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Creativity in Audiovisual Translation and Media Accessibility

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ABSTRACT

Audiovisual translation (AVT) and media accessibility (MA) are some of the most fertile grounds in which to test the validity and operational use of the concept of creativity. Many examples can be found containing splendid and controversial examples of creativity expressed through authorial interventions on even the most revered texts: from films by eminent directors to high quality TV series to global videogames, creative producers, mediators, translators and adapters have all found ways of making their own aesthetic mark. Creative practices in media localisation in today's world of digital technology acquire new meanings linked to the exploration of modern techniques and challenge traditional notions of translation. This article attempts to set the limits of creativity in AVT, to understand this notion from several angles and to map creative practices in the current world of media localisation. It explores the notion of creativity in the postproduction phase of media localisation and addresses the issue of creative media access, when creativity is incorporated into the filmmaking process and is also shared with prospective users in advance, to take the path towards participatory AVT.

KEYWORDS

Audiovisual translation, creativity, media accessibility, media localisation, disability studies.

1. Introduction

Creativity is a buzzword hailed by academics and professionals as the key to success in the world of media localisation. Creativity is sometimes understood as the best way to honour the original (Nornes 1999, 2015), but other times it is used to refer to all forms of non-canonical solutions to localisation problems, in other words, as a deviation from standard (mainstream) translation solutions and from current (mainstream) guidelines (McClarty 2012). In 1998, the editors of a seminal book about creativity in translation stated something that is, unfortunately, still valid today: "The creative process is a large and ill-defined process at present and has not yet been adequately studied by experimental methods" (Beylard-Ozeroff *et al.* 1998: xii). Many questions arise from this concept and its usefulness and implementation in audiovisual translation (AVT): What is creativity or what can be considered creative? Can creativity be equated to (extreme) familiarisation? Is it the opposite of literal translation and/or of compliance with guidelines? Does creativity belong to the new paradigm of the so-called participatory culture? To what extent is the use of the buzzword 'creative' simply a marketing exercise, used by companies to differentiate their products from those of their competitors? Are creative strategies different when implemented in AVT and in media accessibility (MA)?

2. A glimpse into the notion of creativity

The notion of creativity has been broached in different disciplines and areas of study. Although a thorough literature review is beyond the scope of this article, we now look briefly at how creativity has been approached in the areas of creative thinking and Translation Studies and in the creative industries sector.

There is some consensus in creative thinking about its definition and scope. According to the PISA report on creativity:

> Creative insights and advances have driven forward human culture across the world in diverse areas (Hennessey and Amabile 2010): in the sciences, technology, philosophy, the arts and humanities. Creative thinking is thus more than simply coming up with random ideas. It is a tangible competence, grounded in knowledge and practice, that supports individuals in achieving better outcomes, oftentimes in constrained and challenging environments (PISA 2021).

The first grounded theory on creativity was developed by Gentzels and Jackson (1962), who defined creativity as the ability to combine elements which are commonly thought of as being independent. Drawing on these authors, subsequent contributions highlighted other aspects of creativity, such as the ability to form new combinations out of individual components, the surprise factor (Bruner 1962), the component of novelty that is embedded in any creative operation (May 1972), the production of something unique and valuable (Parnes and Noller 1972), etc. In the case of translation and interpreting, Cauti (1988) conducted a pioneering investigation on hand preference, figurative creativity and the practice of written translation and interpreting. This author applied the French version of the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (Torrance 1974), which includes four broad categories that come into play in a creative process. These are fluidity, or the facility with which any individual produces any type of idea; flexibility, or the ability to use different strategies to solve a given problem; originality, or the ability to produce unusual answers; and elaboration, or the ability to develop ideas with appropriate specifications and new details. All four characteristics can be easily applied to the concept of creative translation.

Historically, creativity has been one of the most challenging topics for theoreticians in our discipline. The Russian Formalists believed that the poetic (artistic, literary) component of texts was a *formal* quality of the text, an element that could be detached from the literary (in our case, audiovisual) text (Levý 2008). For these authors, what essentially matters in translation is to identify every relevant communicative linguistic and textual element of the aesthetic component of a text and then substitute each one of them with target linguistic and textual means in order to produce the same or a similar artistic effect. The Prague Structuralists viewed (written) texts as complex networks (even more complex in the case of audiovisual texts, understood as semiotic and multimodal constructs

comprising several codes that produce meaning in constant interplay) based on the interplay of several textual components. Every word – and, we might add, every image — stands not only in relation to other words but also to other components of the same text, and to other words and components of the literary – and audiovisual — tradition. The aim of the translator's activity is, for this school, to render or convey the original work of art, that is, to reproduce it as a work of art through *one's own* creative activity for the ideal reader (Jettmarovà 2008). The deconstructionists, however, go one step further and fiercely resist the idea of a text as an artefact depicting reality (Derrida [1982] 1985). It is language and images that create reality. In a film, neither events nor characters are depicted; there is no pure and essential meaning. Thus, deconstructionists would argue that translation should focus less on copying or reproducing and more on giving a text the chance to survive. Creative solutions that help the text survive and be successful in another culture (or among other user groups) are part of translation (see, for example, the reference to Liza Sylvestre's *Captioned Series* below). Deconstruction challenges the notion of the "correct interpretation" (or "adequate interpretation") of a text. Watching and understanding an audiovisual text can never exhaust its meaning. Every (necessarily subjective) interpretation is only partial and helps the text to survive. This is the idea of creativity pursued in this article.

Finally, Kapsaskis (2018: 6) identifies three main characteristic elements of translation in the creative industries: a creative translation will contain a *creative element*, that is, translation must by definition resist its default mode of operation, which is literal translation or simple imitation; it will contain an *aesthetic element*, namely, an artistic element that engages with the audience as well as with the visual, the acoustic and the purely linguistic elements of the text, sometimes transforming these elements in functional and effective ways; and the *promotional* element, evident in the translation of advertising and marketing materials and in the need for audiovisual texts to persuade or entertain viewers.

3. Definition

With all these ideas in mind, a tentative definition of creative AVT can be drafted. Creative AVT refers to those media localisation and adaptation practices that, on the one hand, provide linguistic and cultural access to media and, on the other, claim to make an artistic, imaginative or creative contribution to the audiovisual text that can elicit a new audience experience and vindicate the translator's or filmmaker's visibility. In the final section of this paper, the reasons why artistic, imaginative and creative practices could be seen as problematic will be discussed.

In the last few years a division has emerged between the ways to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers *during the process* of filmmaking (preproduction, production and early postproduction of a film, understood here as any audiovisual text) or *after the product is completed*, as one of

the strategies implemented during the postproduction and distribution processes, as has historically been the case with dubbing, subtitling, voice-over, etc. (Romero-Fresco 2013). Both approaches can entail different solutions and creative strategies, because some of them can only be applied in the production process, whereas others are typical of postproduction workflows.

However, new technologies (cloud dubbing and subtitling, machine translation, artificial intelligence, to name just a few) and the audience's new role (as prosumers, as active spectators who have their say and can play an important role in the success of the audiovisual product) have altered this split dramatically. To give just one example, in the field of dubbing artificial intelligence (AI) is starting to change the way lip-sync has traditionally been understood. This change, first seen in videogames some years ago, is now taking place in films with the first attempts to manipulate the onscreen characters' mouths using AI so that the process of lip-sync is no longer needed. Subtitling is also affected, as the subtitles are produced during the film production process (*Slumdog Millionaire*, Danny Boyle, 2008, is one example among many others). This means that creative strategies are also implemented during the process, and no longer only in the postproduction phase as was the case until now.

4. Creative Audiovisual Translation

In this section we dissect the three parts of the definition given above.

4.1. Creative strategies provide linguistic and cultural access to the media

4.1.1. Linguistic creativity

Traditionally, creativity was understood as the translator's ability:

> [T]o forget how the original line is structured and to recreate it in another language as if it were not a translation, while fully grasping its meaning, the allusions it contains as well as the intentions that underlie it. In order to achieve this goal, dialogue adapters have the freedom and hence the need to abandon the literal meaning of the source text if this makes it possible to preserve elements that are essential to the narrative (Zanotti 2014: 109, following Galassi 1994).

Therefore, creativity can be understood as simply translation; in other words, if a literal translation is not fulfilling the function of the translation, creativity is then called for, and welcomed, to overcome a particular translation problem. Creative translation is then a synonym for oblique translation (Vinay and Darbelnet 1958/1972), alterations (Nida 1964), contextual re-creation (Delisle 1981), among others, and would be called for in cases when dynamic equivalence is needed (Nida 1964). However, dynamic equivalence is simply translation or, in other words, translation cannot be and is no longer understood as formal equivalence (word-for-word translation or literal translation). Likewise, creativity cannot be

equalled to just a proper translation when literal translation is not possible. This would be going backwards to an inefficient and outdated idea of what translation really is — a logocentric view of translation.

Creativity can also be understood as the set of not strictly necessary strategies used for particular translation problems when literal translation and other strategies more closely related to the source text could have been used. This is the way Delisle (1993) understands the strategy he calls *création discursive*, a cognitive operation that establishes a temporary equivalence that is totally unpredictable out of context, i.e. those unpredictable solutions that would only function in a particular context, in a particular translation and even in a particular segment of that translation. Such is the case of some dubbings of *Shrek* (Katzenberg *et al*. 2001) into several languages, such as Spanish (Richart 2010), Italian (Minutella 2020) or Polish (Chmiel 2010). Here, creativity is a synonym for translations that fall on the domestication side of the foreignisation-domestication spectrum and that aim to satisfy the prospective audience's demands for clarity or enjoyment by recognising something closer to their experience. This seems like an excessively logocentric view of AVT as an area that requires translators to present a clear, neat and easy-to-consume product that removes all the obstacles arising from its foreignness. Constraints (obstacles) are understood as inherent properties of the text that the translator must overcome, instead of simply an analytical category that improves our understanding of the audiovisual transfer process.

These two ways of conceiving creativity are now outdated. Translation is no longer conceived as a literal process of linguistic substitution of segments or word strings, which is why other terms, such as localisation and transcreation, are now commonplace in Translation Studies. A limited, narrowing, linguistic and logocentric view of the term translation obliges researchers and the industry to find concepts and coin labels that explain what really happens in the world of AVT and, more generally, in the world of translation, as a discipline.

4.1.2. Multimodal creativity

On this scale of the notion of creativity, the next step is transcreation. Katan (2014) offers an interesting historical review of this concept, covering its first use in philosophy by Gottfried Leibniz, Samuel Coleridge's adaptation to literature and the more recent use by Purushottam Lal in Translation Studies. According to Katan, the concept encompasses both faithful transmission and creation. And if researchers and the industry are not able to incorporate the notion of creation – including creation of new content – into the idea of translation, as we advocate in this article, our discipline will have to continue producing more and more labels to mean the same thing (Mangiron and O'Hagan 2006: 20). The concept of transcreation can be much more operative if it is understood as an enhanced type of AVT (Chaume 2016), a new AVT mode (Spinzi *et al.* 2018) that is now

widespread as a direct consequence of digitalisation. Transcreations are all forms of semiotic adaptation and manipulation where some or most — if not all — semiotic layers of the original (audio)visual product are localised, that is, manipulated or created from scratch. Historically, only the signs belonging to the five acoustic codes of the audiovisual text (linguistic, paralinguistic, musical, special effects and sound provenance) have been localised via dubbing/voice-over and subtitling practices. However, in the age of digitalisation, images (icons, indices and symbols), lighting, movement (kinesic signs) and types of shots, can now also be manipulated in order to shape a domesticated product that, allegedly, satisfies a specific target audience (Mangiron and O'Hagan 2006: 20). Transcreation is thus another way to build the audiovisual cultural capital of a community that adapts both global and local products, combining some characteristics from their foreign origin with others from the target culture. Creativity is an intrinsic and essential part of this phenomenon.

In fact, dubbing has also been defined as a kind of enhanced translation (Chaume 2016). Transcreation is used in the new North American version of *Doraemon* (Kozo Kusuba 2005) with a strong moral agenda. The cartoon is manipulated in such a way as to replace Japanese cultural and ideological values with Western ones, with the excuse of making it more appealing to the American audience. Other significant examples of extreme localisation (transcreation) include the Japanese version of *Inside Out* (Pete Docter, Ronnie del Carmen 2015). Here, the main character, Riley, refuses to eat peppers, whereas in the American source version, she refuses to eat broccoli, which Western audiences easily understand. However, in Japan, because children tend to like broccoli, it was replaced by peppers, which are not very popular amongst Japanese children. In another scene, Riley's father is thinking about hockey in the American version, but this is replaced by football in the Japanese version. This creative process is carried out with one purpose in mind: to align the target text with the target audience's expectations and tastes — which at the same time could be considered patronising. Transcreation requires creativity and originality, and it allows the localisation team to add new elements that are not present in the source text, normally respecting the original spirit of the latter. Transcreation allows the text to survive and live a second, different life. Pixar has made extensive use of transcreation and other companies are following suit. For example, Garfield's favourite dish is *lasagna*, which in the Lithuanian dubbed version becomes *kugelis*, a type of potato pudding. Even titles can be changed, following this agenda, when images change: the film *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* (Phil Lord, Christopher Miller 2009) was renamed *It's Raining Falafel* in Israel. The Argentinean dubbing of *The Incredibles* (Brad Bird 2004) is a famous example of creative dubbing for its constant references to streets and places in Buenos Aires.

The same process can be observed in some transmedia projects. Unlike AD and museum translation, images are 'translated' into other images, whether from the same culture (intraiconic translation) or from another culture

(intericonic translation, be it the target culture or a universal feature belonging to other cultures). Intraiconic and intericonic translations (transcreations) should be included in this new concept of translation discussed here, and are a clear example of creative AVT.

And finally, going one step further, creativity is also an inherent part of adaptations, transmedia extensions, TV franchises and transnational remakes, which become new domestic audiovisual texts that imitate, incorporate and adapt foreign models. Broadly speaking, they become enhanced forms of translation that are initially a modern peripheral way of consuming foreign texts and eventually find their place in the target culture, thus enriching its cultural audiovisual capital. They can easily be considered new translation modes, in line with what Gentzler (2016) calls post-translation, new modes that generally demand large doses of creativity (Mazdon 2000: 181).

4.2. Creative AVT encapsulates some strategies that claim to make an artistic and imaginative contribution to the audiovisual text, thus eliciting a new audience experience.

This second part of the above definition of creative AVT focuses on the artistic side of creativity. A new attribute is now added into the equation: the artistic and imaginative component is worked into the audiovisual text, making the audience experience something else that might or might not be part of the source text. Once again, equivalence plays no part in this debate. Martínez Sierra (2008) states that constraints in AVT are precisely what pave the way to creative solutions, rather than hindering them (necessity as the mother of invention). Creative translation allows us to understand the asymmetry between the cultural systems in question. Creative strategies can strip the represented (and translated) actions, objects and characters of allegedly essential aspects. Creative strategies are therefore the perfect tool with which to question prefabricated notions and stereotypes because they can reveal the historical and conceptual scaffolding holding up the different cultural layers attached to behaviours, and also serve as an analytical tool against essentialism or immanent properties of texts and cultures (Villanueva Jordán 2021).

New media are helping to popularise and consolidate these modern ways of increasing a specific target audiovisual capital. Social networks, VoD platforms, media websites and so on are hotbeds for new artistic techniques, norms and values that circulate faster than ever before. Aesthetic evolutions have always been a sign of modernity and although they are by nature ephemeral, some of them can have a strong impact on audiences and may also have a bearing on canonical domestic products and canonical translated products (professional dubbings or subtitlings, for example). An example of an impressive macro aesthetic evolution is the interesting contemporary trend of the new dubbings into English — a language that rarely accepted dubbings for consumption of foreign fiction

(Spiteri Miggiani 2021, Mereu Keating 2021, Hayes 2021) — that Netflix is currently broadcasting with great success. Aesthetic, artistic and creative micro operations can be seen in all AVT modes. The world of fandubbing, fundubbing, fansubbing, funsubbing and other cybertranslation practices is a clear example of how an artistic and imaginative contribution to the audiovisual text can reach new audiences and give them a new experience (Baños-Piñero 2019).

Creative subtitles are also proof of this change of habits. Many of today's creative media practices fall within what Díaz Cintas (2018) calls cybersubtitles, which include different types of subtitles made by users "outside the commercial imperatives that regulate professional practice" and subverting standard subtitling conventions with creativity. New audience communities, groups and individual web users are starting to change the rules of the game. These new creative subtitles, some of which are hugely imaginative, challenge the formal and professional conventions we have known and practised to date (Foerster 2010, McClarty 2012). This leads to the third characteristic of creative AVT: the translator's visibility and capacity for intervention.

4.3. Creative AVT vindicates the translator's or filmmaker's visibility.

In parallel, we are witnessing a change of habits in the translator's traditional role as an invisible mediator. Kapsaskis argues that the notion of creativity is intrinsically linked to:

> the debate about whether translation is to be understood in terms of imitation/reproduction/resemblance or of creation/originality/difference. Interestingly, creativity as a (Western) cultural imperative, a value to be cherished and rewarded, is both what reduces translation to the status of "second-order representation" (Venuti 1995: 7) and what adds currency to the idea of creative industries (Kapsaskis 2018: 6).

According to Venuti, until very recently translation has been regarded as inferior in the literary field because it has historically been stigmatised as a form of reproduction, a kind of imitation, a "second-order representation" (Venuti 1995: 7). Following this line of argument, professional audiovisual translations can be understood as samples of ethnocentric practices that give confidence to target culture spectators, since — mainly in dubbing but also in subtitling, according to Nornes — they tend to remove the foreignness of a film and replace it with the comforting, recognisable traits from the target culture in the form of words, images, music, special effects and text on screen. In the field of AVT, Nornes (1999) suggested the term abusive subtitling, as a creative stance to experiment with. The abusive subtitler uses textual and graphic elements to avoid corruption, which in the author's opinion, is the idea of translation as a simple carrier of pleasure.[1]

A paradigmatic case of abusive translation is fandubbing and fansubbing, where the seams of translation are usually clearly visible. A canonical dubbing follows the notion of suture from film theory, that is, the techniques film uses to make us forget the camera that is really doing the looking. Dubbing is another trick to make us forget about the process of filming. Seams between the original and target voices and mouth articulation are hidden, deleted, carefully covered. In contrast, fandubbers and fansubbers do not mind showing their seams and may even be proud of them. They vindicate intervention. This empowerment of the translator's role not only applies to already translated products. Selecting the materials to be translated is the first step towards establishing new values and norms. Traditionally, distributors have always decided what to broadcast, what to sell and where and what not to distribute. After digitalisation, which has also empowered audiences, fansubbers and fandubbers decide what to subtitle and what to dub, including non-canonical products that are deemed "second-order texts" and that perhaps already enjoy some status in their community. Therefore, the habitus can be changed and indeed has done so.

Professional translation now co-exists with fan translation. The market for audiovisual content localisation is constantly changing. Now all options are open to translators and the creative team sometimes applies an extremely domesticating technique (linguistically and visually) that turns the source product into a hybrid product which could easily be part of or related to the domestic culture and tradition; at other times, intervention, visibility and action are chosen. Both options contribute to build new audiovisual cultural capital: by means of AVT the target culture incorporates canonical and non-canonical audiovisual products drawn from foreign cultures, thus giving them the status of new texts. Both familiarising and domesticating strategies have dared to challenge the rules of the game by using all kinds of creative strategies.

AVT is more than just a linguistic transfer of audiovisual texts. It can be understood as a form of mediation, as a form of localisation, as transcreation, adaptation, remaking, as a trigger for creating new genres, new values, new relations, new ideas, creativity. However, an important aspect is still lacking in this discussion. AVT is also a means of providing universal access.

5. Creative Media Accessibility

MA has recently been described as concerning "access to media and non-media objects, services and environments through media solutions, for any person who cannot or would not be able to, either partially or completely, access them in their original form" (Greco 2019: 18). As for creative MA, the definition proposed here resembles that of creative AVT but it also points to some differences that are worth elaborating on:

Creative MA refers to those practices that not only attempt to provide access for the users of a film or a play, but also seek to become an artistic contribution in their own right and to enhance user experience in a creative or imaginative way. Often considered during production (as per the principles of accessible filmmaking or integrated theatre access), this is an alternative approach to traditional MA that stands in opposition to many of the current guidelines, especially to their emphasis on objectivity. Creative MA practices are sometimes anchored in a wider fight for inclusion and diversity and, as such, they may be used as a political tool to vindicate the users' right to full participation in the arts and in society as a whole.

MA is very much determined by legislation and guidelines. Directives such as the European Accessibility Act (2019) have set access requirements that have led to the development of norms and guidelines by standardisation bodies, broadcasters, cultural institutions and online streaming platforms, amongst others. Until relatively recently, many of these guidelines were based on the personal experience of experts and well-seasoned professionals. However, over the past decade, AVT and MA have experienced a significant cognitive turn, illustrated by an increasing number of audience-reception studies such as eye-tracking experiments (Orero et al. 2018). This has provided guidelines with an empirical, intersubjective and scientific basis and it has made them more democratic, as they now include the input of groups of viewers that are statistically significant enough to be considered as a majority.

While MA has undeniably benefitted, and is still benefitting, from this cognitive turn, it is also important to consider what has fallen by the wayside, namely a greater emphasis on individual users, an appreciation of the value of subjectivity and an acknowledgement of the political role played by MA (Romero-Fresco 2021a, Romero-Fresco 2021b). Creative MA can help to tackle these three aspects.

5.1. The subjectivity of the individual user

Audience-reception studies have inevitably placed strong emphasis on statistical significance. In the case of eye-tracking experiments, what matters is where most of the participants focus their gaze. This helps to identify scientifically solid patterns that can reveal how different groups of viewers process audiovisual media, but it also tends to flatten out differences. Researchers focus mainly on what is common to all rather than what is not, in other words, on the average data of a group of viewers rather than on the full data provided by a single participant. As noted by Brown (2015) with regard to eye-tracking studies on original films, the view of the majority is favoured over marginal ways of watching films or marginal viewers. Participants whose cognitive behaviour, or whose gaze patterns in the case of eye tracking, differs dramatically from the rest are often classified as outliers and their data are routinely discarded in empirical research as problematic, unrepresentative and useless (Zimmerman 2010).

This is perhaps particularly problematic in the case of MA, whose raison d'être was from the beginning to account for those who are left behind and excluded from accessing audiovisual media (Díaz Cintas et al. 2007). As we will describe below, creative MA can help to "individualise the all" and engage with these outliers meaningfully in a way that complements the quantitative and statistically significant data obtained with experimental reception studies.[2]

Another criticism Brown (2015) makes of eye-tracking research is that by focusing on attention, it validates and encourages a type of homogeneity that is more common in commercial than in non-mainstream films and that may be at odds with the artistic nature of cinema: "Cinema is both business and art, but if art is one thing it is unique/different, and so a move towards homogeneity is a move towards the reduction of art in favour of business."

Many of the current empirically-based MA guidelines have led to a homogeneous use of access services that can limit their potential creativity. These guidelines normally encourage the same use of MA regardless of the particular nature of every film. Whereas every other stage in the filmmaking process is adapted to the idiosyncrasy of the film in question, MA tends to build the same ramp for every building. This can result in situations where, while the original viewers of a film can access the creative vision of the filmmaker, the audience of the accessible versions is provided with a much more standardised, comprehension-based access route.

Connected with this is the issue of objectivity, an essential element in most MA guidelines, including the BBC and Netflix's subtitling guidelines and the audio description guidelines followed by most broadcasters around the world. For authors such as Kleege (2016) and Thompson (2018), while this objective approach ensures consistency, it fails to provide the straightforward, unmediated, and wholly effective access that it promises. It presents access without authorship, as if it represented an unassailable truth or the voice of God. For these authors, objectivity is neither desirable nor possible. Access is always going to be provided by someone, often a non-disabled accessibility expert who does not share the same aural or visual experience as that of the film users and who may have ableist assumptions.[3] This explains why some guidelines lead to practices that are too focused on comprehension and too compensatory. In other words, they are designed almost exclusively to provide visually- and hearing-impaired users with information about what they cannot see and hear, respectively, which can limit the creative and transformative potential of MA:

> Many times, I feel captions are intended to 'raise' a Deaf or Hard of Hearing person's understanding of sound 'up to' a hearing person's experience and that feels incredibly limiting to me precisely because I don't know many hearing people who think about sound in as profound and imaginative ways as Deaf and Hard of Hearing people must (O'Daniel 2021).

AVT and MA scholars have long been advocating for alternative approaches that value subjectivity and engagement (Remael 2021, Szarkowska 2013), often from the standpoint of AVT and MA. However, a different perspective can be considered by drawing on recent work on this issue by other scholars from areas such as disability studies, cultural studies and technical and professional communication, through a disability/accessibility lens rather than a translational one (Chottin and Thompson 2022; Kleege 2018; Zdenek 2018).

5.2. Creative MA as a political tool

Disability studies is an interdisciplinary area that views disability in the context of culture, society and politics, challenging the concept of normalcy (and the normal-abnormal binary) and broadening the understanding of disability to better understand the lived experience of disabled people and to contribute to their full and equal participation in society (Ferguson and Nusbaum 2012; Goodley 2016). Disability studies and its cousin, critical disability studies, scrutinise the stigmatisation of disabled people in society (for instance through different forms of ableism) and how it intersects with other forms of discrimination due to race, class and gender. Although it has taken a long time, (critical) disability studies and MA are finally starting to take note of each other, largely thanks to creative MA.

Scholars and artists, such as Thompson (2018), Kleege (2018), Zdenek (2018) and Lazard (2019), have noted that research on MA has been primarily concerned with solving technical problems, not least to develop, test, assess and validate access services that can work for different types of users. This work has been extremely useful in raising awareness and exponentially increasing the quantity of access services provided globally. However, it has also often neglected the wider picture, that is, the political impact of MA and how it interplays with current social developments. One of those developments is the transition from accessibility to inclusion and participation: "Access is walking through the door, inclusion is sitting at the table and participation is eating the meal and talking about it." (Mundy 2017).

Looking at MA through a (critical) disability studies lens helps to question the currently prevailing notion of MA as a service designed by non-disabled experts so that disabled users can access films or plays made by non-disabled artists. It interrogates MA on the extent to which the traditional disability slogan "nothing about us without us" is being implemented. The aim here is not only to demand more participation from disabled people in MA but also to identify and eliminate potential ableist assumptions built into MA guidelines as a result of the fact that they have largely been produced by non-disabled people.

Creative MA plays a major role here, as will be discussed in the next section, which includes examples of creative MA practices that underscore the

importance of the individual or marginal user, the value of subjectivity and the political impact of MA.

5.3. CMA practice

In his compelling webtext "Designing Captions: Disruptive experiments with typography, color, icons, and effects", Zdenek (2018), a scholar in technical and professional communication, takes issue with the lack of innovation often found in captions. In his view, they tend to be too homogeneous and generic, stripped of voice and embodiment, with no idiosyncrasy — they make all voices sound the same. He then wonders: "What if accessibility was not treated as an aside or an objective and straightforward process of "providing subtitles for all sounds" (McKee 2006: 335) but had the potential to be transformative?".

Zdenek turns to creative MA (in this case, creative captions) to question "the official narrative of captioning as objective transcription and captioners as glorified typists". He addresses some of the most challenging captioning issues (character identification, overlapping speech, description of music) by experimenting with typography, colour, placement, icons and animation to create a closer connection between visual and verbal meaning. For character identification, he puts forward the notion of character profiles, "composites of type, size, and color selections" that embody each character and reinforce their personas, as shown in [this clip.]

Zdenek also resorts to text-based images in order to distinguish between the characters' direct and indirect speech (as in [this clip]) and uses different non-verbal symbols and images to convey music (see [this clip]), thus reacting to the currently prevailing logophilia, according to which words are the best and only tool to account for the full meaning of sounds and their contexts.

The final words of Zdenek's webtext chime with many of the elements of creative MA discussed here so far and are an open invitation for those working in MA…

> …to fold captioning into the creative process, to center the needs of viewers who are deaf or hard of hearing, to design for more diverse audiences by questioning the entrenched notion of the default hearing user, and to consider how our understanding of audio accessibility might be expanded to include non-linguistic signs (Zdenek 2018).

Some of the most significant examples of creative MA are currently being produced by an emerging wave of visual artists, many of them deaf and/or blind, who adopt radically subjective stances to explore the poetic and generative potential of MA and its ability to become a window into the lived experience of disability. In her *Captioned Series* (2017), deaf artist Liza Sylvestre uses captions in several clips not to convey the dialogue on screen

but to provide her own personal account of exclusion from audiovisual media and from society. The captions include Sylvestre's interpretation of what is happening on screen as a result of not having access to the dialogue (Figure 1), descriptions of the images (Figure 2) and a wider commentary on what it is like to be excluded from sound in society (Figure 3).

Figure 1. Sylvestre's interpretation of the plot.
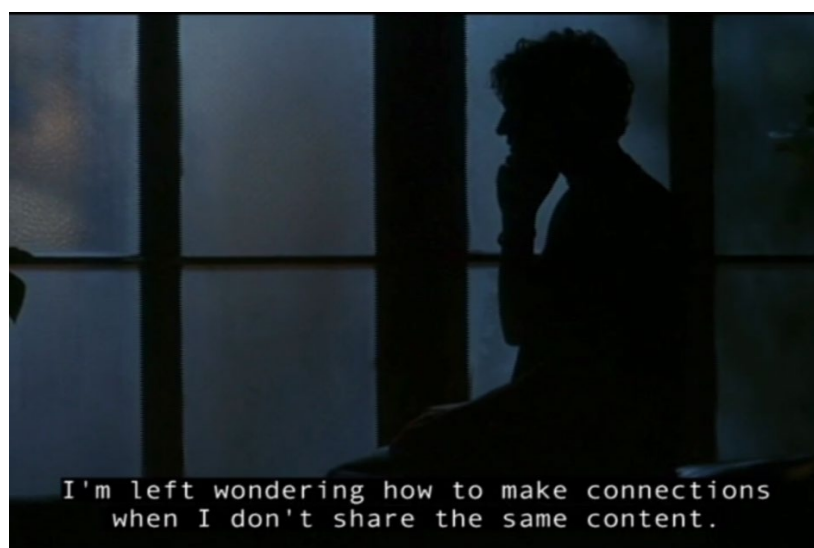

Figure 2. Sylvestre's descriptions of the images.

Figure 3. Sylvestre's personal account of exclusion.

Along similar lines, American artist Christine Sun Kim (2020), profoundly deaf from birth and an ASL user, resorts to creative captions to turn the normally hearing-centric experience of producing captions into a deaf-centric one: "I place a lot of trust in the people who write captions. But those people have a different relationship with sound and the world than I do. So I started to wonder… What would it look like if I wrote the captions myself?"

In her short film *Closer Captions* (2020), Sun Kim produces captions that describe sounds ("feet slapping onto bathroom tiles") and images ("sweetness of orange sunlight"). Other times, they fall somewhere in between ("the sound of hurt feelings scabbing over"), which suggests that their content could potentially be used for both captioning and audio description, as though poetry was the meeting point between these two MA modalities and their users. In a previous piece entitled *Close Readings* (2015), Sun Kim asked a group of deaf viewers to provide sound captions for clips from *A Space Odyssey* and *The Little Mermaid*, whose images were blurred (see Figures 4, 5 and 6).

Figure 4. First non-standard sound description provided by deaf users for *Close Readings*.
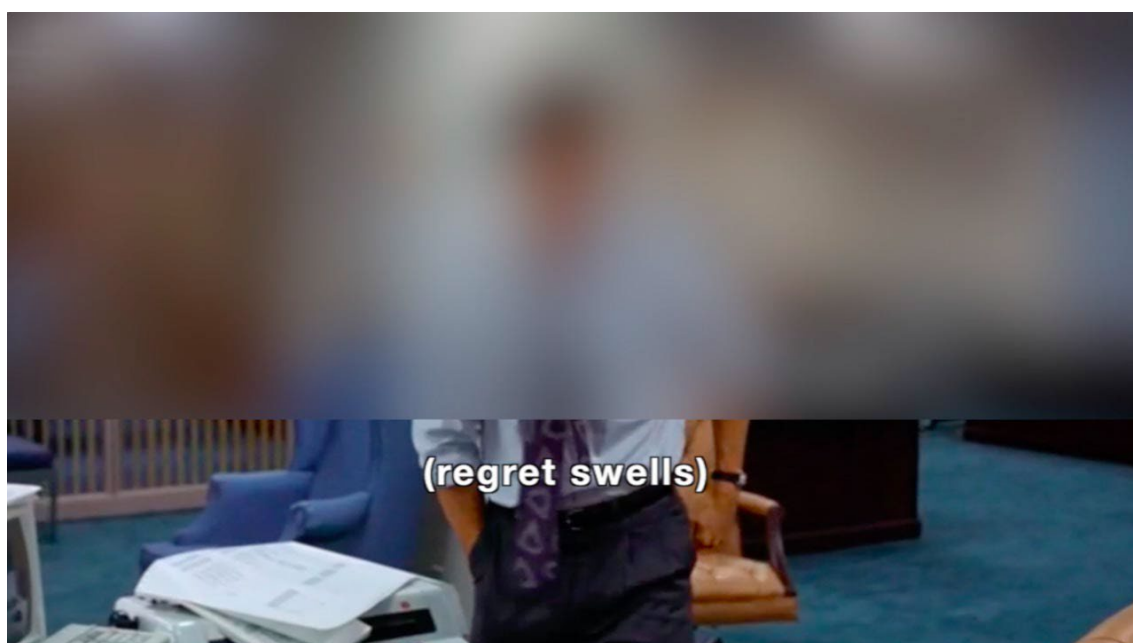

Figure 5. Second non-standard sound description provided by deaf users for *Close Readings*.

Figure 6. Third non-standard sound description provided by deaf users for *Close Readings*.

By blurring the images, Sun Kim challenges the semiotic hierarchy of MA, giving prominence to the normally marginalised captions, which here, as produced by deaf users, range from literal to conceptual, imagined or even poetic. They are anything but homogeneous; in other words, they are a true reflection of the heterogeneity of the viewers.

Another artist who subverts the semiotic hierarchy of MA is Caroline Lazard. Her work encourages viewers to reconsider and embrace the complexity and political potential of MA:

> Accessibility is often thought of in relation to the idea of clarity or transparency or coherence, but I think disabled people also deserve access to the incoherency of the experience of art. There are also so many incredible disabled artists who are thinking through definitions of accessibility that don't necessarily evolve from Western frameworks of rationality or intelligibility but are focused rather on the idea of being together, of collectivity and care, grappling with the real challenges of accessibility rather than this sanitized idea of transparency (Lazard in Damman 2020).

In *A Recipe for Disaster* (2018), Lazard applies creative MA to an episode of Julia Child's *The French Chef* from 1972, the first programme ever broadcast with open captions in the US. She revisits the show adding words across the whole screen with an AD and a video-essay type of manifesto about accessibility. Lazard uses images, sound and text (just as Child uses eggs, butter and salt to cook her omelettes in the programme) and forces all viewers, with and without disabilities, to share the same space and the same difficulty in processing the different layers of information. In her manifesto, Lazard (2018) imagines a more accessible and integrated future, one in which MA can focus on the viewers' engagement rather than on their comprehension:

> The possibility of an integrated audience (…). A media slow enough for everyone to follow. A media quick enough for everyone to get lost together. To each their own. Engage one sense, then the other, knowing full well that, everything is speculation of need and all translation is a failure.

This is a far cry from the current state of affairs, where MA is often an afterthought and where, as Lazard puts it, "we have to be grateful for getting to join the party. Well, your party sucks".

With her video, Lazard invites non-disabled viewers to join a party made by and for disabled people and to experiment first-hand the cacophony, sensory failure and exclusion often experienced by people with disabilities when accessing works made by and for others. It is, as the manifesto explains, a redistribution of the violence involved in the discrimination of disabled people from audiovisual media and from society: "If you can't share then no one gets any. Image and sound currently disentangled. A suffusion. A cacophony. No legibility. Illegibility for all. A sensory failure. A redistribution of violence."

The sense of urgency and even anger conveyed by Lazard's manifesto can also be found in the work of the deaf British-Jamaican poet Raymond Antrobus. His poem *Dear Hearing World* (2018)*,* an angry indictment of the attitude of the hearing society towards deaf people, was turned into a short film by Adam Docker in 2019. It features Antrobus' spoken delivery of his poem, creative subtitles and deaf actress Vilma Jackson's performance in British Sign Language against urban London scenes.

In a more recent piece, "The Royal Opera House (with Stage Captions)" (2021), Antrobus imagines what it would be like to produce sound captions for a show at the Royal Opera House. Interspersed with descriptions of the plot, his captions are poetic, like those by Christine Sun Kim, but they are also political and intersectional, as they connect the demand for more accessible art with the wider fight against race discrimination. Featuring an all-black cast, the plot tells the story of a boy in a South African Township who sees her mother killed by rebel soldiers ("[sound of speechless poverty]", reads the first poetic caption). The boy is saved by his uncle and later by his cousin, but they both get shot ("[sound of blood in the air]"). The boy grows up, becomes a hustler and marries a woman about whom we know next to nothing ("[sound of newer emptiness]"). They both travel to America to have a go at the American dream ("[sound of mirror refusing reflection]").

At this point, Antrobus asks us to look at what is not addressed by the plot, as well as at the writer and at the reaction of the audience:

> We don't see the oil or the Coca-Cola Company or land rights or coups or the arms industry or the drug companies. We don't see who owns the ships, who owns the land, who owns the business, who owns the road. We don't muddy ourselves with details that complicate, we don't see whose body is left in the desert, or a city street or an ocean. We see men on the stage become criminal by yanking hoods over their

heads.

[American music]

We see them hide their face, we see them keep a gun or a knife in their pocket or a gold tooth in their gums. We see all the black bodies in this play hide the white man who wrote it.

[sound of the future working]

The writer, educated at Rhodes and Oxford University has somehow freed himself from his own history. We hear a line in the play that has the boy, older now, say, just before entering the American border, I will write my own story

[unstoppable singing]

and this is where everyone in the Royal Opera House, Black, white, whatever, rises to their feet and shouts and hollers and claps and cries and none of the silences, none of them are filled.

Antrobus's captions turn here into daggers that cut through the silences of the plot, exposing the potential of the play to aggravate the racial discrimination that it is setting out to fight.

Concerned as it has been with solving more or less practical problems, MA has also largely remained silent regarding its wider political context. The examples included in this section show that now that disability studies and disability art are turning their attention to accessibility, creative MA gives us the language that we need to be able to talk to artists and scholars from these areas and to embrace the potential of MA to contribute to the wider fight for real inclusion and participation. Zdenek resorts to creative MA to push the technical boundaries of captions, experimenting with non-linguistic signs in a bid to question the logophilia that prevails in standard captioning. Liza Sylvestre's and Christine Sun Kim's works create deaf-centric experiences where captions become a window into the lived experience of deaf viewers and a source of poetry, respectively. Finally, Lazard and Antrobus present more visceral pieces that denounce the negative effect that standard MA practices can have on disabled people and, in the case of Antrobus, resort to intersectionality to show how these practices are bound up with other forms of discrimination in society. What all of them have in common is that they view standard MA as a commitment to the status quo, that is, to a reality that we are expected to leave untouched or, at the very least, as unaltered as possible (Lee Clark 2021). Against this background, CMA emerges as an opportunity to question and, if possible, change this reality.

4. Final thoughts

Creativity is a slippery concept when it comes to AVT and MA. Firstly, it may be seen as contentious and even offensive, as it can imply that there is no creativity in canonical, by-the-guidelines AVT and MA. Secondly, it is not easy to pin down exactly what creative AVT and MA are and how they compare to one another. As discussed in this article, they share many

common traits, but they also come from different places and point in different directions.

Creative AVT encompasses practices that not only provide linguistic and cultural access to an audiovisual text, but also become an artistic extension of it — the chance to have a second and often different life. In the process, creative AVT vindicates the role of the translator and/or filmmaker in the production of translated versions. The constant technological developments and innovative practices currently taking place in the professional market and in fans' translations provide a fertile breeding ground for creative practices, which challenge the traditional relationship between original and translated versions and stretch the concept of translation to include notions of transcreation, adaptation and remaking.

Creative MA practices also go beyond the provision of access to become an artistic contribution in their own right. They are a reaction to current guidelines, which are sometimes regarded as too aseptic, impersonal and apolitical. Creative MA is often used as part of a wider fight for inclusion and diversity that vindicates the users' right to full participation in society. Creative MA is the language that can enable MA to speak to disability studies and disability art and to embrace its political potential.

Many questions arise at this point, not least regarding the role that creativity can play in the training, research and professional practice of AVT and MA. Training programmes are yet to integrate these non-standard practices, which can enable students to develop their artistic skills and diversify their portfolio in an area that is not too likely to be automated in the near future. As for research, the artistic, idiosyncratic and subjective nature of some of these creative practices may call for qualitative approaches, which would usefully complement the prevailing quantitative trend in this area.

When it comes to professional practice, commonly asked questions are whether it is realistic to expect the industry to implement this approach and whether creative AVT/MA has any chance of becoming mainstream. To answer these, it may be useful to reconsider the questions, which somehow imply that becoming mainstream is the ultimate goal or measure of success for creative AVT/MA. As we have discussed here, creative AVT/MA often exists precisely as a way to react to and problematise mainstream practices and dominant quantitative trends. It is an opportunity for artists and translators who are willing to experiment with AVT and MA as a creative extension of an audiovisual text. As shown in this article, creative AVT/MA already exists and it can have important social and political implications, so it deserves to be researched, taught and acknowledged as a reality in the professional market. This consideration may not be the same for creative AVT and for creative MA, however. Creative and non-standard approaches to AVT are often regarded as a bonus, an added value for those directors and producers who are willing to provide translated versions with a new and

richer life. This is at odds with the sense of urgency in the use of creative MA, which arises from the belief that current MA provision does not always enable full access to audiovisual media for disabled users.

This brings us to our final discussion. The boundaries between AVT and MA are blurring, as access services are increasingly being used by people with and without disabilities. This broad notion of access has been critical in raising awareness and has become a very powerful argument for increasing the provision of access on TV, streaming platforms and cultural institutions. It has also been an antidote to the ghetto effect (Greco 2016), which arises when the needs of persons with disabilities are highlighted, thus singling them out and eventually further excluding them from society. However, there is a risk that this universal view of access may end up prioritising non-disabled users (who are always the powerful majority) and neglecting the lived experiences of users with disabilities (Romero-Fresco and Dangerfield 2022, *forthcoming*). The consideration of creative practices as a luxury, instead of an urgently needed step forward, is a case in point.

How do we square the circle of ghettoisation versus a broad notion of access; in other words, how can we reconcile the benefits of a universal view of access with the acknowledgement of the specific needs of people with disabilities? How can we find space for creativity (which requires time and a film-specific approach) in a professional AVT market that prioritises speed and efficiency? Can this creativity be boosted by technology when most developments in this area are moving towards automation?

Although these and many other questions must remain unanswered for now, they promise exciting times ahead for researchers, trainers and professionals working in this area.

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Notes

[1] Nornes (2015) has recently revised the notion of abusive subtitling and replaced it with sensuous subtitling, which puts not only the foreign but also the art of cinema before industrial needs. When the film calls for it, sensuous subtitling bends rules and can become visually inviting, sensitive and even haptic (Josephy 2017). It is thus an example of creative AVT/MA as discussed in this article and it bears significant similarities with the creative captions analysed in section 5.3.

[2] Interestingly, this emphasis on the majority can also be found in the descriptive approach to (audiovisual) Translation Studies that dominated research in this area in the 19n 90s and early 2000s. The focus was placed on the so-called norms, i.e. recurrent patterns observed in translators' behaviour (Toury 1995), to the detriment of idiosyncrasies, which can only represent the subjective preferences of a single translator and were therefore regarded as random and of little use (Pedersen 2011). Thus, by embracing the value of subjective and idiosyncratic practices, creative MA reacts to decades of descriptive and cognitive work based on trends, quantitative data and objectivity.

[3] Ableism may be understood as a type of discrimination against people with disabilities that is not only manifested through individual opinions, but also through forms of exclusion that get codified and naturalised in various systems of power because they are built into the structure of our societies (Elmén 2016).