



Cornu, J-F., & O'Sullivan, C. (2016). The Translation of Films: History, Preservation, Research, and Exhibition. *Journal of Film Preservation*, (94), 25-31.

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available by subscription online via Questia at <https://www.questia.com/magazine/1P3-4079125201/the-translation-of-films-history-preservation-research> . Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/pure/about/ebr-terms>

The translation of films: history, preservation, research and exhibition

Jean-François Cornu & Carol O’Sullivan

Jean-François Cornu is an independent film translator and researcher based in France.

Carol O’Sullivan is Senior Lecturer in Translation Studies at the University of Bristol.

What would our enjoyment and knowledge of world cinema be without translation? Ever since the silent era, cinema has relied on translation to reach audiences all over the world. Without subtitling, dubbing and other forms of translation, films would be confined within their own languages and geolinguistic areas. Translation is a necessity for the worldwide distribution and exhibition of films. But so far, it has been overlooked as an essential, not to say fascinating, aspect of film history and preservation.

It is often considered that translation became necessary only from the introduction of sound, and specifically speech, in films. For a long time, even major film history textbooks merely noted that, when films started to talk, subtitling and dubbing were invented to maintain international distribution. No further explanation was given as to how and when these translation techniques were designed and implemented, and by whom. The cinephile reader was led to believe that dubbing and subtitling were practically invented simultaneously with the introduction of speech in films. Translation was taken for granted; it seemed that the difference between seeing a film in the original or in translation was one which did not greatly affect film scholarship, and that, with the exception of a few of the most famous cases, the version in which a film was originally seen was not of huge significance to the film historian. This lack of attention to the translation issue in cinema may also be linked to the widely held belief that silent cinema was a universal language which could be understood by every viewer. Such an attitude overlooks the fact that silent films usually contained a varying number of intertitles which needed to be translated, adapted and reinserted into “foreign” versions for exhibition outside their geographical or linguistic area. They also had credit sequences and, often, optical titles which required translation, and they were frequently recut for foreign markets, which must also be considered part of the work of translation.

Whether in the context of silent cinema or talking films, the history and practice of film translation seem to have rarely been raised within the wider field of film history and preservation, though it has sometimes been discussed under an umbrella other than that of translation (for instance, Yuri Tsivian’s work on the editing of films in Russia for

import and export, or Jeremy Hicks' study of the reception of Russian films in English).¹ Such issues are not often broached in journals dedicated to cultural heritage, and specifically to film heritage. Since its inception in 1948, the multilingual *UNESCO Courier* has entirely or partly devoted seven issues to cinema, including two issues with special features on film heritage, as well as one whole issue and two articles specifically dedicated to the question of preservation;² yet none of them deals with film translation, except to lament the use of dubbing either as an aesthetic calamity or as a weapon for invading a new film market.³

To our knowledge, only the 2013 FIAF Congress "Multiversions" Symposium included discussions of multilingual versions, in themselves a form of translation, and to a lesser extent dubbed versions. The tables of contents of the *FIAF Bulletin* (1972-1993) and its continuation as the *Journal of Film Preservation* suggest that this question has not been directly addressed in their pages either.⁴ Yet references to dubbing and subtitling can occasionally be found in the *JFP*. Dubbed versions are generally considered unacceptable by cinephiles and archivists, but subtitled versions may also be found unpalatable. For example, a recent account of the foundation and development of the Austrian Film Museum tells how, in the 1960s, its creators were reluctant to screen subtitled prints for aesthetic reasons, "since the titles were thought to distract from the main image."⁵ Interestingly, this attitude is in line with Henri Langlois's decision to remove intertitles from the prints of the silent films he used to screen at the Cinémathèque française. The practical aspect of preserving "foreign" versions with

¹ Yuri Tsivian, "The Wise and Wicked Game: Re-Editing and Soviet Film Culture of the 1920s", *Film History*, vol. 8, no. 3 (1996), pp. 327-343. Jeremy Hicks, "The international reception of early Soviet sound cinema: *Chapaev* in Britain and America", *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* vol. 25 no.2 (2005), pp. 273-289.

² "Special issue: the cinema", vol. IV, no. 9, September 1951 (whole issue); "Forgotten Shadows: the birth of cinema", no. 1, 1955, p. 4-21, 32; David Gunston, "Preserving the cream of the screen", no. 6, June 1958, p. 28-30; "Lost treasures of the cinema", September 1974, p. 4-11, 32-33; "Eternal Cinema", August 1984 (whole issue); "A Century of Cinema", July-August 1995 (whole issue); "The Rage for Asian Cinema", October 2000, p. 18-39. All issues can be downloaded on the *UNESCO Courier* website: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco-courier/the-magazine/>.

³ See, for instance, the 1937 text by Elie Faure, "A silver-screen symphony" (originally published in French as "Un langage symphonique"), and interviews with Suresh Jindal and Mani Kaul, all in *UNESCO Courier*, "A Century of Cinema", July-August 1995, pp. 44-45, 35 and 37 respectively.

⁴ The making of "flash titles" in various languages for the foreign versions of silent films is briefly mentioned in an article by Vincent Pinel, "Notes sur le remontage des films muets", *FIAF Bulletin*, no. 32, September 1986, pp. 29-32.

⁵ Eszter Kondor, "'Such people we need.' The Founding of the Österreichisches Filmmuseum and its Admission to FIAF", *Journal of Film Preservation*, no. 91, October 2014, p. 74.

subtitles has been broached by Jon Wengström who mentions the need to preserve subtitle files along with DCPs of digital films.⁶

Whereas many translation scholars have studied audiovisual translation from a theoretical and pragmatic point of view, mostly in a contemporary perspective, very few researchers had, until recently, shown interest in the history of film translation as such. Apart from a few historical studies dealing with the situation in Japan, France and Italy,⁷ the lack of attention given to the historical perspective explains why researcher Thomas Chen asks, in his recent study dedicated to the early dubbing of foreign films in 1950s Maoist China:⁸ “Where are translated films to be found in cinema studies?”

The 2015 London conference on film translation history

The historical, archival and aesthetic aspects of film translation were the subject of “Splendid Innovations”, an international conference held in London in 2015. Organized by the writers of this article with the support of the British Academy for the Humanities and the Social Sciences, it was chosen as one of the six British Academy Conferences for that year. Bringing together researchers in screen translation, film historians, archivists and curators to share expertise and research methods, the conference focused on various forms of screen translation from the silent period to the late 1930s.⁹

A large number of questions were raised such as: how, and how quickly, did dubbing and subtitling develop, both in and out of English? How did producers, distributors, exhibitors and audiences respond to the development of screen translation? What materials survive as evidence of transitional screen translation practices? What is the role of translation in the textual transformations of film in the 1920s and 1930s? To what extent, if any, do early translation practices affect later traction of films within the

⁶ Jon Wengström, “Collection Building and Programming in the Future. The fate of non-national films in archives in light of the change from 35mm to DCP in theatrical distribution”, *Journal of Film Preservation*, no. 88, April 2013, pp. 18, 20.

⁷ See, for example, Abé Mark Nornes, *Cinema Babel. Translating Global Cinema*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 2007; Jean-François Cornu, *Le doublage et le sous-titrage : histoire et esthétique*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014; Carla Mereu Keating, “‘100% Italian’: The Coming of Sound Cinema in Italy and State Regulation on Dubbing”, *California Italian Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2013; and Mereu Keating’s forthcoming book on film translation in Italy.

⁸ Thomas Chen, “An Italian bicycle in the people’s republic: Minor transnationalism and the Chinese translation of *Ladri di biciclette/Bicycle Thieves*”, *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, March 2014, pp. 91-107; also available in French as “Une bicyclette italienne en République populaire de Chine : à propos de la version chinoise du *Voleur de bicyclette*”, *L’Écran traduit*, no. 4, autumn 2015 (<http://ataa.fr/revue/archives/3667>).

⁹ A list of the participants and the full programme of the conference is available on the British Academy website: http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2015/splendid_innovations.cfm.

canon? To what extent do archival practices take into account screen translation, and are there possibilities for future cooperation in this area between researchers and archives?

Not all questions readily found answers, which is testimony to the need to further explore the early history of film translation. However, some trends were revealed: Charles O'Brien (Carleton University, Canada) discussed how early dubbing practices had an impact on sound-film aesthetics, while Jean-François Cornu emphasised the possible significance of such practices for early film sound historiography. Martin Barnier (Université Lumière-Lyon 2, France) showed how the development and reception of dubbing in Europe was linked to the production and demise of multilinguals, and Frederic Chaume (Universitat Jaume I, Spain) sketched the history of audiovisual translation in Spain. Rachel Weissbrod (Bar-Ilan University, Israel) shed light on film translation practices in early 1930s Mandatory Palestine and explained how much they were linked to marketing and distributing strategies. Dubbing was quickly abandoned as a way to translate films in Sweden in favour of subtitling from a very early stage in the sound era, as Christopher Natzén of the National Library of Sweden explained. A survey of the exhibition, reception and translation of European, and particularly French, cinema in Britain in the 1930s was presented by Lucy Mazdon (University of Southampton, UK).

To map the history of film translation worldwide, a variety of research methods are being used. Markus Nornes (University of Michigan, USA) explained how he explored the *benshi* performance in the exhibition of Japanese and foreign silent and early talking films in Japan. Carol O'Sullivan discussed the challenges of finding evidence for early subtitling practices in the US and the UK. A public conversation between Nataša Ďurovičová (University of Iowa, USA) and the organisers helped to summarize the diversity of approaches involved in the research in film translation history.

Major contributions also came from film archive curators during a special round table on archival issues. Dominique Moustacchi (Archives françaises du film du CNC, France) focused on the collaboration between her institution and the Cineteca nazionale in Rome to restore the intertitles of *La Mirabile Visione*, a 1921 Italian film directed by Luigi Caramba, using two incomplete prints, one with original Italian titles, and the other with (badly) translated French titles. Bryony Dixon (BFI, UK) presented evidence of similar problems when restoring films from prints with (sometimes animated) intertitles in other languages. She discussed the current restoration project of an English film whose only surviving element is the Dutch version, with no source for the English

intertitles available: should new English titles be invented or the Dutch titles kept with English subtitles? The general issue of restoration ethics was addressed by Thomas Christensen (Danish Film Archive, Denmark) in the context of film translation history. He discussed pragmatic approaches in restoring intertitles, in particular maintaining narrative continuity, which allows silent films to be enjoyed by contemporary audiences. He also emphasised how the conference was a great opportunity for archivists and researchers to demystify each other's professions, and their necessary cooperation in defining ethical restoration practices with translated films. Paolo Cherchi Usai (George Eastman House, USA) summed up the crucial issues at stake in the preservation of translated films: the reconstruction of intertitles which were long considered as not being part of the film; the problematic question of subtitles interfering with the integrity of the image; dubbing as a possible art form, and its implications in terms of preservation. He also highlighted the multidisciplinary nature of all these issues, and the need for cooperation between film archivists and scholars.¹⁰

The conference sessions were chaired by the distinguished scholars Ginette Vincendeau (King's College, UK), Adrián Fuentes Luque (Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Spain), François Thomas (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3, France) and Sarah Street (University of Bristol, UK). We wish to emphasize the enthusiasm and commitment of all the participants from the early stages of this project which we started to put together in early 2014. It has brought home to us even more how important the question of film translation is, particularly from an archival and curatorial perspective.

The idea of gathering scholars and archivists to discuss these issues in a specific event partly grew out of the contribution of one of the cowriters of this article, Jean-François Cornu, to the "Multiversions" Symposium during the 2013 FIAF Congress in Barcelona, where he discussed the importance of properly identifying "foreign" versions held in film archives. The identification of these versions is indeed essential to properly trace their history and reception.

Exploring "foreign" versions for history, preservation and exhibition

Studying film translation history has far-reaching implications for film history in general, as well as for the preservation and exhibition of "foreign" versions. One desirable result would be a departure from what is by now a rather sterile opposition

¹⁰ For a report in French on the conference, see Samuel Bréan and Anne-Lise Weidmann, "Colloque international 'Splendid Innovations': The development, reception and preservation of screen translation", *1895*, no. 77, Winter 2015.

between dubbing and subtitling. Dubbing is disparaged by cinephiles out of principle on the ground that substituting voices is ontologically wrong, that it necessarily goes against the director's artistic choices. However, some subtitled prints would be better left unviewed because their subtitles badly interfere with the image composition and texture and/or the content of the translation is of poor quality. But programmers will often prefer to screen a badly subtitled print rather a well-dubbed version of a given film. This position is rarely challenged. Mark Betz provides a telling example of audience resistance to his programming of a dubbed print of *Day for Night* (Truffaut, 1973) at George Eastman House in 1998.¹¹

Knowing more about the development of film translation also allows for a better understanding of the reception of films in the silent and early talking eras. With the introduction of synchronised speech in movies, a particular film could be translated in various ways according to the target market and audience. For example, Leontine Sagan's *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931) was distributed in subtitled versions in France and Britain. In spring 1932, Gaumont released the film in Paris under the literally translated title of *Jeunes Filles en uniforme*, with subtitles by the novelist Colette. A trailer even advertised the fact that she was the author of "*quelques textes français*" [some French texts], conferring a degree of distinction on this version of the art film.¹² Although these subtitles read well, they don't include lines considered irrelevant to the main plot. By today's standards, their number seems limited, with 367 subtitles.¹³ But they are definitely more numerous than the trailer suggests.

However, the English-subtitled version distributed in Britain in spring 1932 under the original title, of which a copy is preserved in the British Film Archive, has far fewer subtitles: 123, compared with 592 in the Janus Films VCD release of 1987. This raises some interesting questions, not least why this film, highly acclaimed and commercially successful at the time, is not currently available on an official DVD release for English-speaking viewers.¹⁴ It may of course not be available for reasons unrelated to its past translation; but we may wonder whether its marginal status in the canon is linked to the fact that for many decades it was only available in the UK in a very sparsely subtitled

¹¹ Mark Betz, "The Name Above the (Sub)Title: Internationalism, Coproduction, and Polyglot European Art Cinema", *Camera Obscura* 46, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 1-45.

¹² Prints of this subtitled version and its accompanying trailer are preserved at the Cinémathèque de Toulouse.

¹³ This count is based on the commercial VHS edition released in France in the 1990s, which may be slightly shorter than the print kept at the Cinémathèque de Toulouse.

¹⁴ We have not yet seen a copy of the first US release version, which had subtitles by Donald Freeman; this may shed further light on the film's English-language trajectory.

version, or shown with audio commentaries at the National Film Theatre. It was re-released in 1981 in a re-subtitled version by the BFI and the collective Cinema of Women, though we have not yet been able to locate a print of this re-release.

Either way, the varying number and rather different styles of subtitles in the French and English versions would suggest a different kind of viewing experience on the part of their respective audiences. This also has crucial implications for exhibition today: screening a print or publishing a DVD of either version should include an explanation of the context in which they were designed and presented. Along similar lines, another important moment in film translation history is René Clair's experiments with using music, song, pantomime and *mise en scène* to transcend national language in *Sous les toits de Paris* (1930), *Le Million* (1931), and other films. *Le Million* was shown in English in a version where the two characters leaning in at the skylight, who bookend the French film, act as translators, recurring briefly at a number of points through the film, as reported in the press of the time. One of them is an English speaker, and requires his companion's services to interpret the story's plot. Other language versions also seem to have been in circulation; Mordaunt Hall, writing in the *New York Times* on 31 May 1931, refers to German, among other unspecified languages. Hall approves of this "clever idea", but he might well, given that at the time, films in the US and UK were routinely exhibited with no translation at all, except the synopsis in the cinema programme; this lack of translation sometimes proved rather trying for their audiences.

The study of early film translation methods also reveals that they were not yet standardized and the form of translation of a given film is not always easy to establish. Fritz Lang's *M* (1930) and its French and English versions are a case in point. The French version actually mixes dubbing and the reshooting of scenes in the style of multilinguals.¹⁵ In many silent and early sound films, in-vision text in the form of letters, telegrams, notices and other verbal material were reshot in the target languages for distribution abroad, which further blurs the distinction between dubbing and multilingual versioning. Early dubbed versions also have a lot to tell us about the differences in sound practices in Hollywood and Europe. For example, French-dubbed versions of Warner and MGM productions such as *A Free Soul* (Clarence Brown, 1931) or Greta Garbo vehicles like *Mata Hari* (George Fitzmaurice, 1931), *Grand Hotel*

¹⁵ See the enlightening study by François Albera, Claire Angelini and Martin Barnier, "M / Le Maudit, ses doubles et son doublage", *Décadrages*, no. 23-24, Spring 2013, pp. 80-113; also published in German as "« M » / « Le Maudit », Doppelgänger und Dubbing", trans. Nathalie Mälzer, in Alain Boillat and Irene Weber Henking (ed.), *Dubbing: Die Übersetzung im Kino / La Traduction audiovisuelle*, Marburg, Schüren, 2014, pp. 65-114.

(Edmund Goulding, 1932) and *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933) provide evidence of less sophisticated re-recording equipment available in French post-synchronisation studios at the time, compared with the Hollywood facilities where multi-track recording was already being used, albeit at an early stage.

Cooperation between scholars, archivists and curators

We would argue that the preservation and study of “foreign” versions in all their aspects is not a niche for highly specialised researchers. Because film translation is essential to the circulation of films, making its history and preserving individual versions are just as essential for today’s and tomorrow’s audiences to fully understand and enjoy films of the past.

The few examples we gave above, and the collected volume currently in preparation as a result of the conference, will show, we hope, the importance of locating and documenting which subtitled and dubbed prints survive in film archives, and the usefulness for tools and references for identifying different versions, when available, for preservation, research and exhibition. Identification of such versions is a key issue in the context of the implementation of the European Standard for the description of cinematographic works.

At a time when commercial distributors often neglect to provide information about the translated versions of films they re-release with theatrical DCPs and home-viewing DVDs, this may also contribute to a properly contextualised exhibition of translated films. There are surely promising opportunities for further collaboration between film archives, museums, curators, researchers and translators, in exploring common interests in the role of translation in the exhibition and preservation of film.

Special thanks to Elaine Burrows, Christophe Dupin and Samuel Bréan.

The writers welcome comments and suggestions (jfcornu.trad@yahoo.fr; carol.osullivan@bristol.ac.uk)