

Translating the 'Still' and the 'Silent': Stephen Poliakoff's Shooting the Past

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Abstract: In this montage-essay I want to explore the co-being of two forms of visibility in contemporary culture: the photographic and the cinematographic. But this is not my main concern. The more important thing for me is to unravel the notion of translation as movement between them. For this purpose, I'll focus on Stephen Poliakoff's movie *Shooting the Past*¹. I'll also show that a similar translation/movement takes place in various sections of the text that makes this essay. I will examine translation, as an act/event, at three different but inter-related levels: at the level of the film, that is, within the cinematic narrative; at the level of this essay, that is, in the process of writing and reading this essay; and at the most general level, the level of signification.

Keywords: translation, cinematic image, photographic image

¹ British playwright and film director Stephen Poliakoff has so often used photographic images in his well-known television serials and films that it is described as a trademark of his style. They appear in films such as, *The Tribe* (1998), *Perfect Strangers* (2001), *The Lost Prince* (2003). For a comprehensive study of his work see, Nelson, Robin. *Stephen Poliakoff on Stage and Screen*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, Methuen Drama imprint, 2011).

Film gives back to the dead a semblance of life. Photography maintains the memory of the dead as being dead.

Christian Metz (*Photography and Fetish, 1980:84*)

The promise of translation is that which announces to us being-language of language: there is language, and because there is something like language, one is both able and unable to translate.

Jacques Derrida (*The Ear of the Other 1988:124*)

Let me begin this essay with a story about a movie-wallah who visited the street of a small Indian town in Punjab where I used to live. I was ten or perhaps a little older. The movie-wallah would come hauling a movie box in his brightly painted rickshaw. There were six peeping holes in the box which used to be pasted with technicolour posters of Hindi (Bollywood) films. On the top sat an old gramophone, the one which you have to wind up with a handle. He would place a vinyl record, wind up the gramophone, and with his righthand start turning the other handle. We, the kids, sat around the box peeping through the holes watching colourful images move in front of us. The speed with which the images moved often depended on how tired the movie-wallah was on that day. His repertoire was limited to a few sets of reels, and the records were old and scratchy, and often images and songs didn't match, but that didn't bother us. We were happy watching the same reels again and again, thrilled by the movie-wallah and his magical box. For a sumptuous feast of ten to fifteen minutes, we paid him an *anna*, one twelfth of an old Indian rupee.

Fifty years later, when I think about the movie-wallah, I am unable to pinpoint the reason why I and other children were so fascinated with the movie box. This is even more puzzling because by then I had already seen 'real' movies in a cinema theatre. I had also discovered that the reels we were shown in the magic box were nothing other than a sequence of still photographic images. It seems what fascinated me most was the fact that by merely turning a handle on the movie box, the movie-wallah was able to transform still images into images that moved. This movement aided by optical illusion conjured stories I heard and saw at the same time. The magic, I am convinced now, was indeed in the stories which used to come alive by adding movement and translation to the images.

Like many movie-goers I have come to believe that our desire to read, hear and watch stories compels us to suspend our disbelief and assume that in a movie we encounter, 'real' people living in a 'real' world. Movement and translation append time to still images making the stories spatial as well as temporal. They no longer appear to us as mere abstract representations of the real world but the real world itself.

Translation/Movement 1

Two monologues addressed to the viewers frame the narrative in *Shooting the Past*. The first appears just after the introductory sequence and shows Oswald Bates sitting on a couch; a porky, dishevelled nerd wearing a cardigan. He is looking at us and talking. We hear the click of a shutter, a flash flashes, and we realise that he is sitting in front of a photographic camera. To his right, on a table, we see a tape recorder. He speaks and the tape records. Every now and then he clicks, and the camera takes his photo. This is what he has to say:

First of all, clearly, I don't have a video camera. The only time in my life it would have been handy to have one. I want to leave a record of what has been happening. If at all, it bloody seems late to buy one on the last afternoon of my life. But I have got this, a camera with a remote shutter

A short history of the MacFarlane Photo Library follows, and the movie begins to roll. The second monologue comes towards the end, and shows Marilyn Trueman, the chief librarian of the MacFarlane Photo Library. Her role is to tie up neatly all the loose ends of the narrative.

It seems that the opening shots of Oswald Bates precisely define the main narrative thread of the film. The opposition between 'still' photos and moving images is thrust right up, although we also hear Oswald acknowledging that he would have, at this time of crisis, the last day of his life, found a video camera handy. Oswald, the archivist of photos who has dedicated his whole life in collecting, seeing and showing these photos, suddenly finds doubting their capacity to record the last day of his own life. Why this doubt? Why this distrust in letting his story being committed to a series of photos? Has he been seduced by the flickering images of a movie camera? Is he scared of the openness of photos, their strange emptiness which triggers the viewers to weave stories around and about them? Perhaps he doesn't want any other Oswald like him to inseminate his images with alien stories, the way he himself does to the photos which fall into his hands and catch his eyes. Perhaps that is why he is recording his story. The photos need the safety net of his voice to keep them shielded from being corrupted by other voices and stories.

Oswald's monologue drives the narrative. It moulds and modulates it. Its content and duration change, and often the monologue accompanies the narrative as a voice-over. He is the main narrator of the story. His point of view dominates. The only exception perhaps is the last sequence in which Marilyn takes over. The unsuccessful attempt to commit suicide leaves Oswald crippled, half dead, almost as dead as the people in the photos of the collection he looks after. The nexus between death and photos, the one which Roland Barthes so eloquently exposed in his *Camera Lucida*, is made visible again and again in the movie.

One of Oswald's many monologues is heard and seen as he readies himself for his final exit. He is facing his camera and talking to us. 'All these people killed themselves,' he tells, 'because they were unhappy with their lives.' And he shows us the photos of

Virginia Woolf, Marilyn Monroe and Tony Hancock. The camera clicks and the flash flashes. These photos would appear again in the final episodes of the story.

As one would expect from a movie about a photo library, there are hundreds of photos seen, shown, and talked about in the film. There are photos which serve as a background for the narrative, creating an engaging visual ambience. At times, these photos only hint, make a gesture or cast a sideways glance, looking cheekily for the eyes of the viewers, generating ripples in the narrative.

However, there are photos and sequences, which are asked to play a specific role in the narrative. They are the ones through and around which different stories are told. One of the stories tells us about three fat brothers who committed a bizarre murder with apples and a crossbow. Another story shows us Lily Katzman, the Jewish girl, who was sent to live with an upper-class non-Jewish family to save her from the concentration camp. However, the most intriguing story is that of Mr. Anderson's grandmother. Mr. Anderson is an American businessman who wants to empty the grand, eighteenth-century, country house of its ten million photos and convert it into a twenty-first century school of business and economics. Often, photos on their own possess enough charm to seduce us but when they invite stories to weave their own narrative web around them, the level of seduction becomes irresistible. Oswald and Marilyn, the two curators in the library, know this fact well, and therefore use stories deftly to charm and entrap Mr. Anderson.

A remarkable feature of the film is the way repeated movement/translation between sequences of still and moving images is employed to structure the narrative. This is the first level of translation/movement I want to discuss in some detail. What interests me most is the nature of visuality created through this mode of translation. When I call the still images 'still' and 'silent', I do it metaphorically. It is obvious that they are neither still nor mute. When they are thrust in front of a movie camera and projected onto a tele-screen, they gain an excess, both visual and narrative. In a similar fashion the cinematic narrative created through and around them also acquires an excess. The movie-ness of the movie is not only defined but accentuated.

In *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, Gilles Deleuze notes that '...cinema does not give us an image to which movement is added, it immediately gives us a movement-image. It does give us a section, but a section which is mobile, not an immobile section + abstract time' (1996: 2).

Deleuze begins with Bergson's three theses on movement and constructs an understanding of cinematography that overcomes Bergsonian scepticism of a cinematographic image, which according to Bergson only represents false movement. Bergson understands movement to be distinct from the space covered. The space covered is infinitely divisible whereas movement cannot be divided without changing it qualitatively. False movement takes place when immobile sections are arranged along the axis of abstract time. 'Real movement,' to quote Deleuze, 'needs to be understood as a mobile section of duration, of the whole or of a whole. It expresses the change in the duration, in the whole. The whole is neither given nor givable because it is open and because its nature is to change constantly, or to give rise to something new, in short to endure' (1996: 9). According to Deleuze, through the combination of fixed and moving shots (fixed and mobile camera) and through montage, cinema is able to present

movement-images which are '...pure movement extracted from bodies or moving things' (1996: 23). 'The essence of cinematographic movement-image,' he adds, 'lies in extracting from vehicles or moving bodies the movement, which is their common substance, or extracting from movements the mobility which is their essence' (1996: 23). The movement-image in his opinion has two facets, 'one of which is oriented towards sets and their parts (frames or closed system), the other towards the whole and its changes' (1996: 55).

Let us examine how the story of Lily Katzman is shown and told. Marilyn takes a photo out of a folder and slides it in the direction of Mr. Anderson who is sitting on the opposite side of the table. Mr. Anderson takes the photo and the camera moves behind him looking over his shoulders. For the viewers the seeing of the photo becomes framed within a subjective shot, the point of view of Mr. Anderson. Although it is Marilyn who is showing the photos and telling the story, the viewers are still made to look over the shoulders of Mr. Anderson. At first, we are shown one or two photos but gradually we are exposed to a montage of photos embedded within a haunting soundscape. We hear the off-screen sounds and watch Lily sitting with her mother in the park. The sounds continue as she walks back home alone. On the way she has to stop for a Nazi street march to pass. The penultimate photo of the sequence shows Lily standing on a railway platform with other children holding their bundles, ready to be deported. 'The bundles,' we hear Mr. Anderson speak. 'The Bundles,' replies Marilyn. We, like Mr. Anderson, are already hooked eagerly waiting to find out what happened next. Marilyn tells us that Lily survived the camp and shows us the last photo in which we find an old chubby woman, standing on the Old Kent Street in London, feeding pigeons.

In the essay *Painting and Cinema*, Andre Bazin notes that the frame of a painting is centripetal whereas the screen centrifugal (1974: 166). This means that when a painting, and in this particular case, a photo, outspans the screen (that is when parts of it fill the whole screen) the space of the painting/photo loses its orientation and its limits (1974: 166). In *Shooting the Past* we see similar outspanning frequently. Often, we are shown close-ups of photos. The cinematographic camera zooms in and out. Frequently, it pans over the surface of the photo, mimicking the eye looking for a face in the crowd. In the photo that shows Lily Katzman with her bundle, the camera not only pans over the surface but rocks up and down. And when we hear the rattling sounds of wheels accompanying the movement, this slight gesture, this minimalist hint of a train taking the kids to the camps, becomes visually palpable.

One of the most intriguing sequences of the film involves Oswald taking an overdose of pills. We see him sitting on the side of a bed. He opens a bottle and pops a handful of pills in his mouth, grabs a glass of water and washes them down. Then he puts away the glass, walks over to a table lamp with a single bulb, turns the light off, and unscrews the bulb. In the darkness he walks over to the bed and lies down, waiting for the moment to come. A close up of his face fills the screen. Slowly the camera moves away still focused on his eyes and ends up with a shot that shows Oswald sitting in front of his camera. The camera clicks and the flash flashes after which we are taken back to Oswald lying on his bed. The camera is still focused on his eyes. This is when black and white photos of Oswald appear in a quick succession. Most of them are close-ups of his face. We remember him shooting these photos, and we also know that just a few hours ago he had got them printed. In one of them he is holding the photos of Woolf and Monroe: the photo within a photo, framed by a static, frontal cinematographic shot.

A visual walking trail, a movement, a sort of translation, from one photo to the other and to the next. Along this trail also lie the signposts of past times, more past than the one that precedes it, as if we have traced a geological traverse in the landscape of memories.

'The cinematic apparatus,' notes Jacques Aumont, 'implies not only the passage of time, a chronology into which we would slip as if into a perpetual present, but also complex, stratified time in which we move through different levels simultaneously, present, past(s), future(s) ...' (1992: 130). It seems that the sequence of black and white photos of Oswald, I have described earlier, achieves a level of condensation of various forms of time, of its flow, its duration. The present-ness of Oswald's monologue first brings the past represented by the photos of Woolf and Monroe in the present moment of Oswald's monologue, but as the monologue itself moves into past, that past time is pushed back into much deeper past. But the two pasts still remain bound to the present-ness of the ongoing movie and the story it shows and tells. It coincides with the present-ness of my watching the movie.

As I watch the sequence, I begin to understand the idea of the crystal-image discussed by Deleuze. Deleuze describes crystal-image as a special form of time-image, a kind of 'direct image of time' that shows 'pure time' independent of movement. In the time-image, to quote Aumont, 'time is barely re-presented. Instead, it is presented, made into present, cloned or twinned' (1992: 181). In Deleuze's own words, in this image '...the past does not follow the present which it no longer is, it coexists with the present it was' (1996: 183).

'Walking,' notes Michel de Certeau, 'is to the urban system what the speech act is to language. Walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, ... speaks' (1998: 97). In *Shooting the Past* we are invited to take many such walks, and as we walk with the camera and hear and see the story, memories begin to unravel with the help of stories strung by photos, littered across the passageways. The time is unfolded and refolded. It becomes spatial, geographic.

Take for example the story of Hettie, Mr. Anderson's grandmother. It begins in a photolab where Marilyn is examining some old negatives on a screen attached to an enlarger and a projector. Once a connection to the next sequence of photos is found, the story moves to a room with a table where we see Marilyn and Mr. Anderson sitting on the opposite sides. The next narrative segment takes us on a walk with Mr. Anderson along a passageway where photos are hung from strings crisscrossing the space. We walk with them and soon find ourselves near a table with a red velvet tablecloth opening the way into an empty room where we encounter photos spread on the floor.

In the film, translation of still and moving images becomes intertwined with walking and movement in the company of photos. Translation and movement begin to complement and stand for each other.

Translation/Movement 2

There is a story often told about Matisse. It is said that one day as Matisse was working in his studio, a visitor who had come to watch him paint, asked him, 'What are you painting?' 'I am painting a painting,' he replied.

I smile reading Matisse's reply and yet it leaves me wondering about his intention. I don't want to believe that he is being arrogant or snobbish. Most probably, he is trying to express his inability to find a reference in the real world outside the painting his visitor was keen to know about; in a way he is questioning the idea of 'aboutness' of a work of art; a question that demands translation of the visual content of an image into words. Like all translations this is a process fraught with pitfalls. It is never complete, marked either by excesses or deficiencies.

Roman Jakobson calls this mode of translation between two different art-forms intersemiotic. 'Intersemiotic translation or transmutation,' he notes, 'is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non-verbal sign system' (1959: 233). Although Matisse was asked to do just the opposite, to interpret non-verbal sign system by means of verbal signs, the task he faced was similar: to bridge the gap between two different modes of artistic expression. In a way, he was trying to explain the visitor that in order to explain what he was painting, he'll have to paint another painting about the first painting.

This incommensurability of intersemiotic translation also shows that the dichotomy between content and form, which forms the basis of much of the popular understating of works of art is artificial and unusable. The two elements are inseparable. Their osmosis is intrinsic and organic. Separating them, even for methodological reasons, sucks out the life force from these works. And yet that's what most critics and interpreters attempt to do. In fact, that's what I have been doing in this essay: translating the narrative content of Poliakoff's movie.

After watching *Shooting the Past* several times, I have attempted to translate its content and form into verbal signs. I have downloaded from a website stills and photos used in the film and printed them out to look at them separately. I have similarly listened to the excerpts of the soundtrack independently. I am hoping that by moving from the whole to the parts, and then from parts to the whole, I'll be able to grasp the meaning of the film, or at least be able to explain to the readers why the movie manages to engage me emotionally.

An easier way would have been to insert a YouTube address of the movie and ask the readers to watch the movie and find the answer themselves. But this would have brought an end to the process of translation I have been engaged in. Like Hamlet, the question I, and others like me, face is simple: to translate or not to translate.

The answer for me is simple: to not translate is impossible. This is what we, as thinking and feeling human beings, have always done. This is our predicament, our burden, and our joy.

In a roundtable on translation, collected in the book *The Ear of the Other*, Derrida expresses the same double bind. 'Translate me,' he notes, 'and what is more don't translate me. I desire that you translate me, that you translate the name I impose on you; and at the same time whatever you do, don't translate me, you will not be able to translate it' (1988: 102). Derrida here talks about the special status of a proper name, of its translatability and untranslatability. But it won't be incorrect to suggest, as I have done earlier, that we face the same double bind when we encounter a text (object, thought, painting, film) created by someone else's words, language, seeing and showing.

Perhaps what drives my project is the belief that readers of this essay are interested in the nature of my engagement with the movie. They don't want my disinterested or objective look at the movie. They are looking for my presence and my voice. However, I hope they aren't interested only in my voice. I hope they want to know how my voice interacts with many other voices and seeings in the movie and thereby hear a polyphonic dialogue between the voices, including my own. A polyphonic dialogue, I believe, might help the readers of this essay to establish a similar dialogue with the movie. Like most translators, I hope that after reading the essay they'll develop an urge to watch the movie and talk about it.

The movie, as expected, ends on a positive note. The library is saved and sold to an American collection. We hear this from none other but Marilyn in her final monologue. However, the focus of this monologue is Oswald, who according to her had an uncanny capacity to make connections between photos, events and people. 'I make connections,' he tells the woman in the photo-lab waiting for the roll to be processed. But Marilyn tells us something else about Oswald. 'Oswald changed my life,' she remarks, 'and the life of Mr. Anderson but in the process harmed his own life. The world needs many more Oswalds,' she laments. Although Oswald has been turned into a hero, and in a way, he is a hero who helped save the collection. He achieved the task not merely because he loved the photos or his job but because of his uncanny ability to see and engineer connections between photos, stories and people around him. In my view he is a masterful translator who can use translation and movement to spot, establish, and unravel connections between seemingly disparate events.

Translation/Movement 3

In an interview Poliakov was asked to explain the idea behind the making of *Shooting the Past*. 'The idea,' he replied,

came from an archive in England that belonged to one of the big studios, just outside London. The studio closed in the sixties, then EMI, the British Music Company, bought it. Anyway, it changed hands again, in the early nineties, they were going to bulldoze the site and destroy all the photos. There was an art director who tried to get somebody in England to rescue the collection, and she failed. Finally, she got the George Lucas Foundation to take it.

In the same interview, Poliakov mentions another collection. 'There was a collection (which has just been sold) very like the one in the film, a period house in the middle of

London ... very, very dusty ... It was an old ballet school, all covered up with pictures. That was literally the archive you see in the film, but much worse, much less tidy.'

Poliakoff seems to suggest that the MacFarlane photo-library in the movie has not one but at least two real-world proto-types. Poliakoff in his movie transports or, let us say, translates these two, or elements of the two, to clone, like Dolly, the sheep, the MacFarlane Photo Library.

According to Poliakoff the process of cloning began with the photos preserved in and provided by the Hulton Photo Archive in London. These photos are 'real' photos firstly because they have been turned into pro-filmic objects filmed in the movie. They are also 'real' because they exist as a photographic imprint, a mould, an instantaneous abduction, to use Metz's words, 'of the object out of the world, into another kind of time' (1985: 84). They possess a higher degree of 'resemblance complex,' in the words of Bazin, or a higher 'analogy effect,' in the words of Aumont, than, for example, Oswald Bates played by Timothy Spall.

Therefore, if after watching the film, one wants to know whether the film is based on a true story, this is most probably because the presence of 'real' black and white photos of people and places used in the film urge us to. In them we can possibly see the connection with the real world outside the film. And because we suspect this connection, we readily let ourselves believe that some of the stories told about and through them might also be true. It doesn't matter if the actual filming took place in the Hulton Archive itself or in some other similar library. The photos compell us to suspend our disbelief and perceive the imagined reality in the film as real and artistically true.

Poliakoff translates/transports elements of a real photo archive to create an imaginatively real MacFarlane Library by shooting the photos with a movie camera and stringing them into a compelling narrative. However, in this process, the movie also creates the possibility of a second, reverse, translation or movement. For instance, if I were to find myself in the Hulton Archive in London, I would find it hard to escape the presence of MacFarlane Library imaginatively created by Poliakoff's. It would block my way to the real Hulton Archive, which I would be forced to see, as if, refracted, transmitted, and transfigured by Poliakoff's library. In this way Poliakoff's translation begins to blur the boundaries between the two worlds: the real and the imagined.

In his much cited paper, Jacobson distinguishes three kinds of translations: intralingual or rewording where an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs in the same language takes place; interlingual or translation proper where interpretation of verbal signs by means of other language occurs; and intersemiotic translation or transmission where interpretation of verbal signs by nonverbal signs happens (1959: 233).

In my essay translation of still photographic images into images in a narrative film represents an example of intersemiotic translation. Here the sign system of still photographic images is translated (or interpreted/assimilated) into the sign system of a cinematic narrative. It needs to be emphasised that this process is hard to imagine without the presence of written text because the filming is invariably preceded by screenplay which involves not only directions but also dialogues.

In my essay I have also used the notion of translation in a much broader sense, and the use is essentially metaphoric. Translation as movement in this sense occurs whenever we try to create a representation of the world. The world and its representation are only strategically and temporarily separate because the world represented and its representation exist symbiotically; they lose meaning and salience as soon the relation between the two are severed.

It can be argued that translation of the real into the imagined real, and transposition of the imagined real onto the real is one of the most significant features of our being in the world. The movement or translation from an object to thought, thought to speech, and speech to alphabetical and non-alphabetical writing is essential to us as Homo Sapiens. To live without it is impossible because translation seems to become an essential element of our co-being in the world.

In Place of Conclusion

Here is a list of some of the words I noted down as I was doing my reading for the essay:

Translation, movement, sliding, displacement, replacement, transmission, transfusion, transaction, transposition, transportation, transference, travel, detour, dissemination, insemination, inhabitation, iteration (*iter*, means once again, in Sanskrit *Itra* – the ‘other’), citation, grafting, performance, trace, residue, weaving, cleaving, joining.

As I move from left to right reading aloud these words, I discover that I am enacting a mode of translation. My eyes move across the page, my voice pronounces the words, and their meaning unfolds. On the paper they sit close to each other. However, their proximity, spatial and semantic, doesn't make them dissolve into each other. Instead, they appear to overstep and overlap on each other casting shadows. Thereby, as I move from one word to the next, I seem to carry traces of sounds and meanings with me. Each word I meet interacts with what I have received from the word I had left behind, the two undergoing a subtle transformation in the process. The words traversed by me don't disappear but find a new mode to enrich, endure and survive.

To help the ‘original’ endure was in Walter Benjamin's view the prime task of a translator. In *The Ear of the Other*, Derrida reads Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator*, to emphasise the same point. Derrida writes:

It happens that Benjamin says substantially that the structure of an original is survival, what he calls *Überleben*. At times he says *Überleben* and the other times *Fortleben*. These two words do not mean the same thing (*Überleben* means above life and therefore survival as something rising above life; *Fortleben* means survival in the sense of something prolonging life), even though they are translated in French by the one word *survivre* (to survive, to live on), which already poses a problem. Given the surviving structure of an original text – always a sacred text in its own ways insofar as it is a pure original – the task of

the translator is precisely to respond to this demand for survival which is the very structure of the original text. (Notice Benjamin does not say the task of translation but rather of the translator, that is, of a subject who finds him/herself immediately indebted by the existence of the original, who must submit to its law and who is duty-bound to do something for the original.) To do this, says Benjamin, the translator must neither reproduce, represent, nor copy the original, nor even, essentially care about communicating the meaning of the original. Translation has nothing to do with reception or communication or information. As Christie McDonald has just pointed out, the translator must assure survival, which is to say the growth, of the original (1988: 122).

If the real task of a translator and translation is to help the 'original' endure and survive, Poliakov in my view achieves the task admirably. He translates the still photos by stringing them into a compelling cinematic narrative. In a way, I have attempted to do something similar: translate Poliakov's movie into a narrative essay, hoping that after reading the essay, the readers would want to watch the movie. The movie, therefore, will endure.

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