SAYING WHAT OTHER PEOPLE MEAN

BRIAN MCFARLANE CONSIDERS THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRANSLATION, INTERPRETATION AND ADAPTATION IN A VARIETY OF RECENT FILMS

ARIETTE Taylor, director of the recent brilliant staging of Chekhov’s little-seen play Ivanov at Melbourne’s ‘fortyfivedownstairs’ arts-space, noted in her production diary (www.ariettetaylor.com) how the company worked with a young Russian immigrant actress, Natalia Axenova, who provided them with ‘a literal translation from which they have developed this contemporary adaptation’. As a result of this process, in which translation in the literal sense is only the first step towards meaning, the actors all sounded absolutely true to character, idiomatically fluent. As I wrote in my review of the production in Australian Book Review (November 2005), it was as if ‘their performances started with interpretation at the level of translation’. Several recent films have further highlighted the ambiguous, sometimes contested territory of translation, interpretation and adaptation.
Saying What Other People Mean

interpret, v.t. & i. Make out the meaning of

IN Sydney Pollack's The Interpreter (UK/US/France), the very title engages with some of the ambiguities involved. Nicole Kidman plays Silvia Broome, who works at the UN as the eponymous interpreter. 'Interpreting' in this context refers to the spoken word—usually simultaneous translation—while 'translating' usually relates to the written word.

What is Nicole up to in this film? Well, something quite dangerous really, in what proves to be a moderately entertaining, intermittently unconvincing thriller. After an unsettling pre-credits sequence in the African state of Matobo, ruled by Zuwanie, a Mugabe-like dictator once thought its liberator, the film switches to New York. Here, behind the credits, we see close-ups of lips talking in many languages, and then UN tour guide Luin (Tsai Chin, resident exotic of 1960s British horror films) foregrounds the film's preoccupation with the spoken word by informing tourists that 'six languages are spoken on the General Assembly floor'.

And, for the first time, a film is shot in the UN building, giving it a kind of authenticity of ambience that its plot can't always match. Former Matoban resident Silvia returns to the building late at night to collect her forgotten flute from the translation room and overhears a plot to assassinate Zuwanie when he comes to address the Assembly. Credibility is at once stretched by the emptiness, darkness and lack of security; and the film enters the lady-in-danger sub-genre. Nothing wrong with that as a mode, except that the film doesn't seem to think it's enough, and the thriller aspect isn't tautly enough developed. A secret service agent, Keller (Sean Penn), is assigned to protect Silvia and oversee security for Zuwanie's imminent visit. He has a bruised private life; she has had a family tragedy in Matobo; and the film constructs their growing relationship with subtlety and feeling. He can't be sure how far to believe her and between them the matter of translation/interpretation becomes crucial. To the film's credit, it doesn't head for a conventionally romantic ending, but from their constant need to interpret each other something else valuable grows.

Against this, and against the fascination with the idea of 'interpreting' as allowing a leeway that literal translation wouldn't, the thriller plot looks perfunctory. Veteran British-Caribbean actor Earl Cameron is utterly charismatic as Zuwanie, but what kind of security arrangements can possibly account for his being left alone in a room with Silvia bent on revenge? This would matter less if the film had been an unpretentious thriller, but it keeps wanting us to think about more interesting matters. Up to a point it succeeds in this, but at the expense of more basic narrative pleasures.
translate, v.t. 1. Express the sense of ... in or into another language

The gaps between speaker, translator and listener have always been part and parcel of our viewing of foreign language films. If the plot of Pollack's film and of the Penn–Kidman relationship depends on how reliable an interpreter she is, so in any foreign film we, the listeners, are in the hands of the translator who has provided the subtitles. (The alternative, much and rightly despised by serious filmgoers, is 'dubbing', in which the foreign actors speak with voices belonging to the listening language.) But when I say 'listeners' are at the mercy of the translator, I am choosing the word carefully. Certainly 'audience' literally means 'a hearing' or an 'assembly of listeners' but in common usage, as it refers to people present at a film (or a play), it will be generally accepted that 'listening' is not all we have to do to attend to the performance before us. In the case of film, there is more at stake than attention to dialogue or to diegetic writing (letters, newspaper headlines, and so on) or, with foreign films, the mere translation of spoken dialogue in subtitles at the foot of the screen.

The fact that foreign-language films have generally been regarded as art-house entertainments, with only very rare commercial breakthroughs, perhaps points to the notion of translation as barrier to the audience's full appreciation. There is inevitably some element of interpretation here: the subtitles represent not purely literal translation but the result of a search for the equivalent idiom, the appropriate character association in English that will render the subtitler's best sense of what the original dialogue conveys. Up to a point we are at the mercy of subtitlers, but their words are not the only source of the film's meaning: mise-en-scène (decor, costume, colour, lighting etc.), editing and music do their parts.

Two wildly diverse foreign-language films recently in Melbourne offer evidence for how much more is at issue, in accounting for our responses, than just reading the subtitles. In Alexandra Leclère's Les Soeurs fâchées, the matter of translation is raised at the outset: that is, with the title. The literal translation would be 'The Angry Sisters', whereas the film was known locally as Me and My Sister, a handing of the original, a draining out of the title the essential conflict that underscores the film. In the opening sequence as we watch Martine Demouthy (Isabelle Huppert) go about her early morning routines with husband and son, the mise-en-scène informs us at once that she is a bourgeois obsessed with order. She then goes to the train station to meet her younger, provincial sister Louise (Catherine Frot), a beautician who has come to Paris to discuss the publication of a book she has written. Long since having gone their separate ways and
leaving behind an untidy background with an alcoholic mother, they have three
days to endure each other in Paris.

The basis is laid for a somewhat acrid comedy of contrasting manners. The
two women scarcely need dialogue for the audience to be aware that they are
polar opposites. These are two superb actresses and in their facial expression and
body language, in their responses to everyone they meet and to every situation
in which they find themselves, the contrast is almost too unmissably made.
Compare soft-hearted Louise weeping at the opera—it’s *La Traviata*—with
Martine lying rigid and stony-faced during sex with the husband she despises,
while Jacques Demy’s gloriously romantic *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* plays
silently on the television. In fact, the film settles too quickly and too easily for a
schematic treatment of a set of oppositions. What works visually is unneces­sar­ily spelt out in verbal terms. It is one thing for Louise, as a tourist, to take in the
sights of Paris in the company of Martine’s unloved son Alexandre, or for Martine
to sit rigid with snobbish disapproval as Louise commits a series of social gaffes;
it is another, and clunkier, for Martine coldly to ask Louise ‘Will you please try to
act normally?’ When Martine’s rage and jealousy finally surface and she says
‘I don’t like the way I am’, it doesn’t seem adequately *earned*. The gulf between
the two sisters has been too stridently enunciated at every narrational level for us to
accept the final rapprochement without wondering how this has come about.

The Iraqi–Iranian co-production *Turtles Can Fly* seems to rely even less on its
subtitles. Anyone who saw director-writer Bahman Ghobadi’s wonderfully eloquent
and moving 2000 film *A Time for Drunken Horses* won’t be surprised at the power
and compassion of this latest film. *Turtles Can Fly* is set in a Kurdish refugee camp,
near the Turkey–Iran border. It opens on an alarming image of a girl walking to the
edge of a cliff and the camera homes in on her moving feet as we await breathless,
fearing her next move. It then cuts to an imposing panorama of a tent city in which
children are forced to live like (deeply deprived) adults as they await the US decla­
ration of war on Iraq in 2003. The harsh terrain is already perilously infested with
landmines, which the kids collect and sell—sometimes at the cost of limbs.

At the film’s centre is a charismatic 13-year-old known as Satellite, because he
works to set up dishes and antennae so that the villagers will have some access to
the world outside, even if this is only a matter of images of George Bush and
Saddam Hussein peddling their ideologies. Like the Kidman character in *The Interpreter*, he is also responsible for ‘translating’ the news, for interpretation on
several levels. But the film is essentially concerned with what is happening on the
personal level of the displaced children barely able to sustain life. Agrin, the
haunted-looking girl from the opening sequence, wanders the bleak countryside with a small child (a result of her rape by a soldier) and her armless brother Hengov. Though the film isn’t much interested in the structures of classic Hollywood narrative cinema, it is not surprising that there is some convergence of the lives of these three with Satellite on a minefield.

This is a film full of unforgettable images when dialogue, in whatever language, is scarcely needed. There are appalling moments as Hengov uses his teeth to disarm a mine, or when Agrin leaves the child tied to a rock. The images and their juxtapositions, the gestures and faces, the severity of the landscape and the climate: these all make their impact without the mediation of words for much of the time. The film ends on the spring arrival of soldiers but this is no occasion for hope. The most optimistic elements in the film are the spectacle of Satellite irrepressibly hurtling around the encampments on his bike, and the tenderness of Hengov for his doomed nephew. With images like these, it’s not surprising that one so little recalls the translated words at the bottom of the screen.

interpret, v.t. Bring out the meaning of ... by artistic representation
translate, v.t. Convey ... from one art etc. into another

IN film, the ultimate translation is that of adaptation. The Concise Oxford Dictionary’s second meaning for ‘translate’ is, conveniently enough, ‘Convey, introduce (idea, principle) from one art form into another’. In 2005 there have been two film translations of Jane Austen’s most popular novel, Pride and Prejudice: the Bollywood musical extravaganza Bride and Prejudice and the new British film from Working Title. And Oscar Wilde’s stage play Lady Windermere’s Fan has been ‘translated’ into A Good Woman. With this kind of translation we don’t—or at least shouldn’t—expect anything literal, but it is probably true that most expect, if the film announces its antecedents, that it will bear some relation to them.

When Jane Austen’s Mrs Bennet, obsessively matchmaking mother of five daughters, decides to send her daughter Jane on horseback to Netherfield, where she has high hopes that Mr Bingley’s obvious attraction to her will blossom into something more tangible, she does so (in Austen’s words) ‘because it seems likely to rain; and then you must stay all night’. Jane would rather go by coach, but determined Mrs Bennet says ‘... your father cannot spare the horses, I am sure. They are wanted in the farm, Mr Bennet, are they not?’ and he is forced to agree that ‘They are wanted in the farm much oftener than I can get them.’ My point in quoting this exchange is simply to note that this is the first version of Pride and Prejudice in which I have ever had any sense of the Bennet property as a working
farm. In neither the high-gloss MGM romantic-comedy translation of 1940, with Laurence Olivier and Greer Garson, nor any of the television series has there ever been any sign of agriculture or husbandry to sustain Mr Bennet’s library-based indolence or the daily needs of wife, daughters and shadowy household staff. In Joe Wright’s new film, that word ‘farm’ seems to have been picked up as having a real significance and to have been ‘translated’ on screen, via Sarah Greenwood’s immaculate production design, as a comfortable, if somewhat untidy house, through whose open back door one sees geese being fed in the opening minutes of the film. Later, as Mrs Bennet prattles on about Jane’s prospects, a pig with huge testicles waddles past outside (well, of course), and there is a persistent sense that this really is a house with a farm attached; Roman Osin’s cinematography frequently gives us glimpses of field and farm that recall Constable, both in their soft light and in what is going on in them.

Wright and screenwriter Deborah Moggach have translated this word ‘farm’ wholly in terms of images (as far as I can recall, the word itself is never mentioned). In this captivating adaptation of a well-loved novel, the film-makers have translated intelligently in other ways too. Mrs Bennet is, in Brenda Blethyn’s performance, as foolishly, harryingly obsessed with marrying off her daughters as Austen observed, but Blethyn, Wright and Moggach have clearly decided to let her have one moment when her fixation is rendered sympathetically. ‘When you have five daughters you’ll understand,’ she ruefully chides Lizzie. Foolish as she is, she is allowed to be humanly comprehensible and there is a late scene between her and Mr Bennet (Donald Sutherland), glimpsed through their bedroom window, where there is a suggestion of intimacy as she talks happily of the reunited Jane and Bingley. Mr Bennet, too often depicted as cuddly while dispensing aphoristic cruelties, is here not so much softened as made explicable. As is the foolish Mr Collins, sycophantic and orotund, who in Tom Hollander’s expert rendering becomes a gravely absurd character rather than a caricature, a man who perhaps is not ready to marry anyone but is being pushed into it by his situation and his patroness, a very daunting Lady Catherine de Bourgh, unsparingly played by Judi Dench with an embittered awareness of what she is protecting—and losing. These roles, richly comic as they are in Austen, and in moments still so here, have been to some extent deconstructed so as to understand them, rather than to offer them as one-note delights.

What Lady Catherine has lost, by the end, is Darcy as a prospect for her (touchingly) pallid daughter Anne, and she has lost him to someone who won’t be daunted by her. The film leaves little to choose between Lady Catherine’s imper-

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tinent catechising of Elizabeth and Mrs Bennet’s relentless matchmaking: they are both deeply vulgar manifestations of monomania. But it is on Darcy and Elizabeth that any adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* will be judged. At the risk of outraging half the televiewing world, I’d say that Matthew McFadyen, star of the compelling TV series *Spooks* and the New Zealand drama *In My Father’s Den* (2004), is at least as impressive as Colin Firth in suggesting a hauteur that is a facade for true feelings. These are glimpsed touchingly in his delight at seeing his sister again and there is real pain, anger and held-in passion in his proposal to Elizabeth. She is played by Keira Knightley, last seen as an uncommonly ludicrous Guinevere in *King Arthur*, and here perhaps the most engaging Elizabeth I’ve ever seen. Not matronly like Garson (37 at the time) or incessantly smiling like Jennifer Ehle, but independent, frustrated and oppressed by many aspects of her family life, honest enough to linger pensively over what she might have been mistress of at Pemberley if she’d accepted Darcy’s first proposal. The final proposals—between Bingley and Jane, between Darcy and Lizzie—have never been so affectingly achieved, and this is the result of the extent to which the film-makers have translated and/or reimagined the original material.

The Bollywood version, Gurinder Chadha’s *Bride and Prejudice*, is a strenuously noisy, determinedly colourful, cross-cultural affair that looks for Austen’s class-based conflicts in present-day India. It is good-natured enough but almost entirely lacking in sharpness, so that when it reproduces bits of Austen’s dialogue these stand out like hens’ teeth, because the rest is so banal, has so little in common with her tough-mindedness. Banal is especially what the lyrics of the songs are, such as ‘Show me the way, take me to love’, as Darcy shows the Lizzie-equivalent, Lalita (Aishwarya Rai), Los Angeles. There is no reason to be suspicious of an attempt to relocate a story set in early nineteenth-century England to twenty-first-century India, Britain and the United States, or to turn it into a semi-musical, but equally the enterprise needs a lot more rigour than it gets here to stop it turning to syrupy mush.

Mike Barker has also done a relocation-and-updating job on Wilde, but *A Good Woman* suggests that the process has been carefully thought through. A British–Italian co-production, it both recognises the strength of the original play and deals boldly with it. What emerges from *A Good Woman* is how sturdily constructed its melodramatic plot is: the fact that Wilde’s plays hold up so well, when the mores they dramatise have so changed, points to how narratively solid they are. In this version, for instance, Lady, now plain Meg, Windermere suspects that her apparently devoted husband Steve is having an affair with the adventuress
Mrs Erlynne, a byword for scandalous behaviour in regard to men and money. How Meg is rescued from making a huge mistake and ruining her life, and how Mrs Erlynne ultimately earns the film's title, still seem engrossing enough as a basis for a melodrama of deceits and true love, with a chorus of chattering society.

The main change is probably that the Windermeres and Mrs Erlynne ('I'm infamous and poor') are now Americans holidaying in Amalfi, and this is no doubt in the interests of international box-office. It works perfectly well, however, and Helen Hunt is an incisive, somewhat ravaged Mrs Erlynne, who compromises then rescues Meg, played by the ubiquitous and luminous Scarlett Johansson, who suggests both the beauty and the intolerance of untried innocence. They are surrounded by a cast of enjoyable English character actors, notably Tom Wilkinson (funny and touching in his study of goodness), John Standing and Roger Hammond, and Stephen Campbell Moore's rakish Lord Darlington makes the most of some of Wilde's best lines. Between them, these characters make us reassess the values of innocence and experience: the former can be tiresomely puritanical; the latter can be generous as well as tarnished.

Barker has transferred the play from upper-class London in the 1890s to the Italian Riviera in 1930, the period ushered in by big-band strains on the soundtrack. At first I wondered if the setting was going to be too irresistibly lush for the good of the drama; then it became clear that all those precipitous inclines and narrow streets were working as metaphors for the danger into which Meg might plunge and the devious ways of the society around her. Unlike Bride and Prejudice's dealings with Austen, Barker's screenwriter Howard Himelstein, in preserving plenty of Wilde's epigrammatic dialogue, devises some of his own without any sense of jarring.

Barker knows that the verbal is only one weapon in film's arsenal of meanings. Adaptation, the most advanced form of 'translation' that we are concerned with here, depends as well on various other aspects of the 'language' of cinema, aspects that may trigger our aesthetic and affective responses at least as powerfully as words do.