What's German for G.I. Joe?: How film titles travel

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Have you seen the film "The Unbelievable Trip on a Wacky Airplane"? How about "The Incorruptible"? Or "The Urban Neurotic"? Many Germans [1] have. Perhaps you have, too: the original titles were "Airplane", "All the President's Men", and "Annie Hall".

Traduttore traditore, say the Italians – translators are traitors. Like the classic traitor who stuffs his pouch with secret correspondence, the translator exposes one people's private thoughts and conversations, if not necessarily to an enemy, still to strangers. The translator may betray his readers, as well, concealing the rich ambiguity of the author's words behind his own interpretation. But this typically slippery Italian proverb has yet another, perhaps more sinister meaning. For while the translator is openly and intentionally revealing a text to his target audience, he is also – if he is any good – revealing them and their language to any outsider willing to have a look. Translations are hardly ever "overheard" by foreigners, which makes them singularly revealing, particularly for a people as obsessed with its image abroad as the Germans have been in the second half of the twentieth century.

Film titles are an intriguing special case. Translation is perhaps a misleading term, since fidelity to the original is hardly even a significant consideration, much less the aim, of the film distributors who provide the titles. Film titles serve above all to lure paying audiences into a dark alleyway, where they may buy candy and beer as well. Other influences – the artistic pretensions of a director, for instance, who may still have some influence in the domestic distribution – are shaken off when the celluloid crosses the big water. The new titles are chosen by professionals, with heaps of money to lose if they choose wrong, to suit the needs, demands, and desires of their own cinema public. A new title must above all be memorable, say a majority of German film distributors in one survey, and if possible convey an accurate impression of the film's contents. Reasonable goals, to be sure, but the German realization of these two commandments is often startling.

The deformation of titles in transit from Hollywood to Hamburg, it must be noted, unlike the reverse journey from Berlin to Boston, is not an adjustment of social or intellectual class. In the United States, even the most inane foreign films, if they do happen to reach the cinemas, appear as esoteric artifacts of a higher culture. Like caviar and unpasteurized cheese they are segregated for

[1] For films released before 1990, I use the term "Germany" to refer to West Germany alone. Film distribution in East Germany was subject, of course, to a vast array of more complex political and economic considerations.

the few refined palates, and neither offered to nor sought by the masses. The German John Q. Public, *Otto Normalverbraucher* (Otto Averageconsumer), subsists on an entertainment diet of foreign films, television programs, pop songs, and novels. The local product is sorted into pretentious film-board-subsidized pap, full of ravishing cinematography and long pregnant pauses, in which the festival audience can hear one another snoring; and gross-out comedies of the fart-belch-fuck school, that gratify the German public's insatiable demand for toilet humor. This is a self- perpetuating malaise, part of a larger phenomenon of postwar German self-loathing in all cultural domains. The same adolescent comedy that draws in millions on a summer weekend in the US will be dubbed into German and play to packed houses the following Christmas. The different titles reflect above all the different predilections – real or perceived – of the American and German audiences.

The easiest way to translate a film title, clearly, is not to translate it. With the increasing prestige of English worldwide, the penetration of English-language skills into the German population, and the internationalization of news media, this lazy strategy is growing ever more popular. About one third of the English-language films, and even more of the lower-budget "independent" films, are released in Germany under their original titles, with no further information.

A related strategy is to maintain the original title, but to pair it on the marquee with an explanatory tag in German. This strategy is less popular than it once was, but still gets the nod when distributors see an advantage in reminding the public of the film's country of origin. Thus the hip 1996 hit "Trainspotting" was released in Germany under the title *Trainspotting – neue Helden* (Trainspotting – New Heroes), while Alan Parker's Turkish-prison-torture flick "Midnight Express" came out as *12 Uhr Nachts – Midnight Express* (12 a.m. – Midnight Express). The American *Cage aux Folles* remake with Robin Williams and Nathan Lane as the loveable gay nightclub proprietors, ran as *The Birdcage – Ein Paradies für schrille Vögel* (The Birdcage – A Paradise for Garish Birds). And Alfred Hitchcock's one-word classic "Vertigo" had a five word tail *Aus dem Reich der Toten* (From out of the Kingdom of the Dead) stitched onto it, which reveals a major motif of the film, unmentioned in Hitchcock's laconic original.

This points up the most striking characteristic of the new German titles: their often absurd literalness. Where the English title takes a stab at poetry, wordplay, or subtle allusion, the German title quite commonly hits you in the face with some banal description, often a genre cliche, and not infrequently a long phrase summarizing the basic plot. Thus Steven Spielberg's comedy "1941," about civil defense efforts to thwart a Japanese invasion of Hollywood, got the German tag *1941 – wo, bitte, geht's nach Hollywood?* (1941 – Excuse me, which way to Hollywood?), perhaps because the German public might have no jolly associations with the year 1941. A comparable explanation is hard to find, though, for the retitling of Ridley Scott's science-fiction thriller "Alien" as *Alien – Das unheimliche Wesen aus einem fremden Welt* (Alien – The sinister creature from a strange world). "Scanners" received similar treatment, coming

out as *Scanners – ihre Gedanken können töten* (Scanners – Their thoughts can kill). And just in case the George Eliot film “Adam Bede” – a title which would not seem to require translation – might hold out insufficient treacle to the moviegoer, the German distributors rounded out the film version to *Adam Bede – Schicksal und Leidenschaft* (Adam Bede – Fate and Passion).

German film audiences eschew ambiguity above all else on their nights out in the cinema. Or, at least, the German film distributors believe that they do. It is not only the double titles, which might by their nature be expected to appeal to the very worst instincts of gray movie bureaucrats with eyeshades and sharp pencils. Most foreign films that hit the screens with a simple German title are subject to the thermodynamic law of increasing banality. “Beethoven”, a silly children’s film about a dog named Beethoven, ran in German cinemas under the title *Ein Hund namens Beethoven* (A Dog Named Beethoven), presumably to forestall the wrath of irate music lovers who mistakenly supposed it was the composer’s St. Bernard slobbering on the movie posters. The German public must be explicitly informed that “The Spitfire Grill” is, in fact, *Die Geschichte vom Spitfire Grill* (The Story of the Spitfire Grill), and was given a clear edge in figuring out what “The Other Woman” of a 1996 film was up to: *Eine Frau kämpft um ihr Kind* was the title (A Woman Fights for her Child). And if the title “Fly Away Home” seems a shade too diffuse for a touching little Canadian film about a teenaged orphan named Amy, who mothers an abandoned brood of wild geese, that is straightened out in the German title: *Amy und die Wildgänse* (Amy and the Wild Geese).

“The Seven-per-cent Solution” merely alludes to Sherlock Holmes’ cocaine addiction, for which the great detective seeks treatment on Sigmund Freud’s couch in this 1976 film, based on Nicholas Meyer’s novel of the same name. The German version *Kein Koks für Sherlock Holmes* (No Coke for Sherlock Holmes) does nail that plot device square between the eyes, although it also sounds less like a whimsical mystery film than like a 1960s underground comic. And why is Tennessee Williams’ streetcar “named” desire? The name on a streetcar is its destination, of course. But don’t worry, the German title *Endstation: Sehnsucht* (Last Stop: Desire) has already thought this through for you.

There is no way to know that 1946’s “Night Boat to Dublin” is smuggling drugs unless you actually go to the trouble of seeing the film, or unless you know that the German title is *Rauschgift an Bord* (Narcotics on Board). “The Day of the Triffids”, a typical 1950s Hollywood florophobic maneating-mutant-plant shocker, has its neologistic title straightened out in German to *Die Blumen des Schreckens* (Flowers of Terror). Somerset Maugham’s novel of Paul Gauguin’s life, “The Moon and Sixpence” acquired for its cinematic incarnation the straightforward German title *Der Besessene von Tahiti* (The Madman of Tahiti). And while Ernst Lubitsch’s “That Uncertain Feeling” could be about anything at all, with the German *Ehekomödie* (Marriage Comedy) we know precisely where we stand.

Protagonists’ names and geographic designations as titles would seem to re-

quire the least translation in the narrow sense. To be sure, special problems of cultural reference may demand alteration or clarification. “The Story of G. I. Joe” for instance, a quintessential WWII combat extravaganza released in 1945 from the Hollywood war factory. The antonomastic “G. I. Joe” is not universally recognized, so he was muscled off the credits; Germans got to see him under the blood-and-iron title *Schlachtgewitter über Monte Cassino* (Battle-storm over Monte Cassino), a reference to the most ferocious battle of the Italian peninsular campaign. Likewise “Dakota”, from the same year, is not among the American states most familiar to Europeans, and would not immediately suggest wild west – not like, say, Texas. The reverse problem occurs as well. “The French Connection” would make a German think of railway timetables, not organized crime; hence the German *Brennpunkt: Brooklyn* (Flashpoint: Brooklyn). Similarly, “Assignment: Paris”, which sounds to German ears more like schoolwork than Cold War espionage, was reassigned to *Budapest antwortet nicht* (Budapest doesn’t answer). An especially delicate case was the 1996 version of “Jude the Obscure”, whose crisp English title “Jude” was unproblematic in the mother country, but could have been unpleasantly misunderstood in the German-speaking world. Light contextualization might have helped, but the distributors leaped right to *Herzen in Aufruhr* (Hearts in Tumult).

Even when the German public would seem to be on equal footing with their American counterparts, proper nouns as titles are generally too ambiguous for uneasy Germans. Even American moviegoers would not immediately recognize, for instance, that “The Great John L.” is a biography of the boxer John L. Sullivan, but to avoid any confusion in the German market it was retitled *Liebe im Ring* (Love in the Ring). “Mister Roberts” on the movie marquis is just some guy you never heard of, but the German title explains that there is *Keine Zeit für Heldentum* (No Time for Heroism), and you can guess what that might be about. The classic western “Shane”, about the friendship between a young boy and a mysterious retired gunfighter, becomes *Mein grosser Freund Shane* (My Big Friend Shane). You wouldn’t immediately know what “Marjorie Morningstar” is up to, and maybe you wouldn’t need to, but in case they do the Germans were given some alluring extra information: *Die Liebe der Marjorie Morningstar* (Marjorie Morningstar in Love) was the German release title. Walter Scott’s “Quentin Durward” was dropped in favor of *Liebe, Tod, und Teufel* (“Love, Death, and Devil”), while the staid Sinclair Lewis adaptation “Cass Timberlane” was steamed up to *Liebe in Fesseln* (Love in Chains) in the Atlantic passage. Why the recent “Dolores Claiborne” was translated to “Dolores”, though, remains a mystery, given the German distaste for American first-naming.

It may have struck you that most of the new titles begin with the same word *Liebe* (Love). The German film-titlers are clearly fixated on a very few magic words; the ill-starred “Quentin Durward” was loaded up with three at once. *Liebe* appears many times more frequently in German titles than in English ones. “Alex and the Gypsy,” from 1976, is a romance of sorts, which justifies

calling it *Liebe und andere Verbrechen* (Love and Other Crimes), while the 1993 marriage-of-convenience comedy "Paper Marriage" was renamed *Liebe nicht inbegriffen* (Love Not Included). You may guess what it is that "Only Two Can Play", but in case the Germans could not, they were offered *Lieben kann man nur zu zweit* (Love Can Only be Done in Pairs). "A Business Affair" seems to point in another direction, but this is straightened out in its German title *Liebe und andere Geschäfte* (Love and Other Business). And *Liebe in Fesseln* (Love in Chains) was so titillating that 25 years after being tacked onto "Cass Timberlane", it was recycled as the release title for "The Affair".

Another magic word is *Tod* (death). "The Long Goodbye", for instance, is based on a novel by Raymond Chandler, so cynicism, despair, and murder are certainly on the cards. Does the "goodbye" precede the soul's departure for Hamlet's undiscovered country? In the German release it certainly is: *Der Tod kennt keine Wiederkehr* (Death knows no return). The likewise ambiguously funereal Chandler title, "The Big Sleep", became *Toten schlafen fest* (The Dead Sleep Soundly) in the original 1945 West German release, and then *Toten schlafen besser* (The Dead Sleep Better) when it was released again in 1978. (In East Germany, on the other hand, the film was known as *Der tiefe Schlaf* (The Deep Sleep).) Often the new title differs from the old merely by the introduction of the extra word "death" or "deadly". What for Americans was simply a "Warning Shot" in 1967, was for Germans "Der Todesshuss" ("Deadly Shot"); where Americans saw "Distance", Germans saw "Tödlicher Abstand" ("Deadly Distance"); where Americans could be content with "The Chase", Germans got to see "Der Todesjagd" ("The Death Chase"); and even "The Killers" was not bloody enough for the German market, so was spiced up to *Tod eines Killers* ("Death of a Killer").

The 1964 remake, that is. The original 1946 version came out as *Rächer der Unterwelt* (Avengers of the Underworld), taking advantage of another popular buzzword, particularly for westerns. Several dozen films have titles that begin "*Der Rächer von...*" ("The Avenger of..."). There is *Der Rächer von Los Angeles* (originally "Old Los Angeles"), *Der Rächer von Mexiko City* (The Fighting Lawman), *Der Rächer von Old Mexiko* (In Old Mexico), *Der Rächer von Montana* (Bitter Creek). In all, about forty titles start with this word. Another forty or so German titles begin with the word *Gangster*, though only about five of the originals included it. Along with *Killer*, another English loan word, it has elbowed out the unhip traditional German *Mörder* over the last decades. The crime classic "Key Largo", originally released under the weirdly sultry title *Hafen des Lasters* (Port of Sin), was returned to the cinemas as *Gangster von Key Largo* (Gangsters of Key Largo). "The Underworld Story" of 1950 became in Germany *Der Gangsterboss von Rocket City* (The Gangster Boss of Rocket City), while *Never Love a Stranger* outranked the gangster boss with *Der Gangsterkönig von New York* (The Gangster King of New York), showing that *Gangster* trumps even *Liebe*. The original title was saved, though, to appear a decade later in a literal translation, *Liebe niemals einen Fremden*, as

the German title of a film utterly devoid of marketable words, Francis Ford Coppola's "The Rain People".

Comedies seem to be subject to the most stringent regulations, perhaps out of fear that a German audience will not laugh unless authorized through proper channels. As in *Die unglaubliche Reise in einem verrückten Flugzeug* (The Unbelieveable Trip in a Wacky Airplane), and its sequel *Die unglaubliche Reise in einem verrückten Raumschiff* (The Unbelievable Trip in a Wacky Spaceship) — "Airplane II: the Sequel" in the original — a mass-market farce usually needs to include the surefire word "verrückt" (crazy, wacky), or something equivalent. Thus Mel Brooks' films get titles like *Mel Brooks verrückte Geschichte der Welt* (Mel Brooks' Wacky History of the World), *Spaceballs: Mel Brooks verrückte Raumfahrt* (Spaceballs: Mel Brooks' Wacky Space Voyage), and *Mel Brooks letzte Verrücktheit: Silent Movie* (Mel Brooks' Final Craziness: Silent Movie). The medical comedy "Carry On, Doctor" became *Das total verrückte Krankenhaus* (The Totally Wacky Hospital), with its sequel *Das total verrückte Irrenhaus* (The Totally Wacky Insane Asylum – originally "Carry On Again, Doctor"). The regulations for spy spoofs seem to be particularly rigid, requiring the title to include a lame parody of the James Bond 007 motif. The Zucker brothers' "Spy Hard" became *Agent 00 — Lizenz zum Totlachen* (Agent 00 – License to Laugh to Death), and "The Man who Knew Too Little", with Bill Murray, was *Agent Null Null Nix* (Agent Zero Zero Nothin') in Germany. The more inane the film the zanier the title: the flop courtroom farce "Jury Duty", for instance, was inflated to *Chaos! Schwiegersohn Junior im Gerichtssaal* (Chaos! Son-in-Law Junior in the Courtroom).

Albert Brooks' last-judgment comedy "Defending Your Life", on the other hand, is not really wacky, but the title at least lets us know that it has a barrel of laughs on offer: *Rendezvous im Jenseits — eine himmlische Komödie über das Leben danach* (Rendezvous in the Hereafter — A Heavenly Comedy About Life After Death). Laurel and Hardy entirely sacrificed their names to the exigencies of zany titling, becoming the comedy team *Dick and Doof* — "Fat and Stupid" — in German. Thus "The Flying Deuces" are *Dick and Doof in der Fremden Legion* (Fat and Stupid in the Foreign Legion), and "Way out West" is *Dick und Doof im Wilden Westen* (Fat and Stupid in the Wild West). These two were then substantially trimmed and packaged together as a single film, called *Dick und Doof — Eine Superschau des Lachens* (Fat and Stupid — a Super Show of Laughs).

In his early days Woody Allen received similar treatment – his first solo film "Take the Money and Run" was transformed into *Woody: der Unglücksrabe* (Woody: The Born Loser), while "Love and Death", perhaps to distinguish it from all the other similar-sounding German titles using these words, became *Die letzte Nacht des Boris Gruschenko* (The Last Night of Boris Gruschenko). "Annie Hall" is a particularly interesting case. This film was originally titled by Allen "Anhedonia", a psychological pathology. Though Allen renamed it shortly before release to focus attention on the character study, the clinical focus was

restored in the German version: *Der Stadtneurotiker* (The Urban Neurotic).

The film titles are of course only the tip of the translation iceberg. The truly gruesome shenanigans have been perpetrated in the dubbing and subtitling of films. One famous example is "Casablanca". Everyone knows that Ilsa leaves Vichy-controlled Casablanca with her resistance-fighter husband Victor one step ahead of the Gestapo. Everyone, that is, except Germans who saw the original 1950s dubbing. There references to Nazis and concentration camps and the Vichy government have been expurgated, to spare German sensibilities, and Victor Lazslo has become a generic Hollywood scientist one jump ahead of the evil enemy agents itching to get their hands on his "Delta Ray". In Alfred Hitchcock's "Notorious" (1946) Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman chase Nazi spies in Rio, but in the German version of 1948 the Nazis have been mutated into drug smugglers. It was routine during the 1950s to expurgate anti-German sentiments from the translated soundtrack, and to change the ethnicity of German villains. In "Never Love a Stranger" the translators even blotted out the incidental Jewish background of the main characters. Slightly less insidious is the practice of accommodating cheap comedies to the German market by injecting extra toilet humor.

When "Casablanca" was released to the cinemas again in the 1970s, it had new German dialogue much closer to the English-language original. As the German public becomes more cosmopolitan and more educated in English, film distributors have take fewer liberties in translation. The large majority of current films run either under their original English titles, or under fairly literal translations. This is especially true of those films that have some pretension of seriousness. English is cool, modern, and international, and overly germanized titles now seem primitive. A commercially revived German film industry now has the production capacity to cover domestic demand for bathroom jokes and drunken pratfalls, reducing somewhat the need for "wacky" American imports. So even if the recent Bernardo Bertolucci film "Stealing Beauty" did get the torrid German title "Feeling and Seduction", and "What's Eating Gilbert Grape" was localized to "Gilbert Grape – Somewhere in Iowa", it is plain that the golden age of creative film retitling is slipping away behind the Berlin wall of history.