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Politics of the archive

Translations in film

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VHS to .flv
A closeup of a woman at a blackboard. She turns around to speak. But her mouth is not visible on screen. Clearly, this picture has been cropped on both sides. But why? And by whom?

Translating images into words.

This text deals with some aspects of the afterlife of two films. Both were shot in Yugoslavia. Both are famous partisan movies, called "Valter brani Sarajevo" (1972) and "Bitka na Neretvi" (1969). The film studio where "Valter brani Sarajevo" was shot was destroyed in the recent Bosnian War. But this film and the even more legendary "Bitka na Neretvi" live on. Their existence in cinemas belongs to the past, just like the country they were produced in. But they travel around the world as home videos, as DVDs or online. The afterlife, as Walter Benjamin once famously mentioned, is the realm of translation. This also applies to the afterlife of films. In this sense, this text deals with translation: with the transformations of two films, whose original prints were caught up in warfare, transformations which include transfer, editing, translation, digital compression, recombination and appropriation.

Memory

I came across the incomplete picture of the woman teacher, when doing research for a film of mine. I saw it on a cinema screen in the Sarajevo film museum, where the print is screened once a year – in order to be ventilated and thus preserved, as the projectionist explained. Because I wanted to use this picture in my film, I tried to find a more complete version of it. But during the research, it turned out that the image as such was no longer the point. It started to give answers to questions nobody had ever asked in the first place. Questions like: what is an archive? What is an original version of a film? What is the impact of digital technologies on translation? And what constituencies are created within the digital limbo of globalized media networks?

The further I got with my research, the clearer it became that the cropping of this image wasn't just a simple mistake or misfortune. It had been cropped because specific forces had been tearing at it and had pushed part of it into an hors-champ, which is defined by political and economic factors. Within the contradictory dynamics of globalization and postcommunism/postcolonialism, archives fragment and multiply, some become porous and leak, some bend and twist their contents. While some images are being destroyed for good, others can never be deleted again.

35mm, color positive.

The image in question is from a take in the film "The Battle of Neretva", a famous Yugoslav partisan movie made in 1969, starring Orson Welles, Yul Brynner, Franco Nero as well as many famous Yugoslav actors. It tells the story of a legendary battle on the river Neretva in Bosnia during WWII. Partisans fought against a combination of German, Italian and Croatian fascists as well as against Serbian nationalists. The female teacher appears near the beginning of the film, as part of a very short scene inside a school located in the liberated territories of Bosnia-Herzegovina. She turns around to her students to spell out the words she had written on the blackboard; the word "AVNOJ" (Antifašističko V(ij)eće Narodnog Oslobođenja Jugoslavije), meaning the antifascist people's liberation committees founded in the Yugoslavia of the early 40s. The intended meaning of this sequence might be: children are being educated in the spirit of socialism and antifascism. But then again, the scene also raises questions about teaching how to read and write as such. What does literacy mean? Does it mean to imprint meanings on other minds or to provide tools for the creation of new meanings?

National Culture

Obviously, many ideals of modernism are condensed within this short sequence: the hope for education, progress, equality, as well as its inherent authoritarianism, and its top-down idea of enlightenment. But most importantly, children are learning to read and to write within a specific framework whose acronym is AVNOJ. We are left in no doubt about the political framework of this education. To educate in common means building a common literacy and, more often than not, a common nation.

Classical cinema is a slightly different institution. It has been rooted within both the national framework of the Westphalian order and international Fordist cultural industries. It still is closely tied to notions of national culture, cultural memory, the construction of a collective imagination, of a patrimony and its preservation as well as to discussions around cultural imperialism and hegemony. The distribution of cinema prints is tightly controlled; it is expensive and prints require an extended institutional framework. Copyright is heavily enforced. Thus, transfer of a film into a different format might also mean transforming this underlying framework.

35mm to VHS.

So why are both sides of the image cut off? The answer is simple. The people working at the Sarajevo film museum made this VHS print on their own. They simply pointed a VHS camera in 3:4 format at a projection which was in widescreen format. As a result, both sides of the screen were cropped. The reason is the rather dramatic lack of funds for this institution in a post-war situation of

rampant privatization. Proper equipment for professional transfers is not available. The cropping of the image refers to this economical and political scarcity, to the situation of a state within so-called transition. The original state has been cropped just like the letters spelling its name on the blackboard. The original word *Jugoslavije*, written in chalk, has been reduced to ...*slavije*, the words liberation and antifascist are hardly legible. The cropping of the image thus refers to a political cropping that replaced the unfulfilled values of modernism with particularist practices.

Archive

The film museum as video rental store: this situation expresses the state of an institution that is supposed to preserve the cultural heritage of a nation, as well as the state of this nation itself. Usually, an archive, like a film museum, is supposed to create "faithful" reproductions of its material: that is, reproductions that are as identical as possible. Keeping the control over reproduction is the basis of the power condensed within archives. As Jacques Derrida has argued, the word "archive" is derived from the Greek *Arkheion*, a house, or the residence of the superior magistrates.[1] Documents are kept in the houses of the powerful. The archive more often than not preserves the history of the victors, while presenting it as historical reality or scientific truth. The archive is a realist machine, a body of power and knowledge, and it sustains itself by repetition. More precisely, the authority of traditional archives controls and regulates the reproduction of their items. Of course, this means that there are criteria of how to reproduce those objects "faithfully", according to specific rules. In the audiovisual area especially, property rights are supposed to be reproduced as well. Repetition within the archive is controlled by different logics

of power and of knowledge, most often enforced both by the nation-state and capital interests.

Repetition

But nowadays, the function of the archive has become more complicated, for the most diverse reasons, ranging from digital reproduction technologies to the mere fact that some nations simply cease to exist and their archives are destroyed and collapse. Temporarily, this was the case with the Sarajevo film museum, which was heavily damaged during the war of the 90s. On the other hand, new national archives appear on the scene. In addition to the film museum of Bosnia-Herzegovina in Sarajevo, there is now also a Bosnian-Serbian film museum in Pale. Heritages are dispersed and recollected, though in different combinations. Not only are the archives themselves being transformed, but some of their content is being repeated differently as well. To put it more precisely: the repetition on which the archives' authority rests is being transformed. Cracks and fissures open up between the various types of control exercised by nation or capital, because nations and capital are themselves profoundly transformed by the forces of postcommunist and postcolonial situations as well as by deep neoliberalization. The repetition of the objects in the archive is no longer identical, it doesn't repeat the same under the same name or ownership. The repetition is no longer faithful, but treacherous, displaced, distorted, expropriated or plainly different. This reminds us of the different types of repetitions, which Gilles Deleuze described in his work *Difference and Repetition*[2]. He argued that several types of repetition are possible. To summarize it very briefly: the repetition of the same, the repetition of the similar and the repetition of the new, which either mask or unmask difference within repetition. Now if, in the case of contemporary

archives, we can talk about different types of repetition taking place, this is due to very specific political, technological and economical situations, which combine digital technologies of reproduction with processes of violent globalization.

VHS: NTSC

Let's come back to the picture of the teacher in "Battle of Neretva". Given the incomplete state of my VHS tape, I went on line to find another, more professional home-video version of the film. In recent years, DVDs and VHS home video copies can be easily bought from Amazon and other retailers. The precise point for the explosive proliferation of private prints is paradoxically the slow death of the VHS format. Because of the introduction of DVDs, lots of VHS rental stores simply sold their old stocks on line, which not only introduced a huge slump in prices, but in fact created a market in which more and more private copies began to be distributed. A few years ago, it would have been very difficult to track down a home-video copy of a film like "Battle of Neretva" in Berlin. But now it was very simple to get an American version of "Neretva" on VHS, which was sent to me within two weeks.

Cut

But the scene I was looking for wasn´t in the video. I couldn´t believe it and looked through it several times. Eventually, I realised it was not included in this version. Indeed this version is 70 minutes shorter that the 175-minute original. Even if it had been there, it would still have been in a 4:3 format. The teacher would still have said her lines off frame, but this time they would have been dubbed in English.

Video 2000

There was one other video tape on sale, which was a German Version and 145 minutes long. But this tape was very difficult to play back since its format is Video 2000, which only existed from 1979 to 1986. Thus, one could only view "Battle of Neretva" for seven years in this specific format, and one would probably have to go to a technical museum now if one wanted to play back this video. So I don´t know whether it contains the complete picture of the teacher on the blackboard. I just knowthat she would have been speaking German.

Dubbing

In the meantime I got suspicious because it occurred to me that the German version might not correspond to the cinema print either, and I retrieved following details about the film´s length from ImdB (internet movie database) and various online shops: *Original: 175 min / Serbia: 165 min / Croatia 145 min / Germany: 142 min / Italy:134 and 147 min / Spain: 116 min / USA:127 and 102 min / Russia: 78 min*

This means that, in all of these countries, different versions of the film are being distributed. The movie thus exploded into countless versions of itself, adapted to ever new national imaginations. A user even commented that one had to see all the different DVD versions and learn German, Italian and Spanish in order to get the most complete version of the film, which seemed to exist only in between its versions like a lost Adamic language. Even within the post-Yugoslav countries, several versions are in circulation. An online comment specified that the Serbian DVD version was ~160

minutes long and consisted of a significantly different cut from any other DVD or video releases.

The film had not only been shortened, but also radically transformed during its multiple dubs. It had not been repeated identically while being squeezed through global digital connections and the dubbing lines of international video industries. It has been remade, refashioned, re-edited so as to conform to specific national tastes or different consumer groups.

Repetition II

According to Deleuze, apart from the repetition of the same, which is based on habit, there is also another form of repetition that repeats not the same but the similar by repeating the things that have never been. This form of repetition displaces the original; it repeats but with a difference. It creates memory, which relates to a present that has never been present. In memory, events are repeated that never existed before like in national memory, which is always based on a fiction. If we apply these statements to the abrupt and violent political and economic effects of nation, capital and technology on "Battle of Neretva", it becomes obvious that the archive has lost its original power of identical preservation. Instead, the power of the new archives consists in twisting and modifying the film according to different interests, and in producing derivative versions for specific markets, thus formatting its audience and reinforcing or even creating different constituencies.

Subtitles

I finally found the picture of the female teacher. It was included in a very interesting post-Yugoslav DVD release, which contains four

national versions of the movie: Serbian, Slovenian, Bosnian and Croatian. Although it features a slightly shortened version of the film, the image of the teacher was there – in all four versions, each of them marked with a small national flag. So I found her not only once but four times. Surprisingly, her scene turned out to be absolutely identical in three out of the four versions. Only the Slovenian version was subtitled, all other versions were the same – no subtitles, no difference in length or anything else. This means that when it came to this scene, three out of four different national versions were absolutely the same, except for the fact that only the Serbian and Slovenian version were licensed. The others were pirated. It wasn't the language that had been fragmented, but the markets for intellectual property.

Accordingly, all parts of the film, in which the local language was spoken, were identical in all three versions. Only the parts that featured other languages like German showed minimal differences within the subtitling. So when I finally found the complete image of the teacher, she had split into four different versions of herself – three of those were the same, except that one was licensed and two pirated.

One could say that the multiplication of the image of the teacher refers to the contemporary multiplication of educational systems in Bosnia, according to so-called ethnic and religious differences. Nowadays, segregated schools are very common in Bosnia. The European Union even encourages this type of education because it complies with its policies of diversity. The result is the creation of new divisions, which are presented as original traditions. The image of the teacher is no longer cropped but it is cloned to produce new national echoes of itself.

H.264

But the "Battle of Neretva" has also moved beyond home-video releases. Digital files of the film are expropriated, circulated in different formats like Flash or Quicktime and distributed for free. On You Tube, the further dismantling and remixing of the film takes place, most notably in the works of a certain Yugomix, who has in some parts made it black and white in order to match historical shots of partisans. In this case, the original material is distorted, rearranged; it is incomplete, it is neither reproduced nor repeated faithfully. Issues like copyright, intellectual property, national heritage, cultural memory are affected by this transformation, as well as traditional notions of patrimony, genealogy, ownership.

Retranslation

One example: Nowadays half of You Tube clips of another famous partisan film "Valter brani Sarajevo" (1972) are extracted from DVD releases dubbed in Chinese. Although the only video available in Europe is an old battered VHS in the original language, "Valter... " became a huge box office hit in China, when it was exported there in the 80s. Apparently it is still being screened every New Year's Eve on national television. It was so popular, that a special Chinese beer brand has been named after Valter. One can currently also download the whole film for free on a very popular torrent client. This version of the film is again strongly modified. An individual user has combined the image of a Chinese DVD with the sound of the old Yugoslav VHS. It is a retranslation into a language that now lacks a specific name. This person has simply assumed control over the different versions of the film and, by

spreading it for free, has temporarily suspended its commodity status.

Copyright

One might be tempted to conclude with Deleuze that these online platforms are the place where the third form of repetition, the repetition of the new takes place. The films break free of the confines of nation and capital, which are trying to control the repetition and reproduction of these films. Their distribution negates ownership and copyright, since it apparently takes place, as Deleuze wrote in characterizing the nature of the repetition of the new, in the mode of theft and the gift.

But obviously, this would not only be naïve but simply wrong. On the new digital platforms, the forces of nation and capital are in full swing, as evidenced by the different lawsuits against You Tube, the different commercial operations around it, the struggle over copyright issues and so on. In the case of Piratebay, a torrent platform distributing all sorts of pirated material without any pretensions to censorship whatsoever, the issue is even more clearly outlined. Its servers were confiscated in May 2006, after strong pressure by the US government on the Swedish government. Absurd details of this raid include the broadcasting of the surveillance videotapes of the raid on You Tube, a hacker attack in retaliation on Swedish police servers and the surprising discovery that Piratebay had been technically and financially supported by a well-known Swedish rightwing populist.

So within these platforms, largely deregulated and quite disordered archives catering to volatile and heterogenous peer groups, the clash between different forces and interests is still going on but is

simply displaced onto a new battlefield. Those archives are not based on exclusion and faithful repetition like the traditional ones, rather on inclusion and invisibility.

Ripping

These archives are closely connected to yet another form of repetition and reproduction, which is called "ripping". Repetition or reproduction is being shortened to ripping. To "rip off" means to tear, to steal, to cheat, but to "rip" is a technical term used for copying files into another file format, also often removing copy inhibition in the process. It means to copy more or less identical content while removing the ownership restrictions and references to the original source or genealogy of distribution. So while some archives are based on repetition and reproduction, those new archives are based on ripping, tearing, stealing, on the possibility both to recover every image and to delete it permanently.

Literacy

Recently Zhang Xian Min from the Beijing Film Academy, told me that a Chinese remake of "Valter defends Sarajevo" has already been underway for a long time. It had been delayed, first because of the Bosnian War, and then because the Chinese producers were unsatisfied with the way post-war Sarajevo looked. Now shooting is supposed to take place in the Ukraine, where the exterior settings of Sarajevo will be rebuilt.

In the Chinese posters of "Valter... " the city's name, written in Latin, has also been slightly altered to spell *Salarewo*. While this is the faithful transcription of the correct Chinese translation of Sarajevo, questions remain. According to Jon Solomon, it is highly

unlikely that translators wouldn´t have known the original Latin spelling of Sarajevo. For him, this creative spelling is rather reminiscent of the spelling on fake branded goods or pirated DVDs. Although it is a perfect clone of the original (except for dubbing in Mandarin Chinese), it transmits the message: Relax, it ´s just a fake.

Again, the politics of intellectual property intersect with national imaginaries, which appear differently depending on perspective. Seen from the devastated film studio in Sarajevo, where destroyed film rolls litter the landscape, it seems as if Valter, the fictitious character created there made a successful escape and even managed to increase his fame in exile. But one wonders whether Valter hasn ´t in fact become a mercenary, like so many ex-Yugoslav veterans, who have become much-valued experts within global theatres of war. Has he become a mercenary of the imagination, travelling around the world, intervening in less than stable nations, haunted by the prospect of partition and disintegration?

[1] Jacques Derrida, *Archive fever: A Freudian impression*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996. S VIII.

[2] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press 1994.