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Accessible filmmaking

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Introduction

The last decade has seen an exponential growth in audiovisual translation (AVT) services in general, and accessibility services in particular, around the world. This is being facilitated by new legislation and new accessibility guidelines that aim to increase both the quantity and the quality of subtitling for deaf and hard of hearing people (SDH) and audio description (AD) for blind and partially sighted people in countries such as Spain (AENOR 2012), France (MFP 2012) or the UK (Ofcom 2016). However, despite having achieved considerable visibility within translation studies and the translation industry, AVT and accessibility remain fairly invisible within film studies and the filmmaking industry.

Almost 60 per cent of the revenue obtained by the leading top-grossing films made in Hollywood in the last decade comes from the translated (subtitled or dubbed) or accessible (with subtitles for the deaf or AD for the blind) versions of those films, and yet only between 0.1 per cent and 1 per cent of their budgets is usually devoted to translation and accessibility (Romero-Fresco 2013). Relegated to the distribution stage as an afterthought in the filmmaking process, translators have to translate films in very limited time, for a small remuneration and with no access to the team behind creative filmmaking decisions. This may be seen as a profitable model for the film industry, but more than a decade of research in AVT has shown that it may also have a very negative impact on the quality and reception of translated films (Romero-Fresco 2017, 2018a). In fact, renowned filmmakers such as Ken Loach are now beginning to denounce that this model often results in the alteration of their film’s vision and that, even more worryingly, they are not always aware of this (de Higes 2014).

Accessible filmmaking (Romero-Fresco 2018b, forthcoming) sets out to address these issues and integrate AVT and accessibility as part of the filmmaking process through collaboration between filmmakers and translators. Following a historical account of the origins and background of accessible filmmaking, this chapter will focus on how this relatively new initiative is being implemented from the point of view of research, training and professional practice to ensure that both translation and accessibility are taken into account at the (pre-)production and post-production stages of a film.
Accessible filmmaking

Background

The integration of AVT as part of the filmmaking process is not new. It goes back to the early days of cinema, before the introduction of sound. Silent films required the translation of the intertitles used by the filmmakers to convey dialogue or narration, which were ‘removed, translated, drawn or printed on paper, filmed and inserted again in the film’ (Ivarsson 1992: 15). This translation was done in the studios, as part of the post-production process of the film (Izard 2001). The introduction of partial or full audible dialogue in films such as *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and *The Lights of New York* (1928) brought about a new scenario and the need for a different type of translation. Some of these films (known as ‘part-talkies’ and ‘talkies’) used intertitles in the target language to translate the original audible dialogue. Others prompted the first attempts at dubbing and subtitling in French, German and Spanish, which were largely unsuccessful (Izard 2001). These three translation modes were part of the post-production process of the films.

Audience reactions to these translations were, however, largely negative, which led the film industry to opt for a different solution: the so-called multiple-language versions (Vincendeau 1999). Films were made and remade in two or three languages with the same director and sometimes in up to fourteen languages with a different director for each language version. This may be regarded as an extreme form of accessible filmmaking in which the need to make films accessible to foreign audiences was not just an element of post-production but rather a structuring principle of film production. The cost (usually 30 per cent of the total film budget) was, however, too high. As soon as dubbing and subtitling were fine-tuned, the studios opted for these modes, which helped reduce the cost of translations to around 10 per cent of the film budget. Increasingly outsourced and unsupervised by filmmakers, translations lost their status as part of the filmmaking process and were relegated to the distribution process, as is still normally the case now.

The heterogeneous and fragmented nature of filmmaking (in terms of time, locations, processes and technology) is likely to have facilitated this scenario, which remains unchanged after the introduction of accessibility services in the 1970s and 1980s. Regarded from the beginning as costly and catering to the needs of a very reduced and specific population (Stephanidis 2001), SDH was conveyed as a separate signal created outside the production process of the programmes. Whereas other types of translation such as videogame localization, which emerged as part of the distribution stage, have become a critical element in the development of videogames, AVT has taken the opposite direction. Having originated as an integral part of the post-production process of silent films, it came to occupy a central position in the production of multiple-language versions (which were effectively localized) but has since then become gradually consigned to the distribution process.

The invisibility of AVT in the film industry has also been reflected in the disciplinary curricula and research agendas. Some attempts have been made by AVT scholars (Chaume 2004, Mas and Orero 2005, Cattrysse and Gambier 2008, Fryer and Freeman 2012) and film scholars (Egoyan and Balfour 2004, Nornes 2007) to bridge the gap between these two disciplines but, up until now, they have been few and far between. As far as teaching is concerned, film(making) courses have traditionally disregarded translation and accessibility issues, and postgraduate programmes in AVT have not normally included film(making).

In an attempt to propose a different model, accessible filmmaking aims to integrate AVT and accessibility as part of the filmmaking process, which requires the collaboration between the translator and the creative team of the film. Accessible filmmaking thus involves giving consideration during the filmmaking process (and through collaboration between the
translator and the creative team of the film) to the needs of viewers in other languages and viewers with hearing or visual loss, ultimately seeking to enhance their viewing experience.

The next sections will provide an overview of how the notion of accessible filmmaking is being applied in research, training and professional practice.

Research

From the point of view of research and training, accessible filmmaking entails an exchange between film(making) studies and AVT, where film scholars and film students learn about the aspects of AVT and accessibility that may have an effect on the nature and reception of (their) films, while AVT scholars and translation students explore the elements from filmmaking and film studies that can contribute to the theory and practice of translation and accessibility. The present overview of research in and around the notion of accessible filmmaking is divided accordingly into contributions originated from film and AVT.

Contribution from ethnographic film(making) to audiovisual translation

Although AVT is regarded as a vibrant research field, AVT scholars have traditionally not engaged actively with the (admittedly few) contributions from film studies that have explored the role played by translation in film, such as the volume edited by Egoyan and Balfour (2004) and the books by Nornes (2007) and Betz (2009). These contributions provide new and refreshing takes on AVT from the point of view of filmmaking (Egoyan and Balfour), history, culture, ideology and aesthetics (Nornes) and film studies and art cinema (Betz). Yet, if there is one area that has been largely ignored in AVT, this is ethnographic filmmaking, which encompasses the work of anthropologists and filmmakers such as David MacDougall. Their work contributes significantly to our understanding of the relationship between film and translation, but they are also the first examples of accessible filmmaking from the point of view of research and practice.

Up until the early 1960s, ethnographic documentaries such as those made by Jean Rouch had normally resorted to voice-over for translation. The pioneering use of subtitles by filmmakers John Marshall and Tim Asch in their documentaries at the beginning of that decade are regarded as a landmark in documentary filmmaking (Henley 2010). Indeed, it helped filmmakers to construct a closer relationship with their participants and it is also key for AVT, since it triggered some of the first theoretical reflections on the role played by translation in film.

Unlike in fiction films, subtitles in ethnographic films were regarded from the beginning as one of the creative ingredients of the filmmaking process, a ‘dramatic component of visual anthropology’ (Ruoff 1994) that required to be tackled collaboratively, often by filmmakers and non-professional translators (Lewis 2003), and from the editing stage (Henley 1996). All these elements—as well as the consideration by these filmmakers and scholars of the effect of subtitles upon the audience—account for the pioneering role played by ethnographic film studies in the research and practice of accessible filmmaking.

Subtitling is considered here as a linguistic, cultural and technical challenge, but one that encourages the creativity of the filmmakers and that allows them to develop new meanings and interpretations for their films (Zhang 2012). For MacDougall (1998), the main disadvantage in the use of subtitles is that the dialogue is packaged and acquires a somewhat prophetic nature, viewers lose freedom and become word-focused, and filmmakers have to go against the ‘show, don’t tell’ formula that is traditionally recommended to enhance the visual nature of film. Yet, he points out that subtitles also present a great deal of benefits to
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Filmmakers, as they can contribute to further the characterization of the participants in the film and can help filmmakers to recontextualize, focus or narrow down their ideas. Subtitles are a ‘stamp of possession’ (MacDougall 1998: 174) on a film, the ‘textual eyes’ (Zhang 2012: 447) that allow filmmakers to project their particular interpretation and to speak to the audience while the participants in the film are speaking to each other.

More specifically, many of these scholars reflect on the impact subtitling has on the filmmaking process. As far as production is concerned, and from a practical point of view, subtitling requires key changes in framing that must be planned before shooting (Henley 2010, Romero-Fresco 2013), whereas from a more theoretical standpoint subtitles are thought to act on the verbal level as the camera acts on a visual level ‘to single out subjects and frame human relationships’ (MacDougall 1998: 169). As far as editing is concerned, MacDougall also stresses the key role played by subtitles on the rhythm, cadence and tempo of the film. Rhythm in film is thus not only determined by the pace of the editing, an aspect that has been researched exhaustively by film scholars, but also by the pace at which the viewers read the subtitles. This is a consideration that has so far been overlooked in film studies and AVT alike. Thus, the density, speed, exposure time and complexity of the subtitles may be critical to determine the rhythm of a film, which may be different in its translated version. The following quote by MacDougall (1998: 168) sums up the role played by subtitling in ethnographic film:

The writing and placing of subtitles involves considerable polishing and fine-tuning, but unlike the ex post-facto subtitling of a feature film, this remains part of the creative process, influencing the pacing and rhythm of the film as well as its intellectual and emotional content.

It would thus seem that just as the emergence of ethnographic filmmaking helped to give a voice to silent communities around the world through the use of subtitles, it also contributed to raising the visibility of translation amongst an admittedly small number of filmmakers and film scholars. Unfortunately, the obvious connection between ethnographic filmmaking and AVT studies has until now never materialized, as shown (to mention one example) by the absence of ethnographic filmmakers in AVT publications and conferences such as Media for All and Languages and the Media and by the fact that ethnographic conferences and panels such as the 2011 ‘Subtitling Ethnographic Films: Knowledge and Value in Translation’ have so far fallen off the AVT radar. Given the current relevance of creative (McClarty 2012), integrated (Fox 2016) and abusive (Nornes 2007) subtitling, the use of, and reflection on, subtitling by ethnographic filmmakers is now more relevant than ever and it shows that it is possible to integrate AVT as a creative element within the filmmaking process through the collaboration of filmmakers and translators.

**Contribution from audiovisual translation to filmmaking**

This section dwells on universal design, part-subtitling and creative subtitling as three concepts developed within AVT studies that may serve as a background to the notion of accessible filmmaking. This is followed by an overview of eye-tracking-based reception studies, one of the most fruitful lines of research in this area.

Adopting the term ‘universal design’ to the field of media accessibility, Udo and Fels (2009) conclude that neither SDH nor AD meet the criteria of universal design because they are designed after the fact, rather than at the beginning of the process; and the designer of the
(audiovisual) product is not involved in the SDH/AD process at all. Udo and Fels propose a new structure to include audio describers and captioners in the film crew under the direction of a supervisor of accessibility services. Whereas this model may be regarded as an example of accessible filmmaking, it also presents a series of drawbacks, not least the need to apply the seven principles of universal design outlined by Connell et al. (1997), many of which are not relevant to media accessibility; significantly, there is also the fact that the model fails to include translation. It may be argued that if a new production model is to be successful in the film industry, it must be as cost-effective and wide-reaching as possible, involving not only viewers with hearing or visual loss, but also viewers in other languages.

Two other concepts that are related to accessible filmmaking and that may contribute to its development are part-subtitling and creative subtitling. Part-subtitling is usually discussed in the context of multilingual films and their translation, an emergent area of research within AVT (Baldo 2009, Corrius and Zabalbeascoa 2011, de Higes Andino et al. 2013, de Higes 2014, Diaz Cintas 2011, Heiss 2004, Mingant 2010, Sanz 2015, Şerban 2012, Zabalbeascoa and Voellmer 2014). According to O’Sullivan (2008), part-subtitles are those used in the original version of multilingual films for the benefit of their primary language audience. These subtitles are not an afterthought in the filmmaking process, but instead are considered at the pre-production stage, when the script is being developed, and are made during post-production by the scriptwriters and the filmmakers, often in collaboration with translators. As pointed out by Şerban (2012: 50), they are an artistic choice of the filmmaker to fulfil different roles, for ‘they help tell the story, advance the plot, and as such they have a narrative function as well as a character portrayal role’. Part-subtitles are thus an example of accessible filmmaking that, given the increasing use of multilingualism in film in order to reflect today’s globalized society, is bound to become an important element in the film industry and a very pertinent object of analysis and research.

As for creative subtitles, they are also gaining popularity among filmmakers and researchers, perhaps inspired by the innovation and creativity found in fansubs (O’Hagan 2009). Instead of abiding by a restrictive set of norms, creative subtitles—which are in line with Nornes’ notion of abusive subtitling (2007)—fulfil both a linguistic and an aesthetic function, responding to the specific qualities of an individual film and giving the creative subtitler more freedom to create an aesthetic that matches that of the source text without being bound by standard font types, sizes and positions (McClarty 2012). Often produced with the collaboration of directors and editors to interact with the mise en scène in the original film, they stand as another example of accessible filmmaking. They do not only call for a collaborative approach, but also for an expansion of the subtitler’s current role, who must be able to ‘read’ the film and understand how meaning is created through the use of film language and visual aesthetics.

Closely related to both part-subtitling and creative subtitles is the creative use of titles/on-screen text found nowadays in films and TV series such as Netflix’s House of Cards and BBC’s Sherlock. This device is described in the literature as TELOP (television optical projection), ‘impact captioning’ (Sasamoto 2014), ‘decotitles’ (Kofoed 2011), ‘beyond screen text messaging’ (Zhang 2014) or ‘authorial titling’ (Pérez-González 2012), and it allows filmmakers to integrate text coming from different sources into the mise en scène, without having to, for instance, show a close up of a mobile phone every time a message is received by one of the characters. According to Pérez-González (2012: 13), these authorial titles are an example of how the interventionism of fansubs or fan-made transformative subtitles and their reluctance to abide by standard guidelines has managed to ‘shape the social semiotic practices of professional media producers working in the era of digital technologies’. In the case of Sherlock,
text acts as a cohesive signature for the series, ‘as it aids in characterization, helps to progress the narrative, and binds the series as a whole’ (Dwyer 2015), while remaining as an overtly post-production effect and prioritizing the communication between the filmmaker and the audience over that between the characters (Pérez-González 2012). Authorial titles combine the innovative nature of creative subtitles and the fact that, as part-subtitles, they are integrated in production. They are therefore a very interesting topic of research from the viewpoint of accessible filmmaking, not least to explore if and how they are made accessible to foreign, deaf and blind audiences, which requires the collaboration of the translator with the production team.

Finally, another fruitful line of research to explore accessible filmmaking is eye tracking-based reception research. Eye tracking was initially used in the field of psycholinguistics for the analysis of language comprehension processes with static texts (Rayner 1998). Over the past years, it has been increasingly applied to moving text and image, exploring the gaze behaviour of different types of viewers under different circumstances. The main findings from the analysis of original films so far show that the viewers’ gaze is often focused on the central features of a traditionally composed film, with a particular bias on faces (where eyes are favoured over mouth) and moving objects (Smith 2013). This often creates an effect of attentional synchrony that brings together the viewers’ gaze during many of the shots (Mital et al. 2011). The viewers’ fixations at the beginning of a shot tend to be central and long, whereas there seems to be greater exploration of the screen and less attentional synchrony as the shot duration increases. However, the exploration of the screen is normally limited, as shown by the fact that viewers take in roughly 3.8 per cent of the total screen area during an average length shot. Peripheral processing is at play, but it is ‘mostly reserved for selecting future saccade targets, tracking moving targets, and extracting gist about scene category, layout and vague object information’ (Smith 2013: 168).

These findings are relevant not only for filmmakers and film scholars but also for translators and translation scholars, who can use them to ascertain how this typical reception of an original film may be modified when the translation of the film is read (subtitles) or heard (voice-over, dubbing, AD) by the target viewers. Surprisingly, eye-tracking studies on AVT are even more numerous than those conducted by film scholars. The most relevant studies carried out so far show, first of all, that the appearance of text on screen (whether subtitles or another type of on-screen text) draws the viewers’ attention to it almost regardless of other factors such as the language in the soundtrack (d’Ydewalle and De Bruycker 2007). This is the type of finding originated in AVT studies that, within the collaborative framework of accessible filmmaking, provides filmmakers with proof that any on-screen text (part-subtitle, authorial title or standard subtitle, etc.) will normally take precedence over the images. Further studies have shown that experienced subtitle viewers watch subtitled programmes almost effortlessly (d’Ydewalle and De Bruycker 2007). They often start by reading the subtitles (Jensema et al. 2000), then shifting their visual attention between subtitles and images (de Linde and Kay 1999) and modulating their processing strategies according to the type of subtitled programme they are watching (Perego et al. 2010). Most viewers spend more time looking at the subtitles than at the images but the fixations on the images are longer (ibid.). In other words, once they have finished reading the subtitles, the viewers of a subtitled film use their remaining time to focus on the key parts of the image (often faces, when they are present) for as long as possible. Thus, they seem to explore the image less than the viewers of the original film without subtitles.

In general, the faster the subtitles and the more movement they present (for example, scrolling subtitles as opposed to subtitles displayed in blocks), the more time is spent reading them and the less time is left to look at the images (Romero-Fresco 2011, 2015). The latter
study has made it possible to ascertain the average distribution of viewers’ attention between text and image depending on the time the text is left on screen (Romero-Fresco 2015). Text displayed at a speed of 150 words per minute (wpm) leads to an average distribution of 50 per cent of the time on the subtitles and 50 per cent on the images. A faster speed of 180wpm yields an average of 60–65 per cent of the time on the subtitles and 40–35 per cent on the images, whereas 200wpm only allows 20 per cent of the time on the images. This provides filmmakers with empirical information as to how much time a part-subtitle or a Sherlock-style authorial title must be left on screen to ensure that viewers have time not only to read it but also to explore the rest of the screen. As for the difference in reception depending on the viewers’ profile, the pan-European study presented in Romero-Fresco (2015) suggests that deaf viewers can find the subtitles on the screen more quickly than hearing viewers (perhaps because they rely on them heavily) but they take longer to read them than hearing viewers, which may be a sign of reading difficulties. However, despite having less time left to look at the images on the screen, the deaf viewers’ visual comprehension is just as good as, and sometimes even better than, that of the hearing viewers. In other words, deaf viewers seem to make up for their sometimes substandard reading skills with a particularly good visual perception and comprehension.

As for the different translation modes, eye-tracking studies comparing dubbing and subtitling (Perego et al. 2014) suggest that general comprehension of film content and visual scene recognition are achieved equally with both translation modalities. They also point to a peculiarity of dubbing, the so-called dubbing effect: an unconscious strategy adopted by dubbing viewers to avoid looking at mouths in dubbing (particularly in close-ups), which prevails over the natural and idiosyncratic way in which humans watch reality and film (favouring eyes over mouths), and which allows them to suspend disbelief and be transported into the fictional world of the film (Romero-Fresco 2016a).

Finally, as well as exploring how reception research in AVT can contribute to film studies and vice versa, eye-tracking studies have recently engaged more directly with accessible filmmaking. Fox (2016) analyzes the reception of three versions of the film Joining the Dots (Romero-Fresco 2012): its original version with no subtitles, its translation with interlingual subtitles produced as an afterthought, and finally its translation with integrated subtitles created in collaboration with the filmmaker as part of the production process. These integrated subtitles were displayed in different positions within the shots on the basis of an established set of criteria regarding framing and mise en scène. The results of the experiment show that while viewers take a little more time to find integrated subtitles than standard subtitles, the overall reading time is reduced. With integrated subtitles, the viewers have more time available to watch and explore the images and they show very similar eye-movement patterns to the viewers of the original film with no subtitles. Furthermore, these integrated subtitles seem to increase the viewers’ suspension of disbelief, producing an enhanced sense of presence in the fictional world of the film. These findings suggest that accessible filmmaking may bring about a degree of similarity in the way in which films are received by the source and target audience that is not normally found in films that are translated at the distribution stage. However, much more research is needed to investigate the impact that an accessible filmmaking approach can have on filmmakers, translators and viewers (of original and translated films).

Although eye-tracking research can be expected to reveal mainly what viewers see, rather than what they think, it has proven to be a useful tool for research in film and AVT, especially when combined with other measures such as comprehension, preferences and sense of presence. The latter measure is a recent addition to AVT studies that is beginning to show that, contrary to the traditional belief that subtitles draw viewers out of the film, they may maintain and
sometimes even increase the target viewers’ sense of presence and suspension of disbelief (Kruger et al. 2015, Romero-Fresco 2016b), which may be seen as one of the top priorities in fiction.

To conclude, in his overview of eye-tracking studies on film and AVT, Smith (2015) complains that film studies scholars cannot use translated films for their studies because the presence of subtitles ‘invalidates the use of eye tracking as a way to measure how the filmmaker intended to shape viewer attention and perception’. The objective of accessible filmmaking is to present a framework where this is no longer the case and filmmakers are aware of, and involved in, the reception of their translated/accessible films. The next sections show how this is being implemented from the point of view of training and professional practice.

Training

Given the current prominence of industrial subtitling (Pérez-Gonzále 2012), carried out after the fact and with no communication with the creative team of the film, accessible filmmaking has so far been applied mainly at grass-roots level, and training has played a key role in its development. As mentioned above, film(making) courses have traditionally disregarded translation and accessibility issues and postgraduate programmes in AVT have not normally included film(making). This is beginning to change. Postgraduate courses in filmmaking such as the MA in Filmmaking at Kingston University (London), the Film Studies Masters at the University of Malta and the MA in Film Production at the ESCAC (Barcelona), the leading film school in Spain, now include classes on AVT and accessibility. The same goes for undergraduate and postgraduate film programmes at Universidad de Valladolid and the Central School of Speech and Drama (London). Likewise, AVT courses are beginning to open the door to film-related content, as shown by the MA in Audiovisual Translation at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona or the MA in Accessibility at the University of Macerata.

In some cases, accessible filmmaking is promoted not only through the exchange of content and modules between programmes but also through the collaboration between film students and AVT students. This is the case of a project set up by five students from the MA in Translation at the University of Antwerp who produced SDH and Italian subtitles for the award-winning film De weg van alle vlees (2013) in collaboration with, and under the supervision of, the Belgian filmmaker Deben Van Dam (RITS Film School, Antwerp). The film was broadcast by VRT, the main public broadcaster in Belgium, on 7 December 2014 with the SDH produced by the students and with their names included as part of the credits. A similar project was set up at the University of Roehampton in 2014 to produce French subtitles for Alvaro Longoria’s film Hijos de las Nubes (2013), produced by Javier Bardem. The subtitles were created in collaboration with the filmmaker and were broadcast by the French TV channel Arte in February 2014. Following this project, the University of Roehampton launched in 2013 the first MA in Accessibility and Filmmaking, where students learn not only how to make films but also how to make them accessible to viewers in other languages and viewers with hearing and visual loss. The students graduating in this course are being employed both in the translation and the film industry and their first films have adopted an accessible filmmaking approach.

Furthermore, training in accessible filmmaking has also been made available to professionals in the industry through workshops and special courses. The workshops have taken place mainly at film festivals such as the International Edinburgh Film Festival (2013) and Venice Film Festival (2012 and 2013). As for the special courses, a case in point is the first official course on accessible filmmaking for documentary directors organized by Fondazione
Carlo Molo, the Torino Film Commission and Museo Nazionale del Cinema, which ran for three months between January and March 2016 and was taught jointly by film and AVT professionals and scholars.

**Professional practice**

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, accessible filmmaking was first applied in the film industry in silent films, where intertitles were produced as part of the post-production process (often supervised by the filmmakers), and also in multiple-language versions, where translation shaped the production process. In the following decades, this approach could only be found amongst the above-mentioned ethnographic filmmakers and some classic directors who were known for caring about every aspect of the filmmaking process, such as Kubrick, Fellini, Godard or Scorsese (Nornes 2007: 243). They made themselves available to translators and engaged with the reception of their films in other countries. In recent years, partly due to the emergence of multilingual films, more and more filmmakers are beginning to engage with translation from the production process and to collaborate with translators, as is the case of John Sayles (*Lone Star* 1996, *Men with Guns* 1997), Jim Jarmusch (*Mystery Train* 1989, *Night on Earth* 1991), Danny Boyle (*Slumdog Millionaire* 2008), James Cameron (*Avatar* 2009) and, more notoriously, Quentin Tarantino (*Inglourious Basterds* 2009) and Alejandro González Iñárritu (*Babel* 2006, *The Revenant* 2015), both of whom issued translation guidelines to their distributors in order to ensure that their vision for their films was maintained in the target versions (Sanz 2015).

However, given the inflexible nature of industrial subtitling, where distributors have the power to decide against the translation wishes of recognized filmmakers such as Ken Loach and Quentin Tarantino (Sanz 2015), independent filmmaking offers an ideal platform for accessible filmmaking to be developed. This is the case of recent films that have integrated translation and accessibility from an early stage, such as Michael Chanan’s *Secret City* (2012), Enrica Colusso’s *Home Sweet Home* (2012), Elisa Fuksas’ *Nina* (2012), the above-mentioned *De weg van alle vlees* (Debe Van Dam 2013) and *Hijos de las Nubes* (Álvaro Longoria 2013) or the Emmy award-winning *Notes on Blindness* (Spinney and Middleton 2014), whose AD was produced by the AVT scholar and professional audio describer Louis Fryer in collaboration with the filmmakers.

In some cases, the commitment of these creators with accessible filmmaking turns them into activists and researchers, as they accompany their films with recommendations and reflections on how to ensure that the filmmaker’s vision is maintained in translation and accessibility. In the UK, the visually-impaired filmmaker Raina Haig was the first to include AD as part of the production process in her award-winning debut film *Drive* (1997). Her website includes articles on disability and filmmaking and on how to integrate accessibility from production. In her view, in order to provide visually-impaired audiences with ‘equitable commercial choices and artistic quality’ the AD needs to be constructed ‘in consultation or even collaboration with the filmmaker’, thus regarding ‘the job of audio description as a part of the film industry’ (Haig 2002). This requires training in film studies for the audio describers to ‘learn how to attune themselves to the filmmaker’s vision’ and in the basics of AD for filmmakers to be able to take decisions on how their film can be made accessible to a blind audience.

Also in the field of accessibility, filmmaker and artist Liz Crow founded in 2005 the production company Roaring Girl Productions, one of whose aims is ‘to pioneer new approaches to film accessibility, working to make audio description, captioning and sign language (ACS) an integral part of the production process rather than an access ‘add-on’. This
is so that people with sensory impairments can participate fully as audience members and filmmakers’ work can be accurately and sensitively conveyed’ (Crow 2005b). In ‘Making Film Accessible’ (Crow 2005a) and ‘A New Approach to Film Accessibility’ (Crow 2005b), she provides detailed descriptions of how her films *Nectar* (2005), *Illumination* (2007) and *Resistance on Tour* (2008) were made accessible. For Crow, it is essential to avoid the prevailing template-based, one-size-fits-all approach to accessibility which results in AD and subtitles that are removed from the overall feel of the production:

For the audience, the result is that the very methods designed to promote access can detract from the qualitative experience of the production. For the filmmaker, the access conventions available can misrepresent and undermine the vision they have worked so hard to create and communicate.

(Crow 2005c: 3)

Crow’s account of how accessibility was brought into the core of the creative process in the production of *Nectar* (2005) through experimentation with both aesthetic and technological solutions is particularly interesting and constitutes one of the first set of recommendations on accessible filmmaking. The subtitles, produced in collaboration with a deaf consultant, were not only based on traditional technical guidelines but also on aesthetic grounds. This helped to decide on the font, colour, speed and display mode of the subtitles on the basis of the visual identity, the *mise en scène* and the mood of the film. Reflecting on the whole process, Crow explains that this approach requires some extra time in post-production, which can be made possible by the inclusion of accessibility in the film budget and by its recognition as a budget line for funding bodies. Only in this way will filmmakers be able to keep control over the way in which their films are received by sensory-impaired audiences, with a degree of subjectivity (and collaboration with the translator) that is not possible within the rigid margins of standard industrial subtitling.

In the field of ethnographic documentary, a good example of accessible filmmaking is the filmography of award-winning director Alastair Cole. His latest film, *The Colours of the Alphabet* (2016), is a feature-length ethnographic documentary about multilingual

![Figure 31.1 Subtitling production process in Cole’s film The Colours of the Alphabet (2016).](image_url)
education in Zambia in which he has used subtitles as ‘an intrinsic part of the filmmaking process that can be planned and engaged with from the start of production, and embraced as a powerful tool for emphasizing perspective as well as forging characters and narratives’ (Cole 2015: 134). Figure 31.1 (Cole 2015: 135) illustrates how subtitling was integrated in the filmmaking process:

Cole ensured that the subtitles were created before the film was locked edit, which allowed them to ‘influence the pacing and emotional engagement of the film where necessary, and permitted the adjustment of any scene that would create significant problems in viewing with the subtitles’ (Cole 2015: 138). Cole worked with a producer of language and accessibility (similar to the supervisor of accessibility services proposed by Udo and Fels (2009) but including, in this case, both translation and accessibility) to create a guide document for subtitlers. This document included the full original transcript, the translation into English, the English subtitles, the Italian subtitles and a section with comments for subtitlers regarding potential translation difficulties. The subtitlers of the various foreign versions of the film had the opportunity to contact the filmmaker, liaising first with the producer of language and accessibility.

In Cole’s view, documentary filmmaking, and particularly ethnographic filmmaking (which has translation at its core), offers a unique context and a fruitful area of research to test new, creative and collaborative forms of translation and accessibility. Furthermore, he adds an essential ethical consideration to support the use of accessible filmmaking in this genre:

The common, and often inevitable requirement to outsource the creation of various foreign language versions of films can result in removal of the director from any translation and subtitling debate, thus shifting ultimate responsibility for the translation and the representation of the characters involved in the film away from the person with whom the people in the film have entrusted their stories. Fully understanding the implications and procedures of subtitling, recognizing the key role of the director in any debate, and understanding one’s own ideological perspective within the creation of the subtitles and the film as a whole is, I suggest, critical to mitigating the obvious dangers and harm mistranslation, and misrepresentation can entail.

(Cole 2015: 148)

All these films, including the above-mentioned Joining the Dots (Romero-Fresco 2012), which has been shown at secondary schools in Switzerland and has been used by Netflix and the United Nation’s ITU Focus Group on Media Accessibility as an example of good practice, show that accessible filmmaking can present a feasible alternative to the industrial model of translation and accessibility that currently prevails in the profession.

However, much work remains to be done in terms of research, training and practice in order to determine, for instance, what degree of collaboration between the creative team and the translators is required for a film to fulfil the standard of accessible filmmaking. After all, the films mentioned here include a wide range of options, from one or two meetings between filmmakers and translators (Secret City, Home Sweet Home, Hijos de las Nubes) to workshops (De weg van alle vlees) and much more thorough collaborations (The Colours of the Alphabet, Joining the Dots, Nectar). Romero-Fresco (2013: 215) provides a list of considerations to inform this collaboration at the different stages of the production:
Pre-production stage

- the provision of metadata for translators, including not only the script (in fiction) or the transcripts (in documentaries) but also any other information available, such as research material, the treatment, the storyboard and the shooting script, which may be very useful for the audio describer;
- attention to clothing colour if subtitles are to be used;
- collaboration between the subtitler and the creative team in pre-production if subtitles are to be used as part of the original film (part-subtitling).

Production stage

- attention to framing if subtitles are to be used. This is particularly important in the case of close ups with dialogue or narration.

Post-production stage

- collaboration between the translator and the post-production team;
- attention to on-screen titles (particularly in documentaries) and on-screen text when dialogue or narration is used over them. Unless the shot is extended, the viewers of the translated film may end up losing either the dialogue/narration or the translation of the text;
- access to the sound editors, or to the sound editing process, may prove very useful for SDH subtitlers. The experience could help them engage with and understand useful terms they need to describe the music, the special effects and the atmosphere for the deaf and hard of hearing viewers.

In order to avoid mere token gestures and consultations by filmmakers that do not result in effective collaboration with translators, further practical and theoretical work on this field could focus on a future set of minimum requirements for a film to obtain the standard of accessible filmmaking. This could include not only the provision of translation, SDH and AD, but also a degree (or different degrees) of collaboration between the creative team and the translators.

Conclusion

Accessible filmmaking is almost as old as cinema. It existed during the silent film era and was subsequently replaced by an industrialized model where translation and accessibility are relegated to the distribution stage, translators have no contact with the creative team and filmmakers have no control over the translated and accessible versions of their films. Profitable as this model may be, it has had a negative impact on the working conditions of translators and on the quality of translation, and is beginning to raise criticism by both filmmakers and translation scholars:

Filmmakers must involve themselves in translation because the contribution of the translator is every bit as profound as that of the screenwriter, actor, or director . . . Thus, it behoves artists to understand the process and get involved if they care at all about their work. They should make themselves available to translators, demand the best, and participate in the process. After all, in an age when no film is complete until it crosses the frontier of language, it is the translator who has the last word. Global cinema is the translator’s cinema.

(Nornes 2007: 243)
Accessible filmmaking offers the possibility to implement this advice by integrating AVT and accessibility as part of the filmmaking process through collaboration between the translators and the creative team of the film. From the point of view of research, accessible filmmaking invites AVT scholars to explore the way in which film theorists and filmmakers have tackled the notion of translation, as in the case of ethnographic filmmaking and its consideration of subtitling as a dramatic component of visual anthropology. For film scholars, accessible filmmaking offers tools, developed in the field of AVT, to study the impact that translation and accessibility can have on the production and reception of film, such as the results of the eye-tracking reception studies conducted so far in this area. Some of these studies (Fox 2016) suggest that this model can help to produce in the target viewers an increased sense of presence and a degree of similarity in the way in which films are received by the source and target audience that is not normally found in films that are translated at the distribution stage.

Training-wise, accessible filmmaking offers an opportunity for AVT students to develop their creativity and knowledge of filmmaking, as well as their potential for employability, and for film students to collaborate with translators from their first productions. This has materialized in several initiatives at graduate and postgraduate level in countries such as Spain, Italy or Belgium that are beginning to bridge the gap between film and translation/accessibility training.

Finally, with the support of user associations, film commissions and the United Nation’s ITU Focus Group on Media Accessibility, accessible filmmaking has also been implemented in the professional industry. Although still few and far between, some mainstream filmmakers such as Tarantino and Iñárritu are beginning to have a say in the way in which their films should be translated. But more importantly, an increasing number of independent filmmakers are embracing this approach and, in some cases, promoting it by producing guidelines and research to substantiate their practice.

Four years after the first article on the subject (Romero-Fresco 2013), accessible filmmaking is slowly but steadily developing, helped by the widespread recognition of accessibility as a key issue in audiovisual media and by the increasing presence of multilingualism and creative authorial titles in original films. Needless to say, it does not pose a threat to the deep-rooted industrialized model that relegates translation and accessibility to the distribution stage as an afterthought in the film industry. Instead, it sits quietly on the side, learning from the innovation and creativity of fan-made translation and offering an alternative model for those filmmakers who care about their foreign and sensory-impaired audiences as much as they do about their original viewers.

**Summary**

Despite a greatly increased volume of research over the past decade, AVT and media accessibility and its main services (dubbing, subtitling, SDH and AD for blind and partially sighted people) are still an afterthought in the filmmaking process. This results in a lack of investment in this area and a worrying decrease in quality and working conditions.

The present chapter focuses on the notion of accessible filmmaking as a way to tackle this problem by integrating AVT and accessibility during the filmmaking process through collaboration between filmmakers and translators. First, a historical account is provided of the origins and background of accessible filmmaking, from the silent film era and the multiple-language versions to the current invisibility of translation and accessibility in the film industry. This is followed by a section on research in this area, both from the point of view of (ethnographic) film and from AVT, with special emphasis on eye-tracking-based
reception studies. The chapter concludes with a section on how accessible filmmaking is being implemented in training and professional practice at an international level as well as with a set of final conclusions.

**Further reading**


Romero-Fresco, P. (2013) ‘Accessible Filmmaking: Joining the Dots between Audiovisual Translation, Accessibility and Filmmaking’, *JoSTrans: The Journal of Specialised Translation* 20: 201–223. Available online: [http://www.jostrans.org/issue20/art_romero.pdf](http://www.jostrans.org/issue20/art_romero.pdf) [last access 20 December 2017] | *This is the first academic article ever published on the notion of accessible filmmaking and it includes the link to the 2012 film Joining the Dots. Both the article and the film are hosted on the online site of the United Nation’s ITU Focus Group on Media Accessibility as examples of good practice.*


**Related topics**

2 History of audiovisual translation
3 Subtitling on the cusp of its futures
6 Subtitling for deaf and hard of hearing audiences: moving forward
8 Audio description: evolving recommendations for usable, effective and enjoyable practices
14 Psycholinguistics and perception in audiovisual translation
17 Multimodality and audiovisual translation: cohesion in accessible films
22 Eye tracking in audiovisual translation research
23 Audiovisual translation and audience reception
29 Audiovisual translator training

**References**


Henley, P. (1996) ‘The Promise of Ethnographic Film’, Lecture given in honour of the late Professor Paul Stirling at the University of Kent at the 5th International Festival of Ethnographic Film.


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**Filmography**


*De weg van alle vlees* (2013) Deben Van Dam. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3178340/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

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Inglourious Basterds (2009) Quentin Tarantino. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0361748/?ref_=fn_tt_tt_1
The Jazz Singer (1927) Alan Crosland. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0018037/?ref_=fn_tt_tt_2