

On the Shoulders of a Giant

From sub-titles for the cinema to sur-titles for the theater

by Mauro Conti (2014)

1.

Live performing arts, to be precise drama, opera, the musical, puppet theater, and other, lesser known traditions, boasts a history dating back thousands of years. Audiovisual narration, on the other hand, has had a journey little more than a century old, having begun with the cinema in 1895; my own grandfather could have told us about its first steps.

From the young audiovisual experience, however, around thirty years ago (1983) live performing arts adopted a technical-literary device that has proved valuable in facilitating the breaking down of linguistic barriers in textual content – subtitles, which all of us have experienced at the cinema, on computers or on mobile devices.

The difference is that cinema sub-titles (incubated in the use of captions adopted by the silent movies) at the theater become sur-titles thanks to their position high up, allowing spectators to read them more easily: a solution couched in common sense, founded on a familiar, comfortable formula, widely tested and even studied as theory by a number of scholars.

2.

The process from the better known sub-titles to the lesser known sur-titles might therefore appear as the gradual extension of a translation system from the audiovisual to the theatrical context. But this passage from film to stage goes much further than the technical aspect, and is today considered one of the most interesting innovations in the field of linguistic mediation.

The first experiment with sur-titles, destined to define the beginning of a new literary genre, took place in 1983. It was based on a consolidated experience in sub-titling, the use of which, if we consider captions inserted between images, coincides with the birth of cinema. It is fair to say, therefore, that sur-titles rise on the shoulders of the giant named sub-titling.

3.

What exactly happened in 1983, and in what context?

We could speak of a rudimentary technical device for sur-titling as far back as 1949. We are in the French sector of a post-war Paris and Bertolt Brecht's production *Die Ausnahme und die Regel* (*The exception and the rule*) is being staged in two versions by Jean-Marie Serreau at the

Comédie des Champs-Élysées: both in French translation (with German sur-titles) and in the original German (with French sur-titles). But this is an isolated case, which went unnoticed despite having taken place in such a cosmopolitan context as Paris.

Why this oblivion? It was not the right moment.

The right moment arrived almost four decades later, in 1983, in a context that was focused on music and thanks to the clear determination of directors and managers such as Lofti Mansouri, whose intuition told them that this method derived from the cinema had the potential to be a powerful tool for popularizing theater, allowing many operatic masterpieces to be presented in their original text. We are in Toronto, where the Canadian Opera Company is to produce an experimental staging of *Elektra* (composed by Richard Strauss to Hugo von Hofmannsthal's libretto), sung in the original German with sur-titles in English. The following year (1984) at the New York City Opera, Jules Massenet's *Cendrillon (Cinderella)*, to Henri Cain's libretto, is staged for the first time in the United States with the same innovative criteria: in the original language (in this case, French) with sur-titles in English. And as early as 1986, at the international festival of the Maggio Musicale, Florence hosts the European debut of sur-titles for the musical drama *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* by Richard Wagner (*The Master-Singers of Nuremberg*, to the composer's libretto), sung in the original German with Italian sur-titles.

Through the experience of opera, this form of linguistic and cultural mediation – which is available today in numerous advanced techniques, such as the multilingual options of cabled monitors and wireless devices – has grown into a regular, necessary tool with the audience of opera and drama across the world.

4.

The success of sur-titles and their main characteristics, as we can see, come precisely from their ability to take on the difficult challenges facing audiences of operatic theater – or rather to clarify textual content, maintaining the originality of the sung word, unchanged in its untranslatable uniqueness of sound and poetic dimension.

The operatic repertoire, traditionally for the masses and today regrettably elitist, is a sort of ambassador for a particular culture and a certain language. The Italian language, for example, is at home in English-language opera houses, as are English and German in opera houses in Latin countries. (And) This is (by now) a fact.

But in the territory of opera houses, where in the past the language of opera traditionally was a common idiom and expressed a common cultural heritage, nowadays the language of the sung word unites few and distances many: it unites experts and lovers and distances the new generations. Because of this, cultural institutions, in order to support their very existence, must open the doors of theaters to a fresh, new audience and at the same time gratify the old guard.

The national and at the same time cosmopolitan aspect of operatic theater has therefore found in the linguistic mediation of sur-titles an extraordinary popularizing expedient capable of amplifying both the range of spectators and the programming of theatrical seasons. And this has become the norm in every part of the world for at least three decades.

Before the use of sur-titles, theaters were either limited in programming operas linguistically distanced from their audience (avoiding for example Janáček in New York, or Berg in Madrid) or had to use singable (rhythmic) versions that compromised both content and musical aspects (just think of Wagner sung in Italian or Verdi sung in German).

Composing for one language rather than another means creating music from the sounds, cadence and colors of that particular language. Those sounds, cadences, and colors (that) make a score one with the original poetic text. If there have been notable exceptions, they have just confirmed this general rule.

5.

The first and most important factors that distinguish the habitual use of sub-titles (as developed in film), from the use of sur-titles are therefore the *experience* and the *knowledge* of opera. The same factors are equally important when sur-titles are displayed in other forms of theater, for example in drama.

Professional attention to the *music*, and therefore principally to the *rhythm*, is the compass that orientates and distinguishes the author of sur-titles – whether working in operatic productions, where the music follows a written score, or following actors, whose musicality is certainly not visible from a stage but is clearly recognizable in the beat of the dialogue.

The attention to the rhythm of the song or the actor, furthermore, is closely functional to a sort of dramatic mapping of the work. To follow the rhythm, in other words, means to follow the story and tell it again together with the actors. With the principal aim of drawing the least possible attention to oneself and not stealing space from the stage.

6.1

The ancient method of work based on *rehearsing* is the other factor that, in associating the habitual use of sur-titles to theatrical procedures, marks a further difference from what happens in cinema, where the authors of sub-titles are faced with a finished product, identical every time it is reproduced, without the renewed involvement of the actors.

From this point of view, the theater succeeds in metabolizing everything, even the cinema and a technique born in the cinema, such as sub-titles. But on condition that this new element be included and optimized through a system that involves every component of live performing arts, such as music, direction, scenery and costumes, and lights.

And this system, in other words, is simultaneous checking in real time of all of the scenic elements. Sur-titles included – a resource that is not in itself an attraction (except in rare exceptions) but that, guiding the spectator during the staging, requires a specific technical, linguistic, dramaturgical and esthetic functionality.

To rehearse, also in the case of sur-titles, therefore means *to correct*. To correct the original solution according to what happens or changes on stage. To correct, by reducing the text, and an excessive effort in terms of reading rather than watching. To correct a graphic format that slows down reading or is not clear next to what is heard.

6.2

The live performing arts are by their own nature non-mechanical, non-routine work. The constant and inevitable variations in every presentation, as well as the focus necessary to sustain the performance from beginning to end, are all elements that affect the work of those who write and send the sur-titles, clearly distinguishing them from colleagues dealing with sub-titles.

The most uncomfortable placement of theatrical titling (*sur*, *over*), in comparison to cinematographic titling (*sub*), requires longer reading times than for sub-titles and, as a consequence, (the need for) a complex and demanding editing, with the aim of creating a translation-adaptation that favors much more what is seen and heard on stage rather than the text to be read.

In any case, the very specific editing required by sur-titles stresses aspects of audio-visual use, already highlighted by scholars of multimedia translation: with the same text, reading is slower than listening; to facilitate listening, it is necessary to intervene in every text to be read. Under specific

circumstances, a text might need to be shortened, but not mechanically; on the other hand, it might need to remain uncut, or even to be enlarged, with no fear of excessive length or repetition.

The point to which a (written) adaptation is faithful to the original (spoken / sung) text depends on the reading time. Each single caption of sur-titling will therefore have a specific relationship with the original language: from a maximum of information (in which the original is even enriched) to a minimum of information (in which the original is considered untranslatable).

6.3

It should be kept in mind that, in drama and opera, both the original scripts and librettos have an important poetical and historical weight. (And) To mediate linguistically and culturally with these texts is a highly responsible task requiring the adoption of effective popularization strategies, capable of overcoming centuries of gap between the audience and the stage.

7.

We have seen how the thirty-year experience on a large scale for sur-titles (formulated for the theater) has benefited greatly from the previously established tradition of sub-titles (which, we might say,) were created at about the same time as the cinema). So much so that studies on sub-titles are useful to put into context the question of sur-titles – even if they do not quite grasp the more specific nature of sur-titles.

Indeed, it has not been stressed so far how important the experience of musical works is for linguistic mediation in the theater, a factor that has molded common practice more than any other aspect - together, naturally, with the working methods of live performing arts, based on *rehearsing* every solution alongside other components, and with the need for very specific editing.

But differences may also become a common patrimony. In this way the experience that the authors of sur-titles have gained through the sung word, and that they have then been able to extend to straight plays, can again be made available to those who, in cinema, deal with guiding the spectator through his / her own journey through the text.

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