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# The translated text. The aesthetic impact of language on transnational cinema

**Abstract:** The presence of the translated text in audiovisual realms, particularly those of multi-language films, is an issue of *mise-en-scène*. Focusing on transnational cinema, this essay proposes to expose how translation can either improve or depreciate the cinematic experience, thus calling for a more conscious use of subtitles and dubbing, making aesthetic and political concerns more central when dealing with audiovisual translation.

## Introduction

The issue of the translated text in an audiovisual medium is not an easy one to approach. Especially with increased internationalization processes in the audiovisual market, which was fostered by the emergence of International Film Festivals in the sixties, easier access to foreign content derived from the digitalization of the medium, and the rise of international coproductions (a consequence both of current financial strategies and the cultural scenario of interconnectivity that has emerged from globalization). With that, almost every film produced today receives at least one translated version in addition to its original. However, despite the hegemonic presence of the translated text today, little work has been done in understanding its influence on audiovisual narratives, restraining any theories to the realm of its linguistic value in decoding the foreign discourse.

However, if translated text is an unavoidable requirement for films to travel beyond their national borders, one has to face the issues that its presence potentially causes, disturbing some canons of the cinematic language. From visual to audio composition, this alien-format-inserted-into-a-finished-work is not only incapable of fully merging into the film's aesthetic, but it also requires a certain level of aesthetic differentiation to serve its purposes. Furthermore, in its overall standardized form, such a text may be deemed incompatible with specifics of particular forms of onscreen speech. After all, the translated text is primarily a decodification

tool within a field filled with the ambiguity of artistic expression. As long as this difference in purpose remains, these formats will be doomed to a problematic relationship.

It is in the realm of multi-language films that the issue is much more central. In such films that are composed in two or more languages, the presence of the translated text is a given; that is, the presence of the translated text in such films is borne simultaneously with the very decision to make a multi-language film. From the moment it captures the encounter of two languages, or the moment where, through montage, two or more forms of speech are put into dialogue, issues of translation are activated. Even if the choice is made to not translate the dialogue, this decision already reflects on the politics of translating. Translating, not translating and how to translate are important decisions in regard to the audience's reception of said material.

But in a global context, the reception of the film and its message is bound to find spectators that are knowledgeable in all of the languages, spectators that know none of them, and some who are somewhere in between. So even the translated text as a tool does not fully control all levels of knowledge, although it can be used to communicate how the filmmaker intends to negotiate the message with the public. Used as the film's active first person speech, this translated text can go beyond decodifying language, and also serve as a political tool.

However, despite its potential on the content level – not to mention its hegemonic presence – little work has been done in understanding the place of the translated text in the overall audiovisual language beyond its linguistic value. How subtitles have escaped almost unharmed from studies on aesthetics up to this point is unsettling at best. Even when the aesthetic implications of the translated text are acknowledged by academia, the conclusions drawn seem to mainly reinforce the ongoing assumptions that either such an alien presence has been normalized, or that there is no foreseeable way to tackle the issue besides recognizing its existence as an issue of audiovisual aesthetics.

Responding to such a deficiency, this essay proposes to expose how much translation can either improve or depreciate the cinematic experience of multilingual films by approaching the translated text as one of the many codes that compose what we understand as an audiovisual work.

Raising its status in cinema studies by calling for a more conscious use of subtitles and dubbing – one that goes beyond the approach of the translated text as means to access codified information – and thus entering into the aesthetic and political fields – invites reflection on the possibilities that could arise from a more conscious use of translation in cinema.

For this reason, the article will start by briefly approaching the space of the *written text* in cinema through mapping out what has been hinted at so far in terms of an *aesthetics of the translated text* within both the fields of cinema studies and translation studies. The second part of this essay will then present examples from multilingual films, in order to discuss the political and aesthetic impact of language on transnational cinema. On one hand, in order to highlight the concept of a *forbidden subtitle*, the article will offer special case studies of translated texts that clash with the aesthetic intent of the source. On the other hand, it will conclude with the analysis of films that have actively and positively responded to issues of audiovisual translation, highlighting the successful examples found in Hansen-Løve's *Eden* (2014) and István Szabó's *Szerelmesfilm* (1970), and finally a special focus on the treatment of the translated text in the multilingual border film *Sleep Dealer* (Alex Rivera 2009).

## The translated text in cinema

In *Cine y Traducción*, a one-of-a-kind publication that is fully devoted to the issue of translation in cinema, Chaume defines the audiovisual text as a semiotic construction simultaneously composed of different codes in order to produce meaning, but he does not acknowledge the translation as a part of such a compound (Chaume Varela 2004: 19). Such perspective reflects the general feeling of the field, where the translated text – be it in the form of subtitles, dubbing, voice-over or any other format – has been seen only as an unavoidable facilitator that allows films to travel. That is to say that, for no apparent reason, a medium which throughout history has had to defend its status as *Art* has permitted one of its components to be understood as a mere communication tool, with no other function besides relaying information to the spectator.

Both in cinema studies and translation studies, very few authors have focused on issues of the translated text as an audiovisual presence

on screen. And, as noted before, when the issue is acknowledged, the approaches remain mostly conservative, as mere exposition of trends or fatalist conclusions that show no way out. Yu Haikuo, for instance, presents a very timid approach to the subject when he acknowledges that the “viewer’s attention is inevitably divided between the subtitles at the bottom of the screen and the rest of the image” (Haikuo 2015: 500). While the accuracy of the observation is well supported by him, Haikuo shies away from predicting ways in which movies could actively respond to this fact. Even Yves Gambier, a strong advocate on the ideological issues surrounding translated text, restricts his contribution to the aesthetics by hinting to the fact that, although usually studied through the perspective of linguistics, “AVT is actually a multi semiotic blend” (Gambier 2008: 11). Although acknowledging the translated text as one of the many codes that compose the compound medium of audiovisual works, Gambier’s research is much more concerned with the specifics of translation in relation to language.

Abé Mark Nornes, a translator of cinema, presents the most comprehensive approach to the theme, one that crosses ideological and aesthetic issues. Nornes affirms that subtitles and dubs are “legible, but inescapably foreign” (Nornes 2007: 8), and therefore they are always implying issues of appropriation. In *Cinema Babel: Translation in Global Cinema*, not only does he advocate in favor of the visibility of the translated text, but he also discusses the negotiation of meaning that occurs between the original text and its translation. Incorporating Phillip E. Lewis’ term *abusive translation*,<sup>1</sup> Nornes dedicates an extensive chapter in defending the need for translators “who are [...] not transparently naked”, and, defending the idea of a positive kind of abuse, calling for “translators with attitude” (Nornes 2007: 27).

However, as his rhetoric targets only the *makers* of the translated text, it is understated that the reach of Nornes’ call for revolution is limited to

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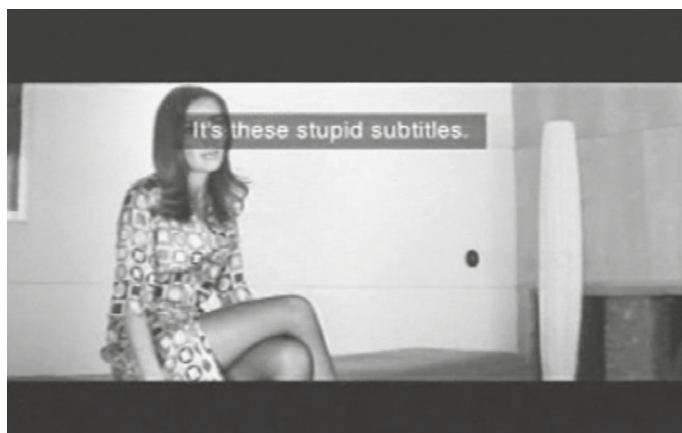
1 “The real possibility of translation – the translatability that emerges in the movement of difference as a fundamental property of languages – points to a risk to be assumed: that of the strong, forceful translation that values experimentation, tampers with usage, seeks to match the polyvalencies or plurivocities or expressive stresses of the original by producing its own” (Lewis 2000: 270).

the realm of post-production. That is to say, that both the examples and the provocations he includes place the weight of creation exclusively on the translator and their decisions, which are made in the post-production stage. With that, this theory shows a reaffirmation of the tendency to deal with the translated text as an attachment, something that comes *after the fact*.

Offering another perspective in approaching the aesthetics and ideology of translation, Michael Raine affirms that “subtitles are both the way and in the way of an encounter with foreign films” (Raine 2014: 152). The author discusses the space of subtitles on screen, but also brings about spectatorship by debating issues of audience reception, due to the fact that the original text and translation are coexisting mediums in subtitled films. From a political standpoint, Raine is in direct dialogue with other works by Christine Heiss (2014) and the before mentioned Yves Gambier (2008), all of whom make important connections between the access granted by translation in foreign products and the deriving assumption that foreign culture is as equally accessible and de-codified as its language that was translated.

Such perspective of the translated text, however, seems to trend towards downgrading the weight of subtitles, and for that reason this perspective should be absorbed with care and with a critical eye. In the work of Massidda, for instance, while acknowledging that subtitles’ primary issues – space and time – are the same as cinema in general, Massidda affirms that “good subtitles are supposed to pass unnoticed” (Massidda 2015: 46). This assumption has little ground in formal analysis, as even if one hopes for transparency, one must readily admit that, in practical terms, the translated text is always noticeable.

Furthermore, it can be said that in order to work, their audiovisual presence has to be not only noticeable but even foregrounded in relation to the other elements of image and sound. Dubbed films are known for having an unbalanced mixing of sounds and effects precisely because, in lacking the visual reinforcement of lip motion to communicate dialogue, the dubbed version must reduce other sonic information in order to present the message more clearly. Equally, the recurrent choice of yellow for subtitles – with a black margin around the letters – is not meant to make these elements *pass unnoticed*, but rather to make them stand out.



**Figure 1.** Still taken from *Aristoc. For legs. For eyes* (Portuguese-subtitled version), 00:00:33 ff.

## The aesthetics of the translated text

The level to which the translated text has been marginalized is exemplified by the little space allotted to subtitles in the recent book devoted to the written text in film by Michel Chion. While acknowledging that “subtitles are the case par excellence of the continued presence of non-diegetic written material over diegetic space” (Chion 2017: 54), Chion is never interested in further exploring the consequences of its problematic presence – which is in constant dialogue with all other elements on screen – while still not being perceived as a full component of the film per se.

His book does however present an interesting concept for understanding the effects of subtitles. When discussing the time factor of the written text in film – that is, that the film passes, and therefore reading acquires a predetermined duration that is decided by the enunciator rather than the receptor – Chion uses the concept of *entrelire*: “to read briefly or indistinctly, such that we can only half-read (Chion 2017: 124). While the author exploits this concept in relation to our experience of the written text, one could easily argue that a similar effect happens to the other elements of the audiovisual format precisely as a consequence of having to split the attention of the spectator with the written text. To an extent,

the other visual and sound elements, when coexisting with subtitles, can only be half-experienced, for audience attention is partially devoted to decoding the written text on the screen.

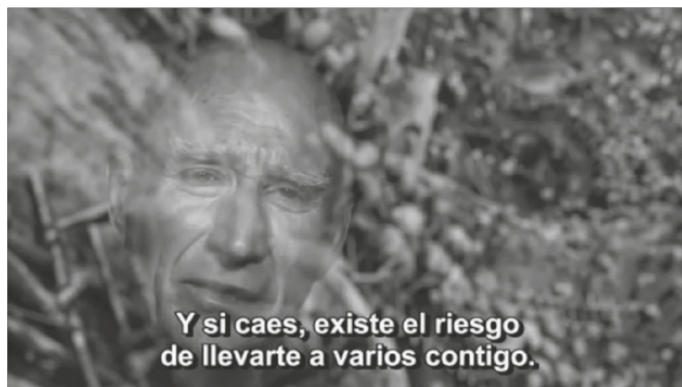
A helpful example that illustrates this idea is the 2000 advertising campaign for the pantyhose brand Aristoc,<sup>2</sup> which uses a self-referential plot that focuses on the idea of subtitles as a barrier. In this commercial, one that targets an English-speaking audience, an Italian couple is having an argument about the fact that the subtitles shift from the top to the bottom of the screen, being placed on the bottom of the man's body, but on the top of the woman's body, therefore covering her face in order to avoid covering her legs (Fig. 1). The comic effect sought after by this narrative relies precisely on the normalization of the presence of subtitles, as well as a sort of aesthetic transparency inherent to them. The gag works on the assumption that its audience will not be able to perceive that they are being denied access to the woman's face until her speech addresses it, thus creating a comic moment through her punch line (*Aristoc. For legs. For eyes.* 2000).<sup>3</sup>

This experience serves to illustrate Zoe De Linde & Neil Kay's argument that "when both mediums are competing for the same visual channel, as with text and image, they can only be processed in succession" (De Linde & Kay 1999: 32). Thus, it states how much the spectator renounces watching the other elements of the audiovisual medium in order to retrieve information from the translated text. And because this collateral effect is not restricted to productive uses of the *dispositif*, this example serves to inform that, even when the subtitles are not being used purposefully, it is still necessary to consider the fact that any visual element presented in a subtitled film will share the attention of the audience with this other source of relevant information. In other words, subtitles have the power to attract the eye of the audience away from what would traditionally be its focal point.

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2 "Aristoc. For legs. For eyes" (Ad campaign by Miles Calcraft Briginshaw Duffy, Media planned and bought by M CBD, 2000, US, spoken in Italian with fixed English subtitles).

3 To see this example in an audiovisual format, please refer to the video essay which complements this article: <https://vimeo.com/216354327>



**Figure 2.** Still taken from *The Salt of the Earth* (Portuguese-subtitled version), 00:02:25 ff.

Translation scholar John Minchiton assertively analyzed that viewers “blink down at the subtitles for information. They ‘photograph’ them rather than read them” (Minchiton 1993: 15). But while his intention was to diminish the weight of the translated text on screen, the concept of the spectator *photographing* subtitles seems adequate as the term serves as a reminder of the basic nature of subtitles on screen: their presence as a visual sign. But whereas in the Aristoc advertising campaign the issue of subtitles was a central tool in building the narrative of the pantyhose advertising, most audiovisual materials do not build off of the relationship between image and translated text.

One example of the unproductive relationship between film and translation is present in the film *The Salt of The Earth*,<sup>4</sup> a documentary about a Brazilian photographer based in France who made his name as an explorer and photographer of native cultures and their struggles. Despite the clear relevance of cultural interrelations presented by the theme of the film, the use of translated text adopted by the film does not respond well to the challenge of integrating the material.

4 *The Salt of the Earth* (Juliano Ribeiro Salgado, Wim Wenders, 2014, France/ Brasil/Italy, mainly spoken in English, French and Portuguese).



As it spans multiple languages, the material has the opportunity to make a constructive use of the mash up of cultures which were made iconic in the photographic work of Sebastião Salgado. Instead, the film approaches subtitling through its traditional standardized practices, even when the translated text is superimposed on recurrent multi-layered compositions that visually braid together the recorded interviews and Salgado's original photographic works.

The complexity of said compositions, which include layers of photo, interview and voice, resist the presence of any other added layers, such as the bold-lettered subtitles placed on the low center of the screen (Fig. 2).<sup>5</sup> The result is that the format chosen for the inclusion of translation, instead of having the multiplicity of languages building on the theme – an artist who worked on diverse cultures – the translated text rather ends up disturbing the construction of the composition, to the extent that linguistic diversity becomes a limitation, rather than a creative resource.

Nevertheless, as disruptive as they may be, the role of subtitles in affecting the audience goes beyond its influence in mere composition. An experiment conducted by a group of researchers at Clemson University and compiled in the article “Visual Reaction to Subtitling in Television and Media” shows that subtitles have the power to increase the attention level of the spectator. Combining both the use of eye-tracking devices to map the sight patterns of viewers, and questionnaires to measure the retaining of information, the group found out that, while subtitles tended to draw eyes away from the other visual components, the effort put into understanding the increased number of layers made the audience more attentive to the events portrayed in the film (Bryant et al. 2004). This is a particularly interesting finding that supports the potential of the translated text to be used in cinema as a creative source of meaning, since it implies that the translated text could be used to draw attention or highlight elements, in a similar manner to how filmmakers nowadays make use of close shots, sounds, colors, focus; in short, all elements available to construct the message of the film.

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5 To see this example in an audiovisual format, please refer to the video essay which complements this article: <https://vimeo.com/216354327>

This power of attraction via subtitles may not have been largely acknowledged in the past for its aesthetic potential, but this aspect can certainly be felt in many filmic examples. Whenever it is being used without agency, however, it brings no major benefits. For instance, while capturing the attention of a spectator might be very productive in many cases, in the case of sequences which rely heavily on fluidity, provoking the excessive concentration of the audience towards the written text might get in the way of creating the effect that should derive from a rhythmic experience. One example can be found in *Faubourg Saint-Denis*,<sup>6</sup> a segment of *Paris I love you*, the French version of the global phenomenon of contemporary city homages, where famous filmmakers are joined together to produce short films exploring aspects of different nationalities. Appearing in both French and English and catering to an international audience, the film fits into the case study of films that require the translated text already from its development.

*Faubourg Saint-Denis* revolves around a romantic relationship between an American girl and a blind French boy. Utilizing a blind protagonist, the narrative makes a conscious choice to highlight different forms of communication evoked by the protagonist, such as voice, sounds and touch. Within this aesthetic search to pair the experience of the audience with that of a character that cannot rely on sight, there is a long section composed as a rhythmic montage, which is based on sounds, colors, repetition and movement, so refined in its time-space construction that the superposition of a layer of yellow subtitles does not integrate well in any manner (*Faubourg Saint-Denis* 2006, 00:03:27 ff.).

However, when using subtitles to make the French voiceover that accompanies the images accessible in English, this element clashes with the aesthetic needs of its rhythmic montage. This is because, in the intention to build a rhythmic message almost purely associative, several cuts are made per second, which breaks a basic rule of subtitling which advises against maintaining them through montage cuts (Kruger et al. 2015). The result is that, instead of complementing the flow of the association of images and rhythm created by the other elements, the translated text

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6 *Faubourg Saint-Denis* (Tom Tykwer, 2006, France/Liechtenstein/Switzerland/Germany, spoken in French and English – segment of *Paris, je t'aime*).

focuses the attention of the spectator. In short, it acts against the intent of the sequence.<sup>7</sup>

However, from the point of view of conceptual intent, this section of *Faubourg Saint-Denis* is much more problematic than an action scene that might have its fluidity affected by the coexisting cuts and written translated text. This montage sequence in *Faubourg Saint-Denis* carries the weight of being more than just an aesthetic effect. Rather, the sequence seems to attempt to be the translation of a perspective which is seldomly acknowledged by cinema: a first-person account in a non-visual focalization. That is, in the impossibility of creating images as if through the “eyes” of a blind character, this builds a subjective sequence by reconstructing the impressions of the memories in more sonic/rhythmic terms. Considering this sequence as a suggestion of subjectivity, the fact that the subtitles are the only direct, objective source of information which are not inserted in the rhythmic logic that this character uses to make sense of the world represents not only an artistic flaw but it compromises the ideological relevance of such a powerful sequence. That is, it not only harms the aesthetic qualities of the scene, but it also calls for a debate on the possible ethical implications of deconstructing the experience of film beyond a mainly visual device which is proposed by this sequence of the blind character’s subjectivity.

## Political implications of translation choices

In the same manner that the former example shows the power of cinema in portraying difference, the emergence of the digital and its accessible cost has made national cinema productions bloom around the world, giving voice to different cultures, and with that, the possibility of responding to Imperialist oppression. But subtitles, as many scholars point out, have the problematic power of normalizing difference. Nornes points out how the mystic machine of cinema translation “smooths over its textual violence and domesticates all otherness while it pretends to bring the audience to an experience of the foreign” (Nornes 2007: 155), while Christine Heiss

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7 To see this example in an audiovisual format, please refer to the video essay which complements this article: <https://vimeo.com/216354327>

questions to “what extent the translation of the film allow the viewers to understand the complexity of a life that is very different from their own” (Heiss 2014: 1), calling attention to the fact that traditional translation in film disentangles the language variations present in international works (ibid.: 26). On the same issue, Yves Gambier spots a political implication of the use of translation in cinema, stating that the fact that the audience understands the subtitles makes them assume that they also understand the culture (Gambier 2008: 14).

But while Nornes, Heiss and Gambier may have focused on subtitles, their conclusions are applicable to the concept of translation as a whole. The phenomena observed by them can be discerned, for instance, in the trend of making multi-versions of the same film in different languages – popular in the emergence of early 1930s talkies – as a strategy to overcome the barriers posed in relation to international markets and distribution that are created by spoken dialogues. In time, due to cost and time efficiency, subtitles and dubbed versions established themselves as the primary formats of translation in film, but some rare contemporary examples of multi-version films still exist. One such is the directorial debut of Angelina Jolie, *In the Land of Blood and Honey*,<sup>8</sup> a war film portraying the story of the Bosnian war that was shot in two versions: one with dialogues in the original local languages Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian, and a more widely distributed version spoken fully in English. From a practical standpoint, the English version of the film appeals to audiences because it makes a foreign film ‘easy to digest’. However, the linguistic simplification also erases the political implications of a territory dispute narrative that is raised by the multi-language version, where different languages serve as a trace of multiple nationalities, which is a key factor in telling the story of a country’s fight for independence.

Stephen Crofts reflected on the power of cross-cultural contextualization in erasing the culturally specific in national cinemas (1993: 950), going one step further than the translation specialists in the analysis of the translation text as a way to make the foreign seem tamable. With a theory which does not deal specifically with the issue of subtitles, Crofts’ theory

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8 *In The Land of Blood and Honey* (Angelina Jolie, 2011, USA, one version spoken mainly in Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian, one version spoken in English).

is still valuable to the discussion since he is critical of the same issues of cultural specificity which make the standardized use of the translated text so problematic. For instance, Crofts is very critical of transnational cinema, saying that international co-productions confound nationalities and encourage the “culturally bland” (ibid.: 954). Indeed, thinking of the way the fully English version of *In the Land of Blood and Honey* blends together multiple cultures in conflict under the same form of expression, the critique made by Croft seems fitting.

However, when watching examples of self-aware multi-national films which are critical of the power relations among nations, transnational cinema does not seem to oppose the concepts presented by Croft, but rather presents itself as an evolution of them. The multilingual version of Jolie’s debut, in opposition to the fully English version, presents the possibility of reflecting on international relations more deeply since it does not renounce the cultural mark of varying forms of speech. In the film, however, the subtitles still present no form of non-differentiating between these languages, exposing the same erasure of difference presented in the English spoken version, just now through a different channel.

A different decision was made with the use of subtitles in Chan-wook Park’s *Ah-ga-ssi/Handmaiden’s Tale*.<sup>9</sup> The film, which makes a critique on Japanese oppressive dominance over Korean national sovereignty, starts with an intertitle meant to inform the audience of a narrative convention: subtitles for Korean and Japanese dialogues will be shown in different colors. By making such a decision, the film shows not only its awareness as a translational product, but finds a way to actively engage the audience in the implications of the interchanging of languages, implications which could pass unnoticed to a non-Asian spectator.

During the concluding remarks of “Reconceptualizing national cinema/s”, Crofts talks about a theory by Edward Said which demonstrates that countries’ political and cultural ties with certain nationalities affects the scope of the world-view theories it produces (Crofts 1993: 952). The use of multi-colored subtitles in *Ah-ga-ssi* engages the translated text in this power that transnational cinema has, a power that helps expose such

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9 *Ah-ga-ssi (Handmaiden’s Tale)*, Chan-wook Park, 2016, South Korea, spoken in Korean and Japanese).

ties and influence in local culture. For its cheap cost and effectiveness, such a resource seems like the perfect medium to, if used critically, explore transnational relations of influence and power.

*Sleep Dealer*,<sup>10</sup> a US-Mexico coproduction, is also a prime example of this type of cinema, one which is critically informed of both the fluidity and concreteness of national borders. The film is a contemporary American-Mexican co-production that uses science fiction to tell the story of a future where borders are physically closed, but the digital network provides a new way to access the world beyond its borders. In the plot, this accessibility has, for the most part, a pessimistic connotation, evoking the ways in which the other continues to colonize the local, even at a distance. And while many aesthetic elements in *Sleep Dealer* are generally flawless in depicting the issue of barriers and contamination, one that particularly stands out is the use the film makes of *active dubbing*. That is, the inclusion of “instant translation” devices between English and Spanish in the original version of the film, and therefore in all subsequent translated versions. In a film about the imperialist presence of American forces in Mexican territory, such an aesthetic choice in translation critically acknowledges the English language status as the *lingua franca* (Nornes 2007: 165), highlighting both the foreignness of this cultural element and the possibility of subversion within the impossibility of the foreign to understand nonstandard discourse.

Already in the opening sequence of the film, we see the protagonist walking with his father towards a gated property. Contacting the individuals *on the other side* only through the intermediation of technology, they are received via camera and a sound device. The voice of a guard we never get to see on screen *greets* them in English by telling them not to make any sudden moves. This voice is directly followed by a computerized Spanish voice which repeats “quietos, no se muevan”. The Mexican father responds to the voice in Spanish, which is followed by a short silence left on the narrative, representing the time the device takes to translate the message into English for the other party. The following response by the guard is transmitted again in English, followed by

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10 *Sleep Dealer* (Alex Rivera, 2008, Mexico/US, spoken in Spanish and English).

the Spanish instant oral translation. The conversation continues to occur in this dynamic, incorporating the breaks necessary for the machine to decodify speech, until the communication culminates in the purchase of water by the colonized Mexican locals through the use of dollars, the currency of the foreigner (*Sleep Dealer* 2008, 00:04:00 ff.).<sup>11</sup>

Despite the fact that the English subtitled version provides further access to all Spanish-spoken dialogue through the written translation, the incorporation of the dubbing of the foreigner into the original version of the film shows a potential to work with the translated text as one of many elements used to convey the ideas of foreign presence and imperialist influence. Through the repetition of the same information in two different languages, the movie effectively hints at the issue it will later explore through narrative: the automatic robotic translation of the English character highlights that there is an external presence factored into the Mexican culture, one whose chosen mode of connecting with the local population was through building an automated device that mediates all relation with the Mexicans while they can be kept at a safe distance outside the gates. The need for the device in itself is evidence (maybe even bigger than the walls surrounding it) that this foreign presence makes no effort to integrate into the culture of the space they now occupy.

The power of the active use of translation in *Sleep Dealer* is undeniable, as it is through the incorporation of instant translation that the audience is provided with essential information on how this text hopes they interpret the power relation between these two nations. Nevertheless, it is also through the inability of translation – the inability of understanding – that the film continues to reflect on the issues arising from the presence of the other. That is, through emphasizing the artificial and non-incorporated presence of the other, the film links the concepts of geographic occupation and cultural alienation, hinting at an exploitative relation happening between the US and Mexico. This issue of communication is further represented in *Sleep Dealer* through the memory-seller Dolores and her interaction with her computer system through voice control. It is through this device that the characters access *Truenode*, a blog-like software where

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11 To see this example in an audiovisual format, please refer to the video essay which complements this article: <https://vimeo.com/216354327>

individuals can share their memories for profit, described in the film as *the world's number one memory market* (*Sleep Dealer* 2008, 00:13:20 ff.), which establishes the globalized nature of the business.

While for the most part this system is only approached critically from an economic standpoint, there is one small segment in the film where language plays a role in contextualizing the relationship between Dolores and *Truenode* in terms of the infiltration of the foreigner into the local culture. At one point in the film when Dolores receives a good offer from an American buyer, the Mexican has a spontaneous reaction by using the idiomatic expression “híjole”, which is a shortened and much more socially accepted version of the expression “hijo de puta” (“son of a bitch”). While in local culture this an appropriate way to indicate a reaction of surprise, the colloquialness of the remark makes it unaccessible to the pre-configured automated computer system. The automated Spanish voice responds to her in a inquisitive tone “no entiendo” (“I don’t understand”), to which Dolores only laughs (*Sleep Dealer* 2008, 00:28:35 ff.).<sup>12</sup> Through the automated Spanish voice of Dolores’ computer system the film again highlights that, although globalized in reach, the program is foreign in essence. This small glitch in communication is enough to establish the lack of ability of the foreign technology to understand the cultural specificities of the Mexican language. That is, the incorporation of this small exchange suffices to highlight the much larger issue of global infiltration which permeates the narrative of *Sleep Dealer* as a whole. The issue of globalization is present in the subtext of the plot of the film, exemplified by the inclusion of a program which collects the local narratives of a Mexican in order to sell it in other parts of the world for profit. But it is the very impossibility of full access to Dolores’ speech which also hints to the revolutionary idea that the foreigner will never be able to fully grasp all the dimensions of the local and, with that, will never be able to fully colonize it. This subversive potential within the dominant presence of the foreigner is presented with similar intent throughout the story, and at the end of the film the protagonists are able to hack into the system of the foreigners to get revenge for the exploitation of the locals. Nevertheless, despite

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12 To see this example in an audiovisual format, please refer to the video essay which complements this article: <https://vimeo.com/216354327>



these traditional cinematic methods of conveying information, these two segments that revolve around the use of language and translation retain the innovative potential to show the often underestimated power of the translated text to work in combination with other elements of the compound medium that defines the cinematic arts.

### Further examples using written text

As shown above, *Sleep Dealer* is an example of the use of dubbing in a productive manner, as the translated text is used to expose imperialist foreign influences in the Mexican continent, going so far as to provoke subversiveness by presenting the impossibility of the foreign to fully grasp national culture. However, the reality of international cinema nowadays – including even *Sleep Dealer* for the most part – is to avoid dubbing in favor of the use of subtitles. In addition to historical reasons, the naturalization of its use, and the lower financial cost of producing subtitled versions, the written text is also the format preferred by film enthusiasts concerned with the preservation of the original text. Needless to say, such preservation is nothing but an illusion, generated by the fact that such technique does not involve the removal of original parts of the media (in opposition to dubbing, removing the original dialogue track). However, through the addition of the written layer, it also contaminates and modifies it, and for this reason it is important to dedicate a portion of this essay to discuss examples of films which have approached the written form of translation in a productive manner, either by showing special care in composing the aesthetics of the translated text or by including the subtitles as a source of meaning, working in an integrated fashion with the other mediums.

The French film *Eden*<sup>13</sup> can hardly be considered a transnational or multilingual film. A French-only production, mostly shot in France and spoken in French, the film has only a few international contaminations that surround the figure of an American character. Although her presence is not constant, by being the first love of the protagonist, her memories and influences are frequently evoked throughout the film, and her foreignness materializes both with the use of English language and in a segment shot

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13 *Eden* (Mia Hansen-Løve, 2014, France, spoken in English and French).



Figure 3. Still taken from *Eden* (English-subtitled version), 02:00:18 ff.

in New York. Nevertheless, in *Eden*, a film about different artists and their materials, the filmmaker was very careful when choosing how to depict the contents of a book written by this American character in English.

In the final scene of the film, as we see the protagonist on screen reading the book, a voiceover of the American's voice and a superposition of her image looking at the camera while reading the text is combined with a layer of written text which is added on screen. The text follows the pace and structure of her speech, appearing and disappearing as if accompanying the fluid experience of reading a poem. The multiple layers amount to a heavy but beautiful composition, which instead of ruining its aesthetics by the addition of the translated text in the form of subtitles, gives to the translated text a treatment complementary to the other elements: the text appears written on screen simultaneously in French and English, following the same logic (Fig. 3). The format chosen by *Eden* fights the constant speed of the standard subtitle format, adapting the obliteration of the message to the time of the poetry, an issue already theorized by Nornes when he addresses the different constraints of time and space present in poetry and subtitles (Nornes 2007: 161 f.).

Another film which also makes an interesting use of subtitling is *Szerelmesfilm*<sup>14</sup>. Although approaching translation in a very traditional

14 *Szerelmesfilm* (*Lovefilm*, István Szabó, 1970, Hungary, spoken in Bulgarian and French).

mode throughout most of the film, this Hungarian production, which deals with exile and concepts of non-belonging through an audiovisual form that mimics the mind process of memory, shows its Hungarian protagonist, towards the end of the film, daydreaming as he is riding the subway in France. Caught up in the conversation of a French elderly couple, the mind of the protagonist is triggered to recall memories from the Russian invasion. But the *dispositif* presents a twist to reinforce the discussion surrounding foreignness implied in this film about borders and exile.

On the English-subtitled version of *Szerelmesfilm*, the *mise-en-scène* highlights this process of becoming aware of the language of the other through showing the couple first speaking in Russian without subtitles and in a slightly de-synchronized sound. Then, when the mind of the protagonist returns to the present moment, the translated text is also used to highlight as the couple starts to speak in French, by including French subtitles to the French spoken dialogue (*Szerelmesfilm* 1970, 01:51:39 ff.). This translation choice not only helps the audience dive into the game of perceptions of the protagonist, but it also creates a distance by denying the spectator easy access to the content of the speech given in French, a language which is not the protagonist's native tongue.<sup>15</sup> In other words, "the viewer is no longer granted a privileged position where communication barriers are overcome via the use of subtitles" (Hassapopoulou 2008: 2); the audience is invited, via an active use of subtitles, to instead experience the game of perceptions that the protagonist experiences.

## Closing remarks

The choice to analyze only films which deal with multi-language text from within is derived from the belief that multilingual films are inherently situated in the very center of this discussion since such films have an undetachable dependency on translation. This ontological connection to the translated text calls for a deeper commitment from those films towards a more active and conscious use of translation. As a result, a special focus of this essay was to highlight those examples which deal with issues of barriers in multi-national

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15 To see this example in an audiovisual format, please refer to the video essay which complements this article: <https://vimeo.com/216354327>

relations in a globalized environment, especially focusing on the problem of borders. While the theme of barriers and miscommunications are at the very heart of the plot of all other examples given here, it is certainly more explicit in the transnational example of *Sleep Dealer*. By the use of this US-Mexican co-production which exposes the issue of physical and cultural borders, this essay tried to expose how much translation can either improve or depreciate the cinematic experience of multilingual films, calling for a more conscious use of subtitles and dubbing that goes beyond the approach of the translated text as means to access information, but also understood as means to emphasize or raise important political discussions in the films.

And while this essay ends in the positive light of the constructive examples presented in *Sleep Dealer*, *Eden*, *Szerelmesfilm* and *Ah-ga-ssi*, it is important to remember that these are a suitable starting point to provoke awareness of the need for further research on the subject, and they are far from representative of all of the possibilities of this cinema-specific medium. Most importantly, it is important to not assume that productive uses of the translated text can only be restrained to certain excerpts of the film. Rather, we see in these exceptional uses shown in these films the germ of a much bigger revolution in the use of translation in cinema, where standardized uses of any part of the audiovisual medium becomes exclusive to mass productions, with a focus on commercial uses of cinema. As for any cinema in an artistic vein, this essay hopes to have proven that continuing to dismiss the aesthetic value of the translated text not only affects the artistic value of a film, but also has an important ideological weight which has to be considered.

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- In The Land of Blood and Honey* (2011). Dir. Angelina Jolie. GK Films USA, *One version spoken mainly in Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian; one version spoken in English*.
- The Salt of the Earth* (2014). Dir. Juliano Ribeiro Salgado and Wim Wenders. Decia Films, Amazonas Images & Solares Fondazione delle arti. France/Brasil/Italy. *Mainly spoken in English, French and Portuguese*.
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