

**Dwyer, Tessa. *Speaking in Subtitles. Revaluating Screen Translation*.  
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017, 240 p.**

João Antonio Pimenta Ribeiro Neto<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universidade Federal do Ceará, Fortaleza, Ceará, Brasil

Tessa Dwyer's *Speaking in Subtitles. Revaluating Screen Translation* deals mostly with the idea of "errancy" in audiovisual translation, specially subtitling. The book is divided in two parts, and each of these parts subdivided in three chapters. Before reading this book, it seemed like I was about to go on a trip of countless terminologies related to the Translation field, but the author manages to show some interesting facts about the evolution of what was first just a practice of translators into an academic area filled with subtleties. Dwyer also proposes an ample discussion about relevant themes to the area of Translation Studies such as the notions of fidelity and respect to the original text. And through that debate she comes to question the notion of what should be considered right or wrong in translation. She tries to deconstruct the so-called right way to translate an audiovisual product by introducing the idea of "errancy" and how inevitable it might be in some forms of audiovisual translation such as "fansubbing", an underground and illegal way to make subtitles, and sometimes considered inferior to the official subtitles made by translators, yet a powerful tool to make audiovisual products accessible to the public who is not acquainted with a foreign language.

In the introduction section of the book, Tessa points out the example of a French director called Leo Carax being awarded at the *Los*



*Angeles Film Critics Association Awards* and on his “thank you” speech he says ironically that he is a foreign language film director and that cinema is a foreign language. Tessa uses that argument to show us that cinema as we know it is not only restrained to the American market or Hollywood, it is much more international than that, and by being so there must be an importance directed to screen translation in the forms of dubbing or subtitling. And that importance is usually overlooked by media makers and distributors. Tessa claims for a revaluing of screen translation, hence the title of the book, given that the operations of dubbing and subtitling are not taken seriously. She proposes the analysis of those activities from a point of view in which the errors must be confronted and studied to better understand dubbing and subtitling.

The book is divided in two parts containing the main topics – Devaluation and Deconstruction in the first one, and Errant and Emergent Practices in the second one. Each of these parts is subdivided in three subtopics related to the main topic expressed in the title of each part of the book. The first part gives us an overview of the Translation Studies during the 60’s and 70’s. It was during that period that the TS became a discipline and was regulated as such, hence the amount of institutionalization and standardization it had. The second part of the book goes deep into current translation practices that go beyond the concept of parameters of “quality”, like fansubbing and crowdsourcing. The matters related to digital dissemination, online networking and streaming are also approached in this second section of the book to evaluate how the new tools of communication and interaction are changing the screen translation and global industries too.

In chapter 1, Tessa presents us with a debate about dubbing vs. subtitling from the release of an article by film critic Bosley Crowther in which the title is pretty evident – ‘Subtitles must go’ in telling us his opinion about that particular form of screen translation. Among the arguments used by Crowther to vilify

subtitles is that they are “obsolete” and “an old device” used as a convenience to reduce the costs of dubbing of foreign language films with no appeal. Crowther also sees in the dubbing of foreign language films a way to make them more available to the masses and not restricted only to the “art” theaters. In that sense, I agree with Crowther. Over the last few years, the same phenomenon has been happening in my home country (Brazil) as a market strategy to make cinema and cable TV channels more accessible to a great part of the population who didn’t have access before and are not familiar with the reading of subtitles. Crowther complains that reading subtitles is “rough on the eyesight” because “you have to spend precious time reading instead of looking what’s going on”. As Tessa points out in her book, it’s not a matter of quality of the product generated either by subtitling or dubbing, but a matter of politics. So whatever form of translation generates more revenue and more profits, of course, that is the one that will be predominant in cinema and TV.

Chapter 2 describes an experiment carried out in the 70’s by the *Anthology Film Archives* in New York called *Invisible Cinema*. In that experiment, the foreign language movies that were shown in the theater had no subtitles or dubbing whatsoever. Tessa informs us that the choice for not engaging in any type of screen translation was merely to support a so-called purist vision and provide an “original” experience of the movie being watched. As a form of protest against the subtitling versus dubbing debate started in the 60’s, the *Invisible Cinema* failed in trying to make audiences see the inefficacy of these two modes of translation. Instead, it made them see how indispensable they were and still are. The *Invisible Cinema* was designed by the Austrian filmmaker Peter Kubelka and his aim in creating such an endeavor was to make cinema something to be felt only instead of watched. According to his vision, the theater should be completely dark, so during screening, the audience is nor even aware of walls or signs or anything that might interrupt the experience of “feeling” the movie.

From the analysis of a typical American avant-garde experiment in chapter 2 to the examination of a European avant-garde experiment in chapter 3 with the analysis of the Situationist associated movie “Can Dialectics Break Bricks?”, Tessa Dwyer talks about themes of subbing (the act of putting subtitles to a foreign film, originally this term was coined to the subtitling of animes) versus dubbing from the point of view of a movie that is trying to break free from the common sense we might have about the idea of “auteur” and “authenticity”. Initially, the movie was supposed to propose a discussion about language, but as it never found its audience, it ultimately failed in “upsetting the balance”. Dwyer states that “Can Dialectics Break Bricks?” is judged either as too comedic to be political or as too political to be any fun. Both judgements oppose the film’s humour to its polemics, whereas, for the Situationists, no such separation is possible. Rather, *détournement*, as they explain, is precisely a ‘parodic-serious’ process in which ‘the accumulation of detoured elements, far from aiming to arouse indignation or laughter by alluding to some original work, will express our indifference towards a meaningless and forgotten original”.

In the second part of the book, Dwyer also divides it in three chapters, being the first one about censorship in the making of subtitling and dubbing and the concept of “errancy”, a practice in translation and that increased with the advent of fansubbing. The censorship applied to translation, as Tessa explains, is “almost inescapable” and “can take the form of personal decisions made by translators, adherence to professional norms or conventions, commercial pressures and state-imposed regulations”. A good example of how censorship takes place in subtitling is the softening of bad language or inappropriate expressions in the interlingual subtitling of DVDs or movies. Tessa shows many instances of countries in which the government and the church were the main responsible institutions for promoting censorship in mass media products like the movies. Such was the case for countries like Italy during Mussolini’s fascist regime, Spain, and Romania. Dwyer

states that such “abusive” censored translations were the fuel for the rising of an alternative market constituted mostly by the fansubbing and the media piracy. It is interesting to notice that the author coins a term for the unofficial translators of screen media. The term is “Guerilla Screen Translation”, which according to Dwyer comes from the assumption of rebellion against the censorship imposed by the standard system of translation. Dwyer establishes a differentiation between the fansubbing movement and this so-called guerilla translation by saying that fansubbers are usually errant in a subversive manner, but the non-fan translations are marked by sloppiness, an unintentional poor text in accuracy, a bottom-up mentality (since the people behind the translation have no formal training), and what ultimately end up creating media products the author call digital Frankensteins.

Dwyer’s definition of errancy is deeply developed in the second chapter of the second part of the book by an examination of the fansubbing subculture in anime. Tessa starts this chapter with a discussion of anime’s highly developed “fansub” cultures, given their level of organization, but she also acknowledges the practice across many other genres. Still, anime serves as the starting point for fansubbing, a practice that involves individual users, usually fans of the material being subtitled, creating their own translations and subtitles for films and making them available among their unofficial networks and with no profit value, since it is a work that doesn’t involve remuneration. These translations are not official nor done by professionals. As the author had previously pointed out, fansubbing is a form of media piracy, which occurs when a media product has not yet been officially made available in a language but has become absorbed into more established screen translation and media distribution networks. It represents a change in the paradigm of media consumers. The translations generated by fansubbing are something like the saying “made by fans and for fans”. Dwyer quotes Jenkins (2006) to state that “decentralisation” (facilitated by digital and online technologies) enables audiences

around the globe to interact with popular culture in new and unpredictable ways that blur distinctions between production and consumption”. Due to its level of organization and achievement in the market nowadays, fansubbing represents the most crucial factor to affect the difficult relationship between top-down corporations and bottom-up fansubbing groups.

The last chapter in the second part of the book analyzes the current developments in streaming, subbing, and sharing personified in a global platform called “Viki” and it also states how legitimate these practices have become when it comes to screen translation these days. Tessa Dwyer points out that from a linguistic point of view, the translations operated by the fansubbers at Viki are far beyond the English language, for they operate with an amount of two hundred languages, on the contrary, *Netflix* has been available in over 190 countries since 2016 but operates with only 3 languages. Dwyer also presents the debate surrounding the term that is getting a lot of terrain along with “fansubbing” which is “crowdsourcing”. According to Dwyer

like fansubbing, crowdsourcing is a multifarious phenomenon that can assume many forms. Some have sought to define it, only to prescribe boundaries that are almost instantly outmoded or overturned. Others have sought to avoid this leaky lingo altogether by proposing new, more robust terms like ‘user-generated translation’ (O’Hagan 2009 and Perrino 2009), ‘open translation’ (Hyde and Floss Manuals 2011) and even ‘massively open translation’ (O’Hagan 2016).

“Speaking in Subtitles Revaluing Screen Translation” is a great book that covers very specific situations about using the two main modes of audiovisual translation, subtitling and dubbing, so that the readers can see their importance and above all understand that the whole discussion of which is better is pointless. The book also cries out for a further investigation about the so-called non-

professional and errant “fansubbing” and its global achievement due to the widespread domain of platforms like “Viki”. Having this phenomenon in mind, Dwyer emphasizes that a shift in the screen translation studies must happen urgently.

## References

Dwyer, Tessa. *Speaking in Subtitles. Revaluing Screen Translation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017, 240 p.

Recebido em: 13/04/2019

Aceito em: 15/06/2019

Publicado em: Setembro de 2019