

# Responsibility and Ethics in Simultaneous Interpretation of Films

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**Abstract.** In this article I raise two questions concerning ethics: Was it ethical to interpret in the way that was done in academic film clubs in Soviet Estonia, where Western films that were banned from public screenings in cinemas were simultaneously interpreted in the 1970s and 1980s, and is it ethical to respond to those interpreters' best efforts in the way the audience responded to my presentation fifty years later? The non-professional interpreting practice in question violates contemporary codes of ethics (accuracy, impartiality, etc.) and goes against current interpreting techniques (condensation, omission, etc.). The interpreters applied creative cross-cultural communication, but was this ethical? This practice ensured accessibility to renowned works of cinematography as without interpretation the screening of those films in the original version might have not taken place. The outcome was shaped by the implicit expectations of the viewers. In 2022, the response to my presentation on this type of film interpreting at a conference was hilarious.

**Keywords:** simultaneous interpreting of films, history of interpreting, academic film club, ethics, user expectations.

## Atsakomybė ir etika sinchroniškai verčiant filmus

**Santrauka.** Šiame straipsnyje keliu du su etika susijusius klausimus. Pirma, ar etiška buvo versti žodžiu taip, kaip buvo verčiama Sovietų Estijos akademiniuose kino klubuose, kuriuose XX amžiaus 8-ajame ir 9-ajame dešimtmetyje buvo rodomi ir sinchroniškai verčiami Vakarų filmai, uždrausti rodyti viešai kino teatruose. Antra, ar etiška reaguoti į to meto vertėjų pastangas kuo geriau atlikti savo darbą taip, kaip po penkiasdešimties metų auditorija sureagavo į konferencijoje skaitytą mano pranešimą. Straipsnyje aptariama to meto neprofesionalaus vertimo praktika neatitinka šiandienų vertimo etikos reikalavimų (tikslumo, nešališkumo ir kt.). Tuo metu verčiant nebuvo naudojamos ir šiuolaikinėmis vertimo žodžių technikomis (trumpinimu, praleidimu ir pan.). Vertėjai tarpkultūrinę komunikaciją taikė kūrybiškai, bet ar šitaip elgtis buvo etiška? Tokia praktika užtikrino prieigą prie žinomų kinematografijos darbų: jeigu šie filmai nebūtų buvę verčiami žodžiu, jų peržiūros originalo kalba galėjo apskritai nevykti. Vertėjų pastangų rezultatą lėmė numanomi žiūrovų lūkesčiai. 2022 metais vykusioje konferencijoje mano pranešimas apie tokį filmų vertimą žodžiu žiūrovus prajuokino.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** sinchroninis filmų vertimas, vertimo žodžiu istorija, akademiniai kino klubai, etika, vartotojų lūkesčiai.

## Introduction

In Translation Studies the simultaneous interpreting of films has not received much scholarly attention, and that which does exist is mostly in the context of international film festivals. In Soviet Estonia, films that were banned from public screenings in cinemas were simultaneously interpreted at academic film clubs in the 1970s and 1980s.

I am a conference interpreter, a ‘practisearcher’ (Gile 1994: 149–158) who is personally engaged in the field of interpreting, but also a ‘histerpreter’ (Takeda and Baigorri-Jalón 2016: xi): a conference interpreter interested in the history of my profession, diving like an archaeologist into the history of interpreting in Estonia. I set an aim to discover and cover different fields of interpreting practiced in Estonia. Thus, I could not skip the simultaneous interpreting of films.

The focus of this article on ethics will be twofold: Was it ethical to interpret films simultaneously the way it was done fifty years ago, and is it ethical to respond to the interpreters’ best efforts the way the audience responded to my conference presentation fifty years later in 2022?

I am walking on thin ice in arguing for the film interpreters’ accomplishments as interpreters. However, in my opinion, we should consider the context, the ideological atmosphere and the user expectations before we condemn or laugh at the techniques the film interpreters used in the 1970s and 1980s.

## Academic Film Clubs

The very first academic film club in Estonia was established at the Tallinn Polytechnic Institute (TPI) in 1966, followed by the film club at Tartu University in 1969. Both closed their doors 27 years later (in 1993 and 1996, respectively) after Estonia regained its independence. The academic film clubs brought together academic staff, students and intellectually active people. The clubs have preserved their legendary reputation till today. From the very beginning, the film clubs were for registered members who paid a nominal annual fee. Thus, film screenings were exclusively for members and held behind closed doors. In 2016, the TPI film club summarised its activity on its 50th anniversary as having been one of the most significant places for culture and technology intellectuals to meet in Tallinn, calling it “a window into the contemporary film world in stagnated Estonia” (Merisalu 2017: 83).

Both film clubs boasted large memberships, around 1000 in Tallinn and up to 1500 in Tartu (Sootak 2011: 40). In Tallinn, the screenings were in the institute’s Assembly Hall and on Tuesdays the TPI Assembly Hall was filled to capacity (Napa 1972). In Tartu, the screenings were at either of the two large amphitheatre lecture

halls in the so-called Chemistry Building (today 2 Jakobi Street) and Science Building known as Vanemuise 46. Occasionally the Vanemuine Concert Hall was also used, for example, to screen Pier Paolo Pasolini's or Federico Fellini's films.

Both academic film clubs screened the most remarkable contemporary and classic movies from the Western world and elsewhere. Among the films were unmissable masterpieces that now have become valuable film heritage. There were also sensationalistic films, for instance by Pasolini, that filled the hall in Tartu to bursting meaning that "viewers had to stand on one foot," as described by one of the club members interviewed for this research (Sootak 2011: 40; Interview 1.11.19). Film clubs were considered to be the only venue "to see a good film" (Teinemaa 1986). The academic film clubs screened films that were not allowed to be shown publicly in Soviet cinemas: for example, by Bergman, Truffaut, Fellini, Antonioni, Vittorio de Sica, Jancsó, Tarkovski, Zanussi and Kaurismäki, to name just a few.

The films were acquired through personal contacts, in particular from Western embassies in Moscow and consulates in Leningrad (St Petersburg). Also, films were occasionally received from the Moscow University Film Club (which was considered to be the first in the Soviet Union, established in 1959) and a couple of times from the Gosfilmofond (Russian State Film Archive).

It should be highlighted that for the academic film clubs the entire system was based on private personal contacts. As a rule, films were sent to Estonia by an overnight train from Moscow, shown at the TPI Film Club in Tallinn, delivered to Tartu for screening, and returned by train to Moscow the next day. The foreign films received were with the original soundtrack. To screen them at the film clubs, interpreting was necessary. Arguably, the earliest use of simultaneous interpreting of films dates back to the Moscow International Film Festival in 1959 (Razlogova 2014).

## Interpreters

For this research, I identified 47 interpreters and conducted 16 interviews with interpreters who interpreted from English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Czech, Russian, Spanish and Swedish at the academic film clubs in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from the interviews, I also relied on film club documentation that Silvi Tenjes, a former long-time secretary of the Tartu University Film Club (1983–1992), had donated to the Tartu University Museum in 2019. The documentation contains

<sup>1</sup> The names of those interviewees who are quoted in this article are available upon request but have not been included for reasons of privacy.

information on films screened, interpreters used and interpretation fees: five Soviet roubles for a feature film, and half that amount for documentaries.

There were no trained interpreters in Estonia but there were many language students/philologists at Tartu University. This solved the interpretation issue in Tartu. All the interviewees admitted that they were invited to interpret. Neither scripts nor advance viewings of the films were available to them. They listened to the original soundtrack and did their best to interpret. There was no chance for them to employ adequate text reduction strategies. They had to make “judicious cuts” (Russo 2005: 3) to cope with speaking speed and overlapping voices.

Several interviewees recalled that the only advice they got from the organizers was “just keep delivering the text” (Interview 28.11.19). Occasionally the quality of the soundtrack was poor. More than once interpreters had to go ahead and invent the dialogue for the rest of the film on the basis of the moving images. They also had to comply with rigid time constraints. On rare occasions it was possible to preview the film but there was no time to consult a dictionary and solve linguistic puzzles. Student interpreters often worked free of charge as seeing the film outweighed the fee. The interpreter from Swedish is known to have said “If it is Bergman, you can invite me any time of the night” (Sootak 2011: 41; Interview 1.11.19).

In Tallinn, the interpreting solution was different for the Tallinn Polytechnic Institute (TPI) Film Club. Most of the interpreting at the TPI film club was done by two well-known polyglots of the time who were considered the best in their field: Aleksander Kurtna (1914–1983)<sup>2</sup> and Ferdinand Kala (1920–1997).<sup>3</sup> Between the two of them, they were able to interpret from about ten languages (Merisalu 2017: 86). They became legends in their lifetime and remain legendary today.

Film club members still remember how different they were. Kurtna<sup>4</sup> was quiet, soft-spoken and unemotional in his rendering of the text into Estonian. Kala was known to interpret with eloquence and more than sufficient emotional involvement, laughing and crying along with actors on the screen. His sighs and acting pretensions were an inseparable part of his presentation style and frequently made the film even more

<sup>2</sup> Aleksander Kurtna writes in his archived CV that he is fluent in Italian, Polish, German, Latin, Estonian, Russian and Ukrainian. His CV also states that he has a weak knowledge of Old Greek, Finnish, French, Old Slavonic (reading skills) and Byelorussian, and that he translates from 23 languages. Languages listed in the CV under foreign languages and languages of the people spoken in the USSR were Italian, Polish, Romanian, German, English, Latin, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Slovenian, Serbo-Croatian, Ukrainian and Byelorussian.

<sup>3</sup> Ferdinand Kala writes in his CV (1941) that he speaks French, English, German, Russian (fluently) and Spanish (weakly).

<sup>4</sup> Since 1988 the Estonian Theatre Union has awarded translators the Aleksander Kurtna Prize for the translation of plays.

enjoyable. Mariachiara Russo (1997: 191) warns that “an interpreter is not an actor” and could jeopardize the film. However, no interviewee recalled any dissatisfaction. Moviegoers of the era responded well to this expressive technique. Elena Razlogova, who has researched interpretation at international film festivals in Moscow and elsewhere, concludes that “translators of that era aspired to be artists” and created a kind of improvisational sound art (2014: 163).

The interviewees admitted that the TPI Film Club occasionally used other interpreters who may not have known the original language of the film but interpreted anyway. This may have been for different reasons—if, for example, a different film was delivered last minute and there was no interpreter at hand. The packed audience was waiting eagerly, the screening could not be cancelled and thus, the film might be interpreted from Japanese into Estonian by a French interpreter and from Estonian into Russian by a Russian interpreter.

An interviewee who regularly acquired films for the TPI Film Club described his practice (Interview 25.02.20). As a graduate of the Moscow State University and a member of its film club, he had friends and good contacts in Moscow, which is where he received the films. Prior to taking the film to Tallinn, he was able to watch it in Moscow, which provided some understanding of the content. At the TPI film club in Tallinn he screened the films and, retrieving memorized information, interpreted into Russian, mostly from languages he did not master: French, Portuguese, Italian, German. He stated that he was not the only one interpreting like that. Summarizing his activity, he admitted: “It was not interpreting: it was either bluff or art.” He was convinced that his interpretation was much better than that provided by someone else might be, even if a language professional, as he had had a previewing. Razlogova also recalls that in Moscow, interpreters “might be asked to interpret non-Western films in languages they did not know from dialogue lists or subtitles, but these promised lists and subtitles did not always materialize” (2015: 75–76).

While interviewing people connected with the TPI film club, I asked whether they also used students as interpreters. The interviewees were astonished and said that there were no language students in Tallinn! The predecessor of what today is known as Tallinn University was the Teachers Training College. After four years of studies its graduates were awarded a diploma to teach English and German. Tartu University taught a five-year course of philology and the diploma read: English philologist.

As a rule, with a few exceptions, there was just one screening; thus, the interpreters had no chance to perfect their rendition. Even if the films were sent from Tallinn to Tartu for another screening, the interpreters did not travel. The documents preserved by the former long-time secretary of the Tartu University Film Club reveal that on rare occasions a Russian interpreter accompanied the film. A student interpreter who interpreted from Hungarian into Russian recalls:

It happened that when a film came from Moscow, a Russian interpreter from Moscow came as well. I start to interpret and she says that as an interpreter from Moscow she is going to interpret. Hers was a very poor interpretation as she did not master Hungarian. She read a very badly translated text and altogether it was a mess. (Interview 14.12.19)

Another interviewee who helped to get films from Moscow stated simply, “Our interpreter was always better” (Interview 25.02.20).

Several interviewees stressed that if films were received via channels other than embassies, Muscovites were eager to visit Estonia and go shopping. In her book *All This Is Your World: Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad after Stalin*, Anne E. Gorsuch describes Estonia as “a combination of historic Western European architecture and contemporary ‘European’ style that was most often marketed for tourists at home and abroad as a form of local difference now acceptable by virtue of Soviet political control” (2013: 50). Estonia was often referred to as “Soviet abroad” (Gorsuch 2013: 49; Viik 2014: 123), meaning a Soviet country yet foreign. The guests had left home “for someplace different” (Gorsuch 2013: 55). According to Gorsuch, “for the rest of the Soviet Union, Estonia was now newly imagined as a source of information about ‘Western’ ways of being” (2013: 55).

## Significance of Interpreting

Researchers into international film festivals held in the Soviet Union have described the work of film interpreters as live translation or voiceover translation in the local language, or in some cases as live commentary (Razlogova 2015). Abé Mark Nornes describes Soviet interpreters who interpreted at international film festivals as “‘abusive’ translators, willing to experiment, to tamper with tradition, language and expectations in order to inventively put spectators into contact with the foreign” (2007: 230). Razlogova concludes that “freeform translation may have been fundamental as a method of encountering foreign film” (2015: 76).

David Snelling, who interpreted films for eight years at the Venice film festival, admitted: “I have never been required to interpret a film directly from the soundtrack without either subtitles or a copy of the script. I would in any case consider the task impossible for a variety of reasons” (1990:14). This is what the interpreters at the academic film clubs accomplished every Tuesday in Tallinn and every Wednesday in Tartu: an impossible task.

Based on his experience, Snelling emphasizes that interpreting films has nothing in common with conference interpreting and recommends the use of the term ‘translation’ (*ibid.*). However, here I disagree with him. In the case of the academic film clubs in Estonia, the interpreters did interpret simultaneously, just like at a conference: They

interpreted live, unprepared and without any script or advance viewing. Films were screened with the original soundtrack. Russo discusses similarities and differences between simultaneous film interpreting and conference interpreting (2005, 1–26). She outlines conference interpreters' advantages over film interpreters (e.g., ability to slow speakers down, etc.) and highlights a major similarity: "The cognitive ability to split one's attention between listening to the source text (ST) and speaking" (2005: 2).

Retrospectively the interpreters considered this an excellent opportunity to listen to authentic foreign speech. We should not overlook the fact that the period under review was a time of closed borders and little if any exposure to live foreign languages. It was a time when foreign language phonetics and pronunciation was acquired by listening to recorded speeches, learning them by heart and then imitating them. When interviewed, the secretary of the Tartu University film club joked that they trained simultaneous interpreters. Actually, they did, as the five-year university study programme included the teaching of interpreting. While the academic film club provided plenty of practice, however, none of the student-interpreters went on to become simultaneous interpreters.

The academic film clubs played a significant role in the lives of intellectually active people. Even if the simultaneous interpreting of films may not have met the criteria for interpreting and interpreters today, it served its purpose. By our standards, the interpreters may have been unprofessional; however, without interpretation the film clubs would have lost their significance. Interpreting made content understandable, even though the viewers' knowledge of foreign languages would have been quite poor. Simultaneous interpreters made the academic film club screenings possible and enlarged the audience as films in Japanese, English or French would have had a limited audience without interpretation. Interpreting facilitated adequate understanding, not just a visual impression of a film in a foreign language not understood by the viewers. The academic film clubs were not centres of resistance but rather made skilful use of the weaknesses of Soviet propaganda.

The role of film clubs was invaluable, as a large segment of academics and intellectuals was exposed to the best works of renowned film directors. The screenings—facilitated by interpretation—offered insight into contemporary world culture, which otherwise may have been missed, thus providing a kind of lifeline to a wider and more open world.

## Interpreters' Ethics and Responsibility

Was it ethical to verbalize moving images as described above? Definitely not! However, retrospectively it seems to have been a working solution. Even if the storyline went wrong, the audience was exposed to the esthetics of some of the greatest film directors.

And the audience was happy. “We were young, bold and brave, maybe even slightly arrogant and daring to accept the offer of interpreting a film simultaneously without a preview,” summarized a former student and current university professor about his experience (Interview 28.11.19).

In May 2022, when I presented my research on film interpreting at an academic conference, it was received with hilarious laughter. I felt like a stand-up comedian. My aim in describing the practice of interpreters who had done their best to deliver the contents of films unprepared was not to entertain, however. Would it have been better not to interpret? Was it ethical to show poorly interpreted masterpieces? Would it have been ethical to prevent the screening of world masterpieces because of unprofessional interpreters? Is it ethical to laugh at the efforts of our predecessors?

The AIIC Code of Professional Ethics (2022)<sup>5</sup> lays down the standards of professionalism, confidentiality, integrity and reserve, which all members of the Association are bound to respect in their work as professional interpreters. In the context of my research, three articles are most important:

ARTICLE 1: Professionalism

Members of the Association shall not accept any assignment for which they are not qualified. (...)

Article 10: Fidelity of Interpretation

Interpreters shall strive to translate the message to be interpreted faithfully and precisely. They shall endeavour to render the message without embellishment, omission, or alteration.

Article 11: Errors in Interpretation

The interpreter shall endeavour to point out and immediately rectify any error in interpretation, whether this is due to poor acoustics or misunderstanding.

In addition, the AIIC Code of Professional Ethics and the AIIC Professional Standards (AIIC Standards 2022) lay down working conditions (equipment, working hours, etc.):

15.1 Satisfactory conditions of sound, visibility and comfort. (...)

15.2 Avoidance of interpreting simultaneously alone. (...)

15.4 Avoidance of simultaneous interpreting without a booth. (...)

15.5 Preparation

Members of the Association shall prepare thoroughly for each of their assignments and shall require that working documents and texts to be read out at the conference be sent to them in advance. They shall request a briefing session whenever appropriate. (AIIC Code 2022)

<sup>5</sup> AIIC = International Association of Conference Interpreters

The AIIC Practical Guide for Professional Conference Interpreters (2016) stresses the need to enhance the trust of those who rely on interpretation and interpreters (AIIC Guide 2016).

Retrospectively, it looks like every single requirement was violated when interpreting films without a script and a preview. However, we have to consider the historical environment, the closed Soviet society. There were no trained interpreters in Estonia. The few interpreters used apart from the language students were also just bilinguals. No one had taught film interpreters how to generalize or deal with omissions under duress or cope with fast speech, gang slang or a Sicilian accent. The only piece of equipment available was a microphone; there were no booths or earphones. No previewing of the film. No chance to use the strategy Russo recommends: “Prepare the dialogue list thoroughly beforehand” (1997: 190).

Who are we to say today that they should not have interpreted, should have refused to work without a script or preview? Maybe we should be more tolerant and admit that under the circumstances the decision ‘to interpret’ was preferable compared to that of ‘not to interpret.’ I believe we should agree with Robin Setton and Erich Prunč (2015: 147): “The difficulty of formulating ethical rules of conduct for interpreters stems, firstly, from the wide variety of situations (...) and secondly, from the wide variation in the status, needs and power of participants.”

## User Expectations

Several interviewees concluded that the viewers were grateful. They came to see the film and needed to understand it. As regards user expectations, they did not come to evaluate the work of the interpreter. They came to see a film banned from the wider public.

Just like beauty is in the eye of the beholder, user expectations vary. Research on user expectations has mostly focused on the conference interpreting setting, but even there expectations vary across user groups. According to Franz Pöchhacker, user expectations “as beliefs about what one is likely to get, or would like to get, are crucial to assessing the quality of service provision, and will depend on a given user’s perspective on the interpreter-mediated event” (2015: 430). The use of certain terms such as pleasant voice, accent, completeness, expressiveness, etc., to describe interpreters’ performance is also problematic: “they mean different things to different respondents,” according to Pöchhacker (2015: 431).

Today the interpreter landscape includes not just well-trained professional interpreters but also a variety of different kinds of interpreters: activists, volunteer interpreters, natural interpreters, non-professional interpreters, etc. The definition of a natural interpreter who “is an untrained and very often unremunerated bilingual individual

who acts as a linguistic and cultural (inter)mediator in a variety of formal and informal contexts and situations” could apply to the interpreters who interpreted for the academic film clubs in Estonia in the 1970s and 1980s (Antonini 2012: 102). They participated in the process of making the film accessible to audience members who did not know the original language of the film.

In hindsight, we may criticize the interpretation; we may even ask WHY the language students/interpreters agreed to interpret. However, we should not forget the environment:

- the closed Soviet society with limited access to Western culture,
- the yearning to see films that were out of reach for society at large, and
- a lack of foreign language skills and no interpreter training available.

## Conclusions

Interpreting foreign films supported intellectual resistance, undermined Soviet propaganda, and enlarged the audience of these otherwise banned films. According to Russo, the simultaneous interpreting of films was “a last resort to avoid total non-comprehension” (2005: 3).

My research revealed that films were interpreted from at least thirteen languages. Similar to reading about artworks, reading about films is not enough; it is necessary to see and experience them visually. Film clubs were like a fresh breeze for intellectuals who resisted the cold war atmosphere that attempted to distort the world. Grey is the colour used to describe the 1970s and 1980s in the Soviet Union: Mediocre ideas, a mediocre environment, works created by mediocre authors, composers and directors all around. The screenings facilitated by interpretation offered glimpses into world culture through cinematography that otherwise may have been missed.

We should not judge our predecessors’ best efforts from the point of view of today’s knowledge without considering the context. Interpreting was a kind of bridge to cinematic masterpieces. Maybe not a fancy marble bridge designed by the best architects but also definitely not a straw bridge; rather it was a robust one that served its purpose. We should consider the context, the ideological atmosphere and the user expectations in the 1970s and 1980s. The outcome was shaped by the implicit expectations of the viewers. The interpreters applied creative cross-cultural communication skills.

The essential difference between this and most cases of film interpreting described in existing research literature is that in the academic film clubs in Estonia the interpreters worked without a script, subtitles or advance viewing in the 1970s and 1980s. Considering the political context, they did their utmost under the circumstances to interpret.

Retrospectively it is clear that this is a fragment from the history of interpreting in Estonia, which underlines the significance of simultaneous interpretation in a most backward and stagnated era. The simultaneous interpreting of films is a colourful but bizarre phenomenon in Estonia's history of interpreting.

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