Are You “Lost in Translation”
(when watching a foreign film)?
Towards An Alternative Approach to
Judging Audiovisual Translation

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“Translating” a text or film means transferring it to another context, whose readers or viewers usually do not share the same sociocultural background and codes – the same “semiosphere”, to borrow Lotman’s concept – as the original receivers. In *Translation and Text Transfer*, Anthony Pym describes this phenomenon as “the belonging of texts”: texts/films are embedded in a spatiotemporal context in which they are maximally comprehensible. In film, this embedding is not only evident in the language(s) used by the characters, but also in the indexicality of the image itself (geographical and historical locus, dress code, non-verbal communication signs), the cinematic conventions adopted, etc. When a film is transferred to a different cultural context, because this degree of “shared knowledge” between author and original viewers is no longer optimal, verbal and non-verbal signs may not be interpretable by foreign viewers. This difficulty is commonly referred to as “cultural discount”, denoting the idea that a film’s linguistic and cultural specificity may jeopardise its success outside its original country of production/reception. The role of the audiovisual translator is therefore to find ways to facilitate the transfer of the film to a new environment (both textual and cultural) in order to loosen the “bonds of belonging” that tie the film to its original context of production. My contention in this article is that this transfer does not systematically involve “losses in translation”, as is so often argued by both audiences and researchers. I propose

1 The research work supporting this paper was carried out while the author was holding an International Postgraduate Research Scholarship at the University of Queensland. I wish to thank my supervisors, Dr Joe Hardwick, Dr Barbara Hanna, and Prof. Anne Freadman, for their invaluable guidance.


to illustrate this argument with examples involving specifically the translation of culturally bound references (henceforth CRs), which constitute one of the main “moments of resistance” in a film’s process of transfer to a new market.

Trying to define culturally specific references is in itself problematic, since a simplistic opposition between “source culture” and “target culture” – two concepts still widely used in the field of Translation Studies – fails to suggest that cultures are always in contact. The issues involved in the definition of cultural references are too complex to be discussed here in depth. For the purposes of this article, CRs will be defined as a relative, subjective and dynamic concept: in film, culture-specific references are the verbal and non-verbal (both visual and acoustic) signs which constitute a problem for cross-cultural transfer because they refer to objects or concepts which are specific to the original sociocultural context – i.e. which, at the time of distribution, do not exist or deviate significantly in their connotational values from similar objects and concepts in the target cultural context(s) considered.

The notion of “problem” is indeed central to describing culturally bound references: these present “moments of resistance” – a “problem” – for translation. The above definition also stresses that the culture-specific nature of references is context determined: it is relative to the pair of cultures considered, the time period, etc.

It is important to note that culture-specific references are only one of the ways in which a film’s cultural embeddedness manifests itself, but one with which translators have to deal directly. The practical difficulties involved in the translation of culturally bound material appear to be mainly of two kinds: (a) “referential problems” relative to the absence of a particular referent in the target culture, and (b) “connotational problems” resulting from different networks of images and associations in the two cultural contexts considered (as exemplified by richly connoted terms such as “public school” in the British context or “banlieue” in the French context).

The problems raised by CRs derive therefore from the fact that foreign viewers may lack the – often implied – background information necessary to successfully interpret the reference. As Olk convincingly argues, translation “does not just involve the transfer of words, but of whole conceptual frameworks”. Since CRs are not insignificant and do fulfill various functions in films (characterisation, geographical and historical anchoring, humour, etc.), translators cannot simply ignore them.

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6 See Pym’s notion of interculturalité.
7 For a detailed discussion of the nature of culturally bound references and the problems they raise for translation, see Nathalie Ramière, “Strategies of Cultural Transfer in Subtitling and Dubbing” (PhD Diss., University of Queensland, 2007), Chapter 2.
8 It must be stressed, however, that these two types of problems overlap and are interlinked.
Using culture-specific references as my focus, I propose to consider an alternative approach to judging subtitling and dubbing as forms of translation and objects of cinematic experience. After outlining the limitations of the current attitude to audiovisual translation (henceforth AVT) from the perspective of both viewers and researchers, I will offer a series of arguments to support the claim that subtitling and dubbing can be considered in a different light. I will conclude by examining briefly some of the larger implications of this contention and suggesting an alternative model for describing and judging cultural transfer in AVT.

The traditional attitude to screen translation: “lost in translation”

Among viewers

When one refers to translation for the cinema – particularly in the case of subtitling (which is an “overt” form of translation since it presents the translation side by side with the “original”) – it is often to criticise, to give examples of “errors” or “inadequate” translations. One often hears such comments as: “That’s not at all what the character said in the original!”, “There were so many mistakes in the translation!”, or “That joke didn’t work at all”. Interestingly, these comments are usually made by bilingual viewers, who – ironically – are not the primary target of translated films.

In dubbing, criticisms are just as common (especially among audiences not used to this form of screen translation). Admittedly, comments tend to pertain mainly to the nature of dubbing as a form of translation, often pointing to the oddity of hearing the target language while being presented with an obviously “foreign” setting, the loss involved in not hearing the original actors’ voices, etc. Nonetheless, criticisms are also heard from bilingual viewers who have seen the film in its original version and point to problems with the translation, comic effects that were “lost”, and so on.

Among researchers

Similarly, many researchers in the field of AVT still consider the constraints with which audiovisual translators have to deal as an “impediment”. Research in AVT has focused for a long time on the negative aspects of the medium, in particular the specific constraints of audiovisual translation, arguing that the latter constantly hinder the task of the translator. Most of the work done in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, for example, consisted in describing how the various constraints faced

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by screen translators make their task more difficult than that of “regular” (text) translators. Researchers argued that in dubbing, for instance, the main constraints – lip and body synchronisation, syntactical differences between languages, the impossibility to dub what has already been mixed, etc. – impede significantly the work of dubbers. In the case of subtitling, space and time limitations (caused mainly by the fact that normal conversation is generally delivered at a faster speed than a viewer is able to read) were shown to make text compression inevitable and thus to pose accuracy problems, while the “feedback effect” (the fact that the original dialogue remains audible in the background) tended to limit translators’ creativity.

Despite its contribution to a better understanding of subtitling and dubbing as forms of translation, this type of research led to a rather sterile debate on whether audiovisual language transfer should be considered as “translation proper” or merely “adaptation”. Although this approach has been largely abandoned in recent years, it still affects much of the research carried out in AVT.

Many comparative case studies, for instance, still focus exclusively on what is “lost” in the process of audiovisual translation (jokes, connotations, cultural references, etc.). Arguably, this has long been a characteristic of the field of Translation Studies as a whole since product-oriented approaches (which consist in comparing source text and target text) tend, as Hatim and Mason pointed out as early as 1990, to (a) lead to a systematic critique of individual translations, and (b) overlook the nature of the whole communication process. Similarly, in the field of AVT, most case studies comparing the original dialogue with its subtitled and/or dubbed version in another language attempt to analyse the shifts occurring in the process of subtitling and/or dubbing. By focusing on the shifts, they judge

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the target text systematically in relation to the source text and thus tend to pay exclusive attention to "what is lost" in the process.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{The translation of cultural references}

Finally, the same defeatist attitude is often adopted in relation to the translation of culture-specific references in general.\textsuperscript{17} André Gide, for instance, famously wrote:

\begin{quote}
Il advient presque toujours qu’un vocable, lors même qu’il désigne un objet précis et trouve un équivalent précis dans une autre langue, s’entoure d’un halo d’évocations et de réminiscences, sortes d’harmoniques qui ne sauraient être les mêmes dans l’autre langue et que la traduction ne peut espérer conserver.
\end{quote}

As this overview suggests, exclusive attention on the part of both audiences and researchers is too often paid to "losses" or "errors" in translation, particularly in the case of subtitling (where the original language remains audible, thus laying itself open to interlingual comparison and criticism). However, it is my contention that subtitling and dubbing do not necessarily involve "losses in translation" and that it is possible to adopt a completely different attitude to linguistic and cultural transfer in AVT.

\textbf{An alternative approach to judging screen translation}

\textit{Argument 1: The role of intersemiotic compensation}

Film is a complex polysemiotic art form in which visual elements, sound, dialogue, costumes, montage, and so on, resonate with each other, thus contributing to the interpretation of the total "film sign". It involves two main channels of information which are used simultaneously to convey meaning – the acoustic and the visual channels, each involving both verbal and non-verbal signs. As Delabastita notes,\textsuperscript{19} there are consequently four types of film signs:

- verbal signs transmitted acoustically (dialogues, songs...)


\textsuperscript{17} For a more detailed account of this approach, see Ramière, pp. 45–58.


\textsuperscript{19} Delabastita, p. 199.
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- non-verbal signs transmitted acoustically (background noise, muzak...)
- verbal signs transmitted visually (credits, place names, words shown on screen...)
- non-verbal signs transmitted visually (kinesics, costumes...).

It appears therefore that, as Lang stresses, "la substance linguistique stricto sensu ne constitue qu'une partie somme toute marginale de l'ensemble signifiant".20

It is thus critical to adopt a holistic, semiotic approach when assessing translation solutions21 and to examine not only the translated linguistic segment in relation to its corresponding segment in the original (as is done in the analysis of text translation, for example), but also the interactions between verbal and non-verbal elements, between acoustic and visual channels, as well as the various contextual factors likely to influence the translator (other scenes, genre, target audience, etc.). In this section, I will illustrate how these various elements come into play in the translators' decision-making process and the viewers' interpretive process, with a focus on cultural references. It appears that translation solutions often work in context due to the many opportunities for compensation offered by a number of contextual factors. To illustrate this point, I propose to examine in more detail three different forms of compensation: compensation from the co-text, compensation from the polysemiotic context, and situational compensation.

The role of the co-text

One of the most obvious forms of compensation is from the co-text (i.e. the linguistic environment of the reference). The role played by the co-text can be illustrated by a scene in the French comedy Le dîner de cons (directed by Francis Veber and released in 1998),22 in which a reference is made to the famous French soccer teams "Auxerre" and "O.M." (Olympique de Marseille). In this film, a group of wealthy and smug Parisians organise a dinner party to which they each invite the most stupid guest they can find in order to have fun at his expense. Whoever has brought the most exceptional idiot is declared the winner. Publisher Pierre Brochant has found the perfect victim: a jovial tax inspector whose hobby consists in building replicas of famous monuments with matchsticks (François Pignon). After a series

22 The film was released in the UK and US in 1999 by Gaumont/Buena-Vista International as The Dinner Game. In the analyses below, the English subtitled version is referred to as (ST) and the dubbed version as (DB), while (FV) designates the French version.
of misfortunes (including the abrupt departure of his wife), Brochant finds himself stranded at home with Pignon desperately trying to help out.

In the following scene, Pignon suggests that they watch the soccer game he missed to come to the dinner. Brochant, who is desperately trying to locate his wife, is not particularly keen on the idea:

(FV) [Pignon] Le mieux, c'est de regarder le match! Vous avez la télé?!
     [Brochant] Mais j'vais pas regarder un match de foot maintenant!
     [Pignon, surprised] L'OM contre Auxerre!
     [Brochant, upset] Mais j'm'en fous!

The reference to the two soccer teams is likely not to be familiar to English-speaking audiences not versed in soccer. Most French viewers, however, would be aware that O.M. and Auxerre are two of the biggest teams and often compete for first place in the French championship league; the game referred to here is thus obviously an important game. The comic effect is created by the discrepancy between Pignon's enthusiasm as a soccer fan (a running joke throughout the film) and Brochant's desperate situation (a discrepancy emphasised by the characters’ facial expressions and tone of voice) – that is, by the degree of importance that the two characters give to the same subtext. These culture-specific references thus activate a whole network of implicit connotations and associations which are necessary for a successful interpretation of the dialogue.

Is this therefore inevitably “lost in translation”? The subtitled and dubbed versions released by Gaumont for the English-speaking market offer the following translations:

(ST) — We’d best watch the game. Got a TV?
     — Not for soccer games!
     — It’s Paris-Marseilles!\(^\text{23}\)
     — Who cares!

(DB) — How about if we watch the game on TV?
     — Sorry, but I’ve got more important things to do!
     — It’s OM versus Auxerre!
     — I don’t give a shit!

It is possible to argue that, in both these versions, English-speaking viewers can in fact work out the same implied subtext from the co-text through a process of inference, based on search for optimum relevance/cohesion between the lines of

\(^{23}\) Although this constitutes an interesting solution, the notable change in team names will not be discussed here.
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dialogue. The subtext may, for instance, be expressed in these terms (subtext in brackets):

- We’d best watch the game. Got a TV?
- Not for soccer games! [= I’m not going to watch a soccer game now! My wife has just left me!]
- [OK, but it’s not any soccer game!] It’s OM vs Auxerre!
- Who cares! [= My private life is more important than a soccer game!]

Particularly interesting is the fact that the dubber made explicit the ironic subtext carried by the connotations attached to the culture-specific references (“Sorry, but I’ve got more important things to do!”).

In both versions, the viewers are thus able to compensate for their possible lack of familiarity/background knowledge by drawing on the co-text to achieve a plausible or logical interpretation. Even though the references are still source culture-specific, English-version viewers do not really “lose in translation”.

The role of the polysemiotic context

In the above scene, the co-text is not the sole source of compensation on which foreign viewers can draw: facial expressions and intonation also play an important role in facilitating the interpretative process. Another excerpt from Le diner des cons will help to highlight the role of the constant interaction between acoustic and visual channels (i.e. the “polysemiotic” context of a cultural reference).

Brochant and Pignon are devising a story to find out whether Madame Brochant has gone back to her ex-partner and former literary collaborator, Juste Leblanc. Pignon is to call Leblanc pretending he is a film producer interested in the rights of the book that Leblanc and Madame Brochant wrote a few years earlier:

(FV) [Brochant] Vous appelez Leblanc et vous lui dites que vous êtes producteur de films. [...] Vous êtes producteur, OK ? Vous avez une maison de production à Paris! Non, pas à Paris, il connaît tout le monde... Vous êtes un producteur étranger.

[Pignon, excited] OK. Américain? Allemand?...

[Brochant, smiling] ... Belge! Voilà, c’est parfait, ça ! Belge !

[Pignon, a suspicious look on his face] Pourquoi belge ?

[Brochant, smiling] Parce que c’est très bien, belge! Vous êtes un gros producteur belge [...].

[Pignon dials Leblanc’s number.]

This example raises fascinating translation problems which cannot all be discussed here. What is of particular interest in this scene is how the various semiotic codes can help the foreign viewers to achieve a relevant interpretation of the dialogue.

The comic effect is based on the stereotype held by the French about the Belgians: the role that Pignon is supposed to take on will not be so “out of character” since Belgians are considered by the French to be naïve and simple-minded — just like Pignon. As well as revealing Brochant’s cruelty, this joke is therefore also a nod to the audience who, because they are “in the know”, can laugh at its ironic appropriateness.

Many English-version viewers may not be aware that the French hold a cultural stereotype about the Belgians. However, I would argue that the polysemiotic context of the reference enables these foreign viewers to achieve a plausible interpretation of the dialogue (even though the reference was not “culturally adapted” in the subtitled version presented above) and retrieve the relevant situational features, i.e. primarily the comic/ironic effect. The contextual factors allowing this interpretation are mainly: (a) Brochant’s comment: “It suits you” (verbal auditory channel), which suggests that Pignon must have something in common with Belgians (b) the characters’ facial expressions: Brochant’s amused look and Pignon’s suspicion (non-verbal visual channel), and (c) Pignon’s intonation as he takes on a Belgian accent (non-verbal auditory channel).25

25 It could also be argued that intonation pertains to the verbal, rather than non-verbal, channel.
Foreign viewers can therefore work out that French people must consider
the Belgians as slightly “stupid”, even though they may not be familiar with this
stereotype. Besides facilitating the interpretative process, this form of compensation
from the polysemiotic context also facilitates the task of translators, as they can
translate more or less literally (that is, keep the source-culture-oriented reference) in
the knowledge that many English-version viewers will be able to achieve a relevant
interpretation and, in any case, retrieve the comic effect from the context.

Situational compensation

The last example I propose to use in order to illustrate the role of intersemiotic
compensation has to do with “situational compensation” – compensation from
the narrative situation depicted in a scene. This example is drawn from Astérix et
Obélix contre César. The film, based on the famous comic book series Astérix, was
directed by Claude Zidi and released in France in 1999. After becoming one of the
biggest successes of all time at the French box office, it was released on several
European and international markets. A subtitled version and a dubbed version were
produced for the English-speaking market(s), with the dubbed dialogues written by
ex-Monty Python’s member Terry Jones.26

At the beginning of the film, the well-known Gaulish characters are presented
to the audience through a travelling shot of the village. In a scene reminiscent of the
comics, Abraracourcix, the village chief, is shown proudly climbing onto his brand
new shield in an attempt to impress his wife (Bonemine). Pretending to admire
him, she exclaims ironically:

(FV) Vive Vercingétorix!

With this comment, Bonemine is suggesting that her husband looks like the famous
Gaulish chief, whom he hopes to emulate (an allusion to the comic strip series, in
which Abraracourcix regularly claims that he will be the liberator of Gaul – “the
new Vercingétorix”). The reference thus contributes to characterisation as well as
irony, and constitutes an intertextual reference to the comics, intended for viewers
familiar with the series.

The two subtitled versions kept the reference to Vercingetorix:

(MA ST) Long live Vercingétorix!

(SBS) Long live Vercingétorix!

The reference to Vercingetorix is likely to be familiar to fans of the comics and most
French-version viewers, thereby not posing any major problem of interpretation.

26 In the analyses below (FV) refers to the French version, (MA ST) to the Madman subtitled
version released in Australia but assumed to be the same as that released originally in the UK,
(SBS) to the subtitled version released by SBS Television (Australia) in 2005, and (DB) to the
dubbed version available on the Pathé DVD released in 2003 (with dialogue by Terry Jones).
By contrast, it is unlikely that the majority of the English-version viewers (especially children?) would be familiar with the name of the Gaulish warrior and his role in French history. However, in view of the situation depicted in the scene (it is an expository scene) and the fact that Bonemine is pointing to her husband, those viewers may well assume that “Vercingetorix” is in fact the name of the chief. Moreover, the co-text and the suffix in -ix indicate to the viewers that it is probably a proper name, thus reinforcing this interpretation. The audience can therefore come to a plausible interpretation which does not interrupt their cinematic experience — a sign that a translation solution can “work in context” without necessarily producing the same interpretation or effect as the original version. This example suggests that, because of the “immediacy” of film, viewers often need to make quick assumptions or inferences, especially if the meaning of a word, or here a culture-specific reference, is obscure in translation.

It may nonetheless be possible to argue that the English-version viewers still “lose in translation” in this scene. However, because it is made clearer later in the film that Vercingetorix is a famous historical figure, the viewers are able to make what I would call a “retrospective inference”, i.e. they can “retrospectively” make sense of a previously obscure reference because they see it in a different context. This kind of “echoing or resonance effect” actually often happens in film, and screen translators can use it as a compensation strategy, which suggests that it is important to analyse solutions used by subtitlers and dubbers at the level of the whole film (other scenes, level of characterisation, film as genre, distribution context, etc.) rather than at the level of the linguistic code alone. Once again, the context of a translation solution as a whole offers opportunities for compensation and reveals that foreign viewers do not necessarily “lose in translation”.

Many other contextual factors can play a role in the decision-making process of translators and the interpretative/inference process of viewers by offering forms of compensation (just to mention a few: the genre of the film, characterisation, paratexts, distribution). If a connotation, implied subtext or effect cannot be conveyed in the translation, viewers can often retrieve the necessary clues from the context. Furthermore, the above examples reveal that technical and contextual constraints are not necessarily “an impediment”: the context can also help translators select the most appropriate strategy. It becomes something upon which translators are able to draw.

Argument 2: “Gained in translation”

In *Le dîner de cons*, Brochant, who has hurt his back playing golf, has to cancel the dinner to which he has invited Pignon. When helping Brochant to his room before leaving the apartment, Pignon stumbles on the carpet, pulling Brochant down with him. Realising what he has just done, Pignon rushes to the phone and starts dialling a number. Brochant, in great pain and annoyed at his clumsy guest, exclaims:
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[Brochant] Qu'est-ce que vous faites?!
[Brochant] C'est pas la peine.
[Pignon] C'est un copain à moi. Il est formidable.
[Brochant, raising the tone of his voice] C'est pas la peine, j'vous dis.
[Pignon, insisting] C'est le meilleur kiné de Courbevoie.
[Brochant, now shouting] J'veux pas du meilleur kiné de Courbevoie!
Rentrez chez vous ; ça va aller!

The reference to Courbevoie, a lower middle class suburb of Paris, creates a realistic effect by anchoring the film in its geographical context, but also points subtly to the social gap between the two characters.

The subtitled versions kept the reference in French, relying on the co-text as compensation. However, the dubber, assuming that most of the viewers would be unfamiliar with the reference (and constrained by the fact that the character's lips are particularly visible on the screen at that moment), decided to opt for a solution strongly tied in with the situation portrayed in the scene and which will be echoed in a later sequence:

— Who're you calling?
— A specialist!
— Don't bother.
— He's a buddy of mine, he's unbelievable!
— Don't both—, don't bother; really.
— This guy could make a cripple walk!
— I don't want somebody who can make a cripple walk! Just leave! I'll be alright!

Referring indirectly to Brochant as "a cripple" is unwittingly ironic given his situation (spread-eagled on the floor), thus contributing to Pignon's characterisation as spontaneous and tactless, as well as reinforcing the thematic coherence of the film. Interestingly, the solution used in the dubbed version produces an additional humorous effect which was not suggested by the original cultural reference, and therefore also reinforces coherence in terms of genre (humour/comedy).

More generally, many solutions in both the subtitled and dubbed versions of the comedies examined in this article increase the coherence or "cohesion" of the films, either in terms of the situation depicted in the scene, or in terms of genre, plot, characterisation, etc. For instance, in the reference to Vercingetorix in the scene from Astérix et Obélix contre César described above, the dubbed version prepared by Terry Jones had: "Long live Vitalstatistix!" (the name of the village chief in the English version of the comics). This is a pragmatic solution tied to the situation and perfectly coherent in the context, which offers situational or diegetic
reanchoring of the reference.

**Argument 3: Viewers usually do not experience translation solutions as losses**

Another important aspect often overlooked by viewers and analysts is that, since the notion of “loss” is only relative (in the sense that it results from a comparison between source text and target text), foreign viewers usually do not experience translation solutions as losses (provided, of course, that these solutions are coherent enough for the film to make sense). Indeed, foreign viewers either do not have access to the original dialogue (in the case of dubbing),\(^{27}\) or do not – typically – know the original language (in the case of subtitling).\(^{28}\) In these two cases, any form of “comparison” is prevented, thus relativising the problem of loss.

**Argument 4: Not all original viewers “get everything”**

The problem posed by culture-specific references in translation and the focus on loss can also be put into perspective by stressing that not all original viewers “get everything” either. What is generally referred to as the “original audience” is not a homogeneous group, and certain cultural references may be unknown or remain obscure to certain viewers (for instance, viewers not familiar with the comics in the case of *Astérix et Obélix contre César*). The idea that everything in a film needs to “make sense”, either in the original or the translated film, is thus not tenable. Different viewers will understand different things because they each activate their own networks of associations and interpretations.

**Argument 5: Not everything needs to “make sense”**

Lastly, it is possible to argue that, even when not all culture-specific references make sense, when connotations cannot be conveyed or when “recognition” does not occur, the film can still work.

Certain aspects do not matter from the perspective of the viewer, such as intertextual references (for example, allusions to other films). Furthermore, obscure or unfamiliar references can appear “exotic” and therefore contribute to the pleasure of the viewing experience for foreign audiences. In this case, the fact of not understanding everything participates in the negotiation of the Foreign and even the enjoyment of the film experience.

Lastly, because of the “continuity” of film (the fact that the viewer is not in control of the flow of information), the diegesis and, in the case of comedies, the

\(^{27}\) As Ascheid puts it, with dubbing, “the new text constitutes the original for most spectators” (Antje Ascheid, “Speaking Tongues: Voice Dubbing in the Cinema as Cultural Ventriloquism”, *The Velvet Light Trap*, 40 (1997), 32–41 (p. 35)).

\(^{28}\) Only bilingual/bicultural viewers will notice discrepancies or “losses”.

\(^{29}\) Gale MacLachlan and Ian Reid, *Framing and Interpretation* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1994), p. 35.
entertaining nature of the film take precedence. As MacLachlan and Reid put it, the constraint of "movietime" implies that, unlike what happens with photography, viewers have very little time for contemplation, and therefore for pondering unfamiliar references in the dialogue. They usually keep watching even if they do not understand a particular culture-specific reference. Connotations and associations tend to remain at the level of the implicit (floating as a subtext, in a way) – only those relevant or necessary for interpretation or coherence are translated and/or activated in the minds of viewers.

Implications and Conclusions

The relativity of the notions of "loss" and "problem"

The various arguments put forward in the previous section raise the question of the ultimate impact of culture-specific references in a film and point to the relativity of the notion of "problem", which, paradoxically, constituted the starting point of this article. Although cultural references present undeniable challenges for translators, they may well, in the end, not pose a problem for audiences, especially when translation solutions work in context, which, as demonstrated above, is often the case.

The notion of loss is therefore, from the perspective of viewers, extremely relative. This is particularly true, as argued earlier, for viewers who do not understand the source language and who are, one should remember, the primary target of foreign translated films. However, it is possible to argue that even bilingual viewers could approach screen translation differently. Rather than focusing on losses and discrepancies, they could, and perhaps should, embrace the possibility of accessing two (and possibly more) networks of signification and thus enjoying a truly intercultural reading of the film.

The process of recontextualisation

If one takes the analyses above one step further, it is possible to consider that what actually happens when an audience watches a foreign film is a process of recontextualisation (itself activated by the strategies used by translators). Indeed, in order for a film to work in a foreign market, it needs to be recontextualised, since, through the process of linguistic, cultural and material transfer, the film is actually placed in a new context (new audience, new language, sometimes new genre, etc.). The cultural embeddedness of film, which I described at the beginning of this article, does not therefore prevent a "re-embedding" in the new context of reception. This is what distributors and translators do through their marketing and translation strategies respectively, but it is also the process which viewers constantly activate when interpreting. New signification effects, new networks of associations and connotations – new "resonances" – are created in the target context, usually as a result of particular translation strategies (the establishment of connections
between two scenes, the addition of a joke, etc.). A translation therefore has its own networks of coherence, which may be different from those of the original dialogue/text. Ultimately, it is possible, and perhaps desirable, to do without the notions of "gains" and "losses" altogether (an approach based on a comparison between source text and target text) and shift perspectives by emphasising the new context in which the film is received/interpreted.

Implications for the field of translation studies

A change in attitude?

The approach I propose highlights the need to adopt a new attitude to AVT and translation in general (on the part of both viewers and researchers). Exclusive attention is too often given to "losses" or "errors" in translation, while the experience of watching a foreign film is in fact much more complex. When adopting an approach focused on translation as a problem-solving activity rather than as a "bottling and preserving activity" (which inevitably leads to a focus on losses due to linguistic and cultural differences), it is clear that, faced with a problem (such as a culture-specific reference), translators have at their disposal a whole range of strategies to "solve" it. Therefore, instead of identifying what the target audiences (may) lose in translation, it is much more revealing and interesting, from a research point of view, to examine how a translation solution works (or not) in a particular context of reception, what effects are produced, or how the various filmic and verbal signs interact and provide opportunities for compensation, and so on.

The role of the viewer

Finally, it is important to highlight the role of the audience in the cultural transfer of a film – thus relieving the translator of all the responsibility for the transfer of a film to a foreign market. Audiences are active participants in the interpretative process, and a large part of the responsibility for the cultural transfer/recontextualisation process lies with them, as they need to “make an effort”, to move towards the “source culture”. Audiences’ intercultural skills and readiness to accept the Foreign are too often underestimated. I believe that viewers are able to accept “not understanding everything” or being faced with “unfamiliar” realities. Is the very act of sitting in a dark room to watch a foreign film not in itself a sign of openness to another cultural reality? As Graeme Turner points out in Film as Social Practice, “[t]here is a high degree of cross-cultural coding where audiences agree to accept an imported system of meaning for the purposes of enjoying the film”.

The image of interculturalité proposed by Pym to describe the position of the translator could therefore be broadened to include the position of the viewer. With the advent of globalisation, TV satellite, travelling, etc., very few viewers nowadays

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can be described as “monocultural” or situated in one culture only. They navigate in an intercultural space from which they approach foreign films. One of Pym’s contributions has been to put the translator at the centre of the translation process. I believe it is time to also put the viewer (or reader) at the heart of reflections and discussions on translation.

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