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Accessible filmmaking: Joining the dots between audiovisual translation, accessibility and filmmaking

Pablo Romero-Fresco, University of Roehampton

ABSTRACT

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

The present article focuses on the notion of accessible filmmaking as a potential way to integrate AVT and accessibility during the filmmaking process through collaboration between filmmakers and translators. After a comparison between the historical background of videogame localisation and that of AVT and accessibility, the article focuses on three current examples of the implementation of accessible filmmaking: universal design applied to media accessibility, part-subtitling and creative subtitling. The article also presents the short documentary *Joining the Dots* (Romero-Fresco 2012) as a case of accessible filmmaking and discusses how this notion is being applied with regard to teaching, research and practice, as featured on the website www.accessiblefilmmaking.org.

KEYWORDS

Accessibility, accessible filmmaking, audiovisual translation, part-subtitling, creative subtitling, universal design.

1. Introduction

Audiovisual translation (AVT) services in general, and accessibility services in particular, are growing exponentially around the world. New legislation is leading to increasing amounts of subtitling for deaf and hard-of-hearing people (SDH) and audiodescription for blind and partially sighted people (AD), with countries such as the UK and France approaching 100% SDH coverage on national TV. Now that many of the quotas are being met, the focus seems to be shifting from quantity to quality. New accessibility guidelines have been issued in Spain (AENOR 2012) and France (MFP 2012) and academic research in AVT is increasingly focusing on experimental research and reception studies aiming at improving the quality of SDH, AD and the more 'traditional' interlingual subtitling and dubbing. In general, though, there is still one obstacle standing in the way of further growth and development in this area: although AVT and accessibility have achieved considerable visibility within Translation Studies and the translation industry, this is not the case within Film Studies or the filmmaking industry. Indeed, descriptions of subtitles as "an evil necessity, a product conceived as an after thought rather than a

natural component of the film” (Sinha 2004: 174) may well also be applied to SDH, AD and dubbing.

Paradoxically, even though these translation and accessibility services only account for 0.1%–1% of the budget of an average film production (Lambourne 2012), over half of the revenue of, for example, both top-grossing and award-winning Hollywood films comes from foreign territories¹:

Top-Grossing Films 2001-2011		
Film	Foreign Gross	Foreign Gross Dubbed/Subtitled
<i>Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone</i> (2001)	67.4%	83%
<i>Spider-Man</i> (2002)	50.9%	84%
<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King</i> (2003)	66.3%	79%
<i>Shrek 2</i> (2004)	52%	72%
<i>Stars Wars – Episode III</i> (2005)	55.2%	88%
<i>Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest</i> (2006)	60.3%	80%
<i>Spider-Man 3</i> (2007)	62.2%	84%
<i>The Dark Knight</i> (2008)	46.8%	72%
<i>Avatar</i> (2009)	72.7%	87%
<i>Toy Story 3</i> (2010)	61%	75%
<i>Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2</i> (2011)	71.3%	81%
Average	60.5%	80.4%

Table 1. Overseas revenue as percentage of total gross for top-grossing films (2001–2011); percentage of overseas revenue generated by dubbed or subtitled prints.

Best Picture Oscar Winners 2001-2011		
Film	Foreign Gross	Foreign Gross Dubbed/Subtitled
<i>A Beautiful Mind</i> (2001)	45.5%	83%
<i>Chicago</i> (2002)	44.4%	71%

<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King</i> (2003)	66.3%	79%
<i>Million Dollar Baby</i> (2004)	53.6%	86%
<i>Crash</i> (2005)	44.5%	71%
<i>The Departed</i> (2006)	54.3%	78%
<i>No Country for Old Men</i> (2007)	56.7%	80%
<i>Slumdog Millionaire</i> (2008)	62.6%	78%
<i>The Hurt Locker</i> (2009)	65.4%	78%
<i>The King's Speech</i> (2010)	66.5%	59%
<i>The Artist</i> (2011)	66.5%	76%
Average	57%	76.3%

Table 2. Overseas revenue as percentage of total gross for Best Picture Oscar winners (2000–2011), percentage of overseas revenue generated by dubbed or subtitled prints.

As shown in tables 1 and 2, well over half (60.5% and 57%, respectively) of the revenue obtained by the leading top-grossing and Best Picture Oscar-winning Hollywood films made between 2001 and 2011 came from foreign markets. Of this, more than three-quarters (80.4% and 76.3%, respectively) was from foreign countries where these films are subtitled or dubbed. The remaining revenue came from territories where the films are shown in English but where some viewers are likely to watch them with AD and especially SDH. If such a large proportion of the money earned by these films comes from their translated (subtitled/dubbed) or accessible (SDH, AD) versions, it is extraordinary that only 0.1%-1% of their budget is devoted to translation and accessibility. Can anything be done about this lack of attention to AVT and accessibility in the filmmaking industry?

The present article introduces the notion of accessible filmmaking,² the integration of AVT and accessibility as part of the filmmaking process, as a potential way to tackle this problem. Following an initial comparison between AVT and localisation, where some steps have already been taken in this direction, this article will concentrate on universal design, part-subtitling and creative subtitling as three examples of accessible filmmaking that are already being implemented and have received some scholarly attention. The next section will introduce *Joining the Dots* (2012), a short documentary on AD available [here](#) that will serve to illustrate how translation and accessibility may be taken into account at the (pre-)production and post-production stages of a film. Finally, the last section will outline how this notion of accessible filmmaking may be implemented from the point of view of teaching, research and practice, including some initiatives that are already underway.

2. Historical background: videogame localisation and AVT

2.1. Videogame localisation

Unlike AVT, the localisation of videogames has already made significant strides towards the integration of translation into the production process. However, this did not become common practice until the turn of the century. During the birth of the videogame industry in the 1970s and with a few exceptions such as *Pac-Man*, games were shipped in their original version, and no localisation or translation was involved (Bernal-Merino 2011). The 1980s saw the introduction of the “Box and Docs” approach, where game packaging and documentation, but not the game itself, was translated from English into German, French, Spanish, Italian and Dutch. The 1990s introduced “partial localisation” (Chandler 2005: 14), including translation for user interface and menus as well as subtitles for specific scenes, which rendered these games accessible to users with hearing loss. This was followed by “full localisation”, which involved the recording of voiceovers in blockbusters for each language version and positioned the game localisation industry “as a necessary partner of the game industry” (Bernal-Merino 2011: 15). The turn of the century has brought the “Sim Ship” model, with the simultaneous shipment of all language versions of some games and, most importantly, the implementation of localisation as the game is being developed (Christou *et al.* 2005). Both the design and some of the key parts of quiz games such as *Buzz* (Crosignani and Ravetto 2011) or role-playing games such as those made by BioWare (Christou *et al.* 2011) vary depending on what language they are going to be translated into. In some other cases, localisation is also taken into account in the pre-production stage, where localisation departments and their translation agencies receive some game files and metadata (pronunciation guides, glossaries, Q&A documents, etc.) to help them review and prepare their translation.

These examples, and the inclusion of a Localization Summit at the annual Game Developers Conference in San Francisco, illustrate how videogame localisation is ahead of AVT both in terms of visibility in its field and in terms of integration in the videogame (pre-)production process. This integration may be explained by several factors. Videogames are adapted for consumers because “customisation is part of the very nature of the technology that makes it possible, as well as part of the essence of entertainment software” (Bernal-Merino 2011: 15). Localisation is, needless to say, a key element in this customisation. Furthermore, videogames are created mainly as consumer products (instead of as works of art) and are therefore driven by sales and profits, which increase when foreign markets come into play. Since the introduction of localisation in the 1990s, revenues in the videogame industry have doubled (*ibid.*). A final factor may be the technology, which is much more centralised in the videogame industry than in the film industry, in the sense that all the

assets are created and organised by engineers in a computer programme, thus facilitating the collaboration between game developers and localisers.

2.2. AVT and accessibility

A thorough analysis of why AVT and accessibility have not managed to make the same progress as localisation is beyond the scope of this article. However, a quick look back at the introduction of language transfer in film may provide useful context.

Even before the introduction of sound in cinema, silent films required the translation of the intertitles used by the filmmakers to convey dialogue or narration: "In the era of intertitles, it was relatively easy to solve the translation problem. The original intertitles were removed, translated, drawn or printed on paper, filmed and inserted again in the film" (Ivarsson 1992: 15). This translation was often not outsourced, but rather done in the studios, as part of the post-production process of the film (Izard 2011: 190). However, translation in the silent era also involved other practices, including plot modifications at the pre-production stage and the use of alternate takes at the production stage to cater for foreign markets or to meet censorship requirements (Vasey 1997: 54–64). As summed up by Dwyer (2005: 302), "translation formed an integral part of the industry as a whole." The introduction of partial or full audible dialogue in films such as *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and *The Lights of New York* (1928) brought about a new scenario and the need for a different type of translation. Some of these films (known as *part-talkies* and *talkies*) used intertitles in the target language to translate the original audible dialogue, while others prompted the first (largely unsuccessful) attempts at dubbing and subtitling in French, German and Spanish (Izard 2001: 196–198). What these three translation modes had in common was that they were part of the post-production process of the films.

In view of negative audience reactions to these translations, the film industry opted for a different solution in the form of "multiple-language versions" (Vincendeau 1999), also known as "multilinguals" or "foreign language versions" (Đurovičová 1992). Films were made and remade in two or three languages by the same director and sometimes in up to fourteen languages with a different director for each language version. The cast could remain the same or change depending on the films and the number of versions to be produced (Vincendeau 1999: 208–209). The Joinville studio, founded by Paramount in Paris in 1930, made multiple versions in up to 12 languages, which usually accounted for 30% of a film's total budget. They even had a literary committee to supervise the quality of the translated versions (Izard 2001: 201–202). This may be regarded as an extreme form of accessible filmmaking, where the need to make films accessible to foreign audiences was not just an element of post-production, as was the case until then, but rather a structuring

principle of film production. Once dubbing and subtitling techniques improved, however, studios opted for these modes, which would reduce the cost of their translations to some 10% of the film budget. Increasingly outsourced and unsupervised by filmmakers, translations lost their status as part of the filmmaking process and became part of the distribution process, as is the case now.

The heterogeneous and fragmented nature of filmmaking (in terms of time, locations, processes and technology) is likely to have facilitated this shift. In fact, AVT and videogame localisation seem to have taken opposite directions. Initially considered only at the distribution stage, localisation has now become a critical element in the development of videogames. In contrast, AVT was born as part of the post-production process in silent films, it briefly became an integral part of the production process in multiple-language versions (which were effectively localised) and since then has been relegated to the distribution process.

The introduction of SDH in the US and Europe during the 1970s and 1980s did not change the situation. Accessibility services were regarded from the beginning as costly and catering to the needs of a very reduced and specific population (Stephanidis 2001). In the case of SDH for TV, this marginalisation was also determined by the teletext-based technology used. The subtitles were conveyed as a separate signal created outside the production process of the programmes. The same applied to SDH for the cinema, produced by a third party and thus not supervised by (and often unknown to) the members of the original creative team.

Since then, AVT and accessibility have been an afterthought in the film industry, which has also been reflected in research and teaching. Some attempts have been made by AVT scholars (Chaume 2004, Mas and Orero 2005, Cattrysse and Gambier 2008, Fryer and Freeman 2012) and film scholars (Egoyan and Balfour 2004) to bridge the gap between these two disciplines, but they remain few and far between. As far as teaching is concerned, film(making) courses rarely pay any attention to translation and accessibility issues, and postgraduate programmes in AVT do not usually teach film(making). The following section introduces the notion of accessible filmmaking as a potential way to start bridging this gap.

3. Accessible filmmaking

Before attempting to provide a more thorough definition of accessible filmmaking than the one included above (the integration of AVT and accessibility as part of the filmmaking process), it may be useful to look at the following three initiatives.

3.1. Universal design

Coined by the architect Ronald L. Mace, the term “universal design” is applied to buildings, products and environments that are accessible to people both without and with disabilities (Mace 1976). To abide by the principles of universal design theory, the design of a product needs to include as many potential users and uses as possible and to do so from conception. In their article “The Rogue Poster-Children of Universal Design: Closed Captioning and Audio Description” (2009), John-Patrick Udo and Deborah Fels apply the principles of universal design theory to SDH and AD in order to ascertain whether they may be regarded as examples of universal design. SDH is often described as an “electronic curb-cut” that is, a service that, just like ramps in pavements, benefits not only the target users (viewers with hearing loss) but also less predictable users; in this case, those who may be watching screens in noisy environments or who may need subtitles for language learning. Nevertheless, Udo and Fels find that neither SDH nor AD can be regarded as examples of universal design because they are designed after the fact and not at the beginning of the process and because the designer of the (audiovisual) product is not involved in the SDH/AD process at all:

Whereas every other aspect [of the filmmaking process] is shaped to form parts of an inextricable and greater whole, the CC [closed captions, American term for SDH] and AD exist on the outside, noticeably different parts that do not fit, as they have not been created by the same person with the same vision (Udo and Fels 2009: 27).

As the addition of SDH and AD is likely to affect the audience’s interpretation of a film, Udo and Fels wonder to what extent a third party with no access to the creative team can take it upon themselves to convey the director’s vision. In order to tackle this problem, the authors propose an alternative model:

We assert that audio describers and captionists should operate under a similar system [to the rest of the filmmaking crew], reporting to or, at least, consulting with a director of accessibility services. This team would then meet with the production’s director to develop an accessibility strategy that re-interprets the “look and feel” of the production. The captioning and description team would then work together to develop prototypes that would, in turn, be approved by the director before being produced. The final product should receive similar attention (Udo and Fels 2000: 24).

This is very similar to the approach adopted by Raina Haig, the visually-impaired British filmmaker whose debut film, *Drive* (1997), was the first one to include AD as part of the production process. For Haig (2002), in order to provide visually-impaired audiences with “equitable commercial choices and artistic quality” the AD needs to be constructed “in consultation or even collaboration with the filmmaker,” thus regarding “the job of audio description as a part of the film industry.” As pointed out by Udo and Fels (2009), this model does not require film directors to be

experts in access services. They can rely on the director of access services or on the subtitler/audiodescriber just as they rely on the lighting director or the director of photography. However, they would ideally be familiar with the basics of AD (and SDH) in order to make informed decisions. Likewise, Haig (2002) suggests, audiodescribers need to “learn how to attune themselves to the filmmaker's vision,” which requires training in film (studies) “to have an understanding of how and why film sequences are put together the way they are” (*ibid.*).

This collaborative model outlined by Udo and Fels and applied by Haig may be found in the film presented here, *Joining the Dots* (2012), and in the other films and initiatives mentioned in section 5 below. They all fall within the notion of accessible filmmaking, which has been chosen here over the term ‘universal design.’ Although universal design is a useful and widely-recognised concept, it has drawbacks. First of all, in order to assess whether or not a given product may be considered as an example of universal design, Udo and Fels feel compelled to apply the seven principles of universal design outlined by Connell *et al.* (1997). These principles were, however, created for a different type of accessibility and, as Udo and Fels acknowledge, many of them are not relevant to media accessibility “because they are not physical entities” (2009: 20). More importantly, in their model of universal design, Udo and Fels only deal with access services (SDH and AD) but not with translation. However, if a new production model is to be successful in the film industry, it must be as cost-effective and wide-reaching as possible. If it only applies to access services, it risks being considered costly and appearing to cater to the needs of a small, specific population (Stephanidis 2001), even if this is not true. By integrating AVT and accessibility as part of the filmmaking process, accessible filmmaking addresses all the elements that filmmakers must take into account in order to make their films accessible not only to viewers with hearing or visual loss, but also to viewers in other languages. We are thus no longer referring to a minority, but to a large share of the audience.

3.2. Part-subtitling

Foreign languages have been used in original films since the introduction of sound, but they have traditionally been relegated to play a “postcarding” role (Wahl in O’Sullivan 2008: 82). Anglophone cinema has been accused of “ventriloquizing the world” and speaking “for others in *its* native idiom” (Shohat and Stam: 1985:36). Films such as *Schindler's List* (Spielberg 1993) or *Valkyrie* (Singer 2008) are examples of this homogenising tendency, where Polish and German characters tell the story of Nazi Germany in (more or less accented) English. However, the past decade has seen the development of a multilingual imagination in mainstream Anglophone cinema (O’Sullivan 2008), which is increasingly resorting to foreign dialogue not just to highlight ‘exotic’ locations or

nationalities but to drive plot and character development. This trend, described by Sternberg (1981) as “vehicular matching,” may be manifested in at least three ways. Films featuring more than one language may choose to leave the foreign language untranslated (if for example it is not meant to be understood by the audience), to have diegetic interpreting (translation by one of the characters in the film) or, as is increasingly the case, to translate the foreign language with subtitles. This is what O’Sullivan (2008: 81) refers to as partial subtitles or part-subtitling:

Part-subtitling is understood here simply as a strategy for making a film shot in two or more languages accessible to viewers. Unlike conventional subtitles, part-subtitles are appended to part of the dialogue only, are planned from an early stage in the film’s production, and are aimed at the film’s primary language audience. Such films will have no ‘original’, unsubtitled version, but will be partially subtitled for all audiences.

In some cases, part-subtitling may even have a significant impact on the final dialogue of a film. Independent American director John Sayles, whose films often feature multiple languages, has found himself writing dialogue “to fit the subtitle format of thirty-two characters per line” (Molyneaux quoted in Miller 2003: 143). But part-subtitling does not only feature in independent films. Instead, it has become the norm in blockbusters featuring several languages, such as *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), *Avatar* (2009) and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), where subtitles take up as much as 70% of the dialogue.

Interestingly, the partial subtitles in some of these films are not exactly a translation of the dialogue on the screen but rather a “pseudotranslation” (O’Sullivan 2011: 118). The original dialogue is the one featuring in the English script, which is then translated into the “foreign language” to be spoken by the characters of the film as if it was original and is subsequently subtitled into English for the viewers. As described by O’Sullivan (2011: 120), these films are thus English-language films for English-speaking audiences which happen to “take a quick holiday” into other languages along the way. This is in contrast with other examples of part-subtitling that are not pseudotranslations, such as those found in Jim Jarmusch’s *Mystery Train* (1989) or *Night on Earth* (1991). In these films, the non-English dialogue is created in collaboration with the actors, but not necessarily as a translation of a script originally written in English.

At any rate, and whether or not they constitute cases of pseudotranslations, partial subtitles may be regarded as an example of accessible filmmaking. Instead of being an afterthought in the filmmaking process, they are considered at the pre-production stage, when the script is being developed, and they are made during the post-production stage by the scriptwriters and the filmmakers often in collaboration with translators. The increasing use of multilingualism in film and the

popularity of part-subtitling to convey it suggest that this type of accessible filmmaking may be here to stay.

3.3. Creative subtitling

As mentioned in section 2, the creativity shown in the use and translation of intertitles in the silent era was followed by a long period of norm-abiding utilitarian subtitles, produced as a retrofit without the supervision of the creative team and often interfering with the carefully framed shots of the directors. However, as McClarty (2012) points out, the recent practical turn in theatre translation, where translators are collaborating with directors and actors (Johnston 2010), and especially the appearance of fan subs (fan-made subtitles that do not usually comply with traditional subtitling standards) indicate that this trend may be about to change. Over the past years, an increasing number of filmmakers have used subtitles as a visual stimulus in their films. This is the case of Tony Scott in *Man on Fire* (2004), where part-subtitles are treated as a character in the scene with their own depth, typography and display mode. McClarty (2012: 139–140) refers to this phenomenon as creative subtitling:

Rather than adhering to a restrictive set of norms, the creative subtitling practice responds to the specific qualities of the individual film text, giving the creative subtitler more freedom to create an aesthetic that matches that of the source text, instead of being bound by standard font types, sizes and positions. Creative subtitles may be subtle or striking, bright or neutral, wild or restrained, but they will always respond to the individual film text, or even to specific moments within that film text.

Creative subtitles are often produced by the directors and the editors to interact with the *mise en scène* in the original film. As is the case in *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), for instance, the translational role of these subtitles (and even their legibility) often takes a back seat to their affective use of colour and position to advance plot and character development. But creative subtitles are not only found as part-subtitling in 'original' films. Examples such as that of the Russian film *Night Watch* (2004), whose translation into English features subtitles merging with the background, show that this creative use of subtitles may also form part of the post-production process for distribution abroad³.

In any case, with its integration of subtitling as part of the filmmaking process to fulfil both a linguistic and an aesthetic function in the film, creative subtitling stands as another example of accessible filmmaking. Unlike standard part-subtitling, it does not only call for a collaborative approach, but also for an expansion of the subtitler's current role. First of all, if the subtitlers are to produce subtitles that respond to the individual nature of a particular film, they must be able to 'read' the film and understand how meaning is created through the use of film language and visual aesthetics. Secondly, they must be able to use editing software and

to become 'translator-title designers,' capable of producing subtitles that are linguistically and aesthetically appropriate for the film:

It therefore follows that the translator-title designer, rather than remaining outside of the filmmaking process, should become part of the postproduction team, working alongside the film editors and title designers. This would enable the translator-title designer to gain closer working access to the film's production team, including the director, and consequently achieve greater insights into the film's style and the director's intentions. In turn, this would facilitate a creative subtitling that truly responds to the film and, moreover, becomes an aesthetic extension of the film itself (McClarty 2012: 149).

In sum, as examples of accessible filmmaking, universal design, part-subtitling and creative subtitling help to substantiate the definition of this notion as:

the integration of AVT and accessibility as part of the filmmaking process, often involving the collaboration between the translator and the creative team of the film

or, put it another way,

the consideration during the filmmaking process (and through collaboration between the translator and the creative team of the film) of some of the aspects that are required to make a film accessible to viewers in other languages and viewers with hearing or visual loss.

From the point of view of research and teaching, accessible filmmaking entails an exchange between film(making) studies and AVT, where film scholars and film students learn about the aspects of AVT and accessibility that may have an effect on the realisation and reception of (their) films, while AVT scholars and translation students explore the elements from filmmaking and film studies that can contribute to the theory and practice of translation and accessibility.

Although this may sound idealistic, some of the examples included here have shown that accessible filmmaking is already a reality in some contexts. The following two sections include further evidence of its feasibility in terms of practice (sections 4 and 5), training and research (section 5).

4. *Joining the Dots*

(Click [here](#) to watch the film and [here](#) to read a review.)

4.1. The film

Joining the Dots (2012) is a short 12-minute documentary about AD presented here as an example of accessible filmmaking. It tells the story of Trevor, who lost his sight at the age of 60. Following a period of depression, he found his way out with the help of audiodescription, which

also enabled him to rekindle his passion for cinema and theatre. I directed and edited the film in 2012 in collaboration with Martina Trepzyck (director of photography), Geetika Sood (camera operator), Panagiotis Papantonopoulos (sound recording and editing), Linda Koncz (research and production) and the translation team: Soledad Cano (Spanish), Elisa Beniero, Sabrina Delcuratolo, Matteo Campanile and Benedetta Alpigiani (Italian), Anne-Claude Ruet (French), Renata Mliczak (Polish), Stephanie Kolsch and Robert Hollinshead (German), Radha Case (Japanese), Diana Costa (Portuguese), Denisse Kreeger (English SDH) and Rosamund Webster (AD). *Joining the Dots* was screened during the 69th International Venice Film Festival and selected for the 2012 London Spanish Film Festival, the 12th Watch Docs International Human Rights Film Festival in Poland, the Travelling Film Festival Watch Docs and the Look and Roll international film festival on disabilities in Switzerland. Since February 2013 it has been hosted at the United Nations' International Telecommunication Union (ITU) website ([link](#)).

4.2. Making *Joining the Dots* accessible

By privileging Trevor's narration over the images, the first cut of the film lacked the necessary "visual rest from the talking heads" (Van Sijll 2005: 6) for viewers to reflect on the story and posed a problem both from the point of view of filmmaking and AVT. This cut contained too many instances of Trevor speaking, i.e. "passive self-images" that often "disable storytellers because the central characters they depict emerge as passive" (Rabiger 2009: 29). As far as AVT is concerned, the lack of visual rests and the prevalence of narration resulted in a subtitle-heavy film for deaf/hard-of-hearing and foreign viewers, especially given the short duration of the film. It also made things complicated for AD, since there were no gaps to describe the three main settings (train, theatre, garden) featuring in the three acts of the film. At this stage, this was a film about accessibility that was not accessible; a film *about* blind people but not *for* them. The solution to this problem was to film some extra footage, mostly transition shots that provided the documentary with further visual rests as well as with an extra layer of poetic meaning: a window with drops of rain over the line "I could see you sinking into this depth of despair," black shadows of people walking down a platform at a slightly canted angle over "that's when depression sets in," etc.:



Figure 1. Transition shot: train window.



Figure 2. Transition shot: people walking down train platform.

Although most of these transition shots alleviated the subtitling load and provided gaps for AD, some were still covered by Trevor's narration. This is likely to have an effect on the reception of the film, as shown by anecdotal evidence gathered in an eye-tracking test conducted at the University of Roehampton with 10 native-English viewers of the original film and 10 native-Spanish viewers of the version with Spanish subtitles. While 8 out of 10 viewers of the original film were able to recall both the images and the content of the narration in these transition shots, none of the Spanish viewers remembered the images, most likely because their eyes (the red dots in the following screenshot) were fixed on the subtitles:



Figure 3. Transition shot with fixations from the eye-tracking study: view from train window.

Over the past years, eye-tracking research has focused on the reception (and perception) of original films (Smith 2006, Smith *et al.* 2008) and translated films (Perego (ed.) 2012), but it may also be necessary to compare both experiences. To what extent and how do the subtitles affect the reception of a film?

While the need for 'visual rests' was solved in production, other problems were tackled in post-production during the editing process. An example of this is the following sign, which is essential to follow the third act of the film:



Figure 4. Sign in Trevor's and Mags' garden.

Trevor's narration ("she knows what she's got down there, I'm not sure") covered most of this image. This meant that the subtitler was forced to choose between translating the content of the sign or the narration, but not both, and the describer only had time to introduce a quick description of part of the text on the sign. Fortunately, the collaborative approach advocated within accessible filmmaking provided a quick audiovisual solution to what otherwise would have been a linguistic problem. By bringing Trevor's narration a few frames forward, it became possible to leave enough of a gap for the subtitle to translate the content of the sign and for the AD to describe it without compromising the overall vision and flow of the scene.

Finally, there were a number of accessibility-related issues that were not solved and that, in hindsight, could have been tackled in the pre-production process. The most noticeable one concerns the clothes worn by the participants in the documentary. As is customary in documentary filmmaking, participants may be asked to avoid certain patterns and colours (too bright, too dark) that may look strange on camera. Knowing that the film was to be subtitled, the filmmakers should have warned participants not to wear black and white stripes...



Figure 5. Mags in the garden.

... and they should have known better than to frame Trevor's medium shot with a black and white table at the bottom:



Figure 6. Trevor's interview.

Before concluding this section, it is worth mentioning that the film presented here is a very particular case of accessible filmmaking where the director/editor is involved in the field and has worked closely with the translators. However, the implementation of accessible filmmaking does not necessarily involve a dramatic change in standard filmmaking practice. It merely requires the consideration of some of the following issues, which often go unnoticed:

Pre-production stage:

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

Production stage:

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

Post-production stage:

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

This list is by no means exhaustive, but it may serve as a starting point to enable the collaboration between filmmakers and translators that is needed for the implementation of accessible filmmaking.

5. Accessible filmmaking in practice, teaching and research

There are different types of accessible filmmaking, just as there are different degrees of involvement and collaboration between filmmakers and translators. But this does not mean that accessible filmmaking is unfeasible or unrealistic.

Examples of accessible filmmaking are becoming more common in the film industry, as shown by the increasing number of independent and mainstream films that include subtitles in their original version and those films that feature creative (original or translated) subtitles. It can also be found in independent films such as Peter Middleton and James Spinney's *Rainfall* (2012), Michael Chanan's *Secret City* (2012) and Enrica Colusso's *Home Sweet Home* (2012), which involved close collaboration between the directors and the translators. The AVT industry seems to be moving in the same direction. In the UK, Screen, a leading company in the field, is pushing for the inclusion of AVT and accessibility as part of the filmmaking process (Lambourne 2012) and in Belgium the main state-owned channel VRT is building aspects of AD and SDH into the pre- and post-production stages of some of its programmes. The spirit of this trend is summed up in the following words by British filmmaker Raina Haig, which refer to the specific case of AD but which could easily apply to AVT and accessibility in general:

You have a group of artists: writer, director, actors, and designers, who collaborate on a creative project, the film. Well, the audio describer to my mind is just one more participant in that project, and how can they work as part of an otherwise highly qualified team, without a sound basis in how film works? (...) I'd like to see screen writers and filmmakers training and working as audio describers. What is the screenwriter's job after all but to conjure up the world of the film in words, for a metaphorically blind audience? (Haig 2002)

As highlighted by Haig, accessible filmmaking also requires collaboration and exchange between film(making) studies and AVT at the training stage. Fortunately, some MA courses in filmmaking such as the one in Kingston University (London) are beginning to include classes on AVT and accessibility, as are undergraduate and postgraduate film courses at Universidad de Valladolid (Spain) and the Central School of Speech and Drama (London). Likewise, AVT courses are beginning to open the door to film-related contents, as shown by the MA in Accessibility and Filmmaking at the University of Roehampton (London), where students learn not only how to make films but also how to make them accessible to viewers in other languages and viewers with hearing and visual loss.

In research terms, accessible filmmaking could be useful for filmmakers and film scholars to explore the aspects of AVT and accessibility that have an impact on the reception of their (translated) films and for AVT scholars and translators to identify the elements from filmmaking and film studies that can contribute to the theory and practice of translation. Some of the latest contributions on part-subtitling (O’Sullivan 2008), creative subtitling (Foerster 2010, McClarty 2012), multilingualism on film (Vermeulen 2012, Serban 2012) and reception studies (Perego (ed.) 2012, Fryer and Romero-Fresco 2013) are promising steps in this direction. The same goes for a series of new initiatives to create forums for exchange between the two areas, such as the panel on accessibility organised by Sub-ti and FRED Film Radio at the 69th Venice Film Festival in 2012, where *Joining the Dots* was presented, the Accessible Filmmaking seminar held during the 67th Edinburgh Film Festival in June 2013 and the Accessible Filmmaking masterclass planned as part of the International Film Critics’ Week at the 70th Venice Film Festival in September 2013. Information about this, as well as films, events and publications related to accessible filmmaking, is available at www.accessiblefilmmaking.org. The site also includes [a special report](#) published in the Spanish newspaper *El País* (Romero-Fresco 2013) about an Accessible Filmmaking project carried out in Kenya.

6. Conclusion

They drew a circle and left me out.
We drew a bigger one and included us all in.
(Native American saying)

The idea behind accessible filmmaking is not new. As we have seen in this article, it goes back to the early days of cinema, when language transfer was integrated as part of the (post-)production process. Since then, AVT, unlike videogame localisation, has been relegated to the distribution stage. The introduction of accessibility in the form of SDH and AD in the 1980s did not change this trend, perhaps because it was (wrongly) considered a minority service and transmitted on television as a separate signal created outside the production process of the film.

The fact remains that AVT and accessibility cost a tiny proportion of total budgets and contribute to more than half the revenue of big-budget Hollywood productions. Depending on who is asked, this can of course be used to advocate change (which would not be very costly) or to argue against it (why alter such a profitable system?). However, what must be highlighted here is how the invisibility of AVT and accessibility in the filmmaking industry affects the quality of translated films and the working conditions of translators. The majority of film viewers may not ever experience the dialogue written by the scriptwriter and supervised by the filmmaker over a period of months or years. Instead, they hear (dubbing and AD) or read (subtitling and SDH) the dialogue and the descriptions

produced by translators in no more than three days, for little money and with no access to any of the people who have made the film. As good as translators may be, the quality of their translations (and thus the overall vision of the filmmaker) inevitably suffers because of this system; at the same time, the structures in place tend to prevent the filmmaker from becoming aware of the problem⁴.

The aim of accessible filmmaking is to integrate AVT and accessibility as part of the filmmaking process through collaboration between translators and the creative team of the film. It is important not to restrict this idea to SDH and AD, but rather to include audiovisual translation in general. After all, to translate a film is to make it accessible to viewers in other languages. Far from being unrealistic or applicable only in special cases such as that of the documentary *Joining the Dots* (2012), presented here, the feasibility of accessible filmmaking is backed up by plenty of recent examples in the film industry. The presence of multilingualism in film, the increasing use of subtitles in the original versions of independent and mainstream films, the incipient collaboration between independent filmmakers and translators and the general awareness of accessibility show that this is the right time to advocate for this change. It is true that accessible filmmaking may be easier to implement in small productions than in big-budget films that may be translated into many languages, which makes the collaboration between the filmmaker and the translators more complicated. However, even in these cases filmmakers could supervise the SDH, the AD and the subtitling template, which forms the basis of the subsequent translations into different languages.

The definitions of accessible filmmaking included in section 3 are still general, but there will be time to fine-tune them as this concept develops, ideally in collaboration with practitioners and researchers from film and AVT. As it stands, the notion of accessible filmmaking places more emphasis on where accessibility and AVT are included in the production process than on the extent to which the films are actually accessible. This could lead to mere token gestures and consultations that do not result in effective collaboration between translators and filmmakers. In this sense, it may be a good idea to work on a future set of minimum requirements for a film to fulfil the standard of accessible filmmaking, which would include not only the provision of translation, SDH and AD, but also a degree (or different degrees) of collaboration between the creative team and the translators.

For the time being, though, it is essential to highlight that the change advocated here does not need to alter the experience of the original audience of the film or compromise the filmmaker's vision. On the contrary, it is intended to ensure that this vision is also preserved in translation and it is up to the filmmakers to decide what degree of collaboration they want to have with the translators.

In short, accessible filmmaking does not aim to detract or constrain, but to add and to ensure that viewers in other languages and viewers with hearing and visual loss are not left out of the circle.

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Biography

Pablo Romero-Fresco is a Reader in Translation and Filmmaking at the University of Roehampton. He is the author of the book [*Subtitling through Speech Recognition: Respeaking*](#) (St Jerome). He is a member of the Focus Group on Audiovisual Media Accessibility organised by the United Nations' ITU and of the research group CAIAC, for which he has coordinated the subtitling part of the EU-funded project DTV4ALL. Pablo is also a filmmaker. His first documentary, *Joining the Dots* (2012), about blindness and audiodescription, was screened during the 69th Venice Film

Festival and selected for the 2012 London Spanish Film Festival. His second documentary, [Brothers and Sisters](#) (2012), about education in Kibera (Kenya), has been broadcast on Austrian and German TV and on the online version of the Spanish newspaper *El País* in 2013 along with the feature article [Levantarse en Kibera](#) and the short film [Joel](#) (2012).



Notes

¹ Data obtained from IMBD, www.boxoffice.guru.com and www.boxofficemojo.com.

² As will be explained in section 3, the term 'accessible' in accessible filmmaking includes not only accessibility for people with sensory impairments but also, in a wider sense, translation or linguistic accessibility; in other words, making film accessible to viewers with hearing/visual loss and to viewers in other languages.

³ Authors such as Nornes (1999) and Fozooni (2006) advocate the translation of film by means of "abusive subtitling," which, instead of striving for invisibility, aims to take on a more overt role.

⁴ In an interview with Ken Loach, de Higes Andino (forthcoming) shows how the British filmmaker was not aware that the multilingualism of his films is often lost in translation. For instance, in *It's a Free World...* (2007), a scene where an interpreter translates a conversation between Polish workers and their English-speaking employer in London becomes, in the dubbed Spanish film, a conversation between the Polish workers (who speak broken Spanish) and the employer (who speaks perfect Spanish), where the translator is now a secretary that is somehow part of the conversation. In *Ae Fond Kiss...* (2004), set in Glasgow, the conversations that some of the characters have in Punjabi, which are subtitled into English in the original film, are dubbed into Spanish in the translated version for Spain. Once again, all the characters speak in Spanish. Upon finding out about this, Loach and his scriptwriter Paul Laverty pointed out that this approach "destroys the films," as it breaks "the whole trust between you and the audience" (*ibid.*).