



# From film reception to translation production: Suboptimal visual-verbal coding

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**Abstract:** Typically, translation is conceived of as a process in which the translator is presented with source elements to be rendered into the target language. In this paper we focus on a decision-making phase that is taken for granted in the above formulation but emerges in the context of audiovisual translation, where the source material is semiotically complex. That phase consists in deciding whether certain source elements are to be translated. Language in film is canonically thought of as dialogues or monologues that are delivered orally, and it comes as no surprise that research into the translator's decisions has been mostly concerned with this mode of communication. An under-examined case is when rather than being spoken, language is shown on the screen. As is argued in this paper, such scenarios have rich meaning-making potential and clearly deserve scholarly attention. The paper has two main objectives. The first one is to offer insights into how different types of visual verbal coding (VVC) function in film, with an emphasis on the implications for the translator's decisions. The second objective is to offer a methodological perspective. To that end, the reported research into VVC is two-pronged. First, we offer an introspection-based qualitative analysis of a representative selection of VVC cases. That line of inquiry is then combined with input obtained from a reception experiment.

**Keywords:** Translation and cognition; visual attention; audiovisual translation; translatorial decision making.

## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on a decision-making phase of the translation process. Since translation is conventionally conceived of as a process in which the translator is presented with source elements to be rendered into the target language, the decision-making phase consists in deciding whether/which source elements are in fact to be translated. In the context of audiovisual translation, where the source material is semiotically complex (cf. e.g., Delabastita, 1989; Chaume, 2004; Zabalbeascoa, 2008), remarkably more so than in many other types of interlingual transfer, this decision-making phase gains significance. Language in film is canonically thought of as dialogues or monologues that are delivered orally, and it comes as no surprise that research into the translator's decisions has been mostly concerned with this mode of communication. An under-examined case is when rather than being spoken, language is shown on the screen in the form of diegetic text. As is argued below, such scenarios have rich meaning-making potential and clearly deserve scholarly attention.

The present paper aims at combining a methodological perspective with practical insights into how different types of VVC (visual verbal coding) function in film, with a particular emphasis on the implications for the translator's decisions. With this in mind, we offer an introspection-based qualitative analysis of a representative selection of VVC cases, which is then combined with input obtained from a reception study. We wish to argue that such a combination enables productive cross-feeding whereby introspection is a critical phase – for instance when it comes to identifying facets of the researched phenomena and formulating hypotheses – but is vitally enriched and even productively constrained by external input elicited from participants in experiments.

## 2. Definitions and illustrations

### 2.1. Visual-verbal coding

As indicated above, our focus is on visually represented uses of language, i.e. what has been referred to as “text on screen” (Matamala & Orero, 2015) or “visual verbal coding” (Deckert & Jaszczyk, 2019), hereinafter VVC. We examine a subset of VVC's diegetic cases – those that function as part of the action – as opposed to VVC that comes from outside of the film's universe (extra-diegetic VVC), such as opening credits. Further zooming in, we investigate cases characterised by suboptimal ostensiveness, the premise being that VVC in film can be positioned on a cognitive-communicative continuum. On one end of that continuum there are visual verbal stimuli with high cognitive salience, and in those cases, it can be rather unambiguously concluded they are intended to draw attention to themselves, or to be optimally “ostensive” (cf. Sperber & Wilson, 1995 [1986]). Toward the other end of the cline, we find visual verbal stimuli that are suboptimally salient, or – as a more extreme subset – liminally salient (cf. Deckert & Jaszczyk, 2019). In practical terms, those instances will be cognitively registered by only a (variably) small portion of viewers – these stimuli draw attention to themselves in less ostensive fashions. Then, naturally, there will also be a host of cases between these extremes.

With these introductory remarks in mind, a broader premise of this paper is that films generally communicate messages with variable ostensiveness<sup>1</sup> – not limited to VVC – which poses translatorial challenges.

Before we discuss suboptimally ostensive visual stimuli, we want to provide an example of optimally ostensive VVC. For instance, in the neo-noir psychological thriller *Nocturnal Animals* (2016), which uses a story-within-the-story narrative, in one of the scenes, Susan, ex-wife of the main character Tony, is in an art gallery watching a large painting composed of an enormous inscription: *REVENGE* (see Fig. 1). The painting is centrally framed in the scene and the message is potentially important for the interpretation of the entire plot of the film, which can be read as a revenge story on two different levels.<sup>2</sup>

Such a global reading of the film does not necessarily require this particular painting to be consciously apprehended by the viewer, but its salience significantly contributes to this understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term ‘ostensiveness’ following the terminology adopted in Relevance Theory by Sperber and Wilson (1995 [1986]). By “optimally ostensive VVCs” we mean VVCs which are easily/likely noticeable by the audience. By contrast, “suboptimally ostensive VVCs” refers to instances which are less perceptible and less likely to be registered.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2016/12/9/13641416/nocturnal-animals-review-tom-ford-jake-gyllenhaal-amy-adams>.



Figure 1. Screenshot of *Nocturnal Animals* with an example of optimally ostensive VVC

## 2.2. Suboptimally ostensive visual stimuli: The case of “Fight Club”

The construct of suboptimally ostensive visual stimuli draws on that broader idea that filmmakers can intentionally include elements that will be accessed by a mere subset of viewers<sup>3</sup>. Let us illustrate the notion with David Fincher’s 1999 film *Fight Club*, which is a very rich source of such examples.

One of these is that Tyler Durden – one of the film’s central characters, portrayed by Brad Pitt – can be noticed in the film a number of times before he actually appears in the film in the more standard sense of “appearing”. This is accomplished by inserting frames containing Tyler Durden into shots, which produces in viewers who register them an impression of a momentary visual lapse. Given that the juxtaposition of what is real and what is not functions as an important organising notion in the film, this device could fairly easily be accounted for. Additionally, as we learn in the film from Tyler Durden, he used to work part-time as a projectionist at a cinema where he himself inserted frames into films for viewers to subliminally register them. What is more, Brad Pitt/Tyler Durden can be seen for a short while as a member of hotel staff in a promotion video that the film’s narrator views at a hotel, still before Tyler Durden is introduced as a key character in the story.

Another device of this type are Starbucks coffee cups visible in the frame on numerous occasions throughout the film. David Fincher specifically explains that idea as follows:

When I first moved to LA in 1984, you could not get a good cup of coffee in Los Angeles to save your life (...) Then Starbucks came out, and it was such a great idea: good coffee. And when it became successful there were like two or three on every block. It’s too much of a good thing.

He further explains that the company agreed to be featured in his film – they “read the script, they knew what we were doing, and they were kind of ready to poke a little fun at themselves (...)” – and goes on to argue that “(...) there are Starbucks cups everywhere, in every shot”. With the director’s open commentary, we see that there was a clear intention behind what could be

<sup>3</sup> At the same time there are YouTube channels offering in-depth analyses such as “The Film Theorists” breaking down “Fight Club”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-k2pf6fVpI>.

argued – at least by some members of the audience – to be just a random case with no rationale.

In addition to suboptimally ostensive non-verbal stimuli like the two instances mentioned above, the film also features cases of VVC that are suboptimally ostensive. One of these is a cinema marquee displaying the film title *Seven years in Tibet*<sup>4</sup>, notably starring Brad Pitt. Two further film titles briefly and partly visible in the background in the same scene are *The People vs. Larry Flynt* and *The Wings of the Dove*, starring respectively Edward Norton and Helena Bonham Carter<sup>5</sup>, both of whom are the sole actors whose characters are having a heated conversation in this scene of *Fight Club*. While the latter two references can be viewed as having little import to the interpretation of the story told in *Fight Club*, the *Seven Years in Tibet* metatextual reference can be arguably seen as more plot relevant. According to one interpretation, the reference could explain that the film's narrator modelled the projected persona of Tyler Durden on Brad Pitt as he starred in *Seven Years in Tibet*, which was showed at the time.

Without going into more detail – as a more film-centred discussion is beyond the scope of this paper – the point we wish to make is that these ploys of the filmmakers – thought-provoking and consequential for the interpretation of *Fight Club* as they can be – will remain unnoticed by some portion of viewers.

Naturally, one could argue that *Fight Club* will be more of an exception than a rule in the sense that most films will not include such an extensive and well-designed layer of suboptimally ostensive stimuli. While Fincher's film might be hard to match in that respect, among many other aspects, the film we chose for analysis and illustration in this paper is a much newer production, and one that has received less acclaim than *Fight Club*. Nonetheless, as we will go on to show, the film's creators introduced a number of interesting VVCs of the type discussed on the example of *Fight Club*, which in turn may be regarded as translational problems by more perceptive or vigilant translators.

### 3. The analysis: *Velvet Buzzsaw*

#### 3.1. Degrees of VVC ostensiveness and plot relevance

The film *Velvet Buzzsaw*, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and shortly afterwards, was released on Netflix in February 2019. The film was written and directed by Dan Gilroy, starring Jake Gyllenhaal (Morf Vandewalt), Rene Russo (Rhodora Haze), Toni Collette (Gretchen), Zawe Ashton (Josephina), Tom Sturridge (Jon Dondon), Natalia Dyer (Coco), Daveed Diggs (Damrish), Billy Magnussen (Bryson), and John Malkovich (Piers). The film is described as “[a] satire set in the contemporary art world scene of Los Angeles, where big money artists and mega-collectors pay a high price when art collides with commerce” (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7043012>). In fact, the film is a supernatural horror thriller which tells a story of several fictitious characters from the art world (Morf Vandewalt – art critic, Rhodora Haze – art gallery owner, Gretchen – art curator, Josephina – ambitious agency assistant, Coco – gallery assistant, Piers – former artist, Bryson – art gallery worker, Jon Dondon – art gallery owner, Damrish – rising artist) who come into contact with a series

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<sup>4</sup> To be exact, two of the letters on the marquee are missing and the title reads “SEVEN YEAR IN TIBE”.

<sup>5</sup> David Fincher is reported to have chosen Edward Norton and Helena Bonham Carter for their roles in *Fight Club* specifically based on their respective performance in *The People vs. Larry Flynt* and *The Wings of the Dove*.

of mysterious paintings which enact revenge on those who have allowed their greed to get in the way of art.

In the following part of the paper, we discuss cases of VVC in *Velvet Buzzsaw* by characterising two of their constitutive parameters. The first one is how ostensive VVC is in a particular shot or scene. This parameter will be linked to visual salience – in the sense that salient stimuli are typically ostensive (more noticeable) – and can be thought of as the extent to which VVC is likely to attract the viewer’s attention by being recognised as intentionally used to communicate something. The other parameter of VVC is what we could term ‘plot relevance’. The idea here is that VVC will be feeding into the viewer’s interpretation of a film in differently ‘direct’ ways<sup>6</sup>. In other words, while some instances of VVC will more unambiguously relate to some element of the plot, in other cases one could argue for a link but the reasoning behind such a link is easier to question. We will discuss the examples in order of descending ostensiveness.

The examples will later on be again referred to as they were also used in the empirical component of this paper. In that sense, the observations formulated in the following analysis will serve as a basis for hypotheses tested in the reception study we report in the second part of the article.

### Case 1: “No Death No Art 1983”



Figure 2. Screenshot of *Velvet Buzzsaw* with an example of salient and optimally ostensive VVC

The tattoo on Rhodora’s forearm reading “No Death No Art 1983” (see Fig. 2) is a canonical example of optimally ostensive VVC. It is clearly visible on the screen for approximately 3 seconds, with no competing visual stimuli.

When it comes to plot relevance, the very fact that this occurrence of VVC is cognitively salient (cf. e.g., Silva et al., 2006) indicates the filmmakers wanted viewers to read it, which in typical communicative scenarios presumes the stimulus is relevant (enough) for attention allocation and for this purpose was part of the design of the scene (cf. Barsam & Monahan, 2010, p. 156). Indeed, the tattoo explicitly corresponds with the film’s theme as the inscription reflects upon art, which already at this point in the film is a central motif, and (foreshadowingly) upon death, which is yet to become one. What is more, the

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<sup>6</sup> While this will be a matter of degree, it could be argued that in some cases the relevance of a VVC to the plot is relatively uncontroversial. This presupposes that it is hardly possible to conclusively argue that any case of VVC will not be plot-relevant.

relationship between art and death is alluded to in Rhodora's conversation with a long-term colleague, Piers, as Rhodora shows him a piece of paper with observations on artistic creativity. As Rhodora explains, these words were written down by her late friend Polyanna in 1983, and Rhodora "found it clearing her apartment after she ODeD" [overdosed]. It should be noted that Pollyanna and Rhodora together were in a punk rock band called *Velvet Buzzsaw*. The band is referred to in the film, and Rhodora has a tattoo on her neck literally displaying a circular saw blade with the words *Velvet Buzzsaw* inscribed inside. Additionally, this tattooed statement ties to Rhodora's later comment on the nature of art, which will be mentioned in the discussion of Case 4 below.

It should be noted at this point that the Polish subtitles on Netflix render this VVC quite literally – and in capital letters, which increases their salience for the Polish audience – as "BEZ ŚMIERCI NIE MA SZTUKI", but omitting the year. Interestingly, the English audio description completely ignores this very ostensive VVC.

### Case 2: "Humble"

This instance of VVC is not optimally ostensive, but it is relatively salient and is seen on the screen more than once for a fairly long time in a sequence that lasts almost exactly 2 minutes (from the first to the last appearance of "HUMBLE"). In this scene Bryson, Rhodora's employee, has an accident in his truck. He starts a fire while driving and trying to light up a cigarette, and eventually crashes into a gas station.

The word "HUMBLE" is first visible as it lights up when the car approaches (see Fig. 3). Then it is seen less discernibly from the vantage point of the driver and right before the car hits the gas station. The word is then visible as an inscription on the wall of the station as the driver leaves the car (see Fig. 4), and then again when he uses a fire extinguisher. Finally, this case of VVC can be seen once more when the gas station is showed from a distance as the neon light goes out and the screen fades to black (see Fig. 5). It should be pointed out that this final case of VVC is seen when Bryson's drama unfolds inside the building, i.e. earlier on the viewers see Bryson as monkeys come alive in a painting and start pulling him into the painting but Bryson's ultimate fate is left underspecified as the next shot takes the viewer outside and we just hear Bryson's desperate scream that stops simultaneously with the lights of the station going out.





Figures 3-5. Screenshots of *Velvet Buzzsaw* with an example of salient but less ostensive VVC

When it comes to plot relevance, it is here less ascertainable than in Case 1 and more generally, the use of this VVC is somewhat reminiscent of the example of the “REVENGE” painting found in the film *Nocturnal Animals* discussed above.

Admittedly, a simple explanation is viable as “Humble” is short for “Humble Oil and Refining Co.,” an actual company name which used to display signs with the word “Humble”, coming from the name of the town Humble in Texas. As a result of a merger, the company ceased to function under this name in 1973. Still the sign in *Velvet Buzzsaw* could be explained as a relict given that the film is set contemporarily<sup>7</sup>. While this explanation could suffice, the question remains, however, about how much of a coincidence it could be that the name of the station in this scene simultaneously functions as an adjective in English. The question is all the more valid if one tries to interpret the trait of humility – or lack thereof – in the context of the attributes of multiple characters in the film. Following that line of thinking, one might conclude humility is here visually foregrounded for a contrasting effect. In that sense, this instance of VVC also concludes the sequence featuring Bryson, since shortly before his accident and, in consequence, his death, he decided to steal Vetril Dease’s

<sup>7</sup> In this interpretation it remains unclear how it is possible that the station’s neon sign is still connected to a power supply, as it lights up (on its own) for a period of several minutes.

paintings that Rhodora Haze, his employer, instructed him to store away. In doing so, he arguably transformed from someone who plays second fiddle as a technical physical worker into someone who displays artistic ambitions and feels under-appreciated. Bryson's failed attempt to come to the fore through stealing could be tied to hubris, thus supporting the interpretation of VVC in which it is intended to stand for more than a generic name of a gas station. Notably, earlier on in the film, Bryson introduces himself to Coco, another employee at the Haze gallery, as he stands on a ladder and fixes what looks like an electric cable, by saying:

Bryson: I'm really an artist, you know. I did, um, Bandini's "Froot Loop Hippo", you know that. And I glued on all the Froot Loops. Yeah. It's at The Broad right now.

Against this background it is interesting to note that the Polish subtitles do not render this case of VVC. On the other hand, English audio description does refer to the element stating: "In the road ahead the lights of a gas station turn on and glow. A sign above the station reads 'Humble'. The truck barrels toward it." If we assume "Humble" is no longer recognised as a gas station, the phrasing employed in the audio description could likely be interpreted in line with the more elaborate variant we posited.

### Case 3: "Hope"



Figure 6. Screenshot of *Velvet Buzzsaw* with an example of potentially salient but liminal VVC

In the above shot, lasting a little over 3 seconds, one can notice two very small blue street signs giving the name of the street "Hope" in white. We wish to argue that this case of VVC will be positioned at the far end of the "ostensiveness" cline, with a very small portion of the audience allocating visual attention to the name. Similarly, we posit its plot relevance is far from unambiguous. At the same time, it can hardly be argued that the name is random, i.e. that it "just happened to be in the shot". To begin with, "Hope" does not seem a very standard street name, although in downtown LA there in fact is South Hope Street. It is actually possible that the scene was shot in that particular location as the Google street view suggests this would be 1202 Hope Street, but still this does not seem to be an entirely incidental but rather conscious decision made by the filmmakers (as an element of *mise-en-scène* that has a symbolic meaning – cf. Bordwell & Thompson, 2010, Chapter 4). What is more, the intentional character of the street name seems to be

corroborated by the insertion of another visual-verbal element which simply cannot be deemed accidental in this shot – two inscriptions of “HAZE” placed on the door, stating the name of the art gallery in which the subsequent conversation is held between Morf and Rhodora (Haze), the gallery’s owner<sup>8</sup>. Notably, in an earlier scene shot from the inside of the gallery we see Rhodora enter the building through this door with the name of the gallery being visible (see Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Screenshot of *Velvet Buzzsaw* with an example of potentially salient but less ostensive VVC

A word like “hope” could be reasoned to contribute to the viewer’s interpretation of virtually any film. In the case of *Velvet Buzzsaw*, the import of the name can easily be accounted for if one considers the topic of the conversation that the shot with VVC directly introduces. The conversation, in turn, is motivated by Morf’s anxiety, largely due to the fact that three people he knew died in mysterious circumstances over a short period. In that conversation Morf fiercely tries to dissuade Rhodora from dealing in Dease’s works to try to prevent further tragedy.

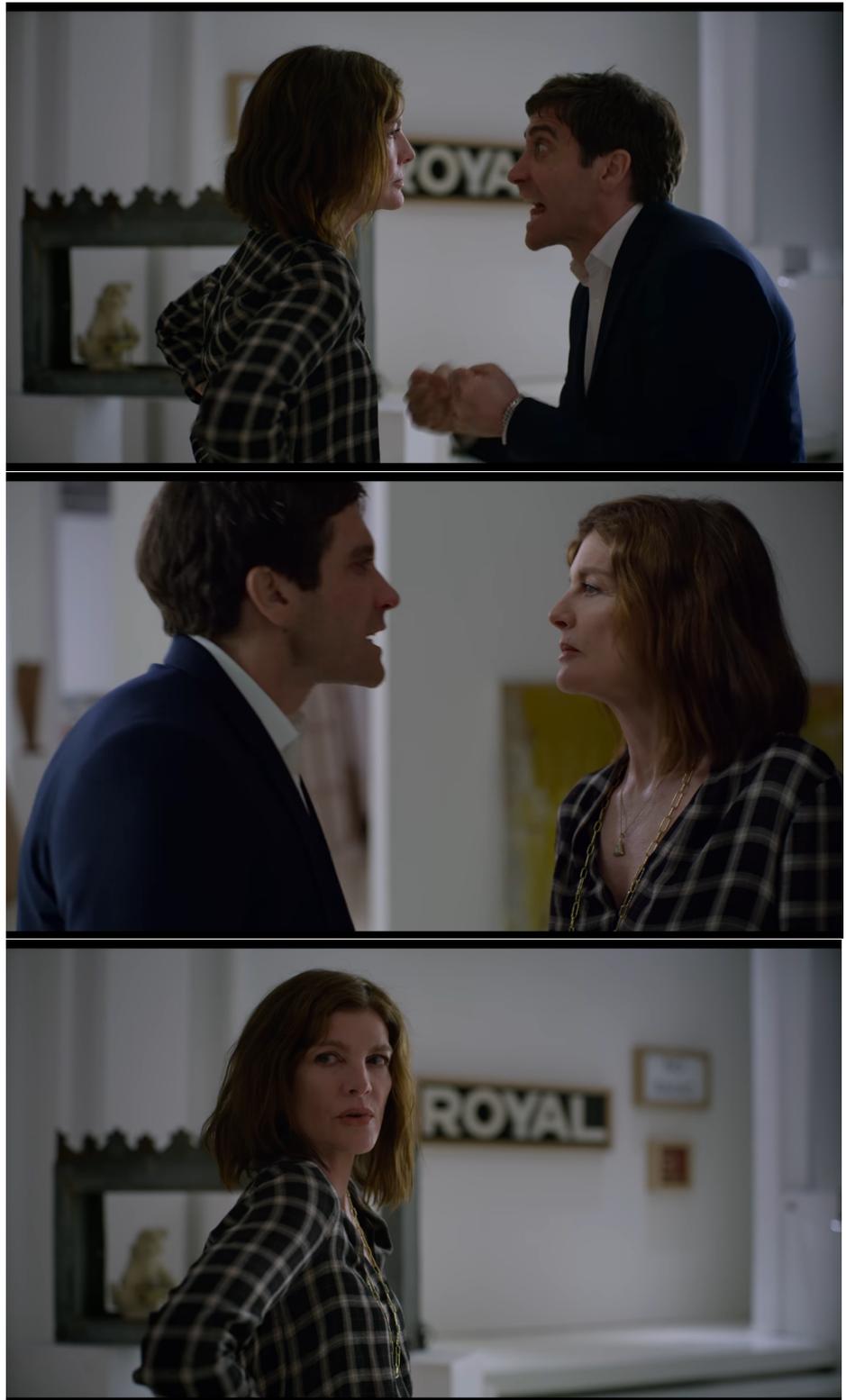
Seen in conjunction with “Hope”, which subtly heralds it, the exchange between the characters can be taken as a stage in the film’s plot when both Morf and Rhodora can be saved, i.e. there is still hope for them. Naturally, not registering the case of liminal VVC in the introductory shot will not prevent the viewer from interpreting the scene along such lines. Still, registering the case of VVC can reinforce and enrich the message as well as – we would argue – add to the viewer’s appreciation of the scene, and possibly of the film as a whole. Neither English audio description nor Polish subtitles mention this instance of VVC.

#### **Case 4: “Royal”**

The conversation between Morf and Rhodora discussed above features another single-word instance of suboptimally ostensive VVC.

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<sup>8</sup> The name of the gallery (Haze), similarly to other cases of VVC used in the film (Humble, Royal, Hope) can be seen as verbal access points to concepts, which – within the interpretative frame of the film at least – seem to form a coherent conceptual frame, i.e. they fit a certain mental model against which the viewer may interpret the behaviour of the main characters or the general state of affairs in the LA art-dealing world (for instance along the lines that that the characters lack humbleness, they live as if in a haze, they act as if they were royals, but there is still some hope for them).



Figures 8-10 Screenshot of *Velvet Buzzsaw* with an example of potentially salient but suboptimally ostensive VVC

The word “ROYAL” is partly visible for approximately 12 seconds in the background against which Morf and Rhodora are shown (see Fig. 8, with the framed inscription positioned exactly between their faces. Towards the end of the exchange, a different shot is used (see Fig. 9), with “ROYAL” no longer displayed. Then, as Morf leaves, the shot is analogous to the one used earlier (see Fig. 10) but this time VVC is more prominent. While it is partly out of

focus – which is constitutive of its suboptimal cognitive-communicative status – as was the case in the earlier shot, it is now visually unobstructed. Even more significantly, there are fewer competing stimuli in this shot, both verbally and visually, since in the previous shot featuring “ROYAL” attention was strongly attracted by Morf’s emphatically emotional way of speaking and gesturing. Here the word is displayed adjacent to Rhodora’s face for a little under 4 seconds before the scene comes to a close.

On the whole, then, this example of VVC would be categorised as liminally ostensive, and in that respect could be comparable to the instance in Case 3. However, the difference is the overall exposition and prominence of “ROYAL” as part of *mise-en-scène*. Compared to Case 3, the word occupies a significantly larger portion of the frame, contrasts well with its surroundings (for some, it may reflect the colour of Rhodora’s outfit and thus produce a metaphorical link) and features in several adjacent shots within this scene. When it comes to ascertaining the degree of plot relevance, “ROYAL” is arguably the most challenging one among the four cases discussed here. An admittedly intuitive postulate would be that the notion of royalty connects to exclusiveness and selectiveness of art<sup>9</sup> – at least in the sense depicted in *Velvet Buzzsaw*. This idea appears to make sense if we take into account what is transmitted acoustically when “ROYAL” is coded visually. As she is left alone, Rhodora utters a maxim-like line, formally addressed at Morf (given the form of address at the end), even though Rhodora knows he cannot hear her at that point: “All art is dangerous, Morf”. This statement – notably used on the film’s promotional poster – dovetails with the idea that dealing with (and in) art is not, or should not, be open to anyone. While such an interpretation will not be universally shared by all viewers, this VVC appears to co-create an interesting case of cross-modal complex of speech and image that brings in new meaning-making potential and opens avenues of interpretation.

Again, the examined case of VVC was not rendered into Polish, it was also ignored in the English audio description.

### 3.2. *The empirical part*

#### 3.2.1. *Study design and methodology*

In order to empirically test the hypotheses and observations formulated in Section 3.1. on the varying degrees of VVC reception and their subjective relevance to the film plot, we conducted an online reception study.

The study took a form of an anonymous survey questionnaire which involved open and close-ended questions which the participants had to answer after watching three film scenes (with a length of 2:26, 3:20 and 4:57, respectively). The participants were explicitly instructed to first download a package with video clips and only then proceed with filling in the survey questionnaire via the provided URL address. In addition, in order to minimise potential interference, the participants were instructed not to discuss the survey questions with other study participants and the survey remained active for one week only.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts: one general and the other specific. In the introductory part the respondents were asked about their age, gender, level of English and their previous watching experience with the film *Velvet Buzzsaw*. The second part focused on respondents’ reactions and reflections concerning selected scenes from the analysed film – corresponding

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, selectiveness is explicitly referred to at one point in the film by Morf. As his friend Josephina comments “Nothing is ever good enough for you” after he criticises the music and colour of the casket at a funeral, he replies “That’s my job, I am selective.”

with the case studies described in Section 3 above. In particular, the respondents were asked whether they had noticed the examples of VVC in the scenes they previously watched (the questionnaire included a visual prompt in form of a screenshot of a film frame featuring the VVC in question) and whether this element should be subtitled. These two closed-ended questions were then followed by three further open questions/instructions aimed at eliciting the respondents' reasoning behind their answers to the previous question:

- Why should the given element (not) be subtitled?
- Does this element have any function in the film?
- Feel free to provide any other comments on this case (or similar cases) from the viewer's/subtitler's perspective.

A total of 70 people took part in the study, all of whom were students of English Philology (University of Łódź) and Applied Linguistics (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin) who had previously completed an AVT/subtitling course as part of their study curriculum. The participants were directly invited to take part in the survey by the study authors.

The study participants' age range was 20-42; the mean age was 22.5. For the gender distribution: 20 participants were male, 49 female, and 1 person did not indicate their gender. The vast majority of the study participants declared their level of English to be Advanced/C1 (72.9% – 51 respondents); the rest indicated Proficient or Native Fluency/C2 (15.7% – 11 respondents) and Upper-Intermediate/B2 (11.4% – 8 respondents). Only 2 (out of 70) respondents had watched the film *Velvet Buzzsaw* prior to this study, which means that 97.1% of participants were not familiar with the material examined in the study.

### 3.2.2. Results and discussion

First, we present the general distribution of answers to closed-ended questions (see Tab. 1 below), which is followed by a more detailed summary of the follow-up open questions relating to each analysed case.

Table 1. Summary of the answers to the closed-ended survey questions

Question	Case 1		Case 2		Case 3		Case 4	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
<i>Did you notice the VVC?</i>	66 94.3%	4 5.7%	60 85.7%	10 14.3%	8 11.4%	62 88.6%	31 44.3%	39 55.7%
<i>Should the VVC be subtitled?</i>	63 90%	7 10%	37 52.9%	33 47.1%	17 24.3%	53 75.7%	8 11.4%	62 88.6%

#### Case 1 – “No Death No Art 1983”

In the first studied case, the vast majority of respondents (94.3%) noticed the VVC and concurred (90%) that Rhodora's tattoo inscription should be subtitled. Among the reasons for this VVC example to be subtitled, they gave the fact “it is rather easily noticeable” or “the camera zoomed specifically on the tattoo” and “it is a written text that is visible for a couple seconds which means viewers have plenty of time to read it for themselves”. The respondents further concluded that the tattoo might be relevant to the character, the plot or the topic of the film, even if they have not watched the whole film, but the film genre and the supernatural aura permeating the scenes they were asked to watch also suggest that it might be of importance. One respondent even stated that “every

clearly significant and visible text should be translated in order to avoid viewer's confusion".

Among those who were not in favour of subtitling this VVC there were interestingly three answers pointing to the possibility of the hidden meaning of the tattoo but, at the same, the respondents claimed that since the viewer cannot be certain as to that meaning, it would better to leave it untranslated or the translation could be inappropriate.

Particularly valuable insights come from respondents' free comments relating to the scene featuring the given VVC. In the case of the tattoo, three respondents remarked that attentive viewers who are not fluent in English would prefer to have the inscription translated, otherwise they might be even irritated at not being provided with the whole information which clearly seems relevant. One respondent suggested translating the tattoo, but simultaneously claiming that the date could be omitted in the subtitles. Finally, six respondents explicitly commented on the potential technical difficulty of translating the VVC in this case, citing, *inter alia*, the following reasons: "the translator may have difficulties translating it and keeping the similar length of the subtitles", "it would be hard to time and break the subtitles correctly" since in the scene, as the camera zooms in on the tattoo, Rhodora is answering the call (simultaneous dialogue in the scene, non-synchronous with the picture). However, one respondent proposed a solution: "the subtitle may have to be shown while her caller answers" or "if there is no place for it, it can be skipped as what she is saying during this conversation is more important than her tattoo".

### **Case 2 – "Humble"**

In the second case again, the vast majority of respondents (85.7%) noticed the VVC, which is not surprising, considering it had a long exposure in the film throughout the entire scene, in more than one shot. However, only slightly more than a half of the study participants (52.9%) maintained that this VVC should be subtitled. Interestingly, out of 10 respondents who did not notice the VVC, 4 were convinced that it should be subtitled as it is or may be important to the plot. At the same time, 27 respondents who did register the VVC deemed it not worthy of subtitling. Asked about the function of the VVC in the film, only 4 respondents were strongly convinced it had no importance to the plot (explicit "no"), just as 4 other respondents were unequivocally convinced it was significant (assertive "yes" or "I'm sure"), whereas the remaining 72 participants indicated different degrees of uncertainty while leaning towards one of those two options ("I'm not sure", "probably", "I suppose", "I (don't) think", "I (don't) believe", "from my point of view", "I may be wrong", "it may/might" etc.).

The respondents' attempts at justifying their choices were largely divergent, sometimes even contradictory. Although the majority acknowledged that they lacked a broader context (e.g., "It [the VVC] doesn't seem to relate strongly enough with following events, however I haven't seen the film so I don't know all the context"), there was a huge difference in the depth of their interpretation of the analysed scene. For instance, some respondents claimed the word *HUMBLE* was "a big, visible name" and "it appears a few times so viewers must notice it at some point" with additional "lighting effect making it even more prominent", but for some others it "was barely visible", it was an "element of the background" and thus "translating it would be too explicit".

For the supporters of subtitling this VVC, it was rather apparent that the word *HUMBLE* is not a typical name of a place, which points to its significance for the plot. Some even perceived it as a direct warning for Bryson, who in this scene was too confident stealing the paintings. Another argument adduced by viewers was the very unique name for a gas station (not a typical proper name),

which would also point to some special meaning to it, as well as the fact there was plenty of time in the scene (virtually no dialogue) to introduce the subtitle. Since *humble* has a particular meaning, foreign viewers should be given an opportunity to have a similar watching experience as that of the source audience, or “it is always nice to be able to understand just as much as the source viewer would”.

On the other hand, the main arguments of the opponents of subtitling this instance of VVC concerned two aspects. The first was the interpretation that *HUMBLE* is just a name of the place, a proper noun, which does not have to be translated.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, four respondents had an impression that this particular name of place translated directly into Polish would sound very “strange” or “awkward”, with one respondent even claiming that “nobody would notice that there is no translation of this; we [Poles] are used to foreign names of places”, while another one observed that “a literal translation would sound awkward to a Polish viewer though some alternative should be made up for purposes of maintaining the atmosphere being built upon this word”.

### Case 3 – “Hope”

A very small number of respondents (11.4%) discerned the street name *Hope*, which is what we expected as it posed the least ostensive VVC example of all the examined cases. Similarly, the number of the study participants in favour of subtitling it was quite small, albeit more than twice as high (24.3%). Thirteen respondents who did not register this VVC believed it should nevertheless be subtitled, while 4 respondents who did notice it did not find it necessary to translate it.

The respondents were decidedly more confident that this VVC had no particular function in the film or thought it might have one but even then “it is not crucial” or “minor if any”. However, one respondent commented that “it adds to the aesthetics [of the film]” and seven others started to link this VVC with other analysed instances, which led them to some deeper reflections, e.g. “Considering the aforementioned ‘Humble’ name, I believe that there is an ongoing motif in the movie with virtues or lack of thereof”, “it may be a case of symbolism, similarly to ‘humble’, may be connected to the plot”, “taking into account the abstract character of the film, naming the street ‘hope’ may have been an intentional move of the creators”, or even: “art is usually associated with the feeling of hope. In this film, art brings the completely opposite feelings. It haunts people; it can make them mad”.<sup>11</sup> There were also contradictory comments, with some respondents arguing *Hope* is “just a name of street, and typical one” or “an ordinary street sign”, whereas others claimed it is “not a typical name of street”.

The prevailing justification for not subtitling this VVC was its size in the frame – “barely visible”/“rather invisible”. Notably, 9 respondents (12.85%) additionally commented that subtitling this VVC could only confuse less perceptive audiences, claiming that most people would “not even notice it in the first few viewings” and the viewers would not have enough time to find the graphical element to which the subtitle is referring before the shot with the street name disappears. Indeed, the shot is not a close-up and the word *Hope* is not in the camera focus. However, two respondents believed that if they had seen a subtitle, they would have paid more attention to the shot and tried to spot the corresponding element (the street sign).

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, one respondent was of an opposite opinion: “In film you rather translate names of bars, cities etc., so why leave it now?”

<sup>11</sup> It cannot be excluded that by this point in the study, the participants have already been primed to (subconsciously) perceive the VVC of relatively low ostensiveness as more salient and look for more intricate, hidden meanings.

#### Case 4 – “Royal”

VVC cases 3 and 4 were featured in the same, longer scene (4:57 min), but in comparison to the previous case, *Royal* is much more ostensive. This was reflected in the number of respondents who noticed this VVC (44.3%). However, despite that, an even smaller number of respondents thought it should be subtitled (only 11.4%). Five respondents who did not register the VVC considered the element important to translate, but as many as 29 of those who noticed it decided it does not require subtitling. Interestingly, some of the respondents who did not notice the VVC on their first viewing later commented (on seeing the screenshot of the scene) that this visual element was actually quite conspicuous.

The respondents were not very confident as to the relevance (or lack thereof) of this element to the plot of the film, hence their comments frequently included hedged expressions such as “maybe”, “it may”, “I assume”, “probably”, “I do not know”, “I cannot really tell”, “it does not seem like” which is similar to Case 2, but the visual quality of the VVC (blurry) and the length of exposure in the scene (shorter than in Case 2, but still considerable) seemed to impact the respondents’ decision not to recommend subtitling it. While decidedly a minority, a few respondents were more eager to state this VVC was relevant to the film plot – e.g. commenting “the word can tell viewers something about the character of the woman [Rhodora]”, “Yes it comments on the lady’s attitude I think” or “it is an element of some puzzle or an important metaphor”. Among those who believed there was a slight chance there might be some hidden meaning behind this VVC, there was a group of 4 respondents who, nevertheless, were convinced the English word *Royal* would still be commonly understood by the Polish audience, with one respondent even affirming: “I would entrust the viewer with the knowledge of the meaning of this word”.<sup>12</sup>

Most respondents commented that the inscription *Royal* is blurred, and it is rather just an element of the background. One respondent even suggested that the fact the word is blurry “would justify the reason for not having it subtitled”, and another one claimed that the “translator should intentionally omit translation of the parts which are blurred” because she was convinced that this blurry effect was intentionally used by the filmmakers. Also, the majority of respondents treated this VVC as an element of the background and insisted that generally the viewers do not pay that much attention to the background. In addition, for 14 respondents it was just an element of decoration/exhibition in the gallery – a piece of art hanging on the wall. Three other respondents interpreted the VVC as a kind of a proper name (e.g., a brand name). One respondent spotted a “No smoking” sign in a similar position to that of *Royal* in a shot a few seconds earlier, which he interpreted as pointing to the irrelevance of this VVC.

However, even respondents who believed this VVC might be “an indirect hint for careful viewers” were hesitant whether it should be subtitled. One of them commented that “it would have been odd to leave it without subtitles if the other signs were subtitled, however, it seems natural to leave it”. Two other respondents were convinced that providing a subtitle for this VVC would strip the scene of its subtlety and the aura of mystery, thus the subtitler should not translate this word “just in order not to give everything on a plate, and to let the audience notice certain things on their own, or just to let it pass unnoticed”. Finally, 7 respondents remarked that during the scene featuring *Royal*, Rhodora

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, another respondent claimed: “I suppose the word is quite common in Polish nowadays when we talk about ‘royal baby’ for instance, we do not say ‘królewski potomek’ but we rather use the phrase ‘royal baby’”. This and similar remarks highlight that some students and translators may tend to overestimate the viewers’ English competence.

and Morf are having a conversation, which makes it problematic to subtitle this VVC as the dialogue must be subtitled in the first place. Two of those 7 respondents suggested the Polish equivalent of *Royal* would have to be put somewhere in the upper part of the screen, but still all agreed any such attempt would result in unwanted confusion among the viewers (the onscreen characters' "conversation and its dynamics might be disturbed by adding such information in the subtitles").

#### 4. Discussion

This paper has looked into film translation from the perspective of receptors with the ultimate aim of informing the decisions of the translator in audiovisual contexts. In doing so, we draw on the idea that:

(...) translation production and translation reception are interrelated: the production of translations involves the cognitive representation of perceived potential reception (in other words, the translator's mental construction of "the reader" and her horizon of expectations), which affects decision making during translation (Kruger & Kruger, 2017, p. 72).

That line of reasoning is aligned with what came to be known as "theory of mind". According to Premack & Woodroof (1978, p. 515), an individual who has a theory of mind "imputes mental states to himself and to others (either to conspecifics or to other species as well)." An important point the authors make is about the construct's intangible nature as well as predictive potential both of which are vital in the context of the current paper: "A system of inferences of this kind is properly viewed as a theory, first, because such states are not directly observable, and second, because the system can be used to make predictions, specifically about the behaviour of other organisms" (Premack & Woodroof, 1978, p. 515).

A similar approach is advocated by researchers who analyse films from the perspective of cognitive embodiment. They claim that meaning of the visual features in film is grounded in sensory-motor experience (cf. Karavanja & Coëgnarts, 2015, p. 65). This is based on the assumption that there is an inherent link between the intuitive sensory experience and abstract reasoning, which is dependent on viewer's perception, but "perception is not a process that involves a relation between the eye and the mind (whether conscious or unconscious); more fundamentally, it involves the metaphorical projection of the body on screen and in frame" (Coëgnarts & Kravanja, 2012, p. 98).

Visual as well as auditory modes are primary semiotic means of the film because film presents a story with a picture (visual narration) and sound (dialogues and music). This is done as part of a wider context, which is the general narrative pattern implemented through a film (Post, 2017, p. 31; cf. Monaco, 2009). From a diachronic perspective, the visual input was the basic and primary semantic mode for films, only later dialogues, subtitles and sound were added to motion pictures. Even today, depending on a director's aim, sound and dialogues may be reduced to minimum, though, the picture is always present (Post, 2017, p. 147). It thus seems that every aspect of the visual (every detail) should be perceived as an instance of a very careful and conscious decision of the filmmakers and its inclusion in the film is not incidental<sup>13</sup>. By

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<sup>13</sup> This is line with the principles of relevance proposed by Sperber and Wilson:

(i) Cognitive principle of relevance – "Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance" and (ii) Communicative principle of relevance – "Every

extension, it follows that the role of VVCs, even if they are suboptimally ostensive, should not be entirely disregarded/underestimated in subtitling.

While the results of our analysis (Section 3.1.) and the reception study results (Section 3.2.2.) generally converge, there are indeed instances where the overlap is unexpectedly low. For instance, in Case 1, where we hypothesised VVC would be optimally ostensive and plot-relevant, we found that over 5% of participants reported not noticing the case of VVC and 10% opined it need not be translated. On the other hand, while we postulated that Case 4 was liminally ostensive, the VVC detection rate there was as high as 44.3%.

Another important observation is that noticing or failing to notice VVC oneself is not invariably the decisive factor guiding the viewer's decision as to whether VVC needs to be translated. This is true in two directions. In Case 4, for example, 44.3% of participants report noticing VVC but only 11.4% say it should be translated. Conversely, in Case 3 the detection rate is only 11.4% but more than twice as many participants (24.3%) state the instance of VVC needs to be translated.

Based on numerous comments provided by the study participants, it may be generalised that VVCs should be subtitled if (a) they are relatively well visible in a given scene (esp. when the camera somehow highlights those VVCs or they appear multiple times on the screen); (b) they are rather directly relevant to the plot of the film (i.e. they contribute significantly to its interpretation); and (c) the technical aspects of a given scene allow for subtitling the VVC, i.e. the possible timing and spatial constraints related to subtitling must be considered (e.g. there is a dynamic dialogue in the scene which should be subtitled first). These conclusions are largely in line with general subtitling guidelines which our participants might have known, especially having attended AVT classes; however, students do not necessarily have to draw these conclusions from those guidelines but can derive them intuitively on their own on the basis of the material analysed (it might be just coincidental convergence).

Many study participants also pointed out the unwanted effect of possible confusion on the part of the viewer if VVCs are not given proper treatment in subtitling (this includes both giving them unnecessary emphasis and unjustified omission). This requires from a subtitler a highly strategic approach to each VVC instance.

One more noteworthy point is that some study participants clearly stated they focus directly on the action of the film, on what is happening in the foreground rather than on the elements of the background, which points to the different profiles of viewers and for some of them VVCs would be largely irrelevant. In addition, the use of VVCs may vary across different filmmakers and film genres. In some of them (e.g., in horrors, thrillers, mystery films), VVCs tend to play an important role, hence the viewers' awareness of genre specificity directly translates to their expectations as to the handling of VVCs.

## **5. Limitations of the study and conclusions**

When it comes to epistemological and methodological caveats, a potential shortcoming of the adopted study design is that the study participants were shown only short selected scenes and thus could not develop a fuller understanding of the plot and appreciate the import of the selected scenes in the entire film. Nonetheless, the film fragments selected for the study constituted complete scenes which in themselves formed closed and coherent wholes.

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aspect of ostensive/overt communication conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance" (Sperber & Wilson, 1995 [1986], pp. 260-272).

Furthermore, while having the study participants watch the entire film (1h 23min) would benefit the study's ecological validity, using longer stimuli has to some extent remained a methodological challenge for empirical research in (audiovisual) translation at large<sup>14</sup>. By extension, on a technical note, even though our participants received detailed instructions on how to proceed (cf. Section 3.2.1.), it was theoretically possible for them to access the questionnaire prior to watching the clips. While a case of misreading the instructions cannot be ruled out, the risk of participants not following the instructions intentionally, possibly to improve their performance on the task/questions ahead, was mitigated by ensuring participant anonymity.

Another issue to be brought up is that there are virtually no limits – other than the practical ones – to how far one can go analysing a film's VVC and producing interpretations. For instance, in the Hope street shot (Fig. 6), one could go further than we have suggested in our analysis. A way to proceed could be to talk about the direction of arrows depicted in the shot as one of them points toward the signs which read "Hope" and the other points the opposite direction, additionally being crossed out.

As we have attempted to show by integrating two perspectives in the analysis above, a primary asset of such an approach is that external inter-subjective experimental input can work as a means of keeping the researcher's subjective interpretations in check. As research by definition requires careful scrutiny, it could be particularly conducive to the researcher's overanalysing, overthinking and possibly over-estimating the phenomena under scrutiny. Linking this to our discussion of suboptimal VVC in film, with an analysis limited to our observations and postulates, the reader could be getting a one-sided and likely distorted account of the role of VVC – even if a well-intentioned one – that potentially overemphasizes the significance of minutiae that are inconsequential to viewers. This could be accounted for by making reference to what came to be known as the "focusing illusion", i.e. the idea that individuals can overestimate the weight of a given factor when forming judgments. An analogous idea is neatly expressed by Kahneman & Schadke (1998, p. 345) as they conclude their paper: "Our research suggests a moral, and a warning: Nothing that you focus on will make as much difference as you think."

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<sup>14</sup> For a review of practical considerations in experimental AVT research – including the choice of materials – cf. Orero et al. (2018).

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