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Michael Cronin. 2009. *Translation Goes to the Movies*. Routledge. ISBN13: 978-0-415-42285-7.

Translation goes to the Movies (Routledge 2009), Michael Cronin's excellent new book, opens with the following mission statement: "This book is about the visibility of translators. More properly it is about how translation becomes visible when we know how to look. And one of the places where we have often neglected to look is a medium primarily concerned with visibility, cinematography" (x). Such an oft-translated medium as film certainly deserves our attention, not just as scholars interested in translation, but as inhabitants of a globalized, multilingual world. Cronin, the Director of the Centre for Translation and Textual Studies at Dublin City University, is well-equipped to instruct us in such matters. He has authored several cutting-edge works on translation including Translation and Globalisation (2003) and Translation and Identity (2006).

His latest book takes a scholarly look at translation in the context of film, expanding the scope of translation well beyond the practical exchange of words, and showing his readers why translation matters. This is evidenced by the essential role that translation has played and continues to play in a sector as mainstream as Hollywood film. While Cronin argues that translation has always been an element of film, he points out how translation and translators have recently become increasingly visible onscreen characters who are in and of themselves worthy of filmmakers' interest. For Cronin, the changing role of translation and translators on the big screen reflects contemporary trends of globalization. While some of the links that he draws between acts of translation and film are at times a bit hasty, Cronin's work is nonetheless quite thorough, and forces us to consider the weighty effects of an activity which has too often been dismissed as a merely practical exercise.

The book's structure is lively and comprehensive, first introducing translation and film and explaining their connection, and then delving into a specific aspect of this film/translation nexus in each of the following chapters. Cronin begins with a comprehensive history of film, fittingly viewed through the lens of translation. As the author shows, directors as early as Griffith (whose films ranged from 1908-1930) believed that the moving picture was "a universal language, a way of undoing the mishap of Babel" (1). Yet even the earliest forms of film were combined with more literal attempts at translation. The majority of silent films were accompanied by evocative music or a live lecturer who would create dialogue on the spot to accompany the film.

Cronin's historical discussion firmly anchors the role of the viewer in the movie-going (and thus translation) process. The viewer confronts the film with his/her own language, culture and set of beliefs. While this has always been true (viewers interact with the films they see), it has recently become an increasingly charged issue due to film digitization, which allows today's films to "remain on the move and . . . continue to exert their influence..." (25). This means that every film will have varying audiences, as they can be viewed in varying places and times. A film that premieres in Japan may become available over the Internet and be viewed by audiences in Africa. Similarly, an American film made in 1910 might now be easily available on DVD, and modern American audiences will have a very different experience of it. Thus globalization and technology, as the mechanisms that increase the access to film and the cultures and languages they portray, have become important influences on translation and film alike. For Cronin, both film and translation are forms of mediation, and his subsequent analyses consistently examine the role of translation and translators within this context.

Chapter 2 examines the classic *Western*, viewed as a linguistic hotbed for its location in "the place where all borders meet, the frontier" (28). Cronin takes the opportunity to examine issues of power and control as they relate to language, particularly with regards to colonization. In *Stagecoach*, directed by John Ford in 1939, special attention is paid to the Native American character Yakima (who, despite her origins, speaks Spanish). She is married to an American, yet

is still the subject of much suspicion. When Yakima disappears, she is blamed for stealing things, and many fear she will return with dangerous Apaches.

As Cronin astutely observes: “[t]he relationship between language mediation and gender has had many ramifications from the colonial period to the present. Control of the speaking subject in many instances implies control of the body. The control is rendered problematic, however, by the difficulty in controlling/monitoring the translation flow” (34). Yakima’s foreignness, as a woman and a Spanish-speaker, is cause for fear: an inability to understand her translates into a lack of control. It is thus impossible for even the colonizing Americans to overpower her, for they lack the words to do so.

While this language-based translation analysis is certainly thorough, Cronin is careful to remind his readers that translation does not only involve different languages. He cites another *Stagecoach* character, Doc Boone, who in manipulating various linguistic registers acts as intralingual translator for the various kinds of English-speakers who would not otherwise be able to communicate effectively. Holding the “interstitial place of the translator...[he] is able to create an, albeit fragile, community of understanding between the different members of the stagecoach party” (37). Doc’s effective translations enable communication and thus allow the plot to move forward.

While translation can ensure that the plot does not break down due to a lack of communication, translation itself can be exploited for comedic purposes, and to uproarious effect. Cronin relates this use of translation to history as well as comedy, citing in particular how the vast migration from Old to New World was portrayed through film. As Cronin notes: “One way of exploring the tensions implicit in language encounter was through parody or satire, laughter both a guide and a caution to the hybrid polity coming into being” (54). Film, perhaps because it too is a medium of translation, has historically been extremely attuned to differences of language and culture, and has craftily used such differences for comedic purposes.

In his discussion of *A Night at the Opera* (directed by Sam Wood, 1935), a tale which involves illegally bringing an Italian opera singer to New York to perform, Cronin discusses the various ways in which language differences are portrayed onscreen. These include metonymical use of exaggerated accents or cultural signs such as food. Thus the “interpreter” speaks nothing but an Italian-cadenced gibberish, and only a few characters are required to speak with any accent at all, even though they are “Italian”. Similarly, it is indeed the *act* of interpreting (or lack thereof) that is more important than the words interpreted.

This performative aspect of translation (and its various degrees of success) is further analyzed with regards to Sacha Baron Cohen’s *Borat* (2006, directed by Larry Charles), a film in which translation serves as the central comic mechanism. The film employs a sustained “... translation effect, namely, the sense of a text which is clearly translated by virtue of the fact that [it] is clearly beholden to the syntax or lexicon of the source language” (72). Borat’s over-translated speech signals his foreignness and naïveté, giving him license to violate all kinds of taboos. As someone who is “obviously and publicly laboring under the burden of translation” (74), Borat may use any register, including the obscene, as he travels across the “US and A”. In transgressing taboos, his character provides a comedic social commentary on the people and authorities he encounters and causes viewers (in between their fits of laughter) to question these same rules and institutions.

Translation as a means of social commentary in a globalized world is Cronin’s ultimate object of study, yet it is really only in his penultimate, and arguably best, chapter, entitled “The long journey home: *Lost in Translation to Babel*” that he extensively and exhaustively deals with this subject. He begins by citing one of the first scenes of *Lost in Translation* (2003, directed by Sofia Coppola). After finishing an advertising shoot for a Japanese brand of whiskey, the main character Bob Harris calls his wife in Los Angeles. After she coolly remarks ‘I’m glad you’re having fun’ Harris replies ‘It’s not fun. It’s just very, very different.’ (81).

The films discussed in this chapter highlight the fact that no one is immune to language difference (and especially not to its potential accompanying loneliness). The characters' sometimes startling and sudden dependency on translation allow us to "consider what happens when translation becomes a way of examining the contemporary consequences of living in a globalized world" (81). Dependence on translation and the consequences of mistranslation are certainly highlighted here, as when Harris' interpreter truncates a lengthy series of directions to a mere "Yes, turn to camera" (83). Yet for Cronin, rather than this being merely a case of bad translation, it is a reflection of an inability to effectively translate local idioms into a foreign language. As Cronin notes "...the irresistible rise of the brand image can suggest a centripetal version of globalization as a gallery of images, freed from the nets of language by the universal currency of the gaze. *Lost in Translation* suggests otherwise by reminding spectators of the intractable, local realities of translation on a multilingual planet" (85). Mistranslation is funny, yet viewers feel Harris' loneliness and alienation all too well, a casualty of not just insufficient translation, but of differing cultures.

Cronin's analyses of *The Interpreter* (directed by Sydney Pollack, 2005) and *Babel* (directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006) are similarly strong, especially in their demonstration of how translation is related to issues of risk and control. Thus in *Babel*, when the doctor tells *ad hoc* village interpreter Anwar that Susan will die if she stays in the village, Anwar tells her husband she will be fine (104). While Anwar's lie is ethically inexcusable, Cronin points out that he has been placed in a risky and unfortunate position. He is the only one in the village who can speak both languages, and thus have any possibility of acting as translator; yet, language ability is not enough, as ultimately he fails to fulfill his translation mission faithfully for emotional reasons - he cannot transmit such a harsh message. This scene reemphasizes the idea that translation, while it involves using words, cannot be reduced solely to linguistic utterances.

Cronin's final chapter discusses translation in science fiction films, including the *Star Wars* trilogy (1977, 1980, 1983 directed by George Lucas, Irvin Kershner and Richard Marquand respectively). While the analyses of the films are thoughtful and comprehensive, most insightful

is Cronin's discussion of subtitles. Subtitles very literally highlight the act of translation by giving "substantive reality to the existence of difference" (115). Cronin draws a distinction between dubbing, which tries to hide language difference, and subtitling, which brings such difference to the fore, creating an opportunity for the viewer to simultaneously experience difference and achieve understanding.

This is at the heart of the book's message and is thus an excellent conclusion to Cronin's treatment of translation and film. Indeed, translation as mediation within film reflects the tendentially global and multilingual nature of current times and can lead viewers to become more diverse in their understanding of differences. As Cronin himself notes: "Translation is that moment of containment where the other becomes capable of being understood and equally importantly, becomes susceptible to influence". This book, in demonstrating the power that translation wields, firmly establishes the theme as one for which study is not only worthy, but essential.

Translation's new more visible presence within film seems to point to viewers' increasing, literal awareness of translators and translation. While film has always involved a translation of sorts, interest onscreen has begun to shift to the characters who perform this mediative service. This increased visibility of translation is indeed exciting, as it perhaps also reflects an increased awareness of the global and cultural differences that translators mediate.

Liza Tripp is a full-time freelance translator of French, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese into English based in Brooklyn, NY. She also holds a Chancellor's Fellowship at CUNY Graduate Center, where she is currently completing the 4th year of the PhD program in French Translation. She can be reached at liza2395@aol.com