

O'Sullivan, Carol and Cornu, Jean-François (eds) (2019). *The Translation of Films, 1900-1950*. Oxford: Oxford University Press for The British Academy, pp. 321, £ 70/79.71 €. ISBN 978 0197266434.

The *Translation of Films, 1900-1950* by Carol O'Sullivan and Jean-François Cornu is a pioneering and successful effort to bring together film archivists, restorers and scholars from both Film Studies and Translation Studies to explore what remains, in the words of Paolo Cherchi Usai, a "vast and largely uncharted territory of scholarly research" (xix). The collection stems from the conference "Splendid Innovations: The Development, Reception and Preservation of Screen Translation", held in London in 2015 with support from the British Academy. Composed of fifteen chapters, a copious introduction and a concluding section, the volume covers a time span of fifty years, from 1900 to 1950, i.e., from the silent era to the years comprising the transition to sound and the first two decades of the talkies. Translation-focused research on this period of cinema history is still limited, although notable exceptions are the works of Abé Mark Nornes (2007), Jean-François Cornu (2014), Carla Mereu (2016) and O'Sullivan and Cornu (2019). One reason for the paucity of research in this area is that "translation is routinely devalued and ignored within screen culture" (Dwyer 2017: 2). It tends to be ignored by film historians, critics, and reviewers, while in the film industry it is little more than "an afterthought" (Nornes 2007, Romero Fresco 2019). As a precondition for a change in perspective, the editors of the volume call for "an urgent need to better understand the nature of film translation, the many contingencies which have shaped its development since the birth of cinema, and its implications for film history" (2).

In adopting a multidisciplinary perspective, at the interface between Film Studies and Translation Studies, the book critically engages with the notion of film translation, which is understood "in the widest sense" (2). It is argued that, in the context of early cinema history, translation cannot be reduced to language transfer activity, as it encompasses a wide array of strategies, ranging from titles and film explainers in the silent period (Dupré La Tour), to multiple-language versions, subtitling, dubbing and voice-over in the sound era, but also including "related interventions of all kinds" (8), from film re-editing (Barr), to additions (Cornu), image manipulation (O'Brien) and paratextual framing devices (O'Sullivan).

In addition to shedding new light on early film translation practices and their development in different cultural contexts, the volume raises larger issues within the study of audiovisual translation (AVT). Ample space is given to the transition to sound (Brown, Fuentes-Luque, Mereu Keating, Cornu, Barnier, Weissbrod, Natzén, O'Sullivan), a period that has so far been neglected by AVT scholars and which was characterised by the co-existence of different translation practices. According to the editors, this aspect seems to complicate our understanding of the development of AVT, including

“received narratives” such as the association of specific territories with specific translation modes. More importantly, perhaps, the book raises a number of crucial methodological questions. The fifteen chapters make little use of text-based comparative analyses, as the main aim of the volume is to show the value of research that draws on primary sources and archival documentation (from translated film prints, to reviews and production papers). In arguing for the proper contextualisation of translation practices, O’Sullivan and Cornu’s volume reclaims a place for translation in film archives. It shows that an accurate cataloguing and identification of prints of translated films would contribute importantly to the making of film translation history. Related to this is an emphasis on the role of curators, archivists, and film restorers (as illustrated in the chapters by Bryony Dixon, Dominique Moustacchi and Thomas Christensen), as part of a shift in perspective that places “the material aspect of film translation history” (296) at the centre of the scene, as stated by the editors.

The Translation of Films, 1900-1950 is a truly remarkable achievement, illustrating the potential of archival research in AVT studies. Aiming “to set the agenda for research on the history of film translation” (11), this groundbreaking book makes a significant contribution to both AVT and Film Studies, opening up truly multidisciplinary perspectives and marking a radical change in our understanding of film translation history.

References

- **Cornu, Jean-François** (2014). *Le doublage et le sous-titrage: histoire et esthétique*. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes.
- **Dwyer, Tessa** (2017). *Speaking in Subtitles. Revaluating Screen Translation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- **Mereu, Carla** (2016). *The Politics of Dubbing: Film Censorship and State Intervention in the Translation of Foreign Cinema in Fascist Italy*. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- **Nornes, Abé Marcus** (2007). *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- **O’Sullivan, Carol and Jean-François Cornu** (2019). “History of Audiovisual Translation.” L. Pérez-González (ed.) (2019). *The Routledge Handbook of Audiovisual Translation Studies*. New York and London: Routledge, 15-30.
- **Romero Fresco, Pablo** (2019). *Accessible Filmmaking. Integrating Translation and Accessibility into the Filmmaking Process*. London and New York: Routledge.

Serenella Zanotti

Roma Tre University

E-mail: serenella.zanotti@uniroma3.it