

## Censorship of Subtitled Films

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### Abstract

This research aims to analyze the complex questions raised by the censorship of subtitled films, focusing on cultural considerations as well as the technical and linguistic constraints imposed by such practices. It seeks to explore each element of the issue: specifically, censorship and its role in shaping the intellectual patterns of nations and societies, as well as the importance of subtitling as the primary technique for translating films. This raises several important questions: How can subtitling maintain its primary function as a cultural intermediary when it is subject to censorship that erases or alters the cultural markers and elements of the original language to avoid offending norms? Can we truly speak of globalization and openness to the Other when censorship confines viewers and keeps them trapped within their own social reality and a singular culture, under the guise of preserving social, moral, and cultural systems? Does preserving a film's cultural elements through subtitling necessarily mean shocking the viewer, offending his sensibilities, or undermining his moral beliefs? What solutions can be proposed to address these concerns? All of these questions are examined using an analytical approach, aiming to highlight the complexities of this translation practice across linguistic, cultural, and cinematic dimensions.

**Keywords;** Audiovisual translation, Cinematic films, Film censorship, Self-censorship, Subtitling

### المخلص

إن الهدف من هذه الورقة البحثية هو تقصي و تحليل مجمع الإشكالات و التساؤلات التي تطرحها الرقابة على الأفلام السينمائية المسترجعة و اعتباراتها الثقافية و الإكراهات التقنية و اللغوية التي يفرضها هذا النوع من الممارسات محاولين بذلك فرد مساحات للبحث حول كل عنصر من عناصر الإشكالية و المتمثلة في الرقابة من جهة و دورها في تحديد الأنماط الفكرية للأمم و المجتمعات و من جهة أخرى مدى أهمية السترجة بوصفها التقنية المعتمدة لترجمة الأفلام السينمائية و هنا يتبادر إلى ذهننا كما هانلا من التساؤلات: كيف يمكن للسترجة المحافظة على وظيفتها الأساسية بوصفها وسيطا ثقافيا في ظل خضوعها إلى رقابة تعمل على طمس كل المعالم و المكونات الثقافية للغة الأصل أو تعويضها بأخرى خشية الوقوع في أي محظورات؟ وهل يمكننا الحديث عن العولمة والانفتاح على الآخر في ظل رقابة تعمل على محاصرة المشاهد وإبقائه سجين الواقع الاجتماعي المعاش والثقافة الواحدة تحت شعار المحافظة على النظم الاجتماعية والأخلاقية والثقافية؟ وهل التسليم بضرورة الحفاظ على المعالم الثقافية للفيلم المسترجع يعني إلزاما صدم المشاهد و خدش حياته و زعزعة معتقداته الأخلاقية؟ و ما هي الحلول المقترحة؟ كلها تساؤلات سنتناولها بالبحث والتحليل وفق منهج تحليلي، سعيا منا إلى استبيان حقيقة هذه الممارسة الترجمة المعقدة في مقارباتها اللغوية و الترجمة و الثقافية و السينمائية.

الكلمات الدالة: الترجمة السمعية – البصرية – السترجة – الأفلام السينمائية – الرقابة السينمائية – الرقابة الذاتية

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## Introduction

Cinema has always played a serious and highly important role in forming individual behavior and modifying social and moral values (Zimmer, 1974, p. 374), as well as changing the methods and thought patterns of individuals and societies. It is considered one of the most effective and impactful arts in shaping the human mind and cultural identity. Furthermore, cinema is regarded as a critical player in cultural development, openness to others, and the elevation of societal thought, as well as in shaping community values. In addition to being a means of entertainment and recreation, it is also a tool for guidance, direction, and cultural enlightenment. With the global spread of films and their ability to overcome language barriers through translation, alongside their reliance on visual imagery as a means of expression and creativity, cinema has emerged as a medium for cultural and civilizational communication between peoples. Since the early days of cinema, countries have recognized the ability of films to disrupt their systems through openness to others and the capacity of these films to fulfill social mobility and challenge the political, social, and ideological foundations of individuals and societies. Consequently, they established various regulatory bodies to serve and maintain their interests.

### 1. Film Censorship History

Film censorship began in 1909 with the establishment of the National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures (Martazul, 2024, p. 06) in New York. Then, in 1922, the Hays Office was created under the leadership of Will Hays, tasked with protecting the public from violence and verbal indecency. This was viewed as a form of self-censorship (Gabriela, 2004, p. 128).

In the Arab world, film censorship in Egypt began with the issuance of the Theatrical Regulations on July 12, 1911, which outlined all texts of repressive censorship. These regulations remained in effect until 1955, when Law No. 430 was established to regulate censorship on film reels, art pieces, songs, plays, and recorded activities. These censorship guidelines are divided into two parts:

First: the social and moral aspect, starting from religion and ending with violence and unethical practices (Gabriela, 2004, p. 125). This involves prohibiting the representation of God's power through physical forms, depicting prophets and messengers, reciting the Quran in inappropriate places, and portraying social life in a way that undermines the value of the family or criticizes its living conditions. Furthermore, any offense against established authorities, including leaders, ministers, religious figures, and legal entities, is prohibited.

Censorship, in its cinematic sense, refers to an administrative body that aims to monitor all cinematic works and productions (Zerhouni Belkacem, 2024, p. 71). Its purpose is to combat all forms of corruption and moral decay, protect the state's higher interests, safeguard the public good, and reinforce moral and social standards. What concerns us in this topic is the censorship imposed on subtitled films.

### 2. Subtitling Censorship Function

Subtitling is a type of audiovisual translation, a cinematic translation technique that depends on displaying written text at the bottom of the screen, representing the translation of dialogues from the film's original version. It is a summarized translation of the meaning contained in the dialogues of the original film, appearing on the screen or below it. (Larousse, 1977, p. 1363).

As defined by Lucien Merleau, the term "subtitling" in a foreign film introduced in its original version refers to the concise translation of the dialogue text displayed at the bottom of the screen. This process involves an approximate translation of the dialogue text of the film shown in its original language, distinguished by the brief appearance of illuminated text in the target language (Merleau, 1982, p. 273).

Censorship in this subtitled film is similar to other censorship imposed on cinematic production. It is a regulatory body staffed by employees specialized in the audiovisual field, primarily consisting of experts in translators.

Censorship on subtitled films operates as an added burden on the translated cinematic work. In addition to the constraints faced by the subtitling technique, which the translator must navigate as it is a specific type of text (Hellal, 1986, p. 193), censorship imposes another set of limitations that directly affect the viewer. It confines him within a singular culture by distorting and misrepresenting the social and cultural realities presented in the subtitled film.

This type of translation, particularly in films that employ subtitling as the primary method of presenting the translation, depends heavily on verbal symbols rather than visual ones (Gambier, 2002, p. 6/10). Since language is the vessel of thought and the carrier of the cultures, experiences, and histories of peoples, any alteration or distortion in the meanings and connotations of the original linguistic expression constitutes a change in its cultural implications. Thus, subtitling is an adaptation of the original message according to the culture of the target language (Cordova, Undated, p. 1/6), seeking to convey meanings and concepts that transcend mere words and phrases, moving beyond linguistic equivalents to other cultural and contextual references. The reliance on censorship in subtitled films includes everything associated with politics, religion, ideologies, and cultural elements.

### **3. Film Censorship Types and Their Motivations**

There are two types of censorship in this field:

The first type is governmental censorship, also known as higher censorship, imposed by specific entities within the state represented by specialized offices closely tied to governmental bodies and ministries responsible for cultural affairs. This form of censorship is politically motivated, seeking to maintain stability and public security while avoiding any affront to the higher authorities representing the state and suppressing any attempts to incite unrest or sow discord within society.

Religious motivations may also play a role, aiming to safeguard religious beliefs and avoid violations that may impact religious symbols or texts.

The second type of censorship is self-censorship, a regulatory approach imposed by the translator during the subtitling process, influenced by his personal, political, religious, and ideological inclinations. This allows the translator to avoid crossing certain political, ethical, or religious taboos that may not be accepted by the viewer.

The translator must possess a high degree of awareness that enables him to recognize the gravity and sensitivity of translation concerning these topics. Consequently, he may need to omit or bypass specific linguistic segments and sentences carrying cultural significance that may not be acceptable to the viewer of the subtitled film.

The translator resorts to various translation techniques that allow him to overcome these obstacles, such as puns, synecdoche, allusion, and others. In this process, the translator becomes a cultural mediator, facilitating communication, understanding, and interaction between individuals and groups. Thus, he must interpret each culture's expressions, intentions, perspectives, ideas, and expectations.

Gabriela Scandura indicates that the translator may be compelled to alter certain elements that carry social, political, or religious taboos in order to protect the viewer (Gabriela, 2004, p. 125).

Does the translator have the right to exercise this self-censorship on the subtitled film, stripping it of all its cultural elements and components? Is it acceptable to restrict and confine the viewer

in the name of protection? Does the censorship machine justify limiting individuals' and societies' cultural choices and orientations?

Hence, censorship becomes a tool of confinement rather than a protective measure. Beyond distorting the viewer's perception and concealing cultural truths, it subjects them to a form of cultural siege that turns them into prisoners of their social reality, preventing them from recognizing the civilization and culture of others and sharing their life experiences.

Furthermore, censorship on subtitled films has another effect that is cinematic, artistic, and aesthetic in nature. Every omission, deletion, or puns used by the translator in subtitling the foreign film negatively impacts the translated work on dramatic and aesthetic levels (Gambier, 2004, p. 4/11).

The difference between higher censorship and self-censorship is that the former is imposed on cinematic work to fulfill political, religious, or ideological interests. In contrast, self-censorship is based on the translator's personal beliefs and ethical principles. In this context, Mathieu Kossovitz states, "I have always been against censorship but in favor of self-censorship as a moral issue because individuals must be responsible for their actions. (Kassovitz, n,d).

#### **4. Limits of Adaptation in Film Subtitling**

As a translation method, adaptation is one of the most significant linguistic tools translators employ to embody this censorship. It involves adjusting all information that carries social or religious connotations that could offend or shock the viewer due to its unethical implications, which do not align with our societies' nature, customs, and traditions.

The issue of censorship in subtitled films remains complex, given its social, cultural, linguistic, and cinematic dimensions. The translator finds himself at a crossroads, pulled in multiple directions. In addition to the linguistic, technical, and psychological constraints posed by the subtitling process, the effect of censorship on the film's content and drama becomes evident. This impact is felt through the removal of all cultural components present in the dialogue that reflect the culture of the other and their social realities, customs, and traditions.

If censorship seeks to erase the identity of the other and deceive the viewer by replacing cultural facts and realities with those more suited to their cultural context, does this necessarily mean abandoning this censorship and disregarding it, presenting the cultural realities depicted in foreign films as they are, without adaptation or alteration? This approach would inevitably shock the viewer and offend his sensibilities.

The solution must be moderate and balanced, relying on the translator's professionalism, broad cultural knowledge, and translation acumen. While the term "censorship" carries negative connotations associated with various forms of oppression, self-censorship remains the preferred solution to fulfill this difficult balance. On the one hand, it involves attempting to preserve as many cultural elements as possible from the original foreign film, thereby maintaining its cinematic quality and dramatic coherence, while making only slight adaptations to the linguistic meanings that the translator may perceive as unethical or unsuitable for their social environment or the religious and ideological inclinations of the audience (Gotlieb, 1994, p. 304).

On the other hand, it protects the viewer from any shocks that could undermine their religious or moral principles, impacting the community's customs and traditions. All this must be done while respecting the viewer's intellect and understanding their psychology and desire to open up to new worlds and cultures that broaden their perspectives and aspirations.

## 5. Self-Censorship

Self-censorship stems from systematic or higher censorship imposed by state authorities. The translator, as a member of society, absorbs several censorship patterns that have always been imposed on them, whether through social norms — upbringing, societal standards that reject vulgarity and require respect for sacred rituals, religious practices, and beliefs — or politically, based on the ideologies and policies of the state that have been ingrained in them, becoming part of their personality.

Therefore, self-censorship can either be conscious, with awareness of its source and causes, or unconscious, becoming an inherent trait in the translator's personality and reflected in their work.

Christian Metz states that "Self-censorship seems, for aesthetic reasons, to be in direct contradiction with the creativity that should emerge from every work." (1968, p. 22).

According to Metz, artistic creativity should not be subject to any kind of censorship, particularly self-censorship, as creativity and censorship are two opposing components that cannot coexist in the same work. Censorship restricts creativity and artistic freedom.

Self-censorship is defined as a preventive measure that a translator resorts to in order to protect themselves from any legal consequences they may face or that might impact the production company or broadcasting channel. It can also be a way to safeguard the audience from awkward situations or exposure to certain shocking or offensive scenes, which could detract from the viewing experience.

Consequently, translators might use various techniques such as imitation, borrowing, altering sentence structures, omitting metaphors and idioms, and generally filtering the text of all cultural signs and markers that distinguish it.

In general, audiovisual translation, particularly subtitling, suffers from what Buckley calls "linguistic conservatism" (Buckley, 2001, p. 275). Subtitling can never fully preserve the original text or translate it completely and accurately due to immense pressures from technical constraints and censorship. The meanings of spoken phrases and sentences in the original film texts cannot undergo a complete and faithful translation because they are fundamentally rooted in culture — and anything cultural is inevitably subject to censorship (Buckley, 2001, p. 276).

Self-censorship, especially in audiovisual translation, remains a challenge that necessitates the translator to employ his skills wisely. He must choose the most appropriate linguistic and translational techniques that enable them to balance linguistic, cultural, and translation components while maintaining the artistic and aesthetic integrity of the film.

## 6. Proposed Solutions

The translator should adopt a moderate approach, seeking to preserve the original version of the subtitled film while respecting the audience's sensibilities and providing content that aligns with the viewer's personality, beliefs, and societal norms. Furthermore, viewers always have the option to access the original untranslated version of the film.

Professional objectivity should also be maintained (Gambier, 2002, p. 8/10).

With that in mind, there are numerous solutions that could help reduce the intensity of censorship on subtitled films, particularly in the Arab world, regarding that Western countries have made significant progress in this area:

- Utilizing Signalétique (signage) symbols to demonstrate the type of films.

- Using colors and shapes to signal the suitability of programs and films for specific audiences. For instance:
  - Green: for family films.
  - Yellow: for adult films only.
  - Red: for violent and horror films.
- Selecting the optimal broadcast time (*Prime Time*), when viewership is at its peak.
- Scheduling broadcasts according to the target audience.
- **Employing the most appropriate language registers**, considering the target audience's age group, educational level, and preferences.
- Families can also apply internal censorship by utilizing software like V-chip and TV Guardian (Gabriela, 2004, p. 126), which are linguistic purification tools (*Purification Langagière*) designed to filter out or cover offensive language based on an adjustable internal dictionary.
- Moreover, using the most suitable translation techniques for effective subtitling is recommended.

## 7. Conclusion

The primary objective of our research was to compile as many questions as possible raised by censorship in subtitled films, regarding that censorship is an integral part of any audiovisual document and a variable factor in the equation of cinematic translation. This aspect can be particularly challenging for non-specialized or inexperienced translators who are unfamiliar with the technical requirements of this type of translation.

The findings of our study are as follows:

- Censorship is regarded as one of the essential and significant mechanisms that subtitled films are subjected to.
- Subtitling films necessitates a wide range of competencies—technical, cinematic, linguistic, translational, and cognitive.
- Subjecting subtitles to censorship can lead to the erasure of a film's cultural characteristics and a dilution of its dramatic content.
- The nature of the receiving culture is one of the primary reasons for adopting censorship and cutting.
- Censorship is a constraint that translators must navigate during the subtitling process to avoid shocking or offending the audience.
- Subtitling is a tool for censorship, allowing modifications to the original dialogue through the omission or replacement of certain linguistic segments.
- Translators may resort to censorship to avoid breaking taboos or employing inappropriate or offensive language.
- Censorship should not distort the film's overall content or its dramatic essence.

Audiovisual translation is a vast field and a fertile ground that requires considerable effort, time, persistent research, and a precise scientific approach to explore thoroughly. This practice raises several challenges and questions that can contribute to building a solid academic and scientific foundation for the field. By intensifying research and studies, we can enrich its scientific framework and provide researchers with the necessary tools to establish this specialty. This type of translation has grown to hold great significance in scientific, social, cultural, economic, and even political contexts.

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