AVT as a vector of cultural dissemination:
fiction or reality?

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ABSTRACT

Audiovisual Translation (AVT) has been one of the most recent research fields in Translation Studies, as translation theory felt the urge to open up to more flexible and even creative ways of thinking translation within the audiovisual (AV) field. Since then, research has been oriented towards linguistic, semantic, historical or cultural aspects, among others. However, studies based on statistical data still lack, as well as those centred on the real perception of the message that is received through different AVT modes. Considering the representative nature of audio description (AD) and subtitling among the existing modes of AVT in Portugal, we intend to analyse the potential of these 2 AVT modes to enhance the transmission of cultural elements of audiovisual products to wider audiences.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION

Historically, AD aims at enabling a specific population group, the blind and visually impaired people, to have access to the cinema and television programmes. This is done by means of the addition of a descriptive narration to the existing dialogues and sound track, using the pauses in the audio (see Fig. 1). According to Benecke (2004: 78), these commentaries intend to describe the "action, body language, facial expressions, scenery and costumes", so that "what goes in the eyes comes out the mouth" (Novovitch n/d: online).

AD for cinema and TV started in the 1980s both in the USA and in some European countries, especially in Germany and in the UK.

Fig 1. Example of a AD commentary from "Pátio das Cantigas", Portuguese film by Francisco Ribeiro (1942), AD presented by Quico (Tv Cabo) at UTAD in 2006.

Despite this, audio description continued to expand to other areas, namely the performing arts, galleries and museums, historical sites and other forms of entertainment. Museum AD consists of a technique to create a verbal image of a piece of art (e.g. a painting, a sculpture), or a whole exhibition, so as to bring it to life to the blind and visually impaired, along with historical and cultural information. The need for museums to cater for visitors' special demands led to the development of audio guides as the technical support for this service (see Fig. 2). Eventually, audio guides ended up satisfying requirements of other museum audiences, namely the access to a more complete and thorough overview to exhibitions that went beyond the labels and available brochures and included a historical background, a description of the piece, highlighting special features, and relevant technical aspects.
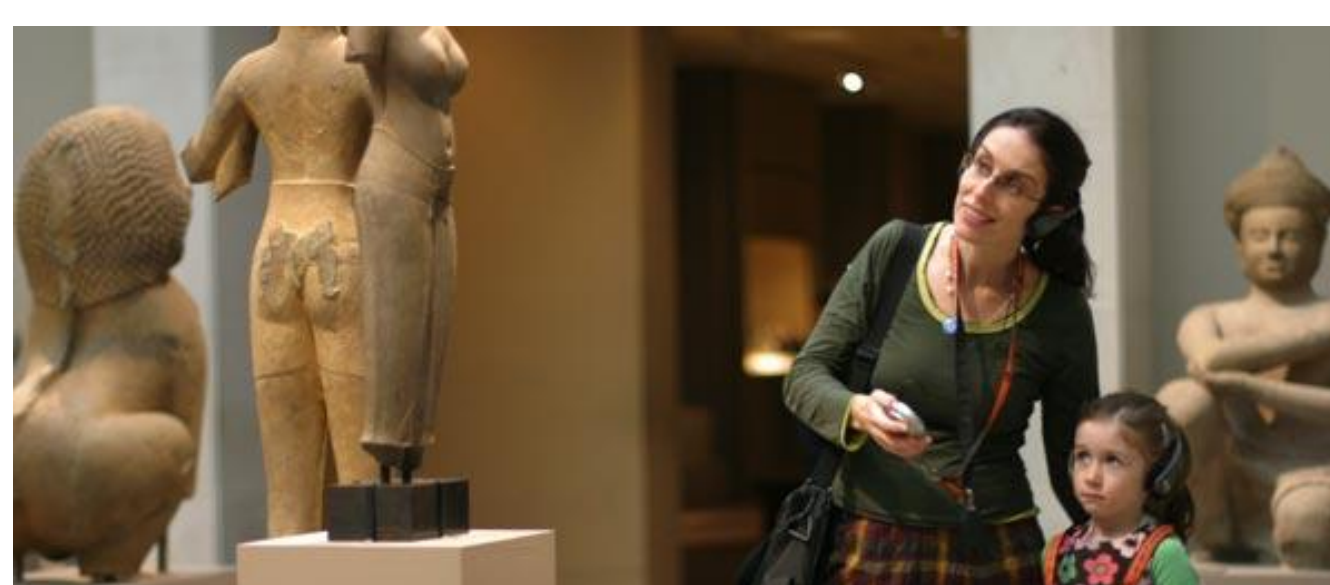

Fig 2. Family guide in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA.

It is due to this that we uphold that one of purposes of AD is strongly connected to cultural dissemination, since it is through the recurrent use of audio guides that AD overcomes the restricted group of the blind and visually impaired and reaches the general audiences of museums.

SUBTITLING

In order to demonstrate how cultural elements of an AV product may escape the attention of viewers who have no access to subtitling, we decided to conduct a test with a group of 16 master's students in Translation (see Fig. 4). The short film used for this survey was "Missing" (2007), by Matthieu Donck, a Belgian young director. This short was considered by the critics as an example of a nonsense story, which is also a particularity of Belgian cinema.

Fig 3 Image of the Belgian short film "Missing", by Matthieu Donck (2007).

The first stage consisted of watching the film without subtitling and trying to identify different elements of the film (see Fig. 5 and 6). At a second stage, after watching the film with subtitles, students had to complete or change previous information and identify the major elements that they had only understood thanks to the subtitling (see Fig. 7 and 8). Generally speaking, we could observe that the cultural elements were much better identified with the subtitled version and this was

particularly relevant for the sub-group of students who had no or little knowledge in the French language (G1 in Fig. 5 and 7). However, we should point out that one specific cultural aspect, the Belgian accent in French (which is quite striking), was not noticed as a relevant characteristic, neither by G1 nor G2.
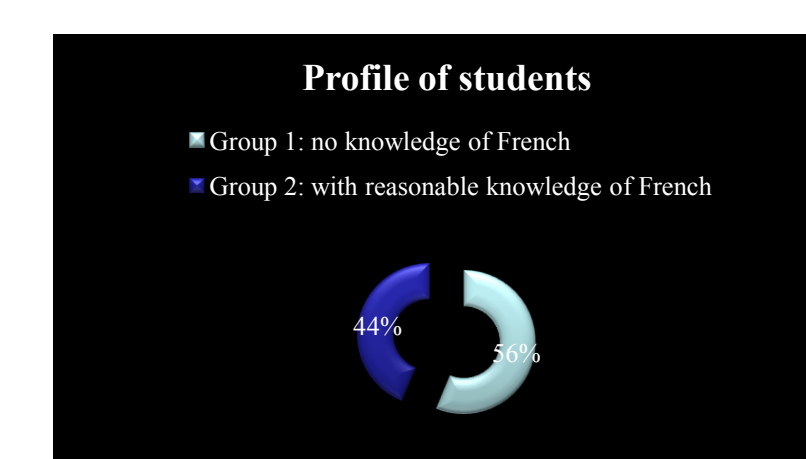

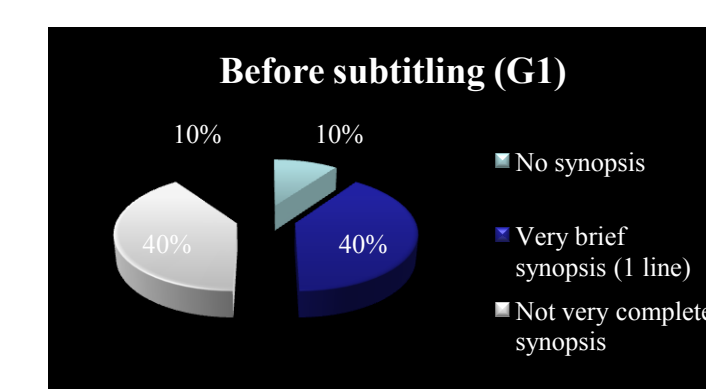**Fig 4. Profile of the students polled.**

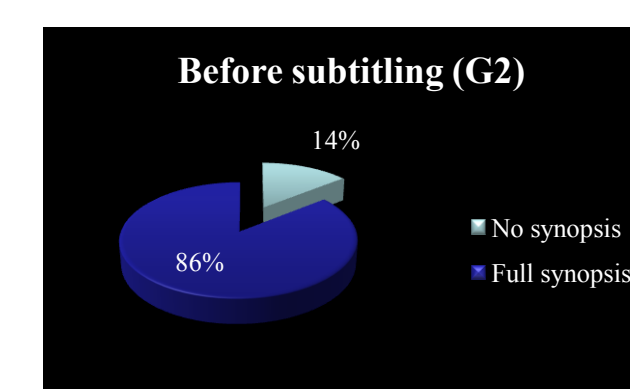**Fig 5. Cultural perception of G1 after watching film without subtitles.**
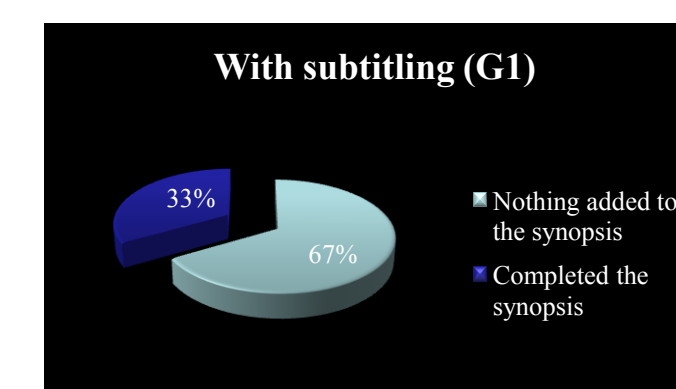**Fig 6. Cultural perception of G2 after watching film without subtitles.**

Fig 7 Cultural perception of G1 after watching film with subtitles
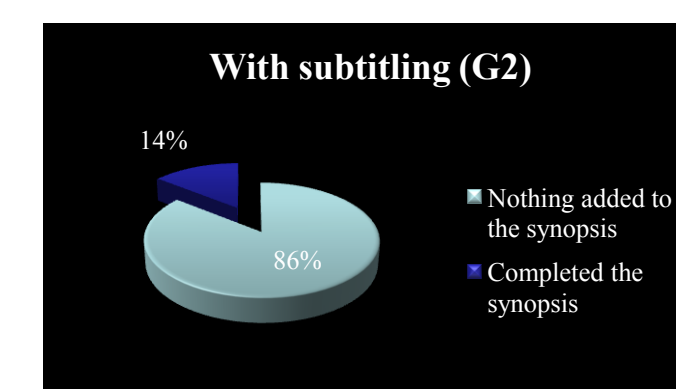**Fig 8 Cultural perception of G2 after watching film with subtitles**

FINAL REMARKS

The conclusions to which we have reached so far seem to clearly indicate that there is a contribution of these two AVT modes to a higher degree of dissemination of cultural products, either within the cinema and TV products or those of the performing arts and even at places which traditionally exhibit art in a more "static way", such as museums. Nevertheless, it also appears that some cultural aspects may not be clearly transmitted by these modes and research has to be pursued in order to turn their role into reality.

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