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## passages in translation

Ektoras Arkomanis

### Abstract

This experiment began with the translation of a poem for a film set in the Eleonas refugee camp in Athens. The poem, Pier Paolo Pasolini's Athens, is a portrait of an enigmatic place on a summer evening, in times of uncertainty. Originally, the purpose of the translation was simply to produce a Farsi version that the actor could recite in the camp, but curiosity about translation then led to a series of collaborations. How does translation complicate the themes of the film, such as migration, refugeeism, belonging and not belonging? What might translations into other languages and across mediums reveal about Pasolini's poem, my film, and about cinema, poetry, and language more broadly? I invited artists and historians to translate excerpts from the same poem into their native languages – Yoruba, Arabic, Farsi, Basque, Maltese, Tagalog, Polish, Greek – and to discuss the process. The poem has not only travelled between languages, but also across mediums – written text, audio recording, performance, and film. This exposition is my record of these dialogues and processes – a personal, albeit polyphonic notebook on translation.

### Biography

Ektoras Arkomanis is an artist and writer. He uses film for its capacity to preserve and explore, but he is especially interested in what the medium omits, its inadequacy for describing things that are no longer there, and the narratives that are invented to fill these gaps. He is currently working on a series of films about the district of Eleonas in Athens; the latest one, *work / memories of work*, was released in 2024.

Ektoras has published essays and articles on film, architecture, and art, and has edited a volume titled *Migrations in New Cinema* (Cours de Poétique, 2020). He recently co-created a collaborative installation titled *Protea/Extraction* (commissioned by the Anti-Apartheid Centre of Memory and Learning in London), which explored colonial histories of exploitation and commodification of natural resources in South Africa.

Ektoras teaches history to architecture students at London Metropolitan University.

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## Hana in language (introduction)

This experiment began with the translation of a poem excerpt into Farsi for a film. Curiosity about translation then led to a series of collaborations on translating the poem to other languages and reflecting on the process and discoveries.

My film was shot in the [Eleonas refugee camp in Athens](#), over two periods: first in December 2017, when the camp was operational, and then in May 2023, after its closure. The film script fuses testimony, histories, literature and personal observations into a single poetic narrative, spoken by different voices which the viewer cannot place. Documentary footage is woven together with acted parts. Among the testimonies, clippings, and literary fragments is a short excerpt from Pier Paolo Pasolini's enigmatic poem *Athens*, the memory of a place in times of uncertainty, possibly on a summer evening, or perhaps spanning centuries. In the film, the excerpt was spoken by Hana, who is an activist, not a professional actor. Hana is from Afghanistan, so a Farsi translation was needed.

The cultural and linguistic gaps between the different versions of the poem were widened by physical distance and the lack of direct communication; initial translations were carried out in Greece, Germany, Britain and in transit, and so the translators never met each other or the actor. The first linguistic aberration had occurred earlier still: my knowledge of the poem's original language, Italian, is minimal, so I had to work from the English translation. The same was true for the other translators. In the beginning I had to accept the hybridity as a necessary concession, but later I came to view it as a series of productive gaps.

The poem has not only travelled between languages, but also across mediums – written text, audio recording, performance, film. Whether or not intersemiotic translation can be examined with the same criteria as linguistic translation is perhaps less important than understanding how these transferences across mediums and languages interact with the task of translation.

How do the translated words complicate the film's themes – migration, refugeeism, memory, assimilation – and how is the discourse of translation enriched by them?

The title 'passages in translation' carries multiple meanings. While filming in the camp in Eleonas in 2017, I found myself drawn to the passages between the trailers. These outdoor corridors epitomise the refugee/migrant condition in the new place: moving through predetermined routes that lead to the same limited destinations becomes a metaphor for normal life in suspension. In the film, I used the passages as spatial and temporal transitions, narrative corridors that take the viewer elsewhere, or back in time. The static, eye-high point of view and the fixed perspective evoke the horizon, and so they hint at newness, open ends, and potentials; yet, the actual horizon is obscured by the perimeter wall. In its absence, time unravels; the passages become receptacles of memories found in literature and collective memory, or in testimonies that recall that other passage, the journey over sea or land.

I returned to the camp after its closure in 2021. Seeing it abandoned, I felt that it was necessary to incorporate that last chapter of its story. The site, now muted, with derelict trailers and overgrown vegetation, gave a new poignancy to the words I had collected or written; they became a means of re-animating the place in the absence of its people.

This time, as I'm reworking the film, my concern with the translation of Pasolini's poem brings about new thoughts: like the actual passages, the translation process is transitional. Unlike the passages, translation is a slow, painstaking negotiation which lacks a fixed destination; it is finite as an outcome, but open-ended as a process, ever-expanding in the mind, and for that reason, liberating.

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Hana was not a resident of the refugee camp, but she had arrived in Greece via one of the perilous migrant trails, so her experience

is valuable when embodying the part as both actor and narrator. Hana is from Afghanistan but she grew up in Iran. She speaks Farsi but can also speak the Afghan dialect Dari, which is also rooted in the old Persian language.

London, 3 March, 2023

- excerpt: short, but not easy to memorise (in its exact form almost impossible for a non-professional actor)  
- Have emailed Katrin to ask if she can translate it into Farsi or knows someone who can. Katrin says her mum, Shayestah, is a poet and studied literature in Kabul.

10 April 2023

Shayestah has sent me two versions:

- 1) demotic – she says it sounds more realistic as a character's words
- 2) 'bookish' – it preserves the poetic tone

17 April 2023

Met online with Hana and her sister, Karimeh.

They looked at Shayestah's text and discussed it between them, intensely. They think this version will not do – it doesn't match how they speak.

I would like to know why/how, but there's no time – new version needed (important that Hana feels comfortable with the text).

4 May 2023

I asked my colleague [Torange](#) who is from Iran to write a new translation.

7 May 2023

Torange gave me a new, handwritten version just before my flight to Athens. Have txted it to Hana

Athens, 8 May 2023

Hana says it's good, she can work with it. I have no way of knowing what has changed and what difference it makes (more colloquial?) Filming tomorrow morning.

The root of this inquiry and my concern with the translation of Pasolini's poem, can be traced back to the above sequence of events. It made me realise how little control I had over the translation of the text for the film. This lacking insight extended beyond the contents and style of the Farsi script, to trivial issues:

for example, another colleague noticed that one of the sentences looked bizarre. It turned out that Microsoft Word jumbles up the words when copying left-to-right scripture.

From London to Athens, from my desk to the filming set, and through various interpreters, the translation process became transitory and public. This was dictated by practical reasons, but there are theoretical implications:

A translation-sensitive approach affirms that knowledge is constructed on the move, that local and global dimensions or national and transnational approaches exist in tension, and that to forget or ignore the porous, dynamic, dialogical relationship between cultures, and languages is always risky. (1)

The dependency on others for translation means relinquishing control; it requires acceptance of not fully grasping the outcome. Filmmakers are used to relying on collaboration for every aspect of filming; in this case however, there is a conceptual analogy with the immigrant/refugee relying on interpreters in the place of arrival. It seems logical then, that a cinema which engages with migration needs to embrace dependency and to incorporate it in the making process, for its own poetic and political vitality.

For the film *Kalès*, Laurent van Lancker equipped residents of the Calais refugee camp with mobile phones, so they could record their own footage, which he then edited together. (2) This exercise has a dual purpose: to empower the subject (the refugees), and to incorporate their point of view. Both acts aim to achieve what Polezzi raises in relation to the canon: “with its focus on multiplicity and instability, on rewriting and appropriation, on difference and transculturation, translation dethrones notions of canonicity.” (3) The idea of handing over the camera to participants as a gesture of empowerment is not inscrutable; in the first and second chapters, I revisit *Kalès* to discuss how the ethics and politics of this method play out in the film. A crucial discovery lies in poetics: this chain of thought

eventually leads me back to Pasolini and his idea of the ‘free indirect point of view.’

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## translation dialogues, political and poetic potentials (methodology)

So, here we are now, translated and invented skins, separated and severed like dandelions from the sacred and caught alive in words and in the cities. —Gerald Vizenor [\(4\)](#)

The earliest known departure from the notion of translation as a literal, word-for-word transposition is from Cicero. [\(5\)](#) The Latin *conversio*, which Cicero uses for ‘translation’, means ‘to turn around’ and shares a linguistic root with ‘conversation’. Meaning is conveyed by adding to or converting the existing ideas. We think of translation as a solitary process, but this early term suggests that it is dialogic. The dialogue between the author and the translator happens across space and time, which is both wondrous and a real limitation.

In the time of Athens,  
the girls would laugh in the doorways of squat little houses, all  
the same  
(as in the poor quarters of Rio);  
houses along avenues filled, at the time,  
with the fragrance (you couldn't remember the name) of lindens.  
Evenings, as usual, were eternal,  
because one had to perform a whole ceremony  
(go up dusty stairs to the bedrooms,  
which was an ascension, and this made the girls laugh even more).

Τὸν καιρὸ τῶν Ἀθηνῶν,  
Τὰ κορίτσια γελοῦσαν στὰ κατώφλια τῶν χαμηλόστεγων σπιτιῶν,  
ὅλα ἴδια  
(ὅπως στὶς φτωχογειτονιὲς τοῦ Ρίου)  
σπίτια σὲ δρόμους ποὺ ἐκεῖνες τὶς μέρες μύριζαν (ξεχνοῦσες τὸ  
ὄνομα) τίλιο.  
Τὰ ἀπογεύματα, ὡς συνήθως, ἦταν αἰώνια·  
ὀλόκληρη τελετὴ ν' ἀνέβεις

τις σκονισμένες σκάλες μέχρι τις κάμαρες  
κι ή ανάβαση έκανε τὰ κορίτσια νὰ γελοῦν ἀκόμα περισσότερο.

When the translation of the excerpt was complete and the film shoot was over, the time seemed right to expand the inquiry on translation in directions opened by the film, but not dictated by it. Thinking back to the dialogic aspect, I invited artists, architects, designers – mainly colleagues and collaborators from other projects – to translate, recite and discuss. Each of us chose an excerpt from Pasolini’s poem and translated it into our native language. Then we would meet to exchange observations and record the recitations. [Nina Gerada](#) is a Maltese artist and a former colleague. When we meet, she enquires about my intentions with the project and shares her initial doubts:

**Nina Gerada** **Funnily, I come from a family with two interpreters. One of my uncles interpreted the Lockerby trials for a European court, for example, and could probably do a better job than me [laughs] ... That was my first thought, that perhaps I’m not the right person for this.**

None of the participants has a background in translation. My rationale for inviting artists and other practitioners instead is that professional interpreters tend to focus on the outcome – an accurate transposition – whereas I would like to dwell on the process, pausing to consider what our choices mean in the context of our practice and artistic concerns, and to reflect on the broader implications for art or language. The aim is not to ‘execute’ translation, but rather to deploy it for other discoveries.

Preconceived notions or ideological stances from within the field of translation are largely absent. Nuances and tints are examined first in the context of practice and experience, then in conversation. Could this result in what Brian James Baer describes as a ‘radical broadening of the concept of translation?’ (6) Baer argues that the growing acceptance of ‘cultural translation’ from the 1990s onwards has led to translation being treated as a metaphor, and the translator’s task being treated as an abstract contribution to pretty much any

discipline, political aim or cultural mediation. Even though I agree that this is undesirable – leading among other things to decreased language proficiency in the field (7) – my aim here is not to supplant translation with artistic endeavours or to dilute the discipline that the everyday process of translation requires. The exposition looks at what translation can offer to cinema, poetry, and artistic practice. Its aim is to reveal mutual and exclusive elements of language and perception, through translation and discussion – the two ideas that Cicero’s Latin term links.

Nina explains her relationship with Maltese:

**Nina Gerada When you asked me [to take part] I felt a bit of impostor syndrome, because Maltese is not my first language. That comes from Malta being an ex-colony, and from being raised in that window in the early ‘80s, and from my family. It is my father’s first language; my mother’s first language is English, my [maternal] grandparents spoke Italian – we’re really a multilingual family. But we didn’t speak Maltese at home, even though it’s my father’s and my paternal grandparents’ language.**

The stages of Nina’s life and the circumstances she describes are now sensibilities which manifest in her translation. In that sense, we can also consider translation as a pathfinder that zig-zags into one’s past and unlocks potentials in the present.

The earliest known departure from the notion of translation as a literal, word-for-word transposition is from Cicero. (5) The Latin *conversio*, which Cicero uses for ‘translation’, means ‘to turn around’ and shares a linguistic root with ‘conversation’. Meaning is conveyed by adding to or converting the existing ideas. We think of translation as a solitary process, but this early term suggests that it is dialogic. The dialogue between the author and the translator happens across space and time, which is both wondrous and a real limitation.

In the *Poetics of Relation*, Edouard Glissant uses the term ‘situational competence’ for the contextual knowledge that is required to understand a text in another language and, by extension, to translate it. (8) The apparent transparency of a

text, he argues, may be just an illusion, owed to the reader's lack of contextual understanding. The implication is that [the same words and phrases acquire different meaning in each text](#), which relies on specific networks of meanings. Glissant does not touch on the reverse principle, which is also true: that translation offers a path towards situational competence. Rather than learning in the abstract, the translator seeks both precise and relational meanings of words and phrases.

When Nina mentions impostor syndrome, I realise that despite our numerous previous interactions, I have not heard her and the other contributors speak their native language, and they probably have not heard me speak mine. This highlights one of the most common immigrant experiences: burying one's language and parts of one's identity in the process of integrating. The day-to-day practicalities of living in a foreign country necessitate this condition, which steadily transforms our emotional landscape. Nina continues,

**Nina Gerada I've come to accept that this, too, is a valid version of being Maltese. But one can feel marginalised as a result of growing up in that crack between the colonial and postcolonial eras.**

So, there is a motive for un-muting ourselves, even temporarily, for the translation of a poem.

My familiarity with the participants is not essential to the project, but it is a choice, because the personal and collective aspects forge a community of practice. I like to think of the practice in question as that of 'impostors', as we are coming to terms with this characterisation and adopt it for ourselves, for its subversive potential.

The choice of languages rests on several factors, such as including a variety of language families (Indo-European, Niger-Congo, Austronesian) and branches (Latin, Arabic, Slavic, Tagalog, Indo-Persian, Greek, Basque, Yoruba), rather than favouring dominant cultures. The peculiarities of the chosen languages offer additional opportunities for what Walter

Benjamin describes as coming to terms with the foreignness of languages to each other. (9) Basque, for example, is a *language isolate*, evolving autonomously since antiquity, and has no relationship with any other language spoken nearby. At the other end of the spectrum, languages with extremely mixed derivations, such as Maltese, speak of coexistence of peoples and creeds, and the frictions between them – historical entanglements amalgamated into speech.

Elsewhere, the coexistence of peoples has not engendered coalescence of elements within a language; instead, it manifests as linguistic plurality within a geographical area. In Nigeria, there are half a thousand indigenous languages spoken alongside English. ‘I speak Yoruba as my second language’, [Adeyemi Akande](#) tells me, ‘but when my mother speaks Yoruba with others, sometimes I don’t understand anything.’ Similarly, in the Philippines, there are nearly two hundred living languages across regions of the archipelago, and an official unifying version (Filipino, based on Tagalog) is spoken on the radio and in formal settings. In specifying his choices, [Davide Bugarin](#) says that he translated mainly into Tagalog, but occasionally he used Ilocano, which is spoken predominantly in northern Luzon. He adds that he tried to avoid words with colonial origin, namely Spanish. Davide also has Italian ancestry, and he was able to translate the Pasolini poem from the original Italian, rather than from the [English translation](#).

In contrast to the Nigerian and Filipino concentration of languages, Arabic can be visualised as a map of dispersal, with multiple dialects of the same language spoken across western Asia and northern Africa. [Mae Shummo](#) was born in Sudan and lived in Oman before coming to Britain, and so she is familiar with the Arabic dialects used in both Sudan and Oman. She explains that she chose to translate into Sudanese Arabic because she finds that dialect more melodic and better suited to poetry than Omani Arabic. It makes me wonder if the opportunity to mentally reconnect with Sudan played a part in her decision.

In the milieus of the immigrant, the refugee and the exiled ... identity is a product of articulation. It lies at the

intersection of dwelling and traveling and is a claim of continuity within discontinuity (and vice-versa). A politics, rather than an inherited marking, its articulation and re-articulation grows out of the very tension raised between these two constructs – one based on socio-cultural determinants and the other, on biological ones. (10)

Mae can choose her affinities, being simultaneously here and there (or being *also therewhile* here). This freedom owed to migration is an important reason behind the choice of collaborators. Existing in-between – or in ‘the cracks’, as Nina puts it – underpins the usefulness of translation for transcending narrow definitions and perceptions of ethnicity, origin, and nationality. Engaging closely with language and registers ultimately helps us comprehend and accept versions of belonging and of not quite belonging.

Some of the principles that inform this experiment can be found in the practice of Versatorium, a collective translation project that emerged from the University of Vienna. In their staging of Elfriede Jelinek’s play *Charges (The Supplicants)*, the members of Versatorium collaborated with refugees who translated the text into various languages and performed it as a dynamic text: alterations, mistakes and inconsistencies were incorporated in the ever-evolving performance. (11) There was no final or definitive translation, and no version was ever transcribed. Christine Ivanovic writes that the emphasis was placed on the collective aspect of translation rather than the result, and that ‘the translation was not used as a medium to transfer meaning, but as a medium of reflection and realization of how meaning is generated in the first place.’ (12) The implication is that through translation, the participants reflect on their own circumstances and experiences, which are in turn invested into the performance. Ultimately, the original text also emerges with more nuance.

Since language is our predominant means of re-articulating reality, the usefulness of translation can be expanded beyond the language paradigm, to juxtapose other domains of life and

thought, offering ways of looking again, through translation, and seeing anew.

The dialogues are broken up and re-arranged across three thematic chapters. The first chapter looks outwards; it explores translation in the context of place and those around us – family, neighbours, society. The second chapter leaves the communal behind to examine the personal. This is not a retreat from the world; it makes sense, politically, to begin from negotiations of meaning with others before examining personal emotions and the senses. As the theoretical inquiry of the chapter unfolds, the translator, sometimes visible and at other times almost imperceptible, is the interlocutor between the outer and the inner world. The third chapter focuses on the body as the threshold between these two worlds and the locus of their conflict, as well as other conflicts in the poem and in the world. Poetically, the path is carved from the tangible towards the not-so-easily defined, and finally towards conflictual and uncertain states.

Translation, then, is another passage – the latest in this project about passages – where the encounters with multiple voices and sensibilities unveil political and poetic potentials. It should feel like looking into a notebook, where the thinking responds to the writing, and the reader can gauge the considerations and doubts that arose during the translation process in textual and visual form: stills, film clips, drafts, corrections, and communications. In the final chapter, conventional narrative is abandoned in favour of a more immediate form, of fragments. Translation is treated as a form of making; the outcome emerges gradually, as an artefact that displays its imperfections and carries the possibilities of a work in progress.

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### **(1) your relatives, neighbours, and mountains: translating the familial, the societal, and the geographical**

It's a while before the lights go out;

you have a bone to pick with your sister  
—disdained from birth for reasons unstated  
even though kept mysteriously deep in your heart —  
and mother.

Every family has its own story, knows the others' stories, too;  
from neighborhood to neighborhood, all of Athens  
is contained in the night of one girl,  
who will one day get fat, but is now in full bloom, chubby-cheeked  
and with hair worthy of ancient grandmothers come from inland

Yíó kù diè kí àsálẹ̀ tó sò  
Aáwọ̀ kan nì bẹ̀ làárín ìwọ̀ pẹ̀lú arábìrin rẹ̀  
--Tí o kórira láti ìgbà ìbí rẹ̀ fún ìdí tí a kò sọ,  
Şùgbón tí o wa nì 'pamọ̀ nínú ọ̀kán rẹ̀--  
Oun ìyá rẹ̀. [àti ìyá]  
Gbogbo ẹ̀bí ni ó ní ìtàn tirẹ̀, tí ó sì mọ̀ ìtàn àwọ̀n òmíràn pẹ̀lú;  
láti àdúgbò dé adúgbò, gbogbo Áténì  
nì bẹ̀ nínú alẹ̀ ọ̀mọ̀bìrin kan,  
Tí yíó sanra l'ójó kan, şùgbón ó ti rúwé nísinsinyí, pẹ̀lú ẹ̀rẹ̀kẹ̀ rọ̀pọ̀tò,  
àti irun bíí tí àwọ̀n ìyá àgbà láti ilẹ̀ okèèrè

'Siblings are not a thing in exchanges between Nigerians',  
Adeyemi tells me. 'There's no word for sister in Yoruba.' Instead,  
speakers of the Yoruba language describe a sister as 'a  
girl/woman/female that is mine' (arábìrin rẹ̀). It is the same for  
'brother'. Names are usually not mentioned, either; when  
referring to one's sibling, one uses a similar construct: 'the  
older/younger that is mine'. What if there is more than one older  
sibling? In that case, the meaning will be inferred by the context.  
The same applies for the missing gender. I remark that 'younger'  
and 'older' do not denote age, but seniority. Adeyemi nods and  
explains that seniority plays a big part in how people converse;  
for example, it is considered rude to contradict one's seniors,  
even in minor subjects.

It appears that there are two aspects behind these habitual  
omissions of sex, name and precise age – one societal and one  
linguistic. Firstly, there is less emphasis on individuals; a  
person's identity does not matter that much. 'At birth people  
don't ask about sex or name', Adeyemi says. A parent will

announce a child's birth and receive brief congratulations, with no questions attached. The lack of attention to identity and individuality entails greater privacy; since no one asks about your private life, the emphasis implicitly shifts to your public exchanges and conduct. I wonder if in your absence, you embody a type rather than an individual. We find similar attitudes expressed through artefacts from past centuries and millennia – think of ancient Greek gravestones from the Classical period, where the deceased person is represented as a type. The sculpted features bear no resemblance to the person that was; they reach our age as representations of status, virtue, and achievements, not personality.

The lack of specifics regarding age, sex, name, and other characteristics also lends itself well to traditional modes of storytelling. In ancient Greek drama actors wore masks, presumably to draw attention to what they embodied or represented (the state, the role of father, a profession, the interests of a group of people, etc.), rather than to the complexity of their emotions. The stakes were raised above the individual, to the societal level. Similarly, a translation from English into Yoruba may shift attention from the characters in a poem to the positions they occupy or the virtues they embody, thus speaking to collective concerns. This matters especially here because it draws closer to Pasolini's poetics: the tragic and comical themes of ancient storytelling are centre stage in Pasolini's films (see *Medea*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Decameron*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *Arabian Nights*). The actors work with expressions that correspond to basic emotions (happy, angry, surprised) and their speech is often dubbed with an Italian voiceover. In the poem, archetypes are cast to populate Athens on a timeless evening: the virgin; the beggar with neither family nor friends; ancient grandmothers.

Regarding the linguistic reason for omitting information in Yoruba, Adeyemi explains that less is stated explicitly and more is deduced from context. If, for example, he refers to one of his older siblings without mentioning their name, the identity of the sibling may eventually become apparent through other

information disclosed. What is the impact of this lag in conversation, where bits of information are revealed gradually? There is a shift of focus from character to meaning; as long as we do not know the person (or the protagonist, in fiction), we are more attentive to the poetic, instructive and political aspects of the story, which acquire fable-like significance, since they concern an unnamed citizen rather than an identified individual.

But nobody knows what will be,  
except, perhaps, for some old beggar who doesn't care;  
or anyone who has no family or neighborhood,  
or is under the illusion that he does.  
Perhaps in distant regions connected by a hinterland  
which will remain forever unknown,  
or connected by the sea, the ever more diaphanous Adriatic...

As another example of elliptical formulation in Yoruba, for 'all of Athens', Adeyemi uses a construction that can also mean 'all of the Athenians' (gbogbo Áténì). In an exchange between Yoruba-speaking Lagosians, content of this kind is initially understood loosely; it may refer to either a group of people or the city; which of the two entities is signified will be deduced later from the context.

There is no such ambiguity in Basque. [Lucia Medina Uriarte](#) explains that *auzoa*, the word for 'neighbourhood', connotes a network of people who self-organise and hold regular meetings, discuss issues, make decisions, and act. These gatherings function like community hubs and embody the social contract in which one partakes. By partaking, one becomes *auzokide*, a member of *auzoa*. The derivation works in the opposite direction than in English, where 'neighbourhood' is derived from neighbour; in the Basque context, the neighbour is defined through her/his participation in the common affairs. Socially and linguistically, the neighbourhood produces the neighbours, not vice versa.

There is another word that denotes locale: *auzogune* (also spelled as *auzune* in a contracted version), constructed from

*auzoa* (neighbourhood) and *gune* (area). *Auzoa* is the area of the neighbourhood, a geographical approximation that *contains* the network of participants. As such, this is also a derivative of the neighbourhood in linguistic and socio-political terms. Lucia points to factors such as class and ethnicity: the participatory element is more pronounced in working-class neighbourhoods and in those with a strong Basque identity, and less pronounced in affluent or predominantly Spanish-speaking areas. Age is also a factor, as young people often take the lead in holding communal gatherings and enacting collective decisions. There is a strong element of care in the neighbourhood where Lucia grew up and went to school; this manifests in actions like organising food parcels for vulnerable members, or helping the elderly during the COVID pandemic.

The balance between physical proximity and networks is different in the refugee camp because the area is small and delineated. Dependencies are vital. Networks between inhabitants – and between inhabitants and humanitarian workers – form faster here than in other environments, and they can expedite all kinds of provision and support: goods, friendships, education, childcare, skills, paperwork, etc. Even though communication is bolstered by the physical proximity of the inhabitants, there are more language barriers, so the operation of networks relies heavily on translation. This is but one contact point between translation and actual migration. However, migration terminology abounds in translation discourse, mainly in the form of metaphors:

The migration-translation nexus is, by definition metaphorical. [...] This nexus provides the diasporic editor, poet, and translator with a set of rhetorical tools, including translating strategies. (13)

In *The State We're In: Narratives of Migration and Translation*, Denham, Ellis and Atkin list a few more metaphorical applications, pointing out that the relevance of the metaphor is useful beyond aesthetics:

When we talk about translation, we describe transfer, exchange, displacement, carrying over, movement, accommodation, degrees of “foreignization” or “domestication” of sense and meaning. The same kinds of terms and frames for translation of words and meaning can help when we try to talk about the migration of people. (14)

When reflecting on the usefulness of the migration metaphor for poetry translation, I realise that it links translatability to vitality. Deeming a text or speech ‘untranslatable’ implies a diminished vitality or necessity. The vitality of translation in the refugee camp reminds us that there are areas in life where [untranslatability](#) is not an option. Transposed from migration to literary discourse, this realisation pares down the dilemma of the translator to a simpler moral-aesthetic choice: is the text/speech in question *worthy* of translation? If the answer is affirmative, then the hurdles of idioms and colloquialisms must be overcome even if the finished product is not satisfactory in every respect. That is the nature of translation: it leaves us unsatisfied, with a lingering sense of what could have been.

Is the metaphor useful if we follow it in the opposite direction, from literature to migration? The opacity of certain texts reminds us that legibility is not always desired; not everyone wants to be ‘read’. We find this idea in Édouard Glissant, who writes about ‘the right to opacity’ as a state of being that allows relation but resists domination of both people and places. (15) Historically, transparency and legibility are connected with imperial ventures, order, and domination. The enactment of empire has relied on imposing clarity at every stage and on every aspect of life, from cartography, to administration, to valuations of natural resources, labour, people. What troubles Glissant more than the attempt at ‘reading’ the other is the intention to *interpret* the other. (16) Predicated on colonial curiosity and on the utilitarian nature of imperial enterprise, for Glissant, the interpretation of the other is at best haphazard and reductive and at worst opportunistic and exploitative.

Does the necessity of translation lead to a compromise in opacity

– an unwanted transparency – for the refugee or migrant? Interviews and data collection, paperwork processing, movement monitoring and biometric checks, physical proximity during intimate moments – these are some of the obvious ways in which privacy dissolves. We read about all this in theoretical works, from Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben, to more recent studies produced in the thousands. We also see it in the many TV documentaries and other representations such as films, photography and installations that are now finding their way into museums and art galleries. In turn, such representations further increase transparency.

The proliferation of images together with the decolonial turn of the last few decades has led to a surge of studies on the poetics, semiotics, and ethics of representation. We read camera angles as well-intended or lacking empathy; colour as truthful or artificial; cuts as respecting one's privacy or as silencing, close-ups as compassionate or intrusive. In short, poetics guides us in forming [moral judgments](#). This explains why poetics serves Glissant as a framework for his concept of relation:

Relation informs not simply what is relayed but also the relative and the related. Its always approximate truth is given in a narrative. For, though the world is not a book, it is nonetheless true that the silence of the world would, in turn, make us deaf. Relation, driving humanities chaotically onward, needs words to publish itself, to continue. But because what it relates, in reality, proceeds from no absolute, it proves to be the totality of relatives, put in touch and told. [\(17\)](#)

The preference for approximate truth rather than absolutes is Glissant's objection to transparency. He does not believe that full knowledge of the other is a reasonable or ethical pursuit in encounters between people and cultures. As an antidote, he advocates empirical engagement as opposed to abstract or totalising thought.

We must not imagine totality as we earlier suggested nor simply approach Relation through a displacement of thought; we must also involve this imaginary in the place

we live, even if errantry is part of it. Neither action nor place is generalizable. (18)

Glissant's notions of situatedness and errantry are encompassed in the refugee camp: situatedness because it is a specific place that merits commitment, and thus counters the 'displacement of thought'; and errantry not as unnecessary driftage, but as the poetics of the exilic, the diasporic and the unfixed. It is not hard to imagine how the premise of relation and the negation of transparency are applicable to filming in the camp: for example, refraining from epistemological and pseudo-analytical approaches which attempt to exhaust their subject but ultimately reduce it to an *only* story – that of refugeeism. We come back to Rangan's point about avoiding generalisation and including aspects of migrant life that do not pertain to migrant status. Ethics is contingent on the rigour and openness of poetics.

Unsurprisingly, such moments are found in abundance among the children in the camp. They think in the present, invent games that utilise available features, and adapt to the circumstances. I think back to *Children's Games*, a remarkable series of 50 short documentary films by Francis Alÿs, which spans locations around the world, often in remote, impoverished or conflict-stricken zones. (19) The games could be categorised in many ways; one would be as self-referential games and games that more explicitly relate to the spatiality of their environment. A further taxonomy for the latter type would distinguish between games that opportunistically exploit space (finding a clearing to play *contagio*/ 'it', for example, or a road wide enough for football) and those where the spatial qualities generate the game (rolling down a slope curled inside a tire, jumping over lines on street crossings, or playing war in an abandoned district).

This final type is more pronounced in Eleonas because of the limited space and the density of dwellings and other physical features and barriers. There is a Bruegelesque quality to the confinement, but also to how these games unfold in the close presence of indifferent adults going about their business. In Bruegel, children's interactions and games are shown in select

moments when acts and emotions culminate (often, these are moments of cruelty), and they do not escape the compartmentalisation that befalls everything in the painting. In Eleonas, the kids' roaming animates the camp, and their encounters and exchanges weave together its spaces.

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Ayham Dalal points out that the encounters between refugees and volunteers re-humanise and re-politicise spaces like the refugee camp, because they redress the power balance between refugees and official aid providers. (20) Re-politisation is an apt term, because this is the first step towards polity in a space that was not conceived with the idea of a classless society in mind.

The discussion of dependencies and re-politicisation brings us back to Laurent van Lancker's film *Kalès* and the gesture of handing the camera to the camp's residents. In *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary*, Pooja Rangan cautions that handing the camera to the subject can be compared to a 'gift', and that there is an expectation that the recipient should reciprocate in some way. At the very least, the gesture amounts to false benevolence, reinforcing positions of dominance. (21) Rangan sees also a radical potential in surrendering the camera: by relinquishing some of their own privilege, the documentary maker is asserting the rights of the subject. Rather than gifting humanity to others, the filmmaker-editor-producer is levelling their own pedestal.

The privilege that is passed on is essentially editorial, so the potential to which Rangan refers is only realised poetically. It can be located in the unexpected instances in films that reveal aspects of the subjects' lives that resist or abrogate stereotypical views of them. (22) In *Against a Migrant Cinema*, Pavoni explains why filmmakers should not turn the 'eye of the migrant' into the 'eye on the migrant'. The filmmaker can instead rely on self-representations, because they diverge from expectations: 'the migrant's gaze, indeed, is always, to some extent, twofold: never completely assimilable, never exclusively classifiable as "other".' (23)

My intention with this study is not to delve into the ethics of [participatory methods in films about migration](#). Rather, I look at ethics at the contact points or intersections with poetics whilst attempting to examine the creative usefulness of translational thinking. In *Kalès*, Van Lancker begins from an ethos of filmmaking – making himself dependent. Once he develops the practice around it, the ethos morphs into a method. Almost imperceptibly, we have crossed from a political decision to a question of poetics. The polyphonic expression is evident in the variety of themes as well as the mood, as we watch everyday scenes of friends wandering about, exchanges at improvised stalls inside the camp, footage of some isolated tents among the trees, and later, violent incidents and fire breaking out while the camp is being evacuated on order of the French authorities.

The visual pluralism is a result of van Lancker's absence rather than his facilitation. As he removes himself from the process of filming, his idea undergoes two types of translation: the first is the change in the point of view that takes place when the director entrusts his camera to others. This is another facet of the radical potential that Rangan identifies: the aesthetically disruptive images that bridge the subject and audience, circumventing the director. (24) Inconsistency is embraced as polyphony or stylistic variation: here there is less sky; there, more camera shake; some choose to film the person talking to them, others opt for meandering shots in and around the camp without an obvious subject.

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But nobody knows what will be,  
except, perhaps, for some old beggar who doesn't care;  
or anyone who has no family or neighborhood,  
or is under the illusion that he does.  
Perhaps in distant regions connected by a hinterland  
which will remain forever unknown,  
or connected by the sea, the ever more diaphanous Adriatic...

As another example of elliptical formulation in Yoruba, for 'all of Athens', Adeyemi uses a construction that can also mean 'all of the Athenians' (gbogbo Áténì). In an exchange between

Yoruba-speaking Lagosians, content of this kind is initially understood loosely; it may refer to either a group of people or the city; which of the two entities is signified will be deduced later from the context.

There is no such ambiguity in Basque. [Lucia Medina Uriarte](#) explains that *auzoa*, the word for 'neighbourhood', connotes a network of people who self-organise and hold regular meetings, discuss issues, make decisions, and act. These gatherings function like community hubs and embody the social contract in which one partakes. By partaking, one becomes *auzokide*, a member of *auzoa*. The derivation works in the opposite direction than in English, where 'neighbourhood' is derived from neighbour; in the Basque context, the neighbour is defined through her/his participation in the common affairs. Socially and linguistically, the neighbourhood produces the neighbours, not vice versa.

There is another word that denotes locale: *auzogune* (also spelled as *auzune* in a contracted version), constructed from *auzoa* (neighbourhood) and *gune* (area). *Auzoa* is the area of the neighbourhood, a geographical approximation that *contains* the network of participants. As such, this is also a derivative of the neighbourhood in linguistic and socio-political terms. Lucia points to factors such as class and ethnicity: the participatory element is more pronounced in working-class neighbourhoods and in those with a strong Basque identity, and less pronounced in affluent or predominantly Spanish-speaking areas. Age is also a factor, as young people often take the lead in holding communal gatherings and enacting collective decisions. There is a strong element of care in the neighbourhood where Lucia grew up and went to school; this manifests in actions like organising food parcels for vulnerable members, or helping the elderly during the COVID pandemic.

There is an additional facet to the role of language in the space of the refugee camp: the humanitarian vocabulary sometimes reinforces the boundaries of separation between volunteers and refugees. (25) In other words, the jargon of humanitarianism can lead to exclusion.

Mae Shummo brings up an image from the poem that speaks of neighbourhood but not society:

**Mae Shummo 'Every family has a story' but there are those who have no family or neighbours, like the beggar. Do they even care if there is a story? Pasolini is talking about them as well.**

What about the neighbourhood as locale – a realm that contains the people who do not partake in the community and in which there are other life forms, not just people? Davide and [Ania](#) both narrate how the sensory references in the poem made them think of their early years:

**Davide Bugarin The noisy, loud neighbourhood takes me back to my childhood in the Philippines, having animals in the background, having the sea in the background, the frogs, all the sounds, the neighbourhood murmuring...**

**Ania Dabrowska *gleboko w zapach lip* ('deep into the scent of the lindens') takes me to a memory of a specific place – my grandmother's village, central Poland, a country lane lined with linden trees, a straight line leading from the village church to the village cemetery, always fragrant, buzzing with bees, singing wind, shaded and cool, sweet in the summer heat. Walking with flowers, watering cans, small garden tools to clear the graves, often with grandmother – *always with grandmother – my sister, sometimes cousin.***

Davide remarks that Pasolini uses the word *vicinità* for neighbourhood. It makes sense that the vicinity is described sensorily; smells, sounds and weather constantly redraw the contours of the neighbourhood, making it a realm of shifting boundaries. From day to night, wet season to dry season, one gauges its outer reaches, similarly to hearing a stone's echo when it hits the bottom of the well; an auditory interpretation that is approximate yet factual. Mores, attitudes and behaviours can guide us that way too. The neighbourhood becomes a mental map dotted with memories of approval and disapproval, gossip and scandal – an emotional topography with heat zones of safety and risk drawn over time.

Is geography translatable? The farther away we stray from the neighbourhood in Pasolini's poem, the more abstract geography becomes. The mentions of *ancient grandmothers come from inland and distant regions connected by a hinterland* relay no details, topographic or other. I wonder how these opaque origins resound across different countries or geographical contexts.

Lucia Medina Uriarte **There are two movements or geographical conditions that come to mind in relation to the Basque Country. One is probably up until the twentieth century when the way of life by the coast was quite distinct from living in the mountains. The grandmother from inland makes me think of dispersed, agricultural populations. The other movement is from the twentieth century onwards, when Bilbao became an industrial centre. There was a lot of migration from all around Spain, and especially from the central regions. If you think of that time, you could read this as referring to a family that came from somewhere else a few generations back, like my father's family.**

In Glissant's works, opacity is often preserved in the back-country (*l'arrière-pays*), which is contrasted with realms that are fully configured, such as the commercial ports of colonial maritime networks and the coastal plantations. The unequivocality of imperial configuration dissolves as one moves inland; identity and relations, including language, elude colonial deciphering. When I ask Nina how a Maltese person might read 'hinterland', she seems conscious of the fact that the absence of a hinterland makes Malta geographically transparent:

Nina Gerada **Malta is small, and there are no mountains... there is no hinterland to speak of. If you move away from the coast you are just farther away from the coast.**

Following Glissant, this legibility is consistent as both cause and effect with the numerous colonisations of the island from antiquity to modern times.

Nina Gerada **I went to a school which had been set up by the British, so it had that 'raising good English girls' culture, even though I didn't realise it at the time. But now that I've thought**

**this through, I can see what it was like in my years at school...  
You weren't allowed to speak Maltese at school.**

The Maltese language has evolved over centuries of hybridisation from a multitude of diverse languages and dialects. It is there, rather than in the Maltese topography, that we find a conceptual equivalent of Glissant's hinterland, a repository of relations that resist colonial deciphering and dismantling. Even earlier than Maltese became a written language, colonisers had tried to overwhelm or eliminate it, only to witness it assimilate their own languages. Nina recalls a colloquial jibe that encapsulates divides across languages, ethnicities and classes in Malta, and confirms spoken language as the point of maximal resistance:

**Nina Gerada *Tal-pepe* means a person who calls his/her father 'papà'. The educated/professional class used to speak Italian – it was the official language in law and education – and called their father 'papà'. So, the working class, who spoke Maltese, mockingly called them 'tal-pepe'. This became synonymous with being a snob and later, when Malta was a British colony and English had become the official language, tal-pepe came to describe the British. Or the privately educated, those upwardly mobile folk who worked for the British.**

Pasolini seems instinctively attuned to the concept of opacity when he introduces *the old beggar who doesn't care; /or anyone who has no family or neighborhood /or is under the illusion that he does*. Here, the origin and familial ties hold out against translation, protected by the impenetrable hinterland 'which will remain forever unknown' unlike the 'ever-more diaphanous Adriatic.' Deliberately or not, Pasolini steers us away from gauging this abstract person's ancestry – their hinterland – and with a soft, yet decisive break, we move on: *Whatever the case, here it is a summer night...*

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**(2) sense for sense: hubris and the visible translator**

The work of the writer consists of taking words from this dictionary, where they are kept as if in a shrine, in order to use them in a specific manner: specific in respect to the historical moment of the word and of the writer. The result of this process is to increase the historical value of the word, that is, to increase the meaning of the word.

– Pier Paolo Pasolini, *The Cinema of Poetry*, 1965 (26)

A translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux.

– Walter Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator*, 1921 (27)

Anxiety to convey meaning often results in over-emphasis and emphasis as a way of conveying meaning means that you are unconsciously holding on to meaning and limiting it.

– M. NourbeSe Philip, *Lessons for the Voice*, 2015 (28)

When [Mina Boromand](#) read the poem, she was absorbed by the news from Gaza and the conflict between Israel and her country, Iran. The translation task was a welcome distraction, as was a linocut she made. She had never made a linocut before; while listening to the news she found herself carving a piece of wood, not trying to represent anything figuratively. She wrote down the translation next to the linocut print, creating a record of her occupation at that time; in fact, Mina chose an excerpt which she interpreted as speaking to that moment:

It's a while before the lights go out;  
you have a bone to pick with your sister  
– disdained from birth for reasons unknown  
but mysteriously kept deep in your heart –  
and mother

Mina thinks that the hour 'before the lights go out' stands for times of uncertainty. The 'bone to pick' with the sister and mother are differences between us and our neighbours and fellow humans, which must be put aside or resolved for the sake of solidarity and collective action. She tells me that upon reading the rest of the poem she thought that perhaps this was *not* what

it was about, but she then went on to read more about Pasolini and concluded that her translation was nevertheless faithful to his personality and preoccupations. This admission of ignoring the immediate context of the stanza (the poem as a whole) in favour of a broader context (Pasolini's life and work), takes me aback at first – it would never cross my mind to take such liberty with a translation – but soon I come to terms with it and begin to see its potential.

As we discuss her approach, Mina tells me that she is aphantasic. [Aphantasia](#) is a trait which affects one's visual memory and understanding. Mina struggles to retain visual information, and so her memory relies on different mechanisms to process and store. The diminishment of a whole category of associations creates a freedom too. As a child, she says, she had an unusual capacity to move on from unpleasant realities and adapt to new situations, such as having to spend a long summer away from her parents. She does not know if this has impacted her on a deeper level; concerning her artistic practice, it means that she is neither aided nor encumbered by visual connections that her mind has already discarded. Most of the time, there is a clear path forward through her immediate encounter with things – what she perceives in the present.

In the essay titled 'Seeing clearly, glimpsing, picturing', Lavinia Greenlaw wonders if clarity of vision can be contained in a moment, and if that moment can somehow be held on to:

Perhaps seeing clearly is not a matter of emptying the eye of preconception but pinpointing the moment of when the brain is starting to make sense of what it sees and before it has crowded out fresh information with those preconceptions. [\(29\)](#)

I point out that artists try hard to re-adjust their brains to be able to see new associations in the familiar, whereas this seems to come naturally to her. Mina acknowledges that at times it can be a drawback and at other times an advantage, but she says she does not compare her experience with that of other people. 'This is just how it is for me.'

A little earlier in her essay, Greenlaw describes her encounter with the drawing of a mouse on a manuscript. The clarity of vision in that moment does not come about by coincidence; instead, it is facilitated:

Seeing these things clearly, we stop seeing them at all and focus on their surfaces as a wonder of colour and design. What makes this possible is what stands between us and them: the artist and the page. The artist has put us in place. Looking at Hoefnagel's mouse, I find myself a little above it and unusually close as if on my hands and knees. I can't get any nearer and I can't move. [\(30\)](#)

The similarity between Greenlaw's example and Mina's perception of the poem excerpt is in the disappearance of the mid-distance viewpoint. What we are left with are the close-up view (the mouse and, in Mina's case, the stanza), and a broader context (Greenlaw's inquiry about Hoefnagel, and Mina's about Pasolini).

The effect of the elimination of the mid-distance view can be jarring; in reaching for an unrelated context, Mina has disrupted the temporality of the poem – when Pasolini wrote it more than half a century ago, he did not have current political events in mind. Secondly, in maintaining the close-up view on the verse, Mina opts for a modernist interpretation, one that lies outside the poet's intentions. Her reading is radical not because it is unprecedented in art or literature, but because it is performed without subversive intention, only with the conviction of the senses. As words pop out, the poem momentarily fades away, like Hoefnagel's painting when our eyes focus on the mouse.

This issue concerns the visibility of the translator, an extensively debated matter in the field of translation studies. Should the audience be reminded of the translator's presence, or is it preferable that they forget they are reading a translation? Is the translator's invisibility a virtue achieved through technique, or does it amount to tricking the reader into forgetting that they are not engaging with an original? What is at stake with these

opposing attitudes becomes clearer if we look at the best- and worst-case scenarios they offer: those who argue for invisibility may regard the translator as either a quiet mediator or an imposter; whereas those who prefer to be made aware of the fact of translation may view the translator as either a poet or a deceiver. The range of characterisations is intriguing.

According to Cicero, literary translation should be confined within a literal, word-for-word transposition, whereas the orator is permitted the more intuitive 'sense-for-sense' translation. The exclusive licence is probably granted in recognition of the orator's task: political persuasion. Crucially, Cicero's sense-for-sense translation is realised in performance, not manuscripts. Poised or sensational, appealing to the audience's principles or its shrewdness, seeking to manipulate or coerce, speaking gently or waving his power about, the politician-actor delivers the message explicitly or between the lines: an instructive story, a promised gain, a concealed threat.

Cicero is unambiguous about the degree of visibility: the literary interpreter must remain diligent and 'unseen', whereas the translator-orator performs in the spotlight. This is not surprising; Cicero had studied in the Athenian Akadēmia where Plato's legacy loomed large. Plato famously wanted to banish poets from his Republic, for fear they would corrode its political life. The reason for his antipathy was that according to Plato, the perceived world is a copy of the real one, so poets are guilty of straying ever further from the truth by creating imitations of an imitation. If, for Plato, the problem is the discrepancy between the imitation and the original, then it is the translator that he distrusts in the poet – poetry is translation is hubris.

A.E.B. Coldiron writes that one of the reasons behind the translator's continued invisibility in modern times is the sway that the myth of Babel holds over Western tradition and literature. The punishment of multilingualism in the archetypal translation story and the resolution reached in the New Testament resemble the discipline that cautionary tales aim to instil in children: 'we are to be passive, obedient and credulous,

so as to undo the curse given for having been successfully industrious, ingenious and cooperative.’ (31)

Coldiron suggests that a secular rewriting of the myth of Babel would remove the taboo of the translator as a threat to originality, because ‘Human cooperation, curiosity and mutual understanding do not threaten a destructive deity, nor do translations threaten such literary gods as Authorship or Originality.’ (32)

Biblical myths do not get removed or rewritten. Babel has persisted in our conscience for millennia. In the story, the inflicted multilingualism has a dual objective: to stave off the revolt, *then* punish it. The symbolism of the punishment comes after the expedient action, precisely because this is a political crisis. The myth is conceived to deter hubris, to warn us against upsetting the equilibrium of governance, which usually begins with the rejection of its word and laws. We cannot detach the allegory from the myth – that is what Babel tells us; we cannot rewrite its story or overreach in any way, because that too would amount to hubris. Babel is self-referential; the myth is also the decree, erected symbolically on a site of demolition.

It is worth examining how Plato’s (and by extension, Cicero’s) absolutism differs from that of Babel. In *Phaedrus* (written around the same time as the *Republic*), Plato, through the character of Socrates, denounces the art of writing for the same reason that he wants to expel poets; namely, imitation.

You know, Phaedrus, writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offsprings of painting stand there as if they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You’d think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever. When it has once been written down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn’t know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not.

And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its support. (33)

The malady, then, is the fixedness of writing, not hubris. Hubris is open-ended; it is committed by venturing farther than one is supposed to, in search of originality, whereas writing is the stagnant replica of speech. So, in Babel, the impasse is originality as divine privilege; in Plato it is the writing itself. Both tales end in voicelessness, but for opposite reasons: one overreaches and the other does not reach far enough.

Earlier in Phaedrus, Plato postulates that part of the philosopher's wisdom is the ability to gauge his audience and tailor his speech according to their intellectual level. (34) For him, oration is not only part of philosophy; it is also its last critical juncture. Conversely, this is what writing cannot do once it is fixed on papyrus. This is the same inflexibility that typifies the word-for-word translation compared to the sense-for-sense.

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The path towards visibility invites scrutiny, and it also leads to hubris – or at least controversy, if we prefer a modern or secular equivalent. How prepared are we modern readers to accept a visible translator? The answer hinges on our theoretical and ideological views on the scope and broader purpose of translation.

In *The Task of the Translator*, Walter Benjamin comments on the mutual exclusivity of words in each language, which reveals to us that languages are supplementary in their intentions. (35) Translation points at that which is exclusive to a word in a particular language – what is meant differently or what is not meant at all when we compare with other languages. For Benjamin, this mitigation between the greater forces of language and history becomes a higher, if hidden, purpose of translation, distinct from the incidental concerns of any specific translation task. He is drawn to ideas of historical time, progress, and

messianic interruptions – not the practicalities of translation – and so he becomes engrossed in the innermost linguistic relationships. (36) While Benjamin does not use the word ‘method’ in his essay, there is a methodological hue to the value he assigns to translation: it offers, among other things, a comparative process for exploring the histories and associations of languages. In other words, Benjamin is not interested in translation methodology, but in translation *as* method. In recognising this potential, he understands translation as a mediator between *domains* of language, not just words or phrases. The question that concerns artistic practice, then, is whether translation can also bridge across other domains of expression, not just linguistic ones.

In his essay on poetics and semiotics titled *The Cinema of Poetry*, Pasolini compares how the filmmaker and the literary author navigate the creation of an aesthetic object (film and text, respectively). From the outset, he recognises that the filmmaker has to perform an additional task: to create a dictionary of image-signs before syntax and style can be pursued. (37) Words are readily available to the writer, whereas the filmmaker needs to think up images and then create them before assembling them into a narrative.

In van Lancker’s film *Kalès*, the handing over of the camera by the director to some of the refugees in the camp means that the filmmaker entrusts the conception and realisation of image-signs to others. The filmmaker later arranges/edits these signs, like an author trying to write a novel or poem with words – new words – conceived by others. The inherent concreteness of images prevents the cacophony of Babel; images are tethered by their recognisable content, as opposed to words, which are abstract, at least initially, and meaningful only by convention. The authenticity of images in *Kalès* – the fact that the participants capture their own lived space – reinforces that concreteness of images.

Once in the editing timeline, the images carry an abstract quality as well, because they have been severed from their creator and the initial logic behind their collection. At first glance, this

creative tension exists in any unscripted documentary film if the camera operator and the editor are not the same person. There is, however, another element here, related to perspective and metaphor, which Pasolini explores in the same essay.

The problem with the creation and utilisation of the 'dictionary' of images is that it ties film down to a prosaic mode. (38) Images do not have the cultural specificity of words, which are rooted through usage and tradition, so, by necessity, film 'narrates' its images; that is, it is forced to illustrate, or at least imply their connection to one another, so that the images can 'speak' articulately. How, then, asks Pasolini, can film untie itself from the prosaic and attain poetic expression, even fleetingly?

This turns out to be an inquiry with intersemiotic translation at its heart. One of the possibilities Pasolini identifies lies in the literary 'free indirect discourse' whereby the author substitutes their own point of view for that of the protagonist. (39) Pasolini suggests that the cinematic equivalent is a change of perspective between shots, from character to director. He calls it 'free indirect point of view' and he thinks that it can liberate the director from the prosaic, but only to an extent; another rationale or pretext is necessary for the director to experiment with formal elements like the poet does. This element resides in metaphor. He cites Michelangelo Antonioni's film *The Red Desert* (1963), where the director merges his perspective with that of the main character and uses her neurosis to express his own formal vision of the world, delivered through countless free indirect point-of-view shots and 'syntactical' breaks. The outcome and its significance are described by Pasolini as follows:

This insistence on particulars, especially on certain details of the digressions, is a deviation in relation to the method of the film: *it is the temptation to make another film*. It is, in short, the presence of the author, who transcends his film in an abnormal freedom and who constantly threatens to abandon it, detoured by a sudden inspiration which is, finally, the latent inspiration of the love for the poetic world of his own vital experiences. (40)

The question that concerns poetics and migrant/refugee cinema more broadly is: what similar metaphor exists that will enable a merging of the director's and subject's perspectives? If Antonioni's film, for example, uses the character's neurosis towards a formal articulation, what technical affordance might be discovered in the migrant's or refugee's perspectives?

This is highly subjective territory, but I think that *Kalès* uncovers a potential in the articulation of real time into filmic time. When the place or time changes, there is little sense of whether the same person is operating the camera, how far we are from where we were before, and how much time has passed. The sounds and silences of the film – for example, a shift from the bustle of the camp to the quiet parts of nature around it – amplify the disorientation. This subtle yet constant tension conveys the residents' daily anxiety when operating in this environment and having to wield it to their advantage.

An even more potent analogy is subliminal: the temporal incongruity harks back to the skewed temporalities of refugeeism – the unabating impact of adverse events (war, fleeing, perilous journeys, hostile encounters, etc.) in the new reality. The journeys and situations that one undergoes sever the present from previous states of life, but they also persist in dream-like manner. This is what *Kalès* works towards: a poetics which almost imperceptibly reproduces the fragmentation and ruptures of refugee time. This soundscape, or time-scape, lays the director's formal vision as a foundation that will carry the [multivocality](#) of the characters.

The overlaps between intention, method and coincidence in this case are precipitated by the translations across mediums (language and film) or modes (filming and editing). In a chapter titled 'Translation as Migration: The Unfolding of a Metaphor', Marta Araldi refers to an observation by Matthew Reynolds, author of *The Poetics of Translation* (2011):

Stylistic, thematic, and rhetorical aspects of source texts can affect the ways in which they are themselves translated.

... This means for instance, that erotic texts may elicit erotic translations, just as diasporic texts may activate displacing translatory tools. (41)

In *Kalés*, this correspondence between subject and poetics takes place inadvertently, but there are examples where it is consciously exploited. Christian Rossipal writes about such an approach which is more explicitly formal than van Lancker's: in Philip Scheffner's film *Havarie* (2017), the brief footage from a boat with refugees is slowed down to almost still images, with each filmic frame stretched to a full second.

While the visual information is reduced to a bare minimum, the soundscape is dense and layered. Radio communication between vessels and maritime rescue centers can be heard in Arabic, French, English, Russian, and Spanish: "The lifeboat ... has given us their arrival time. They still need about an hour and a half from now." What appears to be personal testimonies can also be heard: "They were waving and people were waving back to them. It was a strange, strange sight." [...] Witnesses and rescue personnel are interspersed with migrants and refugees who speak about going to see their loved ones, their hassle with authorities to get papers, and having to seek medical treatment in Europe. (42)

Here, the sound is syncretic rather than analogous; by doing away with synchronicity, Scheffner deliberately distorts time in a twofold way: expanding the image duration while condensing the timeline of events into the soundscape. Unlike the effect in *Kalés*, this causes a sharp tear between perspectives, rather than merging them. The image clings to the 'now' of the refugees on the boat, while the sound expands beyond the frame to relay information by the filmmaker - [narrator](#), with plenty of hindsight.

We find a similarly expansive methodology in Caroline Bergvall's *Drift*, which ventures into other genres and mediums: Bilingual poetry (in Norwegian and English, the author's languages) which includes rune-like symbols; narration based

on official reports; line and symbol-based drawings which in their abstract repetition looks as if they were sublimated from a seascape; and a map series of different places and scales abstracted into uniform white dots scattered on near-black pages. (43) The subject of the book is unclear: a boat incident? The sea observed, the sea as lore, or perhaps the sea as witness of time, gatherer of events and swallower of lives and gazes? Or is it language? It seems that the subject continually shifts until it becomes a sea mirage and all that remains is process, or the memory of a process – content dissolving into pure translation. On Mina's page, the coexistence of the translated verses and the linocut print look aleatory rather than discursive: the verses have an allegorical function, whilst the print is a sensory interpretation. Even though they are created in different mediums, for Mina the two works are complementary, because they are connected by the events that inspired them and by their simultaneity. Together, they express Mina's emotions about this moment in time, *now*. The significance of this articulation is that it owes its existence to a loosening of self-censorship, a kind of un-filtering, rather than to inquiry or method.

At this instance when self-censorship is loosened or removed, translation threatens to embark on a fragmented reading of the present. Its initial task may seem at peril, but if it does not stray so far that it loses sight of the factual task, then it reveals itself as an artistic act and a critical tool, at once disruptive and reconciling. Where that exact red line lies – the boundary that should not be crossed – is not the issue here; opinions will vary according to the text in question, schools of thought, other predispositions, personal taste, mood, weather, etc. What matters is that there is, in theory at least, a liminal space where the actual task, fluid parameters, and the subjectivity of the artist-as-translator coexist in creative tension.

If this threshold appears, even fleetingly, in a passage, stanza, or verse, it is counter-productive to ignore it or reject it based on narrow interpretations of the role of translation or dichotomous theories (visibility/invisibility of the translator, domestication/foreignisation, and other binaries). I think

[Benjamin recognises a threshold similar to Pasolini's alternating perspectives](#) when he notes that

Unlike a work of literature, translation finds itself not in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooden ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in an alien one. (44)

This exploration of the visibility of the translator and its connection to hubris began from an unconventional step in Mina's translation. Notes on a paper, a linocut print, aphantasia, Greenlaw's encounter with Hoefnagel's mouse, a biblical myth, Cicero, Plato, Pasolini, Benjamin, tales from Calais and tales from the sea brought us to this threshold where hubris unveils a poetic potential, allowing us a glimpse of what translation can offer to poetry, art, and criticism whilst situated on their doorstep.

\*

### (3) sacred or holy? bodies, skirmishes

Whatever the case, here it is a summer night,  
youth is eternal,  
and the skirmishes have been brought to a victorious conclusion—  
the unrealized kiss,  
victory of the virgin's aridity;  
he has departed, "tall and blond," deep into the scent of the lindens.

W każdym razie, tutaj jest letnia noc,  
Młodość jest nieśmiertelna,  
A potyczki zakończone zwycięską konkluzją –  
Niespełnione pocałunki,  
Zwycięstwo dziewiczej jałowości;  
On już odszedł, "wysoki i jasnowłosy", *głęboko w zapach lip.*

It is time to go home,  
voices continue to rise from other houses,  
the neighborhood speaks with sleepless voices;  
perhaps they hear frogs in the distance,

and of course a light wind blows in from the sea  
It's wartime; and if the girls laugh, it's because they are holy—

Ang barangay ay nagsasalita sa mga tinig na di makatulog  
Marahil ay naririnig nila ang huni ng mga palaka sa malayo,  
At siyempre, may mahinang hanging umiihip mula sa dagat.  
Panahon ng digmaan; at kung tumatawa ang mga babae, **ito ay dahil sila ay banal**

**(marahil ito'y dahil taglay nila ang kabanalan)**

This chapter abandons conventional narration in favour of a more immediate form, using conversational excerpts and other fragments. If Cicero's term *conversio* implies a dialogue between the author and the translator, that dialogue transcends time. Rather than a limitation, the temporal gaps can be seen as a potential – unravelling the space in which translation operates. The conversation that follows, is constructed across spatial and temporal barriers: participants who were not sitting in the same room are brought together in text. Notes, quotes, ponderings, communications and diary entries are juxtaposed with one another.

20 April 2025

Another version of the same excerpt produced, this time for the subtitles of the film, matching what was spoken on camera, rather than the script. Torange has translated Hana's words back into English. This is the fifth version of the excerpt, not counting the unused Farsi version created by Shayestah.

Mae Shummo **Is the poem set in contemporary times? It reads like something taking place in the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century. There are not that many details, it could be anywhere. It's meant to be Athens, but when, who knows exactly... Athens seems like a placeholder, it could be other cities in war or facing adversity.**

*Athens*, last verse:

It's wartime; and if the girls laugh, it's because they're holy—

A more accurate word-for-word transposition of 'C' e la guerra' into English would be 'There is war' rather than 'It's watime'. The difference is slight, but not without implications. 'It's wartime' sounds ubiquitous, whereas 'there is war' is

ambiguous; it leaves us wondering about the war's location and its proximity – there is war *somewhere*, not necessarily here. There is news about war, maybe rumours, and the impact is felt in some way. The Athenians in the poem know about this war, whether they have witnessed the war first-hand or not.

**Mae Shummo** The mention of war comes at the end, but from the beginning I felt that something was up. When you read under the everyday described in the poem there is also a disdain, perhaps, or at least a harshness. There is a warning, when he uses 'skirmishes', because it is a war term. The memory of lindens – it *is* a memory. The mention of war makes it so; otherwise, why wouldn't you remember the name?

**This is why in the present day I could place this in Sudan; not because of the narrative of the daily life, but because he's not talking about normal times, he's speaking about times when things are obvious, like wartime. Everything during war is heightened, it's obvious, you can't miss it. Somehow justifications are found for things. Much of life becomes a transaction, and I think that's how Pasolini is using sex in the poem.**

A scene in 2017: At times I let the camera run, to record what took place between the passages. Only later, during editing, did I notice some things it had captured – for example how often the same children appeared in footage that had been shot in different parts of the camp on the same day. At one point, a conversation between two men unfolds far in the distance. After about a minute, a woman comes out of a trailer, unusually well dressed for the camp, with jewellery and a handbag. The two men exchange a DAP handshake and one of them leaves together with the woman.

There was something awkward and unusual about the scene – had I witnessed a prostitution transaction? Or was I misinterpreting the postures and signs? I have since wondered if that memory played a part in my choosing Pasolini's poem. Or was it the view of the trailers which recalled the description of the lined-up houses 'as in the poor quarters of Rio'? Or the mention of wartime and the girls' laughter, which was a direct

parallel to adolescents getting on with life in the camp, having fled the war in Syria?

**Daide Bugarin** In the last verse, are the girls saintly, or are they sacred? Or pure? That is the main challenge for me to be able to understand the poem. I am reading 'holy' in terms of purity. He says 'girls', he doesn't say 'women'. Are they literally girls, or does he call them girls because they're pure?

**Mae Shummo** Are the men soldiers? Are the women doing this voluntarily or are they exploited? He throws in some hints and lets you ponder on them. And when I do that, I can see situations that people experience right now in Darfur, where sex is weaponised. Women's bodies are implicated for political reasons. There are instances of rape and murder by the RSF, and instances of marriage happening under the gun. They will bring gifts to the bride, jewellery, gold... and supposedly they'll seek the dad's permission while in reality they're holding the whole family hostage. Horrific.

24 April 2025

Curious about the English translation we are using for translating to our languages. I've asked [Niside](#) what she thinks of it in relation to Pasolini's original.

26 April 2025, *email from Niside*

Niside thinks the English translation is straightforward and sometimes leans towards the poetic in comparison to Pasolini's verse, which is plainer. It has caught her attention that Pasolini uses 'holy' for the girls. Wonders why not 'sacred'. She thinks 'holy' ties the girls to a Catholic idea of purity, as opposed to delivering them from all that happens in the poem.

**Daide Bugarin** In Italian you wouldn't really say about people that they are sacred – it's very poetic, feels too heavy to bestow on someone. 'Holy', for all its Catholic significance can also be used ironically. I wouldn't use the word *banal* ('sacred') in Tagalog either. Probably because of the profanity, a sense of shame, I guess. [Laughs] I am very queer.

Daide's work explores architectures of shame.

Davide Bugarin **I'm looking at the penal code [in the Philippines] for another project. Article 153 states that any religious reference must be respectful, and not offend religious feelings. Recently there was a drag queen who impersonated Jesus and they got arrested.**

I think Davide means article 133, not 153, though there are overlaps. *Remember to ask him.*

From the revised penal code in the Philippines **Act No. 3815, s. 1930. Art. 133. Offending the religious feelings. — The penalty of arresto mayor in its maximum period to prisión correccional in its minimum period shall be imposed upon anyone who, in a place devoted to religious worship or during the celebration of any religious ceremony shall perform acts notoriously offensive to the feelings of the faithful. (45)**

Davide Bugarin **Maybe it's not for that reason [profanity] that I wouldn't use 'holy' – it's rather a matter of register.**

Ania Dabrowska (on register) **I left Poland when I was eighteen, I had already learned to talk about my body, and the word 'virgin' in Polish makes me think of that teenage body... at the time when talking about being a virgin would have been very awkward. And then there's the icon of Virgin Mary, which in Poland is so normalised, so you say the word a lot. Whereas when I say 'virgin' in English, there are almost no associations, it just passes over me. So, there is the teenage memory of the body, awkward, and then there is my adult female subjectivity, whatever that is, which I developed living as an adult in London. And sometimes, when thinking about different periods and circumstances of our life through language, these boundaries are not distinct, but migration makes them more apparent.**

Hana told me that her Farsi does not come across as colloquial in Afghanistan, but rather as formal or erudite. 'They'd tell me, you speak as if you had swallowed books.'

Ania Dabrowska **I thought about 'aridity' as something dry that doesn't have nutritious potential for any growth. I looked it up and the phrase 'virgin's aridity' made me consider 'aridity' poetically, in a symbolic or metaphorical way. I think I searched for synonyms of it in Polish to reconnect with my mother tongue.**

My mother tongue is not  
not a foreign lan lan lang  
language  
l/anguish  
    anguish  
— a foreign anguish.

M. NourbeSe Philip, *Discourse on the Logic of Language* ([46](#))

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Daide Bugarin **'Sacred' is elevated, enshrined within poetry, whereas Pasolini does not write like that, he uses simple Italian.**

So maybe 'holy' comes closer to how everyday people would refer to someone pure (?)

Daide mentions 'simple Italian'. In her email Niside refers to it as 'standard Italian... whatever that means'. She implies that the existence of a pure, absolute linguistic form is fiction, but she also highlights that the poem is stripped of dialect. I have underlined her words and want to find out what 'standard Italian' means for Pasolini. He wrote his early poems in the Friulian dialect but then transitioned to non-accented Italian –

From *Pasolini as Jew*, by Robert S.C. Gordon **Finally, following the move to Rome and under the influence of Pascoli in particular, a synthesis of this dialect idiom and aesthetic with a national dimension, in the civic 'umile Italia' of *Le ceneri di Gramsci* (1957).** ([47](#))

From S. Sartarelli's foreword to his translation of Pasolini's poetry **The institutions ingrained in the Italian language also enable the poet to address a broader collectivity, the Church and, eventually, the nation, with all the ambivalence this may entail. ... Where the dialect poems evoke primarily the simple, almost pagan Christianity that Pasolini was so pleased to find still intact among the Friulian peasantry, in Italian he immediately confronts the**

instituted Church head on, flirting with sacrilege ('ah, blasphemies, heresies, sole sweet memory of Christ'). (48)

From *La Rabbia*, by Pier Paolo Pasolini:

Soon the days came  
when the heroes took up dressing in grey,  
and those who were good citizens before the war  
went back to being good citizens,  
in the Catholic faith and bourgeois ferocity  
conducive to the city's ceremonies.

Time was a slow victory  
that crashed the victors and the defeated. (49)

This addresses both of Niside's observations – the plain Italian in which the poem is written and the specific choice of 'holy'. Pasolini does not want to avoid the Church but to confront it. Does he canonise the girls as the Church *should*? Put them on a pedestal? Not the sacredness bestowed by the poet, but the holiness that the common faithful assign; he is thinking of the Church as a body, not as institution.

15 March 2026

In search of Pasolini's 'holy' I remember a series of photographs, sent to me by a friend who worked at the Calais refugee camp as an art therapist. Around 2016 – before the destruction of the camp in the same year, and a short while after I began filming at Eleonas. I search through old hard drives and find the photos. They depict the Christian Orthodox chapel/tent in the camp. It had been set up next to one of the schools, by Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees, and was open to all. 'It was a beautiful thing', Naomi tells me, 'among the many grim spaces in the camp.'

Pasolini frequently employs [frozen register](#) in his films, specifically religious words or iconography which he juxtaposes with informal elements and language, as a means of reclaiming faith from the Catholic institutions for the lower classes. Some of the many examples that spring to mind:

- in *Mamma Roma*, the loose pigs and the insult-singing exchanges during the wedding banquet, which is visually composed like Leonardo's Last Supper;
- also in *Mamma Roma*, Ettore strapped on a prison bed recalling Mantegna's Crucifixion and intercut with images of the working class in Rome's *borgate*;
- in *La Ricotta*, peasant Stracci's gorging on cheese and bread to his death, filmed in gritty B&W and juxtaposed with a staged Crucifixion during a film shoot shown in lush Technicolor.

In *Athens*, the 'simple', un-tinted Italian provides the deliberately casual register required for this kind of reclamation, but every now and then archetypes (the virgin, the sex worker, the saintly girls) are contrasted with [intimate register](#) in the form of sound or image, rather than language: the echo of the girls' laughter from the bedrooms upstairs, or the eroticism of watching the young man being absorbed into the scent of lindens.

Davide Bugarin (on that last image)... **watching with a sense of shame, who knows why, perhaps because of feeling he is not masculine enough.**

From *Pasolini as Jew*, by Robert S.C. Gordon (highlighting mine):  
**in 1962, [Pasolini travelled] to Egypt, Sudan, and Kenya again (and also Greece: not beyond Europe, but later re-envisioned by Pasolini with alienating, anthropological, and 'de-Europeanizing' eyes) (50)**

Davide Bugarin **In Tagalog, in a spoken, colloquial way, I would say 'holy', or 'oly' with a Filipino accent. There's a lot of English on media, TV, etc. It would still be related to the Catholic concept and understanding of holiness. In the Philippines the word 'virgin' has a stronger connotation of religion, even than in Italy.**

Italian, Polish, Tagalog – these languages respond to the Catholic tradition (and so does Maltese), so I wonder how the difference between holy and sacred is understood in other traditions or creeds. I ask Mae how she perceives it in Arabic.

Mae Shummo **For 'holy' one could use *kadasa*, but it's conditional – only because we know that it's *not* used in terms of worship; it is**

just for the literal translation of a word in a poem which is written by a non-Muslim person. Because for Muslim people *kadasa* can only be attributed to God. Or the Quran. I wouldn't feel comfortable using that word in reciting this excerpt. Another option is to translate 'holy' to *baraka*, which means 'blessed', but instead I created a descriptive sentence, where I used four different terms, co-opted to convey holy. I used *noor* ('light'), *huda* ('guidance'), *baraka* ('blessing'), and *q'dar* ('destiny'). I wrote *maloum q'dar*, which is a 'known destiny' – it is known to God only, not to us. This ties with the theme of war.

On a day of filming, just when we have arrived in the camp, one of the participants/informants texts me that s/he cannot come. A text message in broken English, written hastily. S/he has taken ill and is at the hospital. We film other stuff, waiting for updates, slightly worried. Between takes s/he sends me a selfie from the A&E. Breathing mask on, looking towards the phone camera; does not look distressed, rather stoic. Nothing untranslatable about a breathing mask, and nothing to translate.

Language started shaking  
ok the day started shaking  
ok words are a matter of shaking  
ok openly handled  
ok ok turn gold to goats

Caroline Bergvall, *The Drift*, 2014 ([51](#))

From *La Rabbia*, by Pier Paolo Pasolini:

16. Experimenting with ways to split truth apart and present the remaining half-truth in the only voice through which the bourgeoisie is able to speak: the voice countering any ideal with a debasing irony, the voice countering Tragedy with jokes, the voice countering the excesses of meek men with the common sense of murderers.

17. Skulls and bones  
(*Silence*)

([52](#))

Mae Shummo 'The unrealised kiss, the victory of the virgin's aridity' ...this is where theology comes in, or the spiritual aspect. The women in Darfur who are raped or forced to marry... in Islam this is not valid, that marriage is void. In the eyes of God they are holy. By going to war the men become ungodly, normal rules now don't apply and these men make the rules, their power is absolute, but that's in their mind only. In God's truth, these women are still virgins, it doesn't matter how many men have had their way with them, because it wasn't consensual. The laughter is purity, retained. The body may be subjected to things that you are not able to repel, but your soul is not trapped within that state.

In thinking through Mina's translation into Farsi and Mae's into Sudanese Arabic I realise that the sharpest divergence from literal translation occurs in the harsh parts of the poem: the 'bone to pick', the disdained-from-birth sister, and the theme of prostitution. When we talk about it with Torange Khonsari, who helps me understand the word-for-word transliteration from English into Farsi, she says that it is common in Persian to avoid banal or unpleasant elements in poetry and translation. I cannot help thinking that this exaltation is pre-modern, though perhaps it is diachronic rather than outdated; instead of eliminating harshness or bleakness it works around them, and in the end leaves them there in subtle disguise, like a quiet lament behind the veil of the verse. The procedure, like Pasolini's poem, ends in absolution.

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## epilogue

In *Short Talk on Homer and John Ashberry*, Anne Carson muses on a (translated) moment in the *Odyssey* where we encounter a mention of

δῆμον'Ονειρων, which Homer leaves undescribed and unexplained. Δῆμος is "people, population or country.", "Ονειρος", "dream." A demographic of dreams. My friend, Stanley Lombardo, translator, translates it "the dream deme." So how would this work? Big file catalogue with all the dreams waiting in alphabetical order to slip into some

head at night? Or they're standing around with drinks? Or so bored by signifying they lie on the ground in heaps? Have a gift shop? Sell books by Adorno? Form factions and animosities? Perch on chairs like an audition? Smell of sweat? Exhaustion and tears? Or are they blissed beyond meaning, barefoot, organised by gentle bells? Do they practice all the time to keep in dream shape or is it more like perfect pitch? ... If Freud is there, is he aloof or enjoying himself? (53)

There is a locale, a hinterland perhaps, where we have arrived like immigrants – a neighbourhood with specific flavour but no contour, so vivid and yet utterly indefinable that it compels an outsider to translate it into being.

There is the visible translator, Carson, stretching the thinking that comes with the discipline to its limit, conjuring a wild collage of images from a single phrase. More than visible because we get a generous insight into the task as she ad-libs on someone else's work without a deadline looming. She lets her imagination run, sets up a weird and wonderful reverie, allows intrusions at will, of recognisable people and inanimate things: Adorno, Freud, chairs and bells... This is not theorising about 'untranslatability' but revelling in the grey areas of translation, colouring them with pastels.

Is Carson asking "how does it work?" about Homer's original or about the translation? The boundary dissolves, like in Pasolini's free indirect point-of-view shot. Here between author and translator, not author and character.

And what of bodies? We find the strangest community in the most unlikely place, a world on the border between dreams and death, inhabited by disembodied beings. They exist in hybrid form, like pre-Platonic ideas awaiting description. Do they also exist *hubristically*? We know that hubris, that incredibly complex ancient concept, is etymologically related to 'hybrid'. Related mysteriously, not determinedly; dictionaries and linguists cannot trace exactly how, but here, in our encounter with these

ghost bodies, we can sense the connection because their mere presence undoes our ideas of the natural and the divine. This is where hubris begins, in visions or dreams. They are the product of inner translation, metaphors of deep-rooted desires and anxieties, or banal renderings of daily encounters and insecurities. Their origin and destination may be occasionally recognisable, but their nature remains obscure – are they images, words, or something in-between?

We have receded into ever more ancient and dreamy territory: from Cicero and Roman assemblies, past Babel and Plato, and into the Homeric δῆμον Ὀνειρώων. A parallel route could be imagined through Pasolini's work: from a subliminal Athens in an undisclosed time, to his dream of Oedipus' dream, a prolonged ritual in *Medea*, or the unrealised vision for an African *Oresteia*.

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## translations & reading

Dr Adeyemi Akande is a researcher interested in the material culture, religion, and visual art of pre-20th century West African societies. He lectures on history of art and architecture at London Metropolitan University. Adeyemi translated into Yoruba.

Mina Boromand is a multidisciplinary artist, originally from Iran. She took part in the revolution of 1979, and in its aftermath she experienced a series of displacements, to Afghanistan, the Soviet Union and, finally, Britain. Mina's work explores displacement, idealism, and pain, through memory. She teaches critical creative practices to art students. Mina translated into Farsi.

Davide Bugarin is an architectural designer and artist who works with film, performance and installation to explore architectures of shame, sound, and colonial afterlives. He often collaborates with Angel Cohn Castle under the name Bugarin + Castle. Davide translated into Tagalog.

Ania Dabrowska is an artist and curator. Drawing on archives, cultural iconographies, processes of myth-making, and 'narrative agitation', her work explores how meaning, agency, and belonging are formed and contested. Ania teaches Photography in London Metropolitan University. Ania translated into Polish.

Nina Gerada is a Maltese artist who works with clay, landscape, and the body to explore embodiment. Her processes are durational and intuitive, frequently centring the body as both subject and tool. Migration, memory, ancestry and land are also prominent concerns in her work. Nina translated into Maltese.

Dr Torange Khonsari is the founder of non-for-profit design practice Public Works Ltd and co-director of the Centre for Applied Research in Empowering Society (CARES) in London Metropolitan University. Torange translated into Farsi for the film.

Lucia Medina Uriarte is an architect working across practice, research and education between London and Zurich. She is currently working on a book about self-organised forms of architectural education and practice. Lucia translated into Basque.

Niside Panebianco is an artist and visual researcher working with photography, archives, and time-based media. Her research explores identity, memory and migration through collaborative practices and the use of mixed media. Niside read and discussed the original (Italian) version of Pasolini's poem.

Mae Shummo is a British Sudanese multidisciplinary artist and curator. Her curatorial research focuses on indigenous cultural production in a global context. Mae translated into Sudanese Arabic.

Shayestah Wahdat is an Afghan poet and musician based in Germany. She translated into Farsi for the film.

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Ektoras Arkomanis  
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