

A Conversation with Tessa Dwyer on the Risky Business of *Speaking in Subtitles: Revaluating Screen Translation*

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Translation, broadly conceived, has been an underlying theme for much of my own research and work recently, but it is a subject that Tessa Dwyer has obviously thought through on many levels, for many years. I must admit, when I first read this book, I expected it to be bounded by the discipline of translation studies. I was very pleasantly surprised to see that Dwyer addresses so much more. From the outset of *Speaking in Subtitles* she asserts that translation in any media form entails risk. This gambit is an effective way to encourage readers to question their own positionalities vis-a-vis the subject and object of translation in film. What is at stake when shifting the hierarchies between sound, image, and words in a film? What is lost? What is gained? What might be a vestigial artifact or unexpected outcome?

After posing this provocative set of questions in her book's introduction, Dwyer addresses the concept of errancy and the need for a bridge between theories and practices of screen translation, then cycles through these questions in each chapter. This repetition is not at all redundant, for it enables the reader to approach each of the chapter's case studies more thoughtfully and to make productive connections among them. She discusses resistant modes of screen translation, where risk is inevitable and in fact necessary for any form of translation to occur. She elaborates on the error, impossibility, and disarticulation that are not only part of the practical work of the translator but also deeply theoretical concepts. In much screen studies writing, it is difficult for authors to bridge the theory-practice divide. This is not the case for Dwyer. Her research and writing demonstrate a deep connection to the subject matter and understanding of the stakes.

Precisely because she understands the stakes, Dwyer divides her book into two parts: "Devaluation and Deconstruction" and "Errant and Emergent Practices." Part 1 begins with the chapter "Sub/Dub Wars: Attitudes to Screen Translation." This is where most people (scholars included) tend to start when thinking about translation in film. The practical



aspects of filmmaking and the synthetic nature of sound and image in cinema emphasize a certain materiality of film production—even in the age of digital production. While Chapter 1 covers the expected terrain of the 1960s sub/dub debate (i.e., the choice of voice-over dubbing versus subtitling) in relation to arthouse cinema—spearheaded by Bosley Crowther, then the lead film critic for the *New York Times*—Dwyer's in-depth assessment of the archives of this public debate calls attention to the distinctions of taste, class, and authenticity that undergirded the debate from its inception and persist to this day. Chapter 2 addresses the early 1970s Invisible Cinema experiment, while the third and

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final chapter of Part 1 focuses on the experimental comedy *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* (René Vienét, 1973).

Chapters 2 and 3, while highlighting distinct projects in different parts of the world, also work as a piece to bring into relief specific objects and moments in the 1970s in the very different cultural contexts of America and Europe. In the end, Anthology Film Archives's Invisible Cinema experiment, which prohibited both subtitles and dubbing—ostensibly to preserve an original, artist-driven filmgoing experience—led to the distribution of written transcripts that were indeed translations. This experiment created a rather disruptive film experience, where it was impossible for moviegoers to get lost in a “pure” artistic or cinematic experience as they rustled papers and shifted their eyes from page to screen. Dwyer then moves from examining the results of this American avant-garde experiment to consider, in Chapter 3, the European avant-garde experiment by recuperating the Situationist-associated film *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* This chapter addresses issues of subbing versus dubbing from the perspective of a film that is actively working to rupture notions of the auteur and authenticity. Dwyer notes that while *Dialectics* was meant to provoke a debate about language, it never reached a large enough audience upon initial release, therefore dooming it to be an experiment in hypothetical commentary rather than the statement-making film that its director had intended.

Dwyer utilizes *Dialectics* to finesse her dialectical approach to Part 2, where her focus moves from a genealogy of practices established (through trial and error) in the field of screen translation to a more flexible examination of the current fault lines in media translation. Investigating the errors and inconsistencies in translation processes that are emerging with changes in the technologies of production, distribution, and translation, Dwyer notes that current trends in screen translation are indeed more consumer- and fan-driven. As such they tend to be bottom-up rather than top-down practices. Such bottom-up practices may seem simpler because they often rely on more specific or localized consumer demands, but they can quickly transform into complex systems. In fact, Chapter 4 addresses how these original systems can become subsystems of more established screen translation practices through an examination of the links between media piracy and censorship that lead to misuse.

Dwyer's concept of errancy is further developed in Chapter 5 through an examination of the fansubbing subculture in anime. Dwyer begins this chapter with a discussion of anime's highly developed “fansub” cultures, but she also addresses the practice across several other genres. Still, anime serves as the ground zero for fansubbing, a practice

that involves individual users creating their own translations and subtitles for films and sharing them among their unofficial networks. These translations are not officially licensed nor done by professionals. Often, in fact, fansubbing occurs as a form of piracy, which occurs when a media object is not yet legitimately available in a desired language but has become enfolded into more established screen translation and media distribution networks. Essentially, media producers and distributors have found ways to harness unsanctioned distribution of their content in order to increase interest and demand for that content, and drive up their profits. Thus a form of strategic copyright employment occurs, whereby fansubbing and the fan sites that distribute its content actually function to increase demand for merchandise related to specific anime series, and therefore the unlicensed use of content through fansubbing is being ignored/encouraged to increase global brand recognition and profits.

Dwyer's final chapter (6) examines the recent developments in streaming, subbing, and sharing that have become increasingly legitimate practices of screen translation. In some ways, it is as if fansubbing has met crowdsourcing (crowdsourcing), with the goals being to streamline and standardize the work of subtitling at little or no cost to many media producers. The democratization of streaming technologies and digital tools for subtitling has shifted the focus (somewhat and temporarily) away from media piracy toward sharing—at least for independent media producers. This has in turn led to a renewed focus on the place of screen translation in screen studies. *Speaking in Subtitles* calls for a continued examination of these practices that were once considered improper, errant, or nonprofessional in order for them to be granted a central rather than peripheral position in screen studies. Dwyer insists that the time for a revaluation of screen translation is now.

REGINA LONGO: Could you expand on the concept of translation as a form of risk, an idea that you discuss in the book's introduction?

TESSA DWYER: This question delves into the central core of the book and my approach to translation. Yes, translation always entails risk as well as compromise. I think these two elements are always present, as translation involves an encounter with difference and otherness. For Derrida, this encounter is always about a failure of sorts, and for Walter Benjamin it entails defeat.

Many theorists and philosophers have written extensively about the inevitable (necessary) risks of translation. We are all overly familiar with the concept of loss via translation. Just think of Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* [2003]. Yet what this means for cinema and screen media in particular

is, I think, rarely given much consideration. What strikes me as odd about this situation is that screen culture is so steeped in translation—and it has been ever since the very emergence of film in the early silent era, when inter-titling, lecturing, and live, behind-the-sheet voicing all accommodated multiple modes of inter-lingual and *intra*-lingual translation.

Film and screen industries have always traded off a global imaginary, and import and export trade has always been vital economically. Hence, translation is integral to the industry—one could even suggest that the medium itself engenders a “translational” moment first and foremost—yet nevertheless, the day-to-day practicalities and indeed risks of cultural and linguistic translation have been all but ignored within screen studies to date.

The fact that screen media can and always have traveled across multiple borders (national, regional, inter-generational, etc.) forces the issue of language. Yet too often the supposed primacy of the visual is invoked, presenting a sort of visual *Esperanto* to suggest cinema is beyond translation, with the purity of the visual speaking universally, over and above the local, in a way that language never can. I think this is a misnomer. As I have mentioned, even silent cinema was supplemented and infused by language and translation. Cinema is an audiovisual medium, and was always conceived as such.

Hence, how does the risk of translation affect the medium? How does it affect its global address? How does translation as risk, as failure, as dysfunction allow us to reconceive the global currency and globalizing nature of screen media? This risk involves mismatch, error, cultural asymmetries, appropriation, censorship, gatekeeping, etc. It also involves renewal and revitalization, activity, mobility, activation, accessibility. Cinema and screen media are situated within and amongst these forces and flows—which need to be acknowledged and unpacked.

To think about the risks entailed by translation is to engage with cinema and screen media as living entities.

LONGO: How did you go about choosing the specific case studies that engage the constructs of error, impossibility, and disarticulation to uncover resistant modes of screen translation?

DWYER: Perhaps surprisingly, this is quite a difficult question to answer. I must cast my mind back many years, to when I began my doctoral thesis and embarked on the research that formed the basis of this book. I think partly why I find this such a difficult task relates to the nature of research itself—which I find haphazard in the best possible way, opening itself up to chance and randomness. When researching, one follows trails, never knowing where they will take you or to

what end. Those that stuck—those that intrigued, those that led somewhere—formed my case studies.

For instance, I remember visiting the Anthology Film Archives in New York, at an early stage of my research. I’m not sure why I did, however, or what I was hoping to find or how I stumbled across the translation synopsis of *Stride, Soviet!* [Shagay, sovet!, Dziga Vertov, 1926]—which led me to the Invisible Cinema and Anthology’s early, provocative stance against all forms of screen translation, both dubbing and subtitling. Coming across this early chapter in Anthology’s history felt like a gift. It was a story that needed retelling, from a fresh perspective outside of avant-garde film histories alone. I wanted to tell it in a way that was attentive to the cultural politics of language and translation being unearthed.

I can attribute the case study on global TV site Viki, on the other hand, which offers amateur subtitles in hundreds of languages, much more specifically. Colleagues Sun Jung and Ramon Lobato alerted me to Viki at a conference on Bad Cinema, where I had just spoken on notions of badness in relation to screen translation and “fansubbing.” I was partly inspired to research fansubbing after reading “For an Abusive Subtitling” by Abe Markus Nornes, a seminal screen studies piece on translation published by *Film Quarterly* in 1999.¹ I had already come across fansubbing via the journal *Bad Subjects* earlier in the 1990s. I have continued to research Viki for many years now, as it occupies such a fascinating position at the crossroads of industry change. It melds subversive participatory politics and corporate interest, pointing to the vital role of language diversification within contemporary industry convergence.

LONGO: In Chapter 1, you home in on the Anglo-American sub/dub debate (over dubbing versus subtitling) that raged in the 1960s during the golden age of European arthouse cinema, spearheaded by the *New York Times*’s Bosley Crowther, who was in favor of dubbing. I found this discussion of originality and authenticity to be of great interest, perhaps because we have the idea that today’s critics would argue for authenticity and originality—and subtitles of course. Can you expand on how the sub/dub debate reveals or conceals economic and political distinctions rather than aesthetic distinctions of style or taste?

DWYER: The sub/dub debate overdetermines the way that many people approach screen translation. In Chapter 1, I focus on the way it played out publicly in the *New York Times* in the early ’60s—spearheaded by Crowther’s controversial pro-dubbing stance. I was drawn to this public debate mostly due to the interesting, thoughtful, and unconventional way

that Crowther approached the topic—and, of course, due to the outcry he provoked.

In many ways, Crowther took film culture and appreciation to task, particularly in relation to the European art cinema circuit in the United States. He argued that subtitling was snobbish, elitist, clumsy, and inartistic. He also revealed as somewhat foolish and naïve the idea that subtitles offer a more authentic mode of translation than dubbing. Rather cleverly, he pointed out how that bastion of serious film appreciation—European art cinema—often involved inbuilt forms of dubbing and vocal substitution, especially in the case of Italian cinema and European co-productions. Crowther noted how in the U.S, subtitles appeal to certain types of audiences, with the sub/dub division occurring along class lines.

Hence, subtitles have come to be associated with high culture, functioning as a sign of authenticity, even when they add yet further layers of mediation—as in the case of Fassbinder's *Querelle* [1982]. One thing that is particularly interesting about this debate and Crowther's insightful remarks over fifty years ago is how little things have changed and how the link between subtitles and authenticity remains so steadfast today.

LONGO: Can you address how the practical aspects of filmmaking and the synthetic nature of sound and image in cinema have forced the foregrounding of the sub/dub debate?

DWYER: Yes, I think this is a very important point. Filmmaking is indeed a synthetic process, as the recording of separate sound and image tracks makes clear. This duality and division (that is discussed so eloquently by Michel Chion) causes a schism in the medium, a seam that can often unravel, as Chion puts it.² The technological and sensorial distinctions between sound and image causes an internal instability that introduces possibilities of disjuncture and manipulation: an inherent “dubbing effect.” As Rick Altman famously declared, all sound cinema partakes in lip-sync and can be thought of as a form of ventriloquism.³ Subtitling and dubbing unsettle audiences because they draw attention to the artifice at the very heart of cinematic fabrication.

LONGO: Do you think that being Australian and positioned in that part of the world led you to set up these distinctions that in some ways mirror those addressed between the Anglo-American and European sub/dub debates?

DWYER: Well, I suppose this mirroring is only partly intentional. In fact, I have never thought about it in these terms. Of course, the focus on, and comparison between, Anglo-American and European filmmaking is not surprising—as

these traditions play such a huge part in setting the agenda of screen culture globally, and screen theory/scholarship. They also reflect my own institutional and cultural makeup, coming from an Anglophone nation that borrows from (while competing with and resisting) both U.S. and UK models. The last two chapters of the book look towards different regions and relations, reflecting on the global influence of Japanese animation, Korean television dramas, and fan subcultures.

LONGO: I want to push you a bit more regarding what you state on page 110: that you will not take up censorship and/as translation because it is beyond the scope of this book. I ask because I think this notion of the piratical, as well as the desire to squelch piracy for economic reasons, is opening up this subject now. Do you intend to address this in future work?

DWYER: I think that piracy and censorship are huge issues in the screen industry, and ones that are intimately related. This is something that I do address in Chapter 4. Although I do only skim the surface of a topic that deserves far more sustained investigation, I identify how both piracy and censorship can involve forms of mistranslation and/or translation abuse. However, in many cases, pirate translation is partly a byproduct of (or response to) censorship. If access to certain material is blocked, or the translation offered is deliberately misrepresentative—then underground, informal translation can offer an alternative.

At the same time, the idea that censorship is prevalent, to some degree, within many otherwise reputable types of translation provides further food for thought. In this chapter, I try to draw out the connections between translation and censorship, which are both controlling to a certain degree, to disrupt the dominant way that translation tends to be framed. If we think about these connections, we start to intimate how misuse (and/or the *risk* of misuse) is so prominent within translation practice. I argue that this mode of thinking offers a productive way to engage with contemporary modes of digital piracy, fansubbing, crowdsourced translation, and other forms of informal intervention enabled by networking technologies. This is something that I will continue to investigate in future work, as media piracy and fansubbing have a pivotal role to play in current and future industry politics.

LONGO: Chapter 5 [“Fansubbing and Abuse: Anime and Beyond”], particularly the discussion on page 158, and your discussion of the analyses of scholars Nornes and Marks in relation to *Surname Viet Given*

Name Nam [Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1989], Siskyavi: The Place of Chasms [Victor Masayesva, Jr., 1991], and Iron Chef [Fuji Television, 1993–] resonated with me. In relation to the practices you discuss in this chapter, can you speak more about the online communities and training programs that have led to the practice of fansubbing? I keep thinking of that Benny Lava/Buffalax meme from a few years ago that was of course hilarious, but can also be serious business.

DWYER: Well, fansubbing is something that I have been interested in for a long time now, and something that I think is incredibly powerful in the current era of digital distribution. It holds so much potential for democratizing access to screen media, and providing audiences with a voice as well as means of intervention and participation. Fansubbing is not one thing—and it has many internal factions and tensions. Also, I think it is important to recognize that fansubbing does not necessarily pose a threat to professional subtitling. I think it is more productive to understand it as a supplement or addition. Professional practices are always limited by time, money, and means. Fansubbing and crowdsourcing are largely about filling in gaps and needs that aren't being met by professional practice due to economic, sociocultural, or political reasons. These unmet needs are massive—with so many language communities still underserved by digital technologies and online modes of communication and distribution.

LONGO: Does this decentralized practice allow new and different translations and interpretations of a text? And if so, do you see the future of subtitling going this way beyond fan and subcultures?

DWYER: Yes. Definitely. Already, fansubbing and crowd translation are being deployed as tools for literacy, language preservation, and activism. So I do think that this type of informal, collaborative, do-it-yourself translation facilitated by networking technologies forms a vital part of subtitling's future.

The decentralizing nature of this practice goes with the territory. The potential for diverse interpretations, subversions, and play is always there, although so too are regulatory forces, ethical codes, and standards. Many professionals also contribute to crowd translation projects and often these informal processes produce work of the highest quality. Lastly,

the potential for multiple, competing interpretations returns us to a core element of translation dynamics. Translation is always an interpretation, and it is never stable. Retranslation and reinterpretation are always possible. Translation is open, not fixed. A degree of error is not just possible, but rather preconditional. Perhaps there is no “correct” translation, there is just: translation. Informal processes like fansubbing bring to the surface this tendency that is present, nevertheless, within all translation modes.

LONGO: And, last but not least, what is next for you? New work in progress? New topics of interest to you?

DWYER: My current projects include research into “barrage cinema” and “bullet subtitling” practices where audiences make comments via text messages that appear directly on the movie screen. I'm interested in this phenomenon because of the playful, innovative ways that text is used to facilitate digital interactivity. In the digital era, film and televisual screens are becoming increasingly interactive, highlighting the currency of text and linguistic play on emerging platforms and formats.

I've also been exploring eye-tracking technologies in relation to moving-image media and onscreen text (including subtitles and SMS, for instance). And, I have been writing about accents on screen—something I'm hoping to turn into a sustained investigation soon into the role accents play in shaping ideas around national identity. I'm interested in shifting trends around accent, histories of practice, and the encounter with difference and sameness that they rehearse.

A further, future project that I'm really excited about involves developing transmedia strategies—including fansubbing—for a collaborative web TV series!

Notes

1. Originally published in *Film Quarterly* 52.3, it became a chapter of Nornes's book, *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
2. Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbmann (Columbia University Press, 1999).
3. Rick Altman, “Moving Lips: Cinema as Ventriloquism,” *Yale French Studies*. 60, Cinema/Sound (1980): 67–79.