The (im)possible translation of Nostalgia

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Abstract

Nostalgia (1983), Andrei Tarkovsky’s first foreign production, represents crisis – the distressing longing for one’s own land is mixed with the rejection of the concept of translation, which consequently leads to a state of permanent alienation and forms an irremediable breach between cultures. Arsenii Tarkovsky’s poem ‘As a child I once fell ill …’ and the Italian translation of his ‘My sight, my strength, dims …’ embody the film’s discursive dilemma. The impossible possibility of contact between the two ‘foreign’ cultures is embodied by the two male protagonists – the madman and the utterly confused individual who both die for the sake of an obscure ideal. The film’s climax is reached in the poetic declamation by Gorchakov in Russian and by Domenico in the Italian translation. The reading takes place in the dilapidated flooded church, which might be perceived as an embodiment of the ruins of the Tower of Babel. Its incompleteness relates the Babylonian failure to arrive at a monumental completion. This sense of ambiguity also dominates the film’s concluding sequence – Gorchakov’s imaginary return home. The final image, the open space of the Cistercian church accommodating Gorchakov’s Russian house, is a resolution that resolves nothing but nevertheless completes the film.

Translation, foreignness and nostalgia

Nostalgia (1983), Tarkovsky’s first film shot outside the Soviet Union, directly addresses the idea of foreignness and the discomfort of being away from one’s homeland. Parallels have frequently been drawn between developments in the film-maker’s private life and issues raised in it. Nevertheless, the film is evidently more than a mere projection of Tarkovsky’s personal anxieties. It starts with the exploration of the phenomenon of nostalgia as a sentimental and ‘acute longing for familiar surroundings’ (Oxford English Dictionary) or as ‘toska po rodine’ (Ozhegov) and develops, through the trope of translation, into an ostensibly more universal contrast of foreignness and homeliness.

Translation, as an abstract category, is based on the ‘steadfast’ binary pair – native vs foreign. Tarkovsky appears to elaborate its function on several philosophic and aesthetic levels of the film.1 Binary oppositions, such as male and female, dream or vision and present reality, Russia and Italy, sanity and madness, life and death, together with the phenomenon of doubling are omnipresent in Nostalgia.2 The manner in which they emerge is similar to the ‘clash’ between two foreign languages that try to find reconciliation through the act of translation. Gorchakov, the main protagonist of the film and, allegedly, Tarkovsky’s own alter ego, yearns for a place devoid of painful linguistic and metaphysical binarism, and

Keywords

Andrei Tarkovsky
nostalgia
poetry
Arsenii Tarkovsky
translation

1. Samardzija is one of the very few critics who highlight the importance of the translation trope in the film, but who nevertheless tends to ignore the theoretical implications of this phenomenon. An examination of these implications is, however, appropriate since it allows for some deeper complexities of the film’s fabula and visual discourse to be exposed.

2. Many critics (for example, Le Fanu 1987: 109; Green 1987: 109) have pointed out that the film’s discourse is dominated by binary pairs such as Eugenia vs Gorchakov’s wife or Gorchakov...
appears to reach his goal, albeit in a tragic manner, that is by means of a mortal ‘exploit’.

The main trope that is used to express the yearned-for impossibility of complete wholeness is translation – an act that is, by definition, approximate and, according to some critics, inevitably destined to failure. It might be suggested that the contradictory and incongruous nature of Nostalgia’s discourse is inspired not by the film-maker’s whims, but by this very debate.

Roman Jakobson (1971: 261) makes a fundamental distinction between three ways of interpreting a verbal sign. It may be translated into other signs of the same language (intralingual translation or rewording), into another language (interlingual translation or translation proper), or into another, non-verbal system of symbols (intersemiotic translation or transmutation, for example, a literary adaptation in cinema). The Jakobsonian schema is radical in the sense that it claims that almost all communicative attempts revolve around the idea of translation. All forms of understanding, interpretation or commentary belong to the domain of translation unless they are word-for-word duplications.

While the idea of translation proceeds from the assumption that texts have a stable meaning, which can be discovered and then transmitted into another language, it also has to negotiate between a multiplicity of choices for transmission. Translation treats every word as a synonym. Therefore, translation is doomed to inevitable failure because ‘synonymy [...] is not complete equivalence’ (Jakobson 1971: 261). Since full correspondence between linguistic units is not achievable, translation is a process of constantly negotiating differences. It involves two equivalent messages in two distinct codes, as Jakobson (1971: 262) points out: ‘equivalence in difference is the cardinal problem of language’. The seemingly oxymoronic expression ‘equivalence in difference’ is a central problem of translation studies, and various debates have developed around the resolution of this paradox.

Walter Benjamin approaches the issue from a more abstract, poetic angle. Translation, in his opinion, is a domain where a ‘suprahistorical kinship between languages’ (Benjamin 1996: 257) is established through their otherness and difference. Translation ‘ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the innermost relationship of languages’ (Benjamin 1996: 255) by turning one ‘foreign’ language towards another. It should not reduce itself to mere imitation, but instead it ‘must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are [a broken] part of a vessel’ (Benjamin 1996: 260). A ‘broken part of a vessel’ is an eloquent metaphor; it suggests some kind of wholeness without insinuating completeness.

Tarkovsky’s film highlights the theoretical paradoxes of translation elaborated by Jakobson and Benjamin. For its main protagonist, Gorchakov, the thesis of untranslatability becomes a condition of essential incompletion – an infinite task. Thus, despite the fact that the film includes only two direct quotations, both poems by Arsenii Tarkovsky,
Nostalgia is one of the most ‘literary’ films in the director’s oeuvre, since it deals primarily with the notion of translation, and linguistic translation in particular. The two poems, one in the original Russian and the other an Italian translation, illustrate Gorchakov’s confused discourse on untranslatability. Translation, or rather its impossibility, becomes the main leitmotif of the film. It dominates every major discourse in Nostalgia and, more importantly for our purposes, shapes the film’s methods of visual representation.

The notion of the impossibility of achieving any kind of comforting unity, which echoes through the film, can also be found in Tarkovsky’s own reflections. On 5 September 1970, he elaborated, in his diary, the notion of ideal: ‘The attempt to present something attainable and specific in the guise of the ideal subverts common sense, it is a way to madness’ (Tarkovskii 2008: 27). The notion of impossibility culminating in insanity is developed in the character of Domenico – a madman who is horrified by the spiritual crisis of contemporary society and who exemplifies the desperate attempt to attain the ideal through public suicide.

The notion of the impossibility of reaching the ideal is always accompanied by an act of violence in Nostalgia. In this sense the transformation of the film’s Italian and international title, the customary ‘Nostalgia’, into ‘Nostalghia’ is illuminating. ‘H’ is a mute sound, but it hardens the preceding ‘g’ which is consequently pronounced not as [g(ı)a] (as in Italian and in English) but as [gi:jæ], thus making it sound ‘Russian’ or rather Greek. As such, Tarkovsky’s insistence on his film’s title being spelt with an ‘h’, Nostalghia, requires the word to be pronounced in the Russian manner. It is thus almost a violent attempt to Russianize foreign languages – a consciously utopian project.5

Gorchakov’s very first utterance in the film – ‘Parla italiano, per favore’ – is another overtly violent gesture. He foils Eugenia’s attempt to speak his own language and thus to establish an intimate link with him. The translator apologizes and from this point on continues to communicate with Gorchakov in Italian, despite the fact that her Russian is probably more fluent than his Italian. This uneasiness at hearing his native language spoken by an ‘alien’ interlocutor is an early indication of the main protagonist’s reluctance to allow anything or anyone foreign to infiltrate his nostalgia. His complete detachment from his Italian surroundings will gradually transform itself into the idea of complete ‘untranslatability’. Gorchakov, unable to relate to his spatial surroundings, or to translate himself into the Italian landscape, chooses to yearn for another place – distant Russia.

Some critics (for example, Jones 2007) have suggested that Eugenia and Gorchakov are involved in an enduring gender power struggle. However, tensions between them are not only created by the male–female binary opposition. Gorchakov believes that Eugenia, being a professional translator, is deluded in her belief that an artistic artefact or a human emotion can be transplanted from one cultural tradition into another. Ironically, he adheres to the Italian rhyming epigram – ‘Traduttore, traditore’ or ‘A translator is a traitor’.6 Gorchakov cannot share his anxiety over the impossibility of translation with Eugenia, whose professional raison d’être is to translate.
Eugenia, by contrast, fully believes in the feasibility of translation. She carries around a volume of Arsenii Tarkovsky’s poems translated into Italian and at one point she even exclaims: “I’m not just an interpreter […] sometimes I try to improve the words of those who use my services!” (Tarkovsky 1999: 489). Eugenia is irritated by Gorchakov’s strong accent since she appears to believe in the possibility of an unaccented confluence of two cultures. The following scene between the two characters is illustrative:

‘What are you reading?’ Gorchakov asks, unexpectedly.
‘Tarkovsky … Poems by Arseny Tarkovsky.’ Eugenia looks a little taken aback, as though caught red-handed.
‘In Russian?’
‘No, it’s a translation … A pretty good one …’
‘Chuck them out.’
‘What for? … Actually, the person who translated them, he’s an amazing poet, in his own right …’ she says, as though trying to justify herself.
‘Poetry can’t be translated … Art in general is untranslatable …’
‘I can agree with you about poetry … but music? Music, for example?’

Gorchakov sings a Russian song.

‘What’s that?’ asks Eugenia, not comprehending.
‘It’s a Russian song.’
‘Right … but how would we ever have known Tolstoy, Pushkin. How could we even begin to understand Russia,’ Eugenia says testily, ‘if …’

Gorchakov interrupts her: ‘But you don’t understand Russia at all.’
‘And Dante, Petrarch, Macchiavelli? So Russians don’t know Italy?’
‘Of course not,’ Gorchakov agrees, wearily. ‘How could we, poor devils?’
‘Then what should we do, do you think, to know each other better?’
‘Abolish borders.’
‘Which borders?’
‘National borders …’

(Tarkovsky 1999: 475–76, my italics)

Gorchakov refers here to a spatial category, which, he asserts, would help to overcome the ‘translational trauma’. The complete removal of national frontiers – a utopian project by definition, would, in Gorchakov’s opinion, make space into a homogeneous entity and solve the problem of translating one culture into another. The opposition between bordered and unbordered space becomes one of the most important translation-related tropes employed in the film, indeed translation is interpreted as a sort of movement in space.

One of the definitions of the word ‘translation’ reads: ‘Transference; removal or conveyance from one person, place, or condition to another’ (Oxford English Dictionary). Gorchakov’s exclamation is followed by the very erasure of state borders he has just imagined – the viewer is suddenly presented with an image of his wife back in Russia wiping a glass. This shift is not motivated diegetically in a straightforward manner and after a few seconds the camera returns the viewer to ‘normal’ reality with a close shot of Eugenia (which also suggests a connection between the two women). The succession of close-up shots signifies, as Samardzija
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The title itself is an ‘untranslatable’ pun. Des might mean ‘some’, ‘of the’, ‘from the’ or ‘about the’, while tours can designate ‘towers’, ‘twists’, ‘tricks’ or ‘turns’. Des tours is also pronounced as détour (English ‘detour’). The translator of the article into English left the title as it was in order to preserve the ambiguity.

(Gorchakov can mentally collapse the borders between the object of his nostalgia and his present’.

Gorchakov, dreaming of a world without borders, appears to long for Babel – the city that united humanity with a single language. He must also be aware that after divine intervention, Babel became a symbol of the impossibility of reaching the realm of the unknowable and of the consequent damnation to the sphere of translation. The fall or relegation to the state where translation is ‘possible’, indeed even essential, occurred, according to the Old Testament, as a result of the unsuccessful attempt to build a super-structure – the Tower of Babel ‘whose top may reach unto heaven’ (Genesis 11: 4). At the centre of the story is the spatial conflict provoked by linguistic unity: ‘Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do’ (Genesis 11: 6). God imposes a certain spatial limit beyond which humans cannot ascend; everything that remains further than this point in space is destined to be beyond human reason and knowledge. The damnation is achieved by means of a confusion of languages with further dissipation: ‘So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city’ (Genesis 11: 8, my italics).

Abroad is a key word which is related to the verb to scatter in the King James’s Version and means in this case a state of being ‘widely asunder’; in its modern use, however, it tends to signify ‘any region outside one’s homeland’ (Oxford English Dictionary). Abroad is the condition of Gorchakov since it describes his estrangement: the protagonist is disconnected from his current surroundings (language, people and landscape), he finds himself abroad in the two senses – ‘widely asunder’ and outside his homeland. Language and topography operate as agents of alienation and the film’s aesthetic strategy is to resolve somehow the divergence between the character’s inner aspirations and outer surroundings.

The linguistic and spatial layers of the story of Babel are examined by Derrida in the essay ‘Des Tours de Babel’. The critic begins by enquiring whether the proper name, Babel, belongs to just one language. Proper names are by definition strictly applicable, accurate, correct, literal, non-metaphorical and untranslatable; they designate something that is unconditionally singular. The Old Testament story exemplifies the struggle for the proper and strictly singular name:

In seeking to ‘make a name for themselves’, to found at the same time a universal tongue and a unique genealogy, the Semites want to bring the world to reason, and this reason can signify simultaneously a colonial violence (since they would thus universalize their idiom) and a peaceful transparency of the human community. Inversely, when God imposes and opposes his name, he ruptures the rational transparency but interrupts also the colonial violence or the linguistic imperialism. He destines them to translation, he subjects them to the law of a translation both necessary and impossible ...

(Derrida 1985: 174–75)

Gorchakov seems to be acutely aware of this divine damnation. His dream about an impossible monolithic singularity and cultural imperialism is the
9. The script contains a few lines of dialogue which were omitted from the film and which convey Gorchakov’s confusion of spiritual and ideological matters. Eugenia interprets Gorchakov’s rejection of culturally and geographically delineated states as a political project inspired by utopian communism: ‘Then what should we do, do you think, to know each other better?’ – ‘Abolish borders.’ – ‘Which borders?’ – ‘National borders ...’ – ‘What a thing!’ Eugenia blazes. ‘Read too much Lenin, have we?’ – ‘Who, me?’ Gorchakov [asks], surprised (Tarkovsky 1999: 476, the italicized lines do not appear in the film).

source of his constant anxiety throughout the film and can also be understood as a cause of his premature death. Such a task, whose completion is both necessary and impossible, has to be carried out at the brink of human spiritual strength. Gorchakov perishes in his attempt to defy the dominant ideology of separatism.9

Interestingly, the film script contains a direct reference to the ‘Babel’ phenomenon. The sequence in which Domenico first appears with his Alsatian dog near the pool was differently conceived. According to the script text, Gorchakov dreams about a conversation between his son (who is in Russia but in his dream is transported to Italy with his dog) and some hotel guests. The following remarks are exchanged:

‘But don’t they cure dogs in Russia?’ And then it sounds like his son speaking: ‘Yes, but here it is with hot water. I brought him here. He’s called Dak. I even learned Italian for the purpose.’
‘And what’s the matter with your dog? His legs?’
‘He was hit by a tree, actually.’
‘And you’re here by yourself?’
‘My mother couldn’t come, she wasn’t allowed ... You see, she can’t speak Italian.’
‘It would be much better if everyone spoke the same language.’
‘Of course, it’s a babel.’
‘People would be happier if it weren’t for speech. Speech divides people.’
‘Take dogs – they can’t talk! That’s why they live happily, and in better understanding of each other.’

(Tarkovsky 1999: 478–79, my italics)

The absurdity of the passage (the son coming to Italy to cure his dog) is countered by the succinct remark that ‘speech divides people’. In several episodes Gorchakov is actually trying to overcome this division in the same manner as Benjamin, who envisages translation as a process in which two languages try to overcome their essential separation, as ‘fragments of a greater language’ (Benjamin 1996: 260). Towards the end of the film he tells an Italian girl called Angela a joke in Russian, which the latter, of course, does not understand. An important feature of this small episode is that it takes place between the recitation of the two poems: in Russian by Gorchakov and in Italian by Domenico. The fruitless act of communication (the girl fails to understand completely) is located on the frontier between the Russian and Italian languages. The script describes the ending of the scene in the following way: ‘Gorchakov laughs out loud with glee. “But of course you don’t understand a thing ...”, and he continues in his wretched Italian: “What’s your name?”’ (Tarkovsky 1999: 495). Communication, in this case, is more important than the information it attempts to transmit. In the same way, Gorchakov’s poor Italian proves no obstacle to Domenico, who easily understands his new Russian friend. The men establish verbal contact and immerse themselves into linguistic and spiritual labyrinths only after Eugenia – the mediator, fluent in both languages – leaves them. The interaction between Gorchakov and Domenico is both an abortive and a successful act of communication. Gorchakov clearly experiences some problems.
with his limited Italian vocabulary, but nevertheless he understands Domenico.

Gorchakov is not preoccupied with linguistic translation as such; he is concerned with the possibility of translating and relating experiences. Experience, or what Willard Van Orman Quine calls ‘empirical meaning’, is what unifies people who do not speak the same language. Quine (1966: 148) maintains: ‘Empirical meaning is what remains when, given discourse together with all its stimulatory conditions, we peel away the verbiage. It is what the sentences of one language and their firm translations in a completely alien language have in common’. Thus, Gorchakov attempts and succeeds in relating his spiritual anxieties to those of Domenico, or, in other words, he is able to translate his empirical knowledge into an intelligible ‘language’ to which Domenico has access.

Only once does there appear to be a misunderstanding between the two men: Domenico gives Gorchakov the mission ‘to save the world’, to which the latter replies, and then repeats several times, in Italian ‘va bene’ meaning ‘all right’ – a mere standard expression of consent. However, Domenico is irritated by the phrase and retorts: ‘va male!’ (‘all (is) wrong’). The ‘madman’ accomplishes an act of linguistic reflection, and a habitual expression – all right – becomes a statement concerning the human condition. Later the understanding that ‘all is wrong’ will serve as a bridge between the two men and will bring them to mirror each other’s acts of self-immolation by fire.

Before this dramatic resolution, the film is dominated by narrative gaps – the protagonists do virtually nothing but alternately talk and keep silent. Gorchakov is the most extreme case – his ennui does not allow him to relate to his Italian surroundings and makes him incapable of action. Furthermore, his yearning for the abstract absence of national frontiers develops into a desperate, now personal and tangible, need to move away from his current spatial location. Nostalgia as a phenomenon is also a type of longing for a reunion with one’s homeland; it is a desperate attempt to achieve an imagined topographic wholeness stemming from the alienation experienced in one’s current surroundings. The feeling of nostalgia derives from the gap between the idealized home and the confrontation with an alien reality. Moreover, as the film-maker suggests in Sculpting in Time (Tarkovsky 2005: 204–05), nostalgia is as much a state of alienation from the world as it is from the self. It is an exercise in distancing oneself from perceiving the present by escaping into existence in an idealized imagined space. Tarkovsky writes that his film Nostalgia was conceived as a

portrayal of someone in a state of profound alienation from the world and himself, unable to find a balance between reality and the harmony for which he longs, in a state of nostalgia provoked not only by his remoteness from his country but also by a global yearning for the wholeness of existence.

(Tarkovsky 2005: 204–05; emphasis in the original)

Paradoxically, or rather logically, Tarkovsky’s film, inspired by his journey through Italy together with Tonino Guerra in 1979, opens
with a hazy monochromatic shot, which is supposed to represent his Russian country house. This tranquil reflection of the homeland is accompanied by credits and functions as a preamble to the protagonist’s journey through the foreign land. Later on, in the course of the film, memorable images of the homeland will intrude on the Italian topography and, as a consequence, will undermine its would-be stability. The desperate attempt to reconcile the two distant and utterly divergent places finds its fulfilment in the very first second of the film.10

The hazy ‘Russian’ sequence is followed by images of Tuscany, the region to which Gorchakov and his translator Eugenia have travelled in order to see Piero della Francesca’s Madonna del Parto. The film starts with an immediate contrast between the two spaces (Russia vs Italy) and a quarrel between the main protagonists – speakers of the two different languages. Gorchakov refuses to leave the car and to enter the church that houses the painting. Moreover, he carries keys to his Moscow apartment in his overcoat and constantly fiddles with them. An irritation stemming from the feeling of alienation overpowers Gorchakov and prevents him from enjoying the aesthetic pleasures Italy has to offer – as Macgillivray (2008: 163) puts it, the protagonist rejects ‘the spatial sense of Italy’. The memory of Russia displaces him. The protagonist’s leaps to alternative spaces (there are six leaps in the course of the film) destabilize the narrative flow, but more importantly they help create the sense of the painful impossibility of bringing the two places and the two languages together.

**Dream and doubling**

The constantly altering topography is not the only tool employed to undermine the unity of temporal and spatial categories in the film. Doubling and dream sequences are also utilized to help create a discourse of, to use the Derridean lexicon, the impossible possibility or possible impossibility of translation. After shooting the film, Tarkovsky asserted that one of his

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Stills 2–4: The continuous tracking shot reveals two Gorchakovs.

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predominant artistic concerns was to go beyond predictable and conventional montage techniques:

I am seeking a principle of montage which would permit me to show the subjective logic – the thought, the dream, the memory – instead of the logic of the subject […] To show things which are not necessarily linked logically. It is the movement of thoughts which makes them join together inwardly.

(Tarkovsky 1983: 76–77)

Doubling and dream sequences constitute aesthetic tools capable of presenting a ‘subjective logic’. The highest level of improbability is achieved by distorting the conventional material of everyday life: people and inanimate objects appear in abnormal circumstances. Doubling, for instance, violates the comforting notion of human singularity. Once multiplied, identity together with physicality achieves an uncanny status. Moreover, one can argue that doubling is a perverse form of an ‘ideal’ translation:

*Stills 5 and 6: The continuous tracking shot doubles Gorchakov’s family members.*
something is replicated without losing anything of the original, though this replication creates a sense of uneasiness.

There are two notable scenes in Nostalgia, in which protagonists are ‘duplicated’. The first one takes place in Domenico’s house in a mise-en-scène, which, at first glance, does not appear intended to introduce any uncanny dream-like effects. Gorchakov leans against a wall near a mirror and looks in someone’s direction. The tracking shot reveals that this someone is another Gorchakov. The second duplication occurs in an explicitly dream-like or memory-inspired sequence shot in sepia. This time Gorchakov’s family members back in Russia are shown in a hazy landscape near their country house. The episode is clearly taken from the realm of dreams since the characters are static and observed by the tracking camera as if it were an omnipotent external observer. In both cases the uninterrupted tracking shots present an impossible reality: the protagonists are presented in two incompatible spaces at once. As Johnson and Petrie (1994: 168) note: ‘the logic of normal time and space [in the “doubling” shot] is ignored in favour of a higher, transcendent inner reality’.

The dreams in Nostalgia also deal with the phenomenon of the double, though from a slightly different perspective. Instead of duplication the viewer is presented with the no less disturbing phenomenon of displacement. In the first dream Gorchakov imagines a ‘reconciliation’ between his wife and Eugenia. It is most likely that the women have never seen each other; however, they are brought together by Gorchakov’s anxious mind. The dream sequence reconciles the two foreign languages and two distant spaces – Russia and Italy. Time and topography are never stable in the dream sequence, their rigidity and stability are loosened. Distant and dissimilar entities are brought together in an improbable and artificial manner: the women express a remarkable tenderness towards each other, which transforms into an almost homosexual attraction.

The second dream presents not only an improbable but also an unsettling displacement. This time Gorchakov has a vision in which he finds himself on a narrow Italian cobbled street. He is alone and everywhere there are signs of devastation. Gorchakov notices an abandoned wardrobe with a mirror and opens its door trying to catch his reflection. However, instead of his own he sees Domenico’s reflection. What makes the episode more unsettling is the fact that Domenico is dressed and looks like Gorchakov – he wears the same coat and scarf and his face is clean-shaven like his Russian friend’s.11

The two sequences inevitably invite a psychoanalytic interpretation. The episodes can be read as a dividing and interchanging of the self in the Freudian sense or, if one is to follow Otto Rank (1971), as a means of avoiding the total destruction of the ego through death (i.e. doubling as a defence against physical extinction). One might also employ the Lacanian model and describe the sequence as an operation of the mirror apparatus, which accommodates images ‘of the double, in which psychical realities, however heterogeneous, are manifested’ (Lacan 1977: 3; emphasis in the original).

However, what might be more relevant to the present discourse of Nostalgia is the fact that doubling and substitution undermine any uniform notions of space and time. The impossibility of remaining within his current

11. The sequence where Gorchakov’s sees Domenico’s reflection in a mirror instead of his own has clear affinities with an episode conceived for another of Tarkovsky’s projects – Hoffmanniana. The film was supposed to be an imagined biography of E.T.A. Hoffmann mixed with episodes from the German writer’s novellas and short stories. Tarkovsky describes one of the episodes in which a mirrored wardrobe functions as an uncanny object: ‘[Hoffmann] rises from the bed, walks up to the mirror to comb his hair, but he cannot see himself as a young man; the only thing reflected in it is the sunlit room and the wardrobe with the half-open door. He does not see his face. He is drawn by a quiet rustle inside the wardrobe. He walks up to it. Listens. Then he quietly opens the wardrobe doors wide. It seems to him that the wardrobe has no back’ (Tarkovsky 1999: 367). Tzvetan Todorov (1973: 122) has highlighted the importance of the mirror to the German romantic writer; this thesis can also be applied to Tarkovsky: ‘in Hoffmann it is not vision itself that is linked to the world of the marvellous, but rather eyeglasses and mirrors, those symbols of indirect, distorted, subverted vision’.
spatial and temporal context (Italy) is, for Gorchakov, the catalyst for these leaps into other spaces and temporal frameworks (imaginary Russia or illusory non-existent places). These leaps do not sit comfortably with the conventional notions of singularity and homogeneity, while the imaginary spaces are able to accommodate their non-linear spatio-temporal essence. Thus Gorchakov overcomes the unbearable fact that he is located in an alien land by undermining the stability of his own location in space and time.

Furthermore, doubling and substitution are inherent qualities of translation. The idea of the uncanny – something that is both homely and intolerably alien at the same time – is analogous to the otherness produced by translation, which, by definition, deals with ideas of the familiar and the foreign. In this sense, the two poems of Arsenii Tarkovsky also can be included in the realm of doubles. It is no coincidence that Gorchakov and Domenico perform the role of elocutionists in the film. The surroundings in which the poems are read, together with the fact that one of them is an Italian translation of the original Russian, are crucial factors that inevitably overshadow the actual content of the poems.
‘As a child I once fell ill …’
Arsenii Tarkovsky’s poems ‘As a child I once fell ill …’ (Ia v detstve zabolel) and ‘Si oscura la vista – la mia forza …’ are the only direct literary references employed in the film. The poems appear after a short period of time (approximately five minutes) in the second half of the film. The first poem is recited by Gorchakov on his way to and inside the flooded church. Gorchakov is clearly drunk, and he mumbles the text of the poem almost absent-mindedly; his recitation is not very skilful and clearly is not addressed to an external audience.

As a child I once fell ill
From fear and hunger. I’d scratched off the scab
From my lips and licked my lips; I remembered
The cool and salty taste.
But still I go, but still I go, I go,
I sit on the front stairs and warm myself.
Delirious, I wander as though to follow
The tune of the pied-piper to the river,
I warm myself on the stairs, consumed by fever.
But mother stands and beckons, she seems
Not far away but unapproachable:
I approach a little, it’s only seven steps,
She beckons, I approach but she still stands
Only seven steps away, she beckons.

Heat
Grips me, I undid my collar and laid down –
And trumpets started trumpeting, my eyelids
Were struck by light, and horses galloped, mother
Is flying above the cobblestones, she beckons –
And vanished ...

And now I dream
Beneath the apple trees, a white ward,
And the white bed-sheet beneath my throat.
And the white doctor looks down at me,
And the white nurse stands beside my feet
Ruffling her wings. And they remained.
But mother came and beckoned –
And vanished ...

The spatio-temporal position of the poem’s main protagonist, presumably a small boy, is highly unstable. Movement intermingles with stillness in a highly impulsive and improbable manner. The following five lines, for example, describe the protagonist in four successive states – movement-rest-movement-rest: ‘But still I go, but still I go, I go./I sit on the front stairs and warm myself./Delirious, I wander as though to follow/The tune of the pied-piper to the river/I warm myself on the stairs...’.

This volatility leads to yet more instability – the hero starts experiencing hallucinations and dreams: ‘But mother stands and beckons, she seems/Not far away but unapproachable’ or ‘And now I dream/Beneath the apple trees, a white ward’. All spatio-temporal coordinates in the
poem are subjective and volatile. As a consequence of this unsteadiness, the text seems to represent a delirious dream dominated by images of presence and absence. The narrator relates his present reality to his imaginary world. One can argue that Gorchakov’s disorientation in Italy is intensified by this poem, which can also be read as a chronotopic hallucination. Moreover, the poem relates a longing for a mother who beckons but vanishes; the text ends with a non-pacifying ‘And vanished ...’. The impossibility of reunion with something homely and dear is another trope that can be related to Gorchakov’s situation.

Apart from these thematic associations, the poem is important from the point of view of the present discussion of translation. The name of Arsenii Tarkovsky is already familiar to the viewer from Eugenia’s book of translations, which appears at the beginning of the film. This same book is now seized by Gorchakov and brought with him to the flooded church. Here the character recites the Russian version of the poem to himself. By reciting the poem in the language in which it was originally written the
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proponent of untranslatability performs an act of self-affirmation. The book is not open in the sequence and Gorchakov makes audible the very words that it has ‘repressed’. His intentions are clearly antagonistic and the water inside the church together with fire already seems to imply that the book is threatened as a material object.

This sequence is a clear enactment of the idea, propounded by Tarkovsky, that nationality is a defining feature of artistic production. In interviews and public talks, the film-maker insisted on this point (for instance, in Gianvito 2006: 74).13 Goethe’s dictum ‘Wer den Dichter will verstehen, muss in Dichters Lande gehen’ (‘Who wishes to understand the poet must go to the poet’s land’) not only finds its way into Tarkovsky’s 1978 diary (Tarkovskii 2008: 183), but also becomes a very important reference point in *Nostalgia*.

The allegation of the impossibility of translation shapes the discourse present in *Nostalgia*. Gorchakov’s intolerance of Eugenia’s profession does not merely derive from chauvinistic principles, in the guise of the ‘Russian soul’ discourse. At the same time, translation is one of the most significant tropes of human communication. Translation allows cultural discourses to renew themselves by borrowing ‘alien’ and seemingly unrelated topics. The dilemmas and struggles of one culture can be put into a new perspective through exposure to something inherently different.

For Tarkovsky, poetry seems to be the ultimate vehicle of ‘friendship’ between nations: when asked if he believed poetry to be the only genre capable of acting as a point of contact between cultures he answered in the affirmative: ‘I think so. But it is not so simple. There must be the same level of ability on both sides and both sides must be on the same wavelength’ (*Nostalgia* DVD). The reservation implicit in the film-maker’s answer seems to require a certain spiritual affinity between interlocutors before linguistic (translational) contact can take place.

The impossible possibility of communication is enacted a few minutes after the recitation of ‘As a child I once fell ill …’. The other protagonist – Domenico (Gorchakov’s only spiritual contact in Italy) – reappears on the scene. However, the character achieves both presence and absence at the same time: Domenico’s voice is heard while his physical body is not present in the sequence. The voice-over is not diegetically motivated; it overcomes the linearity and coherence of narration. The Italian ‘madman’ does not utter a single word except for lines from another poem by Arsenii Tarkovsky.

‘Si oscura la vista – la mia forza ...’

‘Si oscura la vista – la mia forza ...’ is the second and the last of the two unequivocal literary references to appear in the film. Despite the previously discussed theoretical justification of untranslatability and Tarkovsky’s obstinate personal convictions, the poem materializes in the form of an Italian translation:

My sight, my strength, dims,
Two invisible adamant spears;
My hearing deafens, full of distant thunder
And the breathing of home;

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The knots of my tensed muscles have weakened,
Like grey oxen on a ploughed field;
Two wings at the back of my shoulders
Don’t shine anymore in the night.

I am a candle, I burned out at a feast.
Gather my wax in the morning,
And this page will prompt you
How to cry and what to be proud of,
How to give away the last third
Of joy and die easily.
And under the shade of an inadvertent home
How to burn as posthumously as a word.14

The structure of the visual sequence accompanying the poem mirrors that of ‘As a child I once fell ill …’. The recitation takes place in the same flooded church near the bonfire Gorchakov has made. However, the poem’s

Stills 11 and 12: Images accompanying ‘Si oscura la vista – la mia forza ...’.
appearance in the film is accompanied by several developments, none of which correspond with the preceding sequence. First, the poem is read not by Gorchakov, but by Domenico whose native language is Italian. The protagonist’s presence is not diegetically motivated and his voice-over appears as if from nowhere. Second, the recitation is followed by an act of ‘auto-da-fe’ – the book is burnt towards the end of the poem. Uncannily, it is only in this sequence that the book is seen open for the first time, and this happens only during its physical destruction. The visual sequence seems to contradict the soundtrack: while Domenico’s recitation reaffirms the validity of the translation and its presence in the world, Gorchakov burns the book and makes its physical existence impossible without uttering a single word.

The recited poem deals with nostalgia for a time in the past. The process of ageing is metaphorized through various images, from the inanimate ‘Two invisible adamant spears’ to the animate ‘Like grey oxen on a ploughed field’. The metaphorization of bodily functions leads to the ‘improbable’ statement where the poet asserts that ‘Two wings at the back of my shoulders/Don’t shine anymore in the night’. The idealization of the figure of the artist continues with Andrei Tarkovsky’s favourite line ‘I am a candle, I burned out at a feast’. However, the second stanza functions more as a spiritual testament. The sense of finality dominates and reaches its zenith in the last line: ‘How to burn as posthumously as a word’. The line appears to be illustrated visually – the book containing the poem’s words is being burnt.

In addition, one can easily link the first and the last lines of the second stanza with one of the most memorable sequences in Nostalgia, which takes place after the poems are recited – Gorchakov carrying a candle in the pool in Bagno Vignoni. This sequence is filmed in one continuous take and lasts almost nine minutes. Gorchakov accomplishes the task Domenico demands of him by carrying a candle from one end of the pool to the other without letting it go out. The absurd task becomes an ultimate spiritual quest. Gorchakov burns himself out (he literally dies following Domenico’s example) while accomplishing the mission, like a burnt down and eventually extinguished candle. However, his self-sacrifice is not in vain and through it he seeks to abide by the last line of the poem, glorifying the posthumous burning word. This word is beyond mortality and inhabits the layer of poetic and spiritual eternity.

The two poems appear to be quite diverse in terms of subject matter. The hallucinatory ‘As a child I once fell ill …’ differs substantially from the nostalgic ‘Si oscura la vista – la mia forza …’. However, the idea of levitation connects the two poems. The fleeting (flying away) mother and sister ‘ruffling wings’ in the first poem are counterbalanced by the two dulled wings behind the poet’s shoulders in the second. More importantly, however, is the fact that both poems are recited while an Italian girl called Angela is present in the building. She is in fact the third visual ‘angel’ to appear in the film. The previous two were a human-size angel standing by the side of Gorchakov’s Russian house at the beginning of the film,15 and the sunken marble statue of an angel (possibly taken from a representation of the Annunciation since the angel’s hand is raised in a manner characteristic of the scene) found near the entrance of the flooded church.
Flawed buildings

The two poems are at the very centre of the film’s discourse: the trope of nostalgia accompanied by the anxiety of untranslatability developed in the preceding scenes finds its ‘resolution’ in the two readings. The setting in which the poems are presented is itself notable – Gorchakov declaims ‘As a child I once fell ill ...’ on his way to the ruined and flooded church, while Domenico recites the Italian version of ‘Si oscura la vista – la mia forza ...’ inside it. The building itself embodies the impossible possibility or possible impossibility of translation. It is a defective construction, which, apart from the leaking roof (a trope recognizable from other Tarkovsky films), is filled with water and rendered uninhabitable. The idea of a building as a shelter that protects humans from nature’s elements is thus undermined: the inside vs outside binary opposition is overcome.

The ruined building is a very important trope for Tarkovsky’s cinema. It epitomizes the film-maker’s artistic strategy on many levels – the ruin is a symbol of decay but it also includes the possibility of future revival. Naficy is one of the few commentators who highlight the importance of the ruin to the director’s oeuvre. The critic claims that the inclusion of the ruined building is driven

... by the various philosophical, spiritual, and personal falls that bedevilled him throughout his [Tarkovsky’s] life – the fall from the state of grace and harmony with God and nature, from the prelapsarian world of childhood, and from the presymbolic union with [his] mother. As a metaphor for a time before these multiple falls, therefore, the house always already necessitates nostalgia for its coming into being. This means the house is subject to continual metamorphosis, as a result of which in Tarkovsky’s films houses can be neither complete nor permanent.

(Naficy 2001: 175)

The building where the two poems are recited acquires an explicitly theological status (even if one disregards the fact that it is a former church). In

Still 13: The church’s deteriorated interior.
a certain sense, it follows the convention set by the Pantheon in Rome, which has a round opening oculus (or Great Eye) in the top of its dome. In the Pantheon, the oculus has always remained open, allowing rain to enter and fall to the floor, from where it is carried away through various drains. Moreover, it admits the only natural light into the interior of the edifice. The Roman church and the ruined construction in Nostalgia are thus both exposed to natural phenomena and are capable of bringing together the terrestrial and celestial strata.16

However, unlike the Pantheon, the flooded church, together with other buildings within the film (such as Domenico’s house and the ruins of San Galgano Abbey that appear right at the end), has ceased to perform its original function – to provide a space for worship or shelter. The deficiency of these structures, seen through the mythical prism, leads to a deficiency of translation. The constructional failure leading to the linguistic one is at work in Nostalgia’s flawed buildings; this twofold failure is exemplified by the Tower of Babel phenomenon, which has already been discussed. The builders hoped that their project would bring into existence a place of ultimate unity – the monolithic Tower. However, the demolition of the as yet unfinished edifice left these hopes unfulfilled: ‘The “tower of Babel” does not merely figure the irreducible multiplicity of tongues; it exhibits an incompleteness, the impossibility of finishing, of totalising, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification, architectural construction, system and architectonics’ (Derrida 1985: 165).

Tarkovsky’s buildings are ultimate manifestations of what Derrida calls ‘incompleteness of the structure’. These buildings are destined to remain in a state of incompleteness, open to natural meteorological phenomena, simultaneously enclosing and disclosing their inhabitants and visitors. Their ‘deficiency’ does not seem to bother the protagonists. On the contrary, Gorchakov appears to seek seclusion in the ruined churches – places that retain a trace of divine worship but are nevertheless abandoned by their congregations. Domenico, by contrast, is content with the confines of his apartment. Despite the lack of partitions, he still follows habitual

Still 14: Domenico’s home.

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16. Cf. Joseph Brodsky’s fascination (Brodsky 1997: 168) with the same phenomenon in ‘Ostanovka v pustyn’ – a ruined Greek church which suddenly reveals something unsettling: ‘And night itself/ yawned widely in the altar’s gaping holes./ And I – through these same altar’s holes – looked out/upon the trams that ran off in the distance./upon the row of streetlights that were dim/And what you’d never see inside a church/I now saw clearly through the church’s prism’ (trans. by Michael Wachtel).
conventions, ‘using’ doors that are no longer attached to walls. Indeed, he maintains his behavioural habits within a house that in fact no longer exists. The recurring motif of the flawed building reflects the protagonists’ yearning to regain home, both in a spiritual and physical sense. It is interesting that Tarkovsky clearly links the phenomenon of *nostalgia* with the concept of *home* in an interview: ‘The title of Nostalgia denotes yearning for something which is far away from us, for those worlds, which cannot be united. But it is also the yearning for our native home, for a sense of spiritual belonging’ (Tarkovskii 1989: 131).

The film’s discourse is dominated by Domenico’s and Gorchakov’s two obsessions – reclaiming ruined buildings and striving towards the necessity and at the same time the impossibility of communication (translation). Both obsessions are doomed to failure: the deformity and disrepair of architectural constructions in *Nostalgia* signify the ultimate impossibility of translation. Deformed buildings are mere flawed resemblances of the completed ideal of a house or edifice. Domenico’s house, the flooded church in the middle of the film, and the ruins of San Galgano Abbey at the end all undermine the concept of *building* as some kind of a shelter that provides refuge for human beings. Their deficiency – the dilapidated or non-existent roofs – decreases the possibility for these buildings to hide or conceal, indeed their openness grants a direct link with the celestial stratum. In a similar way, translation discloses a tension between two foreign linguistic systems, although full reconciliation is never possible, remaining only within the realm of hope. Furthermore, the *translational* Tower of Babel can never be built, which means, according to Derrida (2004: 429), that ‘translation is devoted to ruin, to that form of memory or commemoration that is called a ruin; ruin is perhaps its vocation and a destiny that it accepts from the very outset’.

The centrality of the tropes of the impossibility of translation and of constructional unity to the film’s discourse is emphasized by the diegetic importance of the Cistercian abbey in San Galgano in Tuscany, described by Pallasmaa (1994: 156) as ‘a skeleton of memory, a sheer melancholy

*Stills 15: San Galgano Abbey.*

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The concept of a building housing another building was inspired by a sight Tarkovsky encountered in Italy: ‘In Loreto there is a famous cathedral [...] in the middle of which stands Maria’s house in which Jesus was born, transported here from Nazareth’ (Tarkovskii 2008: 274).

The ruined gothic church, which Gorchakov visits during his stay in Italy, plays a crucial role at the end of the film. This deformed sanctuary is clearly aestheticized and appears for the first time in an unobstructed state – its interior is empty: ‘Remains the heavy lacework of walls, arches, columns, and window frames missing any glass. A packed earth floor has reverted to its grass covering; the grey structure stretches up from this surface of green straight into Tuscany’s sky’ (Kamuf 1993: 46). The imposing, desolate skeleton of the Cistercian abbey is extremely photogenic. As the camera explores its picturesque aisles, breathtaking perspectives are revealed through sparse ornamentation and the sober gothic style.

However, the most memorable images of the abbey come in the closing sequence of the film. The both too literal and too ambiguous finale accomplishes an impossible reunion between the dead protagonist and his Russian homeland through the Italian landscape. Samardzija provides an eloquent description of the sequence, bringing together various themes in the film’s discourse:

The use of black and white in the shot links it to the nostalgic images that haunt Gorchakov. It suggests that the unification of the contradictory spaces has occurred belatedly. The logic of his nostalgia has consumed itself. No unification has truly occurred because the past, in death, has consumed everything. There no longer is a future. And yet, the fact that Italy and Russia occupy the same space in the shot, even if it is only imaginary, imparts a Utopian element to the image. The image, in its failure, invites the viewer to ponder the limits of the possible and seek the methods to transcend those limits.

(Samardzija 2004: 304)

The first shot of the closing sequence hints at the Russian countryside. The house featured in the shot resembles Tarkovsky’s own country house in Miasnoe village. The topography of Gorchakov’s homeland is directly
linked with his native tongue and general system of values. The country house is more than a familiar and cherished space. Its image, contained within the medieval Italian church, signifies a successful failure or failed success of communication by means of translation. The hero must be reunited with his native land in order to relate to the Italian landscape. Quine highlights that ‘most talk of meaning requires tacit reference to a home language in much the way that talk of truth involves tacit reference to one’s own system of the world’ (Quine 1966: 171, my italics). References to already familiar things and places are unavoidable in one’s interactions with the external world.

Nevertheless, the image of Gorchakov’s house already contains a hint of improbability – a reflection in a puddle of one of the two triplets of arched windows of the east end wall of San Galgano. This reflection signifies that there is something ‘irrelevant’ to the surroundings of the house, since the puddle should reflect the open sky. The elaborately crafted illusion is revealed through this reflection. The camera gradually zooms out and discloses the side walls of the abbey together with the east end wall. In the true Cistercian tradition (Leroux-Dhuys 1998: 320), the east end is square with two triplets of windows surmounted by one small and one large oculus. The eastern wall is oriented towards Gorchakov’s homeland and, at the same time, serves as a background for his imaginary home.

Benjamin’s metaphor for translation as ‘a royal robe with ample folds’ (Benjamin 1996: 258) is a very apposite reference point for this sequence, as it utilized spatial categories. The fact that the language of translation always remains unsuited, overpowering and alien to its newly acquired content creates a disjunction which ‘prevents translation’ (Benjamin 1996: 258). In the same manner, the Cistercian church envelopes the Russian house with more than just ample folds. As the camera zooms out, it appears to consume the house completely. Artificiality and extreme stylization are the principal qualities of this final sequence.

The translation of the Russian landscape into the Italian church, or vice versa, is the climactic episode of the film and is also its end. From this perspective it is interesting to note the double meaning of the Greek word nostos, which simultaneously stands for a homecoming or homeward journey (for example, the return of Odysseus and the other Greek heroes of the Trojan War) and, in a more general sense, signifies the conclusion of a literary work. While nostalgia is a painful (algia means pain) longing for home, the end of Nostalgia is a mortal (more than painful) homecoming, which also functions as an ultimate conclusion to the film.

Conclusions
The impossibility of the structural unity of the Tower of Babel serves as an extremely potent trope for dealing with the discourses of Nostalgia. The Old Testament story of the ultimate failure to reach a dominant singularity culminates in damnation to the sphere of translation – a sphere of negotiating differences and multiplicities that always fails to produce satisfactory results. As Derrida (1985: 171) writes: ‘This story recounts, among other things, the origin of the confusion of tongues, the irreducible multiplicity of idioms, the necessary and impossible task of translation, its necessity as impossibility’ (emphasis in the original).
Gorchakov, the main protagonist of the film, openly declares his ideological and aesthetic belief in the untranslatability of cultures. The aborted romantic encounter with his personal translator Eugenia is countered by his meeting with the local madman, Domenico. The impossible possibility of contact between the two ‘alien’ cultures is easily attained by the two men and reaches its climax in the declamation of the two poems by Arsenii Tarkovsky, which are read by Gorchakov in Russian and by Domenico in the Italian translation. The poems’ semantics thus becomes secondary to the very act of recitation in a foreign language. The encounter between the protagonists represents a repeated familiarization with their native languages in the manner described by Barbara Johnson (1985: 143–44): ‘Through the foreign language we renew our love-hate intimacy with our mother tongue. We tear at her syntactic joints and semantic flesh and resent her for not providing all the words we need.’ Once the linguistic intimacy is restored, Domenico and Gorchakov recognize a mystical bond uniting them, a recognition that eventually culminates in their mortal self-sacrifices.

The urge towards self-destruction is not only conveyed through language. Domenico’s place of residence and the places that attract Gorchakov also inform the discourse of disintegration. The characters occupy and visit ruined edifices, which can be considered as annexes to the remains of the Tower of Babel. Their incompleteness relates their failure to arrive at a monumental completion.

At the same time, the deformed churches and Domenico’s house are not only symbols of the impossibility of achieving structural singularity; the extremely photogenic ruins are aestheticized by the camera and their presence shapes the texture of the film. Nostalgia thus becomes a beautified longing for unity, which is aware of its own impossibility. The ruined building is always a symbol of sentimental nostalgia for something that has perished and is painfully absent – the desired object or space is always removed.

All the aforementioned semantic possibilities are interwoven in the last sequence of the film. The final, posthumous, imaginary or even false homecoming of Gorchakov brings his nostalgia to an end (he overcomes the imposed distance between himself and his homeland); the sequence is also the end of Nostalgia – the film. The open space of the Cistercian church accommodates Gorchakov’s Russian house. Svetlana Boym (2001: xiii–xiv), while not directly discussing Tarkovsky’s film, makes a very illuminating comment: ‘A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life.’ The concluding cinematic image of Nostalgia literally presents the mentioned dichotomies.

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Suggested citation

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Edited by Graeme Harper and Jonathan Rayner

ISBN 9781841503097
paperback | £14.95, $25

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