Co-creational subtitling in the digital media: Transformative and authorial practices

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Abstract
This article explores the emergence of transformative subtitling practices in the digital culture, a context of production shaped by the dialectical relation between technological advances and cultural change. Drawing on a qualitative discussion of fansubbing practices, the article contends that transformative subtitling signals a clear move towards a regime of co-creation between producers and users of media content, fostering mutual recognition between these increasingly blurred camps. The second part of the article delivers an analytical discussion of examples of authorial titling in mainstream British drama to demonstrate the penetration of transformative subtitling in commercial media products that also posit spectatorial subjectivity. The article concludes by reflecting on the parataxic reading practices that these new subtitling practices encourage and the fluid nature of the transnational collectivities it caters for.

Keywords
couve-creation, digital culture, fansubbing, film translation, multi-modal analysis, subtitling

Although translators have been and continue to be central to most aspects of film culture, the industry ‘has historically discounted their contribution’ (Nornes, 2007: 3). The fact that, for most of the 20th century, subtitling was inextricably entwined with the mediation of the foreign in cinematic textualities allowed the film industry to impose a rigid apparatus that I refer to below as ‘industrial subtitling’. The advent of digital media technologies, however, has brought about the de-legitimization of such practices: as
ordinary citizens become increasingly involved in the co-creation of media content, subtitling now contributes to the overall semiotic assemblage of non-cinematic texts and plays a key role in shaping social relations. This article explores emerging subtitling practices (‘transformative subtitling’) in a new context of production shaped by the dialectical relation between technological advances and cultural change. Drawing on a qualitative discussion of subtitling practices by fan networks, my argument suggests a clear move towards a regime of co-creation between producers and users of media content where transformative subtitling takes on a performative function, fostering mutual recognition between these increasingly blurred camps. Drawing on examples from the British series *Sherlock* (2010), I contend that this shift is bound to influence textual practices (‘authorial titling’) in commercial media products where spectatorial subjectivity is posited for creative reasons.

My argument develops in three main sections. In ‘The crisis of industrial subtitling’, I critique developments that have led to the de-legitimization of industrial subtitling. ‘Subtitling in the era of digital culture’ explores the emergence of a ‘transformative subtitling’ style in the context of self-mediation practices by ordinary citizens from both a perceptual/material dimension and a sociological/value-driven dimension. Finally, ‘Authorial titling as an emergent cultural practice’ delivers an analytical discussion of ‘authorial titling’ practices in commercial media content. It is suggested that these practices illustrate the impact of transformative subtitling on the industry, as more mainstream drama needs to develop expressive means to project viewers immersively into the narrated text; moving image media thus develop new rhetorical strategies and resources for representational design that redefine the traditional relationship between the diegetic and the extra-diegetic.

The crisis of industrial subtitling

Subtitling was first incorporated into the conglomerate of film semiotics with the advent of sound in the late 1920s. A decade later, distributors were able to superimpose titles straight onto the film strip images to provide a translation of the original film dialogue in synchrony with the relevant fragment of speech. As the lion’s share of commercial film subtitling has always involved the translation of Hollywood films into other languages (Fawcett, 2003), the American film industry has played a prominent and conservative role in shaping currently used subtitling conventions. Indeed, despite the technological changes witnessed in other aspects of film production, distribution and reception, ‘all the major studios continue to rely on a decades-old system of inserting subtitles on film prints that dates back to the 1930s’ (James, 2001).

The subtitling apparatus imposed by the industry has tended to prioritize maximum synchrony between the display of written subtitles, ‘the temporality of utterance and the temporality of reading’ (Sinha, 2004: 175). Given that speech delivery rate is much higher than the average viewer’s reading speed, subtitlers significantly condense the original spoken dialogue to comply with technical constraints of shortage of screen space and lack of time. More critical studies, however, suggest that the technological impasse of subtitling processes is not so much motivated by objective medial constraints, but by an attempt to reinforce and perpetuate the narrative tradition of the Hollywood classical
cinematic apparatus (Berliner, 1999: 6). By drawing on an increasingly sophisticated set of editing conventions and montage practices which disguise the technological process required for the very construction of films, Hollywood narratives have historically shifted:

from what had been called a ‘cinema of attractions’ to the self-contained diegetic world. The latter conception of cinematic textuality is based on a new kind of realism that closed the world of the story off from the space of the audience, demanding narrative motivation for everything on screen. (Nornes, 2007: 115)

Several attempts have been made to explore the implications of this ‘self-effacing’ presentational style (Nichols, 1991: 165) for the work of audiovisual translators. For Minh-ha (2005), Hollywood favours the use of synchronous diegetic sound because of its capacity to spread hegemonic commercial discourses, as part of an aesthetic of objectivity that provides ‘unmediated access to reality’ (2005: 129). In the classical cinematic apparatus, synchronous diegetic sound shifts viewers’ attention away from the tools and relations of production, that is, the spaces between image, sound and text, thus reducing the margin for subjective spectatorial experiences. The hegemonic structure of the Hollywood narrative thus imposes ‘suture subtitling’ practices aiming to ‘collapse, in subtitling, the activities of reading, hearing, and seeing into one single activity, as if they were all the same’ and hence ‘to naturalize a dominant, hierarchically unified worldview’ (Minh-ha, 1992, quoted in Nornes, 1999: 18).

Ulrych’s (2000) and Nornes’ (2007) critiques of industrial subtitling centre around the qualitative impact of self-effacing conventions on the subtitlers’ capacity to exercise their professional discretion and their visibility as mediators of filmic texts. According to Ulrych, the medium-related constraints under which audiovisual translators operate often lead ‘to the acculturisation or domestication of the source text in line with dominant conventions and expectancies prevailing in the T[arget] C[ulture]’ (2000: 130). Audiovisual translators therefore become ‘subservient scribes’ doing ‘nothing to improve standards in the film translation industry’ (2000: 140). Nornes (2007), on the other hand, argues that the subtitler’s willingness to comply with ‘a method of translation that conspires to hide its work – along with its ideological assumptions – from its own readers-spectators’ (2007: 155) represents a form of corruption presenting audiences with a distorted experience of the foreign. By smoothing over cultural differences on the grounds of medial constraints and hiding their presence through restrictive rules, corrupt subtitles fail to explore those spaces of generative cultural and linguistic multiplicity that emerge in any instance of cross-cultural transaction. In this context, those ‘textual and cinematic effects that exceed the creation of a narrative-focused equivalence’ (2007: 180) and could favour experiences of spectatorial distanciation by providing unmediated access to the source culture are sacrificed.

The premise that self-effacing subtitling is unable to articulate and present to target language viewers what Cazdyn (2004: 405) calls the ‘unmanageable surplus of meaning’ conveyed by media texts also drives recent studies by scholars interested in emerging forms of critical spectatorship and political representation in the media. According to Cazdyn, ‘transformative subtitling’ practices (2004: 415), developed outside the domain of cinematic textualities, contribute to de-legitimizing the tradition of suppression and
disrupt the assimilation of subtitles into the visual mode that the apparatus of industrial subtitling demands. Whereas industrial subtitles acknowledge the presumed ontological status of the original text, their transformative counterparts are in a dynamic relation with it. By ‘de-link[ing] and de-territorializ[ing] the subtitled version from the original’ (2004: 414), transformative subtitling allows translators to appropriate the original text in a less violent manner; it also challenges the traditional marginalization of the subtitle as a peripheral constituent of the audiovisual semiotic ensemble by exposing the interaction between image, sound and text as spaces of generative multiplicity.

This article is based on the premise that the crisis and de-legitimization of industrial subtitling can be productively recounted in terms of its emancipation from cinematic textualities and the emergence of new collaborative subtitling agencies. Conceptualized here as an integral aspect of the (self-)mediated participation of ordinary people thanks to advances in communication technology, amateur subtitling is delineating ‘a new terrain of democratisation … that is shifting the sensibilities and practices of citizenship’ (Chouliaraki, 2010: 227), and hence acquiring an increasingly transformative role. The term ‘transformative subtitling’ is used here to designate forms of collaborative audiovisual translation undertaken by ordinary people for the benefit of other members of their transnational communities of interest. In what follows, I argue that transformative subtitling often involves a re-positioning of the text within the geography of the frame, a shift from a representational to an interventionist agenda that erodes the privileged status of the original text, and the establishment of a direct relationship between subtitlers and their audiences.

Subtitling in the era of digital culture

Over the last decade, networked and collaborative technologies have prompted a ‘shift of all culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution, and communication’ (Manovich, 2001: 19). These include practices of mediated self-representation by ordinary people – for example, through blogs, video-sharing platforms – that foster the emergence of new instances of participatory citizenship in the new digital economy (Hartley, 2009). By enabling ‘consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate media content in powerful new ways’ (Jenkins, 2004: 33), networked technologies have given them more control over their experience as media users, thus ‘blurring traditional boundaries between media producers and consumers, and leading to new forms of playful citizenship, critical discourse and cosmopolitan solidarity’ (Chouliaraki, 2010: 227). Given that most of these mediation practices involve the formation of transnational communities of interest, subtitling has become instrumental to the circulation of media content in the digital culture. As Pérez-González (forthcoming) shows, the democratization of technology – understood as a context of cultural production that fosters radical forms of citizenship and articulates ‘novel discourses of counter-institutional subversion and collective activism’ (Chouliaraki, 2010: 227) – has favoured the creation of networks of amateur translators involved in practices of cultural resistance against global capitalist structures through interventionist forms of subtitling.

The centrality of computerization in the development of participatory textualities, including transformative subtitling, brings to the fore the dialectical relationship between
technological developments and cultural change. Do the affordances of digital technologies shape the subtitling practices of these new interventionist agencies—in much the same way as industrial subtitling was constrained by the classical apparatus of suppression? Or is it a set of values and expectations, shared by networks of consumers-turned-producers, that drives the manipulation of digital technologies in ever more creative and complex ways? As far as subtitling is concerned, two types of critique prevail in the wider debate. Whereas some scholars hold the view that advances in media technologies necessarily alter textual output within a given culture, others opt to account for changes in our modes of communication in terms of the values and practices that individuals choose to articulate and promote through the new spaces that technology opens up for them. The implications of these two approaches are discussed in more detail in the remainder of this section.

Among the different types of amateur subtitling identified by Pérez-González (forthcoming), the discussion will be illustrated with examples drawn from fansubbing practices. The term ‘fansubbing’ was originally coined to designate the work of amateur subtitlers who, unhappy with the shortage of English commercial translations of Japanese anime, and their cultural insensitivity, set out to translate selected productions of their favourite dramas and make them available to global audiences—in what has been conceptualized as the beginning of a trend towards cosmopolitanism that now underpins the global media landscape (Jenkins, 2006; Leonard, 2005). The examples are taken from episodes 28 and 29 of Detective Evil subtitled by Live-Evil—a fansubbing group that has been established for 10 years and whose primary goal is the subtitling of classic unlicensed anime.¹

**Technodeterminism**

Commenting on the impact of early films on their audiences, Leavis argues that motion pictures make ‘active recreation, especially active use of the mind, more difficult’ (1930: 20)—in line with Mann’s (1978 [1928]) earlier claim that audiences can only react to, but not reflect on what films show. According to Littau (2006: 3), this concern over the ‘reinvention of affective response’ typically follows the advent of new media. With the arrival of the mass culture of reading enabled by the printing press, for example, ‘Immanuel Kant complained of “parchment-headed” men and women who, because they read so much, had lost the capacity to think for themselves’ (2006: 3). Indeed, the nature of film viewing during most of the 20th century—an unalterable, collective and fleeting experience afforded by industrialized machinery in purpose-built venues—made it difficult for audiences to actively participate in the production of the film’s meaning. But developments in digital media technologies are now allowing viewers to archive, manipulate and recirculate media content—in such a way that each personal copy of an audiovisual text now has the potential to provide a unique reading experience. Networked computer technology is also fostering more reflective forms of spectatorial activity, arguably corroborating Nietzsche’s claim that ‘our writing instruments contribute to our thoughts’ (quoted in Littau, 2006: 6).

As is also the case with readers of manuscripts, consumers of digital media content can assemble or version their own copy of an audiovisual text. Just as in the Middle
Ages ‘[a]ny reader could decide to cross over and become an author’ by reconfiguring a given text during the copying stage (Bolter, 1991: 149), anime fansubbers have the technological means to create and distribute their own subtitles. More importantly, their tools also allow them to enrich the viewer’s reading experience by introducing additional layers of representational and affective content or insinuating their own interpretation of the source text through annotations and glosses displayed all over the frame. This is illustrated in Figure 1, where the subtitle delivering a translation of the diegetic speech competes for attention with a gloss of other written textual elements at the top of the image. By incorporating these glosses, fansubbers challenge the traditional hierarchy between centre text (image) and marginal notes (subtitles/glosses). ‘Connective reading’ practices (Landow, 1992) – similar to those prompted by modern hypertextual environments – are thus often required to process these increasingly complex textualities, with viewers having to adjust their use of technology (e.g. by pausing their media players at certain points) to navigate their own pathway through a given text. In so doing, they collaborate in the process of text production and become active ‘prosumers’ (Denison, 2011: 460) of meaning. The fact that fansubbing networks translating into other languages often take as their source text the English versions of Japanese dramas (Dwyer, 2012) accelerates this process even further. Faced with difficulties in distinguishing between authoring and commentary in their source text, they assemble all contributions into their own version of the audiovisual artefact. Ultimately, fansubbers’ lack of concern over the difference between consuming a text and re-authoring it brings to the fore the active participation of ordinary citizens ‘in the process of making media as co-creators of content and experiences’ (Banks and

Figure 1. Fansubbers’ glosses as co-creational practices (reproduced by kind permission of Studio Pierrot)
Source: animesuki.com
Deuze, 2009: 420), and indicates that affective responses to audiovisual texts have given way to more reflective spectatorial practices.

Although seldom formulated in explicit terms, the argument that technological developments exploited by human agency can impact on and shape our cognitive and perceptual capabilities through changes in our reading, writing and thinking practices (McLuhan, 1964), as discussed in the previous paragraph, is gaining ground among subtitling scholars (Kayahara, 2005; O’Hagan, 2008) and other specialists looking at the impact of computer technology on the way we conceptualize translation, as acknowledged by Munday (2008: 179). Although technodeterminism sits ill with the widespread assumption within cultural studies that it is certain cultural conditions that enable technological developments, cultural practices in the era of digitization suggest that humans do not simply use or interact with technology. Instead, they would appear to be so immersed in it that it is worth treating films and other textual artefacts ‘as objects of medical, neuropathological and neurophysiological enquiry’, considering how the medium ‘perceptually – and not symbolically, manipulates its user’ (Littau, 2006: 59).

Cultural reconstitution

Placed in a responsive relationship to technodeterminism, the understanding of technology as an effect determined by socio-historical causes has been widely supported during the age of printed culture and mass media (Williams, 1990 [1974]) and continues to have currency in the era of digital culture. While accepting that networked technologies are gradually changing the way people interact and becoming a dominant form of social organization, media sociologists appeal to the process of individual reconstitution as the only way to make sense of and intervene in the ‘proliferation and saturation of screen-based, networked and digital media that saturate our lives’ (Deuze, 2006: 66). Participatory media practices enabled by collaborative technologies are thus to be regarded as forms of individual and collective reconstitution through the expression of values by ‘hypersociable’ (2006: 64) and ‘glocalized’ (Wellman, 2002: 11) users involved in the remediation of media content.

Anime viewers outside Japan constitute a geographically dispersed and linguistically diverse audience whom digital technologies have allowed to reach beyond their immediate personal environments and become members of transnational communities of affinity to produce and share versions of their favourite series. Live-Evil, for example, shares its work through aggregation sites3 where geographically distant fans participate in active discussions concerning the transnational decisions of their favourite fansub groups. As Cubbison (2005: 45) notes, fans ‘have learnt to articulate for themselves and for *anime* distributors their product specifications’ so that their subtitling preferences eventually become standard practices not only in fansubbed *anime*, but also in commercially released *anime*. Fansubbing networks, based on the interaction between fan translators and their own (fan) audiences, therefore constitute ‘highly generative environments, from which new aesthetic experiments and innovations emerge’ (Jenkins
et al., 2006: 9) as the building blocks of participatory cultures. The monitorial quality (Schudson, 1995) shown by these networked individuals is indicative of the process of hypersociability through which network members ‘rebuild structures of sociability from the bottom up’ (Deuze, 2006: 67) – thus empowering subtitlers to develop their own subtitling standards without regard for industrial subtitling conventions.

As part of this reconstitution process, monitorial fansubbers position themselves outside and in opposition to the regulatory framework underpinning the commercial dynamics of the media marketplace. Collaborative technologies endow fansubbing networks with the capacity to manipulate media texts and reform conventional representations of reality through transformative subtitling to effect aesthetic change. Fansubbers’ subversive refashioning of commercial media content is thus primarily driven by a desire to tamper with the industrial context of production responsible for what they regard as culturally ‘deodorized’ (Leonard, 2005) versions of anime in English – even when that means engaging in what the industry regards as copyright infringement.

The involvement of fansubbers in the remediation of anime dramas through the ‘augmentation’ of the original texts (Denison, 2011: 455) is clearly signalled from the opening credits. As Figure 2 shows, Live-Evil members demand recognition of their status as co-creators by manipulating the visuals to flag up their agency, in juxtaposition to the commercially sanctioned creators. Unlike their industrial counterparts, bound by the constraints of the self-effacing apparatus, amateur subtitles flaunt their presence in the text in visible and often playful ways, with subtitles becoming facilitators of creative interaction between subtitlers and their online audiences.

Figure 2. Fansubbers’ signalling of their status as co-creators (reproduced by kind permission of Studio Pierrot)
Source: animesuki.com
For hypersociable communities like Live-Evil, subtitles are instruments of remediation that allow for the co-construction of an affinity space with their viewers, as illustrated by Figure 3. In this instance, their high-level genre expertise and familiarity with the expectations of their target audience materializes in a profusion of textual elements that foreground the performing function of subtitles, thus incorporating ‘the spectacular dimension of publicness’ (Chouliaraki, 2010: 228). The traditional subtitle in static Japanese characters that conveys the lyrics of the song playing at this point is likely to be of interest but hardly comprehensible to fans: dynamic writing is thus introduced in the form of karaoke typesetting, with the delivery of an English transliteration of the lyrics, whose syllables change colour as they are uttered by the singer. A title translating the lyrics into English is added at the top of the frame for the benefit of those readers willing to engage in a more active spectatorial experience.

The emancipation of fansubbing groups from industrial subtitling practices and the apparatus of suppression is predicated, to a large extent, on their free access to media content and voluntary work. The production and consumption of anime is mediated through multiple websites where fans exchange ‘raw’ footage for new fansub projects, volunteer/recruit like-minded individuals to collaborate in ongoing translations, provide video embedding codes, or share expertise on quality assurance matters.4 Not only does this network of interconnected websites act as a hub of aesthetic and affective clustering, it also encourages other fans to engage in ‘shovelwaring’, that is, ‘the repurposing or windowing of content across different sites, media, and thus (potential) audiences’ (Deuze, 2006: 70). The implications of shovelwaring practices for the industry are profound. Raw footage is often repurposed through ‘softsubbing’, that is, the production of new language versions of a given content by recycling some of the technical work involved in the production of previous subtitles. Ultimately, however, ‘sub-cultural brand-like capital’ (Denison, 2011: 456) is garnered

Figure 3. Fansubbers’ use of performing titles as a remediation strategy (reproduced by kind permission of Studio Pierrot)

Source: animesuki.com
through the endorsement from fans of the network’s co-creational practices. As Deuze notes in relation to other networks of media workers, fandom-based collectivities – consisting of both the subtitlers and their fan audiences – are ‘not created and self-maintained through connected devices and access alone’; they also have ‘self-referential properties in that certain values, beliefs, and practices are preferred over others’ (Deuze, 2006: 71).

Despite differences, these two approaches to the dialectical relationship between technology and cultural change have similar orientations: they both assume that the relation between film-makers and their audiences is being re-negotiated towards a regime of co-creation and acknowledge the semiotic potential of transformative (in the sense of performative) subtitling practices by ordinary people in the context of self-mediated texts. Whether the emphasis is placed on the perceptual/material or the sociological/value-driven dimensions of transformative subtitling, the latter’s growing economic value in commercial circles raises a number of questions pertaining to its current and future impact on industrial subtitling conventions. What evidence is there of the impact of transformative conventions on commercial subtitling standards? How, if at all, is subtitling re-negotiating its contribution to the overall semiotic assemblage of mainstream media content? How do new developments in subtitling practices, if any, contribute to a better understanding of popular media content in terms of consumption?

**Authorial titling as an emergent cultural practice**

Unlike industrial subtitlers, fans involved in fansubbing share other creative citizens-consumers’ ‘view of publicness that thematises performance, voice and claims to recognition’ (Chouliaraki, 2010: 227). As illustrated in the previous section, amateur subtitlers make their presence visible through subtitles that overstep their translational role, often criss-crossing the boundaries between the diegetic and the extra-diegetic, to delineate spaces for self-expression and facilitate the process of mutual recognition with their fans. These changing practices corroborate Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) account of the transition from ‘recording technologies’ (including cinematography) to ‘synthesizing technologies’ (prevalent in the digital culture) in terms of an ontological shift from referentiality to deconstruction. In this light, the obsession of the classical cinematic apparatus with synchronous diegetic sound as a way to hide the artifices and machinery of film-making is typical of the ‘ontologies of referentiality, a view of representation being founded on direct, referential relations between the representations and the world’ (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006: 218). The aesthetic of objectivity entailed by recording technologies therefore demands the use of exclusively translational subtitles as gatekeepers of the diegetic to present the filmic text as a unified naturalistic representation. Synthesizing technologies, on the other hand, encourage the deconstruction of representation by exposing the cultural and social make-up of the semiotic resources deployed in the filmic text. As Kress and van Leeuwen note, this entails:

the need for conceiving of social semiotic practice in terms of rhetoric and ‘design’, where the term ‘rhetoric’ focuses on the social relations which obtain in the process of communication, and the term ‘design’ focuses on the arrangement of the available semiotic resources in the making of the representation as a message. (2006: 219)
Investigating the rhetorical nature of media texts therefore demands a clearer understanding of what media creators (and co-creators) choose to fashion into a resource for those representations and how that fashioning process unfolds. Access to what lies beyond the unified frame – including the subtitling agencies located in the interstitial spaces between the image, sound and text – prompts viewers to engage with the materiality and constructedness of media content. It also fosters new forms of consumption predicated on a set of shared rhetorical competences between producers (including subtitlers) and viewers, equipping the latter to negotiate the limitations of the apparatus as reflexive spectators or to join the ranks of consumer-turned-producers within participatory collectivities. I would argue that this context of production favours the use of obtrusive titles inviting scrutiny and interpretation of their interplay with other representational resources, even if this means that viewers’ attention is explicitly drawn to the relationship between subtitles and the (extra)diegetic world.

The implications of the discussion above can be summarized as follows. Recording technologies favoured industrial subtitling practices, while their synthesizing counterparts are associated with ontologies of deconstruction encouraging experimental approaches to subtitling. Against this instability, we need to examine the impact of transformative subtitling, as developed by ordinary citizens clustered around networks of collective intelligence, on popular media consumption. Admittedly, recent studies corroborate the growing cultural and economic value of these self-mediation practices, both in relation to activist subtitling (Pérez-González, forthcoming) and the wider domain of media co-creation (Banks and Deuze, 2009). But the prospects for the consolidation of this new ontological orientation, I would contend, rely on the latter’s capacity to infiltrate and shape the production and consumption of commercial media content. From the disciplinary perspective of cultural studies, the main focus of interest is the degree to which transformative subtitling, conceived and developed as a programme of radical politics of resistance in amateur circles, is able to shape the social semiotic practices of professional media producers working in the era of digital technologies. If, as has been argued earlier in this article, subtitling practices are indicative of the shift from referentiality to constructedness, the ubiquity of synthesizing technologies ought to be reflected in the role that subtitles perform in industrial media output.

Rhetorical changes in commercial subtitling practices have been identified in a small range of media products where the aesthetics and delivery of the subtitles are part of the overall artistic programme. The fact that subtitles are incorporated in the picture during the production process, rather than after the completion of the film or series, for the purposes of commercial distribution can show in their materiality (e.g. graphic style or movement) or their unusual positioning on the frame. O’Sullivan (2011: 149) discusses a number of films where the translation of dialogue through such innovative subtitles performs a number of dramatic functions, in addition to the purely translational one. The fact that the production of translational subtitles is still under the control of the industry, however, keeps a firm lid on the potential spread of innovative subtitling. This article therefore argues that the scope of commercial penetration of the new ontological orientation in media production and consumption enabled by digital technologies can be best gauged by focusing on the use of transformative subtitles without a translational function. These are textual elements that commercial film and TV drama creators opt to
integrate in their multi-modal assemblages for reasons other than interlingual transfer. It is suggested that, in an attempt to immerse the viewer in the story, media creators draw on the conventions developed by participatory subtitling collectivities. Titles without a translational function thus become an additional resource conveying the diegetic or extra-diegetic information required to process unconventionally complex or non-linear narratives; foregrounding spectacularization within the overall mise en scène; or facilitating the process of mutual recognition or affinity between the director (narrator) and the viewer (narratee), who becomes privy to information that is unavailable to diegetic characters. In so far as these titles belong to the film or drama itself, rather than being added during the post-production stage to market that content in foreign markets, the term ‘authorial titles’ is proposed here.

**Sherlock as a case study**

Although this article is largely theoretical in its arguments, illustrative examples from the British television series *Sherlock* (2010) are drawn upon here to explore this argument further. The importance of Sherlock Holmes fandom – as attested by the longevity of its admiration societies, the existence of outlets for the publication of specialized scholarship and the breadth of references to the character in popular culture – is one of the main reasons for this choice. Being both big Sherlock fans (Thorpe, 2010), the series creators were aware that their contemporary adaptation of the character and his fictional world would be thoroughly scrutinized by fellow fans. Thus the plot incorporates allusions and references to canonical elements of the original novels which, as is also the case with some anime dramas, have been discussed and annotated by fans online. Reported meetings between the series creators and Holmes fans prior to the recording to the series (Thorpe, 2010) further corroborate that the negotiation of spaces of affinity with Holmes’ admirers was regarded as central to the success of the series.

The second reason for the choice of this data sample is the prominent role that digital technologies play in the actual adaptation of the series. As Pendreigh (2010) notes, ‘this latest incarnation has him [Sherlock] as an ubergeek who has embraced 21st-century technology, compulsively firing off texts and hoping to track down a killer via a missing mobile phone’ as well as running his own blog. Sherlock’s compulsive use of the tools of the new age plays an important dramatic role in the series. It is meant to showcase the centrality of Holmes’ intellectual skills – in particular, his keen observation powers and ruthless logic – to the resolution of his cases. As one reviewer notes,

> his brilliance is shown by allowing him to tell us what is about to happen before it does.

> … *Sherlock* [the series] takes this a stage further: one of its great joys is the way in which Moffat and his collaborators have devised ways of showing its protagonist’s mind working. Labels are flashed onto people’s clothing to reveal the methods by which Holmes deduces history and character; pin patterns are painted on the screen as he tries to break into a phone; numbers float across his face as he cracks a code. (Crompton, 2012)

Using Cazdyn’s (2004) terminology, the use of Holmes’ cleverness as a rhetorical device to propel forward the narrative creates an ‘unmanageable surplus of meaning’ at different
points throughout the series. Consequently, the creators of this series often need to transcend the diegetic space as they struggle to represent the unfolding events while, simultaneously, providing the reader with insights into Sherlock’s observation powers at work.

In Example 1 (episode 3, starting at 50′:26″), Holmes is embroiled in a row with Watson when a photograph of the Thames banks is sent to his mobile phone: it shows the unidentified location of an anonymous body. Holmes’ mobile immediately becomes a tool to conduct preliminary research and the text of the menus that Sherlock navigates becomes superimposed on the frame. Holmes’ initial search (see Figure 4) returns no useful results. As he then makes other unsuccessful attempts to retrieve information on the potential sighting of a dead body by the river, successive titles (displaying search menus) follow one another on the frame. The rolling of Holmes’ thumb on the mobile’s trackwheel as he continues his search is reflected in a number of dynamic titles, with viewers’ eyes moving up and down the menu options as they become momentarily activated at different points.

Faced with the need to design the semiotic representation of a complex narrative involving two intersecting planes (the argument between Holmes and Watson and Sherlock’s mobile searches), the creators have opted to transgress the conventions of narrative framing through ‘narrative metalepsis’ (Genette, 1983 [1980], quoted in O’Sullivan, 2011: 161). Information which would have normally remained confined to the diegetic (research conducted individually by Holmes would have been only known to him) is thus transferred to the audience through the use of authorial titling. To represent Sherlock’s brilliance, the creators exploit the ‘double-layeredness’ of filmic communication (Vanoye, 1985), prioritizing the vertical level of interpersonal communication (between the film-makers and the audience) at the expense of its horizontal counterpart (between the film-makers and the audience) at the expense of its horizontal counterpart (between the film-makers and the audience).

Figure 4. *Sherlock*: narrative metalepsis through authorial titling (reproduced by kind permission of Hartswood Films)
*Source*: commercial DVD release
characters). The upshot is that Watson remains oblivious to the working of Sherlock’s logic, while viewers receive the information required to appreciate Holmes’ brilliance as both narrative planes unfold.

**Authorial titling: rhetoric and design**

The use of narrative metalepsis in Example 1 enhances the spectacular dimension of subtitles and performs a clearly immersive function: it suggests that ‘the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees – you and I – perhaps belong to some narrative’ (Genette, 1983 [1980]: 236). Genette’s insight is particularly relevant in the case of *Sherlock*, whose (fan) creators are particularly keen to elicit the complicity of the character’s fans. The development of spaces of affinity with this segment of the audience through narrative metalepsis, a marked rhetorical strategy intended to create a perception of playful estrangement, thus becomes particularly effective when used to articulate simple narratives that would not require the use of such an anti-naturalistic device.

Example 2 (episode 1, starts at 22′:40″) begins with Holmes and Watson joining Detective Inspector Lestrade at the scene of the latest in a series of unexplained suicides. Holmes silently inspects the scene, walking around the body of a dead woman. His attention is first caught by the word ‘Rache’, which appears to have been carved on the wooden floor by the victim’s nails. As he scrutinizes the woman’s left-hand broken nails, the title ‘Left handed’ appears between the tips of her middle and ring fingers. Sherlock’s gaze shifts back to the wooden floor, where a kinetic title – composed in the style of a dictionary definition (‘RACHE/German (n.) revenge’) – is printed next to the carved word. A point-of-view shot putting the viewer in the position of the dead woman then shows Sherlock looking down at the body, at which point an effective rhetorical device is used. The title containing the dictionary definition remains suspended half-way in the diegetic space between Sherlock and the victim/viewer (Figure 5), who can read it back to front for a few seconds – as if it was meant only for the detective – before it vanishes (indicating that the relevance of the German word has been discarded by Holmes). Holmes proceeds to examine the victim’s clothes. As he slips his gloved hand behind the coat’s collar or pockets, titles with the words ‘dry’ or ‘wet’ appear next to close-up shots of his fingers. His inspection of the victim’s jewellery is also accentuated by variously placed titles indicating that her bracelet, ear-rings and necklace are ‘clean’, while her wedding ring is ‘dirty’. Holmes’ interpretation of the latter finding is delivered in the form a kinetic title formed by the words ‘married’, ‘unhappily’, and ‘10+ years’ appearing on the frame. Further titles serve to make the point that, while the outside of the victim’s wedding is ‘dirty’, the inside is ‘clean’. The titles conveying the conclusions of this contrast are then superimposed on the victim’s ring (‘regularly removed’) and face (‘serial adulterer’).

As Holmes’ inspection takes place in total silence, there is no ‘unmanageable surplus of meaning’ that can be held responsible for the use of authorial titling in this scene. Unlike Example 1, this scene features no dramatic tension between the diegetic dialogue and the semiotic representation of Holmes’ brilliance. Sherlock, for example, could have reflected aloud on the results of his examination as he conducts it, thus allowing the diegetic characters and the viewers to gain insight into his thoughts in real time. Alternatively, a voice-over...
track articulating Sherlock’s train of thought in his own voice could have been used to convey the character’s direct subjectivity exclusively to the viewers – who would thus be granted access to the sleuth’s mind at work as he proceeds with the inspection. Neither of these two potential realizations of what film narratologists call ‘indirect style’ (Branigan, 1992: 125), however, has been used in this sequence. Instead, the series creators have opted for a ‘free indirect style’ at the visual level, which allows for the ‘interjection of the personal/direct discourse into the narratorial/indirect discourse’ through ‘[p]oint-of-view shots, cutaways, perception shots, even certain shot–reverse-shot configurations’ (Naficy, 2004: 136). This highly subjectivizing rhetorical strategy, combined with the lack of diegetic speech, articulates through visual semiotic resources the alienation that Lestrade and Watson feel as they are unable to keep up with Holmes’ powers of deduction. It is precisely the combination of diegetic silence and a narratological free indirect style that enhances the dramatic function of authorial titling. Again, the series creators indulge in the use of narrative metalepsis to create a shared space of affinity between Holmes and the viewer, where subtitles act as a projection of Sherlock’s actions and mental processes, complementing the semiotic value of the expressive camera movements and editing in this scene. Ultimately, the rhetorical significance of the narrative pattern built on this technological and textual entanglement lies in the productive social relations that obtain in the process of audiovisual communication.

In terms of representational design, this sequence makes a highly innovative use of titling elements. Their kinetic nature; their unpredictable location within the geography of the frame – with titles visibly struggling to negotiate their diegetic space next to, between or within the visual elements that they are semiotically complementing; their combination with sound effects to suggest certain interpretations; and their sophisticated materiality (allowing text, for example, to change size or dissolve) are clearly predicated on the affordances of digital technologies and an ontological orientation that emphasizes constructedness. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 264), it could be argued that the use of authorial titling creates ‘an ‘alienation effect’, to break with conventions meant
to naturalize the fictional world of stage and screen, and so to make audiences more aware that they [are] watching a fiction and invite them to reflect on its content’. To prioritize their affinity with viewers (interactive participants) at the expense of the diegetic characters (represented participants), the series creators incorporate titles that draw attention to the material apparatus of filmic production in much the same way as the transformative subtitles used by ordinary people involved in participatory self-mediation practices. As is also the case with fansubbing, authorial titling is a form of content aggregation that shapes audience engagement by commenting upon the diegetic action and disrupting conventional forms of semiotic representation, making viewers consciously work as co-creators of media content.

**Conclusion**

This article has presented a two-pronged argument to account for the de-legitimization of industrial subtitling in the era of synthesizing technologies. First, the focus has been placed on subtitling practices that, unlike their commercial counterparts, do not attempt to naturalize the world of the story by making it self-contained and closing it off from the space of the audience. Taking as examples the practices of a fansubbing network, I have accounted for the shift towards the deconstruction of the filmic and subtitling apparatus in terms of the engagement of amateur (emancipated) subtitlers in the process of annotation/aggregation and distribution of subtitled media content using digital media technologies; the idiosyncratic nature of the relationship that holds between these participatory networks of co-creators and the increasingly deterritorialized audiences that they work for; and the need for these collectivities of consumers-turned-producers to delineate a shared (often transnational) space of affinity for the expression of a common set of values. The insight that digital technologies and active audiences are also central to the dynamics of the media industry has served as the basis for the second part of my argument. If content and experiences mediated by ordinary people foreground a spectacularized and aestheticized approach to subtitling as a means to facilitate mutual recognition between producers and users, this thematization of performance is likely to shape the use of titling conventions also in commercial media content seeking to promote similar spectatorial experiences. In so far as much of what is commercially subtitled at present is still bound by industry conventions, this article has opted to gauge the impact of transformative subtitling on commercial media content by focusing on the use of authorial titling as a rhetorical device in mainstream British drama.

The discussion has brought into sharp relief the extent to which titles are re-negotiating their role within the overall semiotic assemblage of both participatory and mainstream media content. Rather than simply contributing to the representation of reality, transformative and authorial titles comment upon the diegetic and extra-diegetic reality. In so doing, they promote the same ‘parataxic’ reading experience as the primitive intertitles (Grillo and Kawin, 1981). In other words, they prompt viewers to experience ‘the whole film in an additive way, by combining the various elements [images, dialogue, titles] consciously’ through ‘discrete and intellectual’ reading practices (Naficy, 2004: 147) – although, in the contexts of production discussed in this article, the term ‘intellectual’ is understood in the sense of ‘active’, for the function of transformative and authorial titles is often a playful one.
that can project the viewers immersively into the narrated text. The parataxic reading practices encouraged by transformative and authorial titles ultimately acknowledge the increasingly elastic nature of media audiences, configured as ‘ever more complex assemblages of difference and distinction across national borders and other institutional affiliations’ (Li, 2009: 120). Only by positing the spectatorial subjectivity through titles presented in critical juxtaposition with the audiovisual text can the producers of media content accommodate the new forms of transnational constituencies engaged in constant negotiation and co-creation of their multiple and shifting identities in the margins of the frame.

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Notes

1 See Live-Evil’s website (http://www.live-evil.org/), Releases section. The episodes used for the purposes of illustration are available for download at http://animesuki.com/group.php/31.html
2 Not all instances of fansubbing are transformative. As Dwyer (2012) notes, there are many examples of recent fansubbing strands that are formally conservative and would appear to follow closely the synchrony-oriented conventions of industrial subtitling.
3 Animesuki (http://www.animesuki.com/), whose fan forum contains millions of entries organized around a stable set of threads (http://forums.animesuki.com/), is one such aggregation site.
5 A very popular fansub download often attracts in the region of 200,000 downloads – download figures are available in sites such as http://www.animesuki.com. A commercial release of such a product in each language version would have earned £400,000 in revenue if it had been marketed as an online copy at £2, or £3.9 million if sold as a £19.99 DVD purchase. Denison (2011) explains how the growing consumption of fansubbed anime has led industry players to opt for similar distribution technologies, hoping that an almost simultaneous release of their content will undermine the penetration of fansubs. For her part, Dwyer (2012) discusses how Korean fansub platform ViKi is beginning to ‘monetorize [sic] a large percentage of its Asian content’ through commercial DVDs distributed by a Korean broadcaster.
6 See: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00t4pgh (accessed August 2012). The three episodes of Sherlock’s Season One are included in a corpus of commercial and amateur subtitled media content that the author has been compiling since 2009.
7 See: http://www.bakerstreetjournal.com/
8 See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pop_culture_references_to_Sherlock_Holmes
9 See an instance of online annotations for episode 1 at: http://www.newscarama.com/tv/sherlock-annotations-episode-1-101118.html. The Wikipedia pages on each of the three episodes contain sections on ‘sources and allusions’ whose compilation requires a similar degree of genre expertise.

References


Filmography


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