

Ismaël Ferroukhi's *Le Grand Voyage*: Successful Rudimentary Transactions and the Failure of Globalized Languages

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Pre-history: "Illiterate readings, reading illiteracy"

The first leg of this virtual research trip focused on the articulation between illiteracy and maps. Last year's paper asked how a migrant is supposed to read a map if he or she is illiterate and what contradictory injunctions are set up by the implied definitions of a map.¹ In Rachid Boudjedra's novel, *Topographie pour une agression caractérisée*, a North African immigrant is stuck in the Parisian metro, unable to use the maps as guide because he cannot make sense of the system of symbols that represent destination, location or directions. He has an address, he knows where he wants to be or rather where he wishes to go but his desire to reach a given destination cannot be transformed into a rational practice in the presence of an incomprehensible map. The map is there to help but the will to lead and the desire to go somewhere cannot meet. No knowledge is produced by the encounter between the two desires.

Two crucial elements were thus underlined in Boudjedra's novel. First, the map relies on a type of knowledge that only insiders can be assumed to have acquired. Yet, it addresses itself to outsiders who do not know enough to find

¹ See: "Illiterate Readings; Reading Illiteracy," <http://cf.hum.uva.nl/illiteratereadings/>

their way around a new territory. This initial and potentially damning contradiction, however, has never stopped maps from being created and being used, but I would argue that the implied contract involves a fundamental misunderstanding that is never completely avoided or addressed as a problem.

The encounter between the map and the user who needs it presupposes a type of contract that may well function as a vicious tautology to the extent that the stranger is assumed to be able to use a language, a code and a protocol that he or she could only have learned after reaching the destination that the map is supposed to materialize for him or her. In other words, the relationship between a text that knows and the reader who does not highlights, rather than bridges, the gap that separates the maps' official goal (the object is supposed to be a guide) and the conditions that must be fulfilled for that project to be carried out (the reader who is supposed to be led must first learn the language that the map assumes known).

The novel points out, however, that the migrant's incompetence does not amount to paralysis or interpretive silence. The failed encounter becomes the substance of a new text, a narrative that deliberately insists on the impossible transaction between the map and the traveler.

In Immigrant Narratives in Contemporary France, Susan Ireland and Patrice Proulx point out for example that the genre of Boudjedra's story is what "conveys" (another sort of "metaphor" in the sense of what transports and translates at the same time) the stranger's disorientation. Rather than reading the map or describing the journey, the novel reads and makes us read the protagonist's illiteracy.

The interest of the text lies rather in its style and structure, which are unusual for texts of the period representing the life of immigrants. The non-linear, labyrinthine structure and the new novel style fragmented representation of events are used to convey the increasing anguish of the disoriented immigrant

and his underground encounter with an unfamiliar world he is unable to decipher (34).

The inability to read does not lead to silence or an absence of text. It produces a proliferation of different genres and an excess of what we could call false readings: the novel does not so much retrace the character's steps as represent the urban text that his body-map generates as he tries in vain to extricate himself from what has become an "uncertain territory" (Boer 2006).

[<http://cf.hum.uva.nl/illiteratereadings/8.1.Boudjedra.hitchcott.htm>]

The initial "wrong" that is constitutive of the genre of the map does not ultimately lead to systematically failed encounters between the object and its users, rather it is a highly productive matrix that generates layers upon layers of texts. An illiterate reading remains a form of active reading that creates a hybridized textual and territorial reality, a theatrical and dynamic space where the staging of assumptions about legibility and power relationships become apparent.

Ismaël Ferroukhi's 2004 *Le Grand Voyage*

In the second installment of this research project, I propose to focus on a more recent work of fiction that addresses the issue of illiteracy and maps in a very different way. In Ismaël Ferroukhi 2004's film, *Le Grand Voyage*, two characters travel together from the South of France to Mecca, but they do share the same experience. As a result, we take, with them, (at least) two trips instead of one. The film superimposes two maps, two itineraries, two European and Middle Eastern geographical, linguistic and cultural constructions. Moreover, the two men's ways of navigating through space, and through spatial conventions are radically different or even incompatible so that this (modified) road movie presents us not with the representation of one journey but with a series of disconnected moments that highlight each of the protagonists

areas of expertise and incompetence, their unique way of dealing with religious beliefs, languages and illiteracy.

From Beur cinema to Babelized road movie: New European and global geographies

Ferroukhi's choice of migratory aesthetics invites us to compare this trip to pre-existing geographical but also cinematographical maps. The film moves away from the conventional elements that spectators have come to recognize as the main ingredients of *Beur* or *banlieue* cinema (Tarr 2005, Hargreaves 1999 & 2003). Unlike the young men of (mainly) African origin who are associated with the typically French *banlieue* cityscapes, Ferroukhi's atypical Beur hero does not hang out with his male friends, is not involved in any recognizable subculture, and we will not have the opportunity to wonder how he relates to the idea of Frenchness because the story immediately separates him from his neighborhood and from his familiar surrounding. Both Reda and his father must communicate on a transnational level. The cluster of stereotypical elements that we now identify in the Beur film genre of the 1980s and 1990s is remarkably absent.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, Beur cinema has provided French and international audiences with a photo-album and an imaginary map of French *banlieues*, the dense forest of low-cost housing projects that surrounded French cities after the 1960s. Ferroukhi's film, instead, starts with a few shots of a village in the vicinity of Aix-en-Provence. When the two men depart, they leave behind a cluster of small apartment buildings. The beginning of the story thus highlights the structuring absence of other familiar intertexts or inter-images. For if Ferroukhi's *Le Grand Voyage* and other *beur* and *banlieue* films were simply incommensurable, we would not even notice an absence that begs to be interpreted. Preceded and surrounded by comparable works, the film opts for new aesthetic strategies that we must also experiment with as relatively inexperienced decoders. In order to notice that

there are no high rises, no stairways, no basements, no *verlan* (or *banlieue* slang), no "big" or "little brothers," no brother-sister theme, no drugs or police brutality subplot, the spectator needs to (perhaps involuntarily) recall other films.² The question is, of course, what mental mechanism is activated when a spectator both expects the film to belong to a certain genre and recognizes an original variation on what we presume is a common theme. A simultaneous reading occurs that constantly maps our reading, leading us towards issues that we must constantly encode as relevant or irrelevant, plausible or implausible, belonging to our own sense of cinematographic tradition or modernity.

What remains of the list of classic ingredients of Beur cinema makes it difficult to claim that a radical point of discontinuity has occurred and that any comparison between *Le Grand Voyage* and Beur cinema is an irrelevant or even reactionary gesture (subsuming any allusion to migration or Islam under the category "beur" or "banlieue" is obviously highly suspicious). The story does address the familiar, almost stereotypical religious, cultural and linguistic issues that a Moroccan father who raised his children in France is expected to struggle with. Yet, I am arguing that *Le Grand Voyage* rewrites the genre to such an extent that it creates a bridge between traditional Beur heroes and the new transnational characters that share the difficulties encountered by the protagonists of globalized narratives such as Merzak Allouache's *L'Autre monde* (2001), Nadia El Fani's *Bedwin Hacker* (2003) and of course Alejandro González Iñárritu's 2006 blockbuster *Babel*. In those films, national identities or national boundaries do not define the border between inside or outside, familiar or strange. Multilingualism and multinationalism are the rule rather than the exception, so that in order to represent the heroes' trajectory, filmmakers have to

² Such as Malik Chibane's *Hexagone*, Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine*, Philippe Faucon's *La Squale*, Fabrice Genestal's *Samia* or Jacques Doillon's *Petits Frères*.

deal with many sets of assumptions about what is familiar and what is not, what is understandable and what is not, given that characters and spectators do not necessarily belong to the same imagined community. Stories cover territories that the spectator and the characters are not expected to recognize but to discover and chart at the same time. The issue of verisimilitude is thus redefined. Both audience and characters are involved in inventing different scales and different sets of symbols, rather than in simply relying on previously established maps or landscapes.

In terms of spatial representations, *Le Grand Voyage* takes us away from the suburbs, from the *banlieue* housing projects³ and gives Reda access to an almost limitless territory that covers Europe and the Middle East. But the price to pay for this enlarged territory is that he is forced to make a journey that seems to strip him of his freedom to lead his own life. Whatever constituted Reda's routine before his departure is reduced to the few clandestine and interrupted conversations that he manages to make on his cell or from a hotel phone when his father is out of earshot, and to the picture of his girl friend that he carries in his bag. As for the old, frail but tyrannical father, he is not going "home" but to Mecca, as a pilgrim. This is no reverse migration but a one-way trip from which he will not come back alive, and that he cannot begin without his son's help for the simple reason that he cannot drive.

³ The *banlieue* is sometimes filmed as a space surrounded by invisible borders and perceived as a world of its own. As many critics have pointed out (see especially Begag 1999, 2002), the assumption is that people from the *banlieues* want to move to the city and that city dwellers fear their arrival as if they were barbarians. Besides, *banlieues* are separated from each other as if, as Laronde argues, cities were built like a panopticon (Laronde 1993). See the double special issue of *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* edited by Alec Hargreaves in 2004. Reda is precisely not one of the typical "hittistes," the young men whose narrative and visual function is to "hold the walls" as the original dialectal expression suggests. He is not identified by his local environment even if French *banlieues* themselves are cultural glocalized.

The other most recognizable genre is that of the road-movie but Ferroukhi plays on those conventions too. The fact that the two travelers understand the journey in radically different ways makes it difficult to settle for one interpretation of this (non)pilgrimage-(non)aventure and the film both recalls and departs from the figure of the "étonnant voyageurs" whose literary productions have recently been proliferating in the context of the Saint-Malo festival.⁴ Just as a new "littérature-monde" seems to be displacing the old "Francophone" category, new films treat France and Frenchness as one of the multiple nodes in an individually reinvented global network.

Ferroukhi does not oppose France to Morocco for example, at least not from a recognizable postcolonial perspective (Higbee 2007). But he does not describe the two men's point of departure as a monolithic and cohesive entity (he does not need to insist on their unrecognized hybrid Frenchness to take them out of what Mustafa Dikec calls the "Badlands of the Republic" (Dikec 2007). What might be strange or exotic to some (to some of "us") already exists at home and does not have to be sought elsewhere. Even for Reda, his dad is as strange as Montesquieu's Persians. Being "from" (the same place) is not a relevant predictor of future transactions with what "elsewhere" represents. There is more difference within the pair of travelers than there will ever be between each of them and the strangers that they encounter. From the very first scene, the film establishes that nothing is shared. We cannot read the trip as a movement from one unique and monolithic point of departure that stands for sameness and oneness towards other spaces whose linguistic, cultural, religious or political difference will be emphasized as

⁴ For a list of "babelized" travel narratives that were recently published in this context, see <http://www.etonnants-voyageurs.com/spip.php?rubrique33>. See also the collective volume edited by Michel Le Bris and Jean Rouaud, *Pour une littérature monde* (2007).

different through an implicit process of comparison with the characters' home.

The emphasis is on what separates two protagonists who, according to other types of biologically-based narratives, share almost as much as it is possible for two humans to share. They are after all, father and son. But the fact that they have the same origin is precisely shown to be an idea that we may well be misusing as a political and cultural myth without even being aware of the consequences of that mental process. We watch as two men drive together from the South of France to Saudi Arabia. Throughout the film, their small blue car with an orange door serves as a confined experimental space that highlights not their resemblances but what separates them. What matters is not their identity (in both sense: they are not identical and their identity is difficult to pinpoint) but the tactics that they each choose to deploy when they must cope with the unexpected, the unknown. Proximity, the story insists, never means complicity; it is imposed upon both characters because the father both depends on his son but only accepts his own vision of the trip.

Religion as de-linking? (religere)

The father wishes to go to Mecca. He will travel as a pilgrim and only the destination and the meaningfulness of the pilgrimage counts. His son, on the other hand has no desire to travel at all and if he must, his ideas of a worthwhile trip have to do with efficiency (why not take a plane to Mecca he wonders?), with quick communication (do you speak English?) and with tourism (why not stop and visit Milan?). He seems to have no interest in religion at least not in the way his dad practices it, he even finds it embarrassing or inappropriate. The film repudiates the Western or non-Western stereotypes, negative and positive images of a monolithic Islamic community.

The camera avoids positing a Muslim world in which the word "Muslim" is used so loosely that the distinction

between culture, religion and history disappears, replaced by fantasies of conflicts (Muslims against the West) or internal cohesion (the Ummah). The innermost circle, here constituted by the father and the son, is systematically split by their individual position in front of the camera. Whenever the father prays, the frame physically separates the two men. For example, when they reach the first border between France and Italy in what seems to be the middle of the night, the father, noticing that it is time to pray, asks the son to park the car. According to Reda, he is breaking some unwritten rule of propriety: "C'est une douane ici... Tu vois bien que ce n'est pas un endroit pour prier." But the "tu vois bien" has none of the expected rhetorical force and the dialogue is counter-productive because both men follow their own logic. The father retorts, in Arabic: "do you believe in God?", a non-sequitur for Reda and the end of the conversation. As usual, the father imposes his will but fails to convince. The inter-generational difference is one of the most recurrent topoi in Beur literature and cinema and the way in which religion is defined and practiced among the immigrants and their children changes from decade to decade. Since the rise, in the 1990s, of a much-maligned "political Islam," the younger generations are expected to have rediscovered a form of Islam that they did not inherit but rather reinvent as a response to their marginalization. Sons and daughters can no longer be expected to symbolize an unavoidable move towards secularization. Yet, beur cinema and literature has carefully accumulated references to the problems raised by that phenomenon and Ferroukhi's film deliberately focuses on a teenager who does not seem interested in religion in general and in his father's beliefs in particular.⁵

⁵ Commenting on Akli Tadjer's 1984 *Les A.N.I du Tassili*, Anne Cirella-Urutia writes:

Une référence à l'Islam par exemple, apparaît dans l'épisode du « Tassili » et bien qu'il ne compte qu'une seule page, il témoigne du fossé qui sépare Omar et les Beurs des générations qui les ont précédées et de ceux qui sont restés au

As the father kneels on his prayer rug, we hear the son's voice asking "Ça va?" (are you ok?) but the camera soon reveals that the gentle question is not addressed to his dad. The shot excludes Reda to concentrate on the silent figure of the father, lost in his prayers. Only when the camera focuses on the car, now leaving the father out, do we realize that Reda is talking on his cell phone, informing his girl friend that he has "minor family problems" and asking her to inform the school authorities that he will be away for a while. This first one-way conversation is interrupted by the father's return as if, in that dimension, each man could only coexist.

The same principle recurs like a refrain throughout the film. Although they are cooped in the small car, or share a hotel room, the camera isolates them whenever the father prays or when the son wants to talk to his loved one. When the father reads the Q'ran in the passenger's seat, the camera looks over his shoulder, framing him, then cuts over so that another shot focuses on Reda who drives as if he were alone. Later, the father prays in a hotel room. The next shot shows Reda trying to call his girl-friend from the hotel phone only to be interrupted again by his father's arrival. The father's practice of his religion is set up as what both allows and disallows

pays. Omar est invité à la prière par un vieil homme et il se trouve confronté à un choix cornélien :

"Tu viens à la prière, mon fils?" Insiste-t-il. C'est certainement la question la plus embarrassante qu'on m'ait jamais posée. Si je lui dis que mon savoir théologique se limite à "Allah ou Akbar" et "Inch Allah", je vais passer pour le dernier des connards. Si je lui réponds que ça ne m'intéresse pas, je vais passer pour le fils du diable en personne, et qui peut deviner la suite. (63)

Il est évident qu'en affirmant sa position vis à vis de la religion, Omar provoquerait un conflit ouvert et serait rejeté par ceux qui partagent la même idéologie que celle de ses parents (Cirella-Urutia 2003).

In this text, the conflict is staged as a dialogue that will not take place, a non-conversation that Ferroukhi's film chooses to represent as spatial alienation: the camera acts as if it were impossible to let the two characters share the frame.

Reda's daily life. They are in competition, as if they could not occupy the same space, the same time, the same visual slots.

When they arrive closer to Mecca, the separation deteriorates into nightmarish fears. The son dreams that he is sinking into the desert sand while his father walks away, driving a little herd of sheep. When he wakes up, Reda looks around, frightened and lost, and sees his father kneeling on a dune, praying. Once again, the camera carves a frame around the solitary man. Finally, when they meet up with a group of other pilgrims, the father joins his fellow travelers in prayer while his son plays in the sand, the camera closing up on his sneakers. As the shot gets larger, the spectator discovers that he has written USA on the sand, a cryptic yet obviously defiant comment that once again, modifies the map of the trip and rewrites the pilgrimage as a complex and incomprehensible globalized space. The father has reached Mecca, Reda either dreams of or has symbolically arrived in some bizarre definition of the USA.

Islam is not "their" religion but "his" religion as Reda angrily points out when after a particularly violent quarrel, the father walks out on his own. And the pronoun underscores the film's constant allusions to the fact that the father's way of living "his" religion, is not necessarily shared by other Muslims, which makes it all the more difficult for Reda to relate to his father. A last-minute meaningful conversation during which father and son finally smile at each other hardly makes up for the rest of the trip. The scene, however, provides some resolution by giving the father a new role. For the first time, he steps out of his figure of dependent tyrant to adopt the position of the native informant who answers the son's questions about the pilgrimage. No earth-shaking information about the meaning of the pilgrimage is revealed and the spectator will wonder how plausible it can be for the son to ignore what any casual exposure to international media coverage (if not his own relatives) would have taught him. But from a narrative point of view, Reda finally treats his father as

someone who knows something that he may want to teach him, although at no point does the father try to convince or convert. Whatever respect is finally and grudgingly expressed remains firmly grounded in difference of opinions, beliefs and practices.

The practice of Islam itself is concretely represented as a multifaceted reality. Earlier in their trip, when they arrive in Istanbul, they meet another Muslim who stands for a different conception of Islam, one that can accommodate drinking and tourism, and that the father will naturally try to exclude at all costs. This man's narrative function is to help them and then to be excluded as a result of a terrible misunderstanding. Because he speaks French and knows how to deal with the immigration officers who expected a bribe, he, alone, makes it possible for Reda and his dad to cross the border. Their passports are useless. Ironically, fortress Europe is more difficult to leave than to enter in this case and only the father with his green passport is allowed out.

For the first and only time, a third French-speaking character transforms the father-son *huis-clos* into an unstable trio where the place of the excluded third changes regularly. Mustafa's presence changes the balance of the relationship between the powerful father and his young and inexperienced son. A figure of gentle authority, he implicitly questions the father's strict version of Islam and provides what could be a third way between the two radically different manners in which the two men experience this trip: pilgrimage for one, failed touristic expedition for the other.

One scene shows Reda, Mustafa and the father in the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. The spectator, who may be inside the Mosque for the first time, is presented with two different models and implicitly asked to either side with one or at least reflect on the two possibilities. Once again, the father is alone, sitting in a corner and reading the Q'ran. Reda takes photographs of the architectural details. He has become one of the many tourists who walk around in the great hall. The

camera adopts his perspective, closing up on the details of the blue pillars and the stained glasses, then revealing the father's seated silhouette, blurred at first and then slowly coming into focus as if he had been metamorphosed into one of the aesthetic beauties that his son wishes to capture.

Most of the time, however, any relationship to space that may be interpreted as "tourism" (the father uses the word as an implicitly derogative word) is adamantly vetoed. Before they reach Turkey, the way in which they travel generates two completely different maps of what should have been the same geographical Europe: the pilgrimage is apparently incompatible with certain itineraries (with certain stopovers) and with some navigational tactics (especially the way in which Reda uses maps).

Two maps of Europe: geographical negotiations

Reda is in the car as the driver because his father, who cannot drive, has demanded that he takes him. Reda is a reluctant traveler, all he wants is to get his father to his destination as far as he can and come back. Under such circumstances, the way in which they encounter the hypothetical strangeness of strangers, the novelty that each new country may represent, and even the shape of Europe in general will always be a subject of conflicts and tense negotiations, the father usually imposing his will in a stubborn silent way.

Each man will generate his own map. "Tourisme" is one of the options but what being tourists would mean is never explored because the father simply uses it as a dirty word when his son expresses desires that do not correspond to his own definition of what the trip should be. What is vetoed makes us realize how Reda perceives Europe. What *he* wants to see are cities that he has heard about. He treats Europe as a patchwork of cities that he wishes to "visit," that are linked by fast expressways and clearly marked on a map that he constantly checks for directions. But cities, expressways and maps are low on his father's list of priorities.

A first conflict sets the tone for the remainder of the trip. One hour away from Milan, where Reda intends to stop for the night, the father demands that they park the car in a rest area and sleep. Unable to convince Reda who wants to reach some meaningful destination, he simply pulls the hand break in the middle of the expressway, at the risk of killing them both. The message is clear, rather die than lose control, especially if his son's way will derail the pilgrimage and turn the trip into an adventure, a series of sight-seeing stopovers. Reda pleads in vain that this may be his only chance to ever see Milan, he does not even get the "one hour" that he asks for, so that the city will remain unvisualized, only talked about as an already nostalgic non-memory. Venice is equally ruled out (but talked about), so that the film has a dramatic reason to completely avoid the aesthetics of postcards. Some reviewers have commented on a "lack of scenery" (Papamichael 2004) and even assumed that the filmmaker's low budget is to blame. In fact, this is a systematic filmic choice as long as the characters are in Europe. The system of representation only changes once the men have arrived in Turkey and the spectator must wait until the end of the trip to be asked to watch what occurs outside the car, to be provided with visual details. Typical touristy images have been successfully banned and the father has his way. What we, as viewers, bring back from the trip are rare images of pilgrims completing the last leg of their pilgrimage. Most reviewers were impressed by the visual depiction of Mecca. Bradshaw praises the "unprecedented scenes at Mecca itself" (Bradshaw 2005); John Nesbitt notes that "the film's final scenes in Mecca are truly awe-inspiring" and adds that "Few have ever been allowed to record the throngs of committed Muslims circling the Kabba for a commercial film" (Nesbitt 2005).

By then, the modern gadgets that are symbolically linked to Reda's gaze and that allow information to circulate, have been discarded by the father. He has thrown out his son's cell phone while he was asleep in the car. As for the camera

that Reda had brought with him and with which he had taken a few shots along the way, it has disappeared from the story, exchanged for a useless lamb when the two men, who had misplaced their money, tried to supplement a diet of bread and eggs. The spectacular images of the Blue Mosque are lost from the narrative photo-album and the scenes from the Kabba cannot be exported as photographs. They are part of Reda's future memories, part of his and our ambiguous non-pilgrimage.

Not only does the father avoid cities but he wants to opt out of expressways, at the risk of finding himself literally outside the map. Lost between Zagreb and Belgrade, the two men are on a small country road, in the middle of what we tend to call "nowhere" because none of our familiar landmarks are present. Nothing stands out, no one drives by, there are no buildings. The two men do not agree on how to find their ways out of this no man's land. Reda, as a matter of course, looks for directions on a map, but his father is illiterate. Reda proposes to get back to the readable track, pointing out that it was not his idea to get off the expressway. For reasons that he does not make clear, the father stubbornly refuses the son's solution, which involves retracing their steps. When he simply gestures in a none too convincing way "it's this way," Reda explodes and yells at his father: "Qu'est-ce que tu en sais? Tu sais même pas lire!" The issue here is not so much that Reda humiliates his dad but that the two characters are incapable to talk about their respective tactics. The father seems to know where to go, and so does his son, but the film does not help us decide whether the old man has some sort of unrecognized talent, a form of wisdom that his son never acquired, or if he is just being stubborn, refusing to accept what, to Reda, is simple common sense. The dialogue fails lamentably. Even when Reda calms down and suggests "Regarde papa..." trying to point to the map, his father simply does not see. He stares silently in front of him, refusing to as much as glance at what his son is trying to explain. The camera keeps them both in the

frame, sitting right next to each other, emphasizing the violent lack of eye contact. Later, when they do find themselves closer to Belgrade after a series of funny encounters with strangers who cannot help them, it is still impossible to ascertain whether the itinerary was indeed a better way or if they have wasted unnecessary time and energy. The story as a whole does not choose between illiteracy as lack of a most basic skill that prevents the father from traveling through Europe (tu ne sais *même* pas lire) and illiteracy as what exposes the son's prejudice: he only recognizes the type of knowledge that the majority accepts as knowledge and does not realize that his father knows other things, knows differently.

Languages: a bilingual dialogue

One of the most original elements of this film is that the two main protagonists do not speak the same language, a linguistic issue that has constant and direct consequences not only on the structure of the story (whenever the heroes deal with other languages throughout their trip) but also at the level of the film (the way in which sub-titles are used is an implicit commentary on the theoretical difficulties that such an interesting premise raises at the post-production and reception level). The number of languages involved in this story invites us to observe what gets sub-titled and what does not and what implications such decisions have on our position as spectators.

Migration and postcolonial studies have already drawn our attention to the power relationship between languages and each colonial or postcolonial situation has generated linguistic debates. Often perceived as an acute ideological issue in formerly colonized lands, the canonization of Europhone cultural productions has been both systematically embraced and critiqued by postcolonial authors who are not always convinced that it is possible to effectively re-appropriate the colonizer's language. Different approaches have been experimented with and *Le Grand Voyage* both inherits this critical legacy and moves on.

The film constitutes a radical break from some of the strategies originally adopted in literature, the medium that we associate with the first solid steps of postcolonial creations. Some writers deliberately turned their back on French as the language of the metropole and accepted to address themselves to a smaller local audience that would have been excluded by more internationally recognizable works.⁶ In Algeria, one of the exemplary representative of that trend is Kateb Yacine whose experiments with dialectal Arabic is often celebrated as evidence of his ethical and aesthetic engagement. But the next generation of postcolonial authors have opted for a more hybrid approach to linguistic issues, privileging métissage, creolization and multilingualism, especially in the context of diaporic literature and cinema. The original debate about colonial situations of diglossia and vernacular languages has not disappeared. It now overlaps with more general discussions about the role of English as the lingua franca of globalization and the cohabitation of languages within previously monolingual Western spaces.

The film is not interested in mixing French and Arabic and allows both languages to coexist, relatively peacefully, in a relatively egalitarian space. Reda's father understands French but never speaks it, except for a few odd words here and there. He speaks Arabic throughout. He is not exactly monolingual but his linguistic abilities are selective. His knowledge of Arabic is more complex than the subtitling is able to suggest. When they reach a portion of their journey where other pilgrims congregate, the father can talk to Egyptian, Syrian and Sudanese travelers presumably because of his familiarity with classical Arabic. Reda, however, cannot

⁶ At the end of the 1970s, in Martinique, Raphaël Confiant published three novels in creole and contributed to the Creole journal, *Grif an tè*, preferring his "creole-dragon" to the "français-banane" as one of the titles of an interview suggests. And even within the creole-speaking community, the solution is not unanimously accepted: the "creole-dragon," i.e. the literary version of oral creole, is perceived as scary and artificial (Hardwick 261).

answer their questions and his dad must explain that his son only understand his own Moroccan dialect.

The father's Moroccan Arabic is not seen as colonized or dominated. It cohabitates with the son's French and whatever miscommunication occurs between the two characters has little to do with language but rather with the fact, as Reda will eventually tell him, that they are on different "wavelengths." In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Jacques Derrida explained his alienation from language as the impossibility of having learned any language but French in a colonial space that, retrospectively, should have always already been multilingual (Derrida 1996). Ferroukhi's characters, individually, function within the same model but the film's originality is to suggest that both of them are needed, at the same time, to perform a certain version of what Abdelkebir Khatibi called "bilangue," a problematic and poetic union of French and Arabic (Khatibi 1983). Reda and his dad have a relationship to language that tolerates, if not welcomes, different levels of competence and different uses of different languages. His dad speaks one language and understands his son in another.

The bilingual dialogue is not celebrated at all (in the way in which creolization was sometimes hailed as a poetic solution [Prabhu 2007]) but presented as an unavoidable fact of life. At times, it is also presented as the symptom of a gap between Reda and his dad. They literally do not speak the same language. Of course, the idea of "speaking the same language" has become a metaphorical way of defining successful communication. Presented with this new type of dialogue, we can also read the film as what makes us question the conventional wisdom according to which Babelian spaces are cursed. Here Babel is dedramatized yet not idealized. After all, the characters do not have to speak the same language to communicate. But even if they do, they remain on different "wavelengths." The film does not creolize their language but babelizes understanding.

On the other hand, the issue of sub-titles is there to remind us that this original bi-lingualism occurs in a work of art that circulates in a world where babelized dialogues are neither the rule nor the norm. When the film is subtitled in English, the bilingual dialogue is both preserved as oral object and erased as text by the monolingual translation but when the DVD is addressed to a French audience, only the father's Arabic is translated. In other words, the film must make assumptions about different audiences and privileges two Europhone languages when it creates its imaginary public. As in *Babel*, another film that lets the story wander in various linguistic territories, we hear many different languages that we may or may not understand but the principle of sub-titling pre-supposes an audience united by a shared knowledge of French or English rather than taking risks and opting for generic transnational literacy. For example, it is interesting to notice that the conversations that take place in Italy, Slovenia or Bulgaria are not subtitled. We do not know more than the two characters and, in a couple of scenes, this inability to communicate is a source of comedy or tragedy. But the system is imperfect. For those spectators who also speak some of the languages used in Turkey, Italy, Bulgaria and Bosnia or in the Middle East, the narrative contains facets that a French-speaking spectator would miss. For those who, like Reda, understand both French and Arabic, most the subtitles are redundant. As spectators, we hear many different languages and sub-titling is never used to give us more information than the characters themselves can digest. Each viewer is dependent on his or her own background and any audience, taken as a whole, might be capable of deciphering most of the moments of incomprehensible dialogue. But as individuals, we are expected to be in the position of the two travelers, who must guess, assume, interpret and sometimes just give up on the idea of understanding. The film implicitly caters for a French or English monolingual spectator, reducing the represented Babelization to a strategic monolingualism without

celebrating it as a desirable centralization. Instead of presenting Babel as an undesirable fragmentation that occurs after a crisis, the film treats the unavoidable reduction of all forms of languages to one protocol (subtitles) as a form of tactical deprivation. Throughout the film, the issue of languages is emphasized both intra- and extra-diegetically to point out that the equation between "speaking the same language" and "understanding each other" is a convention based on a political definition of language.

Transnational protocols and the failure of "globish"

The encounter between languages is crossed with two other issues that separate the father and the son: the story is split into small case studies or experiments in linguistic and cultural encounters that test several related hypotheses. The bilingual conversation between the two main protagonists cannot exhaust the possibilities of communicating and as soon as they meet strangers, two issues keep resurfacing: the father's illiteracy on the one hand, and one assumption that Reda keeps making about the people he meets, i.e. that if they do not understand his language, they probably speak English. Each representation of a new encounter tests the limits of each of the characters' competence but also their ability to make do, to find a way. For Reda, for example, his dad's illiteracy is a radical form of disempowerment. In his mind, his own ability to read maps and his knowledge of "globish" count as assets when it comes to negotiating with unknown landscapes and unknown languages. But one scene in particular serves to illustrate the limits of his system. Not only is globish not effective on this journey but the power of language itself, of any codified language is shown to be less important, sometimes, than an ability to share minimalist protocols.

His father, for example, is capable of carrying out a proper business deal with a person that he has never seen, who neither speaks or understands his own language. This business deal without language is an implicit response to the

humiliating moment when his son refused to accept that he may have known something about navigating space because he could not read the map.

When they arrive in Belgrade, Reda and his son are filmed in front of one of those international offices where travelers can exchange their own currency for the local form of payment. The camera shows us an official panel that informs us and the two characters of the official exchange rate and also of the possibility to go through proper channels. A standard form of equivalency is part of the system. People are provided with a sort of dictionary that gives them access to two languages and allows them to cross over without having to negotiate their way through the process. But the word "language" is precisely not appropriate in this case and in retrospect, the son's "globish" will be shown to have the same limitations as this rudimentary yet tyrannical code. For it is a code rather than a language: it only allows prerecorded transactions to take place, it does not give travelers the possibility to invent, to speak to one another.

What happens in the scene is a subversive transformation of this code into a language. One man approaches Reda's father and starts a sort of conversation without words. The two men have the same age, and they are practically silent. The camera films the whole scene from above, like a surveillance camera but also from a position that allows us to observe the way in which the conversation turns into a sort of ballet. The place occupied by the bodies signal who is in and who is out, who has the power to engage in the dialogue and to communicate.

The stranger puts his hand on the father's arm and gently drags him away from the window. The two men create their own space, away from the official exchange circuit. Their two bodies are very close to each other and their look at each other very carefully (this is different from what happens when Reda and his dad are in the car). Only two words are exchanged or rather repeated by both protagonists: "change"

and "euro." The nature of the transaction, the name of the currency, the absolute minimum amount of information is reinforced by the context and is enough to create a strong channel of communication between two men who have never met, will never meet again and can still conduct a business that complicates the simple system of equivalency that the poster proposes.

Something is added, the possibility to negotiate, to barter, a layer of uncertainty that needs to be compensated by the two men's willingness to come to some sort of an understanding. Arguably, the content of the negotiation is not semantically very rich. It is obvious that the two men need to agree on the unofficial rate. They both understand and accept, without having to discuss or argue, the existence of this protocol. They both know that they need to come to an agreement about how much money will change hands but their own skills play a role. The way in which this scene is filmed, once again, reinforces the radical difference between the ways in which each character uses or refuses language.

The men talk with their fingers, opening their hands to propose rates, refusing or accepting offers. At one point, the father walks away and the spectator understands that this is part of the genre of bartering. So does the protagonist who, once again, reaches out and touches the man's arm to indicate that he is willing to change his mind. We, presumably, do not speak that language. We recognize the genre of the transaction but it would be hard to provide a precise translation of what the men say to each other: how exactly do the two men convert complicated change rates that usually have several decimals into a series of signals made with the fingers of two hands is a bit of a mystery. The son and the spectator would probably need a calculator to reach the same level of accuracy but the film portrays the business deal as an efficient, quick and cordial affair.

The performative marking of the end of the deal is just as minimalist as the whole conversation. The stranger says

"change?" and the father nods "yes" while taking out his wallet. At the end, the conventional handshake confirms that both men are satisfied with the transaction. By then, the camera has changed to a closer angle, and catches the way in which the stranger looks over his shoulder, a clear reminder that the whole situation is part of an illicit parallel economy.

While the two men focus on the money that changes hand, the son, caught between them, stares at the panel, as if he could still not be part of the transaction. He is left out not only by the fact that he does not speak the man's language but also by his own desire to try and use what he thinks is a lingua franca that proves useless here. At first, he wishes to stop or at least slow down the conversation that he does not understand. When he sees his father talking to a stranger, he barges in: "Attends attends, excuse me do you speak English?"

He obviously does not recognize or respect the way in which his father has already started a negotiation where not one ounce of superfluous information needs to be inserted. The son's language is useless and the script reduces his words to what Jakobson call the phatic function, that is what precedes the conversation and announces that the speaker needs to check that he is heard or understood. The "Attends, attends" addressed, to the father, in French, signals his desire to slow down what he perceives as a conversation that may fail because the main tool is absent (a shared language). But it is already too late.

As for the "excuse me do you speak English?" addressed to the other man, it is much less efficient than the body language that the two men have been using. Throughout the film, the use of "globish" fails is shown to fail to bridge linguistic gaps. Reda may know much more English than "Do you speak English?" but the story does not give him a chance to use the language as a proper means of communication. A few words here and there fall on deaf ears, the strangers to whom he tries to talk either ignore him completely or answer him in their own language (especially on borders or when he

asks for directions). Yet it is clear that this switching to English has become an acquired reflex: whenever Reda finds himself in a position of linguistic insecurity, his reaction is to ask "Do you speak English?" His father never attempts to speak English but when conventional language fails, he resorts to different types of protocol, a sort of sign language that privileges body language and a will to communicate that bypasses other channels.

Conclusion

I am suggesting that *Le Grand Voyage* is both a "babelized" trip, and the babelized representation of a trip. The film invents a type of journey that is indistinguishable from the way in which the visual narrative is composed. The familiar postcolonial logic that sets up an axis between France and the Maghreb or rediscovers, within France, the ghost of this conflictual duality, is replaced with a France-Maghreb constellation that functions as if it were a point of departure (except that even the idea of departing and arriving are modified by this conception of the trip). The father-son unit is the hero to the extent that the heroic function is shown to be split in terms of religious beliefs, languages and traveling protocols. Two irreconcilable types of journey are told at the same time. Even at the end of the trip, both versions are not harmoniously fused, the images and the dialogues constantly record the possibility to take two simultaneous trips, to read and write two maps that never quite overlap. Some postcards are never shown (Milan and Venice are written out of the map), religious fervor can be turned into a postcard (when the father prays in Istanbul), extremely readable geographical locations (the sacred center of Mecca) co-exist with just as "scriptable"⁷ white pages (the soft sand where Reda's sneakers inscribe his angry message), the trip takes place in the car but the distance between the two passengers is an unbridgeable

⁷ To reuse a familiar Barthesian opposition.

gap. The simultaneous presence of more than one language is neither an obstacle to a successful dialogue nor the guarantee of a better, more opaque Glissantian conversation.⁸ The possibility to converse in one language does not preclude conflicts, misunderstandings or hostile silences, and each new encounter proposes a new way to deal with the presence of several languages, to reinvent the principle of translation and sub-titling and to come to terms with the babelization of our cultures.

The film never quite manages to give us a coherent vision of this journey or, rather, makes the point that there is no such thing as a unified perspective. The two men travel together. Literally, they are companions, but their journey is not identical. If the father had his way, he would be a pilgrim and nothing else, but he does not have a ready-made model of a 21st century pilgrimage that he wants to apply to the here and now. He prefers to translate or transpose what happened to his own father, and the circumstances have changed so much that none of the practical details are applicable. He cannot climb the dune every morning to see if his father is coming back as he did when he was a child, but he will not take a plane either because old stories have taught him that experiencing the delays and uncertainties of a long journey matters. A pilgrimage organized by a professional is apparently out of the question. The long car-trip charts an unknown road that neither the past nor the present has paved. The way in which his own father used to travel is now a story, the film provides no image of what that road looked like. But Reda's obvious solution (why not take a plane?) does not exist visually either. Only words can be used to eliminate ways of traveling that the father-son unit excludes from their own experience. This form of pilgrimage must be invented.

⁸ See Edouard Glissant's Caribbean Discourse (*Discours Antillais*) in which he praises "La bienheureuse opacité, par quoi l'autre m'échappe, me contraignant à la vigilance de toujours marcher vers lui" (Glissant 1981, 278).

But just as "his" (Reda's father) religion cannot explain everything about this trip because no set of rituals can be used as a map, Reda's trip is just as ambiguously situated between pre-existing contemporary models. He is not a pilgrim and yet he follows exactly the same path as his father. The father leads, but so does Reda, who knows how to drive, to read, to speak English, and who represents the present and the future generations. And yet, the limits of Reda's competence are just as systematically represented as the father's dependency. Reda can drive a car but his father can stop it from the passenger's car. Reda can read a map but his father's illiteracy is not, or at least not only, a handicap. In a globalized and babelized Europe, Reda's globish is paradoxically not as effective as his father's supposedly archaic attempts at by-passing languages altogether. In other words, Reda is not a guide who knows what to do because he has already taken the same trip. Aesthetically, the film respects, rather than fights, the fact that the main protagonists have a different definition of space, of time and of what matters in terms of communication. Visual and linguistic choices recognize that this journey can neither be told by one narrative voice (or by one single hero) or reduced to one visual logic. *Le Grand Voyage* is the story of two men who are both traveling together and pulling in different directions.

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