

***Ad hoc* Screen Translation in Soviet Estonian Film Clubs: Negotiating Boundaries**

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Abstract

In Soviet Estonian official cinemas, foreign films were always dubbed into Russian with Estonian subtitles. Founded at the end of the Thaw, film clubs and other semi-official screening locations became popular as part of the alternative scene and unauthorised discourse. They screened uncensored original Western European and Hollywood films and thus the works of forbidden film directors and cinema movements from the West were introduced to a limited audience of film enthusiasts. Compared to other Soviet Socialist Republics, Estonia was in a privileged geographical and linguistic position to be able to access the films of the West via Finland. Film clubs looked beyond the Iron Curtain and opened up a cultural dialogue between the West and Soviet Estonia. This article analyses the repertoire of foreign films and different translation modes, social relations and the agency of the interpreters, and it looks at their interpretative act from theoretical perspectives discussed by Juri Lotman and Naoki Sakai.

Key words: film clubs, boundaries, interpreters, simultaneous interpreting, in-betweenness, heterolingual address, semiotics of culture.

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1. Introduction to Soviet Estonian Audiovisual Translation

Estonia has been a subtitling country since 1950 when Olga Lauristin, the Minister of Cinema of the Estonian SSR, made the necessary arrangements to start subtitling into Estonian. The post-war efforts to dub Soviet film productions into Estonian were costly and time-consuming: Estonia had no proper dubbing equipment and dubbings were made in Leningrad (in Lenfilm studio). Subtitling of foreign films in Soviet Estonia tended to be an exception rather than the rule in the USSR where only Russian dubbings or voice overs for foreign film productions were shown in official Soviet cinemas. Almost all foreign films were re-cut to fit the rigid Soviet matrix of film length. Western Euro-pean and Hollywood films, censored with different strategies, underwent visual and verbal manipulations during the dubbing process (Hoffmann, 2021). This was the case in the so-called first screen or Soviet *kinoprokat*¹ that was the network of official cinemas. The distribution scene was divided into three sectors: the official cinemas, film festivals, and film clubs, the latter being the semi-closed third setting, counterbalancing the first screen's repertoire by screening uncensored original films with simultaneous ad hoc translation. Regarding the general practice of audiovisual translation (AVT) in the USSR, Soviet Estonia was exceptional in three aspects. As for the official network of cinemas, Estonia was the only SSR which had set and also achieved the goal to subtitle into the local language all films that came with Russian audio². Secondly, in two main Estonian universities there was a distinct film club culture, boasting of a versatile and liberal repertoire coming from Finland. Thirdly, Northern Estonia had access to Finnish Television that could be qualified as a illegal "fourth channel".

The present paper is focused on the last two aspects, charting the film distribution and translation in Soviet Estonian film clubs in the context of general Soviet AVT practices. This article provides the first analysis of its kind into alternative oral screen translation practices of the semi-illegal foreign films that could be viewed in Soviet Estonia. Although film clubs were a wide-spread phenomenon in the USSR, the Estonian case clearly represents an exception with its liberal and versatile repertoire. In addition to the introduction, methodology and historical context in Sections 1 to 3, the paper analyses the specific situation of Soviet Estonia as a translation hub on the Soviet periphery and its more or less liberal cultural environment through different political periods. The paper thus discusses two topics in two parts: the emergence of film clubs in Soviet Estonia and film translation and translators in the Estonian film clubs. In the last two sections I analyse the close affiliation between Estonia and Finland and intense translation activity that made it possible to establish an active

¹ Russian: *злавкинопрокат*. The Soviet Estonian *kinoprokat*, run by Ahto Vesmes in 1970–1988 (Taevere, 2010), was a governmental quasi-corporation operating under the supervision of the USSR Ministry of Culture (Levitsky, 1964, p. 42). In a broader sense, *kinoprokat* encompassed the whole network of official cinemas in cities, regions, and villages. The number of film prints circulating in *kinoprokat* was limited. A print moved from the first screen, where it was officially released, to the second, and eventually to the third screen, which meant that different cinemas started showing the same films at different times.

² This statement, not being the topic of this article, is supported by a substantial personal archive of around 3,500 pages of manuscripts from the popular television broadcast *Jupiter* that introduced new films and was hosted by Ahto Vesmes (Hoffmann, 2021).

cultural dialogue. This article argues that translation activity in the Soviet Estonian film clubs was not triggered solely by resistance to the ideology of a totalitarian regime but also, and perhaps largely, by Estonia's fortunate geographical position on the border of the USSR and tight connections with Finland that opened up a socio-cultural dialogue with the West. Finland itself, with a strong Communist neighbour, was not the "classic" West, being under direct political pressure from the USSR, and yet it tried to keep good bilateral relationships during the Cold War. The dialogue with the West was facilitated by other factors, like linguistic similarities between the Estonian and Finnish languages and the initiative of the Finnish government to broadcast their national television and hence many Western European and Hollywood films also in Northern Estonia.

2. Methodological Considerations and Sources

Semiotic research into audiovisual translation practices in film clubs provides illuminating insights into Soviet AVT translation practices. Paradoxically, the discursive controversy, liberty, and heterogeneity of AVT practices were actively promoted under the totalitarian regime of the USSR, but only on the second and third screens. AVT used in content distributed via the official channel usually included straight cuts and manipulations of ideologically unorthodox visual and verbal material (Albera, 2017, p. 11) as an integral part of the dubbing process. But this was only one side of the coin. The Soviet dubbing practice also provided manifold educational possibilities for cinema professionals (see, e.g., Barr, 2019, p. 96) and moreover it addressed the problem of multilingualism in a straightforward way – in the long run, *homo sovieticus* should master the Russian language. Soviet film clubs balanced this rigid monolingual approach (cf. section 5).

Studies of Soviet film clubs need applicable concepts to describe the often contradictory and non-coherent social, ideological, cultural, and political aspects of AVT. In the case of Soviet Estonian film clubs, different kinds of gaps appear in this area: we are missing knowledge, context, theories, methodologies, and canonical literature. The gaps in related academic research are hard to identify, as there are no published AVT history papers about the film clubs that surely existed in the other Baltic states. Besides research into general AVT studies (Pérez-González, 2019; Gambier & Ramos Pinto, 2018), oral AVT history (for instance Sullivan & Cornu, 2019; Díaz-Cintas, 2019), and interpreting (Carbonell i Cortés & Monzó-Nebot, 2021), perhaps the closest related AVT topics are covered by the descriptive and historiographic articles discussing screen translation at Gosfilmofond's cinema theatres (Razlogova, 2014) and Soviet film festivals (Razlogova, 2014, 2015, 2020), as well as Soviet Estonian interpreting practices in general (Sibul, 2018) and live theatre translation (Sibul, 2017).

For the present article, previously undiscovered archival materials have been identified and analysed, informants were interviewed, and new theoretical approaches were explored. Regarding film clubs, Tiit Merisalu, the founder of the leading film club in Tallinn, has shared valuable information via interviews and his personal archives concerning the repertoire, screening information programmes and all relevant details regarding, e.g., lecturers, interpreters, club membership, statistics

and press cuts from *Tallinna Polütehnik*, the bi-monthly magazine of Tallinn Technical University, which covered various film club activities. The personal diaries of the film club organiser Silvi Tenjes, located in the archive of the University of Tartu Museum, give details about the film club's activities in Tartu in the 1980s.

Considerable leverage is provided by postcolonial theories that relativize the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. When analysing translation practices in totalitarian societies from a postcolonial perspective, Monticelli and Lange criticised the use of streamlined binary dichotomies such as censorship-resistance as “stereotypical historiographic dichotomies dating back to the Cold War era” (Monticelli & Lange, 2014, p. 96), stating that historiographic approaches relying on streamlined dichotomies have been criticised in both Soviet studies (Yurchak, 2006) and translation studies (Tymoczko, 2007). From the theoretical perspective, Juri Lotman, a persecuted Soviet scholar who found a haven in Tartu, formulated a theory of semiosphere (Lotman, 1984/2005, 1990), which represents an insider perspective and is therefore relevant for post-colonial approach. The semiosphere is a model of the semiotic space as a complex structure with a core and periphery and the border composed of bilingual belts that separate the semiosphere from the extra-semiotic space. Juri Lotman's cultural semiotics can explain the liberty in repertoire and translation activity visible in Soviet Estonian film clubs. Lotman coined his central concept of the semiosphere in 1984 to model the cultural meaning-making process as an interaction between the semiosphere and the non- or extra-semiotic space surrounding it (Lotman, 1984/2005), and he continued developing the concept as part of cultural semiotics until his death in 1993 (Lotman, 1990, part two). The semiotic boundary (or border, Russian: *граница*) is the most active area in a sign process, as it is “represent-ed by the sum of bilingual translatable ‘filters’, passing through which the text is translated into another language (or languages), situated outside the given semiosphere” (Lotman, 1984/2005, p. 208–209). The notion of a “sum of filters” already suggests translational activities on different levels. Inside the semiosphere, in the present context it would be the USSR, Lotman also distinguished interplay and communication between the core and the active periphery – in our case, Soviet Estonia.

Lotman's theories provide a deeper insight into complex translation activities in combination with Naoki Sakai's critical theories of cartographic translation models (Sakai, 2009; 2010a; 2010b). Sakai defines translation as a “heterolingual address” (Sakai, 1997, pp. i–xii), designating a situation in which one addresses oneself as a foreigner to another foreigner. This does not necessarily imply an interlinguistic communication act. Sakai emphasises the ambiguity inherent to the translator's position: who is the translator and where they are in relation to the source and target texts? (Sakai, 2009). When analysing the position of film interpreters in film clubs, we can see that their state of “in-betweenness” can be assumed on two distinct levels, as “the translations are positioned between the utterance that gave rise to them and the response they are intended to evoke” (Monticelli & Lange, 2014, p. 102). Sakai underlines the temporality of the translator's position, being at different moments of time both the addresser and the addressee. In relation to the source text, the translator is the addressee, but also the addresser, because “the addressee of the enunciation is not located where the translator is” (Sakai, 2009, p. 174), as the target audience of the text are not a priori the translators of the text. In relation to the source text, the film club interpreter was both the

addressee (obviously the receiver of the text), and the *addresser* (the author of the enunciation). The transformative role of the interpreters (in the sense of Tymoczko, 2007) in the process of building a dialogue is further investigated based on the example of the interpreters Aleksander Kurtina and Ferdinand Kala.

3. Soviet Estonia as a Translation Hub

Subtitling and dubbing of films into local languages was officially encouraged but left to the discretion of the SSRs who had to organize the process locally. Soviet Estonia was one of the few SSRs taking an active stand in this respect. Right after the end of the war in 1944, the first Estonian dubbings of Soviet productions were made in Lenfilm studio, after 1946 also in *Tallinna Kinostuudio*. This costly practice lasted until 1950, totalling 50 Estonian dubbings (Hoffmann, 2021, p. 71–72). From the 1950s onwards, only children's cartoons were continued to be dubbed into Estonian, as according to Olga Lauristin decree, Estonian subtitles became obligatory for all foreign and Soviet film productions.

The first screen subtitling was organised by ENSV MN Riikliku Kinematograafia Komitee Filmilaenu-tuse ja Reklaami Valitsus, the Estonian national film lending and distribution office. This institution organized the Estonian subtitling process and became the main subtitling hub for the whole USSR, doing also subtitles in Russian and even for the deaf and hard of hearing. The subtitlers in this institution worked solely based on the post-production scripts of the Russian dubbings or voice overs without seeing the film they were translating (revisers, though, could correct the subtitles during pre-screenings). Furthermore, they could not consult the original scripts despite requesting them from Moscow (Liivaku, 1985, p. 15).

The shift to subtitling in 1950 coincided with the emergence of live screen translation in Soviet Estonia; theatrical productions in Estonia have been simultaneously interpreted regularly since 1952 (Sibul, 2018, p. 258). In Soviet Estonia, non-subtitled films were rarely screened: generally during rare film festivals (usually the festivals were held in bigger cities, as was the case with Moscow International Film Festival, Asian and African Film Festival in Tashkent, etc.), cultural events and other festive occasions when a foreign language could be heard (this created “great excitement in town”, according to the principal subtitler Uno Liivaku (personal communication, October 12, 2018). During such events, simultaneous interpreting was provided in cinemas.

The real booster for oral screen translation was the founding of film clubs. At the end of the Khrushchev Thaw in mid-1960s, a group of students and professors initiated an alternative film club movement. Although the clubs acquired many films from *filmikontor* (including before their official release; personal communication with Merisalu, 2020), they compensated the scarcity of original uncensored films, inventing ad hoc solutions to show and translate the films from their original languages in a short preparation time to reach the highest possible number of spectators without receiving any unwanted attention from censorship agencies.

It is interesting to note that the Soviet third screen or distribution channel included, besides film clubs, also spontaneous screenings in churches, railway stations, cellars, even on planes (Gusarov, 2020) or educational screenings at the premises of professional organisations, creative unions of writers, composers and other liberal professions, kolkhozes, factories, works, hospitals, etc., but also the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow. In ESSR, the Cinema Union and Soviet Estonian *kinoprokat* organised actively closed screenings of uncensored films in Tallinn.

The general mindset in Estonia favoured translations: it was partly due to the fact that a big percentage of Estonians had poor command of Russian, partly because Estonia was the smallest republic and had always had the necessity and flexibility for different translation activities in many cultural domains. Besides that, the official Soviet rhetoric referred often to Estonia, and to the Baltic states in general, as the “Soviet ‘Abroad’” (Gorsuch, 2011, p. 56; Risch, 2015, p. 65). Especially Estonia was frequently referred to in the Soviet tourist brochures, newsreels, and media as “Our West” (Gorsuch, 2011, p. 33). This mythological concept dating back to the Russian Empire had many lives and was resurrected during the Soviet rule by Stalin until 1953, flourished mainly during the Khrushchev Thaw until the mid-1960s, and was put on hold during the Era of Stagnation in the 1970s under Brezhnev to be later revived again in 1980 when Estonia hosted the Olympic regatta. The Thaw was a prolific era in Soviet Estonian cultural and subcultural life (Allaste, 2013): in literature (Hiedel, 2006), arts (Helme, 2000), music (Radsin, 2005), theatre (Saro, 2019) and cinema. The founding of film clubs formed an integral part of a liberal cultural environment in Soviet Estonia in the 1960s that lasted until the beginning of 1970s. At the same time, on the first screen, the distribution quotas became very rigid, limiting the number of the so-called capitalist films (Hoffmann, 2021, p. 176). Regarding literature and translations from foreign languages, in 1973 the USSR joined the Universal Copyright Convention, after which all translations from foreign languages started to be closely monitored and censored. The Era of Stagnation was characterized by the intense sovietization on socio-cultural and linguistic levels. It lasted until the beginning of *Glasnost* in 1986.

Nevertheless, the Stagnation is way too general a concept to describe those 15 years it encompassed. It should be pointed out that despite severe censorship and restrictions, many liberal translation activities in Soviet Estonia were achieved using a strategy that Peeter Torop calls “dissimilation via assimilation”, the introduction of unauthorised and forbidden discourse via authorised discourse (Torop, 2009). One example is that film clubs reached the height of their popularity exactly during the Era of Stagnation, celebrating the unauthorised discourse.

4. The Emergence of an Alternative to Official Cinemas

The first film clubs were founded in Soviet Estonia at the end of 1960s at two leading Estonian universities in Tallinn and Tartu. These semi-closed clubs with limited membership proved extremely popular among students, intellectuals, and film enthusiasts during the Era of Stagnation (1966–1985) and later until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Film clubs screened original films from Western Europe and the US that were otherwise screened in official cinemas either in limited

numbers, censored versions, or entirely forbidden altogether. The club members could hear original foreign language with a simultaneous oral translation into Estonian – in official cinemas, the films were all dubbed into Russian. Film clubs in Soviet Estonia were part of a broader phenomenon that emerged in the Soviet Union in the mid-1960s. The aim was to provide a professional thematic overview of contemporary cinema and classical masterpieces, with discussion evenings and meetings with film critics and specialists from the industry, like directors and actors. Estonian film clubs had close connections with Finland and other film clubs, especially in Leningrad and the embassies in Moscow. Those resources helped counterbalance the rigidity and monovalence of official cinemas and supported cinema education.

4.1. Historical Background of Film Clubs

Throughout the Soviet period, Northern Estonia had direct access to the West thanks to its geographical location. After Finnish President Urho Kekkonen visited Estonia in 1964, the first regular ferry line between Helsinki and Tallinn (served by the *Georg Ots*) was opened (Tart, 2010, p. 96). In 1971, the Finnish Government launched a powerful new TV transmitter in the town of Espoo; half of its total capacity was directed to the Gulf of Finland, and it reached Northern Estonia. On the Estonian side, numerous illegal antennas began to rise on the rooftops. Because of its wide audience in Estonia, we could ironically call the Finnish Television the “fourth screen” of the Soviet Union. In early 1974, despite strong objections from the Soviet Estonian Communist Party, Finnish Television (*Suomen Televisio*) became widely accessible in Estonia (Siiner, et al., 2017, p. 87). Finnish Television and the maritime connection with Finland played a vital role in the liberation movement (see, e.g., Lõhmus, 2001) and opened Estonia to the West, as contacts between Estonian and Finnish citizens became closer. The Estonian and Finnish languages are closely related Fin-no-Ugric languages, so communication on some level is possible even without learning the language.

Movies from the West were introduced to Estonians by the legendary Finnish film critic Martti Savo, who was of Russian origin and whose real name was Modest Savtschenko (1918–1995); he was the film review editor of the Finnish communist daily newspaper *Kansan Uutiset*, which was the only Finnish magazine authorised in the Soviet Union. Tiit Merisalu, having worked as a tour guide in Helsinki, could interpret fluently from Finnish and English, and he recalled how he was inspired to start interpreting foreign films when watching Finnish television in the lobby of the Tallinn University of Technology (hereinafter TPI) student dormitory (T. Merisalu, personal communication, December 15, 2019). Complete filmographies of semi-banned or unknown directors, such as Ingmar Bergman, Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, were distributed on Finnish Television along with the complete overview of the French New Wave films, accompanied with commentaries by Peter von Bagh, a famous film connoisseur. Many masterpieces from Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia were shown, of which only a few were distributed in official Soviet Estonian cinemas. Merisalu translated simultaneously from Finnish subtitles; his translations became highly popular: 20–25 students usually watched the screenings every evening (T. Merisalu, personal communication, December 15, 2019).

In August 1966, a few months after the legendary Illiuzion theatre of the Gosfilmofond³ was opened in Moscow (March 1966), Aleksandr Garšnek, Tiit Merisalu, and Professor Georg Golst founded the first film club in Soviet Estonia at the Tallinn University of Technology. This club subsequently became known as “TPI film club”, Estonian: TPI kinoklubi). In 1969–1970, the State University of Tartu founded a film club run by Jaak Lõhmus (later known in Estonian as TRÜ filmiklubi). By 1988, the number of film clubs in Soviet Estonia participating in The Union of Estonian Film Clubs had reached as many as 45 (Merisalu, 2017, p. 97), totalling nearly 11,000 members. Soviet film clubs had a clear pedagogical orientation and were active in schools and other educational establishments (Fedorov & Friesem, 2015). Film clubs existed all over the Soviet Union and were united under the Union of Film Clubs in Moscow, but the Soviet Estonian film clubs were part of a more significant cultural phenomenon in Soviet Estonia and engaged in an active dialogue with the Finnish and also other Soviet clubs.

4.2. Film Club Repertoires – Dissimilation via Assimilation

Films from the West that were considered for purchase by the Soviet *kinoprokat* were first closely studied for (prospective) compliance (Hoffmann, 2021, p. 113). First, the screened films had to be commercially successful and fulfil the budget and planned economy targets. Another vital factor was whether they expressed ideological ideas that supported the socialist-communist worldview. These two principles had to balance each other: box office profits could compensate for compromises made on the ideological battlefield (Zhokhova, 2007).

Film club repertoires originated partly from the local *kinoprokat*. Some popular films were repeatedly screened, while some were screened first in the clubs and shortly afterwards in official cine-mas with proper subtitling. Estonian film clubs and other film screening places had, in addition to the officially released re-edited and dubbed films, three primary sources of prints:

(a) Gosfilmofond’s original uncensored prints that were not officially released – the Gosfilmofond lent out both original and censored prints, depending on the demand and availability of the print, but they preferred originals. (T. Merisalu & E. Razlogova, personal communication, September, 2020);

(b) films acquired via friendly cooperation with the cultural institute of the French Embassy, as well as other embassies in Moscow, such as those of Poland and East Germany. The

³ Illiuzion was a cinema theatre, not a film club, but was nevertheless classified as a third screen. The Gosfilmofond had two cinemas in Moscow, including the famous Illiuzion, one in St Petersburg and one in Tbilisi, Georgia. Vladimir Soloviev, Gosfilmofond’s primary researcher, has characterised the cinema’s liberal repertoire as walking on a knife edge, keeping Illiuzion perpetually on the verge of being shut down (Artem’ev & Soloviev, 2008).

embassies began sending films to Estonia via the Kinematographe and Kity film clubs in Leningrad (Nerman, 2004; Merisalu, 2017); and

(c) semi-illegal sources – prints received from personal archives from Finland (Helsinki, Espoo, Kotka), as well as Hungary, Poland, and other countries.

As soon as copies of foreign films received from Finland arrived in Tallinn, censors took custody of the prints at the port and delivered them to the Cinema Committee of Soviet Estonia for inspection (T. Merisalu, personal communication, December 15, 2019). The prints were then screened as soon as possible (usually within a couple of days) at Tallinn film club, then sent to Tartu and then on to Latvia and Lithuania, meaning that the prints remained in Estonia for only a few days (T. Merisalu, personal communication, December 15, 2019). Films received from Moscow or Leningrad had to be returned (Silvi Tenjes' archives, 1986/1987), leaving little time to prepare for screening. The distribution *marsroute* of the prints was irregular and chaotically recorded, but the aim was to reach as many film clubs as quickly as possible.

Soviet cinemas seldom screened Western European films, especially rare were Hollywood commercial films (Hoffmann, 2021, p. 175). Nevertheless, many forbidden films were screened in film clubs. The repertoire of the clubs was often considered subversive and in violation of the official Soviet film distribution principles. Soviet viewers were unfamiliar with the works of French New Wave and European *films d'auteur*. Films by Jean-Luc Godard, Agnès Varda, Ingmar Bergman, Andrzej Wajda, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Volker Schlöndorff, Werner Herzog, Wim Wenders and Pier Paolo Pasolini were generally unknown, as was also the case with countless US directors (Meinert, 1988). In film clubs, the complete overview of the French New Wave (unavailable through the official channel of "the first screen"), was screened several times, just as other New Wave movements in Europe. Although the exact percentage of movies from Western countries is unknown, the main difference from other Soviet film clubs concerned the TPI club's repertoire, which was bold, focused on the intellectual author cinema of the West and was even provocative. Several film clubs in Leningrad and Moscow encountered major problems, including the closure of certain clubs: for example, the screening of Jean-Luc Godard's so-called Maoist film *La Chinoise* (1967) at the film club of the Moscow State University led to the closure of the club the next day; meanwhile, the TPI film club was able to screen the same films without any problems (Merisalu, 2017, p. 84).

Although Soviet Estonian film clubs were under the control of cinema agencies, they operated within the unauthorised discourse and contributed to cultural resistance in Estonia, especially at the end of the 1960s. They walked the thin, ever-changing line between the permitted and the forbidden. Moscow's cinema control agencies probably did not pay close attention to these practices, and even if this semi-subversive screening practice had been noticed in Moscow, cultural policies considered Estonia too small and irrelevant: a republic that was too peripheral to be sanctioned or repressed (Zubkova, 2009). Although after the Thaw, artistic life in Soviet Estonia in general was under severe pressure due to Stagnation and Sovietisation, varying degrees of cultural liberty "[...] suggest that Sovietisation practices in this region were not only diffuse but dependent on local Party and state

officials who implemented policies and decided what was bourgeois ‘nationalist’, ‘alien’ or ‘anti-Soviet’” (Risch, 2015, p. 77). The Soviet censorship system was ambiguous with many loopholes and the intelligentsia sometimes managed clever ways to circumvent the Moscow rules (Saro, 2019). Paradoxically, Estonian censorship agents were rather liberal regarding film club activity in TPI where many of them had studied or worked: for instance, Georgi Golst who was the representative of the Communist Party in the TPI, himself founded and organized the film club. Indrek Toome, a Communist Party official, was also a former TPI student and a film club activist. Reet Ristlaan, the daughter of Rein Ristlaan who was the ideology secretary of the Communist Party and the highest-ranking censor in 1980–1988.

Uncensored foreign movies formed part of unauthorised discourse “crawling in” via different loopholes using different strategies and channels. One of the main strategies used was “dissimulation via assimilation” (Torop, 2012): to screen something semi-illegal, a way had to be paved before. This also applies to literary translation (Hiedel, 2006). According to Peeter Torop, to publish works of unauthorised speech, such as books by Juri Lotman, officially a persona non grata in the Soviet Union, one had to publish the works of Mikhail Bakhtin first. But since he, too, belonged to the category of unauthorised speech, translations of two books representing authorised speech had to be published beforehand (Torop, 2011, p. 143). Tiit Merisalu recalls that during the Era of Stagnation, which started in Soviet Estonia around 1973, the TPI film club had to show some Soviet masterpieces and invite Soviet lecturers to comment on films, etc., which meant a long process necessitating compromises and sacrifices. The practice only survived because of years of meticulous diplomacy and keeping up good relations with various agents of censorship and cinema organisations (T. Merisalu, personal communication, December 15, 2019). The censorship system became less rigid after 1986 (Saro, 2019, p. 284), and many cinema goers recall popular Italian cinema sessions with the works of Federico Fellini and Pasolini in 1986–1988.

5. Ad hoc Screen Translation

Other Soviet Estonian film clubs were usually not as well organised and well equipped as the one in Tallinn, which managed to provide original sound with simultaneous interpreting in the native language of the audience, mainly Estonian and Russian. Interpreters at TPI operated from a separate interpreting booth equipped with headphones and microphones; loudspeakers rendered the Estonian version over a turned-down original soundtrack. In Tallinn, such a booth also existed in the Cinema House (Kinomaja). Other screening venues were usually not so well equipped. Razlogova described Kira Razlogova’s first interpreting job in 1966, a screening of Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* (1959) at a house of culture for workers on the outskirts of Moscow: in a theatre with four hundred seats, without headphones or a microphone, screaming over the soundtrack, which could not be muted because she had to hear it from the loudspeakers to translate (Razlogova, 2014, p. 172).

Audio equipment used at TPI was built in-house and was one of the best in the Soviet Union; the same equipment had also been used for high-level conference interpreting since 1968 (Sibul, 2018,

p. 225). Advanced equipment facilitated various and often surprising translation practices used in simultaneous film translation of foreign films. Mixed screen translation modes used in Estonian film clubs mainly included the following:

- direct simultaneous interpreting from the original language into Estonian (or at the same time into Estonian and Russian);
- relay translation of the original films via another language (other than Russian) from subtitles or post-production scripts;
- simultaneous interpreting from Russian dubbing into Estonian as indirect translation; and
- Russian dubbing with Estonian subtitles with no oral intervention.

Even if there was only one person among the audience who could not understand Estonian interpreting, simultaneous translations into two different target languages were offered. Russian speakers received a headset while others listened to the interpreted version from the loudspeaker. After Estonia regained independence, its cinemas took over this heterolingual translation mode, and most of the films shown in theatres come with both Estonian and Russian subtitles.

Because of ambiguous semantics, the traditional terms “interpreting” or “interpretation”, as well as “voice-over” are not apt *strictu sensu* for describing this translation practice. I suggest terming this particular form of translation “live ad hoc screen translation”, as in Soviet film clubs, long-term planning of screenings was usually impossible, due to the number of factors to be accounted for. When films arrived, the translation solutions (precise mode of translation, interpreter(s), technical means, etc.) had to be quickly and flexibly organised on the spot and from scratch. This made translation a spontaneous, time-bounded performative act that had no fixed format. It combined both translating directly from the film and/or from dialogue lists (could be basically in any language) into Estonian or both into Estonian and Russian. There was no ready-made translation to be read out or over: the translation was made up on the spot based on initial impressions. Tight schedule and spontaneity were crucial; there was usually insufficient time for preparation and no pre-screenings for the interpreter, although exceptions were occasionally made upon request (Sootak, 2011). The term *prima vista* or sight translation is one of the primary modes of interpreting where the interpreter is provided with the original text and is expected to instantly and smoothly deliver the contents at a speed appropriate for natural oral production⁴. Alternatively, *prima vista* screen translation could be used in film club translation for translating dialogue lists or subtitles (when no available interpreter mastered the original film language).

Estonian official cinema organs often received foreign prints from Moscow or Leningrad accompanied by a Russian interpreter and sometimes even a lecturer who provided commentaries and introductory lectures (Kanter, 2014). A film lecturer was used during screenings at the Cinema Committee, the local *filmikontor*, Cinema House, on television and elsewhere. Soviet Estonian

⁴ Definition from the *Handbook of Translation Studies* (2010, pp. 320–323).

lecturers included Õie Orav, Veste Paas, and other Estonian film scholars who had graduated from the VGIK (The Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography) in Moscow. Igor Vinokurov and especially Ürij Šujksij from Leningrad often visited TPI film club. Lecturers were often dispatched by the Gosfilmofond or invited by Tamara Huik from the Propaganda Bureau of the Soviet Film Art. Merisalu recalls a case when a cinema lecturer from Moscow visited the Tallinn film club and gave a lecture on censored materials from Andrei Tarkovsky's banned film *Andrei Rublev* (1966, screened in TPI in 1972 with major cuts). The lecturer also became a sort of a translator, an "official interpreter", presenting the audience with the ideologically "correct" way to understand the film. Meanwhile, the Estonian interpreter acted as the translator of unofficial discourse.

5.1. Film Interpreters: In-Betweenness

Two legendary professional interpreters were employed in Tallinn on a regular basis: Ferdinand Kala (1920–1997) and Aleksander Kurtna (1914–1983). In Tallinn, they were the main interpreters for two decades: both came from bilingual families and covered more than 20 languages between them. They did not work together during the screenings, rather covering each other whenever the other was occupied. Ferdinand Kala mastered more than eight languages; his mother was French and she also worked as a translator. Kala was more specialised in simultaneous interpreting: in 1972, he interpreted for Persia's Shah Pahlavi during his official visit to the Soviet Union and Estonia, replacing professional official interpreters who had specifically travelled to Tallinn from Moscow for this purpose (Sibul, 2018, p. 214). Kala also worked as a stenographer and translator for some organs of the Estonian Communist Party where he was a member. He died in poor health and complete poverty; he could not professionally survive in the transformed AVT market after 1991 when film clubs dissolved.

Aleksander Kurtna, being Russian on his mother's side, was also a prolific and highly esteemed literary and film script translator: thus, he produced brilliant translations of Luchino Visconti's *Rocco And His Brothers* (1960) and Federico Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973) in 1981. During the Second World War, Aleksander Kurtna was engaged in espionage for the Soviet Union and later for Germany in the Vatican City (Erelt, 2010). Kurtna made no secret about his past. In 1935, he received a scholarship to study at the Vatican and pursued preparatory studies at the University of Lviv. In 1936, he studied at the Pontifical College of Russicum, and in 1939, he received a scholarship from the President of the Republic of Estonia, Konstantin Päts, to research the Vatican Archives. When his Estonian scholarship was interrupted in 1940, Kurtna got funding by the USSR Academy of Sciences in exchange for joining the Soviet spy network. From the summer of 1941 to June 1942, however, he lacked funds and started working for the Germans. On 30 June 1942, Kurtna was arrested by the Soviets and court-martialled. From 1944 to 1954, he was imprisoned in Norilsk, Siberia. After his release, Kurtna managed to restore his reputation in the eyes of the authorities while unofficially remaining a critic of the Soviet system. Serving several masters, he deceived them all – he liked this great game of strategy (Erelt, 2010).

Kala and Kurtna were not neutral but rather emotional interpreters and sometimes even improvised acting by assuming different roles and attempting to imitate the intonation and accent of the actors. Regarding the target text, the interpreters took different stands, both as the *addresser* (being the creator of the translation text, the 'I' who speaks coincides with the 'I' of the interpreter) and the *addressee* (the subject of the enunciated translation, with a personal stake and attitude). Aleksander Kurtna showed his attitude by deeply sighing during his interpretation whenever he personally disagreed with the character's utterance or found it somehow peculiar. Third, in relation to audience response, the interpreters were also both the *addressee* (receivers of the feedback) and the *addresser* of the reaction, by provoking it. Moscow film interpreters also used audience reactions to perfect their craft: a translation that evoked emotions was deemed successful; if it failed to provoke the expected level of laughter, they used different expressions and idioms (Razlogova, 2014, p. 170). Although in some screenings in Estonian film clubs, censors were sitting among the audience to learn about their reactions, the relationship with those censors was more or less liberal in Estonia.

As Sherry (2012, p. 63) points out, a 1959 discussion published in a cultural and political newspaper *Literaturnaya Gazeta* on the position of (Russian) translators in the Union portrays their role as explicitly ideological, stating that translators stood "on the ideological front". Such a statement is undoubtedly valid for the interpreters of authorised discourse, i.e., in our case, the official Russian dubbing actors and film lecturers. Estonian interpreters had no stake "on the ideological front" and strived to deliver the messages from the other side of the Iron Curtain. Unlike literary translators, film interpreters in Soviet Estonian film clubs, as well as subtitle translators, did not work in restricted conditions, meaning that their work did not have to pass through the main censorship organ *Glavlit* (*Главное управление по охране государственных тайн в печати при Совете министров СССР*) (Hoffmann, 2021, p. 375).

5.2. Negotiating Boundaries

As a dynamic translation hub, Estonia represented a geopolitical as well as a socio-cultural boundary of the USSR, but not only that: to be more precise, it was also a boundary between the Russian-speaking core area of Russian SFSR⁵ and the occupied territory that needed integration, thus forming an area of intense double polarity.

The spatial (or "cartographic") concept of translation as a filter between two distinct spaces is a popular metaphor that was critically developed by Naoki Sakai in his "Translation as a Filter" (2010). In Sakai's theory, a filter, in order to divide space, is unidirectional; however, in Lotman's view, filters in the semiosphere are bidirectional. Sakai claims that descriptions of translation activity should not overestimate the spatial dimension, emphasising instead its temporality and social relations, terming

⁵ Being unofficially known as Soviet Russia (independent state 1917–1922 and as a Soviet Republic 1922–1991), where Russians formed the largest ethnic group.

translation a “heterolingual address” (described above cf. Section 2). That aspect makes it possible to dislocate translation. Lotman says that “[t]he structural heterogeneity of semiotic space creates reserves of dynamic processes” (Lotman, 1984/2005, p. 214), referring thereby to the readiness for dialogue and translation, and “[t]he possibility of dialogue simultaneously suggests both heterogeneity and homogeneity of elements” (Lotman, 2005, p. 220). Returning to Sa-kai, Estonian viewers visiting film clubs were addressed in two dialogic and yet distanced ways. First, they were addressed heterolingually by the film lecturers in the “assumed homogeneity of the Soviet nation” as the “other” belonging to “our” space, on the precondition that the “other” first had to address itself as “other” (similar to Sakai’s homolingual address, naming oneself is considered an integral part of self-description by Lotman (see Madisson, 2016)). Second, Estonian film interpreters acted in recognised heterogeneity of the translation act by using the heterolingual address. Both types of heterolingual address during screenings in Estonian film clubs enlarge the definition of screen translation, serving as Bachmann-Medick points out, “as an anti-essentialist and anti-holistic metaphor that aims to uncover counter-discourses, discursive forms and resistant actions within a culture, heterogeneous discursive spaces within a society” (Bachmann-Medick, 2006, p. 37).

The relationship between Estonians and Finns – two Finno-Ugric nations speaking similar languages, separated by the Iron Curtain – provides fertile grounds for applying both the heterolingual address model and the Lotmanian model of the dynamic translation taking place on the boundary of the semiosphere. The Lotmanian boundary simultaneously belongs both to the semiosphere of the “own” (similarity) and the “other” (difference) and the translation process is inexhaustible and bidirectional. One might ask, what did the Finns gain in return for this intense dialogue between Finland and Soviet Estonia? Soviet Estonian film clubs had not much more than a warm handshake to give in return for the countless films they received: Estonians could not even send original Estonian-language film productions to Finland – the Finns had to order them from Gofsilmo fond dubbed in Russian. Nevertheless, because of the shared past (Finland had also lost territories to the USSR, the so-called Karelian question), the quaint everyday life of Soviet Estonia was undoubtedly an intriguing topic of discussion in Finnish media.

But the boundary has yet another function in the semiosphere: it is the area of accelerated semiotic processes which always flow more actively on the periphery of cultural environments, seeking to affix them to the core structures, and to displace them (Lotman, 1984/2005, p. 212). When the Soviet Estonian film clubs became free in 1991 and started functioning like the clubs in the “real West” did, they also started to lose their appeal. One of the reasons was that the new digital era made access to any film easy for the audience. The other reason was that they had lost their original *raison d’être*. From the semiotic Lotmanian point of view, film clubs and their interpreters shift-ed the boundaries of the Iron Curtain. Their function was to expose Soviet Estonian film enthusiasts to Western cinema and culture behind the Iron curtain; from a broader perspective, they also helped to prepare Estonia for the restoration of independence in 1991. Film interpreters negotiated the boundaries on many levels, addressing the audience from the other side.

6. Conclusions

What triggered the unusual form of translation activity in Soviet Estonian film clubs was not the censorship-resistance relationship but rather, first of all, the favourable geographical location with a good maritime connection and the socio-linguistic capacity to engage in dialogue with the “other side”, paradoxically continuing throughout the deepest era of Stagnation. Dialogue with Finland was made possible mainly due to liberal cultural processes that took place during the Thaw, to the similarities between the Estonian and Finnish languages and the accessibility of Finnish television in Northern Estonia. Soviet Estonian film clubs, owing much to the connection with Finland, could circumvent authorised discourse with a strategy called “dissimilation via assimilation”, meaning that unauthorised and forbidden films could be shown as part of a continuous effort in diplomacy and negotiations with state officials. The unofficial film repertoire acquired legitimacy through the screenings of Soviet classics and the provision of official interpretations by film lecturers participating in film screenings and discussion evenings. The spontaneous, time-bounded, dialogic, and social nature was an important aspect of the film club ad hoc translation activity, based on heterolingual address. Ad hoc film translations gave rise to the first school of Estonian film interpreters who had transformative powers in dislocating the translations over the boundaries of the Iron Curtain. The interpreters, negotiating many boundaries between the source text, target text and response to the translation, transformed the understanding of Western cinema and culture in Soviet Estonia.

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