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Underground Film Translations in 1980s Romania: A Gateway to Freedom

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Abstract

The context of the communist regime in the late 1980s Romania was definitely a most peculiar one. During this period of time, translations from other languages were scarce and only the ones which were in accordance with the communist ideology were allowed. It was a time when people had neither many rights nor did they have many choices to make. In the latter part of the 1980s more and more foreign films were smuggled into the country and most of them were obviously American. Such films revealed a new and different world for those who watched them. Consequently, these films needed to be translated and the most well-known voice to have done it was Irina Margareta Nistor's. Her task was both interesting and demanding but also dangerous at the same time given the political context. This essay investigates the manner in which underground film "dubbing"¹ was done and describes the particularities of the clandestine film "dubbing" by discussing how it was performed and by analysing the translations qualitatively.

Keywords: film translation, dubbing, voice-over, underground translations, omissions, additions, Romanian translation, 1980s Romania

Film translation in 1980s Romania is an instance both peculiar and appealing due to the manner in which the translations were done, the circumstances in which this process took place and the magnitude of the influence they exerted on the minds and the worldviews of all those who watched them. In order to present a minute picture of the context in which such translations were done, it was essential to conduct a research on the working method, the limitations and possibilities at hand. To this end, several sources were referred to in order to gather as much pertinent information as possible about film translators, about their opinions and those of the audience. The analysis of the quality of film translations was carried out after watching fragments of films. Mention should be made of the fact that the choice of the analysed films was based on the quality of the recordings which, in most situations, was very poor. The translated version was barely comprehensible many times even when using headphones, so multiple replays were necessary. Another criterion was the availability of the original versions of the translated fragments so that a comparison between the two could be made. The fragments which were analysed were extracted from the following films: *Stone Cold*, *American Commandos*, and *Stakeout*.

It is a matter of common knowledge that the 44 years of communism in Romania had a devastating impact on the cultural life of this country. By the early 1980s, it was almost impossible to watch quality shows on television since everything was subjected to very strict censorship (*Cum erau cenzurate ...*). The quality of television programmes was very poor because the shows were mostly appraisals of the president's "achievements" and the success of the communist regime. So, people could not watch anything worthwhile. History facts were forged in order to serve the purpose of the political leaders of the time. Libraries had been deprived of the books written before the communist era exactly because the Communist Party was striving to blur and conceal the past. In its turn, literature was subject to censorship. The literary works which were not ideologically appropriate were not accepted by the regime and, therefore, were not published. In a similar manner, music is subject to censorship. The communist authorities rejected certain

musical genres such as rock and roll, not necessarily for political reasons but simply because this kind of music did not sound “right” in the ears of the communist nomenclatura (*Cum erau cenzurate ...*).

On the whole, censorship points to the prohibitions imposed on the individual. It is true that, to a certain extent, it is present everywhere, in every society, but, when it comes to totalitarian regimes, it is perceived as a cultural, political, and social coercion weighing heavily on people’s conscience. The censorship imposed by the communist regime was utterly obvious, visible in every aspect of life, and this made it seem all the more insidious, even dangerous. It was meant to ‘defend’ society from the ideology which was perceived as harmful by the leaders of the Communist Party. It existed in order to impose a new and better morality, the morality of the “new citizen” who was completely submissive and devoted (Rădulescu 26).

The cultural Romanian background of 1985 was dominated by Nicolae Ceaușescu’s regime. The last twenty years had been characterised by deprivations of all sorts: food, clothing, decent living conditions, in a nutshell, poverty. As if it had not been enough, the Romanians were culturally isolated. Freedom of expression was also strictly controlled. Although the leaders were promoting the idea of people’s freedom and their right to self-determination and personal development, reality proved otherwise. Paradoxically, the political mechanism did exactly the opposite since it restricted the very fundamental rights of any individual, among which freedom of expression, free movement, or religious belief, to mention just a few. In certain cases, this deprivation was total (Sîtnic 83).

Translations from other languages, especially those with “capitalist” origins, were very scarce. The only works which were translated had to be in harmony with the communist ideologies. This stringent control over everything that was published led to a shortage of good books available to the public, regardless of the fact that their topic had no direct connection to politics. Romania was in the dark, literally and figuratively. One of the many aberrant decisions made by Ceaușescu, a genuine dictator, was the daily

two-hour television program, yet another opportunity to enforce the communist propaganda. Educational and informative programs were forbidden or heavily censored. The abnormal decision to restrict people's access to any source of information would have, in the long run, a disastrous impact on the entire population. Nevertheless, even during the darkest of times, humans feel the need of some sort of entertainment to which, unfortunately, Romanians did not have direct access during the 1980s ("Romania").

Little by little, in mid-1980s Romania, underground video tapes with films were becoming more and more commonplace. Most of them were, obviously, American. Censorship had already become normality, and it was visible in every respect and in any program aired by the national television service; however, underground films were not censored, hence people's desire to watch and learn about something new, something different from what they had been used to. The clandestine films paraded an entirely different world, different ideas and attitudes of various nations. The big problem of those days was that such forbidden films, once smuggled across the border, had to be translated for the wide audience (*Chuck Norris vs. Communism*).

Any kind of audiovisual translation plays an important part in the development of a people's identity and national stereotypes. Each country has its own tradition in translating films. That is why, due to the fact that language plays a very important role in the perception and reception of films, during those times, appropriate strategies had to be found in order to connect through films cultures and nations speaking different languages. As a consequence, three options were available: subtitling, dubbing, or voice-over. The choice of any of the above-mentioned options was normally anything but random. The decisive factors that led to any of the three alternatives were based on different factors such as historical circumstances, traditions, expenses, the technique to which the public was used, but also the position of the source and target cultures in an international context (Sîtnic 84).

The alternative chosen in communist Romania, but also in all the other communist countries, was probably a unique combination between the techniques of voice-over and simultaneous interpretation. This choice was made because it was the most accessible from a financial point of view but also because the amount of time allotted to the translation of a film was extremely reduced; since everything was illegal, it had to be done cheaply, quickly, and secretly.

According to the same sources mentioned previously, clandestine film translation in 1980s Romania is a particular case, interesting from the point of view of the manner in which the translations were performed. The circumstances in which the process took place were also fascinating, and the extent to which underground film translations managed to mould the average Romanian's mind can be classified as unique; the thirst for such productions was immense (*Chuck Norris vs. Communism*).

In this context, Irina Margareta Nistor was one of the most well-known women in the country, although nobody knew what she looked like. Nevertheless, those who were lucky enough to own a VCR and were able to watch the clandestine films she translated, could recognise her voice anywhere. Starting with the middle of the 1980s until the Revolution in 1989, Nistor translated thousands of Western productions smuggled across the border. In 1980s Romania, the "voice over-simultaneous interpretation" combination was used to translate films and due to this clandestine technique (referred to as "dubbing") it was possible for constrained communist Romania to get closer to the liberal capitalist West. It was done in the basement of a house, using a microphone, two video recorders and a television set. This is how Nistor would translate up to eight films a day (*Chuck Norris vs. Communism*).

Mention should be made of the fact that dubbing brings a lot of changes to the source text and reveals them to the audience through domestication, which, along with foreignisation, has been debated for hundreds of years; however, it was Lawrence Venuti who formulated them in their modern sense in his book *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. By way of

domestication, the translator pays special attention to the fluency of the target text and thus minimizes the particularities of the original text by adapting it to the expectations of the target audience (Lungu-Badea 104). In the case of film translations, domestication is used in order to create the lip sync effect while dubbing the dialogue in the target language. Consequently, the effect on the audience is that the original actors appear to actually speak the target language.

As mentioned before, films in Ceaușescu's Romania were "dubbed." and, for a very long period of time, all the characters in those films were rendered only by Nistor. Generally, an important aspect of dubbing is that the words of a character are given by a professional actor, a dubber, in order to maintain or at least to come close to the voice and particularities of the original actor. Also, synchronising the simultaneous interpretation with the text of the film is considered to be an important indication of the quality of translation. If we are to take into account the period of time aimed at in this essay, synchronisation was a mere informative reference since the adaptation of the translation was totally missing. At the time, this was not a priority for those involved.

Beginning with 1986 up until the collapse of communism, film "dubbing" had a major impact on the Romanian people who were all too tired of what they were offered by the national television. From the point of view of many Romanians, the films "dubbed" by Nistor were considered a real breath of fresh air, a gateway to the much-desired freedom of the people, which they could choose to watch whenever they wanted. Nistor "dubbed" films coming from the West, most of them American, most of them forbidden in Romania. Therefore, they had to be watched stealthily, and, due to the underground translations, the translator had the freedom to express herself freely and render the scenes as they were, uncensored. By all means, this was definitely not possible officially because everything had to be scrutinised through the lens of the communist regime. Romanian productions, scarce as they were, would have never included swearing, rough words or vocabulary with sexual connotations. On the contrary, underground

films allowed the translator to break out from the mind prison imposed by the regime and into the realm of uncensored translations (Sîtnic 87).

The people living in 1985-1989 Romania were witnessing a gradual process of breaking free from the inhibitions as a result of the films they watched. Nistor had the freedom to translate absolutely everything in the clandestine film. Nevertheless, the translator chose to use a somehow camouflaged style so that the impact on the audience was not the same with the effect induced by the original on the source audience. Structures like *Holly sh*t!* or *Mother f***er!*, which were inconceivable in totalitarian Romania, were translated using milder expressions such as *Ticălosule! Dumnezeule mare!* or *Sfînte Sisoe! F*** you, man!* was simply translated as *Du-te dracului!*, and *Son of a bitch!* was usually rendered as *Fir-ar să fie!* or *Nenorocitul!* (Sîtnic 87).

In an interview for the Digi24 TV station, Nistor explained why she chose to translate swear words as she did. Invariably, regardless of the words or expressions used in the original, her translation was almost always *Du-te naibii!* or *Sfînte Sisoe!* In her defense, Nistor claimed that education was the reason why she refrained from using stronger words. She stated that her audience could easily imagine what the real curse words were, and, perhaps the most important reason for her choice, as she avowed, had to do with the communist prisons, where one of the main forms of torture consisted of the convicts having to swear at each other, at their mothers or relatives. Therefore, she decided that her voice would never be the voice of a torturer.

In those days, the few existing underground translators did not have time to watch the films before translating them. As a consequence, the films were translated in real time, and the number of errors was quite high. Some of the errors made by the translator have become famous and memorable: linguistic structures such as Nistor's translation of *I'll kill ya, bitch!* which she rendered using homonymy as *O să te omor pe plajă!*, as well as the scene where some elderly women were playing scrabble ... and one of them writes *f***er* ... translated by Nistor as *cel care face dragoste*,

while another lady adds... *mother f***r...* rendered by Nistor as *mama celui care face dragoste*. Another structure of the same type is *Wow, what cool curves!* translated word-for-word and therefore inaccurately as *Ce curbă răcoroasă!*. In the film *Pretty Woman (Frumușica)*, the word *pantyhose* is translated by Nistor as *chiloței*, which is obviously incompatible with its meaning. This may not only puzzle the viewers, but it will definitely make them laugh (Ștănic 88). The same thing applies in the case of the wrong translation of the linguistic unit *How long has he been in there?* in the film *Stakeout*. It is rendered in Romanian as *Cât mai stăm?* The subject of the sentence is also mistranslated as the personal pronoun *he* is rendered into Romanian as *noi*. Similarly, in the film *Stone Cold*, the construction *the jury has found...* is translated as *L-am găsit ...*.

Along with the translations which frequently did not correspond to the message in the original text, during the process of “dubbing” there were also quite a few omissions exemplified in Tables 1 and 2 below. These omissions were mainly caused by the abundance of words uttered by the characters in the film, whose words had to be translated as closely to the original as possible. In this respect, it is worth mentioning the incapacity of the translator to keep up with the characters’ talking speed. This situation led to problems in the translation of some problematic and complex structures because the translator did not have enough time at her disposal to find the right meaning of a particular phrase. Because of this lack of time, perhaps the translator was trying to somehow make up for the lost information. Another compensatory strategy was the frequent use of *Hai!* more often than necessary, probably to give the impression of a more dynamic dialogue. Nevertheless, this eagerness to compensate for omitted words was not always justified since the translator did nothing else but fill in the blanks, due to the absence of a pre-established work plan. Taking this into consideration, one can notice the alternations between omissions and additions in the translation process. Obvious omissions have been highlighted on the left side of Table 1 whereas additions have been pointed out on the right side of the same table.

Table 1 (sample taken from the film *Stone Cold*)

The original	Nistor's translated version
<p>Let's go! Get down! Get over here! I love it! Shut up! Big fun. Charlie, unload the cash drawers! Hot. What the f***? Charlie, go check it out! Mom! Mom! Shut up! Don't you f***ing move! Relax, man. I'll buy the damn thing, all right? Charlie! Son of a bitch! Shut up! Go check it out. Screw that business, man. Hey! I said, "Check it f***ing out." Now! F***, man. Why the f*** I got to babysit? Charlie! Charlie! My baby! Shut up! Come on. Is somebody playing with me?</p> <p>Somebody thinking they can f*** with me? I'm going to kill Miss Tinselteeth. You wanna play? Okay, come here.</p> <p>Try me! Son of a bitch! Joe, what the hell's going on?</p>	<p>– Acum, hai!</p> <p>– Hai, păpușico, hai! – Ah, ce-mi place! – Gura! – Golește repede casa!</p> <p>– Ce dracu? – Ia vezi, ce se întâmplă?</p> <p>– Taci din gură! – Să nu miști, auzi? – Stai liniștit, gata, cumpăr tot! – Fir-ar să fie! – Taci din gură și verifică ce se întâmplă!</p> <p>– Am zis să verifici ce se întâmplă! Mișcă!</p> <p>Lasă-mi fetița în pace! Gura!</p> <p>– Aaa... și-a pus cineva în gând să se joace cu mine? – Crede cineva că se poate pune cu mine?</p> <p>– Vrei să te joci, mă? Vino-ncoace dacă ai curajul! Hai! – Hai! Încearcă numai!</p>

<p>You're still on suspension. Let me see you sweet-talk your way out of this one. Huff. What have you got to say for yourself this time? You got to clean up on aisle 4. Better not shoot me, baby.</p> <p>Man, that's bullsh*t.</p> <p>Try it up here, mother f***er! Come on! That's it! Give me some head, baby! All right, brother. Come on, man. Well, that's cute, baby. Look at what I got here Try that, mother f***er! I demand the death penalty. Court will come to order! The jury has found the defendant guilty of murder in the first degree! I hereby sentence you to 45 years in the State Penitentiary without possibility of parole!</p>	<p>– Nenorocitul! – Ce dracu se întâmplă aici? – Doar erai suspendat, nu? – Să te văd cum ieși din încurcătura asta.</p> <p>– Ce mai ai de spus de data asta?</p> <p>– ...că ar trebui să faci puțină curățenie aici.</p> <p>– Așa ... – Ei, pe dracu, nu vezi că nu ești în stare de nimic?</p> <p>– Hai ... acum, hai, în cap! – Ai văzut, frățioare? – Ia să vedem, ce-am eu aici?</p> <p>– Ia să vedem...</p> <p>– Cer pedeapsa cu moartea!</p> <p>– L-am găsit pe acuzat vinovat de crimă de gradul unu! 45 de ani de închisoare!</p>
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A closer look at the translation leads to the conclusion that omissions are clearly numerous in the Romanian version. A logical explanation for these omissions would be that the translator did not have time to draft a translation beforehand as it was all done on the spot. In addition to the obvious omissions, Nistor's translation is defined by an extreme lexical scarcity. A lexical unit composed of a random number of words was rendered using far fewer terms which means that a considerable amount of information was lost. More precisely, if the two versions in the table above were compared

from the point of view of word number, one could easily notice a significant difference: whereas in the original version there are 244 words, the translation only has 174 words. A possible cause for this deficit of words could be the abundance of words in the original version and their fast unrolling during a scene which did not give the translator enough time to process everything.

There is also a tendency to ignore names probably because the translator considered them less relevant since the audience could easily understand from the images who was who, but also because there was no time to translate every single word. However, in order to compensate for the omissions, the translator makes a few additions, mostly using the above-mentioned interjection *Hai!* to make the dialogue sound livelier.

Table 2 (sample taken from the film *American Commandos*)

The original	I.M. Nistor's translated version
<p>What is it with you? Every time you move, somebody ends up dead! So, put those maniacs behind bars.</p> <p>Stan, this is Dean Mitchell. I know, I got it all right here. You must have been damn good!</p> <p>Youngest patrol leader in the Berets Some very good commendations Lots of decorations! Very impressive!</p> <p>What you don't have there is a couple of names, Specs and Puck. Aliases don't hack it!</p>	<p>– Ce Dumnezeu se întâmplă? De câte ori faci o mișcare, cineva moare. – Ei, atunci bagă-i după gratii pe nebuni și nu se mai întâmplă așa ceva. – El e Christian Mitchell. – Știu. – Ești grozav!</p> <p>– O grămadă de decorații în timpul războiului... – În schimb, n-aveți niște nume acolo, Spec și Duck.</p> <p>– Știi că puștii din ziua de azi își schimbă numele mai repede decât își schimbă izmenele...</p>

<p>The kids we're after changed their names faster than their underwear</p> <p>That is if they ever wear any! I need more than that!</p> <p>Chandler and the dead girl lead us nowhere, but we're still checking...</p>	<p>– Încercăm să le dăm de urmă...</p>
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One can talk about a general pattern when it comes to the excerpts presented in this essay. The same lexical scarcity can be noticed in the second fragment (Table 2) where the original version has got 106 words versus 71 in the translated version. However, taking into consideration the manner and the context in which underground translations were done during the 1980s, the tendency towards an economy of words might be justified. Another repeated aspect is the omission of names - they are overlooked many times. Moreover, in some situations, the translator misunderstands them and invents others: Dean vs. Christian or Puck vs. Duck, both in Table 2.

Another reason for omissions, as is the case with the two consecutive lines, “Youngest patrol leader in the Berets - Some very good commendations,” may be that the translator was not very familiar with the meaning of the words. Such an example is “Berets” which does not refer to the piece of clothing but to the soldiers of the US Army Special Forces. The word “commendations” is also a good example in that the translator probably did not have time to process the translation of words which may have been less usual for her. This conclusion is drawn based on the fact that in the aforementioned part of the dialogue, there would have been enough time for an ampler translation.

Table 3 (sample taken from the film *Stakeout*)

The Original	Nistor's translated version
My God. Do you eat like that in	– Bine, tu mănânci așa și în fața

front of your mother? First the smell – Oh, for Christ’s sake!	lu’ maică-ta? – Știi, trebuie mai întâi să simți un parfum bun și dup’ aia... Gata.
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The choice of the third table was made in order to highlight the tendency to neutralise the stylistic value of idiomatic expressions during the translation process. Such examples are *For Christ’s sake!* which was simply translated as *Gata!* or *My God!* which, in Romanian, was rendered as *Bine!* (Table 3). Even though the semantic value of the structure is preserved, the translator no longer reproduces the *couleur locale* of the linguistic unit which, as a result, diminishes the impact and effect on the audience (Sîtnic 89).

All in all, despite the countless flaws encountered in Nistor’s renditions, such translations need to be taken into consideration within the context of those times, and, once more, it is important to underline the fact that this “dubbing” process was done in unusual circumstances during unusual times; therefore, the general impact on the audience was just as powerful as if the translations had been done faultlessly.

Despite the fact that the process of film translation was cumbersome during the 1980s due to the restrictions and prohibitions of all sorts imposed by the totalitarian regime regarding this kind of activity, it is worth appreciating the contribution and the role played by translators in entertaining the masses and opening a window to a better, free world. Given the fact that these clandestine film translations were done in unusual circumstances, inappropriate locations, with very little time and unprofessional tools at hand, their quality was acceptable after all. The inaccuracies and lack of equivalence with the original versions of the analysed films in terms of errors, a multitude of omissions, ambiguities or reinterpretations of the original message, did not cause the films to have a diminished effect on the people who watched them. Later, many of them expressed their gratitude for the work and effort which the translators of the “forbidden films” undertook (Sîtnic 89). The quality of the translations was not a

priority for the viewers as long as the films offered a temporary way out of the gloomy life enforced by the communist regime. After all, looking back in time and considering the context of those years, the general impact of such translations was definitely a positive one.

By evaluating the actual work of the “forbidden film” translator, this essay generated an assessment of the quality of the film translations performed in unusual, improvised conditions. It is quite clear that the samples analysed in this study prove that the unique combination of the voice-over and simultaneous translation techniques promoted a product which is rather inferior if taken out of context. The multitude of omissions, but also the lexical scarcity, were so commonplace that they became part of a translation pattern. Nevertheless, such issues were inevitable because of the considerable amount of words spoken during some scenes, and this aspect stands out from the very first translated words. If performed in normal circumstances, this would have been seen as the work of an amateur. The aforementioned problems sometimes led to other problems such as mistranslations. Sometimes, perhaps in order to compensate for the loss, the translator relied on additions of her own to revive the tempo of the dialogue. At other times, the stylistic value of idiomatic expressions was neutralised, in which case the specificity of the original linguistic unit was no longer preserved and that led to a lesser impact on the viewers. A similar effect was triggered by the manner in which swear words were translated. There is a pattern here as well. The translator resorts to only two or three standard expressions which are much softer than the original ones and which are repeated time and again. At a first glance, all the flaws and errors which define the analysed translational work could lead to the conclusion that it was mediocre. However, before judging the quality of the translator’s work, everything must be seen through the lens of the atypical conditions in which the translations were performed and, more importantly, the historical and political context of those times. The goal of this particular endeavour of translating “forbidden films” has however been met in every respect. The aftereffects could not

have been more rewarding for the audience if the translation work had been performed impeccably. It was mission accomplished. The viewers enjoyed a well-deserved break from the constraints imposed by the communist regime and that was appreciated to such an extent that the impact and influence of the “forbidden films” and their translations have made them part of the history of this country.

Notes:

¹ The translation technique used, in reality a combination between the techniques of voice-over and simultaneous interpretation, was mistakenly named ‘dubbing.’

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