] Heterolanguage remains a useful analytical term for Tashkent screenings because of the festival's multilingual audiences and provisional translation. However, it applies to the situation rather than to the cinematic "original." At Tashkent, Carthage, and elsewhere, each revoicing left its trace as films circulated further, "forever in translation and rooted in material practices of cooperation, organization, and struggle."[39] In the decolonization era, understanding a Global South film was hard but necessary work.[40] ✻

35 Ron Holloway, "Mueda," *Variety*, June 18, 1980, 22.

36 José Massip, "Tashkent: Breve crónica de un festival," *Cine Cubano* 58–59 (1969): 71.

37 Djagalov and Salazkina, "Tashkent '68"; Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* 91 (1991): 33–40.

38 Vieyra, "Film and the Problem of Languages in Africa," 127.

39 Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 275. See also Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On Japan and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

40 As Antoine Damiens demonstrates in this issue, this labor of translation remains visible in informal film translation practices at alternative festivals today.