

The Translator Talks Back: Lilianna Lungina's *Podstrochnik* on Page and Screen

Lilianna Lungina (1920-1998), the prolific translator of children's literature such as Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking*, *Karlsson on the Roof*, and other literary works from Scandinavian authors, was the subject of Oleg Dorman's extremely popular and renowned documentary *Podstrochnik* (2009). In 2010, the transcript of the documentary in book form appeared. Unlike how most books are adapted to film or television, *Podstrochnik* began for the medium of television and was later adapted to literature. Additionally, Lungina did not write out the text of her life, but dictated it to Dorman who formatted it for television. Consequently, the story on page and screen is not entirely Lungina's or Dorman's, but a combination of both her story and his interpretation. Although Lungina never formally called herself a feminist, her account provides an excellent example of female testimony that can be analyzed through a feminist approach. *Podstrochnik*, both as film and as book, is a rich, complex document of an amazing life.

In Oleg Dorman's documentary film *Podstrochnik*, Lilianna Lungina narrates her life in a series of installments for Russian television that was first shown in four parts during July 2009. It was an unexpectedly huge hit with high ratings at every night of its broadcast. According to Andrei Rogatchevski in his review, the "film was promptly hailed as the most important broadcasting event of the year." It received prizes from the Russian television critics in September 2009 and from the Stalker Film Festival in December 2009. It also received the Lavr (Laurel) Prize for the year's best documentary television series in December 2009.

In a different format (fourteen twenty-six minute episodes and one forty-three minute final episode), *Podstrochnik* was broadcast again on February 2010. According to Rogatchevski, such immense success came after years of refusals and rejections from almost every Russian television channel. Television executives believed that the film's format, where most shots are of Lungina narrating with some cuts to photographs or city scenes, as dull and not conducive to high ratings. Though Lungina led an adventurous and fascinating life, she was unknown outside of Moscow's intellectual circles. Only through the endorsement of the famous detective novelist Boris Akunin and his connections was Dorman's film able to be televised.

Seemingly, the film's rather ascetic style would repel broad appeal. Lungina even wears the same outfit and sits in the same position throughout the entire film. However, Rogatchevski asserts that the documentary "paradoxically, succeeds in retaining the attention of the viewer precisely by defying the basic strategies for doing so." Lungina's voice and storytelling entrance the viewer into entering an engaging narrative about life in the Soviet Union. Night after night, millions of viewers tuned in to simply hear Lungina tell of her ordinary extraordinary life. She had a Scherezade effect on the viewers, who were entranced at her accounts of a childhood spent in Paris and struggles under the Soviet system. She was not a dissident, a gulag survivor, a political figure, or a celebrity, but an ordinary unheroic person who led a charming, captivating existence. In spite of various adversities, she maintained her hopefulness and optimism.

One can also regard Lungina as a cultural mediator. She was fluent in several European languages, spent her childhood in Berlin and Paris, and attended a German school in Russia. As an adult, she worked as a professional translator. Not only did she make the Pippi Longstocking and Karlsson stories accessible to the Russian reader, she also translated the works of Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg. Her work exemplifies Sherry Simon's conception of "translation as a process of mediation" (8) that engages two different cultures, bringing the source language culture alive to the target language reader. Simon states that translators "communicate, re-write, and manipulate a text in order to make it available to a second-language public" (9). Female translators especially can "use language as cultural intervention, as part of an effort to alter expressions of domination." In *Podstrochnik*, Lungina mentions that her being a woman, and especially a Jewish woman, prevented her from embarking on a career as a creative writer. Yet, through her translations, she was able to carve out an artistic niche for herself and an audience for her work. Simon asserts that feminist theory allows female translators to achieve a "renewed sense of agency in translation" (Simon 29). Although Lungina never called herself a feminist or identified herself as a proponent of feminist theory, her translations have indeed given her a "sense of agency."

Moreover, as a Jewish woman, there was cultural significance to Lungina being a mediator. Translation was one of the few occupations in which Soviet Jews were allowed to participate in and succeed. According to Harriet Murav, "Jews were disproportionately represented among the ranks of writers, literary researchers, journalists, professors, and translators throughout the Soviet years" (286). In her French-language memoir *Les Saisons de Moscou* (1990), Lungina observes that to advance in one's career is more challenging as a Jew. Even some prestigious publishing houses, like Khudozhestvennaia literatura, which specializes in Russian and foreign literatures, had a policy at that time to never surpass a certain percentage of Jewish translators ("recurent la consigne de ne jamais dépasser un certain pourcentage de traducteurs juifs") (*Saisons* 195). Though most Jewish translators served as what Murav terms "cultural emissaries" (287) of Soviet culture, and Russian language and literature to Central Asia and the Caucasus, Lungina acts as a mediator between the Western Europe of her childhood and her translated works, and the Soviet Union. In *Podstrochnik*, Lungina engages in an unmediated dialogue with the audience watching her on the television screen. The viewer hears Lungina's actual words, a translator who finally speaks for herself in her own words.

The book *Podstrochnik* is a transcription of Dorman's interviews with Lungina, what Leonid Parfenov, in his introduction, calls an "ustnaia kniga" (5). As of 2010, the book's sales have "reportedly exceeded the average print run for non-fiction in Russia, currently estimated at about 2000 copies, by at least ten times" (Rogatchevski). Importantly, only two-thirds of the book is featured in the film. In the book's foreword, Oleg Dorman comments that he made only the most insignificant corrections, which were usual for editing purposes, and included those parts of Lungina's tale that, for various reasons, were not in the film, adding a third more to the book's contents ["Ia vnes samuiu neznachitel'nuu pravku, obychnuiu pri publikatsii stenogramm, i dobavil te chastii rasskaza, kotorye ne smogli po raznym prichinam voiti v fil'm, tak chto kniga stala bol'she pochti na tret'"] (8). As if she is speaking directly to the viewer or the reader, Lungina introduces herself with "My name is Lilia Lungina" ("Menia zovyt Lilia Lungina") (*Podstrochnik* 15). She then proceeds to list all the names in various languages that she has identified with over the years. Moreover, she introduces herself with the diminutive form of her

name, Lila, instead of the more formal Lilianna, giving an intimate, conversational look into her life. She welcomes the reader into her world as honored friends.

The book describes Lungina's family history and literary accomplishments. Her narrative is a family saga that begins with her parents living in Poltava, and ends with her sons and grandchildren thriving in Moscow. She also mentions how she meets her future husband Sima Lungin, and her relationships with intellectual and cultural contemporaries. Not all of Lungina's life was joyful. She depicts in detail the sadness she experiences after the death of her parents—first, her father from a severe illness and next, her mother, especially painful since both losses occurred before Victory Day in 1945. Like the film, the book ends on a positive note. Lungina declares that “life is crazy, but beautiful” (“Zhizn' bezumna, no vse-taki prekrasna”) (*Podstrochnik* 382). The good will always triumph over the bad. As if she is giving sage advice to a friend, she concludes her narrative with the remark that “what is important in life is people—there are many more excellent people than you suppose” (“glavnoe v etoi zhizni—liudi, I liudei zamechatel'nykh gorazdo bol'she, chem predpologaesh'”) (*Podstrochnik* 382).

Additionally, in the book *Podstrochnik*, Lungina describes in detail her literary work, particularly her translations of Astrid Lindgren's children's books. Not only does Lungina bring Lindgren's stories to life for Russian children, but she also develops a friendship with the world famous writer. To Lungina, “to translate is a huge happiness” (“Perevodit'—ogromnoe schast'e”) (*Podstrochnik* 259). It is not only a profession for her, but it brings her much joy. She compares the “art of translation only to musical execution.” It is an interpretation.

While both the film and book are in Lungina's words, the overall construction and appeal of *Podstrochnik* are dialogic. She tells her life story to Dorman, who then creates a format that will allow her to tell that story to a wider audience. Dorman knew about the shorter *Les Saisons de Moscou*, but he believed that it was “only a draft of her long story” [“Dumaiu, frantszuskaia kniga stala prosto chernovikom ee mnogodnevnogo rasskaza”] (8). Her wearing the same dress in every episode adds consistency to her storytelling, placing the focus squarely on her words rather than on anything else. Yes, Lungina's story is her own, but the production of the film and the book create a dialogue between both Lungina and Dorman as well as with the readers and viewers. It becomes more than simply a tale about her life, but about how people respond to another person's life story. According to Kate Douglas, autobiographies about childhood “are often heavily dialogic – containing a plurality of voices that are often juxtaposed or interactive” (88). Although they seem to only convey the ideas of the author, they are really more collaborative, including the readers or, for the documentary's case, the viewers. They find the account engaging and reflective of their own life experiences. Lungina's texts are a “testimony that is sanctioned – accepted as true, but more significantly, accepted as culturally valuable, educative, or morally instructive.”

Similarly, Julia Swindells looks at autobiographical narratives and asserts that there is more to these accounts than the text itself. To her, autobiography seems the “most direct and accessible way of countering silence and misrepresentation” (Swindells 7). It is not only about the author's personal life, but also how that life “nearly always stands for something additional to itself” (Swindells 9). In Lungina's case, the autobiography represents an individual life in a specific historic context, the Soviet period. The autobiographical account “provides both the record of

the life, and also the means by which that life can be held to account.” The readers and viewers can compare their experience of life in the Soviet Union with Lungina’s. Swindells also claims that “women’s history appears to have had the most commitment to autobiography.” While such a statement might not be appropriate in all instances, many people would not have known about the particular aspects of Lungina’s history without her autobiography. She describes her fascinating life as a translator and as a well-traveled intellectual in an accessible way that informs the reader and viewer of her unique history.

In the television documentary film and book *Podstrochnik*, Lilianna Lungina narrates about her amazing life. It is a translation of her life, an interpretation that focuses on particular features of her identity – her life under communism, her Jewishness, and her womanhood. She is a unique individual with an entertaining, yet powerful story to tell about a life amidst Soviet history.

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