In this chapter of Nornes book, Nornes focuses heavily on the translation of intertitles—intertitles being photographed dialogue cards that are placed in the midst of a film. Nornes seems to be saying that intertitles are very important, calling them “untapped riches” (Nornes 95), which expresses the mood of a film in a way that action cannot. So in his opinion, intertitles are what make the film.

Intertitles were in part important back then, because they have yet to invent a technological system that could successfully synchronize sound with moving images. Therefore they have voice actors who supplies the dialogue live. But such a technique only works when the voices are in harmony with the movie. Otherwise, Nornes feels it is disjointing to have a human voice in conjunction with the film. The antonymic quality of human voices disturbs the element of the film, and at that time, in the early the 1900s, intertitles are more suitable, and flows better with the movie, for any necessary narration needed for the film.

Stemming from that, Nornes moves to a more microscopic focus on the translation of intertitles in imported films. Translating intertitles might seem like a simple and straightforward task, but there are many nuances in languages that complicate the task. Not to mention, translators who were not up to par often misspelled words in the foreign language they are translating the intertitles into.

In addition to misspellings, through translation, the original meaning and intent of intertitles are often hashed up. There are many reasons for such a phenomenon, one being that shorter intertitles are more economical, thus during translation, translators often cut down on poetic intertitles, and therefore shortening the film and saving money. While being an economical move, this sort of dialogue trimming often times takes away from the artistic style of the inscriptions, thereby affecting the overall mood of the film. Judging from Nornes words, he does laments this lost.

The next reason for flawed translations in intertitles is not due to the folly of the translator, but due to censorship by the government of the importing country. If the content of an intertitle was offensive to the people or undermining to the reigning government, then the government will seek to censor the translated content so that it is render harmless. In this case, the hashing of intertitles was deliberate. Despite the intentionality, such censorship is another example of how the meaning of the original intertitle gets twisted and lost in translation.

Finally, the third reason for this misprision of intertitles falls under the idea of free translation. In this case translators will disregard the original intertitles to create something new and potentially diverge greatly from the original intent and meaning of the intertitles. Some translators will even take the freedom to create burlesque intertitles in lieu of the original ones to create a parody of intertitles.

The three reasons above all serve to emphasize on the loss in meaning that happens when a body of text is translated. Based on these points, regarding the translation of intertitles, Nornes seems most concerned with the elements and information that is lost during the process of translation. However, Nornes also acknowledges that a literal translation would not be able to accurately express the more artistic or poetic style of certain intertitles. In this sense, it is hard to ascertain Nornes stance in this debate, since he does not state his preference for a certain translation mention. Does Nornes think that literal translations are better? Or would he like a
freer form of translating that won’t be as rigid, but will lose some information in the translating process?

As for my views, I don’t believe word-for-word translations are the way to go. Although doing a literal translation should, in theory, ensure that nothing gets lost in translation, I feel that the diversity and differences across languages simply would not permit a direct translation that is eloquent and applicable to the local region. A translator must take into account colloquial nuances when translating, otherwise the translated product will be disjointed, stiff, and incoherent, much like a badly dubbed film, as Jeffrey Dym would put it.

Reviewed by Melissa Yang