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FANSUBBING ANIME: INSIGHTS INTO THE ‘BUTTERFLY EFFECT’ OF GLOBALISATION ON AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION

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Abstract
This article revolves around fansubbing, a subtitling-based mediation phenomenon whose emergence and consolidation in recent years has gone hand in hand with the globalisation of Japanese animated cinema. The paper begins with an overview of (i) the origins and rationale for the popularity of anime in Japan and beyond; (ii) the first attempts to localise anime into other languages; and (iii) the contribution of fansubbing to the expansion of anime fandom worldwide. The article then proceeds to delve into the organisation of the fansubbing process and outline its most distinctive practices. The final section appraises the potential for propagation of fansubbing practices within a fast-changing cultural landscape, drawing on the theoretical models that media sociology has developed to account for similar developments in the audiovisual marketplace.

Key words: Fansubbing; anime; subtitling; globalisation; chaos theory; media sociology.

1. Introduction
Audiovisual translation practitioners are reported to claim “that subtitling and dubbing are not translating”, but rather forms of adaptation (Fawcett 1996: 65) – understood loosely as a form of deliberate and, to some extent, arbitrary interlingual and intercultural mediation. In a heavily constrained form of audiovisual translation like subtitling, the priority is to ensure that maximum synchronisation obtains in time and space between the delivery of speech in the source language and the display of subtitles in its target counterpart (O’Connell 1998). In professional and scholarly circles, adaptation has become accepted as inherently and inextricably bound up with the practice of subtitling. However, the emergence of new amateur subtitling cultures in recent years against the backdrop of ‘mainstream’ or ‘professional’ subtitling has brought into sharp relief the extent to which the latter is shaped by the commercial interests of Western media industries. In this article, I propose to look at one of the most influential amateur subtitling cultures, whose emergence and consolidation has gone hand in hand with the globalisation of Japanese animated films or anime. Fansubbing, a new subtitling-based mediation phenomenon postulated by anime fans (and hence amateur subtitlers), was born to provide fellow fans worldwide with the fullest and most authentic experience of anime action and the Japanese culture which embeds it. Unsurprisingly, some of the subtitling strategies developed for this purpose are at many removes from their mainstream counterparts.

Section 2 provides an overview of the historical origins and the rationale for the popularity of anime in Japan and beyond. Early attempts to localise anime into other languages are examined, before the discussion moves on to address the significance of fansubbing as a new development on this front. Once the role of fans in the popularisation of anime has been established, section 3 sets out to gain deeper insights into the articulation of fansubbing as a collective mediation paradigm; to this end, I account for the organisation of the fansubbing process.
process in terms of participants, roles and stages; I also present some of the most radical practices of amateur subtitling and explore the scholarly reception they have enjoyed so far. In the final section, I consider the future of fansubbing conventions by (i) placing this phenomenon within the wider framework of current developments in the audiovisual marketplace as a whole; and (ii) examining how media sociology is trying to theorise both the genealogy and the potential effects of such changes.

2. Translation and Anime ‘Fandom’: the Fansubbing Phenomenon
In Western countries the term ‘anime’ encompasses a relatively wide range of Japanese animation genres. Wikipedia’s entry on this form of filmic entertainment develops a rudimentary classification of the latter on the basis of criteria such as the identity of the protagonist, the profile of the intended audience or the nature of the narrative thrust that propels the action forward. It then goes on to note that, effectively, most anime films combine formal and dramatic elements from more than one animation genre. Thus, “it is not uncommon for an action themed anime to also involve humour, romance, and even social commentary” or vice versa. A single anime film often weaves together one prevalent genre that sustains the plot and a set of underlying genres which add depth to the storyline by way of subtexts. Unsurprisingly, Western characterisations of anime have tended to play down this thematically motivated diversity. Instead, they have opted to highlight the permeability between the boundaries of the constitutive genres of Japanese animation cinema and bundle these together under the umbrella term ‘anime’. Wells (1999: 240), for instance, defines it as a highly idiosyncratic entertainment form that “prioritises exaggerated and sometimes caricatured expressions of human traits in order to direct attention to the detail of gesture and the range of human emotion and experience”. Born outside the sphere of influence of Western filmic conventions, anime has come to be known and recognised worldwide by the core aesthetic and narrative patterns that cut across the boundaries of individual anime genres.

Whilst a detailed characterisation of Japanese animated cinema falls beyond the scope of this article, it cannot be emphasised enough that anime is a conglomerate of culturally-centred filmic genres. Admittedly, it is not the only type of animated film available on the market that relies heavily on a representation of culturally idiosyncratic values, customs and objects. In a recent study, Di Giovanni (2004: 208) observes that Disney animated films are increasingly turning to “the depiction of cultures which are distant in space or even in time from the familiar cultural background and experience of Western audiences” as a strategy to boost the success of the American animated film industry worldwide. Disney animation and anime, however, differ in at least two fundamental aspects. The first difference pertains to the number of cultural systems interacting within a given film. In Di Giovanni’s terms, Disney animation sets out to exploit the interplay between the alien ‘narrated culture’ and the Western ‘narrating culture’ via the latter’s deployment of an identifiable range of filtering or adapting strategies. For its part, anime exhibits an almost total overlap between the culture portrayed in the film and the culture that ‘packages’ the animated product. Secondly, while “Disney animated films are conceived as internationally-valid products, aiming generally at large audiences beyond
the American national boundaries” (Di Giovanni 2004: 217), anime films were originally created for the enjoyment of one or more specific segments of the Japanese audience.

The connection between Japanese animated films and their viewers is worth exploring in some depth at this point. According to Sato (2002), the consolidation of anime as a form of entertainment with artistic quality dates back to the late 1970s. Although children-geared examples of this filmic manifestation were well-established before then, the release in the transition between the 1970s and 1980s of a number of successful (predominantly science fiction) animation films oriented towards a more adult audience “prompted a fundamental shift in the cultural status of [Japanese] animation”. Since then, anime has evolved and grown to take over ‘live-action’ cinema as the undisputedly dominant form of cinematic entertainment in contemporary Japan. In addition to economic constraints and the pervasiveness of manga (comics) in the Japanese culture since the Second World War, Sato identifies two major historical reasons whose importance deserve being quoted at length:

[The] flight to anime is an inevitable result of the ethnic self-denial that has suffused Japanese society ever since the Meiji era, and especially since the end of World War II. Bent on achieving the goals of modernization and Westernization, the Japanese, in rejecting their own history and traditions, have sought to become Nihonjin-banare (de-Japanized) – a generally complimentary term, implying that one looks and acts more like a Westerner or a Caucasian than the average Japanese … [This] tendency of Japanese to reject their own history and traditions in favor of a Western ideal has undermined live-action film also by affecting the performances of Japanese screen actors. An obvious example is the inability of today’s younger actors to portray Japanese of earlier eras with authenticity. It is not only in period pieces, however, that the rejection of our country’s history and tradition robs actors’ performances of authenticity. In postwar Japan’s cultural climate, it is exceedingly difficult for actors in any type of role to convincingly express complex, deep or intense emotion — in fact, any dramatic emotion at all [in live-action films]… Yet in animation, which lacks visual realism and features de-Japanized characters to begin with, the expression of emotion paradoxically takes on a more convincing sense of reality. This may explain why most of the serious and ambitious film efforts have used the vehicle of anime. (Sato 2000)

Despite the westernisation of its characters’ physiognomy, anime has developed its own aesthetic conventions and narrative techniques. In the light of Sato’s quotation above, a plausible explanation for the panoply of comic freeze-frames or elaborate tableau-like visual inserts used in anime could well be the need to enhance the emotions presented to the viewers in certain parts of the film. It would therefore seem reasonable to argue that anime constitutes a culturally distinctive narrating culture. In fact, it is a widely accepted view that the visual conventions and filmic syntax of these movies challenged the entertainment experience of the viewers who were first exposed to it outside Japan (Napier 2001). But the cultural exceptionality of anime is even more obvious when regarded as a narrated culture. In this form of cinematic expression, language is imbued in cultural values; in turn, the comprehension of the real or fictional ‘anime-specific’ references denoted by language require the viewer’s familiarity with the culture that embeds them. In sum, the overlap between the narrated and the narrating cultures that characterises Japanese animated films brings
into a particularly sharp focus the role that the language-culture revolving door plays in the reception and enjoyment of these audiovisual products.

Over the last three decades, globalisation has contributed to the increasing availability of previously ‘local’ forms of entertainment outside the contexts in which they originated. The diffusion of anime outside Japan that began in the late 60s required the translation of the films and opened up faultlines that, for the first time, split the language-cum-culture conglomerate underpinning Japanese animation. The fact that these early televised anime shows were oriented towards American children had a major impact on the approach to their translation. Dubbing, the modality chosen for these transfers, made it possible to “alter the stories and characters to suit the perception of the tastes of American children and their parents” by Americanising Japanese names and removing “elements of Japanese Culture” (Cubisson 2005: 52). Drawing on Furniss (1998), Cubisson reports that viewers were immediately aware of the visual and narrative differences between these pioneering anime series and the more established products of the American industry. However, the transformations that the original texts underwent during the translation process meant that the viewers could not even identify anime as a Japanese product. Despite these initial obstacles,

[t]he fandom grew through screening sessions at science fiction conventions and through the efforts of Westerners who traveled to Japan. Anime videotapes and laser discs were imported and distributed among club members and later by small companies formed by fans. When through such means Western fans became aware of the extent to which these texts had been altered for American audiences, distribution practices within the fan community were aimed at gaining access to the original versions of the programs (Cubisson 2005: 48).

Ultimately, anime fandom in Western countries consolidated itself with the advent of a second generation of adult-oriented productions. The increasing sophistication of the storylines and the ever more crucial impact of cultural references on the viewer’s appreciation of the plot enhanced the fans’ awareness of their own needs as a small but steadily growing audience. The fans’ wish to enjoy the essence of anime was therefore articulated in terms of their right to experience the cultural ‘otherness’ underlying anime films, a development which some specialists have described as a form of resistance to Western popular culture (Newitz 1994). Against this backdrop of increasing engagement on the part of anime communities, their strategy shifted away from the circulation of original versions to the production of fan-friendly translated copies enabling their access to and immersion in the unique imagery and connotational value of the genre-specific cultural references.

Anime viewers outside Japan constitute a geographically dispersed and linguistically diverse audience. Even in the USA – the single biggest market of anime outside Japan – it is unlikely that commercial releases of translated anime films or alternative fan-oriented versions of major productions (which will have been previously translated for a mainstream audience) manage to meet the profitability threshold required by most distribution and/or licensing companies (Kayahara 2005). Consequently, when fan-friendly versions are licensed, they tend to be packaged as professionally subtitled DVD collections of episodes that have been previously broadcast in dubbed form. Whilst the
debate on the advantages of dubbing and subtitling among anime fans has been just as intense as in other filmic genres, the cost factor has effectively ended up imposing subtitling – a relatively ‘inexpensive’ modality of audiovisual transfer (Dries 1995; Luyken et al. 1991) – for the translation of non-mainstream translations of anime. In the remainder of this section, I propose to examine the implications of this de facto monopoly of subtitling for the fan’s enjoyment of translated anime, with particular emphasis on (i) the widely acknowledged limitations of subtitling when it comes to conveying the ‘alterity’ of the source culture to the target audiences; and (ii) the emergence of the ‘fansubbing’ phenomenon as a reaction to the former.

While it is difficult to pin down consistent patterns in professional translations of culture-specific material (Ramière 2006), an emergent body of literature within the field of audiovisual translation studies suggests that commercial subtitling practices foster cultural and linguistic standardization by ironing non-mainstream identities out of the translated narrative (Díaz Cintas 2005). Drawing on Venuti’s well-known ‘domestication/foreignization’ dichotomy, Ulrych (2000) argues that the medium-related constraints under which audiovisual translators operate lead “to the acculturisation or domestication of the source text in line with dominant conventions and expectancies prevailing in the TC [Target Culture] and, more often than not, to the translator’s effacement or invisibility” (2000: 130). Concomitantly, audiovisual translators become “subservient scribes” failing to take a proactive stance in the act of cross-cultural mediation. “In assuming and accepting such a position”, Ulrych contends, “translators endorse the positive and negative effects of both foreignising and domesticating processes and do nothing to improve standards in the film translation industry” (2000: 140). Contrary to what is normally assumed, domesticated translations do not result solely from the condensation and streamlining of the source text – and hence, the suppression and substitution of references to foreign source cultures – that subtitling requires (Fawcett 2003). In a recent study, Perego (2004) shows that subtitling culturally-loaded language may occasionally demand an explicitation of certain elements that are present in the source text. Perego’s analysis reveals that, despite the effects of spatio-temporal restrictions on subtitled discourse, expansion is sometimes the only feasible strategy to mediate successfully between non-converging world-views that a particular film has brought into contact. However, Perego herself is quick to express her preference for a domesticating strategy, i.e. an “unobtrusive manipulation and use of target culture frames … to orient viewers and provide them with an effective cognitive framework that enables them to interpret new realities consciously, and process them quickly and easily despite their foreignness” (2004: 161). Regardless of the translation strategies and techniques deployed at each particular juncture, professional subtitlers appear to be trapped by subtitling standards attuned to the interests of commercial products (see section 3.3 below). The upshot of this situation is that professional subtitlers have little room for manoeuvre when dealing with the subtleties of social, ideological or cultural diversity – even more so when there is at least one non-Western culture involved.

Since professionally subtitled anime was first released for the home video market, fan communities objected to the use of mainstream subtitling conventions in the translation of these Japanese genres. In their opinion, commercial
subtitling neglects cultural references and dilutes the idiosyncrasy of Japanese animation (Carroll 2005). Together with the restricted availability of translated anime, the failure of mainstream subtitling practices to deal successfully with the “moments of resistance for translation” (Ramière 2006) which arise in anime films have led to the emergence of a new and influential mode of linguistic, cultural and semiotic mediation known as fansubbing. According to Wikipedia, a fansub “is a copy of a foreign movie or television [commonly anime] show which has been subtitled by fans in their native language … [and] shared amongst other fans” with a view to

make minor films (that go unnoticed by the major distribution companies) more widely available to non-Japanese speakers; to have minor films noticed, and hopefully redistributed, by the major companies; and to make available a subtitled version where only a dubbed version exists (Kayahara 2005).

Fansubbing networks represent a qualitative step forward in the consolidation of anime fandom outside Japan. Whereas the early fan communities in the 1970s took on the duty of distributing original films to express their objections to anime localisation policies at the time (and, by extension, of alerting the industry to the existence of alternative anime audiences), fansubbing groups emerged in the mid-1990s with the explicit remit of producing and releasing their own amateur translations of anime films. In pursuing this agenda, fansubbers intervene in the traditional dynamics of the audiovisual industry by acting as self-appointed translation commissioners. Moreover, being fan themselves, their linguistic and cultural mediating task is informed by their familiarity with the needs and preferences of their target audience (Díaz Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez 2006). As we will see in section 3.2 below, the conflation of these two factors has granted fansubbers an unlimited degree of latitude. The development “by instinct” (Nornes 1999: 32) of their own subtitling standards and practices is widely regarded as subversive of consolidated practices in mainstream subtitling.

3. The Fansubbing Process and its Scholarly Repercussions

Although fan-subtitled copies of anime were already available in VHS and commercial laserdisc formats (Cubbison 2005: 48) back in the 1980s, the expansion of fansubbing networks has gone hand in hand with the increasingly widespread availability of information and communication technologies. In fulfilling their self-appointed role as guardians of the essence of anime, fansubs have “turned into a mass social phenomenon on Internet, as proved by the vast virtual community surrounding them such as websites, chat rooms, and forums” (Díaz-Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez 2006). According to recent figures, popular fansubs are typically downloaded by more than 200,000 fans worldwide, with a substantial percentage of such downloads taking place literally within the next few hours after the fansubbed programme becomes available (Henry 2006). But contrary to what may be inferred from the points made above, the Internet is not only a vehicle for the dissemination of amateur-subtitled anime. More importantly, it provides fan communities with the tools and avenues for the appropriation and manipulation of the films or programmes in question. As Cubbison aptly notes, “fans engage with the texts of anime through their interest in particular movies and series, [but] in identifying themselves as anime fans
they connect to the work as it appears in its tangible mediated format” (2005: 45; my italics). In other words, the Web is not just a rich source of anime programmes or texts for anime fans. It is also a technological environment that determines which texts are selected for translation and shapes the subtitling process itself – both in terms of workflow organization and selection of linguistic and cultural mediation strategies. The upshot is that fansubbed anime texts, as packaged and made available for consumption via the Internet (online works), differ from the TV-broadcast versions of those same texts (conventional works).

This section explores the status of fansubs as idiosyncratic translated works based on anime texts. To this end, I will begin by outlining the process of production of fansubs, thus accounting for the appropriation, manipulation and dissemination stages involved in fansubbing anime. Secondly, I will focus on the actual subtitling standards deployed in the translation stage of the fansubbing process. This section ends with a brief survey of the reception that fansubbing has been given by scholars from film and translation studies.

3.1. An overview of the fansubbing process

Although fansubbing is a new phenomenon that has so far attracted little scholarly attention, there are already a number of published accounts of the way the fansubbing process is typically organized (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006; Infusion Fansubbing Newbie Guide). The overview provided below – informed mainly by Henry (2006) and Live-EviL⁹ – aims to cover the main steps that tend to recur in the fansubbing process across individual fansubbing group protocols.

The first stage in the fansubbing process is the acquisition of ‘raw’ (original or unsubtitled) audio and video captures of the episode or series that a fansub network intends to subtitle. The most common course of action to acquire raw is ‘ripping’ (copying) the audio and/or video data from the original source, typically an original DVD previously released in Japan. Although “DVD-rips are used whenever possible as they offer the best image and audio quality” (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006), the most common way to secure raw anime is via television broadcasts. Up-to-date raws can be easily obtained through peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing interfaces. Raw anime often becomes available on P2P sites within 3-4 hours of airing on Japanese television networks. Most fansubbing groups have members who work in the capacity of ‘raw hunters’ or ‘providers’; they browse through the files available online until they find a reliable ‘Trip’. Within P2P environments, “Trip IDs [are used] to verify the identity of a person sharing a file. A Trip is a sort of encrypted key that identifies a person is who they say they are”¹⁰. The use of Trips enables the user to make an informed choice about whether or not to download a file from that person, based on previous sharing experience or on information from other users: a reliable trip would be one that consistently provides high quality captures. This stage of the process is completed when the raw hunter sends the video and audio files to the fansubbing group’s FTP (File Transfer Protocol) server computer, commonly known as the ‘dump’.

The raw anime is then passed onto the translator, thus initiating the second stage of the fansubbing process. The translator watches the footage a number of times using a video player until a script – in the form of a plain text file with
translated text, indications of character turns, off-screen sources of spoken texts and, in some cases, roughly estimated time codes – is put together. Given the amateur status of fansubbers, translators working for fansubbing groups are seldom formally trained as such:

When transferring from Japanese into English most translators are not English native speakers … This is a factor with a crucial impact on the quality of the final translation. Knowledge of the Japanese language is generally not required in the case of translating into other languages because translators usually work from the fansubs translations that have been distributed in English (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006).

Although the difficulty of each programme depends to some extent on the genre at issue – with ‘school anime’ being regarded as easier to translate than its ‘science fiction’ or ‘samurai anime’ counterparts (Henry 2006) – a high proficiency in Japanese is required to appreciate the wide range of cultural references that find their way into the plot as well as the dramatic significance of linguistic (e.g. dialect- or register-based) variation.

During the third stage of the process, it is the job of the timer to enhance the script by synchronising the translated dialogue with the audio file. The main tool used in this part of the process is Sub Station Alpha (SSA), a freeware program which has the capability to open plain text scripts alongside an audio file and to assign in- and out-times to lines of dialogue using a mono wave stream. As Dries (1995: 36) points out, “good timing of subtitles is essential for their quality. Subtitles need to be coherent with the words that are spoken during the time of the display, if not, viewers may have difficulty identifying the speaker and the sense of the story”. Timing an average anime episode may take between 2 and 3 hours, although really experienced fansubbers may work much faster (Henry 2006).

Once the script has been finalised and the timing re-checked, it is passed on to the typesetter. In this fourth stage of the fansubbing process, the typesetter is mainly concerned with finding the most appropriate fonts and colours for different types of screen text and signage, including dialogue, thoughts, background noises and captions, as well as opening and end credits. As opposed to standard practices in mainstream interlingual subtitling (which do not allow for unusual choices in the fonts and colours of subtitles), fansubbing typesetters seek to produce episodes that are ‘sympathetic’ to the general style and colour of the show by matching the fonts and colours of the original material wherever possible (Henry 2006). This is particularly so in those parts where text in both languages may have to be displayed at the same time, e.g. opening or closing credits. SSA and additional software applications such as TextSub are used to render the subtitles on the video, so that the typesetter can repeatedly check their appearance and display on the screen.

The editor’s main role in the fansubbing process is one of overall quality assurance. Specifically, the editor is expected to (i) ensure that the subtitles read natural and idiomatic; (ii) check for errors in grammar, punctuation and timing; and (iii) conduct any additional research required to confirm that the interpretation and manipulation of cultural references on the part of the translator is adequate. It is obviously useful if the editor has some knowledge of
the source language in question, should there be any ambiguity stemming from the translation of the dialogue. At this stage of the fansubbing process, the raw anime and the subtitles are still separate texts awaiting their final conflation. Therefore, the editor usually watches the raw anime using programs such as Direct VobSub, which links up to SSA and shows the subtitles on screen over the raw without the video file having to be encoded yet. If editors detect any errors, they will go back into SSA to revise the script and carry out the amendments required.

Encoding is the next stage in the fansubbing process and consists in using the finalised edited script to make a video file with the subtitles encoded onto it. Encoding typically involves the compression of the raw anime file, so that it takes less time to aggregate the subtitles onto it and the resulting file is, ultimately, easier to distribute due to its smaller size. Codecs (compressing devices) such as XviD and DivX rank high among the most popular tools used for the purposes of video compression. Once the latter has taken place, the audio file must be added along with the subtitles using Virtual Dub (a video capture/processing utility designed for Windows platforms). At the end of the encoding stage, the fansubs in the target language appear superimposed on the original programme and are ready for distribution.

There are two main channels of distribution currently in use, XDCC (Xabi Direct Client-to-Client) and BitTorrent, a P2P tool that distributes over the Internet fragmented torrent files which will be reassembled once downloaded. According to Henry (2006), most of the downloading activity occurs within the first 72 hours of release of the subtitled product by the fansub group. Screen capture 1 shows the interface of BitTorrent available at Animesuki11, an index of links to other fansubbing-related websites. The screen capture provides complete and convenient overview of links to all unlicensed English anime fansubs available through this P2P application, with the most recent additions listed at the top. Venus Versus Virus 1, for instance, was released by ‘Gnu-Fansubs’ on 15 January 2007 at 01:01 hours. The figure listed for this anime under the ‘ul’ column (245) quantifies the number of fans who had a complete downloaded file (‘seeders’) at the time of printing this screenshot. The ‘dl’ column refers to the amount of people connected who were still trying to download the file but did not have a complete file yet (‘leechers’).

Contrary to the norm in the mainstream film and television industries, anime fans interact within their Internet-based networks in their uniquely multifarious capacity as patrons, producers, distributors and viewers of the subtitled product. Albeit at a very small scale, the overview of the fansubbing group dynamics presented in this subsection fittingly illustrates a number of what Gambier (2005) regards as emerging trends within the changing audiovisual landscape. Firstly, there is the “vertical concentration between production, distribution and programming” (2005: 8). Fansubbers bring new products—understood as releases of previously existing films or shows in a new language—into existence, make them available via fan-dedicated channels and turn them into the staple diet of a growing number of entertainment consumers. The second trend pertains to the increasingly complex relation between copyright holders and distributors resulting from the ever pervasive digitisation of the audiovisual industry commodities. In this respect, Gambier anticipates that “[t]hose who actually
control circulation of AV [Audiovisual] products will have greater power than the producers [in the future], since no one will want to invest in a project for which there is no guarantee of satisfactory distribution” (2005: 10). Regardless of the accuracy of these forecasts with regard to the audiovisual industry as a whole, this second trend is already noticeable in that segment of the market that fansubs represent. Indeed, fansubbed products have always been a technically illegal activity on which copyright holders have consistently cast a blind eye.12

But despite fansubbers not holding the copyright to the products they choose to translate, the volume of anime released by fansubbing groups and the number of viewers continue to rise steadily in synch with the increasingly easier and affordable access to technology that characterises the new audiovisual scene.

3.2. An overview of the standards and conventions used in amateur subtitling
In her study on anime fandom, Cubisson (2005) alerts us to the heterogeneity of this market niche, which ranges from casual viewers to extremely committed fans or otaku. Despite its pejorative connotations in Japanese, a growing number of fans have “adopted the term to identify themselves proudly as obsessive fans of anime” displaying qualities such as “obsessive expertise and hoarding” in their search for a true anime experience (2005: 45). Otaku, contends Cubisson,
“have learnt to articulate for themselves and for anime distributors their product specifications [or subtitling preferences]”, hoping that the latter will eventually become standard practices in commercially released anime. In this subsection I will focus on the fansubbers’ own stance within these market dynamics. Anime fans integrated in the fansubbing movement represent an extreme faction within the otaku audience segment. Instead of negotiating with or attempting to persuade anime producers, distributors and retailers to take their preferences on board when packaging anime for DVD release, fansubbers impose their own linguistic and cultural mediation strategies. Going back to the text/word dichotomy presented in the introductory paragraphs of section 3, it can be safely contended that otaku and fansubbers share an interest in the same texts, but work towards the production of their preferred works in different ways. While otaku aim for the acceptance of their agenda in mainstream circuits, fansubbers have developed their own appropriation, manipulation (including translation) and distribution mechanisms that allow for a unique form of comprehensive intervention directed at a smaller target audience. As far as the translation stage is concerned, fansubbers have developed the means to avoid domesticating practices in the mainstream audiovisual industry, where translators often receive

either suggestions or outright orders from “above” (distributor, dubbing studio, and the censorship agencies…) to alter “foreign” elements and culturally unfamiliar items to make them more palatable and attractive (that is marketable) to their target language audience (Whitman-Linsen 1992: 125).

Despite earlier references to fansubber’s specific practices in the context of broader descriptions (e.g. Díaz Cintas 2005), the most complete account of fansubbing conventions available so far in the literature is, to the best of my knowledge, the one provided by Ferrer-Simó (2005). Below, I elaborate on a selection of Ferrer-Simó’s observations under an alternative set of headings:

a) **Use of fonts.** Mainstream subtitling often use typefaces with no serifs, “since the visual complexity added to the latter results in a decrease in the legibility of the subtitled text” (Karamitrouglou 1998). In fansubs, different fonts, sizes and faces coexist within the same film. Ensuring that the visual styling of subtitles is compatible with the aesthetics of the programme represents a priority for the typesetter. The wide range of fonts and other graphic resources that new technologies make available allow even for the composition of mimetic subtitles when this is most needed (e.g. in the subtitling of credits and other karaoke-like titling elements). Subtitles blending into the overall visual composition of the frame constitute a strong statement on the fansubbers’ part. The manifestations of their mediation are presented in a camouflaged manner, thus seeking to maximise the viewer’s enjoyment of the original semiotic resources while minimising the mediator’s intrusion.

b) **Colour of titling elements.** Professional subtitlers are advised to stick to “coloured pale white (not “snow-bright” white)” on the grounds that “a too flashy pigment would render them tiring to the viewers’ eye” (Karamitrouglou 1998). In fansubbed productions, different colours are typically used to denote each of the characters taking part in the interaction by way of a character/text
association mechanism (a feature that fansubbing shares with subtitling for the hard-of-hearing) or to identify other changes in the use of language, such as dialect shifts (Carroll 2005). Working as they are for a committed audience, fansubbers often subordinate optimum visibility to aesthetics.

c) Use of translators’ notes and glosses, which help fansubbers to deal with ‘untranslatable’ cultural references or otherwise culturally specific elements (Nornes 1999: 32). Notes and glosses – normally displayed at the top of the screen using text in a different colour or font – are often worded as a definition or explanation of variable length. The two most distinctive features of such notes and glosses from the point of view of audiovisual translation scholars interested in emerging subtitling practices are illustrated by Screen captures 2 and 3 below. Screen capture 2, consisting of a sequence of two successive frames, demonstrates that funsubbers’ notes and glosses need not be synchronised with the subtitle they seek to clarify or elaborate on. In this example, the subtitler’s note (“Kujaku Myouhou: Mysterious Peacock Method”) remains on display across shifts in visual perspective, thus transgressing the widely accepted mainstream convention not to override visual syntax cuts and transitions (Karamitrouglou 1998). For its part, Screen capture 3 exemplifies the fansubbers’ determination to enhance their own visibility as translators. Admittedly, the very use of translators’ notes is clearly indicative of this resolve. In this example, we come across an overt attempt on the part of the fansubbers to frame the viewer’s interpretation and even impose their assessment of the comicity arising from the narrated action (“In an unprecedented episode of bad hearing and even worse jokes, Naruto has misheard ... God help us”). The fansubbers’ assumption of this interventionist role represents thus the ultimate statement against the effacement of the translator prevailing in commercial subtitling.

d) Lay-out, positioning and delivery of subtitles. Contrary to standard commercial subtitling conventions on these aspects (Karamitrouglou 1998), amateur subtitles tend to be inconsistent in terms of length, number of constitutive characters or lines and screen-positioning. Whereas some fansubbing groups overly favour long one-line subtitles delivered at a fast pace, others prefer displaying more text (often segmented in more than two lines) during longer periods. As far as positioning is concerned, most groups opt not to restrict themselves to the bottom of the screen as the default subtitle-displaying area – thus contributing to the consolidation of a technique known as ‘scenetiming’. Titling elements used for scenetiming purposes may convey diegetic content or translations of other written elements that are visually present in the original footage. Screen capture 4 below shows how the same frame – and hence the textual elements that it sustains – has been dealt with in two different subtitled versions of the same anime film. While the commercial version (Frame 4a) sticks to the original arrangement of linguistic and visual semiotic resources, its fansubbed counterpart (Frame 4b) transcribes the kanji (Japanese characters taken from the Chinese writing system) to the right of “NEW” into an alphabetical system that is recognizable to English-speaking viewers (“Kabuki-cho). True to their penchant for visually harmonious intervention, the new subtitle has been positioned in such a way that it seems to belong to the original film, due to the font style and colour used.
Screen capture 2:
Temporal asynchrony between conventional subtitles and fansubbers’ top-of-screen notes (Naruto, episode 178).

Screen capture 3:
Fansubbers’s intervention on film reception through top-of-screen notes (Naruto, episode 178).

Frame 4a:
Commercial version (FUNimation)

Frame 4b:
Fansubbed version (Lunar)

Screen capture 4:
Visually integrated ‘scenetiming’: Differences between commercial and fansubbed anime (Burst Angel, episode 1).
3.2. Scholarly reception of the fansubbing phenomenon

Nornes (1999) is, to the best of my knowledge, the first scholar to have acknowledged the emergence of fansubbing practices in the film studies literature. In his opinion, the Americanising localisation of early anime for young audiences represents a corrupt “mode of translation”, insofar as it “conforms the foreign to the framework of the target language and its cultural codes. All that cannot be explained within the severe limits of the regulation subtitle [or dub] gets excised or reduced to domestic meanings which are often irrelevant or inappropriate” (1999: 29).

The severe limits Nornes refers to derive from the subtitlers’ uncritical adherence to mainstream subtitling conventions and their search for maximum synchronisation between the so-called “speech delivery” and “subtitle presentation” rates (de Linde & Kay 1999: 45-51). In commercial subtitles, any stretch of speech delivered during a given period of time contains, on average, 40% more text than the subtitles used to translate the former into the target language (op. cit.: 55). Poststructuralist critics such as Minh-ha (1992) contend that this subtitling strategy is bound to result in translation loss, although it has continued to prevail and consolidate itself over time as a reflection of Hollywood’s film editing and montage conventions. In other words, the narrative style that prevails in mainstream cinema explains Hollywood’s penchant for the synchronization between sound and image and its implications for subtitling. Contrary to what has been commonly argued, commercial subtitling conventions are not shaped by the viewers’ needs but by the American industry’s attempt to impose its own narrative and presentational style on the markets worldwide:

The duration of the subtitles, for example, is very ideological. I think that if, in most translated films, the subtitles usually stay on as long as they technically can – often much longer than the time needed even for a slow reader – it’s because translation is conceived here as part of the operation of suture that defines the classical cinematic apparatus and the technological effort it deploys to naturalize a dominant, hierarchically unified worldview. The success of the mainstream film relies precisely on how well it can hide [its articulated artifices] in what it wishes to show. Therefore, the attempt is always to protect the unity of the subject; here to collapse, in subtitling, the activities of reading, hearing, and seeing into one single activity, as if they were all the same. What you read is what you hear, and what you hear is more often than not, what you see” (Minh-ha 1992: 102; quoted in Nornes 1999: 18; my italics).

Ideological considerations aside, Minh-ha’s stance implies that the film establishment continues to underestimate the average viewer’s reading speed, thus perpetuating an unnecessarily low subtitle presentation rate. In doing so, translation commissioners would seem to have overlooked the impact that the pervasive presence of screen-based technologies in our everyday life has had on our capacity to process information delivered simultaneously through different channels. Against this background of mainstream stagnation, fansubbing postulates itself as the key to a more demanding (and yet, also more rewarding) experience of anime on the part of the non-Japanese viewer. In one respect, fansubbing resorts to semiotic meaning-making resources which are typically under-exploited in commercial subtitling – such as the choice of colours and fonts or the more intrusive insertion of interpretation-framing notes on the
part of the fansubber. Insofar as these resources are deployed concurrently, fansubbed films constitute complex gestalts of stimuli aiming to transmit more information through more sensory dimensions of the acoustic and visual channels. In another respect, fansubbers exploit the increasing sophistication of their viewers’ spectatorial experience, often appropriating well-established conventions from cognate entertainment forms. This selective appropriation is the basis for recent characterisations of fansubs as a “hybrid” form of audiovisual transfer embracing practices which had so far been primarily associated with subtitling for the deaf and hard-of-hearing and videogames (Díaz-Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006).


In previous sections I have examined the origins of fansubbing networks and offered an overview of the differences between their subtitling practices and those that still prevail in the mainstream film industry. Furthermore, my survey of fansubbing scholarship in the fields of film and translation studies has revealed the limited impact that this phenomenon has had so far among academics. In this section, I intend to explore whether fansubbing practices stand any chance of being imported into professional subtitling in a more or less distant future. In order to answer this question, I propose to (i) problematise the singularity of anime fandom; and (ii) discuss whether the status that fandom currently enjoys within mainstream culture is likely to change within the increasingly globalised and technologically mediated cultural marketplace.

The very few speculations on the future of fansubbing available in the literature are somewhat conflicting. Kayahara (2005), for instance, predicts that “other genres will pick up on fansubbing, thus providing a more diverse field of source material for audiovisual translation theorists to work with, and raising the visibility of subtitling as a practice”. By contrast, Ferrer Simó (2005) regards fansubbing as a risk for professional translators. In her view, amateur subtitlers (who are often the first to subtitle an anime product) tend to put into circulation inadequate subtitling strategies and practices which the distributor will later impose on the professional translator when commissioning a new subtitled version for commercial release. Unsurprisingly, given her appraisal of the fansubbing phenomenon, Ferrer Simó expresses her wish to see fansubbing gradually absorbed by DVD-based subtitling. In her own words, “perhaps in a not very distant feature, it will be feasible to enrich DVD editions with ‘extras’ catering for the needs of that small segment of the audience which currently relies on fansubs and may end up putting the [professional] translator’s work in serious jeopardy” (2005: 43; my translation)13. Regardless of the \textit{prima facie} discrepancies between the views that I have just outlined, Kayahara and Ferrer Simó’s opinions share a common denominator. Their contradictory appraisals of the potential for propagation of fansubbing practices are informed exclusively by recent developments in the audiovisual translation industry, rather than the media industry as a whole. This is particularly evident in the portrayal of fansubbers and their audience as some sort of unique anomaly whose disappearance is to be welcomed for a number of reasons. On the one hand, the capacity of amateur subtitlers to intervene so effectively in the traditional dynamics of the audiovisual market has economic implications for distribution
and/or licensing companies. On the other hand, the fansubbers’ ground-breaking innovations undermine the case for the alleged inevitability of domestication and condensation as consequences of mainstream subtitling practices.

Overall, critical appraisals of fansubbing lend credence to the belief that there are currently no other forms of intervention in place within the audiovisual landscape that resemble the former. Given their alleged isolation and idiosyncrasy, the fansubbing movement is ultimately expected to fade away. It is precisely this assumption that I intend to scrutinise in the remainder of this section. In this attempt, I propose to widen the range of factors which have been previously taken into account when assessing the capacity of fansubs to leak out of the boundaries of anime into other genres. In doing so, I hope to tease out the connections that exist between fansubbing and other fandom-led intervention phenomena that seem to be emerging in the audiovisual landscape.

To begin with, I would like to revisit the argument that the expansion of the fansubbing phenomenon has been greatly facilitated by the availability and affordability of digital technologies. Developments in the cultural marketplace over the last five years suggest that the marriage between fandom and technology has started to shape the creation and distribution of audiovisual products in general, not just their translation. On the creative front, Hollywood directors are already resorting to blogs in order to interact with their future viewers, elicit their feedback on the script or release trailers and photographs. David Ellis, director of the feature film *Snakes on a Plane* (2006) admits to have changed his original shooting plans, adding more blood, sex and violence in order to take on board suggestions from bloggers (Ayuso 2006). Similarly, the increasingly popular ‘broadcast yourself’ sites – such as YouTube.com or MySpace.com, which negotiate thousands of video uploads and viewings of millions of videos every day – have helped certain amateur directors with millions of fans ‘hooked on their feeds’ to be signed by important studios. On the production side, this shift of viewers’ attention from commercially packaged products to clips shot by fellow amateurs with their camcorders has led media executives to predict a rise in the number of low-budget films oriented towards minority audiences (Ayuso 2006).

In the light of the above, the power of media consumers is set to grow further in the future. In a recent and widely covered address to media barons in the UK, media tycoon Rupert Murdoch has acknowledged that “[p]ower is moving away from the old elite in [the media] industry – the editors, the chief executives and, let’s face it, the proprietors. A new generation of media consumers has risen demanding content delivered when they want it, how they want it, and very much as they want it” (Gibson 2006). Murdoch’s argument has been echoed by media sociologist McNair (2006), who contends that the age of ‘linear models of communication’ – in the form of top-down, elite-controlled media – is passing and being replaced by a decentralised global ‘infosphere’ of unprecedented accessibility and diversity. In the new age, argues McNair, the interconnectedness between the emerging non-linear communication networks is shaped by ‘cultural chaos’ and its best-known manifestation, i.e. the butterfly effect:

> Phenomena arising from the workings of non-linear systems ... display what chaos scientists call sensitive dependence on the initial conditions of the system.
Small variations in those initial conditions, such as the proverbial butterfly flapping its wings in a tropical rain forest, will be expressed through huge differences in outcome further down the line ... Chaos theory tells you that the slightest uncertainty in your knowledge of the initial conditions will often grow inexorably. After a while, your predictions are nonsense (op. cit: 19).

It can hardly be denied that McNair’s notion of infosphere helps to account for the origin and dynamics of the fansubbing process (chaos culture) against the background of the media industry (control culture). In a globally connected information environment, fans (agents of chaos) have brought about new subtitling practices (small variations in the initial conditions of the system) whose future impact on mainstream subtitling conventions should not be minimised. Although length restrictions preclude discussing this issue in more detail here, I wish to contend that the interventionist agenda of anime fandom is only the tip of the iceberg which subsumes all current and future initiatives taken by the viewers to assume more power following the decentralisation of the media establishment. The impact of the fansubbing movement on the way other viewer-centred phenomena may develop in the future is bound to receive more scholarly attention both from audiovisual translation and media studies scholars in years to come.

5. Conclusion
The fansubbing phenomenon remains under-represented in audiovisual translation scholarship. The technically ‘illegal’ nature of this activity and the formally radical conventions that fans often deploy have somewhat contributed to stigmatise fansubbing within the overall domain of audiovisual translation research. In this paper, I have argued that scholarly interest in fansubbing is likely to grow in the near future. Indeed, the interventionist agenda of fansubbers is representative of the goals of other emerging movements in the media marketplace, whereby viewers seek to shape the dynamics of the audiovisual media industries. This being so, gaining insight into the consolidation of the fansubbing phenomenon can only be productive for researchers working on the interface between the media and the language industries and beyond. Most crucially, fansubbing may become just the facet of translation activity to attract the attention of new generations of translation scholars. This is, at least, what can be inferred from Maria Tymoczko’s (2005) overview of the six areas of research that will be central to translation studies as a discipline in the next decades. Fansubbing falls neatly within the remit of two of the areas identified by Tymoczko: “the internationalization of translation, which challenges basic Western assumptions about the nature of translation … [and the] changes in translation theory and practice associated with emerging technologies and globalization”, including the notion of collective authorship (2005: 1083). While we wait to see whether the currently marginalised conventions used by fansubbers make it into the mainstream circuits, their activities will undoubtedly take us a long way towards the development of a new and hopefully more effective framework for the understanding of multimodal translation. Watch out for butterflies flapping their wings.
Notes
1. I would like to thank Jonathan Bunt (Japan Centre, The University of Manchester) for his assistance in accessing the data used in this study and Craig Henry (fansubber) for providing me with facts and figures on the fansubbing process.
2. Given the role that the Internet has played in the development of fansubbing and the fact that the latter is ultimately a collective undertaking on the part of fan groups, my reliance on Wikipedia for the characterisation of anime is deliberate. Traditional scholarly sources are, however, resorted to later in the paper when analysing the significance of fansubbing within audiovisual translation studies.
5. The first anime programmes broadcast on American TV networks were “amalgamations of unrelated anime series cobbled together into a single story” (Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anime#Early_anime_in_the_United_States). Last accessed on 5 January 2007.
6. Despite not being an audiovisual translation scholar herself, Cubisson (2005: 49) explores in some detail the consequences that the ‘self-empowerment’ of fans had for the linguistic transfer of anime films outside Japan, paying particular attention to the dubbing-versus-subtitling debate.
7. The fans’ ubiquitous concern over the translation of cultural references in anime is perhaps most evident in online forum threads. In a RIUVI (Research Institute for Unicultural Visual Arts) post, a fan complains that “[w]ith the large amount of anime in history and the present, it’s pretty much impossible to know most of them so I don’t get all the references in anime. Some references used in the right places are funny. I feel the [creating] staff get a bigger kick out of references than viewers really … The biggest problem with references is that it slows down subbing and a lot of the jokes are lost if improperly subbed … But doing research takes a lot of time and effort and many a subber have given up on this unrewarding task” (RIUVI 2006). The difficulties that some fans experience in interpreting these references explain the success of ‘anime companions’ (such as Poitras 1999 and 2005).
9. Live-eviL (www.live-evil.org) is a fansubbing group that has been established for 5 years and whose primary goal is the subtitling of classic unlicensed anime. According to Henry (2006), Live-eviL released 120 fansubbed animes during 2006, which amounts to over 2,800 minutes of subtitled footage.
13. In expressing this opinion, Ferrer Simó seems to overlook the fact that current DVD editions of certain anime programmes already incorporate such extras. “Fortunately for American viewers”, discs already come “with optional pop-up video notes which explain the many Japanese-language puns and cultural references” (Robinson 2003). However, although DVDs incorporating such notes or ‘capsules’ (Cubbison 2005: 51) support “the textual experience desired by many fans” (ibid.), the fansubbing phenomenon has not ceased to grow.