

Patricia de Figueirédo
(trans. Mark Harris)

The Script... and the Original Version

Editors' Foreword

"You have the option to hand in your final paper in any of the following languages: English, French, Italian, or Spanish... Or, for that matter, any language that your T.A.s can understand!"

Each semester, without fail, Dr. Mark Harris would close his first lecture with such a statement that not only intimidated his students, but evoked his own passion for alternate modes of communication.

Mark was a true cinephile, interested in international cinemas and the cultural contexts in which they are created and perceived, so much that when he showed a film in one of his classes, the foreword could easily transform into a separate lecture about the country's history, cultural background, and political situation.

In a sense, he was a cultural civil engineer, always designing and building *bridges* between different cinematic cultures. So, it is not surprising that as one of his many academic interests, he was intrigued by the process of film translation (subtitles and/or dubbing).

In fact, Mark considered subtitling as its own art form and, during lectures, jokingly moaned the times that English subtitles of Chinese films actually made sense, as he believed that grammatical inaccuracies could be viewed as poetry—Mark frequently compared them to the Japanese Haiku.

Mark never hesitated to share his time, energy, and wisdom with his students and colleagues. For example, in response to the request of one of *Cinephile's* former editors-in-chief, when searching for academic materials on the topic of subtitles and voice-over, Mark provided a handful of his own unpublished articles and translations. "The Script... and the Original Version" is one of those pieces. We are

grateful to both Mark for this posthumous contribution and Patricia de Figueirédo for her enthusiastic approval of its publication (originally published in the French journal *Synopsis*).

Mark was a brilliant, chaotic, humble, encyclopedic, uncensored, non-conformist, mad professor who will be remembered for his love of cinema and its role as a cultural mediator.

Mark Harris
(1951-2013)

—Andrea Brooks, Oliver Kroener, and Babak Tabarraee

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Unlike literary translations, where the translator is not limited by space, the film adaptor is faced with strong technical constraints, regardless of whether they relate to the movement of the mouth during dubbing or the restricted space reserved for subtitles.

Under such circumstances, is it always possible to respect the integrity and originality of the original dialogue, and what sort of concessions need to be made?

Line writers—which is to say, adaptors of French language versions [of foreign language films]—and translators of subtitles deal with one essential aspect of the script: the dialogue. They are considered authors because they receive, over and above their remuneration, authors' rights in regard to movie entries and television broadcasts and work in collaboration with the writers of the film. "I've never been consulted and I don't know what has become of the foreign

version of my films,” confides the scriptwriter Colo Taverrier O’Hagan. Amanda Paquier, who has adapted numerous TV movies and television series, including *Atomic Train* (1999), *Joan of Arc* (1999) which was recently broadcast on TF1, or *The Practice* (1997), the series on M6, emphasizes that: “With different line writers, you wind up with different films.”

On the technical level, dialogue writers are, above all, held hostage to the movement of the actors’ mouths and to the length, to the rhythm, of the sentence. “The labials—the ms, bs, ps—are visible when the mouth closes, so one must try to make the French labials match the American, and needless to say to respect the beginnings and endings of sentences,” Paquier explains.

For Lori Rault, the technical director at Warner Brothers’ who supervises the two versions of each film, including the recent *Space Cowboys* (2000) and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000): “One must adapt while remaining faithful to the original, without going as far as in a literary translation. As a text, I can tell you if it’s a good translation, but after that we’ll have to see it played before we know if it flies.” In practice, the dubbing actor must appropriate the text and not infrequently changes things. If, for example, the screen actor is very calm, and if one hears 15 syllables for seven or eight in the original, that changes the performance completely.

Certain languages translate better than others. Despite appearances to the contrary, French and Mandarin go well together, because with these two languages one does not articulate with the mouth as one does in German or American, for example. Of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Lori Rault states: “It’s magnificent; one could actually say that the actors were emoting in French.”

For subtitles, the maximum French norm allows for two lines with 40 spaces and characters each. But there again, the translators are subject to the rhythms of the sentence and the speed of elocution. Sometimes it is more difficult with certain languages. Catherine Cadou, the translator of numerous Japanese directors, including Akira Kurosawa and Takeshi Kitano, explains the peculiarities of the language: “The rhythm of the sentences is slower in Japanese, and the subject comes at the end, so one cannot follow French logic. For example, in a sentence, a Japanese would say: ‘The person who killed my husband is me;’ one needs to keep that translation in order to roll with the rhythm of the phrases and the performance of the actor, even though, in French, we would say: ‘I am the one who killed my husband.’ On other occasions, the character will talk in a staccato fashion, like a submachine gun, as in the film by Kitano, *The Summer of Kikujiro*. There is was necessary to cut the dialogue.”

It is essential that the spectator understand very quickly that he is not missing anything onscreen. “It is necessary to give the best possible idea of what is being said without using too many words, as well as words which condense things,” Catherine Cadou notes for both the French version and the subtitled original version, and not only for technical reasons. Vulgarities, notably, do not pass muster in France. “The Americans are spicy, but French distributors often ask us to sweeten things,” Amanda Paquier says emphatically. The same tune from Catherine Cadou, albeit for different reasons: “Certain things, too crude or too vulgar, don’t work very well when written down.”

As for the differences between a dubbed and subtitled version, sometimes they can be minimal. That was the case, for instance, with *Space Cowboys* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. “It will become more and more common, in the case of DVDs, to have a choice of two versions which rely on the same source,” predicts Claude Dupuis, of LVT Laboratories. “Some words sound better to the ear, while others appeal more to the eye,” explains Lori Rault. For example, in *Space Cowboys*, a young astronaut is compared to Don Quixote in the French version and to Tintin in the subtitled print.

But, at the same time, the differences can also be great. This is often the case with the rare French versions of Japanese films, which bear little similarity to the original version. “The line writers do not speak Japanese, and they translate from English subtitles which are often inaccurate,” Catherine Cadou laments. There’s no recognized course of study for translators and line writers, so the technique must be learned on the job. It is necessary to work quickly; translators have at the most two weeks to produce their copy, the line writers perhaps a little more. It is often necessary to research the period in which the film is set. For *Space Cowboys*, line writer Christian Dura and translators Bernard Eisenschitz and Robert Louit consulted two specialists with the European Space Agency.

It is also necessary to know how to adapt oneself to different film genres, even though [subtitlers] inevitably wind up with their own specialties. “I choose my translators and dialogue writers according to the style of the scenario; some are better at reproducing American humour, while others excel at children’s films,” Lori Rault explains. Still, regardless of whether they’re line writers, adaptors or translators, these shadowy men and women bring a personal touch, as well as their own imaginations, to bear in the service of the script.