

Strange, very strange, like in a dream: Borders and translations in ‘Strogij Yunosha’

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Abstract. Semiotics applied to translation studies produces an original approach that is generating scientific texts of high interest. On the other side, the notion of “translation” in a broad sense appears very important within semiotics itself, as in Ch. Peirce’s and J. Lotman’s thought. Distinguishing between translation studies’ influences on semiotics and semiotics’ influence on translation studies becomes increasingly difficult. In this article a synthesis is tried: the Soviet film ‘Strogij Yunosha’ is analyzed using the tools of both disciplines. At first the concept of “strange” is analyzed from a semiotic point of view, looking also for etymological reasons to classify strangeness as simple difference or as inimicality. Then cultural implicit is considered as the problem of mediation between Self and Other, both in a collective and in an individual (psychological) sense. The ways of relating to the Other are then considered in the light of a systemic approach to the cultural polysystem, in which the least unit or subsystem is the individual. The film is then decomposed in many “worlds”, and their borders and relations are viewed in the light of the aforementioned approaches. Such translational analysis of the film allows to hypothesize why it was banned from the Soviet regime.

1. An interdisciplinary method to analyze a film

Strogij Yunosha, 1936 (director Abram Room, screenwriter Yuri Olesha, Ukrainfilm), is a film crossed by many borders, inhabited by many worlds. Hence, it is possible to study its dynamics as if it were a set of translations. This is my thesis. I’ll try to build a borderline analysis around this black and white (and white) film that is almost seventy years old, on the borders between cultural studies, gender studies, translation studies and psychology.

2. Strange?

I'll try to deal with this film, elusive to an easy cataloguing, starting from Giovanni Buttafava's definition: "the most insane film of the Thirties" (Buttafava, quoted in Piretto 2002: 79). If you want to define "strange", you need first of all to decide which canon you use as your reference. If you want to analyze a film in terms of translation semiotics, you need first of all to see what the borders within the film and outside the film are, and where they pass, and then see how the various translation processes work in relation thereof. Buttafava refers, implicitly, to the canon of Soviet cinema in the Thirties. Since, however, the film in the Soviet era didn't have any history of criticism or audience, Buttafava's criticism, as the other Western researchers' criticism, starts from an altogether different chronotope: the chronotope of the post-Soviet era, of Western-European culture, of translation studies /cultural studies /gender studies:

After the expansion of the paradigm of postcolonial and the related field of gender studies into translation studies, the border drawn between culture studies and translation studies has become fuzzier, yet at the same time, a visible complementarity has emerged. On the one hand, since the turn of the century, the understanding of the cultural value of a translation text has grown deeper, especially in respect to the importance of translations for the identity of the receiving culture. On the other hand, culture theory, particularly in the area of cultural studies, has again begun to value the concept of identity through culture. Due to the activity of the topic of globalization and the opposition of the global and the local, the understanding has been reached once again that no society wishing to enact its specificity can escape the consideration of cultural identity. (Torop 2002: 593–594)

It is also very interesting to establish the "strangeness" of *Strogij Yunosha* for the Soviet canon contemporary to the film, since such strangeness has evidently induced authorities to lock it in a storehouse, preventing its circulation in the cinemas. This kind of strangeness (and, probably, of dangerousness) is the most interesting for the researcher of Soviet culture.

From a semiotic-translational point of view, I wish to establish how, within a culture, difference is perceived. In brief, we can say that different images can be associated to diversity within a culture.

(1) *Diversity as rule*. Let us think of a culture like in New York City, where the quantities and qualities of people from different

cultures is such that one finds hard realizing which one is the dominating canon, i.e. WASP. In such a context, diversity is the rule.

(2) *Diversity as eccentricity*: a culture in which, unlike the previous case, a different individual stands out, and is considered an eccentric, such a difference goes without being connoted either in a positive or in a negative way (there is only registering of differences).

(3) *Diversity as an evil to be persecuted*: in this culture the different individual is persecuted, or at least indicated as a negative model. In most cases, it is a totalitarian society, in need of a unique model in order to preserve its cohesion. This is what Bruner says related to works produced in such a society: “the rhetorical overspecialization of narrative, when stories become so ideologically or self-servingly motivated that distrust displaces interpretation, and ‘what happened’ is discounted as fabrication. On the large scale, this is what happens under a totalitarian regime [...]” (Bruner 1990: 96). As I’ll try to show, in this third category falls the film that is analyzed here, ‘persecuted’ just because it is not predictable at all.

3. Etymology and cultural implicit

That a culture (in this case a collective culture, a society) synthetically a priori judges the different token can also be interpreted as a cultural criterion for translating the other. The criteria for translatability of the different individual are then dictated by the cultural system, and the ‘different’, the ‘deviant’, is not simply perceived (after Kant, can still we be so naive as to think that ‘pure perception’ exists?), it is also pre-translated into something else; and in a totalitarian society, this something else is a well established something.

Etymology is one of the registers through which implicit values in a culture can be reconstrued. The vision that a system has of itself and of others (cultural implicit) works as a *translational filter* through which all that comes from without passes. Referring to Renate Lachmann’s research, consider the origin of some words in Russian meaning difference, in order to reconstruct what lies behind them:

drugoj other
drug friend

From such a semantic splitting it is evident that the notion of “friend”, that can be defined as “a person whom one knows well and is fond of; intimate associate; close acquaintance; a person on the same side in a struggle” (Websters), originates from the notion of other, of different. In the moment when the Self is differentiated from the Other (drugoj), in the etymology the ambiguity is preserved whether such an Other is to be considered a friend (drug) or simply a different person, almost a stranger. Another pair stressed by Lachmann is:

strannyj strange
stranà (other’s) country

In contemporary Russian, *strana* doesn’t mean “other’s country”, simply “country”. On the contrary, as Piretto suggests (personal communication), there is a key song of the Stalin era that sings: *shiroka strana moyà rodnaya*. Etymological dictionaries however indicate the shared root of *strana* and *storona* (part), and consequently also of *postoronnyj* (stranger). The Dal’ dictionary gives this definition of *postoronnyj*: “storonnyj, ne svoj, chuzhdyj, chuzhoj, so storony” (Dal’ 1882, 3: 346), while for *storona* he indicates: “prostranstvo i mestnost’ vne chego libo, vneshnee, naruzhnoe, ot nutra ili ot srediny udalennoe” (Dal’ 1882, 4: 331), while the first definition of *stranà* is just “storonà” (Dal’ 1882, 4: 335). Hence also the *strannik*, the pilgrim, the one who travels, and that is strange, in the sense that he is literally out of (his normal) place. Something similar happens in Italian too, with the etymology of “strano” and “straniero”.

4. Individual Self and collective Self

Recognizing the other’s difference is a fundamental step for being aware of one’s Self. Realizing that there are different individuals (cultures) means also realizing that one’s way of being (one’s culture) is not universal, that, therefore, in the perception-judgment of others, different criteria can be employed from those usually applied to oneself. Recognizing the other’s difference to be able to recognize one’s Own peculiarity is a notion on the border between culturology and psychology, because it can be seen, (a) in individual terms (formation of the Self), and (b) in collective terms (formation of one’s culture identity). One’s culture identity depends on the acknowledging

of different cultures. Depending whether a culture negates or acknowledges its specificity, enables or disables its acceptance of a different, stranger culture as a culture on equal terms with one's own (*stranger* but not *strange*). Thinking that what holds true in one's own culture has a universal value devaluates the different cultures, because as *chuzhye* (other), they also are *chudovishchnye* (monstrous). Not recognizing one's own specificity means applying One's criteria to the Other: the Other comes out then as inadequate. Devaluating the Other has a precise psychological function (both individual and social): the strengthening of *one's own* identity.

5. Culture as pre-judgment

Any culture contains within itself the view that that culture has of itself and of the other cultures. The prejudice towards the other cultures is also encoded in a culture's DNA, i.e. the 'translational filter' through which the cultures-other pass even before being perceived. It is a translation problem. Every time there is a passage between Self and Other, i.e. every time a border is crossed between two systems that are part of the semiosphere, there is a borderline culture, or translational culture: "the semiotic border is the sum of the bilingual translational 'filters', the passage through which translates the text into a language (or in more languages) other than that are *outside* the given semiosphere" (Lotman 1992: 13). The ways to translate an outer culture to the inside are many, and it is upon these that the perception of a system from without depends.

From a theoretical point of view, there is no difference between individual systems (persons) and super-individual systems. I think it is necessary, therefore, to investigate the Self/Other relations, to truly appreciate, beyond the contributions made by cultural studies, also the contributions of systemic psychology, of the systemic psychological school originating in Palo Alto. The systemic view focuses, rather than on the single individual or event, on interactions and interrelations. Culturological and psychological-systemic approaches share the top-down approach (they start from the system of cultural interrelations in order to descend to the single micro-system/text/individual), unlike the bottom-up approach, focusing on the single micro-system/text/individual, that is studied as an isolated system.

Since, from a semiotic point of view, an individual is a text and is a system as well, to increase the applicability of this reasoning to individual or super-individual situations from this point on I won't use the formula "micro-system/text/individual", I will simply say "text", implicitly referring to the three concepts in an interchangeable way.

6. System, translation, interference

Even-Zohar has defined some regularities characterizing the relations between systems calling them "general principles of interference". Even if the Israeli researcher refers above all to literature, and such principles are part of his view of the "literary polysystem", I think that they can be extended to any cultural polysystem (semiosphere), therefore I propose them here as tools that will serve for the translation-oriented analysis of *Strogij Yunosha*. I will transpose here Even-Zohar's principles modifying the references from "literary" to "cultural" and assuming full responsibility.

- 1 cultural systems are never in non-interference
 - 2 contacts will sooner or later generate interference if no resisting conditions arise
 - 3 interference is mostly unilateral
 - 4 a source cultural system is selected by prestige
 - 5 a source cultural system is selected by dominance
 - 6 interference occurs when a system is in need of items unavailable within itself
 - 7 an appropriated repertoire does not necessarily maintain source culture functions
- (Even-Zohar 1990: 59)

Even-Zohar, moreover, lists some determinant factors for a culture to be easily subject to interference by other cultures it contacts, and easily influenced, and therefore easily renewable thanks to other's items:

- (a) when a polysystem has not yet been crystallized, that is to say, when a literature is "young", in the process of being established; (b) when a literature is either "peripheral" (within a large group of correlated literatures) or "weak", or both; and (c) when there are turning points, crises, or literary vacuums in a literature [...] translated literature is not only a major channel through which fashionable repertoire is brought home, but also a source of reshuffling and supplying alternatives. (Even-Zohar 1990: 47, 48)

7. Different modes of encompassing the Other (translation)

Such other elements are encompassed in one's own culture in a different way according to many factors. In brief, the foreign element can be metabolized as other's element coexisting as a different item within one's own culture, or as an appropriated element, which makes it lose the features that make it recognizable as other (it is therefore offered as own, even if it isn't). To explain these dynamics I turn to Toury (1995: 56–57): “whereas adherence to such norms determines a translation's *adequacy* as compared to the source text, subscription to norms originating in the target culture determines its *acceptability*”.

In a case of ‘acceptable’ translation, it happens that the specific features of the other's text are transformed into ‘normal’ features on the target culture: “in translation, source-text textemes tend to be converted into target-language (or target-culture) repertoireemes” (Toury 1995: 268). This means: features that in the original are describable as typical of that text (textemes) tend to be transformed into typical traits not of that (meta)text, but of a repertoire (repertoireemes), i.e. of a set governed by systemic relations. It is the description of a tendency of translations to refer to text systems of the target culture, that can be formulated also in this way: “in translation, textual relations obtaining in the original are often modified, sometimes to the point of being totally ignored, in favor of [more] habitual options offered by a target repertoire” (Toury 1995: 268).

These are the theoretical notions, borrowed from culturology, translation studies, systemic psychology, that in the following I would like to apply to the analysis of the film *Strogij Yunosha*.

8. Systems and borders in *Strogij Yunosha*

The text *Strogij Yunosha* presents itself as “insane”, according to Buttafava. The notion of “insanity”, as “strangeness” and “diversity”, presupposes a norm, a canon. Moreover, it is a polyphonic text, because within it many different worlds or systems coexist.

The first world that is encountered has very little to do with the Soviet Thirties. A naked woman voluptuously bathes in the lake, while her husband's assistant dozes in front of their luxurious villa. There is a finely laid table, porcelain and crystal, fine linens, exquisite decanters, flowers; an organza curtain veils the lens's vision. The

assistant, Tsitronov, is plagued by not very Communist feelings, like sexual desire and adulterous urges. Luxury and lust, in fact.

This world is delimited by a very elegant border: wrought-iron fencing that is often shot at length, sometimes the only object of the frame (nearly an absolute border), sometimes to signal its function as the limit of the little world within a bigger world. In such a microcosm, life goes on as if the history of the macrocosm had no influence whatsoever on its inside. The great surgeon Stepanov after the revolution is still a great surgeon and still has all the privileges he presumably had before the Soviet era.

The second world is that of the Soviets. There lives Grisha, the hero, together with two symbolic figures: Diskobol, Devushka... This world has mostly two "seats": the stadium and Grisha's apartment. The stadium is the symbol of Soviet power: the athletes' bodies, partially naked, very muscular and well formed, are the symbol of young power, strong, efficient, ready to reproduce itself (probably, in the stereotype, much less ready to enjoy; Piretto 2002: 83) and to be launched into the rarious future. It is a world that, in many ways, echoes the Roman classical world: chariot races, discus throwing. The Soviet empire recalls illustrious precedents that it hopes to equal (but the myth of the Roman empire goes back to the pre-Revolution era: Raffaello Giovagnoli's *Spartacus* Russian translation is of 1899).

This world is at the climax of a phase of self-definition: the Kom-somoltsy are taking care of the rules that the life of their neighbors will have to follow, which shows that it is a new system non yet provided with a strong (authoritative) inner canon. The locker room scene is exemplary: the young men discuss rules while on the background there is a bas-relief with the 'fathers' of Communism.

The third world is represented by the West, and London in particular where professor Stepanov must go. This world is so important that, when a Soviet citizen is invited to it, the day before his departure a special party is organized to celebrate the event. Another element that indicates a special world used as a model is the moment when Stepanov has a drink after the operation, and with his colleague boasts he is a member of a British scientific association (implicitly he thinks that it is far more important than being member of a Soviet association). Since this world has a mythical quality, you can never see it. A language is spoken there that only Stepanov knows. (Stepanov therefore stands out as a bearer of the borderline culture, as a 'translator'.) For the young and beautiful wife Masha, her being

included among the most important co-workers at an assembly of British scientists and of other countries is a very special privilege (in Stepanov's opinion, at least). The Western world appears also in the dream where the party is placed in a Hollywood-type scene.

9. Applying translational principles to the inner worlds of the film

By applying the laws of interference to these exchanges between the three worlds, we have a series of consequences.

The world of luxury and lust is the one to be translated into the proletarian world of rules: in the proletarian world they speak a lot of the world of the villa, but not the reverse, "interference is mostly unilateral".

"The source cultural system is chosen on the basis of its prestige and dominance". That implies that a lot of prestige is attributed to the 'ancient' world of the villa, with all its contradictions as compared to the notions of parity and equality. When genius and privilege are discussed, two different positions emerge: (1) socialist canon: we must fight for equality, and eliminate the different individual (Stepanov) who, since he is a genius, is dangerous, and he perpetuates the exploitation of man over man; (2) capitalist canon: genius is useful for competition (to production and well-being). The rule that is bent to adapt to the other is the Socialist canon: a genius can and must exist also in the equalitarian society (and, obviously, he has a right to a notable series of privileges: villa, car, staff, assistant, a beautiful woman etc.).

"Interference occurs whenever a system needs elements that are not found within it": if Soviet censors had, for the sake of argument, had the suspect that such a rule existed, that would have made it a very uncomfortable text. Because, literally, it would seem that the quantity of elements not found within it is multitudinous. Room and Olesha suggest (from the standpoint of the regime, it is a grave suggestion) that the world of reference is that where there is a beautiful lonely villa, luxury, lust, or maybe Western world, as in the scene where Stepanov organizes the party for his *komandirovka* abroad.

10. *Strogost'* and closed text

Both in psychology and in text semiotics, rigidity, severity, closure are faithful indicators of frailty. One who busies himself drawing and defending limits, borders, demonstrates his uncertainty in being able to recognize those limits in a more 'natural' world. *Strogost'* characterizes, in the child and the teenager, the process through which autonomous moral principles are being constituted; the formation of the Super-Ego is a sign of the progressive emancipation from the parents' outer conscience. Rigidity and closure are in this stage a physiological phenomenon, because the borderlines are newly traced, and the essential is, for the time being, to learn to recognize them. Only later, if the evolution takes the most usual course, the individual learns to recognize limits and borders in a more spontaneous way, and to transgress them.

In text semiotics, something similar occurs with closed and open texts: as a first definition we can state that by 'open text' we mean a text that can be interpreted in many ways. But texts that are *strogie* (closed, aimed obsessively at producing a given reaction) actually end up being more open still to "shot in the dark" decoding:

Those texts that obsessively aim at arousing a precise response on the part of more or less precise empirical readers [...] are in fact open to any possible 'aberrant' decoding. a text so immoderately 'open' to every possible interpretation will be called a *closed* one. (Eco 1984: 8)

Let us see an example of the textual closure of the film. Grisha Fokin does not have a precise notion of border: he falls in love with Masha, who is however married to the genius-surgeon that is part of the other world. Of such a situation, two translations, two readings are made:

1. Masha loves Grisha, and it is right for him to take her away from her husband, to 'free' her, because she is a prisoner of a criminal that works against the parity and equality of Socialism. 2. Socialism is compatible with the existence of geniuses, and competition exalts Socialism: Masha is untouchable because she is 'property' of a genius.

In both cases Masha is a pure commodity without will nor intelligence (is this Socialism in one gender?). Moreover, a comparison between the Socialists' and luxury worlds, in such a translation, disconcerts the former, not the latter. For this reason doctor Stepanov can afford to

say to Grisha shut in the closet: "A member of the komsomol should have a sense of humor". A sense of humor can be afforded only by a consolidated, not inflexible, system.

From that we also gather that, in terms of adequacy/acceptability, the western world is translated into the Soviet one according to adequacy criteria: the otherness of the Western world is not hidden, its elements are easily introduced into one's own, where they function as nearly unobtainable models.

Interference does occur, and it is a one-way influence, as Even-Zohar states: no member of the British Academy of Science would ever dream of bragging to be a member of the homologous Soviet academy.

11. A dangerously interpretable symbolism

Peirce holds that signification occurs through a triad of sign, object, and interpretant. This means that the relation that is developed between sign and object is a mental entity, and therefore a subjective relationship depending on the experiences that an individual had with a given object, and a given sign. The interpretant is a result of the individual experience with a given sign and/or a given object. As Fornari states, it is a relationship of affective signification (Fornari 1979). The possibility for communication between individuals arises out of a compromise that anybody makes to try to be understood and to understand, despite the intrinsically affective and eminently subjective nature of expression.

Moreover, Peirce distinguishes three kinds of sign: icon (low interpretability), index (medium interpretability), and symbol (high interpretability). *Strogij Yunosha*, with its high symbolism, is a text that has a very high rate of subjective interpretability. Many different translations can be made out of it. The top level of symbolism is in the passage of the party dream, where to the symbolism present in other parts of the narrative is added the symbolism intrinsic in oneiric language.

For all these reasons, *Strogij Yunosha* lends itself to innumerable translations. Despite the closure of some characters that animate it, on the whole it is a text open to many readings, and this is a defect for a narrative text in a totalitarian regime (Bruner 1990). As if it weren't enough, many of these possible readings lean towards accepting the

two non-proletarian worlds in the text — the luxury world and the Western world, that, in part, coincide — as positive models to which the proletarian world should inspire itself. This fact connotes the text as strongly anti-Soviet.

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Странный, очень странный, как во сне: границы и переводы в фильме “Строгий юноша”

Использование семиотики в науке о переводе является базой для выработки нового подхода, который порождает множество интересных научных текстов. С другой стороны, применение понятия “перевод” в широком смысле оказывается весьма важным и для самой семиотики, как, например, в работах Ч. Пирса и Юрия Лотмана. Становится все труднее отличить влияние переводоведческих штудий на семиотику от влияния семиотики на переводоведение. Данная статья пытается синтезировать средства обеих дисциплин (семиотики и переводоведения) при анализе советского фильма “Строгий юноша”. Прежде всего понятие “странный” анализируется в семиотическом

аспекте, при попутном разыскании этимологических оснований для определения “странности” как простого “отличия” или “враждебности”. Имплицитность культуры трактуется в качестве проблемы посредничества между Я и Другим как в коллективном, так и в индивидуальном (психологическом) плане. Способы соотношения с Другим объясняются в свете системного анализа культурной полисистемы, наименьшим элементом или подсистемой которой является индивидуальное. Затем фильм как бы раскладывается на несколько “миров”, границы и соотношения которых рассматриваются на основании вышеупомянутых подходов. Подобный переводоведческий анализ фильма позволяет выдвинуть гипотезу о том, почему данный фильм был запрещен при советском режиме.

Veider, väga veider, nagu unenäos: piirid ja tõlked filmis “Strogij Junosha” (“Range noormees”)

Semiootika rakendamine tõlketeaduses on aluseks uudsele lähenemisele, mille tulemuseks on väga huvitavate teaduslike tekstide tekkimine. Teiselt poolt on tõlke mõiste avar kasutamine osutunud oluliseks semiootika enda jaoks, nagu näiteks C. Peirce'i või J. Lotmani käsitluses. Üha raskem on eristada tõlketeaduse mõju semiootikale ja semiootika mõju tõlketeadusele. Käesolev artikkel on katseks sünteesida mõlema distsipliini vahendeid nõukogude filmi “Range noormees” analüüsimisel. Kõigepealt on oluline vajadus lisada semiootiliselt analüüsivale mõistele “veider” ka etümoloogiline võimalus määratleda veidrat samasuse või erinevuse kaudu mõistega “kahjulik”. Kultuuri implitsiitsust on võimalik vaadelda vahendusena Enda ja Teise vahel nii kollektiivses kui individuaalses (psühholoogilises) mõttes. Suhestumise viise Teisega seletatakse siis süsteemse lähenemise kaudu kultuurilisele polüsüsteemile, mille väikseimaks elemendiks ehk alasüsteemiks on individuaalne. Tulemusena eritletakse analüüsis filmi erinevaid “maailmu”, millede piire ja seoseid vaadeldakse semiootikast ja tõlketeadusest lähtudes. Filmi taoline translatoogiline analüüs võimaldab oletada, miks antud film nõukogude režiimi poolt keelati.