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Transliterated Vampires:
Subtitling and Globalization in
Timur Bekmambetov’s Night Watch “Trilogy”

In 1947, about twenty years into the sound film era, Hollywood Quarterly published an essay by Vsevolod Pudovkin entitled “The Global Film.” That Pudovkin’s article is tinged with nostalgia for the silent film era, with its unquestioned privileging of image over sound and spoken word, should come as little surprise. To Pudovkin, the silent film is artistically and linguistically superior to the sound film because verbal speech simultaneously encourages a focus on dialogue over visual imagery and montage, and because that speech must be translated in order to be understood by foreign audiences. A silent film’s intertitles could, he asserts, “be replaced in any language without harming the artistic integrity or the organic elements of the work.” But a sound film presents problems of translation that, to Pudovkin’s mind, inevitably ruined the artistic (read: visual) impact of the film: “Since the spectator has to read, almost without pause, the translated words of the film’s dialogue, idiotically printed on the picture itself, he cannot be expected to gain any impression from the pictorial composition of the original film […] He is not fully moved, as one should be by a work of art.” Dubbing, he claims, is little better, and Pudovkin passes over it in a single sentence. If the film is to be understood, and neither the replacement of one actor’s voice with another nor the “idiotic” printing of subtitles at the bottom of the screen is an adequate solution because both destroy artistic unity, then how is a foreign audience to appreciate the foreign film? How, in short, can film become “global”? Such questions of translation in global filmmaking—of visual and aural languages, of subtitling and dubbing—have been circulating since the advent of sound film, but have rarely been addressed in critical discourse. Two recent book-length studies, Abé Mark Nornes’ Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema and Mark Betz’s Beyond the Subtitle: Remapping European Art Cinema, have made important strides in identifying and addressing the theoretical and ideological implications of film translation. Both texts reveal Pudovkin’s assumptions regarding even silent film translation to be somewhat naïve. However, Pudovkin’s comments on the visual apparatus of the subtitle, particularly its tendency to draw the viewer’s eye to the bottom of the screen and fix it there, remain entirely relevant—and, all these years later, very infrequently addressed in academic writing on film. Borrowing (and perhaps extending) Nornes’ conception of “abusive subtitling,” this paper considers the use of animated subtitles in the American theatrical releases of two Russian good-versus-evil supernatural thrillers: Nochnoi Dozor (Night Watch, 2004/U.S. release 2006) and Dnevnoy Dozor (Day Watch, 2006/U.S. release 2007). In playing with color, spacing, placement, time, and movement, the subtitles in Night Watch and Day Watch help to close the linguistic gap between original and translated text. But the subtitles should not be considered apart of the other creative, economic, and political forces that shape the films as a whole—in fact, considering the implications inherent in any act of
translation, to do so would be rather nonsensical. These films enjoyed unprecedented success in Russia; first *Night Watch* and then *Day Watch* broke all domestic Russian box office records, bringing both the films and their director, Timur Bekmambetov, to the attention of international distribution companies. Back home in Moscow, the *Night Watch* trilogy has become a poster child of sorts for the still-emerging and rapidly expanding post-Soviet film industry, which was, at the time of the first two films’ production, releasing between fifty and sixty films a year.

My discussion will thus focus primarily on *Night Watch* and *Day Watch*, especially considering the films in terms of their “Russian” status in a domestic market that is dominated by Hollywood as well as considering how, following Bekmambetov’s “discovery” by the international distribution market, Hollywood has appropriated these particular filmic commodities. The word “commodity” should be understood to have multiple connotations here, not all of which are intended as negative. The most obvious commodities are the first two films of the trilogy, which were distributed in limited release by Fox Searchlight to modest box office returns. However, the planned third film in the trilogy (with the tentative English title of either *Dusk Watch* or *Twilight Watch*) has been put on hold. This was initially so that Bekmambetov could direct the 2008 mainstream Hollywood release *Wanted*, which featured the star power of Angelina Jolie, James McAvoy, and Morgan Freeman, and while he has continued to produce films domestically in Russia, the worldwide box office (if not critical) success of *Wanted* secured Bekmambetov’s official crowning as a hot international commodity. Currently attached to direct a version of *Moby Dick* for Universal, Bekmambetov’s name has circulated in rumors regarding other star-powered, high-budget productions.

Whether appropriation of the trilogy is (financially) ultimately successful for Fox Searchlight is best left undetermined until the fate of *Dusk Watch* is ultimately settled. Given Bekmambetov’s current schedule, it appears increasingly likely that there will not be a third film. However, the potential creative, linguistic, economic, and ideological implications of *Dusk Watch* as conceived are extraordinarily complicated and fascinating; I will return to these implications later. In the meantime, questions of translation(s) must be engaged, since *Night Watch* initially entered the American market with highly distinctive and unique animated subtitles that help to elucidate the film to its American audience to a greater degree than subtitles generally do. In fact, as an avowed non-fan of horror film, it was precisely the subtitles that drew me to *Night Watch*.

How might we describe the standard subtitle? Echoing the language of Pudovkin, for instance, Amresh Sinha has described subtitling as having the ability to cause a “complete betrayal of the visual dynamic,” arguing that the words “drown” a film’s images: “The audience starts to literally see only the texts. The texts get superimposed over the image, and the reading of the subtitles also takes over the act of seeing.” Subtitling—indeed, any act of translation—also betrays the original dialogue. Betz, for instance, estimates that source dialogue may be cut by “as much as half” in creating the translated script. What does not get said in the translated film text is not only important from a perspective of the foreign audience’s ability to grasp the plot, but what is omitted or altered from the translated film is often highly ideologically charged. This is especially true, according to Nornes, when the translation (and this applies to both dubbed and subtitled films) attempts to make itself invisible or unnoticed.

On the other hand, *Night Watch* foregrounds its subtitles in a manner that is integrated and occasionally, but certainly, not striving to be invisible. This manner of delivering an English translation seems to work towards what Nornes
has called an “abusive subtitling,” one that is willing to experiment with and bend the rules of language cinema. According to Nornes,

The abusive subtitler uses textual and graphic abuse—that is, experimentation with language and its grammatical, morphological, and visual qualities—to bring the fact of translation from its position of obscurity...while ultimately leading the viewer to the foreign original being reproduced in the darkness of the theater. This original is not an original threatened by contamination, but a locus of the individual and the international that can potentially turn the film into an experience of translation.

It is my contention that the techniques used in the English theatrical subtitles of Night Watch and Day Watch, which seem especially to experiment with the visual qualities of language provide a heightened accessibility to the Russian-language films. This entry point is simultaneously articulated through the use of familiar (to American audiences) genre strategies and postmodern bricolage techniques, taken largely from American sources. These strategies are not confined to film alone: if the subtitles are experimenting with the visual qualities of language, the film itself is exploring the textual qualities of contemporary visual culture. The experiences of translation are complimentary.

The film versions of Night Watch and Day Watch are based on a series of novels by the Russian fantasy author Sergei Lukyanenko. The plot (begun in Night Watch and continued in Day Watch) is extraordinarily complicated, but can be generally summed up thus: living amongst us all are those who call themselves Others. The Others have any number of powers, such as prognostication or shape-shifting, and are divided into two groups, Light and Dark (the Dark Others seem mainly to be vampires). The two groups patrol each other to ensure neither side breaks a thousand-year-old truce. As with any number of good fantasy tales—Lord of the Rings and Star Wars both spring to mind—they are waiting for the coming of the one all-powerful Other, and whichever side he chooses to join will determine the fate of the world. In Night Watch, he comes and chooses the Dark side; Day Watch deals with the consequences of this choice.

The films’ broad outlines may sound familiar enough to a Western audience, but according to the director, Timur Bekmambetov, and Fox Filmed Entertainment chairman James Gianopulos, they are “not simply Russian versions of American movies.” This is to say, the films are not remakes of American productions. Yet, while the content may have come from a uniquely Russian source, the films’ structures rely on very American blockbuster techniques and internationally-recognizable genre strategies. This seems a logical choice for attracting a domestic Russian audience, considering that before Night Watch and Day Watch, Russia’s previously highest-grossing films were American-financed blockbusters such as The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (2003) or Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines (2003). Thus, following the commercial success of Night Watch, the franchise has been seen as a revitalizing production for the entire industry. Not only has the film been hailed as the first Russian blockbuster, but Bekmambetov seems to have designed it to be just that, a sort of hybridized Russian/Hollywood production. So, while he has called Night Watch “a very Russian movie,” his full quote is far more revealing:

It’s impossible to imagine this kind of movie somewhere else: a movie with a depressing ending, a lot of inexplicable storylines, strange characters. It’s a Russian reflection of American film culture. It’s got our unique way but is a reflection of the genre movie.

He has also brought this sensibility to his American work, describing Wanted as “like a good Russian film: Everybody dies and the idea survives.” At the same time, Bekmambetov has described his greatest influences as his background in [Russian] television commercials and the American independent/exploitation maestro Roger Corman, with whom he has worked. It is in this peculiar space between the Russian and the American that I wish to examine the film’s particular application of subtitling.
It seems to me that *Night Watch* is certainly a Russian film that was made under the unique constraints of the post-Soviet film industry. Nevertheless, in its relentless quotations of (primarily American) genre techniques, it operates under conditions very similar to those articulated by John Mowitt:

Hollywood designates a mode of production that has profound, perhaps unseverable, roots in a globalizing capitalism. If, as many have proposed, capitalism is the decisive impetus behind both Western modernity and Western modernism...then, to the extent that the cinema belongs to the dialectic of modernism and mass culture, it has played a central role in the cultural globalization of capitalism. “Hollywood” is virtually a metonymy for this process.18

Taking Bekmambetov’s “Russian reflection of American film culture” statement at its word, one could extrapolate any number of stylistic similarities to *The Matrix* trilogy, for example. There are also numerous music video-style techniques: slow/fast motion, rapid cuts set to hard rock guitar solos, and so on. There is even a bevy of Western product placement, as numerous shots prominently feature Nokia cell phones or Nescafé hot beverages. In fact, the entire production processes of *Night Watch* and *Day Watch* seem to be an attempt to recreate American film culture within a Russian context.

*Night Watch* cost about $3.5 million to make, an exorbitant sum for a Russian film, but returned about $16 million in Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States. *Day Watch* was made for $4.5 million and took in $29.7 million in its first month of release alone, breaking every Russian box office record and going on to gross roughly $32 million in its home country.19 This has all been aided by the recent exponential growth of theaters, particularly multiplexes, in Russia. In 2000, there were 105 multiplex screens in Russia, nearly all of them in either Moscow or St. Petersburg. By 2006, there were around 1,500, and the number is expected to grow to more than 2,200 by 2011.20

Unique strategies were required in order to complete *Night Watch*’s multitude of computer-generated special effects shots. As Russia does not have an industrial framework in place to create the more than 400 CGI shots necessary, Bekmambetov organized an Internet community of over 150 independently working artists in order to complete the work, claiming, “We’re proud people, we created this directly, we decided we couldn’t face doing it through studios.”21 But it is clear that, for Bekmambetov, there does not seem to be an ideological conflict by which making his Russian text reflect American film culture would make the text less Russian. Perhaps there is none—as stated previously, I do not wish to vouch one way or another as to the film’s Russian-ness. But it certainly seems apparent that Bekmambetov’s version of Russian-ness involves a reasonably large investment in a global style of consumer culture. This is reflected, for instance, through costuming, as many of the Forces of Dark are clad in Adidas tracksuits. It also appears that speedy communication has been commodified; in addition to the previously mentioned Nokia cell phones, there is a sequence in which a Russian Internet search portal features prominently.
While acts of consumerism might translate almost flawlessly for American audiences (the Adidas tracksuits seem rather dated), the spoken language must still be translated. Thus, subtitles. For a large portion of the film, subtitles are entirely as usual, following the rules described by veteran subtitler Henri Béhar in his essay “Cultural Ventriloquism”: static, white sans-serif letters shaded in black, centered on the screen, never straddling a cut if it can be helped. But during certain scenes, far from being forcibly superimposed upon the image, the subtitles become part of the screen space: moving off-center, appearing one word at a time to emphasize the speaker’s hesitation, fading away rather than ending in an ellipsis. These subtitling techniques, though subtle, destabilize the usual dynamic between subtitle and screen image that Sinha has described in disparaging terms:

Habitually, the spatial placing of the subtitles at the lowest spectrum of the screen betrays its contemptuously lower status, its inferior origin in the hierarchy of image and sound. Its origin remains an evil necessity, a product conceived as an after-thought rather than a natural component of the film.

While Night Watch was indeed a fully complete film before the need for subtitles became apparent, and its subtitles are thus indeed of “inferior origin,” they seem far from being an evil necessity. Rather, they are a necessity that provides the film with an opportunity to enrich a viewing experience that is always already multifaceted, even fragmented, by the nature of the original Russian text.

This creative use of subtitling is at its most effective during the scenes when the young boy, Yegor, hears “the Call” of a female vampire who is attempting to lure him to her in order to drink his blood. While we do not see her (for she is miles away; her voice comes from inside Yegor’s mind), we do see her words, which appear not at screen bottom, but next to Yegor’s head, reinforcing that this is a voice only he can hear. As he is underwater in a swimming pool, the words of the Call disappear in swirls and clouds, exactly like blood dissolving in water—which we soon see is actually happening; the Call has given Yegor a nosebleed. Because this is a vampire movie, and a violent one at that, blood will be of perpetual and ongoing importance; seeing a blood-red call to death follow Yegor across the screen before disappearing into crimson swirls is far more chilling than seeing the same words in unmoving plain white letters at the bottom of the screen would be.

Sinha has claimed, “Most interlingual translations are not translations but adaptations.” I do not wish to refute this claim, as it seems entirely logical and appropriate. However, I do wish to propose that some of what is lost in translation can perhaps be recovered through this relatively simple strategy of making the subtitles “act,” an instance of Nornes’ “abusive subtitling.” Béhar gives another useful example in his discussion of his English subtitling of Alain Cavalier’s film Thérèse (1986), for which he kept references to Jesus Christ in lower case (“he” instead of “He”) in order to reflect that the nun whose conversations with Christ he was subtitling “had the flavor of a lovers’ quarrel”:

One American critic who saw the film... thought the director was “showing disrespect” and reduced the dialogue between Thérèse and Jesus to a lovers’ tiff. Which, of course, was the whole point. When the eye and ear are not in sync, the filmgoer senses something is wrong, without knowing exactly what. In this case, the eye was able to alert the language-impaired ear to the point being made, and the lower case stayed.

In this case, adapting the graphic qualities of language, abusing the rules of correct English grammar—making the subtitles act—provided a deeper understanding to an English-speaking audience.

And, while making the subtitles act could seem to be another instance of visual hegemony, for one can only presume that acting subtitles would necessitate a great deal of graphic design, it also liberates the subtitles from their traditional, hopefully unobtrusive place at the bottom of
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the screen. In following Night Watch’s dialogue across and throughout the entire frame, the eye is actually freed to explore other parts of the image, reconditioned to watch the movie rather than to simply read it. Reading is still necessary, of course, but the act of exploring the film’s visual dimensions helps the subtitles to support or even to enhance the film’s visual dynamic, rather than disrupting it.

Subtitles in Night Watch also help cue the foreign viewer into shared (postmodern) cultural reference points. In one scene, a computer technician giving a data report has each word appearing one letter at a time as if typed, followed by a blinking underscore. In these instances, the subtitles resemble nothing so much as the text that appears onscreen during a video game cut scene. I do not wish to delve too far into video game narrative theory here. It should be sufficient to note that the cut scene generally exists as a sort of “plot dump” through which the player learns information that may be important in future action (game play) sequences. As Night Watch follows a similar pattern—there is very little talking during action sequences, and very little action during scenes with talking—it seems logical to add the video game to the list of multimedia sources from which Bekmambetov has drawn. The computer technician is, indeed, a plot dump.

A double play on language and subtitling occurs much later in the film, when we see Yegor watching an episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer. The character of Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar) has been dubbed into Russian and is retranslated into English via subtitles, which here are embedded within the television’s screen, making it seem as though Yegor is watching the show with English subtitles on. This can, of course, be read as yet another reference to the apparent American media hegemony within contemporary Russia—a hegemony that has not only intruded upon, but also already co-opted the Night Watch franchise. However, I find the decision to re-subtitle Sarah Michelle Gellar’s lines particularly intriguing. Was the purpose simply to translate the (American) show for an American audience? This seems likely, since presumably the Russian version of the film does not include these English subtitles. At the same time, subtitling Gellar into English adds a dimension of humor to the setup, a knowing wink at the absurdity of translating English back to itself. Somewhat paradoxically, it also works to reinforce the Russian-ness of the film, for “Buffy’s” voice is still speaking Russian. Would it not have been just as easy for Sarah Michelle Gellar’s real voice to be “reattached” to her body?

The choice to use subtitles instead of dubbing was apparently made by executives at Fox Searchlight. Stephen Gilula, who was then head of distribution at Fox Searchlight and is now a Chief Operating Officer at the company, has said, “You don’t take such an original vision of the world... and try to homogenize it. It’s a Russian movie, and dubbing it into English actually can make it more jarring to American audiences.” The U.S. marketing campaign for Night Watch made no attempts to disguise that it was a Russian film; the untransliterated “Nochnoi Dozor” was left rather prominently on movie posters.

That makes Gilula’s statement all the more interesting, for nothing in any way explains why a dubbed English version of the film is the main one available on Night Watch’s initial U.S. DVD release. It is also easy and straightforward to access the audio/language menu, select “Russian” as the soundtrack language, and watch the film with standard, visual-dynamic-disrupting, non-abusive subtitles. While the English theatrical release is included on the DVD, it is on the flip side of the double-sided disc. It also takes effort to find, as it is labeled as “the original Russian version,” without alluding to the fact that English subtitles are included (and in fact impossible to turn off, due to the fact that they are animated graphics rather than industry-standard subtitles). The Blu-ray edition of Night Watch does not include the original theatrical subtitles at all; nor is it possible, on home video release, to find Day Watch’s theatrical subtitles.

Thus, it is fairly simple to guess that despite their playful, “abusive” potential, we will not be seeing very many foreign films translated with animated subtitles. To my knowledge, Fox Searchlight has not disclosed the cost of subtitling Night Watch and Day Watch for theatrical release, but it is not hard to imagine that between the creative process and the animation process, animated subtitles would be far more expensive to produce and incorporate in the film print. Moreover, in order to conform to the typical DVD/Blu-ray standards, the film would
need to have standard subtitles created in any case. Until software is developed that would let a layer of animation be switched on and off, as subtitles currently are, it seems unlikely that studios will want to go to the trouble of creating anything as intricate as the experiment which Fox Searchlight has regretfully shoved aside.  

For American audiences, very little will be lost in translation in the third film: if Dusk Watch (or Twilight Watch) is ever made, Bekmambetov will direct it in English. Admittedly, this possibility is looking increasingly unlikely. But if the film does come to fruition, it will be co-financed by Fox Searchlight and Russia’s Channel One, the television company that financed the first two films. Dusk Watch, which is supposed to be a prequel set in 14th-century Central Asia during the reign of Mongol warlord Tamerlane, would, in fact, be filmed in Los Angeles. These (increasingly hypothetical) questions have to be asked in reverse: what will be the state of translation from the English language to the Russian one? Would Dusk Watch involve subtitles? Dubbing? And if it were to succeed in the former Soviet states, could it still be considered a Russian blockbuster? 

Perhaps the inherently contradictory nature of such productions is left in no better hands than those of the cheerfully opportunistic Bekmambetov, who can assert “I cannot be an American director, I will always be a Russian director,” then immediately declare, “For sure if I have a Hollywood budget I will try to imitate Spielberg.” This theoretical Dusk Watch is simultaneously fascinating and problematic. However, it is difficult to fault Bekmambetov personally for wanting to make movies that Russians will want to see, or for taking Hollywood up on its offer to give him a higher budget. Judging by the success of Wanted, which took in roughly $26.4 million in Russia, the two are not mutually exclusive. And though Wanted, like a true Hollywood production, was shot mainly in Prague, Bekmambetov was able to use the production to continue supporting the Russian film industry. 

According to a special feature on the Wanted Blu-ray, Bekmambetov’s own company, Bazelevs Production, was responsible for creating the film’s CGI previsualization as well as a large percentage of special effects. The Night Watch films may be popular art rather than fine art, but as they are succeeding spectacularly in revitalizing the post-Soviet movie-going public, so much the better for the Russian film industry’s ability to create a sustainable infrastructure for future productions. In this sense, the idea of the films and their director as commodities should be understood as positive for the future of Russian filmmaking.

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Notes
2 Pudovkin and Leyda, 329.
3 Abé Mark Nornes, Cinema Babel: Remapping Global Cinema (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Mark Betz, Beyond the Subtitle: Remapping European Art Cinema (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
6 Despite the deaths of several main characters, Wanted 2 had been put in development by July of 2008; see Michael Fleming, “U Cozy with Wanted Man,” Daily Variety, July 15, 2008.
8 The necessary disclaimer in discussing the film’s translation (both linguistically and culturally) is that I am limited to exploring this from a thoroughly American perspective. The main difficulty in elucidating the subtitles’ effects will be that while I believe that the various languages of Night Watch translate relatively well into “American,” I cannot vouch for the quality of the linguistic translation, as I do not speak Russian, and must rely on what has been written and published in English in order to make claims regarding the films as cultural product. I do, however, have several years' experience working in closed captioning and subtitling (primarily SDH, or subtitles...
for the deaf and hard of hearing), and feel qualified to speak of the aesthetics involved in putting words on a screen.


10 Betz, 91.

11 Nornes; see especially chapter five, “For an Abusive Subtitling,” 155-187. This article unfortunately lacks the scope to fully explore Nornes’ discussion of the ideologies of translation.

12 Ibid, 179.

13 Ibid, 176-7, emphasis in original.

14 Johnson, “From Russia, With Blood and Shape-Shifters.”


18 John Mowitt, Re-Takes: Postcoloniality and Foreign Film Languages (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 59.

19 Johnson, “From Russia, With Blood and Shape-Shifters.”

20 Barraclough, “Russian Box Office to Double.”

21 Simpson, “Timur Bekmambetov – Night Watch.”


23 Sinha, 174.

24 Ibid, 181.

25 Béhar, 81.

26 Johnson, “From Russia, With Blood and Shape-Shifters.”

27 For a thorough description of the current DVD subtitling process, see Nornes, 233-6.

28 Simpson, “Timur Bekmambetov – Night Watch.”