The Hotel as a Translation Site: Place and Non-place, Difference and Indifference

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Abstract: The hotel is a translation site, a place of accelerated language transactions. The Hotel Bristol in Vienna beloved of Joseph Roth, Cees Nooteboom's Ritz in Barcelona, and Wes Anderson's fictional Grand Budapest Hotel speak the language of community. By contrast, the Tokyo Park Hyatt in Sofia Coppola's 2003 film Lost in Translation is more like a “non-place” and aligns with weak, ineffective forms of translation, with apathy, and with cultural indifference.

Where does translation take place? Translators are often imagined as figures in motion. By dint of their multiple affiliations, they are considered marginal, even alienated, from a sense of home. But in fact, as becomes quickly evident when attention is focused on space, interlingual exchange is anchored in specific sites which enable the work of translation and which are part of the everyday life of today's citizens.

By exploring translation sites—places that are shaped by language traffic, places where languages and histories meet—I want to foreground the importance of translation in public life. Translations open up routes of commerce and exchange, circulate stories, create the possibilities for coexistence on the streets. But to see the translational nature of objects and places is to be attentive to the shadows of other times and languages.

Translation sites are varied in nature. Five broad types can be defined: Architectures of Memory define stratified memories, where one language history has been imposed upon another, where places are renamed or subjected to linguistic conversion. Translation participates in the aggression of overwriting, obliterating former histories. In the aftermath, however, a movement of countertranslation can become an instrument of redress.

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**Sites of Transit** are liminal zones which enable travelers and pilgrims to move from one sphere to another. The hotel, the bridge, the mountaintop, the tower—these nurture communication across languages (human, divine, or alien). Modes of translation result from the tensions generated by large or small differences, encumbered or smooth passage, horizontal or vertical trajectories.

**Crossroads** call up colliding voices and activist forms of intervention and include the market, the street, the museum. Here translation expands beyond written, textual forms to become a more volatile figure of passage across forms of expression. Translanguaging and metrolingualism include translation in their repertoire of practices. Language crossings challenge conventions, whether they be the norms of commerce in Hong Kong, modes of political protest in Montreal and Cairo, or the presence of Indigenous languages in museum displays.

**Thresholds** define language transactions through frames that separate inside and outside, here and there. The translator’s study, the garden, the library, the psychoanalyst’s couch—these are structures that foster dialogues between the immediate present and a wider universe.

A final category includes spaces which Michel Foucault would call “disciplinary,” where languages are a form of **Surveillance and Control**. This is the case at borders, checkpoints, and reception centers where migrants are processed for entry into national territory. Also considered here are zones (no-man’s-land, the edge of empire) that resist translations and that treat authors as representatives of their national, religious, or linguistic origins. “Contaminated languages” and the “stepmother tongue” put pressure on the categories that define separate languages; they resist the enforcing of language borders.

Today’s cosmopolitan cities, markets, cinemas, and universities are increasingly polyglot. But polyglot does not refer here to the peaceful coexistence of languages. Translation sites argue against multilingualism as a simple juxtaposition of languages. Instead of seeing cities as avenues of free-flowing words or as collections of language communities, translation sites crystallize language relations in time and space, defining specific moments of exchange or confrontation. They focus attention not on the multiplicity of languages but on their interactions and their rival claims. This is especially true for the hotel.

**PLACE AND NON-PLACE**

Cees Nooteboom’s favorite hotels have an air of bygone times: old-fashioned taps, cracks in the porcelain, rickety elevators, an air of tranquility. For the Dutch essayist, language plays its part in creating this atmosphere. At the Ritz in Barcelona, for instance, the safety regulations, printed in Catalan, seem to be addressed to people of another era, stoic in their attitude toward fate. “Non perdeu la serenitat” (do not lose your serenity). “No correu, ni crideu” (do not shout, do not run). In the event of heavy smoke, “gategeu” (crawl like a cat).¹

The Austrian novelist Joseph Roth (1894–1939) also wrote with affection of hotels. Roth traveled extensively as a journalist in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s and then spent his last years in exile in France. He was temperamentally drawn to hotels and turned them into an alternative version of the family. “Other men may return to hearth and home, and wife and child; I celebrate my return to lobby and chandelier, porter and chambermaid.” This love was also a kind of defiance. In a time of rising nationalism, Roth swore an oath of allegiance to his version of “fatherland.”²

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Like Nooteboom, Roth savors the languages that flow through his hotels. The patron, born in the Levant to Greek parents, “is fluent in very many languages. There is not one in which he can write an error-free letter.” The staff are drawn from across Europe and speak in all its tongues. One understands that this unruly jumble is part of the joy of the place.

That writers should be drawn to hotels is hardly surprising. As homes to people on the move, they combine features of rootedness and transience. Nooteboom and Roth provide colorful illustrations of the hotel as a polyglot place. Their Old World accommodations are communities of strangers coming together through prescribed codes of conversation and ritual. This nostalgic version of the hotel is a prominent feature of Wes Anderson’s visually extravagant and witty film *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014). Based on the Palace Bristol hotel and the Grandhotel Pupp in Karlovy-Vary, the Grand Budapest represents many of the most endearing aspects of the twentieth-century European hotel. By contrast, Sofia Coppola’s 2003 film *Lost in Translation* introduces through the Tokyo Park Hyatt what could be considered the polar opposite of European charm and *gemütlichkeit*—an impersonal and cold space of hypermodernity.

These hotels represent opposite poles on the spectrum that Marc Augé calls “place” and “non-place,” sites that are culturally embedded versus anonymous and identical spaces associated with purely functional consumerism. The two movies and their corresponding hotels invite us to consider translation as an additional variable. Anderson’s enthusiastic engagement with historical

![Figure 1](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palace_Bristol.jpg)

*Figure 1* The Palace Bristol Hotel in Karlovy Vary. Wikimedia Commons, photograph by Richard Schubert, accessed October 25, 2019, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palace_Bristol.jpg.

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3 Roth, *Hotel Years*, 182.
and linguistic otherness defines his hotel as translational, in contrast to Coppola’s depiction of melancholic in-difference. Christine Brooke-Rose’s (1923–2012) experimental novel Between (1968) helps us understand the idea of the hotel as a site of in-difference, as the very materialization of the process of translation, one exemplar replaced by another, simultaneously identical and not.⁷

**THE GRAND BUDAPEST**

Joseph Roth was notoriously profligate—and impecunious. His correspondence with Stefan Zweig (1881–1942) is full of entreaties for cash.⁸ All the same, he would probably not have stayed at a hotel as sumptuous as the Grand Budapest Hotel, the site of Wes Anderson’s movie, which is loosely based on Stefan Zweig’s stories. The movie is a rare example of an English-language popular film resonant with accents and echoes of a meticulously reconstituted past. Much of its humor comes from the comic echoes of the fancy-dress Austro-Hungarian days and fantastical palace-like hotels such as the Grandhotel Pupp in Karlovy-Vary. The movie is an operetta-farce, indulging in the Old World backdrops of luxury spas and Alpine scenery and the writerly characters who observed them.

The Grand Budapest Hotel presents a translational feel. It begins with a voice-over: “A number of years ago, while suffering from a mild case of scribe’s fever, a form of neurasthenia common among the intelligentsia of that time, I decided to spend the month of August in the spa town of Nebelsbad below the Alpine Sudetenvatz, and had taken up rooms in the Grand Budapest, a picturesque, elaborate and once widely celebrated establishment. I expect some of you will know it.” With the term “neurasthenia,” the archaic “taking up rooms,” and, to the American ear, the somewhat comic ring of German-sounding places, these words call up an Old World sensibility and the vacation spas all over Europe, including the beach hotels in Ostend recalled in Volker Weidermann’s chronicle of the summer of 1936, when a group of intellectuals and writers exiled from Germany gathered there. The central characters in Weidermann’s book are Stefan Zweig and Joseph Roth, whose troubled friendship is a product of their very distinct brands of genius and who, in different ways, bear witness to the decline and fall of prewar Europe.⁹

The Grand Budapest Hotel takes place in the fictional republic of Zubrowka, a thinly disguised Czechoslovakia. Though it combines several time periods, it engages with very specific historical aesthetics—resulting in a creative pastiche of Central European cities and hotels and Alpine backgrounds inspired by the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840).

This sensibility connects to a mythology of the Grand Hotel, which begins with the German-language novel Menschen im Hotel (1929) by Vicki Baum, turned into the 1932 American film Grand Hotel.¹⁰ Thomas Mann’s Venice Lido Palace in Death in Venice (1912) was very much in the same tradition, as is the recent nonfiction Shanghai Grand by Taras Grescoe (2016).¹¹ In the light

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of nostalgia, the hotel conjures up a community of wanderers united in their differences, of “unacknowledged acquaintanceships,” where “you brush against someone in the elevator; you meet again in the dining room, in the cloakroom, and in the bar; or you go in front of him or behind him through the revolving door.”12 These acquaintanceships are also moments when languages “brush against one another” and finally enter into conversation.

The outlandish dimensions of Anderson’s Grand Budapest Hotel and its whimsical decoration, its years of glory and then the indignities inflicted by the Communist era, are evoked through precise and authentic detail. The artifacts in the film were inspired by reference materials collected by the designer and the director as they traveled through Eastern Europe. Letters and newspapers are presented in “genuine” versions, though they are offered in translation. The director, Wes Anderson, also designed fictitious newspapers with titles like the *Trans Alpine Yodel*, the *Continental Drift*, and the *Daily Fact* and wrote stories for these papers . . . in English. There are other plays on words: a gas station is called “Fuelitz”; the forest, the Sudetenwald. Monsieur Gustave’s elegant, formal diction and his sense of declining standards of decorum echo the nostalgia of Zweig’s *World of Yesterday* (1942).13 Where the film does not attempt historical accuracy is in the accents and speaking style of its minor actors. The characters playing the criminals who help Monsieur Gustave escape from prison speak in the slang of their own native language: Harvey Keitel, for instance, speaks with an Australian twang. What this does is to introduce an unusual kind of diversity into the film, echoing (through parody) the multilingualism of the spas of Central Europe.

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12 Baum, *Grand Hotel*, 190.

Wes Anderson’s hotel is a site of translation, then, from several points of view. It is the filmic representation of a text translated from Stefan Zweig’s German, and it uses both visual and linguistic devices to remind the viewer that it is engaging with a distant but historically precise reality. Though venturing into the realm of the madcap and the fantastical, the film remains attentive to the evidence of history.

**THE TOKYO PARK HYATT**

Sofia Coppola’s 2003 movie starring Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson occupies an entirely different kind of terrain. The film takes place in the luxurious Park Hyatt Hotel in Tokyo. The spaces are often empty and impersonal, and the characters are filmed gazing out over a city they do not understand. In contrast to the beloved stopping places of Nooteboom, Zweig, or Roth, with their Old World feel and array of familiar faces, the Park Hyatt shares the attributes of the hotel as a non-place—anonymous and impersonal. Like shopping malls, airports, or service stations, these are infinitely reproducible in their sameness. They strip their visitors of individuality and reduce them to the role of consumer. Communication, too, is simplified, limited to utilitarian forms of expression.

The film gave new life to the tired phrase, itself become a cliché, “lost in translation.” Once associated with Robert Frost’s lament about the essence of poetry disappearing in the transfer across languages, it is now, thanks to the film, most often connected with cultural disorientation. Lost in Translation tells the story of an aging Hollywood actor who has been invited to Tokyo to perform in advertisements selling whiskey to the Japanese. He meets a young American woman, staying at the same hotel. She has been abandoned by her husband, who is busy with a photo shoot of a Japanese rock group. The loneliness of both is exacerbated by their feeling of alienation from the city they find themselves in, Tokyo. They fall into a romance, which may or may not continue when they return home.

On the ground, the city is a labyrinth, and the characters are often alone, isolated from the crowds around them. The script is crowded with miscommunication between languages. For instance, though the Bill Murray character is given an interpreter, he is deprived of any real communication with his Japanese hosts. When the director gives him directions that include a reference to American film culture, hoping that Bill Murray’s character will infuse his simple line “Suntory time” with feeling, the interpreter opts for an abbreviated message. What the director had said, in Japanese, was: “Look slowly, with feeling, at the camera, and say it gently—say it as if you were speaking to an old friend, just like Bogie in Casablanca: ‘Here’s looking at you, kid’—‘Suntory time.’” What the translator says is simply: “He want you to turn, looking at camera. OK?”

This is translation played as a gag. In his wide-ranging commentary on the film, Michael Cronin calls this “a well-established Anglophone comic routine of decent chaps encountering Funny Foreigners.” Could this advertisement for Japanese whiskey ever contain the kind of feeling that Humphrey Bogart brought to his exchange with Ingrid Bergman in the 1942 American movie? Surely the interpreter is aware of the irrelevance of the director’s cues and chooses not to translate them at all. What this means, though, is that the American is excluded from this bit of input from his Japanese host—input that shows that the Japanese director is speaking with

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American cultural references in mind. The failure of translation has an impact, then, on the character’s ability to play his role according to the director’s (Americanized) Japanese expectations.

Cut off from real communication with those around them, the Americans retreat further into their isolation. This sense of exclusion reinforces their apathy and inability to connect. Both the American actor and the housewife give the impression of being so distanced from the city around them that they have little desire to connect. They see only the incomprehensible surfaces of neon signs and hear only an opaque babble. The affect of loss dominates the film; in fact, a kind of depression seems to keep the characters from trying to penetrate the barriers separating them from those around them. Theirs is a melancholy of disorientation, a condition nourished by ignorance and indifference.

**INDIFFERENCE**

It is useful here to consider the broader implications of the notion of indifference. What if the ability to feel compassion, empathy, and interest for others is related to the capacity to engage with difference? Surely one of the most brilliant explorations of this question is an experimental novel by Christine Brooke-Rose called *Between* (1968). The protagonist is a professional conference interpreter, who travels across Europe to attend high-level international congresses on lofty themes. The relentless travel and the repetition of the high-minded phrases she must translate make her world into a succession of similar events—in some ways the same, in some ways different. “What difference does it make?” is a phrase that punctuates the novel. What difference from one hotel to another, from one language to another, from one cliché to another?

Brooke-Rose was a novelist who enjoyed imposing invisible constraints on her work. *Between* is written without the verb “to be,” making the quality of language more active, maintaining a sense of movement. More importantly, the novel is written across languages. While English ensures the syntax, many other languages, especially French and German but also Greek, Romanian, and Turkish, are integrated into the text. There are Joycean resonances to the invented, blended languages. But rather than wandering the streets of a city like Dublin, the protagonist, a conference interpreter, moves from one airplane and hotel room to another.

Each new journey brings the narrator into contact with people and things that are both the same and different. Her travel companions are called Signor Ingegnere Giovanni-Battista di Qualcosa, Erich von Irgendetwas, and Comrade Pan Bogumil Somethingski (their surnames, respectively, Italian, German, and fake Polish words for “something”). Speakers at international conferences on different topics proffer the same banalities.

Evoking the postwar years of the 1950s and 1960s, Brooke-Rose’s hotel rooms are modern but filled with small differences of language and personality: “At any minute now some bright or elderly sour no young and buxom chambermaid in black and white will come in with a breakfast-tray, put it down on the table in the dark and draw back the curtains unless open the shutters and say Buenos dias, Morgen or kalimera who knows, it all depends where the sleeping has occurred out of what dream shaken up with non merci nein danke no thank you in a long-lost terror of someone offering etwas anderes, not ordered.”15 In each hotel room, there will be a bottle of mineral water, whose labels detail the origin, chemical composition, and benefits of its contents: Vichy État in France, Sariza in Greece, Eau du Kiém in Luxembourg, Vidago in Portugal. In each hotel room, there will be instructions for leaving the building in case of emergency.

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In her hotel room at night, the interpreter is obsessed with the jumbled tongues she has heard during the day, including the stock phrases of advertising, phrase books, and international conferences. She is consumed by these differences in expression, by the fact that waitresses in German ask her if she has “noch ein Wunsch,” yet another desire. “What difference does it make?” Sometimes, however, these fragments of language dissolve into one another. They form a layered, fragmented language:

Und even wenn man thinks AUF Deutsch wann man in Deutschland lives, then acquires it a broken up quality, die hat der charm of my clever sweet, meine deutsche madchen-goddess, the gesture and the actions all postponed while first die Dinge and die Personen kommen. 

As if languages loved each other behind their own facades, despite alles was man denkt darüber davon dazu. As if words fraternised silently beneath the syntax, finding each other funny and delicious in a Misch-Masch of tender fornication, inside the bombed out hollowed structures and the rigid steel glass modern edifices of the brain. 16

Brooke-Rose’s collage defines a consciousness which cannot guarantee separate language realities. The character cannot keep her two languages distinct, just as she cannot maintain the distinctness of her surroundings. Each hotel room blends into the last—the same but different. Like translation itself, each new iteration (of language, of place) produces a same which is not identical. There can be no exact sameness, because the second language is made up of differently shaped networks of meaning. Brooke-Rose’s hotel rooms are indeed translations of one another: the same, yet different, materializing what Roman Jakobson called “equivalence in difference.” 17

The relentless movement of her existence ends up, however, driving the protagonist into a state of melancholy. Her love affairs are unsatisfying; the dizzying multiplication of languages produces no real novelty.

**BETWEEN Cliché AND PARODY**

*Between* was published in 1968, at a time when internationalization was still a goal to be achieved rather than a nightmare of uniformity. But genuine difference seems to be elusive for the protagonist. When various languages become simply another way of expressing cliché, they provide little stimulation. Hotels are not much better, becoming a focus of her disappointment. They are clichés, a repetition of sameness: same bed, bedside table, bottle of mineral water, waitress inquiring after her wishes. And so, paradoxically, the abundance of languages and the proliferation of experiences undermine the possibility of real engagement with cultural specificities. Translation cannot guarantee separate realities.

Can too much difference, or the repetition of trivial differences, induce a state of indifference? Indifference can be a neutral attitude: apathy or passivity, a not caring. But it can also suggest a much more negative quality: an active lack of engagement and empathy, a hardening of oneself against the plight of others. Both these attitudes are pathologies of empathy. They arise out of an incapacity to measure: too close to, too far from, others?

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16 Ibid., 53–54.

Brooke-Rose’s protagonist anticipates something of the flat affect that the characters in Coppola’s *Lost in Translation* evince. Translation fails them mainly because they don’t try; they are indifferent. They lack the desire to penetrate the veneer of flashing lights beyond the hotel walls. Neither the aging actor nor the photographer’s wife has come to Tokyo to learn about Japan. They are in Tokyo only by happenstance. Another city, another country, would have been the same. The aging actor is himself his own source of symbolic capital: he has come to Japan to portray himself as an American whiskey drinker. The whole movie is constructed around the affirmation of sameness: the characters have been set up to fail in any attempt to disturb the cocoons they inhabit. The fact that the movie was released in Japan with its English title confirms the film’s indifference to translation.

On the spectrum of non-place to place, the Tokyo hotel stands squarely on the side of impersonality and anonymity. By contrast, Anderson’s *The Grand Budapest Hotel* gets as close as can be to the opposite pole: to a (comical) homage to historical *place*, translated into the fantastic colors of an exploded English.