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# TRANSLATION AS ALCHEMY: THE AESTHETICS OF MULTILINGUALISM IN FILM

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the aesthetics of multilingualism in film. We start with a discussion of translation strategy in several films and continue with two case studies based on *Azur et Asmar* (2006) by Michel Ocelot, on the one hand, and *Nostalghia* (1983) and *Offret* (1986) by Andrei Tarkovsky, on the other. Our analysis does not involve a comparison between the original dialogues or monologues and their translations into one or several languages, but, rather, it focuses on the role of translation in film making, considering it independently from any pre-existing oral or written texts. This will lead us to a number of reflections about the possibility and the limits of communication, about poetry and cinematography, and the role of language(s) and silence in film.

## Résumé

Cet article se donne pour tâche d'examiner l'esthétique du multilinguisme au cinéma. Dans un premier temps, nous allons nous pencher sur des exemples de stratégie de traduction dans plusieurs films, pour ensuite analyser *Azur et Asmar* (2006) de Michel Ocelot et *Nostalghia* (1983) et *Offret* (1986) d'Andreï Tarkovski. Ce n'est pas notre but de comparer les dialogues ou monologues sources avec leurs traductions vers une ou plusieurs langues, mais, plutôt, de cerner le rôle de la traduction dans la création cinématographique, en l'envisageant sans la ramener toujours à un texte préalable, oral ou écrit. Ainsi, nous serons amenés à nous poser des questions sur la possibilité et les limites de la communication, sur la poésie et la photographie, et la place des langues et du silence au cinéma.

**Keywords:** Film. Interpreting. Multilingualism. Subtitling. Translation.

**Mots-clefs:** Film. Interprétation. Multilinguisme. Sous-titrage. Traduction.

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## 1. Introduction

The doctrine of *coincidentia oppositorum*, the interpenetration, interdependence and unification of opposites, has long been a characteristic of mystical thought. Whereas Western philosophers have maintained a system of binary oppositions and the principle of non-contradiction, mystics have often held that their experience can only be described in a way that violates this principle and goes beyond what appear to be mutually exclusive terms. In fact, according to the 1922 Nobel Prize winner for Physics, the Danish Niels Bohr, there are superficial truths, the opposites of which are obviously false, and profound truths, whose opposites may equally be right.

Translation and alchemy are two arts of transformation which endeavour to join together entities that are, or look, distinct, and to create a substance described as possessing unusual properties. Indeed, the outcome of the translation act stands in a relationship at the same time of difference and of identity with something other than itself. In other words, a translation is the same as, and at the same time different from, that which it is a translation, a transmutation of. But how many entities are to be joined and transformed? Transformed how, and into what?

The idea for this paper originated several years ago, when I first became aware of a fact I had undoubtedly encountered numerous times before, without paying attention to it or considering its implications: films can be in more than one language, and often are. The trigger for this realization came in the form of a scene from the visually stunning *Andrei Rubliov* (1966), by Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky. A teenage boy who has cast a church bell for the prince (we are in the 15<sup>th</sup> century) must now make it toll in front of his master and courtiers, as well as of a large crowd of people who have gathered for the occasion. The prince is accompanied by foreign ambassadors. It is in fact likely that there is only one ambassador, the other man being his interpreter. We are not told explicitly where the ambassadors are from, but they speak Italian. And it is through their private conversation that we learn extremely important things such as, for instance, that should the bell not toll, the boy will be put to death, together with everyone who worked with him. The interpreter



Illustration 1: The young bell maker and his companions.

seems to know much more about local customs, people and events than the other Italian.

As a result of discovering multilingualism in *Andrei Rubliov*, I started drafting a list of all the films I knew in which two or several languages are in contact: *Manhunt* (Fritz Lang, 1941), *Roma città aperta* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945), *Le Mépris* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1963), *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965), *The Godfather I and II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972 and 1974), *Les Aventures de rabbi Jacob* (Gérard Oury, 1973), *French Connection II* (John Frankenheimer, 1975), *Nostalghia* and *Offret* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1983 and 1986), *Amadeus* (Milos Forman, 1984), *A Passage to India* (David Lean, 1984), *The Mission* (Roland Joffé, 1986), *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990), *Green Card* (Peter Weir, 1990), *The Last of the Mohicans* (Michael Mann, 1992), *Indochine* (Régis Wargnier, 1992), *Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992), *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1994), *Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, 1995), *Le Hussard sur le toit* (Jean-Paul Rappeneau, 1995), *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella, 1996), *Kavkazskiy plennik* (Sergei Bodrov, 1996), *Karakter* (Mike van Diem, 1997), *La vita è bella* (Roberto Benigni, 1997), *Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 1998), *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998), *Fail Safe* (Stephen Frears, 2000), *The Whole Nine Yards* (Jonathan Lynn, 2000), *Ničija zemlja* (Danis Tanovi, 2001), *Lagaan* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001), *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Peter Jackson, 2001, 2002 and 2003), *Monsoon Wedding* and *The Namesake* (Mira Nair, 2001 and 2006), *L'Auberge espagnole* and *Les Poupées russes* (Cédric Klapisch, 2002 and 2005), *La Repentie* (Laetitia Masson, 2002), *The Pianist* (Roman Polanski, 2002), *Politiki kouzina* (Tassos

Boulmetis, 2003), *Les Invasions barbares* (Denys Arcand, 2003), *Lost in Translation* (Sofia Coppola, 2003), *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004), *Mar adentro* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2004), *Everything Is Illuminated* (Liev Schreiber, 2005), *Tsotsi* (Gavin Hood, 2005), *The Interpreter* (Sydney Pollack, 2005), *Azur et Asmar* (Michel Ocelot, 2006), *Efter brylluppet* (Susanne Bier, 2006), *The Painted Veil* (John Curran, 2006), *Ostrov* (Pavel Lungin, 2006), *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006), *Youth Without Youth* (Francis Ford Coppola, 2007), *Once* (John Carney, 2007), *Eastern Promises* (David Cronenberg, 2007), *Restul e tăcere* (Nae Caranfil, 2007), *Gran Torino* (Clint Eastwood, 2008), *Le Concert* (Radu Mihăileanu, 2009), *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009), *Des hommes et des dieux* (Xavier Beauvois, 2010), *Hævnen* (Susanne Bier, 2010) and *The Way Back* (Peter Weir, 2010).

This is only a very short list of films in which two or more languages are spoken, and far from reflects how widespread the phenomenon of multilingualism really is in national cinemas across the world (for a list of multilingual Hollywood films belonging to a variety of genres which include, among others, historical dramas, action thrillers and romantic comedies, please see Bleichenbacher 2008; for multilingual film productions in German-speaking countries, see Heiss 2004). In two of the films listed above, *The Piano* and *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, sign language is present.

All these films and many others point to the fact that translation is required not only when a film travels abroad and will be seen by an audience other than that of its country of origin, although this remains the classic situation in which some form of language transfer on screen is most often needed. But beyond this, translation (or lack thereof), as a consequence of multilingualism, can be a deliberate artistic choice made by the director of the film, who, sometimes, has to fight to impose it (see, for instance, Viviani 2008, for a discussion of Francis Ford Coppola's risk-taking when he decided to have subtitled Italian in *The Godfather*). From what we have been able to observe, the two forms of translation which are most likely to be used in such cases are subtitling and interpreting. What we mean by interpreting is that there is a character in the film who translates for the others, sometimes in a professional capacity, but often not. Many films fall under this category: *Andrei Rubliov*, *Nostalghia*, *The Mission*, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Piano*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Fail Safe*, *Lost in Translation*, *Everything Is Illuminated* and *The Interpreter*, to name a few.

The aim of this paper is, then, to explore the aesthetics of multilingualism in film. We start with a few general considerations and discuss translation

strategy in several different films. This is followed by two case studies based on *Azur et Asmar* (*Azur and Asmar: The Princes' Quest*) by Michel Ocelot, on the one hand, and *Nostalghia* (*Nostalgia*) and *Offret* (*The Sacrifice*) by Andrei Tarkovsky, on the other. Separated by time, country of origin, language(s), and genre (animation film versus feature films), all of them have at least two things in common: a preoccupation with language, migration and some form of exile, and an elegant simplicity which is the ultimate sophistication. Our analyses will not involve a comparison between the original dialogues or monologues and their translations into one or several languages, but, rather, focus on the role of translation in film making, considering it independently from any pre-existing oral or written texts. This will lead us to a number of reflections about the possibility and the limits of communication, as well as about poetry and cinematography, and the role of language(s) and silence in films.

## 2. Multilingualism in film: interpreting and translation

There are several reasons for multilingualism in film, mainly linked to the realistic depiction of situations which involve travelling, migration, studying abroad, work or personal relations in an international environment, or families whose members are of different national or ethnic origin. Multilingual interactions represented in film include code switching and code mixing, but multilingualism can also come in the form of intertextuality, for example songs or quotations, such as, for instance, Alexander's declamation in English of a line from act 2, scene 2 of *Hamlet*, in the Swedish language film *Offret*. But, as Heiss (2004), among others, pointed out, not only can there be more than one national language in an audiovisual programme; there will, most of the time, also be intralinguistic variations (archaic language, dialects, sociolects, idiolects, as opposed to standard language) which convey important information about the characters (see Bakhtin, the founding theorist of heteroglossia and multivoicedness in the novel, 1981 for the English translation). Thus, films such as *Trainspotting* (1996) or *Snatch* (2000), which are in English, are extremely difficult to understand without some form of intralinguistic translation; an interesting discussion of the issues surrounding the translation into Italian of two films shot in southern Italian dialect can be found in Longo (2009). Sometimes languages are invented, as is the case with *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *Avatar*.

The spectrum of degrees of multilingualism is very wide, ranging from a few occasional words or sentences in a language other than the main language of the film, to productions such as *Monsoon Wedding*, *Les Poupées russes* or

*Azur et Asmar*, where two or more languages coexist from the beginning to the end and the presence of all of them is substantial.

Multilingualism does not always appear where one might expect it. In Romanian historical films, foreigners always speak Romanian: this is what Bleichenbacher (2008) calls “the replacement strategy”. The viewers have to suspend disbelief and accept that people of diverse origin, such as Turks, Tartars, Poles, Italians, Austrians, the Pope in Rome and the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, all express themselves in fluent Romanian.

### 2.1 Interpreters in films

The role of interpreters is extremely interesting. They have a mediating role between the other characters on screen, while at the same time translating for the audience of the film. Indeed, “characters on screen address each other as if they were real persons while, in reality, a scriptwriter is, like a novelist, constructing discourse for the sake of the effect it will have on its receivers” (Hatim & Mason 2000: 433-434). All this interaction has to be carefully scripted and staged so it works seamlessly.

Our first example of a rather reluctant, at least in the beginning, interpreter comes from *Dances with Wolves* (1990), by Kevin Costner. According to Viviani (2008), one of the major achievements of this beautifully scenic film, well served by music composed by John Barry, is to overcome negative portrayals of Indians. While this is not the first attempt to do that, as is sometimes believed, it is crucial that the Indians are given a voice, albeit the one attributed to them by a white film-maker. There are long dialogues in Sioux in the absence of outsiders, and this is important because it means the Indians are portrayed by themselves, not just in their dealings with white people (though, once again, the film is about the interaction between a white person and the Indians). The dialogues in Sioux are subtitled for the audience of the film, and this removes some of the threat. We often fear what we cannot understand, and some negative portrayals engendered by, and generating, fear may spring from the impossibility or difficulty of communication. Through the subtitles, spectators find out that the Indians mean no harm; rather, they are intrigued by the presence of the lonely soldier at the fort, and worried about their own survival as they keep being pushed west by the whites until, finally, there may be nowhere left to go (see Viviani 2008).

The white woman adopted by the Indians in her childhood and known as Stands with a Fist (actress Mary McDonnell) is recruited by Kicking Bird, the wise man of the tribe and her benefactor, to act as interpreter, which she strongly refuses, at first. Translation is not, for her, an indifferent task. By



exposing her to the language of her parents and by forcing her into the company of a white man, it brings back traumatic memories from the past as well as an unresolved identity issue. In the scenes where she interprets, mainly between Kicking Bird and John Dunbar (Kevin Costner), there is no need for subtitles to assist the audience. John Dunbar, who progressively takes on an Indian identity himself, to the point that he is given an Indian name and becomes Dances with Wolves, starts learning Sioux. The interpreter becomes language teacher, giving the people she serves the tools to manage on their own. This means that, at a later stage, she will no longer be needed for her purely linguistic skills, though she retains her role as cultural mediator between Dances with Wolves and his new friends.

The dialogues in *Sioux* were probably originally scripted in English and then translated into Sioux. The present researcher does not speak that language and is not in possession of a gloss which she could compare with the English subtitles in the original version of the film. It is obvious that these subtitles are not in fluent English (e.g. “I cannot make the white man language” or “It has been a long time since I made the talk”, in the scene where Kicking Bird tries to make Stand with a Fist accept to act as interpreter). Given the respectful approach to Indians of the film, we can only assume that deliberate foreignization is at work here, to allow a better insight into their language. In the French dubbed version of *Dances with Wolves* the English in the soundtrack is replaced by French, the Sioux is left unchanged, and the English subtitles are translated. As for the French subtitled version of the film, we notice a tendency towards domestication, normalisation and fluency in the dialogues translated into French from Sioux, via English. And since there are now subtitles in the entire film, not only in selected scenes, multilingualism becomes less salient because it is no longer visually marked. An attentive and informed spectator will, of course, be able to discern that two different languages are spoken in the soundtrack. We would like to mention at this point that, according to Cornu (2011), there is no guarantee in France that the quality subtitles usually available for the cinema release of a film will be found on the DVD.

In *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), by Michael Mann, three languages are present, as well as a variety of accents, and there are subtitles in the original version. English remains, though, the main language of the film. The intensely dramatic scene in which the Great Sachem decides the fate of Cora, Alice and Major Duncan Heyward, who are Magua's hostages, while Hawkeye (Daniel Day-Lewis) arrives to rescue them, is extremely rich in terms of multilingual interaction, in a context where a lot is at stake: the hostages' freedom and

even their lives, and, beyond that, the fate of the Indians caught up between the British and the French.

Huron, French and English are spoken in this scene. Major Heyward acts as interpreter between Hawkeye, who does not speak French, and the Great Sachem, who does not speak English. He is chained up from the beginning to the end, and literally interprets for his life and that of Cora and Alice. Magua speaks the three languages, although not fluently. From what we can judge based on his behaviour in the film, the major is not familiar with the intricacies of the cross-cultural and political situation involving the British and the French armies, the colonists, and the various Indian tribes. He is just a loyal soldier, and someone who happens to speak French.

An old Huron woman shouts something at Hawkeye as he enters the village, and this is not subtitled into English. It would be interesting to know whether she is aggressive towards him, or whether she is trying to chase away the Huron warriors who attack Hawkeye as soon as they see him, even though the latter is not armed and does not fight back.

Naming strategies are very interesting here, and are always associated with points of view. Depending on who is speaking, Daniel Day-Lewis's character is called "Hawkeye, adopted son of Chingachgook", "Nathaniel of the Yengeese" or "la Longue Carabine"; references to the French and the English also suffer various transformations.

The audience is informed, via English subtitles, of the decisions the Great Sachem has made, even as he is uttering them in Huron. The spectators consequently know more than Hawkeye, Cora, Major Heyward and Alice, who are told nothing in a language they can understand. When Hawkeye realizes what is happening, he offers to be put to death in Cora's place, and asks Major Heyward to translate that into French. The major immediately conforms, or at least that is what the others believe. He does indeed translate, but unfaithfully. He appropriates Hawkeye's idea and asks to be put to death himself. When Hawkeye and the two women see that he deliberately mistranslated, it is too late to change anything.

In the French subtitled DVD version of the film, Magua's awkward French is not transcribed literally. There is reformulation and normalization, which also extends to everything the Great Sachem says in French, in the original. In the French dubbed version, everything is in French, including the dialogues in Huron. The tension created by the simultaneous use of several languages which not everyone involved can understand disappears from the scene, which is extensively rewritten. Major Heyward no longer acts as interpreter, and his heroic gesture is diminished. The linguistic dimension, which

plays such an important role in portraying the complex relationships between individuals and between nations in a troubled moment in the history of what is now Canada, is levelled down.

It is not only in *The Last of the Mohicans* that an interpreter intervenes in a very tense situation. In *The Mission* (1986), by Roland Joffé, the Jesuit priest Gabriel (a young Jeremy Irons) translates between the Guarani Indians and the envoy of the Pope. We are in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The outcome of the discussion will decide the fate of the San Carlos mission and all the other missions in South America. A professional interpreter is required by the American president in Cold War drama *Fail Safe* (2000), as he is about to negotiate by phone in a crisis situation where nuclear catastrophe is imminent. The president asks the young man to do more than just translate the Russian. He wants his interpreter to translate what the person at the other end of the line thinks. Symbolically, while many people are involved in managing the crisis, the president is alone in a room with the interpreter at his side. All the situations described above would make wonderful subjects of discussion in an ethics-based approach to the translator's responsibility and involvement, as envisaged by Pym (1997).

On a lighter note, though far from melancholy free, in Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003) interpreting between Japanese and English appears as one of the many metaphors of alienation. Bob Harris, a rather washed-up American film star who travels to Tokyo to shoot a commercial, is lost in Japan, where everything is so different, and where he does not understand the language. But he is also lost in his own life, and estranged from his family.

The scene of the shooting of the commercial is a wonderfully clever *mise en abyme*, with many resemblances to the film viewing experience of a monolingual spectator who needs to rely on the subtitler to explain what is being said. Everyone on the set, except for Bob, speaks in Japanese. Bob notices that the length of the English translations is significantly shorter than that of the Japanese, and asks "That's all he said?" and "Is that everything? I mean, it seemed like he said quite a bit more than that" (the usual comments on subtitles when people do not realize there has to be text compression). Should Bob Harris trust the interpreter, or is he right to assume that he is missing on something? Or, possibly, both at the same time? Unlike the Great Sachem scene in *The Last of the Mohicans*, in which the audience of the film is given, through the subtitles in English, information which is not accessible to some of the characters, here the non-Japanese speaking spectator is only told as much as Bob. Interestingly, after two attempts to question whether the interpreter provided a full and accurate translation of the director's instructions,

Bob stops asking questions. He smiles and nods in agreement, and does whatever he assumes may be expected of him.

The Japanese interpreter does not speak fluent English, and this is reproduced via non-fluent French in the DVD subtitled version. This is another of the amazing possibilities engendered by/in translation: someone can speak broken English... in French. Will the French (and other non-Japanese speaking) spectators transfer what they see in the film to their own viewing situation, which is also translator-mediated?

Sometimes the interpreter is a child, as is the case in *The Piano* (1993), and sometimes a grown-up child. Alexander 'Alex' Perchov in *Everything Is Illuminated* (2005) does not really speak the same English as his American Jewish client who has travelled to Ukraine, the home country of his ancestors, to unravel the past. Not only is he far from linguistically fluent, but he also lacks sensitivity to cultural and religious difference, and piles up blunder after blunder. This incompetent but cheerful and well-meaning interpreter is assisted by his ostentatiously anti-Semitic grandfather, who claims he is blind although he is perfectly able to drive the taxi, and the grandfather's inseparable "deranged" dog. It is one of Alex's memorable quotes that gives the title to the novel *Everything Is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer (2002) and its adaptation to the screen by Liev Schreiber: "I have reflected many times upon our rigid search. It has shown me that everything is illuminated in the light of the past. It is always along the side of us, on the inside, looking out".

## 2.2 Subtitles as artistic choice

Subtitling as an artistic choice envisaged by the director of the film and his creative team is present, to a smaller or larger extent, in most of the films listed in section 1 of this paper, including in some scenes from films in which there is an interpreter. *Dances with Wolves* is an example of this.

What are the subtitles, then? Often referred to as an afterthought, cumbersome, a necessary evil, an addition to the finished work, we are here in a situation where they actually are part of the film – as the director wanted it. And with the advent of 3D, subtitles become one of the objects on screen whose position has to be determined in space (one member of the team who translated *Avatar* into French had to travel to the US to work with an engineer at the film studio; for a discussion of the 3D subtitling of *Avatar*, see Baldo & Vallée, in press). But even in 2D, many creative solutions can be envisaged, as shown in Vallée (in press). In the examples Vallée chooses for her case studies, the subtitles are special effects reflecting and enhancing the mood of the film.

Subtitles are, undoubtedly, an aid to understanding. But they are also a voice in the film, incarnated in a graphic presence on screen. They help tell the story, advance the plot, and as such they have a narrative function as well as a character portrayal role.

Audiences are not always monolingual. In particular, spectators of a film in English could be non-native speakers from around the world. And there are all kinds of interesting viewing situations: the “other” language in a film could be the mother tongue of some of the spectators.

When a multilingual film which includes subtitles in the original travels abroad, the main language of the film as well as the subtitles are translated. If this is done via subtitling, the several languages in the film end up merging into one, i.e., the target language, while continuing to be present in the soundtrack. Italics can be used to indicate that another language is being spoken, and foreignizing translation techniques may be implemented to signal difference.

According to Viviani (2008: 19), in recent years subtitles have started being almost systematically inserted for dialogue which the director of a multilingual film left untranslated in the original, though it is logical to assume that their absence was a deliberate option. The words which come to mind are normalization and standardization, also noticed by Kaufmann (2004) with respect to the translation strategies used in a documentary film she analyzes.

“Every film is a foreign film, foreign to some audience somewhere – and not simply in terms of language”, say Canadian director Atom Egoyan and academic Ian Balfour in the introduction to their co-edited volume *Subtitles: on the foreignness of film* (2004: 21). In fact, every film is a foreign film to most audiences, including the one at home, in as much as spectators do not have direct access to the director’s mind and experiences, and can only look through the window provided by the images, music, and the spoken or written word. Watching a film in one’s mother tongue is experiencing the alterity of the person, or team, who created it. And so, mediation may be required. According to Steiner (1975), every instance of human communicative interaction is translation.

Meet the other? Receive the other? Berman (1985) notices that most translators tend to reduce the tension between the several languages which may co-exist in a text. How is it possible to keep the voices different, when translation is usually conceptualized as the “full transposition of *one* (monolingual) source code into *another* (monolingual) target code for the benefit of a *monolingual* target public” (Meylaerts 2006: 5)? As Meylaerts pointed out, it

may be necessary to stretch the boundaries and find creative solutions to the conundrum of the multiplicity of languages in texts.

### 3. *Azur et Asmar*: two countries, two languages and two religions

*Azur et Asmar* (2006) is, first and foremost, beautiful cinema. It is a vibrantly coloured animation film which took six years in the making.

Right from the start, I considered the obstacle of languages, because I wanted to show the condition of the immigrant for whom the language barrier is a major difficulty. So, in certain passages, I do not try to make people understand, so that they feel a little lost. But most of the time, I alternate between the two languages in the dialogues, and a reply provides unequivocal information about the question. I also find this absence of subtitles rather elegant... It is also a gift I am giving to children, the possibility of hearing several languages. I think it is an appealing event in sound.

This is what says Michel Ocelot, *Azur et Asmar*'s creator, in an interview with Nigel Andrews (Press Images 2006). Ocelot is a French animator best known for *Kirikou et la sorcière* (1998), *Princes et Princesses* (2000), *Kirikou et les bêtes sauvages* (2005), *Dragons et Princesses* (2010) and *Les Contes de la nuit* (2011), the latter also available in 3D. There is a sequel to *Kirikou* in preparation at the moment, entitled *Kirikou et les hommes et les femmes*.

The two languages in the film are French and Arabic, with no subtitles at all. There is also a bit of lion language – roaring! – in the scene where Azur meets the Scarlet Lion with blue claws (Ocelot's invention; the Saimourh Bird with rainbow wings, on the other hand, is a mythical creature from Persian tales) and, by means of a magic pill judiciously given to him by princess Chamsous-Sabah, is able to converse with animals. No interpretation is provided.

Azur does not have a mother and Asmar does not have a father. They are brought up together by Jenane, Asmar's mother, who is a maidservant in Azur's father's manor. The boys always want the same things and dream the same dream, inspired by Jenane's fairy tales from across the sea. Jenane, who is bilingual, does not make a difference between the two of them, gives them equal shares of everything, and speaks to them in both Arabic and French.

The harmony between them is somewhat disrupted by the boys' growing up and starting to compete with each other, and is completely destroyed by the intervention of Azur's father. He sends his son to study with a teacher in town without allowing him to say good-bye, and banishes Jenane and Asmar.

When Azur and Jenane are reunited many years later, she tells him that, through her experience of two countries, of two languages and of two



Illustration 2: Jenane and the boys.

religions, she knows twice as much as other people who are prisoners of their ignorance and superstitions, and that is how she was able to overcome hardship and succeed in life (she has become the richest merchant in her town in the North of Africa). Brought up bilingual, Azur is not bicultural also, as he has had no experience of Jenane's country and its people. Upon arriving as a poor immigrant who has lost everything at sea, he quickly becomes

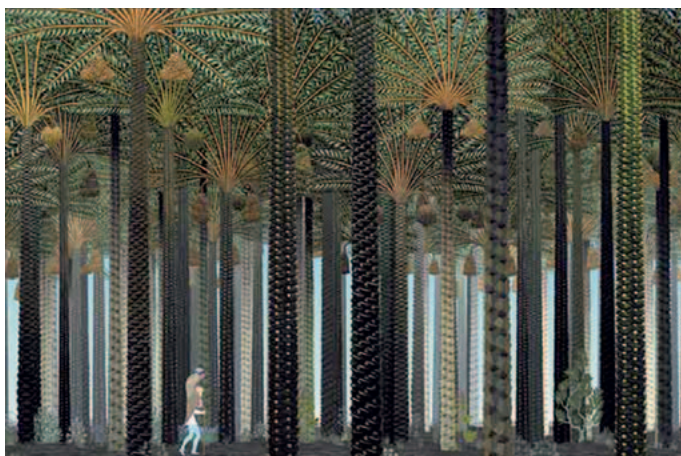


Illustration 3: Azur and Crapoux in the palm forest.





Illustration 4: Azur and Crapoux near the medina.

discouraged by the hostile attitude of the locals, who consider that his blue eyes bring misfortune, and decides that the world is ugly and that he will never open his eyes again. He will be blind. As a consequence, he needs someone to guide him. This person is Crapoux, a compatriot who has spent twenty years in the country, while remaining a foreigner.

In illustration 3, Crapoux, perched on Azur's shoulders as he pretends he has a lot of difficulty walking, is telling Azur that the palm forest they are crossing is ugly, like everything else in that land. He complains that there are no fir trees.

As they approach the medina, the town, Azur wants to know what it is they are hearing. At nearly every step he asks "What's that?". It is almost as though he is asking for a translation; only, it is not the names of things that he wants. What he needs is a description, because he continues to keep his eyes closed. Crapoux describes the places and the people, always adding a disparaging comment which reinforces Azur's determination to remain blind. He also speaks for Azur, since the latter cannot remember very well the language of his nanny, which he has not heard since his childhood. So, it is not only his capacity to see the world for himself that Azur gives up temporarily, but also his voice. He only opens his eyes again when he is sure he has found Jenane. She is beautiful and welcomes him as a son. From that moment onwards, Azur accepts to see the beauty of the land across the sea, in no way inferior to that of his home country, only different.





Illustration 5: Azur and Asmar's childhood in France.



Illustration 6: Jenane's garden.

According to Jenane, Crapoux can only have lied to Azur and told him nasty things about the country, so Azur also lives a miserable life of failure like himself. On the other hand, it is revealed that Crapoux has blue eyes, which he hides behind thick eyeglasses because of the superstition of the locals. He will continue to hide his eyes because life in the streets is not the same as

the sheltered life Azur will lead from now on in rich Jenane's house. Michel Ocelot confesses having drawn, to an extent, his own portrait when he was 15 years old. Having moved with his parents from Guinea, in Africa, to Angers, in the north-west of France, he complained for ten years instead of making the most of his new situation, and trying to be happy.

An international team of people from 25 countries besides France was involved in the making of the film, in Paris. Hiam Abbass, who gives her rich and warm voice to Jenane's character, is a Palestinian with an Israeli and French passport. Gabriel Yared, who composed the music, is of Lebanese origin.

*Azur et Asmar* has been translated into many languages. At least two different dubbed versions exist in English: a British translation and an American one. George Roubicek, the British dialogue director, who worked together with Ocelot, talks about the translation being an adaptation. Among the reasons for this, he mentions the different sense of humour of his target audience by comparison with that of the original film, and that cultural references which are obvious to one audience may not be so to the other.

"Fairy tales are my natural language", says Ocelot, "all fairy tales from around the planet" (Reuters UK, 13 February 2011). He feels at ease in them like a fish in water.

### 3. Andrei Tarkovsky: silence as language

Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-1986) feels at ease in silence.

When the images in a film need a lot of dialogue, when the dialogue has an important function, then I feel it is no longer cinema. It is something else. I want a film with few words and with images which are significant.

These are the words of Antonio Guerra, Tarkovsky's scriptwriter for *Nostalghia*, in a 1983 interview with Cesare Biarese. Guerra, who worked with celebrated film directors such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Theodoros Angelopoulos, Francesco Rossi, Giuseppe de Santis and Vittorio de Sica, had been a poet before he became a scriptwriter, and never stopped writing poetry. That the visual dimension of film should be of primary importance is something that makes a lot of sense, given the nature of the medium, but is sometimes forgotten. According to Guerra (same interview with Biarese), the most banal of objects, a bottle, for instance, can become poetry if it is lit and photographed in a particular way.

Tarkovsky made seven feature films during his career: *Ivanovo Detstvo* (1962), *Andrei Rubliov* (1966), *Solaris* (1972), *Zerkalo* (1975), *Stalker* (1979), *Nostalghia* (1983) and *Offret* (1986). His last two films were made in exile,



Illustration 7: Detail from a Tarkovsky film.

*Nostalghia* in Italy and *Offret* in Sweden. If Bird (2004) was right to claim, with respect to *Andrei Rubliov*, that the entire film is about what cannot be shown, the same statement can probably be made about poetry, and about all of Tarkovsky's work.

It may be interesting to mention at this point that the sets of *Nostalghia* and *Offret* were a real tower of Babel. Tarkovsky spoke some Italian and, when he made *Nostalghia*, he was able to communicate, to an extent, in that language, with his crew and actors. A Russian interpreter was, however, often needed, also because actor Oleg Yankovsky did not speak Italian at all. An English interpreter was needed for Erland Josephson, who is a Swedish actor. In *Offret*, Tarkovsky worked with respected cinematographer Sven Nykvist, who had been involved in many Ingmar Bergman films. The two men could only communicate through an interpreter, who had to be present on set all the time, to translate between Tarkovsky and his Swedish crew. Yet everyone who worked with him claims that language was never a barrier, that excellent communication was established because of Tarkovsky's sincerity or, as Erland Josephson put it, sophisticated innocence.



Illustration 8: Words, words, words.

Multilingualism is present right from the start in Andrei Tarkovsky's last film. Two titles, *Offret* and *Sacrificatio*, are displayed simultaneously on Leonardo Da Vinci's "Adoration of the Magi", on the background of music by Johann Sebastian Bach. But mistrust of human language is also expressed very early in the film, in the form of a quotation from *Hamlet*: "Words, words, words". Hamlet gives this reply to Polonius, who wanted to know what the prince was reading. In *Offret*, whose English title is *The Sacrifice*, it is Alexander (Erland Josephson) who says this, in one of his monologues, as he wanders around accompanied by his mute son. Alexander speaks a lot, and the child listens.

The word can only be heard in silence. Many important characters in Tarkovsky's films hardly ever speak. In fact, very few of his characters speak at all. The icon painter in *Andrei Rubliov* makes a vow of silence. In *Nostalghia*, Domenico (also played by Erland Josephson) is a hermit – or a lunatic. Little Man, Alexander's son in *Offret*, is mute throughout the film, except at the very end, when he says something of an importance beyond everything everyone else has spoken, put together. He recovers his voice just as his father has made a vow of silence and set fire to all his possessions.

Silence is space and time. Tarkovsky often uses long takes, even up to ten minutes, to follow a character deep into his world. This also creates a measured rhythm of the film.



Illustration 9: Leaving everything behind.

*Nostalghia* is about exile, and was made in exile. A Russian poet, Gorchakov (Oleg Yankovsky), travels through Italy, accompanied by his guide and translator Eugenia, researching the life of an 18<sup>th</sup> century Russian composer. They arrive in a small spa town, said to have been a favourite place of saint Catherine of Sienna, and go to the hotel.



Illustration 10: The ending shot of *Nostalghia*.





Illustration 11: Gorchakov and Eugenia, talking.

As they wait to be shown their rooms, they have one of their rare conversations, which, like all the others, leads nowhere except to frustration. Yet it would have seemed logical that the foreigner, the outsider, the exile, should find an interlocutor in the only person who speaks his language. Eugenia is reading Russian poems in Italian translation, and this infuriates Gorchakov, who thinks that poetry is untranslatable. He does not claim that all translation is impossible, but probably is not far from believing it (a more detailed discussion of this scene is in Şerban, in press). There are only two people Gorchakov is able to communicate with, and he does not need an interpreter for that: Domenico and a little girl whom he tells, in broken Italian, complicated things about his life, and to whom he recites poems in Russian. At all other times, he is silent.

Languages, in the plural, and silence, the two forms of language in Tarkovsky's films, lead to the grand finale in *Offret*, at the same time a statement and a question are left unanswered. Alone under the barren tree he helped his father plant near the sea, and which he will water until it blossoms and bears fruit, Little Man speaks for the first time.

"In the beginning was the Word. Why is that, Papa?". The beginning of the Gospel According to John, and this question, are the last words ever uttered in a Tarkovsky film.



Illustration 12: Alexander and Little Man planting the barren tree.

## 5. Concluding remarks

Multilingualism makes communication and mediation issues more visible, testing their limits and stretching their boundaries. When it appears in films, it creates a *mise en abyme* which encourages the audience to reflect on their experience of being in a world in which we need interpreters and translators.

Languages and silence in film, and the paradox of how to alchemically transform something into something else that will be different, while remaining the same, reminds us of the only decoration in Domenico's house, in *Nostalgia*. High on one of the walls, there is a big inscription which says " $1 + 1 = 1$ ". No explanation is provided for how that might be possible – the visitor will have to believe that it is, or not.

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