



Pieter BOULOGNE

From One Jail to Another. Pavlensky's Arson of the Bank of France as (Un)Successful Cultural Transfer and Self-Translation

Résumé

Piotr Pavlenski est un artiste émigré d'origine russe qui, dans le but de dénoncer le pouvoir des banquiers français, a incendié en octobre 2017 une succursale de la Banque de France, Place de la Bastille, à Paris. Dans cet article, je propose de considérer cet acte non seulement comme un cas de transfert culturel, mais aussi comme une auto-translation. Le fait est que la performance de Pavlenski à Paris, intitulée en français « Éclairage », présente une ressemblance frappante avec celle qu'il a réalisée à Moscou en 2015 sous le titre russe « Ugroza » (Menace), lors de laquelle il avait mis le feu au siège du Service fédéral de sécurité de la fédération de Russie. Nous sommes dès lors invités à comparer les deux performances, à rechercher des différences et à les interpréter. Grâce aux connaissances fournies par la traductologie descriptive et les études de transferts culturels, il est possible d'acquérir une compréhension plus profonde de la réception paradoxale de l'art transnational et provocateur de Pavlenski. Cela conduit à analyser « Éclairage » comme une manière pour l'artiste de se défendre contre toute forme d'accaparement par le régime du pays d'accueil.

Abstract

Piotr Pavlensky is an émigré-artist of Russian origin who, in order to protest the power of French bankers, in October 2017 set fire to a branch of the Bank of France, at the Place de la Bastille in Paris. This article proposes to consider this action not only as a case of cultural transfer, but also as self-translation. In fact, Pavlensky's performance in Paris, called *Éclairage* (Illumination), bears a striking resemblance to the performance that he carried out in Moscow in 2015 under the Russian title *Ugroza* (Threat), which consisted of setting fire to the headquarters of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation. We are hence invited to compare these two performances, to look for shifts, and to interpret them. Drawing on Descriptive Translation Studies and Cultural Transfer Studies, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the paradoxical reception of Pavlensky's transnational, provocative art. This leads to analyzing *Éclairage* as a way of the artist to defend himself against recuperation by the regime of the receiving country.

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FROM ONE JAIL TO ANOTHER. PAVLENSKY'S ARSON OF THE BANK OF FRANCE AS (UN)SUCCESSFUL CULTURAL TRANSFER AND SELF- TRANSLATION

1. Introduction

Pyotr Pavlensky was born in 1984 in Saint Petersburg, where he studied monumental art at the St. Petersburg Art and Industry Academy. Between 2012 and 2020 he produced eight different works, which have caused a great deal of controversy in Russia and abroad. In 2017, after allegations of sexual assault, Pavlensky and his former partner Oksana Shalygina fled Russia and successfully filed for asylum in France. In his capacity as an émigré-artist, he created a new performance, involving setting a fire a branch of the Bank of France in Paris, not coincidentally located at the place de la Bastille. This work, referred to by the artist in French and Russian respectively as *Éclairage* and *Osveshchenie* (Illumination), is the object of this case-study. Before analyzing it as cultural transfer and self-translation, this article begins with a brief overview of Pavlensky's Russian works and a discussion of its reception in Russia and abroad. Next, the analysis shifts to the features of the first work Pavlensky made as an émigré-artist in France, namely his performance *Éclairage*, as well as to its reception.¹

The goal of this case-study is twofold. On the one hand, it intends to illustrate that it can be useful to combine competing as well as connected concepts and insights from Cultural Transfer Studies and Descriptive Translation Studies in order to gain a deeper understanding of transfer as an omnipresent and complex cultural phenomenon. I will argue that the concepts linked to transfer in the latter discipline go beyond purely conceptual discrepancies, and that they can provide Cultural Transfer Studies with unexpected insights. On the other hand, this article is meant as a contribution to the discussion of the impact and success of transfer processes. More specifically, this article will question whether the impact and success (or failure) of transfer processes can be measured at all.

¹ For a more detailed and in-depth discussion of the art by Pavlensky on Russian soil, see the following publications: Jonathan BROOKS PLATT, "Hysteria or enjoyment? Recent Russian actionism", in: Birgit BEUMERS, Alexander ETKIND, Olga GUROVA & Sanna TUROMA, (eds.), *Cultural Forms of Protest in Russia*, London, New York, Routledge, 2018, 141-159; Lilya KAGANOVSKY, "Vystuplenie i nakazanie. Performing Political Protest in Putin's Russia (Voina, Pussy Riot, Pavlensky)", in: Julie A. BUCKLER, Julie A. CASSIDY & Boris WOLFSON (eds.), *Russian Performances. Word, Object, Action*, Madison Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2018, 148-155; Vladimir D. MENDELEVICH, "The extraordinary case of Russian performance artist Pyotr Pavlensky: Psychopathology or contemporary art?", in: *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 2019, 56, 3, 569-585; Pieter BOULOGNE, "Kunstactivisme in/uit Post-Sovjet Rusland: Pjotr Pavlenski in de voetsporen van Aleksandr Brener.", in: Lien VERPOEST (ed.), *Rusland, onveranderlijk anders? Russische identiteit in politiek, cultuur en geschiedenis*, Leuven, Universitaire Pers Leuven, 2019, 73-89.

In accordance with the plea for reflexivity in regard to the position of the observer formulated in *Histoire croisée* by Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmerman, I want to stress at the outset that although this article deals with contemporary political art, I am not at all a specialist on the subject.² Given my background as a Belgium-based Slavist, I have dealt mostly with Russian literature, which I have more often than not studied from the point of view of a translation scholar (although I do not necessarily identify as such). However, the history of political art has much in common with the history of Russian literature, as under the czars and in the Soviet Union writers systematically were subjected to ideological pressure and censorship, to which many have reacted with anti-authoritarian stands – be it between the lines of their works or in underground publications. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, depoliticization became the norm for Russian culture. Because of this political indifference, some analysts hold Russian culture responsible for the installation of the Putin regime (and hence, in an indirect way, also for the ongoing war in Ukraine).³ The case study presented in this article serves as a reminder that in our time there are also Russian artists who strongly believe in the marriage between art and political beliefs. In the extreme case of Pavlensky, this marriage came at a high cost for the artist himself as well as for other implied actors (such as his ex-partner).

By walking into the field of Cultural Transfer Studies with just a single case of contemporary political art from Russia under my arm, I also want to highlight that many characteristics that might seem typical of literary transfer processes actually apply to other cultural products as well. My point is that, at least in some cases, it can be theoretically and methodologically useful to analyze performance art as transfer phenomena and as translations, and not in a metaphorical way. Still, after reading this article – which is, in a very literal sense, about crime and punishment, and more specifically about arson and incarceration – some readers might feel that the case presented is more about an arsonist and his transfer from one prison to another than it is about translation or *cultural* transfer. Of course, this criticism can be refuted by remembering that crime and art are not mutually exclusive. Anyway, this article is meant as an experimental invitation to think of new ways to make productive use of existing approaches to translation when analyzing various kinds of cultural transfer.

2. Pavlensky's art made in Russia

On 23 July 2012, in the middle of the highly mediatized trial against Pussy Riot, Pyotr Pavlensky put on his first performance *Show* (Stitch). The artist positioned himself in front of the Kazan Cathedral in St. Petersburg, standing stiff and motionless, with his lips sewn up, and holding a banner proclaiming Pussy Riot's

² Michael WERNER & Bénédicte ZIMMERMAN, "Beyond comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity", in: *History and Theory*, 2006, 45, 1, 33.

³ Pieter BOULOGNE & Benjamin DE MESEL, "Leve Oekraïne! Weg met Rusland? Morele verantwoordelijkheid, sancties en cultuur.", in: *Rekto:Verso* 6 May 2022, [online], <<https://www.rektoverso.be/artikel/leve-oekraïne-weg-met-rusland-morele-verantwoordelijkheid-sancties-en-cultuur>>.

action was “a re-enactment of the famous action of Jesus Christ (Matthew 21: 12-13)”.⁴ In doing so, Pavlensky expressed his solidarity with the Pussy Riot artists, who were on trial for having sung a punk song in the Holy Savior Cathedral in Moscow.

On 3 May 2013, Pavlensky performed his next action, in Russian entitled *Tusha* (Carcass), to protest the adoption of a series of new repressive laws: his assistant dropped him off next to the main entrance of the Legislative Assembly of St. Petersburg, naked and wrapped in a cocoon of barbed wire. The artist remained speechless, lying still in a half-bent position inside the cocoon, without reacting to the actions of others. The action was ended by the police with the help of wire cutters. On 10 November 2013, not coincidentally Russia’s annual Police Day, Pavlensky, sitting naked in front of Lenin’s Mausoleum, hammered a large nail through his scrotum, attaching his testicles to the pavement of Red Square. In his statement to the media, Pavlensky described his action as “a metaphor for the apathy, political indifference and fatalism of Russian society”.⁵ On 23 February 2014, the Russian artist decided to create a collective work of art, entitled *Svoboda* (Freedom), as a tribute to the Ukrainian Maidan Revolution. Close to the church built on the spot where at the end of the 19th century Czar Alexander II was killed by left-wing radicals, an imitation barricade was built while tires were being burned and drums beaten. On 19 October 2014, in order to protest the political instrumentalization of the mental health system as a means of repression, Pavlensky cut off a piece of his earlobe with a large kitchen knife while sitting naked on the roof of the Serbsky State Scientific Center for Social and Forensic Psychiatry. Obviously, this self-harming behavior was meant as a nod to Vincent Van Gogh, who cut off a portion of his left ear.

Pavlensky’s actions on Russian soil reached their culmination with *Ugroza* (Threat) on 9 November 2015. This performance did not involve self-harm, but, quite the reverse, the deliberate destruction of public property. He positioned himself in front of the main entrance of the Lubyanka Building, the headquarters of the Russian Federal Security Service FSB, formerly known as KGB and, under Stalin, as the NKVD. He poured gasoline on the door leading to the place where numerous artists suspected of disloyalty to the regime, especially in the 1930s, were interrogated, pressured, tortured, convicted and executed. Subsequently, he set the door on fire and was immediately arrested – as by then, he was well accustomed.

The abovementioned performances by Pavlensky, carried out on Russian soil, have many features in common. Firstly, they are all set in a public place, challenging the public order. More importantly, they all carry a political message, more specifically about the repression executed by the Russian authorities, which is made explicit by the author himself during or after the performance in the form of para- and epitexts: written statements, posts on social media and/or interviews. The performance is systematically built around the body of the artist, who fulfills at once both the role of the main subject and the main object. Pavlensky uses his physical

⁴ My translation from Russian.

⁵ Newsru.com. “Khudozhnik-chlenovreditel' Pavlensky pribil moshonku k Krasnoy ploshchadi”, in: *Newsru.com* 10 November 2013, [online], <<https://www.newsru.com/russia/10nov2013/pavlensky.html>>. My translation from Russian.

body as a visual code: it can be deciphered as a metaphor for Russian civil society, “the ‘social body’ of which it is a part”.⁶ The artist explained, for instance, that lying in a cocoon of barbed wire, in which each movement brings pain, symbolizes the paralysis of Russian society, which is frozen out of fear of repression. During the performance, the body remains stiff and motionless. By demonstratively not reacting to the representatives of the state authority, such as the police or security agents who try to put an end to the performance, the artist deliberately forces them to step into the performance, to become an improvised part of the happening, without realizing it. For instance, during the action *Fiksatsiya* (*Fixation*), the police, unable to take Pavlensky away (given his delicate attachment to the Red Square), covered the scene with a blanket, so as to hide his nakedness and to restore public order. In addition, the reactions of potential bystanders during the performance can also be seen as part of the art piece itself. The legal consequences, such as interrogations, court appearances, incarceration and/or psychiatric evaluation in a second temporality, however, are not meant as a part of the happening: Pavlensky asserts that somewhere a line has to be drawn between his art and the reality surrounding it.⁷ It is obvious that despite the clear continuity between these actions, they also differ significantly from one another in regard to the chosen settings, the instruments used (a banner, a sewing kit, barbed wire, a kitchen knife, a nail, tires, drums, fire), and the targeted body parts (lips, whole body in standing/lying/sitting position, ear lobe, scrotum).

3. The reception of Pavlensky’s art made in Russia

From 2012 onwards, Pavlensky gradually became a household name among the Russian intelligentsia in general and in the Russian art scene in particular. By carrying out the various subversive artistic performances described above, he consolidated his reputation as a fearless and intelligent artistic opponent of Putin’s regime. In this context, it is important to highlight that the immediate, direct reception of Pavlensky’s performances was generally limited to a few random bystanders. A wide audience, however, was reached with the video’s and images made by invited photographers, as well as by the written explanations, in Russian language, by the artist and/or his ex-partner Oksana Shalygina. Hence, we are dealing with a kind of second-degree reception. Given that Pavlensky’s art is predominantly visual, disturbing/provocative and very sensational, it has the potential to spread like wildfire on social media, like Facebook, which as an inanimate mediator guaranteed a prompt international reception. Apart from the coverage on social media, Pavlensky’s Russian art was also picked up by newspapers, in and outside Russia. The main animate mediator in this whole process was the artist himself. As Michaël

⁶ Lilya KAGANOVSKY, “Vystuplenie i nakazanie.”, 148.

⁷ Tikhon DZYADKO & Mariya MAKEYEVA, “Chudozhnik Petr Pavlenskiy, pribivshiy moshonku k bruschatke Krasnoy ploschadi: «Telo – eto krepkiy material»”, in: *Dozhd* 11 November 2013, [online], <https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/here_and_now/hudozhnik_petr_pavlenskij_pribivshij_moshonku_k_bruschatke_krasnoj_ploschadi_telo_eto_krepkiy_material-356444/>.

La Chance writes: “Pavlenski se fait complice de la presse pour mieux subvertir le programme médiatique qui perpétue un spectacle de la violence.”⁸

For the scope of this article, it is relevant to pay special attention to the French reception of Pavlensky's work before his emigration. It is striking that his actions carried out on Russian soil were clearly considered as relevant news by the French media. Before January 2017, France's biggest newspaper, *Le Monde*, published four lengthy reports on the topic, all written by the Moscow-based journalist Isabelle Mandraud. On 11 November 2015, a 720-word report covered Pavlensky's action *Ugroza* (Threat) and included a photograph and a video about the action.⁹ On 28 January 2016, a new 650-word article was devoted to the repression Pavlensky endured as an artist in Russia.¹⁰ On 14 May 2016, a feature article acquainted the French audience with four actions by Pavlensky, all analyzed from the artist's perspective and illustrated with photographs.¹¹ On 10 June 2016, an article in *Le Monde* reported Pavlensky's court hearings.¹² Interestingly, these reports pay quite some lip service to the artist, thus becoming a forum from which he can protest the Russian authorities. In the headline, he was called a ‘dissident’. *Le Monde* reported: “Piotr Pavlenski, lui, n’a qu’un seul message : ôter la peur des Russes en bravant les interdits”.¹³ Drawing on the framework proposed by Translation Studies scholar Mona Baker, it seems reasonable to say that this rather reductionist narrative perfectly fit the dominant (and, for clarity's sake, also convincing) public narrative in the French press, according to which the Russian Federation is an untrustworthy dictatorship.¹⁴

The process of absorbing the radical actions of Pavlensky in a more socially acceptable context is a form of recuperation by means of framing.¹⁵ If he makes political art to protest the *Russian* political system, it is tempting to believe, looking from the French perspective, that the extreme political situation in Russia creates extreme political art. Such a view frames Russia as a “natural, self-enclosed

⁸ Michaël LA CHANCE, “Éclairage de Piotr Pavlenski : Un manifeste révolutionnaire”, in: Michaël LA CHANCE, *Les inventeurs du vacarmes. Théories et pratiques de la performance*, Les Éditions Intervention, Québec, 2021, 137.

⁹ Isabelle MANDRAUD, “A Moscou, un artiste enflamme les « portes de l’enfer » de l’ex-KGB”, in : *Le Monde* 9 November 2015, [online], <https://www.lemonde.fr/arts/article/2015/11/09/a-moscou-un-artiste-enflamme-les-portes-de-l-enfer-de-l-ex-kgb_4806036_1655012.html>

¹⁰ Isabelle MANDRAUD, “Pavlenski, le « dissident » de Poutine, soumis à une expertise psychiatrique”, in : *Le Monde* 28 January 2016, [online], <https://www.lemonde.fr/arts/article/2016/01/28/pavlenski-le-dissident-de-poutine-soumis-a-une-expertise-psychiatrique_4855555_1655012.html>

¹¹ Isabelle MANDRAUD, “A feu et à sang”, in: *Le Monde* 14 May 2016, [online], <https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/05/12/piotr-pavlenski-a-feu-et-a-sang_4918223_3232.html>

¹² Isabelle MANDRAUD, “La justice russe condamne Piotr Pavlenski à une simple amende”, in : *Le Monde* 10 June 2016, [online], <https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2016/06/09/la-justice-russe-condamne-piotr-pavlenski-a-une-simple-amende_4944661_3214.html>

¹³ Isabelle MANDRAUD, “A Moscou, un artiste enflamme”. My italics.

¹⁴ Mona BAKER, *Translation and Conflict. A Narrative Account*. London, New York, Routledge, 2016.

¹⁵ ‘Recuperation’, a term used by the Situationists, is “the process by which those who control the spectacular culture, embodied most obviously in the mass media, co-opt all revolutionary ideas by publicizing a neutralized version of them”. See Karen KURCZYNSKI, “Expression as vandalism: Asger Jorn's ‘Modifications’”, in: *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 2008, 53, 54, 295-296. Baker defines ‘frames’ as “structures of anticipation, strategic moves that are consciously initiated in order to present a narrative in a certain light”. Framing is “an active process of signification by means of which we consciously participate in the construction of reality”. Mona BAKER, *Translation and Conflict*, 167.

communicative unit”¹⁶. This image is in perfect harmony with Russia’s diplomatic isolation, which already long before the recent invasion in Ukraine went hand in hand with economic sanctions. One could say that the French reception of Pavlensky’s Russian works was dominated by the romantic-nationalist paradigm, which favors the nation-state as a unit of analysis.

However, the idea that when Pavlensky carried out his performances in Russia, he was operating purely as a *Russian* artist driven by intrinsically national motivations – or that Russia gets the artists it organically deserves – can be disputed quite easily. Whereas it is true that as an artist operating in Russia, Pavlensky was deeply involved in mediating between Russia’s left-leaning so-called creative class to right-wing representatives of the state, his actions were “designed for mass media consumption” regardless of national borders.¹⁷ The main reception of his works took place on the Internet: a transnational receiving polysystem, in which the normal borders between countries play a negligible role – for it is very difficult for national authorities to control the way citizens make use of the internet and its various applications. That being said, translation is still needed to get the written statements accompanying his performances around the world.

The nationalist paradigm is also challenged by the insight, repeatedly formulated by Cultural Transfer Studies scholars, that national cultural products are more often than not of transnational origin. Digging deep enough, it becomes clear that this very much applies to Pavlensky, who – as also Jonathan Brooks Platt explains – derives from a transnational artistic tradition with roots both in Russia and in the European avant-garde traditions.¹⁸ However original Pavlensky’s performances may seem, he is greatly indebted to a number of vanguard predecessors. His works bear a strong resemblance to performances by the Moscow actionists of the 1990s.

Especially Kazakhstan-born artist and writer Alexander Brener, who several decades ago provoked the Moscow art scene with all kinds of subversive happenings, including physical violence and nudity, is an explicit source of inspiration for Pavlensky. Brener’s most notorious act took place in 1997 in the Municipal Museum of Amsterdam, where he painted a green dollar sign on an exhibited painting by Kazimir Malevich. For his artistic protest against the commercialization of art, Brener was incarcerated for more than six months. Brener, his fellow actionists and his followers, were and are inspired by all kinds of Avantgarde and Neo-Avantgarde movements from in and outside Russia, such as Dadaism, Russian futurism, with Mayakovsky as a key figure, Situationism, led by the Marxist theorist Guy Debord, and Viennese Actionism.¹⁹ The current wave of Russian protest art, of which before the arrival of Pavlensky also the street-art group Voina and the feminist punk band Pussy Riot were a part, is not only outspokenly anti-capitalist, but overtly transnational.

¹⁶ Joep LEERSSEN, “Networks and Patchworks: Communication, Identities, Mediators”, in: *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire. Special Issue : Histoire médiévale, moderne et contemporaine. Middeleeuwse, moderne en hedendaagse geschiedenis*, 2014, 92, 4, 1395-1402, [online], <https://www.persee.fr/doc/rbph_0035-0818_2014_num_92_4_8618>, 1398.

¹⁷ Jonathan BROOKS PLATT, “Hysteria or enjoyment?”, 142.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁹ Pieter BOULOGNE, “Kunstactivisme in/uit Post-Sovjet Rusland”.

It is striking that the journalists of the French newspaper *Le Monde* didn't look at Pavlensky in this transnational context of performance art. Their views sharply contrast with the analysis of scholars such as Lilya Kaganovsky, who uses Marina Abramović as a point of reference to interpret Pavlensky's art (although Pavlensky himself explicitly distances himself from the Serbian conceptual and performance artist, calling her art "institutional, for galleries and exhibition halls").²⁰ Brooks Blatt, in turn, also places Pavlensky within the transnational tradition of actionism, but he warns that the artist cannot be reduced to being a representative thereof, given his seriousness, "that makes him susceptible to vacillation between hysterical displays of castration and macho-heroism, making his practice into a mirror image of the regime itself".²¹

Kaganovsky explains that "performance art and political performance specifically seek to engage the audience in direct dialogue" and that "the act itself does not conclude with the performance but continues as long as there are consequences: hospitalizations, arrests, trials, prison terms".²² In Russia, Pavlensky has indeed been charged with numerous offenses, such as hooliganism and destruction of cultural heritage. During his interrogations, pre-trial detentions and trials – which the artist himself declared to be not a part of the performances²³ – he repeatedly took the floor to protest the abuse of power by the Russian judicial system in general. In total, he spent more than half a year in Russian jails. His actions in Russia have also led to several court orders for his psychiatric evaluation – with various resulting diagnoses, such as an acute psychiatric disorder and an acute polymorphous psychotic impairment with self-aggressive behavior.²⁴ As Vladimir Mendelevich explains, "from the point of view of the Russian government, members of the judiciary, and many laypeople, Pavlensky is a hooligan, an extremist, and someone in need of psychiatric help".²⁵

All-in-all, the Russian repression of his person was relatively mild according to contemporary norms of Russian society, especially when compared to the fate of, for instance, Maria Alekhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, the two famous Pussy Riot members who lost their freedom for having sung a song in a church. This (relative) mildness can be explained by the alleged reluctance of the regime, which underestimated the impact of the Pussy Riot trial on its diplomatic relationships, to create yet another martyr. Nevertheless, at the end of the day Pavlensky did choose to flee Russia and to emigrate to Western Europe. He did so, together with his partner and former accomplice Oksana Shalygina, after being accused by a Russian actress of sexual assault. Both Pavlensky and Shalygina declared the accusations were fabricated. According to his own statements, the artist did not want to do jail time for a crime he did not commit, and by leaving Russia with their two daughters, the couple managed to protect them from falling into the hands of the Russian authorities.

²⁰ Lilya KAGANOVSKY, "Vystuplenie i nakazanie.", 145.

²¹ Jonathan BROOKS PLATT, "Hysteria or enjoyment?", 156.

²² Lilya KAGANOVSKY, "Vystuplenie i nakazanie.", 155.

²³ Tikhon DZYADKO & Mariya MAKEYEVA, "Khudozhnik Petr Pavlensky".

²⁴ Vladimir D. MENDELEVICH, "The extraordinary case of Russian performance artist Pyotr Pavlensky: Psychopathology or contemporary art?", in: *Transcultural psychiatry*, 2019, 56, 3, 577.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 570.

The sharp contrast between the (earlier) international status of Pavlensky as a Russian dissident artist on the one hand, and his criminal persecution by the Russian state on the other, is explained by Craig Steward Walker as a deliberate “cultural transduction”: Pavlensky organized his actions in such a way that they would transcend the original sphere of interpretation in which they took place, namely the Russian Criminal Code, and enter another, namely the international art scene.²⁶ His argument is that Pavlensky’s performances were meant to be received by onlookers and the authorities as acts of criminal insanity, “but thanks his use of the Internet, they have been presented and received as artistic works that make political statements”.²⁷ A crucial factor in the international recognition of Pavlensky as an artist were indeed his own comments on the Internet (originally in Russian, translated into a variety of languages): they connected the meaning of his performances with the history of modern political art. These paratexts contributed to the construction of an international interpretative context, in which Pavlensky’s performances, by the Russian authorities regarded as criminal and/or insane, could be attributed artistic meaning.

4. Pavlensky as an émigré-artist in France

By opting for emigration motivated by political repression, Pavlensky once again walked in the footsteps of the post-Soviet actionists. However, the country he chose as his destination was less typical. Instead of emigrating to the United States, he filed for political asylum in France. In doing so, he followed in the footsteps of Inna Shevchenko, who as the leader of the Ukrainian feminist activist group FEMEN, was granted asylum in France in 2013. However, Pavlensky himself gave a different explanation for having chosen precisely France: it was, after all, the cradle of the French Revolution, which in his view stimulated the very beginning of Russian art:

Our motives were associated with the intersection of cultures and the great influence of French culture on the transformation of Russian culture. In 1789, the Great French Revolution took place, and in 1790 [the Russian writer and critic of Catherine the Great’s regime] Radishchev published *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow* using his home book press. From that moment, for me in Russia, the history of art in Russia becomes about the clash of man and power.²⁸

It did not take long for France to decide that Pavlensky, whom the French media had celebrated as a brave dissident of the Putin regime, merited the status of political refugee. Subsequently, his lawyer Beyreuther Minkov enthusiastically stated: “La France reste une terre d’asile pour les opposants politiques. C’est là notre

²⁶ Craig Steward WALKER, “Madness, Dissidence and Transduction”, in: *Palabra Clave*, 2017, 20, 3, 690.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 695.

²⁸ Zhanna NEMTSOVA, “Petr Pavlensky: V Rossii idet imitatsiya demokraticeskogo stroya”, in: *Deutsche Welle* 13 September 2017, [online], <<https://www.dw.com/ru/петр-павленский-в-россии-идет-имитация-демократического-строая/a-40477410>>. My translation from Russian.

honneur.”²⁹ In a way, this political asylum increased the symbolic value of Pavlensky within Russian society. As David Bethea and Siggy Frank explain, exile becomes significant because it produces great artists: “[T]he humiliation of being outcast is compensated for by the implicit recognition of the Russian writer’s significance in, and impact on, Russian society and culture.”³⁰ However, soon after his immigration, around the anniversary of the Russian Revolution, Pavlensky treated Paris to a performance which made it crystal clear that he was not there to raise his symbolic capital in Russia by getting into the good graces of French public opinion (as used to be the custom among Russian writers and artists during many decades preceding the Russian Revolution³¹).

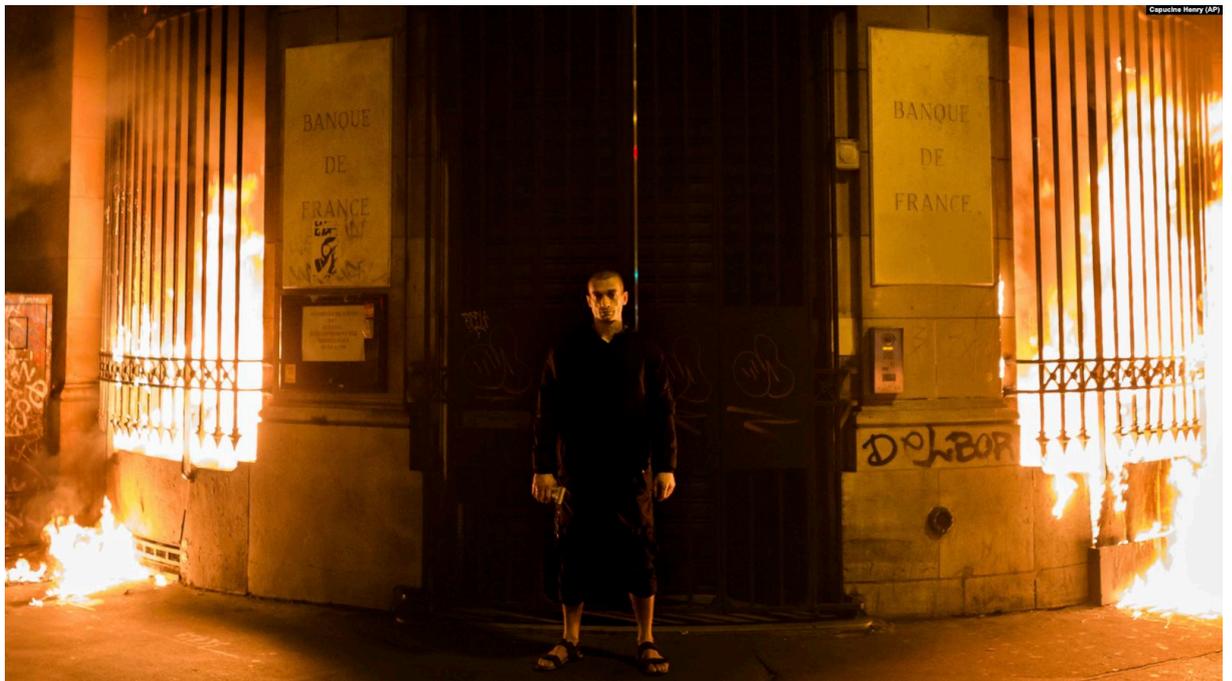


Figure 1. Pavlensky’s action *Éclairage* as photographed by Capucine Henry, who kindly granted us the reproduction rights

On 16 October 2017, around 4 AM, Pavlensky went to the Place de la Bastille, where he poured gasoline on the windows flanking the main entrance of the headquarters of the Banque de France, the national bank of France (see figure 1). About fifteen minutes later, Pavlensky and his accomplice Shalygina, for the

²⁹ “L’artiste russe Piotr Pavlenski a obtenu l’asile politique en France”, in: *Le Monde* 4 May 2017, [online], <https://www.lemonde.fr/arts/article/2017/05/04/l-artiste-russe-piotr-pavlenski-a-obtenu-l-asile-politique-en-france_5122402_1655012.html>

³⁰ David BETHEA & Siggy FRANK, “Exile and Russian Literature”, in: Evgeny DOBRENKO & Marina BALINA, (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-century Russian Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, 196.

³¹ Alexandre STROEV (ed.), *Les intellectuels russes à la conquête de l’opinion publique française. Une histoire alternative de la littérature russe en France de Cantemir à Gorki*, Paris, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2019.

occasion disguised as the French bank robber Jacques Mesrine, were arrested on the spot for intentional property damage by means of arson. The journalists and photographers present, who once again had been summoned by the author himself, were given a flyer with the following explanation (in an anonymous translation from Russian into French):

Mettre le feu dans la Banque de France c'est mettre l'éclairage sur la vérité que les autorités nous ont forcé à oublier. La Bastille a été détruite par le peuple révolté ; le peuple l'a détruite comme symbole du despotisme et du pouvoir. Sur ce même lieu, un nouveau foyer d'esclavage a été bâti, la banque, qui trahit les révolutionnaires et qui sponsorisa le Versailles criminel. La Banque de France a pris la place de la Bastille, les banquiers ont pris la place des monarques. La grande Révolution Française a fait de la France un symbole de liberté pour le monde entier. En 1917, grâce à ce symbole, la Russie s'est élancée vers la liberté. Mais cent ans plus tard la tyrannie règne de nouveau, partout. La renaissance de la France révolutionnaire déclenchera l'incendie mondial des révolutions. Dans ce feu, la Russie commencera sa libération.³²

Paradoxically, although Pavlensky was an already well-known artist before arriving in France, his action in Paris under the title *Éclairage* has received very little attention from Western media. For instance, the Flemish newspaper *De Standaard*, which previously esteemed the fact that Pavlensky had fled Russia to escape political repression worthy of several articles, including a 600-word one by Eva Cukier, did not even mention his performance at the Bank of France.³³ In France, the silence was less absolute, but the French media that did pay attention to *Éclairage* showed little understanding. According to *Le Monde*, for instance, Pavlensky's flyer did not explain his action but was only *supposed* to do so: "Piotr Pavlenski a distribué aux journalistes présents un communiqué de quelques lignes, censé expliquer cette action baptisée *Éclairage*."³⁴ Also, many of Pavlensky's Russian fans were disappointed that he had bit the hand that fed him. As a result of his action, Pavlensky spent nearly a year in pre-trial detention, during which he underwent psychiatric examination. Throughout this period, he received very little opportunity to start a debate by engaging with the press, as was his custom and intention; the judge had ordered the hearings to take place behind closed doors. Frustrated, Pavlensky stated in a letter from jail: "Les médias libéraux occidentaux sont allés aussi loin que possible pour faire taire tout ce qui concerne *Éclairage*. Comme si rien ne s'était passé."³⁵ A journalist affiliated with the French newspaper *Le Monde* publicly admitted that the

³² LEXPRES avec AFP, "Un artiste russe met le feu à la Banque de France.", in: *L'Express* 16 October 2017, [online], <https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/un-artiste-russe-met-le-feu-a-la-banque-de-france_1952766.html>.

³³ Eva CUKIER, "We hadden twee opties: een strafkamp of het land verlaten", in: *De Standaard* 18 Januari 2017, [online], <https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20170118_02681521>.

³⁴ Benoît VITKINE, "L'artiste russe Pavlenski arrêté à Paris pour avoir mis le feu à la Banque de France.", in: *Le Monde* 16 October 2017, [online], <https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2017/10/16/l-artiste-russe-pavlenski-arrete-a-paris-apres-avoir-mis-le-feu-a-la-banque-de-france_5201602_3246.html>. My italics.

³⁵ Quoted from Yann MERLIN, "Piotr Pavlenski premier gilet jaune ou artiste visionnaire ?", in: *lundimatin*, 176, 31 January 2019, [online], <<https://lundi.am/Piotr-Pavlenski-premier-Gilet-Jaune-ou-artiste-visionnaire>>.

media coverage that Pavlensky received as an emigré artist was indeed strikingly unbalanced: “La relative indifférence qui entoure sa situation tranche avec l’émotion qu’avait suscitée dans la presse internationale sa détention pendant seulement sept mois en Russie pour une ‘performance artistique’ similaire.”³⁶

During his trial, which he dedicated to Marquis de Sade “qui a montré la vraie nature du pouvoir,”³⁷ Pavlensky explained that a guilty verdict would boil down to officially banning political art in France.³⁸ The judge was not impressed. In January 2019, Pavlensky was sentenced to 1 year in prison and 2 years’ probation for the destruction of another’s property by a means dangerous to other persons. As he has already spent 11 months in pre-trial detention, he did not have to return to detention. His accomplice and ex-partner Oksana Shalygina was sentenced to 2 years in prison, 16 months of which were suspended.³⁹

5. *Éclairage* as self-transfer

Now that Pavlensky has been introduced both as an artist working on Russian soil and as an émigré-artist in France, and that the western reception of his works has been described as paradoxical (praise for his works on Russian soil vs. disapproval for his works in France), I want to explore the potential of Cultural Transfer Studies and Descriptive Translation Studies to deal with the concerning case. The first question is very simple, but deserves to be asked regardless: can *Éclairage* be considered a case of cultural transfer at all? It is interesting to note that Pavlensky himself uses the term ‘transfer’ to define his performance art in general terms: “It is contextualization, the *transfer* of context in information and in a symbolic field.”⁴⁰ Given the flexibility or hospitality of Cultural Transfer Studies, its willingness to accept all kinds of movements between two or more cultures as legitimate objects of study, it seems that Pavlensky’s emigration and his performances on French soil can smoothly be considered a cultural transfer. Following the lead of Lieven D’Hulst, it might also be called a case of “assumed transfer,” which is receptive to many types of relationships to so-called sources.⁴¹ Of course, we are dealing with a special case of transfer, given the fact that the main mediator is the artist or author himself. Hence, one could also refer to it as “assumed self-transfer”. Whereas a scholar identifying as a Translation Studies Scholar might, for institutional reasons, be reluctant to embrace such a case as a research object, scholars working in Cultural

³⁶ Jean-Baptiste JACQUIN, “L’artiste qui ne demande pas à sortir de prison”, in: *Le Monde* 8 September 2018, [online], <https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2018/09/08/l-artiste-qui-ne-demande-pas-a-sortir-de-prison_5352110_3224.html>.

³⁷ Michaël LA CHANCE, “*Éclairage*”, 133.

³⁸ Le HuffPost avec AFP, “Piotr Pavlenski, qui avait incendié la Banque de France, condamné à un an de prison”, in: *Huffingtonpost.fr* 11 October 2019, [online], <https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2019/01/10/piotr-pavlenski-qui-avait-incendie-la-banque-de-france-condamne-a-un-an-de-prison_a_23639869/>

³⁹ After her break-up with Pavlensky, Oksana Shalygina accused him of being an oppressive hypocrite. See her book: Oksana SHALYGINA, *Sous emprise*, Paris, Editions de l’Observatoire, 2021.

⁴⁰ Quoted from Vladimir D. MENDELEVICH, “The extraordinary case”, 573. My italics.

⁴¹ Lieven D’HULST, “(Re)locating translation history: From assumed translation to assumed transfer.”, in: *Translation Studies*, 2012, 5, 2, 142.

Transfer Studies are not hesitant to study multimodal phenomena such as performances.

The inclusion of multimodal artworks, such as Pavlensky's performance *Éclairage*, in our field of study is all the more important since “[s]ans la prise en compte de toutes les formes de circulation culturelle, on n'établira qu'un inventaire partiel et faussé des transformations de la modernité en Europe”⁴² (of which, geographically and culturally speaking, also Russia can be considered a part). At the same time, in another sense, namely as a sensational avant-gardist artist, unrepresentative of the Russian mainstream culture, Pavlensky is also a typical object of study:

Comme l'histoire culturelle a toujours tendance, en fonction d'un préjugé lettré hérité des humanités, à privilégier tout ce qui relève de l'avant-garde, de l'inédit ou de l'exotique, elle tend toujours à privilégier le segment novateur et international, très minoritaire dans les productions culturelles.⁴³

Another advantage of looking at this case from the perspective of Cultural Transfer Studies is that we are invited to take into account the multidirectionality of the movement, and the transnational (digital) space in which the reception of Pavlensky's art takes place. As was described above, not only is it rooted in a European avantgarde art tradition, but it also appeals to international audiences, which means that the countries in which he has been living and working, Russia and France, are perhaps not the only possible frames of analysis. When the artist creates his art in Russia, he has multiple audiences abroad (Russian speaking and others). When he creates art in France, thanks to the mediation of the Internet, he targets the same audiences, including his Russian one. Such an observation undermines thinking in terms of source system versus target system. Besides, also the laws on the basis of which Pavlensky was put behind bars in Russia and in France, are rooted in a shared transnational tradition.

6. *Éclairage* as self-translation

The following point I would like to make risks being more polemical: I believe that there is an important theoretical-methodological drawback in studying this case as merely a cultural transfer. Precisely because Cultural Transfer Studies steers away from comparing a given cultural phenomenon with one or more than one alleged source text, it makes sense, at least from a theoretical point of view, to consider Pavlensky's performance as a case of *translation*, understood as “a reformulation of a source utterance by means of a target utterance”.⁴⁴ Here, the notion “source utterance” can include all kinds of multimodal texts.

⁴² Christophe CHARLE, “Comparaisons et transferts en histoire culturelle de l'Europe. Quelques réflexions à propos de recherches récentes”, in: Sophie BABY & Michelle ZANCARINI-FOURNEL (eds.), *Histoires croisées : réflexions sur la comparaison internationale en histoire* (Cahiers IRICE 5:1), 2010, 73.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ Itamar EVEN-ZOHAR, “Translation and transfer”, in: *Poetics Today*, 1990, 11, 1, 74-75.

The action *Éclairage* at some point involves translation in the traditional sense of the word: the author's accompanying statement has been translated from Russian into French. The mere fact that this performance combines the verbal and the visual in complex ways is an argument in favor of expanding the scope of Translation Studies not simply by including intersemiotic translation, but by resisting Jakobson's classification of translation into three different types (intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic) as unnatural and restrictive.⁴⁵ At the same time, the action *Éclairage* is not a translation in a strictly descriptive or functional way: it was not presented as such to the (French, international) audience, and no audience has perceived it explicitly as a translation. Does this necessarily mean that Translation Studies has nothing to offer the analysis of this performance? Numerous theorists have argued the opposite, suggesting that Translation Studies and Transfer Studies share a field of study. Three decades ago, Itamar Even-Zohar admitted that "[the] practice [of Translation Studies] with products of translation has been rather selective, inconsistent from a theoretical point of view":⁴⁶

So far, only actual text translations have been admitted as a legitimate source for theoretical induction, while the whole intricate problem of system interference, through which items of repertoire (including, naturally, models) are transplanted from one system to another has been ignored.

More recently, Joep Leerssen argued that "the specialism of Translation Studies [...] is now in a position to address an entire spectrum of concerns that heretofore were the remit of Comparative literature at large, revolving around the diffusion of texts to unintended readerships across a cultural distance".⁴⁷ Given the fact that he sees literature as a phenomenon that "has been refined from a verbal art-form [...] to a praxis in social and cultural communication," his statement logically can be understood as an argument for why Translation Studies should not a-priori exclude transfer cases from the field.⁴⁸ Of course, it is not because Translation Studies and Cultural Transfer Studies share an interest in intersystemic movements, that it is useful to consider literally all cases of transfer as cases of translation.

The reason that an overview of Pavlensky's actions on Russian soil was included in this article, was not so much to show what features they have in common (such as the use of the artist's harassed body as a visual code, the inclusion of the immediate reaction of the authorities into the piece of art itself, and the presence of paratexts by the author or his ex-partner), but rather to highlight that they also differ from one another when it comes to the specific use of instruments, the setting and the position of the artist. Only when seen in the context of his complete works, it becomes clear to what extent two specific performances by Pavlensky bear an unusual resemblance to each other: *Ugroza* (Threat), the arson of the headquarters of the FSB in Moscow, and *Éclairage*, the arson of the Bank of France in Paris, which took place only seven months after the former. This resemblance cannot be

⁴⁵ Roman JAKOBSON, "On linguistic aspects of translation," in: Reuben Arthur BROWER (ed.), *On translation*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1959, 144-151.

⁴⁶ Itamar EVEN-ZOHAR, "Translation", 75.

⁴⁷ Joep LEERSSEN, "Networks and Patchworks", 1396.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

overlooked when one places the resulting iconic photographs of the performances next to each other. Undeniably, both performances have a privileged relationship of resemblance to each other.

Admittedly, a strong resemblance between two performances is not extraordinary. In Performance Studies it is a common insight that all performances – in everyday life or on stage – are constructed from previous performances.⁴⁹ A performance is never completely spontaneous, but always partly learned or rehearsed. *Ugroza* (Threat) and *Éclairage*, however, resemble each other to the extent that the former can be regarded as the script of the latter. Such is the relationship between a source utterance and a corresponding target utterance.

To our knowledge, Pavlensky has never commented on his performance *Éclairage* using the word “translation”. Instead, in an interview given in broken French, he has called it “la deuxième partie d’un dytique”.⁵⁰ In the art of painting, a diptych consists of two pieces that can be looked at separately, but their ultimate significance arises from their interrelationship. The qualification of the works *Ugroza* (Threat) and *Éclairage* as a diptych is hence an instruction to regard *Éclairage* not solely as an autonomous piece of art, but to look at it with *Ugroza* (Threat) in the back of one's mind, and vice versa, and to zoom out. The same suggestion is present in the book that Pavlensky recently published under the title *Stolknoveniye* (Collision)⁵¹: it consists of a description of *Ugroza* (Threat) on the one hand and *Éclairage* on the other, as present in various documents (police reports, psychiatric reports, court decisions, etc.), without a single word added by the artist himself.

If the road from *Ugroza* (Threat) to *Éclairage* is, in essence, a case of translation by the author himself, Pavlensky is stepping into the footsteps of other Russian émigré-artists. The self-translation practices of Vladimir Nabokov come to mind: after emigrating to the United States and establishing himself as an American writer, Nabokov adapted his Russian novels for the American market and vice versa. Needless to stress, by translating his own novels, Nabokov gained more control over their interpretation in the receiving communities than he would have had otherwise. There is, of course, a circumstantial difference: given the fact that Pavlensky's art is a predominantly visual code, in which language plays only a secondary role, he didn't need to be raised a polyglot to stand the threat of being deprived of his mode of expression in exile.

In Translation Studies, it is customary to study textual shifts in order to gain insight into the norms governing a given translation process, and to evaluate their effects on the text's construction. Now that it has been argued why *Éclairage* can be considered a case of self-translation, this presumed target utterance can be compared with the presumed source utterance, *Ugroza* (Threat), in order to look for shifts, and to interpret them. Drawing such a parallel in order to allow for a comparison is exactly what the artist himself wanted his audiences to do. According to one of his French interviewers, Pavlensky hoped to provide the audience with an answer to a question that was repeatedly put to him upon his arrival in France:

⁴⁹ Richard SCHECHNER, *Performance: an introduction*, London, Routledge, 2013.

⁵⁰ Yann MERLIN, “Piotr Pavlenski premier gilet jaune”.

⁵¹ Piyotr PAVLENSKY, *Stolknoveniye*, Moscow, Gorodets, 2021.

Il voulait simplement répondre à une question qui revenait constamment dans la bouche de tous ceux qu'il rencontrait depuis qu'il était arrivé sur Paris. Au point que cette question est devenu centrale dans sa réflexion. Cette question, Piotr a fini par se l'approprier. Il l'a synthétisée ainsi : "Quelles différences entre mécanique de pouvoir Russie et mécanique de pouvoir France. Les gens toujours vouloir comparer, toujours faire comparaison".⁵²

The abstract of Pavlensky's book *Stolknovenie* (Collision) explicitly mentions similar questions: "[I]s there a difference between the judicial executive power in Russia and in France? And if yes, then what exactly is the difference?"⁵³ The answers, however, are not given. They are to be found by the spectators.

So, let us compare both performances. In each case, the piece of art is constructed mainly by two subjects: one author and his accomplice, Pyotr Pavlensky assisted by his then partner Marina Shalygina. In both cases, the performance essentially consists of the arson by the subject and his immediate arrest by the authorities. Both performances are witnessed by invited photographers. Both settings are similar, as the headquarters of the FSB in *Ugroza* (Threat) are replaced by the branch of the Banque de France in *Éclairage*. The instruments being used are fuel and fire. Also the targeted spaces are similar: each time, the main entrance is set on fire, although in the case of the FSB the door itself was targeted, whereas in the case of the Banque de France, it was the flanking windows. In both cases, the immediate results were material damage and criminal prosecution, including court orders for psychiatric evaluation. At first glance, the main shift between both works concerns the political context; whereas *Ugroza* (Threat) was set in Russia under Putin's rule, *Éclairage* took place under Macron in France.

The author's own artistic statements about the performances, which function as paratexts, also differ substantially. The burning door of the FSB headquarters was "a glove thrown by society into the face of the terrorist threat".⁵⁴ He continued: "Fear turns people into a clingy mass of separate bodies. The threat of inevitable violence hangs over each of those who is located within reach of monitoring devices overhearing their conversations, and within borders of passport control."⁵⁵ The burning windows of the Banque de France, on the other hand, are said to illuminate the truth, which the authorities want their citizens to forget, that after the great French Revolution, the place of the monarchs has been taken over by today's bankers. When looking at paratexts, it is also interesting to compare the titles: *Ugroza* (Threat) refers to the emotional state of the authorities, who must feel in danger when confronted with empowered citizens, whereas *Éclairage* refers to the Enlightenment, of which the French Revolution was an immediate emanation. The implication seems to be that in Russia the people lack the feeling of empowerment

⁵² *Ibidem*.

⁵³ Pyotr PAVLENSKY, *Stolknovenye*, colophon. My translation from Russian.

⁵⁴ Quoted from Vladimir D. MENDELEVICH, "The extraordinary case", 572.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

(emotive state), whereas in France they have not enough insight in the more implicit mechanisms of oppression (rational state).

Remarkably, when looking at *Éclairage* through the lens of Translation Studies, we perceive a narrative quite different from the public narrative that shaped the reception of the artists' previous performances ("Pavlensky as the opponent of Putin"): if *Éclairage* is a self-translation, then the audience is invited to make the effort of comparing the arson in Paris with the arson in Moscow. Suddenly, the national bank of France emerges as the French equivalent of the Russian secret service, which is commonly known to be functioning as an instrument of political repression.

According to the artist, who has spent more time in a French prison for *Éclairage* than he spent in a Russian prison for *Ugroza* (Threat), the political conclusion he arrived at through the exercise of comparing both performances and their outcome, is sobering:

Existe-t-il une différence entre les systèmes des pouvoirs russe et français ? Bien sûr il y a. En Russie, un réseau se trouve à l'intérieur de la cellule de prison et l'autre à l'extérieur. Et en France, les deux réseaux sont en dehors de la fenêtre et l'ouverture est donc libre. C'est là que réside la différence. Dans la position des barres sur la fenêtre de la cellule de prison.⁵⁶

In other words, the artist concludes, from his own experience, that in essence, the French state is just as authoritarian in its way to deal with political art as the Russian authorities, whom they accuse of intolerance.

7. *Éclairage* as failed or successful cultural transfer?

The next logical question about Pavlensky's *Éclairage* is whether this is a case of failed or successful cultural transfer. Obviously, it is impossible to answer such a question in a straightforward fashion. There is no tool to measure the success of a given cultural transfer. And this is for good reason, as we should distinguish various perspectives to this question: we can try to answer it in terms of economic capital, popular success, symbolic capital and authorial intent.

In our capitalist world, success often of thought of in economic terms. However, in the case of an anti-capitalist artist such as Pavlensky, who literally set a bank on fire, it seems more than a little inappropriate to even consider such a criterion. As Charle comments: "Plus on va vers des secteurs à but non lucratif de l'économie des biens symboliques, plus ces facteurs symboliques, littéraires ou politiques prennent le pas sur les considérations économiques."⁵⁷

In terms of popular success and symbolic capital Pavlensky's work *Éclairage* was undeniably rather a failure than a success, given the relatively scarce media

⁵⁶ Quoted by Yann MERLIN, "Piotr Pavlenski premier gilet jaune". My translation from Russian.

⁵⁷ Christophe CHARLE, "Comparaisons et transferts", 54.

coverage and the lack of large-scale critical appreciation. It would seem that the main reason for the lack of popular and critical success was that *Éclairage* did not fit the preexisting French categories for how Russian political art should look. It is tempting to believe that the allegedly dangerous arson attack deterred the French audience, but when a similar arson attack took place in the headquarters of the Russian security agency, the western audiences did not express disapproval. Paradoxically, Pavlensky's self-translation entailed a more complicated understanding of his art, which quite promptly killed his previously established artistic reputation. There are, of course, also people who believe Pavlensky was effective in raising awareness about the power of bankers in France. For instance, the Quebec writer and philosopher Michaël La Chance seems full of admiration for *Éclairage*:

L'action de Pavlenski met en lumière que la banque, en tant que machine à calculer, contribue à la métaprogrammation de notre société, ce qui se vérifie plus que jamais à l'ère numérique, lorsque les dispositifs de captation des images, les appareils photo mais aussi le calcul et les transmissions, sont surdéterminés par une « pensée en nombres » qui s'étend, niveau par niveau, programme par programme, dans toutes les sphères de la société. Une raison calculante a subverti toute la société pour faire de nous les esclaves des banques, les prisonniers des normes, incapables de nous libérer de nos conventions sociales [...] ⁵⁸

Also the photographer Yann Merlin praised Pavlensky's work *Éclairage* as visionary.⁵⁹ It is indeed most ironical that while the artist was in jail, the Banque de France had to be protected by a fence against the anger of yellow-jacket protesters, who advocated economic justice.

One can try to evaluate to what extent the artist has been correctly understood in his own terms, which, given his self-identification as a political artist, are bound to be political. Such a question is tricky. Firstly, because we potentially have to differ between the declared intent and the inner intent, to which we have no direct access. Pavlensky's declared intent consists of metaphorical, hyperbolic paratexts, included in the performances, which are subject to subjective interpretation. As mentioned above, the statement accompanying *Éclairage* ended with the words: "La renaissance de la France révolutionnaire déclenchera l'incendie mondial des révolutions. Dans ce feu, la Russie commencera sa libération." The implication would be that the authorial intent was to unleash, in France, a new worldwide anti-capitalist revolution. During his trial, however, Pavlensky brought up somewhat more modest motives, explaining to the judge that the only goal of his performance *Éclairage* was "déplacer la Banque de France de la place de la Bastille".⁶⁰ However, we cannot reasonably expect that the artist actually had hoped that his performance would achieve such a goal. Here, we should take into account that

⁵⁸ Michaël LA CHANCE, "*Éclairage*", 139.

⁵⁹ Yann MERLIN, "Piotr Pavlenski premier gilet jaune".

⁶⁰ Le HuffPost avec AFP, "Piotr Pavlenski, qui avait incendié la Banque de France, condamné à un an de prison", in : *Huffingtonpost.fr* 11 October 2019, [online], <https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2019/01/10/piotr-pavlenski-qui-avait-incendie-la-banque-de-france-condamne-a-un-an-de-prison_a_23639869/>.

‘political art’ is not about taking over the power. As Jacques Rancière highlights in his essay ‘Les paradoxes de l’art politique’:

La politique en effet n’est pas d’abord l’exercice du pouvoir ou la lutte pour le pouvoir. Son cadre n’est pas d’abord défini par les lois et les institutions. La première question politique est de savoir quels objets et quels sujets sont concernés par ces institutions et ces lois, quelles formes de relations définissent proprement une communauté politique, quels objets ces relations concernent, quels sujets sont aptes à désigner ces objets et à en discuter. La politique est l’activité qui reconfigure les cadres sensibles au sein desquels se définissent des objets communs.⁶¹

In other words, it is plausible that the declared authorial intent, which as a part of the performance is an object of stylization, is instrumental to the artist’s implicit political intent, which very well could be about playing the opposition and reconfiguring our frames of mind by means of an artwork.

There is a second, more fundamental reason why assessing the success of *Éclairage* in terms of authorial intent is a difficult exercise: hasn’t Roland Barthes taught us about the death of the author? A simplistic reaction would be to completely disavow the importance of Pavlensky’s intent, but this seems all the more unnatural, if only because one statement the artist made about his performance is itself an integral part of it. Michel Foucault warns us that it is not enough to “repeat the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared,” but invites us to locate the space left empty by the author’s disappearance.⁶² He argues that the author “is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses: in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition and recomposition of fiction.”⁶³ He continues:

In fact, if we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius, as a perpetual surging of invention, it is because, in reality, we make him function in exactly the opposite fashion. One can say that the author is an ideological product, since we represent him as the opposite of his historically real function.⁶⁴

We have seen that when Pavlensky was celebrated as a Russian political artist in the West, he was framed in accordance with the dominant public narrative that Putin’s regime is evil (which already back then was quite convincing, and even more so today, in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine). This framing did not only disturb his Western success, it even enhanced it, making it possible to embrace Pavlensky as a brave Russian dissident without regard for his roots in a long transnational tradition of leftwing avantgarde artists. Such an observation serves as a reminder of the fact that an artist’s motives for making art should not be mistaken for the audience’s motives for appreciating it, and that those motives can fundamentally differ from one another. As Charle puts it:

⁶¹ Jacques RANCIÈRE, *Le spectateur émancipé*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2008.

⁶² Michel FOUCAULT, “What Is an Author?”, in: Josué V. HARARI (ed.), *Textual Strategies. Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2019, 159.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

Pour ce secteur littéraire ou intellectuel, il faut attirer l'attention du public en l'impliquant dans des enjeux de lutte symbolique du moment présent de la culture importatrice, même si les œuvres importées n'ont initialement rien à voir avec eux puisqu'ils sont issus d'un autre contexte.⁶⁵

In the history of translation, the framing of foreign authors has often been beneficial for the popularization of their works. For instance, in the mid-1880s the anti-socialist and anti-catholic Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky was successfully popularized in Germany by socialist-minded men of literature, who embraced him as the champion of the humiliated and insulted, whereas in France he was popularized by the catholic French critic Vogüé, as an antidote to amoral French realism.⁶⁶ However, this happened only after the death of the Russian author. A crucial difference with Pavlensky's work is that the artist is still alive. As an émigré-artist, he was able to take up the role of self-translator in order to actively interfere in the reception of his works abroad. As such, following his own artistic terms, by creating *Éclairage* in the capital of France, he was able to provide the French audience with a disturbing counternarrative about his artwork.

Following the artist's suggestion to analyze his performance as a painting ("la deuxième partie d'un dytique"⁶⁷), one could say that in a way, he used the situationist technique of *détournement* (rerouting) – the opposite of recuperation – in order to create a new work on the basis on a previous work, with a meaning that is antagonistic or antithetical to the original.⁶⁸ Also the aforementioned actionist Brener, one of Pavlensky's predecessors and admitted sources of inspiration, adopted the technique of *détournement*, when in 1997 he painted a dollar sign on the painting *White Suprematist Cross* by Kazimir Malevich, in order to express his discontent with the capitalist framing or recuperation of the avantgarde piece. In a similar way, Pavlensky revisited a previous performance, in casu one of his own, to hijack the recuperation thereof, screaming out his refusal to be reduced to his status as a martyred anti-Putin hero – which he indeed after *Éclairage* promptly ceased to be in France. In short, I believe that the performance *Éclairage*, from the perspective of the artists' project, can be considered an example of successful (self)transfer to the extent that Pavlensky effectively reframed himself, reinscribing himself in a transnational history of leftist performance art, at the cost of (and also by means of) criminalization, medicalization and vilification.

⁶⁵ Christophe CHARLE, "Comparaisons et transferts", 55.

⁶⁶ Pieter BOULOGNE, "Europe's Conquest of the Russian Novel. The Pivotal role of France and Germany.", in: Hanna PIETA & Theresa SERUYA (eds.), *IberoSlavica, A Peer-Reviewed Yearbook of the International Society for Iberian-Slavonic Studies. Special Issue: Translation in Iberian-Slavonic Exchange*, 2015, 167-191.

⁶⁷ Yann MERLIN, "Piotr Pavlenski premier gilet jaune".

⁶⁸ The term 'détournement' was coined by Guy Debord in 1956: "Détournement is political plagiarism, distortion, hijacking, or otherwise rerouting something against itself. For Debord, détournement was a revolutionary project 'undertaken within the present conditions of oppression, in order to destroy those conditions.'" See Richard GILMAN-OPALSKY, "Unjamming the Insurrectionary Imagination: Rescuing Détournement from the Liberal Complacencies of Culture Jamming", in: *Theory in Action*, 2013, 6, 3, 1. In English, often the related term 'culture jamming' is used. Baker calls this "[a] radical form of genre-based subversion of dominant narratives". Mona BAKER, *Translation and Conflict*, 166.

Pavlensky's newly established French reputation as a villain in the course of 2020 further deteriorated as a result of his similarly criminalized protest piece titled *Pornopolitics*: the artist leaked a sex tape tanking the Paris mayoral bid of the ruling party candidate Benjamin Griveaux, who liked to show off his family values. The resulting controversy plunged Pavlensky in a series of legal entanglements, suggesting that by 2020 the artist from Putin's Russia had entirely worn out his welcome in France. In the course of the past century, exile has proven to be "an effective tool for constructing the myth of the martyred Russian writer,"⁶⁹ but by persisting in his role as a rebel, Pavlensky categorically refused to put on the fitting shoe.

8. By way of an afterthought

The Italian philosopher Emanuele Coccia severely criticizes our universities as corporations that have, since their very foundation, been dividing our collective knowledge of the world into different research disciplines, leading to a "cognitive kashrut" that we tend to call "specialization".⁷⁰ It is not exceptional for Translation Studies scholars to defend themselves against such a navel-gazing by advocating an open notion of translation. An example in this sense is Tak-Hung Leo Chan, who questions the theoretical validity of the dichotomy between "translation" in a strict sense and "adaptation".⁷¹ Nonetheless, Translation Studies too, has made a great effort to become an institutionalized discipline with a limited number of research objects. Some find it threatening for the discipline that, if understood in a radically open manner, translation can be found virtually everywhere.

Still, as long as the cultures of humans, who, ironically enough, are themselves a product of rewriting with shifts (DNA), are about rewriting, and as long as intertextuality is a common artistic practice, it will remain potentially fruitful to investigate whether a given autonomous-looking cultural phenomenon could be described as cultural transfer and at the same time as a target utterance corresponding with one or more source utterances. This article has tried to illustrate this point, by using tools, objects and insights from both Translation Studies and Cultural Transfer Studies for the in-depth analysis of Pavlensky's performance *Éclairage*. I hope to have shown that when analyzed as a case of cultural transfer and self-translation, this performance manifests itself more clearly as a way of the artist to defend himself against recuperation by the regime of the receiving country.

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⁶⁹ David BETHEA & Siggie FRANK, "Exile and Russian Literature", in: Evgeny DOBRENKO & Marina BALINA, (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-century Russian Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, 211.

⁷⁰ Emanuele COCCIA, *The Life of Plants. A Metaphysics of Mixture*, transl. by D.J. Montanari, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2019, 113-114.

⁷¹ Tak-Hung Leo CHAN, "At the Borders of Translation: Traditional and Modern(ist) Adaptations, East and West", in: *Meta*, 2009, 54, 3, 387-400.